

1001



DARK
NIGHTS
DISCOVERY

Collection I

10 Stories by

MARI CARR • K.L. GRAYSON
RILEY HART • MICHELLE ST. JAMES
SKYE JORDAN • KENNEDY LAYNE
JENNIFER LYON • ANGEL PAYNE
C.D. REISS • REBECCA YARROS

1001 Dark Nights

Discovery Authors Bundle 1

Introducing:

K. L. Grayson

Mari Carr

Angel Payne

Michelle St. James

Rebecca Yarros

Kennedy Layne

Skye Jordan

CD Reiss

Jennifer Lyon

and Riley Hart

1001 Dark Nights



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ONE THOUSAND AND ONE DARK NIGHTS

Once upon a time, in the future...

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

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

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

One afternoon, curious about the myth of the Arabian Nights, I traveled back to ancient Persia to see for myself if it was true that every day Shahryar (Persian: شاهریار, "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.*

LIVE WITHOUT REGRET

By K.L. Grayson



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First and foremost, I have to thank my husband, Tom. The endless amount of support and encouragement you give me while writing is truly amazing. Thank you for making sure the house stayed clean, the laundry got done, and the kids were fed. Thank you for taking over nighttime duty so that I could stay up late and write. Your love and support is what gets me through the day and I'm so incredibly thankful for you.

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Last and certainly not least, thank you to every single one of my readers. Thank you for begging for Brittany's story. I hope you swooned over Connor just as much as I did. Your support means so much to me and without you and I wouldn't be doing what I love.

DEDICATION

To Liz.

Thank you for believing in me when I was struggling to believe in myself.

CHAPTER 1

Brittany

I push the door open and a small bell signals my entry. At best, InkSlingers is a complete dive, not near as sleek-looking as some of the newer tattoo parlors. But this place has one thing—one person, really—that sets them above all the rest.

Connor Jackson.

Not only is he one of the most highly recommended tattoo artists in the city, but two years ago he won top prize on the reality show *Inked*. If I recall, the grand prize was two hundred thousand dollars to be used toward the establishment of his own parlor. So why in the hell he works in this dinky building off the corner of Hampton and Third, I have no idea. And to be honest, I don't really care.

"Hello?" I look around. The place is eerily quiet, not a soul in sight. Glancing down at my watch, I check the time. Sure enough, it's fifteen minutes earlier than my scheduled appointment. That's me...Miss Punctuality.

I spend the next five minutes pacing across the waiting room of the shop without seeing a single person, all the while wondering who in the hell leaves their shop unattended?

Just when I'm about ready to say screw it and walk out, the front door opens and once again the bell dings. I spin around on my heel, prepared to chew someone's ass for making me wait, and then nearly trip over my own feet when I see the behemoth of a man standing in front of me.

Without permission, my eyes rake him over from head to toe. His dirty blond hair is shaggy and clearly hasn't been trimmed for months. He could probably pull it into one of those man-bun things that seem to be all the rage, but instead it hangs loose with the stray strands tucked behind his ears.

My eyes travel south, taking in his plain black tee that stretches tight across his broad chest and even tighter around his biceps. A colorful sleeve of tattoos decorates his right arm, and as far as I can tell the left is completely bare. He's sexy, in a rugged sort of way. He's also the complete opposite of the guys I'm normally attracted to, yet I find myself enraptured.

The stranger clears his throat, and my eyes snap up to find piercing blue eyes staring back at me. When he cocks an eyebrow, I realize I've been caught checking him out. My first instinct is to avert my eyes and murmur an apology, but then I realize that's what the old Brittany would do. And I dropped her off by the curb a long time ago.

"What?" I say, shrugging unapologetically.

"Were you checking me out?" The sound of his gravelly voice does things to me that a voice should never be able to do to another human being. I squeeze my thighs together to suppress the tingling it caused.

"Well, that depends."

"On what?"

"Do you want me to check you out?" I ask.

He nods and moves past me, his shoulder grazing mine. "Bold. I like it. What can I do for you?"

Furrowing my brow, I tilt my head. I totally had him pegged for my next conquest—a.k.a. one-night stand—but I have a strange feeling he just brushed me off. I shake my head, trying to remember the question. Oh yeah. Connor. "I have a ten o'clock appointment with Connor. He's late."

The stranger looks down at his watch and then back at me. "He's not late. It's only nine fifty-five."

I roll my eyes. "Okay, fine." I walk over and plop down in a waiting room chair, then cross my legs, knee over knee. "Will you call him and see how much longer he's going to be?"

"You in a hurry?" the guy asks.

Not really. No. "Maybe."

He nods and sets his to-go coffee cup and brown paper bag on the front desk, then sits down and pulls out his phone. “He won’t be long.”

“Let’s hope,” I mumble, grabbing a *Tattoo Weekly* magazine off the table in front of me.

“Would you like a doughnut?” I glance up to see the man holding up a chocolate-covered doughnut. It looks delicious, and I’m two seconds away from accepting his offer when I remember my closet full of clothes that are becoming too tight. That one doughnut will easily take me hours at the gym to burn off.

“No, thank you.”

He shrugs. “Suit yourself.”

Smiling tightly, I look back at the magazine and spend the next several minutes absently thumbing through it. I skim a few articles then toss the magazine on the table and grab another, my frustration growing with each passing second.

“Are you ready?”

I glance up to find the sexy stranger standing in front of me. Putting the magazine back on the table, I look around. “Is Connor here?”

The man smiles, his full lips parting to reveal perfectly white teeth. There’s a smudge of chocolate near the corner of his mouth, and I briefly wonder what he would do if I stepped forward and licked it off.

“I’m Connor,” he says. His words catch me off guard and all thoughts of chocolate drift from my mind. My eyes roam his face, only this time I take a closer look.

“You’re Connor?” I ask incredulously.

“Wow,” he says, chuckling. “Don’t look so surprised. I take it I’m not what you expected.” His voice is clipped, and I instantly berate myself for the way that came out.

“No.” I shake my head vehemently. “I didn’t mean it in a bad way. You’re an incredibly attractive man. It’s just that you look different from when you were on the show. You didn’t have the facial hair—or the long hair, for that matter—both of which I find unbelievably sexy.” Connor’s eyes widen and I realize what I said. “I can’t believe I just said that. Damn it,” I mumble, averting my eyes. This is what happens when I get nervous, and for some strange reason, Connor makes me nervous. Sighing, I decide to give up. “I’m sorry if I offended you.”

My eyes are trained on the floor as I contemplate leaving to avoid further embarrassment. I’m still undecided when a pair of Chuck T’s enters my line of sight. I smile because those are my favorite shoes. “So you like the beard?” he says suggestively, causing me to look up. His blue eyes are swirling with a mixture of amusement and lust.

“I like the beard.”

Connor grins as though he just found out he won a prize. Without saying a word, he steps away and I follow behind. Leading me into a small room in the back of the shop, he says, “Did you find something in the magazine that you want?”

“I actually have a picture of what I want.”

“Let’s see it.”

I walk toward him and hold out my phone. Connor takes the phone, examines the picture then looks up.

“Where do you want it?”

“Here.” Lifting my right arm, I tug my shirt up and point to the location along my rib cage, just under my breast.

“I like that,” he says, handing me my phone. “But what if we angled it just a bit like this…” Connor puts a finger at the top of my ribs and a tiny zap of electricity jolts through my body. He looks up, his eyes searching mine before he drags the tip of his index finger along my skin. His touch leaves a trail of goose bumps. My pulse quickens, and it takes everything I have not to beg him to keep touching me when he pulls away.

“What do you think?” he asks. His pupils are dilated, his breathing a bit faster, and I get the feeling he was as affected by that as I was.

“I”—my voice cracks and I flush with embarrassment—“I like it. Plus, you’re the expert so I’ll leave it completely up to you.”

Connor swallows hard and my eyes follow the movement. “Good choice.” He turns away. “All right, have a seat here,” he says, gesturing toward the reclined chair, and I sit down. “Turn this way.” He angles my body to the left. “Is that comfortable?”

“Yep.”

“Good,” he mumbles, tugging my shirt up to expose my right side again.

The soft cotton slips down and he pushes it back up, only this time his hand brushes against my bra, grazing the outside of my breast. Another jolt passes through me, only this time it’s stronger. His eyes snap to mine, and I know—I *know*—that he felt *that*. As I bite down on my bottom lip, his sinful eyes flash with heat, and I watch him take a ragged breath before turning away.

“So...is, uh, is this your first tattoo?” he stammers, bringing his eyes back to mine.

“Nope. I have another one.”

“Good, so you know what to expect.” I nod, and then he smiles brightly before getting his equipment ready. “Okay,” he says. He rubs my skin with something cool and I presume he’s prepping it. “Let’s do this.”

The faint whir of the machine signals this is happening, and I squeeze my eyes shut as he gently pulls my skin taut. Okay, time to go to my happy place, which just so happens to feature none other than my sexy-as-hell tattoo artist.

My mind drifts into eroticland—as I like to call it—as I picture Connor sliding his hand up my bare thigh. He hooks a finger under the side of my panties, and with his wicked eyes on me he slips a finger in—

“I like the quote,” he says, pulling me from my fantasy.

“Do you know what it means?” I ask, opening my eyes and then quickly looking away. I’m a doctor, so you’d think the sight of blood wouldn’t bother me. And it doesn’t, as long as it isn’t *my* blood.

“I’ve put it on a few other people. Looked it up one time. It’s deep.”

“Yeah”—I take a big breath, holding it in for a few beats before letting it out—“well...” My words trail off because I don’t really know what else to say, and I sure as hell don’t want to talk about why this particular tattoo means so much to me.

Connor goes quiet, but I can feel his eyes burning a hole through my head. When I glance up, his eyes catch mine for a brief second before he looks back down. It was just enough time to tell me that he had my number.

“So it’s personal, huh?”

“What?” I scoff. “A girl can’t get a tattoo just to get a tattoo?”

“Of course she can, but you’re different. This is personal.” He cocks his head to the side, his hair falling in front of his face. I have to fist my hands together to keep from brushing it away so that I can see his face more clearly.

“Okay, fine, you’re right. It’s personal.”

“I’m always right,” he says, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “It would be prudent of you to remember that.” I tilt my head to the side just as the machine turns off and Connor looks up. He has one hand settled at the base of my waist, the other holding the tattoo gun off to the side. His eyes are smoldering, pinning me in my seat.

My tongue darts out, running a slow path along my lower lip, and I watch as his eyes follow along. *Oh yeah, this is happening.* Not one to beat around the bush, I decide to go for it. It’s obvious we’re attracted to each other, so there’s no reason for this not to happen.

“What are you doing when you get off work?”

Connor’s eyebrows push into his hairline. “Are you asking me out on a date?” he asks.

My heart clenches inside my chest and I take a deep breath, because as much as I’d like to say yes, that just isn’t who I am anymore. “Nope,” I state impassively. “I gave up dating.”

“You don’t date?” he asks incredulously.

“I fuck.”

Lips parted, he nods slowly several times as though he’s processing what I just said—and deciding what he’s going to do about it.

“Well, that’s too bad, because I gave up fucking.”

His cheeks flush, probably because he realized what he just admitted to, and I can’t help but laugh. “So you don’t have sex?”

Connor rolls his eyes, and even though I’m not a fan of the gesture, he makes it look sexy. My guess is that he makes most things look sexy. “Of course I have sex, I just stopped fucking. I gave up the meaningless one-night stands.” He shrugs. “I want more.”

“Ahhh.” I nod. “Well, good luck with that.” Connor doesn’t say another word. He puts the tattoo gun down and then holds up a mirror so I can check out my new ink. “It’s perfect,” I state, my eyes roaming over the beautiful script.

“I’m glad you like it.” Connor puts the mirror down and slathers some Vaseline on my tattoo. He follows it up with a bandage, all the while rattling off the aftercare instructions.

“Are we done?” I ask, secretly hoping he’ll tell me no. At least then I’d have a reason to stay.

“We’re done.” I push up from the chair. Connor nods his head toward the front desk and I follow him up there to pay. We seem to have fallen into a comfortable silence, and his presence alone is calming in a way I can’t explain. I wish like hell that he would’ve taken me up on my offer, because I have no doubt that it would’ve been fucking fantastic.

Without a word, Connor swipes my card, then I sign the receipt and shove my wallet back in my purse. When I look up, Connor is watching me intently. “Thank you,” I murmur.

His blue eyes are two swirling pools of liquid heat, and what I wouldn’t give to dive in and beg him to change his rules for just one night. “Don’t thank me,” he says, shaking his head. “It was my pleasure.”

We stand there for several more seconds, the air crackling around us as I search for something to say. “I’m Brittany, by the way,” I say, somewhat awkwardly.

Connor grins. “I know.” I furrow my brow and he points to the desk. “You made an appointment.”

“Right.” My phone beeps in my purse, and I decide that’s my cue to leave. “Well, I better go.”

“When will I see you again?” he hollers as I walk toward the door.

Spinning around, I give him my best come-hither look. “When I decide to get another tattoo.”

“Or?” he asks, a grin splitting his ruggedly handsome face.

“When you decide to fuck.”

His jaw nearly hits the floor.

Brittany, one. Connor, zero.

I think I’m going to like playing this game.

CHAPTER 2

Brittany

Three weeks later

Shut up already!

Brad—twenty-five, full-time firefighter—hasn't shut his fucking mouth since I sat down at the bar forty-five minutes ago. He needs to shut up.

You need to shut up.

Somehow, by the grace of God, I manage to keep the words from actually spilling from my mouth, which is becoming increasingly more difficult with each dirty martini. Speaking of dirty martinis...

Raising my hand, I signal the bartender for another drink. In a matter of minutes I'm back to sipping while *still* staring at Brad's mouth as he tells me about...*shit*. What the hell was he telling me about?

It's too late. The Mississippi native with a sexy Southern drawl has officially bored me to death. My shoulders deflate, and I take another drink. This is pointless. As much as I'd like to rip off Brad's clothes to see if his body is as chiseled as it looks, I just can't get past the fact that he's unable to hold my interest in a simple conversation.

It's probably my fault. I'm the one who asked him to tell me about himself, and now I have to figure out how in the hell to get him to stop.

"Brittany." Brad snaps his fingers and I look up, catching his gaze. He smiles a thousand-watt smile, and for a fraction of a second I reconsider my decision to ditch him.

"I'm sorry," I say sheepishly. "I, uhh...I must've zoned out. What was the question?"

"He asked if he could take you out on a date." My head whips to the right at the familiar voice. Looks like the night just got a whole lot more interesting.

Connor's blue eyes lock on mine. "I take it you haven't told him yet."

I have no idea what he's up to, but I decide to take the bait. "I'm not sure I know what you're talking about." Raising my eyebrows, I wrap my lips around the rim of my glass and take a sip. Connor cocks a brow, his gorgeous eyes dancing with mischief.

"She doesn't date." He directs his words at Brad. "She fucks."

My eyes leave Connor's long enough to see Brad perk up in his seat.

"You don't date?" Brad asks.

"I don't," I tell him.

"She fucks," Connor clarifies.

Brad nods, his brown eyes now thick with lust. "She fucks," he says slowly as though he's trying to understand what Connor just said.

Connor grins. "But not you."

"Why not me?"

Shifting in my seat, I narrow my gaze on Connor. "Yeah, why not him?"

"Do you want to fuck him?" he fires back, tossing a thumb toward Brad.

"Now wait a minute," Brad says as he slides off his chair. In one stealthy and incredibly sexy move, Connor pushes his way between Brad and me, effectively blocking out our third wheel. His hands land on either side of my chair and he bends down until we're eye to eye. As his breath fans my face, I wonder if he tastes as good as he smells.

"Have a drink with me?" he asks.

Holding up my martini glass, I give a little wave. "I am having a drink."

Connor pushes against my legs and I automatically part them, allowing him to step in between. Heaven help me, he feels good settled between my thighs. I just wish we could resume this position later sans clothes. “Have a drink with me over there,” he says, nodding toward a booth.

“Like a date?”

He shakes his head, a grin pulling at the corner of his mouth. “Well, since you don’t date, I know better than to ask you out on one. It’s just a drink. Two, if I’m lucky.”

“Excuse me.” Brad steps around Connor, who throws up a hand.

“We’re not done,” Connor says dismissively.

Brad’s eyes widen and flick to mine. I need to put the poor boy out of his misery. As much as I’d love to spend a few nights with him warming my bed, it’s probably a lost cause. He’s too young, and I’m not ready to be classified as a cougar. Not yet anyway.

Setting my drink on the bar, I push up from my seat. Connor’s face falls when he’s forced to move back. I smooth my hands down the front of my blouse and step up to Brad. This is the part I hate.

Rejection. Been there. Done that. I’ve got a broken heart to prove it.

And that’s exactly why I need to do this now. “Thank you for the drink,” I say, knowing that honesty is always the best policy. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Connor grin. “I think you’re a great guy, but this”—I wave a hand between the two of us—“isn’t going to happen.”

I don’t give Brad a chance to reply, because giving him that chance also gives him hope ... and there is no hope. Spinning around, I come face-to-face with Connor. “I’m ready for that drink,” I say. His grin grows into a breathtaking smile, causing my heart to stutter inside my chest. “Or two.”

Connor grabs my hand, and I snag my drink from the bar. He leads us toward a booth tucked in a corner where we slide in opposite each other. I glance toward the bar, thankful when I see a busty blonde sidle up next to Brad. I knew it wouldn’t take him long.

“Hi.” Connor’s smooth voice rolls over me, wrapping me up like a warm blanket.

Turning my attention to Connor, I smile. “Hi.”

“I’m starting to think you’re stalking me.” He smirks before quickly adding, “Which, for the record, I’m totally cool with.”

“Funny, because I was just thinking the exact same thing.”

“That I’m stalking you or that you’d be totally cool with me stalking you?” Connor’s playful words, coupled with my alcohol-infused state, cause me to let down my guard.

“Both.” I lean forward, placing my elbows on the table, and Connor mimics my position. His woody scent floats through the air and I take a deep breath, trying to memorize the smell. “Have you changed your mind?” I ask.

“Funny, I was just thinking the exact same thing,” he says, tossing my words back at me.

Lifting my glass, I take a sip. It’s the only way to keep myself from smiling like a fucking idiot, which is exactly what I want to do. “So”—I set my glass down—“do you come here often?”

Connor blinks several times, the look on his face telling me he wasn’t expecting me to say that. Honestly, it isn’t what I wanted to say. What I wanted to say was *‘hell yes, I’ve changed my mind,’* but I knew better. My heart remembers the sharp pain that lanced through it, effectively slicing it into thousands of tiny pieces. It remembers the sound of my cries as I begged Tyson to stay, to love me, to choose me. Worse yet, it knows I don’t have a heart left to give away.

“As a matter of fact, I do come here often. How about you?” he asks, absently peeling at the label on his beer bottle. “I don’t think I’ve seen you here before.”

“You haven’t,” I confirm, shaking my head. “I moved back a few months ago.”

“So you grew up here in St. Louis?”

“I grew up across the river on the Illinois side, but, yes, this is home.” I’m reluctant to give him much more than that because it’ll lead to talking about what brought me home, and that’s something I’m not ready to discuss. He doesn’t need to know my fiancé walked out on me, and he sure as hell doesn’t need to

know it took me two years to pick myself up from that devastating blow. So instead, I decide to redirect the conversation. “Are you from—?”

“There you are,” Casey breathes. Sliding into the booth next to me, she pushes a chunk of hair out of her face. “I was looking everywhere for you.” She glances up and freezes when she sees Connor sitting across from us. Her eyes widen, a grin playing at the corner of her mouth. “You aren’t Brad, the firefighter.”

Connor laughs and shakes his head. “Connor, the tattoo artist,” he says, reaching his hand across the table. She slips her hand in his and this weird twisting sensation takes place inside my chest. I thought I had gotten rid of that green-eyed monster. Guess I was wrong.

I don’t like them touching.

Why the fuck don’t I like them touching?

My first instinct is to shove Casey out of the booth or accidentally spill my drink in her lap, but I quickly push the thoughts away because those are things a jealous girlfriend would do.

And I am *not* a jealous girlfriend. Plus, Casey is my sister...whom I love...dearly.

Hell, I’m not even *a* girlfriend.

But I do need to do something because she’s smiling and—*shit*—now he’s smiling. And they’re still touching.

Why in the world are they still touching?

“Where’s Mike?” My words are rushed, my voice clipped, but it does the job. Casey releases Connor’s hand and I sigh in relief. I should feel better, but I don’t. In fact, now I’m really pissed off at myself for getting jealous.

“Mike who?” Casey says, interrupting my thoughts.

“The guy you were just molesting out on the dance floor. Remember him?”

Casey tilts her head to the side, narrowing her eyes. For a split second, I’m certain she sees right through me. And she might. Not only is she my baby sister, but she’s also my best friend and knows me better than anyone.

“Oh, right. Mike. He was no one.” She shakes her head and quickly waves me off, returning her attention to Connor. “So, Connor, how do you know my sister?”

I peek up at Connor. *Please say you’re the man who’s going to be spending the night with me*, I silently beg. “You two are sisters?” he asks, motioning toward us.

I nod. “We are.”

“I,” Casey says, pointing toward herself, “am the younger, sweeter, smarter sister. *Oomph*.” She grunts when I elbow her in the side and then she giggles. “You still haven’t answered my question, Connor.”

Connor takes a swig of his beer. “I’m her tattoo artist.”

“*What?*” Connor winces at Casey’s loud screech. I’m used to the sound, having lived with the crazy broad my whole life. “You have a tattoo?”

“Actually, I have two,” I say proudly, holding up two fingers.

“When did this happen?” she asks, looking from me to Connor and back to me. “And why am I just finding out about it now?”

Connor holds up his hands and slowly shakes his head. “Hey, I’m only responsible for the second one. I wasn’t the lucky son-of-a-bitch who got to pop that cherry.”

Warmth radiates up my neck, infusing my cheeks, and Connor’s heated gaze slides to mine. To avoid his penetrating eyes, I look down. My body tingles—literally fucking tingles—under the weight of his stare.

“I like you,” Casey states. “And you just made my sister blush, which I’ve never seen. I feel like you should get some sort of prize for that.”

Lips pursed, I look up. “I’m not blushing.”

“Right,” Casey says, drawing out the word while slowly nodding. A knowing smile slides across her face. “It’s just hot in here.”

“It *is* hot in here,” I argue.

Connor clears his throat. “I’m not hot.”

Casey’s head whips around and she points a finger at Connor. “Uh, yes. Yes, you are.” Connor grins at the compliment.

My head drops and I bury my face in my hands. I love my sister, but her inability to filter what comes out of her mouth can be a bit annoying. “Go get me a drink,” I mumble, nudging her out of the booth. She sighs but eventually gives in.

“Fine, but only because *I* need a drink.” I look up as Casey turns to Connor. “Do you want another beer?” she asks.

“That’d be great.” Connor holds up his beer bottle to show her what he’s drinking. “Just put it all on my tab.”

“Connor, the tattoo artist, you are too kind.” She flashes him a flirty smile and struts—yes, struts—toward the bar.

Connor nods toward Casey. “I like your sister.”

“You can have her.”

“I heard that,” Casey yells. “And you would miss the hell out of me,” she tosses over her shoulder before reaching the bar.

I shake my head and mouth ‘no.’ Connor’s answering smile is enough to make my insides go all soft and gooey, something I haven’t experienced in a long time. What I wouldn’t give to feel that every single day. What I wouldn’t give to know I was the one who put that smile on Connor’s face—the kind of smile that, if allowed, could mend broken hearts. The kind of smile that could make a girl hope for things she shouldn’t be hoping for, like white picket fences, blond-haired babies, and the promise of forever. Except...

Forever doesn’t exist.

Forever can be taken away.

Minds can change, and in the blink of an eye, everything you thought you had simply disappears.

Shit.

Why the hell am I thinking about forever? Surely his smile isn’t that potent.

“You can’t smile at me like that,” I whisper. Then I squeeze my eyes shut when I realize I actually said those words out loud. I’ve been so good about closing myself off, putting on my armor and shielding myself from feeling...well, anything.

But Connor is different. He’s a game changer. When I’m around him, I want to rip down all of my walls and try.

Try what? I’m not sure. Anything, maybe. Anything other than what I’ve been doing. And it’s not that I want to try with just anyone, I want to try with *him*.

“You don’t like it when I smile?” he asks, his husky voice invading my thoughts.

Opening my eyes, I glance up. His eyes are smoldering, begging me to give him what he wants. Who am I to disappoint? My head is screaming...

Mayday!

Abort!

Look away!

But my heart isn’t listening. “I love it when you smile.”

Connor’s eyes widen and he goes completely still.

Oh, God. Why in the hell did I just say that?

He’s probably confused with all of these mixed signals I keep throwing out. Hell, so am I.

Connor hasn’t said a word and he’s still watching me. I’ve seen that look before. I saw it on Tyson—several times, in fact—years before he ripped my heart out.

Fix this, Brit.

My eyes drift to the dance floor. I can't help but feel like I'd be much safer out there in the midst of all those gyrating bodies than I am here sitting in this booth, looking into the eyes of this man who sees way too much. This man who makes me say stupid, *stupid* things.

Looking at him isn't an option, because if I look at him, I'll cave. So I do the only thing I can do—the only thing that will preserve what willpower I have left.

I ease out of the booth. "I'm going to go dance."

CHAPTER 3

Connor

What just happened?

“Where the hell is she going?” Scooting into the seat Brittany just vacated, Casey hands me a beer, but her eyes are locked on her sister’s retreating form.

“I’m an asshole.” A *fucking* asshole.

Brittany’s blatant honesty caught me off guard and I froze. She had made it clear that she wasn’t into dating, only meaningless sex. Therefore, I expected her to brush off my question, or at the very least come up with some sort of sarcastic answer. But the vulnerability on her face when she said she loved my smile was unmistakable, and it left me at a loss for words.

I had been seconds away from telling her that I’d gladly have meaningless sex with her if the offer still stood. The need to touch her was growing by the second, and although I would’ve hated myself in the morning, I was willing to take whatever she would give me.

But then I saw it. The truth behind whatever façade she was putting up was short-lived, but it was all I needed. I knew right then and there that if I played my cards right, I could break down her walls ... and I desperately want to break down her walls.

“Most men are,” she mumbles. We both watch as Brittany finds an empty spot on the dance floor and starts moving her body in perfect rhythm with the music. “But,” she says, turning toward me, “I have a feeling that you, sir, are a redeemable asshole.”

Choosing not to comment, I take a drink of my beer. I know I’m not really an asshole, and I can tell by the tone of Casey’s voice she doesn’t think that either.

“She likes to think she’s made for meaningless sex,” Casey says, confirming what I had begun to suspect. “But she isn’t. It’s not who she is. She’s been hurt, and this is her way of protecting herself.”

Casey takes a sip of her purple concoction. When I open my mouth to respond, she holds up a hand, signaling me to wait. Lowering her glass to the table, she twirls it between her fingers. “There are two things you should know about my sister. First,” she says, holding up a finger, “she can’t—and I repeat *cannot*—say no to the Cardinals.” I furrow my brows, completely confused as to what the Cardinals have to do with anything. Before I can ask, Casey quickly continues. “And second, when it comes right down to it, she will *always* follow her heart. Now,” she says, sliding from the booth, drink in hand. “That’s all you need to know to land my sister. What you do with it is completely up to you. But”—she points a finger at me—“if you break her heart, I will hunt you down and do godawful things to your manhood.” Without a second glance, she spins on her heel and walks away.

For the second time in a matter of minutes, a woman has rendered me speechless. But this time I don’t let the girl get away. “Why are you helping me?” I ask.

Casey stops mid-step and looks over her shoulder. “Because I love my sister more than anyone else in this world, and I saw a spark in her eyes tonight that I haven’t seen in over two years. I want to see that spark every day, Connor.” I have absolutely no idea what to say to that, so I nod. “Now”—Casey gestures toward the dance floor—“you better go get your girl before some other asshole snags her.” With a quick wink, she walks away.

Tipping my head back, I drain what’s left of my beer then scoot out from behind the table. I may be an asshole, but I’m a smart asshole, and she doesn’t have to tell me twice.

I stand up and walk toward the edge of the dance floor. It isn’t big, but you’d never know by the number of bodies currently inhabiting the small space. It doesn’t take long to locate Brittany, and not

because my eyes are drawn to her like a magnet—which they are—but because she’s the one with men circling her, waiting to stake their claim.

She’s completely oblivious to the attention she’s getting, and for some reason I find that insanely attractive. Brittany has a kick-ass body that most women would pay ridiculous amounts of money for, and she isn’t even using it to get what she could clearly have—what she stated she wants.

Her head is tilted back, eyes closed, and when the beat of the song shifts, she tosses a hand up in the air. Slowly, she lowers her hand, threading her fingers into her straight blonde hair as her hips roll from side to side.

I’ve watched women dance before. Hell, I’ve even had a few lap dances, but nothing compares to watching *this* woman dance. It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen and my cock swells against the confines of my zipper. Without bothering to hide it, I adjust myself and take a step toward Brittany. The guy next to me must be thinking the exact same thing because he too takes a step in her direction.

Ain’t fuckin’ happening.

I hold my arm out and it bumps him in the chest. “She’s taken, bro,” I say. His reply is nothing but muffled noise because I don’t stick around to listen. In three long strides, I’m standing behind Brittany.

Heat from her body is rolling off in waves. She smells like a mixture of sweat and tropical flowers with a hint of summer, and it’s hands down the most intoxicating fragrance I’ve ever encountered. Unable to keep my distance, I step toward her until the front of my body molds against her back. She doesn’t look to see who it is, but she doesn’t move away either. I’m not sure if that makes me happy or insanely jealous.

Does she know it’s me? Does she feel the same strange sensation in her chest when we’re within arm’s reach of each other? Or would she dance with just anyone pressed against her backside?

Our bodies move together for several beats, her hips rocking from side to side. Gripping her waist with my right hand, I pull her body flush with mine. Her ass pushes against my groin and she gasps.

Lowering my mouth to her ear, I whisper, “That’s what you do to me.” Her body shivers at the sound of my voice, and when her head drops to my chest, I push my hips forward.

Looking down, I see Brittany’s eyes flutter open and then her eyes lock on mine. Her chest rises and falls with each sharp intake of breath, and that’s when I know she’s just as affected as I am. The music keeps playing, but our bodies are no longer moving. Everything around us fades away. All of the other bodies—gone. It’s just this insanely sexy woman and me. I wait patiently for her to make her move and then, as though the DJ himself knew exactly what we needed, the music shifts and everything changes.

“Ride” by Chase Rice pumps through the speakers. Brittany spins in my arms until her ample chest is pressed snugly against mine. She regards me quietly for several seconds and then her eyes drop to my mouth.

Hell yeah.

I slowly run my tongue along my bottom lip, and I’ll be damned if she didn’t just whimper.

“You’re teasing me, Mr. Jackson.” Her words come out all breathy as she drags her gaze to mine.

“Trust me”—I slide my arm around her waist and she comes willingly when I pull her in close—“there are a lot of things going on right now, but teasing isn’t one of them.”

Brittany closes her eyes. She takes a shuddery breath and blows it out, drawing my attention to her pouty lips. Without thinking twice, I dip my head until my lips brush hers.

CHAPTER 4

Brittany

Oh my...

We're kissing.

Connor Jackson's lips are on mine. It's not much of a kiss—*yet*—and it's already the best kiss I've ever had. If that isn't a scary fucking thought, then I don't know what is.

My hands slide up his shirt and I splay my fingers across his broad chest. But instead of pushing him away—which I had every intention of doing—I curl my fingers into the soft flannel and hold on for dear life.

The kiss is soft, sweet, and unlike anything I expected from this tatted-up man. A rush of emotions pulse through my veins, and the need to be closer to Connor, to feel his body against mine, is all-consuming. Winding my hands around his neck, I tangle my fingers in his hair. A low groan rumbles from somewhere deep in his chest.

That sound...*holy shit that sound*. I want to hear it again.

My tongue swipes along the seam of his lips and he opens up. Tilting my head to the side, I give him full control and he doesn't hesitate to take the reins. The fact that we're making out on a dance floor in the middle of a crowded bar should bother me. It doesn't. I don't care who sees us. In fact, if his tongue keeps doing that swirly thing it's doing, I'll likely let him have his way with me right here and now.

Connor pulls back far too soon. I groan in frustration and the bastard has the nerve to chuckle. Fisting my hand in his hair, I try to yank his mouth back to mine but he resists. Instead, his hot mouth finds its way to my neck. Trailing his lips along my jaw, he finds my ear. "I changed my mind," he whispers.

His words slam into me. There's no need for Connor to explain or elaborate. I know what he's referring to, and it's exactly what I wanted.

Right?

So why does it feel so wrong? Why do I have this strong urge to get to know him, and why in the world do I have this strange feeling that one night with him won't be enough?

I shouldn't, but I want to know what makes him tick. I want to know what makes him smile, what makes him angry. I want to know what his favorite color is and what Christmas traditions he treasures most. I want to know every little thing that will cause him to make that sexy rumble I love so much.

Hope sparks deep in my chest, and it's that hope that should have me running for the hills. It serves as a reminder of why I made my rule to begin with, which in turn leads me to grabbing Connor's hand. He glances at our joined hands and then back at me.

"My place or yours?" I ask. Without waiting for an answer, I all but drag him toward the door. I need to get this over with in the slowest possible way. Meaning, I need to cherish every second with Connor because I can't allow myself to have him after tonight. I'm in too deep...and I don't even know his middle name. That alone spells disaster. But I'm weak and can't walk away. This thirst I have for him has been growing since we met in his shop three weeks ago, and tonight I'm going to quench it.

As we approach the door, I glance over my shoulder, expecting to see hesitation on Connor's face. There is none. Squaring his shoulders, he smiles confidently, and when I cock a brow, urging him to answer, he says just one word: "Mine."

Hell yes, I'm yours...for tonight.

I don't bother to tell him I only live a couple of miles away, because his place is probably a better choice. At least this way I can make a clean break when it's over.

Connor leads me to his car, and in a matter of seconds we're speeding away. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I check the compartment on the back of my case, ensuring my ID and credit card are still firmly in place. Then I shoot Casey a quick text.

Me: Left with Connor. We're going back to his place. Leave your phone on; you'll have to come get me later.

Her reply is almost immediate.

Casey: Good for you. It's about time your vagina gets a workout.

Me: My vagina gets regular workouts, thank you very much.

Casey: BOB doesn't count.

I shake my head, smiling. How does she know I have a battery-operated boyfriend? I choose not to reply to that comment though, because you get Casey started on something and she won't stop.

Casey: Where does Connor, the tattoo artist, live?

Good question. I look up at the same time Connor makes a left-hand turn. Squinting, I focus on the street sign to see where exactly we are.

Davenport Way.

Hold up.

Davenport Way?

"You live out here?" I ask as we pass a familiar line of duplexes.

"I do," he says, turning onto Baylor Hills Drive.

"Nice neighborhood." Connor drives by yet another familiar street and I shoot off one more text to Casey.

Me: Not sure I'll need you to pick me up. I'll explain in the morning. Be good tonight. Love you.

"Thanks," he says. I tuck my phone in my pocket and look up as he pulls into a driveway.

No fucking way.

Stepping out of the car, I shut the door and stare at Connor's duplex. I don't hear him walk toward me, but I know he's there. I can feel him. The hair on my neck stands up any time he gets close, and my heart starts bouncing around inside my chest as though it's trying to get his attention.

I take a deep breath. "Are you sure this is what you want?" I ask, giving him an out and secretly hoping he'll take it. As much as I want to spend one night—*this* night—with Connor, I know that one of us is going to end up getting hurt, and it won't be me. I won't let it be me.

Connor's warm hand wraps around mine. My knees go weak at the soft, unexpected touch. "I won't lie. I want nothing more than for you to throw your rules out the window." I try to remove my hand from his, but Connor only tightens his grip. "But," he says, laughing at my weak attempt to get away, "I understand you have your rules for a reason. I wish I knew what that reason was so I could find a way to push past it, but I realize that isn't what you want and I respect that."

The wind picks up, blowing a strand of hair in front of my face. Connor drops my hand and brushes the hair from my eyes. "Ready?" His voice is strained, and a part of me wonders if it's because he wants this just as badly as I do or if it's because he knows he's making a mistake.

I pause, giving myself the opportunity to walk away, but apparently my feet have a different agenda. Because when Connor grabs my hand and leads me toward his door, I follow.

With one hand still connected to mine, Connor unlocks his door and pushes it open. We step inside, and when he walks to the left to flick on the lights, I step further into the open space and toss my phone on the entryway table.

His home is gorgeous, and not at all like the bachelor pad I expected. The walls are a deep blue accented with dark wood trim, and the room is filled with oversized, chocolate-colored furniture. It fits Connor perfectly, but it's almost *too* perfect.

I look closer to find that the mantel is adorned with framed pictures and knickknacks. A vase filled with fresh flowers sits on a hutch tucked in the corner. Intricately decorated throw pillows adorn the couch

and a fluffy blue afghan is draped over the arm of the recliner. All of the details indicate a woman's touch, but what woman? A sister, a mother, an old girlfriend...a best friend, maybe?

That last thought is like a bucket of ice water being dumped on my head, and I'm reminded why it doesn't matter who decorated this place. This is the last time I'll be here.

Squaring my shoulders, I turn to find Connor standing off to the side, his eyes igniting a fire as they roam over my body. I stalk toward him until his back is pressed against the wall. His gaze drops to my mouth, but I don't give him a chance to think, let alone react. I seal my lips over his and our tongues collide, instantly dueling for power. Sliding, pushing, and sucking, neither of us is willing to give up control.

Connor tastes like pure fucking heaven.

Connor shouldn't taste like pure fucking heaven.

Tearing my lips away from his, I slide them across his jaw. Dragging my mouth to his ear, I nip at it playfully before sucking the soft flesh into my mouth. "Bedroom. Now," I whisper.

Strong arms wrap around my waist and lift me off the ground. As he takes off down the hall, I lock my ankles behind his back then claim his mouth in a heated kiss. He growls in response, and before I know it I'm wedged between the wall and a rock hard body with Connor's erection cradled between my thighs. Tilting my hips, I grind against him.

He pulls his lips from mine. "You're killing me," he says, trailing his mouth down the side of my neck. The sound of his gravelly voice shoots straight to my clit, and I push against him harder, trying to ease the ache.

"Easy," he murmurs. "We've got all night."

The scruff on his face scrapes against the sensitive skin of my neck when he talks, and it's like nothing I've ever felt before. *More. I want more.*

I open my mouth to tell him I can't wait—that I want him right here, right now. But then he pulls the front of my shirt down, exposing my white lace bra, and all thoughts flee from my brain.

"That's sexy as hell, but I want what's underneath," he says, tugging the bra down as well. My breasts pop out and he places open-mouthed kisses around one of my nipples, then blows lightly. My nipple tightens and Connor grins before bringing his lips back to my breast and devouring it. The sight proves to be too much and I drop my head back against the wall, thrusting my chest into his face. He laves one breast and then moves on to the next, all the while torturing me with slow circular motions and tiny nips.

Against my belly his erection grows, along with my desire to touch him. Dipping my hand between our bodies, I flick the button of his jeans open and lower the zipper. Connor releases my nipple with a wet pop, and keeping me anchored against the wall, he pulls his hips back enough for me to shove his pants down. Rock solid and throbbing, his erection bobs heavily between us and I wrap my fingers around his length and stroke several times. Pushing his body flush against mine, Connor drops his face to the crook of my neck. He pumps his hips, thrusting himself into my hand. We're both panting as our bodies fight to get closer, desperate for some sort of release.

"Fuck," he growls, sinking his teeth into the side of my neck.

I had no idea that giving a guy a hand job could be so erotic. Then again, I guess it isn't what I'm doing...it's who I'm doing it to. Connor's warm breath against my neck and the grunts that keep rumbling from his chest tell me he's close, but I don't want him to get off in my hand.

I release my grip on his cock. Looking up, he furrows his brows, then reluctantly lets go of my legs and I lower them to the ground. Warm hands wrap around my upper arms, steadying me until I find my balance. When I've regained some control, I nudge Connor across the hall until his back meets the opposite wall. My fingers trail up his shirt and I slowly work my way back down, undoing each button as I go. The soft flannel falls open and I can't help it—I have to get a better look at this crazy beautiful man.

Smoothing my hands over the hard plane of his abdomen, I sweep them up his chest, pushing his shirt off in the process. My eyes are drawn to an intricate tattoo etched across the left side of his ribs. Bending at the knees, I take a closer look. It's a detailed tribal cross with a set of angel wings coming out from behind

it. My fingers skate across his skin, following the black lines. Connor shivers, goose bumps breaking out across his body under the touch of my hand. His eyes follow my every movement as he allows me to explore his body.

Pressing my lips against his skin, I place a kiss to the center of the cross and then slowly drag my mouth across his chest, stopping to tease each of his nipples before kissing a path down his stomach. My tongue flicks out, outlining the chiseled lines of his abs before tracing along that sexy V that leads straight to the good. Then I slowly drop to my knees.

“Brittany.” His voice sounds tortured when my name falls from his lips. Connor sinks his fingers into my hair, and the closer my mouth gets to his cock, the tighter his grip gets. The muscles of his stomach tighten beneath my touch, and I revel in the knowledge that I’m affecting him this way.

The weight of Connor’s stare is heavy against my head, and I want nothing more than to look up. But I can’t—at least not yet. Instead, I finally give in to what we both want. Wrapping my fingers around his hard length, I pump him several times, giving a slight twist of my wrist as I do.

A jumbled mess of words emanates from Connor, but I can’t make out what he’s saying. My heart is thumping loudly in my ears and pure, hot desire is pulsing through my veins.

Running my thumb along the head of his cock, I rub at the bead of cum that has formed on the tip before I flick out my tongue to taste it.

“Shit,” Connor grinds out. He’s losing control—I can hear it in his voice. And if that isn’t the best damn feeling, then I don’t know what is.

Slipping the head of his cock inside my mouth, I push my tongue against the underside of his shaft and take him deep into my mouth.

“Ah, fuck,” he groans. The words are followed by a loud thud, and I finally allow myself to look up.

Connor’s head is against the wall and he looks sexy as hell. His eyes are squeezed tightly shut, and I watch for several seconds as his chest heaves with each breath he takes. Sucking hard, I work him faster and deeper. He grows impossibly large inside my mouth, and his abs flex with each pump of my hand. The sight of him losing control is almost too much, causing a strangled moan to rip from my throat.

His eyelids flutter open and Connor looks down under a hooded gaze. “Deeper,” he demands. “Take more of me.”

What woman in her right mind could ever say no to that? Sure as hell not this woman.

Curling my lips around my teeth, I push deeper. His cock bottoms out at the back of my throat and Connor grunts. “Fuck yeah. Just like that.” His words send a surge of heat straight to my pussy and I close my thighs as best I can.

A few strands of my hair fall forward, blocking my view of his gorgeous face, and he reaches out to sweep the strands to the side. With one hand buried in my hair and the other cupping my cheek, he watches me take him over and over into my mouth.

“Sexiest thing I’ve ever seen,” he rasps. “Watching your sweet little mouth take my cock like that...” His eyes close as his words trail off and I silently beg him to continue. I’ve never been one for dirty talk, but from him I *love* it.

The silence is filled with soft moans, and then Connor’s entire body jerks and his eyes pop open. Dropping his hand from my cheek, he links his fingers at the back of my head, urging me to pick up the pace as his hips thrust forward.

“I’m not gonna last,” he says, gritting his teeth.

I can’t remember the last time I actually watched a man lose himself to the pleasure of a woman. Honestly, it’s not something I ever gave much thought to, but I want to watch *this* man. I want to watch as Connor surrenders himself to my mouth—to *me*.

His body goes rigid beneath the weight of my hands and his grip on my head loosens, presumably giving me the opportunity to pull back.

No way in hell.

My cheeks hollow, my tongue pushing his cock against the roof of my mouth as I suck long and hard. With a string of incoherent words, Connor finally lets go and I suck him dry, savoring every last drop he has to offer.

CHAPTER 5

Brittany

Connor pulls me up off the floor. One hand pressed against the small of my back, the other cradling my head, he hauls me in close. Then he smiles, slow and sexy. “What am I going to do with you?” he asks, sealing his lips over mine.

Unlike the last kiss, this one isn’t hurried. It’s slow, methodical, and utterly intoxicating. Skimming my hands up his arms, I tangle them in his hair. I’ve never been with a man whose hair is long, but I’m finding it incredibly inviting. Plus, it’ll give me something to hold onto when he has his head buried between my thighs.

Hell, Connor’s hair isn’t the only thing that sets him apart. My previous conquests have been perfectly groomed, suit or scrub-wearing types that wouldn’t dream of having a tattoo, much less a body covered in them. Maybe that’s where I was going wrong with men. Maybe all along I just needed someone more like Connor.

What the hell am I talking about?

I don’t need a man. I have a hard enough time keeping myself in check, let alone having to worry about a man.

This is all Connor’s fault. If it weren’t for his seductive mouth, I wouldn’t be having these crazy thoughts. Damn his lips for being so hypnotizing.

Giving his hair a tug, I pull Connor’s head back. His eyelids bob heavily several times. “Bedroom,” I say, my lips brushing his. “I need—” A loud noise rings throughout the house, interrupting me, and I cock my head to the side. “Is that a house phone? Do you have a landline?” I curl my lips into my mouth, trying to suppress a smile at the look of disbelief on Connor’s face.

“Yes,” he says chuckling as he pulls his pants up. He leaves them unbuttoned, which I assume is an invitation to get back into them later. “And don’t you laugh at me. It’s connected to my shop phone so I can take calls and appointments when I’m home.” I stare blankly at him. “People still have house phones,” he states firmly.

I shake my head. “Most people don’t have house phones.”

Connor takes a step forward, nudging me back. “Are you making fun of me?” he asks with a sly look on his face.

The phone rings one last time before the answering machine picks up. Connor’s voice filters through the air, but the caller hangs up. And that’s when I start giggling. I can’t help it. Slapping a hand over my mouth, I fail at trying to hold in my amusement, and the look on Connor’s face does nothing but make me laugh harder.

“I can’t believe you’re making fun of me.”

Maybe it’s the low level of alcohol still sifting through my body, or perhaps it’s all of the pent-up emotion I’ve been holding in lately. Or maybe it’s Connor and the way his eyes are softening as he watches me, but I tip my head back and let out the most unladylike snort known to mankind.

“Did you just snort?” Connor asks, making me snort again.

“I did.” I gasp, nodding like a damn bobblehead. “I totally snorted.” I take a few deep breaths to calm myself down. Wiping the tears of laughter from my face, I glance at Connor. Something in his expression has changed. He’s no longer looking at me like he wants to ravage me, and his face is void of any amusement. Instead, his eyes are warm and inviting.

The phone starts ringing again, and I point toward the other room. “Do you need to answer that?”

Connor shakes his head. “I don’t care who it is,” he says, taking another step toward me.

“All I care about right now is this beautiful woman standing in front of me.”

Oh.

Oh my.

That was good.

Connor’s eyes rake down my body and then back up again. He looks like a man who is in desperate need of food, and I’m his next meal. I don’t remember the last time a man looked at me like this, but I want *him* to look at me like this all the time.

But he can’t if you don’t give him a chance.

And just like that, my resolve crumbles. Because as much as I hate to break my own rules, I hate the thought of never seeing Connor again even more. The thought of letting my own fears keep me from what could potentially be something great makes my stomach roll. Plus, if any man is worth taking that chance on, it has to be this man. The one I can’t stop thinking about, and the one who makes me wish for things I’d long ago given up on.

And let’s not forget the butterflies.

A big, huge swarm of them that take flight every single time he looks at me.

I haven’t felt that ... *ever*.

Two years is long enough, so I decide to go with my gut—or maybe it’s my heart. Right now I think they’re working together, plotting against me. *Damn conspirators.*

Swallowing hard past the lump in my throat, I say the words before I chicken out. “I change my mind,” I whisper.

Connor’s eyes widen, and in a flash I’m scooped up in his arms. But instead of walking down the hall toward where I imagine the bedroom would be, he walks into the living room. Sitting down on the couch, Connor settles me on his lap. I straddle his hips and bring my hands to the front of his shirt.

“This isn’t the bedroom,” I state, leaning forward to place a kiss on his plump lips.

Connor allows me to have my way with his mouth, and when I finally pull back to take a breath, he chuckles. “If I would’ve known it’d only take a blow job to get you to change your mind, then I would’ve obliged at the tattoo shop.”

I slap playfully at his arm. “The blow job had nothing to do with it.” The answering machine kicks on for the second time and I smile before continuing. “It was all you and that damn smile,” I say, kissing him again because, well...I can.

“Connor, the tattoo artist...” Gasping, I slap a hand over my mouth as my sister’s voice fills the room. “Brittany isn’t answering her phone, or her texts, and I am *not* happy about it. Did you know your buddy Todd is an asshole? Because he is. He wouldn’t give me your damn number. Do you know what I had to do to get him to give me your number?” she asks.

“Who’s Todd?” I whisper, lowering my hand.

“He owns the bar we were at earlier,” Connor answers as Casey continues with her tirade.

“I had to *flash* him,” Casey scoffs. “Can you believe that? The little shit wouldn’t give me your damn number until I agreed to flash him. Unbelievable. Anyway,” she says with a yawn, as if flashing Todd was no big deal. “Brit, if you’re there, I really need you to come home. I locked myself out of the house—” The answering machine beeps, cutting Casey off mid-sentence. Scooting off Connor’s lap, I grab my phone from the entryway table and shoot her a quick text.

Me: Be there in one minute.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, straightening my clothes. “But I’ve gotta go.”

Connor stands up, buttons his pants, and smooths out his rumpled shirt. “I’ll take you home,” he says, grabbing his keys from the hook next to the door.

As much as I hate to leave, this next part should be fun. “You don’t have to take me home, I can walk. It’s not far.”

“Hell no,” he says, shaking his head. “It’s after midnight. No way am I letting you walk home.”

“It’s really not necess—”

Connor's big blue eyes fill with uncertainty. "Did you change your mind?" he asks, cutting me off.

"No," I breathe, shaking my head. "Did you change your mind?" I'm hoping he'll say no, because I wouldn't bend my rules for just anyone and I really, *really* like him.

Connor takes a step toward me, wraps me in his arms, and pulls me in close until we're nose to nose. "Not even close. Tonight was..."

"Tonight was what?" I ask.

Connor kisses me softly once...twice...and then a third time before pulling back. He licks his lips and runs the back of his fingers along my cheek. "You taste amazing."

"Tonight was what?" I ask again. I want to know what he's thinking, and I need to hear the words.

"It was fucking incredible." Warm hands cup my cheeks. "I want to do it again. *A lot.*"

I bust up laughing. "You want a lot more blow jobs?"

"No...well, yes." He starts laughing, too. "I want more of you. I want to get to know you. Let me take you out on a real date."

"An official first date, huh? Where would you take me?"

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes," I answer. Just knowing I'm going to get to spend more time with Connor causes my chest to fill with warmth.

"I was thinking maybe—"

My phone beeps with an incoming text, cutting Connor off. "Shit," I hiss. "I bet that's Casey."

Connor releases his hold and I shiver at the loss of his touch.

Casey: It's been three minutes. Where the hell are you? I have to pee.

"I've gotta go." Bolting for the front door, I yank it open. Connor yells my name as I slip out the door, down his steps, and jog across the tiny patch of grass before stopping in front of my side of the duplex. Casey is sitting cross-legged on our porch, her back propped against the door.

"Where the hell did you come fr—?" She stops abruptly, her eyes cutting over my shoulder. Connor must have followed me. "No fucking way."

"Way." I walk up the stairs and nudge Casey with my knee. She pushes up off the concrete, giving me room to unlock the door. Shoving my key in the lock, I twist it and push the door open. I turn to Casey before glancing at Connor. She's standing off to the side, her eyes bouncing between me and the sexy Adonis, who looks like he's still trying to figure out what's going on. She dances in place, squeezing her legs together.

"We're gonna talk about this *after* I go pee." She rushes into the house, our front door slamming loudly behind her.

"So," I say, walking toward Connor. "It turns out I have this really hot neighbor. You should probably be jealous."

"Do you walk around naked?" he asks with a cat-ate-the-canary grin. Warm fingers wrap around mine. He tugs on my hand and I fall forward against his big, hard chest.

"Only when my sister isn't home."

"Good to know. Don't tell your neighbor that or he'll be dropping by for unexpected visits. You know"—he shrugs—"to borrow sugar...and stuff."

"Sugar?" I scrunch up my nose. "He doesn't look like the baking type."

Connor tilts his head to the side and brings his mouth to mine. He kisses me long and slow, only pulling away when we're both breathless and fighting for air.

"He is now." Connor winks and slaps my ass playfully before heading in the direction of his door. "He's gonna be baking all the damn time," he says, laughing, as he disappears into his house.

Well played, Connor. Well played.

CHAPTER 6

Connor

It's been three days since I left Brittany standing on her front porch. I knew the duplex next to mine had sold, but I've been working so much lately I never paid attention to whether or not someone had actually moved in. There's been an old Grand Prix sitting out front a couple of times and a sleek black Audi, but I didn't think much of it. Today, the Grand Prix is gone, but the Audi isn't, and I'm about to find out if the sexy little car belongs to my sexy little neighbor.

Running a finger over my smartphone, it comes to life, and I shoot her a quick text.

Me: Who drives the black Audi?

Her reply is almost instant.

Brittany: Who is this?

Me: It's your really hot neighbor.

Brittany: How did you get my number?

Me: Changed your mind already, huh?

Brittany: Not at all. I was actually wondering when you were going to make your move. Is this you making your move?

And that right there is exactly why I'm so insanely attracted to Brittany. There aren't many women who are willing to speak their minds, but she has no problem with it. Smiling to myself, I type out a quick response.

Me: I actually tried to make my move yesterday. Went over to your place to borrow a cup of sugar, but Casey said you were working. She gave me your number.

Staring at my phone, I wait for her to reply. A couple of minutes pass and then I internally berate myself for waiting on a text. "Fuck no," I mumble to myself.

Flipping on the TV, I find the sports channel and settle in to watch a recap of last night's major league baseball games. The announcers are talking excitedly about the Cardinals win over the Cubs, and as they debate whether or not the Cards will sweep the series in tonight's game, I pull out my wallet to check—for the fifth time—that the tickets are still there.

I'm tucking them away just as a soft tap on the front door catches my attention. I shove my wallet back in my pocket, walk to the front door, and pull it open. Brittany smiles, revealing two of the cutest damn dimples I've ever seen. *How in the world did I miss those before?*

"Borrowing sugar from another woman, huh?" she says, clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

I prop my hip against the doorframe. "Nah, I don't want another woman's sugar."

Brittany's face lights up. "Good answer, Mr. Jackson. You just earned yourself something swee—"

She doesn't get the chance to finish her sentence because I yank her into my house and swallow her words with my mouth.

"Well"—she pulls back and runs a thumb along her bottom lip—"that was more spicy than sweet, but I like spicy."

"Oh yeah?"

"Mmm hmmm." She nods as I lower my mouth to the side of her neck. "I like it a whole lot."

"Go out with me tonight," I whisper.

"Okay," she says, tilting her head to the side. She brings her hands to my arms and steadies herself. She tastes so damn good; I can't help but nip at her shoulder. "If you keep doing that, I'd probably agree to just about anything."

“Then maybe I’ll have to do it again tonight after the baseball game.”

“Baseball game?” Brittany squirms and I look up. “Who’s going to a baseball game?”

“We are,” I say, pulling my wallet out once again. “You did agree to go out with me, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” I hand her the tickets and her eyes widen. “Connor,” she breathes out, looking between me and the two tickets that cost me a small fortune. “These are front row seats.”

“I know.”

She shakes her head. “Not just any front row seats. They’re right behind home plate.”

“We should be able to see everything.”

Brittany’s eyes glisten under the soft light and my gut twists. *Is she crying? Did I do something wrong?*

“I can’t believe you did this. How did you…” She snaps her mouth shut, swallows hard, and blinks several times.

I snatch the tickets from her hands. “We don’t have to go,” I say, desperate to fix whatever the hell I did to make her cry. “We can do something else, like go catch a movie or have dinner or something.”

“No.” She steals the tickets back. “The game is perfect. It’s exactly what I would’ve picked. It’s just that…well… no one has ever done something like this for me before.”

I have the intense urge to punch her ex in the nose. What man in his right mind wouldn’t want to spoil this woman? I sure as hell do. Especially when she looks at me with those big, expressive doe eyes—like she is right now. “Well, I’m not your normal guy.”

“No,” she whispers. “You’re not.”

“So,” I say, sliding my hand to her waist. “How fast can you get decked out in your Cardinals gear? I’d like to take you out for lunch before the game.”

“No ballpark food?” She pushes her plump bottom lip out and it’s too damn enticing. Leaning forward, I suck the offending piece of flesh into my mouth.

“Definitely ballpark food,” I say, biting gently on her lower lip. “But a light lunch first.”

Brittany pats my chest and steps away. “I’ll be back in ten minutes!”

Spinning on her heel, she runs out of my house. And, if I’m not mistaken, she just took a tiny little piece of my heart with her.

CHAPTER 7

Connor

“Connor,” she says, nudging my arm. “This is amazing. I’ve never been this close.” The look on her face is priceless and tugs at something deep in my chest. Brittany’s lips part, a wide smile stretching across her face.

Casey told me her sister has an addiction to the St. Louis Cardinals, but I don’t think Casey even knows just how deep that addiction runs. When Brittany showed back up to my house earlier today, she was wearing a red Cardinals shirt with a matching hat and even dangling Cardinals earrings. But the kicker was her shoes. Yes, the girl has Cardinals shoes.

Her blonde hair was pulled up in a ponytail and tucked into her Cardinals hat—an incredibly sexy look on her—and she had her face painted with a red number four proudly displayed across her left cheek.

“Oh my gosh, there’s Yadi!”

Who the fuck is Yadi?

My eyes follow her gaze. Sure enough, there he is—number four. Apparently, *Yadi* is the object of my date’s affection.

“Have you always been a Cardinals fan?” I ask, genuinely interested.

Dragging her eyes back to mine, she nods. “Yep. My dad is a huge baseball fan. He used to bring me to games all the time, but we sure as hell couldn’t afford seats like these. We were usually in the nosebleeds. Way up there,” she says, pointing to the top of the stadium. “But that didn’t matter. It was our thing.”

I wish I had memories like that. Hell, I wish I had a dad. I take that back. I’ve got a dad—somewhere—but the piece of shit decided drugs were more important than his own kid.

“How about you?” Brittany asks. “How long have you been a fan?”

I tilt my head to the side. “About three days.”

“What?” she asks, crinkling her nose.

“I’ve never been much of a sports fan.” I shrug, leaving out the fact that I didn’t even have a TV to watch sports until I was put into foster care at the age of fifteen. And even then I wasn’t allowed to actually watch the TV. “When your sister told me how much of a Cardinals fan you were, I decided I should rectify that.”

Brittany watches me for what feels like hours, her blue eyes churning with emotion. Warm fingers tangle with mine, and I look down at our joined hands and then back up at her. “I’m not really sure what to say.”

Leaning over the arm rail, she kisses me gently on the lips. I don’t know what it is, but I’m starting to think she has a magic mouth. Every time we kiss, it’s as if nothing else in the world matters but *that* kiss. At first I thought it was just a fluke, but I’ll be damned if it doesn’t happen every single time.

Brittany pulls back and my mouth follows hers, begging for more. “You’re getting major points for this,” she says softly.

“Hmm, I like the sound of that.”

Brittany glances over my shoulder and her eyes light up. “Cotton candy!”

“What?” I ask, caught off guard by the sudden change of subject.

Standing up, Brittany waves down a vendor loaded down with bags of sugar on a stick. When the young girl reaches our row, Brittany says, “Two bags, please.”

“Why two bags?” I ask, pulling out my wallet. No way am I letting her pay for a thing today. Brittany swats at my hand, but I’m taller and my arms are longer. I hand the girl a twenty-dollar bill and she gives me change, along with two bags of cotton candy.

“Because,” Brittany says, grabbing the pink one from my hand, leaving me with the blue. “I don’t share well and you’ll undoubtedly want a bite of mine. This eliminates that problem.”

Chuckling, I open up my bag and pull off a chunk. “Well, aren’t you a smart cookie?” I say, popping the bite in my mouth.

“I am a doctor, you know.” She gives me a smug smile then tosses a bite into her mouth.

My jaw nearly hits the floor. *She’s a fucking doctor?* What in the hell would a doctor see in me? I’m not at all ashamed of what I do for a living, and I’m certainly not living paycheck to paycheck, but still... “You’re a doctor? How did I not know this?”

Wrapping her lips around her thumb, Brittany sucks the sticky flesh into her mouth. My eyes follow the movement, and my blood starts pumping to places that have no need for it at the moment. Now if we weren’t in the middle of a crowded stadium...

I shift in my seat as Brittany slowly drags her thumb out of her mouth. “Did you like that?” she asks, sounding coy. *The little minx.*

“Hell yes, I like it. Now answer my question.”

“I forgot what it was.” Her eyes drift to my mouth and I bend my head to capture her gaze.

“I didn’t know you were a doctor.”

She smiles. “You never asked. Plus, this is only our first date so there are lots of things about me you don’t know.”

“Tell me something.”

“Okay,” she says, pushing up from her seat. Looking around, I notice everyone around us is also standing, so I follow suit. “I get a little crazy at Cardinals games.”

“Like how crazy?” I ask.

Brittany turns her attention to the field, where the players are starting to take their positions, and starts clapping along with everyone else. “Crazy enough that I feel like I should apologize now for my behavior.” She winks, not taking her eyes off the field.

“Come on, you can’t be that bad.”

* * * *

Holy shit, she *can* be that bad.

It’s the bottom of the fourth inning and the crowd roars, heckling the umpire. Brittany jumps from her chair and pushes her face against the screen that’s separating our seats from the field. “You’ve gotta be freakin’ kidding me!” she yells. “That’s the worst call I’ve seen all year. Did you even see that ball—?”

Spinning around, the umpire glares at Brittany, and I slap a hand over her mouth. She continues to scream, but at least this way it’s muffled and won’t get us kicked out of the ballpark.

I hope.

I press my lips to her ears. “Shh. You’ve got to calm down,” I say, fighting back laughter. Turns out Brittany is a little spitfire, and I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t a huge turn-on.

Wiggling from my hold, she opens her mouth, no doubt to tell me where to shove my words, but she doesn’t get a chance. I slam my mouth against hers and push my tongue inside for a searing kiss. Then, just as fast, I pull away.

Brittany stumbles backward, looking a bit stunned.

“Am I forgiven?” I ask, stifling a smile when someone behind us hollers for us to get a room. Brittany nods and lowers herself into her seat. “Good, because I’d hate to—”

“Strike three!” the umpire yells, signaling an out for Brittany’s boy, Yadi.

Oh shit.

“What?” In a split second, she’s pressed against the screen.

Again.

“Come on, Blue!” She tosses her hands up in the air. “Are you even paying attention over there? Pull your head outta your ass!”

The bear of a man that was sitting next to Brittany joins her at the netting, mimicking her displeasure, then they high-five each other. The umpire turns around and points a finger at Brittany and her accomplice.

“I’ve got her,” I say, wrapping an arm around her stomach. She struggles when I lift her up and settle her in my lap. At least this way I can keep a firm grip on her. Brittany continues to bounce around, trying to break free, before finally giving up.

I realize in this moment that I won’t let her go. Not now—maybe not ever.

“You do know we’re winning, right?” I ask.

“That doesn’t matter.” Brittany crosses her arms over her chest. The movement causes her shirt to rise, revealing a hint of skin above the waistline of her jeans. “It’s the principle! That was clearly a ball, which would’ve been ball *four*, which would’ve been a walk for Yadi. With the bases loaded, Wainwright would’ve walked into home and Carpenter was up to bat. Do you know what Carpenter could’ve done with the bases loaded?”

“No.” And to be honest, I don’t care. Right now, the only thing I care about is the creamy skin playing peekaboo above Brittany’s waistband. My arm is already wrapped around her stomach, so I slip my fingers under the hem of her shirt, praying that she doesn’t ram an elbow into my gut. When I stroke the soft skin with my thumb, she shivers but doesn’t pull away. “What could Carpenter have done?” I ask.

Glancing over her shoulder, Brittany looks at me and furrows her brow. “Huh?”

I chuckle and bury my face in her back. She’s so damn cute. “You asked me if I knew what Carpenter could do with the bases loaded.”

“I did? Oh, right, I did.” She shakes her head and turns back around, mumbling something that sounds an awful lot like *‘I can’t think straight when you touch me.’*

“What was that?” I ask, wanting to make sure I heard her right. She may not like that she can’t think straight when I touch her, but I sure as hell do.

“Nothing.” She sighs. “I didn’t say anything.”

The next few innings go by without incident. All too soon it’s the seventh inning and everyone is, in fact, standing to stretch. Pressing my lips to Brittany’s neck, I whisper, “I’m proud of you. You went three innings without calling the umpire an asshole *or* a jackass.”

“Thank you,” she says. I loosen my hold around her waist and we stand up. Puffing out her chest, Brittany raises her arms and stretches like a cat. “I feel like I deserve some sort of prize or something.”

“A prize, huh?” Funny, because being here with Brittany, I feel like I *won* some sort of prize.

She nods.

Grabbing my beer from the cup holder, I tilt my head back and take a swig. “Name it and it’s yours.”

She smiles like the Cheshire Cat. “Anything?”

“Anything.” I’m secretly hoping that whatever she asks for involves the two of us getting naked.

“Nachos,” she states firmly. *Nachos?*

“I said you can have anything you want, and you choose nachos?”

Tossing her head back, Brittany lets out a deep, throaty laugh that travels straight to my dick, stroking it several times. This woman is going to be the death of me. No woman’s laugh should be able to make a man feel *that*.

“But I’m hungry,” she says, slipping her hand in mine. I follow behind her as she leads us toward the main aisle then weaves through the crowd, presumably in search of a food stand. “How can you be hungry? You had lunch, cotton candy, a jumbo hot dog, and half of my pretzel.”

“What can I say?” She shrugs, not stopping in her quest for nachos. “I love ballpark food.”

CHAPTER 8

Brittany

“Connor?” My stomach rolls, and when he doesn’t answer or look at me, I tap his arm. “Connor?”

The crowd goes wild and it pains me to say I have absolutely no idea what just happened. Connor jumps up, fist pumping the air, and despite my ever-growing nausea, I love that he’s enjoying the game.

I nudge him one more time. “Connor?”

“Sorry. That was intense,” he says excitedly. Dropping onto his seat, he looks over at me, and immediately his brows dip low. “Are you okay?” he asks, pressing the back of his hand against my forehead. “You don’t look so good.”

Closing my eyes, I swallow past the burning in my throat. “I hate ballpark food,” I grumble.

“Shit,” he hisses, and suddenly the empty nacho tray is no longer in my hands. I open my eyes to see Connor looking around us frantically. “Are you going to get sick? Do they have barf bags around here somewhere?”

“No.” I start to chuckle but my stomach clenches tight, so I bend over in pain instead. “Can we go home?”

“Yes,” he says, grabbing at my purse and foam finger, which I insisted on buying earlier. “Can you walk or do I need to carry you?”

“I can walk.” Ever so slowly, I stand up and follow Connor to the aisle. As we start up the stairs, he wraps an arm around my shoulders, bearing the majority of my weight. My stomach churns with each step we take toward the stadium’s exit. When warm saliva fills my mouth, I run for the nearest trashcan and bend over as my stomach heaves. Pain rips up my throat as I lose every single thing I ate today.

A warm hand lands on my back and begins rubbing big, slow circles. Connor uses his other hand to hold my ponytail out of the way. He doesn’t move or say a word, but he doesn’t have to. His actions today speak so much louder than words. Tears burn my eyes at his kind gesture, making me grateful that I have the throwing up to mask my sudden emotional response.

My stomach finally settles. Straightening my back, I offer Connor a sad smile. He searches my face for a second before draping the strap of my purse over his shoulder. He pulls the foam finger from under his arm, hands it to me, and then scoops me up. “I don’t like seeing you sick,” he mumbles, taking off toward the car.

“I can walk,” I say meekly. Dropping my head to his shoulder, I silently pray that he doesn’t put me down.

“I know you can.” Connor tightens his hold on me. I may not feel the best, but I’m still able to appreciate his big, strong arms wrapped around me. It’s nice being taken care of for a change.

And for the first time in a long time, I feel safe and content in the arms of a man. It’s as if I saw him in the tattoo parlor and my heart said, *‘oh, there you are.’* That’s a scary thought considering this is our first official date, so I try not to dwell on it and just enjoy the simplicity of the moment.

* * * *

“Come on, pretty girl,” Connor says, gently retrieving me from the front seat of his car. My eyes fly open as he cradles me against his chest.

“Did I fall asleep?” I ask, stifling a yawn.

“Yep, and just so you know, you snore.” Connor kisses the side of my head. I squirm to get down, but he doesn’t relent. “It’s okay, I found it kind of cute.”

“I don’t snore,” I scoff, wiggling again. “Do you have a thing for holding women or what?”

“Not women,” he says, walking toward my door. “Just you. It turns out I have a thing for holding *you*. Don’t ask me,” he says, shrugging. “I can’t figure it out either.”

Damn he’s good.

So, so good.

The front door flies open as soon as we hit the welcome mat. Casey shakes her head, making a *tsking* sound. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“You have?” Connor asks, sounding confused.

“Yep,” she says, popping the *P*. “She does this *every single* time. The woman doesn’t know when to stop. Actually,” she says, motioning for Connor to walk inside, “I’m thinking of finding some sort of ballpark food addiction group she can join.”

Connor sets me on my feet but keeps a hand settled on my lower back. “Ha, ha. Very funny.” Plopping down on the couch, I glare at Casey. “Now, quit making fun of the sick girl. It isn’t nice.”

Casey purses her lips, failing miserably at trying to hide her smile. “You aren’t sick, you just ate too much. Big difference.”

I roll my eyes and Connor laughs. “You did eat a ton.” Sticking my bottom lip out, I give him my best pouty look. He bends down and kisses my forehead. “Want me to stay for a while?” he whispers, his eyes flitting to Casey and then back to me.

“No.” I groan. Grabbing the afghan off the back of the couch, I drape it over myself. “She’s right, this happens all the time. I’ll be miserable for a few hours, but I’ll be okay. No sense in you hanging around. Plus, it’s getting late.”

“Are you sure? I really don’t mind,” he says, tucking the edges of the blanket around my shoulders.

The gesture is so damn sweet it makes my teeth ache. Fisting my hand in the front of his shirt, I pull him toward me. “If I didn’t have vomit breath, I’d kiss the hell out of you right now.”

Connor flashes me his pearly whites. “Oh yeah? Can I get a rain check?”

“I’ll give you something better than a rain check.”

“Oh, good Lord.” Casey huffs and walks out of the room. “Now *I’m* going to vomit.”

Connor and I both laugh, keeping our gazes locked on each other. “Thank you for today,” I tell him sincerely. “It was the best first date in the history of first dates.”

“I’m glad you had fun. Next time I’ll know to limit your consumption of food though.” Connor bends down a little bit lower. Instinctively, I pull back because I really do have rank breath. “And just so you’re prepared, the next time I’m leaning over you on a couch, it’ll be for completely different reasons.”

If I had been standing, I would’ve fallen, because Connor’s mention of ‘next time’ made my knees go weak. And now I *really* want to know what those ‘different reasons’ will be. “Are you busy tomorrow night?”

“No.” Connor grins. “But even if I was, I’d break my plans.” He kisses my forehead once more before heading out the door.

“Where’s he going?” Casey asks, walking back into the room.

“Home.” Rolling over, I curl in a ball, doing my best to calm the tornado swirling around inside my stomach.

Casey stops in front of me and holds out her hand. “I thought some Tums might make you feel better.”

“Thanks.” I take the two pink tablets from my sister and chew them up.

Casey sits in the recliner next to the couch. “So, other than you eating way too much food and making yourself sick, how was your date?”

“It was really great.”

“Wow,” she says, pulling one of her legs to her chest. “Not just great, but *really great*.” I swallow hard and Casey quickly sits up. “Are you going to get sick?”

“No.” Closing my eyes, I shake my head. “I already did that. In front of Connor. Not my finest moment, let me tell ya.”

“Oh shit,” she says, laughing. Opening my eyes, I pin her with a glare. “What? It was your own fault. You’ve been doing it for years. You should know when to stop by now.”

“I know,” I grumble. The insane amount of fullness I felt in my stomach earlier finally starts to subside, and I feel like I can actually breathe again. “I’ll try not to screw things up next time.”

“Will there be a next time?”

Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly. “Yes.” Casey’s eyes widen. Even I’m surprised at how easily that word fell from my lips. The past two years haven’t been easy for me, and actually going out on a date—let alone agreeing to a second one—is huge.

“Good.” The smile on Casey’s face is genuine. “I’m happy for you. If anyone deserves to be happy, it’s you. Just promise me something.”

“What?” I ask skeptically.

“Promise me that you’ll be honest. Whatever your feelings, good or bad, just be honest. Don’t run away from them.”

It’s really quite scary how well she knows me.

I blink several times, pulling my bottom lip in between my teeth. Casey cocks her head to the side, waiting for me to consent. “I promise.”

“Good.” She pushes up from the chair. “Do you need anything? Because I think I’m going to hit the sack.”

“No, I’m good. I’m just going to lie here until my stomach feels better, and then I’m going to go to bed too.”

“Good night.” Casey turns toward the hall, but I stop her before she can get too far.

“Hey, Case?”

She spins around, covering a yawn with her hand. “Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For tipping him off about my love for the Cardinals. I still can’t believe he got us front row seats.”

Casey puffs out her chest. “Well, I can’t take credit for the front row seats, but I’ll definitely take credit for clueing him in. You can pay me back by naming your firstborn child after me.”

“Yeah, right. One of you in my life is enough.”

“Whatever.” Twisting around, she flings her long, dark hair over her shoulder. “I’m fabulous and you know it.”

Casey disappears around the corner and I close my eyes, deciding that maybe some sleep is the best thing for me right now. Only when I close my eyes, sleep doesn’t come. Instead, all I see is Connor and his big chiseled body covering my own.

Screw it, who needs sleep anyway.

CHAPTER 9

Brittany

The clock dings—*again*—and I silently berate my mother for giving me the damn thing. Don't get me wrong, I love the antique clock. It was passed down from my grandmother to my mother, and then to me. But right now it's pissing me the hell off. According to my family heirloom, it's now two o'clock in the morning and I've spent the last four hours thinking. And for me, thinking isn't good, because I tend to overthink, which is exactly what I've done tonight. Connor's laugh, his smile, his touch—he's consuming me. I'm finding myself obsessing over what it would be like to become attached to all of those things, only to have them ripped away. Honestly, I'm not sure I could handle going through something like that again. Then again, he wouldn't do that to me...but he could.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Flinging my legs over the edge of the couch, I rub absently at my heavy lids. Connor's told me that he doesn't do meaningless sex, but he never said he does long-term relationships either.

Shit.

My own thoughts cause my breath to hitch in my throat. What if I'm ready to give up my rogue ways at the chance for something more but Connor changed his mind? What if he saw my brand of crazy tonight and decided to cut his losses and run?

Adrenaline pumps through veins, my body vibrating with uncertainty. The need to see him—to talk to him—is overwhelming, and before I know what's happening, I'm heading toward the door. Thank God he lives close.

Scurrying across the yard, I hop up the steps. His lights are off. Biting nervously at my lip, I try to decide whether or not I should just turn around.

This is crazy.

Running a hand through my hair, I spin around to head back home. I make it two steps and then Casey's words slam into me like a freight train. *Promise me that you'll be honest. Whatever your feelings, good or bad, just be honest. Don't run away from them.*

Damn it. She's right. I hate it when she's right.

If I go home now, I'll most likely talk myself out of whatever this is with Connor. And I really, *really* don't want to do that.

Twirling back around, I take two measured steps, along with a deep breath. I tap the door lightly and then step back. My stomach is twisting in knots, and this time it has nothing to do with my overindulgence of ballpark food and everything to do with Connor.

A couple of seconds pass with no answer. I knock again, a little bit louder this time, and turn around to double-check that his car is still in the driveway. Just then the door flings open, and the sight in front of me causes my heart to go from a steady trot to a full-on gallop.

Connor rubs lazily at his sleep-ridden eyes. His shirt is gone, leaving me with the ridiculously sexy view of his defined stomach, that perfect little V I had so much fun with the other night, and lines upon lines of a tattoo that I want to examine more closely. Shorts hang low on his hips and my eyes are drawn to his erection straining against the gauzy material.

Interesting. I thought men got morning wood. I guess, technically, it is the morning.

Connor clears his throat. "Are you okay?" he asks.

My lady bits tingle at the sound of his scratchy voice and I glance up, meeting his gaze. He looks so ruffled, and a tiny piece of me feels bad for waking him up.

I shake my head. “No.” Connor’s droopy eyelids open wide and he yanks me into his house. He pushes the door shut behind me and then large, warm hands roam over my body. It takes me a second to realize what he’s doing. Chuckling, I pull back. “Yes. I mean, yes. Physically, I’m okay.”

“Thank God.” Connor sighs, pressing a hand to the center of his chest. “I hated leaving you earlier, and I thought about you for hours before I finally fell asleep.”

His words knock the breath right out of me. My heart swells inside my chest, clogging my throat. Swallowing hard, I push past the rush of emotions. “You did?”

“Yes.” He runs a hand through his shaggy hair. “And then you show up and tell me that you’re not okay. You scared the hell out of me there for a second.”

“I’m sorry,” I say quietly, trying to find the words for what I really want to say—for what brought me to his door in the middle of the night. Sucking my bottom lip into my mouth, I look down at my sock-covered feet.

Connor takes a step forward and his bare feet come into view. Placing a finger under my chin, he tilts my face upward and our eyes meet. “What’s going on?” he asks, concern filling his voice.

He lowers his hand, and I catch it on the way down, entwining our fingers. His thumb rubs along the palm of my hand, quickly putting me at ease. “Please tell me you feel this,” I say, my words rushing out. “Because I feel it. I can’t explain it, but it terrifies me.” I continue, leaving out *why* it terrifies me, because it feels good to get it out. “And I’d feel a whole heck of a lot better if I knew you felt it, too.”

Cupping my face in his hands, Connor pulls me in close. His sweet breath fans across my cheeks. “I feel it, too,” he whispers, his big blue eyes flitting between mine. “But why are you scared?”

“I’m not a long-term kind of girl,” I blurt. My eyes fill with tears, but I quickly blink them away. “I’m not even a right now kind of girl.”

Connor grins. “Then what kind of girl are you?”

“I have no freaking clue.”

Brushing his thumb along my bottom lip, Connor searches my face. “You’ve been hurt.” I’m not sure if he’s stating a fact or asking me a question, but I nod anyway. One of those pesky tears that had been threatening to break free finally does, and Connor catches it with his thumb. “Let me tell you what I think,” he says, holding my gaze. “You’ve been burned one too many times. Shutting yourself off was easier than trying again, and now you’re scared.”

My throat feels thick. The familiar burning in my nose signals an onslaught of tears. Despite my best attempt, I’m unable to hold them in any longer.

“Here’s the thing.” He swipes a finger under my eyes before continuing. “Whoever hurt you is a prick. He has absolutely no idea what he lost or gave up. But I *see* you,” he says, bringing my face even closer. “You’re incredibly strong, independent, funny, and tenacious. I adore all of those things about you. But you’ve also got this gentle side that I think most people don’t see, and *that’s* what I want to explore.”

Soft lips descend on mine before moving from one cheek to the other as he kisses away my tears. With each press of his lips against my skin, the shattered pieces of my heart are slowly put back together. I realize some of the edges may be jagged and it’ll take time to smooth them out, but I’m hopeful this man will be the one to do it.

“I can assure you that if you step out of the box you’ve holed yourself up in, you won’t regret it. This chemistry between us,” he says, waving a hand between our bodies, “is nothing I’ve ever felt before. I have no idea what it means or what all of this will amount to, but I want to find out.” Connor drops his forehead to mine. “I promise you that I won’t hurt you.”

“I’m not worried that you’ll hurt me.” My voice is shaky. Taking a deep breath, I try to regain some sort of composure.

Connor furrows his brow. “Then what are you worried about?”

“That I’ll hurt *you*.” Lifting my hands, I wrap my fingers around each of Connor’s wrists.

“How about you let me worry about that.”

“But—”

“Nope.” Connor presses a finger to my lips. “You already told me you were giving this a chance, and I’m holding you to it. This *is* happening.”

I sigh and Connor drops his finger from my mouth. “Okay,” I breathe, giving him control. Connor’s smile is blinding. “Okay.”

CHAPTER 10

Connor

This girl.

She fucking kills me.

Grabbing Brittany's hand, I lead her toward my bedroom. Thank God she follows behind without question, because there is no way in hell I'd be able to let her go tonight. Pulling back the covers of what has always been the empty side of my bed, I motion for her to climb in.

"Umm...with my clothes on?" she asks, looking a little unsure.

"Yes," I say, chuckling. "With your clothes on."

She slips between the covers like a good girl. I pull them up to her chest, then walk around the bed, and slide in next to her. Situating the pillow under my head, I lie on my back.

"Come here," I say, holding out my arm. She doesn't hesitate. Her lithe body cuddles up next to mine. Curling herself into the crook of my arm, she rests her head on my chest. I tangle my fingers with hers and bring her arm across my stomach. *Perfect.*

"What's your favorite color?"

Propping her chin on my chest, she examines me. "You brought me to bed so you could ask me what my favorite color is?"

"Oh no," I counter. "I also want to know how you take your coffee in the morning, what your favorite food is, what types of books you prefer, your favorite childhood memory, where your other tattoo is... The list goes on and on, so we could be up all night if you don't cooperate."

Brittany's eyes twinkle with what I can only describe as pure happiness. "Okay." She nods, resting her head back down on my chest. "Purple. I don't drink coffee. Pizza, but it has to be Chicago style. Romance. Cuddling with my mom at night. And," she says, dragging the word out, "you'll have to find it yourself."

"Wow." I laugh, amazed she remembered the order in which I said everything. "I'm impressed. And trust me"—bringing her hand to my lips, I pepper kisses across her knuckles—"I have every intention of finding that tattoo."

She doesn't look up, but I feel her smile against my skin. "What about you? Same questions," she says.

"Hmmm." Closing my eyes, I try to remember everything I asked her. "Red. Black with one scoop of sugar. Lasagna. Thrillers, but I'm open to this 'romance' that you speak of as long as we get to try out what we read." A burst of laughter rips from Brittany's chest. The exact reaction I was hoping for. "Listening to music with my best friend, Logan. Also, I have a ton of tattoos you're more than welcome to explore any time you please."

I open my eyes to find Brittany watching me. "Your favorite childhood memory is of listening to music with your best friend?"

Shit.

"It is." I take a deep breath, preparing myself for what I suspect will be her next question.

"What's your favorite memory of your parents or your family? Speaking of family, do you have any brothers or sisters?"

And there it is.

"The majority of my childhood memories involving my parents aren't good."

Brittany's eyes soften, but she isn't looking at me with pity. "I'm sorry to hear that." She looks across the room, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth.

"What is it?" I already know what she wants to ask; it's the same thing everybody else wants to ask. People always want to know why my childhood was shitty. They want the nitty-gritty details. I'm not

ashamed of my past—I've worked too damn hard to move away from it—but I also don't necessarily like talking about it. To other people, that is. For some reason, I want Brittany to ask me. I want her to know.

"Is it too soon for me to ask what happened?"

"You can ask me anything you want." The words don't surprise me. With her, I seem to be an open book. "My parents were druggies. Mom ran out on us when I was six. I don't really remember a whole lot about her, and the few memories I do recall aren't pleasant."

"Like what?" Brittany asks.

"Well, I remember seeing her falling over and stumbling around the house. At the time, I didn't understand. I know now that she was most likely either drunk or high. And I remember my dad smacking her around a few times, but that's about it."

Brittany pulls her hand from mine. Resting it against my chest, she starts drawing slow circles with the tip of her finger. "What happened after she left?"

"My dad got worse. He was drunk or high nearly all the time. Eventually, he lost his job, which resulted in us losing our house. That's actually how I got taken away from him. One of my teachers found out we were living in his car. And you know what?" Brittany raises her eyebrows but doesn't say a word, and I'm grateful because it feels good to tell her this. Other than my foster siblings, I've never told anyone about my childhood. "He didn't seem to care. I think he was just glad to get rid of me."

"Wow," she says, sighing heavily. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything," I whisper, running a hand through her hair.

"What happened after that?"

"I was put into foster care. Moved from house to house until I ended up at the Smiths' when I was sixteen. That's where I met Logan. In fact, that's also where I met Isabelle, Ryan, Jake, and Carter."

"Your foster brothers and sisters?"

I nod. "Logan and I were closest in age, so our friendship was almost instantaneous. In fact, we're still best friends, and we see each other nearly every day. Isabelle was younger so we weren't as close, and I haven't seen her in years. Ryan and Jake are biological brothers, and we've stayed in contact over the years. Carter..." A sharp pain rips through my chest and I take a moment to collect my thoughts before continuing. "He, um...he battled with depression most of his life. He committed suicide three years ago."

Brittany's eyes go wide. "Oh my gosh," she says, her grip on my body tightening. "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, not gonna lie, that was hard for Logan and me. Carter was like our big brother. Shit, he *was* our big brother. When we turned eighteen and got released from the system, it was Carter that was there to help us out." My eyes drift across the room, landing on the picture of the two of us that sits on my dresser. "He helped us enroll in college, gave us a place to live, and when we started down a bad path, he was the one to bring us back. I owe him my life."

"He sounds like a great guy. I'm glad you had someone like him."

"Me, too," I say, bringing my eyes back to Brittany. "If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be doing what I love."

"Was he a tattoo artist?" she asks.

"He was. That's how I ended up at InkSlingers."

Brittany's lips part, understanding flashing across her face. "I was wondering about that," she says.

"About what?"

"Well, I remember seeing you on *Inked*. You won a decent chunk of money to start up your own parlor, but instead you work out of InkSlingers. But it was his, wasn't it? It was Carter's shop."

"It was," I say. "When Carter died, he left the shop to me—"

"Not to Logan?" she asks, interrupting me.

"Nope. Logan never had anything to do with the shop. I was Carter's apprentice, and he taught me everything I know. Anyway, the first year after he left me the shop was tough. I was on the brink of foreclosure when Logan suggested I try out for *Inked*, and, well, the rest is history. I put a big chunk of

money into the business, paying off debts, updating equipment, all that good stuff. And I'm glad I did. That parlor is my life, and I want to make it as successful as possible."

"I love that." Our eyes stay locked for several seconds. Out of nowhere, she leans forward, presses her warm lips to the center of my chest, and then wraps herself around me. "You amaze me, Connor Jackson. I feel like you're too good to be true. Like one of those sexy men I read about in my romance novels."

"Oooh," I say, rubbing my hand along the top of her head. I thread my fingers into her blonde hair and let the strands slowly fall where they may. "I like where this is going. Does the sexy man end up with the girl?"

She giggles. The tinkling sound radiates through my body before settling in the center of my chest. "I guess you'll have to start reading some books to find out."

"Well played, Dr. Caldwell. Well played."

Brittany's head pops up. "You know my last name?" Her lips tilt, revealing those beautiful white teeth. "That sounded so bad. I'm in bed with a man that I didn't think knew my last name. In fact," she says, frowning her brows, "how *did* you know my last name?"

"I'm psychic."

"Yeah, right." She slaps playfully at my chest. "Tell me."

"You were in my appointment book, remember? I knew who you were the second I walked into my shop that day."

"Oh." She nuzzles her face back into my chest. "I didn't think about that."

"But I didn't know you were a doctor, which is pretty awesome. What type of practice do you work in?"

Brittany yawns as I continue stroking my fingers through her hair. "I work in the ER."

"Wow, that must be intense." I can't imagine the types of things she's witnessed.

"It has its days. When I lived in New York, I worked in a trauma ER. Now *that* was intense. It almost makes the ER here seem easy."

"But you like it? You're happy?"

"I am. Taking care of people is what I've always wanted to do. And not only do I take care of people, but I save lives. I wouldn't change it for the world."

I drop a kiss to the top of her head. "I think you're the amazing one."

"Mmmm..."

A couple of minutes pass, the silence even more comforting than I had predicted. Brittany's breathing evens out, and when I'm certain she's asleep, I close my eyes.

It's been years since I've actually slept with a woman, and even then it didn't feel like *this*. It probably makes me sound like a fucking pussy, but as long as our bodies are touching in some way, everything in the world just feels right.

CHAPTER 11

Brittany

Pulling the covers back, I take in the yumminess that is Connor's body. It's magnificent in every way...perfection at its absolute finest. The sheet is bunched around his hips, giving me a perfect view of all of his intricate tattoos. I have every intention of exploring them individually, but right now I'm transfixed on his body. From the waist up, he's all smooth lines and chiseled curves. It's the type of body women dream of, the type that only exists in books and on TV. Except this isn't a book and we sure as hell aren't on TV—this is my life, Connor is real, and as long as I keep playing my cards right, he'll be mine.

My finger traces a slow path from his bearded square jaw down to the base of his neck. I place a soft kiss against his chin and my eyelids drift shut as I remember the way the scruff on his face rubbed against my chest when he worshiped my breasts the other night. The feeling alone was so damn erotic that I nearly buried my fingers in his hair and begged him to stay there forever.

My heavy lids open and I peek up at Connor. He looks so peaceful when he's sleeping. His dark lashes are fanned out on his cheek and his lips are pursed in the sexiest little pout. More than anything, I want to kiss him awake and demand he make love to me, but I'm still exploring.

I trail my finger down his chest, stopping at his heart. Then my lips take over and I kiss his chest several times. Resting the palm of my hand over his left pec, I make a silent promise to cherish and protect his heart if he does the same for mine. I know we still have so much to learn about each other, but I'm ready to take that next step.

Connor shifts in bed, cocking his leg out to the side, but he doesn't wake up. His breathing is slow and steady, making me wonder how far I can go before he'll stir. I scatter slow, open-mouthed kisses down the hard plane of his stomach, pausing to trace the etched V that leads to the place I so desperately want to be.

The other night I drove him crazy, and now I'm ready to do it again. That tiny slice of heaven wasn't nearly enough. I want more. I want all of him. I want him so fucking turned on he can't see straight. I want to hear my name falling from his lips when he finally lets go.

Slipping my hand into his shorts, I find him swollen and semi-hard. I move a little lower to get a better angle—

"Brittany." My eyes snap up to his. Connor blinks several times. He looks conflicted, and I can't tell if I'm pushing things too far or if he's desperately trying to refrain from pouncing all over me. It's a toss-up, but I'm hoping for the latter.

"I want you," I whisper, attempting to convey in those three little words just how much I need him. That must have been exactly what he was hoping to hear because, in the blink of an eye, our positions are switched. Connor is hovering over me, his delicious body pressing me into the mattress.

"I want you, too," he says, brushing a strand of hair away from my face. "So much." My body is vibrating with sexual energy, and without thinking, I tilt my hips, silently begging for him to take me. Connor sucks in a sharp breath. Gripping my hips, he grinds against me. "No." Running his thumb along my bottom lip, he shakes his head. "This time, *I'm* controlling the pace."

Sitting back on his haunches, Connor slips his fingers under my shirt and slides it up my body. I lift my upper body just enough for him to pull it off. He flicks the clasp of my bra and the cotton material falls from my heavy breasts. His eyes flare at the sight of my naked chest. "So fucking sexy," he rasps, tugging my bra off. He kisses the swell of each breast. "I've been dying to get my mouth on you again—and I will—but first..." Connor's words trail off. His eyes drop, and then he slowly peels my pants off, along with my underwear.

My eyes stay locked on his. Watching him watch me is the most intense sensation ever. I didn't think it was possible to be more turned on than I was just seconds ago.

I was wrong.

Running his hands from my knees to my ankles, Connor lifts both of my legs, opening them in the process. He kisses one calf and then lowers my leg before repeating the process with the other.

My knees are bent and I'm completely open to him, feeling sexier now than I ever have. "Please," I beg. Lifting my hips, I urge him to touch me.

"No begging," he says. Then he gives me exactly what I want. One long finger pushes inside of me and my eyes roll back in my head. "I'll give you whatever you want." Connor shifts lower on the bed and I peel my eyes open, a little shocked at his admission. "Haven't you figured that out yet? I can't get enough of you." His lips trail along the inside of my thigh, his eyes trained on his finger as it slides in and out of me. His mouth is close enough to join in the torture, but it doesn't.

"Are you watching?" he asks, not taking his eyes off my pussy long enough to check for himself.

Hell yes, I'm watching.

The moment is way too sensual and I can't seem to form words. Connor adds a second finger, pushing it deep inside of me. When he curls them both in a come-hither motion, my body coils tight. "I bet I could make you come just like this. You don't even need my mouth," he says, his voice thick and heady.

He's a dirty talker.

Oh, God. That's my weakness.

"What do you think?" he asks. Pulling his fingers out, he twists his wrist and pushes his fingers back in, only this time with a bit more force.

"Connor." I know, it's not the most clever thing to say, but right now my brain is mush. The only thing I can concentrate on are his fingers and the way they're hitting that swollen spot way down deep. "Please."

"What did I say, pretty girl? No begging. What do you want? Tell me and it's yours."

I squirm beneath him, pumping my hips in rhythm with his hand. Tiny sparks of pleasure shoot through my body. Tossing my head back, I squeeze my eyes shut. "More. I need more."

"More of what?" he growls. "Tell me what you need."

"Your mouth. I need your—*Oh, God.* That. That's what I—*ahhh.*" Connor's tongue pushes inside me at the same time I thread my fingers in his hair and hold him against me. His tongue swirls and lips suck, and when he slides a finger through my wet folds, finding my clit, I nearly lose it.

Connor glances up at me under thick, dark lashes. "Gorgeous," he mumbles. Wrapping his lips around my clit, he sucks—hard—before nipping at the swollen bud. And that's all it takes.

My body spirals out of control, my thighs clenching tightly around his head. Connor's glorious mouth doesn't stop. Instead, he rides out the orgasm, licking and sucking relentlessly until I'm nothing but a big pile of loose limbs.

"I don't even have words for that." Dropping my head back on the pillow, I revel in the feel of Connor's body as he crawls on top of me.

"Open your eyes." It's a gentle command, and one that I'm more than happy to follow. When I lift my lids, Connor's face is mere inches from mine. His mouth is glistening, a lazy smile stretched across his face. "There aren't words for *that*. Watching you come, watching you lose control...it was the sexiest thing I've ever witnessed. I want to see it again," he whispers, then presses a kiss to my lips before sitting up.

Leaning across the bed, Connor grabs a condom from his nightstand. He rips open the foil, pulls out the condom, and slides it over his throbbing erection. As he lowers himself on top of me, he asks, "Do you want this?"

Is that a real question? "Yes."

"Say it," he says, his eyes imploring mine. "I want to hear the words." Connor squeezes a hand between our bodies. His fingers find my clit, which is still swollen and throbbing, and my hips buck off the bed. Then he grinds against me, his erection sliding between my folds. Rocking his hips, Connor slowly

pulls my body from its sated state. In a matter of seconds he has me writhing against him, desperate for a second release, and even more desperate to feel him inside me.

“I want you.” My throat is dry from panting and my words come out scratchy. Gliding a hand down his back, I squeeze Connor’s ass.

Dropping his face to the crook of my neck, he finds my ear. “Do you feel how hard I am? That’s all you. Do you want my cock inside you?”

“Yes.”

“Be sure, baby. Because once I’m inside you, I’m going to claim you. Your body”—grazing a hand over my breast, he plucks at my nipple—“will be mine. This pussy”—pulling back, he aligns himself at my entrance—“will be mine. Is that what you want?”

The head of his cock slips inside of me. “Yes.” The word isn’t even out of my mouth and he buries himself to the hilt, filling me in ways that I’ve never experienced. All of my insecurities fade away. The only thing that matters in this moment is *this* man.

“Fuck.” Connor grunts, trailing hot kisses over my chest as he starts moving his body. “You feel so good. I’m not going to last.” His hips are pumping in a perfect rhythm, and I meet him thrust for thrust. But I still need more.

Wrapping my legs around his back, I lock my ankles. “Harder.” He’s pounding into me, each pump pushing him deeper and deeper until I’m certain he’s found a permanent spot to call his own. My legs begin to shake. Tightening my thighs around him, I try to hold off my release, wanting to prolong this moment—this feeling—as long as I possibly can. “Connor.”

A low rumble emanates from his chest. Wiggling my hand between us, I make a V with my fingers and slide them along my pussy. Then my fingers squeeze his cock as he thrusts in and out of me. “Son of a bitch,” he growls, staring at where we’re joined.

“Fuck me, Connor,” I command in a completely non-commanding voice. Connor’s eyes snap up to mine. His hooded gaze is full of desire, showing me he needs this as much as I do. Warmth settles low in my belly. My clit throbs with each smack of his hips against mine, and without warning, my body explodes, sending sparks of pleasure throughout.

Connor’s movements become quicker, almost frenzied. A string of unintelligible words tumble from his mouth, and his muscles tighten under the touch of my hands. Within seconds, he’s groaning my name as he rides out his own release.

Collapsing on top of me, Connor cradles my face in his hand. “There aren’t words for that either,” he says.

“I disagree.” Curving my hand around the back of his neck, I pull him down until his lips rest against mine. “It was mind-blowing, and I want to do it over and over and over—”

Sealing his mouth against mine, Connor swallows my words. It’s the best feeling to have a guy kiss you as though you’re the only woman in the world. And that’s exactly how I feel every time I’m with this man.

Nibbling on my bottom lip, he slowly pulls back. “You’re mind-blowing,” he says, peppering kisses anywhere and everywhere he can find a place to kiss. My heart swells painfully inside my chest.

I’m actually beginning to wonder if my broken heart was ever really broken to begin with. Because what I feel for Connor in just a few shorts days is so much more than I ever felt for Tyson. Maybe he isn’t piecing my heart back together at all, maybe Connor is stealing my heart one little chunk at a time.

I smile to myself when his lips lock around my nipple. “Is it too soon to do the ‘over and over and over again’ you were talking about?” he mumbles.

Arching my back, I offer him every bit of my body...and quite possibly my heart. “Absolutely not,” I say. “In fact, the sooner the better. What are you waiting for?”

In the blink of an eye, my body is flying through the air as Connor flips me over. Wrapping an arm around my stomach, he pulls me up onto all fours and smacks my ass.

I suck in a sharp breath and arch my back. The sting of his skin slapping mine isn't at all what I expected. It doesn't hurt, and surprisingly I want more. Wiggling my ass, I urge him to do it again.

"Of course you like that," he murmurs, giving me what I want. Connor's hand swiftly connects with my ass again, and then he rubs the area gently before sliding his hand up my back. His fingers skate across the base of my neck, sweeping my hair to the side, and then his touch falters.

"*Alis volat propriis*," he whispers.

"You found it." My words come out husky and breathless. I'm anxious to get this out of the way so we can get back to that ass smacking.

"What does it mean?"

"She flies with her own wings."

"It's beautiful. I love it."

"Thank you," I say, pushing my ass into his groin, hoping he gets the hint.

"You're going to be the death of me," he breathes, fisting his hand in my hair.

Connor tugs gently, tilting my head back, and a tiny whimper falls from my mouth. Whatever game we've been playing, Connor just won.

CHAPTER 12

Connor

“Where do you think you’re going?” Tightening my grip on Brittany, I pull her warm, naked body against mine. Her tight little ass pushes against my cock. My body is sated to the point of blissful relaxation and there is no way I’m getting hard again. Although I’m half tempted to see if she’d let me try.

Brittany chuckles, allowing her body to melt into mine. She’s all soft curves and silky smooth skin, and I could touch her forever. “Don’t you have to work today?” she asks.

“Yes.” I kiss the soft spot under her ear. Her shoulders scrunch up, a wave of goose bumps popping out along her skin. I fucking love that I can do that to her. “My first client doesn’t come in until noon. So we still have”—craning my neck, I look at the clock—“two hours.”

“I wish,” she says, rolling over. “I promised I’d have brunch with my mom.”

“Brunch? Do people really have brunch?”

“Yes,” she says, shoving playfully at my chest. “Well, I think they do.” She furrows her brow. “Or maybe just my mom and I do. Anyway, I’m supposed to meet her at ten-thirty, and I really should get home and shower beforehand.”

I smirk. “What, you don’t want to go with that fresh I-just-had-the-best-sex-of-my-life look?”

“No,” she says, laughing. “As far as I’m concerned, my mother can keep believing I’m a virgin.”

“Riiiiight.” Trailing my lips down her neck, I suck lightly. “Maybe I should leave you with a parting gift?”

Brittany springs from the bed so fast I don’t even have time to react. “Oh hell no,” she says, holding her hands out.

Seriously? Like that could stop me. But it’s cute that she thinks it could. Sweeping my eyes down her naked body, I take a moment to stare at her.

She glances down as though she just realized she’s in her birthday suit. “Crap,” she hisses, covering her gorgeous tits with her arm. Bending down, she looks around, presumably for her clothes.

Flinging the sheet off, I climb out of bed, tug her arm away from her chest, and haul her in close. “Don’t hide from me,” I say, running my fingertips along her chest. Her eyes drift down, watching my hand as I brush my fingers across the swell of each breast. “Not after what we just did.” Placing a finger under her chin, I lift her face to meet mine. “Your body is perfect. I should know, since I just spent hours worshiping every single inch of it. In fact, what are your plans for tonight? Because there are a few spots I’d like to examine a little closer.”

Brittany shivers, a light flush infusing her cheeks. I can’t help but wonder what it would take to make her flush like that all over. I think I have an idea, but it’ll have to wait until tonight.

My fingers skate down her chest, flicking at her nipple before squeezing it gently. I swear I hear Brittany purr. Apparently, that’s all it takes to make my cock hard again. Okay, who am I kidding? It was full-on throbbing the second her naked ass jumped out of the bed, putting all of her glorious curves on display. But now...now I’m rock solid, and the object of my affection is trying to leave.

Out of nowhere, Brittany starts laughing. She pulls back just enough to look down at my straining erection. “No.” Shaking her head, she places both hands on my chest and nudges me away. “I have to go. If I miss brunch, my mother will know that something is up and she won’t stop until she figures out what it is.”

“Something is up,” I say, waggling my eyebrows. Like a predator stalking its prey, I take a measured step toward her.

“Connor,” she warns, stepping back. “Don’t touch me.”

I stop dead in my tracks. No means *no*, and I don't take something like that lightly. I just don't like hearing it come from her mouth. "Why can't I touch you?"

"Because my body craves your body, and if you put your hands on me, I won't leave. I'll stay and let you fuck me, loving every second of it, but I really need to go."

"I love that answer, baby." Bending down, I pick up her shirt and toss it at her. "You have two seconds to put that on or I'm gonna pounce." Brittany giggles, tugging the shirt over her head. Grabbing my shorts off the floor, I slip them on and adjust my dick. "Can I touch you now?"

She nods, almost shyly, and takes a step toward me. Slipping her fingers in the waistband of my shorts, she pulls me toward her. I snake my arms around her waist. "What time do you get off?"

Her warm body is pressed against mine, but I can't seem to think about anything other than the fact that she isn't wearing pants—or underwear. All I need to do is brush my fingers along her pussy, find her clit, and she'll be mine for the next two hours.

"Connor." Fingers snap in front of my face, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Huh?"

"I asked what time you get off tonight."

"Oh, ummm"—I run a hand down my face, trying to focus on her question—"my last client is at four. I should be done by five-thirty."

"Perfect," she says, kissing my cheek. "I was thinking I could make you supper."

"What are you going to make?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'll surprise you. Is there anything you don't like?"

"Are you kidding?" I say, laughing. "Hell no. I'll eat just about anything."

Brittany smiles, giving me a soft kiss before she starts rummaging around for the rest of her clothes. I watch her get dressed, all the while wondering how strange it is that I'm already missing the feel of her body against mine.

Get a grip, Connor. She's two feet away, and you'll see her tonight.

"Okay." She smooths her hands down the front of her wrinkled shirt. "I'll see you tonight?"

"Yep. My place or yours?"

"Yours. Casey will be home, and if you come to our place, we'll never get rid of her." With one last peck on the cheek, Brittany is out of my bedroom and moving down the hall at a fast clip. Following behind her, I open the door and smack her ass as she walks out.

Twirling around, she points a finger at me. The smirk on her face tells me that she isn't actually mad. I'd bet just about anything that she secretly enjoyed it.

CHAPTER 13

Connor

Poking my head around the shower curtain, I listen carefully. I swear I just heard someone knock on my door. A few seconds pass and I hear it again. “Shit.” Turning off the shower, I grab a towel and wrap it around me, knotting it at the waist. The knock becomes more insistent, and I pick up my pace in case it’s Brittany and she forgot something. I skid to a halt, nearly falling flat on my ass as I yank open the front door.

My shoulders deflate when I find Logan standing in my doorway. “Hey.”

“Don’t sound so excited to see me,” she says, pushing her way into my house. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were hoping I was someone else.”

“As a matter of fact,” I say, shutting the door behind her, “I *was* hoping you were someone else.”

She winces, feigning pain. “Ouch. No wonder you haven’t called me back.” Cocking her hip, Logan narrows her eyes. “What’s her name and how long until I get my best friend back? And why in the hell am I just hearing about her now?”

“You called?” Brushing past Logan, I walk into the kitchen and grab my phone off the counter. Sure enough, I’ve missed three calls since last night. I should probably feel bad, but I don’t. Mainly because I was too preoccupied enjoying who I was with. “Her name is Brittany. You’re just now hearing about her because we’ve only been seeing each other for a few days, and what makes you think it won’t last long?”

“Because it won’t.” Logan walks over and stands next to me. “It never does. You gave up fucking and started dating, but your standards are too high. No woman ever measures up.”

“What’s wrong with a guy wanting a smart, sexy, funny, caring woman who has dreams and goals and actually goes after them?” I ask, feeling more than a little put off by her assessment that Brittany and I won’t work out. “Why shouldn’t I wait for a woman with all of those qualities?”

Logan’s face softens, and I remind myself she’s just looking out for me. Plus, I’ll just have to prove her wrong. Leaning down, I press a kiss to her cheek. “Besides, you’re all of those things.”

“Ooh, you’re good,” she says, wrapping her arms around my stomach. “So this Brittany...she’s all of those things?”

Logan gives me one tight squeeze before pulling away, her question lingering in the air. I don’t answer right away. Logan doesn’t show affection very often, mostly because of her childhood. Being neglected for years on end will do that to a person. I’m guessing that not hearing back from me—and quite possibly the mention of Brittany—has left her feeling a little insecure. She’s reaching out, needing to know I’m still here. I know this girl better than she knows herself.

“Hey,” I say, snagging her arm when she turns toward my refrigerator. “I’m sorry I didn’t call you back.”

She shrugs, but it’s half-assed and I know I need to give her more. “She consumes me,” I say, breathing out the words. “When I’m with Brittany, I forget everything else around me. But that’s no excuse. I should’ve checked my phone and called you back. Please forgive me?” I ask, jutting my lip out, mostly because I know she has a weakness for my pouty face.

I really do feel bad. Logan is the closest thing to family I have, and it devastates me to know she’s hurting because of me.

“I forgive you,” she mumbles, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge. She twists the top off and takes a swig. “So I guess this means you wouldn’t consider moving to Tennessee with me if I asked?”

“What?” My eyes widen, my brain processing what she just said. “Oh my gosh, Lo, you got the job?”

She nods, smiling wide. Grabbing her by the waist, I spin her around and she squeals with laughter. *I fucking love that sound.*

“Holy shit.” Putting her back on her feet, I grip her shoulders. “You’re leaving?” My mind races, trying to decide what this means for her...for us.

“I am.” Placing the bottle of water on the table, she wrings her hands together. “But I’m nervous, you know? This is a big move.”

“It is, but you’ve worked so hard for it. You deserve this.”

“Really?” Her dark brown eyes search mine.

“Of course.” Taking her hand, I lead her to the living room. She sits down on the couch and I move to sit next to her before remembering I’m wearing nothing but a towel. Holding up a finger, I motion for her to give me a second. Then I rush down the hall to my bedroom, where I make quick work of putting on some clothes. When I walk back into the living room, Logan is reclining on the couch.

“Talk to me,” I say, swatting at her legs so I can sit down next to her.

Sitting up, she props her elbows on her knees and drops her head into her hands. Her dark brown hair falls around her shoulders, acting as a curtain. “I’m scared.”

“Of what? You’re finally getting out of this hellhole, so what on earth are you scared of?”

“This hellhole is my home.” Lifting her head, she glares at me. “This is all I’ve known. Plus...” Her words trail off as she purses her lips.

“Plus, what?”

“*You’re* my home. I don’t want to live where you aren’t, Connor.”

“Logan.” Sighing, I scoot next to her. She slips her tiny hand in mine and I squeeze it lightly. “It doesn’t matter how far away you live, you will always be a huge part of my life. I will always be here for you.”

“So if I beg you to come with me, would you consider it?” she asks without an ounce of humor.

“Wow.” Pulling my hand from hers, I run my fingers through my hair. “Logan.”

“Don’t.” Shaking her head, she pushes up from the couch. “I shouldn’t have asked that.”

“That’s not it,” I say, trying to figure out the best way to say this. “You know I would love to go with you. The thought of not seeing you and talking to you all the time terrifies me. But I’ve got InkSlingers now, and I’m not ready to leave that behind.”

She nods, swallowing hard. “And Brittany. I guess you have her now, too?”

“Please don’t. This has nothing to do with Brittany. Yes, I really like her. Yes, she’s everything I’ve been looking for in a woman. But we’ve only been seeing each other for a *few days*. I’m staying because this is my home, and I don’t *want* to leave. I want to keep building up the shop and see where it goes.” I blowing out a harsh breath. “And yes, I’m anxious to see where this thing with Brittany goes too, but I want to stay here because I’m finally happy. And you know I’ve worked really hard to find my happy.”

“Ugh,” she grunts, tossing her head back. “I know. I know you’re happy. But the selfish part of me wants you to be happy where *I* am.” She takes a deep breath. “Connor”—Logan looks up at me, a wave of uncertainty swirling through her eyes—“I’ve never been on my own. Not really. You’ve always been a hop, skip, and a jump away, ready and willing to pick up whatever mess I’ve made. What if I can’t do this on my own? What if I fail miserably?”

“Don’t—”

“And what if I lose you?” she asks, cutting me off. “What if you forget all about me? You’re the only family I have, and I don’t want to lose you.” Her voice cracks on the last word, slicing my heart in two.

“Stop it.” Hooking an arm around her neck, I hug her tight. “You *are* my family. Nothing is going to change that. I don’t care that we don’t share the same blood. You are my sister in every sense of the word. You’ve seen me through so much bullshit, and I could never forget that. I could never forget *you*.”

“I’m sorry.” She sniffs, swiping at her face when a tear runs down her cheek. “I know I’m being an emotional female about this. It’s all just happening so fast.”

“Is it?” I ask, pulling back to look her in the eyes. “You’ve been going to school, planning for this moment, and when you filled out the application, you knew it was in a different state.” Logan worked two jobs to put herself through nursing school. She knew immediately that she wanted to work in a trauma ICU. Apparently, it’s difficult to get that particular position right out of school. So when she found out about a hospital that was accepting applications for a one-year paid internship at their trauma ICU with the option to stay on full-time afterward, she jumped on it.

“I hate it when you’re right,” she mumbles, burying her face in my chest.

“You know,” I say, deciding now is not the time to gloat about always being right, “more than likely you’re going to get out there and make a whole new set of friends. Before I know it, you’ll be bringing home a boyfriend for me to meet. And I’m warning you now, as your brother and best friend, I *will* intimidate the hell outta him.”

Logan laughs, and it’s as though I can feel some of the weight being lifted from her shoulders. “You think?”

“I don’t think...I know. You’re intelligent, beautiful, and you have this incredible heart. Any man would be more than lucky to have you in his life. Myself included.”

Taking a deep breath, Logan blows it out slowly. “Okay, I’m going to do this. I’m moving to Tennessee.” Her smile grows. Pulling out of my arms, she rubs her hands together. “Holy crap. I’m moving to Tennessee. I’m going to be a full-time nurse.” Her eyes widen, almost comically, and I’m getting the feeling she’s moments away from either laughing hysterically or crying. At this point, it could go either way.

“I’m so proud of you, Lo.”

Her eyes glisten. “Thank you. We’ve come a long way, haven’t we?”

“I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“I guess we got lucky getting sent to that last foster home, huh?”

“Damn straight. If it wasn’t for that godforsaken place, I wouldn’t have you in my life.”

“And we wouldn’t have met Carter.” Logan looks down for a beat before glancing back up. “I miss him,” she whispers. “Do you think he’d be proud of me?”

“I miss him, too. And he’d be *so* proud of you.”

“Thank you.” Logan wipes her hands over her face and straightens her shoulders as though she’s pulling herself together. “Speaking of Carter,” she says, “you probably have to be at work soon, don’t you? Hell, I have to be at work and here I am blubbering all over the place.”

“Actually,” I say, glancing at the clock on the wall, “I probably should finish getting ready so I can head in. I already took a shower, but I still need to trim my beard.”

“Oh!” Logan waves her hands in the air as though she just remembered something really important. “*That’s* why I was trying to call you. My water heater went out. Do you mind if I swing by tonight after work and get cleaned up?”

“Damn it,” I say, groaning. “Why didn’t you tell me? You know that shit pisses me off. I would’ve gone over to take a look at it for you.”

Logan cocks an eyebrow, giving me her classic don’t-get-sassy-with-me look. “Ummm...*you’re* the one who didn’t answer your phone. And there isn’t anything you could’ve done anyway,” she says, waving me off. “I have to have a new water heater put in, but my landlord says they can’t come until tomorrow.”

“Still pisses me off,” I grumble. “But since you’re going to be here, why don’t you plan on staying for supper? Brittany is cooking.”

“Will she mind?” Logan asks, walking toward the pantry. “Can I steal a Pop-Tart? I was in such a hurry this morning I forgot breakfast.”

“I don’t think she’ll mind, but I’ll talk to her and make sure. And eat the chocolate ones; that strawberry one is mine.”

She nods and reaches for the Pop-Tarts on the top shelf, but she’s not quite tall enough. I take a step toward her but stop when she grabs a chair from the table. My mind drifts to Logan’s water heater. Who is

she going to call when she's in Tennessee and has a problem? Who's going to fix her garbage disposal or change the batteries in her smoke detector?

I watch silently as she slides the chair toward the shelves, steps up, grabs the box, and puts the chair back. It was a simple task—and obviously not all problems will be fixed quite so easily—but it reminds me that she's a big girl and fully capable of solving her own issues. And I'll still be here for the ones she can't.

“Why are you staring at me like that?”

“You're going to do great in Tennessee,” I say sincerely. Logan tilts her head, probably wondering why in the world I went from Pop-Tarts back to Tennessee.

I'm two steps down the hall when she calls my name. “Connor?”

“Yeah?” I peek over my shoulder to find her standing in the hallway. “Thank you...for everything. I can't wait to meet Brittany tonight.”

I smile. “You're going to love her.”

“I already figured as much.” She smiles back, a look of pride and—most importantly—acceptance shining from her face.

Everything is going to be okay.

For the both of us.

CHAPTER 14

Brittany

This is crazy, I think to myself, staring at the door. Is it proper dating etiquette to drop in on someone at work just to say ‘hey’? Probably not, but Connor does own the place and I’m in the area, so what the hell. I tug the door open and the familiar bell dings, signaling my entry.

Everyone in the shop turns toward me. I freeze, surprised at the amount of people in here. Honestly, I thought it would just be Connor and a client. Nope, there’s actually...one, two, three, four—

“Can I help you?”

I turn toward the front desk and the tiny girl seated behind it. “Um, I’m here to see Connor.”

“Good timing,” she says. “He just finished with a client. He’s in the pissier.”

Okay. That’s not at all what I expected her to say, but she’s cute in a gothic Tinker Bell sort of way so I decide to go with it. “Is it okay if I wait?”

Tinker Bell shrugs, popping the gum in her mouth. “Suit yourself. You can keep me company. I’m hella bored.”

I stick my hand out. “I’m Brittany.”

She looks at my outstretched hand hesitantly before slipping her much smaller, more delicate one into mine. “Nora.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Are you sure you’re in the right place?” she asks, scrunching her nose.

“Hell yes, she’s in the right place.” Turning around, I come face-to-face with Connor. “I see you’ve met Nora,” he says, snaking an arm around my waist. I step into him, the front of our bodies molding together.

“I did meet her.” My words come out way too husky for my liking, so I clear my voice. “She’s very sweet. You’re very sweet,” I say, looking over Connor’s shoulder. Nora is staring at us, mouth agape. I look around, and everyone else in the shop is staring at us too. “Do I have toilet paper hanging out of the back of my pants?” I whisper, pressing in closer to Connor.

He smiles, slow and sexy. “No,” he whispers. “You’re just that fucking gorgeous, and they’re all wondering why in the hell you’re here to see me.”

“Psssh.” Slapping at Connor’s chest, I push away. “I highly doubt that.”

Connor rolls his eyes. “Whatever.” Gripping my hand firmly in his, Connor pulls me to his station. “So, to what do I owe this wonderful surprise visit?”

Once we’re out of sight, Connor drops to a chair and tugs me onto his lap. Large, warm hands find their way up the back of my shirt, and for the life of me I can’t remember what he just asked me. “What?” He continues trailing his fingertips across my skin and my eyes nearly roll back in my head.

“I asked what brought you by,” he says, nuzzling the side of my neck.

“Oh, yeah...I was in the area. I need to go by the Chef’s Nook down the street, so I figured I’d drop by.”

Connor’s deft fingers travel around my waist, stroking my stomach, and a shiver races up my spine. “What do you need from that place?” he asks, seemingly oblivious to the way he’s torturing me.

My body is thrumming with sexual energy, and if I don’t get out of here soon, I’m going to beg him to fuck me right here in this chair. “You have to stop touching me,” I demand, earning myself a bright, white smile from Connor.

“Sorry, I can’t do that. Now tell me what you’re getting at the Chef’s Nook.”

“A pan for lasagna.”

Connor's hands stop. "You're making me lasagna?"

"Is that okay?" I ask, suddenly unsure of my supper choice. He did tell me that was his favorite food, right? Shit. Maybe I was so damn horny I didn't hear him correctly.

"It's perfect."

"Good. I realized when I got home that I don't have the right-sized pan. It might still be in storage, but there's no way in hell I'm digging through that mess so I'll just buy a new one."

"Don't." Connor shakes his head. "I've got every size pan you can imagine in my kitchen. Just go borrow what you need. Hell, make dinner at my place if you want. In fact," he says, wagging his eyebrows, "I wouldn't complain one bit if I came home and you were wearing nothing but an apron. That would actually be really fucking awesome."

"Is sex all you think about?" I ask with mock annoyance.

"No," he says, pressing his lips to the base of my neck. The scruff on his jaw abrades my skin, and I squeeze my thighs together in a desperate attempt to control my ever-growing need. "All I think about is you."

My body shudders at his words. Damn he's good. "I like that," I say, cupping his face in my hands. "Because I can't stop thinking about you either."

A deep growl rumbles from Connor's chest. "You can't say those things to me when I'm at work because it makes me want to lay you flat on that table," he says, motioning toward the tiny table with supplies scattered on the surface. "And I *cannot* lay you flat on that table." He pauses and glances at said tiny table. "Well, I could, but we'd end up flat on our asses."

I push up from Connor's lap. "Tonight you can lay me on any surface you want. How about that?" I whisper, giving him a quick peck on the lips.

"Fuuuuuck," he says, reaching for my arm.

Laughing, I sidestep his grabby hand. He attempts to glare at me, but it lacks the necessary edge and I end up laughing harder. "Later, I promise. Now are you sure you don't mind if I borrow a pan?"

"Fine." He sighs, reminding me of a petulant child. Normally, I would find that annoying, but when Connor does it, I find it cute. "And you're more than welcome to borrow it." Connor stands up and leads me out of his workstation toward the front door. "You can go in through the garage. My code is 9080."

"Thank you."

"You're making me lasagna. Trust me, I should be the one thanking you. Oh! By the way"—he snaps his fingers—"is it okay if Logan joins us for dinner tonight?"

"Absolutely. I'd love to meet your best friend." Lifting up on my tiptoes, I brush my mouth against Connor's ear. "Just make sure Logan is gone by dessert. I've got a can of whipped cream I was planning to bring over."

"Leave. Now." I bust up laughing when Connor all but shoves me out the front door. He immediately yanks me back in and gives me a searing kiss that earns us several catcalls from the guys in the shop, and then he shoves me back out again. "Now go."

"Goodbye, Connor." I walk out of InkSlingers, and my body feels as though I'm floating down the sidewalk. My heart is full, my soul is happy, and I'm afraid this goofy-ass smile will be permanently etched on my face.

Holy shit, I'm in love.

CHAPTER 15

Brittany

“This smells fantastic.” Keeping his hands on the hot rags, Connor takes the steaming dish from my hands.

“I slaved all day over a hot stove for you,” I say jokingly as I follow him into the kitchen. “So now what are you going to do for me?”

Connor puts the lasagna on the stove top. “Where’s the whipped cream?” he whispers, wrapping his arms around my waist.

Bringing my hands to his chest, I slide them up his neck. Then I cup his face in my hands and kiss him softly. “It’s already in your fridge,” I mumble, my lips brushing his. “I brought it over when I borrowed the casserole dish. Wasn’t sure what Logan would think if I walked in with a can of whipped cream and no dessert to go with it.”

“But you did bring dessert.” Connor’s husky voice wraps around my body. “I plan to lick it off of you here”—he trails his lips to the base of my neck—“and here”—his tongue darts out, making a path along the tops of my breasts—“and we can’t forget about here,” he says, slipping his hand between my legs.

I’m ready to rip my clothes off so he can fuck me right here in the kitchen, company be damned.

How in the hell does he do that?

“Connor.” I hate to admit it, but yes, I just whimpered his name.

He hoists me up on the counter and pushes my legs apart, making room for his big, sexy body.

“When you say my name like that, it makes me want to do dirty, *dirty* things to you.” His mouth descends and he attacks my neck. My head drops back between my shoulders, giving him better access. There is no way we’re going to make it through—

“Connor, can I get another towel?” My head snaps forward at the sound of a delicate voice—a delicate *female* voice. Then, as a half-naked woman rounds the corner, my heart seizes in my chest. Long, dark hair spills over her shoulders, water dripping down her bare arms, and miles upon miles of long legs are on display.

I think I’m going to throw up.

“Oh, shit.” The woman’s steps falter when she locks eyes with me. “I’m so sorry,” she says, fisting her hand in the knotted towel, just above her breasts. She looks as shocked as I probably do.

Connor groans, dropping his head to my shoulder before turning around. “Logan, this is—*holy shit, woman!* Go put some clothes on.”

Logan.

Connor’s best friend is named Logan.

Oh no. *No-no-no-no.*

“I need another towel,” she says, right before giving me a bashful smile. “I really am sorry.” She takes a step toward us and my entire body freezes. “I don’t usually”—her words trail off and she waves her hand in the air—“you know, walk around here...like this.”

I’m at a complete loss for words as she stares at me, presumably waiting for me to tell her that’s it’s all right and I understand. But it’s not all right, and I most certainly do *not* understand. And—oh great—now Connor is staring at me.

“You know what?” Logan says, gesturing toward the hall. “I don’t need that other towel. I’ll just...go.” She scurries off and I watch her until she disappears. I can see out of the corner of my eye that Connor hasn’t taken his eyes off me.

“Hey.” Connor puts his face in front of mine. “Are you okay?” He runs soothing hands down each of my arms, and my body stiffens. Scooting forward, I nudge him back, and when there’s enough room, I slide off the counter.

“So...” Running my shaky hands down the front of my shirt, I sidestep Connor. “That’s your best friend Logan?” I’m proud that I was able to keep my voice from wavering because, really, I don’t want Logan to be his best friend.

“It is.” Those two little words are said with so much caution that I know he knows I have a problem with it. “Are you okay?”

I would be, except you forgot to mention that Logan is of the vagina-yielding species.

My lungs fight to suck in air, but it’s getting more difficult with each passing second. Pressure builds behind my eyes and I blink several times to keep the tears at bay, though I know it’s only a matter of time. “Wow.” I blow out a long breath. “Your best friend is a woman.”

“Brittany.” Connor steps in front of me. Tilting his head to the side, he studies me. We’re not touching, but God do I want to touch him. *So bad.* I want him to wrap me in his arms, tell me this is all some horrible mix-up, and promise me that everything will be okay. But that won’t happen and I need to quit being so damn naïve. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you that Logan was a girl. To be honest, I didn’t even think about it. She’s like a sister to me.”

Funny, Tyson said the exact same thing.

How in the hell did I not see this coming? “Of course she is,” I mumble. My heart is screaming at me not to make any rash decisions, but my heart is also the traitorous bastard that got me here in the first place.

I look at the front door and then down the hall. Logan hasn’t reemerged and I’m wondering if she has her ear pressed to a door, trying to listen. Bile rises in my throat and I swallow hard. I’m seconds away from losing my shit, and I sure as hell won’t lose it with another woman here. “I need to go,” I say, scurrying toward the front door.

“Wait.” Connor snags my wrist and spins me around. Brows dipped low, he shakes his head. “Are you upset because I didn’t tell you Logan is a girl?” he asks. “Because I would’ve told you if I thought it was going to be an issue—hell, if I’d even thought about it.” His voice is no longer gentle and careful, instead it sounds as though he’s frustrated.

Welcome to the club, buddy.

“I’m sure you would have.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Releasing my wrist, Connor steps back and runs a hand through his hair. Lacing his fingers behind his neck, he releases a heavy sigh. “I’m so fucking lost right now.”

“She’s your best friend,” I state simply, as though he should understand. I know in my heart that he doesn’t, but we’ve already established what an idiot my heart is.

“So what?”

So what? *So what?* I’ll show him *so what!*

“You have a key to her place.” I wasn’t asking, I was making a statement, but Connor answers me anyway.

“Yes, I do.”

“How often do you use it?” I don’t even know why I’m asking. I guess I’m hoping that if he only uses it once a month then maybe, just maybe, I could find a way to move past this.

“What the fuck?” he growls, tossing his hands up at his side. “I don’t know. A couple of times a week, maybe. But what the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“Have you slept with her?”

His jaw drops open, but he quickly recovers. “No,” he snaps. “I haven’t *fucked* her if that’s what you’re asking. Look, I made a mistake. I should’ve told you and I’m sorry. Please”—he shakes his head—“don’t do this. I know what you’re doing, and I’m asking you not to do this.”

“You don’t know what I’m doing,” I say with a tad more bite than I intended. Connor’s eyes widen. It looks like we’re having our first official fight...and ironically, our last. “Do you love her?” I want to punch

myself in the fucking face for asking. It's completely unfair to him—and to Logan—but I need to hear him say it.

It doesn't matter what his answer is, I tell myself. You need to leave now. Make a clean break while you can.

“Of course I love her. She's my best friend.”

My heart twists painfully inside my chest. It's as if I'm right back where I was when Tyson left. I can't do that again. I can't pour my heart and soul into someone—and I would've poured my heart and soul into Connor—and risk being left again. I've regained some strength over the years, but I'm not that strong.

“I'm sorry,” I say, all of the fight draining out of me. I won't resort to acting like a jealous teenager. Twisting my hands in front of me, I will myself to find the courage to walk away. After a deep breath, I say, “I'm sorry for leading you on like this. I know I'm not making any sense, but...but I can't do this with you.”

The air grows thick with tension. Connor purses his lips but doesn't say a word. Instead, he walks straight to the door. Twisting the knob, he pulls it open and steps back, giving me plenty of room to pass. I walk toward him, hating the way his gaze drops to the floor. The tic in his jaw catches my attention.

Connor doesn't understand what's going on and that doesn't sit well with me. If I'm going to walk out of here, never to return, then he at least deserves to know why.

“I was engaged,” I blurt out. Connor looks up and now it's my turn to look down. I don't want to see the pity I know he'll offer, because that's what everyone does.

Clearing my throat, I start talking, and I don't stop until I've told him everything. “We were college sweethearts, together for years. In 2006, we applied to med school in New York and we both got in.” I smile to myself, remembering how happy I was. The same kind of happy I was just minutes ago. “Right before the big move, Tyson's best friend—*who happened to be a woman*—confessed her love for him.” I suck in a shuddery breath. I've worked so hard to forget that horrible night, and reliving isn't going to be fun.

“She begged him to stay and give her a chance, but he didn't. He walked away from her—he chose me. I was thrilled because, in the back of my mind, I'd always thought he had a thing for her, but I had to have been wrong, right?” I shrug. “That was his opportunity to be with her and he didn't take it. Anyway,” I say, rubbing a hand over my face, “we moved to New York and started our lives there. The years went by, and like any normal couple, our relationship progressed. One year over Christmas break, Tyson brought me back home, and after asking my parents for permission, he proposed.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I allow the warmth and love from that moment to seep back into my heart, a glimpse of what true love—or what I thought was true love—felt like. “You know that old saying that hindsight is twenty-twenty? Well, it's true.”

Connor has been eerily silent and I peek up at him. I'm shocked when I don't see pity swimming in his eyes. Empathy, yes, but no pity, and in this moment my respect for him grows. “We weren't living our lives. I was living *my* life and Tyson was living around me. We were merely existing, and I wish I would've noticed it sooner. But it was too late. I came home from the hospital one night and found him sitting in the living room surrounded by suitcases.”

The pain from that moment pierces my heart. Lifting my hand, I prepare to rub away the ache—the same ache I get in the left side of my chest any time I think about that night. Only this time, the ache doesn't come.

“Tell me the rest.” Connor's voice is raspy, his eyes filled with emotion.

“He left me. Broke off the engagement, moved back home, and eventually won back the girl he truly was in love with.”

“His best friend.” It isn't a question. Connor's a smart man and he easily puts two and two together.

I nod. “Her name is Harley and, believe it or not,” I say, laughing mirthlessly, “I actually like her. I don't want to like her, but I do. And I'm sure I would like Logan as well, but I just... I can't put myself in that position again.” Reaching out, I wrap my hand around the doorknob, ready to make my escape—but

not before finishing the story. I've come this far, so I may as well tell him the rest. "Tyson is adopting Harley's son and they have a baby on the way. Three weeks ago they tied the knot."

Connor's eyes widen. "*Ad astra per aspera*," he murmurs.

I scrunch my nose. "Huh?"

"Your tattoo." Connor takes a hesitant step toward me. "You came into my shop on their wedding day. That's why you got the tattoo."

I take a deep breath but it catches in my throat, and I close my eyes to try and stop the building tears. There's no point in denying it, but I also don't want to talk about it. Opening my eyes, I step through the doorway and spin around to get one last look at Connor. His anger and frustration from moments ago are completely gone and his eyes are pleading with me to stay.

But I just can't. By staying, I'm opening myself up to the kind of pain I experienced before, and that's exactly what I've been afraid of.

I had a momentary lapse in judgment when I decided to let Connor in. My mistake. Either way, I'll move on, and so will he.

Fuck. I don't like the sound of that at all, but it's for the best.

"The tattoo you got that day, what does it mean?" he asks, almost frantically.

"A rough road leads to the stars." I don't wait around to see his reaction or give him time to respond. "Goodbye, Connor." I shut the door before he has the chance to stop me from leaving. Pressing my back against the wood, I squeeze my eyes shut and blow out a long, slow breath.

A few moments ago when I was talking about Tyson, I'd waited for my chest to ache. It never did. But now that I've walked away from Connor, the pain is back. This time, however, it's so much more than an ache—it's a stabbing pain that not only slices through my heart, it pierces my soul.

CHAPTER 16

Brittany

It's been three days since I've seen Connor. Four thousand three hundred and twenty seconds, to be exact, and every single one of those I've been thinking about him. Since that night, he's left me seven voicemails and fifteen texts, begging me to talk to him, and he's stopped by the house twice. I know I'm a coward, but I just couldn't. One look in that man's eyes and I would've caved.

I keep telling myself it isn't a big deal that his best friend is a woman. Except it *is* a big deal. Being second best in someone's life isn't something I'm willing to do—not again, at least.

“Are you going to turn the TV on, or just stare at the blank screen all night?” Casey asks, walking into the living room. She falls onto the couch next to me and nudges me with her elbow.

“I kind of like the blank screen.”

“Sure ya do.” She glances down at her watch, a knowing look on her face when her eyes meet mine. “It's almost four.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I do my best to appear unaffected. “So?”

“Sooooo,” she says. “Connor stopped by yesterday at four, and the day before that at four. I bet today won't be any different.”

“Yes, well, we're over. He needs to move on. It's not like we were together long.” I laugh out loud at myself for saying that. I felt more with him in those few short days than I did after years with Tyson. That should mean something, and if I wasn't being so stubborn, it probably would.

“You need to talk to him.” Leave it to my little sister to try and put me in my place. “Have you at least returned any of his texts or phone calls?” I shake my head and she rolls her eyes. “You're being a little bitch.”

I rear back as though she just slapped me across the face. “Whose side are you on?”

“Yours,” she says. “Always yours. But even if I'm on your side, it doesn't mean I think you're making the right decision.”

“He had a half-naked woman in his house,” I yell, hoping it finally sinks into her brain. “A half-naked woman who just so happens to be his best friend. Does this not sound familiar to you? Do you remember the hell Tyson put me through?”

“Of course I do,” she says, understanding flashing in her eyes. “But Connor isn't Tyson.”

“Tell that to my brain.”

“See, that's the problem. You need to quit thinking about this with your head and start thinking about it with this big, fat muscle right here,” she says, poking me in the chest. “You are a doctor, right? You know which muscle I'm talking about.”

“Yes,” I say, slapping her hand away. “I know which muscle you're talking about. But Case...I'm not sure I could survive another broken heart.”

“Well”—she pushes up from the couch, then puts her hands on her hips—“the mopey-ass look on your face tells me you're already surviving one.”

“My heart isn't breaking,” I say, giving her a tremulous smile. My eyes well with tears and a few slip past my lashes. Because even as I say it, I know it isn't true. Connor and I may not have been together for very long, but I *really* did see a future together. “I wasn't in love with Connor.”

“You don't have to be in love for your heart to break.” Casey brushes a tear from my face and then walks away.

I'm not sure how long I sit and stare off into space, but I'm startled when a loud knock sounds at the door.

Come on, Connor. You're only making this harder on both of us.

Several seconds pass, and right when I think he gave up, another knock sounds. Maybe it's best to just get this over with now, although I feel like I've said all I needed to say. Pushing up from the couch, I open the door and come face-to-face with... "Logan."

"Hey." She waves awkwardly. "Can I come in for a second?"

"Sure." Stepping aside, I open the door wide. She walks in and follows me to the living room. Her eyes drift around my duplex. My gaze follows hers, and I realize that she must think it's odd that the place is completely bare.

"I just moved in." Scratching the top of my head, I try to come up with something to say, *something* to fill this awkward silence. I've got nothing.

"I know." Logan brings her gaze back to me. "Connor told me."

My skin prickles at the mention of his name. "Right. Connor." Sucking my bottom lip in between my teeth, I nod.

"Connor's crazy about you."

Hold up. What did she say? I expected her to come over here and yell at me, maybe try and start some sort of catfight, but I didn't expect her to say *that*. Something on my face must clue her in to my confusion because she chuckles.

"It's true." I stare at her, trying to figure out how to respond. "Mind if I sit?" she asks.

"Please, have a seat."

She sits on the couch, scooting toward the edge, but I stay standing. Logan's shoulders droop. Her eyes fall to something in front of her, and for a brief second it's as though she's reliving some sort of memory. When she looks back up, her eyes are full of understanding. "I heard what you said to Logan. Eavesdropping isn't typically my thing, but what can I say?" she says, shrugging. "I'm a woman."

A bubble of laughter crawls up my throat and she visibly relaxes at the sound. "It's okay. I have a sister. A nosy-ass sister. I understand."

"I'm sorry that happened to you," she says, once again catching me off guard. "I can't imagine how difficult that must've been. I won't pretend to understand what it felt like, because I've never been in love. But I do know what it's like to come second to someone else."

She's offering me an olive branch. I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, so I take it. "You do?"

"Unfortunately." Logan wraps a strand of hair around her fingers, twirling it. "My dad chose his girlfriend over me. It's not something I like to think about, but I want you to know that I understand and I wouldn't wish it upon anyone," she says, looking up at me. "Did Connor tell you how we met?" she asks.

"Foster care."

"Yup. My dad neglected me and I was eventually taken away from him. I bounced around several horrible foster homes, but the day of my last move was the luckiest day of my life."

"It was?" I ask, curious. Why on earth would moving into a new foster home be the best day of someone's life?

"It was. Because that's the day I met my brother." I didn't miss that Logan emphasized the word *brother*. "Connor and I might not share the same blood, but he is my family in every sense of the word. Do I love Connor? Yes, but not the way you're afraid of. And trust me, I understand why you'd be afraid."

"You do?"

"Yes. I don't necessarily agree with it—which is why I'm here—but I understand. Putting yourself out there like that, in the same situation you were in before? That would be terrifying. I'm not sure I could do it, so I wouldn't expect you to."

"But you just said you don't agree with me," I say, my brows dipping low.

"Yeah, well, that's the other thing I wanted to tell you. Coming in second sucks. I don't want to go through something like that again, just like you don't want to. But I'd gladly come in second *to you*."

"What?" I drop down onto the couch.

“I love Connor,” she states firmly. “Nothing and no one is ever going to change that—not even you. But I’m not *in love* with him. Never have been, never will be. And the thing is, I realize Connor isn’t my dad. He may put you first, which he should, but he wouldn’t forget about me. He won’t treat me the way my dad did. And he wouldn’t treat you the way Tyson did.”

My lips press together in a frown. “I don’t know, Logan.” Bringing my hand to my mouth, I pull at my lip, my mind digesting everything she just said.

“Do you want to know why I’d gladly take second place to you?” she asks hopefully. I nod. “Because you make him happy. You’re so different than any girl he’s been with, and trust me, I’ve been there for all of them. He smiles every time he says your name, even after you left him.”

My eyes burn, tears pushing against the confines of my lashes. Logan didn’t have to come over here and tell me all of this, but she did because she wants her best friend to be happy. And apparently, she realizes the person who makes him happy is me. The old Brit would’ve likely found a way to discredit everything she’s saying, but the new Brit wants desperately to believe it. Because the new Brit can’t say Connor’s name without smiling, too.

A small grin tugs at the corner of my mouth. Maybe my heart was right to take a chance on Connor. Maybe it learned its lesson the first time and recognizes Connor for who he is—the type of man to love me the way I deserve to be loved.

“I hope that smile means something good,” Logan says, her eyes bright with hope.

Regret quickly overshadows my moment of happiness as I recall the way I so easily dismissed Connor. What if he doesn’t forgive me? What if he thinks I’m batshit crazy? What if I threw away my one chance at real happiness?

“No,” Logan snaps, catching my attention. “Your smile is fading. Why in the world is your smile fading?”

“What if I already ruined everything? It wasn’t like we were together long. What if he’s decided I’m a flight risk?”

“Girl…” Logan clucks her tongue. She stands up and I follow suit. “We’re all flight risks. It’s what makes us human. And guess what?”

“What?”

“Humans make mistakes, and the really awesome humans—like Connor—forgive those mistakes.”

“Did he tell you he’d forgive me?”

“Hell no,” she scoffs. “And trust me, I’ve tried to talk to him about it, but all I’ve gotten are grunts and nods. You know, the typical male bullshit. That’s the other reason I knew you were in his life for good.” I cock a brow, urging her to continue, and she rolls her eyes. “Connor tells me everything about everything…except when it comes to you.”

Wow. That’s surprising, especially if they’re best friends. Tyson used to tell Harley *everything*. It was one of the things that pissed me off the most. Maybe appearances aren’t the only way that Connor and Tyson are different.

“I’ve spent the last three days begging him to give me the nitty-gritty details, but the brute won’t budge. His lips are sealed because you’re important to him. And if you’re important to him, you’re important to me.”

Logan barely gets the last word out before I yank her into my arms. At first she doesn’t hug me back, but that’s okay; I don’t take offense to it. I just keep squeezing until she finally does. It starts with a pat on my back and then her grip on me tightens.

“Maybe we can both come first,” I say, wanting so badly to be Logan’s friend.

“Nah,” she says. “You should come first. That’s how it should be. Plus, I’m moving to Tennessee.”

Gripping her shoulders, I pull back until we’re eye to eye. “You’re moving to Tennessee?”

“Yep. Connor didn’t tell you?”

I shake my head. “But I didn’t exactly give him the chance.”

“Well, I am, and I need someone here to look after my brother. I need to know he’s taken care of. And I could *really* use someone that’s willing to help me out when I bring a cowboy back home with me.”

Furrowing my brows, I try to picture Connor meeting Logan’s cowboy boyfriend. Connor in his Chucks, long hair, beard, and colorful tattoos, versus a Stetson-wearing cowboy. That could be really interesting. “I promise to run interference,” I say.

“See?” she says, nudging my shoulder. “This is going to work out perfectly.” Logan’s eyes soften. “Who knows, maybe I’ll get a sister out of it.” She tried to sound flippant, but I could see past her façade.

“I think that sounds fantastic.”

Logan’s face lights up, and for several seconds we both just stare at each other.

“Well, I better get going,” she says, nodding toward the door.

“Are you going to Connor’s?” I ask.

“No,” she says, winking at me. “You are.”

CHAPTER 17

Connor

It's been three days since Brittany walked out of my house. I shouldn't care, considering I'd only known her for a hot second, but boy was it a hot second. The best damn hot second of my life.

And that right there is exactly why I can't let her go.

I can't...and won't.

She stunned the hell outta me with the story about her fiancé. As much as I hated to hear what happened to her, it explains her reaction to Logan being a female. I can't say I blame her for being upset. If the roles were reversed, I probably would've lost my shit, too.

My heart broke for her, and by the time I came up with something to say, she was already gone. I pounded on her front door for nearly an hour, begging her to talk to me. It wasn't until Logan grabbed my arm and physically pulled me back to my house that I finally gave up. But even then I didn't really give up, because I can't stop thinking about her and I'd be lying if I said I haven't been plotting ways to get her back.

I've been with my fair share of women, but not one has affected me the way Brittany has. Her big blue eyes peeking up at me under thick, dark lashes made my heart flip over in my chest. The dimples in her cheeks, winking at me every time she laughed, caused me to lose my breath. But what affected me the most was feeling her body shudder under the touch of my hand. *That* feeling made me want to stand on a mountain and pound my chest, claiming her as mine.

So right now I'm doing the only thing I can do. I'm holding on to those moments while I give her time. Unfortunately for her, the more time I spend thinking, the more pissed off I get.

What Tyson did was shitty, but I'm not Tyson.

Clenching my jaw, I stand up. What the hell am I supposed to do? How do I handle this? A part of me thinks I need to sit back and just give her time to miss me; that she'll realize what a terrible mistake she made. The other part of me wants to tear into her for screwing with my feelings the way she has. I let her into my life, I bent my rules, and this is the shit she pulls?

Fuck.

She's got me so fucking tied up in knots it isn't even funny. It's infuriating, actually.

My frustration is at an all-time high. I pace the living room several times before deciding that giving her space is the wrong choice. I'm not sure giving her a piece of my mind is the right way to go, but it's what I'm going to do, and damn it, she's going to listen.

Leaving the house, I stomp toward Brittany's side of the duplex. Before I make it to her porch, the front door flies open, revealing what appears to be a deliriously happy Brittany and a smiling Logan.

What. The. Hell.

Brittany's gaze lands on me. Her smile falters just a fraction, the happiness seemingly replaced with uncertainty. *There's no room for uncertainty now, sweetheart.* You said your piece, and now it's time I said mine.

She takes a step toward me. Straightening my back, I square my shoulders and stalk toward her. Something in my approach must confuse her because she stops and flicks her eyes to Logan before bringing them back to me.

"Goodbye, Logan," I say without sparing her a glance. Logan snickers, but out of the corner of my eye I see her scurry toward her car. I walk straight over to Brittany, not stopping until we're toe to toe. The air around us crackles. It's something I'd gotten used to, something I'm going to miss if I can't get her to see she's making a huge fucking mistake. Something I'm afraid I'll never feel again with anyone else.

Chin held high, I glare at Brittany. Gorgeous blue eyes are watching me carefully, sparkling with what looks a whole hell of a lot like hope. Her hair is pulled up in a bun on top of her head, loose strands floating around her face, and her shirt is a rumpled mess. She looks so different like this; not at all like the put-together doctor she is. I like this side of her. I like every side of her.

I've never wanted so badly to both kiss a woman and physically shake her as I do in this moment.

"I'm so fucking pissed at you right now," I say, grinding the words out. Brittany scrunches her nose at the tone of my voice. She's so damn adorable when she does that. My body deflates, my frustration waning.

Oh hell no, Connor, I think to myself, you will not get distracted. You came here because you have something to say, and—damn it—you're going to say it.

"We need to talk, and by that I mean I'm going to do the talking and you're going to listen."

Brittany's brows are now nearly touching her hairline. She plants a fist on her hip. "Well, I have a few things to say, too," she says with just as much bite.

"You've already talked and now it's my turn." My eyes lock on her plump lower lip as she sucks it into her mouth. Even though it's only been a few days, I already recognize this as a nervous habit.

Pulling my eyes to hers, I swear I see a hint of amusement flash across her face. "Cut the bullshit," I snap, watching her face fall. "This isn't funny. You're blaming me for the mistakes of that prick who broke your heart." Nothing like throwing it all out there, and there's no stopping now. "I'm nothing like him. I would never hurt you because I care about you, and hurting you would hurt me. But you don't feel the same way, do you?" I ask, not really looking for an answer.

"That's not—"

"Because if you felt the same way," I say, interrupting her, "then you wouldn't have walked away so easily. Did you even try giving us a chance, or were you so scared of getting hurt again that you looked for an out any place you could find it?" She opens her mouth, but I'm not done. "And I handed it to you on a silver fucking platter, didn't I? I gave you the one reason to bail that everyone would understand."

"Connor—"

"This is pointless," I say, gripping the back of my neck. "You've already put me in the same category as him. There's no sense trying to defend myself. But you know what? I shouldn't have to defend myself, because I deserve better than that. I'm a good guy who would give every single part of myself, and I deserve that in return." Brittany's eyes glisten under the dull light of the falling sun. Her tears rip through my heart, the sharp pain radiating to my soul. I can tell my words hit their mark.

I hurt her.

I just said I would never hurt her, yet I did it anyway.

I'm no better than she is. Maybe we're better off not together after all.

Taking a deep breath, I find my resolve. "I can't do this." I glance at my house. Maybe it's time to make my exit.

"Are you done spewing all of that bullshit?"

My head snaps back, her words a slap in the face. "You've got to be kidding me."

"I came out here to tell you I'm sorry," she says, the expression on her face much softer than her voice.

"You did?"

"Yes, but—"

"No buts." Grabbing her chin, I demand her attention. "Tell me," I plead. The energy that was coursing through my body is quickly transforming from frustration to hope.

"I'm sorry—"

My arms wrap around her before she even finishes apologizing. Pulling her body flush against mine, I hold her close...and this time I'm not letting her go. Relief washes through me, because being without her was going to hurt like a bitch.

Brittany laughs, her face squished against my chest. "You don't even know what I was going to say," she mumbles against my shirt.

Chills race down my spine, unease settling in my gut. Pulling back, I narrow my eyes.

“No,” Brittany says quickly. “I didn’t mean it like that. I do apologize, but I want to *finish* apologizing.”

Lips parting, I sigh in relief. “Does your apology end with us being together?”

“Yes, but I don’t want you to let me off that easily,” she says, her eyes brimming with more tears.

“It doesn’t matter—”

“Shush.” Brittany presses a finger against my lips. “It does matter.” I shake my head, but it doesn’t deter her. “You were right. I was blaming you for someone else’s mistakes, and that wasn’t fair to you or to Logan—whom I’m very fond of, by the way. I’m sorry I hurt you, and I’m sorry if I broke your trust.” I shake my head again, and this time she lowers her hand. “But I promise I’ll make it up to you. Just…” Her voice trembles. Grabbing her hand, I lace our fingers together, silently urging her to continue. Her fingers tighten around mine. “Be gentle with me, okay? Because I’m going to fall for you, and I’ve already had my heart stomped on. I’m not sure how much more abuse it can take.”

Bringing my free hand to her face, I cup her jaw. “Well, that’s good to hear because I’m already falling for you.” Brittany’s face lights up, the dimples in her cheeks popping out. Warmth radiates through my chest, slowly seeping outward. “I’m not sure what life has in store for us, but I can promise that you won’t regret this. You won’t regret us, and you won’t regret me.”

Closing her eyes, she nuzzles her cheek in the palm of my hand. “Just promise me one thing,” she says, her lids fluttering open.

“What’s that?”

“If at any point you’re not happy or you have feelings for someone else, just tell me. Please don’t stay with me out of obligation or fear. Just be honest. That’s all I need.”

“I can do that,” I whisper. “As long as you’ll promise to do the same.”

She pulls her hand out of mine and then slowly slides both of them up my chest. “I promise.” Gripping the material of my shirt, she crashes her lips against mine. My lips part as she devours me, and there really is nothing else I can do other than go with it because I need her so much right now.

Planting my hands on her ass, I hoist her up. She wraps her legs around my waist, the warmth of her body pressing against my cock. My chest rumbles and I rip my mouth from hers. “Is this the point where we get to have crazy hot make-up sex?”

Her swollen lips part. “Yes,” she says, breathless. “Make-up sex. Great idea. What the hell are you waiting for?” Running her fingers along my scruffy jaw, she pushes her hands into my hair and fists it. Her hot mouth attacks my neck, and what little control I had left snaps.

I have no idea what I did to deserve this little spitfire, but no way in hell am I letting her go again.

EPILOGUE

Brittany

Several months later

“Are you sure about this?” Connor asks, prepping the underside of my left forearm.

Leaning forward, I kiss the top of his head. “Of course I’m sure about this. I trust you.”

His beautiful blue eyes peek up at me. “I know you do, baby. All right, here we go. It shouldn’t take long at all.”

Sitting back in the chair, I close my eyes. The tattoo gun buzzes to life, and I flinch when it first touches my skin. Connor said this would be a sensitive spot, and it definitely is, but the pain seems to be dulling with each pass.

I knew it was time for my next tattoo. My previous two are linked to not-so-great memories. They’re there to remind me about my past and what I’ve overcome. This time, however, I wanted the tattoo to reflect a really great memory. Last week, Connor told me he loved me for the first time. I felt those three words deep down in my soul, and of course I returned them.

Connor is it for me; I have no doubt about that at all. And what better way to celebrate our love than with a new tattoo. Something to remind me every single day that taking a chance on Connor was the best decision I’ve ever made.

It must’ve been something that Connor had been thinking about too, because as soon as I mentioned it, he said he had the perfect idea. I went with it. Connor knows me better than anyone, and my trust in him is unwavering.

So here I am letting the man I love give me a tattoo, and I have absolutely no idea what it’s going to look like or what it’s going to say. I gave him two stipulations; the tattoo had to be in a different language, just like the other two, and I wanted it on the underside of my forearm, straight down from my pinky.

Time passes quickly, and before I know it, Connor turns off his tattoo gun. “All done,” he says, running a cloth over my skin to wipe off the blood. “You ready to see it?”

I nod excitedly, and he turns my arm so I can see the three beautifully scripted words he’s permanently etched into my skin. “*Vivere senza rimpianti*,” I whisper, trying my best not to botch the pronunciation. “It’s stunning,” I say, looking at Connor. His smile is beaming, and just like always, it melts my heart. “What’s it mean?”

“That’s the best part,” he says, bringing his lips to mine. He kisses me gently a couple of times before pulling back. “Do you remember when I promised that no matter what happened between us, you would never regret this or me?” I nod, my eyes welling with tears when I remember the heartache I caused that led to that moment. Grateful isn’t even a strong enough word to describe how happy I am that he decided to forgive me.

“No crying.” Curving his hand around the back of my neck, he tugs me in close. “It says ‘live without regret’ in Italian. I thought it would be perfect.”

My breath hitches in my throat. “It’s more than perfect.” Mindful of my fresh ink, I wrap my arms carefully around his neck.

Connor nuzzles his face in my hair. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Not like. Love,” I say, emphasizing the last word. “I *love* it. Almost as much as I love you.”

“I love you too, baby. More than you know.”

“Why don’t you take me home and you can show me just how much.”

Connor growls, his eyes eating me up from head to toe. “That’s a brilliant idea,” he says, pulling back so he can perform his aftercare on my tattoo. “You’re so damn smart. Just one of the millions of things about you that turn me the fuck on.”

“Connor. Hurry,” I say, wiggling in my seat. My need for this man hasn’t waned...not one bit. In fact, it’s grown to epic proportions.

“And Brittany,” he says, wiping salve on my arm, “just to give you some warning so you can prepare yourself...” I look at him questioningly, wondering what he’s going to say next. “I’m going to ask you to marry me and it’s going to be soon.”

My heart stutters to a stop, flops around inside my chest, and then restarts, kicking into high gear. “Not if I ask you first.”

Connor’s head snaps up, a shit-eating grin plastered to his face. “Well played, babe,” he says. “Well played.”

Pursing my lips, I give him a smug little smile.

I think I’m going to like playing this game.

THE END

(Or is it?)

ABOUT K.L. GRAYSON

K.L. Grayson resides in a small town outside of St. Louis, MO. She is entertained daily by her extraordinary husband, who will forever inspire every good quality she writes in a man. Her entire life rests in the palms of six dirty little hands, and when the day is over and those pint-sized cherubs have been washed and tucked into bed, you can find her typing away furiously on her computer. She has a love for alpha-males, brownies, reading, tattoos, sunglasses, and happy endings...and not particularly in that order.

If you enjoyed reading *Live Without Regret* as much as I enjoyed writing it, I hope you'll consider leaving a review.

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A Lover's Lament

JUST FOR TONIGHT

By K.L. Grayson

Coming 2016

We all have our weaknesses...rich, decadent chocolate, fancy designer handbags, overpriced stilettos in every color under the sun. My weakness is Benny Catalano. To call Benny tall, dark, and handsome would be a massive understatement. His giant, tattooed, drool-worthy frame sits at an impressive six foot three. Thick dark hair sticks up in every direction, giving him that notorious I-just-had-crazy-monkey-sex look that most women love. And the five o'clock shadow on his perfectly square jaw could bring any woman to her knees. Benny wasn't just smacked with the handsome stick. Nope, he was smacked and then beaten with the Adonis bad boy belt.

My only problem ... he's playing hard to get.

I've never had to work too hard for anything, especially not a man. My father is the most influential music producer in the world—I'm used to getting what I want. But if I've learned anything from dear ol' dad, it's that money can't buy happiness and the best things in life don't come easy. And Benny is worth having, although the way he's been dangling the goods and giving nothing away, he sure as hell is making things difficult.

The question is, why?

What he doesn't know is that this privileged socialite isn't afraid to get her hands dirty. If the man of my dreams is the end result, I'm ready to put in the work to make him mine.

My name is Mia Brannigan, and this is my story.

OFF LIMITS

Sparks in Texas, Book 4

By Mari Carr



DEDICATION

To Liz Berry and M.J. Rose
For their belief in me and my stories

PRELUDE

One year earlier...

“Closing time,” Lacy Sparks said, gently tapping on Logan’s shoulder. He’d been looking down at his beer so long he had almost forgotten where he was.

“I thought maybe you’d found a way to sleep with your eyes open,” she teased.

He glanced up at her, and then let his gaze wander around the restaurant. He was surprised to find the place empty. Where the hell did everyone go?

Her cousin, Macie was behind the bar, wiping the counter and he could hear Sydney in the kitchen, washing dishes. Lacy had already cleaned the dining area and he hadn’t noticed them doing any of it.

“Sorry.”

“No problem. I’ll walk you home,” she offered.

Logan wasn’t drunk. Not even close. After all, he’d nursed the last still-full beer for over an hour. But he wasn’t going to turn down the offer of company. Especially Lacy’s. She was one of the reasons he’d returned to Sparks Barbeque tonight. He’d been here earlier with her brother, Evan. His best friend since first grade, Evan had picked him up after work and declared they were going out for happy hour. His friend had been hell-bent on cheering him up. After all, Logan had just gotten dumped. For the first time.

Logan had dated lots of girls, but in the end, he’d always been the heartbreaker because none of them had captured his affections. Until he met Jane.

He should consider himself lucky. Not many men made it to the ripe old age of thirty-three without ever having their hearts ripped out. Of course, the more he thought about it, the more he realized it wasn’t his heart Jane had just tromped all over. It was his pride. His heart had walked out of the relationship about six months ago.

He and Evan had eaten dinner, kicked back a few beers and then Evan had dropped him off at his place. Logan had taken one look around the quiet apartment and then walked the two blocks back to the restaurant. He preferred noise to silence, and there was something very soothing about Lacy’s Uncle TJ’s off-color stories, Macie’s boisterous laughter, and the sweet way Lacy kept stopping by to check on him. When you were with the Sparks family, it was easy to forget what ailed you. The pressure that had taken permanent residence on his chest since Jane moved out last week lifted when he was here.

“Logan?”

God. He shouldn’t have bothered coming back. He was shitty company. “Sorry,” he repeated.

Lacy reached out to clasp his hand, giving it a quick, comforting squeeze. “You ready to go?”

He nodded. “Yeah, but shouldn’t I be offering to walk you home?”

She grinned. “I live five blocks from here and I walk myself home every night. Besides, your place is on my way.”

Logan reached for his wallet, but she waved off his money when he tried to pay for the beer. “It’s on me.”

“Lace.”

Rather than fight about it, she simply pulled her jacket on and walked to the front door leaving him no choice but to follow. “Night, Macie,” she called out.

“Night, y’all,” her cousin replied wearily. It had been a busy night at the restaurant and they were obviously pooped.

Once they stepped out onto the sidewalk, Lacy decided to take the bull by the horns. “I know you’re upset about Jane. If you ever need someone to talk to, I’m a pretty good listener.”

There was no debating that. While he'd been Evan's friend growing up, once they became adults, Lacy had stopped being the kid sister and became a friend in her own right. She was one of the most upbeat people he'd ever met. An eternal optimist. Logan liked the humor and positive energy that seemed to surround her all the time.

"I'm not sure there's much to talk about. The breakup had been coming for a while. Not like it was a total shock."

"Another man?"

He didn't bother to lie. Logan nodded. "Yeah. Some old boyfriend from back home. Apparently they've been chatting on Facebook for nearly a year."

"Fucking Facebook," she said with a grin.

The joke worked. He laughed, but didn't bother to say Jane's flirting over social media had very little to do with what really broke up the relationship. And it certainly wasn't anything he could explain to Lacy. Not fully anyway. God only knew what she'd say if he went into all the gory details.

"This is probably one of those things that's best left alone. Rehashing it won't make it better. I just need to figure out where to go from here."

"So, I'll change my offer. If you ever want to hang out and *not* talk about it, you know where to find me."

"Thanks."

He appreciated her kindness, but he didn't see himself taking her up on the offer. Logan was getting out of a three-year relationship. He needed time to recover and to get his shit together. Looking at Lacy tonight, Logan felt something he didn't want to put a word to, simply because it would be too dangerous to acknowledge.

Once they reached the front of his apartment, he paused. "I really don't mind walking you home, Lacy."

She smiled, and then reached up on tiptoe to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. "It's Maris, Logan. I'll be fine. Night."

He watched as she walked away, not turning toward his front door until she was completely out of sight.

The second Lacy was gone, the heavy feeling he'd managed to keep at bay in the restaurant, returned, along with a new one.

Fuck it. He called it by name. He felt tempted. By Lacy Sparks. It was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER ONE

“This isn’t Vegas.”

Lacy rolled her eyes as Macie repeated the same sentiment she’d been muttering all night. Damn woman had been bemoaning the fact they were holding their cousin Sydney’s bachelorette party in boring old Maris, Texas, instead of Las Vegas for about six weeks now.

“Yeah. That’s totally not getting old, Mace,” Lacy said with a sigh. “Besides, I think Sydney is handling the disappointment just fine.” She lifted her chin toward the bar, where Sydney was giggling her fool head off while sporting a short white veil, jeans and a “Kiss Me, I’m the Bride” t-shirt covered with guys’ signatures in Sharpie. She was drinking blowjob shots with three sexy ranch hands who were only too happy to celebrate with the tipsy bride-to-be.

“I bet she’d trade those three farm boys for male strippers any day of the week.”

Lacy laughed. “This is Sydney’s party, not yours. I suspect she’s perfectly happy right here. We’ll go to Vegas when you get married.”

Macie tipped back her beer. “That’s small comfort. I’ve done a thorough accounting of the stock around here and I’m fairly certain I’m never getting married.”

Lacy found it difficult to argue with her cousin. Macie had cut a wide swath through most of the available men in Maris. Not that Macie was a slut. Quite the contrary. She was very discerning when it came to her lovers. However, she was an equal opportunity dater, which meant she didn’t turn down many requests to go out. Only a handful had ever gotten a second date. “Maybe you should widen the search, check out some neighboring towns.”

Macie simply rolled her eyes. “Already done that.” Then, as so often happened with her cousin, Macie spotted a “squirrel” and changed topics. Shiny things constantly distracted her, too. “It’s good to see Coop out tonight.”

Lacy glanced toward where the rancher was sitting alone, nursing a beer. “Wonder how he’s doing.”

“Considering his wife died of breast cancer three months ago, I’m going to go out on a limb and say shitty.” Macie rose from her seat. “And since the pickings around here are so slim, I’m going to give up on getting lucky and go buy that man a beer. Looks like he could use some cheering up.”

Hank Cooper had always been a regular at Sparks Barbeque, the restaurant Lacy and her cousins operated, stopping in for lunch at least once a week. However, since his wife Charlotte’s death, he’d become even more regular, sitting at the bar with a sandwich, plate of fries and a beer nearly every single night as Macie held court.

While Macie was a terrible cook, she was one hell of a bartender. Lacy was pretty sure that, while people originally came for the delicious food Sydney and Jeannette prepared, they returned because of the fun Macie provided.

Lacy lifted her beer for a drink as her cousin walked away and took the opportunity to survey the bar. It was the first time she’d had five minutes to herself since they began this crazy adventure. Her boisterous cousins and several of their girlfriends had surrounded her all evening as they ran through the typical checklist of bachelorette insanity, complete with tequila shots and raunchy sex toy and negligee gifts. Then they started playing some silly game that Paige had found online, where Sydney had to find guys who fit certain characteristics to sign her t-shirt. She’d found men with tattoos, piercings and facial hair quickly, and had her pick of the litter on men wearing cowboy hats and boots. So far, she’d had no luck on finding a male prostitute or a transvestite—Macie’s additions to the list, items she insisted Sydney would have found easily in Vegas.

With the exceptions of Sydney at the bar and Macie sitting with Coop, most of their party was now out on the dance floor, shaking their booties, completely oblivious to how many cowboys currently stalked

them. Lacy didn't blame the guys. She'd always thought her cousins were beautiful women—inside and out. When they were out together in a pack, like they were now, they tended to turn more than a few heads.

Several men got bold and attempted to break into the circle, hoping to pick one of the women off and get her away from the others. It looked like one guy had just about managed to capture Adele's attention before she shimmied back into the fold. Obviously tonight's unspoken theme was *chicks before dicks*. Which suited Lacy fine, because there wasn't anyone here she was interested in hooking up with.

A slow song started playing and most of the girls headed back toward the table. Only four of them made land as the rest found dance partners and stayed on the floor.

"Damn. It's a total meat market out there," Amanda said as she and her girlfriend Brandi returned, along with Jeannette and Gia, who, unlike the rest of their cousins, had steady boyfriends.

"Tell me about it. I'm pretty sure at least three different guys tried to grope my ass during that last song," Gia added.

Amanda laughed. "Yeah. I saw that. One was my ex, Chuck, who's actually here with his girlfriend, Paula."

"Wait. You dated Chuck? Or Paula?" Jeannette asked, clearly thinking Amanda had misspoken.

Amanda waved away Jeannette's confusion with a grin. "Chuck, but that was way back in two thousand and straight. And believe me, if I hadn't already realized I was into girls way more than guys, Chuck would have pushed me into full-fledged lesbianism."

Gia tossed Chuck a dirty look as he did some sort of obscene bump-and-grind dance with Paula. "It's a dick move trying to feel up one woman when you're with another."

"It's late in the night." Brandi reached for a pretzel. "The drunker these rednecks get, the more hands they're going to grow."

"We should have gone to Vegas." Amanda wrapped her arm around Brandi's shoulders to tug her closer.

"Not you too," Lacy said. "I just managed to talk Macie off that ledge. Besides, you were both cool with this plan." Amanda, Macie's best friend all through school, and Brandi were currently saving up for their wedding. It was one of the reasons why they'd all elected to stay local for the bachelorette party rather than travel to Sin City.

Of course, the main reason was the restaurant. They would have had to close the place down this weekend if they had all ventured out of town, and that was something they only did on Thanksgiving and Christmas. They'd managed to get tonight off because Uncle TJ, along with Lacy's aunts and her mom, had volunteered to man the place during the dinner shift so they could go out.

Money was tight for all of them, so they had decided to stick with the tried-and-true bachelorette party, venturing to the only local nightclub in town, Cruisers. Given its close proximity to the highway, there was always a chance of meeting someone new, but tonight's crowd was nothing more than the usual faces.

Brandi pointed toward the front door. "That was before the guys decided to crash the party."

Lacy glanced up then scowled as her cousin Tyson and her big brother, Evan, made their way toward the table. As her Uncle TJ liked to joke, a person couldn't shake a stick in Maris without hitting a Sparks. That was certainly a true statement. Sometimes Lacy enjoyed having such a large, close-knit family. Sometimes she felt like the only privacy she ever got was in the bathroom.

Then she realized Evan and Tyson weren't alone. Jeannette's boyfriends, Luc and Diego, as well as Evan's best friend, Logan, were there as well.

"Couldn't fit the groom in the car?" Gia asked sarcastically.

Sydney's soon-to-be husband, Chas, appeared to be the only fella who hadn't decided to crash the party.

Tyson looked unapologetic as he sat down next to Gia. He raised his hand to call the waitress over and asked for a round of beers as the other guys claimed the rest of the empty seats. Luc and Diego instantly flanked Jeannette, and she was clearly delighted to see them as they each took a turn kissing her.

“You gals have been here for three hours. We decided you were probably hitting the breaking point.” Tyson looked around the bar as he spoke, no doubt doing a cousin head count.

“And what breaking point is that?” Gia asked.

“Either too drunk to make smart decisions or not drunk enough to deal with all the wasted cowboys. Figured it was time for reinforcements either way,” Evan explained.

“It’s a bachelorette party, Evan,” Lacy said, all too familiar with her big brother’s tendency to take overprotectiveness to new extremes. “You can’t just barge in here like this. You’re lucky Macie hasn’t seen you yet. She’ll flip out.”

Lacy made sure to maintain eye contact with her brother as he studied her face, letting him see how much his presence annoyed her. Unfortunately, her anger was lost on him. The cop in him was trying to visually assess how much she’d had to drink. She was the first to look away in disgust. “You’re pissing me off.”

However, he wasn’t. Not really. Lacy loved her brother more than words could say and in truth, she was sort of glad he was here. Not because she liked him hovering—that really did drive her up the wall—but because where there was Evan, there was Logan.

Lacy was delighted to see him out tonight. Since his breakup with Jane nearly a year earlier, he’d maintained the “stay-at-home” lifestyle he’d picked up with his ex, refusing to jump back into the dating scene.

Instead, he spent most of his time working. He owned his own furniture business and was a genius when it came to crafting beautiful things from wood or refurbishing precious antiques. He sold both in his store on Main Street, just two blocks away from the restaurant.

Glancing around the bar at the other men, Lacy realized that Logan would always be the yardstick by which she measured every man. So far, no one had ever come close to her ideal.

In addition to his creative talents in the woodshop, he used to play bass in Tyson’s Collective, her cousin’s bluegrass band. He could beat out one hell of a rhythm on the bass. What was it about musicians that made them so freaking irresistible and hot?

Plus Logan wasn’t hard to look at. At all. He was six-one, with chestnut-brown hair that he wore just a touch too long, which gave him a permanent just-rolled-out-of-bed look that never failed to send her thoughts straight to sex. In addition to that—and his muscular arms and his chiseled jaw and his five o’clock shadow and his great ass—were his eyes. God. Logan had the most striking blue eyes she’d ever seen. They were ice blue, so light and piercing, she got lost in them.

Like now.

She blinked rapidly when she realized Logan was speaking to her. She hadn’t heard a word he’d said.

“Lacy? Did you hear me?”

“Um. Sorry. Music is too loud,” she lied.

“I said I finished fixing your chaise lounge. Wondered if you wanted me to deliver it to your place sometime next week.”

She had found a gorgeous chaise at a flea market a month earlier. Picked the thing up for a song, but it had a couple loose legs and the upholstery had been torn. She’d driven it straight to Logan’s store and asked him to fix it for her.

“That would be great, but I can come get it.”

He chuckled as he leaned closer. “You were lucky you got the thing to me the first time. Still can’t believe you managed to strap it to the roof of your car.”

“It was too big for the trunk.”

“I’ll drop it by in my truck. It’s not too heavy. Figure the two of us can get it up the stairs to your apartment on our own.”

She nodded, delighted by the prospect of having Logan in her apartment alone. Not that it would make one iota of difference in the way he treated her.

To Logan, she would always be Evan's kid sister, which made her off-limits. The two idiots had actually made some sort of vow about it back when they were sophomores in high school. Evan called it their bro code, like that cliché wasn't old and tired.

Of course, Lacy knew their promise to not bang each other's sisters all those years ago had had absolutely nothing to do with her, and everything to do with Logan encouraging Evan to keep his hands off *his* sister, Rachel.

Rachel had been a year older than Logan and Evan, and growing up, she'd been the Maris High School It Girl. Every guy in the school—and Amanda—had been in love with her. And Rachel had been in love with at least half of them. Unlike Macie, Rachel had been a bit less discerning when it came to sex, and she'd gotten one hell of a reputation by the time she'd hit senior year.

Lacy suspected Logan initiated the bro code as his attempt at managing to keep at least one boy out of Rachel's pants. And Evan, because he was a good guy, had agreed to keep his hands off. Then he'd solicited the same promise from Logan.

She figured Logan hadn't even had to think twice before agreeing. After all, at the time, Lacy had been the annoying eight-year-old who hovered around them like a gnat that they constantly had to swat away. They had both been totally oblivious to the fact that even then she'd been in love with Logan.

Logan had eternal dibs on her heart. He had been her first crush, her first love, and the man to occupy every sex dream she'd ever had. When she'd kissed her pillow in eighth grade, she pretended it was him, and she had at least three notebooks she'd accumulated during middle and high school that were filled with her name and his.

Mr. and Mrs. Logan Grady. Logan and Lacy Grady. Logan + Lacy. LG heart LS.

And the worst part about all of it was, he didn't have a clue.

Logan looked at her and, rather than noticing she was now an available, attractive woman of twenty-seven, he still saw the kid sister.

Of course, it wasn't like Logan had been looking around much. He'd been happily shackled up with Jane for three years, then mourning her departure the last twelve months.

There had been very few people in Maris who hadn't expected to hear wedding bells in Jane and Logan's future, so everyone had been shocked when Jane moved out. And she hadn't just vacated their apartment, she'd left town. Packed up her stuff and hit the road.

Unfortunately, the rumor mill was precious low on details about the breakup, apart from her moving back home for another guy. Lacy suspected there was more. Evan, no doubt, knew what had gone down between the couple, but he would never betray a confidence and Lacy would never ask him to.

In the end, she realized she didn't really care why they broke up. She was just grateful as hell they had. For so many years, she feared she had missed her chance with him.

The table became too crowded for her to continue her conversation with Logan when the rest of the women returned from the dance floor. Then Macie dragged Coop over to join them.

Despite their protestations at the guys' presence, Lacy had to admit the party was more fun with them there. So much so, Sydney called Chas and asked him to come join them, which he did.

It was safe to say Lacy was having one of the best times of her life. She was surrounded by all of her favorite people in the world. Lacy's life was pretty simple, composed of work, flea markets and yard sales, and home. Occasionally she dated, but, like Macie, she wasn't having much luck on the boyfriend front. And since learning that Logan had broken up with Jane, she'd turned down every single guy who'd asked her out—all three of them—because in her foolish, stupid heart, she still hoped that Logan would finally notice her.

So they drank, ate, talked, laughed and danced the night away, and even the fact that Logan had headed to the dance floor a couple of times with other women hadn't dimmed her enjoyment of the evening.

Eventually, the couples began to peel off. Jeannette was the first to leave with her hot firefighters. Not that anyone could blame her for being in a hurry to get home with those two. While ménages were far from the norm, Lacy couldn't deny Jeannette, Luc and Diego fit together perfectly.

Sydney and Chas were the next to go. According to a very tipsy Sydney, they needed to start practicing for the honeymoon. Amanda and Brandi walked out with them.

Over the next hour, everyone else left, the sober ones offering rides to those who had over-imbibed until it was only Logan, Evan and Lacy left at the table.

“Slim pickings tonight, I’m afraid,” Evan said as he slapped Logan on the back. It occurred to Lacy, her brother had brought his friend out tonight in hopes of finding him a girl. Or maybe just getting him laid.

It took all the strength she had not to jump up and down, wave her hands around and shout “Yoo-hoo! I’m right here.”

Logan shrugged. “I wasn’t really looking.” He picked up his beer and took a swig, giving Evan a teasing grin as he winked at Lacy. “Let’s face it. Hottest girls here tonight were all related to you.”

Evan chuckled. “Bro code is still in effect. I know all about you, you kinky bastard. She’s my sister.”

Lacy felt like kicking her brother under the table. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell them she knew all about Logan’s kinks, but both men would die if they realized everything she knew. If they found out she had followed Logan one afternoon about ten years ago and gotten one hell of a sex education...

Gladys Winthrop’s granddaughter, Yvette, had traveled from New York to spend the summer with her. Every redneck in town had honed in on the city girl about ten seconds after she crossed the city line. Strangers in Maris were few and far between and when a gorgeous woman wandered into their midst, all the guys took notice.

However, it was Logan who had the distinct privilege of being the man to capture her attention. The two of them had been inseparable that summer—and Lacy had wanted to know why.

Then she’d found out. Oh man, had she found out.

She had followed the couple as they left the annual Fourth of July picnic at the public beach early and returned to Gladys’ lake house. Peering through the bedroom window, Lacy had seen Yvette on her knees, her hands bound behind her as she gave Logan a blowjob. That ended when Logan picked her up, placed her facedown over his lap and started spanking her. She might have worried, if Yvette hadn’t been begging for more, her expression one of total bliss.

Lacy had been equal parts horrified and turned on. At seventeen, she’d only just begun to truly discover her sexuality. That day had molded her fantasies, sparked feelings she had never had the opportunity to explore, and ignited cravings she had never wanted to indulge in with anyone other than Logan.

The deejay announced the last dance at the same time Evan’s phone rang. “It’s Annie. I need to take this.” He stepped outside to take the call from his wife, leaving her alone with Logan.

“Want to dance?” she asked.

He shrugged good-naturedly. “Sure. Why not?”

She fought down her annoyance at the realization he was just humoring her.

Then she decided it was time to set the record straight.

Maybe he was determined to cast her in the role of little sister, and maybe he was determined to keep his hands off her because of some stupid teenage vow, and maybe he was still getting over his last girlfriend—but enough was enough.

There was no way Logan Grady was leaving here tonight without the knowledge that she was an experienced, available and completely fuckable woman who was more than capable of keeping up with him in the bedroom. She refused to take one more second of his condescending pats on the head that made her feel eternally eight years old.

He took her in his arms, maintaining a polite distance that she instantly breached. He stiffened briefly as she pressed her breasts firmly against his chest. His hands rested lightly on her waist, the touch platonic, boring. She didn’t follow suit as she wrapped her hands around his neck, letting her fingers play with his hair. It was even thicker than it looked.

Lifting up on her tiptoes, she lightly ran her lips along his neck. Logan's hands tightened, and for a moment, she expected him to push her away. Instead, he surprised her, letting his fingers drift around her back until he'd managed to split the difference between touching her waist and her ass.

Then he used his grip to tug her closer, letting her feel his erection pressed against her stomach—and it occurred to Lacy her plan was backfiring. She hadn't anticipated Logan returning her touches. In her mind, she would leave him hot and bothered, his punishment for failing to acknowledge her as a woman.

So much for that idea.

Her pussy clenched and her nipples tightened when his hands drifted even lower, his palms molding themselves to her ass.

Unable to resist, she glanced up and found him looking at her curiously.

"How much have you had to drink?" he asked.

"Not much."

Not enough.

She'd been relatively sober when they'd stepped on the dance floor, but now she felt wasted, her legs stumbling, barely able to hold herself upright under his sensual touches, and her brain was fuzzy from a system overload of arousal.

She kept one hand in his hair as the other traveled along his chest, her fingers digging into the muscles she found along the way. She didn't stop until her hand rested on the buckle of his belt, less than an inch away from his cock.

His hands tightened on her ass and she released a soft sigh.

"You know what you're doing?"

She nodded, though she wasn't so sure anymore. Originally, she'd thought she was seducing him. Now it felt like *he* was seducing *her*. And she was responding to it.

He left one hand on her ass as he lifted the other to the side of her neck. He lightly ran one fingertip along the neckline of her top. The shirt dipped low, revealing a healthy amount of cleavage. Macie had taken one look at her when she'd arrived at the party and wolf-whistled at what she'd jokingly referred to as Lacy's hootchie-mama shirt.

Logan paused when he hit the cleavage. "Nice shirt."

For the first time in her life, it felt like Logan was looking at her.

And really seeing her.

Reaching up, she grasped the hand still hovering above her breast and pressed his palm against it. She didn't have a clue where she'd found the outright boldness, but opportunities like this had been too few and far between. She couldn't run the risk of Logan finding another girlfriend and moving her in for three long-ass years before she took her shot.

He squeezed her breast roughly. The touch sent a jolt of electricity along her spine and straight to her pussy.

"Lacy," he whispered, his hot breath sweet from the soda he'd been drinking. "I—"

The song ended and another couple jostled against them as they left the dance floor. It forced them to break apart before he could finish his statement.

Rather than continue, he grasped her hand and led her back to the table. Mercifully, Evan hadn't returned. God only knew what her brother would have done if he'd caught sight of her and Logan fondling each other on the dance floor not three minutes after he'd reminded them of the bro code.

The waitress was at the table with their bill. Logan handed her his credit card. She resumed her seat, her legs still unsteady. It had only been a dance, but it had shaken Lacy to the core. She'd had sex before and she'd certainly experienced desire, but what she felt now seemed eons away from mere want. She was ravenous, predatory. Her whole body ached with a need so intense it took her breath away.

She searched for something to say, but her brain wouldn't function. Words wouldn't form.

Evan returned before she could gather her wits. "Hey, I gotta run. Eryn's got a fever."

"Is she okay?" Lacy asked, concerned about her adorable little niece.

“She was tugging at her ears earlier, so Annie thinks it’s probably an ear infection. We’re out of baby Tylenol and Annie asked me to pick some up on my way home. I need to get going. Do you mind driving Lacy home, Logan?”

Logan shook his head, but it seemed pretty clear that he wasn’t exactly pleased by the prospect. “Not at all. I’ll take her. You need to get home to your baby.”

Logan’s chilly expression went through her like a bucket of cold water. While his body had responded to her—and really, what guy’s body didn’t react when a woman threw herself at him?—it was obvious he didn’t want to be alone with her.

Unfortunately, she was stuck without a car. She’d ridden to the party with Amanda and Brandi, but had elected to stay when Evan said he’d drop her off.

“Great. I’ll catch you guys later,” Evan said as he passed the waitress on her way back to the table.

“I can call a cab,” she offered.

“Don’t be silly.” Logan signed the credit card slip, and then gestured toward the exit. “You ready?”

She nodded, draping the sweater she’d brought with her over her arm as they stood to leave. It was early spring in Texas, which meant warm days and chilly nights. When Logan placed his hand against her lower back lightly, she knew she wouldn’t need the extra layer for warmth. He’d lit a fire inside of her that was going to take a few rounds with her vibrator to smother.

He helped her into his truck, the door panel plastered with the Grady Furniture logo, before circling to the driver’s side.

She hadn’t spoken a word to him since leaving the dance floor, apart from her half-hearted offer to call a cab. Lacy feared she’d open her mouth and beg him to fuck her—right here, right now—in the parking lot of Cruisers. So she kept her lips pressed shut. Clearly he wasn’t interested in following through on what they’d begun on the dance floor.

Logan fiddled with the radio as he turned onto the highway and stopped when he found a country station.

“Haven’t heard this one in ages,” he said as Glen Campbell’s “Gentle on my Mind” played.

She loved the song too and tried to concentrate on the music, but all she could think about was Logan’s hand on her ass, on her breast.

He lived in a studio apartment above his shop on Main Street, while she had a smaller place three streets over. For the past few years, she hadn’t lived or worked more than a mile away from him. They saw each other almost daily, simply because they occupied the same small space and shared similar friends and interests. And while she fantasized about him a little bit too much, for so many years she’d never indulged the idea that they’d have anything more than a platonic relationship because, number one, he had been dating Jane, and number two, that stupid bro code thing was apparently still in effect.

Lacy had just about convinced herself that her actions on the dance floor had been ill-advised when Logan pulled up in front of her apartment building, parked and turned the truck off.

In fact, she opened her mouth to apologize to him for sending the mixed signals and for coming on so strong.

However, the words “I’m sorry” never came. Because the second her lips parted, Logan covered them with his own.

* * * *

Five years earlier...

“Lacy? What the hell are you doing?”

“Walking home.” She was still in a fury, and not even Logan’s arrival was enough to calm her down.

He pulled over to the side of the road in front of her. “Get in the truck,” he called out through the open passenger window.

“I’ll get the seat wet.”

“I don’t give a damn about that. Get in.”

She climbed into the front seat of his truck and gratefully accepted the jacket he handed her. Until that moment, her rage had been keeping her warm, helping her ignore the cold rain. Now that she was inside, she was struggling not to shiver.

“It’s pissing down, getting darker by the minute and you’re two miles out of town. I almost didn’t see you. How the hell did you get out here?”

“I was on a date.”

Logan hadn’t put the truck back in drive. Hadn’t bothered to start moving again. “A date?”

“With Bucky Largent. We got in a fight on the way home and I told him to let me out of the car. He did.”

“That fucking asshole.”

“Wasn’t raining at the time.”

“Doesn’t matter. He knows he left you out here. Did he come back?”

She lifted her hands in a silent *duh*. “Would I be sitting here if he had?”

“Guess that depends on how pissed off you were.”

“Not *that* damn mad.” She sighed. “You’re right. He’s a fucking asshole.”

“What happened?”

“We went to Cruisers together. I excused myself to go to the ladies’ room and when I came back, the jackass was kissing someone else. I told him to take me home. We got in a big fight on the way to town and I decided I’d rather walk home than spend one more second with the idiot. He stopped. I got out. He spun tires when he pulled away. Big dramatic scene. And now *I* feel like the idiot.”

“Didn’t realize the two of you were a thing.”

She shrugged. “We weren’t really. We’ve gone out to dinner a few of times. Gotten pizza and watched movies at my place once. Tonight was our fifth date. And our last.”

“I didn’t think you liked the guy.”

“When did I say that?” she asked.

“That day you were crying. When you told me that Missy kissed him.”

She laughed. “Jesus. I was thirteen, Logan.”

“Sounds like your first impression was the right one.”

Lacy couldn’t argue with that. “Yeah. I guess it was. Thanks for stopping.”

He looked at her incredulously. “As if I’d drive right past you.”

They chatted for a little while about the weather and a Christmas concert Ty’s Collective was going to play. It took her a few minutes to realize Logan wasn’t headed back into town.

“Where are we going?”

“Pit stop.” She didn’t question him. After all, he’d saved her from a very long, very wet walk home. It wasn’t until they turned onto the lane to Bucky’s house that she figured out what Logan intended.

“Uh, Logan—”

He raised his hand to cut her off. “Won’t be a minute,” he said as he put the truck in park outside Bucky’s house.

Lacy watched as he got out of the vehicle, walked to the front door and knocked. The front porch light turned on as Bucky walked out. Though she couldn’t hear a word that was said, she could read the body language just fine. Clearly Logan was explaining a few things to Bucky, who still seemed to think he was in the right. The conversation ended when Logan punched Bucky in the stomach. Bucky didn’t bother to return the favor. Clever man just remained bent over at the waist as Logan walked away.

“You hit him?” Lacy said when Logan returned to the truck.

“I didn’t like some of the things he was saying about you.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m not repeating them. Stay away from him. He’s an asshole. Find yourself a nice guy.”

Lacy smiled. She already had.

CHAPTER TWO

Logan hadn't planned to kiss her. That was his first thought the second his mouth pressed against hers. Her silence on the ride home had bothered him because Lacy was never quiet.

She'd been flirting on the dance floor. At first he'd assumed she was tipsy and feeling playful. So he'd given her a dose of her own medicine, teasing her back.

Then he realized she was relatively sober, and her touches took on a much different meaning.

It had been no secret that Lacy'd always had a crush on him. That idea had been cute when they were younger. He was eight years older than her and she'd only been a kid. Her doe-eyed devotion had fed his teenage pride, but that was all it had done.

Once she had grown up, she'd started looking in a different direction. She'd had a couple of serious boyfriends and she didn't seem to lack for dates. Whenever they ran into each other, they were cordial, friendly, and Logan had worked damn hard to make sure it was nothing else. He hadn't always succeeded, but for the most part, he'd kept his thoughts pure.

Sort of.

Somewhat.

He assumed Lacy had given up the crush after he'd gotten into a serious relationship and she'd lost interest. She had begun to simply view him as Evan's best friend, another brother figure, which was fine by him. It had helped him keep his hands off her this past year.

Because she was definitely off-limits.

For one thing, his needs would probably scare sweet Lacy Sparks spitless if he ever revealed them. And secondly, Evan would cut off his cock and feed it to him for breakfast if he touched her, because his best friend knew perfectly well all the things Logan liked to do with—and to—women in the bedroom. And they weren't things you did with your best friend's kid sister.

Hell, he'd spent the first couple hours of tonight drinking a beer in his workshop with Tyson and Evan, telling both men why he was finished with sweet, nice women, why he would never be happy in another vanilla relationship like the passionless existence he'd escaped with Jane.

He had probably gone into too much detail, talking about all the things he'd do to the next lover he took to bed. Evan and Tyson were likeminded guys—dominant lovers with a penchant for kink. However, neither of them held a candle to Logan. Which was why they'd been so surprised when he had eschewed that lifestyle and remained with Jane.

So when Lacy had opened her mouth to say goodbye, Logan should have let her. Instead, he reacted without thinking. Because he didn't want to let her go. Not yet.

He expected her to shove him away, to give him shit for the kiss, but she did neither. Instead, her arms tightened around his neck and her hands found his hair again. Lacy touched him like he mattered, like she wanted him. It was a heady, horny experience.

He twisted her body toward him while keeping his lips on hers. Lacy followed the direction, lifting and parting her legs as he tugged her onto his lap. Thank God he'd kept his old truck rather than opting for the new one with the bucket seats. The wide bench seat allowed him to drag her closer as she straddled his legs and press his dick against her.

He could feel the heat radiating from her even through the thick denim of his jeans. His cock was so hard it hurt. Logan raced through his memories, searching for a time when he'd wanted a woman this much.

The truth hit him like a two-by-four between the eyes. He'd never wanted anyone—not even Jane—as badly as he wanted Lacy right now.

“Want you,” he said when she turned her face slightly, seeking air. He couldn’t stop kissing her, so he ran his lips along her neck.

“Yes,” she whispered.

The windows of the truck had fogged up, shielding them from the outside world, but that didn’t change the fact they were still parked on the city street. Of course, this was Maris and it was three a.m. Most of Lacy’s neighbors had no doubt turned in hours ago. He considered inviting himself up to her place, but realized he’d never make it that far.

So it was happening here.

Decision made, he rucked the miniskirt that had been riding high around her thighs to her waist.

Then he reached down and bit back a groan as he tugged her panties to one side and ran his fingers over her slit. She was hot and wet. She jerked when he ventured lower and thrust two fingers inside her pussy. Her body clenched around them tightly. Jesus. She was already close to coming. He wanted to see that. Wanted to watch her face.

But he needed to slow this party down or it would be over before it ever started.

Logan put a few inches between them, pulling his fingers out.

Lacy frowned and shook her head. “Don’t—”

“Shh. Lift your shirt, Lace.”

With clumsy, shaking fingers, she managed to tug the hem above her breasts. He’d had a hard time keeping his eyes above her neck all night. Somehow he had found a way. It probably helped that her overprotective brother and Tyson had been at the table.

Now, he took time to enjoy the feast. Logan had known Lacy her entire life, so he knew down to the day when she’d gotten boobs. However, back then, she’d been a kid while he had been a man, and the only thing he’d done with the knowledge that she was filling out was tease the fuck out of Evan with it, claiming he’d have to beat the boys away with a stick.

Logan shouldn’t be here. Shouldn’t be staring at Lacy’s tits like a starving man eyeing a steak. But he couldn’t look away. He reached out and tugged her silky bra down, cupping the bottom of her breasts to push them out and over the material. The second her pink nipples appeared, all bets were off.

He lowered his head, sucking one of her nipples into his mouth. Lacy’s hands found his hair once more, and she used her grip to hold him in place. The effort was wasted. He wasn’t going anywhere. He increased the suction, taking it to that place right on the borderline between pleasure and pain.

He was just about to ease off when Lacy groaned. “Harder.”

Logan struggled with the request. He didn’t want to hurt her, scare her. Rather than give in, he cupped her other breast with his hand, squeezing the generous flesh. She fidgeted on his lap, seeking relief as she tried to press her crotch against his.

He lifted his head, forced himself to look at her. This was Lacy. She didn’t deserve for him to give her false hope or the impression that this would lead somewhere. Nothing could come from this because he couldn’t be the kind of man she wanted, that she deserved.

What the fuck was he doing?

She didn’t appear to notice his hesitance. Instead, she covered his hand on her breast and peered at him with sultry fuck-me eyes. “Pinch my nipple,” she whispered.

His thumb and forefinger were there before his brain could engage. He applied pressure as he studied her face. Lacy never looked away as her cheeks flushed a deeper shade of red, not with embarrassment, but with longing.

Once again, he held back. It went against everything in his nature to stop, but he had to. He had sworn he wouldn’t settle for another vanilla relationship. Wouldn’t hide his dominant urges, his need for control. Lacy wasn’t the woman he needed. She was sweet and loving. The kind of girl a man married. Not the kind you tied to your bed and fucked like a two-bit hooker.

“Please.” Lacy bit her lip, her tone rife with frustration. “I need...I need...”

A light went on inside his brain. He increased the pressure and pinched her nipple hard.

He was rewarded by her loud moan as Lacy threw her head back in absolute bliss. She was responding to the pain.

Logan's cock thickened even more and he found it difficult to suck in a deep breath.

Fuck him.

This was bad. Really bad.

He needed to call a halt, to get out of here before he lost the battle.

Unfortunately, Lacy's actions sealed her fate. And his.

She reached down to stroke her clit, two of her fingers sliding into her own body. The damn woman intended to give herself an orgasm.

Hell no.

The Dom inside came roaring to the forefront. His women were not responsible for finding their own pleasure. Not unless he told them to so he could watch.

He gripped her wrist firmly, stopping her actions.

Lacy tried to shrug him off. She was too close and out of her mind with need to understand what she was doing.

"Stop, Lacy. Now!"

Her entire body froze as his deep-voiced command came out too forcefully, too loud.

"Logan—"

"Hush. I know what you need."

He leaned back slightly to watch her as he shoved three fingers between her legs.

She blinked rapidly, gasping loudly. Her hips thrust in time to the rhythm of his fingers. Lacy wasn't shy about taking what she needed. He liked that.

The last year they were together, Jane had become passive in bed, nonresponsive. Half the time, he never had a clue if she loved what he was doing or hated it.

He pushed the thought of his ex out of his mind. Fuck that. There was no place for Jane here.

Lacy continued to gyrate, moving faster. "God, yes," she groaned. "Harder. Do it harder."

Logan had been worried about hurting her, but her request set that concern to rest. He moved his fingers deeper. She was so fucking tight. He couldn't wait to get his cock inside her.

But first...

He rubbed her clit with his thumb and Lacy started to scream. Logan gripped the back of her head and covered her mouth with his, capturing the sound. The last thing he needed was for someone to call the cops. He could see it now. Evan roaring down the street in his patrol car with the lights flashing and siren blasting only to discover his best friend with his fingers buried deep inside his little sister.

He wouldn't have to worry about being arrested. Evan would simply pull out his gun and shoot him.

Lacy was the one to break the kiss as her orgasm began to wane. She panted, her eyes resting on his face unseeingly. He wasn't sure where her climax had taken her, but she wasn't back yet.

It gave him some time to consider what had just happened. He'd just finger-fucked Lacy to an orgasm. And he hadn't been gentle about it.

This was Evan's sister. Not only did the promise they'd made to each other all those years ago hover in the air like a swarm of killer bees, but so did the fact that Evan knew him, knew what he liked in the bedroom too well. He'd never approve of this.

He shouldn't do this.

No. He *couldn't* do this.

He slowly dragged his fingers out of her, her pussy walls fluttering against them. She would feel like heaven on his dick. They sat in silence for a few moments as he gave her time to recover. And himself time to figure out how to end this without hurting her feelings.

"Lacy—"

She shook her head and placed a quick kiss on his lips. "No. Don't say it. We both know the reasons we shouldn't do this. There's no need to list them."

“I shouldn’t have started it. Shouldn’t have kissed you like that.”

Lacy grinned and gave him a friendly shrug. “You don’t really expect me to complain, do you? I’m still sort of flying high from that orgasm.”

He chuckled. Leave it to Lacy to take what should have been a damn awkward situation and make it funny.

“My relationship with Jane...it ended badly.”

“Okay.” The word belied the tone. Lacy didn’t understand. “So...the timing is bad?”

He shook his head. He was over Jane before she’d pulled away from the curb. Maybe he should feel guilty about that, but she hadn’t shed any tears either. As far as breakups went, theirs had been as lackluster as the last year of the relationship. If anything, she’d fucked up his head more than his heart.

“No. Not really. After she left, I took some time to reevaluate my life, my priorities. To decide what I want and need.”

Jane was everything he’d always thought he wanted in a woman. Sophisticated, stylish, elegant, educated. She wasn’t from Maris. She was big city. Prep school. And a far cry from every woman in town.

Evan claimed Logan had been attracted to her because she reminded him of Yvette. Yvette had been the first woman to expose his penchant for BDSM. While their affections hadn’t been engaged, their sexual attraction had been off the charts. Yvette and Jane had many similar attributes and, looking back, Logan figured his friend had probably been right. He probably *had* homed in on Jane and thought she was the complete package. Sexual attraction and love. He thought he’d found both in her.

Jane was an artist, a sculptor, and they’d spent hours together following their creative endeavors and sharing their love for the work. She had been attentive, intellectual, interesting. He’d fallen for her hard.

However, the chemistry they shared initially had morphed into something much less chemical—although it was certainly toxic—over the years. He had believed her the perfect submissive to his dominant tendencies because in the beginning, she had let him believe that she shared the same interests.

As more time passed, Jane began to balk at his sexual requests until finally, at the end, she acted as if he were a monster anytime he suggested bondage or a sensual spanking or wax play. That was when he’d discovered she had started a long-distance, online flirtation with an old boyfriend. Apparently, the guy convinced her BDSM was something enjoyed by sociopaths, so she packed her bags.

“And I don’t fit the bill?” Lacy asked. “As far as these needs go?”

Logan was worried if they took these explorations much further, he’d discover that she fit perfectly. But what would happen a few years down the road? Would she still feel the same? He never wanted to be a monster in Lacy’s eyes.

“Evan.” He merely spoke her brother’s name. More for himself than her.

She rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe that stupid bro code thing is still in effect. You guys made that silly promise when you were in high school. We’re all adults now.”

He needed to explain, needed her to understand why, though the promise they’d made back then had been based on something childish and immature, it still remained today. Because of the man he’d become, because of his need for control. Evan knew way too much about Logan’s bedroom habits. He wouldn’t like the idea of his sister on the receiving end of them, even if she did enjoy them.

And given Lacy’s responses to him tonight, Logan was pretty sure she’d love submitting to him. For now.

“I’m not an easy man to be with, Lacy. Evan knows that.”

She frowned, obviously confused. “Evan is your best friend. He loves you, Logan. I hardly think that would be the case if you were an asshole or something.”

“I just got out of a relationship where I basically had to shut away a big part of who I was. I spent years denying my needs in the name of love. When Jane left, I swore I wouldn’t do that again. Wouldn’t pretend to be anything other than the man I am.”

“I’m not asking you to change. I would never do that. I’m not even asking for a relationship, Logan. Just a hookup.”

Her words were a lie. He knew her well enough to understand that. But Lacy knew him, too, which was why she knew exactly what to say right now to diffuse the situation. She thought that by convincing him the stakes were low, he'd give in.

Logan forced himself to look at Lacy and he recognized something that he should have seen right from the start. Something that had been there for years.

Lacy loved him. She had always loved him.

And he'd ignored it. First because she'd been too young and because she'd been Evan's sister, and then because he'd been in love with Jane. Seeing it now only drove home exactly how high the stakes were.

That realization gave him the strength to say the hardest words he'd ever uttered. "It's not going to happen, Lacy. Ever."

Her eyes narrowed with anger and frustration. "Because of that stupid promise?"

He shook his head. He owed her the truth. Total honesty. Even if it did shock her.

His sex drive was too strong for her. And right now, it was on system overload. He'd spent the last few years of his life playing Missionary Man and feeling like an ogre for wanting more. He couldn't go back to that. Not even for Lacy. He'd explode.

"No. Because I'm not going to lay you down on my bed and make love to you like I'm Prince fucking Charming. If I took you to my bed, I'd fuck you hard, Lacy. Tie you down. Clamp your nipples. Gag you. Spank your ass with my hand, my belt. Take your mouth, your pussy, your ass. I'd make demands I would expect you to obey and if you didn't, I'd punish you. I couldn't just love you, Lacy. I'd claim you. Body and soul. That's what I would want from you."

Her mouth gaped, but no sound emerged.

"I need to leave, Lacy. Now."

"But—"

"Have you ever been tied up?"

She shook her head.

"Fucked in the ass?" His question was deliberately crude. He needed to make her see reason.

Again, she shook her head. "But I—"

"You need to get out of this truck while you still can. While I can still let you."

"Logan—"

"Now!" he shouted.

Lacy jerked at the anger in his voice, then slowly slid across the seat and reached for the door handle. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, no doubt with fear.

Maybe now she'd give up on this schoolgirl crush and turn her attention toward a nice man who could give her everything she needed, who would put her on a pedestal and treat her the way she deserved.

He couldn't be that man. He had tried for Jane and it had nearly killed him.

She slammed the truck door behind her. Logan started the engine, ignoring the way his hands trembled. He waited until she'd entered her building and then he pulled away from the curb.

In the past, it hadn't been difficult to say goodbye to her, to watch Lacy walk away. Now, it took every ounce of strength he had not to follow her inside.

* * * *

Nine years earlier...

"Y'all played really good tonight," Lacy said, leaning against Logan's truck.

Logan lifted an amp and placed it in the truck bed. "Thanks. What are you doing out here?"

"Waiting for my cousin, Paige. She's my ride. She's inside flirting with some guy. Thought I'd give her space to work."

Logan laughed. "That's real nice of you."

“Was sweet of y’all to play a song for my birthday.” Lacy hadn’t been able to take her eyes off him all night. She loved watching him knock out a deep beat on the bass.

“Not every day our girl turns eighteen.”

She sighed. The older Logan got, the more he treated her like a kid sister. It was starting to get annoying. “So, I was thinking maybe you could give me my other present.”

Logan’s forehead crinkled. “I’m sorry, Lace, but I didn’t buy you anything.”

She grinned and stepped closer. “No, nothing like that. You said you’d kiss me when I turned eighteen.”

His confusion grew. “I did? When?”

“That day on my back porch when I was crying because Missy had kissed Bucky.”

The light went on. “That’s not exactly what I said.”

“You said you’d kiss me on my eighteenth birthday if nobody else had. Well, I’m here to tell you I’ve been kissed by a bunch of nobodies.”

“Forget it. That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

She crossed her arms. “I don’t want to forget it. You promised.”

“Be reasonable, Lacy.”

“It’s my birthday. Please?”

Logan glanced around the dark parking lot. The community dance had wound down. Most people had gone home, and now there were only a few folks left inside, cleaning up the mess.

“Fine.” He leaned forward and placed a quick buss to her forehead. “There. Happy birthday.”

She lifted one shoulder in a dismissive shrug, not bothering to hide her disappointment. “Whatever, Logan. I was hoping to finally get a kiss from someone who knew what he was doing, but obviously, you’re as clueless as every other guy I’ve ever kissed.”

He moved toward her, caging her against his truck as his hands rested on the roof of the Chevy. “You think taunting me will get you your kiss, little girl?”

She hadn’t really expected it to work until he moved. Now, she wasn’t so sure. “Yeah. I do.”

“Your brother is going to kick my ass for this.”

“I won’t tell,” she whispered a mere second before his lips touched hers.

Lacy didn’t possess blinders when it came to Logan. She had watched him far too closely her entire life. She’d seen him kiss other girls, seen the way he cupped their faces, pulled them close and took control. Hell, she’d seen him do a lot more than kiss them, though she certainly wasn’t going to tell him about that.

He didn’t do any of that with her. The kiss was sweet, gentle, and excruciatingly boring. His tongue touched hers only once, a brief stroke, and then he pushed away.

Then he practically dared her to complain with serious eyes that said she wouldn’t get anything else from him tonight. Her heart refused to add the word “ever” to that thought.

Logan didn’t think she was ready for him. But one day, he would change his mind about that. She’d make sure he did.

CHAPTER THREE

“You look like shit, man.”

Logan glanced up from the paperwork on his desk to find Evan leaning against the doorjamb in his police uniform. He’d been sitting in his office for the past three hours and he’d managed to accomplish nothing.

Instead, he replayed the scene with Lacy from Saturday night over and over, torn between whether he should kick his own ass for kissing her or for driving away without fucking her. Now it was Friday and he was no closer to putting her out of his mind than he had been when he’d climbed into bed that night. He’d been sporting an almost constant erection; his dick pissed at him for denying it the treat of sliding into Lacy’s hot, tight—

He shoved the fantasy away as Evan frowned.

He should not be thinking about fucking Lacy while her brother was there. Shit, he shouldn’t be thinking of fucking her, period.

“I didn’t think you were all that torn up over Jane leaving.”

Mercifully, his friend had misinterpreted his expression. God help him if Evan ever found out what he was really thinking about.

“You should have taken my advice,” Evan continued. “Found yourself a pretty girl and gotten laid Saturday.”

“I’m not ready.”

“Jesus, man. It’s been a year.” Evan leaned forward. “You know there’s a woman out there for you, right? One who is better suited to you than Jane was. She fucked you up, man. Made you think things that aren’t true. There’s nothing wrong with liking your sex rough. Even Annie and I have been known to do some kinky role playing.” Evan wiggled the handcuffs that were hanging from his belt. “These aren’t just for bad guys.”

Logan shrugged. “Spare me the details about your unnaturally happy marriage. You found a good one. And yeah, I know that old adage there’s someone for everyone, so I don’t need the clichés. I’m not pining over Jane. I’m simply being a realist. The chances of me finding that woman in Maris is…”

Logan’s words drifted away as he struggled to finish a sentence that no longer felt true. So much of his thoughts this week had been consumed by the idea that Lacy actually might be exactly what he was looking for. He shut the idea down when he recalled the look in her eyes as she’d climbed out of his truck.

“You’ll find her,” Evan reassured him. “But hiding in your office isn’t going to help. You haven’t met me for lunch or happy hour once this week.”

He hadn’t met Evan because both of those weekly events took place at Sparks Barbeque. Logan wasn’t ready to see Lacy yet. And he was sure as shit she didn’t want to see him.

“I’m not hiding. I’m just…busy. I’ve got a lot of work piling up. I guess the stress is getting to me.”

Evan accepted the excuse easily. “Busy is a good problem to have. Means money. You’ll come through. You always do.”

“Yeah. Thanks. Hey, did you need something in particular or did you just stop by to nag me?”

He expected Evan to laugh. Instead, the man stepped into the office and plopped down in the chair opposite his, the desk between them. “Actually, I’m on patrol. Thought I’d take a second to stop in and thank you for taking Lacy home the other night.”

Logan swallowed heavily, forcing a casual tone to his voice. “No problem.”

“Did she seem okay to you after the party?”

Logan wasn’t sure how to respond. Did Evan know something? Lacy sure as hell wouldn’t have talked to her brother about what had happened. Had one of her neighbors seen them?

“Yeah. Why?”

Evan shrugged. “She’s been really quiet since then. I thought maybe she was getting sick, but it’s going on too long. She’s got dark circles under her eyes and Macie said she’s been snapping at them at work. You know as well as I do Mary Sunshine is never in a bad mood, so I’m worried. Wondered if she said something to you, if something happened at the bar that pissed her off or if someone bothered her.”

Logan shook his head. “She didn’t say anything. I’m not sure what could have happened,” he lied. He knew what was ailing Lacy. It was the same thing that was making him irritable as fuck.

“Yeah, okay. I might talk to Tyson, see if he can talk her into going in for a checkup. Maybe she does just have a touch of something.”

There wasn’t a damn thing Dr. Sparks could do for her, but Logan nodded as if it was a solid suggestion. He’d avoided the restaurant since Saturday because he suspected he was the last person Lacy wanted to see. As such, he’d holed up here, moving between his apartment upstairs, down to work, and then back again. Unfortunately, he was starting to run low on food. He would have to venture beyond the front door eventually.

Evan’s walkie-talkie crackled. “Guess I better get back out on the road. Call me this weekend if you want to meet up for a couple of beers.”

“Will do.” Logan rose as Evan left, debating what to do now. He hated knowing exactly how much he’d upset Lacy, but he was at a loss over how to help her. The best thing he could do for her was to keep his distance.

His phone beeped and he glanced at the screen to find a text from Lacy.

Coming by in a few. Bringing lunch.

He considered texting back and telling her to stay away. However, as always, his gut overrode his brain when it came to Lacy.

He simply tapped in two letters.

OK

His cock thickened at the thought of her arrival, so he forced himself away from the desk. Time to hit the workshop and start working on a new piece. Hopefully he’d manage to lose himself in the project enough to ward off this fucking erection. His brain needed all the blood it could get if she was coming by to talk.

Work was always a good distraction for him.

Logan closed his eyes and sighed. Work hadn’t distracted him once since Saturday night.

He closed his eyes and recalled his first kiss with Lacy. She’d been eighteen, beautiful, vivacious and just discovering her sexuality. She’d dared him to kiss her and he’d been just weak enough to give in. Somehow, he’d managed to keep the kiss fairly platonic and push her away that night, but it had been a damn close call.

Great. Now, he wasn’t just obsessing over Saturday night, he was recalling things he’d managed—just barely—to forget.

He was fucked.

Lacy stood outside Grady’s Furniture with her bag of takeout and tried to calm down. She’d spent the entire week in a state of constant horniness.

After Logan kicked her out of his truck, she had spent two days in a fury. He’d pushed every hot button in her body, told her in no uncertain terms all the ways he wanted her—ways she wanted to be taken—and then gone into that frustrating, protecting-you-for-your-own-good mode that drove her insane.

He had pissed her off enough that she’d actually decided she was finished with him. She wasn’t going to keep begging the dumbass to acknowledge that she was fucking perfect for him. If he couldn’t figure it out on his own, then screw him.

The anger waned around Monday afternoon, at which point, her hormones kicked back in. She was lightheaded and dizzy from the never-ending, pussy-pulsing arousal she felt every time she thought about Logan's assertion that he would claim her.

This morning, she managed to fight her way out of the haze of horniness enough to make a plan. Logan thought she was off-limits, thought his needs were too much for her. So she had to find a way to get him to take that first step toward her without feeling guilty about breaking his vow to Evan or fear that he'd hurt her—physically or emotionally.

That thought produced a mental eye roll.

Yeah. Like he'd hurt me in any way I don't totally want.

Overcoming his reticence was a tall order to fill, but she was determined to make it happen.

A tiny bell rang as she opened the front door. The showroom was empty. Then she heard the buzz of an electric saw from the workroom. Turning, she flipped the sign that hung on the front door that said "Be back in one hour" and locked the bolt.

She made her way around his handmade furniture, mentally reorganizing the place as she went. It was a good thing Logan made such beautiful pieces they sold themselves, because his ability to show them off sucked. It was a damn maze in here. Total chaos.

She paused at the door to the workroom. His back was to her as he guided a piece of wood through the jigsaw. She had never had the opportunity to watch him work. The muscles of his back and arms flexed as he pushed the cedar plank through the blade, moving it in a waving pattern.

Once the cut was complete, he turned the saw off.

"What are you making?"

He turned at the sound of her voice, and then glanced back down at the wood. "A hope chest."

She lifted the bag she carried. "Lunch. Hope you're in the mood for barbeque. Haven't seen you at the restaurant this week, so I figured you were ready for a fix." Logan usually made it to Sparks Barbeque at least a couple times a week. She'd felt his absence intensely, her gaze traveling to the entrance every single time another patron entered. Searing disappointment followed each arrival when he never bothered to show up.

"I thought you'd prefer some distance from me."

So, he was going right for the jugular. She was relieved. Lacy didn't have the patience to pussyfoot around the issue either. "You thought wrong."

"Lace—"

"No." She cut him off the second she heard that condescending tone in his voice that made her see red. "Hear me out first."

He lifted his hand, inviting her to speak. "Fine."

"I'm off-limits, right?"

He frowned. "What?"

"I'm off-limits. Because I'm Evan's sister and because you think I can't handle what you want from me."

He nodded slowly.

"So we won't have sex. You can keep your stupid promise to my brother. No bro codes will be broken. But I want the chance to disprove the second part of your argument."

Logan crossed his arms. "How do you propose we do that without having sex?"

"For the sake of argument, we're going to call sex actual penetration. Your dick in my vagina."

"That's a pretty narrow interpretation."

She grinned. "And it leaves plenty of wiggle room...so to speak."

He shook his head. "Please don't do this, Lacy. I'm trying to do the right thing."

"How is this right? You want me and I want you."

Logan rubbed his forehead, his expression incredulous. "Even after everything I said last weekend?"

"Especially after that."

He chuckled at her quick response. “God. You’re going to be the death of me. You don’t have a clue what you’re saying. What you’re inviting.”

She scowled. “You’re wrong. I know exactly what I want. And you’re the man to give it to me.”

He didn’t respond, but she didn’t fool herself into believing he was wavering. He wasn’t. The asshole was stubborn. Which sucked for him because she was too.

“I can’t do what you’re asking.”

She took a step closer to him, relieved when Logan didn’t back away. She didn’t fancy the idea of chasing him around the workshop like some lovesick Pepé Le Pew. “Yes. You can. In fact, I think you’re the only man who can give me what I want.”

“You’re too young to know—”

“Finish that statement and I’ll stab you in the heart with that screwdriver over there. I’m twenty-seven, Logan. I’m not a virgin and I’m not stupid. I’ve done my research on BDSM because the idea of it turns me on. A lot. I need someone experienced to teach me about it. Someone I trust.”

Lacy had him on the ropes, so she decided to go for broke. “Besides, Evan made out with your sister the summer after you guys graduated, so we’re entitled to bend the rules a little too.”

“He what? No way.”

“I caught them.”

“That son of a bitch.”

She grinned. “So the bro code has already been broken.”

“Making out is a far cry from what you’re proposing we do, Lacy. It doesn’t mean that you and I—”

Lacy tugged her t-shirt over her head, tossing it to the floor. Logan’s gaze landed on her breasts within an instant.

“What are you doing?”

She tilted her head. “I thought I was making it pretty clear. I’m seducing you.”

“Put your shirt back on.” His heated look didn’t match his request. He hadn’t looked away from her tits yet.

She shook her head. “No.”

“I need you to be sensible.”

She scoffed, then reached behind her back and unhooked her bra. She dropped it on top of her shirt.

Logan’s jaw clenched. She had to give him credit. His powers of resistance were stronger than she’d anticipated. Which only pushed her to up the ante.

Her fingers started to work loose the button on her jeans.

“Stop!”

Logan used that same commanding voice he’d unleashed in the truck, the one that had her panties going damp.

His gaze captured hers and held. “Put your shirt back on, or…”

“Or what?” she taunted.

“Or I’m going to tug down your jeans and beat that cute little ass of yours.”

She gave him a coy smile. “You think my ass is cute?”

Logan closed his eyes and she wondered if he was praying for patience. When he opened them again, she shuddered at the intensity, the hunger laid bare on his face. He had clearly turned a corner.

The friendly, safe, hands-off Logan she’d always known was gone. In his place was this new Logan, dangerous, sexy, demanding.

“You have three seconds to do as I said.”

She didn’t move. Instead, she counted. “Three, two—”

One minute she was facing him down, the next she was facedown. Over his lap.

Logan rubbed her ass through the denim of her jeans. She hated the barrier, wanted his hands on her bare skin.

She started to shift, hoping to find a way to work the jeans over her hips, but he caught her hands, dragging them behind her and holding them together at the base of her back.

“Not so fast. Ground rules.”

Lacy growled. “I don’t want rules. I want sex.”

He tightened his grip on her wrists. “That’s the first rule. No penetration.”

She *had* made that suggestion. And she was already regretting it. “We already determined that,” she said impatiently, wondering if she could change his mind.

Logan smacked her ass, but her jeans dulled the impact. It wasn’t even close to enough for her. “Three times. That’s it.”

“What?”

“There has to be a deadline to this, Lacy. We’ll get together no more than three times, each meeting one week apart, during which I’m going to show you exactly what kind of man I am. I’ll expose you to BDSM and you can see if you like it. If you want to call it off before that, you can. But we’re not doing this more than three times.”

She wanted to argue, but it was clear he didn’t intend to be swayed. It didn’t matter. She planned to use every single second of those meetings proving to him why they should extend the deadline indefinitely. “Fine.”

“Your safe word is *chaise*. Say that anytime it’s too much for you or you get scared and we’ll stop, talk it out. Okay?”

She nodded.

“Say okay.”

“Okay,” she said, her voice betraying her shortness of breath. She was worried he’d misinterpret it as fear when the truth was she was so turned on, her whole body hurt.

He released her hands and she instantly missed the restraint. Then she was disappointed even further when he helped her stand.

Logan took her hand. “Not in here. Too much sawdust, too many wood shavings. I don’t want you to get cut.” He led her toward his office, but stopped just as they reached the threshold and glanced toward the front. “I need to—”

“I already locked the door and flipped the sign.”

He gave her a crooked smile and reached down to pinch one of her nipples. She gasped as moisture pooled between her thighs. “Pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“I think the word is determined.”

He shook his head. “No. It’s stubborn. Something the Sparks family has in abundance.”

“Remember that in three weeks.”

Logan twisted her, guiding her into his office. “I’m not changing my mind, Lacy. I’m already crossing too many lines by agreeing to this.”

Once they entered the room, he closed the door and locked it as well.

“Take off your jeans.”

Lacy lost no time kicking off her shoes and tugging the denim—and her panties—off. Within sixty seconds, she stood before him completely naked. Meanwhile, Logan was still dressed.

“What about you?”

He didn’t reply. Instead, his gaze traveled over her nude form like a caress. She held her ground and let him look his fill. She liked the look in his eyes, the genuine appreciation there. He thought she was pretty and it made her feel that way.

“Beautiful,” he whispered when his eyes met hers once more.

She flushed at the compliment and lifted one shoulder timidly. She wasn’t sure she’d go that far, but she was touched that *he* had.

“Turn around and bend over the desk. I owe you a punishment.”

Lacy did as he said without question, her pussy clenching in anticipation. She had seen him do this to Yvette all those summers ago and since then, her imagination had run wild with the fantasy.

Logan stepped behind her as she assumed the position, his hand cupping the back of her neck, pressing her more firmly against the smooth surface of his desk. "Open your legs."

Again, she responded to his request. It was so easy to do. With Logan, she didn't have to think, to consider. She wasn't worried about her safety because he would never hurt her. At least not more than she would enjoy.

He ran his fingers along her slit and she shivered as one hand held her tight to the desk. She started to reassure him she wouldn't move, but she liked that extra restraint, liked the feeling of being his captive.

One of his wet fingers circled the rim to her anus. Lacy realized she'd forgotten to breathe. She sucked in as much air as she could, releasing it in short pants through her nose as he fondled her ass.

Logan didn't speak as he explored. She longed to end the silence, but her chest was too tight to utter a single word. A million questions flew through her head. She wasn't used to being *apart* while a part of something like this. In the past, her lovers had been equal partners and everything was discussed and voted on in committee meetings.

Logan was clearly the CEO, CFO, and dictator rolled into one. He'd do what he wanted and he didn't ask permission beforehand.

God. The quiet was maddening. What was he thinking? What would he do next? When was he going to spank her? Could she convince him to forget that stupid thing she'd said about not fucking her? Why had she said that? She needed—

"Shh." Logan bent over her back, his soft hush blowing hot against her ear. "Shut it all down, Lace."

His words washed through her like a gentle wave and just like that, she relaxed.

"Say your safe word," he commanded.

"No." She panicked. There was no way she was going to call this off. "I don't want to."

"I just want to hear you say it. Want to make sure you remember."

"You won't stop?"

She half expected him to laugh at her childlike pleading, but instead he pressed a warm kiss against her cheek.

"I won't stop. Right now, I'm worried that I can't." A tinge of pain seemed to lace his tone. He felt it too. She had never experienced desire so strong that it hurt, but the only thing she was sure of right now was that her body physically ached for him. It was agonizing.

"I'm glad."

He shook his head, a motion she felt more than saw. "No. That's not good. Say the word. I need to hear, need to..."

"Chaise," she whispered.

She wasn't sure why that word set him free, but whatever harness held him tethered and kept him from giving in to his baser instincts, broke.

He pushed himself upright and his hand landed against her ass in a solid smack. The loud cracking noise filled the room.

Reflex took over as Lacy tried to escape. It was a futile effort. His large, strong hand had returned to the back of her neck, holding her down. The second and third blows fell as she still struggled.

When the fourth came, the pain and heat mingled. Transformed.

Lacy's back arched and she went up on her toes to meet the fifth and sixth smacks.

"Logan," she cried out, her voice tight with unshed tears. The spanking hurt, but not in a way that she longed to end. Instead, she wanted more.

Logan's fingers found the opening to her body and before she could assimilate to the change, he had two buried deep, pounding roughly inside her.

This. God. Yes. This.

She tried to thrust back against his hand, but he still held her to the desk. She couldn't move, couldn't steal any extra stimulation. It was as hot as it was frustrating.

"Let me go." She clenched her fists and beat them against the surface.

"No." His reply was firm, unyielding.

"I need to move!"

He tightened his grip, added a third finger to the other two and increased his pace.

Lacy gasped at the increased tension, the beautifully brutal way he took her.

No. Claimed.

He promised to claim her. And now he was.

She wanted more. Wanted him to take everything she had to offer and then demand more from her. God. She'd give it all to him. Every. Fucking. Thing.

Lacy's orgasm hit her like a bullet, arriving out of nowhere. One second she was grasping for harder, faster, deeper. The next, her body was writhing like a rag doll in a storm, shaking almost painfully as she came harder than she ever had before.

Logan didn't give way. Didn't stop the powerful thrusting. Instead, he rung out every drop of sensation he could. It seemed to last for hours. And when it began to wane, Lacy finally stopped fighting.

She wasn't sure how long she lay there, draped over his desk, how many breaths she'd taken in and blown out before his fingers slowly withdrew.

Her pussy clenched greedily, trying to hold them in, but as always, Logan did as he pleased.

Lacy lifted her head and glanced at him over her shoulder. She shuddered at the hungry, almost feral look in his eyes.

Though she had known Logan her entire life, his beloved face as recognizable to her as her own, she had never seen *this* man. And yet she seemed to know him just the same. In some ways, it felt as if she knew this man better than the other.

She pushed herself from the desk as he took a step away. The connection of their gazes never broke as she twisted to face him, and then dropped to her knees.

Logan issued no complaint as she worked to free his erection from his jeans. She dragged the denim to his knees and then took his cock in her hands.

He didn't say a word as she stroked the thick, hard flesh. God help her if she thought three of his fingers stretched her. He'd tear her apart with this baseball bat. And she'd love every second of it.

She ran her tongue along the bottom of his cock, her eyes studying his face. She'd never been very sure of her abilities when it came to blowjobs. She'd gone down on a few guys and while they made all the right noises, sometimes she felt like those sounds were similar to her grunts when the guys fucked her. They were based more on encouragement than actual excitement.

Logan didn't make any sounds, but his face and the way his hand cupped her cheek told her he liked what she was doing.

It gave her the confidence and courage to continue. Parting her lips, she sucked the head into her mouth, enjoying the way Logan's hand flew from her face to her hair.

She closed her mouth around it and applied a bit of suction. Then, recalling the way Logan had suckled her nipples in his truck, she sucked harder.

His fingers gripped her hair tightly, tugging it. As she lessened the pressure on his cock, he softened his hold on her hair. She repeated the suction and his hands gripped her hair almost uncomfortably. The burning in her scalp traveled straight to her pussy, her own arousal returning with a vengeance.

Lacy held on to the base of his dick as she moved her mouth lower, trying to take more of him inside. She hadn't even hit the halfway point before his head brushed the back of her throat.

While Logan's hands remained in her hair, he didn't seek to drive her actions. Instead, he let her continue to explore, to play, to figure it out. He was a very well-endowed guy, so she had to improvise. Lacy was desperate to give him the same pleasure he'd just offered her.

Soon, she found her pace, moving her lips and her hand in unison along his erection, trying to keep the pressure tight, hoping it was enough to push him into climax.

Whenever his fingers tugged her hair roughly, she knew she'd hit a sweet spot and she catalogued the information, returning there over and over.

For several minutes, she worked her mouth on his hard flesh, losing herself in the quiet magic of the moment as Logan rocked gently toward her.

When Logan's fingers tightened on her head more roughly than before, she thought he'd made it to the brink. She started to move faster, but he halted her motions.

Tipping her face up until her eyes met his, he held her there, his cock still in her mouth.

"You ready?"

Her brows creased, slightly confused. She assumed he meant for his climax, but he didn't look like a man on the verge of blowing.

She nodded slightly—and then everything she ever thought she'd known about blowjobs was blown out of the water.

Logan gripped her cheeks as he took the reins from her. Lacy's fingers flew to his thighs, seeking purchase when he tripled their previous pace.

He fucked her mouth, pressing deeper than she'd dared to take him on her own. All she could do was hold on as he took. Her eyes began to water and she gagged a couple of times, but Logan didn't cease the movement.

Once again she was overwhelmed by the sensation of being taken. Claimed. When he'd spoken that word in the truck, she'd thought it sounded hot. It triggered all those sexual fantasies she'd never shared with anyone before, the ones where she was captured by a stranger and used roughly. She had always felt slightly ashamed of those dreams, like they were wrong, like she shouldn't feel arousal over such things.

Then Logan had promised to claim her, and it had brought all those shameful fantasies to the surface.

She couldn't find a damn thing wrong with what she wanted now. Instead, she struggled with the realization that she was close to coming as well. How was that possible? He wasn't touching her.

"Fuck yourself, Lacy. Put your fingers in that hot pussy of yours and fuck it. Hard."

Her fingers tightened in the hard muscle of his thighs, her nails scratching his skin. However, she wasn't sure if his loud grunt was due to pain or a precursor to his climax.

Then she obeyed his command, pressing two fingers inside herself as he continued to pound inside her mouth.

"How many?"

He tugged his cock out of her mouth briefly and she cried out in frustration.

"How many fingers are you using?"

"Two," she gasped.

He shook his head almost angrily. "Not enough. Four. Shove four in there." He punctuated his command with a rough return, his cock trying to slide all the way in. She panicked for a moment before her throat opened and he slid deeper.

"Fuck," he murmured.

Lacy added two more fingers to her pussy, curling them to find that special place that never failed to set her off.

Stars exploded as she came. Logan was mere seconds behind her.

One moment he was pounding into her mouth, the next he was jerking roughly as he came, jets of hot come splashing against the back of her throat.

She swallowed several times, but didn't seek to pull away. Even as his cock softened in her mouth, she held him there.

Wanted him there.

She was his. Completely.

But more than that, he was hers. And she was never going to let him go.

Off-limits or not.

* * * *

Eleven years earlier...

Logan tilted his head, confused when Lacy opened the door, wearing a tatty old t-shirt and jeans. “What are you doing here? Thought you were going to prom tonight.”

She shrugged casually, though her painted-on smile looked fake. “My date got chicken pox.”

“Oh man. I’m sorry.”

She stepped aside so he could come inside. “It’s okay. It’s not like he did it on purpose.” She paused for a second, and then looked at him, concerned. “You don’t think he got them on purpose, do you?”

Logan chuckled. “I’m one hundred percent sure Tommy didn’t get chicken pox just to get out of going to prom.”

“Yeah. I guess not.”

“You could always go stag,” he suggested.

She looked at him like he’d sprung a second head. “That’s social suicide. No thanks.”

Logan figured she was probably right. He’d been out of high school for too many years to remember all the silly rules.

Lacy’s mom, Beverly, walked into the room before he could devise a way to cheer her up.

“There you are, Logan. I just finished wrapping the tray of cookies for you. Lacy, will you go grab it for me?”

Lacy nodded and headed for the kitchen.

“Tough break on prom,” Logan said when Beverly’s gaze followed her daughter’s retreating form.

“I absolutely hate this. You know Lacy. She smiles and pretends it’s okay, but she’s devastated. She worked every single day after school in the bakery with me for six months, saving the money for that dress.”

Beverly quickly dashed a tear. Logan couldn’t stand the thought of Evan’s mom and sister upset. They were two of the sweetest women he knew. “Mrs. Sparks. What if Lacy comes to the barn dance with me tonight? Evan’s heading over there in a couple hours, once his shift ends. Tyson and I will keep an eye on her until then.”

“Are you sure?”

Ordinarily, Beverly would never have consented to let her sixteen-year-old daughter hang out with them, but the fact that she so quickly agreed proved how much she wanted to see Lacy happy. It wasn’t that they hung with a rough crowd. Hell, half the people there tonight would be Lacy’s older cousins. She’d be surrounded by friendly faces and Logan didn’t doubt for a second they’d all make sure she had a prom night to remember.

“We just play music and dance. I’ll make sure she stays out of the spiked punch and Evan will get her home at a decent hour. We won’t let her out of our sight. Promise.”

“Oh, Logan. How can I ever thank you for this? She’ll be delighted.”

Lacy entered the room with the cookies Beverly had made for the barn dance.

“Hey, Lace,” he said, taking the tray from her. “Go upstairs and put on your prom dress. You’re going to the barn dance with me.”

Lacy’s eyes widened in sheer joy. “Seriously?”

She glanced at her mom for confirmation, who grinned. “Logan and Evan will keep an eye on you.”

Lacy dashed toward the stairs excitedly. “Five minutes. Give me five minutes.” With that, she raced up, with Beverly hot on her heels.

“Better give us fifteen, Logan. I have the cutest idea for her hair.”

Logan waved, grinning. Surprisingly, he was kind of looking forward to taking Lacy to her first barn dance. God knew the kid had been begging him and Evan to let her tag along with them for years.

Beverly and Lacy split the difference on the time it took to get ready. Lacy descended the stairs ten minutes later.

She looked absolutely gorgeous—and Logan suddenly regretted the offer. It would have been easier to keep an eye on her when she was still dressed like a gangly sixteen-year-old girl. Right now, she would pass for much older in her form-fitting dress. It was way too fancy for the barn, but no one there would care when they heard about her sick prom date.

“You look amazing, Lacy.”

Her smile lit her entire face.

“Here,” Beverly said. “You two stand there real quick and let me snap a picture.”

“Mom. It’s not like Logan is my date.” From her blush, it was clear she was embarrassed.

“I don’t mind.” Logan set the cookies down and put a friendly arm around her shoulder. They both said, “cheese” and then, somehow, Logan found himself taking Lacy to “prom.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Logan stood outside Sparks Barbeque and cursed himself for being the world's biggest jackass. It had been a week since Lacy had shown up at his shop and seduced the fuck out of him.

And for seven days, he'd done nothing but think about how he wanted her to do it again. After her mind-blowing blowjob, he had helped her dress and cuddled her on his lap as they sat in his desk chair for nearly an hour. He *cuddled* her, for God's sake.

Then, he told her to take a week to decide if she wanted another round. Damn woman had said yes before he had finished speaking, but he'd rejected the response and insisted she really think about it.

Now, it wasn't her at his doorstep, but him at hers. He tried to reassure himself he wasn't here because of the sex—yeah, right—but because of business. He had to get her chaise lounge out of his shop. It was driving him insane. He'd been a fool to make that her safe word. Every time he looked at the thing, he recalled Lacy bent over his desk as he spanked her.

It was way past time to get Lacy Sparks out of his head. He hoped that by engaging her here—amongst her family—he'd remember why it was a very bad idea for him to become involved with his best friend's sister.

Lacy homed in on him the second he crossed the threshold, her too-pleased grin doing funny things to his insides. It occurred to him she had always lit up like that whenever he walked into a room, even when she was just a kid. And it had always made him feel good. Made him want to be a good man, a positive role model, the kind of person who was worthy of her admiration.

Now it just made him want to push her into the nearest broom closet and have his wicked way with her.

"Hey," she said as she approached him.

"Hi, Lace." His fingers itched to pull her close to him, to hug her tightly. That impulse seemed odd. He would have expected to feel desire—and he did—but the urge to simply embrace her and soak up the smell of her perfume was even stronger.

"Did you come for dinner? I'm off the clock in about ten minutes. I worked the breakfast and lunch shifts today. I could join you."

He shook his head. "No. I'm not here for food." He pointed to where his truck was parked out front. "I've got your chaise. Thought I'd see if you could take a few minutes to pop over to your place and unload it. Looks like I picked a good time."

She leaned closer and murmured, "It's been a week."

Logan sighed. "I know."

"Hey, Logan," Tyson called out from his seat at the end of the bar. "Come have a beer with me."

Logan nodded. "Go finish your shift. I'll wait for you."

He crossed the crowded room, stopping to say hello to a few people. One of the best—and worst—things about living in the same small town your whole life was that everybody knew everybody else. And not just in a "passing acquaintance" way, but in a "remember you when you were knee-high to a grasshopper" way.

As such, Mrs. Higgins had no compunction about asking him for the millionth time how he could have let that lovely girlfriend of his go. He politely told her the breakup had been Jane's decision, not his.

TJ didn't mind slapping him on the back and joking he'd been smart to avoid putting on the ball and chain. Then he'd not-too-subtly reminded him that his daughter Macie was still single.

Logan simply raised one eyebrow. "I think Macie is too much woman for me."

TJ laughed loudly, the sound booming across the room. "Yeah. She probably is. What about my baby girl, Adele, then?"

TJ was always trying to play matchmaker for his daughters. Something that drove Macie and Adele nuts, since all those efforts were made right in front of them.

“Ignore him, Logan. We suspect dementia is setting in,” Macie called out from behind the bar. “And dear God, Dad. Why are you still here? You’re not even on the schedule to work today.”

“It’s happy hour,” TJ called out, lifting his beer and clinking glasses with the two old cronies at his table.

Sparks Barbeque was actually TJ’s restaurant, but he left the cooking, waitressing, management, basically everything to the girls. And between the seven of them, they had put the restaurant—and by extension, Maris, Texas—on the map. The place had been featured in several national magazines as one of the best barbeque joints in the country, and just last month, Paige had received a call from the Food Network about filming a show there. For several days, the local gossips had been all abuzz about the possibility of their little town appearing on TV.

Finally, Logan made it to the bar, claiming the stool next to Tyson. “Busy in here tonight.”

Tyson shrugged. “It’s Friday in Maris.” He let the comment stand as if that explained it all, which it did. With the exception of Cruisers, which was on the outskirts of town and catered more to the party crowd, Sparks Barbeque was the only other option for social drinking. It was quieter, and it attracted the older men who liked to toss back a few with TJ, and the established couples out on dates, looking for a place where they didn’t have to yell to be heard over the loud music.

“Budweiser?” Macie asked him, even though she was already pouring the draft.

Logan nodded his thanks as Macie went back to the other end of the bar, continuing the story she’d been telling Coop without missing a beat.

“You know,” Tyson said, “I’ve been thinking. Maybe we should get the band back together.”

Logan laughed as he shook his head. He, Tyson, and their friends Harley and Caleb had formed Ty’s Collective back in high school. When Caleb and Tyson went off to college, they’d do local gigs whenever the guys were home over holidays and then they had resurrected it fulltime after Tyson graduated from med school and returned to Maris. “Hell no.”

“Why not?”

Logan lifted his hand as he ticked off his reasons. “For one thing, Cal’s too busy running his father’s Feed and Seed while he recovers from his heart attack, and Harley moved away. Band wouldn’t sound the same without her killing it on the banjo.”

Harley Mills had been an integral part of their group of friends for the past thirty or so years, but that changed when she took off to Florida a year ago after her brother’s death. They all felt her absence. With her departure, the band had dissolved. Logan missed the music and the camaraderie, but he also knew Ty’s Collective only worked with Harley on the stage with them.

“I can be the lead singer,” Macie interjected.

“Jesus, Mace. How do you do that?” Tyson asked. “You’re in the middle of a conversation with Coop, yet you’re listening in on ours.”

Macie shrugged. “It’s not that hard. Besides, I don’t like to miss stuff. Like Mrs. Higgins over there bitching about the new sign outside the Baptist church. Let it go, Agnes.”

“I’m not bitching,” Agnes called out. “I just said it was hard to read.”

Macie ignored the woman’s outburst and pointed to TJ. “And Dad’s over there making a bet on next week’s Rangers game with Earl, even though he promised my mom he wouldn’t gamble anymore.”

TJ frowned, hotly denying what everyone in the place knew was true. “I am not. And don’t be feeding your mother those stories either.”

Macie rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to Logan and Tyson. “So I can be lead singer.”

Tyson shook his head vehemently. “No way. Never. Not in a million years. I’ve heard you sing, Mace. It’s bad. Really bad.”

Macie was infamous for her extraordinarily awful singing voice, a fact she drove home when she took it upon herself to sing “The National Anthem” at the annual Fourth of July picnic by the lake a few years

earlier. Patriotism hit a new low as everyone in attendance burst out in hoots and hollers, laughing until their sides hurt at the painful performance. Which, of course, only encouraged an unoffended Macie to sign louder and to draw out the high notes longer.

“You’re tone deaf,” Logan added.

“I’ve been practicing in the shower. I really think I’m getting it. Tell them, Coop. You were here last week when I sang ‘Happy Birthday’ to Paige. Nailed it, didn’t I?”

Coop looked at her, frowning. “You were singing? I thought you’d burned yourself on one of the candles.”

Macie chucked a peanut at Coop’s head, which he deftly dodged. “To hell with all of you.” Then she launched right back into whatever story she’d been telling Coop before interrupting them. She was impossible to keep up with, but funny as hell.

Logan had avoided the restaurant for two weeks, trying to hide from Lacy. Now, he realized he’d missed it.

“Maybe we can find another banjo player, and I can do most of the lead vocals,” Tyson offered. “We all took turns at the mic anyway.”

“Tyson, I know you’ll probably find this hard to believe, but we weren’t that good.” It was a boldfaced lie. They were awesome. More than once, it had been suggested that they all quit their day jobs and pursue the music career fulltime. None of them had been tempted. It was a passion that they all shared—on a hobby level.

Tyson chuckled. “Bullshit.”

“Why the big need to start it all up again? Aren’t you pretty busy these days?”

Dr. Tyson Sparks was the one who’d suggested they take a hiatus after Harley left. He was one of only two general practitioners who lived in Maris, while the nearest hospital resided nearly forty minutes away in the neighboring town of Douglas. As such, he was in constant demand, treating everything from cut fingers to the more serious medical concerns.

“I thought you might like the distraction,” Tyson explained.

“Distraction?” The only thing Logan needed to be distracted from was Lacy, but God help him if Tyson knew that. He was as overprotective of his cousins and sister, Paige, as Evan was.

“It was just a thought.”

It occurred to Logan that perhaps it was Tyson who needed the distraction. Logan had been walking around with his head up his ass for so many months, he’d failed to see Tyson was facing his own struggles as well.

“You miss Harley?”

“Is that really a question?”

“I’m sorry, man. Didn’t realize how rough it was on you. I miss her too.” He really did. Though her departure had been easier for him. He’d always hung out more with Evan than Caleb, Harley, and Tyson—who had been inseparable for most of their lives.

“It’s alright. Let’s face it. You took a double hit. I mean, Jane took off just a few weeks after Harley.”

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

Tyson placed a friendly, comforting hand on Logan’s shoulder. “Believe me, there are plenty of other women out there who would be lucky to have you. Jane didn’t deserve you.”

“Uh. Am I interrupting?”

Logan glanced over his shoulder to find Lacy standing next to him with her purse over her arm.

Great. From the look on her face, it was clear she’d heard Tyson’s comments and now she thought he’d been sitting here crying in his beer over Jane.

“No. You’re not,” Logan said, standing. He needed to get her out of here. Set things straight. “You ready?”

“You two going somewhere?” Tyson asked curiously.

“He fixed my chaise. We’re taking it back to my place,” Lacy replied. The happiness she’d shown when he had first arrived at the restaurant was gone, replaced by uncertainty.

“Need any help?” Tyson started to stand.

“No,” Logan said quickly. “It’s light. We can manage.”

He placed his hand at the base of Lacy’s spine and guided her to the door before Tyson could insist.

He continued to propel her toward his truck even though she appeared to be dragging her feet. When he opened the door, she paused. “If you’d rather do this another time…”

Logan shook his head. “Get in the truck.” He didn’t make it a request and he didn’t bother to make it sound nice. He’d spent a week waiting for the moment when he’d get her alone again, and he wasn’t wasting the opportunity on misunderstandings.

As always, Lacy responded to his commanding tone, which didn’t help his already painful erection. He’d stopped trying to beat the fucking thing down the second they got out of the restaurant. Now he was wondering how the hell he could walk around to the driver’s side without limping. God help him if anyone in the restaurant was looking his way. It was bound to be obvious what was troubling him.

Logan climbed behind the steering wheel, adjusting his dick before he did himself an injury. Lacy’s eyes twinkled briefly and she opened her mouth—no doubt to give him shit for his condition—before she sobered up again and remained quiet. He hated seeing her upset.

“Don’t.”

She tilted her head, confused. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t think what you’re thinking. I’m not still hung up on Jane.”

“No one would blame you if—”

“I don’t miss her.”

Lacy didn’t appear to believe him. “Logan—”

“I don’t miss her, Lacy,” he said more resolutely. “The breakup was long overdue and I think I’d mourned the end of that relationship before it was even over. She and I were wrong for each other. It’s over. I swear.”

“Really?”

He could read the doubt in her tone and he didn’t blame her. Three years was a long time to live with someone. And he hadn’t helped himself by holing up inside his shop for a year after it ended, not bothering to date anyone else.

“She has nothing to do with us.”

Her smile grew. “There’s an us?”

He closed his eyes, wishing she didn’t befuddle him so. She had him talking in circles, saying everything wrong. “For now.”

His response didn’t dim her enthusiasm. “Now works for me.”

His lids opened at the sound of her shifting on the seat. She was wearing a short skirt that she lifted just enough to show him that she wasn’t wearing panties.

Logan had never considered himself the jealous type, but knowing she’d been flitting around that restaurant all day like that had his vision going red. “You worked like that all day?”

She laughed. “Good God, no. My Uncle TJ was in there. How awkward would that be? I took them off and stashed them in my purse just before I came to meet you at the bar.”

She was too adorable for his own good. “I like the idea of you dropping your panties whenever I show up.”

“Logan?”

“Yeah.”

“Can we go now?”

He made no move to start the truck. “In a hurry?”

The dirty girl reached between her thighs and ran her finger along her slit. Logan watched, spellbound, as she raised one very shiny finger to him. “Yes.”

He started the truck, using the five minutes it took for them to get from the restaurant to her front door to control himself. Foolishly, he'd agreed to the no-penetration rule, as if that somehow kept him true to his promise to Evan. He hadn't just broken the damn vow to his friend; he'd shattered it and was currently dancing barefoot on the shards.

When they arrived at her place, he took a steadying breath and forced himself to calm down. He'd sworn to himself when he loaded up the chaise and left his shop, he wouldn't touch her tonight. He'd slowly extricate himself from whatever this was.

Lacy was halfway to her front door before he could find the voice to call out, "Forgetting something?"

She looked over her shoulder, finding him standing at the end of his truck bed. "Oh. Yeah. The chaise."

From her heavy-lidded eyes, Lacy had expected him to drag her upstairs and let the games begin again. He was sorely tempted.

Logan lowered the back of the truck and slid the chaise out. It wasn't that heavy. Lacy helped him guide it down then held on to the light end, leading him to her door and up the stairs to her apartment.

He'd been in her place once before three years earlier, when he, Tyson and Evan had helped her move in. He had spent the day lugging furniture, placing it here, there, and then back to here as she directed their movements and changed her mind every five seconds. Logan hadn't been back since.

Once she opened the door to her apartment, he followed her in and whistled. Damn. The place had been nothing more than white walls and a few hand-me-down pieces of furniture last time.

"You like it?" she asked, setting the chaise down just inside the door. He followed suit, letting his gaze travel around the space. Logan knew she had an eye for decorating and a knack for taking someone else's trash and uncovering hidden treasures. But seeing all her efforts put together like this...

"It's beautiful, Lace. So homey."

Her apartment looked like the kind of place where a man could come home, kick off his work boots and sink into the comfy couch with a beer. He could spend hours just looking around at all the cool pieces she'd found. While he knew most of the decorations in the place were flea market and yard sale castoffs, everything worked together. More than that, it looked damned elegant.

Lacy was clearly pleased by his praise. "Thanks. You know, if you ever want to redesign your showroom, I'd be happy to help."

"Is that your subtle way of telling me the place looks like hell?"

"Well..."

He chuckled. "I'd love your help. Keep intending to work on it, but I never manage to shift around more than a couple pieces before I get overwhelmed and give up."

"I was thinking that if you added some funky artwork to the walls and maybe set it up like a house layout, it would show off your furniture better. Plus, I could add a few vases, knick-knacks, stuff like that, to add some color and some visual interest. I think it would make the whole place pop."

He nodded. "Yeah. I'd really like that."

"Awesome. I'll come by next week on my day off and we can draw up a layout. And then I'll start hitting the sales looking for the pieces I'm envisioning. It won't cost much. Promise."

"Money's not an issue. I suspect the investment will be worth it in the long run."

"And you'd be helping me out too."

"How's that?"

She grinned as she waved around the room. "I'm sort of at maximum capacity for crap in here. This way I can still fuel my bargain-shopping addiction without crowding up my apartment."

"I see. Speaking of, where's this going?" he asked, pointing at the chaise. There didn't seem to be a spot for it in the living room.

"My bedroom."

Of course.

Logan blew out a long sigh. "Listen, Lace. I think—"

She stepped closer and placed her finger over his mouth. “You promised me three times.” She smelled like flowers and French fries; the combination was ridiculously appealing.

“We need to be practical about this.”

“Okay. So be practical. You said Jane wasn’t an issue. Is that true?”

He nodded though he wasn’t sure that answer was entirely accurate. While he wasn’t still hung up on his ex, he was struggling with the fallout, trying to find a way back to normal.

“And what do you think Evan would say if he found out?”

Logan knew the answer to that. “He wouldn’t say anything. He’d beat the shit out of me very quietly.”

“You’re best friends, Logan. He loves you like a brother. What makes you think he’d disapprove of us as a couple? Is it the age difference?”

He shook his head. “No. It has nothing to do with your age. We’re both consenting adults.”

“Then it’s the sex. I mean...the way we like to have sex.”

Logan didn’t reply for a long time. He had been terrified of scaring Lacy away with his sexual appetite, but rather than run, she’d responded to it. With Jane, he’d worn the kid gloves at the beginning, introducing her to his desires slowly. That technique had blown up in his face. By the time he figured out they weren’t compatible lovers, he was in love with her, so he adapted, tried to hold back some of his stronger urges.

When the silence stretched too long, Lacy filled it. “You didn’t seem to have these hang-ups when it came to Yvette. What makes me different from her?”

He reared back. “Yvette?”

Lacy flushed. “I followed you one day. Watched you take her when her grandmother was out of the house.”

“That was nearly ten years ago.”

She shrugged. “I know.”

“You were just a kid.”

She scowled at his comment. The woman was touchy about him referring to her youth, but he’d spent too many years of his life seeing her as a kid. While that certainly wasn’t true now, the fact remained that she had no business spying on him at that age.

“I was seventeen and not entirely innocent.” Then she seemed to recall what she’d seen. “Of course, after that, I wasn’t innocent at all.” She laughed, but Logan didn’t find the humor.

“Jesus. You were too young to see that.”

“Maybe I was, but I’m not going to pretend it didn’t turn me on. A lot. Like *a lot* a lot.”

Logan ran a hand through his hair and forced himself to recall all the things he had done with Yvette. He had no idea which day she’d followed them, but any of them would have provided her with a fairly substantial education in kinky sex.

The knowledge certainly explained her interest in pursuing him, in her research on BDSM. He’d unwittingly exposed her to his true nature and the spark had ignited. Years ago.

He had no business being here.

“Let’s put this chaise in your bedroom. Then I need to head home.”

“What? Why? Are you pissed off I followed you and Yvette? Because—”

“No, Lacey. I’m not pissed. I’m just coming to my senses.”

She fell silent for several moments. He let her sort through her thoughts, taking the time to get his own settled.

“I’m getting tired of chasing you, Logan. Sick of trying to force you to see something that’s standing right in front of you. You want to be blind? Fine. Be blind. I’m not in the mood to beg.”

She bent over and picked up her half of the chaise. He lifted his side and followed her to the bedroom, her words racing through his brain. Why couldn’t she see that he was trying to do the right thing?

They were halfway across the room when something on the bed captured his attention.

He put the chaise down and walked over to the mattress. “What the hell?”

Lacy followed him, picking up a thick butt plug and waving it around as if it was nothing more scandalous than a hairbrush. “I did some online shopping after the last time we were together. I was sort of hoping you’d educate me on all of this.”

“That was one hell of a shopping trip.”

In addition to the plug, there was a vibrator, a large dildo, nipple clamps, a crop and a jumbo-size tube of lubrication.

He’d met the woman of his dreams. And he’d known her his entire life.

Lacy sank down on her bed, letting her skirt ride up high on her thighs. “Guess I’ll have to find someone else to introduce me to—”

“Lacy,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Yeah?”

“Get undressed. Now.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Lacy fought hard to hide her grin as she tugged her t-shirt over her head. It was simply a stroke of luck that her new toys had arrived that morning and she'd decided to unpack them to take a peek. After that, she'd lost track of time, fantasizing about Logan using all the toys on her until she'd been late for work and had left them lying on the bed.

Logan was still resistant to a relationship, but Lacy wasn't sure why. Whatever was holding him back wasn't something he was ready to talk to her about. So she needed to find ways to keep him returning to her bed until he was. She didn't intend to give up on him. Especially not now, when it was obvious they were so perfect for each other.

Once she was naked, she waited, curious about what he would ask her to do next. He was looking at her treasure trove of naughty toys intently.

"You really want to try all of this?"

"Yes." She was taken aback by his uncharacteristic hesitance. She wasn't used to seeing Logan unsure of himself. Typically, he was the king of confidence. "Of course I do."

"You're not doing this just to please me, because you think it's what *I* want?"

Lacy frowned, wondering where his questions were coming from. This was the first time he'd shown this touch of reticence. "I love what we do together. It doesn't just please *you*, Logan. God, you're giving me orgasms that make my teeth rattle. It's amazing."

He considered that, and then—finally—the dominant lover she'd come to adore reemerged. His gaze swept over her naked form.

"Get on the bed. Lay down on your back in the center."

As she moved into position, Logan swept the toys to one side of the bed.

"You forgot something," he said as he walked toward her closet.

"What's that?"

"Handcuffs."

Lacy squeezed her legs together and cursed herself for the oversight. "I'll steal some from Evan's house tomorrow."

He chuckled. "I'd prefer to buy you some. Last thing we need is Evan arresting his kinky kid sister for stealing his cuffs." He opened the closet door. "Scarves?"

"They're in a box right there on the floor."

He followed her direction and tugged the box out. Opening it, he searched until he found several long scarves that apparently suited his purpose.

Lacy squirmed on the bed, wishing for the millionth time she hadn't taken sex off the table. As fun as the toys looked, she would never be fully sated until Logan was buried deep inside her.

She watched as he approached the bed. He looked so large, so serious, so powerful. A sane woman would probably be terrified. Lacy felt nothing but excitement.

"Lift your hands above your head."

Lacy obeyed, directing her hands toward opposite sides of the headboard.

He shook his head. "No. Cross your wrists."

She moved them together. In her fantasies, she was always spread eagle. The idea that he would tie her up some other way had her heart racing at a dangerous pace.

Logan rested one knee on the mattress by her side as he reached up, tying her wrists together and then securing them to the headboard. Her arms were stretched taut, and she didn't bother to test the knots for more than a second or two. Those suckers weren't coming loose.

Logan rose from the bed and pulled his t-shirt over his head. She was treated to a visual feast of muscular arms, six-pack abs and smooth, tanned skin she longed to lick like an ice cream cone. She hoped the striptease would continue, but Logan stopped with just the shirt.

“Pants,” she suggested hopefully.

His eyes narrowed and she knew she’d made some sort of faux pas. “I won’t gag you this time because it’s all new to you and I want you to be able to say your safe word. So here’s your only warning. We’re doing this my way.”

“So...in other words, no suggestions from the peanut gallery. Got it.”

His stern expression slipped for just a moment, his lips tipping up in a smile he was trying to hide. He recovered quickly, but the twinkle in his eyes told her he wasn’t really annoyed with her.

“Don’t make me regret the gag decision.”

She bit her lip, trying to look chastised. In truth, the action was helping her to not laugh. It wasn’t that she wasn’t taking this seriously. She was. It was just that she was so happy. God, her joy was seeping out of her and it was hard to keep inside, contained.

She had loved Logan Grady her entire life and now, being here with him like this, she felt as if she’d come home. As if every dream she’d ever had was coming true.

Logan returned to the bed, crawling between her legs as he pushed them apart. The man certainly liked having her on display. She didn’t mind her nudity with him. He looked at her as if she were the most beautiful piece of artwork in the museum. It warmed her up, made her feel cherished. Sexy.

He ran his fingers along her slit. This time, she did flush. She was dripping wet. To the point where it was slightly embarrassing.

“Guess we won’t need that lube,” she said, jokingly.

Logan moved one finger lower and pressed just the tip into her anus. The move was unexpected, the penetration tight. It pinched slightly and she gasped.

“We’re going to need it.”

Suddenly, Lacy was reconsidering the size of the butt plug she’d purchased. In her overheated, horny mind, she had selected one that would be approximately the same size as his dick. She hadn’t fully considered the ramifications of putting something that big in such a small hole.

“Relax, Lacy.”

The man read her like a book. “I’m cool,” she lied.

This time he didn’t bother to hide his grin. “No. You’re not, but you’re worrying about the wrong things.”

As always, his words calmed her down. She assumed it all came back to that trust thing. He wouldn’t hurt her, wouldn’t abuse her or force her to do anything she didn’t want to do. She knew that as sure as she knew tomorrow was Saturday.

Logan lifted her legs, resting them on his shoulders as he bent forward to suck on her nipples. She was suddenly grateful she’d started taking those yoga classes at the gym. Logan was definitely going to stretch her flexibility limits.

When his teeth bit into her nipple, her mind went blank. She longed to grip his head, to run her fingers through his thick dark hair, but the scarf held firm.

She’d never had anyone pay so much attention to her breasts. Or to just one nipple. Logan spent ages laving the distended flesh, licking, sucking, biting. Every sting of pain he produced was followed by softness. He hurt. He soothed. Over and over. Her body trembled with the conflicting sensations, her pussy clenching resentfully on empty air.

Lacy needed to be filled. Needed him to fuck her.

“Please,” she gasped after several minutes. “God. I need you, Logan.”

He lifted his head, letting her see the pain etched on his face. He was suffering too. Strangely that idea comforted her. She wasn’t alone in this.

She was so distracted by his expression, she never saw him pick up the nipple clamp. She didn't realize he had it in his hand until the sharp teeth of the wicked contraption snapped down.

"Ahh," she cried. "Shit. That hurts."

Logan didn't remove it, but he didn't put the other on either. Instead, he studied her expression. "Focus on your breathing, Lace."

She did as he said, sucking in as much air as she could muster, which wasn't much.

He shook his head. "No. Like this."

She followed his lead, her chest rising and falling in time with his, in slow inhalations followed by long exhalations. Lacy had just adjusted to the sting of the clamp when he snapped the second one on.

"Fuck!"

He waited again, leading her through the breathing exercises. This time, it took fewer seconds to regulate, to adapt. Mainly because Logan had distracted her. Two fingers slammed inside her pussy and Lacy jerked roughly.

God. She was going to come. Like...right now.

She screamed and thrashed her head on the pillow as every nerve ending in her body exploded. What the fuck was happening?

It was several minutes before she realized Logan's fingers were no longer inside her. Instead, he was hovering over her, caging her beneath him as his elbows rested by her shoulders. He kissed her gently, the touch in direct opposition to the pleasurable pain he'd just produced.

"Okay?" he asked quietly when she finally managed to gather her wits.

She nodded. "I don't understand how..."

"You're submissive."

Lacy would have argued that point. She'd chop off any guy's dick if he tried to control her life, tell her what to wear or how to behave. The Sparks women had more than their fair share of independent and authoritative streaks.

But that wasn't what he meant. She understood that.

And whether he realized it or not, Logan had molded her desires when she was seventeen, unwittingly revealing a part of her that she might never have known existed.

"I want you, Logan."

The moment she uttered the words, she wished she could take them back. They seemed to break whatever spell had settled over them.

He pushed himself up and glanced at the pile of toys that still rested next to her on the bed. "We're not finished with the lessons yet."

The affection she'd just seen in his eyes was shuttered away. Logan would play with her, broaden her horizons, indulge her curiosity about BDSM. But he wouldn't give her what she truly wanted. Him. All of him. Heart, soul and body.

Unfortunately he didn't give her the chance to mourn that fact. Instead, he uncapped the lube and threw her back into a maelstrom of sensation.

Logan squeezed some of the lubrication onto his finger, and then slowly worked it inside her ass. She struggled to adapt to the pinch. It didn't hurt, but it wasn't entirely comfortable. She recalled his declaration about fucking her there. The masochist in her wanted that, even knowing it was likely to hurt like hell.

She had to hand it to him. Logan seemed to have the patience of Job. One finger eventually became two, and two became three. Hours could have passed for all Lacy knew as he took his time to stretch her. All the while he added even more lubrication.

Finally, seventy-two years later, she felt the tip of the plug against her ass.

"Shit," she breathed out on a whisper as he pressed the wicked toy deeper. She really should have picked a smaller size.

"Logan," she gasped as he continued to breach the tight portal.

He captured her gaze and then, with a wink, he pushed the fat end completely inside as her anus clenched around the base.

“Ohmigod.” Once again, he led her through the breathing exercises and then, just like before, he distracted her. This time with the dildo.

He grinned as he rimmed the opening of her body with the toy. “We won’t need lube for this one. You’re soaking wet.”

“You can’t put...”

That was as far as she got before Logan shoved the dildo in to the hilt.

Her back arched off the bed as her second orgasm rumbled along her spine, ravaging her. That orgasm was followed immediately by a third, more powerful one when Logan removed one of the nipple clamps and then the other.

Her cries were hoarse as her body trembled in the aftermath. Logan laved her sensitive nipples with hot, wet, soothing kisses. He’d done no more than push the dildo inside. He hadn’t even fucked her with it. She had come three times tonight and it had only taken him one little thrust to do so.

A trickle of sweat tickled her cheek as it slid along her damp skin. The room had been chilly when they’d first walked in. Now, it was like a sauna, the air thick and humid.

Logan untied her wrists, slowly drawing her arms down as he massaged her shoulders. He had just given her three earth-shattering orgasms. It felt as if she should be the one worshipping at his feet, taking care of him and giving him the moon on a silver platter.

However, it was Logan who gave as she lay there with no more strength than a newborn kitten. He ran his fingers along the valley between her breasts, over her stomach and back to her pussy. Her inner muscles fluttered against the thick plastic as he pulled the dildo out.

When his fingers drifted lower, to the plug, she sucked in a deep breath and held it.

“Ready?”

It was the first time he’d asked permission to do anything tonight. The fact that, ready or not, the damn big thing needed to come out, wasn’t lost on her.

Logan placed a quick kiss on her cheek as he gripped the base of the plug and pulled it free. She closed her eyes tightly as the thickest part passed, sighing in relief—and disappointment—as he dropped it to the floor by the bed.

She felt...empty.

“That was...” Lacy couldn’t find the words.

Logan simply nodded, looking at her so intently she had to fight the urge to glance away. He could see too much and she didn’t have the strength to hide, to shelter her emotions.

“You’re incredible, Lacy.”

She closed her eyes and pretended there wasn’t going to be a “but” added to the end of that statement. She could read him too. Whatever he’d just seen in her face—and she was pretty sure it was pure, unadulterated, undying love—had helped him batten down his hatches.

He was going to break her heart.

“We can’t do this again.”

She tried to push herself upright, but her arms were still weak so it took some effort. “Why not?”

“You’ve had a crush on me since you were a kid.”

She blushed and glanced down. “I wasn’t sure you knew that.”

He cupped her cheek, forcing her gaze to meet his. “It was pretty hard to miss. I didn’t know you knew about Yvette, that you’d followed us. God, Lacy. How much of what you’re feeling right now is based on what you know about me and my needs? How do you know this is really what you want?”

She scowled. “Um...maybe because I’m a fucking adult and I know what I like.”

“Jane pretended she liked BDSM at first too. We fell in love with each other and when those emotions were new it was easy for her to go along with my desires because she wanted to make me happy. In the end, she wound up resenting me for what I wanted.”

“I’m not pretending.”

“How can you be sure?”

She snapped. Her temper flaring red-hot. “I can!”

“I don’t want to hurt you. You’re the last person on earth I’d *ever* want to hurt.”

The anger that had flashed dissolved into heartbreak. “You’re hurting me now.”

“And that’s why I need to leave.”

* * * *

Fourteen years earlier...

“I think it’s on the back porch,” Evan yelled from the kitchen.

Lacy glanced up, surprised when Logan stepped outside. She turned her head away from him quickly, not wanting him to see her cry. She’d had a crush on Logan her entire life, so it was just her luck he’d show up and catch her ugly crying.

“Hey, Lace.” He walked over to retrieve a cooler. Logan and Evan were going camping with a bunch of their friends for the weekend. Needless to say, once again, she had been deemed too young to tag along.

“Hey,” she said, not looking his direction.

She was used to being invisible to her brother’s friends. They were eight years older and there was precious little a gang of twenty-somethings had in common with a thirteen-year-old. So she hadn’t expected Logan to walk over to where she was slowly rocking on her mom’s loveseat glider.

“You crying?”

She shook her head, refusing to face him. Of course, she didn’t help her lie by reaching up to wipe away her tears.

“What’s wrong?”

“Missy Martin kissed Bucky Largent.”

“Oh. And you like Bucky?”

Lacy crinkled her nose in disgust as she looked at Logan. “Eww. No. Gross.”

“You like Missy?”

She rolled her eyes. “No. But now I’m the only girl in my class who hasn’t kissed a boy.”

Logan chuckled. She expected him to walk away, as he clearly didn’t find her reason for crying very important.

Once again, he did the unexpected. He put the cooler down and sat next to her on the loveseat. “I wouldn’t worry about that too much. You’re going to kiss lots of guys in your life. Doesn’t matter if you’re last or not.”

“Nobody likes me like that.”

“They will.”

Lacy had her doubts. The boys in her class tended to flock toward the girls with the big boobs. Hers had yet to make an appearance. “Pretty sure I’m going to die alone.”

Logan laughed and stood up. “Tell you what. If nobody’s kissed you by the time you’re eighteen, I’ll kiss you.” With that, he picked up the cooler and headed back into the house, while Lacy did some math.

In five years, Logan Grady was going to kiss her. Lacy had waited this long. She could wait five more years.

CHAPTER SIX

Macie stood with her hands on her hips. “Alright. Let’s have it.”

Lacy looked at her cousin, wondering what she’d forgotten. “Have what?”

“Who is he?”

Lacy bit her lower lip, especially when Evan’s head popped up as he dipped one of his fries in ketchup.

“He?” Evan asked.

Lacy shook her head and fought like the devil not to cry. “There is no he.”

She was able to say the words with confidence because they were true. Logan hadn’t returned a single one of her calls in five days and, despite her efforts to get him alone, the man somehow always managed to have customers in his shop.

She’d stopped by his place after hours the last two nights, but he either wasn’t in or he wasn’t answering the door.

He had told her when he left Friday that it was over. He’d blown her world away with his clamps, plug and dildo. Given her the greatest sexual experience of her life and then, at the end, he’d simply walked away.

Once he said he was leaving, she hadn’t bothered to beg or plead. One look at his determined face told her all she needed to know. He wouldn’t be swayed.

As a result, he’d left her with a big freaking hole in her chest where he had ripped her heart out.

“There’s no one.”

Her cousin studied her face too closely for Lacy’s comfort, so she worked hard to keep her expression impassive.

“Only guy troubles would explain your behavior the last few weeks.”

Lacy rolled her eyes. “I’m behaving like I always do.”

Macie made an annoying buzzer sound, as if Lacy had given the wrong answer on a game show.

“Nope. You’ve been all over the charts. Testy as hell one day, then the next you’re walking on air. Spent the better part of a week yelling your name until you finally managed to pull your head out of your daydreaming ass long enough to answer me. During that phase, I had to brush my teeth twelve times a day while trying not to get a toothache looking at that sappy, sweet, can’t-wipe-the-grin-off-your-face look. Now you’ve spent the last few days moping around here like you lost your best friend. If that’s not some man fucking with your head, then I don’t know what else it could be. You’ve got all the classic symptoms.”

“Lace?” Evan asked. She hated seeing the worry in his eyes.

“No one is jerking me around, Evan.” Logan had been a straight shooter from the start, telling her they could only have a short-lived affair. She was the one who’d pushed for more than he was willing to give.

Her brother nodded and she was relieved that he appeared to accept her words. “Maybe what you have is catching.”

“What do you mean?”

“Logan’s down in the dumps too.”

Lacy was very careful not to look too interested in that tidbit, but Macie picked it up like it was a hundred dollar bill on the ground. “Really?”

Though she was responding to Evan’s comment, Macie’s gaze had zoomed in on Lacy—big time. The last thing she needed was for Macie to put two and two together. That wouldn’t be good for anyone.

Lacy needed to get out of here. Her head was pounding, her throat closing and she was in serious danger of falling apart in the middle of the restaurant.

“Listen, Mace. Things are slow around here tonight. Do you mind covering for me? I’ve got a wicked headache.”

Macie nodded slowly, still studying her face too intently. “Sure. If things get busy, I’ll call Gia or Adele to come in and help out.”

“Thanks.” Lacy grabbed her purse from the storage closet then gave Evan a quick kiss on the cheek on her way out.

“You’re sure you’re okay?”

She nodded. “Pinkie swear.”

He smiled and said goodbye.

Lacy waved then rushed outside. Glancing toward the sky, she saw a dark cloud forming in the distance. Looked like they were in for a storm tonight. Strangely, Lacy found some comfort in that thought. She wasn’t in the mood for sunshine.

Besides, maybe a good old-fashioned, noisy thunderstorm would drown out her crying. Because she had every intention of throwing one hell of a temper tantrum the second she got home. For days, she’d walked around in a haze of pent-up sorrow. She’d held her depression in, afraid to let it out. Now her skin felt as if it would crack from the pressure.

She stared at her feet as she pounded the pavement, walking the five blocks from the restaurant to her apartment in record time. She’d been so focused on the ground, she hadn’t noticed Logan’s truck parked on the street out front until she’d passed it. Then she glanced from the vehicle to the door.

Logan sat on the front stoop, his face stoic, unemotional. She hated the way he could tuck away his feelings so easily. It took all the strength she had not to go over and punch him in the stomach the way he had Bucky.

She felt a tear slide down her cheek, but she didn’t bother to dash it away. Ordinarily, she’d rather eat dirt than let someone see her cry. That didn’t apply this time. She wanted Logan to see her pain, to understand exactly how bad he’d hurt her.

Logan stood as she approached him. “Lacy.”

She simply stared at him as another tear fell. She was unable to speak, too afraid she’d rain down a torrent of horrible words on his head.

“Please don’t cry.”

Her jaw tightened, her teeth clenched. It was on the tip of her tongue to scream the words “Fuck you!” He didn’t get to tell her what to do. How to feel. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m going to break my promise to Evan.”

She frowned. “What?”

“Get upstairs.”

Her body responded before her brain could engage. She started upstairs. She hesitated briefly, but Logan was there, urging her to keep moving.

Lacy’s tears evaporated, her head whirling over what he’d said.

Broken promise.

She allowed him to propel her forward as she struggled to figure out what the hell was going on. Why was he here? Was he collecting on the last night? Did he still intend for this to be the end? Maybe his hormones had finally gotten the better of him.

God knew she’d been fighting some seriously hardcore sexual needs, employing her vibrator far more than was probably healthy. What was worse was the whole time she sought to assuage her needs, her heart was shattered. She missed him even as she cursed his name, and then screamed it during her self-inflicted orgasms.

She was a fucking mess.

If he’d simply come here to use her for sex, she’d...what?

Kick him out?

She wouldn’t do that. All he’d had to do was tell her to move and she was all but running to her bedroom. She should hate him for that.

Or maybe she should hate herself.

Once she unlocked her door and entered, Logan was right behind her.

“Bedroom.”

“Logan—”

“We’re going to talk, Lacey. We’re going to say every single fucking thing that needs to be said. I promise. But if I’m not inside you in the next five minutes, I can’t be held responsible for my own actions.”

Every ounce of pain she’d felt in the past five days vanished. She wasn’t going to let him leave again without that conversation. But he was right. The physical aches needed to be quenched first or she wouldn’t be able to say anything coherent.

“Fine.” She grabbed his hand and led him to her bedroom quickly. It sounded as if he had turned the corner on whatever had been holding him back.

At least she hoped he had.

If not, she was making the mother of all mistakes.

Not that it mattered. She was diving into this fire feet first, aching for the burn, because as much as her heart ached, her body was currently suffering more.

As they entered the room, she lost no time. She turned to face him and unbuckled his belt, her fingers grazing his erection as she worked. He was rock hard. How long had he been suffering with that condition? The petty part of her that was still pissed he’d made her wait hoped it had been a while.

She unbuttoned his jeans, slid the zipper down, wrapped her hands around his cock and stroked it slowly. She shuddered as she considered how full she would feel with him inside her.

“I want you so much, Lacey.”

She smiled and placed a soft kiss on his cheek. “I’m right here.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “For the way things ended last time.”

He had promised her they would talk. After. She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him. “It’s okay.”

He shook his head as if to disagree, so she forced him to look at her. His apology had gone a long way toward soothing her anger, her pain. So had the fact he’d shown up here tonight. They would discuss whatever had compelled him to leave, but not right now.

“I mean it. It’s okay.”

Logan gripped her cheeks in his large palms and gave her a kiss so passionate it took her breath away. This was what she’d hoped for on her eighteenth birthday. There was nothing on earth so magical as being kissed by someone who clearly adored you.

“God, I missed you.”

She grinned at his confession. “Ditto.”

He was obviously trying to hold back, giving her the chance to tell him to take a hike.

“It’s time.”

His jeans hung on his hips, so he reached back, trying to dig out his wallet. Lacey gripped his upper arm to stop him.

“Don’t. I’m on the Pill.”

“Lacey—”

She pressed her cheek against his. “Please. I want you to come inside me.”

He didn’t respond for several moments. Then he cupped her cheek affectionately. “I find it impossible to say no to you.”

She laughed softly. “That’s good. That’s *very* good. Hold on to that thought and we’ll always be happy.”

He twisted her away from him with one quick motion and swatted her ass. “Minx.”

“Wait,” she said, unfastening her own pants. “Let me get these silly jeans out of the way and you can try that again properly.”

“If I wasn’t in agony, I’d gag you for trying to run the show, but as it is…”

Together, they got each other out of their clothing. When Lacy climbed onto the mattress, Logan was right there behind her.

She turned, lying down on her back as he came over her.

Her legs were parted in invitation and Logan took no time accepting. He placed the head of this dick against her pussy and pushed in. One hard, deep thrust.

Lacy gasped, her fingers gripping his arms. Her pussy muscles tightened around him. Her head swam. She was close. Again. It typically took her ages to reach her orgasms, but Logan found them within seconds.

He hadn't sought to move. Instead, he remained buried deep. When he lifted his face to look at her, she was blinded by the emotion she saw there.

He loved her. Thank God.

He loved her.

"Logan," she whispered. "I'm not afraid. I'm yours."

Her words set him free. After that, any semblance of control vanished. They came at each other like animals in heat, taking what they wanted with a ferocity that should have been painful. Hell, it was.

Logan beat a power rhythm inside her, crashing up and down like a jackhammer as she cried out. She came, but Logan never stopped moving.

Then she pressed on his shoulder, forcing him to his back as she straddled his hips. Lacy rode his cock like it was a stallion as he kept hold of her hips, pounding her against him roughly.

"Lacy." His hands tightened as she continued to bounce.

She was going to have bruises on her hips from his fingers. She reveled in that thought. Then decided she wanted to mark him as well.

Her fingers were in his hair, so she pulled it. Hard.

He groaned. "Goddammit."

It was the greatest sex of her life, but it still wasn't enough. He twisted once more, pressing her to her back as he came over her again, and he took her even harder, even faster.

Lacy lifted her legs, wrapping her ankles around his back. She didn't shy away, didn't try to stop him. She'd never been fucked with such force. She loved it, begged him for more. She dug her fingers into his shoulders and tilted her hips so he could stake a deeper claim.

Then Logan hit that magic spot inside her and she went off like a bottle rocket. This time, he did too.

"Jesus, Lacy. So. Fucking. Good." Jets of come erupted, filling her.

For several moments, the only sound in the room was the two of them, panting loudly, her heart pounding in her ears.

Logan had Lacy caged beneath him, his dick still inside her. He studied her flushed face and she wondered what he was thinking.

She decided to break the silence first, despite the tiny fear that he'd retreat again. "That was amazing."

He nodded. "It was."

She tightened her legs around his waist. "You're inside me."

"Yeah. I am." His cock stirred as she grinned.

"Are you getting hard again?"

Logan's lips tipped up in a sexy grin. "I've been in misery since we started this game. I'm fairly certain it's going to take me a long damn time to get this need for you out of my system."

She didn't ever want him to get her out of his system. But she didn't say that aloud. They still hadn't sorted through the mess, so she decided to hold off on declaring her undying love for him until he confessed his first. She'd been wearing her heart on her sleeve her entire life. It was his turn to open himself up to her.

"Where's that lube?"

She pointed toward the nightstand drawer. "Not sure that's necessary. I'm more than ready for round two."

He grabbed the tube anyway, his cock still buried inside her. As far as recoveries went, she wondered if this was some sort of world record. The man was rock hard and as thick as ever.

“That’s good to know. But I think we’re going to give this sweet pussy of yours a rest this time around.” As he spoke, he withdrew.

Lacy’s pussy clenched hungrily as she realized his plan. She hadn’t touched the plug since the last time he’d been in her bed. And as large as the thing was, it was no match for what he was proposing to put inside her this time.

“I…”

“What’s your safe word?”

“Chaise,” she whispered.

Logan gave her a quick kiss on the lips. “Good girl.”

She had expected him to get right down to business, but Logan never did anything the way she anticipated. He reached back into the nightstand drawer and pulled out the vibrator.

“We didn’t get to use this last time.”

She didn’t bother to mention that particular toy had become her favorite over the last week and a half. Hell, she’d even started calling the stupid thing Logan.

He slid the thin vibrator into her pussy with ease. She was still wet from her arousal and his come.

He turned the toy on low and she groaned at the sudden sensation against her well-used, uber-sensitive tissues.

Logan narrowed his eyes when she started swaying her hips, working the vibrations against her G-spot. “Don’t even think about coming.”

She froze. “What?”

“I’ve let you grab those orgasms of yours whenever you want. No more. Next time you come, it’s going to be with me, while I’m buried in that tight little ass of yours.”

“But I’m close.”

His expression was stern, though his eyes gave him away. He was amused, even if he was trying to act all big and bad. “You’re always close. Hold it off.”

She started to shake her head. The truth was she had absolutely no control over her orgasms with him. Hell, half the time they hit when she wasn’t even expecting them. “I can’t—”

Logan gripped her chin and forced her to look at him. “If you come without my permission, I’m going to tie you to this bed so that you can’t move a fucking muscle and keep that vibrator on low all night until you *do* learn how to control it.”

“You wouldn’t dare. That would only hurt you too.”

The smile he gave her was pure danger, especially when his gaze traveled to her mouth. He ran his thumb over her lower lip before he pushed inside. Her lips closed around it instinctively. “I don’t intend to suffer.”

She closed her eyes, trying to ward off the impact of his words. His dirty talk was as detrimental to her self-control as his actions. This was not going to end well.

“I’ll try,” she said begrudgingly.

“Just remember that I’m a man of my word. I will do exactly what I’ve said if you don’t succeed.”

She didn’t have time to respond before he flipped her onto her stomach. He stroked her ass cheeks with calloused hands. She loved the rough feel of them against her soft skin. It was incredible to her that he could use those hands either to spank or caress and produce the same heart-pounding effect.

“Lift your ass in the air.”

She did as he said, the vibrator still buried inside her. She was fighting like the devil to ignore the thing, but as she shifted, it hit one of her happy places. She gripped the sheets in her fists and winced, battling back the urge to come.

“God. I think I might hate you.”

He chuckled, completely unconcerned by her confession. “That’s good.”

Logan squeezed some lube in her ass. Lacy shivered when the cold gel hit her.

He slowly worked it inside her, adding lube and fingers over the course of the next several minutes. Lacy forgot to be nervous about what was coming as she worked overtime not to come. Somewhere in the midst of Logan stretching her ass, he bumped the vibrator up to the next speed.

She called him a long string of unsavory, rude names, but he ignored her and kept going.

Lacy was so focused on not coming, she jumped slightly when she felt the head of Logan's cock pressing against her ass. At some point, he'd covered it with a condom.

"Oh!"

"Shh," he soothed, running his hand along her back. "Say your safe word if you hate it."

He'd only pushed the head in before she decided she wasn't going to hate it. He was so much bigger than the plug and his fingers, not just in width, but in length.

"How much more?" she gasped as he continued to work his way inside with short, easy thrusts.

"Halfway there."

"Fuck me," she groaned, prompting him to laugh a little.

"That's not the safe word."

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "Keep going, asshole."

He slapped her ass lightly. "That's not it either."

During their previous sexual encounters, she had been so focused on how fucking good the sex was and on finding a way to get him back in her bed, that she hadn't had a chance to consider what it would be like to truly date Logan.

Words like fun and playful floated to the surface. Even as he dominated their play, taking her to places she'd never imagined in all her twisted, kinky fantasies, she couldn't deny that being with him was as much fun as it was hot.

When he was fully lodged, he paused. "That's it." His words sounded almost pained, which seemed weird to her. She was the one being practically split in two. Then she considered how much control it must have taken for him to move so slowly, to give her this experience with as little pain as possible.

She took a second to adjust, marveling over how freaking much she loved everything they'd done together. Something told her a hundred years with the man wouldn't be enough to get him out of *her* system.

"Lacy," he murmured. He was holding on for her. "Baby..."

"Can I come now?"

A short burst of laughter filled the room. "God. You're all kinds of perfect. Yeah. Come at will, gorgeous."

With that, he began to fuck her. He kept his motions slow, easy. She appreciated his efforts at not hurting her, but it wasn't enough.

"Logan," she gasped. "Please. More."

"As you wish." He reached down and found the control to the vibrator. He cranked the thing on high and then it was game over.

He took her hard, driving deep into her ass, as Lacy came violently. One orgasm stretched into a second before Logan joined her. His fingers tightened on her hips as he jerked once, twice more. Then he fell to her side as she turned to face him. She shuddered when he reached between her legs to turn off the vibrator and pull it out.

"I think you killed me."

He took her hand in his and gave it a squeeze. "I was going to say the same thing to you."

"Logan."

"Hmm," he murmured sleepily, his eyes drifting closed.

"Can we do that again?"

He chuckled, his lids lifting briefly. "Sure. Give me a few minutes."

She laughed softly. They hadn't talked yet, but at least he wasn't sprinting for the door. They had time to get into the heavy stuff. Later.

She sighed happily at the thought of what else they'd do later before giving in to her own need for sleep.

* * * *

Nineteen years earlier...

Logan studied the lake until he found his sister. Sure enough, Rachel was boob-deep in the water, wrapped around Rodney and kissing him like the guy was going off to war or something. He wouldn't mind so much, but last week she'd been doing the exact same thing with Lee.

"We need to make a pact," he said, glancing over at Evan. The two of them were sitting in the sand, chowing down on hot dogs they'd bought at the concession stand. He knew a lot of his friends were looking forward to growing up, becoming adults, but Logan figured they had it made. They were sixteen, out of school on summer break and their biggest decision each day was whether to hit the beach at the lake or head over to the park to play baseball.

"What kind of pact?" Evan asked.

"We don't hook up with each other's sisters."

Evan glanced at Rachel and Logan spotted the reticence on his friend's face. He knew. Knew Evan had been looking a little too often in Rachel's direction. What Evan didn't realize was that Logan was putting the pact in place for his friend more than his sister. Rachel was a man-eater.

"I don't see what the big deal is if—"

"I mean it, man. I don't want you hooking up with Rachel."

Evan frowned and then, because he really was a good friend, he shrugged and agreed. "Fine. But same goes for my sister."

Logan looked across the sand and spotted Lacy building a sandcastle with her little friend, Bucky. "You got it," he said with a grin.

Evan rolled his eyes. "You realize I'm getting the bad end of this deal."

"It's a bro code," Logan said, reaching out for the traditional handshake to seal the deal. "And it's binding. Forever."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Logan stirred as a roar of thunder pierced the quiet of the evening. He and Lacy had been dozing in bed for nearly an hour, both of them physically exhausted.

Then he recalled the thunder. “Damn.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I left the windows rolled down on my truck.”

“I don’t understand why you drove here. You only live a few blocks away.”

He reluctantly disentangled from her embrace. “Made a furniture delivery, and then came straight here.”

“In a hurry to see me?” she teased.

Logan tickled her, enjoying her giggle. “Yeah. I held out as long as I could, and then realized I was being a first-class tool. Turned the truck toward your place and decided it was time to set things right.”

He reached for his jeans and tugged them on.

The two of them still needed to have a serious talk. Logan had spent the past five days trying to come to grips with everything that had happened. Lacy had come into his life—and his bedroom—and she’d saved him.

He had let Jane mess with his head, let her convince him that his needs were wrong if he wanted a long-lasting, normal relationship. Which he had finally been able to admit to himself that he wanted this morning. He wanted what Evan and Annie had. A loving, kinky, forever relationship. And there wasn’t a doubt in Logan’s mind he was going to find that—and more—with Lacy. She was perfect for him.

He’d accused her of pretending to please him. He owed her an apology for that. Lacy didn’t lie. She was the most genuine, honest person he’d ever known, yet he’d foolishly let his insecurities cast her into shadows that simply weren’t there. There wasn’t an insincere bone in her body.

“Tell you what. Why don’t you order a pizza while I run out to take care of the windows?”

“Sounds good,” she said, lazily stretching. The sheet drifted lower, giving him a perfect view of her breasts.

“Do me a favor and get dressed before I get back. You and I need to talk, but there’s not a snowball’s chance in hell of accomplishing that with you looking so sexy.”

A glimmer of nervousness crept onto her face. He hated that he’d left her so uncertain. She’d just given him the best—and worst—three weeks of his life. When he was with her, everything felt right, but spending the past five days without her had been brutal. Jane had left after a three-year relationship and he’d gone to work the next day as if she’d never been there. For the last five days, he hadn’t been able to work, eat, or sleep. He had been miserable.

“Hey,” he said, grabbing her hand and tugging her to her knees at the edge of the mattress. “It’s nothing bad. Okay?”

She smiled, though he could read the doubt in her expression. He had a lot to make up for.

Logan gave her a quick kiss. “Won’t be a minute.”

He didn’t bother with a shirt as he walked out of her front door and downstairs. There were three floors in the building and each one contained two apartments. It was unlikely he’d run into any of her neighbors, but the more time he spent with her, the less he gave a shit who saw them. It was a dangerous mindset to have until he came clean to her brother, but he was currently too happy, too sexually sated to give it much more than a passing care.

He was halfway to his truck when he realized Evan was standing next to it. His best friend’s gaze drifted from him to the truck and back again, his expression going as dark as the cloud-ridden sky as he took in Logan’s half-dressed state.

“What are you doing here?” Logan asked.

“Thought I’d swing by, see if I could figure out who Lacy’s new boyfriend is.”

“Boyfriend?”

It was the absolute worst thing he could have said, but Evan’s comment caught him off guard. Had Lacy told her brother she had a boyfriend?

Evan was in front of him after three long strides, which he followed with a hard right to the face.

Logan stumbled at the impact of the punch and it took him a couple of seconds to shake off the pain, and then regain his vision. When he did, he stood there with fists clenched, ready to defend himself if Evan came at him again.

“The first one is free. I probably had it coming. But you hit me again and I’m going to punch back.”

“You *probably* had it coming? You’re questioning that?” Evan shouted.

“Alright. I definitely had it coming, but you’re not much better than me. I know about you and Rachel.”

“How?”

“So you *did* make out with my sister.”

Evan looked slightly chagrined, but it was clear any guilt he felt was struggling to outweigh his anger at finding out Logan was sleeping with Lacy. “How did—”

“Lacy saw you.”

Evan dismissed the accusation as insignificant—which it really was. “Who gives a shit? We were teenagers and all we did was make out one time. Is that all you’re doing with Lacy?”

He shook his head.

Evan’s fists were still clenched. “That goddamn bro code thing was *your* idea.”

Logan shrugged. “I know. We were just kids, Evan.”

Evan ran his hand through his hair as Logan braced himself for another blow. Instead, his friend hit him with something much harder to deflect. “I don’t give a shit about the stupid vow. Never did. I thought you weren’t doing vanilla again.”

Logan didn’t reply. What the hell could he say? He’d fucked Evan’s sister six ways to Sunday, introduced her to bondage, clamps, butt plugs and spankings.

Evan’s jaw clenched as the silence lingered too long. “She’s my fucking sister, Logan!”

“And she’s a grown woman,” Lacy said, rushing out of her apartment.

She was barefoot, but at least she’d had the good sense to throw on a t-shirt and jeans. Evan really would have beaten him to a pulp if she’d come outside in just a robe or something. It was one thing to know your best friend was fucking your little sister and another to have it slammed in your face.

Lacy stepped between them, clearly concerned the fistfight was going to continue. “My sex life is none of your business.”

“Dammit, Lacy. I’m always going to worry about you. You can’t ask me to stop that.”

“Then worry about shit that matters. How Logan and I have sex doesn’t qualify.”

Evan winced, but he rallied quicker than Logan would have. “Please don’t say the word sex to me. I prefer to think of you as my sweet, innocent sister. Pure as freshly fallen snow.”

Lacy rolled her eyes and snorted. “Yeah. That snow was plowed a decade ago.”

Evan groaned and shook his head. “You’re killing me.”

“Serves you right for hitting Logan.”

“He had that coming, and he knows it. So what is this? A relationship? Are you two dating?”

Lacy looked at Logan and shrugged, taking her time to reply. “I don’t…”

Evan’s face turned murderous. “Don’t say you don’t know. I swear to God, if this is just a hookup, if you’re just using her to get your rocks off, I’ll fucking kill you.”

Raindrops began to fall. Logan looked at Lacy, even as he spoke to Evan. “I’m in love with her.”

Lacy’s eyes widened. “You’re in love with me?”

“Of course I am. How could I not be? You’re everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“Took you long enough to figure that out,” she teased.

He pulled her into his arms. “I mean it, Lacy. You’re perfect for me.”

“Then why did you leave last time?”

The rain started to come down harder. He hadn’t intended to have the conversation with her outside, in front of her brother and—he glanced around—the seven people who’d opened their front doors in hopes of catching a fistfight.

“Looks like the two of you have a few things to discuss.” Evan was giving them a chance to escape back inside.

Logan nodded. “Evan—”

“Later, man. We’ll talk it out later. Make things right with her first.”

“Okay.”

Evan sighed. “And do me a favor. Never, under any circumstances, talk to me about your sex life again. Promise?”

“New bro code?”

Evan’s eyebrows lifted as he considered that question. “If you fix things the way I hope, maybe the ‘bro’ part of that code could become a legal, binding, official thing.”

Lacy interjected. “Dear God. It’s only been three weeks, Evan. Go away before you screw everything up.”

Logan wrapped his arm more tightly around her shoulder. None of them bothered to seek shelter from the steadily pouring rain. “Technically, it’s been three weeks, plus a lifetime.”

She twisted out of his arms and narrowed her eyes. “This better not be a proposal, Logan. I haven’t even had a chance to yell at you properly for breaking my heart.”

“You broke her heart?” Evan asked, his scowl returning.

Lacy threw her hands up in exasperation. “Go home, Evan. Turn that annoying overprotective nonsense of yours on Eryn. Poor girl.”

Evan glanced at Logan, hesitant to leave.

Logan reached out to put his hand on Evan’s shoulder. “I won’t hurt her.”

Evan’s expression cleared. “Yeah. I know you won’t.” And with that, he walked back to his patrol car and climbed in.

Lacy turned to look at him. “You told Evan you loved me before you told me.”

He grinned. “He forced my hand. Guy packs one hell of a punch.”

His words sent Lacy’s gaze to his left cheek. “I think you’re going to have a black eye.”

“Great,” he said with a grimace.

“Why did you leave last time?”

He looked up at the dark sky. “It’s raining, Lace. Do we have to do this here?” They were both drenched.

“Come on.” She accepted the hand he proffered and the two of them returned to her apartment. Once they were inside, Lacy went to the bathroom to grab them a couple of towels. He wiped off his chest as she used hers to dry her hair.

“Here. You’ll catch a cold if you don’t get out of those wet things.” Logan drew her wet t-shirt over her head, forcing himself to keep his eyes on her face. Her breasts were his kryptonite, and they needed to talk before they continued with anything else.

She peeled off her jeans as he did the same. They threw their wet clothing in a heap on the floor of her laundry room, and then returned to the living room.

Lacy grabbed a fleece blanket and tossed it to him before getting a second one for herself. They curled under them on the couch. Lacy didn’t resist when he tugged her legs over his thighs so he could rub her feet.

“Jane did a number on me.”

She nodded slowly. "Yeah, I figured that much out. It's just...you said you weren't brokenhearted about her leaving."

"I'm not. That's not what I mean. When we first started dating, I thought the two of us were compatible lovers. She seemed to enjoy my rough edge, although I'll admit I didn't..." He paused, trying to find the right words.

"Unleash the Full Monty?" she supplied helpfully.

Logan laughed. "Something like that. I didn't want to scare her right out of the gate, so I took things slowly. However, the more I tried to introduce BDSM into our sexual relationship, the more she resisted. I was in love with her, Lace. So I held back."

"I'm not afraid of what we do, Logan."

"I know."

"Have you been holding back with me?"

He shook his head and chuckled. "No. Not at all."

"Phew." She pretended to wipe her brow. "That's a relief. I'd hate to have to deal with twenty or thirty more orgasms every time we crawled between the sheets."

He playfully messed up her hair. "Smartass. You realize that's just daring me."

"Good. That was my intention."

Logan took a deep breath and said what had been keeping him from her, though even as he said the words, he knew exactly how stupid he'd been. "I can't do vanilla. It's not in my nature."

"It's not in mine either. Not anymore. Maybe not ever. You ruined me when I was seventeen."

"Do me a favor, Lace. Don't tell your brother about that peeping Tom escapade of yours. He'll punch me again."

She leaned closer and pressed a kiss against his cheek. "I love you too, Logan. I didn't get a chance to say that outside." She blushed and he wondered what she was thinking. "Of course, I probably didn't need to say it. I haven't exactly hidden my feelings from you all these years."

"I know it's only been three weeks, but when I look at you, Lacy, I see a very long future."

"Forever?"

He nodded. "I hope so."

"I'd like that, but I'm going to need a promise from you."

"In addition to the 'I Do' one?"

She rose from the couch and grasped his hand, pulling him to his feet as well. "Yep. I want you to promise me that nothing...and I mean nothing...is ever off-limits between us again."

He laughed, shook her hand. "Deal."

Twenty years earlier...

Logan looked over and caught sight of Lacy sitting in the stands with one of her little friends playing with dolls. Her hair was pulled up in pigtails and she gave him a toothless grin. She waved, so he waved back.

"See that boy over there?" Lacy pointed to a fifteen-year-old Logan, currently standing on first base. Justine Matthews laid her Barbie doll on the bleachers and looked. "Yeah."

"His name is Logan Grady, and I'm going to marry him one day."

ABOUT MARI CARR

Writing a book was number one on Mari Carr's bucket list and on her thirty-fourth birthday, she set out to see that goal achieved. Too many years later, her computer is jammed full of stories — novels, novellas, short stories and dead-ends and she has nearly eighty published works.

Virginia native and high school librarian by day, Mari Carr is a New York Times and USA TODAY bestseller of contemporary erotic romance novels. Join her newsletter so you don't miss new releases and for exclusive subscriber-only content. Find Mari on the web at www.maricarr.com | Facebook | Twitter | Email: carmichm1@yahoo.com

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Trinity Masters:

Elemental Pleasure
Primal Passion
Scorching Desire
Forbidden Legacy
Hidden Devotion
Elegant Seduction

Sparks in Texas:

Sparks Fly
Waiting for You
Something Sparked
Off Limits

Big Easy:

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Three Reason Why

Boys of Fall:
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Princess

Cowboy

Master

Hands

SPARKS FLY

Sparks in Texas, Book 1

By Mari Carr

Now Available

I Do is the easy part. *Happily ever after*? Not so much.

Evan and Annie are deeply in love, but that hasn't stopped tension from creating cracks in their relationship. Determined not to fail his wife, Evan takes action before those cracks become craters, damaging their marriage irreparably. Over the Fourth of July weekend, he'll reignite Annie's passion with his own brand of fireworks.

Stand back and watch the sparks fly.

Please enjoy this excerpt from Sparks Fly. Available now.

"Are you searching for something special, officer?"

The breathless quality of her voice let him know she'd finally caught up with him.

"I need to be sure you aren't carrying any concealed weapons."

She looked over her shoulder and gave him a flirty smile. "Oh, I'm packing heat. But you aren't looking in the right place."

He fought to restrain a groan. Annie was a master at dirty talk. Then it occurred to him that this fantasy—the cop and his criminal—was one they'd never played out. Which was strange considering his occupation and the fact he had all the right toys.

"Face forward, Ms. Iser. I don't think you understand the seriousness of this situation."

Annie held his gaze a few seconds longer before looking away. Her hips wiggled seductively as he moved his "search" lower. He didn't take the bait. He had a definite strategy for how the night would unfold and it had everything to do with his pretty criminal submitting to his authority.

"Have you been drinking, Ms. Iser?"

She lifted her shoulders casually, unconcerned, unrepentant. "I may have had a glass of wine earlier. It is a holiday, you know."

Annie wasn't much of a drinker, even on the holidays, so he wondered about the wine. Was she feeling the same pressure he was? Had she been looking for a way to relax before seeing him again? That thought made his chest ache. He pushed it away. Hopefully, tonight would help them mend the rifts they'd unconsciously let grow.

He reached for her upper arm, dragging her upright and turning her until she faced him. "Drinking and driving?"

"You don't really expect me to confess to that, do you, officer?"

"Lieutenant." The mischief in her eyes told him she was purposely refusing to acknowledge his rank. "And I don't need your confession. I have a breathalyzer."

She didn't pretend to be worried. He loved her spunk, the challenge in her posture. She crossed her arms, allowing them to push up her breasts. The move drew his attention to her hard nipples. His mouth watered for a taste of them, but it was far too early for that. If he started taking off her clothes, the game would end too fast.

For months, he'd viewed sex as a chore, the two of them going through the motions with very little passion or foreplay. As he looked at her flushed face, as he watched her chest rise and fall with breathless expectation, he wanted to kick his own ass for forgetting how good it could be between them.

"Don't I have to consent to the breathalyzer?"

He shook his head. "I'm not giving you a choice." He cupped her face in his hands, pulling her closer. "Are you ready?"

He didn't give her a chance to respond before placing his lips on hers. He pressed them open, touching his tongue to hers. He couldn't detect even the faintest hint of wine on her breath. Regardless, he kept kissing her, tasting and breathing her air. Evan didn't need alcohol. He could get drunk on Annie.

Finally, after several minutes, he forced himself to release her, working overtime to maintain control, to stay in character. "You realize you're in quite a bit of trouble, Ms. Iser."

She feigned a contrite smile that didn't fool him for a minute. "Maybe there's some way I can convince you to forget all this and let me off with a warning?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Are you attempting to bribe a police officer?"

She reached out to run her hand along his chest, toying suggestively with his badge. "I didn't say anything about a bribe."

He moved so quickly she didn't have time to counter or retreat. Evan turned her toward the car, grasping her wrists and tugging them behind her back. She had just begun to struggle when he slapped on the handcuffs. Then he bent over her, pressing her against the hood of the car, letting her helplessness sink in.

"What did you have in mind?" he murmured in her ear.

He'd taken her off-guard. It took her a few moments to regroup.

"I..." She swallowed heavily when he ground his cock more firmly against her ass. "I..." She paused again. Finally she said, "What do you want?"

Evan chuckled. Annie was rarely at a loss for words. It felt good to shake up the self-assured woman. "I want it all, Ms. Iser. Your total submission. For the entire night."

WAITING FOR YOU

Sparks in Texas, Book 2

By Mari Carr

Now Available

How do you protect the woman you love...when the greatest danger is sleeping in her bed?

Sydney Sparks can't remember a time when Chas wasn't part of her life—from childhood playmates, to high-school sweethearts, to long-distance friends. Now, after twelve long years, Chas is leaving the Marines and coming home. Sydney's thrilled to have him back on American soil, safe and sound, even if his return is doing funny things to her heart.

The second he stepped off the plane and locked gazes with Sydney, Chas refused to waste a minute more on their "just friends" status quo. Together again, it feels as if they were never apart, the love they'd shared as innocent teens now vastly more intense as adults—with a sexual hunger to match.

However, despite his newfound happiness, Chas can't seem to shake the memories of his tours in the Middle East, of the firefights, the killing...the deaths of his friends. When the flashbacks grow stronger, Chas struggles to hide his increasing lack of control, terrified of losing everything he'd just regained—including Sydney.

Please enjoy this excerpt from Waiting for You. Available now.

Sydney stood next to Gran, who was flanked by Julian on the right. The three of them were standing at the international arrivals gate, grinning like fools as they held the banner Sydney had made. Chas' flight had landed and her heart was racing a million miles an hour. She'd seen him just a few months earlier over the holidays. They'd exchanged small gifts and consumed a bottle of eggnog together. Chas had even told her a little bit about two friends he'd lost in combat, the story breaking her heart.

Chas had ended up sleeping on her couch that night, while she'd tossed and turned in her bedroom, fighting the urge to go out and comfort him. However, there had been something in his eyes—some dark, unfamiliar sadness—that had stopped her, that had told her to keep her distance.

Several more people walked through the gate. Sydney watched as relatives reunited with hugs, laughter and sometimes tears. She loved coming to the airport, loved the energy and the atmosphere, the hustle and bustle. It was a hotbed of emotions unlike any other place.

Gran captured her attention with a nudge of the elbow. "There he is."

Chas strolled through the doors in jeans and a t-shirt. It would seem so weird to see him dressed in civilian clothing rather than his fatigues from now on, and she wondered if he'd give up the crew cut he'd kept for so many years and return to the longer style of his youth. He looked around the area, searching for them. Sydney smiled and waved when his eyes met hers.

Chas walked faster then, laughing when he read their banner. Sydney took it from Julian and Gran, stepping back so that Chas could greet his family.

She was shocked when he bypassed both of them and walked right up to her. He tugged the banner out of her hands and dropped it to the floor a split second before he grabbed her in his embrace and kissed her.

His mouth was demanding, forcing her lips apart so he could stroke her tongue with his. Sydney fought off a wave of dizziness and disbelief. Even a bit of embarrassment when she recalled his grandmother was standing less than five feet away from them. She put her hands on his shoulders, intent on pushing him away, but Chas only gripped her tighter, one of his hands rising to cup the back of her neck, his fingers lightly stroking the sensitive skin there.

She was a goner. Sydney stopped giving a shit who was there and what they were seeing. Chas was home. And he was kissing her.

Twelve years melted away into a haze of nothingness. He was home. Finally.

SOMETHING SPARKED

Sparks in Texas, book 3

By Mari Carr

Now Available

Jeannette's life is...nice. Great job in the family restaurant, cute house, sweet cat. All very nice...and boring...and maybe a little lonely. But she'll suffer that price for the safety she desperately covets. Now, if only something could keep her safe from the temptation that is Luc and Diego. The gorgeous firemen are a danger to her libido, if not her heart.

Lovers Luc and Diego have had a hunger for the pretty cook at Sparks Barbecue since they rolled into town three years ago. But everyone knows Jeannette doesn't date, so the men's lust seems destined to go unslaked, no matter how much they want her in their bed. If friendship is all she's willing to offer, Luc and Diego will greedily take it.

That changes quickly when an arsonist throws Jeannette in harm's way, forcing her to find security and comfort in Luc and Diego's arms. But the trio's simmering heat is barely a flicker before the men learn Jeannette has secrets that run dark and deep...presenting them with a challenge unlike any they've yet to face.

Note: This book contains a scene of abuse from 16-year-old Jeannette's past.

Please enjoy this excerpt from Something Sparked. Available now.

Throughout the dance she'd shared with Luc, she had been aware of Diego's eyes on them. Somehow knowing he'd been watching had excited her, though she was hard-pressed to understand why. It was as if she wanted Diego to know how Luc was making her feel...because she sensed that made Diego happy.

Which was bizarre, because she had no idea if that was true or not.

Diego took her into his arms, tugging her until her breasts were pressed firmly against his chest. He didn't ask, didn't hesitate. He simply took. While that idea should terrify her, it didn't. Instead, he had a way of making her feel cherished, safe, protected.

Like Luc, Diego was a skilled dancer. With subtle pushes and pulls, he guided them, taking over so that she could just enjoy the moment.

"You liked Luc's kiss."

It wasn't a question, but she answered anyway. "Yes."

"I liked watching it."

"I know," she whispered.

"Do you understand now?"

It was a vague question, but Jeannette didn't need clarification. She knew what he was alluding to. She nodded.

"You feel it to. I can see it in your eyes. Even though you're dancing with me, focused just on me, you know he's there watching us. It makes you hot and shivery inside, doesn't it?"

She swallowed, struggling to find her voice. "It does, but—" She tried to stop herself, tried to beat back the fears. It appeared Nettie refused to go down without a fight.

"But nothing." Diego tightened his grip. However, this time she couldn't sink into the embrace. Her back stiffened as self-preservation and years of running away ganged up on her.

He loosened his hold, tipping her chin up, forcing her to face him. "We're going to take this nice and slow, Jeannette. But we're not stopping."

“I can’t...do...” Again, the words died. She couldn’t go where they wanted to take her. But damn if she didn’t want them to try anyway.

“You can’t tonight. I can see that. But we’re not going to stop trying. We’ve got as many nights as we need, all the time in the world.”

She frowned and asked the question that had tormented her since they’d pulled her into the park and insisted on this date. “Why would you go to all that trouble?”

“If this weren’t our first date, I’d take you home and turn you over my knee for that. Even now, I’m sorely tempted.”

Had he seriously just threatened to spank her? And was she honestly disappointed he was resisting? God, this whole night was confusing. And maddening. And sexy as hell.

Regardless, her spine stiffened. “All I’m saying is, you and Luc could basically have your pick of women around here. I’m not sure why you’d want—”

Diego placed his finger over her lips. “I’m going to advise you to stop while you’re ahead. If I hear one more self-deprecating comment come out of those pretty lips of yours tonight, I won’t be held responsible for my actions. And believe me, angel, as much as you might want to tempt me on that, you aren’t ready for it.”

Jeannette wasn’t sure how to reply. Diego’s thumb stroked her lower lip, his gaze glued to her mouth like a starving man eyeing a steak.

Though the slow music continued to fill the air, couples swaying back and forth around them, neither of them moved. Instead, they stood there, on the edge of the floor, and looked at each other.

Diego didn’t seek to close the distance between them. In fact, it seemed as if he were waiting for something. Waiting for *her*.

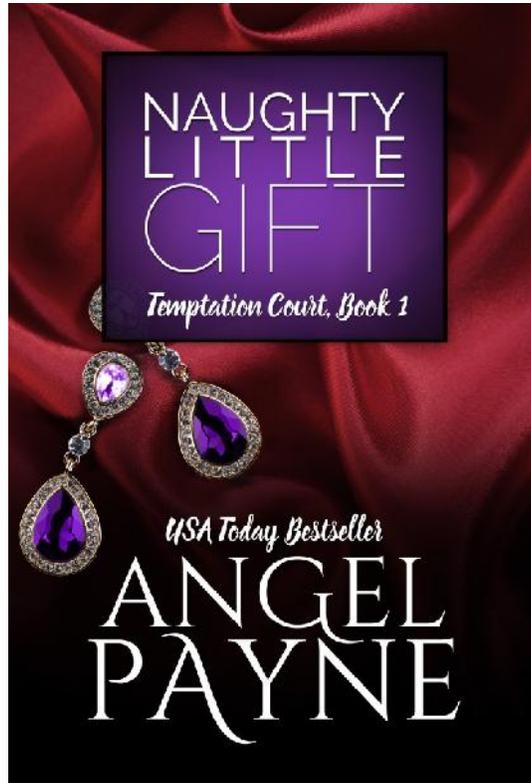
“Kiss me,” she whispered.

He smiled at her request. He had been waiting for an invitation. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

NAUGHTY LITTLE GIFT

Temptation Court, Book 1

By Angel Payne



AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A few thank-yous!

To Thomas...for the best adventure ever: our awesome life. I love you.

VERY SPECIAL THANKS TO...

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Your friendship and support have been boundless and beautiful, and I am grateful.

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have meant on this one.

Susan: My sweet, beautiful sister in more than just blood—but in heart.
Thank you for all the wonderful love, support, and kayak trips!
Here’s to more dolphins...

Gratitude beyond compare...
for each and every blogger, reviewer, reader, and supporter
who has taken the time to support, believe, and love Arcadia and the Cimarrons.
Without you, Temptation Court would not have been born! Thank you!

“The declaration of love marks the transition from chance to destiny,
and that’s why it is so perilous...”
--*Alain Badiou*

CHAPTER ONE

MISHELLA

“Dear, sweet Creator. That man’s ass needs its own web page.”

“Right?”

“Maybe it already has one. Have we tried looking it up? What would that search string even be?”

“Cassian Court’s Glorious Glutes?”

“Sounds about right.”

I scowl at the exchange between my best friend and my princess of a boss. Debate adding a huff, though that might make them giggle harder. As it is, Vylet lifts her head, lets the wind blow her black waves as if she is shooting a scene for a movie, and slowly bats the thick lashes framing her huge lavender eyes.

“Is there an issue, Mistress Santelle?”

Her purposeful drawl on the s’s turns her query into a tease—though before I can properly purse my lips, she is answered by a long, snorting laugh. I add a groan to my own response, stabbed at the sound’s source. Brooke Cimarron, Princess of the Island of Arcadia, might have the loyalty and love of thousands across our land, but her royal in-laws are not in that legion—and outbursts like that are no help to her cause at all.

The groan might be forgotten but the sigh is not. Even after three months in her employ, my work is still clearly cut out for me. In my princess’s own words, I am to do everything in my power to “whip the royal decorum into shape.” Some days, the task is easy. Some, like today—are entries in the Sweet Creator Help Me journal.

I have one of those. Literally. Though on the outside, as I observe right now, the book simply says Action Items.

Despite the lists taunting me from the pages of said journal, there are many more checks in Brooke’s “plus” column than not. Brooke has a good heart, a willing spirit, and a loyalty to Arcadia rivalling that of many native-born to the island. If I can only work out a way to keep Vy from enabling the woman’s snarky American side...

Not likely anytime soon.

Most certainly not during this week.

Cassian Court’s arrival in Arcadia has sealed that certainty solidly enough.

Cassian Court. Just rolling my mind over the man’s name jolts me with such intense heat, I wonder if the Earth has rolled too quickly on its axis, shifting my chair into the sun instead of beneath the table on the Palais Arcadia lawn. That only forms the start of how he has upended my world in just two days.

Two. Days.

Cassian Court.

I cannot help myself. The syllables are synonymous with so many other expressions. Engineering genius. Corporate wizard. Billionaire icon. Consultant to kings. Yes, that includes the leader of our land, Evrest Cimarron, who has invited his friend for a “modernization think tank” with Arcadia’s leaders. Yanking a kingdom forward by two hundred years in two days is no small feat.

Two. Days.

World. Upended.

Not to mention my thoughts. And my bloodstream. And the very wiring of my nervous system...

“Mishella?”

Vylet’s playful prompt is perfectly timed. “Hmm?” I am grateful to leave behind a memory that has

been taunting, of the man in his formal wear from the party King Evrest threw for him last night. Out of respect for Arcadian tradition, he wore a doublet-style jacket with his tailored Tom Ford pants, everything flawlessly fitted to his tapered torso and long legs. The black garment had featured one modern touch: a moss green zipper instead of buttons, drawing out the same shade in his eyes. Matching zippers had adorned his hip boots, making him look very much “at home” in the ballroom’s courtly crowd...

“You truly have no comment?” The edges of Vy’s lips curl up. Little wench. She knows I would sooner watch a storm come in over the sea than have to look at the body part they’ve referred to on Cassian Court’s incredible form.

Incredible.

And magnificent.

And breath-stealing.

And in just two days, has made me painfully aware of how small my island home truly is. The man and his magnetic pull have actually made me yearn for a land as big as his, though the expanse of America still does not seem big enough for all these new feelings he inspires—sensations that sweep in again, as I gaze upon him training at swords with Jagger Foxx on the palais lawn.

Dizzy.

Giddy.

Hot.

Needy.

No.

I cannot. I will not.

Instead, I compress my lips harder. Swing another censuring look at my friend. “I was being courteous, in deference to Her Highness.”

“Oh, here we go again,” Brooke mutters.

Vylet hides a laugh behind her elegant fingers. “But Mishella wants to practice her protocol, Your Highness.”

Brooke glowers. “Am I going to kick your ass about this now, too?”

“Not in that pretty tea frock, missie.”

“Oh, even in this rag, ho-bag.”

“Who you calling ho...ho?”

“Say it twice because I own that, baby.” Brooke swirls then stabs an index finger. “Especially after last night’s marathon under that man of mine.”

“Ohhh!” Vy roller coasters the syllable with knowing emphasis. “And I thought you were just walking funny from the platform pumps.”

“See how I did that? Gotta have a cover, girl.”

They snicker harder than before. I fume deeper than before. Attempt a prim glance down at my lap, but only get two seconds of the reprieve. A fresh punch of testosterone hits the air, swinging all our stares back up.

By everything that is holy.

The masculine energy is well supported. Even a hundred feet away, the two men are like gladiators of old, shirtless bodies lunging, gleaming muscles coiling. Jagger Foxx, the Arcadian court’s lieutenant of military operations, does not give his American guest an inch of visitor’s courtesy—a handicap Court would take as an insult anyway.

The result is...

Glorious.

Slanted forward, his body forty-five degrees from the lawn, Cassian Court is a breath-stealing study of sinew, strength, might, and motivation. His thighs, clearly etched beneath his white fencing pants, wield the force of a stallion. His torso, the color of a lion in the sun, coils with equal power.

Their blades clash. Metallic collisions zing the air. Jagger stumbles back. Again. Grunts hard—though

not as deeply as the man besting him. Just like that, Cassian Court turns into an even more exhilarating sight. His beauty is meant for the glory of physical triumph.

All the heavens help me, I cannot stop staring. Or wondering. What would it feel like...to be held by those massive arms? What would it be like, to lie beneath that beautiful body? To spread my legs, allowing his hardness against my welcoming softness...my tight readiness...

My throat turns into the Sahara. I swallow, coughing softly as the moisture clashes with the dryness.

“Holy hell,” Brooke murmurs.

“Which has to be where I’m going, after what I just imagined about that man.”

Vy’s confession welcomes new knives of confusion. Logically, I should be reassured. My reaction to Court is not unique or special. But another part, new and foreign, fights the urge to think otherwise. To scratch her eyes out for sliding into my territory.

As Brooke would eloquently put it: what the hell?

Men are a complicated subject in my life—contradicted by their very simplicity. They are like clothing or cars or office tools: needed but not coveted, functional but not desirable. Yes, some exist in higher-end form, but I do not think of them longer than the time it takes to interact with them. I do not dare. Father and Mother will eventually use me as a pawn to gain what they want from one. It might be the 21st century, but politics are politics—and world-changing decisions are still made by the heads between men’s legs, not the ones on their shoulders. I have to be grateful for reaching my twenty-second year without having to bother with it yet.

But I will.

And lingering lustings for Cassian Court will not make it any easier.

“Pffft.” Brooke flings the comeback at Vy while reaching across the glass table for her sun tea. At least Brooke looks like a princess today, the pale blue tea dress coaxing matching sparkles in her eyes, the daisy yellow sweater matching her platform pumps. Shockingly, she has listened to my suggestion of wearing a pearl necklace and earrings with the ensemble. “We’re mated, not entombed.” But looks can be deceiving. Her saucy smirk proves it. “Besides, neither of us is the treasure who’s caught Mr. Court’s eye—and likely some other body parts.”

Mortification. While I debate whether to let it curl me into a ball or send me under the table, Vy erupts in laughter. “True that, sistah!”

At least that helps with the decision. No shrinking now. I fire off a new glare. “Have you two gotten into the nectar?” I am half serious. Nipping at the Arcadian fruit wine, followed by sitting in today’s ruthless sun, would be a reasonable explanation for their giddy moods.

“Right.” Brooke leads on the response, laughing wryly. “We could only wish.”

Vy echoes the snicker. “Word to the princess.”

They collide fists in a punching motion, followed by fanning and wiggling their fingers, prompting my fresh fume. It is a joke. I know that. I also admit these are confusing times for everyone in Arcadia. Our country is emerging from two hundred years of self-imposed separation from the world into a reality where nearly everything has changed. The adjustment is unsettling at times, even to Brooke, who was born American but has lived here for the last seven years.

Now, she wears the gold band on her left hand declaring her legally married to Prince Samsyn—a detail Vy enjoys forgetting whenever they get together. That turns me into the reminder police.

“Do not forget your place, Vylet Hester. Brooke is your princess.”

I delete the part about Brooke having been the kingdom’s actual queen for a week—seven days she never wants to remember again, though they have brought one joyous result. At the time, she needed a secran as soon as possible, so I entered her employ—and found a purpose I never thought possible for my life. For the first time, I am no longer Fortin Santelle’s pretty trinket of a daughter, or even a faceless Arcadian court clerk, filing and typing my days away. Brooke depends on me. Confides in me. Relies on me for input on everything from appropriate clothing choices to modern political issues from a native Arcadian’s point of view. It is a serious responsibility, and I never take it lightly—despite the fact that she

sometimes does.

“Okay, listen up, missie.” The woman herself sets her drink down so hard, some of the tea sloshes out. “If you don’t loosen that caboose and relax a little, I’ll have to personally hunt up some nectar for you.”

And sometimes, she completely forgets. Like now.

“Yes! Do it!”

“No. No.”

My response overlaps with Vy’s, doubling our volumes into an outburst across the lawn—enough to freeze the men in mid-clash. But only one of them adds a concerned glance, giving his opponent a crucial second of advantage. It is the only second Jagger needs. With a shout, he plunges. With a grunt, Cassian goes down.

With a gasp, I lurch to my feet.

Just as swiftly, I sit back down. Too late. The damage is wrought. My chair has certainly sprung flames, since they waste no time climbing to my face. Vy and Brooke give me no mercy, either. They actually clap as I sit there, drowning in embarrassment, and continue the racket so long, the men obviously assume the praise is for them. Well, Jagger does. As soon as he helps Cassian up, turning both their bodies into gleaming masterpieces of sun-drenched muscle, he sweeps a gloating bow.

Brooke and Vy laugh even harder.

Shockingly, my lips twinge. Their joy might be a little contagious...and the day is perfect, with the breeze carrying salty moisture bites off the ocean, along with jasmine and orange from the trees. A little laughter cannot be such a crime. Perhaps it is...therapeutic. I am not a prude—I grew up in the back halls of the Arcadian Court, after all—but talking about lust and experiencing it firsthand are two separate things. Entirely. I have spent the last two days as skittish as a toddler at her first swimming lesson. Everyone has to get in and paddle sometime, though taking oneself too seriously can only be dangerous.

A perfect reassurance—

Until I swing my sights up, to watch Cassian Court approaching across the grass.

Striding like a king.

Rippling like an Olympian.

Staring like a hitman.

At me.

Laughter, meet shredder. Throat, get back to the desert. Composure...

Composure has gone rogue—doing whatever it bloody well wants. My mind is frozen but my sex is incinerated, cranking the intensity with every smooth, sure step with which the man dominates the lawn. By the time he and Jagger stop beneath the table’s wide umbrella, my hands are a rigid ball in my lap, and my breaths are rapid pumps against my flower-print dress—which is suddenly, completely, too tight. Oh sweet Creator, how he makes my breasts throb...and ache.

And tingle?

“Oh...my.” I keep it to a whisper for my ears alone. Miracle. My hand flies up to assuage my racing heartbeat. I easily disguise the action by fiddling with the polished piece of Minos Reef coral suspended around my neck. Usually, the purple trinket lends me focus and strength. Not now. Not even close. Not with Cassian Court continuing with his unflinching stare at me...his unyielding examination. I cannot help but note every nuance of his gaze. Even in this blazing heat, it is the color of cool forests. I am drawn to thoughts of waterfalls and lagoons in those glades...and him swimming in them, drenched and naked.

By the powers...

When his features crunch, horror sets in. I’ve blurted it aloud. Can he read the thought that has prompted it too? Does he know the lewd turn of my mind—and his importance in it?

Oh crap oh crap oh crap...

And now, I am as guilty as Vy of borrowing the vulgar Americanism. But that is where I have descended. Where he has made me fall.

“Miss Santelle?”

And just like that, with just two words, has me flying once more. Takes me higher, as I lift my gaze to meet his. Shivering on a breeze of awakening, as I absorb the regal angles of his face, contrasted by the tumble of his dark gold hair and the contemplative indents of his dimples.

“Are you all right?”

I feel my mouth open. Know sound of some sort needs to follow. “I...”

“She is fine.” Vylet’s tone is playful but her gaze watchful, installing an invisible tether between Cassian and me with the back-and-forth concentration. As if one is not there already...

“At least she will be,” Brooke adds. “Forgive her, Cassian. It’s this thing called sunshine. New concept for my sweet little secran.” She tosses a huff at me then twirls a hand at the palais. “She’s always cooped in that place. Day and night, busy as Cinderella in those dark castle halls.”

Jagger snorts while shrugging into a black T-shirt. Tosses one to Cassian. “And what does that make you? The evil stepmother?”

“Dude, I’m a wicked stepsister—in all the best ways.”

Vylet masks a giggle behind a hand. The tiny nick in her front lip, betraying the cleft repaired when she was a babe, still makes her insecure when men are near—yes, even Alak, her completely smitten betranli. “Corrupting her prince, one day at a time.”

“Only when it comes to attending his royal balls.”

Jagger and Vy fill the air with their laughs. Yes, I fume again. How can I caution the princess about making comments like that when our friends reward her for them? Jagger, now Prince Samsyn’s key aide in running the security forces of the kingdom, cannot be expected to know better—but I need more support from Vy.

And maybe I am simply being a toddler at the pool again.

I drop my head, wrestling with the thought.

Until muscled thighs in white pants kneel in front of me. And a hand, powerful and long-fingered, slips over my knee. And another hand, warm and firm, tilts up my chin.

And that stare, dark and majestic, wraps around me again. Into me.

“Out of the cinders, Ella.” His murmur is formed of the same perfect velvet. “It’s time to live in the light.”

Survival mode. Now.

Lungs, inflate.

Heart, keep going.

Survival may be overrated. Extremely. Dear sweet Creator, all I want is the blissful release of giving in to his sensual hunt...

Ugh.

Can I get any stupider? Princes like him do not chase backward bumpkins like me. They might pretend to...for a little while. Toy with them. Are perhaps amused by them, until the island novelty wears off and they return to the heights of Mount Olympus—also known as New York City—to bed nymphs and marry goddesses.

And despite that entire diatribe, I bear my gaze just as deeply into his—before rasping ridiculous bumpkin words.

“Maybe I like the dark better.”

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

I expect more giggles from the girls—but they are busy bantering with Jagger, leaving room for the bubble around Cassian and me to thicken. For the world around us to fall away...

For his nostrils to flare, as if catching my scent.

For his lips to part, as if anticipating a bite into his prey.

For my whole body to quiver, as if wanting to let him...

Through one exquisite moment.

Another.

Before being ripped from our reverie by a hand at my elbow. Twisting in, issuing a silent command to get on my feet. I obey before looking, for that grip belongs to just one person in my world—the sole person I expect least right now, and dread most.

“Paipanne.” My dutiful murmur is a thread of disguise. Surely he can see every illicit thought that has been possessing my mind and body.

“Mishella,” he levels, from between tight teeth.

Once more this afternoon, my throat convulses on a dry gulp. He has seen. Creator help me.

“High Councilman Santelle.” Cassian’s tone comes as a surreal interjection. He is not a stupid man. Surely he sees how Father’s quiet fury wrings the joy from the air, though he smiles as if exchanging niceties about the weather. “What a pleasant surprise. Thought I’d have to wait for the pleasure of greetings until this evening.”

My nerves flee. No. Wrong. They double. Ice in one’s veins is tricky that way. “Th-this evening?” I dare a glance up at him, forcing my features to neutrality—not an easy task when the wind plays with the edges of his hair, and molds his T-shirt against the steely planes of his pectorals.

“Yes.” Father’s tone modulates to match Cassian’s—on the surface. Likely, nobody but Vy and I detect its lingering tension. “It is Mr. Court’s last evening on the island, and your maimanne thought he might be tiring of the rich palais food. He and his retinue shall be dining with us at seven.”

“I—I did not know.”

“Because you were dressed and out the door before we could tell you this morning.”

“And you must be so proud.” Vylet slices out the statement before Father can issue another accusation. If I am not tempted to kiss her feet for that, her finishing look is the decider. Few are experts at sweet-but-deadly like my rule-breaking friend.

“I’ll back that up,” Brooke adjoins. “Your daughter works harder than anyone I know, High Councilman. My life would be a mess without her.”

Paipanne colors. A little. “You are too kind, Highness.” Dips his head with a thin smile. It assures me little, for his initial agenda, whatever that is, lingers in his steel gray eyes. “Her maimanne and I are certainly proud of her. On that note, I must have needs to ‘borrow’ her for a moment. About tonight, you know.”

“Of course.” The distrust in Brooke’s eyes cannot be missed from a hundred feet away, but I sneak a reassuring nod in her direction. Father will not be able to wreak too much damage right here, without all of them watching and noticing. He will restrict the blows to verbal form only; I am sure of it.

And to that, I am well accustomed by now.

CASSIAN

The craving is as shocking as it is sudden.

But sure enough, I long to smash in every inch of Fortin Santelle’s self-righteous face.

Why not? He’s an ass.

But you’ve known that from the beginning.

Still, he’s the ass willing to vouch for my ass with the decision-makers about Arcadia’s new infrastructure needs. So yes, I’m conflicted. But—perhaps this has nothing to do with Mishella. Not really. I’m just trying to reconcile doing business with a rung-grabbing bastard. Replacing my discomfort about a future in professional bed with the man by breaking—translation: snapping in half—one of my own hard-and-fast rules. Pushing my nose into his personal affairs. Actually caring about the fact that he treats his own daughter like a puppy to be disciplined.

Stay out of it. Personal ties become business pigsties. Didn’t you learn that the hard way? And you haven’t dealt with thousands like him before? Even the man you once called father-in-law?

A huff escapes me, thick with relief. At least now I have an explanation. Displaced emotions, courtesy of the shit storm known as old baggage. It makes sense—meaning now I can compartmentalize and cope.

Until I look once again at her.

Mishella.

My little Ella.

The words embed into my psyche like diamonds stirred into concrete. She has changed the structure of my being. But how the hell? I've seen her exactly six times in the last three days, including what was supposed to be a "casual" welcome reception at the palais but turned into the cataclysm of my first sight of her—and I remember every moment of every encounter since. Even just passing hellos with her make it happen all over again—the world fading away, the senses captivated by her—and just like that, my interest is amplified in the island girl with hair like spun gold and eyes like a toy store collector doll.

Interest?

No. I'm not "interested" in her.

I'm fascinated by her. Entranced. Maybe a little obsessed. Maybe a lot more than that. Worse, I have no idea how to explain it—which should scare the living fuck out of me, but doesn't.

She feels...right. Secure. Even safe. Yet she's the most exhilarating adventure of my life, a high-wire walk with a view of the entire world.

Just don't look down.

"Christ." I grit it to myself while bending down, retying a perfectly secure shoelace. It's a quick fix; I can keep eyes locked on Fortin and her, but hide the growing erection she has inspired.

Yeah. Inspired.

What was the word Samsyn used with me last night after dinner, when describing how he'd felt the moment he met his Brooke? It was an Arcadian phrase, unique in its blend of Turkish and French influences...

Soursedias.

Yeah. That. It's goddamn perfect, coming close enough to even the English word for what that woman has done to me.

Sorcery.

Yeah. That has to be it. She's an island enchantress, empowered by the Arcadian spirits to wrap my mind, soul, and body in a searing, clinging erotic spell. And fuck, is it working. I want to give in to the rest of it, just to know how high and hot she'd take me...

And how far I'd take her. Claim her.

How greatly would her gorgeous innocence change...transformed by lust? How much wider could I make those big blue eyes? What would her pretty bow lips look like, formed into an O of raw desire? What would her refined voice sound like, panting in the spasms of a mindless orgasm?

I break a shoelace.

Snap back to reality.

I have to get off this damn island.

It will happen—first thing tomorrow morning. I'll wrap up the talks with Santelle tonight—not looking in his daughter's direction while doing so—then tell Mark and his crew I want the plane ready by daybreak. That'll allow time to check numbers in the foreign markets, call my key project managers in New York, then get out of here before Mishella Santelle can weave any more wonderful witchery into my willing soul.

Witchery.

Who the fuck am I kidding?

She's not a witch. Fairy, maybe. Perhaps an angel, or a mermaid given legs. The certainty hits harder as I stare at her again. She holds herself as regally as any of those, even as her father continues quietly berating her—I cannot label it anything else, if the expression on his face is to be believed—and even in how she sways after he pivots, heading back inside.

But only one sway.

After that, she returns to the queenly stance, holding it despite the wounds Fortin has inflicted. Not physical cuts, but damage just as torturous to bear. Somehow she does, returning to the table with

astounding composure. Keeping her shit together even while Brooke and Vylet peal with laughter at some joke from Jagger.

For a moment, I am incensed. How can her two closest friends not see her pain?

Realization. Massive. Maybe she doesn't want to see it.

An answer I'll likely never have—and shouldn't want to. Rescuing knight, I sure as hell am not. Repulsive giant in the clouds? There's the fit.

And it is well past time for me to climb back up the beanstalk. To remember that counting beans is the only magic left in my life now. No more turns at sorcery. I've had my turn at that shit already. Sucked up my life's ration of magic. Neither of them exist for me anymore.

There's only tonight's dinner to get through first. With the sorceress and her family.

God fucking help me.

CHAPTER TWO

MISHELLA

“Hold. Still.”

Though Mother murmurs the words, the command in them is as clear as the directives Father growled at me this afternoon.

Know your place, girl—and stay in it.

Know your purpose, daughter—and stick to it.

I struggle not to wince as she stabs another pin into the bun atop my head. Three pins later, she grunts softly: an approving sound. “Better.”

Translation: I look as nondescript as a push-pin. Perfectly acceptable, as far as I am concerned. I have even assisted the effort, selecting a basic black sheath with a demure square neckline and a mid-calf hem. My low heels imbue the ensemble with a tiny stab of class—enough to honor my paipanne without disgracing him—which I apparently accomplished by “fawning” over Cassian Court this afternoon.

With effort, I control the color threatening to invade my cheeks again. I do not dare give Mother any more fuel for her irked fire, which has only increased in the months since I chose to stay on as Brooke’s secran. She and Paipanne barely understood my enthusiasm about the position when Brooke had been queen; now that she is a mere princess again, my decision is seen as close to walking the streets a whore.

At first, the dichotomy puzzled me. In the palais, I was happy, productive, and certainly protected. But one day, a conversation with Vy shifted my view.

This is not a matter of controlling your virtue, shella-bean. It is a matter of controlling you.

I’d scoffed, even gotten defensive with Vy, refusing to see my own parents in that light—but more and more evidence has surfaced to support the assertion. Incidents and attitudes I’ve ignored before, perhaps written off as their love expressed in the only way they knew how...but if that were the case, why does it manifest in that form only with me? How is Saynt so different—or has he received the same pressure since Father and Mother pushed for an early end to his school studies, followed by immediate entry into Arcadian military training? At this rate, he will surely be an officer within a few years—though even that timing does not seem swift enough for them.

But there is no chance to steal away for that intimate sibling chat tonight, in light of the events planned down to the second. In that regard, I have an easier assignment than Saynt—a truth Mother reminds me of now, meeting my gaze in the mirror.

“Just cocktails and dinner, hmm?” She arches brows in subtle expectation. “Neither of us needs the fat calories in dessert, anyway.”

“Of course, Maim—”

I am interrupted by my own astonishment, when she reaches into my jewelry box and withdraws the amethyst drops from my last birthday. My brows lower. The gemstones are not the plain pearls I would have predicted as her preference—and honestly, they make me squirm a little. They are beautiful but entirely too bright. They are—

“The perfect touch.” Like the direction on my hair, it is an order, not a suggestion. She finishes it by holding them against my ears. “Ahhh, yes. Definitely. Perhaps you can talk about how they were passed between each generation in our family...to celebrate our prosperity.”

I lower my gaze. It is a sweet story—if only a word of it were true. But Father and Mother are not above “sliding” on the small facts to justify larger gains. As far back as three years ago, before the crown of Arcadia shifted and Evrest Cimarron officially reopened the island to the outside world, they saw Arcadia’s future as a major player on the world economy’s stage—and did not miss a chance to seize the

opportunities from it. A single chance. As a result, they have become nothing short of obsessed with the Santelle family holding major strings in the new Arcadian economy.

Now, Saynt and I are expected to shovel into that locomotive too—and long-gone are the days when we were given any preference about our contributions. Saynt is learning to face our enemies, even take a bullet, for the family name. And I'll learn to spread my legs for the man they point me toward.

And oh, yes—to keep my mouth shut on everything but rehearsed lines until then.

Like the propaganda about my earrings.

“I—I shall try.” I add a game smile at Maimanne for effect. She does not have to know that just the idea of lying to Cassian sits on my stomach like rotting fish. It feels too close to lying to myself.

The flash of revelation bursts another into life.

Cassian. When he is near, I somehow feel closer to... myself.

To parts of myself beyond “the physical obvis,” as Vy would call them. Things far past the racing blood, the lightning nerves, the throbbing womb...

Things that are even better.

Things of wonder.

Anticipation.

Feelings brand-new, tied to desires as old as the ancients.

Needs I have to lock away. Now.

Stuff into a place deep inside, as firmly as I seal my pearls back into my jewelry box. Bury deep beneath my gaze, glittering too brightly from the mirror as I secure the amethysts on my ears. Conceal behind my face, lashed into serenity, as Maimanne tilts a last look from the doorway. That will do, her eyes seem to say—the closest thing I shall receive in the way of praise.

“That will do.” I repeat it to my reflection, fighting for a shred of its reassurance. Press my clammy hands to my flushed face, praying for an infusion of composure. Beseech the Creator for the strength to get through the next three hours, pretending I feel nothing for the man—and his money—who is so important to our family's future.

Because, despite everything, I love them. And know—pray?—in my deepest heart, that all of Father and Mother's maneuvers are for ultimately for Saynt and me. I can support them without having to lie to Cassian about the earrings—or anything else, for that matter.

Except how I feel about him.

Except how two days and six encounters—not that I am keeping track—have transformed the man from a complete stranger into the very nucleus of my thoughts, center of my heartbeats—

And apparition on my balcony?

“Guuhhh!”

Stealing more slang from Vy is better than surrendering to my first option of a reaction: a throat-razing shriek. As I choke the sound all the way down, I thank the Creator his hair is slicked back from his face, tamed into waves catching the outside lights as he swings over the wrought iron rail from the bougainvillea trellis he has just scaled. Sweet Creator, his hair. As long as I live, I will not forget it. Thick as molten gold, streaked with honey straight from the hive—a dangerous thought for all the dangerous things he makes me feel, especially now...flinging open the balcony's double doors, locking his gaze to mine once more—

And bringing pure fire back to my world.

CASSIAN

Will this woman ever not set me completely on fire?

The question is as mystifying as the one before it: the demand that hounded every inch I just clawed up the goddamn trellis. It went something along the lines of: *you swore you wouldn't look at her tonight, yet now you're scaling a wall in the dark, hoping you've pegged the right bedroom as hers?*

Even if there *are* answers, I care nothing for them. I don't care about much of anything, other than the euphoria of knowing I was right. The pastel and cream décor I glimpsed from the ground is hers—and now she is standing in it, a stark contrast in her classic black dress and shoes. Not a hair on her head breaks free from its bun. The look should bring severity to her face but accomplishes the opposite. Every angle of her impeccable beauty is brought out in bold relief, turning her into something close to fine art. I half expect to look down and see a *Do Not Touch* sign attached to a rope around her waist.

Thank fuck there isn't one.

Because I need to touch. *Now*.

One step. Another. Then a stop, wondering if she'll shy back, like this afternoon...like the wiser one she is in this whole thing. She knows the truth, more than me. She understands that these threads between us can only ever be that. Threads, like cocoon floss. Gossamer. Temporary.

But she doesn't move. Simply closes her eyes as my hand raises. Releases a shaky rasp as I curl fingers over her full, beautiful cheek. Finally whispers words like the faint furrows that crinkle the top of her elegant nose.

"How did you..."

I laugh softly. "Damn lucky guess."

"Why..."

"Do you really have to ask that?"

Her eyes open. She swallows hard. "We cannot do this. Mr. Court, I—"

"And do you really have to call me *that*?"

"We are both supposed to be downstairs—where *you* will complete business with my *father*. This is *not* part of the plan."

"The *plan*?" I slide closer to her. *Goddamn*, her scent. Her skin exudes something exotic, like island flowers. Her hair, while yanked back with some shiny styling product, betrays hints of jasmine and vanilla. "How do I know it's not?"

As I anticipate, her stare snaps up, full of incensed fire.

"It's a fair question." I half-abhor myself for venturing down this path. But as long as we're here... "I need your father's influence on this island, but he needs my money. How do I know he hasn't dangled his daughter to sweeten the deal for himself?"

Tears join her fury. Just a sheen—enough to show me the threads are about to break. Her hand swings up. Flies back. When it's at full height, I snap a grip around her wrist. Use the hold to circle her around, pinning her to the wall behind her terrace door. The shadows of the corner envelop us, making her gritted teeth glow, setting even more fire in her huge sapphire eyes.

"Damn you." Her syllables are more like sobs. They jab my gut, reaffirming that all my stress about doing business with a jackass is pretty stupid. *Like attracts like*.

It's not a new revelation. But right now it sears like pure acid, and I have to halt the damage—no matter how desperate the measure.

"I'm sorry." All right, maybe I *am* desperate. In the last five years, those words have only left my lips once before—on an occasion I'm determined not to dredge up. Not now. "Sshhh, Ella. *I'm sorry*."

She huffs through her nose. Several more times. "Let me go."

I concede, despite the harsh twist of my gut.

Unbelievably, she stays put. Lowers her arm into a protective wrap around her waist, but doesn't move beyond that.

Like an idiot, I brush fingertips up to her face again.

Like a miracle, she lets me.

"I'm a moron. And I *am* sorry." It's the truth. I hope she can feel it in the pressure of my thumb, slowly tracing the strong line of her jaw. God, she's so warm and smooth. "I'm also trying to make logical sense out of this. Out of...us."

Her laugh is quick—and strangled. "There *is* no 'us'."

“Oh, there’s an *us*.” And in another bonehead move, I drag her hand away from her body...sliding it beneath my blue silk tie, against the dress shirt covering my sternum. “You know it as well as I do, Mishella. You feel it too. You feel it...right here...don’t you?”

Her lips work against each other. “What I feel does not matter. What *either* of us feels—” She lets her hand drop. Blinks slowly, her lashes shimmering with new salty drops. “I am not free to *feel*, Cassian. You must know that by now. You have spent two days exposed to my father’s determination and will. He desires your money, but only because it will bring him something greater.”

“Power.” I could have supplied the answer from a coma. It was the Holy Grail of the elite, a high better than multiple zeroes in a man’s bank account. And in the hands of fools—worse, in the hands of arrogant fools—it could end the entire planet.

“And my brother and I...are additional tools in helping him gain that power.” She looks down, using her dress as a visual aid in her argument. She has no fucking idea that the staid color and the conservative cut, accented only by the gemstones on her ears, have only stoked my imagination more. It’s a battle not to visualize peeling the garment away from her sleek curves, her creamy skin contrasted by the dark fabric...and showcasing the marks of my grip. “I am to be the ultimate prize for the man at court who helps our family rise the highest. Any ‘dalliance’ before that time, especially with an American investor who was only here for three days, would wag enough tongues to lower his asking price for me.”

I don’t even try to contain a disgusted growl. “Like a fucking virgin offered to a dragon.” When her reply is nothing but extended tension, my head jerks up. “Wait. *Shit*. Because you really *are* still a...” Her eyes confirm it in a second. *Goddamn*...her eyes. Those wide blue depths, such a turn-on for me from the start, ignite me to shaking lust now. Openness and honesty, because she *is* open and honest.

And a virgin.

A thought—like so many others that have struck about her—that should horrify the hell out of me.

But doesn’t.

Holy hell...just the opposite.

The idea of being the first man to fill her...to bring her to the bliss that will convulse her walls around my cock, make her scream my name as I pump my hot release deep inside her body...

Crap. Shit. Fuck.

You’ve had enough, sailor. Time to close out the tab and wobble on home.

Somebody needs to tell that to the breathtaking blonde now pushing from the wall and pressing her body against mine, that gaze again betraying so many of her thoughts. At least the ones betraying the exact match of her fantasies to mine.

Crap. Shit. Fuck.

No.

“I want to give it to you, Cassian.” She slips her hand up to my neck, working those slender, seeking fingers beneath my shirt. “You know that, yes?”

Hell.

Now she curls her heated touch into the ends of my hair, awkwardly at first, as if she’s just learned the move from movies and is shocked that it works...that such a small gesture has pierced my entire body, slicing into my cock—pulsing heavily between our bodies. Her lips part on the sexiest gasp I’ve ever heard. The flare of her gaze ensues, making my dick swell again.

“Creator’s sweet stars,” she whispers. “Would it even fit?”

“Holy *fuck*.”

It’s all I can say—fortunately, all I *have* to say. She opens her mouth before I even descend, an invitation to plunge with every wet, needing inch of my tongue, embedding her taste into me...gifting me with her soft supplication. And goddammit, I take it. Every inch, every drop, every taste I can possibly steal.

Because it’s all I’ll get to take from her.

All I’ll allow myself to take.

Because despite how much I want her, I refuse to ruin her. Refuse to even think of what her life could be like, if she is of no use to her father's master plan of Arcadian commercial dominance.

Pathetic bastard.

Will he even listen if I tell him it's a losing track? That he'll attain his goal, only to want something beyond it? *Right*. Shaking a spider in its web often just makes the spider work harder—making life hell for its prey.

With a rough moan, I tear myself from her kiss. On legs that shake, step back from her. Then again. Force my hand into a quivering claw, pulling her grip off my neck. But before I set her fingers completely free, I push my face against her palm and impale her gaze with the unmitigated fire in my own.

"It would fit, sweet Circe."

She smiles, acknowledging the illicit imagery I invoke—but winces, recognizing what I do. We'll never act on the words. "Circe," she finally echoes. "The Greek sorceress? The one who transformed her enemies into animals?"

I answer with a growl into her hand. She tries to hide the answering quiver down her body. Fails miserably.

"But you are not my enemy."

"But you have turned me wild."

Her breath catches. In the exquisite silence that follows, sneaks her tongue between her lips.

"Cassian."

My own name has never brought me more heat, more tension...more arousal. Two syllables, and my whole system is heated by another ten degrees...and my cock now throbs against the plane of her belly.

I groan. She whimpers. But the temptation to shove her back, hike her dress to her waist and take her right here, against the wall, hits my gritted restraint. This woman isn't just a whim. She's not a fuck-then-flee socialite, or remotely close to my other preferred social distraction: haute couture bimbo, sans panties. In my jacket pocket is a phone with hundreds of those women on it, willing to be ready the moment my plane touches down in New York once more.

The thought of it makes me ill.

It will pass—it always does—but as I dip toward her, needing one more taste before giving her up forever, I give in to the illusion that it won't. That Mishella Santelle has pulled a real Circe on me, and accomplished the impossible.

Transformed me.

Changed me back into a creature I recognize. A man I respect.

Impossible.

Impossible.

I am so screwed.

CHAPTER THREE

MISHELLA

My eyes itch. My back aches. The indents in my palms are likely permanent by now, considering the hours my fingernails have been digging into them. How many hours, I have no idea. At this point, time has been slammed into the same category as my physical comfort level. Irrelevant.

I sit in a stiff chair in Father's study, scooted forward, hands tucked in my lap, knees at a ninety-degree angle. I focus on my toes, flat against the floor, peeking from beneath my sleep pants. Distractedly, I note how they have changed color through the hours, going bluish at the brink of dawn. Living in Sancti, the warmest part of Arcadia, still means ocean breezes that chill the air at night.

Winds capable of lifting Cassian's hair off his high, straight forehead...

Of teasing that hair into his eyes, changing like ripples across a lagoon with his rising desire...

Of infusing wild new scent across his skin, so taut and tanned over all the hard ridges of his body...

"Salpu."

Not even whispering the profanity against myself is effective against the relentless images of him. And maybe, as awful as the torture is, it is for the best. The pictures are all I will have now.

He is gone.

And I am a selfish salpu for lamenting the bizarre sense of loss in my heart, when so much more has walked out the door with him.

New memories assault, making me grimace. That moment, having let down my hair and climbed into bed, when the door of my chamber burst open...then my gape when Father filled the portal. Luckily, the curse I had prepared for Saynt was not yet at my lips. I had expected nobody else, since Mother retired to her own quarters after we bid good night to Father and Cassian, immediately following dinner. I had not diverted from acceptable decorum during the meal, despite the yearning to do exactly that—cheese soup, crème fraiche, and stuffed chicken breast gained new meaning when one dined across the table from Cassian Court's intense gaze—but when Father stormed in, rage mottling his face, I discerned the awful truth before he spat it.

Did I not tell you, two damn days ago, not to throw yourself at the man like a common rospute? Do you know what you have done, Mishella? Do you know what you have ruined?

"Tell me again." Mother's mandate jerks me back to the present—though it is no less agonizing than the flashback. "Word for word, Fortin—what Court said before he left, and when."

Father growls. "I do not fathom how this will—"

"Tell. Me. Again."

"Woman."

"Husband." She jerks the edges of her dressing robe tighter. Firms her stance. She doesn't need to say more. Even with a bare face and tangled hair, etched in the unforgiving gray of early morning, Selyna Santelle's golden beauty arrests a whole room.

Suddenly—strangely—I feel sorry for her. Father and she are children of equally ambitious court schemers who married them off for political gain. For many years now, it has been plain that little connects them but a mutual drive for more. And, I suppose, Saynt and me. They love us, in their bizarre way—which might be the only way they know how.

"He is likely preparing his plane for takeoff as we speak," she persists with the same steely calm. "So if I am to help with salvaging the damage,"—a glance in my direction gives chilling clarity about her definition of damage—"I must visualize it again. He said he was 'unable' to commit to the agreement 'as is'?"

“Yes,” Father bites out.

“Not that he refused the terms outright?”

“He said what he said, Selyna. I did not have time to dally with semantics.”

Mother waves a hand like his snarl is a persistent fly. “But he took the time to issue the last of it? It was issued in the parlor, not tossed over his shoulder in the front drive, on his way out?”

Father expels a breath. Finally mutters, “Yes. In the parlor. After he turned down cigars, had one bite of the trifle, and excused himself to take a discreet shit.”

Mother cocks her head. “And you are certain that was it?”

“Certain what was what?”

“The shit. That was what he excused himself for?”

Exhaustion. Shock. Not the best combination for containing frantic laughter. A tight choke helps me at the last minute. Is there any ground forbidden in the path of their ambition?

Father’s loose shrug confirms the answer. “I gathered so,” he mutters. “I very well did not listen at the door, though he was gone long enough, so I assumed...”

He trails off with a tense scowl—though it has nothing to do with spying on Cassian’s bathroom business. Assumed. The word alone implies one of their cardinal sins, as bad as laziness or murder. In this case, it brings just as heinous an outcome—if I correctly interpret the messages beneath their extended, silent exchange...

What if he wasn’t spending the time on that private matter? What if he went to the bathroom for other reasons—such as the chance for second thoughts? Why has he backed out of signing the contract so suddenly?

No answers of logic or comfort come forth.

The only thing that has changed in the last four months, since Father and Cassian first communicated about this deal, has been—

Me.

I can peg the millisecond my parents reach the same conclusion. My head jerks down as theirs swing around, though that helps not in battling the weight of their scrutiny.

I want to cease breathing. Not an exaggeration. Every breath I take is a sharp slice between my ribs; like the air itself is contaminated by their disappointment—and disgust.

They know.

I have been circling the ugly words, unwilling to accept them, but now they sting as sharply as the cold on my feet, and throb as hard as the pain behind my eyes. I drop my gaze to the floor. Wish for a way of lasering an escape hole through the polished wood.

Am I supposed to say something now? What on Earth do they expect?

But I know the answer to that already.

It is me. I am the one who derailed it all. Who ruined any respect he had for our family by flirting with him, making stupid eyes at him. Letting him into my bedroom...and letting him do other things there.

And Creator help me, I liked it.

A lot.

And I made him like it.

At least I think I did.

Sweet Creator...did he like it? And why am I stopping to even wonder about it? Or to care?

But I do. If hell takes me for it, then so be it. My virginity is still pristine, and I shall never again see the man who tempted me to change that, so I cling to the memories of the feelings...all the passionate, exquisite perfection of those moments with him. It is shameless and selfish and for one sublime moment, I do not care. For a collection of perfect breaths, I am again simply a woman letting a man climb up her balcony then kiss her senseless...render her breathless...arouse her to that perfect place called mindless...

All too soon, it is over.

With the stiffness in Father’s shoulders, as he abruptly turns away.

With Mother's censuring glance, before she rises like an empress. "What happened after that? When Court returned from the tuvalette?"

A blush attacks. The Arcadian word makes the subject sound prettier, though the gritty reality remains. And the guilt. Always the guilt. While I hate their bald zeal on so many levels, I crave their parental pride and approval. My flirtations with Cassian did go too far—perhaps the "romantic" breach into my room was even his way of testing my character—making my overnight moping about it even more pathetic. And how many times have I replayed his kiss in my mind, shamelessly using it to keep myself awake, while my parents watched their plans vanish like a sandcastle under a wave?

In Vy's terms, I suck as a human being.

In Brooke's terms, maybe you've earned the suckage, girlfriend.

Father gets up. Walks to his desk. Slumps into the chair behind it before drumming impatient fingers atop the unsigned contract in front of him. "He did not say much more than that," he finally states. "'Unable to commit.' Those were his exact words. Then he said he would be 'taking some matters into advisement' and would 'be in touch soon.'"

Not much is different than the first twelve times he has told it—but this time, the words click differently. I jerk up my head to look directly at him—a penance I have avoided for the last six hours. Crazy—perhaps insanely—it drives words to my lips too.

"'Be in touch'," I echo. "That is not a full no...right?"

Father does not answer. His features are fixed, frozen and dispassionate, as Mother answers me instead—by digging a scalding grip into my ear. I gasp in place of a scream. The woman has perfected ear twisting to such an art, Saynt still bears a tear at the back of his lobe from the day he skipped school as a boy.

"Stand. Up," she seethes. "You know nothing of these matters, girl—and now you will admit that as you apologize to your father, who might be able to salvage the mess you have made of this."

A thousand needles stab the backs of my eyes. I grit them back while trying to nod, but her fingers feel sewn to my flesh. Her grip is unyielding. And maybe it is what I need. Maybe I am just a stupid girl, playing with fire much too golden, beautiful, and hot for me to ever handle safely. Maybe, Creator help us, my lustful idiocy has not torched everything they have worked for. Maybe Father can fix it...if I get out of his way. If I am humble and prove it by being truly sorry.

It feels right, this simple acceptance of their truth...of my fate. Fighting it, doubting them...it has been exhilarating and exciting—and exhausting. Now a sad peace sets in, like a field mouse surrendering to a hawk's grip, simply letting the end happen—

Until Maimanne jerks to a stop.

I save my ear by skidding short with her—or have my senses been my saviors, sizzling from the blast of new electricity on the air?

Oh...my.

Every neuron in my body is fried from it, letting the energy in—recognizing it at once.

Knowing him at once.

By the Creator.

He has returned.

But my joy is instantly shadowed—by mortification. Cassian Court has come back—to find me being led around by the ear, clad in nothing but my sleepwear. And there go any lingering thoughts for him, at least the good ones, about our passion last night...

Though all I behold on his face right now is—

Fury.

Taut, defined, and clear, all across his perfect, noble features—

And all directed at Mother.

"Let her go."

I blink. Again. Yes, the words have emanated from him—inducing Maimanne's incredulous sputter.

Then her forced, tinkling laugh. “Ahhh, Mr. Court! What a delightful surprise. Did you have to let yourself in? I apologize; good help is so hard to find on this tiny island, and we were not aware you would be—”

“Mistress Santelle.” Every syllable is a scimitar, bleeding even her conjured civility from the air. “What wasn’t I clear about?”

He steps over, readjusting a black messenger bag over his right shoulder, making me wonder if there’s a gun stowed inside. He looks like a man intent on drawing a firearm—and using it.

I shiver, boldly afraid. Then gasp, blatantly stunned.

Dear Creator. Has the fear...aroused me?

Though Mother drops her hold, everything still feels surreal. Never has a man said such things on my behalf...been so enraged on my behalf. Or is that it at all? What in Creator’s name is going on? Cassian’s energy is so different now. While he has changed into more relaxed attire—a white cable-knit sweater and tailored khaki slacks—his demeanor is more high protocol than at any court event I have attended. And I have been to many.

The same curiosity governs Father’s face as he rises. “Cassian.” His extended hand is given a mechanical shake in return. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your return?”

One of Cassian’s tawny brows hikes up—which, of course, makes more of me quiver. Even the forbidden parts. “You weren’t expecting me to?”

“In a word,” Father rejoins, “no.”

Bizarrely, that nicks Cassian’s armor. He chuffs without humor. “Then you’ve misread the business, Fortin. In this case, luckily, it hasn’t cost you the business too.”

My jaw almost plummets. No one has ever dared this kind of thing with Father. Reproving Fortin Santelle like this, even disguised as “casual” conversation, would drop jaws up and down the halls of the palais. Father has even struck servants for less.

But the look on Cassian’s face...as if he is nearly enjoying this...

My nerve endings go icy. By the powers...I actually afraid for him.

Until a new recognition sets in.

Father cannot call on a single recourse against this man. Before him stands Cassian Court: an equal individual. A leader from the most cutthroat kingdom on Earth. New York City.

My lungs clutch. What will Paipanne say? Do?

“Ah. So we still have business?” His desperation is hidden beneath the diffidence, but Cassian sees through it...is utterly beautiful about it. I am only aware of movie stars through pictures Vylet brings up on her computer—when the Arcadian internet chooses to function—but I easily imagine the man as the chiseled star of a high-stakes spy thriller, detecting every weakness in his opponent in the space of a glance.

Cassian himself only fuels that vision—perhaps even enhances it, with a study of Father that reminds me of straight-from-the-mine emeralds. He is...breathtaking. “I said I needed to take advisement, not my complete leave.”

Father stiffens again. “You also said you could not sign the agreement.”

“I said I couldn’t sign that agreement.” Out from the messenger bag, in his impossibly long fingers, comes a sheaf of papers. “This one, I’ll sign.”

Mother snags the air with a caught breath. Father balances her, barely flinching. But his gaze goes to work, descending in another silent assessment of Cassian...searching for weakness. He will be out of luck. Cassian remains a perfect, unreadable wall: a hotter, steelier version of Jason Bourne, Jack Ryan, Ethan Hunt, and all their friends put together. He stands tall and determined, legs braced in a solid A, locking hands firmly as soon as Father takes the papers...appearing like he has all the time in the world to wait for feedback.

It does not take nearly that long.

Less than a dozen seconds, to be exact.

Which has to be a record for transforming my father from practiced deal broker into stunned gaper.

“We discussed a loan of twenty million.”

“Correct,” Cassian replies.

“This offer is for twice that.”

“Also correct.”

Maimanne gasps again. I join her. Forty million dollars? Am I doing the math correctly? I cannot be certain, since every cell in my brain is short-circuited.

“And you cut the interest rate...in half.”

As Mother and I now struggle against fish gawks, Cassian’s face is unchanged. “Also correct,” he states.

“As well as a finder’s fee for any additional opportunities in Arcadia that arise within the next year.”

“Yes.”

I almost beg Mother to pinch my ear again—or anything else, to ensure this is not a dream. The only thing holding me back: the look on Father’s face. His gape is gone, replaced by a troubled scowl—shot at me then Cassian, in that order.

My heartbeat stutters all over again. By the powers, what have I done now? More precisely, what kind of concessions has Cassian demanded in return for this astounding new deal? The contract is practically Faustian—except the Devil looks like an angel, moves like a prize fighter, and enthralls like a wizard.

“All for this sole condition?” Father presses.

Mother practically leaps forward. “Accept it! Whatever it is, Fortin, say yes!”

Father looks at her for a long moment. Then once more at me, his gray gaze suddenly hazy—like that of a field mouse in a hawk’s talons.

“The acceptance is not mine to give.”

CASSIAN

“This is insanity.”

It’s the eighteenth time she’s blurted it. Yes, I’m counting—wondering if she’ll hit the internal estimation I set during the drive back over here, after having the new contract printed up in one of the palais offices. Somehow, Doyle found a security guard to open one of the rooms for us at four in the morning. Not that I’d ever planned on sleeping, after walking out of here consumed by the proposal now outlined in the pages in her hands.

Proposal.

That’s one way of putting it.

In the last half hour, she’s come up with quite a few more—though insanity is the favorite, as I’d predicted. Doyle—I make a mental note to give him a massive bonus, after the miracles he’s pulled to make this happen in less than six hours—clearly has some more for the list. His stare, filled with have-you-lost-it perplexity, burns from the shadows of the wingback in the corner. I don’t earn myself a reprieve by jerking my head, motioning him out the door—not the one beyond which the Santelles are waiting in suspicious silence. It’s the one opening onto a small patio with the morning sun now glittering in a small fountain flanked by padded chairs.

Doyle’s eyes narrow tighter.

I nod toward the patio again.

With a grunt, he rises. Fortin has all but ordered him to witness every second of my conversation with Mishella, but we’re not going to move past the next “this is insanity” at this rate. The dynamic in the room badly needs to change—and D has to know that too. On paper, the guy is my valet, but that bullshit flies as much as saying the same thing about Kato and the Green Hornet. Doyle and I finish thoughts, sentences, and cheeseburgers for each other. He’s the closest thing I have to a sibling. At least one who’s alive.

As soon as D steps outside, my theory proves out. A rush of relieved breath leaves Mishella.

Just as rapidly, she pulls one back in.

Wheels on me so fast, her loose hair tumbles over her shoulder—

And her breasts pucker beneath her pink sleep shirt.

She's so fucking sexy, I can barely think.

But I must. Force myself to, with willpower I'm now grateful to have fortified over the years...the only thing riveting me in place as blood rushes to stupid places in my body.

"This is insanity!"

So much for theories.

"You must know that," she continues, once more pacing the length of the room. "You—you have to know that."

I can reply right away—I actually have known that since leaving this mansion the first time—but I don't. Instead I lean against her father's desk, bracing hands to the wood at my sides, giving her the full thrust of my gaze, the full recognition of my intent—

The full truth of my spirit.

"It feels more crazy to think of leaving without you."

It's a bomb drop even to me, but I don't try to mitigate the blast. I don't want to. The shrapnel cuts in, and I let it. I welcome the blood; the sensation that I'm watching my heart fall on the floor. For a second, I simply revel in watching it pump. For so many years, I've had my doubts.

I'm braced for the twentieth reference to lunacy but she turns instead, brow tightly knitted. In a rasp, she asks, "Why?"

I quirk a small smile. "After the last two days, do you really have to ask? Wait." I push up, a move easily carrying me into the steps remaining between us. "After last night, do you have to ask?"

She tilts her head up. I'm certain she must hear the thunder in my chest, now so close to her stunning face, as I take in her flash of joy. She hasn't just remembered what happened in her bedroom. She's relived it as many times as I have.

Which doubles my confusion about the new mask she slams down over that bliss. "Cassian—"

"Ella." Yes, I use the name intentionally. With just as much purpose, grip her by both elbows. I don't shirk the hold, even when she stiffens against it.

"Why do you insist on calling me that?"

"Why do you insist on pretending you don't like it?" When she relents, just for a moment, I seize the chance to move an inch closer. Nearly fitting our bodies against each other... "Why do you insist on acting like you're not pleased with my revised proposal to your father?"

"Proposal." She twists both arms free, stumbling back. "That is what you have titled it?" The arms fold back in. She spits a bitter laugh. "And I thought Arcadia had been missing out on so many miracles of the modern world. But if buying a human being is still simply relegated to a piece of paper—"

Okay, slow down." I half-expected her to go here. I didn't expect the vehemence with which she'd do it—or the pain in her eyes as she did. "Nobody is getting 'bought,' Mishella."

"Right," she retorts. "Désolument. So sorry. My big bad. You do not wish to purchase; you simply want to rent."

"What?" I want to be angry but shock makes that impossible. "Where do you get—"

"Six months." She sweeps a hand toward the contract. "I have that correct, yes? Is it not all completely spelled out in your pretty papers? You agree to invest forty million dollars in Arcadian entities recommended by my father, in exchange for getting to have me on call to you for the next six months."

A band of pain clamps my head. I step back before snarling, "Not on call." It's no less crude than her inflection.

"Oh?" One of her hands hitches to a hip. "What, then? Forty million dollars' worth of companionship? A 'plus one' for social affairs? A movie buddy? A dog trainer?"

One side of my mouth kicks up again. "You want a dog?"

Her eyes widen. I swear that inside, she's just regressed to the age of six. "Do—do you have one?"

"I can get you one."

The six year-old disappears. The woman is back, head tilting, going for what she perceives to be

cynicism. “Cassian, are you seriously saying you expect me to return to New York with you...and not fuck you?”

Well, hell.

I’d anticipated that question too—hello, obvious—just not those words for it. And those words, flowing in her musical voice...what they instantly do to me...

Damn. Damn.

Everything in my body tightens. The skin around my cock does not get a free pass. The fucker just got charged double fare, and he’s not happy about it. The insult to the injury: that tiny tick of her auburn eyebrows, which might as well be fist pumps in some unseen boxing match to which she’s challenged me.

Okay, sweetheart. You take that victory dance. I’ll wait riiiiight here.

I’ve never looked forward more to surging off the ropes.

And I do.

One unwavering step—two—then I’m right back next to her, screwing propriety, manners, and personal space, molding our bodies exactly as they’d been in the recesses of her bedroom. Just as intoxicating as those shadows is the Arcadian morning sun, surrounding us...warming her lips for a kiss I long to brand on her, into her, through her. But I don’t. I lean until only the tips of our mouths touch, enlivening those areas so exposed yet so erotic, making us breathe together—me out, her in, then reversed—until she shudders harder than the motes in the rays around us.

“Mishella.”

Her eyes drag open. Just a little. “Hmmm?” Then pop wide, as I drop both hands around her ass. Wider as I jerk her body tighter against mine.

“You’re not going to fuck me in New York.”

“I—” For a moment, before she attempts to hide it, she looks dejected. “I’m not?”

“I’m going to fuck you.”

She swallows. “Oh.” Pulls in trembling air. “Um...oh.”

I roll my hips, making sure the layers of our clothes don’t cushion the erect enforcer of my meaning. Complete backfire. My dick rails it at me, screaming to be set free in the hot, soft valley between her lush thighs. Somehow, I’m still able to get words out. Hoarsely.

“You know what else?”

“Wh-what else, Cassian?”

“You’re going to beg me for it.”

Bigger gape. So goddamn captivating. I could get lost in every facet of her huge sapphire eyes. “I’m—oh.”

Her helpless rasp warms my neck. The heat from it reverberates, echoing along my muscles and tendons, my blood vessels and skin cells, an assault of demand to give her a preview of exactly what I’m talking about. But another element shimmers in her breath...and now in the gaze she lifts at me.

She’s still afraid.

And I refuse to push her...until she’s afraid of only the good things.

With gritted effort, I loosen my hold and step away. My hand finds one of hers. I lead her over to the wingback Doyle was moping from. She looks much better in the thing, the golden tumble of her hair contrasted by the dark leather. Her posture is pristine, though her gaze doesn’t miss an inch of my actions. Christ, she’s beautiful. My misplaced Cinderella, complete with the princess pink PJs.

“All right,” I state, hunkering before her. “Perhaps we should step back.”

Her stare clouds. “But you just made me sit.”

I quell a chuckle through supreme effort. Lift an indulgent smile—not an effort at all. “Just an American expression, favori.”

The Arcadian endearment is clearly a surprise—but her small smile confirms it’s a pleasant one. “What does it mean?”

“That we should look at this with the body parts above our necks.”

She flushes. “A wise idea.” Nods. “And a good term. I shall have to journal it.”

More of my chest warms. Her journals—one of the first things that fascinated me about her, after recovering from the blow of her beauty—are so much a part of her, it’s strange seeing her without one. She keeps them about everything, as if afraid facts will slip into nothingness if she doesn’t harness them on paper.

Or maybe they’re tangible proof that she controls something in her world.

I tuck away the observation—and my anger from it—to the Deal With This Later file. Just like the surges I battled during dinner last night, when once more she was spoken to like a dog to be curbed, the emotion has no place or use here. Instead I focus on the gentle trust in her grip, while softly prompting, “You remember the most important point, don’t you?”

She nods like a child pulling up multiplication tables. “There are three signature lines on the new contract. Yours, Father’s, and mine. The contract is not valid without my agreement.”

“Which means what?”

“Which means the ultimate choice about this is mine.”

“Good.”

My voice is serrated and I don’t hide it. God help me, even her earnestness is a turn-on. I’m a bastard for fantasizing about what it could be when used for carnal purposes, but my guilt is balanced by conviction. She’s the pure air my life has needed for so long. The fresh start I didn’t even know I craved, until two days ago.

“What else?” I manage to continue. She fidgets a little. Then more. How the hell has a woman with such light been forced to hide it so thoroughly? “Ella, it’s all right. It’s just us. I’m listening.”

I’ll always listen.

“This—this is not you ‘buying’ me,” she finally mumbles.

I let my hands slip free. Lean back on my haunches, sensing she needs the distance. “But you don’t believe that.”

Her lips purse. “It is a non-negotiable part of the contract, Cassian. What would you have me believe?”

I firm my own features. It’s the hardest goddamn thing to do around her, screwing on my “business” brain, but I cinch the fucker tight and go on, “Because your father would be open to considering the courtship of an American otherwise?”

“You underestimate my father’s open-mindedness when money is part of the equation.”

“I don’t underestimate it one bit. But for all intents and purposes, at least in his eyes, I’ll be carrying you off then ruining you.” I have to force the next words out. “Making your involvement an ‘option’ gives him an opening for sneaky bullshit. I wouldn’t put it past him to double-dip on this opportunity.”

Her nose crinkles. “I do not understand. Double...dip?”

“He’ll take my money, but still sell off your greatest asset to some horny Arcadian courtier who’s stupid enough to believe some made-up line about your absence, like you’ve been on the other side of the island on a ‘research trip’ for Brooke.” I raise both brows. “There are men that gullible in the Arcadian court, Ella. If I can discern that after two days here—”

“I know, I know.” Her eyes squeeze shut. “Your assessment is—” A wince takes over. “Correct,” she finally concludes. “You are...correct.”

More than she wants me to be. The slew of truths has stabbed her, as I knew it would—but this is why I’ve ordered her parents from the room. If they were still here, she wouldn’t feel safe to speak this honestly. “My ‘greatest asset,’” she finally echoes, blinking at me with aching eyes. “Is that what you are after too, then? Have all the shops on Fifth Avenue run out of shiny virgins, that you have seized the chance to snap one up as a souvenir from Arcadia?”

Her defiance marks each word but she ends with a ragged inhalation—already expecting my righteous fury. Silly, sad, heartbreaking woman. If she only knew that righteous and I have never claimed to remotely know each other—such an abiding truth, her question was one of my first considerations when drafting the new contract.

Battling the urge to yank her close, I settle for locking her in by leveling our gazes. “Ella, if I’d met you here as a hooker in the Sancti marketplace, it wouldn’t have mattered.” I stop for a second, considering that. “Though I’d likely be on my knees in your pimp’s living room instead of here...”

“Having an easier time of it.”

We laugh at her finishing my thought. We sigh because that feels as natural—and as exhilarating, and as intense—as the rest of what has happened between us. We sober because the enormity of it hits again too. The mutual recognition that if this is what everything feels like after two days, I shouldn’t be pushing fate’s favor by forging a contract for six months.

Six months.

Not. Nearly. Enough.

I shove aside the sentimental bullshit. It’s enough, you mooning ass. Long enough to get my fill of her, but not so long that I tire of her. More importantly, not long enough for her to start tugging at the threads...asking all the wrong questions...

The threads don’t get tugged.

The secrets don’t get revealed.

It’s for the best, no matter how hard she gets my cock or complete she makes my spirit. In the tapestry of her life, I’ll become just a thread as well. The way it should be. The lover who took her virginity, but gave her a bigger gift in return.

Her freedom.

And there’s the ultimate ace card in my deck.

The one element she cannot obtain on her own...just six months within her grasp. I watch her start to understand it, her eyes eagerly glittering, even before I speak again.

“Now tell me the third stipulation, Ella. I need to know you understand it.”

She responds inside a beat. Imagine that.

“After six months, I shall return to Arcadia. My job as Brooke’s secran will be returned to me...and I shall be free to wed a man of my choosing, for whatever reasons I deem acceptable.” An incredulous smile flows over her lips. “Even for love.”

“Yeah. Even for love.”

I fight to ignore how good it feels to hear her say it.

And how fucked-up it feels to force my lips around the same words.

And how confusing it is to watch shadows invade her gaze again.

“Of course...I can also choose not to marry at all.” She pulls a corner of her lip under her teeth. Toys with the rivets in the chair’s arm. “Perhaps...simply...take a string of lovers.”

I don’t miss how she finishes it. Her surreptitious glance, darted through her tawny lashes, is a cock-grabbing mixture of question and flirtation. Why deny her the show she’s looking for? The instant strain through my whole body. The leap of peeved color up my neck, into my face.

She releases her lip—but instantly wets it. Blinks heavily, clearly perplexed again. Goddammit. My jealousy is actually turning her on, and she doesn’t even realize it. The little sorceress has bewitched herself.

Maybe she needs a jolt of clarification. Maybe we both do.

Torch to my kerosene.

I surge forward, slamming into her, submerging us in the depth of the chair, mashing our mouths in a burst of passion and heat. Not waiting for permission, I lunge my tongue inside too. Mate it with hers in complete, carnal intent. There’s no ambiguity; she knows what I’m thinking: if she signs that contract, the next six months are going to be about purging this from both our systems, in whatever ways it takes. Whatever the fuck this is...

Right now, I don’t want to explore the options around that answer.

Right now, I push my knees apart, opening a space for myself between her legs. Our crotches slide and thrust; even through our clothes, the fit is perfect.

Right now is for ensuring she receives one message only—with complete clarity.

“Ella...”

“H-huh?”

“Why don’t we focus on you enjoying your first lover?”

CHAPTER FOUR

MISHELLA

I blink.

Once more, very slowly—almost wishing everything around me would click into the same speed. That button is not working. I am caught one step behind, watching as my worldly possessions roll by, stuffed into three suitcases down the narrow strip of asphalt Arcadia calls a tarmac.

Is this happening?

This cannot be happening.

I have surely not done this. Agreed to this.

I take it back. I take it back!

The words are so shrill and loud in my head, surely everyone—and I do mean everyone—can hear them, even over the revving engines of Cassian’s private airplane.

I have never traveled in anything that moves faster than a jeep.

Ohhhhh crap crap crap crap.

I gulp hard. Vylet squeals, her face alight with joy. She is accompanied by Brooke, who wears a smile so wide, she has officially inducted herself as the third member of our “sis-friend-hood.” They haul me into a three-way embrace, where our dipped heads form seconds’ worth of a private chat room. The two of them do not waste the time.

“You know the only reason I’m even agreeing to this is because Samsyn and Evrest vouched for this bozo,” Brooke asserts.

“And the only reason I agree is because she does.”

A giggle spurts out. I am not sure if it is due to sheer nerves, their wonder twins of protectiveness thing, or both, but I am grateful for the respite from decorum. “So you both have reminded me. Repeatedly.”

“Good,” Brooke volleys. “That means you remember the rest of it too.”

“Sure does.” Vy hip-bumps me. “Give us the rest of it, Mistress Santelle.” When I give nothing but a psshh, she nudges harder. “The rest of it.”

I squeeze her as hard as I can. She knows I need to be irked, in order to fight off the tears. It is only six months. It is only six months. I can do this. At least I think I can.

“Shella-bean!”

I jump a little before girl-growling—but continue to hold her tight. “If the bozo goes bonzo, I call the sis-friend-hood hotline.” That is their nickname for our online video chat room.

Brooke nods in approval. “You call it any time, girlfriend. Day or night. Seven hours isn’t that huge a time difference.”

“Says the girl who has not been roused in the middle of the night by the hotline buzz?” It really is one of the most obnoxious sounds I have ever heard—but it can rouse Saynt from a dead sleep, so I know it works.

“Not yet,” she jokes back. “Maybe this is our chance to really test it out.”

And maybe it should not be.

Why am I going to do this? How am I going to do this? I will be living in a world without them—a world as foreign to me as Antarctica, with but a thousand Arcadian dollars in my purse, three suitcases full of belongings, and the promises of a man I barely know.

No. Also not true.

A man...I do know.

A man I have known from the moment our eyes met and our hands joined. As if we had just been two ends of a drawbridge, waiting to be dropped back into place, leading the way back to the castle of us.

A man who, even now, as I dare a glance up, seems to know exactly what I need in this surreal moment.

It is not the strength of his stance, nor the determination in his eyes. They help, but they are not the key.

They are not his nod.

One movement. A sole dip, as forceful as the motors behind him, as clear as the sky into which we are bound, that gives me all the truth of his purpose once more. That infuses me with the bursting belief in it.

That reminds me of exactly what Brooke said, during the hour she and Vy had helped me pack.

I married Samsyn three hours after I was asked, girlfriend—by his freaking brother.

Neither Vylet nor I pointed out that his brother was also her king, and that the reason—at the time—was for Arcadian national security. I do not possess even half as good an excuse, but nor am I committing to Cassian Court's ring on my finger. It is only six months.

"By the powers," I mutter, solely to myself.

Six. Months.

When I return, it will be to stand as a maide attendant for the "real wedding" Brooke and Samysn are starting to plan: a grand double ceremony with Evrest and Camellia's.

When I return, Saynt will be keeping watch over that event—as a full-fledged soldier in the Arcadian Army.

When I return...so much will be different.

Especially me.

I am terrified again. Not even another nod from Cassian fixes it, especially as I turn to my brother, who clenches his jaw and blinks suspiciously shiny eyes. I tug his chestnut hair free from its tie and mess the strands until they're tangled, but that does not prevent the crushing ferocity of his parting hug.

"I took Court outside while you were packing," he says into my ear. "Told him that if he hurts you in any way, or lets any fucker in that crazy city hurt you, that contract is null and void—and I will come get you myself."

I pull back by a little, not sure how to react. I go for the honesty of my curiosity. "Wh-what did he say?"

"That it would not be necessary." Reluctant grunt. "That he plans on treating you like the treasure you are—and that if you do not feel as such and desire to come home, he will put you on the plane himself, anytime."

I threaten a sisterly smack by narrowing my eyes. His handsome face does not falter. "He really...called me a treasure?"

"Why do you think I am not blocking your way to the stairs?"

I crush him close again. Emotion floods me, and I shake from the force of it. I am a...treasure. Not just to the guy who has to feel that way because of genetics, but to the man who looks on, emerald gaze gleaming, the rest of his face seeming like a knight reverently waiting for his lady...

Returning his stare, I smile. In my mental journal, I record the metaphor, for it fits. Knightly passion, while perfect, was never intended to last. What kind of perfection ever was?

Six months is an ideal time limit for perfection.

The conclusion lends me the steel for the last of my goodbyes. Maimanne and Paipanne.

I turn, dutifully ducking my head before them both. Mother is the first to tuck me close, pressing quick kisses to both my temples, before scooting back and murmuring, "You are to use that money only for emergencies. You have it stowed safely, yes?"

I lift my head. Search for the sheen in her eyes like Saynt's, indicating she's muttering about money to cover deeper emotions, and that she worries about me leaving for a city with a population ten times that of our island...

Her eyes are hard as flint.

I suppress my disappointment as Father steps over. Perhaps they have agreed he will handle the emotional overtones of the farewell. Makes sense. Mother is not a “public display of affection” type—actually, she is not an advocate of the practice in private either—meaning Paipanne has surely been assigned the parental parting duties.

I lift a new smile at him, giving it an I’m-being-brave-but-do-not-feel-it wobble. He leans over—and bestows the same dual kisses on my forehead, with the same formality as Mother. Tilts my head up, so I am impaled by the similar granite of his stare.

“Do not disgrace our family.”

So this is what a fist in the heart feels like.

I step back, struggling around the blow for breath that needs to come. The pressure surges, jerking my shoulders back and my head up. As I look one last time, I borrow a heavy scoop of stone from both of them—one for my left eye, one for my right.

“Have not a worry, Paipanne. I know exactly what is important to you.”

CASSIAN

“What is it?”

The words are out the second I guide her into the leather chair next to mine, then cinch her seatbelt. The syllables are damn near a demand by this point but maybe that’s for the best. Whatever force of fate has spurred my inner caveman for this woman has intensified tenfold by watching her board the plane like a zombie, her steps full of wood and her eyes full of loss.

“Mishella.”

Her head jerks up—and for a second, she terrifies me. Her gaze takes me in as if she’s been jerked out of a dream. Worse, as if we’ve never met.

Second thoughts?

Dammit...no.

“What. Is. It?”

Suddenly, she’s back—honing her gaze into me as if she wants to laser me open. Pressing fingers to my face, and infusing it with the same penetrating force. I battle—in vain—to keep those beams from searing my cock. Lasered. Game over. Hasn’t it been from the start with her?

“You...really care how I answer that.”

She doesn’t phrase it as a question but I hear her bewilderment, responding with a slow nod. I don’t want her to stop touching me.

“But that does not matter,” she finally murmurs. Expels a long sigh, as if making room for the fresh infusion of sadness over her lush features. “Just get me out of here. Now. Please.”

CHAPTER FIVE

MISHELLA

For a second—perhaps many more than that—I regret letting go of my rage in favor of ogling Cassian like a hormone-drenched teenager. Can I be blamed, after the ferocity of his stare, the press of his lips to my knuckles, and the way he barks, “Wheels up” into a phone in the bulkhead? Just as it has been since we arrived at the airport, every move is about my needs and comfort...

Even now, when a lot of my comfort is beyond his control.

A lot of it.

With the exception of the juncture of our hands, my whole body twists from the race of my bloodstream, the heave of my lungs, the tripled pumps of my heart. Was I actually congratulating myself on the tarmac, for thinking the engines’ roar was the scariest part of this “flying” thing? Now, with the whole plane shaking as it gains momentum, faster and faster down the runway, I clamp my eyes shut, grit my teeth, and pray to the Creator I will survive—

“Ella.”

How can he sound so gentle, in the middle of such violence?

“What?”

“You need to breathe.”

I yearn to hurl a glower—but opening my eyes is not a viable option. “No.”

“Favori.”

“Do not speak at me with sweets.”

“You mean...try to sweet talk you?”

“Now you laugh about it?” The glare cannot be helped. Neither, it appears, can his dimpled grin, making me rip up all my mental bookmarks—even the one I have all but glued to the page marked Cassian Court: Arrogance in the Air.

The air.

We are...in the air.

My breath clutches to a brand-new stop—as I watch the runway disappear, giving way to the aqua expanse of the sea. Then a wisp of a cloud. Another.

“Holy shit!”

Cassian laughs from his belly but I do not care, nearly scrambling over that part of him to gape out the window. A sound escapes me, unlike any I have made before, because it is born of sensations I have never felt before. Fear, yes—but now churned into something beyond. Exhilaration duels with ebullience. Anxiety, but tempered with a new awareness altogether. Something light, like the dandelion seed the plane now feels like. Possibility in the space of a breath.

Is this...freedom?

The knowledge is a crash inside, breaking apart a shell I have never consciously admitted to—but now let myself step from, hatched into something new. Someone new. She is a stranger to me, and I long to crawl back right away into the safety of the tiny world behind me, to the security of the tiny girl who lived there.

Who lived there.

And I realize...

There is no “taking it back.”

I have agreed to let Cassian show me how good those words can be. Signed my name on his paper, giving him the right—and the power—to do so. Power not just over where my body physically goes...but

the vistas my mind, soul, and senses are taken to, as well.

And I think an airplane take-off has been the most terrifying part of my day?

What in Creator's name have I done?

The query makes me tilt my head—toward the man in whose lap I am practically perched. I am not surprised to find Cassian already staring at me. The intensity on his face is another element entirely.

Arrogance in the Sky. He is still that—only now, Mr. Confidence is subdued to silence. Perhaps even humbled. The green glass shards in his eyes spike with the crowning truth atop that. Because of you.

I have no idea how to answer that...save with one set of words.

“Merderim, Cassian Court.”

One side of his mouth hitches up. “Thank you, Mishella Santelle.”

More of the shell shatters.

As more of me steps free, my spirit moves toward the one path in this new world that makes sense...and the perfect, emerald-eyed guide waiting to lead me on it.

My fingers lift to his jaw.

The other side of his mouth raises.

I push my fingers in a little more. Pull tenderly at his jaw.

I want that mouth on mine.

With a ragged grunt of acknowledgement, Cassian obliges.

CASSIAN

How could just a brush of lips be the best fucking kiss of my life?

There are no answers for that.

There are a million answers for that.

My mind implodes on the conflict—the same way it explodes from merely a memory of that sweet, inexplicable touch of her mouth...

Now nearly three hours ago.

I continue gazing at her in sleep, where I fixate on the plush pads that have tossed me into this chaos. Doesn't help a goddamn bit. With Doyle snoozing in the small bedroom at the back of the plane, I'm alone up here with my sorceress—who has me as baffled, bewitched, and just as stunned as I was after kissing her.

And tasting her...

and breathing her in...

then fighting to push her back out.

A lot of good the effort yields me.

She has beaten me.

Good business means admitting when one is defeated, as well celebrating when one is victorious.

And isn't that the rub?

Mishella Santelle is not good business—or so nearly all my teams inform me. Flying all the way to Arcadia, searching for the angles to maneuver Fortin Santelle and save money, don't match what I'm returning with: a contract at double the budget and a “houseguest” for the next six months. What the hell else am I supposed to call her? Like the explanation will fly for one second with Prim and Hodge—both of whom I will put off thinking about until we're much closer to home. A “treat” to look forward to, if Doyle's dour looks have been accurate prophesy—and they usually are.

I don't give a fuck.

I would've paid four times as much for her. Been just as glad I had, for the payback of that kiss alone—though karma now carves her pound of flesh right out of my libido.

That kiss.

I crave so much more.

Goddammit, I've paid for it.

No. You've paid for the right to explore this with her, not take it from her. Dial it back, asshole. You've only brought this torture on yourself.

The woman herself helps with the meaning of that final pronoun, sighing sleepily...stretching until her pink sweater set is yanked tightly across her sleek figure. I watch the fabric slide across her breasts, mentally filling in the basic white bra that undoubtedly covers them.

Suddenly, every lace-clad temptress I've been with before is a dim memory behind Mishella's hot-as-fuck take on that Doris Day goodness. Is she wearing matching panties? And is she still so soundly asleep, she won't notice if I try confirming with a peek under her skirt?

Sick. Fuck.

"Mmmm."

While her moan kills off my Peeping Tom, it wakes up my Ready-To-Go-Randy. I shift in my seat, adjusting the wood to a more tolerable angle.

Her eyes open halfway, then take me in fully.

"Hey there, little Ella."

She curls a drowsy grin. "Bad princess. I fell asleep in the carriage—even after the prince's kiss."

Hell. She has to mention the kiss. "I'm no prince, Miss Santelle." Especially after what you've done to my thoughts in the last three hours.

"Well, thank the Creator." The moment it spills, she clearly can't believe it has. With a dogged shake of her head, she peers out the window. "It is...still light outside."

There's a question in her voice. "Ah. Yes." I follow her gaze, to where the dark orange rays glint against the plane. "We're chasing the sun—for another hour, at least." Unable to rein back the action, I run a hand down the back of her head—intending to do only that. Slow the fuck down. You have six months. But when I pull it back, she chases my touch with her head. Burrows so deeply against my hand she ends up pressed against my chest. After the discernible click of her seatbelt, the rest of her follows, sitting fully on my lap—

And I sure as hell don't stop her.

"Do you...mind?" She glances up, adorably sheepish. "I can see the sunset better from here."

"And I can see you better from here." I let a full grin escape. Goddamn, it feels good. "So it's a win-win."

I hope for a smile in return, perhaps even one inviting a new kiss, but her nose crinkles, and her gaze remains somber. "This decision...the new contract..." She traces the pattern in my sweater with the tip of a finger. "It is not a 'win-win' for you, is it?"

"That's not for you to worry about."

Tighter nose crunch. "To be plain about it, Cassian, that is bullshit."

I struggle not to laugh. "Is that so?"

"I have a mind," she asserts. "And two ears that work."

"I never doubted either, favori."

"I know what Father's voice sounds like, when he is trying to justify a business choice to a colleague. Yours sounded the same way during several calls on your cell phone today. You have walked out in a tree because of this."

"Walked out in a—?" Deep frown. "Do you mean...gone out on a limb?"

She huffs. Waves an impatient hand. "You have taken a risk. A huge one." Her hand slides up, sneaking a little beneath my sweater, caressing the side of my neck. Once more, the breath I've just regulated is a wind storm in my chest. Outwardly, I suck it in as calmly as I can...praying to God the tempest between my legs is equally obedient. "I want to be worth that risk for you, Cassian."

I swallow hard. Run a hand along the back of her arm, up to her neck, around to her nape. "You already are."

"Bullsh—"

I kiss her into silence, but with lingering tenderness. “Ssshhh. We’re not even halfway through the flight.” She draws breath to speak but I yank it right back out of her with another kiss—still lingering, not as patient. “We have time,” I grate. “Lots of time, all right? Let’s just—”

And suddenly, I’m the one being cut off with a kiss. Correction: a kiss, borrowing my idea but very little else; incinerating my temperance on the sacrificial pyre of her passion. Correction: her passion. She is a fireball in my arms: a groaning, grabbing, greedy burst of need, twisting her slender fingers into my hair until our mouths are meshed, our chests are fitted, and our crotches are grinding with inescapable heat...and lust.

Annnnd, the discreet hard-on is officially in my rearview. Who the hell have I tried to fool about that, anyway? Discretion is my Dulcinea when she’s near. A glorious, impossible dream.

A soundtrack for another time—definitely not when my balls pulse like this, rocketing my shaft to a solid ten on the pain scale. The fucker fills and lengthens, punching at my fly in response to her incredible little mewls and erotic little writhes. She is going to kill me, and right now, I can think of no better way to go.

When she finally relents, we are both breathing like goddamn freight trains—but she barely waits before pulling my hand free from her nape then guiding it down, down, down, until it’s formed to her inner thigh. With our gazes still bound, she rolls her hips...sliding her soft flesh against my trembling touch.

But that’s not my undoing.

Her awkward little swallow. The tentative flick of her tongue along the seam of her lips. The questioning glint in her eyes, so unsure about what she is doing but trusting herself—trusting me—enough to follow the instinct of her desire, and do it anyway...

“Wh-what if...I do not want to waste any more time?”

Now I kiss my restraint goodbye.

With a long, slow, growl, I dip my head back down while inching my fingertips up. There’s a method to the madness—and with her, it feels like madness—of being able to read her better through her lips. Their stillness or hesitation will tell me that despite what her brain dictates about honoring my “risk,” her body is on an entirely separate page.

So far, we are very much on the same page.

Holy fuck, what a page.

As I sweep deeper into the heat of her mouth, my hand explores the silken valley between her thighs. Her skin is soft and shivery beneath my fingertips; her muscles bunch as she undulates in ready response. Pain pricks my scalp as she clings to me tighter, tighter still. “Yes,” I hiss, blowing the sound along her lips. “God, yes. Make me feel it, woman. Every shred of it.”

She moans and shakes...as I trail my touch higher.

Every. Fucking. Shred.

She arches up. Strangled sounds vibrate in her throat. I kiss down that strained column, reveling in her tension. She’s a drawn bow, coiling deeper as I glide a path toward the erotic triangle at her apex. It’s shielded by modest panties. I palm her mound through them, my lips hitching as she gasps.

“C-Cassian!”

I growl again. Rub fingers along the fabric’s center panel. “Wet panties, sweet Ella. They feel so fucking good.”

“Mmmm,” she stutters. “I—I am glad you—ahhhh.” She jerks upward as I circle my fingers. I can feel her clit even through the barrier, trembling...hardening.

“Tell me they’re white.”

She shoots a confused stare. “Wh-what?”

“Your panties,” I clarify. “So help me God, if we were in this airplane alone, I’d be hiking up your skirt to look for myself, but for now, you’ll have to let my imagination do the work.” I let my gaze grow heavy hoods while running fingers along the inner seams, never delighting in teasing a woman more. She’s slick with perspiration and arousal. She smells like tropical flowers and honey.

The crown of my cock is wet now too.

“Color,” I manage to command again. “Tell me the fucking color, Mishella.”

She gulps again. “Wh-white.”

I hiss, exposing my bliss. Knew it.

“Ohhhh.” It’s the only option of a response I give her, working my fingers inward, against her bare flesh. “By the Creator. That is...that is so...”

I watch it all take over her face—the wonder, the awe, the heat, the passion—in a transfixed state of my own. Though my cock throbs, damn near screaming for emancipation, it isn’t as important as the horizon to which I’m guiding her. “Yeah. It is, isn’t it?”

“Cassian.” She sighs. “Oh...my...”

“My gorgeous girl.” I swipe my thumb in, testing the taut bundle at her very center. She jolts then mewls, fisting my sweater. “You’re a virgin to this too, aren’t you? Nobody has ever touched you like this before...right here?”

“Oh!” Her head snaps back. “Oh, by all the powers!”

“Tell me, favori. Has anyone—any man—ever stroked you here? Made you this wet and hot?”

“N-no,” she finally blurts. “Nobody, Cassian. Only you have touched me like this.”

I kiss her softly, conveying my approval. “Now tell me...the naughty way. Tell me how you like my fingers in your pussy. How your wet, succulent clit likes my strokes. How you want me to play with the edges of your tight, virginal tunnel...like this.”

“Yes!” It is more rasp than exclamation, though I’m still grateful Doyle has the bedroom door closed. But another part of me mourns the fact, wishing the ass could hear every note of her gasping arousal...wondering if he’d glare at me now for the crazy contract commitment. “I—I like your fingers there. Want you...stroking me...touching my clit...”

“And playing with your entrance?”

“And—and playing with my entrance.”

“With my cock getting harder, as I think of fucking you there? Ella?” I charge it when her lips go still. She’s back to remembering the white panties instead of the gorgeous vixen beneath them. But finally she pulls in a harsh breath, squeezes her eyes shut, and forces the obedient words out.

“Yes,” she blurts. “Yes—all right—I like it when you think a-about f-fucking me.” She breaks in on herself with a moan that has to be the most erotic sound I’ve ever heard. Curls my sweater tighter in her grip, using the hold as leverage for her whole body, shoving herself against my fingers. It’s completely unnecessary. Her fever has infected me too. I flick her erect pearl as fast as I can, snarling in satisfaction when her eyes reopen and her mouth drops in arousal.

“Oh, I’m thinking of fucking you, Ella. Be sure of it.” I thrust up my hips until the swells of her ass embrace the head of my cock, and we groan together from the torturous friction. My boxers are soaked, a cruel reminder of how badly I want to be pumping like a heathen inside her tight core. “Hard and hot and deep. You’d be feeling me in your eye sockets. Screaming for me. Pleading to let you c—”

She lurches her head up to deliver the kiss—or maybe yanks mine down, as if it matters—joining our mouths as our bodies crave, an unthinking collision of fire and fervor and flesh as she writhes toward a climax that has me breathing just as hard...needing just as much.

“Let me come, Cassian. Oh, by the sweet fucking Creator, make me come now!”

CHAPTER SIX

MISHELLA

This is not me.

It cannot be.

These are not my words. Not my lips, rambling with these filthy, wanton things; certainly not my body, pulsing with desire I never dreamed possible...heat I never knew existed...

It is all so good.

Too good.

Not me. Not me. Not me.

Not true.

For as Cassian swirls his thumb in then presses it there, punching the hot bundle at my core, I slam back into myself like a soul returned from the dead. I know all of myself, suddenly seeing the past and the present and even the future, for time ceases to exist or matter. Only sensation does, pure and perfect. As my sex screams with ecstasy, my blood is made of stars. My vision is made of light.

My spirit is flown to completion.

“Fuck! Yesssss!”

I ride wave after wave of the silver-white miracle, now unable to utter a sound. Cassian carries me through with words in a baritone gone husky, keeping me from drowning with his strength and his touch. He is my rock...my haven...my all.

The thought is like an icy tide.

Too soon. It is much too soon.

And yet, I cannot deny it.

He bought me. For the next six months, everything I am is his.

Yet every new moment with him brings me closer to...

me.

Whoever that is.

Do I even know? Do I even want to? Will she be a woman I find, only to be forced to hide upon returning to Arcadia? Not being bound to an arranged marriage does not excuse the rest of Father and Mother's proprieties...the remaining walls of their boxes.

Even more terrifying: what if she is a person I do not like?

Questions that must remain secrets. I ensure that by dragging my eyes shut as I lift my head, a rag doll in reverse—appropriate, since my body is now limp as one. Cassian assists the feeling by gently massaging my thigh while pulling out from beneath my skirt. His other hand duplicates the pressure along my shoulders. Soon, my head droops to his chest, my senses tempted back toward subconsciousness. I fight them, despite his disciplining growl.

“Sleep, Ella. You need it, favori.”

“Mmmm. Noooo.” I sound slurry and silly, the rag doll animated...sort of. “You,” I insist. “I need to...take care of...you.” Despite the lethargy, I am all too aware that his body is still the stiff opposite of mine—especially the part nestled right against my backside. And yes, even in my partial coma, I am aware of how deliciously good it feels.

“I’ll be fine.”

“That is why you sound like a jungle snake is strangling you?”

He grunts. “Why don’t you let me worry about the snakes?”

I trump his sound with a giggle. “Or maybe one snake?”

His laugh rumbles beneath my ear. “Dirty girl. Are you trying to corrupt me?”

“Hmmpfh? No...no corruption. Education.”

“Ohhhh. Hmmm. Right. Education. I can...understand that.”

“Have to know the differences between snakes, Cassian.” I nestle a little deeper against him. As a yawn takes over, so does a distant memory. Maybe not so distant. Was it just yesterday, about this time, that I sat drinking sun tea with Brooke and Vy, being subjected to my own lesson in corruption...and snakes?

“Is that so?” His murmur is warm in my hair. “And what about them?”

“Well, according to Brooke and Vy—”

“But of course...”

“Some are small and harmless,” I go on, disregarding his wry tone. “And others are anacondas.”

“Huge and dangerous?”

Little frown. “But you are not dangerous.”

My dulled logic delays my mortified gasp, though not his chuckle. He tilts up my face, lowering a soft kiss on my nose before murmuring, “Sleep, my little armeau. You have a bigger adventure ahead than you think. The anaconda agrees with me, whether he likes it or not.”

His firm tone demands obedience—and I am too tired to push back anymore. But his sarcasm also dictates a laugh, and on that, I am unable to deliver. *I* am the one choked now—by a thrill that curls down to my toes.

Armeau. He’s deliberately labeled me with another Arcadian word.

It means...

Gift.

CASSIAN

I’ve lived in New York for nearly ten of my twenty-eight years. Have taken this journey back into the city more times than I can count, gazing at the manmade forest across the Hudson before the Lincoln Tunnel makes the skyline disappear—but over the years, have come to think of those buildings as just collections of rooms with collections of people who have nothing but collections of meetings, contracts, conference calls, action plans, presentations, power plans...endless demands of me. Endless lists for me.

The work that rescued me from grief four years ago has become my Manhattan cage.

Until now.

Until, through the eyes of Mishella Santelle, the forest has become magic again. And those eyes, huge as serving platters made from the blue quartz on her island, don’t miss a damn thing. Practically bouncing from one side of the limo to the other, scrambling over the bench seat we share to see it all, she is a conduit of enchantment—a sorceress given new powers, courtesy of New York City.

“How do all those buildings *fit*?”

“How many kinds of cars *are* there?”

“What are the yellow ones called?”

“Can we take a ride in one of those big ones with the seats on top?”

“The horns are like music. So pretty.”

“Wait. It is...a tunnel...*under the water*?”

“So when the lights turn red, everyone just...*stops*? What if someone does not agree to that?”

“All those people, moving together...they are like pods of dolphins, only on the land...”

She trails into rapt silence after that one. Freezes in place, crouched like an awed kitten over my lap. I rip my gaze away from the perfect curves of her profile, following the line of her stare. It’s a quarter to six, so the crowds along 5th are still dominated by business suits and headphones, but she watches the scene as if memorizing every face she sees. I am filled with the same feeling, only my focus frames only one face. I need to remember this moment. *Everything* about it. The azure glitter in her eyes. The twilight breeze in her

long curls. The way she's yanked off my blinders and made me see the poetry in New York City crowds.

Don't forget this. Don't forget this.

Especially not now, as she angles her gaze back to me. Blushes a little, as if discerning exactly what I've been up to. "It is incredible, Cassian."

I don't tear my stare from her. "It certainly is, Ella."

She laughs softly, and sucks in her bottom lip in that go-to move she has for awkward times. *Little siren*; she doesn't realize that shit makes me yearn to replace her teeth with mine—and use that as only the first place I'll bite her. Maybe one day, I will.

Maybe right *now* I will.

I reach a finger up. Tug at that strawberry-colored pillow, still caught beneath her teeth. Let my gaze dip there, fully informing her of my intention.

I'm going to kiss her. Hard.

"Welcome home, Mr. Court!"

I refrain from lunging out of the car and driving a fist into Scott's cheerful grin. The kid isn't responsible for me losing all track of time and place; I should be grateful he didn't yank open the door and get an eyeful of me lunging down Ella's throat—and maybe up her skirt. *Likely* up her skirt.

I clench my jaw, forcing a smile, before climbing out. "Thanks, Scott. Good to be home."

Things become more fun when his grin turns into curiosity, clearly wondering why I hang on to the back door instead of letting him close it. Scott's love for the Jag XJL is no secret; he exploits every chance to caress his "car baby." Inside five seconds, he's actually a little antsy.

Until I reach back inside, and help Mishella step out.

And suppress a chuckle, witnessing the normally smooth college kid become a puddle of astonishment.

If Ella notices the influx of Shar-Pei in his brow, she doesn't show it. Instead, extending a hand with openness and grace, she says, "*Bon sonar*. I—uh—mean, good afternoon. My, what a lovely tie."

Scott runs a hand down the strip of navy-colored satin—and his puffed chest. "Well, thank you." I throw a smug smirk from behind her. If he's not going to mention the tie is part of his required uniform, neither will I.

"Mishella, this is Scott Gaines. He's usually around to drool over the car." I cock a trenchant brow. "And *not* a lot of anything else."

Scott clicks from astonished to stunned. Plenty of women have disembarked from this car before—there's no getting around that, especially with Scott—but to this day, I doubt if the guy knows any of their names. I'm irked with myself about that, until confronted with one irrefutable fact. None of them have stopped to compliment his tie, either.

"So nice to meet you. I am—"

"May I present Mishella Santelle, of the Island of Arcadia." The caveman has stomped in, inspiring my interruption, but I'm not sorry. Handling the introduction allows me to answer the rest of the questions in Scott's gaze. "She'll be staying at Temptation for...a while." Though I am the one who set it, the idea of a time limit on her stay is suddenly repellent—but I accept the twist in my gut. It's likely the first of many to come.

"Oh." At first Scott's response is pleasant. Why wouldn't it be, when basking in the sun of this woman's smile? A second later, my statement sinks in. "*Oh*. Really?"

"Yeah." I arch both brows now. "Really." Translation: *deal with it and behave yourself*.

"Well." The guy bounces on his toes before swooping up Ella's hand, then bowing low over it. "In that case, welcome to Temptation, and consider me at your service."

Mishella laughs. Giggles, really, though she is not a typical giggler. Even that girlish indulgence gets her musical infusion...the kind of harmony that shoots straight to a man's cock, as he wonders how to incite it even more. "*Merderim. Bennim honeur*," she murmurs back before translating, "Thank you. It is my honor."

I give Scott two seconds to be charmed by the Arcadian poetry. *One. Two.* Then I step back around,

grasping her hand with open possessiveness. “All right, all right. I’ve got it from here, whelp.” Instant gloat, as the melody of a giggle again sprinkles the air—for me.

Scott accepts the trounce with a good-natured bow. “Of course, Mr. Court. I’ll take care of the car now.”

“I’m sure you will.”

I say it while gathering Ella’s hand closer. Tucking it under my elbow, and resting her elegant fingers along my forearm. It feels so fucking good to have her there. So right. I guide her past the entrance door, set into the brick wall I had installed when renovating this place five years ago. The entrance disguises what lies beyond: a circular forecourt, also made of brick, leading to a marble staircase that swoops up to the mansion’s main entrance. Urns with modern lines counteract the gothic impact of it all—and the memories of the woman who loved this place because of that.

Now, for the first time, I see the space through Mishella’s marveling gaze. It’s new again. Beautiful once more.

My chest rips in conflict.

In remembrance...

I am glad when Mishella stops to peer around more. Use the chance to turn, fisting the center of my sternum. The cavity beneath has been so dark for so long, these new feelings are like a fucking heart attack.

I’m sorry. I’m sorry, my blossom...

but maybe it’s time for new memories.

“Cassian?”

I spin back around, probably looking as if a ghost has shown up. *And maybe she has.* Lily always did like being the center of attention...

“Hmmm?”

Her eyes find mine—and just like that, my world is filled with nothing else again. The huge blue irises, evoking the sea and skies of her island, bathe me with more warmth and hope and completion than the first time we met. “This—is yours?”

I smile. There’s nothing else to do in response to the pure amazement in her voice. “Yes. It is.”

“The whole thing?”

I can’t help a soft chuckle. “Well...yes.”

“It’s like a palais!”

“Not quite.”

“It has,”—she pauses, her finger in the air, counting the floors—“six levels.” Her gaze returns to me, narrowing. “The palace in Sancti has only two more, including the beach and private residence.”

I shrug. Instantly recognize the lame excuse of a move—but what other option do I have? “A lot it sits empty.” *Fondness for the metaphors today, man?* “I bought it to prove something, at a time in my life when I needed that. But the neighborhood is good, and the views of the Hudson are excellent from the turrets.” Not that I’d made the time for reflective moments lately.

“There are *turrets?*” Her head rocks back as she searches the building once more. Watching her like that, hair tumbling down her back, creamy neck exposed, makes me instantly think of her inside one of those towers—hands fogging the windows as I pound into her from behind...

“There are two.” I clear the croak from my throat. “They’re on the other side.”

Her smile lights up her whole face. “Can we go in them?”

“Of course.” I add hurriedly, “Well, one.” Force a casual shrug. “The other is used for storage. Probably a mess.”

A mess. That’s a safe way of putting it.

She pops her hands together, enough to serve as proxy for excited applause. “One is just as perfect.”

“Then I am at your service.” I give Scott’s words a deliberately husky inflection. Her smile drops just enough that I know she’s heard...and comprehends.

But first things first.

Introducing her to everyone else.

We cross the ornately tiled vestibule at the top of the stairs and are headed for the waiting elevator, when she stops again. Reads the Art Deco letters etched into the granite over the lift doors.

“Temptation.” Her forehead purses. “The building is...actually called that?”

I nod. “It was built in the early twentieth century, in honor of the original owner’s wife, whose name was actually Temperance.”

“When did irony rear its funny head?”

“Nineteen thirty-three, when the government repealed the Prohibition Act. As soon as that happened, the *new* owners had the first three floors turned into a multi-level supper club. They’d already been operating the basement as a speakeasy for years.”

Her frown deepens. “Why would people go to a place just to speak easier?”

“They do it all the time, *favori*. It’s called therapy.” When my joke doesn’t register, I simply go on, “It’s a slang phrase, once used to describe an illegal tavern.”

“Illegal?” she retorts. “Why?”

“They just were. As a whole, selling and consuming alcohol was—for many years. Many people thought the stuff was evil.”

“But declaring something outside the law...does that not just make it more enticing?”

Fucking great. She has to go and issue one of her little insights now, in that insanely sexy accent, as the lift doors close and we’re sealed in for half a minute.

Half a minute is all I need.

I sweep around, pinning her against the elevator’s cage, before dipping and taking her lips beneath mine. I’m not savage about the move, though I yearn to be. The contrast of her soft curves against the ornate steel...and thinking of taking her hard enough to embed the pattern into her flesh...

Fuck. *Fuck*.

What is this woman doing to me?

I pull away enough to stare into her impossibly gorgeous eyes. In the dimness of the lift, they’ve turned the color of smoke. “For the record,” I rasp, “You’re forbidden to say ‘enticing’ again, unless we’re alone.”

A slow smile teases at her lips. “And if I do not heed your...decree?”

I dip my head in a mock threat. “Punishment. Merciless. For certain.”

“I shall make a note of that.”

“In what journal would that go in?”

“Oh, I think a new one shall have to be created.” Her fingers toy at my sweater. Her smile flirts with my gaze. “‘Cassian’s Disciplines?’”

“*Goddamn*.” I push closer, letting *her* crotch feel what that does to *mine*. “That has a very nice ring to it...”

I’m inches away from smashing another kiss on her, devil take the consequences, when the lift *thunks* to a stop at level six—and surprise, surprise—Lucifer himself is waiting with a glare for us, right through the steel mesh. All right, so Hodge is a close enough comparison, and that’s before Prim arrives on the scene. She has to be near; obviously Scott called upstairs the second Ella and I left his sight.

Sure enough, as soon as the door opens and I help Mishella onto the landing, Prim rounds the corner from the kitchen. Her blonde dreadlocks are twisted into a high bun, making it even easier to note the fiery shade of her gold eyes. Fury will do that to a woman—especially this one.

Despite Prim’s ire spiking the air, Mishella slips her hand free from mine then reaches out, as amiable as she was with Scott. “Hello. It is good to meet you. My name is Mishella. And yours?”

Prim glares as if Ella’s fingers are scorpions—until her eyes snatch up to meet mine, as I have known they would. I return the scrutiny with a sole, silent message. *Play nice. We’ll talk later.*

Her pierced nose flares a little. *You bet your ass we will.* She makes short work of accepting the handshake then stating, “Prim Smith. And before you ask, it’s not short for anything. And before you start laughing, I like my name fine.”

“Why would I laugh?” Ella’s nose crinkles. “I like it too. It is unique. And pretty.”

“Thank you.”

There’s civility in it. Just a toss. I still grab it for the win. My little sorceress has melted *Prim* after just thirty seconds. *Alert the press.*

While the advent is significant, it confuses the hell out of Hodge. My burly curmudgeon of a houseman collects his paychecks from me but signed his heart away to Prim at least a year ago—not that she’ll ever notice. Still, Prim’s not jabbed the expected iceberg into Ella’s *Titanic*, clearly causing his internal debate. “So...uh...Boss, are there bags to handle? I think Scott said some are coming up on the service elevator?”

Ah. Conflict handled with the man’s default to practical hospitality. I accept *it* for the win too. “He’s correct. Just put them in the master bedroom.”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

“The master bedroom?”

I ignore Prim’s snip, turning Ella’s attention toward Hodge. “This is Conchobhar Hodgkins, houseman and engineer extraordinaire—but we call him Hodge for obvious reasons. He’ll be your call for anything from heavy lifting to rewiring the lights.”

“And an occasional green smoothie.” Hodge jams hands into his back pockets and nervously toes the floor. He’s not used to bantering socially, but is clearly falling under Ella’s spell as quickly as Scott did—though has held out twice as long as *I* was able.

“Oh.” Her smile widens. “That sounds delicious.”

“If one enjoys drinking the lawn for lunch,” Prim mutters.

Mishella laughs, but kills the sound off when struck by Prim’s cold fish of an attitude. I’m tempted to locate my own inner mackerel and show Prim what a real seafood smack-down is like, but am thawed once more by the hand curled beneath my elbow, and the eager smile beaming past my shoulder. In this moment, I’m certain the woman can probably talk me out of a kidney. Probably both. Suddenly, the wars fought over Helen of Troy and Ann Boleyn don’t seem so idiotic.

“So do I get my tour now?”

I tuck her hand in tighter. Return her grin like a goofy fool—and perhaps I *am* one. At least she’s not asking for a war—or a kidney. “You bet.”

“Even the turret?”

“The turret!”

Prim’s outcry turns me back around—along with the look I’ve been rehearsing for her since the takeoff from Arcadia. Because I knew this moment would arrive. That there’d be *one* chance to communicate this message in the space of a stare.

Mishella Santelle is staying for six months, whether you’re happy about it or not. Which means we’re cooling it about Turret Two, also whether you like it or not.

Prim’s nostrils flare again. Her lips jam into a line of resignation. I nod and declare to Mishella, “We can *start* with the turret, if you like.”

She really indulges a laugh now. “Let us begin with wherever *you* like. I want to see it all, so it does not matter.”

As I guide her toward the main living room, it’s not without a parting stare from Prim—and the knowing truth attached in those deep amber irises. And the sadness layered beneath that.

She wants to see it all, hmmm? Well, good luck with figuring that one out, Cas.

But Prim knows the answer to *that* already too.

There will be no “figuring that one out.”

Because in the end, even Mishella Santelle doesn’t get to see it all. Not every corner of my home...*not* every room in my heart...and *not* the fucking ghost who lives in both.

Not the parts of me that are best left in that grave with her.

It makes sense now: the decision I made back on Arcadia, to call this thing at six months. It’s enough time to savor the heaven...without fearing the hell will rise up. Because, as I already know all too clearly,

hell has a way of doing that. But for six months, I can bribe away the demons. After that, they can have my soul again. I'm sure the damn thing will never be the same after this, anyway.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MISHELLA

Curious.

Even thousands of miles from home, midnight feels exactly the same.

The sounds are different: a wilderness bustling with cars and trains and people instead of wind and waves and birds. The smells are different too: steam and steel and the foods of a thousand cultures, instead of the island aroma that has always brought reminders of only one thing: the water. This is not a complaint; I love the sea; it is the Creator's perpetual gift to Arcadia—but it has always, simply, been there. Then again the next day. And the next. And the next.

This island...is a new world every other minute, even at midnight. Beyond the turret's windows, I watch it all: the people bustling, the horns honking, the trains whooshing, the sirens screaming. The chaos seems to mesh, becoming a peace of its own. A manmade ocean.

It is the respite I need.

The synergy giving me shelter from thoughts that will not stop taunting.

From the memories...

Of that conversation.

The one I was not supposed to overhear. Cassian and Prim, hiding themselves in the pantry off the kitchen after dinner, clearly thinking I was still enraptured by all the technical doo-dads of the living room. Granted, the temptation was certainly there—so many wonderments to play with, hidden cleverly by the wood, glass, and leather décor—but manners are always more important than amusement, so I got up to help clear the table.

Only to wish I had not.

“What the hell were you thinking, Cassian?”

“Prim—”

“Wait. Wrong question. You're always thinking. Just which head was it with this time?”

“Goddammit. This is about more than that.”

“And you don't think I'm afraid of that too?”

“Now what are you about?”

“Oh God, Cas. Have you thrown up the blinders that high—or do you see it and just choose to ignore it?”

“I'm not 'ignoring' a fucking thing!”

“Of course not. Which is why you flew that girl home from the middle of the Mediterranean, then moved her right into the master with you. Let me guess. She was wasting away in the cinders somewhere, and Prince Charming had to ride in with the magic slipper. Wait; no. Perhaps she was a wilting flower, ready to bloom. Eliza Doolittle, filthy island style. Enter Professor fucking Higgins, ready to make that rain in Spain fall mainly on the plain.”

“Yeah. Right. That's it exactly.”

“Are...are you laughing about this? Why the hell are you laughing?”

“Because you're not making any sense.”

“I'm making perfect sense. Dear God, more sense than I want to make. She doesn't just punch one button for you, does she? She punches both. That's why you didn't come home with just the T-shirt.”

“The...what?”

“You went to the island. Banged the local wahine. You should've come home with the damn T-shirt. Instead, you came home with the girl. God. You are such a moron.”

“Dammit, Prim. Keep it down. And for the record, I didn’t bang her.”

“You mean you haven’t yet. I’ll take that lovely silence as a yes. And after you do, what do you think will happen? That she’ll happily hop on a plane back home, without asking for a cent in ‘compensation for services rendered?’”

“It’s not like that, either.”

“So you are compensating her?”

“All right. This conversation is over.”

I did not linger to confirm if it really was or not. Had the damage not already been done? That answer vibrates throughout the clamp remaining on my chest—that has been there ever since making my excuses from staying for Prim’s “famous tiramisu” to retire early, feigning exhaustion from our traveling.

At least it bought me time to prepare for bed—in all the awkward senses of the word—for my first night in a man’s bed. It did not halt my mind from racing with every possible, horrible, incredible scenario that might come. Would he seduce me gently? Taunt me with another version of what he did to me on the plane? Or simply launch into bed and fuck me wildly?

Oh. Yes. Option number three...please?

A brutal breath sucks through my lips. A flush invades my neck and breasts. Heat surges between my thighs. Even my mouth aches, craving the dominance of his once more...as it has since the moment that he finally did come to bed...

Then, after but a few minutes, fell into a drained slumber.

After that, as Brooke would say, my choice of action was a no-brainer. The second his breaths evened into deep sleep, I was out of bed, into my slippers, and headed for this exact spot. The turret is my favorite part of his tour from earlier, perhaps because he’s restored it to its art deco grandeur rather than installing the high-gloss look prevailing over the rest of the building’s interior. Granted, the first three floors of the place are satellite offices for Court Corporation, modern by necessity—but the other areas feel “off” to me, as if the design is a deliberate attempt to shut out the past.

More disturbingly, especially after my accidental eavesdrop on Cassian and Prim’s argument, I sense there is actually a past to shut out.

The recognition brings a heavy sigh.

“I’d offer a penny for those thoughts, but it sounds like they’re worth a dollar.”

The commentary from a few feet back, roughened by recent sleep, is a surprise because it is not a surprise. The air I breathe in for the sigh is the same air that shifts, making room for his presence. Just like it did in the palais back on Arcadia...and has ever since.

Only all those times, I was not trying to inhale around a vice in my chest.

I do not turn, not wanting Cassian to see my grimace. Idiot. Why should he not see it...and know the conflict weighing on me? Prim made no secret of hers.

“I...could not sleep. Time difference, I suppose.” Or the hundred ways I keep wondering why Prim’s input is such a priority to you.

“Is that all? Just the jet lag?” He stretches on the floor next to me, leaning on an elbow as opposed to my stomach-down recline. The reading chaise behind us is comfortable enough, but being closer to the city’s energy is a better fit for my spirit tonight. He sees that too. I discern it in the forests of his eyes.

Does he see the rest of my thoughts?

His query has not made that clear. I worry that he does...and that he does not.

“You must be just as thrown out of your kilt as me,” I finally offer—to be met by a chuckle that should not be as sexy as it is.

“Off kilter?” he offers. “Though I’m not opposed to kilts or taking them off, if that’s the request.” He sobers a little while tugging at his hair, which tumbles lushly into his eyes. “Scottish is somewhere in my mutt mix, which is why my hair turns a little red in the sun...or so Mom tells me.”

“Your Maimanne?” This new revelation tempers my jealousy about Prim—for the moment. “Are you two close?”

A smile remains on his face but changes. Softens. “Yeah. You could say that.”

“Why?” I return. “Why...could I say that?”

His smile evaporates. “We’ve been through a lot together. A lot.” His shoulders stiffen. “Perhaps it’s best we leave it there.”

“Of course.” I swivel my head, resting it atop my hands, again attempting to put aside the petty hurt in my heart. “You have others to confide in, after all.”

So much for attempting—or even kidding myself that I did. But the dig is vague. He has as much right to toss it aside as I did to make it. If he does, then at least I know exactly where I stand. If he does not—

He definitely does not.

Bracing a hand around the back of my neck, he jerks my stare back up to him. The gesture is an unsettling mix of command and calm—reminding me all too clearly of how he took over things in my bedroom, back on Arcadia. Was that just two nights ago? Only a heartbeat has passed since then, right?

No.

A forever has passed.

“You heard,” he grates. “Didn’t you? Prim and me. In the pantry.” He shakes his head. Gets down a leaden swallow. “Never mind. I know you did. I felt you there. Standing at the sink.”

Forget about unsettled. I am suddenly frightened—gripped by spectral shivers, such as the ones I have known while working late in the palais and glimpsing the building’s famous ghosts in my periphery. Only now, the otherworld does not hide in the shadows. It is here, in the air between us...in the dazzle of emeralds in Cassian’s eyes, in the promise of fire in his touch...in the confirmation that he knows me, senses me, feels me just as I do him.

In the magic of us.

“Prim is a good friend, Ella. Nothing more.”

But you have history with her. A lot of it.

I cannot bring myself to utter it. “She has the right to feel...what she feels.”

He grunts. Retorts through his teeth, “The fuck she does.”

“She cares about you. It is a glaring truth, Cassian, from the first second she gazes upon you.” I curl a hand against his cheek, as if I can actually soothe his ire. “I do not blame her.”

He presses his hand over mine. Runs it down to my elbow with nearly punishing pressure. “I don’t want to talk about her right now.”

“But...”

“But what?”

I push to a sitting position. Pull my arm down—as far as he will let me. His hold on my elbow remains firm and determined. “Am I just a ‘rescue project’ to you, Cassian? The Eliza Doolittle you yanked from the slums, and—”

He shoves to his feet. I almost expect him to punch one of the walls or windows but he becomes scarier, not moving, his posture impossibly erect. “Is that what you believe?” Every word is so low, they are almost drowned by a pair of emergency sirens down on the street, their wails growing.

“I...I do not want to.”

I let my head fall, but that brings even more bizarre sensations. Sitting here, my gaze filled with his bare feet, I feel...intimate with him. Stripped for him.

Connecting...

I lean forward. Just enough to touch his knee with my forehead. He’s only wearing white cotton pants, and I realize he must have yanked them out of his luggage. They smell the way he did on Arcadia: his cedar and soap blended with ocean wind and oranges...

And there’s something else now. A smell unique to New York. Musky. Masculine. Really erotic.

Before I can breathe it in again, he is next to me. Next to me, plummeted back to the floor. Both his hands dig into my hair, forcing my gaze up into his.

Connecting...

“Don’t you see?” he rasps into the inches between our lips. “Can’t you see?” And then his mouth is on me, molding me...needing me. Then rasping, “Mishella. My favori. My perfect armeau. I brought you here because I’m a selfish bastard who hasn’t had anyone like you in my world in...” He stops, shaking his head, gaze glittering once more, a thousand shades of confusion. “In a very long time.

“Mishella Santelle...it is you who have rescued me.”

CASSIAN

What the fuck have you done?

My head machetes me with the words. My gut gladly joins in.

But my heart and my soul have never felt more perfect. Yeah...for the first time in my life, perfect and petrified are happy pals, powering their way into the arms that crush around her, the body that fits against hers...

The cock that swells between us.

“Cassian.” Her whisper is high and ragged, verbally interpreting the tears that hovers so beautifully in her eyes. I gaze hard into their glimmer, willing the wetness to break free. To cleanse me, rescue me all over again. To grant me permission for what I’ve been craving since the moment my skin first touched hers, during that formal reception back on Arcadia. She knows it too. I see it in the quiver of her lips, in the choppy pulse in her neck, in the little trembles of her fingers, all ten raising up, bracing my jaw.

Finally, they thicken, brim...and escape.

My perfect invitation.

I crash my mouth back down.

Invade hers without hesitation. Claim her without compunction. Kiss her like she’s my last fucking breath.

As our mouths continue to chase and tease and caress and conquer, our bodies slide all the way to the floor. When we break apart for air, I drag my gaze open to feast again on the sight of her, now awash in the glow of the streetlights and the moon. She’s wearing a light blue sleep set tonight, coaxing out dazzling sparks of silver in the stare she returns to me. My beautiful gift.

I dip in, kissing her once more. With reverence this time.

With thanks.

When her fingers caress down to my chest, I don’t feel so reverent anymore. Keep it together. Keep. It. Together.

The mantra pounds my blood, even as my dick throbs against her hip. Harder still, as she glides her touch across me, a look of wonder in those blue-silver irises. My nipples stiffen for her. My abs tauten, cinching in my breath.

Go lower. Oh fuck...don’t go lower.

I seize my sole moment of self-control, grabbing her wrist, slowly lowering it to the floor on her other side. With our stares still latched, I rasp, “You know what they say about turn-about...” Actually, I’m not sure if she knows—but the anticipation of what she’ll transform it into already enchants my mind, and takes my cock along for the ride.

“Mmmm.” She lifts a modestly flirty look—quite possibly the only woman on the planet who can. “That is one I know.”

Her start-and-stop sigh finishes it—as I yank on the ribbon enclosure of her top, baring her breasts to my view.

And what a fucking view.

She’s more exquisite than I imagined. Round, firm, and full, with flesh a shade paler than the parts of her that get year-round Arcadian sun...a perfect contrast to the sweet strawberries of her nipples, jutting from dusky, tight areolas. They pucker right before I lean in, worshipping her with soft nips and licks, until she’s writhing beneath me—

And then I use my teeth.

“Oh! By the powers! Cassian.”

I palm the breast I'm attending. Constrict it a little, forcing more blood into her throbbing tip, before I bite again. As she screams, I suckle away the pain. When I shift to her opposite peak, she mutters something in Arcadian and drives her hand through my hair, forcing my mouth down harder.

It drives me crazy. In all the good ways.

Too many ways.

I reach up, snaring her hand again. Swing it over her head, until it's pinned to the floor there. In the same violent sweep, I thoroughly embed my thighs against hers. Push up, notching the bastard of a ridge in my pants against the sweet, wet patch in hers, until we're dry-humping like kids stealing a quickie between classes, fast and fierce and feverish.

“Fuck. Me.”

“Take. Me.”

“You're so...hot.”

“You are so...huge.”

“I—we—have to—slow down.”

“Wh-what? Why?”

“Can't...hold back. Not for much...longer.”

“Then do not. For Creator's sake, Cassian, please!”

I rear up. Try to shake my head. That's a big fucking try. “No. There's no do-over on this. I'm going to make this good for you, dammit.” In my head, I already have a vision of how this should go. Candlelit bath, champagne by the fire, and then the roll in the sheets, going as gently as I can. Nothing in there about screwing her senseless in the turret, in the middle of the night, with half of Manhattan watching. Okay, Manhattan probably doesn't care, but that's beside the point. “It's going to be the best for you. It's going to be—”

Her laugh cuts me short, so manic it's cute. “Cassian, if it is more ‘the best’ than this, you will kill me from sheer pleasure.”

I let a taut growl go free. “With all due respect, favori, let me worry about your death-by-pleasure.”

Her nose crinkles. It disappears into a stare of pure resolve—an unnerving sight, for the second I'm still able to think—before her hand is under my pants and all over my erection, milking the pre-come I've somehow kept at bay. Not anymore. I turn into one groan after the next as the drops escape, searing and perfect—and torturous. With every one of my moans, her smile kicks up a little higher, until I'm not sure what's snipping the neurons in my brain quicker: her perfect touch or her incredible beauty.

“Stop!” I finally groan it out. “For the love of Christ, Ella, stop or I'll come all over your hand.”

Her eyes darken. Her teeth catch her bottom lip. “And how would that not be ‘the best,’ either?”

My growl lengthens. Little minx, goading me on to more. Notation for my own journal: my proper little Arcadian likes filthy verbal foreplay.

A detail that deserves a little more...testing.

With a commanding yank, I tug her hand back out. With a brutal sweep, slam it again to the floor. Our bodies slide back together, hard to soft, pulse to pulse, arousal to arousal. Her chest surges up, stabbing her nipples against mine. Her mouth falls open on another gasp, nearly begging for my kiss.

I don't give it to her.

Instead, I linger inches above her, savoring the taste of her anticipation, giving her something even better. The words. “Do you like this, favori? Do you like being flattened on the floor beneath me, trembling and aching for me? Do you like my erect cock against you, leaking come in its need for you?”

“Oh,” she grates. “Oh...yes.”

“Oh yes is fucking right.” I dip my lips to her neck. “I can feel it in your pulse, Ella. Taste it on your skin. And I treasure it...everywhere.”

I emphasize that with another roll of my hips. Rejoice in the answering buck of hers, adorable little

jerks responding to nothing but her most primitive instincts. Have I ever been with a woman like her, so open to feeling everything and thinking about nothing? Have I ever known anyone like her, so transparent about her desire, uncaring that her hair isn't "fanned out" just so, that her feet aren't "daintily pointed," that the sounds bursting from her throat are awkward and rough instead of a mewling porn kitten?

She is a revelation.

A sensual, incredible burst into my psyche. Into my world.

My logic defaults to the only possibility. My lips burst with it, while continuing to suckle her delicious skin. "Sorceress. Dear fuck...that has to be it. You're a sorceress, woman, and I've become your willing slave." I lock her other wrist down with my grip. Rise up, deliberately exposing my muscles and might against her silken skin and curves. "Look at this. Look at you. Do you know what power you have over me, even in your shackles? How your beauty—" I stop, needing to fit breath around the space now occupied by her. "You command me, Mishella. Goddamn...you possess me."

Her own chest pumps, matching the desperate cadence of mine. "Cassian."

I shake my head again. My hair falls into my eyes but I drill a solid stare through the mess at her. "Look at you...begging me. But I'm the one who should be pleading with you."

"Oh...no. Oh...yes..."

"You rule, me, woman. You...destroy me."

As the confession soughs out, I scrape both thumbs across her pulse points. Slide them up, until they dig into the centers of her palms. Deeper...deeper...

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for this sinner...because he wants to sin like he's never sinned before, and the only redemption is the sin. The only heaven left is her...

"Tell me." Now I'm the beggar—and it finally feels perfect. "I need to know. I'm your convert. Your slave. What do you bid of me, sorceress...goddess...?"

Her fingers curl around mine. Her back arches, her thighs constrict...her pussy softens. "Destroy me too," she whispers. "Cassian, please...take me. Fuck me."

My own muscles shake—fighting the surge of heat her plea brings. I breathe raggedly. I've expected the words, so why do they make me feel regressed to sixteen again? Why does air feel like fire as I force it in down my nostrils? Why am I an all-thumbs idiot after rising to pull off her pajama bottoms, then mine?

And now, why does the sight of her mound make my cock drip all over again?

I stare at the rigid fucker, finally admitting my bewilderment. I've always been a Brazilian fan: the football teams, the food, and definitely the bikini wax. But Arcadia is nowhere near Brazil, and the reality here is, again, as I expected—except for one astonishing difference. Beholding Ella's unshaved "wilderness" has turned up my desire—especially when the evidence of her lust forms glittering beads on her tawny curls.

"Fuck. Me." My snarl only hints at the toll she and her enchantress pussy already take. Need to—get in there—so bad.

"A wonderful idea." Her throaty rasp more perfect torture—to which she adds a coup de grace, kneading her breasts until the tips are stiff and red. "Cassian. By the creator—I need you now."

My dick throbs against my palm. Hell yes, it screams—

To be countermanded by my brain. And its evil sense of humor.

Evil.

"You need me, hmmm?" I line myself up, pointing my glistening crest toward her exquisite entrance. "This, right here? You need...this?"

Her whole body tremors. Her hands work her flesh harder. "Yes," she pants. "Oh yes!"

"Not yet." I chuckle in answer to her moan of despair. "First, not without this." Thank fuck I remember Doyle's stash of condoms in the table next to the chaise. This is probably the first time I'm thankful for being aware of the "accessories" he likes to leave behind all over the house. "And second," I continue while sheathing up, "not without you showing me more of...this."

My free hand illustrates the point, running through the slickness between her thighs. Though it elicits a

higher cry, she manages to stammer, “Th-this? Wh-what...do you...mean?”

“I mean show it to me, Ella. With both hands. Take them off your tits. Slide them into your pussy. Rub them on your lips then spread yourself with them. Let me see the gorgeous cunt I’m going to fuck.”

Without another question, she obeys. Dear God, so perfectly...proving I was wise to make that mental journal entry in ink. This woman, and her gorgeous passion, thrive on nasty words like a flower in the sun. As she blooms for me I grow for her, my flesh filling the rubber...straining for the slick, tight tunnel beyond her dripping curls.

The depths I’ll mark for the first time.

The place I’ll have in her soul...forever.

The virginity I’ll claim...and cherish.

“Damn.” Great. That’s eloquent. But nothing else is possible in the moment I fit myself to her opening, and push into the impossible softness...the resistant walls.

I halt when she winces. “It—it is all right,” she protests. “I—I am all right. Probably just a little...” A sheepish shrug, a stunning blush. “Scared.”

I dip my head, kissing her. “It’s all right to be scared. But it’s also all right to breathe, favori.”

She laughs. For a moment. “Oh. Yes. That.”

I take advantage of her distraction to push deeper. Clench back a groan, letting that privilege belong to her. “Good, Ella. You’re doing good, my little beauty.” Brilliance strikes. “Try to bear down a little. Just pretend it’s a couple of your fingers, only fuller.”

“My—my fingers?”

Okay. Screw the brilliance. “Fuck,” I mutter, punctuating with another laugh. “Well, that explains things a little.”

“A little...like what?”

“Like why you’re so goddamn tight...and good.” I’ve used the conversation for the same nefarious purpose: now, I’m nearly two-thirds in.

And blindingly ready to give her the rest.

“So.”

A small test thrust.

“Fucking.”

A deeper one.

“Good.”

She doesn’t scream.

She does try to tear off a layer of my back flesh, as her body accepts the last inch of mine. My mouth opens, needing to tell her to relax, but I selfishly savor one more second of her tension, and what it does to the suction power of her walls.

Pray for us sinners...

Now, and at the hour of our death...

Yeah. That’s it. That has to be. I’ve died, and this is heaven, and—

She really has destroyed me.

“Ella.” There’s nothing left on my lips but her name. Nothing left in my senses but her, surrounding me, consuming me—propelling me to an ether comprised solely of that place in space and time where our bodies pulse together, our hearts hammer together. “Mishella,” I whisper this time, squeezing the globes of her ass, forcing her tighter around me. “We’re there. You’re there. Feel me, favori. Feel all of me...”

“Mmmm.” It’s not a pleasant hum. It’s the I’m trying sound, and I don’t fucking like it. But the moment I withdraw even a millimeter, she scratches once again. The sorceress has claws. Sharp ones.

She pulls her arms in, shifting her hold to my jaw. Forces my lips to hers in a kiss that’s so searing, it’s haunting. As our mouths mesh and our tongues swirl, I am suddenly able to feel her soul, to see inside her heart...for they are the same as mine. Remember. This. The tastes of it, passion and salt and need. The smells of it, sex and skin and jasmine. The sounds of it, roaring in my ears and throbbing through my

blood. The feeling of it, a magic that will follow me until those suspended moments between life and death, when all the best moments of my life return...and I pray more of them await me on the other side.

Unless that moment is now.

As she begins to rock her hips, working her body around mine.

As she arches her head back, releasing a sibilant sorceress sigh.

As she cries out, in the second I slide my touch between our bodies, to finish her first.

And she dies too...convulsing through the most perfect end I've ever witnessed. The orgasm strains her muscles, bulges her eyes...and squeezes every inch of her pussy.

Dear. Fuck.

Over and over she seizes me, her body signing the death warrant for mine. I am executed in a hot, consuming flood, life pouring from me, immense and primal...

And perfect.

"Do not...stop. Oh please, Cassian. I think I might...oh, again. Do not stop!"

"Never." I grate it into her neck while continuing to pump her pussy and work her clit. "Never, sweet armeau."

When I take the throbbing little nub and pinch just the tip, she finally gives me her scream. She vibrates, wild and unthinking, gripping me in desperate need, like the fucking angel leading her to heaven.

She has no idea...of how things really are.

That she's the angel. The enchantress gifted from the clouds...to lead me back from hell.

Morose thoughts—for much later. Now, I only want to think about her laugh in my ear, the mix of melody and husk that brings satisfaction as complete as her climaxes, making my resolve official. This really is where I want to die. Right here, right now. Surely, no other moment in my life is going to equal this perfection.

"Oh...my...high...holy...Creator." She lets her arms sprawl, limp as noodles, straight out to her sides. I chuckle my way into a new kiss, letting my grip slide along them, until our fingers are again twined.

"Certainly took the sting out of jet lag."

"Jet lag." She repeats it softly, her face remaining dazed. "So...how long does that last?"

I laugh again, not missing the hopeful lilt with which she finishes. "Not sure."

"Why not?"

"Usually too keyed up to pay attention to it."

"Hmmm."

It's the hum I'm used to—on the other hand, hope to never be used to, because it's so damn adorable. Half of it is barely audible, since she's already dedicated half her brain to at least eight layers of deeper thought. The exciting part is watching her cycle through them, and wondering what she'll say to make the wait worth it.

"Perhaps we should try to find out."

Definitely worth it.

After grinding a slow, savoring kiss into her, I answer, "Perhaps we fucking should."

CHAPTER EIGHT

MISHELLA

By now, I am fairly certain there is no such thing as a three-day, debilitating case of jet lag—at least not in Cassian Court’s world. But right now, it is not a point I care to argue. Or think about. As if I am capable of either, with my gaze consumed by the sight of his dark gold hair spilling over my lower belly...and the ecstasy of his tongue stabbing into my intimate hole, over and over and over...

My abdomen clenches. My backside pinches in.

Oh, dear Creator...

Close.

A few more. Please...

Close.

I am not even aware of the words spilling off my lips, until his growl interjects—and his head pulls up. “Not yet, arneau. Not...yet.”

I whine, protesting and almost angry, reaching back to grab the pillows. There have to be a dozen of them on his big bed, and for a fleeting second, I wonder why I do not know the exact count. I have barely left these sheets for seventy-two hours. Surely there was time to count all his pillows at some point...

But there was not. Not between sleeping and...things like this.

Lots and lots and lots of this.

The most perfect three days of my life.

Consumed with giving myself to the most perfect man in the world.

His body like a gold marble god, taut and defined as he rolls on a condom. His face lined with fierce passion, as he gazes over my spread nudity. His eyes, shimmering and sharp, as he scrapes fingernails down my thighs, to my knees...

And slams my legs wide.

“Keep them like that,” he orders. “The whole time I’m fucking you.” A moment later, he prompts, “What do you say to that?”

“Y-yes, Cassian.”

He knows I’ll barely get it out. He knows what his rougher, filthier side does to me. How all his dirty words affect me, incinerating the bonds of propriety that have been the hallmarks of my existence for so long. With the words, he gives me no choice about leaving them behind...about becoming his perfect little investment.

And I do feel perfect.

Adored.

Desired.

Worthy.

His face tightens as he positions himself at my entrance. His body is hard...everywhere. I raise my arms, anxious to learn its formidable landscape once more, but he growls, “No. Leave them where they are. Grip the pillows. It lifts your luscious tits...so perfectly.” He sucks and bites one then the other, still taunting my entrance with his cock. “You like that, don’t you? When I make your nipples erect like this? When you know exactly what it does to my dick?”

I struggle for breath. “Oh...y-yes, Cassian.”

“And does it make you hot too, little Ella?”

“Yes, Cassian.”

“Does it make your tunnel wet? Turn you into my horny, sweet sorceress, ready to be fucked?”

“Yes, Cassian.”

He lifts back up. Digs his hands into my hips, pulling my body another inch around his, opening the view to his heated gaze—and mine. The sight of his shaft, absorbed into the softness of my core, is as mesmerizing as the rest of him. Muscles straining. Power coiling. Passion building. He is beautiful, rippled...stunning.

“Then use the words.” He intensifies his grip along with the dictate. “Tell me what you want...with the words *I* want.”

I swallow hard. There will be no getting away with a gentle morning screw. This explosion is going to be nuclear...for both of us.

“Take me,” I rasp. “Please...deep inside...with your cock. Take your payment back from my body, until I cannot see straight. Until I scream from being filled by you—”

Then I do scream, as he plows me hard and hot. No inch of my sex is left wanting. He handles me like a piece of clay, subjected to the pound of his ruthless hammer. In a sense, I am. Less than a week after even meeting the man, I am a being recreated...an artwork unveiled with every slice of his chisel...

Then shattered.

Blown apart into a thousand pieces of being, of feeling, of frantic, perfect fulfillment...

“Take it.”

“Yes, Cassian.”

“All of my cock.”

“Yes, Cassian.”

“In your perfect cunt.”

“Yes...yes...yes!” The pieces of me explode into dust. “Cassian!” I am nothing but sensation, climaxing hard, senses rejoicing as he dissolves with me, coming deep inside me.

And for the fiftieth time in the last week, I wonder if I truly will ever be the same.

Or if I want to be.

Before I can delve into the morose possibilities for answers to that, Cassian’s phone vibrates on the nightstand—for the twentieth time this morning. He groans. I giggle.

“I knew I’d regret telling the world I’m back on the grid.”

“I think our jerk is up, Mr. Court.”

For some reason, that quirks his lips. “Jig.”

“Now?” I glance down. At the moment, dancing in any form is rather out of the question.

He explains only by popping a quick kiss to my forehead, before reaching for the device with a brisk swipe. “Rob. Good morning.”

Between getting his hands on—and in—me, the man has at least divulged that “Rob” is short for Robin, who, in an even more confusing twist, is a young man in his first job out of college. From what I can tell, Rob is succeeding. In the last seventy-two hours, Cassian has entrusted him with everything from changing security passwords—a weekly ritual at Court Enterprises—to things a little more personal, like scheduling a physician appointment for his boss today.

That being known, Cassian still earns a new dose of my amazement with the tone, as if he’s standing in a board room instead of prone in bed, still buried inside me. “Better, thanks,” he continues. “Scheduling that fast turn-around for the Arcadia trip was probably too aggressive. I’m current on emails and the latest reports though,”—he shrugs at my when-did-that-happen gawk—“and I’ll be coming in today. That face-to-face with Flynn Whelan is too important. Have his people confirmed for lunch? Good. Make sure the catering team brings up that Italian water he likes. Any other notable calls?”

It sounds like Rob hesitates, but delivers the reply in a businesslike tone. Cassian matches the timbre—on the surface. Beyond the new shutters over his expression, I see the same discomfort that first stopped Rob—though he quickly cloaks it. I am not sure whether to be relieved or angry. The resulting confusion makes me restless. I shift, pull away, and leave for the bathroom—as if the sliding wood door can keep out the river stone perfection of his voice, smoothness and power beneath each baritone syllable.

“No. You responded as you should have, Rob. She’s been fishing for a definitive on the Literacy Ball for a few months. Jumping up the chain and turning in the RSVP herself...well, I’ll applaud her for the guts, if not the intelligence.” Heavy huff, through a definitive pause. “Call Yolanda Wood at the Literacy Guild. Clarify my RSVP is for two, but I’ll phone myself with my guest’s name by EOB today. It will definitely not be Amelie Hampton’s.”

I finish my business, debating whether to follow my original plan and start the shower, or find a journal and note the name Amelie Hampton. The knot in my belly supports the latter. It is not simply the stress she has brought to Cassian—whoever she is—though that is a start. It is the discomfiting questions now raised in my heart—and the anger that rises in their wake.

Did you think he was living a monk’s life before you arrived?

Did you think because he moved you into his bedroom, he planned on keeping himself out of others?

Did you think he doesn’t have a hundred other “Amelie Hamptons” across this city? This country?

I shake my head, forcing the funk away. With a short huff, crank on the shower. Climb in under the wonderfully hot spray, deliberately turning from the granite seat upon which my backside has been planted numerous times over the last few days—for the most erotic of reasons. Right now, it is best to deal strictly with the steam from the water instead of those salacious visions—and how many women from Cassian’s past share the exact same memories.

Too late.

As he enters the bathroom, clearly finished with Rob, it is too easy to imagine him walking in on another girl, in another time, and tossing his condom in the trash with the same laser accuracy. It is even more effortless to think of him turning and peering through the stall glass, the same dimpled smirk on his face...with the same dreamy follow-through.

“Why’d you start in there without me?”

Oh, yes. All the others have surely felt just like this as well—body newly tingling, senses freshly awakened, tongue perfectly tied—as he plants those long fingers against his corded hips, purposefully pulling attention to that magnificent appendage at their juncture...

I. Will. Not. Look. I. Will. Not. Look.

I steal a small glance. Just one. Dear sweet Creator, why did you build him with such magnificence? Especially there?

I manage to hitch a little shrug. Whether it hits the mark on the nonchalance I am aiming for is hard to discern—especially because his face has transformed to the opposite. I avoid that new intensity to explain, “You...sounded busy. I did not want to be...”

I let it trail off as he enters the stall, seeming to do so in one masterful sweep. I am sure he opened the glass door, even stepped over the tile lip at the shower’s edge, but those sort of movements always seem to simply flow into the powerful prose of his body...

And now the unblinking force of his stare.

“You did not want to be what?”

His tone, just as unflinching, pulses more parts of me to life again. But we are discussing his conversation with Rob, and recalling that brings back composure. At least a little. “In the way,” I supply. “Or interfering...with...important subjects.”

A worm on a hook would be more graceful. I am certain my face flushes, beyond what color the steam has already brought. The man is no bloody help, tilting my face up with a finger then softly but thoroughly kissing me. Before I can help it, my arms twine around his neck, my body molds against every gloriously hard inch of him—only when I expect him to swoop in with the full force of his lust, he steps back. Then again. Literally looks down to make sure his lengthening sex is not touching me in any way, before finally speaking again.

“Let’s make something clear.” He jogs his head in the direction of the bedroom. “That is all the ‘interference.’ That’s all the ‘getting in the way’ crap. This,”—he traces a finger in the air between our chests—“and this,”—then between our foreheads—“is the ‘important subject’ you need to be worrying

about.”

I only swallow hard. There is nothing to say. And everything. And I am more flummoxed than ever.

“Mishella.”

“What?”

“Look at me.” His stare awaits, ready with forest darkness. “Yeah. I thought so.”

“Thought so... what?”

“You don’t believe me.”

“Because I do not have to.” I grab his hands. “Cassian, you had a life before I arrived. And you shall have one after I leave—”

“So you’re already that anxious to go?” The forests flare with angry fires. I try to understand—anger is fear’s child, so what is he afraid of?—but cannot surpass my own uncertainty to see it. I am thousands of miles from home, in a land where even the stupid light switches are new to me, and he is playing at the jilted insecurity?

“Are you truly asking that?” I seethe. “After the last three days? After I gave you my virginity?”

“Which I paid for,” he retorts, “as you cannot seem to stop reminding me.”

“Because it is the truth!”

“Because that ‘truth’ is your safety.”

He does not stop at the accusation. Uses his body as judge and juror, convicting me with the physical lunge that not only closes the gap between us, but flattens me against the shower’s granite wall. His body, tightening and flexing, is now a hard, imposing intruder. His shoulders bunch, ropes of muscles playing against his wet flesh, as he meshes our fingers against the granite.

“Look at me,” he growls again. “Look. At. Me.” When I do, he lowers his face until I can see my reflection in the beads of water down his straight nose, along his clenched jaw. “You don’t get to be safe here, Ella. Neither of us does. We can keep talking about the money, keep pretending it’s the chasm that’s protecting our castles—or we can just admit the truth.” His hands screw tighter into mine. His body pushes harder...so much bigger... “I’m in the fucking chasm, woman—and I’m careening. Tumbling. Every moment I’m with you, next to you, inside you, it gets deeper. Darker. There’s no bottom in sight—nor do I want there to be.”

I work to get air. Very little comes. My balance tilts. My senses swim. He is the only anchor; my new reality. I whimper, lost in the force of his rough words...the magic. Wanting to believe magic really exists...

but...

“Wh-what about...her?”

His gaze glitters. He shakes his head, confused. “Her who?”

Before the answer is even out, I feel like a petty salpu. “Amelie,” I clarify, feeling as if I must. “Hampton. Remember? The woman who responds on your behalf to social engagements?”

“Because she was torqued at me for going to Arcadia without her. Because she also doesn’t know how to express herself like, let’s say, a mature adult.” He pulls away. His shoulders dip as if a weight has been slung across them. “And also, because I’ve let her get away with it before.” Measured huff. “Look...I won’t lie to you, Ella. I’ve let several women get away with it before—because I haven’t really cared before.”

My turn for the irked exhalation finally comes. “So...what does that mean...”

...for me.

I let the words remain implied. He is not a stupid man. He shows me so by settling his gaze firmly back into mine. “It means that I care now.” He lets go of my hands, closing them both in to frame my face. “That I’m not going to that goddamn event with anyone on my arm but the most beautiful woman in New York.” His dimples reappear, deep as craters, as I crunch a questioning frown. “You, my pahaleur armeau.”

For the first time in my life, I roll my eyes at a man.

Partly because he deserves it.

Partly because I know I can.

Mostly because it feels so, so good.

In return, his own eyes go dark with sage smoke. “Christ. Did you roll your eyes at me?” When I do it again, the desire takes over the rest of his face—and his cock slots against my most sensitive tissues, zinging heat to every nerve ending in my body. “You know what I want to do with that expression, don’t you, young lady?”

The grate in his tone brings me more boldness. I toss a flirty glance up, tugging at my lip with my teeth—and his erection with my fingers. He hisses. I clutch harder. By the Creator, I love touching him. Everywhere—but especially here. Feeling him pulse beneath my palm. Watching his jaw clench. Savoring the power that I, for once, have over him...

“Hmmm,” I murmur. “I...have no idea. Maybe it is best that you show me, Mr. Court?”

His throat vibrates with a low, snarly sound. “Maybe it’s best that I do.”

My breath clutches. Holds. I hope, perhaps too desperately, for my backside and the shower seat to become best friends again. Instead, Cassian shifts his hold to my shoulders, urging me down. The action is too brusque to let me trail him with kisses, but I am able to take a tactile exploration. My hand travels the hills of his abdomen, glides into the indent of his hip, savors the perfect plateaus of his thighs. “Beautiful,” I rasp. “You are...so beautiful, Cassian.”

He lifts his hands, burying them in the wet tangles of my hair, as I kneel before him. With his hold digging into my scalp, he grates, “Then wrap your beauty around me.”

I cannot refuse. I do not want to. In my most illicit dreams I have already imagined doing this for him...and for me. Taking over him like this, hoping I can enthrall his body as he does mine...I am flushed all over, intoxicated and afire...all my senses swirl, aroused and alive.

“Fuck.” His groan is as tight as the sinew of his legs, clenching as I grasp them, pushing him deeper inside me. His flesh, musky and wet, pushes at the confines of my mouth. So huge. So delicious. His hands brace the back of my head, soon setting a pace for each new lunge over his pulsing length. “Beautiful...favori...take me...take me...”

His words are like the steam, curling around us, dissolving my thoughts into nothing more than particles on the air. I’ve evaporated, now just a swirl myself, my actions completely controlled by his passion...his will.

“Touch yourself, Ella. Stroke your clit.”

I obey at once. Release a moan around his girth.

“Touch me with your other hand. Around my balls. Yes. Like that.”

I moan louder. So does he. He rams into my mouth at a quicker pace. The sac beneath my hand throbs and writhes. His cock grows, testing the limits of my throat.

Faster.

Hotter.

Sucking.

Stroking.

Climbing.

Coming.

As the zenith hits my pussy, I scream—welcoming the ropes of cream he gives my throat. I drink burst after burst of his perfect completion...his beautiful passion. And embrace all the beauty he sees in me too...

And am glad the water cascading down our bodies can mask the sheen of my tears, born of an exquisite, inescapable realization.

In being owned by him...

I have been set truly free.

Leaving only one insane dilemma.

How will I ever set him free now?

CASSIAN

I have to turn from Ella while buttoning up my shirt.

First, the sight of her in the chair next to the window, dressed in nothing but my bathrobe, is too fucking tempting. She's only five feet from the bed I yearn to throw her back onto, keeping her captive for three more days.

Second—my fingers are shaking.

Trembling.

Me.

Like a fucking cat in the rain.

And I never want it to end.

The same way I never wanted to leave that bed. Or the shower—dear fuck, that shower—or the magical wrap of her arms, her eyes, her body.

How the hell am I ever going to set her free?

Because in another five months and three weeks, she'll be properly purged, man. Spoiled and fucked into perfect oblivion. With any luck, she'll even be like all the rest: another Amelie, ready to stomp all over your space with the social engagements, the photo ops...perhaps even the pre-business trip hissy fits...

The argument has merit.

Except for one major snag.

I like thinking of Mishella Santelle in those scenarios. Yeah, even the hissy fit one. If there would ever be any need to leave her behind on a trip, and if she ever found the need to launch such a tantrum, defusing her anger might be more fun than stoking her passion. The woman's pretty damn adorable when she's miffed. Her gaze turns to blue fire, her neck cords with tension, and she turns all Queen Victoria proper, practically using the royal we on everybody.

We are mad at you, Mr. Court...

We would like you to keep sucking on our nipples...

We would like to suck on your cock...

We would enjoy coming for you...

Yep. Shaking.

I finish with the damn buttons. Not a miracle yet. That comes when I remember how to secure a Windsor knot...that is, when I recall where I put the fucking tie...

My search doesn't last long. It ends with a punch of violent feeling, at finding the strip of red silk trailing from elegant fingers that I long to kiss once more—and do. Ella's smile fills her eyes before her lips, a sequence reaffirming my newfound buy-in to Arcadian voodoo, before she loops the tie around my neck and focuses on the knot. I'm actually jealous of the thing, watching the attention it receives for the better part of a minute, until a more disturbing thought sets in.

“How'd you learn to do this?”

Translation: what man did you learn it for?

She smirks. My subtext isn't the subtlest, and I don't give a fuck. “My brother.” She tugs softly, taking her time, and I sense the quiet intimacy of the moment means as much to her as me. “All the kids on Arcadia wear school uniforms until our last year of secondary level. Saynt never perfected his knot, at least not to Maimanne's satisfaction, so I just did the job and let her believe what she wanted.”

More emotion wallops me. This time, fierce protectiveness. It pushes my hand up, clasping one of her wrists. When she looks up, I don't ease back on my probing stare. “Would an imperfect knot have been that much of a sin?”

I expect her to drop her gaze. When she doesn't, for a very long moment, she lets me see in...allows me to really view the panorama of her life up until now. It is filled with shifting sands, fickle winds, even a fear of where the next step may take her. Steps that have, until now, all been orchestrated by her parents—

down to the threads in her and Saynt's clothing.

Finally, she looks away. Her arm drops too. "And perfection was not expected of you, Mr. Court?"

Clearly, my sadness has come off as pity—not a surprise, if the filter of her pride is considered—so her defensiveness isn't a shock. Nor is the logic behind her words. I've tracked her parents' "research" into Court Enterprises. Undoubtedly, they've told her I didn't inherit the money behind all this. In her mind, two and two are now snapped together—and sum up to a pair of demanding parents.

Little Ella. If only the world were so tidy.

"Perfection," I echo, arching a brow. "Of course it was expected of me. Every day."

She nods, face full of I-knew-it.

"By the guy in the mirror."

The nod halts. "But your mother—"

"Was usually at work by the time I got up for school." I square my shoulders. It's not a new move, even with the onslaught of those distant memories—things not even her parents' probe could have divulged about me. Mom prefers to let me live the public life, and now enjoys the garden she never had while I was growing up, in her dream house out in Connecticut. The way it should be. "She had to take a bus and two trains to get to the Four Seasons on time for clock-in." I cock my head. "You know those rich New York farts. They all don't have much patience when their toilets have to be scrubbed."

She doesn't bite on the levity. Instead mutters, confused frown in place, "But your father surely—"

"Wasn't around." I manage to get it out smoothly.

"A brother or a sis—"

"Wasn't. Around." Not so smooth this time. By half. But Damon is nobody's business. Ever.

"So...it was just you?"

Yes. In an apartment smaller than this room, with the cocaine addicts on one side and the schizophrenic lady on the other. At least the crackheads were quiet in the mornings.

"This isn't the right time for this discussion, Ella."

She nods once more. The I-knew-it is gone but I instantly wish for its return. Anything but the terse lurch into which the action has become. "Of course it is not. I...apologize."

"Dammit." I seethe it beneath my breath, to myself more than her, before wheeling back, grabbing her, and tucking her close. "No apologies," I utter into her hair. "Ghosts are just better left buried; that's all."

"I understand."

But she doesn't. Not really. After courageously unlocking her emotional gates for me, she has met padlocks and guard dog growls from me in return. Not a damn thing I'm going to do about it either.

I tried exposing the pain once before. Forced the gates open.

Was given just another ghost to bury.

Headstone carved with flowers to match her name...

Fresh dirt over the plot, contrasted by the February snow over the graveyard...

I grit the memories away. Gaze over the top of Ella's head, out the window. It's May but the morning sky roils over the city, thick with thunderheads, as if even the big guy beyond them challenges my call. Go ahead, bastard. Give it a try. You turned my secrets into sunshine once, then ripped the sun away. Now, the secrets stay with the ghosts. Buried. For good.

I pull in a deep breath. Normally, it's enough for fortification. Not now. I dip my head, seeking the solace of her warmth, her kiss—but as soon as our mouths meet, I revise the descriptor. This isn't just solace. It's healing. She might hate that my gate is closed, but she accepts it...and simply fixes what she can from where I do let her stand.

She really is a gift.

I've never considered it hell to stop kissing a woman before. Today marks that first, giving new meaning to the words fuck and no. Somehow she deciphers it properly, and giggles a little.

"Off with you, Mr. Court." She adjusts my tie one last time, giving me an accidental eyeful of her cleavage. "The sooner you get done ruling the world, the sooner you can come h—" She barely snatches

back the rest, but it's enough to shatter our pretense of domestic bliss as she revises, "The sooner you can get back." She lifts a little smile over eyes turning rich turquoise. "And remember, you have a physician's appointment today."

Oh. Yes. That.

I step back, guiding her hands into mine—deciding to just broach the subject, now that she's gone there anyway. Clearly, the more "formal" moment for which I've been waiting is not coming soon—especially with her standing there, soft and scrubbed and naked in my robe.

"I had Rob make that appointment,"—I deliberately engage her gaze—"for you."

Nose crinkle. Slow blink. "Me? What? Wh-why?"

No better tactic than a direct one. "It's with Kathryn Robbe. She's a friend. And a gynecologist."

"A gyne—" She's confused more than upset. Good sign. "But Cassian, you know my history. Well, my lack of one. You are my first—"

I stop her with a kiss. It's as much for me as her. Hearing her speak it out loud, that I'm the only man who's ever been inside her, fires primeval urges I don't even want to subdue. After a long minute of claiming her with my tongue, I pull back far enough to speak my full, transparent intent.

"It's just to make sure everything's working fine, favori."

She spurts a little laugh. "After the last three days, you are not sure it is?"

"And to talk to Kathryn about birth control."

More blinks. But no more frowns. Just a gorgeous little O of her lips, followed by the same sound in a rasp. "Oh," she repeats. "You...errmm...that is what you want?"

I lower my head. Inhale deeply. Attempt to absorb the clinical scents between us, not the sensual. Toothpaste, deodorant, shirt starch—not body cream, vanilla soap, even the sexy place at the curve of her nape, where her citrus shampoo blends with beads of her perspiration. So many more places like this on her to discover. Marvelous places...

"What I want,"—Christ, what I need—"is to get my body inside yours whenever and wherever I want." Her all-over shiver conveys I've made the point, but my imagination's off and running again. "For instance, I'd be able to tear this robe off of you. Kind of like...this."

"Oh." Her mouth is a rose around the syllable now...dark as the areolas sprouting her erect nipples. Her hair cascades around those lush swells, turning her into my very own Aphrodite...ready to be claimed by her worthless mortal once more. "And—and then what?"

The dusky cue in her gaze is all I need. "And then...I'd be able to spin you around, and march you to the window seat." I twist her hair around a hand and push her forward. When we're in front of the bench built into the curve of the window, I angle her over until her cheek is pressed down—and her ass is presented high. "Like this."

"Oh...my." She wriggles a little, spreading her legs for better balance...exposing the tight entrance now gaping on the air, its glistening layers begging to be filled. Because denying myself air would be easier than rejecting her needs, I give the sorceress what she wants. With one finger, then two...and three. "Cassian!" she cries. "Oh, by the Creator..."

"If you were taking protection, Ella, I could unzip my pants...like this. Then pull out my cock...and line it up to your weeping little cunt..."

"Please," she begs, when I only follow through with the first half of that promise. Instead, I let her listen as I fist my length and begin to pump, in perfect cadence with the three digits inside her sex. "Please!"

At first I say nothing, letting her arousal spiral with mine, continuing to fuck my fingers into her, keeping a perfect rhythm. But then I pivot my hand, letting my thumb hook up, toying with the rosette between her ass's perfect spheres. "I could play here, too...while I fuck your sweet pussy. Spread your gorgeous ass, then press into it...like this..."

The filthy scene, playing out in both our minds, brings on a mutual shudder. I delve my fingers deeper into her pussy...and her other entrance, so tiny and tight.

“Yes,” she keens. “Oh, yes...take me...”

“In both places?”

“In both. I need it. I need you. Cassian...Cassian...”

There are more words, long strings of them, but the Arcadian spills from her in such a heated slur, I can only assume she’s continuing the dirty theme. At least that’s what my cock wants to believe. Engorged and pulsing, pre-come slicking the length, the beast roars through my fist, over and over again, screaming for release as desperately as Mishella does.

And Christ, does she scream.

Openly.

Gloriously.

“Ardui! Faisi-banu-ardui!”

I can translate only the last word but it’s enough.

Harder.

My enchantress’s wish is my command.

We orgasm together, her gasps mating with my roar. Her walls squeeze around my fingers. My fist milks my cock. Streams of my essence fall across her back, like white chocolate poured against vanilla ice cream. Though I am spent, the sight of it keeps me hard...craving to lean over and fill her with my dick instead of my fingers.

Instead, as our breathing normalizes, I force myself to step back. Scooping my robe back up, I improvise it into a towel, cleaning her back and my cock before scooping her back up against me...yearning to hold her like this all damn day.

Well, not exactly like this.

Doing it in bed would be so much better. Naked and sated, limbs twined, heads sharing a pillow...

For a moment, I consider it. Strongly. Nothing sounds better right now than fucking the day’s demands—but even amenable Rob will point out that canceling on Flynn Whelan is professional poison. The man has clout with both the Greek and Croatian governments, contacts we’ll be needing once operations in Arcadia move forward in full force. And right now, staying close to the Arcadians has leapt high on my priorities list.

Close.

It’s never felt like a flimsy word—but right now, drawing Ella even closer, it comes nowhere near to what I crave to share with her...what I still burn to have beyond this. I’ve just compared her to a decadent dessert, and stuffed my senses full of the damn thing, yet I’m ravenous for more. So much more.

But will it ever be enough?

I hope so.

Dear fuck, I hope not.

The breath I fan into her neck is full of that rough conflict. She responds with a quiver, rolling down through her whole body, making her skin pebble beneath my touch. I firm my roaming caresses, partly to warm her, partly to memorize the feel of her nakedness. Something has to get me through the day, goddammit.

She finally breaks our silence with a hitched murmur. “Cassian?”

I wrapped myself tighter around her. “Yeah?”

“I will go to the appointment. With your friend.”

I tilt my head in. Press lips to her temple. “Thank you, arneau.”

She cocks her own head. There’s an impish smile on her lips. “You can thank me later. In very thorough detail.”

I growl lowly. “Yes, ma’am.” Then set about proving how I fully intend to follow through—by stealing that smile off her lips with the attack of my own.

CHAPTER NINE

MISHELLA

Scott drops me off at the front door of Kathryn Robbe's medical office, which is attached to her home somewhere in a neighborhood on the other side of Central Park. It is far from the sterile environment I spent the morning dreading, and I am more relaxed than I ever thought possible—under the circumstances. There is even a little cartoon bubble taped to the ceiling overhead, emblazoned with the words *I Hate This*. It eases the discomfort, perhaps a little, of having my womb examined from the inside out.

“Okay, then. All finished.” Her tone is crisp but friendly as she pulls out the speculum, and I release my breath in a relieved whoosh. Does any woman ever “breathe normally” through a pelvic exam? “Why don't you get dressed then join me in the other room?”

“Of course.”

The “other room” is a cozy office reminding me a little of similar spaces in Palais Arcadia at home. The furniture is just as grand, though made of darker woods. A pair of Turkish carpets overlap on the polished wood floor. Bookshelves line an entire wall, and the big desk looks like the workspace of a busy but happy person.

A few elements not like home: the pair of plush chairs in the center of the room, also formed of dark wood but cushioned in cream velvet. The upholstery matches the colors of an ornate tea table, centered between the chairs.

“Do you like tea?” Her eyes, the color of sherry, smile as much as her lips. Her hair, pulled into a stylish French twist, is almost the same hue. She would be described as a handsome woman, and looks enough like Cassian that she could pass as his older sister. “If not, I can grab some lemonade from the fridge.” She motions to a kitchenette, off to my left.

“Tea is fine.” I smile as I sit, folding my hands in my lap and crossing my ankles. “And those cookies look even better.” There have to be at least three dozen of the assorted confections, arranged on a multi-tiered tray.

“Ohhhh. Someone else with a sweet tooth.” She winks. “Cas told me I'd like you.”

Cas?

I hide the jealous spike with an answering smile. “Thank the Creator I ate a filling lunch.” A salmon filet, served by a sedate Prim—who has decided to warm to my presence, inch by agonizing inch. I think she even stopped scowling, for a flash, when I complimented her about the meal.

“Well, these are light. And calories consumed during business don't count.” She shrugs and chuckles. “And I kept the lab coat on, so we can consider this business, right?”

I try not to smile too brightly. If she only knew how close to “business” this really is for me. Or maybe...she does know. By the powers, how much information has “Cas” supplied her with?

I lick my lips. Decide to borrow a gutsy page from Vy's book, and “suck it up” with the direct approach. It is not graceful—but sometimes in life, one simply cannot be.

“So...exactly what is your relationship with...Cas?”

She concludes a sip of tea. To my pleasant surprise, gives a smiling nod. “Bull by the horns. Now I really like you.”

That is not my answer but I feel far from pressured to point it out. Sure enough, as soon as the woman finishes nibbling a pink macaron, she replies, “Do you mean am I a lover? Or an ex?”

I take a fortifying bite of cookie for myself. To quote my best friend again, Gawd...delish. “I suppose that is what I mean.”

Once more she nods, that atta girl sparkle in her oh-so-American eyes. “The answer is no, and no,” she

offers. “I went to university with Cassian. We went on one date, which nearly ended in disaster.”

I scowl. “How so?”

“Depends on who you ask: him or me.”

“Well, you are sitting here.”

“But he’s at the front of your mind.” She arches knowing brows at my confirmation of a blush. “Long story short: the man is too damn serious.”

I practically choke on my next bite of cookie. “You are speaking of...Cassian? Cassian Court?” The man with the charm that will not stop captivating me? With the smile that will not let up on assaulting my heart, and the laugh that flips my stomach each time it takes over his lips?

“Six feet-three? Eyes like the Emerald City skyline? Hair so perfect, it belongs on a kid half his age auditioning for a boy band? That Cassian Court?”

We laugh together. That is a very good thing, since it disguises my urge to wistfully sigh at her description instead. I finish with a curious cock of my head. “And yet...you fought with him on your first date.”

“On our only date.” She settles back a little further, crossing her legs at the knee, absently circling her raised ankle. “Half of one, at that—thank God.” An impressive eye roll gets inserted. “All that damn intensity, in one man. He was out to set the world on fire before we were able to legally drink. ‘Relax’ definitely wasn’t a word in his vocabulary, even with dorky bowling shoes on his feet and beer disguised as soda in his hand.”

“Bowling...shoes.” A frown sets in before I can help it. Racking my brain for the Arcadian translation of the word equates to a blank screen—but this “bowling” must be important. They even have special shoes for it.

Kathryn breaks into another laugh. “Hard to believe, right? The man of Kiton and Berluti, kickin’ it casual with a girl in a beat-up bowling alley on a Friday night?” She rests her head against a raised hand. “Neither could he.”

“Ambition is not an awful thing.” I almost cannot believe the words are coming out—even in defense of Cassian. Firsthand, I have seen ambition’s toll on a person—two of them—and on a marriage that was really never a marriage. But thanks to Cassian and the benefits of his drive, I shall never be prisoner to that loveless cage. It is all my choice now—and in a flash, I recognize there is a good chance I will never choose it. Not if I cannot have—

What?

What you have with Cassian? What you are only going to have for six months?

Forever is a long time to be alone, Mishella.

“Of course it’s not.” The woman’s murmur, lined with sincerity, saves me from the miserable turn of my thoughts. “But in this city, it’s a drug as lethal as crack or meth—in some cases, more addictive.”

I swallow hard—letting my mind follow her lead. Hating myself for every step into that dark, uncomfortable place. “In Cassian’s case?”

She barely blinks before answering quietly, “I was starting to fear it...yes.”

“Why?”

At that, she does blink. “I think he’s still purging demons.”

I gulp again. No use. My throat is tight and dry—because I feel the truth of her words. I know it. “Wh-what demons?”

Kathryn lowers her leg. Scoots forward. Pulls in both elbows to her knees. Murmurs as if apologizing, “They’re not my stories to tell. And I don’t even know all of them. But...they’re there, Mishella. Spurring him. Haunting him.” The faraway lilt in her voice is suddenly counteracted...by the new smile edging her lips. “Well, they were. Until today.”

I straighten. “Huh?”

“Until today,” she repeats. “Actually, just an hour ago—when he called, right before you got here, and all but ordered me to take great care of you.”

Tiny zings of pride and warmth chase each other through my chest. “Oh,” I blurt.

“Yeah,” she returns, adding a new chuckle, “oh. The man who never attempted his bossy-boss act with me since the bowling alley catastrophe...” The chuckle mellows. “But now, because of you, he’s pulled out his full Smokey the Bear again. It gives me hope.”

I don’t even hear her last words. “He has a bear?” I recall the moment, in Paipanne’s study, back on the island. He had offered to buy me a dog but said nothing about—

“Why don’t we make sure he doesn’t have a cow, much less a bear.” She returns to her soft laughter, clearly proud of herself for the “humor,” but sobers when I cannot even feign understanding of the line. Not for the first time in my life, I yearn for a transplant into Vylet’s body. The woman is able to laugh even at watching grass grow—and actually has.

“Most excellent of plans.”

It is cheerful enough to earn my “game face” as punctuation, seeming to center Kathryn too. Back into doctor mode she rises—literally—standing with brisk efficiency. “Well, I think you’re an excellent plan, at least where it concerns my friend Cassian.” The strange shadows flit across her gaze again. “He’s been by himself for far too long.”

I return to my feet as well. “But...surely I am not the first ‘friend’ he has sent to see you.”

She does not placate me with a denial, which would also be a lie. But what she does say is just as huge a seed for disconcerting thoughts—and even deeper emotions.

“Giving a man ‘friends’ for his body doesn’t do a damn thing for his soul.” She pulls in a prolonged breath. “And fighting off the alone doesn’t mean you’re taking care of the lonely.”

The words dig into the sides of my mind, refusing to leave even after Kathryn handles the “business” of why I have come, then wraps our visit with a heartfelt hug. It clings as she taps her “digits” into the new cell phone Cassian has purchased for me—and even during her invitation for a “girls’ lunch” soon. Though her kindness imparts me with needed confidence, the dark disquiet about Cassian continues to creep in.

Intensity. Ghosts. Lonely.

Beneath the man’s rapier swagger and ruthless business cunning, is he truly a haunted beast in a solitary tower? And what—or who—put him there?

The queries overshadow even my awe about New York’s nonstop pageantry as Scott drives me back to Temptation—only the trip seems exceedingly short. As we roll to a stop, I peer through the tinted windows in wonder. We are not back at the house. Instead, I look out at wide cement sidewalks, buildings blocking the very sun, and edges of chrome and glass everywhere.

“Errmm...Scott?”

But Scott is no longer in the driver’s seat. He suddenly appears, having opened the limo’s back door, extending a hand to help me out—

Onto the sidewalk before a set of massive glass doors—
gliding open like the gates of a modern palace...

Court Towers

Court Enterprises Incorporated

...with its very own, breath-stealing, king.

My lungs cease working at the mere sight of him. That transforms the journey toward him into an interesting experience—knees liquid, heart thudding, palms gummy—while my gaze works to connect a single thought within my brain.

I was naked with that king. Four hours ago. In his bed. In his shower. On his window seat...

The memories lend me fortitude. I need it. I must attempt a feat so outside my comfort zone, only borrowed words from Vy explain it.

Sizing up my competition.

I have always hated the vulgar words, but right now, there is no better phrase for the dozen women and

three men who are just as fixated on Cassian as I am—who, I am certain, lust after the same experience I do. To explore the proud body beneath that luxurious suit. To dive fingers into that thick honey hair. To learn if the glints in those emerald eyes are really hints of deeper, hotter desires...

Perfect timing for that thought. Cassian surely reads it in my eyes as we approach each other—then again while taking my hands and yanking me close. Now our bodies are nearly flush...and I almost think he will follow through with a crushing kiss.

For a moment, even here, I wish he would.

Instead, with a tight grunt, he behaves. Lowers his face until only I am privy to his quiet murmur, delivered from barely moving lips. “Dear fuck, arneau. Does that light in your eyes mean what I hope it does?”

I giggle. Just for a moment. “You mean the desire I share with nearly every other woman in this lobby?” Stolen glance one way, then the next. “And a few of the men too.”

“Sucks to be them.” His fingers twist tighter around mine. His stare dips to my lips. “Because the only thing I can think about is where to get you private and alone.”

“I am certain Flynn Whelan might find that an interesting show.”

He growls then huffs. “The only ‘show’ Flynn Whelan cares about is the Canine Classic.”

“The...what?”

“Dogs,” he explains. “Greyhounds, to be exact. They’re his only passion besides his businesses.” His gaze swoops down again, teasing tingling energy into the bodice of my pink cotton dress. “But if you’re that into putting on a show...we can talk later on tonight.”

I sigh as his head lifts again. His gaze is a thousand shades of thrilling, so many verdant colors colliding. I am a heated, pulsing mess, craving the audacity to pull him close then plead for one of his thrilling bites on my neck...

“Behave.” I issue it to myself as much as him. We force ourselves back to the respectable hand hold—though his eyes remain hooded, and I can see his clenched teeth past the slight part in his lips.

When a long minute passes without him adding anything verbally, I prompt, “So...”

His dimples make an appearance. Heart. Thud. “So?”

“Ummm...why am I here, Cassian?” I resist adding a crack about showing me his etchings. The man is likely to take me seriously—and I refuse to be the reason for him missing the key meeting with Flynn Whelan.

“Does there have to be a reason?”

Heart. Thunk. And...mortifying blush. “I...I guess not.”

“Guess I just needed to see that,” he murmurs.

“See what?”

“That blush.” His thumbs brush my knuckles. “I’ve missed it.”

A discreet laugh sneaks past my lips. “As Vylet would say, Mr. Court...you are full of shit.”

“Good thing my cock isn’t already half-hard for Vy, then.”

Heart. Melt. Taking the rest of my body with it.

“How’d everything go with Kathryn?”

“Good.” I sound breathless and smitten. Who am I fooling? I am breathless and smitten. And now that the subject has shifted to us soon being able to act on our lust anywhere we want...a little sheepish. “Good, good,” I rush out. “Everything is...errmm...working fine. And safely.” I already know he is. Even the memory of holding his clean lab results rushes more heat to my face. I must be the color of a ripe tomato by now.

Cassian shifts a little closer. “Did she...give you a prescription?”

“Better.” I lift a coy smile. “An injection.”

“Ah. Good...good.” He sounds as flustered as I am but when he lets out a long exhale, the force of his lust possesses every molecule of the air. “Ella.”

“Y-yes?”

“How soon can I be bare inside you?”

My gaze is snatched back up to his. My whole mouth goes dry. Somehow, I manage the response. “Twenty-four hours.”

His hands slide to the backs of my elbows. His stare returns to its green fire, razing into me...through me. By the Creator, my thighs clench at its incursion. My sex throbs, feeling weighted but empty. So empty. Especially after he leans in, whispering words so molten, I am grateful he supports my wobbly walk to the car afterward.

“Twenty-four hours. And starting now, I’m counting every fucking minute.”

* * * *

It only takes ten minutes to drive from Court Towers to Temptation—but in that time, I must swing through just as many emotions. Everything from desire, need, and teen girl-style giddiness is mixed with a soul-deep recognition of the ghosts Kathryn so eloquently explained to me earlier. Of course I have observed the darkness in Cassian’s eyes before; I simply have been lacking a way of identifying them...perhaps even seeking an excuse for them, like extended jet lag or simply deep-seated concern about business matters.

No more pretending now.

No more simple veils or innocent oversights.

But Kate has given me no more to go on. They’re not my stories to tell, Mishella.

And yet, confronting Cassian about them was simply not an option during our ten minutes together—in glaring public. Letting him make goo-goo eyes at me was one thing; bringing up Kate’s cryptic words another. A huge “another.”

So now I stand, in the middle of his home, knowing what I know—but unable to do anything about it. Knowing that there are, in Kate’s words, things that have haunted him so wholly, he has been obsessed with nothing but work excellence and professional success...

For how long?

For what reasons?

And to what purpose?

In the last week, I have locked stares with the man so many times, there is no more counting them. Every time, it is the closest I have felt to twining my soul with another’s...to knowing the heart that is also my own. When I take him inside my body, it is like welcoming myself home...a shore drawing the tide close...

Has it all been an illusion?

Do I not know Cassian Court at all?

And how, in the space of just a week, can I not bear to live with that information as my truth?

Hodge and Scott are downstairs, detailing the cars—Cassian owns three more besides the Jaguar, all prettier and more demanding of upkeep—and Prim is in the kitchen, baking things that make me want to declare dinner will be nothing but dessert tonight. I use the solitude to wander the rooms of the main living floor...not knowing what I plan to find, but hoping it will be some kind of clue about the secrets Cassian keeps behind such high walls in himself.

With every step, I battle myself.

You met him a week ago.

“A week in which our lives have completely changed,” I defend in a whisper.

Most couples barely know each other’s middle names after a week.

“We are not a couple.” I smile from that one. My inner Vylet even high-fives me for it.

He will not even share every secret with Kathryn.

“And the silence is shredding him!”

My whisper has not made it any less a melodrama—making me wonder why I still cannot laugh about

it. Perhaps that is because of the twisting, deep in my belly, confirming that even melodrama can carry truth.

The thought gives me conviction. I walk through each room once again, searching for the tiniest sliver of understanding about who Cassian Court really is. About the secrets that don't just motivate him...

They're there, Mishella...haunting him...

I still find nothing.

I peer harder at the sleek walls, glass accents, and elegant furniture, all seemingly custom-crafted for each of his main living spaces. Every inch practically screams of the money spent on it—and the effort expended to separate it from the scrollwork and romance of the building's exterior. Even the décor pieces are carefully crafted to fit the look: slick, clean, neutral.

None of it matches him.

Not the man I have talked with, laughed with, opened up to, and seen into for the last three days. Not the person to whom I feel more connected than anyone in my life, including Vy and Saynt. Not the lover who has given me himself in return—or so I have thought.

I have sensed them...those missing pieces of him...or rather, felt the empty spaces in him sometimes. The unexplained moments of stillness. The searching casts of his gaze, toward a horizon that does not exist...maybe for a person that is no longer there.

Ghosts.

Spurring. Haunting.

I should be patient. Let him come to me, in his time...

But he has known Kathryn since college—nearly ten years—and he still only gives her the shadows.

I cannot accept the shadows.

Ella...it's time to live in the light.

I want his light too.

I have six months with him, not ten years.

Fortune favors the brave.

It feels like destiny to remember the words, a favorite expression often used by King Evrest back home. Evrest even credits their importance in helping his journey toward true love—though that is far beyond my ambition right now, and must remain that way.

It must remain that way.

I have no idea where Cassian and I are bound with each other. I only know that he has helped me at least see my light—and now, if I can help him step toward his too...

Determinedly, I search the spaces again. Living room. Game room. Movie theater. All three guest bedrooms. Even the gym. Still nothing. No mementos from travels, nor artwork that is not abstract. No knickknacks that are not completely curated or more than a few years old, and everything in sync with the out-of-a-movie décor.

I only find one photo, atop the desk in the study that is as sterile as a research laboratory. The image depicts a younger Cassian, between childhood and adulthood, probably twelve or thirteen. He hugs a woman with the same thick gold hair and piercing green eyes. If she is not his mother, I am the Queen of Persia.

Is she one of his ghosts?

I lower into one of the chairs in front of the desk—the leather is so stiff, I wonder if my backside is the first to ever touch it—and stare at the picture, fighting a helpless despair.

“Tell me what to do,” I whisper to the woman in the photo. “I am certain I want the same thing as you. I just want him to be...happy.”

Deep inside, I wish her sweet smile would order me to leave everything alone. But it does not. It delves to something even deeper...confirms what my gut has already told me since the conversation with Kate.

Satisfying his body comes nowhere close to reaching his soul.

To do that, I must find the ghosts.

“But where?” I beseech it of the room itself now, sending the plea upward as my head falls back. I close my eyes and loll the gray matter to the left. Reopen them—

To find my focus yanked like a weight across a thread. Pulled out the study’s entrance, across the central hall, through the breadth of the living room—

To the handle of a door.

Leading to the stairway up to Turret Two.

I know this as a fact, because there’s an identical door on the other side of the living room—the one Cassian has led me through, that will forever hold one of the best memories of my life. But he has all but commanded me to forget Turret Two, dismissing it as “the joint’s required junk room.” Like a proper, smitten lover, I believed him. I still do.

But is not “junk” often another word for “the past?”

And in the past, there are ghosts.

I rise. My heart pounds at the base of my throat. This is it. The X on the treasure map.

On quiet steps, I cross to the door. Half-expect it to be locked. Exhale in relief when it is not.

The air beyond the portal is different than that of Turret One. Chilled and dusty, though my feet do not leave any imprints on the wooden stairs as I start to climb. Thank the Creator.

But there are creaks.

I wince, wondering why I did not notice the sounds when ascending the other turret. Because you were not trying to sneak someplace you do not belong?

A scowl replaces the wince. Cassian has not expressly “forbidden” me to come up here. And I am not “sneaking.” I am searching. There is a difference—

Which thoroughly explains why I jump like a criminal as someone rushes up the stairway behind me. Why my blood turns to ice and my cheeks flame with accusation, as Prim’s infuriated form comes into view.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

CASSIAN

“Mishella. What the hell were you doing?”

I clench my jaw to stop the query from spilling into accusation. She’s already been subjected to that treatment; a minute into the phone call from Prim has betrayed that much already. While still on the line with her, I’d ordered Rob to cancel the rest of my day and used the Court Enterprises on-call car to get home, instead of waiting for Scott and the Jag.

Wasn’t fast enough.

Prim’s wrath has already taken its toll. I see it along the taut slashes of Ella’s shoulders, in every glimmering sapphire surface of the gaze she’ll no longer lift to mine. Instead, she stares across the study and out the window, perched on the edge of that damn chair—reminding me all too much of how stiff and scared she’d been back on Arcadia, that morning when I’d returned with the new contract.

Only now, she’s afraid of me.

My jaw clamps harder. I get down a hard inhalation, battling the bizarre twist in my gut: the beginning of a tornado so distinct, it startles me as much as it terrifies me. I’ve only endured the tornado twice before. Once for Damon, once for Lily. This—thing—with Mishella is nothing like either of those times.

Is it?

I drop my head. Pinch my nose so hard, vessels are likely broken. I can only hope. A bloodbath from my nose is a thousand times better than a hemorrhage from my soul—which this cannot be. Not after a goddamn week...

You sure about that?

Are you absolutely sure that seven days ago, you didn’t walk into that reception hall on Arcadia, behold this woman, and feel every tangle in your brain fall free? Every sprint of your spirit reach its finish

line...every hunger of your heart find its fill?

Hasn't everything since then...just made sense?

Except...that it doesn't.

"I—I just wanted to know more about you, Cassian."

And dammit, how it should.

If she were with any other man, it would.

"I know." Both words are growled, drenched in my defeat. I hate this. Hate that the secrets I must keep have made her feel like the one on trial here. I hate that Prim has become so obsessed with keeping those secrets, she's turned into the Temptation guard dog. I hate that she and Ella aren't up on the terrace right now, drinking wine and giggling about—whatever the hell women giggle about. Probably their men. In that case, Prim's giggles should be about Hodge, and Ella's should be about—

Not you, asshole.

But the thought of any other man making her smile, much less giggle, turns my ire into barely contained rage—an anger I have no goddamn right to. She's mine for only six months—and there's no room in that timeline for dredging up ghosts. She'll go back to Arcadia with memories of fire, passion, magic, and romance, not with the miserable stories of how fate, helped by two drug addicts I was stupid enough to love, has fucked my ability ever to trust words that mean even more than those. Words like commitment. And promises.

And forever.

Words she fully deserves in her life.

Not the goddamn misery. Or worse, her pity.

Sure as hell not with the story of how my wife threw herself out Turret Two's window—and how I haven't been able to leave her ghost behind for four damn years.

She sneaks another furtive glance up at me. Squirms but sits straighter, like Lily herself is lurking nearby, and gleefully wiggling the phantom flagpole up Ella's spine.

"I..I am sorry, Cassian."

"It's all right."

She stands in a rush. "No."

"Ella, really—it's all right."

"I mean no, I am not sorry."

Her fists bunch, pulling at the hem of the sweater she must've changed into when returning from Kathryn's—and visiting me. Best five minutes of my fucking day. Her lips twist but she firms them before jogging up her chin once more.

"I—I am starting to...care about you, Cassian. Probably...more than I should." She works a bare toe against the floor—making me long to reach up, strip the gray leggings from her, and screw the rest of her unsteady questions right out of her eyes. Yeah, right here. Yeah, right now.

"I care about you too." My hands drop into their own tight balls. My jaw tautens again. None of it goes undetected by her darting gaze. By now, she has to discern the bottom line. I'm dancing around the real subject as much as she is. "Yeah," I finally add. "Probably more than I should."

Another damn placeholder. I've never just "cared" about this woman—unless the term encompasses a connection so strong, every circuit of my psyche has felt snapped into hers from the moment our eyes first met. Our mainframes completely synched—

Without any backup drive in place.

Fuck. So dangerous.

"So why is it a crime to want to know you better?"

"It isn't." When her brows jump, I emphasize, "It isn't. Prim reacted the way she did out of—"

"Love?"

I square my shoulders. "Yes." Pull in another breath. "Out of love. But not in the way you think." Hell. Could I get any more cliché? The sad answer is yes, because now I have to attempt an explanation about

the bond to Prim, without ripping back the scab over the wound named Lily. “You know the funny bit girls have, about friends being a rose garden?” When she gives a small nod, I finish, “Well, Prim and I aren’t a garden. We’re a briar patch. We both bleed a lot—”

“But it would hurt worse to leave.”

Is it a shock that she concludes the thought so perfectly? Rhetorical question. It’s also no news alert when my chest clenches from the aftermath: the look on her face depicting the briar thorns she’s clearly still picking free from her spirit.

Dammit.

I need to fix this.

Disconnecting the mainframe isn’t an option.

“Ella—”

“Cassian.” She takes a measured step back. “I—I understand, all right?” Her gaze turns dark and watery. “You have had years with her. I have had barely a week. She was right in reminding me of my place.”

“Your place?” I rush forward. She retreats again, nearly skittering now. Real smooth, idiot.

“It is fine. Truly.”

“No.” The boulder in my chest is now a quarry, piled with chunks of tension. “Ella...no. Your place here...” I barely hold back from even reaching for her. “You belong in every place.” *I* need you in all of them.

“Except Turret Two.”

I stab a hand through my hair. “It’s just not—safe—up there, okay?”

Truest thing you’ve spoken all day, mother fucker. She knows it too. Knows it. I feel her perception on the air like a mist before rain. “So we are back to where we started.”

She folds her arms. I spread mine out.

“If you want to know things, I’m right here. Just ask me, favori.”

Her dash of a hopeful glance injects something close to joy. Maybe this hurricane will be just a passing storm after all. With Hodge calming Prim with a run through the park and the door to Turret Two now soundly locked, the spark of trust in Ella’s eyes is my light in that storm. If all it takes now to get there is sharing my favorite color and some inane stories from my childhood, so be it.

“All right.” Ella lifts her head and nods. Sets her gaze steadily to mine. Despite the bid for confidence, she nervously wets her lips. “After my exam, Kathryn and I talked for a little while.”

I smile and mean it. “Good. I knew you’d like her.”

“Well...”

“Well...what?”

“She told me some...things.”

Continuing the smile isn’t an effort. Even if Kate spilled all her “things”—which I highly doubt, knowing Kate and her ethics—they wouldn’t be all the things. Nobody has all of it. Silo the explosives, and no one has the power to blow the world up.

“Things like what?” It’s still conversational. Okay...this really isn’t that hard.

“Like about how you two fought on your first date.”

I even let a full chuckle fly. “You mean our only date?”

“Because you were too serious.”

“Fair statement.”

“She says you still are.”

“Which is why I’m the only one laughing about this?”

“She also said intense.”

I widen my stance enough for a comfortable heel rock. And a heated turn of my stare. “Intensity can be a good thing...in many situations.” Just like that, I fixate on her leggings again—but she doesn’t follow the gist. Her brows are knitted, her gaze still clouded.

“She says you are driven to be that way...by ghosts.”

Fuck.

The quarry stacks up again—in my gut. Outwardly, I cop a cool-ass Clint Eastwood, bravado bullets across my chest, teeth clenched on an invisible cigar. “Ghosts,” I finally repeat. “Was she specific? Gory ones with red eyes or cute cuddly Caspers?”

Ella doesn't flinch.

I'm not sure whether to be encouraged or unnerved.

Clint, don't fail me now.

She diverts her gaze from me. Dips a nod at the photo frame on the desk. “Is she one of them? The woman in the photo with you?”

Her redirected sights give me a second to regroup my expression—and my thoughts. While there's nothing to hide about the picture itself—it's sitting in the open, after all—I predict the shot's surface values will be just the start for my curious little Arcadian. Quickly, I start strategies for where she'll take this.

Because as far as I've let her in...

she can't be allowed to go all the way.

“That's...my mother.” I feel my lips kick up as I lift the frame. “Her name is Mallory.” I trace a finger around Mom's face. “She lives in Connecticut now, in a little place I bought her, with a garden and room for her cats.”

“But this was not taken in Connecticut.”

Still not a damn thing wrong with the sorceress's instinct. Right now, because things are still easy, I give her what she wants. “No. Not Connecticut. This was taken at the Jersey shore.”

Suddenly, I'm there again. Maybe it's the way Ella always smells a little like the sea or the memories-on-demand corner I'm in, but for one incredible moment, I'm just a kid again, on a grand adventure with my mom and big brother...

“We were there on vacation,” I murmur. “Just something last-minute Mom threw together. She did shit like that all the time.” I laugh softly as the recollection takes deeper root. “We stayed in this...dump...Christ, the walls were so thin, we heard everything the couple next door was doing. Let's just say I got a crash course in the birds, the bees, and the entire animal kingdom.”

“Oh, my.”

For a moment, I simply gaze at the new flags of color across Ella's cheeks. She steals my fucking breath. “Oh, yeah. Probably the best two nights of my life up to that point.” When she smacks my shoulder, I laugh. “Hey, you wanted to know!”

When her nose crinkles, my breath returns—in time to ignite my chest's fucking fireworks show. “Indeed I did. But I believe the proper term here is...TMI?”

“Too Much Information?” I slide a sly smirk. “Nah. Too much information is bragging that my arm-fart of the national anthem kicked ass all over Damon's. Even Mom agr—”

The abort button is five seconds too late. Ella's curiosity is already in full bloom, though it's still the open, did-I-miss-something kind, not the what-the-hell-are-you-hiding kind.

“Damon?” Her innocence cinches the fresh twist in my gut. Dammit, was I really that careless? “Who is that?”

For a second—maybe more than one—I weigh the merit of a simple lie. Simple? Really? How?

Fine. Maybe half the truth. He went with us to Jersey a few times. I was close to him in childhood.

Both statements are completely true. But neither is the full truth.

“He was my brother.”

And sometimes it's just better to lie in the fucking bed one makes.

She would've learned this part sooner or later. Something would've given her more than a passing clue, then she'd mention it to her 'net-savvy little friend over in Arcadia, who'd hunt deeper than the basic wiki and biography websites from which Legal has managed to suppress the information so far. This way, I'm controlling the feed—and exactly how much of my soul is lobbed off in the doing. The wound will be

repairable. A more invisible scar after she's gone.

"Your...brother." Her murmur is dotted with bewilderment. "Oh. I—I did not know—"

"Few do." My stomach clenches by another notch. I cloak the discomfort in a haven cold but familiar: the corporate photo pose. Powerful lean against the desk. One hand braced against the top, knuckles down. It says impenetrability. It says back the hell down.

But to someone like Mishella Santelle, it only says here's your pause for more questions.

"Well, does he live in Connecticut now too? Is he older or younger than you?"

And fuck it, all my heart wants to do is answer—as my soul screams from the incision.

"Older," I finally grit. "By two years." My fist grinds so hard against the desk, I expect cracks to fissure the glass plane. "At least...he was."

Her breath clutches—the sound I've been dreading. And now hate.

"W-was?"

I twist my lips. Focus my stare out the window, onto something as innocuous as possible. A crow sits atop a chimney half a block away, a black sentinel against the late afternoon sky. Why is that bird so still? And aren't crows supposed to be magical symbols of something?

"Cassian?"

I swivel toward her. It's torture but I'm unable to fight it. Magic. It's not in the crow; it's right here in her searching gaze, her quiet concern, her soft sorrow...

No. Not sorrow.

Pity.

Fuck.

I am the subject of nobody's pity.

"This isn't something I want to talk about anymore, Mishella."

Her throat vibrates on a heavy swallow. Still, her chin jolts up before she replies, "Is that why the only sound louder than your fist against that desk is the grind of your teeth? Why you look as if you yearn to collapse where you stand, but run as fast as you can at the same time?"

I jerk upright. Shove to my full stance. Pivot away. "This conversation isn't going to happen. Period."

I had to go and nickname her after the princess who walked home from the ball carrying a pumpkin and a bunch of mice. Her hand, persistent and elegant, wraps around my forearm from behind. "I think this conversation is long overdue."

"Then you think really wrong."

"I do not want to hurt you."

A laugh twists out of my constricting throat. "Christ, Mishella." All too fast, the laugh becomes a moan. "Don't you see?" I focus outside again—seeking the crow. Needing it to get out in a snarl, "You. Will. Incinerate. Me."

Pumpkin. Mice. This damn, tenacious woman flattens herself against my back, her cheek like a flare to my whole spine...my whole being. "Maybe it is simply time to live in the light again."

Her arms circle my waist. She feels so fucking good...

I clutch her wrists. Bring her in closer. "But you like the dark better."

"Maybe the world needs both."

The husk in her voice follows the fiery path she has already ignited...up my spine then back down. Spreading lower. Lower...

I shudder. She presses tighter.

"Cassian, please. I just want to help."

Her presence penetrates deeper. Makes me consider, if only for a moment...

What would it be like...to surrender? To really talk about it all? To let someone into the darkness again?

Like you let Lily in?

My breath rushes out, full of relief, as the thought slams in. It's the steel door I need. The clarity I

crave. The passage back to the space I can best keep Ella too. Indeed, like a beacon, it guides my hands atop both of hers. Shoves them down until she's cupping me. The inferno of my thoughts turns into the perfect fire between my thighs.

"Then help me," I grate...pushing harder into her grip. Filling her fingers, which now follow my lead. She grips and sprawls and stretches, taking in the width of my bulge...

Her breath quickens against my back. "Oh. By the powers. Oh."

"Yes. Fuck, yes..."

"No!"

It's just a gasp but breaks us apart like a scream. I wheel around but already know I shouldn't be—that my glare, spawned by disgust for myself, is going to look more like impatient fury. Like the expression of a man who expects to get his forty million dollars' worth out of the woman in front of him. The woman at whose feet he should be falling instead.

The woman who stumbles away, lips trembling, eyes entirely too bright.

"Well." Her chin jerks high again—while her hands wrestle in front of her stomach. "I suppose apologies are in order. I am...sorry, Cassian. Truly."

My throat squeezes. "What the hell? You're sorry?"

"You were right. This conversation really is not happening." Her eyes drop like a subject being judged by her king. "And now that I am enlightened about everything, it will not again. I give you my promise about that."

A strange weight slams my chest. "Promise?" I repeat. "Enlightened? I don't...understand."

"It is all right. *I* do." And why the hell is she smiling now—with such open serenity? "What you really wish for in all this is a bedmate."

"A bed what?"

"A fuck friend?" She cocks her head. "Is that more comfortable for you? Or do you prefer a calling booty?"

I unlock my teeth long enough to snap, "You are not my goddamn booty call."

"Hm." The sound is clipped as her smile taps out. She drops her head again—though not quickly enough. The shiny tracks on her cheeks are unmissable. "That is...an interesting point of view."

Another sensation invades my chest. It's not like the normal ache when I'm with her. It's worse—like my lungs are wrapped in rope and a dull knife is relentlessly sawing to get through. Or to get out?

"Mishella." The dagger's in my voice now, an entreaty for understanding. But will that matter? She wants things I can't give. She wants the past. She wants the truth.

She wants too much.

She lets my plea fall into silence, as she turns and leaves on slow steps.

I watch until she disappears—

and then I can watch no more.

I spin back toward the desk, toward the window through which I crave to drive my fist—especially now with the crow on its sill, smugly eyeing me as darkness takes over the city behind him.

CHAPTER TEN

MISHELLA

“Black.”

“Blue.”

“And red all over?”

I watch, a little stunned, as my quip elicits the same wide eyes and dropped jaws from my two best friends. Their matched reactions are not strange because they have dialed into the video call from different locales in Arcadia, but because they agree on something for the first time in thirty minutes. Granted, half that time has been spent studying the fifty evening gowns I have strewn across the largest of Temptation’s guest rooms, and I am in the worst mood of my life not brought on by my parents, but the tension flowing from the two has been palpable—until now.

“Did she just...make a joke?” Brooke ventures.

Vylet cocks her head. “I think so.”

“Everyone hold the line. I need to circle this day in red—somewhere.”

“Hmmm. Maybe America is a good influence on you, missie thang.”

I groan my way into a face palm. “Two weeks, Vy. I have been away for two weeks, and ‘missie thang’ is already out for some vernacular exercise?”

“Two weeks and three days,” Vy asserts. “Almost four. And I’ll give up ‘missie thang’ when you get rid of ‘vernacular exercise’.”

Brooke, who has given us a backup soundtrack of soft giggles, suddenly sobers. “Sorry, M. I’ve let her slide a little. Things have been a little...strange around here lately.”

“Strange?” I push aside a few of the dresses, needing to sit down. “That does not sound...good.”

Understatement. All the strain I have sensed from them is not my imagination—and I shiver just from wondering why.

“Oh, now you have her going, Brooke.”

“Have me going where?” I demand. “And why?”

“It’s nothing.” Brooke waves a hand in front of her awkward frown. “It’s probably nothing.”

“Probably?” My chest feels rubber-banded. “What does that—” I cannot finish. Coming from Brooke, who is married to the head of all Arcadian security forces, it could mean anything—but I force my mind away from the direst scenarios. The ones left behind are not the most comforting either. “Should Cassian be ordering the plane to take me home instead of sending me more dresses?” Because there will be more—of that, I have no doubt.

“All right. Hold on and chug a chill.” Vy throws up a speak-to-the-hand too, with much more purpose than Brooke’s fly swat. “The heightened security watches could just as well be practice drills, and—”

“Heightened security watches?” My optimistic resolve crumbles. My thoughts race, bringing up the period that changed so much for Arcadia three and a half months ago—thanks to the vigilante group who forced King Evrest to fake his own death, thrusting Samsyn onto the Arcadian throne. Thank the Creator, the movement was swiftly put down—though not the outside forces suspected of inspiring and funding it. “Are the...Pura...back?” I grimace, loathing even having to utter their name.

“No,” Vy protests.

“We don’t know,” Brooke says at the same time.

“Saynt.” His name shoots off my lips, an arrow off the bow of my fear. He is technically not a soldier yet, but desperate times beget desperate measures. Where is he, even now? It is a new day on the island. Is he getting ready for one of those watches? Surely he is not getting done with one. They would not place

him on a dangerous night watch so soon. In so many ways, he is still just a boy...

"He's fine, girlfriend." Brooke's words are jabbed with conviction, confirming she has checked that veracity herself. "If anything, he's jonesing for action a little too hard for Samsyn's liking." She inhales with meaning. "But I know how the kid feels."

Slowly, a smile returns to my lips. I hope she can see the gratitude behind it. I miss my feisty former boss—even her daily grumblings about the grind of being a princess instead of a warrior.

"Well...keep him in line," I reply good-naturedly.

"We both are," Vy assures. "Just like his big sistah would."

"Speaking of keeping males in line..." Brooke exaggerates a brow waggle. "Can we get back to the subject—or should I say the confusing jerk—at hand?"

"And the fact that the blue gown will drive him more insane than the black?"

The dress Vy refers to, a sparkly pale blue sheath, is nearly the color of my eyes—not that Cassian will notice my eyes with its plunging neckline. Brooke's top choice is a flowing black creation with an equally dramatic bodice: newly arrived from Milan, according to the curious little woman who has come every morning with fresh batches of gowns, per Cassian's directive—or so she tells me. The man himself has not given me more than twenty words since our "discussion" in the study last week, choosing to work late and eat elsewhere—sometimes even just spending the night at the office. I have little hope that this Literacy Ball is going to change anything, but vow to give it a go.

And yes...perhaps there is a small part of me who wants to really be a princess for a night. Just this once...

"Show us both the dresses again." Brooke's request tugs my mind back to the present—away from its empathy with the sobbing sky outside. Like my spirit, the New York weather has been nonstop on the soggy for days. I welcome the chance to flip the smart pad screen, panning it across the bed. As I do, she emits a low whistle. "Daaammn, girl. You know I'm not into apology by foof, but that man is trying to tell you something."

"Concurred." I change the screen back, to let them see my little shrug. "He is trying, I think...in his own weird way."

Brooke laughs. "What man doesn't have 'his own weird way'?"

"Mine," Vylet retorts. "What you see is what you get with Alak Navarre, thank the Creator. And for the record, I am keeping the hell out of him, so neither of you get any ideas."

I move to the window seat. Gaze over the labyrinth of wet streets below, the streetlights and neon signs blended by the rain into a giant watercolor. I would have much the same view from Turret One, which is one floor directly above—but I have not returned to that space, perhaps in subliminal protest to the continued lockdown of the other tower. As long as it stays shackled, I cannot help but feel a similar weight, invisible but just as formidable, on my spirit.

"Can you just lend Alak out for a while?" I venture. "How long do you think it would take for him to rub off on Cassian, just a little?"

Brooke sighs. "I think that lesson has to come from you, girlfriend."

Vylet smirks. "Which, coincidentally, might be best with a little...rubbing."

Brooke peels off a giggle. I groan. Like old times.

Perhaps too much.

I bite my lip. Too late. The backs of my eyes burn. "Creator's toes," I whisper. "I miss you both so much."

Stunningly, Vy is the first to sober on their end. Even more astonishing, her next words aren't then just come home. She gives four even better.

"We are already there."

As Brooke nods, her eyes are shiny too. "She's right, shella-bean. We haven't gone far...the same way you aren't ever far from us."

Now the rain falls inside too. I grip the smart pad as the flooding love of their friendship hits, a storm

my heart has desperately needed. One awful sob overcomes another and another and another. They wait as only best friends can, their silence as perfect as a pair of hugs.

“I—I d-do not know wh-what—to do.” The confession finally stutters out. “I—I feel so much for him...”

So much. The new understatement. But I am so afraid of saying more. Saying it will make it real. Too real. And too much...

“I told you, B,” Vy murmurs after a pause. “Did I not?”

“Sure did,” Brooke replies.

“T-told her wh-what?” Despite the stammer, I sound shockingly pragmatic. At least I hope.

Vylet folds her arms, leans toward her camera, and nods with confidence. “That Cassian Court was going to be the man who changed you.”

They both smile. I blush furiously. “Wh-when did you tell her that?”

“From the second he first took your hand, at that reception.”

Brooke nods. “That is what she said.”

Vy maintains her close-up angle. Studies me with the intensity only possible in her big movie star eyes. “Mishella—”

I get in my turn at hoisting a hand. “No. Do not ask it, Vylet Hester.”

“—are you in love with him?”

Yes.

No!

“I—I do not know.” I let out a new moan, conking my head back against the wall. “By the Creator. I am a mess...”

“That’s all right.” Brooke’s interjection is as gentle as the rain against the glass. “Who said life is always neat and clean?”

“She did,” Vy snorts.

After joining my watery laugh to theirs, I mutter, “Point made...dammit.”

“Karma is a nasty bitch sometimes.”

“No,” Brooke interjects. “That little Prim what’s-her-name. She’s the bitch.”

I shake my head—more violently than I can believe. “It is...bizarre...but I do not believe that. She does have a connection to Cassian—”

“You mean hooks?” Vy charges.

“Perhaps even that.” My concession clearly spoils a little of her fun—the woman is always up for a rowdy debate—but I continue, “Though they are not romantic ones.” I shrug, trying to sort through my bafflement. It is no use. “Aggggh. There are simply things I do not know.” Rough breath in. Painful exhale. “Ghosts...he will not reveal.”

Silence. Contemplative but not uncomfortable. Though they are half a world away, sitting with my thoughts is so much easier with the sis-friend-hood around.

At last, Brooke penetrates the pause. “Well, I understand ghosts,” she offers quietly. “Samsyn carries a bunch. A real sucky hazard of the job.”

I meet her gaze, which has turned as somber as the thunderheads outside. “But he tells you about them, right?”

“Now he does. But we’re married, bean—and had six years of friendship before the rings went on our fingers. Things are very different for us.”

“Of course.” There is no use disguising my disappointment.

Brooke’s lips flatten. I know the look but have never dreaded it as much as this moment. Tough love. “Mishella...the plan right now is that you’re there for just six months. So now you have to ask yourself—is that a tolerable time to live with the ghosts?” Her shoulders rise then fall. “I can’t answer it for you, and neither can Vy.”

I swallow deeply. “I just want him to be happy.”

She sighs softly. “Perhaps that’s your problem, girlfriend.”

“Huh?”

“You already make him happy,” she contends. “But maybe...”

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe you want something more than just that.”

“Just that?” I openly glower. What is she talking about? Are there “levels” of happiness I do not know about, like they talk about on the cable service ads on the television? Basic, deluxe, premium?

“I’m just saying that maybe you crave...more.” Her own face twists, as if a small skirmish is taking place in her head, before a heavy breath rushes out. “A more he’s not capable of feeling, or giving. Not right now.”

Not to you.

I let the words—hers and mine—descend into taut silence. That is usually what people do when their heart is scooped out of their chest...yes?

“Mishella—”

“Fine.” I abhor the terse snap, but cannot help it from spilling. I cannot bear a moment of her getting apologetic about it—or worse yet, pitying. “I—I understand, all right? And I am fine.”

“All right, stop.” Vy points a finger at her camera. “Do not punish Brooke for this. She is trying to help you see this clearly.”

I force my lips into a girl Buddha smile. Do not let the serenity climb anywhere near my eyes. Continue to let them simmer while rejoining, “I see everything just fine, Vylet Hester. Now...I am certain both of you have a busy day ahead. I shall let you get to it.”

I click my end of the call short without giving them a chance for farewells. It is a childish move—I am taking my sand toys and going home—but I cannot control the reflex any more than the frustration and fury spawning it. Both take over now, annihilating and untamed, then dump out in an unhindered flood. A long, lonely, ugly cry in a room full of silk, satin, and brocade—finery I would trade in a moment for the true fullness of Cassian Court’s heart.

CASSIAN

Holy fuck.

I must be dreaming.

“No shit,” Scott mutters, confirming I’ve let the words slip aloud. Not surprising—nor would I be stunned if it happened again, as my Ella from the cinders seems to float down the steps, directing her soft smile toward where I wait by the car.

I’m not there for long—as in bolting to get the jump on Scott, who’s done the “courtly” thing by stepping up to “collect” her for me—but I’m screwed for watching any man get near her tonight. Delaying the torture a little longer delivers a solid for all.

Annnd, we can start with the solid any time now...

But fate is already having his fun with me tonight. The fucker takes his sweet time about the kumbaya with my nervous system, letting lightning raze me as she steps closer. The skirt of her gown, made of something that looks like a cloud spun into fabric, swirls and sparkles against the stairs with every step she takes. I pray for a breeze, which would likely flatten the filmy fabric around her thighs...

And just like that, solid arrives.

Between my legs.

Focusing on things above her waist is an only slightly better solution. The gown’s strapless bodice is encrusted with gold and silver beads, with a band of the same defining the curve of her waist. While the neckline doesn’t plunge that far down, thank God, the beads have been glued to lead one’s eye toward the center—and the bit of her breasts that are revealed.

Too damn much for my liking.

Yet I can't stop staring.

Fuck. Fuck.

I had to go and hire the city's best hair and makeup to primp her too, didn't I? Damn that Fabiola, rubbing something into Ella's skin to turn it more enticing than it already is. The cream, or whatever the hell it is, gives her neck, shoulders, and arms some kind of iridescence...flooding me with visions of exploring all those planes with my tongue.

Not. Fucking. Helping.

My mind growls it out—like my body needs help remembering how long it's endured without hers. How many days we've wasted in this balance between the heaven of where we started and the hell we're most afraid of, both of us frozen on the tightrope, unwilling to move past the stupidity of surface niceties anymore. I haven't helped the situation by practically living at the office, but coming home to a place that really is temptation for me now, with her scent and her presence in every molecule of the air, has been a fiasco I made no plans for.

Plans.

You actually started thinking of them in conjunction with this woman...when?

Something will have to happen soon. I admit it now. She's not happy, and the sole plug she's given me back to her joy is not a circuit I can connect—not without frying every inch of my psyche. I know that now too, courtesy of the erotic memories that assault my mind's idle hours. Reliving every moment I've spent touching her, kissing her, fucking her, only clarifies the understanding. If she's capable of consuming that much of me sexually, how much more will she gouge from me emotionally?

There's no halfway with her.

Goddammit, there never will be.

Meaning I have to think about letting her leave.

“Bon aksum, Mr. Court.”

Especially if she insists on issuing a lot more greetings like that. Professional cool backlit with sensual music, making me a new fan of the whole boss-and-secretary thing...

“And good evening to you, Miss Santelle.”

And especially if I'll keep being required to bend over her hand like this—snapping a certain something beneath the tux like a goddamn ripe cucumber.

“Well.” She yanks in a breath, lifting a shaky smile. I'll take it. After ten days of watching the dry cleaners' delivery guy get more friendly words than me, I'll fucking take it. “Here...we are.”

Only by filling my lungs with air do I resist kissing away her nervousness. Instead, I go for a friendly smile and an overlay of charm. “It would appear so.”

“That tuxedo is on the cutting edge of...something.” She gestures with her free hand. “Fabiola told me. Several times.”

I press in my lips, working the dimples. No way have I missed what their deployment usually does to her libido—and friendly or not, I'm still not above a few dirty tactics. “I'm sure she did.”

She lowers her hand. Flits it at her skirt. “Well, you look very dashing.”

“And you look like something I've only ever dreamed.”

It wasn't what I'd planned to say—though that isn't astounding anymore; not when Ella's involved. And dammit, I may be ready to think about letting her go, but sure as hell haven't reached acceptance yet. Psychologically speaking, I'm in the “fight for it” phase.

I've fought for things a lot less important—
and won.

“Should we be off?” I murmur, tucking her hand beneath my elbow.

Her flits at the dress turn into full twists. “Sure. Um—I mean—certainly. Of course.”

I mold my hand over the back of hers. “It's okay, Ella. I already know you're going to be the most beautiful one at the ball.”

It's also what I'm afraid of.

She licks the seam of her lips, looking tempted to fully bite despite the contours of lip rouge representing at least thirty minutes of Fabiola's time. "I suppose I shall do," she finally mutters. "I mean...for the hired help."

I halt where I'm at. Slide my grip to her wrist and twist in—though now, we're close enough to the Jag that I have to let her go. She dives into the backseat like a pony let off its training harness—after a charming greeting and smile for Scott.

I remain rooted in place. Carefully reel back the ire that's just tumbled in with her. Tug hard at my jacket—and with gritted teeth, order my cock to a stand-down too.

Fighting for this shit just got very serious.

Scott bounces on his toes, his normal puppy-bright self. "And good evening to you as well, Mr. Court. To the Public Library, right?"

"Not. Yet."

The puppy freezes. "Sir?"

I don't swerve my glare from its angle into the car—and the lofty posture of the woman inside, thinking she's stilled me on the tightrope yet again. "Take the long way there," I command tightly. "A couple of times. No,"—I stop, one hand on the open door—"just keep driving, until you hear from me."

Scott, not being stupid, raises the driver barrier the second he starts the car.

I'm not a stupid man either. As soon as we roll, I reach and brace Mishella by the hips. Haul her over from the spot beneath the opposite window, until she's in the middle of the bench seat—right next to me.

"What on—"

"Be quiet, Ella." With a violent thwick, I pull a seatbelt out. Snap it into the holster at her hip, securing her arm to her side in the doing.

"Cassian. What the hell are you—"

"I said be quiet." I let her glimpse my eyes, on fire with rage, while pressing her other arm to her side. "You'll have your chance to speak—momentarily."

Thwick.

Since the seat can accommodate three, one of the seatbelts descends the opposite direction.

Clack.

I slam the buckle in, ensuring the straps are crisscrossed over her arms and torso. Now, the belts rise and fall with the frenetic pumps of her lungs. Hell. That neckline isn't as demure as I first thought. The sight of her breasts, creamy and gorgeous and just an inch from spilling full nipple, take my cock to something between throbbing and unbearable. Not that I help matters by leaning over and clamping my hands over her wrists—but dammit, this shit has gone on long enough. If I'm going to be ordering up the plane to take her back to Arcadia tomorrow, she'll fucking hear out my side of all this first.

"I—I object to this!" Her eyes fire at me, bright as sun through blue glass. Her breasts show subtle pink strips from where they push at the straps. Goddamn. Why didn't I think of doing this a week ago?

"Are you in any physical pain?"

Her lips, already open to rage at me more, clamp shut. Pop back open to retort, "I—you're—"

"Hurting you?" I volley. "In any way at all?"

"Well—no. But—"

"Then you'll sit right here—and listen to me." I take in her open astonishment—and actually share some of it. My first sight of her full anger is more potent than I ever expected. She's an extra shot at last call. A hard bite into a jalapeño. A scoop of phaal curry. Intoxicating. Blistering. I want more and hate myself for it.

"Listen to you?" Her eyes narrow. "All I have wanted to do is listen to you, Cassian. I begged you to let me do just that—"

"When you were calling the subject matter." I constrict my grip. "Well, now I'm calling it. And the subject tonight—is you."

Her mouth opens again. Releases nothing but pissed-off little grunts, as her brain clearly struggles for a

comeback. “There—there is nothing about me worth—”

“Oh no? Except the fact that you have labeled yourself everything from my fuck friend, my booty call, and now my hired help?”

I push deeper into her personal space, until my hips prod her knees apart and I breathe in her perfect scents. That exotic vanilla of her hair, its up-do layered with products from Fabiola’s arsenal. Equally exclusive perfume—Chanel Grand Extrait, Fab’s favorite—jasmine and rose in a lush mix. The creamy luxury of whatever the hell makes her skin shimmer like this...and feel this damn good.

So. Damn. Good.

“Goddammit, Ella,” I finally snarl. “You are none of those things. You never have been. How can you think them, let alone speak them?”

We both breathe harder. Our gazes meet and tangle. “Cassian.” It’s a sob, and I’m glad of it. I rejoice in her conflict. Good. It’s been hell for you too. I hope it’s been a lot of hell.

“Do you really think you’re just a toy to me? A trinket I wanted and went after, like a car or a house or a suit?” I spit the final syllable, hating the raw emotion I swore not to expose—then even more for the surge of satisfaction as she flinches. “Did I experience something different, the moment our hands first touched...the second our eyes first locked?” I drill my stare harder into her. Slip my hands down until our fingers lace. “Was I the only one who thought the whole room had fallen away—hell, the whole damn island—until it was just you and me, standing on a rock in the middle of that ocean, put there by destiny?”

“No.” As she rasps it, her fingers curl into mine. Her face lifts, eyes searching into mine. “No. You...were not...the only one.”

More feelings hit. They’re like waves in the sea I’ve just evoked: some fast and powerful and violent, some deep and rolling and continent-changing. I grit my teeth, willing them to get the hell over with things and drown me, but they’re a storm surge, relentless against the ramparts of my spirit and soul. They tumble in, taking over my dark corners—the places I’ve vowed no one will get to, ever again. But here my Ella is, not just flooding them. She’s changing them. Moving my continents...

“Then why?” I finally grate. “Why do you reduce it all to such ugliness? Why do you brand my heart with nothing but dollar signs—when I would have cut the fucker right out of my body and given it to your father, if that’s what he demanded?” Maybe that would’ve been the better call, anyway. Inside my chest or out, the thing is destined to beat on empty space without her. Maybe that’s better, in the end—more bearable than the memories, the helplessness, the pain.

Her lips tremble. Her eyes shimmer. “Is that the key to knowing that heart, then?” A sound chokes from her throat, bitterness that doesn’t make it to a laugh. “Because that is all *I* want, Cassian. Can you not see? The same way you have taken my heart, my life, and given them so much more meaning and worth...all I want to do is the same for you. To show you—”

“Show me what?” I release the burst without restraint or balance. Isn’t this what you want, Miss Santelle? Glorious, violent honesty? Fan-fucking-tastic. Let’s do honest. “You want to show that you can ‘get’ to me? That you can make me give you the ‘ghosts’, so you can—what—exorcise them for me? That the power of your adoration is going to ‘change’ me? Christ.”

The last of it scorches my throat—burning past my crumbled resistance, overcoming the flood, eviscerating everything inside with its rage and shame and scorn. With a terrible growl, I let up on her arms. With another one, set her free from the seatbelts. But the fire sweeps in, worse than before. It slams me to my haunches, coiling fists against my gut, fighting its incursion—and losing.

The car takes a corner. It’s a gentle roll, but joined with the heat in my psyche, is enough to pitch me forward once more. My head swims, dizzy. My heart lurches, lost.

“C-Cassian?”

I watch my fist, clenched against the limo’s gray carpet, vanish beneath the volumes of her skirt. Jerk it back, twisting it against the center of my chest. “Get away, Ella.”

“No.” Tears crack her voice, and I steel myself against them. Stiffen myself against the perfect warmth of her hands, pulling on the back of my neck, the whole of my scalp. “No. You do not want that.” She

draws me closer. Tighter into the embrace of her softness, her fragrance...her light.

It is time to live in the light...

Denial explodes from my soul. Churns in my chest. Snarls up my throat. "Leave. Me. Alone!"

Alone is the only place that makes sense.

Alone is the only place I won't hurt you.

The only place you won't hurt me.

But she pulls me harder—how the fuck did she get so strong?—and I'm letting her—how the fuck did I get so weak?—and her fingers dig into my face, forcing it up, commanding me to take in every breathtaking inch of hers. Yes, even the tears streaking it. Even the smudges of her lipstick, from where she's buried her face into my hair. But especially the glory of her eyes, adoring me...ambushing me...

"You are not alone."

Before she forces me closer, and kisses me.

And kisses me.

And kisses me.

I am helpless against the magic of her lips. Consumed by the power of her embrace. Hardened by the nearness of her body.

Suffused by the force of her light.

"Fuck." It's helpless and guttural, as she washes over me...into me. "Fuck."

I lurch up, matching the force of her mouth with mine. Suck her in, feasting on the wet, warm depths that haven't been mine for so long. Too damn long...

Moans escape us. Our mouths reverberate with the sounds, inciting more heat through our limbs. Ella's hands cascade to my shoulders, finding their way beneath my jacket then scratching at my shoulders through my shirt. I go at her with the same ferocity, wrapping one arm around her waist, sliding the opposite hand beneath her bodice.

"Oh!" It sparks off her lips, high-pitched and breathless, as soon as I find her first full nipple. I tease a finger across the tight peak. Then another.

"So hard," I utter against her lips. "So erect. So perfect."

She mewls as I glide my touch to the other. "They have been like this...all week."

"Really?"

She meets my frown with a kittenish smile. "Side effect of the injection. And being without you."

I lean in, kissing her deeply once more. "I've missed you too. Dammit, armean...like missing my own legs. One day, I even forgot what day of the week it was—in the middle of a huge meeting, at that."

We laugh together. It feels so fucking good that I slide my eyes shut, savoring the emotional orgasm of the moment, praying the blinding blast of it lasts forever.

The glaring light of it...

I bolt from the recognition by losing myself in another kiss—and dragging her into its illicit darkness with me. Plunging the corners of her mouth with open, wicked, searing abandon, rolling our tongues until we both can't breathe, then pulling us both even deeper into the lusting, wild abyss...

Yes.

Yes.

This is what we need. If only for now, this is what we can claim as right between us. This is where I can give her exactly what she wants. I pull back, letting her see exactly that in my gaze, before spinning her around and making her face the seat. I tug at her arms, directing her to spread them out—then press in and down, letting her feel every hard, lusting inch of my body.

I dip in, fitting my mouth against her neck. Snarl again, reveling in the hammer of her pulse under my lips.

"Cassian." She battles to lift up, hitching her shoulders against my chest. Mewls with passionate force as I push her back down, skating my hands down her arms, twining my hands over the backs of hers. "Oh, please..."

“Please what, favori?” I softly bite her shoulder. “You want to keep talking about the light...” Another bite. Harder. “Or do you want a trip into the darkness?”

Her breath expels in a needy rush. “By the powers.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Take me...down,” she finally pleads. “Into the...darkness. With you, Cassian. With all of you...”

As soon as the concession leaves her lips, I start shoving her skirts up. It takes a shorter time than I’d estimated to find her ass, barely sheathed in a thong surely mandated by Fabiola, but right now I’m certain I could locate this woman in another galaxy if forced to.

Appropriate imagery—since I damn near see stars the moment my fingers glide beneath those scant panties, to the wet perfection between her legs. “And all of you too?” I work my fingers beyond her damp curls then between her slick lips, stroking the inlet to her tunnel with the rhythmic touch that drives her crazy. In return, her thighs clench, her whole pussy shivers.

“Yes. Oh dear Creator; yes...with all of me!”

At first, I can only grunt. The heaven of touching her again, along with the hell of controlling my cock’s reaction, are a purgatory too intense for words. My brain scrambles, trying to tell my body what to do. Unlatch pants. Pull down zipper. Get yourself out of these fucking briefs.

Another grunt, rapidly turned into a groan, as I lube myself with pre-come. Wildly unnecessary. “So wet,” I growl, stating the obvious. “Christ, Ella. Your cunt is dripping.”

She whimpers. “Take it. Take me. Into the dark. All the way. Please...”

I shove her panties farther aside. Notch my agonized crown against her tight cushions. “This isn’t going to be gentle.” It’s not an apology.

“Thank the fucking Creator.”

I lunge.

She screams.

We shake together, our bodies roaring in gratitude. I’m seated inside her, naked and pulsing, head to balls. Fucking heaven.

My forehead falls to her collarbone. My hands force hers outward, stretching her...until she’s crushed against the seat beneath me.

I pull out. Nearly all the way.

Thrust in again, deeper than before.

Again.

Again.

Scott keeps driving. Around us, the city thrums with horns and hawkers, sirens and shouts, rock music and rowdy madness—but in here, in the haven of our darkness, there is only the wet rhythm of our bodies, the climbing force of our passion...the precipice to which we climb, aching to fall over together once again...

“Cassian. Oh...my. Cassian!”

“I know, sweet armeau. I know.”

“So...close. I...am...so close.”

“Widen your knees. It’s going to spread everything for you.”

I feel the exact moment she complies. Before she can even cry out, her walls clench in, surrounding me in the heated vise of her body. My dick answers with a swell of pressure, punching me deeper in, pulling me closer to the sublime end of my sanity. To make it better for us both, I add a subtle roll at the end of each thrust. If the seat is grinding her clit as I think it is, the effect on her arousal will be—

“Cassian! Fuck!”

Damn. Damn. That word, on her lips...even my hair follicles sizzle. I sink my teeth into her shoulder, and don’t relent one inch on driving hard into her sweet, tight body. “You like that, favori?”

“Uh,” she gasps. “Uh-huh...”

“Of course you do. My perfect girl.” I run my hands back up, cupping beneath her bodice. Pinch her

nipples again, reveling in her throaty cry, before delving my hand back beneath the dress. My hands dive in, bracing her hips. My head fits against her neck. “My perfect girl, in the dark...where it’s filthy and hot, and my cock is buried so deep inside you...”

She inhales, shaky and edgy. Exhales between her teeth, as her hands fist around the seat buckles. “Yes,” she pants. “Yes. More. Take me there. Take. Me. There.”

And...that’s it. Her plea snicks open the lock on my remaining restraint. With a punishing pace, I fuck her body back onto mine. I ram forward with the same force, feeding her the dialogue she craves with equally nasty intensity.

“The only place I’m taking you is under me, woman.”

“Yes...”

“Taking my cock...bare...hard...deep.”

“Yes!”

“Your cunt will keep taking it...and so will your clit.” The tiny tremors of her nub, now flicked by my balls, have not escaped my attention.

“Yes, Cassian. Yes.”

“Without barriers this time.”

“None!”

“Feel me filling you...invading you...making you hotter by the moment, until you think you can’t stand it anymore, and—”

Her shriek finally breaks in. “I cannot! Creator help me—Cassian, please—I cannot take it anymore!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MISHELLA

“What?” His voice is rougher, harder, and more ruthless with lust than I have ever fathomed it could be. It terrifies me. It galvanizes me. “What can’t you take anymore, Ella? Tell. Me.”

And as he finishes it with a sharp smack to my bottom...it soaks me.

“W-waiting,” I finally stammer. “I cannot wait any longer!”

“For what?”

I should be wiser about this by now. Should have known he would get me to this precipice, only to make me beg for the final fall over the cliff.

Because he knows I will adore him for every moment of it.

I shove my mind through sexual smoke. Pull up the words he demands—the words I need—to take us both to the edge...

“I cannot wait...” I frantically lick my lips. “To come. For you. Around you, Cassian.”

A sound chugs from his chest, full of sensual approval. I swear I am glowing from it, though instantly he is all animal impatience again, prompting, “And what else?”

“And...for you to come too,” I rasp.

The husky approval again. Brighter glow.

“Like this?” he encourages. “With my bare cock in your cunt?”

Oh. My.

This. Man.

How does he do this? How does he know the exact angle for his mental scalpel, dipping it into the exact place in my psyche that holds my naughtiest triggers...my deepest arousals?

And right now, does that answer even matter?

“Yes.” I shove my hips back, grinding in time to the raw pace he sets. “Yes, Cassian...with your naked cock inside me.”

“Right here? Fucking you in my back seat?”

“Right here, Cassian. Right now. Here, in the back of your car.”

“Spilling my hot, thick come inside you...as anyone on this street can hear you screaming because of it?”

I cut into his last word by embodying it. My climax rips straight from my fantasies and rampages my body, tearing a shriek from my throat, and filling my sex with a storm. Within seconds, it spirals into a tempest. With a violent groan of his own, Cassian gives me the flood of his seed, relentless with his thrusts until we are both breathless, limp, and sated.

Slowly, he relents his grip on my hips. Though I melt forward a little, he follows me down. With his body still locked inside mine, he trails kisses down then back up my shoulder. Continues around, to the dip between my shoulder blades. His breaths are long and lingering, turning my perspiration into tiny shivers. When they trickle the length of my body, my walls clench around him once more.

“Christ.” He grits it before zigzagging the tip of a finger down my back, causing me to grip him harder. He reprises the word, harsher now.

I cannot help a little laugh. Add a saucy glance over my shoulder. “It is your own fault.”

“Yeah? You may just make it my ‘fault’ again.” His face, defined by taut arousal, is still an ideal pairing with his tuxedo. He was probably one of those children who play-acted James Bond for the martinis and the girls, not the bad guy butt kicking. “Holy fuck, woman. I’m half-hard again already.” When I tighten all my muscles again, deliberately this time, he delivers a sound slap to the cheek that didn’t get it

the first time. I yelp. He purrs.

“You are a beast,” I tease.

“A beast who has to make an appearance at this goddamn gala. So tell your sweet body to let me go...please.”

With as much care as we can give my gown, we slide away from each other. “At least the ball is at the library,” I offer, while he scoops a towel from the limo’s bar and helps clean me up. “I can sneak off and read while you hog-nog with your people.”

“Hob-nob?” he prompts.

“Hm. That too.”

“Well, there’s only one ‘knob’ that concerns me.” His face contorts as he wraps a second towel around his sex—which backs up his honesty with its beautiful, half-erect state. “And yes, it misses you already.”

“Well, *I* miss him.”

He stills, towel still on his groin. “Him?”

Quick shrug. “Well, of course. He is part of you, so...”

“So is it just ‘him’?” His lips twist once more, as he tucks himself back in. “Or is there a proper name involved here? How about...Eugene? Or something more basic? Bill? Bob?”

I hold up both hands. Return with a chuckle, “All right, now. There is such a thing as carrying things too far.”

“We just fucked like animals from the Upper West Side to SoHo. How far would you consider too far?”

I do not miss the tightened corners of his eyes, nor the tension now twining his tone. Perhaps he already feels the difference in the air between us...how I have stuffed away my heart the same way he has pushed down his penis. Clinical? Yes. But survivable? That is the more important yes. Nothing has proved that more clearly than what has just happened between us—a joining that blazed my heart and soul more thoroughly than his essence seared my sex—making it doubly necessary to re-shield them both.

Before he can take over any more of them...

Before they swell too huge, even for the shields.

I smooth my skirts. Pull some tissues from the built-in dispenser in the ledge behind the seat, dabbing at the lipstick that now must be all over my face. “I simply think that boundaries are a smart idea...in some circumstances.”

Cassian stiffens. His gaze turns the shade and texture of jade. “In what circumstances?”

I draw in a breath. You knew this might happen. Remember what you mentally rehearsed.

I re-set my shoulders. Force my stare to align with his. Creator help me. A little of my resolve weakens. His eyes are still jade—but now cut into battle daggers. Comprehension has started to seep in.

“In this circumstance,” I state, folding calm hands around the tissues. “Everything you said earlier, Cassian...it is true, of course. We enjoy a good connection. A blend of chemistry that is...very nice, and—”

“Nice?” As his growl slams the air, his brows descend over his glare. “Fuck. Are you really doing this? Nice?”

I toss the tissues aside. Recollect myself. I have vowed to remain clear about this, even if he cannot view the situation accurately. Not if we are both to emerge from this arrangement as sane entities. “We...enjoy each other,” I venture again. “In many ways.”

He matches my determined inhalation. Wraps one hand around his knee, the other on the back of the seat. A posture of openness—
and challenge.

“Fair statement,” he replies. “And in many ways, correct.” His stare sobers. The car glides through a small dip and sways gently, becoming the expectant metronome to his follow-up. “But...?”

“But...” I fill my lungs again. “I cannot keep ‘enjoying’ them as thoroughly as I have been. This is for the best, Cassian. I truly believe it, and need you to do so, as well.”

CASSIAN

I don't know whether to throw a punch through the back window, or just throw up. Neither option is comforting. Both are confusing as fuck.

This isn't the first time I've heard those words from a woman. If I had a dollar, right? It's damn near the borderline of my norm. Cassian meets girl. Cassian screws girl. Cassian tells girl she gets the Court charm, the Cassian cock, and the designer-clad arm at a few parties. Even pillow talk is part of the package...perhaps a few jokes as bonus, if things are going well.

No hearts. No flowers. And goddammit, no life story sharing.

Which brings us, at some point, to here. A here I am just fine with. Perhaps, in many instances, am grateful for.

But this time, the confines of this car—of this fucking life, and the price fate has demanded from me for it—render me nothing but gutted. Same effect, anyhow.

I grit my teeth, pumping air like a bull as bile hollows my belly and self-disgust dices my intestines. I combat both by focusing on the floor near her feet. Minutes ago, my knees were planted there in order to pleasure her. I'm not above dropping there again, if I have to beg her.

But I wonder if even that will make a difference.

Her regal strength, one of the qualities that blew me away when first meeting her, is now my worst enemy. It retaliates from the depths of her eyes, dark and serious as a graveyard before dawn. In short, her resolve looks pretty fucking set.

Dammit.

Dammit.

"All right." Concealing the gravel from it is as hopeless as hiding bird crap on this car. Poetic fit, since my psyche is about the same texture. "I'd ask you to define 'for the best', but it looks like you've got that figured out too."

A heavy gulp moves down her throat. "I—I have to take care of my heart, Cassian." For the first time since our bodies broke apart, her voice shakes. "I have not even been here a month, and I already feel it..."

"You feel what, armeau?"

Her gaze flares into a glare. Armeau. I'm exploiting her hesitation and we both know it.

"Disappearing."

Hell. Her tactic is worse than mine. Honesty—as only she can use it against me. Like a laser wielded by a master surgeon, aimed right at my ugliest tumors...my deepest fear.

A world without connection again.

A world without her again.

"It is disappearing, Cassian...into you." Her hands rise, covering her whole face. The tips of her fingers turn white as she shakes her head, fighting the very words she's just confessed. "But there is nothing there for it," she rasps. "Nothing...except..."

"Walls." I take the responsibility of it from her. Let the word weigh my shoulders instead, praying like hell that somehow it will—

what?

Change anything?

Because it doesn't change a fucking thing.

Her heart is still her heart—a gift too precious for my keeping.

And mine is still mine—a mess too morbid for her to handle. For anyone to handle. So many have tried—Kate, Prim, and the countless others who thought they had "the right key" to me—but the truth is, only one person has even gotten close to that entrance. To breaking me open.

Shattering me whole.

And like an idiot, I reach again for her now.

I thank God—and any other entity who cares to take credit—when she lets me pull her closer, fitting her cheek atop my heart, spreading her warmth over my whole body. And yes, enticing the twitch parade to carry on in my dick—though that need comes a very distant second to getting an answer to the question on my lips now.

“So...what happens now, Ella?”

She shifts, nuzzling closer. Good sign?

“Are you asking if I want to go home?”

Bad sign.

“Yeah.” I practically choke on the syllable. “Yeah, I guess that’s what I am asking.”

I remember something about her taking special courses on Arcadia, about courtly arts and practices. Undoubtedly, the fine skill of torture was in that mix. Her silence is nothing less.

“I do not want to go home, Cassian.”

I breathe in, claiming back the year she’s just stripped out of me. “Thank you.” It needs to be said. Perhaps more than once. Maybe from that position I was contemplating, at her feet.

“But I need to move into one of the guest rooms.”

“Sure.” It spews too quickly and too eagerly, and I don’t give a flying shit. I make a mental note to text Hodge and direct him to clutter up the two guest rooms farthest from the master, forcing her into the third. “Yeah. Okay.”

“And we make dates to see each other,” she goes on. “Real ones, where we go out in public and I get to meet your friends. What?” She knuckles me curiously in the ribs, responding to my snort. “You do have friends?”

“I suppose.” I don’t have the heart to tell her my closest “buddy” is Doyle, whose idea of stimulating conversation is four grunts, two beers, and a good Knicks game.

“Well, we can start with Kate. Is she dating anyone?”

“I don’t know.” Which is usually the case—which, for the first time, comes as truly troubling.

“We can figure it out.” The woman in my arms shifts back to central focus. I curl in my fingers, making light circles on her creamy shoulder, enjoying the musical cadence of her voice...rejoicing in the fact that it’s not leaving me anytime soon. “The important thing is, we get away from Temptation, so we are not always...well...tempted.”

Light chuckle. A gentle kiss into her hair. “Why, Miss Santelle, whatever do you mean?”

“Says the man with a woodshed poking my thigh?”

I laugh harder. Much harder. “You mean some wood?”

“Hm. That too.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

MISHELLA

“Mishella?”

I hear Scott’s concerned prompt, backed by the rush of traffic along 5th Avenue behind us, but cannot answer. My jaw has dropped on one of the most stunned gapes of my life.

“Armeau?” Cassian now, his body large and close, one hand curving around my elbow, his cedar scent a perfect blend with the grass, trees, and spring flowers abounding through Bryant Park. I now remember Brooke gushing about this place, once she learned that the Literacy Ball would be held at the big library here. Before her family went into hiding on Arcadia, when she was just a young senator’s daughter, she attended something called Fashion Week. The event was a bore, she claimed, but the magnificence of Bryant Park was a win.

Now I understand why.

“Ella.”

The urgency in his voice finally causes me to turn. I do not hide my continuing shock—as if that is even possible. “Cassian...”

His mouth hitches up at one end. “What, beautiful?”

“We are in the wrong place.” I blurt it despite the small throng of other partygoers, strolling along the wide pathways and majestic steps of the soaring Beaux-Arts building before us.

Scott steps forward, darting a worried look. “This thing is at the Library?” he queries Cassian. “Right?”

“But this is not a library.”

“Huh?”

“It is a palace!”

Though Scott relaxes, his posture takes on a shrug. “No better place for books then, yeah?”

I absorb that with a wider smile. “Cassian?”

“Yes, armeau?”

“Give Scott a raise.”

The young man breaks into a chuckle. “I think I’m going to like having her around, Mr. Court.”

Cassian loops an arm around my waist, tugging me tightly. “Me too, Scott. Me too.”

The Schwarzman building is more breathtaking on the inside. We enter Astor Hall by descending wide stone steps flanked by balustrades worthy of a Parisian palace, their fancy scrolls and swirls matching archways down the length of the room, all supporting a soaring, ornate ceiling. Similar carvings adorn the stone bases of multiple candelabra, all at least twenty feet high, lending a romantic glow along with colored lighting, purple and orange and amber, around the room’s perimeter. From some hidden location, a string ensemble plays classic pieces.

I pull Cassian to a stop at the top of the stairs. Pull in a long breath, celebrating the very best aspect of the place.

“Books.” I close my eyes, letting the glorious scent fill me. His guttural growl brings me back to attention. “What?” I add a perplexed giggle. It turns into a sigh when he lifts a grin, dimples on full display.

“Just ignore me.” He leans closer, gaze hooded. “I was pretending the smell of three and a half million books really just hit you like an aphrodisiac.”

I slink my regard to his mouth. It’s one of the most fascinating parts of him, curving in new ways with all his moods. Aroused is definitely one of my favorites. “Maybe...it did.” I slide a finger up his satin lapel. “Add some chocolate and you may get lucky in the library, Cassian Court.”

New growl. “I thought we were ‘scheduling’ dates now.”

“Chocolate gets you priority status on the calendar.”

His eyes darken to my favorite color—sage smoke—as he dips in, brushing those captivating lips to mine. “Before we sprint to the dessert buffet, I need to make a mental note.”

“About what?”

“About buying a chocolate factory.”

My giggle expands to a laugh, opening me for his full plunder. I am secretly—perhaps not-so-secretly—delighted when he does just that. Though we do not give in to a full “mack session,” in Vy’s terms, it is enough of a tangle to reheat my body’s need for him—and rekindle my heart’s hope that one day, he will think about trusting me with more than just his playful side.

“Well, Cassian Court! There you are!”

The exclamation, bursting the air like a full flock of geese, breaks us apart with matching effect. I look up, stunned to realize the voice belongs to a woman who appears more like a swan. Her steps are fluid glides, her arms float like a ballerina’s, and her eyes are huge and dark against practically translucent skin.

“Carol Idelle.” Cassian transforms back into a gallant courtier, stepping forward and bowing low. The woman laughs, a new honk on the air, while tugging him close for air kisses. “Yes. Here I am.”

Carol bats her eyes, making her false lashes look like swan wings in flight. The impression cannot be helped, since the lengths are a curious blend of black and white strands—but when the woman notices my gawk, she exaggerates the effect by tossing me a saucy wink.

I believe I like her.

“Well, better late than never—especially in your case, darling. You look a-maz-ing. Who did this for you? Tom Ford?”

“Valentino.”

She huffs, accenting with a honk. “Of course. I was just speaking with Yolanda Wood. She guessed you’d pick Valentino. I was hoping for Ford.”

Cassian’s responding smile is, for a long moment, mesmerizing. I have not seen the expression for two weeks, since becoming obsessed with it from across the room at official Sancti court events. It is one part charm, one part decorum, one hundred percent sexy. From his first night on Arcadia, Vy nicknamed it “The Panty Melter.” Watching Carol Idelle react to it now, I send a long-distance fist bump to my friend. Right on the money, Vy.

The reminiscence of my friend brings a shot of confidence at the perfect moment—for the woman decides to ogle me now. “And who is this...exquisite...creature?”

She draws out “exquisite” in a way that makes me doubt her sincerity. Glancing to Cassian for clarification lends no help. The Panty Melter remains across his lips but the warmth is miles from reaching his eyes, even as he curves a hand around my waist again.

“I’m honored to introduce Mishella Santelle, gracing us with her presence from the Court of Arcadia. Ella, this is Dame Carol Idelle, a bastion of the city’s library foundation, among other worthy endeavors.”

I dip my head, offer my hand, and debate a curtsy. In the end, I simply murmur, “Bon aksam. It is lovely to make your acquaintance, Dame Idelle.”

I refrain—barely—from starting when the woman releases her largest honk of all. Since the sound could be anything from a climax to a sneeze, I am not sure about selecting any other reaction.

Finally, she exclaims, “Oh, my word. Cassian, she is a-dor-a-ble. It is lovely to make your acquaintance as well, Mishella.”

I open my mouth, preparing a proper return in the form of asking about the building’s grand architecture—but the air is sliced by a new interruption.

No. Not sliced.

Butchered.

“Lovely.”

The word hacks at us, a mixture of drawl and shout that is so unmistakable, I can think of at least three

Vy-isms to fit the mahogany brunette in the Romanesque red sheath, approaching on slinky steps with her clutch in one hand and martini glass in the other.

Tanked.

Shitfaced.

Annihilated.

But none of the labels matter, the moment Cassian gives her just one.

“Amelie.”

My heart tumbles into my stomach. Plummets even further, sinking until my knees are weighted with the burden, and I grip Cassian for purchase. I have no doubts about getting it. Beneath my hold, his arm is a log of tension—a limb extended from the taut tree of his whole body.

Yolanda Wood at the Literacy Guild will need to be called. Clarify my RSVP is for two...my guest's name will definitely not be Amelie Hampton's.

“Well look who's here!” Carol saves us all from a honk—thank the Creator—with a cheerful clap. “Amelie, my dear. Don't you look stunning? Is that Christian Siriano?”

“Valentino.” Amelie's button nose quirks with a strange expression, something between a huff and a flare. “I picked it tah match mah date.” New nostril twitch. At some point in her life, someone probably told her the expression was cute. It is not cute—but it is also impossible for me to accept it for what it is: a drunk girl's dig at the man she wants to keep her claws embedded into. My heart continues racing through my body. My belly lurches, trying to keep up with the pace.

“Isn't that a coincidence,” Carol croons. “Cassian is also—” She stops herself with a comprehending honk. “Oh. Oh, dear.”

Cassian, confirming he truly must have been James Bond in another life, dips a nod as if Amelie's glare is made of silk instead of mud. “You always have been the go-getter, Amelie. But it's always best to make sure the parachute's strapped on before you leap from the plane.”

“Ha!” Carol claps again. “Isn't that just the way of it? Ohhh Cassian, you're a clever fellow by half.”

Amelie sips at what is left of her drink. Bursts with a brittle laugh. “Isn't he just? Carol, ya make the most astute obsahvations.” Another laugh gurgles out her nose. “Ya gettit? Asssss-tute. Asssss-tute. Hee hee.”

Carol huffs. “It might be time to call a car for you, young lady.”

Amelie hurls her glare. “Ah'm fine.” Pulls back her shoulders so hard, her balance is thrown off. She wobbles. Drops her clutch. I hasten to help but am shoved away. “I said ah'm fine! Don't you dare touch my things, bitch!”

“Amelie.” Cassian steadies me with both hands, his grip as forceful as his voice. “Enough.”

“I am all right.” I address the question in his gaze before he even utters it.

“I am all right.” Surprisingly, her sing-song echo does not change my stance—perhaps because I know it for the imbecile move that it is. Even so, the poor woman does not know the difference. “I am all right, Cassian. Jush because you're here now, Cassian. Oh, hold muh now, Cassian. Ah love you, Cassian!”

By the powers. Could she dig her grave any deeper?

“Amelie.” Cassian is not a tree anymore. His frame is now a monolith of rancor, pushing the confines of his clothes. His hands tremor against my arms, betraying his battle for composure. “You. Are. Done.”

She spurts a high-pitched laugh. “Oh God, Cassian. I've known that for weeks now. But does she?” One whip of motion in my direction, and the woman has surrendered her martini to the center of my chest.

“Saint George on gingerbread,” Carol mutters.

Cassian wheels away from me—straight at her. “Are you out of your goddamn mind?”

“No.” She plants an action hero stance—stunning, given her gown and condition—and flings up an arm, cocktail glass still in hand. “But it's clear you are.”

Before I can blink in comprehension, the glass has left her hand—cracking against Cassian's forehead before smashing to the floor.

“By the Creator!” I rush to him as Carol shouts for security. Amelie struggles against the two officers

who arrive, though the stare she swerves toward me, filled with she-cat celebration, is the first thing to truly scare me about the woman since she arrived.

“Gah ‘head, sugar plum,” she purrs. “He’s all yours now. Take goood care of him, because ya won’t get a chance at it for long.”

Carol marches forward. Blasts at the guards, “Get her out of here!”

But their persistent prisoner breaks free. “Ya haven’t told her yet—have ya Cassian?” She cackles through a laugh as they wrestle her in again. “Ha! Imagine that. Cassian Court, preachin’ about a girl bein’ readah with the parachute—only he’s holdin’ the rip cord.” Her head lolls to the side. “Or was it Lily who had the cord...in the end?”

I finally fish a tissue out of my purse—but as I raise it to Cassian’s face, my hand trembles. The crowd that’s gathered...they are surely here to watch the rambling soused girl, not her hapless target...

Then why do I feel the weight of a hundred stares on my back? Squirm against the potent heft of their curiosity and shock?

Feel the probe of Cassian’s desperation because of it, even before he looks up, through his own blood, at me?

“Don’t listen to her, Ella. Don’t. Listen.”

I feel my stare narrow—as my heartbeat quickens. “Is there something to listen to?” A boulder careens down my throat when he gives back only thick silence. “Cassian?”

“Ohhhh, wait. Maybuh she’s juss your type, Cas. Sweet. Cute. Clingy. Suicidal. Right?”

“Fuck.” Cassian mutters it—as the tissue drops from my limp fingers.

“What’d’ya think, little Arcadian princess? Ya have what it takes to be a real Lily Rianna Court, hmmm?”

Her giggle blends with the crowd’s buzz, rising with the pitch only possible with a mix of nerves and scandal—a sound with which I am sadly familiar, thanks to the machinations of the Sancti Court.

As the guards jostle her out the door, Amelie starts to sing, high-pitched and off-key. “Lileee of the valleee...you are so beeeaut-i-fulll to mee...”

In the strange hush that follows, my lungs fight for air.

The crowd still gawks.

As the whispers begin.

And the walls close in. And the room becomes my prison.

“Ella?”

And his voice, my cruel jailer.

“Ella?”

I take jerking steps back. Hold out my hands at his face, now wavering in the blur of my tears. “I—I need air. I have to get air.”

“Ella!”

I do not listen. I do not turn. I cannot.

Somehow, I find my way back outside. It is not the same way we entered the building. Nothing is as bright here, and I am grateful for the shadowed paths. They...fit. More than I want to comprehend...

The only thing I can think about now.

Ella...it’s time to live in the light.

“Bull...shit.” It stutters out between sobs. Ends in a rasp, mingling with the streams down my face, that are finally rescued by gravity to fall away...
into the dark.

“Ella.”

His voice makes me falter.

Fool. Fool.

I double my pace.

“Ella, for fuck sake!”

I stop, telling myself it is more for me than him—that it has nothing to do with the serration in his voice, or how his breath clutches at the end. I freeze, staring across the dark expanse of the park’s main lawn. In the distance, le carrousel glows, alight but empty, only a promise of magic.

Like the man who scrambles to stand in front of me now.

“Ella.”

“No.” It hurtles out, unthinking and unmitigated, from the same awful place where my tears live. My fears. The dread with which I have wrestled since the day I went to Kate’s and learned that the knight who carried me off to his kingdom is not the shining Lancelot I originally painted into my Cassian Court journal...the omen that his “ghosts” were much more than just that, and I would confront those specters too damn late?

After too much of my heart belonged to him.

Like now.

After the point of no return, between it hurting me...and crushing me.

Like now.

“No, Cassian. I—I cannot—”

“Or you will not?”

Again without thought, I whirl. Launch myself at him. “How dare you.” Drive fists into his chest with any shred of strength I have left. “How fucking dare you.” Pummel him again and again, until the tears build and swell and spill once more. “I will not? I will not what, Cassian? Hear your side now, after I begged you for it at Temptation? Try to make sense of you now? Try to figure out why you have crooned to me about our destiny, our connection, and our light, only to learn—in front of hundreds of people—that you were—that...you have...been...”

It grinds to a halt deep in my belly. Stuck in my soul. Brimming instead in my tears.

He speaks it instead.

With his tears soaking through it.

“Married.”

I hate myself for gazing back to him. Hate myself even more for how my heart bursts once more for him, sprouting a million vines that reach for the brilliant sustenance of him...even now, as he falls to the grass in his darkest grief.

No.

Especially now.

Slowly, quietly, I lower next to him. As my skirt floats atop the grass, his hand folds over mine. Grips me with fervent force.

I hold on in return. Just as tight.

Finally, his voice quivers the air between us. “We were together...for a year. Married...for most of the next.”

“Until she took her life.” When he only nods, I go on. “And you...loved her?”

I pray he is not insulted by the query. It feels important for me to know...for absolute certain. Aside from Brooke and Samsyn, and soon Evrest and Camellia, I do not know a single marriage born from love.

“Yes,” he utters. “I loved her.”

“But...?” It is as heavy in his tone as the dew across the grass.

“But it was a young love.” He lifts his head. The wind loosens his hair, tumbling it into his eyes, which are earnest...and honest. “A boy’s, for a girl. Not a man’s—for a woman.” His fingers twist tighter into mine. “Mishella...”

He pauses, giving me time to swallow. To breathe. To think.

Then to yank free from him.

To bolt to my feet. And turn. And run.

I refuse to let him speak it. I possess no doubt that he means it. But accepting it now, as some kind of enchanted glue to “fix” tonight—

No.

Not here, in our dark. In our rawness and weakness.

I need time. I am still...

afraid.

“Heyyyy. What is such a pretty lady doing, running around in the darkness like this?”

The voice clutches me to a new stop. My head jerks up and my stare circles around. Lost in my emotions, I have stumbled all the way to the other side of the lawn—to the darker side of the park.

The much darker side.

Into a triangle of men who are definitely not attending the Literacy Ball.

Their faces are unshaven, though their heads are shiny and bald. Piercings turn the three of them into walking jewelry counters. More silver gleams from their fingers—and from the smirk I get from the one now blocking my path.

“I—umm—I apologize, gentlemen. I seem to have gotten a little turned around.”

“Ohhhh.” Another one sidles in from the left. “Did you hear that, guys? We’re gentlemen now.”

“Moron.” The first one snorts. “We always have been gentlemen.” His pierced brows waggle. “We just...got a little turned around too.”

The third thug steps in from the right. “Maybe we can all get back on the ‘straight and narrow’ together.”

I may be from an island not much larger than this one—and have not seen any of the world beyond it before two weeks ago.

Some may even call me naïve.

But I am not stupid.

I know when to scream as if my life is depending on it.

Because it is.

The world cartwheels and tilts. I kick and struggle but they are strong and many—and the bushes into which they drag me are thick and twisted. And dark. By the Creator, so dark...

Somehow, I get my teeth into the grimy hand that’s been clamped over my mouth. “Dammit! Bitch!”

For a blessed moment, I am able to breathe again. And scream again. “Help! Somebody—”

“Shut her up!”

“And hold her down, dammit!”

A new hand clamps my mouth. More hands pin me down in a pile of leaves and dirt. Still, I never stop struggling, even as they shove my skirts to my waist. I never stop resisting, even as they grab at my thighs, and—

“Get. Your. Fucking. Hands. Off of her.”

Like a bullet shot into a flock of birds, the thugs jump up. I scramble backward, ignoring the twigs and thorns scratching me everywhere, unwilling to trust my trembling knees enough to stand. Fear seizes me like ice. Panic battles it, searing and dizzying. Nausea bubbles in my throat. “C-Cassian?” I finally get out in a choke.

“I’m not alone.” It is him but not him. Rage is a living thing in his voice, a walking beast in his steps. “NYPD’s two blocks away, and they’ve got a GPS lock on my cell.”

“Let’s beat it!”

“Come on, dickwad! Now!”

The new Cassian creature snarls again—and right now, it is the most wonderful sound in the world. “Listen to your pals, dickwad.”

I blink, battling to focus on him. Wonderful or not, he has confronted these monsters head on. I plead the thug with every exigency in my heart. Please be a good dickwad and go away. Just go away!

Creator’s mercy. There is so much movement. So many shadows. It is all happening so fast—

“You know what, fancy ass? Fuck you.”

Then entirely too slow.

And with the cruel joke of horror, I can see him again.
As three bursts of light flare in the night.
And three bullets rip into the man I love.

CASSIAN

Way to fuck up a night, asshole.

At least I think it's still night. Police sirens sound different in the city at night. More desperate. And isn't that the moon, over the buildings, floating in the stars? It's right there. So beautiful. So unreachable.

'Cause you're a sky; 'cause you're a sky full of stars...

So cold.

Like me. Why the hell am I so cold? It's the end of May in New York City. I'm still in New York, right? At the Literacy Ball...kissing the woman I love.

No.

Chasing the woman I love.

I'm gonna give you my heart...

"Ella?"

"Cassian!"

"Ella." Why can't I reach her? Why can't I *move*? "Fuck. Ella."

"Do not move!"

"Okay."

"Help is coming!"

"Help for...what?"

"Sssshh. Save your strength. Be *still*, for Creator's sake!"

"Sssshh." I hurl it back defiantly. Reach up, needing to brush her tears back. Why is she still crying? All I've done tonight is make her cry. "It'll be all right. Everything will be all right."

Her shoulders shake. The cream curves of them are so perfect against the stars. Satin and light...my warmth in the chill. "Ridiculous man." Her watery smile beams into me. *All* of me. The soul I can no longer hide from her... "That is supposed to be my line."

"Why?"

Her head snaps up. The rest of her follows, scattering leaves—*leaves?*—before she's gone and I'm cold again. So fucking cold.

Go on and tear me apart...

"Over here!" Her shout is shrill and scared. No. Terrified. "He is over here! Please—hurry!"

Why is she so frightened?

"Ella." It resonates in my head but is just a puff on my lips. *Ella. Come back. Please...*

"Help him. Please help him!"

"We will—but Miss, in order for that to happen, you need to stand back."

"Cassian. I'm still here. I'm right here. Cassian...please hang on!"

I blink, forcing my head to twist, following the call of her voice. Focusing on her. Only on her...even as the cold closes in, gripping more of me than before...

'Cause you get lighter the more it gets dark...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MISHELLA

“Are you out of your fucking mind?”

Answering my brother’s snarl with a manic giggle, even from thousands of miles away, does not feel like a good idea. He sounds like a completely different person. A forceful man has taken the place of my sweet little Saynt. How can so much have changed in just two weeks?

All too easily, my heart answers that one.

Two weeks can change everything.

One night can change everything.

I drag my head up. Force myself to gaze at my weary reflection in the window of the hospital’s hallway. Beneath the denim jacket Prim offered from her own back after she and Hodge arrived, my gown is torn and dirty. I behold each smudge proudly. I am not the same person who first climbed into this dress.

I am a survivor.

I have earned the full right to laugh in my brother’s face.

“I shall accept that as a supreme compliment, brother mine. And the short answer is: yes, I probably am out of my fucking mind. And proud of it.”

Saynt huffs more heavily. “Mishella, you were assaulted—”

“Because I wandered somewhere I was not supposed to be, in the middle of the night.”

“—by three men—”

“And Brooke was taken captive by twice that many, less than a mile from the Sancti Palais.”

“—in a city full of savages!”

“Saynt.” My laughter vanishes. “That. Is. Enough.”

Moody silence. Then another guttural growl. “I told Court that if anything happened to you...if one hair on your head was hurt—”

“Enough!”

His answering breath is so rough, static invades the line. “Mishella...please,” he finally grates. “Come home, where I can protect you.”

I sigh, but with conviction to match his. “Do Paipanne and Maimanne know you are asking this?”

“Do you know how unfair that question is?”

I give a mixture of grunt and hum, our sibling shorthand for an apology. He is right. My brief call with our parents, just thirty minutes ago, yielded their subdued concern—mostly about whether Cassian would hold his “misfortune” against me or not—but little else. If the decision is solely theirs, I am definitely staying in New York.

As Vy would say: oh, the glorious irony. For the first time in a long time, I want exactly what Mother and Father do.

“But what you are asking is equally unfair, Saynt Austyn Santelle.” I let the rebuke set in before softly going on. “I know it sounds strange, even unbelievable, after what has happened...but please, please try to understand. I...belong here now, Saynt. In New York. With Cassian.”

“Because you signed that fucking contract?”

“Because I have fallen in love with him.”

And it took nearly losing him to realize it.

Another long silence.

As I have expected.

Saynt emerges from the shock with a few sputters—and I brace myself for the string of questions to

come after that—but Cassian’s nurse sprints into his room, clawing me with new dread from head to toe. Past the exposed nerves in its wake, I blurt a promise to Saynt that I shall call back, and race in behind her.

“What is it? What is wrong? Is he—”

“Being completely difficult?” The nurse spits it over her shoulder, fighting Cassian for control of his oxygen mask.

“Oh.” My fingers press my laughing lips. Surely I have earned a spot on the woman’s “shit list” because of it, but holding back my exhilaration is a physical and emotional impossibility.

Ridiculous, tenacious, wonderfully alive man.

My man.

“This is New York Presbyterian, not Court Tower, mister.” The nurse forces the plastic dome back over his nose and mouth. “You’ve just had three bullets pulled out of your body, which means I’m the boss for a while—and the boss says this stays on until your oxygen levels are better.”

To my wonder—and, it seems, to hers—Cassian sinks back to the pillow. Gives a terse nod. She returns the action, looking satisfied with his sincerity.

I bite my lip.

I know better.

Sure enough, as soon as her footsteps fade down the hall, he shoves the mask away. His other hand is already full of mine, dragging me as close as his wounds will allow. Not being his immediate family, I have only been given generalities for updates. By the grace of the Creator, the punk in the park was a lousy shot, and none of the bullets hit major organs. The trauma surgery went well—and one look at the magnificence of Cassian Court’s body, even encased in a hospital gown, is testament to his outstanding base health.

Still, the intensity of his grip is enough to pop my stare wide. “Cassian.” I almost add a maternal cluck, despite the non-maternal thoughts inspired simply by his exposed knees. “Save your strength. The nurse is right. Your levels—”

“Will be fine.” His throat sounds coated in twelve layers of rust—though after one second of his gaze, it is clear some are not physically related. “I have my air again.”

Oh.

Him.

I lift the union of our hands. Several tubes take up the space on the back of his, so I turn it over, then press a kiss into his palm. “And I have mine.”

His beautiful lips push together. He swallows heavily. “My mother—”

“Has been called,” I assure. “Hodge handled it. He and Prim are downstairs, waiting for her.” I crunch a little frown. “For some reason, he was listed as your emergency contact.”

“Yeah.” He nods before closing his eyes for a moment. “He can break things to her better than emergency personnel.”

My frown deepens. “Has he had to do this before?”

He lets that fall into a long silence. Keeps his eyes closed the whole time. When he finally looks back up at me, it is with his lagoon-dark eyes—and his not-to-be-brooked intent. “I was awake...for a little while...before you came in. I heard you on the phone...with Saynt.”

His allusion rests between us like a wick just catching fire—beautiful but uncertain. At last I whisper back, “Oh you did, did you?”

His hand lifts. Frames my face. “Did you mean it? Have you fallen in love with me, Ella...despite the secrets, the ghosts, the flying martini glasses, the New York City wildlife...”

I lean over...unable to hold back from sealing my mouth to his now. And yes, even here and even now, I am shocked we do not make the building’s lights flicker with the flare of our attraction. Before his monitors dance too crazily, I pull away—if only by a few inches.

“Living in the wild is just perfect for me, Mr. Court...as long as I live in it with you.”

CASSIAN

Nurse Ratchet is going to have to deal.

Kissing my woman again isn't negotiable.

Of course...this is more than a kiss.

It's a seal. The signet of my spirit, my soul, my heart...

Everything she has given back to me.

Everything I thought I'd never have again.

Everything that was robbed from me because of pain and loss and fear, instead of hope and belief and light.

And love.

Yeah...that.

I curl fingers into her hair. Pull her down a little more.

"I'm in love with you too." As a smile brims her lips and tears edge her eyes, I quickly clarify, "But favori, I'm rusty at this shit. Really rusty. I'm...I'm not going to get everything right."

She caresses through the stubble along my jaw. "And that is a news flush?"

"Well. It might be a news flash to some—but if you're patient, I promise...I'm a fast learner. It'll get better."

Fuck. So much better. My little sorceress probably doesn't realize it, but she's just dangled the biggest carrot for recuperating I could ever have. Dammit, I will get my ass out of this bed—then get cracking on making every one of her dreams come true. There's an action item list well underway...

One: make love to her for a week straight.

Two: take her to turret two—and include all the details this time.

Three: make love to her for another week straight.

Four: bid on chocolate factories—preferably near libraries.

Five: take her to the newly purchased factory. Collect on preferred calendar status for date night.

"Cassian." Her sweet, high sigh refocuses me on the here and now—and the temptation of her full lips, now parted in perfect invitation. I lift up...and sweep in. She moans, sighing again. I steal her breath, and give her back my own.

My air...

Our tongues tangle. Taste. Conquer. Surrender.

My love...

But the completion of the moment...is the beating of her heart. Pressed to mine, matching mine...knowing mine so far beyond the flimsy confines of the time we've had physically together. She knows me from the depths of fate—from the forever of the destiny that has completely, absolutely, brought us together. The destiny I'm trusting again now...no matter how fucking terrified I am.

But I refuse to live in that fear.

Once more, despite the fear raiding every cell of my body because of it, I choose love.

I choose her.

I'm opening the gift.

Thank you for reading! I truly hope you enjoyed the beginning of Cassian and Mishella's story, because I loved getting to tell it.

More of Cassian and Mishella's love story is on its way...

Part 2, coming in *Pretty Perfect Toy*:
Available on August 23, 2016.

Part 3 (final), coming in *Bold Beautiful Love*:
Available on September 27, 2016.

Discover the Cimarrons of Arcadia:

Book 1: *Into His Dark* (Evrest and Camellia)
Available Now

Book 2: *Into His Command* (Samsyn and Brooke)
Available Now

Book 3: *Into Her Fantasies* (Shiraz and Lucy) – Available November 2016
(Pre-order available soon)

Book 4: *Into His Sin* (Jagger and Jayd) – Available February 2017

ABOUT ANGEL PAYNE

USA Today bestselling romance author Angel Payne has been reading and writing her entire life, though her love for romances began in junior high, when writing with friends on “swap stories” they’d trade between classes. Needless to say, those stories involved lots of angst, groping, drama, and French kissing.

She began getting a paycheck for her writing in her twenties, writing record reviews for a Beverly Hills-based dance music magazine. Some years, various entertainment industry gigs, and a number of years in the hospitality industry later, Angel returned to the thing she loves the most: creating character-based romantic fiction. Along the way, she also graduated with two degrees from Chapman University in Southern California, taking departmental honors for English, before writing five historical romances for Kensington and Bantam/Doubleday/Dell.

Angel found a true home in writing contemporary-based romances that feature high heat and high concepts, focusing on memorable alpha men and the women who tame them. She has numerous book series to her credit, including the Secrets of Stone series (with Victoria Blue), the Kinky Truth, the WILD Boys of Special Forces, and the popular Cimarron Saga, as well as its spin-off, the Temptation Court series.

Angel still lives in Southern California, where she is married to her soulmate and lives on a street that looks like Brigadoon, with their awesome daughter and Lady Claire, the dog with impeccable manners. When not writing, she enjoys reading, pop culture, alt rock, cute shoes, enjoying the outdoors, and being a gym rat.

***Receive monthly updates and exclusive content by receiving *The Wing*, Angel's monthly newsletter. Sign up here: eepurl.com/LoNkz*

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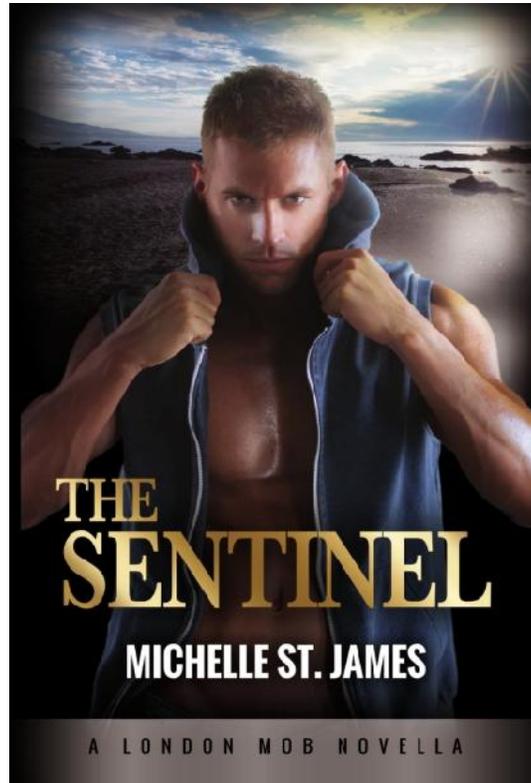
OTHER BOOKS BY ANGEL PAYNE

THE SECRETS OF STONE SERIES
(With Victoria Blue)

THE WILD BOYS OF SPECIAL FORCES

THE SENTINEL

A London Mob Novella
by Michelle St. James



CHAPTER ONE

Diana Barrett forced herself not to glance at the time on her computer. Logic told her not more than five minutes had passed since she'd last checked, but she couldn't seem to help herself. It was worse than she thought.

Three minutes.

She took a deep breath, rolled her shoulders and tried to refocus on the list of wire transfers in front of her. It was always like this when she was meeting Leo, but that didn't make it any less insane. She'd known him most of her life, since year five at St. Ives Primary when he'd helped her up from a game of tag that turned unexpectedly rough. She could still see him in her mind's eye, a tall, gangly boy with soulful brown eyes and unkempt hair that fell over his forehead. On the outside, they couldn't have been more different.

She liked him immediately.

She didn't remember how they'd come to be friends, but one day she realized that it had been a very long time since she hadn't sat with Leo at lunch, since he hadn't been her companion in a game of conkers. Since seeing him hadn't been the highlight of every day.

And then, all at once it seemed, he wasn't lanky, awkward Leo anymore. He was tall and broad, with wide shoulders, a deep voice, and a fierce expression of protection wherever Diana was concerned. They were in their final year of high school when she noticed that he'd become a man, but by then it was too late to change the fact that he was her best friend. She went off to university. Leo took a series of entry level jobs that eventually led him to an executive position at Global Media. They spent summers together when she was home from school, falling back into their old patterns of long days on the beach, chowder on the waterfront when the sun went down, hours spent laying under an inky sky strung with stars.

He was a self made man, unlike Diana, who had every advantage, including worldly, attentive parents on the affluent side of middle class. But he was her Leo, and she thought about him every single day. Now they were adults, both with busy schedules that involved a lot of business travel, but still they managed to coordinate schedules to meet in cities all over the world.

And she got nervous every single time.

She dared a glance at the clock and was relieved to find that she'd spent fifteen minutes lost in her memories of Leo. She logged out of her computer — standard protocol at Abbott, a small but wealthy bank known for its discretion— and grabbed her bag, then rose from her chair and headed to the restroom.

Standing in front of the mirror, she tried to tame her wild curls, then gave up and let them have their way. Leo always said he liked her hair, and anyway, there was no help for it; she'd inherited the unruly mop from her mother's ancestors. She touched up her makeup, grateful for her dark eyelashes and good bone structure. She had her father's DNA and all its classic English features to thank for that one. She finished with a swipe of sheer berry lip stain, closed her bag, and headed back to her desk. She was halfway down the hall when she spotted Maggie's open office door.

"You're alive," Diana said, poking her head into the plush office.

Maggie Kinsley had been Diana's mentor since the day she'd plucked Maggie from an internship program during university. She was one of the smartest women Diana had ever known. Chic and formidable, she'd raised her seventeen-year-old son on her own and was the first woman to become a Vice President at Abbott. Diana didn't know yet if she wanted a career at the bank, but it was nice to know she could have one, and even nicer to know Maggie would be there to guide her along the way, whatever life she chose for herself.

Maggie looked up from her computer with a tired smile. She was as thin as a school girl, with an open face and wide blue eyes. It wasn't at all difficult to imagine her as an ambitious young woman making her way in the male-dominated banking industry of the 1990s.

“I know,” she said. “It’s ridiculous how busy I’ve been, isn’t it?”

Diana smiled. “That’s why they pay you the big bucks.”

“I suppose so.” She leaned back in her chair, narrowing her eyes as she took in Diana’s newly freshened appearance. “I take it you’re seeing Leo?”

“I’d ask how you know, but I’ve already resigned myself to the fact that you know everything.”

“Hardly.”

Any other day, the word would have been accompanied by laughter, but there was something resigned and tense in the way she said it now. It drew Diana’s attention to the dark circles under her friend’s eyes, the stern set of her jaw, usually reserved for business rivals.

“You okay, Mags?” Diana was careful about using the nickname at the office. She never wanted to overstep, or to use her friendship with Diana to unfairly further her career. And she definitely didn’t want anyone else in the office to become resentful of their relationship. But she couldn’t help herself. How long had Maggie looked this tired? Had Diana been so wrapped up in her own life that she hadn’t noticed Maggie needed a week on a tropical beach with an umbrella drink in hand?

“You look like you could use a holiday,” Diana said.

Something faltered on Maggie’s face, and for a split second, Diana thought she might actually confide in her. She didn’t do it often — she was a woman who prided herself on independence in all things — but every now and then she would open up to Diana about Evan, her son, her plans for the future, the loneliness that plagued her so rarely that it passed before she ever found the motivation to do anything about it.

It was gone a moment later, Maggie’s usual cool facade taking the place of the indecision Diana could have sworn she saw a moment before.

“Nonsense,” Maggie said. “There’s too much work for a holiday.”

“That’s what you always say.” Diana didn’t buy the change of subject, but the time wasn’t right for a long conversation about life. She would convince Maggie to go out for drinks soon, come clean about what was bothering her.

“Because it’s always true,” Maggie said. “And I have a birthday supper to cook for Evan this weekend. You will be there, won’t you?”

“With bells on,” Diana said. Evan was an unusually wise, witty kid who was currently number three in his class at Newton Prep. “I haven’t seen him since Christmas.”

“He’ll be happy to see you,” Maggie said, “although I’m beginning to suspect all this talk about me serves only to avoid talking about Leo.”

Diana smiled. “Nothing to say.”

Maggie raised an eyebrow. “At least be honest with yourself, my dear. Otherwise you might find thirty years of your life gone by. You might even go home to a cushy flat with no more company than a bottle of wine and a cat.”

Diana laughed. “Sounds lovely.”

It wasn’t entirely true. She wanted more than the bank, didn’t she? Someone to share her life? A home? Maybe children one day?

Someone like Leo?

“Liar.”

Diana waved, stepping out of the doorway. “See you after lunch.”

“We’re not done talking about this,” Maggie called after her.

Diana smiled as she made her way toward the elevators. She pressed the button, then stepped inside, taking a deep breath.

It’s just Leo. And we’re only friends. We’ll only ever be friends.

CHAPTER TWO

Leo Gage left the club and headed north on foot. The restaurant he'd chosen as a place to meet Diana was a long walk, but he needed the time to clear his head before he saw the woman who was both his best friend and the object of all his private fantasies.

It had been that way as long as he could remember, ever since he'd seen Albert Boone shove her on the playground. Leo's rush toward her had been instinctual even then. She'd been small, with bones as fine and delicate as a bird and an unruly head of black hair that was always escaping from the elastic bands her mother used in a vain attempt to keep it off her daughter's face. He'd held out a hand to help her, and she'd looked up at him, her brown eyes holding an expression of such goodness, such sincerity, that he'd been lost from that moment forward. He'd spent every moment since trying to preserve all the things that made her better than him.

And that meant, first and foremost, shielding her from his influence.

Her parents had made it easy. Clarence and Gwen Barrett had been kind and welcoming, and while he hadn't realized how rare that was when he was a kid, eventually he understood that not everyone would give him the benefit of the doubt like they had.

Leo's mother worked at Charlie's Pub, slinging beer to drunk patrons while she dodged their advances. Leo had never known his father. He spent his time after school wandering the streets, getting into trouble, or sometimes just watching TV at home. While he was throwing rocks at the windows of abandoned buildings, Diana was practicing the piano, developing a lasting affinity for the classical pieces of music she would come to favor. While Leo stole comic books from the corner grocery, Diana learned to paint next to an easel set up next to her mother's on the wide lawn of the Barrett property. Leo ran wild until all hours. Diana was due home promptly after school. Leo ate greasy fish and chips from the stand by the beach, shoving the hot, flakey fish into his mouth while he walked. Diana sat down promptly at six each night to a well rounded meal cooked by her mother.

Still, the Barretts never made him feel self-conscious or embarrassed about their differences, even when he grew from a rough and tumble boy to a young man with two arrests (vandalism and petty theft) and a chip on his shoulder a mile wide. Clarence Barrett had spared Leo no sternness, lecturing him eloquently and frequently on his potential, on his need to develop a path for himself before life took him in a direction from which he could not recover. But he was always kind and fair, and Leo sensed his concern and genuine affection. It was for them as much as Diana that he kept up the charade of his professed career.

And the reason he steered clear of Diana romantically.

The Barretts might welcome him as a wayward foster son, the tough, angry foil to Diana's cultured softness, but he was under no illusion they would continue doing so if he were to profess his love for their daughter.

Besides, Diana deserved better. And so did her parents.

He lifted a hand to his tie as he approached the restaurant. He hated wearing ties. He always felt like he was being lynched by his own clothing. It was one of the many perks of his real job, one that required nothing more than the ability to think on his feet and a willingness to use his fists — and sometimes a weapon.

He ran a hand over his dark hair, pushing back the piece in front that fell over his forehead. He'd been wearing his hair the same way for so long the gesture was like a tic. His hands wouldn't know what to do with themselves without it.

He opened the door to the restaurant and stepped into a sea of suits and dresses, jackets and ties. Everyone looked the same. All of them wearing their cool expressions like armor.

Except her.

She was standing in an alcove against the wall, watching the crowd with an expression of peaceful interest. It was an expression that was quintessentially Diana. Curiosity coupled with a kind of calming serenity. It was one of the many things that drew him to her. Leo was curious, too, but his curiosity was laced with cynicism and a deep-seated belief that whatever he would find in his fellow man wouldn't be good. It was part of why he needed her. She was a dead calm to his stormy sea, Brahms to his classic rock, peaceful slumber to his erratic energy. Just when he thought he couldn't face the ugliness of the world another day, she would call to see if he could meet her for dinner. Maybe it would be London. Maybe Prague or Tokyo. It didn't matter. He came when she called, though he tried to make it seem like he would be in the area anyway. He would meet her in any city across the world, slide into a seat across from her in some crowded restaurant or bar, and his mind would immediately quiet. He would look into her kind eyes, and he would know for sure there was still goodness in the world.

He hesitated before joining her, taking in the elegant neck that begged for his lips, the full mouth he'd dreamt of plundering. Her hair was loose and crazy — just the way he liked it. He'd had more than one fantasy about her naked body under him, her luxurious hair spread out on the pillow under her head.

She was wearing a gray dress that kicked into a flare at the knee, and he had to forcibly banish the desire to cross the room, kneel at her feet, slide his hands up her slender calves to thighs that he knew would be soft and plush.

He was so lost in the fantasy that he hadn't noticed he'd been spotted. Diana was already halfway to him when he emerged from his reverie, and he plastered a smile on his face, trying to quiet the storm in his blood.

“Hey, you!” She stood on tiptoe, touched her lips to his cheek.

“Diana.”

She leaned back, looked up at him with the clinical eyes of someone who knew him all too well. “You all right? You look a little pale. Is everything okay at work?”

Work. Right. Diana believed he was an executive at Global Media, a lie he'd been upholding for nearly five years.

“Fine,” he said. “I was in Paris for a bit. It's taken me awhile to catch up.”

She smiled. “I know how it is,” she said. “We travel for work, then do double duty when we come back. Someday we should take a holiday. If we're going to pay for being away, we may as well have some fun.”

He had a flash of Diana next to him on the beach, her brown skin glistening in the sun, her fingers intertwined with his own.

Tempting.

And dangerous.

“Someday,” he said. It was all he could do to keep his hands off her in a restaurant or on the street. He wasn't foolish enough to overestimate his willpower if they found themselves in some tropical locale, without the trappings of the real world to remind him who they were.

Who he was.

“Shall we?” She gestured to the maitre d' standing behind a podium. “Unfortunately, I can't stay long. I'm swamped at work.”

“I understand.”

He led them to the uniformed man maintaining the reservation list. A few minutes later, they were seated at a quiet table in the back of the restaurant. They perused the menu, then ordered — seared salmon for Diana and a rib eye for himself. Then he was staring into her eyes, feeling the familiar combination of affection and lust that always battled inside him while in her company.

“How are your parents?” he asked, anxious to keep her talking. To keep the conversation moving. Anything that might distract him from the pillowy softness of her lips, the delicate angle of her collarbone, the hollow at her throat.

She smiled. “You know Mum and Dad. Mum is retired now. She spends all her time in the garden and

at the piano.”

“There are worse things,” he said.

“True, but she’s also taken to bothering me about grandchildren.” She laughed. “It’s become insufferable!”

Leo forced a smile, but the thought of Diana marrying someone else, sleeping beside another man every night, bearing children with her kind eyes and gentle smile with a man who might not fully appreciate her, who might not give her all she deserved — or almost as bad, would give her everything she deserved, everything Leo couldn’t give her — was like an ice pick to his heart.

“And what about you?” he asked. “Would you like to have children?”

She turned her water glass in her hand, her expression growing pensive. “Someday. But I’d have to find the right person first. And he seems to be making himself scarce.”

Leo nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat. “And your dad? Still teaching?”

Her father was a professor of literature at a small college not far from Cornwall. It wasn’t overly prestigious, but it allowed him time to study and read, and he seemed as content a man as Leo had ever known. Leo had grown comfortable with his life, with the uncertainty of it, with the isolation. But thinking about Clarence Barrett always left him with a hint of melancholy. Could Leo be happy with such a life? Did he deserve one?

“He is,” she said. “He could retire, but I don’t know if he’ll ever actually do it.”

“He still loves his work,” Leo said.

She nodded. “He does.”

The waiter appeared at the edge of the table and set down their plates before retreating.

“This looks wonderful,” Diana said, picking up her fork. “What about you? How are things at Global?”

Leo cut into his steak, bracing himself for the string of lies he would be forced to tell her. He should have gotten used to it by now, but he didn’t think he’d ever get used to lying to Diana, looking into her guileless eyes and adding to the elaborate charade he’d been building for her since they were kids. Back then he’d lie about the fact that he’d had a warm meal, that his mother had read to him before bed, that there was something more than ketchup and pasta and white bread in the cupboard. He never knew for sure if she bought it, but she never called him on it, and that had been good enough for him.

Was it good enough for him now? Was it still more important that she believe he was like her than really know him?

“It’s good,” he said. “Business is booming. Everyone’s looking for the next frontier. You know how it is.”

She laughed. “Not really. The business of money hasn’t changed much, I’m afraid.”

“Surely more is done digitally now?”

“Well, yes. There’s that. But otherwise, it’s money in, money out. Numbers never change. And they never lie either.”

There was something wistful in her voice, words left unsaid in the breath exhaled at the end of her sentence.

He met her eyes over their food. “Is that what you like about it? That it’s always the same?”

“Well, there’s something to be said for dependable, isn’t there?”

“Is there?”

She smiled a little. “You always did see too much of me, Leo Gage.”

The words sent a rush of warmth barreling through his chest. Both because she believed he really saw her, and because he wanted to see even more of her. And he increasingly wanted her to see all of him, too. It would be a mistake, of course. Their friendship had survived so long not in spite of his lies, but because of them. It was as solid as any fortress, but it was built on the foundation of her belief about him. Take that belief away, and everything they had would crumble into the sea.

“That goes double for you, Diana.”

He regretted the words as soon as they had escaped his mouth. Did she hear the insinuation in them?

Catch the undertone of sex that had crept into them?

He covered it by turning the conversation to safer topics. The weather (typically gray and cold). Football (her team always seemed to be winning, unlike his own). Leo's mother (now retired to a small flat in Cornwall, thanks to Leo's not insubstantial income as Farrell Black's second-in-command). And then, all too soon, they were standing, walking out of the restaurant, Diana's full hips swaying in front of him under the silk of her dress. They stopped on the pavement outside, and a gust of wind blew a strand of hair loose around her face.

He reached up before he could stop himself, tucked it behind her ear. "It's getting cold," he said, to cover the gesture. "Let me get you a taxi."

She shook her head. "The walk will warm me up, and it will do me good after that delicious meal. Besides, it's not that far."

He knew better than to push. To act like a boyfriend instead of a pal. He'd already come too close to crossing the carefully drawn line between them.

"It was nice to see you," he said instead.

"It was nice to see you, too." She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "Talk soon."

And then she was gone, making her way down the sidewalk amid a throng of others returning to work, their numbers doing nothing to distract him from the gloss of her hair as she moved through the crowd, the strong set of her shoulders.

He watched until she turned the corner, then started off the other way. He was itching for his weapon. It was time to get back to work.

CHAPTER THREE

Diana leaned back in her chair and stretched her arms over her head. Other than a couple of trips to the employee room for coffee and one run to the restroom, she'd been sitting in the same position ever since she'd come back from lunch. The work wasn't overly challenging — she was auditing a list of deposits and withdrawals for the previous month — but it was enough to keep her mind occupied, and that was of paramount importance after the lunch with Leo.

She'd hoped it would be different this time. She always hoped it would be different.

It never was.

Some deeply buried part of her soul responded to him, reaching for him like a flower to the sun. She kept hoping he would grow bald.

Or fat.

Unfortunately, she'd had no such luck. He was as beautiful as ever. In fact, the bastard seemed to grow even more sexy with age. His boyish face had somehow morphed into perfect cheekbones and a jaw that could cut glass. The eyes that had once been kind and guarded were now tempered with a kind of wisdom she only found more appealing because it spoke to experiences they hadn't shared. To mystery in the lessons he'd learned and the knowledge he'd gained without her.

The knowledge of a man.

Her cheeks flushed at the thought — and its implication — and the cleft between her thighs grew warm. It was almost obscene to think about her childhood friend in such a way. And yet here she was, sitting alone in the office imagining Leo Gage naked, the perfectly formed muscles of his chest tapering to corded abs that would be hard and well formed under her tongue. His cock would be as big as the rest of him, thick and long, big enough to fill every inch of her.

She squirmed in her chair, all too aware of the wetness now coating her knickers. What was she doing? He'd had twenty years to make a move. He hadn't. Which could only mean he didn't want to. He probably had a woman in every city, someone to warm his bed wherever Global Media sent him. She was just the girl next door.

And she had a feeling Leo wanted something entirely different in a woman.

Her mother was right; she needed to find a man. Get married. Have children. Anything to stop the ridiculous fantasy that was a happily ever after with Leo.

A glance at the clock told her it was nearly eleven. She stood and stretched, then walked into the empty hall. The office was dark and hushed, shadows angling ominously away from the dim sconces on the walls. She knew from experience that they stayed lit all night, only turning off in the morning when the office was flooded with sunlight, or more often, when the weak, gray light of London managed to seep in through the cloud cover.

Everyone else had gone, and the cleaning service wouldn't arrive for two more hours. She should go home, take a bath and get some sleep before she had to be up again for work tomorrow. She was about to return to her office for her bag and coat when she had a thought.

She reached into the bottom drawer of her desk and removed a bottle of red wine and two glasses, then headed toward Maggie's office. She wasn't eager to answer her mentor's questions about the lunch with Leo, but Maggie had seemed unusually tired, even worried, earlier in the day. She'd been a good friend to Diana. It was only right that Diana would repay the favor when Maggie needed someone to talk to. Besides, they'd had some of their best conversations over wine after everyone else had gone home.

She slipped her shoes off next to the desk, then continued down the quiet hall, her footsteps muffled on the plush carpet. She was almost to Maggie's office when she stopped in her tracks.

There had been a noise, something she couldn't quite place. She heard it again, and this time she was

certain; a wet thwack, the sound of flesh meeting flesh, followed by a low moan.

She stood still in the hall, training her ears to the sound. She'd never known Maggie to have a man in the office, and she was almost positive the sound hadn't been sexual. But there was something unsettling about it, something that chilled her skin under the silk of her dress. A moment later, the sound came again and she understood.

It wasn't the muffled moan of pleasure, but the stifled whimper of pain.

Diana stepped back against the wall, every muscle in her body screaming at her to run while her heart moved her slowly forward, compelled by her worry for Maggie. She was almost to the door of Maggie's office when she heard a man's voice.

"Tell us why; if you don't intend to tell anyone, why were you accessing the files?"

Maggie's voice emerged from the confines of her office. "There were anomalies. It's my job."

There was something defiant in the tone of Maggie's voice, but Diana was still surprised to hear the strike of flesh against flesh, and a moment later, a moan that could only be Maggie in pain.

What the hell was going on here? And who did these men think they were to come in here and terrorize Maggie Kinsley when she was alone and defenseless?

Diana straightened, fully prepared to march into the office and tell the men to leave before she called security. How had they gotten upstairs past the guards in the lobby anyway? She would have to speak to someone about that tomorrow.

She'd just stepped out of the shadows when she heard the telltale cock of a gun. She'd never heard the sound outside of the movies, but it was strangely familiar. There was something elemental about it, something that set off a storm of panic in her body. Her heart hammered in her chest, and she found herself back against the wall, the sheetrock cool against her back.

"Who knows about this?" the man asked, his voice low.

"No one," Maggie said. "Do you really think I would risk someone else's safety by telling them what you were doing?"

Thwack.

Another strike against Maggie.

"Answer my questions only."

Diana heard it then — some kind of accent. Russian? Eastern European?

His statement was followed by another voice, also male. But this one spoke quickly and fluidly in a language Diana couldn't place. There was a rapid exchange between the two men that Diana couldn't understand, and then the first man spoke again in English.

"You understand, I'm sure," he said. "We cannot take the chance."

And then Maggie, begging. "No, please... I have a son. He needs me. I won't tell anyone. Please don't —"

Diana didn't have time to consider her options. She didn't even have time to contemplate the horror of what might be happening inside the office. There was only a series of muffled thumps followed by a slightly different kind of impact that could only be Maggie's body hitting the floor.

Diana stifled a cry. She suddenly couldn't feel her legs, and she was only vaguely aware of the wall against her back as she slid to the floor.

"What was that?" one of the men said from inside Maggie's office.

"I don't know. I'll find out."

Footsteps sounded from inside the office. They were heavy and purposeful on the carpet and got louder as the man approached the door to Maggie's office. The door that would lead them to the hall where Diana was still trying to clear the fog from her brain. Still trying to mobilize herself to do the only left to do.

Run.

CHAPTER FOUR

She heard the command in her mind, but it didn't seem to reach the rest of her body. Paralyzed by a horrific combination of fear and grief, she could only listen as the man's footsteps got closer to the hall. He was almost there when the adrenaline kicked in, suddenly flooding her body with a rush of energy that prompted her to move.

She clambered to her feet and turned away from Maggie's office. Then she ran, ducking behind the first row of cubicles in the open part of the office reserved for general accounting and administrative staff.

The footsteps were in the hall as she hit her knees, crawling along the carpet, careful to stay low as she made her way to the stairs.

"Hello?" the man called out. "Is anyone there?"

She navigated her way through the winding partitions, trying to orient herself to the stairwell while listening for the man's footsteps, trying to make sure she didn't inadvertently work her way to his position.

Say something, she thought. She was flying blind without the sound of his voice, scrambling along the floor in what she hoped was the general direction of the stairs while hoping she wasn't playing right into his hands.

He remained quiet, hunting her while she moved at what felt like an excruciatingly slow pace, careful not to knock anything over. Not to bump into anything or make any noise. She'd lost all track of time when she finally saw something she recognized — the pair of potted Ficus trees that flanked the hallway just past the lobby.

She was almost there. She just had to make it through the wide open space of the executive foyer without being seen. Then she'd be in front of the elevators, only steps from the door leading to the stairwell.

Still on her knees, she glanced back. She didn't know where the man had gone, but time was her judge, jury and executioner. He was somewhere in the offices behind her. It was inevitable that he would make his way to the lobby, and that was assuming he wasn't already watching, waiting for her to make a break for the elevator or stairs.

But she didn't have a choice. If she stayed, she was dead. As dead as Maggie...

Oh, god. Maggie...

She couldn't think about that right now. She had to get out of the office. Find the guards. Get help. Maybe they could save Maggie. Maybe she was still alive.

She clung to the idea for a moment before putting it out of her mind. She wouldn't do Maggie any good unless she could escape the men who had shot her. She turned her attention on the hall beyond the lobby. The elevators were right there, the stairwell just a few feet past them.

She got off her knees, rose to a crouching position like a runner waiting for the starting shot in a race. Then, before she could change her mind, she bolted, making a run for the elevator lobby. She was free. Out of the office, past the first elevator, then the second. She pulled open the door of the stairwell and rushed headlong down the concrete and metal stairs. The door had just closed behind her when she heard the ping of metal on metal.

He'd spotted her. Had shot at her. But the bullet had hit the stairwell door, and now she had a head start. It wasn't much comfort against the knowledge that Maggie had been mixed up in something, that she'd been shot, that the same men who had shot her were now after Diana.

But it was something.

The stairwell door opened above her. She barely had time to register it before a series of shots rang out in the enclosed space. Muffled by the silencer, the sound was surreal — a soft thud followed by the deafening ping of bullets embedding themselves in the metal staircase.

She moved against the wall, as close as she dared without slowing her pace, trying to shield herself from the view of anyone peering over the railings above her. She looked at the door as she raced past another floor. It was painted with a large “3”.

Third floor then. Almost to the bottom and the guards who could protect her.

Another round of gunfire opened up behind her. She kept moving, half expecting to feel the tear of hot metal into her skin. And then she was passing another door.

2...

Cursing above her, something in the language she couldn't identify followed by a word she could have sworn was “bitch.” Then more gunfire and the hot sting of something hitting her upper arm, a flash of pain that was gone a moment later.

She launched herself onto the ground floor landing and pulled open the door, spilling out into the bank's main lobby. She was almost to the guard's desk when she realized her error.

His body was sprawled out on the floor, half behind the long desk that was used to check in visitors, half in the open. A small circle marred the center of his forehead, blood caked around the opening. His eyes were open, unseeing.

He was dead.

She didn't have time to feel anything. Her body and mind were singularly focused on survival. On the new reality that she would now have to clear the lobby to get help for Maggie.

She ran as fast as her feet would carry her, only vaguely aware that she was barefoot. Had she taken off her shoes? Had they fallen off? She couldn't remember.

She sprinted for the glass doors, trying to remember if they were left open from the inside or if she needed her key. Her mind was a canvas, blank except for the overwhelming desire to escape, find help for Maggie, make the men who had shot her pay for what they had done.

She didn't have a chance to ponder the consequences of being wrong. She hit the door at full speed as a series of muffled shots hit the floor around her, some of the bullets burying themselves in the tempered glass that surrounded the lobby.

She expected to be met with resistance. To find the door was indeed locked. Instead it seemed to fly open as if by magic.

Easily. Almost like someone had opened it from the other side.

Except she was alone on the darkened street. A car sped past, disappearing into the distance. She hesitated only a split second before turning right, then broke into a sprint, wondering if she would be shot in the back.

She wasn't, and she rounded the corner into an alley and plastered herself against the brick wall of a restaurant, already closed for the night. Everything came into sharp focus as she caught her breath.

The cool night air moving into her lungs, touching her skin with icy fingers.

The pavement, wet and cold under her bare feet.

The distant sound of tires *whooshing* through puddles.

It was foolish to stand still. She knew it in some distant part of her mind, but she couldn't seem to make herself move. She was paralyzed, immobile against the wall, relieved to feel something strong and unmoving at her back.

She didn't know how much time passed before her head began to clear, but slowly, her brain started working again, cataloging everything that had happened. Everything that still might happen. She hadn't seen anyone run past the alley, but that didn't mean they wouldn't be looking for her. She'd left her light on in her office. Her handbag was there, and yes, now she remembered, her shoes. It would be simple to figure out her identity. To realize she'd witnessed Maggie's shooting. Then it was only a matter of looking at her identification. Showing up at her flat.

She couldn't go home. That much was obvious.

She ran through the list of other possibilities in her mind. It didn't take long. It was a short list. She didn't dare contact her parents. Whomever had hurt Maggie — she still refused to believe her friend was

dead — would expect her to go there. She would have to call them.

Eventually.

The only other person she would have trusted was lying in one of the executive offices, counting on Diana to get help. She didn't have any more time to be indecisive.

She pushed off the wall and sprinted to the other end of the alley. They might come after her, but she could at least try not to be in their path when they did. She emerged onto Cannon Street and hurried toward the intersection, looking for one of the old phone booths that could still be found downtown.

She found one near Mansion House, the official residence of the Lord Mayor. Shutting herself inside the booth, she looked blankly at the machine in front of her. She'd never made a call from a pay phone. Did it cost money to dial in an emergency?

There was only one way to find out, and she picked up the handset and dialed 9-9-9. She held her breath while it rang, then exhaled in a rush when the dispatcher came on the line. She gave them the bank's address, told them there had been a shooting. Then she hung up before they could ask her name.

She stepped back onto the street a moment later, relieved against all reason to be out of the booth's close quarters. She looked both ways, debating. Then she started running.

CHAPTER FIVE

Leo was half asleep on the sofa when something broke through the blankness of his slumber. He was standing with his weapon in hand before the fog had even lifted from his brain. A moment later, he realized someone was banging on the door.

He moved carefully toward the front of his flat, the TV flickering blue against the walls. He was thankful for his bare feet, although less so for the fact that he'd stripped down to nothing but his jeans before he'd passed out on the sofa. He still had some hope of getting the jump on whoever was on the other side of the door.

Two feet away, he flattened himself against the wall, his weapon raised to his chest as he waited for the knocking to come again. It did, and this time it was accompanied by a voice.

"Leo? It's me, Diana. Are you there?"

He exhaled his relief, then stuffed the gun in the drawer of the console table where he kept his mail and keys. A quick look around the flat only made him more nervous. He wished he'd had time to give it a once over, make sure there were no signs of his real life, but then Diana knocked again, her voice more urgent.

"I need help! Open the door!"

He hurried to the door, unlocked the two massive bolts. He didn't know what he expected. Diana wasn't in the habit of paying him late night visits, or any kind of visit at all in fact. But what he didn't expect was to find her barefoot and disheveled, blood dripping from some kind of wound on her upper arm.

"What the fuck..." It was instinct to pull her inside, bolt the door behind her. Then he was holding her head in his hands. "What happened? Are you all right?"

"There were some men... at the office.... they... oh, my god..." She choked on a sob. "I think they killed her, Leo."

Leo forced himself to stay calm. Diana was all right. She was alive, right here in front of him. He ran his hands down to her shoulders as if trying to prove her vitality, then carefully turned over her arm. What he saw made him suck in his breath.

She'd been grazed by a bullet.

"Come on," he said, leading her gently to the sofa. "Sit down."

She obeyed his command like a child, and he went to the kitchen and poured whiskey into two glasses. He carried them, along with the bottle, back into the living room. He handed her one of the glasses, watched as she drained it, then poured her another drink before he sat next to her on the sofa with his own.

"We'll have to clean up that arm soon," he said. "But first, tell me what happened."

She took another drink, inhaled deeply, and began to talk. He listened carefully, his mind attuned to the details that would matter when it was time to act.

And he would act.

He would have to. But more than that, he would act because no one could be allowed to scare Diana. To hunt her. To hurt her. There weren't many things in his life worth protecting, but she was at the top of that very short list.

She sipped on her drink as she talked, and he watched as her shoulders began to loosen, the tension slowly leaving her jaw. Her eyes took on a faraway look as the alcohol seeped into her bloodstream. Good. That would help when it came time to clean up her arm, and when it came time for her to sleep, too. When she was done, he paged through everything she'd said for the questions that would help him.

"Had you ever seen the man who chased you? Had he ever come to the office? Visited Maggie there?" Leo asked her.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. He didn't look familiar."

"And what about the man inside Maggie's office?" Leo asked. "Did you get a look at him, even

briefly?”

“I was too scared to look.” Her shoulders slumped in shame.

He reached out, took her delicate hand in his big one. “You did exactly the right thing by getting out alive. Was there anything about their voices? Anything that would make them easier to identify?”

“They had accents,” she said. “And... they spoke in a foreign language. I thought it was Russian at first, but now I don’t think that’s right.”

“But they spoke English as well?”

She nodded.

“This is important, Diana; I want you to think back to their conversation with Maggie, to the words they exchanged with each other. Did they say anything that might help us figure out who they are or what they wanted?”

Her eyes glazed over, and her chest rose and fell with shallow breaths. She was remembering, and he left her to it, resisting the urge to pull her into his arms. To tell her not to remember, not to think about it because he didn’t want her to relive anything ugly or scary. But that wouldn’t help her, and she was going to need his help. That he already knew.

“They... spoke in the other language the one time they exchanged a lot of words,” she said. “I couldn’t understand them. Before that, they were asking Maggie questions. Asking who else knew, who else she told.”

“But they didn’t say what they were talking about?” he asked. “What she knew about?”

“Not outright,” she said. “They acted like Maggie understood.”

“Did she?” Leo asked.

Diana nodded. “I think so. She didn’t deny it. She just said no one else knew. She said... She said she was doing her job, that she wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“Good,” Leo said. “Is there anything else you can remember? Tattoos or scars on the man who chased you? Anything at all?”

“I don’t... I don’t think so.”

He nodded. “Stay here.”

He stood, and she grabbed his hand with panic in her eyes. “Where are you going?”

He sat next to her again, looked into her eyes. “I’m going to the bathroom to get something to clean up that arm. You don’t have to worry, Diana. You’re safe here.”

I’ll kill anyone who tries to hurt you. Tear them limb from limb.

He left the words unsaid. He didn’t know how long he’d be able to keep up the charade of his real life — especially now — but he would try. For her sake, he would try. Because she didn’t deserve what he’d done to her. The lies he’d told.

But neither did she deserve the brutality of the truth on the heels of what had happened tonight.

She nodded, and he rose again, hurrying to the bathroom so he could get back to her as quickly as possible. He returned less than two minutes later with a washcloth, a roll of gauze, some disinfectant, tweezers (in case he was wrong, and pieces of the bullet were still lodged in her skin), and some first aid tape. He set everything down on the coffee table and went to the kitchen where he filled a large bowl with warm water.

When he had everything in place, he poured them both another drink and sat next to her on the sofa.

“Are you sure you should be drinking that before you dig around in my arm?” she asked softly, eying the drink in his hand.

“Would it make you feel better if I didn’t?”

She shrugged. “I trust you.”

Trusting me is the last thing you should do, he thought. *The very last thing.*

He set down the drink. He couldn’t tell her the truth: that the idea of hurting her, of touching her warm skin with the cold metal tweezers, of probing her slender arm for remnants of a bullet, made him want to hit something hard. That it made him want to hunt the streets of London for the man who had dared do this to

her. That he had hoped the drink would smooth out his rage.

“I don’t need it,” he lied, submerging the washcloth in the basin of hot water. “You don’t have to look if you don’t want.”

She met his eyes, her gaze unflinching. “I don’t mind looking.”

He nodded, then squeezed the excess water out of the washcloth before applying it gently to her arm. He held it there for a few seconds, wanting to let the heat loosen some of the dried blood so he wouldn’t have to rub too hard. It was strangely intimate. It seemed he’d known Diana forever, but it had been ages since he’d been close to her without the press of his physical attraction, the weight of his feelings. When they’d been kids, they’d had foot wars in the summer, Diana’s bare feet pressed to his on her front lawn. They’d eaten ice cream off the same spoon. Had grabbed onto each other in the sea, trying to gain purchase on slippery skin as they tried to dunk each other under the waves.

But that had all changed. Somewhere along the way, she’d become an other. A girl.

And a beautiful one at that.

Even the most innocent physical attraction had felt charged after that. Like the air just before lightening cracked the summer sky. He’d grown used to their distance, but only because he hadn’t been forced to endure her closeness.

Now she was right here, her knees bare under the dress, only inches from his denim-clad legs. Her arm was soft in his hands, and he could smell traces of her perfume — vanilla and jasmine — alone with a subtle tang of sweat he found remarkably sensual even as he cleaned the blood off her arm.

True to her word, she didn’t look away. She didn’t flinch either, and for the first time he had the sense that there were things he didn’t know about Diana. Not the stuff he knew he didn’t know — the stuff he didn’t want to know — like how many men she’d slept with or if she’d even been really in love.

It was the other stuff he was catching a glimpse of: a spine of steel under the graceful exterior, courage in the face of clear and present danger, determination that went beyond her desire to have a successful career or to make her parents proud.

“Let’s take a closer look,” he said, his voice gruff as he dropped the washcloth into the basin of water. “Make sure there’s nothing left of the bullet.”

He turned her arm over, exposing the paler underside. The wound was shallow and jagged, like a particularly deep and vicious scrape. He ran his fingers lightly around its edges, feeling for anything sharp or hard under the skin. When he didn’t feel anything, he looked into her eyes.

“I don’t feel anything, but I’m going to have to look a little more closely to be sure. Would you like to take another drink?”

“I’m good. Just do it, Leo.”

He bent his head to her arm and used his fingers to gently spread the wound. A little bit of blood began to flow again, but its quantity suggested the wound was as minor as it appeared, and when he looked more closely, he didn’t see anything to make him think there was shrapnel trapped in her skin.

He grabbed the gauze. “I think you’re clear. You were lucky.”

He wouldn’t have wanted to take Diana to the hospital. There would have been questions — a lot of them — and he was almost certain it was better for Diana to lay low until he could figure out what Maggie Kinsley had been involved in. He could have called the doctor Farrell used for these kinds of situations, but then he would have exposed his real life to Diana, and he was still hoping for a way around it.

He covered the wound with a bandage, then began winding the soft gauze around her arm. He finished with first aid tape, then picked up the bowl of bloody water and returned to the bathroom. When he came back, Diana was studying him with interest.

“What?” he asked.

“You don’t seem very surprised by all of this,” she said.

After working for Farrell Black, nothing much surprised him. Farrell’s organization ran the London crime scene. They had their hands in almost everything — drugs, insurance, bookmaking, loansharking, black market sales. They were even dipping their toes in the water of corporate espionage, although Farrell

would never be a refined criminal like Nico Vitale before the fall of the Syndicate.

No, Farrell Black made no apologies about the brutality of the business, and Leo was more than happy to work alongside him. It was all he'd ever known. He had no real desire for another kind of life.

But he couldn't tell Diana any of that.

He shrugged, avoiding her eyes like that would somehow diminish the lie he was about to tell. The lies he'd already told. "I'm just taking it all in, thinking about what to do next."

"I think it's obvious what we should do next."

"And what is that?" he asked.

She looked at him like he was insane. "Go to the police, of course."

He stood, packing up the rest of the first aid supplies. "Let's give it until morning," he said. "You need rest."

"I don't need rest," she said firmly. "I need to help the police find the men who... who shot Maggie."

"That's not a good idea." He headed for the bathroom, glad of the excuse to return the gauze, tape, tweezers, and anti-bacterial spray. He was putting everything back in the cabinet when she spoke from the doorway.

"We can't do nothing," she said. "Maggie has a son."

He closed the cupboard door and faced her, then crossed his arms over his chest. "I assure you that I don't intend to do nothing."

Her eyes flashed. "What else is there but to go to the police?" she asked. "That's what people do when someone's been shot."

"You already called the police," he reminded her.

"But I didn't tell them anything. I was too scared. I need to tell them about the man who chased me. Give them a description so they can look for him."

"I'm not saying no," Leo said carefully. "I'm just saying let's give it until morning."

Her laugh was incredulous, a little bitter even. "You're not saying *no*? What makes you think you can say no? I came to you for help, Leo."

She turned and disappeared into the hall, her words accusatory in the vacuum left by her presence. He followed her into the living room and into the foyer.

"I'm going to help you, Diana, but we don't know anything about these men. And I hate to break it to you, but the police aren't always on the up and up."

She turned to face him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He sighed, searching his brain for an explanation that would make sense without giving too much away. He wasn't ready to tell her that there were always people in the police department — from the lowliest street cop to the highest ranking officer — who were on the take. He should know — he often delivered their payday.

"Is it fair to say that whoever shot Maggie was probably involved in some kind of financial crime?" he asked.

She hesitated. "I have no idea."

"Yes, but they were talking to Maggie about something at the bank, right? And Abbott is known for being discreet when it comes to their clients?"

"No more discreet than any other bank." A hint of defensiveness had crept into her voice.

"You know what I mean," he said. There had long been rumors that Abbott brokered offshore accounts for influential clients. It wasn't illegal, although Leo suspected the secrecy surrounding the bank's activities had more to do with the power of their clientele than any metric for legality.

"All right, yes," she admitted. "That is our reputation."

"So don't you think it's at least possible that whoever is involved in this is powerful? That they might have resources enough to have someone in the police force on their side?" he asked.

Her throat rippled as she swallowed, and he wondered if she was just this moment realizing how much danger she was in. "I suppose."

“Then let’s give it the night,” he said. “That’s all I’m saying. I have some friends in the department. Let me ask some questions. See if I can get any information. Tomorrow we’ll get help.”

She met his eyes. “Promise?”

“I promise.”

“What about Maggie?”

The pain in her eyes was like a knife in his gut. He wanted to do anything to banish it. Tell her Maggie was almost certainly fine. That people survived gunshots all the time.

But he wouldn’t compound his lies where he could help it.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But you called for an ambulance. She’s getting the help she needs. There’s nothing else you can do. Whether we go to the police tonight or tomorrow won’t change anything.”

He didn’t say the rest of it. That he had no intention of going to the police. That the information the police would be willing to give them — the information the police were even capable of giving them — was nothing compared to the work Leo could do on his own.

She sighed. “All right.”

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get you to bed.”

Alone, he thought. Because if I lay within an inch of you, it will be impossible not to pull you into my arms.

And that would ruin everything.

CHAPTER SIX

She woke up to the smell of coffee and bacon, a strange pair of words running through her mind.

Benny Saff.

The words had seemed to drift to her in the half light between sleep and wakefulness. But it wasn't her voice she heard in her mind.

It was the man from the bank. The one who'd been talking to Maggie.

Benny Saff? The name meant nothing to her, and yet she was almost positive it had been said when the men had exchanged words in the language she couldn't understand. Was it something that would help them identify the language, and therefore the nationality, of the men who had hurt Maggie?

She didn't know, and she lay in bed working the words in her mind, trying to make sense of them before she mentioned them to Leo.

The room was dim, filled with only the weak London light that made it impossible to determine the time of day. She hadn't wanted to take Leo's bed, but he'd insisted. He'd even sat in the chair next to the bed as she fell asleep. She thought she'd be too upset to sleep, her body filled with a strange mixture of adrenaline and shock. But something about Leo's presence had soothed her, and she'd drifted off suddenly and completely.

She looked around, wondering why she'd never been to Leo's flat in London. She'd offered to meet him here, hadn't she? Or had she been too wrapped up in her own life to suggest it? Maybe she simply hadn't wanted to know what she would find — likely some kind of bachelor pad designed to get women out of their knickers.

Except that's not at all how she would describe the flat. Instead it was small and comfortable, obviously expensive, but not overly lavish. It was clean and homey, an escape from the noise and grit of the city.

But this wasn't some kind of holiday. Maggie had been shot. Diana didn't even know if her friend was still alive. She'd followed Leo's lead. Had taken the night to rest and regroup.

Now it was time to go to the police.

She got out of bed and stretched, then nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw Leo leaning against the door frame. He wore the same pair of well-worn jeans he'd had on the night before. They were a little too big in the waist, hanging low enough on his hips to give her a glimpse of a perfectly chiseled "V" under the thin white shirt that clung to every well defined muscle in his upper body. His hair was deliciously tousled, the rogue lock skimming his forehead even more rakishly than normal. He looked like he'd just rolled out of bed, but somehow he was even sexier than when he was dressed and polished, while she was probably a hot mess.

Damn him.

Was it her imagination that his gaze was predatory? That his eyes combed her body from head to toe like he'd never seen her before that moment?

She looked down, wondering if she'd gone to sleep in her underwear and bra. But no. She was in Leo's sweatpants and one of his old T-shirts, just like she remembered. Hardly tempting to a man who'd known her since they were old enough to run wild together.

"Good morning," she said, suddenly desperate to break the tension between them.

A smile barely touched the corners of his mouth. "Morning, Diana."

Diana...

There was something in the way he said her name. Something possessive, even a little subversive. It sent a shiver up her spine, sent little electric shocks to the far recesses of her body.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

“Surprisingly, yes,” she said.

His nod was slow. He bent down, picked up a shopping bag she only now noticed on the floor, and held it out to her. She took it, careful not to get too close, not to let her fingers brush against his.

“What’s this?”

“I thought you might need a few things,” he said. “Come have breakfast. There’s coffee.”

He turned, giving her a clear view of his tight ass before he disappeared into the hall.

Get a grip, Diana. This is no time to explore your childhood crush.

She peeked into the bag and caught sight of folded silk and wool, cotton and lace. How on earth had Leo managed to find her new clothes between last night and this morning? Had he chosen them himself? And were those new knickers under the pants and blouse?

Her cheeks burned at the thought of him choosing something so personal for her. She dropped the bag like it was on fire, then turned her attention to Leo’s bureau. She was looking for an elastic band when his voice traveled to her from the kitchen.

“This food isn’t going to eat itself, Diana.”

She sighed, then gave up and made her way to the kitchen. He was leaning against the counter in front of the coffee pot, holding a steaming mug. Coffee and a barefoot, morning-tousled Leo? Who could blame her for being distracted, even under the circumstances?

She approached the counter. “Where are the cups?”

He held out the cup in his hand.

“Thank you.” She took a sip of the hot coffee, avoiding his eyes. When she finally dared to meet his gaze, he was looking at the hair springing wildly around her head. She laughed, reached up with one hand to touch it. “Still crazy, right? I looked for an elastic, but I couldn’t find one.”

He lifted a hand, touched a curl, twisted it around one of his fingers, his eyes on hers. She couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t take her eyes off his. And now she remembered why she’d never been to Leo’s apartment. Why they always met in pubs and restaurants. They were controllable environments. Places designed to keep Leo at a distance. To keep them separated by a table or a crowd of people.

This... This was dangerous.

“Your hair is beautiful,” he said, his voice low. “Like the rest of you.”

She was still reeling from the words, still wondering if she’d imagined them, when he turned away, busying himself with something on the counter like it hadn’t happened.

“Have a seat,” he said. “I hope you like bacon and pancakes.”

She lowered herself into one of the chairs around a roughly hewn but well designed dining table. As Leo came toward her bearing two plates heaped with food, she thought the table could have been a metaphor for the man in front of her. She shook her head a moment later to dispel the notion.

She did *not* need to think about Leo being roughly hewn.

Or well designed.

He set the plates down and took the other chair, then turned the mug in his hand before speaking.

“Maggie didn’t make it, Diana.” He met her eyes. “I’m sorry, love.”

She shook her head, swallowed the coffee that threatened to make its way back up her throat. “How do you know?”

“I contacted my friends on the police force. Did some quiet fishing.”

She pushed the plate of food away as tears sprang to her eyes. “I can’t believe it. Evan...”

“Her son,” Leo said softly.

Diana nodded. When she looked at him, his features were drawn tight. “What will happen to him?”

He hesitated. “I don’t know. He’s seventeen. I imagine he’ll live with his father until he goes to university.”

“His father is a bastard,” Diana said angrily.

“I’m sorry.”

He was. She could hear it in his voice. But still she was angry. She wanted to throw something. To

scream. To run. Anything but sit at this table in this flat doing nothing at all.

She stood. "I have to get out of here."

She was unlocking the door when Leo spoke behind her. "Diana, wait."

She froze with her hand on the knob. "I don't want to wait. I need... I need to get out of here."

She opened the door and left before he could stop her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

She was halfway down the block when she felt the hand on her arm. She turned to find Leo holding out a pair of sneakers and a beat up leather jacket.

“It’s cold,” he said. “I didn’t know if you had a chance to try on the new stuff.”

She looked at the shoes. “I’m guessing we don’t wear the same size.”

He shrugged, and she realized that while he was holding out his jacket for her, he was in nothing but shirt sleeves. He must have left the flat in a hurry to catch her.

“It’ll do for now.” She didn’t know what that meant. Would they go back to her apartment? Is that what she was supposed to do? Go home. Go back to work like nothing had happened? “Diana,” he said. “Please. Take the jacket.”

She slipped it on, then shoved her bare feet into the too-large sneakers. Leo immediately dropped to his knees to tie the laces. She looked down at his head and was transported back to grade school. She couldn’t count the times Leo had kneeled at her feet.

To inspect a skinned knee.

To pick up a shiny coin that he would inevitably present to her.

To pick tiny wildflowers she would use to weave a crown.

But it was different now. Now when he stood, he towered over her. He was no longer a boy, a playmate. He was a man. And he was still willing to kneel at her feet.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He rubbed the whiskers at his jaw. “There’s just one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I can’t let you walk alone.”

She sighed. “Leo, I just need — ”

He held up a hand. “I understand, Diana. And I’m happy to follow at a discreet distance. But you were witness to a murder last night.” She saw the anguish in his eyes, knew that he hated having to say it out loud. “And you left your bag. Your identification. I’m sure I don’t have to explain why it’s a bad idea for you to be out and about alone.”

“You think they’ll come after me?”

He hesitated, like he was considering lying, then exhaled. “I don’t know. But I’m not willing to take the chance.”

She turned away, used her fingers to pull the hair back from her face. “This is mad. Utterly mad.” She turned to face him. “It’s time to go to the police.”

A shadow passed over his eyes. It was gone a moment later. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

He nodded.

She eyed him suspiciously. He’d put up such a fight the night before. Had been so worried about whether or not they could trust the police.

“What aren’t you telling me, Leo?”

He sighed. “I have one stop to make first. If you want to go to the police after that, I’ll drive you there myself.”

“Promise?”

“I promise,” he said. “But first we’re going to have breakfast.” She started to object and he held up a hand to stop her. “I know you don’t feel like eating, but if you want justice for Maggie, you need to be strong.”

She did want justice for Maggie, and she would tell the police everything she could remember to get it,

even if it put her at risk.

“All right.”

He tucked her arm in his. “Still want to walk?”

She shook her head. “Let’s just get it over with.”

They were heading back to the flat when she remembered the name that had drifted through her mind on the heels of sleep.

“I think I remember something,” she said, looking up at him as they walked. “Something the man said last night.”

“The man who chased you? Or the other one.”

She appreciated his avoidance of Maggie and what had happened to her. There would be time enough to mourn her friend later. Now was the time to do right by her, and she could only do that by staying focused on the men who had murdered her.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “It was when they were in the office. I was in the hall.”

Leo held the door open to his building. “What do you remember?”

“It’s a name, I think. Benny Saff.”

“Benny Saff?” He made sure the door was locked behind them before following her up the stairs.

“I’m pretty sure that’s what he said.”

“Does it mean anything to you?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “And I can’t even be sure it’s English. It’s just something that jumped out at me when they were talking, one of the things that didn’t sound like it fit with the other stuff they were saying.”

He opened the door to the flat. “Why didn’t it fit?”

She thought about it. “I can’t explain it. It just... felt like a name.”

“I’ll look into it,” he said. “Why don’t you finish breakfast while I take a shower? Then we’ll head out.”

She wasn’t sure she could eat. Maggie’s death sat like a lead balloon in her stomach. But Leo was right; she needed to be strong for Maggie — and for Evan. There would be time later for grief.

She headed to the dining room while Leo made his way down the hall. A few minutes later, she heard the water running in the bathroom. She poured herself a fresh cup of coffee and sat down at the dining table. The food was cold, but she forced herself to take bites anyway. Her eyes wandered the flat as she ate, and she tried to imagine Leo watching TV on the overstuffed couch, putting his feet on the rustic coffee table, maybe snuggling with a woman late at night.

She couldn’t. The place was nice, but it lacked Leo’s presence, the quiet strength and warmth that he brought to every situation, every room. She had been able to feel it even when they were teenagers. She would walk down the staircase and know he was there before she ever reached the bottom. She wouldn’t even have to hear his voice. She just knew.

It didn’t feel like Leo was here. It didn’t feel like he’d ever been here.

Which wasn’t that strange. She worked a lot, too. Traveled a lot. Judging from all the times they’d been able to meet on the road, Leo was probably home as little as she was. She wondered if her apartment felt as empty. If it felt cold in spite of the designer furniture and all the care she’d taken decorating it. The truth is, she didn’t like being there very much. It was lonely. Silent in a way that would have been hard to explain, even when she listened to music or on the rare occasions when she watched a movie on her perfect ivory sofa.

What were they both running from?

She put her cup and plate in the sink, then went to the bedroom to get dressed. She forced herself not to look at the bathroom door as she passed. Forced herself not to think of Leo, naked and wet in the shower. But then she was closing the door to the bedroom, and her gaze snagged on a sliver of white tile.

He hadn’t closed the door. Not all the way.

Look away, look away, look away...

Except she couldn’t. Her eyes were pulled to the crack in the doorway, past the white tile, the steam

rising from the hot water to the blurry figure moving behind the foggy shower door.

He was bent over a little, that much she could tell. He moved his hands over his legs, and for a moment, it was like they were her hands. She could almost feel his big thighs under her palms, feel his muscles tense as she worked her way up to his muscular buttocks. She could feel his skin slip under the soap in her hands, could hear his breath become labored as she moved her hands down the ridges of his stomach, reaching for his —

The water shut off, and she was immediately pulled from her fantasy. What the hell was she doing?

She closed the door to the bedroom before she could catch a glimpse of Leo stepping naked from the shower. That was the last thing she needed.

Obviously.

Leaning her head against the door, she forced herself to breathe slowly, to try and calm the too-rapid beating of her heart. This whole situation had thrown her off balance. It was completely understandable. She'd been witness to a murder. Not just any murder — the murder of someone important to her. She'd fled for her life, dodged bullets, raced through the city in the dark of night, half expecting to be killed at any moment.

It was only natural that she would be acting irrationally.

She jumped as a knock sounded at the door.

“Are you decent?” Leo asked from the other side.

She straightened, drew in a deep breath. Thank god she hadn't started to change. “Perfectly decent.”

The door opened, and he walked in wearing nothing but a towel. It was hung low on his waist, barely clinging to his hips from what she could see. She knew she was staring, but her eyes seemed to have a will of her own. His hair was damp from the shower and darker than usual, the way it had been when they went swimming as kids. She wanted to slip her hands into it, feel the strands of it in her fingers as she tugged his lips to hers.

His chest was wide, and strong, the muscles perfectly sculpted, the ridges of his pecs narrowing to corded abs which only narrowed further to the trim waist, a perfect showcase for the line of hair that started at his naval and disappeared beneath the towel.

She could step toward him, reach him in three steps. It would only take one tug and the towel would be at their feet. She could wrap her arms around his neck, press her body against his. It would be cool and slightly damp. She could lift her leg, wrap it around his thigh. Would he lift her off the ground, allow her to wrap her legs around his waist, to press her soaking pussy against his cock?

“Diana?”

She forced her gaze upward only to find him staring at her. Was it her imagination that there was a knowing look in his eyes? The shadow of a grin on his mouth? She busied herself looking through the shopping bag he'd given her earlier.

“Hmm-mmm?”

“Are you all right?” he asked behind her.

“I'm fine,” she said. “Just a little out of sorts.” It wasn't a lie.

“I'll get dressed in the other room,” he said. “Give you some privacy.”

She didn't turn around. “Thank you.”

The door clicked quietly behind him as he disappeared into the hall. She dropped onto the bed, clutching the pile of new clothes in her hands.

She needed to go to the police immediately. For Maggie, first and foremost. But also because she couldn't stay here with Leo. Couldn't rely on him for protection. Not when it was becoming more and more obvious that she was her own worst enemy.

CHAPTER EIGHT

He drove through London and continued outside the city. He was grateful Diana hadn't asked where they were going. He was still debating the merit of telling her the truth: that he was a career criminal. That he worked with people who were both dangerous and violent. That he himself was both dangerous and violent when the situation called for it.

That he was in love with her and had been since he'd first helped her up on that playground all those years ago.

He told himself it wasn't the right time. Wasn't the right circumstance. The last thing Diana needed was another shock. Deep down, he knew it was an excuse. A convenient one, but an excuse nonetheless. The truth is, he feared her reaction. Feared she would no longer trust him, or even worse, that she would no longer want him in her life. If that were to happen, he wouldn't even be able to blame her. And yet he didn't want to think about his life without the bright spot that was Diana Barrett. She was his sun.

Had been for as long as he could remember.

He navigated the car off the highway and wound his way through the streets outside London to a generic looking office building. Pulling into the parking lot made him feel better. It looked like any other company where people pushed paper all day. He would use his cover story. Tell Diana it was a friend's information technology company. He felt like a bastard lying yet again, but this wasn't the time nor the place to spill his guts.

No, that had been back at the flat, you lying coward.

He silenced the inner voice. There was enough time to feel like shit later, and he had no doubt he would do so.

"What is this?" Diana asked as they walked toward the nondescript glass doors at the side of the building.

"It's a friend's company," he said, punching numbers into the keypad next to the door. A muffled beep sounded from inside the walls of the building, and he pulled open the door. "I called early this morning. I think they might have some information on the men who were at the bank last night."

She nodded, a shadow crossing her features. His fists tightened at his sides. It was an involuntary reaction: the desire to hurt someone who had hurt Diana. Bloodlust for the pain of someone who had caused her pain. He had felt it when they were kids. Had had to count to ten in an effort to keep himself from pummeling anyone who teased her, and later, any boy who looked at her too long and hard. He knew instinctively that while Diana's patience seemed boundless, she wouldn't like that about him. And he still wanted her to like everything about him.

They stepped into a small hall with an empty, glassed-in reception area. The carpet was somewhere on the color spectrum between blue and gray, something that was probably bought by every company in London looking to save a buck. Farrell wasn't cheap. He spent money where it was necessary. Where it mattered. But the headquarters of their digital operation was meant to be under the radar, and Farrell was good at playing the part.

Any part.

But Leo obviously still had a lot to learn if he was having so much trouble keeping the truth from Diana. He fished out his keys and opened the door to another long hall, then closed it securely behind them.

"You have a key to your friend's company?" Diana asked.

"It's for emergencies." Leo almost winced as he said it. "In case something happens to him."

She nodded, her brow furrowed as she processed all the information.

They moved down the hall, past large rooms lined with computers. Some of the chairs were manned by people staring intently at the screens or typing furiously. Others were empty. There was no noise except for

the tapping of keys, no Muzak to give the place ambience. The coders and hackers they had on staff had their own rituals. They came armed with headphones and smart phones, with an array of food — some of it imported from other countries — and wearing everything from hipster flannel and skinny jeans to three piece suits. The people who worked at Digital Operations weren't of the same ilk as the people in the rest of Farrell's operations. They weren't hired to scare people. To hurt them.

They were hired for their skill at coding and hacking, their ability to trace a well-hidden IP address or access systems with multiple firewalls and one-of-a-kind security measures.

They didn't hire themselves out. Didn't take corporate clients the way Nico Vitale had in New York. Farrell was all about Farrell, and now, about Jenna, the woman who'd once left him for New York, and Lily, their daughter. Everything he did, including the Digital Operations Center, was done to increase his power — and his monetary return — over London's organized crime. The DOC allowed them to hack computer systems that gave them firsthand knowledge of police activity, information from associates that allowed them to increase their profit margin, and most importantly, a heads up when someone had turned traitor — or when they were thinking about it.

"Leo! There you are!"

He turned toward the voice, his gaze landing on a tall, slender woman with long blond hair and a wide smile that was more suited to the red carpet than Farrell's hidden DOC.

"Here I am," he said, turning to Diana. "Diana, this is Briony. Briony, Diana Barrett."

He wasn't worried about Briony giving anything away. She'd proven time and again to be as secure as one of the vaults at Abbott Bank. She would answer his questions directly, but she would volunteer nothing.

They were all trained to do exactly the same.

She tucked a piece of hair behind one of her ears and held out a hand. "So nice to meet you, Diana. Welcome to our humble abode."

Diana smiled. "Thank you."

"We have that information all cued up for you in the conference room," Briony said. She was slightly nervous around him, a product of his position as Farrell's second-in-command. He didn't like the deference — he never had — and he hurried forward, avoiding her eyes.

"Can I get you something?" Briony asked behind him. "Coffee? Tea? Water?"

"Diana?"

"No, thank you," she said.

"Great," Briony said. "Let me grab my laptop. I'll meet you in the conference room."

Leo led Diana to the end of the hall. The room at the end of it was monopolized by a long table of polished wood and three enormous screens mounted to one of the walls.

Leo pulled out a chair. Diana lowered herself into the plush leather, and Leo took the seat next to her. She looked around, her eyes taking in the room. It was more luxurious than the rest of the office, something that wouldn't go unnoticed. Diana always had an eye for the finer things, yet another reason they weren't on the same playing field. He saw the flicker of interest in her eyes as she combed the simple but high-end furnishings, the expensive electronic equipment, the glowing mahogany of the conference table.

"Sorry about that," Briony said, closing the door behind her. She sat at the head of the table and set up her laptop, then looked to Leo for approval. He nodded, and a picture bloomed to life on one of the television screens.

He heard Diana's soft gasp beside him, knew she was shocked by the image of two men striding across the bank's lobby. He reached out, took her hand under the table. He'd wanted to spare her this, but he wouldn't be able to protect her unless she agreed not to go to the police. And she wouldn't agree to that unless he made it clear how much danger she would be in if she did.

"Two men entered the lobby of Abbot Bank of London five hours after closing." Briony spoke in a clipped voice. This wasn't personal for her. It was just another job, another task handed down from on high. "We don't know how they got in, although there was no evidence on the cameras of any kind of

force, not during their entry anyway.”

“How did you get this?” Diana said next to him.

“We hacked into the security cameras at Abbott,” Briony said simply. “It’s what we do.”

Diana pulled her arm away from Leo’s grasp, turned her eyes back to the screen. “Go ahead.”

“The men continued despite protestations from the guard, who was promptly shot.” Leo watched as the men on the camera raised their weapons, the guns flaring as they fired. Diana flinched next to him as Briony continued. “They went to the elevators, which by all accounts, they took to the fifteenth floor.”

“No time gap?” Leo asked.

“Nothing significant,” Briony said. “It took them thirty seconds to reach the elevators after shooting the guard, and another fifty-six seconds to emerge in the executive lobby. It checks out.”

Leo nodded, and she continued.

“The suspects exited on the thirteenth floor, where they continued through the lobby and open work area to the office of Margaret Kinsley.” The image on the screen switched angles. Briony had obviously edited the footage together from multiple cameras to give them a continuous look at the path the men had taken.

“Was anyone else in the office at the time?” Leo asked.

“Only Miss Barrett.”

“Continue.”

“The men entered Ms. Kinsley’s office at approximately 10:59PM.”

Maggie’s image blossomed on the screen. Leo watched as she looked up from her computer, her mouth opening in shock as the men entered her office. She got up from her desk, stumbled backward toward the window that overlooked the city. The men advanced, and one of them grabbed her, forced her back into her desk chair.

“I don’t want to see this,” Diana said.

Briony looked at Leo as if for permission. He nodded, and the screen went black.

“Are these the men who chased you?” Leo asked Diana.

“One of them,” she said, her head in her hands. “The shorter one.”

Leo looked at Briony. “Who are they?”

Two of the television screens came back to life, this time with pictures of the two men and a list of basic statistics.

“We put the images through the facial recognition software and got a hit on both. The one on the left, the shorter one as Miss Barrett said, is Omar Toumi. Spent a lot of time in Algerian prison, rumored ties to organized crime there.”

Leo let that sink in. Their business had once had rules. An honor code of sorts. But that had all ended with the fall of the Syndicate over a year ago. Now their business was like the Wild West.

No law. No rules. No honor code.

The name wasn’t familiar, but he wanted to ask if Omar Toumi was known to them. If they’d worked with him before. He glanced at Diana and decided against it. There was only so much she could be expected to hear without asking more questions. He would do the homework himself in private.

“And the other one?” Leo asked.

“Antonis Stavros.”

Leo looked at her. “Antonis Stavros?” The name was familiar, but he couldn’t quite place it.

She nodded. “Ties to the Greek mob, rumored dealings with arms dealers in Russia, the Middle East, Israel... You name it.”

Leo rubbed his jaw as he processed the information, trying to formulate the questions he could conceivably ask in Diana’s company.

“Any ties to Abbott that we know of?” he asked.

“We’re still working on that. They have surprisingly good security. I’ll let you know when we crack it, although that’s no guarantee. A lot of it’s done by account number. Might not find anything even if Stavros

did have an account there.”

“What do we know about his family? His home?”

The image on the screen changed to one of a map. Leo immediately recognized Morocco, the Alboran sea running between it and Spain. The image teased his mind, and he spent a few seconds trying to put his finger on the knowledge that hid there.

“Hometown is Thessaloniki, Greece. Has a compound there, and a sister.”

“Would she help us?” Leo didn’t have to be more specific. They needed to find Antonis Stavros. Leo needed to put him down — and anyone else who knew about Diana — before they came after her in earnest.

“Doubt it,” Briony said. “She’s married to her brother’s best friend.”

“Why are we even having this conversation?” Diana asked. “It’s not our problem. It’s up to the police to find these men, although I’m sure they’ll be grateful for the legwork you’ve done.”

Leo sat in silence for a minute, debating his next move before finally deciding he didn’t have a choice. “Put it up.”

Diana looked from him to Briony, clearly confused. A moment later, the center screen filled with a list of names. Leo waited, letting Diana’s eyes travel the length of the list as she read. Leo read as well, although he knew the list by heart. It was broken up by districts and divisions, with the names of their informants listed under each one.

Diana stood. “What is this?”

“I think you know,” Leo said softly.

“I’d like to hear it from you.”

“It’s a list of police officers on the take from organized crime.” Leo avoided looking at Briony, knowing Diana would pick up on the cue, would see it as a sign that there were more secrets to be revealed.

“How do you know this?” she asked.

“We know,” Leo said.

“How?”

Leo slammed his hand down on the table, then forced himself to draw in a calming breath before standing, facing her. “The people who work here are good at finding things out. You’re just going to have to trust me. We know.”

She stared into his eyes, like she might find the answers to all her questions there. Then she turned away, pacing the room. “This is why you brought me here first,” she said. “To keep me from going to the police.”

“To protect you from them,” Leo corrected her.

“There has to be some way...” she started. “Some way to get their help.”

“Everyone talks on the police force,” Briony said. “If you go to them, it’s almost inevitable that word will get out you’re cooperating.”

Leo held his breath as she talked, then released it when she avoided the issue of the DOC’s status as one of Farrell’s criminal enterprises. One that was a crucial part of the business Leo conducted on a daily basis.

“So what am I supposed to do?” Diana’s cheeks were flushed as she turned back to Leo, her eyes flashing. “Hide? Change my name?”

“I need some time,” Leo said. “Time to find out more about Stavros and Toumi. Time to figure out a way to get them in without alerting the wrong people. Without letting them know where you are.”

“They could be getting away right now,” Diana said. “They could be anywhere. The longer we wait, the greater the chance they’ll have disappeared.”

“They aren’t going to disappear,” he said. “Not right away.”

“How do you know?”

Briony answered for him. “Because they have to find you first.”

CHAPTER NINE

Diana looked out the window, her mind spinning. Seeing the pictures of the men who had shot Maggie had sent a visceral pool of dread seeping like an oil slick through her body.

Fear.

Panic.

Loss.

She was still processing the trauma of what had happened, the reality that Maggie was dead. And then there was the other stuff — the quiet office full of hackers working at computer terminals like it was any other job. Briony, who seemed familiar with Leo.

And Leo, who seemed familiar with it all.

She didn't know what it meant, but she had the sense that she didn't have all the information. It was the same feeling she'd sometimes get doing old jigsaw puzzles with her father as an adolescent. The nagging feeling as they got close to completing the picture that there were missing pieces, her brain doing the calculation and coming up short.

"I'm sorry," Leo said, navigating the car back to the flat.

"It's not your fault London is full of crooked police."

He almost seemed to wince. "There are lots of good ones, too. Keeping you hidden is just a precaution."

She turned her face back to the window. "I know."

They rode the rest of the way in silence, the city passing by on the other side of the glass. She didn't speak again until Leo pulled next to the curb two blocks from his flat.

"Why are we parking so far away?"

"Almost impossible to find parking up front," he said. "I just got lucky last time."

She got out of the car and they started down the sidewalk toward the apartment. "What now?"

He hesitated, like he was choosing his words carefully. "I'm going to call in some favors, see if I can get help flushing these guys out."

She stared up at him. "That's a bad idea, Leo. These men are dangerous."

He'd always been her protector, a sentinel whose sole purpose it seemed was to keep her safe. But this wasn't a playground bully or a high school mean girl. These men were killers, and Leo was a media executive, more familiar with laptops and business class than assassins and arms dealers. She wouldn't be able to survive it if he was hurt because of her. Just the thought of living in the world without Leo sent a sharp jab into the center of her heart, like a cleaver cleanly dividing it in two.

"Don't worry," he said, grabbing her hand. "Everything will be okay."

She wondered how he could sound so sure. It was almost enough to distract her from the feel of her hand in his, the soft scratch of his skin against the softness of her own. He'd held her hand before, but there was something different about it this time. Something intimate and loaded with meaning.

She pushed the thought aside. She was being fanciful, probably just because she'd seen him nearly naked not three hours before.

They were half a block from the flat when Leo suddenly slowed down. She looked up to find his mouth set in a grim line, his jaw clenched.

"What is it?" she asked.

He looked down at her, still walking, but more slowly now. "I need you to do exactly as I say," he said. "You'll have questions. I won't be able to answer them until later, but I will answer them."

"You're scaring me." The alarm bells ringing in her mind made it hard to think straight, but she was sure of this much.

“Don’t be scared. I won’t let anything happen to you. Just do as I say, okay?”

She didn’t have time to answer. A moment later three men stepped out of a doorway near Leo’s flat. They might have been anybody, but instinct told her that wasn’t the case.

These were people who meant her — and Leo — harm.

They were big, dressed in black and wearing bulky overcoats. But it wasn’t until they reached inside their jackets that she understood how much trouble she and Leo were in. And then the impossible was happening, because Leo was shoving her behind him and reaching into his own jacket, withdrawing his own weapon.

She was struggling to process the image of Leo — her Leo — wielding an evil looking gun with what seemed to be perfect calm. But there was no time to process anything. One minute Leo was withdrawing his gun: the next, a hail of bullets erupted around them. She had to fight the urge to hit the concrete, cover her head. She would be a sitting duck then, and instinct was screaming at her to move.

Leo backed them up into an alley, then flattened himself against the brick of an old building. The gun seemed perfectly at home in his hand. He held it near his chest, and she could tell from the calm intensity on his face that he was calculating. A moment later, he spoke.

“I’m going to hold them off here,” he said. “You run for the other end of the alley.”

“I’m not leaving you,” she said.

“You’re not. But I need you to get a head start. Once I stop shooting, they’ll come for us, and I want you as close to the street as you can get. Wait for me when you get there. We’re going to make a run for the Tube.”

“What about the car?” she asked.

“Too easy to get stuck in traffic this time of day,” he said. “Easier to get lost underground.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Go,” he said.

She sprinted for the other end of the alley as he started firing. He was met with answering fire from the men who had been in front of his building. The bullets fell like a cacophonous symphony, embedding themselves in the surrounding brick, ricocheting off concrete. She’d almost reached the end of the alley when the gunfire fell silent behind her. She glanced back and saw Leo sprinting toward her, his weapon still drawn. He pulled her around the corner of the building and into the street just as another storm of gunfire roared behind them.

He took her hand, pulling her through the streets, expertly dodging pedestrians as they made their way home from work, people walking their dogs, tourists scoping out the city. They flew through them all, and the crowd seemed to part as if by magic, either because Leo knew exactly where to direct them or because people saw them coming.

Diana’s lungs were burning by the time she saw the sign for Paddington station. Leo hit the stairs full throttle, letting go of her hand as he took the stairs two at a time with a backward glance to make sure she was with him. He took her hand again when they hit the bottom, then wound his way toward the front of the waiting train, elbowing through the crowd to make sure they got a spot. Then they were on board, smashed against one side as more people piled in.

She drew air into her bursting lungs, trying to calm her ragged breath, the rapid beating of her heart, as Leo pulled her toward the back of the train. The conductor’s voice came over the loudspeaker, announcing their destination in a scratchy voice too distorted by the intercom to be understood. And then the bells were sounding, indicating the doors were about to close.

Except it wasn’t fast enough. Movement caught Diana’s eye through the window, and she saw two of the black-clad men racing for the doors of the train.

“There,” she said.

“I know.” Leo’s voice was grim.

She lost sight of the men in the crowd, had no way of knowing if they’d made it on board before the train started moving. Leo was still pulling her to the back as the train barreled through the tunnels under

London, rattling across the tracks at what seemed like warp speed as they raced through the train cars, bumping into people and pushing them aside in their hurry to stay ahead of the men who may or may not have made it on board.

The train was slowing down, Leo and Diana pushing through the doors into the second to last car, when Diana heard a voice shout above the crowd.

“There!”

She glanced back in time to see the two men from the tube platform pushing into the car she and Leo were vacating.

“They’re too close,” she said.

Leo didn’t miss a beat. “Just stay with me.”

The train had almost come to a stop.

Almost.

They were entering the last car as the wheels squeaked against the tracks, skidding as the conductor applied the breaks. Leo pulled her through the crowd and headed for the door at the back of the final car.

She glanced behind her and thought she saw the men pushing through the crowd. Then the train was stopped, the doors were opening, and Leo was dragging her out onto the subway platform, racing toward the stairs that would take them back onto the streets of the city.

She was having a hard time breathing, but her body pushed her relentlessly forward, spurred on by its desire for survival. Leo half dragged her up the stairs, breaking out into the weak afternoon light. She thought they would run again. Instead, Leo pulled her into the vestibule of a small boutique. She fought panic, sure they would be caught.

I won’t let anything happen to you. Just do as I say.

And then, behind them in the reflection of the glass, she saw the men race past, seemingly unaware that she and Leo were right there. She couldn’t believe it would work, but a split second after they passed, Leo grabbed her arm and pulled her back onto the sidewalk. They went back the way they came, down the steps to the tube. Then they were on the train again, speeding away from the station.

She drew in a deep breath, hardly daring to believe they’d escaped the people who had been chasing them. People undoubtedly sent by the man who’d killed Maggie.

But they had. She was alive. They both were.

She looked up at Leo, a new realization dawning on her. She was alive because of him. Because he’d been carrying a gun. Because he’d known how to use it.

And that meant he’d been lying to her all along.

CHAPTER TEN

She looked around as they stepped onto the boat, half expecting someone to burst out of the crowd with a weapon. But there was nothing in the crowd to give her alarm. Just the usual group of tourists looking to see London's sights from the water of the Thames.

Leo kept hold of her arm and guided her to the stern. He hadn't spoken once since they'd escaped the men who had been chasing them, and she hadn't pressed him. She didn't know where they were going, but now she understood something new about Leo.

He wasn't a marketing executive for Global Media.

Whatever he was, he was someone who knew what he was doing. Who knew how to handle a weapon — and an enemy. Who knew how to run and how to hide. She felt instinctively that she was in capable hands, and she'd let him lead her out of the Tube and through the streets, down to the dock that was the boarding spot for the Thames river tour.

They leaned against the railing as the boat moved away from the dock. She watched the water open up between the boat and the pier, felt the boat shift under her feet. She was in no hurry to hear what Leo had to say, both because it would kill once and for all her belief that she really knew him, and because whatever he told her would be the next step in what was an epic upheaval of her life.

The boat had picked up steam, the tinny voice of the tour guide crackling through the loudspeaker, when Leo finally spoke.

“Ask.”

She looked up at him. “Why don't you just tell me?”

He looked out over the water, his jaw tight. Even now, with all the secrets between them, she wanted nothing more than to touch him. To slip her hand around his neck, press her body to his, tell him it was all right.

“I don't work for Global Media,” he finally said. “I never have.”

She sucked in a breath. She'd known. Of course, she had. But hearing him say it made it seem all the more real. She wasn't sure she was ready for what he would say next, but there was no time for fragility.

“I think I've figured out that part,” she said.

He faced her, his eyes hardening. “I'm a criminal, Diana. I've never been anything but that.”

She swallowed hard, torn between wanting to hit him and wanting to ease the pain in his eyes. “We can debate that later. Right now I just want to know how you did what you did back there. And I want to know why you have a gun.”

He nodded. “Have you ever heard of the Syndicate?”

“Of course,” she said. “A bunch of people were arrested last year. It was a mob thing, wasn't it?”

“It was a lot more sophisticated than a mob thing,” he said. “But that's the gist of it. The Syndicate controlled organized crime around the world.”

“What does that have to do with you?” she asked.

“I worked for them,” he said. “Here in London.”

She blinked, trying to process his words. She didn't know what she expected. Maybe that he worked for MI6 or Interpol. Maybe even that he was a hired assassin of some kind.

That's what she got for watching too many movies.

But this? The mob? Her Leo — her beautiful, gentle Leo — a member of the mafia?

That, she hadn't expected.

“You were part of the mob?” She felt stupid repeating it, but she needed time to get her head around what he was saying.

He looked at her. “I still am, Diana.”

“But... they were put out of business. By the FBI in the States, wasn't it? And Interpol?”

He shook his head. “It's not that simple. You don't shut down that kind of business with the flip of a switch. It's been around for hundreds of years. There were organizations all over the world, each one with a leader and several hundred soldiers. The criminal investigation took out the people at the very top — a few of them anyway. For everyone else it's been more or less business as usual.”

The announcer pointed out Buckingham Palace in the distance, and the passengers swung their heads in the direction of the stately building that had been home of the British monarchy for over three hundred years. She gripped the railing, forcing the cold from the metal into her skin as a way to keep herself present. To keep from covering her ears and refusing to listen. When the tour guide was done speaking, she tried to find the words she needed to clarify Leo's statement.

“So the London mob is still in business,” she said. “And you work for them.”

The wind blew across the water, ruffling Leo's hair until the stray lock fell over his forehead. He pushed it back, then spoke slowly. “A more accurate statement would be that I help run it.”

She shook her head, fighting the urge to laugh hysterically. “You run the London mob?”

“No, but I work for the man who does.”

Memories of Leo flashed through her mind.

Leo rushing to meet her by the river in Prague, wearing a leather jacket, looking disheveled.

Leo getting a text over late night drinks in Tokyo and rushing to leave, despite the fact that she could tell he didn't want to go.

Leo meeting her for coffee in New York, then expertly steering her away as a fight broke out in the crowd.

She suddenly felt stupid. She'd never gone to visit him at Global. Had never offered to meet him there for drinks after work. She'd been all too happy to let him come to her. To meet him in pubs and restaurants. To have him for the occasional dinner at her parent's house during holidays and weekends when they both happened to be home.

Because you're in love with him, a voice whispered in her head. *Because you've always been in love with him. Because you knew if you got too close you would ruin everything by telling him.*

“So you... what?” she asked. “Hurt people? Kill people?”

She saw the pain flash across his face in the moment before he composed his features into a mask of indifference. The expression was intimately familiar to her. It was the same one he'd worn when they were kids and someone made fun of his too-short pants. The same one he wore when he'd asked Abigail Dickenson to the dance and she'd laughed in his face. He'd learned early to buffer himself against the judgement of others. That he was doing it now with her made her feel like someone had cracked open her chest with a crowbar.

“Sometimes,” he said. “Yes.”

She shook her head. “But... why? You could have gone to university...”

He laughed. “So I could spend four more years with a bunch of prats who think they are better than me?”

“It's different at university...” But the words sounded lame even to her own ears. Nothing was very different anywhere. That's one thing she'd learned being out in the world.

He leveled his eyes at her, a silent challenge.

She sighed. “All right, they aren't always different. But you could have done anything, Leo. Why this?”

He shrugged, and she knew from the defiant set of his shoulders that he was shutting down. She wouldn't get anything more of out him. Not now. Not about this. And they had bigger problems. More immediate problems.

“So what now?” she asked.

He ran a hand through his hair and surveyed the swiftly approaching dock. The tour was all but over, London's famous tourist attractions summarized and photographed by everyone on board.

“We have to get out of the city,” he said.

“We could go home,” she suggested. “Back to Cornwall.”

He shook his head. “That would only put your parents in danger.”

She fought panic. “Do you think those men will go after my parents?”

She was glad he seemed to consider the question, that he didn’t answer quickly simply to ease her mind. It meant he was telling the truth. “Not if you don’t contact them. Something bigger is going on. My guess is they want out of the city as badly as we do.”

She crossed her arms over her body. “Not badly enough to leave me alone.”

“They were just covering their bases at my place,” he said. “Going through a list of close friends — probably from the phone you left in your office — to see if they could find you. I don’t think they’re going to turn the city upside down to do it. Which doesn’t mean we should take the chance.”

“I’m not coming up with an answer here,” she said as the boat bumped gently against the dock. They stayed at the back of the crowd as the other passengers started disembarking. She watched Leo’s face as he scanned the crowd on the pier.

“I am.” He took her hand. “Stay close.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Leo looked around the plush apartment, wondering what Diana was thinking. The place was nice. Too nice for Hyrum Seaver, the twenty-two-year-old uni drop out who owned it. Leo wasn't surprised. The market for authentic looking forgeries was always hot, and never more so than in the twenty-first century when it was nearly impossible to get past chip readers and databases and all the technology that made being off the grid virtually impossible.

But Hyrum knew his shit. Passports, driver's licenses, birth certificates. Hyrum Seaver could reproduce them all.

And from the looks of the high end flat overlooking the river, business was booming.

Leo had thought about going to the club, asking Farrell for help. But Farrell and Jenna had only been back from Paris for a few weeks. They'd been through hell over the past couple of months. They deserved time with their daughter, and Leo knew Farrell was busy getting things under control with the business.

This was his problem. He would take care of it himself.

Still, he'd felt bad calling Farrell, asking for time off, being cagey about his reasons. But it was better than involving his boss — his friend — in yet another mess.

"You'll have to pay extra for the rush."

Leo turned his attention on the guy sitting at the computer in front of him. "It's fine."

Leo didn't love bringing Diana here. In fact, he didn't love anything about this, not the least of which was having to take her with him as he tried to find the men who were hunting her.

But he didn't have a choice. He couldn't leave her in London, even with a friend. Despite what he'd told her, he wasn't at all sure Antonis Stavros wouldn't come after her. Leo had no doubt the man's informants had been deputized at the police station, but a man like that had connections everywhere. He might flee the country, but that didn't mean he wouldn't leave people behind to find Diana.

Which meant she had to come with him, arguably just as dangerous given that he'd finally figured out why the name she remembered the men saying felt so familiar.

"I need a picture," Hyrum said, looking nervously at Diana. Behind his computer monitor, he was perfectly at ease, a king surveying his kingdom. But his nervousness around Diana made him look like the geeky college kid he should have been.

"Diana," Leo said, directing her to the chair on the other side of Hyrum's desk.

She sat down, and Hyrum tapped a few buttons on his keyboard. "I'll need a couple hours. You guys are welcome to hang in the living room while you wait."

"That's okay," Leo said. "I have a few things to do. We'll be back in two hours."

He led Diana out of the flat and onto London's darkened streets. Night had fallen while they'd been inside Hyrum's flat. Leo relaxed a little. He was comfortable in the shadows. Had been living there all his life.

"Where are we going?" Diana asked.

"We're going to need a few things. Come on."

They stopped at a discount store and picked up a change of clothes, toiletries, and two backpacks. They would be suspicious going through customs with no baggage, and Leo was careful to choose things that would help them pass as a young couple on a budget holiday. The thought caused him a pang of regret. He would much rather be traveling with Diana on holiday, preparing to lay next to her on a sandy beach, than fleeing to a part of the world that was as dangerous as it was mysterious.

He wasn't surprised that Diana didn't ask many questions. It was one of the things he'd always loved about her. She seemed to know when he needed time. Seemed perfectly willing to give him all the space he needed before he was ready to talk. And he was under no illusion; she was likely still figuring things out for

herself. Figuring out how she felt about the fact that everything she believed about him had been a lie.

Not everything, he corrected himself. *Not the way he felt about her. The way he'd always felt about her.*

They left the store with an hour to spare and found a dimly lit pub with a nondescript sign and a blue collar clientele. They were both ravenous, and they passed the time plowing through plates of crispy fried fish washed down with cheap beer. When they were done, they headed back to Hyrum's flat. Leo approached cautiously, wanting to make sure they hadn't been made. It wasn't Hyrum. Leo trusted him as much as he trusted anybody in the business.

But the business bred paranoia. You never knew when someone might trade you for something more valuable. He assumed his connection to Farrell's operation gave him some form of protection, but he wasn't about to risk Diana's life on the bet.

Leo transferred the bags to his left hand so he'd be able to grab his weapon if the situation called for it, but the street outside looked clean, and a few minutes later they were being ushered back into Hyrum's flat.

"Almost done," he said.

His eyes were glassy, and he turned away from them and sat down in front of the computer. Several documents emerged from the printer, and Hyrum spent twenty more minutes carefully applying stamps to the documents, including two that looked like three dimensional holograms. Leo didn't know much about forgeries, but he knew one thing; it was impossible to replicate the holographic stamps that had become standard on identifying documents. The stamps used by Hyrum were the real deal. Farrell didn't even want to know how he'd come into possession of them.

"All set." Hyrum stood and handed the documents to Leo. "The stamps are solid, and the printing technology is about ninety-eight percent there."

Leo raised an eyebrow. "Ninety-eight percent?"

Hyrum shrugged. "It changes fast, mate. We do our best to keep up." He looked over at Diana. "She's not going to have any problem."

Leo knew what Hyrum meant. Diana looked like what she was — an affluent, educated woman. It wasn't just the expensive clothes Leo had chosen for her or her classic bone structure. It was something about the way she carried herself. About the regal lift of her chin and the way she moved so easily through the world, even now. Like she didn't have a care in the world. As if she could part a crowd like the Red Sea simply by moving through it.

Leo wouldn't have been surprised if she could.

He took the documents from Hyrum and gave them a cursory glance. The name was fake, but the picture was Diana, and everything looked legitimate.

"Thanks." He handed Hyrum a wad of cash, thankful all over again that he'd learned from Farrell's example and stashed a sizable chunk of cash and an alternate set of identification for himself in a safe deposit box in the city. He had gone to the bank after the boat ride on the Thames and withdrawn it all.

Hyrum gripped his hand in the kind of bro handshake Leo despised. "No problem."

"Remember," Leo said. "We were never here."

Hyrum nodded as he walked them to the door. "I know the drill."

Leo and Diana stepped out into the hall. They were almost to the elevator when Hyrum spoke behind them.

"Yo, Leo."

He turned around. "Yeah?"

"Watch your back, mate." He glanced at Diana. "And hers, too."

"You can count on it."

They stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the ground floor. When they got there, they exited the building, and Leo flagged a cab.

"Heathrow," he told the driver, settling back into the seat.

"Where are we going?" Diana asked.

“Spain.” He hesitated, wondering how much he should tell her, then deciding there had been enough secrets between them. “And then Algeria.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Diana looked out the window of the taxi, trying to adjust to the scenery on the other side of the glass. They'd left London in the dead of night, transferred planes in Tangier, then landed in Almeria, Spain as the sun was just beginning to lighten the sky. She'd slept most of the way, her exhaustion finally overcoming the questions and fears that had been swirling in her head since the night before. She'd woken up to find her head on Leo's shoulder, the crisp cotton of his T-shirt soft under her cheek, his solid strength propping her up, just like always.

She still wasn't sure what Leo planned to do or why they were in Spain, let alone Algeria, which he'd mentioned in passing as they left London. She had questions, and she wasn't some kind of shrinking violet who wouldn't ask them.

But she liked to have her thoughts in order when she looked for answers. It was difficult to get them in the best of situations. Starting with the right questions narrowed the odds significantly. Besides, the drawbridge was still shut tight over Leo's face. He wasn't ready to talk yet. She could wait. She'd been waiting for years.

They wound their way through the seaside town of Almeria as exotic music sounded from the radio in the taxi. She knew they were in Spain, but the proximity to Algeria across the Mediterranean Sea lent a Middle Eastern flavor to the town. The city was a fortress unto itself, built on sloping hills with a castle-like structure perched on a hill at its center. It would have been a difficult one to conquer with the hills at its back and the sea at its front, and she could almost imagine it being attacked by Berber pirates in the 16th century. Now the buildings were pristine and whitewashed, and a series of hotels lined the waterfront where yachts and cruise ships dotted the sapphire water.

They continued toward the water, then passed a string of lush properties, all of them backing up to the white sand beaches of Almeria. They continued past them, gradually leaving behind the more densely packed parts of the city. The land became drier and more scrubby, long stretches of rocky hills punctuated with desert-like shrubs. The sea was a jewel, glittering and stretching into the distance like a blanket of diamonds under the sun.

Finally, the car slowed around a curve, emerging onto a long paved road leading to a large house balanced on the edge of a hill. The taxi came to a stop. Leo helped her out and grabbed the backpacks they'd bought before leaving London. Then they were alone in front of the whitewashed building, watching the taxi disappear around the curve, the waves rolling onto the beach below.

"Come on," Leo said. "You must be tired."

Tired didn't exactly describe the low-level lethargy that had settled into her bones since they boarded the plane in London, but it was close enough. She took in the white stucco structure as she followed him up a pathway to the house. From this side, it looked like a simple home with minimal windows, but when they stepped into the double height foyer, she saw that it had been an illusion.

The house was large and airy, with a wall of glass on the other side that provided an expansive view of the sea. She knew that Morocco and Algiers lay on the other side of it, but there was no sign of land from their perch on the cliff. The water seemed to go on forever. Leo reached for the glass, withdrawing a door she hadn't seen and pulling it back until it disappeared into a pocket in the wall. The sound of the ocean immediately invaded the house, a rhythm of white noise that enveloped her in an immediate calm.

She walked to the window and stepped onto a large balcony, gazed out over the endless blue water. Even the smell of it — dry and salty — made her feel better. She had the sudden sense of being completely alone in the world — no one but Leo, nothing but this place and the glittering sea and the hot sun overhead.

"It's gorgeous," she said. "Is it yours?"

She didn't look at him as she asked the question. He was both her Leo and not her Leo. Someone she

knew better than she knew herself, and a complete and utter stranger. Did he have the kind of money that could buy such a place? Was he the kind of person that would buy such a place?

It was only the first of many questions she would have to ask.

“No.” He hesitated. “I do own a couple of properties. Nothing this grand. Just little places to escape to when the need arises.”

She turned to face him, a new question urgent in her mind. “And do you feel the need to escape often?”

He seemed to think about it. “No. Not often.”

She wondered suddenly if he traveled alone. If another woman had stood in this place, looking out over the ocean. If another woman had slept on his shoulder as they flew across the sky. Had slept in his bed when they landed.

The idea caused a violent surge of jealousy to rage through her. She walked back into the house to distract herself. “Who owns this place?”

The living room was modest in size, though obviously well designed and furnished with high end decor. It opened directly onto a dining room, which in turn led to a large kitchen visible from the living room.

“An associate,” he said.

She looked at him. “Is that part of your... business? Keeping secrets?”

His eyes darkened. “I’ll keep no more secrets from you, Diana. You can ask me anything you like, and I’ll tell you the truth. But first you should rest.”

“What about Antonis Stavros?” she asked. “Isn’t that why we’re here?”

“I’m still working on it,” he said. “But it’s been a long night, and already a long day. I have some things to do before I’ll know more. Why don’t you shower and rest? We’ll have dinner later, and then we’ll figure out what to do next.”

She felt like she should rebel. She wasn’t used to relinquishing control of her everyday life. She lived alone. Went to work and the gym. Made decisions about her present and future. Now she was on the run for her life, and her best friend was dead. It didn’t feel like the right time to give up control, even to Leo.

But she was out of her element. She had no idea what to do next. How to find out more information about Antonis Stavros and why he’d killed Maggie.

She nodded. “All right.”

He picked up her bag, led her up a set of tile stairs to a second floor hall, and continued into the second room on the left. Like the rest of the house, it was modest in size, grand in design, another wall of windows opening to yet another balcony overlooking the ocean. Was this whole side of the house made up of windows? She resolved to walk down to the beach later and get a look for herself.

“The bathroom’s there.” He pointed to a half open door, and Diana got a glimpse of more pristine white tile. “There should be towels and everything else you need. If not, just let me know.”

“Thank you.”

They looked at each other for a long moment, a lifetime of questions weighing heavily between them. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then seemed to change his mind.

“I’ll see you in a few hours.”

He turned and left the room, leaving Diana to wonder what he might have said. And why he hadn’t said it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

She woke to the sound of the waves rolling onto the beach below the balcony. She was in a pleasant state of limbo, between the horror of all that had happened and the uncertainty of what would come next. She was in no hurry to re-enter reality, and she stretched her naked body against the crisp, cool sheets and watched as the shadows from the fading sunlight played against the ceiling.

She'd showered right after Leo left her alone in the bedroom, standing under the spray for what had seemed like an hour, letting the water wash off the sweat and grime of travel. When she'd finally shut off the water, she'd dried herself off with one of the thick, white towels and walked naked into the bedroom. The balcony doors let in a wind that was both warm and dry, and she'd crawled between the sheets without a second thought and fallen into a deep and dreamless sleep.

The room had fallen under the spell of dusk when she finally kicked off the sheets, let the ocean breeze lay its fingers on her skin. Her nerve endings came alive, and she thought of Leo, of the way he'd looked when he'd emerged from the shower in London. Of the hard planes of his body and the line of hair that had led under the towel. The way it would feel under her palms, the touch of his lips on hers, the press of his body.

She groaned, squeezing her thighs together to stop the pulsing at her center. What was wrong with her? It was true that she'd found Leo attractive since adolescence when her body had come alive, making her notice boys in a way she'd somehow missed until then. But she'd never wanted them. Never *longed* for them.

Not like this.

Why now when everything had gone to shit? When everything was up in the air with no guarantee she would make it back to her old life alive?

She hit the bed with one fist, then got out of bed. She dug through the discount clothes in the backpack and came away with a painfully short list of options for dinner. Not at all like her expansive closet at home, filled with designer clothes and shoes suitable for every occasion. Sighing, she settled on a maxi dress. It was cheaply made, but when she slipped it over her head, allowing the garment to skim her curves, she was surprised to find that it looked quite good on her. The thin straps highlighted her slender but toned arms, and the white cotton stood in elegant contrast to her dark skin. She turned sideways, pleased with the way it hugged her waist, expanded just enough to showcase the hips of her hourglass figure.

Not bad. Maybe she'd been spending too much money on clothes all this time after all.

She contemplated trying to tame her hair, then gave up and let the springy curls have their way. Finally, she removed a pair of gold sandals from the bag and slipped them on her feet, then touched her lips with gloss. She gave herself one last look in the mirror before slipping into the hall, oddly nervous to see Leo.

Someone was in the kitchen. She could hear the sound of running water, the clank of pots and pans. Did Leo cook? It was something else she didn't know about him in spite of their long friendship. She resolved to correct the oversight immediately. If nothing else, the situation that had thrown them into such close, extended proximity had highlighted her failings as Leo's friend.

Friend being the operative word.

Maybe if she focused on being a good friend to Leo she would stop thinking about him naked.

She stepped into the living room and continued into the kitchen, then stopped in her tracks.

A woman with a long black braid stood with her back to Diana, her hands moving in the water running from the kitchen faucet. Steam rose from a pot on the stove, a cutting board on the counter next to it covered with what looked like parsley and garlic. A large knife sat on the counter.

Diana looked around, but Leo was nowhere to be seen. She turned her focus back on the woman, still

oblivious to Diana's presence, then cleared her throat.

"Hello."

The woman spun, her cheeks flushed. Her smile was shy, and when she smiled, faint wrinkles fanned out from the corners of her eyes.

"Hello. You must be Miss Barrett." Her English was good, with only the faint hint of an accent that didn't sound Spanish.

"Yes," Diana said, moving toward her and holding out her hand.

The woman dried her hands on a towel before taking Diana's hand. "I am Mina."

"It's a pleasure meeting you." Diana looked around the great room and onto the empty balcony beyond. "Do you know where I might find Leo?"

The woman raised an eyebrow. "Leo?"

"Mr. Gage?"

"Oh, yes!" The woman smiled. "Mr. Gage is on the beach."

"Down there?" Diana asked, gesturing to the balcony.

The woman nodded. "He's expecting you."

Diana smiled. "Thank you."

She crossed the living room and stepped onto the balcony. The sunset had turned the sky orange and pink. To the south, the city of Almeria was already lit up for the night, the sea expanding along the coast like an indigo ribbon. It was stunningly beautiful, but it wasn't the scenery that made it hard to breathe.

It was the man on the sand below, walking toward her from farther up the beach.

Leo.

He wore black trousers rolled up at the ankles, his white shirt unbuttoned halfway to his naval. He was looking out to sea as he walked, like the water held the answers to all of his questions. Even from the house she could see that his brow was furrowed, the familiar piece of hair falling over his forehead.

He turned his attention back to the beach, then spotted her. He seemed to hesitate, then raised a hand in greeting. She lifted hers in response, waited for him to make his way down the beach, relishing the opportunity to look at him. To really look at him.

When he neared the house, he called up. "Come down!"

She smiled, then made her way to the stairs that led to the beach. The white dress fluttered deliciously around her bare legs, but when Leo stopped in front of her, she wasn't at all sure the goosebumps on her body were a result of the cool breeze blowing off the water.

He gazed at her for a long moment, his eyes seeming to see everything she'd been thinking all too clearly.

"You look lovely."

Was it her imagination that his voice was gruff?

"Thank you." She averted her eyes, pretended to scan the beach she'd already studied to avoid looking at him. "It's so beautiful."

"It is." She thought he was agreeing with her about the beach, but when she turned to look at him, his eyes were on her.

She swallowed hard. "Who is Mina, the woman in the kitchen?"

"She works for the owner of the property," he said. "I didn't want to leave you to go to the market for supplies, so I asked her to cook for us instead."

So maybe Leo did cook. Interesting.

"That sounds nice. I'm starving." She laughed a little, realizing it was true.

He smiled, looked at her a beat too long.

"What?"

He shook his head a little. "Your laugh. It reminds me of something."

"What does it remind you of?" she asked.

He hesitated, then shook his head again. "I'll let you know when it comes to me."

She had the feeling he was hedging, but she suddenly didn't want to push the issue. Wasn't sure she was ready to handle the truth.

"Shall we?" he asked.

"Shall we...?"

He gestured behind her, and she turned to find a table set up under the balcony, its underside strung with white lights.

She looked up at him. "You did this for me?"

She thought she caught the hint of color in his cheeks before he hurried forward to pull out one of the chairs. "Well, the lights were already here. I just brought down the table and chairs. As long as we're here, we might as well enjoy the view."

She sat down, felt a shiver run up her spine when his fingers brushed against her bare arms. He retreated to the other side of the table and poured wine into her glass. He raised his in a toast.

"To old friends." The words seemed to stick in his throat, and she wondered if he regretted their friendship now. She'd brought him nothing but trouble the last two days.

"To old friends," she said, swallowing around the lump in her throat as she clinked her glass against his.

She heard footsteps on the balcony stairs, and a moment later, Mina appeared with a plate of oysters on a bed of crushed ice. She set it between them on the table before heading back to the kitchen.

"Please," Leo said, gesturing at the platter.

She took one of the oysters, squeezed some lemon on top, tipped her head back and let the slippery morsel slide down her throat. She closed her eyes, savoring the taste, primitive and salty, like eating a bite of the sea. When she opened her eyes, Leo was looking at her, his eyes dark with something she couldn't define.

It was lost a moment later when he reached for one of the oysters. Diana took another long swallow of her wine, sighing as the alcohol reached her bloodstream. She was here, in a place almost too beautiful to describe, with Leo. She would try to enjoy their meal. Try not to overthink everything he said and did.

Try not to wonder if he felt it, too.

"So I found something," Leo said. "Something about Stavros."

She looked up, grateful for the distraction from her thoughts. "What did you find?"

"A shipment," Leo said, "coming in to Beni Saf tomorrow night."

"Beni Saf..." The name was like a punch to the stomach, and she was immediately taken back to the hall outside Maggie's office, the paralyzing fear, the moment Stavros had killed her friend.

"It's the name of a port in Algeria. More specifically, a port rumored to have more than its share of illegal arms shipments," he said. "I didn't put it together right away, but it came to me after those men showed up at the flat in London. I wanted to do some more research before I said anything."

So that's what Stavros and Toumi had been talking about when they'd been interrogating Maggie. Not the name of a person, but the name of a port used to traffic illegal weapons.

"Do you think that's why they came after Maggie?" she asked. "Because she found out about it?"

"Maybe not the shipment itself," he said. "But it's not outside the realm of possibility that she discovered anomalies in wire transfers that made her suspect money was being used to fund some kind of illegal exchange."

She remembered how tired Maggie had looked the last day she'd been alive. She'd been worried, and Diana had postponed talking to her because of her lunch plans with Leo. She wished she could go back, do it all differently, insist Maggie tell her everything.

But there was plenty of time for guilt. Now was the time for justice.

"How can you be sure the shipment you're talking about is connected to Stavros?" she asked.

"Because it's registered to a company registered to a company registered to another company that's in Stavros' name. And because Briony was able to trace said company to other questionable shipments that have come in to Beni Saf in the past."

She sat back in her chair. “What are we going to do about it?”

“I’ll know more tomorrow.” He lifted his glass again. “Until then, I say we enjoy the food. And the view.”

It was a tall order, but somehow they passed the next two hours in pleasant conversation punctuated both by the comfortable silences of old friends and a new kind of tension that was either real or imaginary. They talked about her parents, about her job at Abbott and whether she would be able to return to it once they’d found Antonis Stavros, about their childhood. They laughed over their shared memories, arguing about who had the more accurate recollection of events. The only thing they didn’t talk about was the truth Leo had only recently revealed.

And all the while Mina brought plate after plate of amazing food: fish so flaky it melted in Diana’s mouth, tender salad greens served with nothing but fresh lemon and sea salt, smoky lamb, roasted vegetables in a spicy tomato sauce. The food was an explosion of spices — chili and caraway and cumin all coming together to create a symphony of flavor. By the time she cleared the last plate, they’d worked their way through two bottles of wine, and Diana was feeling more than a little relaxed.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

The candles on the table were flickering low in their votive holders when the question tumbled out her mouth.

He turned his glass in his hand. She held her breath, waiting for an answer. Instead, he stood.

“Come on.”

“Come where?” she asked.

“Let’s put our feet in the water,” he said. “Like when we were kids.”

She smiled. “We didn’t just put our feet in when we were kids. Not usually anyway.”

A smile touched his lips. “You’re absolutely right.”

He grabbed her hand, pulled her up out of her chair, started running for the water.

She laughed, all too happy to let herself be pulled along in Leo’s wake, just like always. “What are you doing?”

He stopped at the water line and dropped her hand, then stripped off his shirt. “Going in the water. Like when we were kids.”

“Leo…”

He unbuttoned his pants, and she sucked in a breath, half afraid and half hoping there would be nothing underneath. She didn’t know whether to be relieved or disappointed to discover he was, in fact, wearing boxer briefs.

Then again, any relief was short lived when he turned for the water, revealing perfect buttocks, hard and well-formed above big, muscular thighs.

“Come on, Diana.” His words were snatched by the wind as he rushed for the water. “We’ve done it a thousand times.”

Not like this.

“Oh, bollocks. Fine.” She stripped off her dress and ran for the water, glad Leo was diving under a wave so he couldn’t see her half naked.

By the time he came up, she was already waist deep in the surf, the waves buoying her upward as they swelled underneath her, dropping her back to the sand as they rolled onto the beach.

She swam a little farther out to meet him, then treaded water to keep herself afloat.

“Still crazy,” she said, splashing him.

“You were the one who usually wanted to go swimming,” he said.

“Yes, but not at night, and not without our suits.”

He grinned. “What’s the difference?”

She didn’t have an answer. She didn’t know the difference. She only knew there was one.

“No difference,” she said.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. The ocean had grown calm, the waves turned to small

swells. His wet hair was dark under the shimmer of the moon, drops of water clinging to his lips. She wanted to wrap her arms around his neck, twine her legs around his waist, kiss the droplets of the sea from his mouth.

She was in a dangerous place, a place far from the reality of their lives, a reality that had kept them at a distance in spite of their childhood closeness. Here there was nothing but the moon and the sea, Leo looking at her with liquid eyes over the salty water that separated her from the thing she wanted and the things she knew to be true. It would be so easy. She would wrap her arms around his neck, press her lips to his. Maybe he wouldn't want her the way she wanted him, but at least she'd know.

But then it would be between them. What would it mean for their friendship if he didn't feel the same way? Was she willing to risk losing what they had for the chance to kiss him? To see if all the possibility she sensed bubbling under the surface of their long standing camaraderie was real or fantasy?

No. He meant too much to her. His friendship was part of the bedrock of her life, a foundation comprised of the love of her parents and the knowledge that Leo would always be there to pick her up if she fell.

Decision made, she was willing herself to turn away, willing her legs to propel her body back to shore, when she heard the wave approaching. She knew from the sound of it — a subtle roar she felt in her stomach — that it was bigger than the swells that had been rolling under them until now.

She barely had time to look at Leo before they both ducked, letting it roll overhead the way they had when they were kids. When she was sure it was past, she came up to find that the water had moved her closer to Leo.

Much closer.

He was only inches away now, his lips parted as he looked at her with what she was almost sure was desire.

“Leo...”

It was all she managed to say in the moment before he pulled her toward him. She slid her hands into the hair at the back of his head and wrapped her legs around his waist as his mouth closed on hers. He was taller than her, his feet firmly planted in the sand as the waves crashed around them. She was only dimly aware of their power. It paled in comparison to the need rolling through her body as Leo's tongue swept her mouth, his hands pressing her ass against the hard-on wedged between her thighs.

She opened her mouth, wanting all of him, meeting every thrust of his tongue with her own, fisting his wet hair in her hands. They were in their own universe now. Nothing but them and the empty beach and the almost full moon casting a column of light over the sea. He was mapping her mouth, exploring it with his tongue, then nibbling at her bottom lip before capturing it again.

He pulled away, leaving her gasping — for breath and for him. She wanted more.

So much more.

“Diana...”

She placed a finger over his lips. “I don't want to talk, Leo. We've been talking our whole lives.”

“We haven't talked about it. About what I do. About what that would mean for you.”

“I don't care, Leo. I don't fucking care, okay? I just want you to make love to me now.”

He seemed to hesitate, and for a moment she feared he would turn her away. Then he groaned and pressed his lips to hers, and this time the kiss wasn't an exploration but a possession.

Her hands traveled down, across the broad expanse of his shoulders, down to the biceps that bulged as they held her ass. He kissed his way along her jaw toward her ear, nibbled at the lobe until she gasped, throwing her head back until her hair fanned out in the water around them.

She let her hands travel down the rise of his pecs, past the hard muscles of his abs, into the swim shorts at his hips. Then he was in her hand.

Long. Thick. Hard.

The feel of him in her hand sent an explosion of lust to her core. She was slippery for him, so on fire she could imagine the feel of him inside her. All she would have to do is pull aside her knickers, push

herself onto the pulsing shaft in her hands.

“Fuck, Diana...” He held her aloft with one hand, then slid the other one around to the front, sliding it between their bodies, past the mound of her pubis. She moaned as his fingers brushed against her clit on the way to her secret folds, his mouth trailing kisses along her shoulder to her collarbone. Then his fingers were inside her, claiming her as he licked the hollow of her throat on his way to her breasts.

He was throbbing in her hand as she moved her palm over his shaft in long, languid strokes, relishing the feel of him expand as his need for her grew. It took every ounce of willpower she had not to position herself over the thick head, envelop him in her heat. She’d waited her whole life for this moment, and she had no idea what would happen when it was over.

She was going to lose herself in it while she could.

He lowered his lips to one lace-covered breast, closed his mouth over the fabric of the bra. She moaned as her nipple, cold from the water and wind, was enveloped in the heat of his mouth. It was a wicked combination: his cock in her hand, his fingers inside her, his mouth on her breast, the surf pounding around them in perfect rhythm to the longing beating through her body.

He lifted his head, looked into her eyes. “I need to see you. And I need to feel you.”

He turned her around in his arms so he was carrying her like a bride over the threshold, then stalked through the surf toward the beach. Her body hurt with the absence of his fingers inside her, the lack of his mouth on her skin. How had she lived without them — without him — all this time? How had she sat across from him, making polite conversation over drinks when his body — his heart — had been made for her.

He didn’t take his eyes off her as he made his way toward the beach, the water gradually growing more shallow, falling away from their bodies. She registered the chill in the air with detachment. Nothing mattered but him.

His strong arms around her. His body warming hers. His eyes seeing into her soul.

“We should go inside,” he said. “It’s cold.”

She kissed him. “I don’t want to go inside, Leo. I’ve waited too long already.”

His eyes seemed to turn black in the moonlight. “Then let’s not wait any longer.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

He lowered her to the sand, laying her out carefully. It had been ages since they'd been in bathing suits together. She'd been little more than a kid the last time he'd seen her so scantily clad, and he'd been too young to understand the depth of his feelings for her.

Now he saw that her body was more magnificent than he could have imagined, her breasts full and perfectly formed, the dusky brown nipples barely visible through the lace of her bra. He let himself have the luxury of looking at her, allowed his eyes to travel to the tiny waist, the full hips that were made for his big hands. Her panties were wet, plastered to the mound at the top of her thighs. His pulse quickened as he remembered the walls of her pussy clenching around his fingers. Her legs were full at the top, narrowing to slender knees and calves, and he knew the skin on the inside of her thigh would be soft and fleshy when he raked it with his teeth. Her skin shimmered with droplets of water.

She lifted a hand. "Please."

It was so polite, so Diana, to ask nicely when the fire raged in his body. When he thought he would be consumed by it if he didn't bury himself inside her before another moment could pass.

He lowered himself next to her on the sand, pulled her into his arms. "I don't want you to be uncomfortable," he said, thinking of the sand.

She wrapped her hands around his neck, licked the salt from his lips. "The only thing that's making me uncomfortable is the fact that you're not inside me yet."

She kissed him, slipping her tongue inside his mouth as she hooked a leg around one of his hips, pressing herself against him until he could feel the heat of her pussy against his engorged cock.

He rolled her gently under him, used one of his knees to spread her thighs while he kissed her. He wanted to know every inch of her body, and he started with her mouth, kissing her deeply and thoroughly, letting his mouth explore every corner of it, pulling back to lick her full lips. She bit his bottom lip, hard enough to give him a shock of pleasure-pain that shot right to the tip of his shaft.

"All this time you've been hiding a naughty side," he murmured, moving his lips down her neck, licking his way to her collarbone.

"All this time you thought I was a good girl?" she asked.

He unhooked her bra, tossed it aside. "All this time I've known you were *my* girl." It thrilled him to say it.

His. For now at least, she was his.

He lowered his head to her breast and captured the nipple in his mouth. She gasped as he sucked, working the insistent peak with his tongue while he fingered the other one with his free hand. The little bud rose quickly to a stiff peak, and he tugged at it gently with his teeth before lapping at it with his tongue, soothing it before he sucked and nibbled again.

She grabbed a handful of his hair, almost hard enough to hurt. It only made him bigger. Hotter. He released the nipple from his mouth and kissed his way down her stomach. It was flat but deliciously soft, and he dipped his tongue into the well of her naval, before making his way farther downward.

Kneeling between her legs, he took one slender calf in his hand and kissed his way from her ankle to the tender spot behind her knee. She lifted her head from the sand, watched him spread her open, his mouth moving up her thigh, kissing and nibbling at the delicate flesh inside her legs. The scent of her pussy hit him like a bolt of lightning.

Earthy. Sweet. Musky.

It set his blood boiling, causing another painful rush of need to his already about-to-explode cock. He distracted himself by lowering his head to look at the dewy wetness clinging to her folds, proof that she wanted him as much as he wanted her. He ran a finger through them, upward toward her clit. Her sigh was

like a summer breeze, rising up, mingling with the wind blowing in off the water. He wanted to hear that sigh again. Wanted to look in her eyes when she came for him.

When he poured himself into her.

He ran his tongue through the petals of her sex, resisting the urge to bury his face in her pussy. It was too soon for that, and he circled her clit with his tongue, flicking the tiny bundle of nerves until she moaned. Her hips rose off the sand to meet him, and he lay a hand flat on her belly, both to keep her still and because it was a form of possession. A way to make it clear that for now, at least, her body was his.

He slid his fingers inside her while increasing the pressure on her clit with his tongue and was rewarded with an increase in the juices lubricating his fingers. She moaned, moving her hips against him as he lapped at her clit, slid another finger inside her, moving them in and out in time to the rhythm of his tongue.

Her channel was tight, the muscles already clenching down on his fingers. He sucked at the little seed while he hooked his finger inside her, putting pressure on her G-spot.

“Oh, my god... Leo... I can't...”

She was close. He could feel it in the way the walls of her pussy were tightening around him, the increase in wetness around his fingers, her swollen clit, the way she pressed her hips against his mouth.

“Please...” she gasped.

His cock was so hard it hurt, but he wouldn't take her until she came against his mouth.

He wanted to taste her.

He buried his face deeper in her warm sweetness, covering her clit with the heat of his mouth while he plunged his fingers inside her, holding one against the secret spot that was slowly driving her mad.

She was moving against him hard and fast now, her hips fucking his fingers and his mouth, her body determined to take its own pleasure, her mind occupied only with release. He increased the speed of his tongue and fingers, letting the friction carry her to the abyss until she cried out, shuddering against his mouth, the creaminess of her come invading his tongue as he lapped her clean.

When she settled back into the sand, he rose on his knees and reached for his jeans, extracting a condom from the back pocket. She sat up, licked from the base of his shaft to the tip, sucking on his swollen head until he growled. He shoved her gently back onto the sand and rolled the condom on his rigid staff, then nestled the crown against the wetness of her opening.

He paused, looking down at her, at their almost joined bodies.

“What is it?” she asked, breathless.

“Nothing,” he said. “I just want to look at you.”

“Look at me all you want,” she said. “Just do it while you fuck me, please.”

He chuckled, his love for her welling inside him like a secret spring. How had he lied to himself — to her — about it for so long? The question didn't linger. A moment later, he thrust inside her in one powerful movement, burying himself balls deep.

She cried out, lifting her hips to meet him. He didn't move right away. Just closed his eyes against the exquisite pleasure of her heat all around him, the pressure of her pussy wrapping him in an intoxicating cocktail of warmth and comfort and safety and something like home.

She opened her legs wider, and he sunk deeper inside her. The subtle shift removed the last vestige of his self-control, and he dragged his cock out of her, then drove into her hard and fast, his head slamming against the top of her cervix as she screamed.

“Okay?” he asked, forcing himself not to repeat the motion until she answered. Forcing himself not to drive into her again and again until he exploded inside her.

She answered by grabbing his ass, pushing him harder and farther inside her. It was all the encouragement he needed, and he thrust inside her again and again, feeling his orgasm build at the center of his body even as her movements became more frantic.

He was desperate to come inside her. But he wasn't ready for it to end.

He rolled her on top of him, his breath catching at the sight of her naked body straddling his in the

moonlight. She moved on him without prompting, grinding her hips in a rhythm that was so sensual, the image alone almost sent him over the edge.

He grabbed her gloriously full ass, thrusting upward to meet her as her head fell back. Her breath was coming fast now, a flush spreading across her chest as she moved on him. He reached up, circled her clit with his thumb as he impaled her again and again on his cock.

Gasping, she rested her hands on his chest, leaned back a little so that his cock sank even more deeply inside her. He increased the pressure on her clit and felt her hips quicken, her body taking over as it reached for its promised climax.

“Look at me when you come, Diana.”

She opened her eyes, met his gaze. His whole world was in her eyes.

Past. Present. Future.

And then she was convulsing around his cock, the muscles of her pussy clenching hard around him as she came. It was the moment he'd been waiting for, and he let go, falling after her into the void, the orgasm ripping through him like an earthquake. It was like being suspended in space.

Weightless. Empty. Soundless.

He let himself drift. Let himself burn.

When he finally came back to himself, it was with the sweet weight of her body draped over his, her hair every which way, just the way he liked it. He wrapped his arms around her, slipping one hand into her hair, holding her close. She'd been his forever, he just hadn't known it.

He kissed the top of her head, letting a fresh surge of rage flow through him at the thought of someone trying to hurt her. They would have to go through him, and he would do anything to see that she was safe.

Maim. Wound. Kill.

Anything.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

She felt his absence even before she opened her eyes. She kept them closed for awhile, replaying the events of the night before. It was somehow both a surprise and an inevitability that she had ended up in his bed. That's how it felt now anyway.

His claiming of her on the beach had been every bit as forceful as the tide roaring in from the depths of the Mediterranean, but it had only been the beginning. Afterward, he'd carried her naked to the empty house, continuing up the stairs and into the large master bathroom where he'd tenderly washed the sand from her skin before taking her from behind, her hands and breasts pressed against the glass doors as he drove into her. When they were done, he'd led her to the big bed facing the glass doors. Beyond them, the ocean swept unchanging onto the beach, oblivious to the fact that her whole world had opened up in the three hours since she'd gone down for dinner.

But Leo wasn't done with her, and he spent the next few hours exploring every inch of her, making her come again and again, wringing her out with the intensity of the pleasure he wrought from her body. In between, they lay in silence, her head on his chest, his heart beating out a comforting rhythm against her ear. It felt like a part of her, like she'd heard it since before she was born. They talked about everything — their childhood and their memories and all the secrets they'd kept from each other. And sometimes they talked about nothing at all.

She'd fallen asleep as the first light of dawn began creeping across the ceiling, Leo's arms wrapped securely around her. Now she opened her eyes, looked around the room, flooded with light. He was gone, just as she suspected, but she could hear the sound of water running in the kitchen, could smell melted butter and warm sugar. Was it Leo or Mina?

She bit her lower lip, suddenly nervous. Would things be weird between them now? Would he regret what had happened? She didn't know, but even if they weren't weird, even if he didn't regret it, they weren't in the clear. Antonis Stavros was out there somewhere. It was possible he'd pushed aside his mission to kill her in the name of getting his shipment safely to port, but she couldn't count on that forever. And even if she could, she was not okay with Maggie's killer going free. Not okay with such a vicious man brokering the sale of weapons whose one purpose was to kill.

She sat up, stretched, then reached for Leo's shirt. She held it to her nose, breathing in his scent — salt and wind and denim. She stood, slipping it over her head, then looked at herself in the mirror over the bureau. She only thought about trying to tame her hair for a minute. There was really no point.

The sounds from the kitchen got louder as she made her way down the stairs. She looked at her bare legs, rethinking Leo's shirt. What if Mina was in the kitchen? Diana wasn't exactly dressed for company.

But when she turned the corner into the living room, she saw Leo standing at the stove, flipping a pancake. For a moment, she could hardly breathe. Her fingers itched to touch his shoulders, to trace the perfectly formed muscles she already knew by heart, to touch the line of hair disappearing into the jeans slung low on his hips.

“Good morning.”

She looked up, licking her lips involuntarily. “Good morning.”

He grinned. “Hungry?”

She didn't look away as she walked toward him. “Starving.”

He slid the pancake onto a plate, turned off the stove, and pulled her to him as she rounded the granite island. “We'll have to eat first.”

She laughed. “You're no fun.”

He squeezed her ass, pressed her into the already-impressive erection growing between his legs. Then he lowered his head until his lips were inches from hers. “Really?”

“No.” She was already breathless with her desire for him. “Not really.”

“That’s what I thought.” He captured her mouth in a long, lingering kiss that was as tender as it was all-consuming. “I’m sorry I had to leave you in bed. We have a big day. I wanted to get started.”

“I understand,” she said, trying to will away the wetness between her legs.

He swatted her bottom. “Let’s eat. I think we both need some energy after last night.”

They ate on a table out on the balcony, overlooking the beach where Leo had finally made her his. The sun reflected off the water from a clear blue sky, and the air was scented with the brine of the sea and the strong, black coffee Leo had brewed in the french press. She was in heaven, and she swallowed the last bite of pancake on her plate and closed her eyes, trying to memorize every bit of it.

“What are you thinking?”

She opened her eyes to find Leo studying her. “I was thinking this is a perfect morning. A perfect moment. I was thinking I wish it could last.”

His expression was serious as he nodded. “I know what you mean.”

“But it can’t, can it?” she asked.

“I plan to give you thousands of perfect mornings like this one, Diana.” His voice was hard, his gaze fierce. “But I have work to do first. And we have things we need to talk about.”

She nodded, looking at her hands. “Because you lied.”

“Because I lied,” he said. “And because the reasons I lied are valid.”

“What reasons?” she asked.

“The work that I do is dangerous,” he said. “To me and to anyone who’s part of my life. But that’s not all.”

She looked up. “What else is there?”

He flipped over the knife next to his plate, turning it back and forth. She recognized the fidgeting. It was something Leo did when he was nervous, when he was choosing his words.

“I don’t want this life for you, Diana.”

She looked around, taking in the sea beneath them, the long stretch of pristine sand, the beautiful house. “It doesn’t look like a bad life.”

He scowled. “It’s not all this. It’s strange hours and strange countries. It’s the kind of instability most people can’t imagine. Not the fear of losing your job — fear of losing your life, of being put in prison. And…”

He swallowed hard, and she knew they were finally getting to the crux of his argument. “And?” she prompted.

He shook his head. “You’re better than this, Diana. You should be with someone who has read the classics, who knows Brahms from Beethoven, who knows what it means to live right.”

Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them away. The only thing worse than Leo’s confession — this confession — would be to think Diana pitied him. And that wasn’t why she felt like crying, why it felt like someone was scraping out her insides with a pickaxe.

It was because this was Leo, saying he wasn’t good enough, and she knew suddenly that this is what he’d always believed.

All the summer days he’d spent at her parent’s house, playing games of IT on the big lawn while Mozart leaked from the windows of the house.

All the times he came across her reading a book that had been written before either of them were born. Before her parents and grandparents were born.

All the times he’d sat at her dinner table while her father asked questions about college and her future.

She’d never once thought to imagine Leo felt inferior, because she’d never once thought of him that way. But now she saw it all, like a long and painful film whose sadness only fully hit you at the end.

His expression was guarded as she rose from her chair, came around to his side of the table, sat unceremoniously in his lap. His arms slid around her hips, and his face was just inches away. She almost couldn’t breathe with the need to touch her lips to his.

“What does it mean to you to live right, Leo?”

“You know what it means,” he said gruffly.

“I know what it means to me,” she said. “I want to know what it means to you.”

“It means a stable job with a stable paycheck. The kind of job that can’t get you killed or arrested, and dinner at six every night.”

“It sounds terribly boring,” she said. “And not at all the way I would describe living right.”

He looked confused. “How would you describe it?”

She held his face in her palms, looked into his eyes. “As sharing life with the one person in the world I can’t live without, building a future with that person, laughing and crying with that person. I’d describe it as working toward something together, no matter what. My parents have been married since they were twenty-two. When I look at them, I don’t see the house filled with antiques and art, the money they’ve worked so hard to save. I see the love in their eyes. That’s what I want for myself, Leo. And I want it for you, too. I want it *with* you.”

“You might change your mind,” he said.

She touched her lips to his. “I’ve had twenty-eight years to change my mind, Leo Gage. I think you’re stuck with me.”

“I should be so lucky,” he said. A cloud of worry passed over his features.

“What is it?”

“I want you to live in peace. And that means we have to get Stavros.”

“How do we do that?” she asked.

An aggressive knock sounded from the front door as he opened his mouth to answer. He gently removed her from his lap and stood.

“That will be your answer.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Diana, Braden Kane,” Leo said. “Kane, this is Diana Barrett.”

The man was tall and broad-shouldered, his dark hair cut so short she could almost see his scalp. His face was perfectly symmetrical, the face of a model or leading man. She sensed it was an illusion, that underneath the cover model exterior he was every bit as dangerous as Leo.

They shook hands, and Leo led Kane into the living room. He looked around, taking in the view beyond the glass, the open architecture, the simple but expensive furnishings. “Nice.”

“It’s not mine.”

She wondered if it was her imagination that Leo sounded defensive. She sensed a kind of camaraderie between the men, but a competition, too, and maybe even a wary kind of distrust. It set her on edge. Antonis Stavros wanted her dead. She didn’t have time for a pissing contest between two Alpha males.

“Who are you?” she asked. “I mean, I know your name, of course. But who are you?”

“Kane is an FBI liaison to Homeland Security.”

“Homeland Security?” That explained the American accent at least. “What does that have to do with... what happened in London?” She had no idea how much Kane knew, and she wasn’t about to spill her guts until she had a better handle on who he was and what he was doing there.

“Let’s just say the US has as much of an investment in seizing the weapons coming into Algiers as England.”

“You said we couldn’t trust the police,” she said to Leo.

“Kane isn’t police.”

“It doesn’t seem that different to me,” she said.

“It is.” A hard edge crept into his voice.

“Tell me how,” she insisted. She didn’t care what Leo did for a living. Her life was on the line, and so was justice for Maggie. She was entitled to answers.

“I’ve worked with him before. I know him. I trust him.” There was a kind of resignation in his voice, like he didn’t enjoy admitting it. “We need to take out Stavros. It’s the only way to keep you alive, and Kane can help us do that without tipping off someone who might try to kill you first.”

She nodded. “All right.”

Leo’s shoulders relaxed a little, and he turned his attention to Kane. “Where are your men?”

“On site. Ready to go.”

“Good. What’s the plan?”

“Intercept the shipment, take Stavros into custody,” Kane said. “Simple.”

Diana had the feeling it would be anything but simple.

“And we go on our way?” Leo asked.

“That’s our deal.”

Diana looked from one to the other of them, trying to gauge their obviously complicated history. She had no idea how Leo, a career criminal with ties to the London mob, had come to have such a civil relationship with a man who worked for the FBI, but she was beginning to believe she would be glad he did. Braden Kane seemed calm and at ease, completely confident in the upcoming mission.

Leo looked at his phone. “We have less than fourteen hours before the shipment is due to come in.”

“Then we better get going,” Kane said. “You got a car?”

“Wait... we’re driving to Algiers?” Diana asked.

Leo’s eyes darkened. “If I had my way, *we* wouldn’t be driving anywhere. You would be staying here while we drove to Algiers.”

Diana lifted an eyebrow. “But?”

“But... I’m not leaving you alone in Spain while I go to Algiers, not while Stavros and his men are still on the loose.” He sighed. “So yes, we’re driving to Algiers. Taking a plane is too risky. This is Stavros’ territory. He might have eyes on the airport.”

“Right.” It was yet another sign that she was in a whole new world. She couldn’t just hop on a plane, not right now. She had to think like the men hunting her. Had to be on the offensive.

“Which brings us back to the car,” Kane said.

Leo nodded. “Let’s pack up.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“I can’t get away from these fucking SUVs,” Kane complained from the back seat. “Suburbans in the States, Rovers in Europe... I was hoping for something... sexier.”

“I’m not Nico Vitale,” Leo said.

“Doesn’t have to be a Ferrari.”

“I’m not Farrell Black.”

“Doesn’t have to be a Lotus either,” Kane said.

Leo sighed. He didn’t want to be Nico Vitale or Farrell Black. Nico was in Thailand now, living more or less off the grid with the woman who had inadvertently caused the fall of the Syndicate. And Farrell’s lifestyle was too stylized for Leo. He didn’t want mansions and security detail, blood and bodyguards.

He was more than happy to be the muscle, but for him blood was a necessary part of the job, not an aphrodisiac like it was for Farrell.

“This is the safest way for us to travel,” Leo said, navigating the Rover toward the seaport. “We could be anybody — a diplomat, an entrepreneur, the UN. It will help us get through customs on the other side.”

He hadn’t given voice to his darkest fears about the trip to Algiers. Namely, that they were in a car bound for a notoriously complex political region, one that had become a haven for black market arms and drug dealers, sex traffickers, and terrorists. They’d loaded most of their guns into a hidden compartment in the trunk, but Leo had placed his own weapon under the driver’s seat, unwilling to leave Diana’s safety to chance if they were intercepted. Braden Kane was more obvious — strapping his handgun into a holster at his side — a perk of his FBI badge that would quickly turn into a detriment if the wrong people got ahold of it.

None of it made Leo feel any better about the excursion.

He scanned the crowd as they approached the automobile loading dock for the ferry. There was no reason to believe Stavros expected them to try and get into Algiers, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t possible.

And Stavros wasn’t the only thing they had to be worried about. The region was loaded with people who despised Westerners, to say nothing of Kane’s affiliation with the FBI, an association that could either do them tremendous good, or tremendous harm. They were traveling with a beautiful woman, obviously British, another mark against them.

He pulled up to the line of cars waiting to pull onto the ferry, then rolled his shoulders, trying to relax. Diana reached over, touched the back of his neck as if she could sense that he was nervous. The gesture sent a flush of warmth through his body. It was nice until it was followed by a surge of fear at the thought of losing her.

They handed over their passports to a ferry employee and were waved onto the boat without incident. It did nothing to ease his mind. Spain wasn’t the problem — Algeria was. Security would be considerably tighter there, and considerably less regulated. The wad of cash in his pocket might help them, but like everything else, it could hurt them as well. Would greed trump pride and principle with the Algerian police?

It was anybody’s guess, and they had no way of knowing until they tried.

The cargo compartment was cavernous and dark, a floating parking garage that was wall to wall cars, motorbikes, and bicycles. They locked the car and stepped into the underside of the boat as it started to pull away from the dock.

The ferry was like a mini cruise ship, and they found a cafe and bought kebabs and water, which they took to the upper deck to eat while Kane flirted with a tall, slender brunette in a short sundress.

The upper deck was crowded with an assortment of people — tourists and parents with their children and young people kissing at the railing. Above them, the cloudless sky seemed infinite as Almeria became

smaller on one side of the boat, the Mediterranean stretching toward Morocco and Algeria, still invisible to the naked eye.

He was happy to have the moment alone with Diana. It was a relief to have Kane and his team from the States on their side, but there was never any guarantee when it came to these kinds of operations. Now that he had Diana, it felt like he had something to lose, and he looked over at her, trying to memorize the way her mouth turned up at the corners as she tipped her head to the sun. Her hair blew around her face, barely tamed by the scarf tied around her head. He had the sudden memory of her riding him the night before, her thighs pressing against his hips as she worked her clit against him, pursuing her own pleasure with a ferocity that had surprised him.

He suddenly wanted to freeze time, and he fought the dread seeping through his stomach. He didn't believe in intuition. This would be a routine operation like so many he'd been part of with Farrell. They would intercept the shipment, Kane would take Antonis Stavros and his men into custody, Leo and Diana would return to London, figure out the logistics of building a life together. Figure out if it was even possible.

He could almost believe it.

When they were done eating, Leo leaned back, stretching his arm across Diana's shoulders. "It's a long trip," he said. "You should try to sleep."

"Impossible with this view." She looked at the bench. "And this seat."

He gestured to his lap. "It's all yours."

She smiled up at him, then lay down, resting her head across his thighs. He smoothed the curls back from her forehead, stroked her cheek as she closed her eyes with a sigh.

They passed the next ten hours in various states of unrest: Diana dozing on his lap while he closed his eyes behind his sunglasses, he and Kane running down the possibilities in Beni Saf and catching up on news of Farrell, Luca, Nico. The sun swept the sky while they cruised across the channel toward Algeria. By the time they drove off the ferry in Ghazaouet, it was after ten pm, the light of day nothing but a memory.

They were stopped almost immediately by a group of uniformed men carrying weapons. Leo handed over their papers, offering Kane's driver's license rather than his FBI ID badge. They would save that for a situation when the reward outweighed the risk. Three of the police — if that's what they were — circled the car, eyeing Diana through the window as the fourth flipped through their passports. He wasn't worried about the authenticity of the documents Hyrum had created for Diana. There were no bar code readers here. No computers.

But this was far more dangerous: a group of armed men with seemingly no oversight, standing between them and the desolate road leading to Beni Saf and the man who wanted to kill the woman he loved.

Leo forced his expression to remain calm even as he calculated how long it would take him to reach the weapon under his seat. Even as he watched every move the men made, prepared to push Diana's head out of the line of fire and lunge for the gun at the first sign of trouble.

Ten minutes later, the man grudgingly handed back their passports. Leo nodded, put the car in gear, and rolled forward. The car was filled with tension as they made their way along the deserted road leading to the seaside town of Beni Saf. Street lights were few and far between, and Leo quickly became accustomed to driving through long stretches of darkness. He wanted to believe the worst was behind them, but he knew that was about as far from the truth as they could get. There was every possibility of more police as they entered Beni Saf, and even the possibility that they'd been let go so the men could alert Antonis Stavros of their arrival. Leo wasn't stupid enough to be comforted by Kane's presence. This was an unofficial mission. The Americans owed no loyalty to Leo, and he had no doubt they'd extract their own people and leave he and Diana behind if it was the only way to get out alive.

Which meant he was the only thing really standing between Diana and Stavros.

Fine, he thought. Let him come. Let him try.

They were nearing town when they spotted the next group of police. They weren't manning a road block but sitting atop cars on the side of the road. They were heavily armed, eyes watchful, bodies ready to pounce as they watched Leo drive past them into the city. He should have been happy they weren't stopped, but he couldn't help wondering if it was because Stavros already knew they were there.

"You okay?" he asked Diana.

She nodded. "Fine."

She was probably lying, but he couldn't really blame her. He would have said the same thing in her position. The situation was what it was, and the only way through it was through it.

He navigated the Rover through the rundown city. It was different from the capital city of Algiers, the buildings old and startlingly white against the blue of the sky and sea, the surrounding brush that was reminiscent of Greece. There you could feel the history, could see it in the domed architecture and even the Church of the Holy Trinity built in the late 1800s.

Beni Saf was a seaport town in the truest sense, a place where people lived hard lives unloading cargo from aging docks, where their skin was etched by the moisture-less air, the salt of the sea, the sun that always seemed too bright. Leo could see why Antonis Stavros would find it an ideal location to bring in illegal cargo. It wasn't a place anyone wanted to go, wasn't a place that drew tourists or travelers.

Finally, they came to a low slung house on the outskirts of town. It was old but not derelict, well maintained but not at all grand.

In other words, the perfect safe house.

The Americans knew how to do something right at least.

He turned off the car, and turned to Diana. "Let's go."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Diana knew as soon as they pulled up outside the house what was happening. She should have expected it; Leo would never let her come along as they intercepted the arms shipment coordinated by Stavros.

She took his hand and let him pull her into the house. He was expecting her to argue. She could see it in the set of his shoulders, the rigid line of his mouth. Could tell by the way he avoided her eyes.

Braden Kane followed them into the house, locking the door behind them. The ceilings were low, the rooms small and dark except for a couple of small lamps flanking a low slung sofa. They had just stepped into a narrow, tiled living room when a giant hulk of a man rose from a chair near the wall.

He was at least six-four, with wide shoulders made even wider by the tactical gear covering his back, chest, and arms. His hair was cut so close to his head Diana might have thought he was bald if not for the glimmer of gold hair at his scalp.

“Miller,” Kane said as they entered the room.

“They have you dressing like a pussy, too?” The man asked, eyeing Kane’s trousers and button down shirt. The question had a hint of humor even as it sounded like a challenge.

“Fuck you.” Kane’s voice was nonchalant as they moved into the room. “Everything cool?”

“Everything’s cool,” the man named Miller said.

Kane made the introductions, then turned to Leo. “Ten minutes.”

Leo nodded, his face grim, then gestured to a long hallway. “Diana.”

Diana followed him into a sparsely furnished bedroom and sat on the bed against one wall. “It’s okay.”

“What’s okay?” he asked.

“You’re leaving me here with that guy, Miller.”

“It has to be this way.” His voice was hard, like he was bracing himself for her argument. “I won’t be able to think straight if you’re there, and I can’t guarantee your safety there either.”

She smiled, then stood and wrapped her arms around his waist, leaned her head against his chest. “I understand.”

“You do?”

She nodded, relishing the soft feel of his cotton T-shirt under her cheek, the spicy, purely male scent of him. She slid her hands up his chest, lacing them around his neck as she tipped her head back to look up at him.

“I hate to admit it, of course, but I won’t be of any use to you there.”

He looked down at her. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

“Maybe,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean you need to stop saying it.”

He chuckled, and the echo of it spread through her chest. It had been awhile since she’d heard him laugh. She’d forgotten how his face lit up, how he was transformed from a serious man carrying the weight of shame on his shoulders to the playful boy who’d chased her across the lawn.

She touched his face. “Promise me more of that.”

“More of what?”

“More of your laughter. More of your love.” She swallowed against the tears in her eyes. There would be no place for crying in Leo’s life. No place for it in their life together. She would be strong for him instead. She would start now. “Just promise you’ll come back.”

He bent his head, took possession of her mouth, kissed her until she was breathless. “I’ll come back,” he said against her lips.

She nodded, then stepped away from him. She had a feeling the impending separation was just as difficult for him. She would make it easier. From now on, that would be her goal. To make things easier for

the man who had done it for her through her entire life.

She forced her hands at her side, resisted the urge to touch him again. "I love you, Leo Gage. I've loved you as long as I can remember."

He smiled. "I've loved you longer. And I'll be back."

And then he was gone.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Where the fuck are they? You confirmed the shipment, right?” Leo asked Kane.

“The shipment’s in,” Kane said. “We’re just waiting on Stavros to pick it up.”

They were crouched in the shadows of the cargo port in Beni Saf, their weapons at the ready. Somewhere in the darkness, fifteen men like them watched through infrared goggles, waiting for someone to claim the shipment of weapons that had arrived two hours before.

“How do we know Stavros will pick it up himself?” Leo asked.

“Pattern,” Kane said, scanning the area through his goggles. “He’s a control freak. Doesn’t leave the big stuff to his men. We’ve missed him by minutes in the past. Not this time.”

The note of determination in Kane’s voice made Leo feel better. Kane knew what he was doing, and he had the skill and knowledge of Homeland Security behind him, not to mention all the other armed men waiting in the shadows of the cargo containers. If Leo had any chance of neutralizing the threat against Diana, this was it.

And he had to neutralize the threat against her. He’d become convinced it was his purpose. The life he’d chosen, everything he’d learned and experienced, had brought him to this place where he was the only thing standing between Diana Barrett and the man who would make it his mission to kill her.

“Two Rovers entering the gates. Stand by.”

The voice sounded through Leo’s earpiece, and a moment later, the shine of headlights swept a tower of containers.

“Roger that,” Kane said softly. “We have eyes.”

The port was smaller than most cargo ports, a simple “U” with fishing boats on one side and metal shipping containers on the other. Leo watched as two vehicles eased onto the long stretch of pavement between the stacks of containers and the dock leading to the water.

Kane looked at him, his voice a warning. “Let us lead, Gage.”

Leo nodded, holding back the words he wanted to say: that he would let them lead as long as they got Stavros. That the minute it seemed like Stavros might get away, Leo would break protocol and take the guy down. Whatever the cost.

The cars stopped halfway up the row of containers. Leo held his breath as the vehicles idled, wondering if there was any way Stavros had seen the men lying-in wait for him. But then the rear doors opened on the lead vehicle, and two men in black jackets stepped from the back of the car. They looked around and moved to the car behind them, flanking the back doors.

Leo sharpened the focus on his goggles, played with the contrast as he honed in on the figure stepping from the car. His mind compared the man against the images Briony had shown him in London, the photographs Kane’s people had shown him in the pre-mission briefing.

Tall and meaty, the man’s face was pockmarked with old scars, his hair slicked back and oily even from a distance.

It was him. It was Antonis Stavros. The man who had killed Maggie Kinsley. The man who would kill Diana unless Leo got to him first.

He hadn’t told Kane about his plans to kill the man. As far as the Americans knew, this was an intercept operation. Get the guns. Take the man behind their sale into custody. Interrogate him about the network of underground arms dealers that criss-crossed the globe.

Except Leo didn’t care about any of that. He cared only about saving Diana. And she wouldn’t be safe until Stavros was dead. Kane could interrogate Stavros’ men all he wanted, but Stavros was his.

“Target in motion,” the voice said in his earpiece.

“Copy,” Kane said softly.

Leo watched as Stavros walked to one of the containers, the men on either side of him armed with semi-automatic weapons. Watching Stavros move toward his cargo sent a flood of fresh anger through Leo's body. The other man didn't seem at all concerned. Didn't seem rushed or afraid. This was a man who hurt people to get what he wanted. Who was so sure of his power and control that it never occurred to him that he might one day be stopped. That he might one day go too far.

Stavros gestured absentmindedly at the container, and one of the other men jumped forward, keyed something into the control panel. The man on the other side handed him a crowbar, and the first man used it to pry open the metal door. It shrieked as it creaked open, the sound like a beast howling into the Algerian night.

"Waiting for your go," Kane whispered into the mouthpiece attached to his jacket.

They'd already discussed the necessity of confirming the contents of the shipment before taking Stavros, and Leo tried to see inside the container as Stavros stepped inside with the two men. It was dark, the interior nothing but a smudge on the darker smudge of the night around it. He could only hope one of Kane's men had a better view. Stavros wasn't leaving here alive either way, but Leo wanted to see Kane get his hands on the shipment.

"Still waiting for your go," Kane said again.

"Stand by."

Leo held his breath, his finger itchy on the weapon in his hands. And then the voice came again.

"Cargo confirmed. Move in."

"Let's go," Kane said.

But Leo was already gone, moving into position according to the plans Kane's men had outlined before they left the old warehouse that had acted as a staging area.

He hustled around the container that had given him and Kane shelter, staying low as he moved toward the murmur of voices coming from inside. Several black-clad figures moved in his periphery, surrounding the container as Leo made a beeline for the entrance.

And then all hell broke loose, the men inside the container crying out in alarm as they realized something was wrong, a flash of gunfire erupting from the interior of the container. Kane's men took up positions behind surrounding cargo holds, firing into the night as Leo made his way toward the still idling vehicles.

Stavros' men would try to get him out alive, and the Rovers were the best way to do it.

The doors had already opened on the lead car, and two more men emerged, firing in the direction of Kane's men. It was a flash of color in the goggles, and Leo wondered if their enemy could even see them or if they were just firing blindly in the night, hoping to give Stavros cover.

He got his answer a few seconds later when two figures darted across the pavement near the end of the dock, doubling back toward the vehicles. One of Stavros' men had gotten him out of the container, moved him toward the front of the dock, away from the gunfire while the others held off Kane and his men.

And now Stavros was coming back for the car, just like Leo had expected.

He dropped to the ground, used the car in back to low crawl to the car in front while bullets tore through the night. When he reached the lead vehicle, he waited, listening for the sound of approaching footsteps in the break between gunfire, hoping he was right and that Stavros would make a run for the car in front.

He did, and Leo positioned himself at the rear of the car, listening as the sound of footsteps crunching on pavement got closer. Then the back door on the other side of the car was being opened, someone shouting urgently in Arabic.

Leo pulled open the door on his side, making sure he had eyes on Stavros before he fired. After that it was a series of flashes, one bleeding into the other.

Stavros' eyes wide with surprise.

The familiar sound of Leo's gun firing, the hot kick of it in his hand.

A man standing in the door near Stavros and firing across the back seat.

The hole, neat and clean, opening up in Stavros's forehead as a lightening bolt drove itself through Leo's chest.

His momentary elation at the knowledge that he'd gotten Stavros. Elation that lasted only as long as it took to realize that he'd been shot, too.

The man on the other side of the car was raising his weapon again. The barrel of it was startlingly clear, a long, dark tunnel leading to eternal slumber.

He braced himself for the impact. It was worth it. He had done what he came to do.

But then the man was crumbling, falling onto the back seat over Stavros' dead body as a bullet hit him from behind.

Leo collapsed onto the ground. He wasn't sure if the gunfire had really stopped or if he was already someplace else, moving far away from his body. From this place. From Diana.

He closed his eyes. It didn't matter.

She would be safe now.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Diana walked down the long, white hallway, trying to stifle the fear that threatened to overtake her. It had been that way since they first brought her to the hospital, and now her panic at the thought of losing Leo was inexorably tied to the fluorescent lighting and smell of antiseptic.

“Back so soon, Miss Barrett?”

She looked up, her eyes landing on a familiar nurse with blue hair and hot pink scrubs. “What can I say?” Diana asked. “I can’t stay away.”

The nurse winked. “Can’t say that I blame you.”

Diana laughed, the sound unfamiliar and strange as it emerged from her throat. It had been awhile since she’d laughed.

Two long weeks to be exact.

She continued past the nurses station, raising a hand in greeting as she made her way to the room halfway down the hall.

She stopped when she got to the door, taking a deep breath and reminding herself that Leo needed her to be strong. He was improving, and while the doctors said he had a long road ahead, he would survive. So why did she still feel the clutch of panic when she entered his room? Why did she still wake up in the middle of the night, alone in Leo’s flat, crying?

They were stupid questions. It didn’t take a psychologist to know that even though she hadn’t been on the dock in Algiers, almost losing Leo had delivered its own kind of blow to her psyche. She’d known as she waited at the safe house with the big soldier named Miller that she loved Leo.

She just hadn’t realized how much.

Not until she had to make the long drive to the military base in Tunisia where Leo was already being loaded onto a medi-flight. Not until she’d held his cold, still hand as they made their way back to London, looked at his pale face, wondering if he would ever laugh or grin or kiss her again.

Then she’d known unequivocally that she didn’t want to live without him. She’d spent every moment since — every second he was in surgery, every hour he was unconscious — praying to a god she wasn’t sure she believed in to make him well. Because now her life without him had been exposed for what it was: barren, lonely, so very dark.

She took a deep breath as she approached the door, then pushed it open with a smile on her face. And there he was, head turned toward the window, chest rising and falling.

She stepped quietly into the room and made her way around the bed, not wanting to wake him. His face was peaceful in repose, the masculine features she’d become accustomed to somehow morphing into the boyish ones she remembered. She watched him for a moment, her heart overflowing. Then she brushed back the stray lock of hair and kissed his forehead.

His eyes opened with a start. She was glad he didn’t have a gun. He undoubtedly would have reached for it.

“Shhhh,” she said, touching his cheek. “It’s me. I’m sorry to startle you.”

He sank back into the pillow. “You were supposed to get some rest.”

“I did.”

He smiled. “I bet you haven’t been gone two hours.”

“Almost,” she protested.

He laughed, then clutched the bandage on his chest. “Fuck. Will it always hurt to laugh?”

“I hope not,” she said. “You’re coming home tomorrow. And I plan to make you laugh plenty, so you better toughen up.”

He grinned. “That’s my girl.”

It had been a learning curve, teaching herself not to hover, not to show pity for him even when his face contorted in pain after the four hour surgery to repair the nick in his heart. She'd had to resist the urge to baby him, to do everything for him, to hiss at anyone who asked too much of him. It wasn't what he wanted, and she'd quickly learned to hide her own fear, her own pain, behind a mask of indifference.

Of course, everything you'll be fine.

Of course, you can do it yourself.

"Kane was here," he said.

She sat down next to the bed in a chair that had become as familiar to her as the one she used to occupy at Abbott. "Really? What did he say?"

"They've intercepted six arms shipments in the two weeks since Beni Saf, I'm an asshole for taking Stavros out on my own... you know, the usual."

"Yes, well, it takes an asshole to know an asshole," she said.

He laughed, clutching his chest again. "You're going to kill me." He patted the bed. "At least comfort me before you do it."

She eyed him suspiciously. "I don't think Nurse Owens would approve."

"Fuck Nurse Owens," he said. "I want to feel you next to me."

She sighed, then eased onto the bed beside him, laying her head gingerly against his shoulder. "Is this okay?"

He sighed, stroking her hair. "It's more than okay. It's perfect. Totally worth being shot for."

She reached up, gave his face a light slap as she laughed. "Stop!"

He leaned his head against hers. "It's true."

She heard it in his voice. Felt the echo of it in her heart.

She didn't know what the future held. Didn't know how they would blend their disparate lives. Didn't know if Leo would be able to continue working for Farrell Black, if she would ever be able to go back to the bank.

But as she lifted her face to his, she knew one thing was true: all those years, they hadn't been running away from each other at all.

They'd been running toward each other.

And it was exactly where they were meant to be.

ABOUT MICHELLE ST. JAMES

Michelle St. James aka Michelle Zink is the author of seven published books and six novellas. Her first series, *Prophecy of the Sisters* (YA), was one of Booklist's Top Ten Debut novels. Her work has also been an Indie Next selection and has appeared on prestigious lists such as the Lonestar List, New York Public Library's Stuff for the Teen Age, and Chicago Public Library's Best of the Best. Her books have been published in over thirty countries and translated into over twenty languages. She lives in New York with too many teenagers and too many cats.

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CHAPTER ONE

River

Fuck my life, I was exhausted. Squinting into the sun, I walked out of the Midnight Sun's Hotshot Crew house at 10:45 p.m. I'd never known a more fitting name for a hotshot team in my life. We'd lived here the last seven years—as soon as I'd been accepted to the University of Alaska—but the sunlight situation in late July still caught me off guard from time to time.

Guess my brain always diverted back to Colorado.

"Damn, that was a long one, Riv," Bishop said, swinging his arm over my shoulder and squeezing. He'd done the same thing after every fire we'd ever been on together. I knew he hated that I'd followed him into this life. What the fuck did he think I was going to do? Let my big brother follow in our dad's footsteps and not tag along? Hell no. As soon as I was old enough, I'd applied, worked my ass off through college getting my degree in forestry, and now here we were.

"I'm just glad it's over. It was getting dicey there for a while." I unlocked the doors on my F250 as he ruffled my hair like we were kids again. Strands of the dark, heavy stuff caught in the scruff of my beard as it settled back around my face. Chin-length was as far as I could handle my hair, I had no clue how Bishop managed to keep his down his back.

Our mother is Cheyenne, he always said in explanation.

"It did go to shit," he admitted. "You could always take a cushy job with the forest service. No fires, safe hours, nice scenery..." he said before unlocking the doors to his truck, too.

"Like that's ever going to happen," I said as I tossed my dirt-covered bag into the bed of the truck.

"Yeah, well, I wish it would," he mumbled.

"Gym tomorrow?" I asked, ignoring his jibe. For only being three years older than me, he took his brothering seriously.

"Same as usual," he answered, climbing up into his truck.

I did the same, sliding behind the wheel and shutting the door. A crank of the engine later and I was on the road out of Fairbanks, heading toward my house in Ester. Bishop was a mad man when it came to gym time. *You'd better be able to outrun the fire*, he'd always told me.

So he pushed me like the flames were constantly licking at my heels. Not that I minded the body it gave me—hell, it attracted more than my fair share of female attention. Though I'd definitely sampled the buffet of women up here, my exploits were nothing compared to Bishop's.

We were both the same in one regard, though: we'd never been with one woman longer than six months or so. Bishop tended to leave around that time, and as for me...well, the girls always figured out that they weren't my first priority, which rightfully pissed them off.

As I turned off route three into Ester the sun finally started to set. For God's sake, it was 11 p.m. I missed warm summer nights under the stars in Colorado. Not that Northern Lights weren't amazing...they just weren't the same.

Don't complain about the sunlight. It will be dark nearly all day soon enough.

The lot in front of the Golden Eagle Saloon had an empty parking spot, and I took it, jumping down from the truck once I killed the ignition. I smelled like smoke and ten days of hard firefighting, but I knew she'd lose her shit if I didn't stop by.

Besides, I was itching to see her.

The music was up when I walked into the old-fashioned log cabin saloon. Good crowd for a Saturday night.

"River!" Jessie Ruggles called out from the bar, her skirt a hell of a lot shorter than those long-ass legs

of hers called for. Not that I was complaining. “Everybody make it home okay?”

“Yeah, we’re intact,” I answered. “Have you seen—”

“River!”

I turned toward her voice and was immediately met with a hundred pounds of perfection. She swore it was more. I never believed her.

Avery jumped, and I easily caught her. Her arms wrapped around my neck, one of them cradling the back of my head in that way of hers that always fucking melted me.

“You’re okay,” she whispered in my neck.

Even in the bar, she smelled fantastic, all apples and warm cinnamon.

“I’m okay, Avery,” I promised, my hands splaying on her back. “Everyone is.”

She nodded but didn’t say anything, just held me a little tighter. I’d come home from countless fires in the years that she’d been my best friend, and this was always how she welcomed me home.

There was nothing better on the planet.

I stood there in the middle of the bar, letting her hold me as long as she needed. Mostly because I could never get enough of her in my arms.

Avery Claire had been my best friend since I was eighteen.

I’d also been silently in love with her for just as long.

Maybe one day she’d be ready to hear it, but I knew that today was not that day. Hell, the next year didn’t look promising, either.

Taking in one more deep breath, Avery slid from my grasp, backing up a couple feet once her toes hit the wooden floor of the bar. Then she looked me over, inspecting for anything that might slightly resemble an injury. She tucked her long blonde hair behind her ears and nodded, appeased. Avery was fair everywhere I was dark, her skin pale where mine was deeply tanned by the sun and my mother’s Cheyenne heritage. She was tiny where I was broad, curved where I was straight, and those shorts she wore didn’t disguise much of her toned legs.

“See, I’m fine,” I said with a little grin.

“Promise?” she asked, narrowing those gorgeous blue eyes.

“I smell like smoke and I’m fucking exhausted, but other than that, I’m in one piece. I’m actually headed home, but I figured you were working tonight—”

“And that I’d kick your ass if you didn’t tell me you were home.”

“I could always text.”

“Not the same.” Her smile grew until she could have lit the world with how bright it was. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“Me, too. Did Zeus miss me?”

“Your husky is the neediest, wimpiest dog I’ve ever met, but yes, he’s content and full of treats at your house.”

“He’s a big baby,” I admitted.

“Just like his owner,” she teased.

“Avery, were you thinking about getting back to work?” Megan asked from behind the bar in her pack-a-day rasp. She was ageless, frozen somewhere in her fifties. The woman hadn’t changed since I got here seven years ago.

“Yeah,” Avery called out. “Sorry, I have to go.”

“I know. Don’t worry. I’ll see you tomorrow—”

“Riv!” Adeline came running at me, a tangle of hair and knobby knees.

I caught her easily and squeezed her tight. “Hey, Addy! What are you doing here?”

She pulled back and glanced at Avery. “I was supposed to stay with Stella, but she had to go out of town with her parents.”

I nodded and looked over to Avery, who was biting her lip. I knew she hated when she had to bring Addy in—she was only thirteen—but not nearly as much as she hated leaving her home alone with their

father.

“Why don’t you come spend the night in my guest room?” I asked.

Her eyes flew wide with excitement. “Can I watch *Game of Thrones*?”

“Nope,” I answered. “But I think I have every episode of *Arrow*.”

“Okay, I can rock that. Stephen Amell is hot.”

“If you say so,” I said, grinning at her. Addy never failed to bring a smile to my face.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Avery asked, her hands wringing.

I wanted to cup her face, brush my thumbs across her cheekbones, and lay a soft kiss to her lips. Instead, I squeezed her hand. “It’s no problem. Why don’t you come over when you’re done? Bunk with Adeline, and we’ll go for breakfast in the morning?”

She nodded with a grin. “Yes. I close out at two, and then I’ll head over.”

I would have said anything to see Avery smile like that—carefree and happy. She was always beautiful, but that smile shot her straight to gorgeous, and I never saw enough of it. “You have a key, so just come on in. Addy, you ready?”

“Yes!”

I laughed at her excitement. “Okay, but don’t get too excited. Zeus might want to share your bed, and he’s a hog.”

“True, but he’s nice and warm.”

“That he is,” I admitted before turning back to her big sister. “See you in the morning?”

She nodded and leaned up on tiptoes to hug me. It was the only way to cross the difference between my six-foot-five frame and her five-foot-six. “Thank you for taking her,” she said, holding me tight. “I just couldn’t leave her there on her own. He gets so mean at night.”

When he’s been drinking.

“No problem.” I hugged her back and let her slide from my arms.

Then I took Adeline home.

“I love your house,” she said as we climbed the steps to the porch.

“It’s not as big as yours,” I answered, slipping the key into the lock. I’d built the house myself—with Bishop and contracted workers, of course, and I was fond of its traditional log-cabin design, but I knew it wasn’t much.

“It feels more like home,” she said as I opened the door.

“Umpf!” My breath was knocked out of me as Zeus barreled out the door, tackling me to the ground. All hundred and twenty pounds of him lay on my chest, licking my face as he whined. “Yeah, I missed you, too, buddy,” I said, petting his thick fur.

He looked at me with disapproving blue eyes, like I’d had any control over how long the fire had taken, and let me up. I massaged his head a few more times, and he started to forgive me. “Come back when you’re done,” I told him, and he raced off into the woods. There was something to be said for having ten acres to myself.

I brought two of my fingers to my mouth and then pressed them to the framed picture of my dad that hung just inside the entry. Some rituals had to be kept—and this was definitely one of them. “Made it home, Pop,” I said.

“Why did you do that?” Addy asked.

“Because I always tell him I made it when I get home from a fire,” I told her, hauling my bag in with me.

“Because he didn’t?” she asked.

The innocent question caught me off guard. “That’s right. He died with his whole Hotshot team when a fire took our hometown.”

She looked up at the photo of my dad in his gear and then back to me. “How long ago was that?”

“Ten years.” *Ten years in a couple weeks.*

“That’s sad. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. It’s hard to lose your parent, huh?”

She nodded. “I don’t really remember my mom, though, so…” She shrugged.

“I don’t think that makes it any easier. Loss is loss.”

She nodded, examining the photo of my father. “He was handsome.”

“My mom sure thought so.” They had loved each other in a way that told me I’d never settle for less in my own life. “Your stuff is still in the dresser in there,” I told Addy as she walked into the living room. This wasn’t the first time she’d slept over while Avery worked, and I knew it wouldn’t be the last.

“Thanks!” she said, skipping off to the guest room and its seventy-inch television that I bought mostly for her.

As much as I loved Avery, I was a sucker for Adeline.

Zeus cried at the door, and I let him in, then took my bag to the washer. As usual, all of my clothes smelled like smoke. It never really bugged me until I got home. Once I walked into my house, I couldn’t wait to get the reek of smoke out of my clothes, my hair, my skin. I tossed them in, dumped detergent, and started the load. Hopefully the smell would come out on the first wash.

It took a long shower to do the same for my body.

After I was clean, I grabbed a beer, turned on the news to catch up on the world, and pulled my laptop onto my lap, checking my social media. Zeus curled up next to me, and I absently pet him while I scrolled.

Drama.

Drama.

Cute baby.

Drama.

Shit, when did he get married?

I’d been gone from Colorado so long that I’d completely lost touch.

After a few minutes I closed the computer, leaving my friends—both from college and home in Colorado—behind as I changed the channel and tuned the world out for a little while.

I’d made it home from another fire. I glanced up at my dad’s picture and tipped the beer toward him in salute. Then I took a long pull and leaned my head back on the couch.

“Riv?”

I blinked at the soft voice and raised my head as my beer was pulled from my hand. “Avery?” I asked, my voice husky from sleep.

“Yeah,” she said, running her fingers through my hair. “You must have fallen asleep.”

“Mmmm.” I leaned into her touch. “What time is it?”

“Two fifteen.”

I sat up and shook the sleep from my eyes. “No shit?”

“You must be exhausted,” she said, snuggling into my side.

I wrapped my arm around her and with the other arm pulled a blanket over her. “I am,” I admitted. “I bet you are, too.”

“Mmmhmm,” she said, her head finding that perfect spot on my chest as she let out a jaw-cracking yawn.

Do it now. Every time I was in a fire, I swore that I’d come home and tell her how I felt. I knew she didn’t want to be in a relationship with anyone—that taking care of her nearly bed-ridden father was all she thought she had time for. That her two jobs and basically raising Adeline on her own were her only priorities...

But I wanted her to know that she was *my* only priority.

So what if it got complicated? Messy? I wasn’t going anywhere, and neither was she. We’d find a way to work out whatever got in the way, and even if it took years, I knew she’d be the only one I’d ever want.

Every other failed relationship had already taught me that there was no substitute for Avery Claire.

I took a deep breath and tried to find my proverbial balls. “Hey, Avery?”

She didn’t answer.

I moved just enough to see her closed eyes and parted lips, her breath even and deep. She was asleep.

I should have moved her. Instead I leaned my head back on the couch and savored the feeling of falling asleep with her in my arms.

It had only been five minutes when there was a pounding at my door. I sat up with a start, barely catching Avery before she tumbled to the floor. "Who the hell?" I mumbled, glancing at the window. The sun was up already, but that didn't mean much.

"Whoa, it's eight," Avery said, stretching next to me.

I did not look at the way her breasts pressed against the thin material of her tank top.

I did not appreciate her sleepy yawn, where her tongue curled like a little kitten.

I did not immediately picture putting her sleep-warmed body under mine and waking her up fully with an orgasm that would leave that raspy voice screaming my name.

Not at all.

Fuck.

The pounding continued, and I got up and headed for the door, where Zeus was already wagging his tail. I opened the door and he flew out, past where Bishop stood with his lips pressed together. That face was never a good sign.

"Some guard dog you have there," he remarked as he walked in.

"Zeus knew it was you," I said. "Besides, I'm twenty-five years old. Get off my ass. You're only older by three years."

"Yeah," he said, looking up at Dad's picture before striding into the living room. If he didn't rise to that bait, there really was something drastically wrong.

"Hey, Avery," he said into my kitchen where she was putting on coffee.

"Bishop," she said with a smile. "Coffee?"

"That'd be great," he said before turning back to me. "You awake?"

"I answered the door, didn't I?" I crossed my arms over my chest. "We're not supposed to meet up for another two hours, so why are you here?"

His jaw flexed. "I had an early morning phone call."

"From?" Unless it was our father calling from the grave, I couldn't think of a reason good enough to jolt me out of Avery's arms.

"Sebastian Vargas."

"Bash? No fucking way." I shook my head, certain I'd heard him wrong. "Is something wrong at home?" Why the fuck would Bash call? He was on a Hotshot team in California. Hell, he'd left Legacy the same time I did.

Bishop swallowed and flexed his hands. "They're resurrecting the team."

My jaw hit the fucking floor. "I'm sorry. You're going to have to say it again."

He nodded. "Yeah, I made him say it like six times. I honestly didn't believe him until Emerson Kendrick got on the phone."

"Emmy is in on this, too?" Emmy and Bash had both lost their fathers with ours, buried them next to each other on Legacy Mountain.

"I never thought it was possible, but they got the town council to agree on one condition."

"Which is?" Every emotion possible assaulted me, scraping me raw with disbelief, hope, pride, and a touch of wariness. Was resurrecting a team that had been annihilated the best move? Would it do them justice? Was it cursed to suffer the same fate? We'd buried eighteen out of the nineteen of them.

It was everything we'd fought for during the first years after the fire, but as time passed, and we'd been denied over and over...well, it became the impossible.

"It has to be made up primarily of Legacies. Blood of the original team."

I stood there, staring at my brother while it sank in. He nodded slowly, like he understood the time it was taking me to process the news of the impossible.

My eyes drifted back to where Avery pulled a steaming mug of coffee from under the Keurig. "Say it,"

I nearly growled, knowing his next words were about to rip my plans to shreds.

“They can’t do it without us. If we want the Legacy Hotshot Crew to be reborn...”

Fuck. My. Life.

“We have to go home.”

CHAPTER TWO

Avery

He has to what?

The idea of River going anywhere was enough to nauseate me. Maybe I misheard. Maybe Bishop didn't mean it. Maybe that awestruck look on River's face meant something completely different.

The heat from the coffee radiated through the mug, finally burning my hand before I realized I still held it. I rounded the half-wall that separated the kitchen from the living room and handed the cup to River, who looked at me with shocked, deep brown eyes and mumbled his thanks.

"What does he mean?" I asked River.

His strong jaw tensed as he looked back to Bishop. With the stern set of their faces, they'd never looked more like brothers. Their Native American heritage proved dominant, giving them chiseled features, strong noses, high cheek bones, and raven black hair. But although Bishop was an inch or so taller than his little brother, River had at least thirty pounds more muscle on him. Thirty pounds of insanely cut, incredibly hot muscle.

Whoa. No thinking about River like that.

"What exactly *do* you mean?" River asked Bishop.

Every muscle in my body clenched.

"We'd have to move back to Colorado." Bishop's eyes flickered toward me, but mine were on River.

He nodded slowly, like he was working details through his head. That was one thing about River—he never made a decision without thinking it through. "And they have to have us?" he asked.

"They do. They're going to be tight to hit sixty percent as is. Bash said he can't be sure of final numbers yet."

"How long does he have to come up with names?"

A year. Say a year. Nausea hit my stomach hard. I couldn't fathom a life without River around. It was already hell when he was on fires for a few weeks at a time.

"Two weeks."

Okay, now I was going to puke. I must have made some kind of sound, because River's arm came around my shoulders, pulling me into his side where I always thought I'd be. We weren't together or anything, but he was an integral part of what made my world turn.

"Two weeks," he repeated, rubbing the bare skin of my arm with his hand.

"Council only gave him until the ceremony."

"Well, that's just fucking fitting," River growled.

"I don't understand," I said quietly.

River hit me with those impossibly deep eyes, two little lines furrowing between his eyebrows. "Remember I'm headed back to Colorado for the weekend in a couple weeks?"

I nodded.

"That's the deadline they gave Bash," Bishop answered. "They're making this as impossible as they can, even though he's footing the bill for everything. The firehouse is up and everything, it's just missing a crew."

"Damn. I knew he was rich, but not *that* rich." River took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "Okay, so if we move back, we get to reform the Legacy Crew?"

"That's the plan."

"And if we don't?"

"They fail. There's no mathematical way to do it without the both of us."

River smirked with a sarcastic laugh. “And to think you never wanted me to fight fires.”

“Still don’t. This isn’t an order, River, it’s a choice.”

“Are you in?” River asked.

“I’m going,” Bishop said.

My breath left in a rush. If Bishop was going—

“Then I have to go. There’s no way you’re doing this on your own. We keep each other alive. Isn’t that what you always tell me?”

Pain ripped through me, so intense that I felt the emotion singeing my nerves as though someone had taken a branding iron to my soul.

“Yeah,” Bishop said quietly. “Are you sure this is what you want to do?” His eyes passed over me again, like I would make any impact on River’s decision. I’d never crossed the line that would give me a say—never given in to the intense chemistry we shared, or the longing I’d always had. It wouldn’t have been fair of me, not with the responsibilities I’d taken on.

He deserved better.

River’s grip on my shoulder tightened. “It’s Dad, Bishop. There’s not really a choice. It’s his team and our home. If there’s a chance to bring Legacy back to life, then I’m not sitting it out.”

This was it. He was leaving Alaska. Leaving me.

* * * *

“Where the hell have you been?” Dad yelled out as Adeline and I walked into our home.

She winced. I gave her a reassuring smile. “I’ll take care of him.”

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I lied. “Why?”

“You’ve been on the verge of tears since we left River’s house. Did something happen between you two?”

I tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. “No. River and I are fine. It’s never been like that between us.”

“Well, it should,” she said as she walked off.

He was my best friend. It wasn’t that I hadn’t ever thought of what it would be like—actually being his. I was a woman after all. I already knew nearly every plane and hollow of his body, the way the corners of his eyes crinkled just a little when he full-out grinned. Hell, he’d even starred in some of my most blush-worthy fantasies. But I lived in reality.

“Avery!” Dad yelled from the living room.

A reality with my dad. I steeled my nerves with a deep breath and headed in. “Yes, Dad?”

“Where the hell have you been?” he repeated his earlier question. “You didn’t bother to come home after work.” He was laid out on the living room couch, wearing yesterday’s clothes and reeking of alcohol. Or maybe that was the nearly empty bottle of Jack on the floor next to him. Dishes littered the coffee table, just within his reach.

“We stayed with River last night,” I said, stacking the dishes.

“Well, you should have been here, not whoring around with the Maldonado boy.”

He didn’t even bother to look at me, just went back to watching *Family Feud*. Not that he had any clue what family was. In his mind, that word had only extended to my mother, and with her gone...well, we weren’t worth much.

“We’re just friends, Dad,” I said, taking the dishes back into the kitchen.

“Like hell. Bring me my meds, would you?” he asked, his tone suddenly sweet at the end.

I set the dishes in the sink and turned the warm water on to help loosen the dry, stuck-on food. Then I gripped the edge of the counter and lowered my head, taking in deep breaths.

River was leaving. This was my life. There would be no bright spots of laughter with him, of star-

gazing, or stealing the comfort of his arms under the guise of friendship. This was it.

My heart felt like it was being mashed, squeezed until I bled out. The life I led wasn't glamorous, or even really fulfilling. It was duty. Duty to raise Adeline. Duty to take care of Dad.

Duty.

I slammed the pill bottle onto the counter with more force than I'd intended.

Duty.

I twisted off the cap, Dad yelling again from the living room because I was taking too long.

Duty.

And that had seemed fine last night because I had one small thing that I kept for myself: River.

But now I felt like I was staring across the path my life would take...and suddenly the emptiness was overwhelming.

"Avery!" Dad yelled.

"Yeah, Dad. In a second," I answered, knowing that if I didn't, the shouts would only get louder until they turned to yells. Until he started throwing things. And if I put my foot down and made him get up for it...well, shit got broken. Not us—he'd never laid a finger on Adeline or me—just everything we loved, to make his point.

Mom had died in the car crash that had resulted in Dad's fused spine, and we would forever pay for losing her and his never-ending pain and the loss of his job on the force. After all, they'd been on their way to pick us up from a weekend with our grandmother. In Dad's mind, if we'd never been born, she'd still be alive and he'd be whole—still a police officer.

I knew better, whether or not he would ever admit it.

It was the secret between us. He kept it because he'd never willingly expose himself to the consequences of his actions. I kept it because he was Addy's guardian, and the minute I opened my mouth, he'd kick me out of her life, and then what would happen to her? Even if I reported him for neglect, there was no guarantee she'd end up with me.

I rinsed the dishes and put them into the dishwasher, then grabbed Dad's pain meds from the top of the cabinet, where I'd chosen to hide them for the week. Moving them around ensured that he never took more than he was allotted.

I grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator and carried the pills to him.

"It's about time," he grumbled and cried out as he sat up on the couch. He swallowed the pills and some of the water, then scratched his hand across his unshaven beard. I'd given up trying to get him to shave years ago. "You think about cleaning this place up?" He motioned around the general dishevel of the living room.

"Maybe later," I answered. "I need to run into the office for a few minutes."

"At the *paper*?" he sneered.

"Yes, at the paper. Where I have a job." *So I can keep the lights on.*

He laughed. "That's not a job. Jobs make real money. Why don't you quit that one and take up more shifts at the bar? Pretty girl like you can make good tips."

I did make good tips. Enough to save up almost a full semester's tuition for Adeline. Five more years and maybe I could get her through college without the loans I'd taken out for my journalism degree. But that degree had also led me to River, which was worth every cent of the debt I'd accrued.

"Okay, well, if that's it, then I have stuff I need to get done."

He turned the channel. "Get me clean clothes and make me breakfast."

I bit the insides of my cheeks and something in me snapped. "Say please."

"I'm sorry?" he asked, finally looking at me, his eyes drug-hazed but wide.

"Say please," I repeated.

"Why should I?" he snapped like a petulant toddler.

The pain of River's inevitable loss morphed into red-hot anger. "Because I haven't changed from work yet. Because I'm holding down two jobs to keep the taxes paid, utilities on, and everything Adeline needs.

Because River is moving back to Colorado and this is my life, so I need you to be a little understanding today, Dad, okay?"

"Losing your boyfriend, huh?" he asked, turning his attention back to the television. I had the overwhelming urge to throw that goddamned remote through the screen.

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Then why do you care so much? Let him move on, find a woman who can take care of him. Be happy that he's getting the hell out of here, because we never will."

I never will.

"Nice. Really supportive."

"You're right," he said with a little shrug.

My chest lightened just a little, like the man I'd loved more than life was peeking through the clouds that had covered him the last eleven years. "Oh?"

"This is your life. You earned it. Now get my clothes, these smell."

"Shower once in a while," I threw over my shoulder as I walked away from him and the smell of funk that had become the norm of that room since he'd decided he was done walking to bed.

"Watch your mouth!" he yelled.

I made my way up the stairs and into my bedroom where I flung myself onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling.

Put him in a home.

Move out and leave.

You're an adult now; you don't have to stay.

The words of advice all of my friends had given raced through my head as I lay there. But those friends had all moved on. They'd gone to warmer climates, bigger cities. They weren't responsible for the care of their parents.

Family has a way of pushing us to our limit...but we just keep moving the limits for them. River's voice overpowered every other thought. He'd always understood why I stayed when everyone else left.

I looked over at the picture of us from last summer on the water. His arms were around me, his chin resting on my head as we both grinned at the camera. His chest was bare, the tribal tattoos stretching across his chest and bringing more attention to the definition of his muscles, the tight, honed lines he worked so hard to keep perfect.

As he reminded me constantly—it wasn't vanity but the way he stayed alive and one step ahead of the fires he fought.

Then again, I'd never seen him argue when he turned the head of every woman within fifty miles. He'd just smile back, wink, and I knew their panties would happily drop to his bedroom floor.

Not that I was allowed to be jealous. For starters, we weren't together. He could sleep with every woman in Fairbanks and I wouldn't get to say a damn thing. Not that any of them were good enough for him. But I also had a part of him that none of them ever would. Our friendship had outlasted every failed relationship on both our parts. If there was a constant for us, it was each other.

How the hell was that going to work with him in Colorado?

Would he move, find a hometown girl?

Would I get a wedding invite? A birth announcement? Would his world widen into something beautiful while mine stayed stagnant here—without him?

It should, I told myself. River deserved everything. A beautiful, kind wife who would give him little boys with his eyes and little girls with his hair and courage.

How was I going to put on a brave face while he prepared to move? I couldn't make him choose—and it wasn't like I had much to offer.

Here, River. You have the world at your fingertips and every woman in the country to choose from, but pick me. I come complete with a little sister to raise and an invalid, drunk father. Aren't I a bargain?

I pulled my pillow into my chest, like it could fill the emptiness threatening to make me implode,

simply crumple into myself until there was nothing left.

My phone rang with his ringtone and I swiped to answer.

“Hey, Riv.”

“Hey, Ava. You ran out of here pretty fast this morning.”

Silence stretched along the line while I composed my answer. It wasn't fair to unload on him, to take all of my insecurities, all the responsibilities in my life, and thrust them on him. “Yeah, I just had a lot to do, and it sounded like you did, too.”

“My head is kind of swimming, honestly.”

My teeth sank into my lower lip. “I bet.”

“I never thought they'd restart the team,” he said quietly. I knew what it meant to him, his father's literal legacy.

I wanted to talk to him. I did. I just didn't know how to bury my misery deep enough to not lay it on him. He didn't need my selfish shit on top of everything else.

“I totally get that. But hey, can we talk later? I have to run by the office.” I congratulated myself on not letting my voice crack.

“Yeah, of course. Avery, are you okay?” he asked.

My eyes slid shut as a sweet pressure settled in my chest at his concern. He always made me feel precious, protected. In a world where I spent almost every waking moment taking care of everyone else, he was the only one who cared for me.

And now it was my turn to take care of him.

“Absolutely. I'm fine.”

The lie was sour on my tongue and nauseated me the moment it left my mouth. This was anything but fine. The thought of losing him hurt so deeply that I was almost numb with shock, afraid to look at the damage or see the hemorrhage.

But he could never know that.

CHAPTER THREE

River

Could this day get any fucking worse?

The realtor told me the state of the housing market up here meant I was going to lose money when I sold my house, I'd just had to tell Midnight Sun that I needed to give notice, and Avery was fucking *avoiding* me.

Even when I'd been in my most serious relationship, she'd never pulled that shit. It had been two days since she'd told me she was "absolutely fine" and ran off to work.

In those two days I'd signed a listing agreement with a date to be determined, arranged to stay an extra day in Legacy for house-hunting, and contacted a moving company about getting my crap down there.

I'd been so busy that I'd pushed every emotion onto the back burner. That plan had actually been pretty successful until this moment. But now I was standing in front of Avery's house and every single doubt came crawling back to the surface. How could I leave her? How could I move to Colorado and never see her again? Never put my arms around her? Never help her out when she protested but so obviously needed it?

I swallowed and knocked on the front door.

A few moments later, Adeline answered. "Hey, Riv."

"Hey, Addy. Is Avery around?"

"She's just getting off work from the paper, but she called to say that she was on her way. Want to come in and wait?"

Normally I'd say no, that I'd call her, and then I'd intercept her drive home in order to steal a couple quiet moments with her. But since she hadn't answered any of my calls and had replied to my texts with one-word answers, this was probably the only way I'd get any face time with her.

"Yeah, that sounds great," I said, walking into the house. It was nice, spacious enough for a family, and had been built with care, but the last eleven years had been tough on it, and it wasn't like her dad was going to jump up and volunteer to grab a hammer. *Speaking of which, I should fix that bannister while I'm here.*

"Avery? Is that you?" her dad yelled from the living room.

"Nope, Mr. Claire, it's me—River."

"Get in here, boy."

I rolled my eyes at not just his word choice but his tone. I sure as hell was not his boy. My father would have kicked this guy's ass ten times over for the man he'd let himself become. But for Avery, well, I could handle him.

"Sir," I said as I entered the living room. Jesus, there was shit everywhere. Dishes on the coffee table, trash on the floor, and he smelled like he hadn't seen water in at least a week...if not two.

As much as I longed to pick everything up before Avery got home, I knew she'd die of embarrassment. So I did what I learned to do the first year we'd been friends—ignored it.

"You're leaving for Colorado, eh?" he asked, shifting his weight enough to reach for the beer on the floor.

"That appears to be the plan."

"Find greener pastures?" He took a swig, and I briefly wondered if he was mixing the alcohol with his meds, or if Avery had successfully hidden the bottles before she left for work.

"No, sir. My father's old Hotshot crew is restarting, and they can't get the job done without me."

"Well, aren't you just important."

I wanted to sigh, to curse him, to steal Avery away from this life he thought she owed him. Instead, I offered him a tight smile and said, “It’s just a numbers game, really.”

He grunted. “Well, I imagine Avery will be a little put off.”

“I imagine so.”

An awkward silence settled over us, which was—thank God—soon interrupted by the sound of the door opening.

“Riv?” Avery’s voice carried through the downstairs.

“In here,” I answered.

She came through the arch of the living room, all frayed ponytail and well-worn Beastie Boys T-shirt. “I saw your truck out front. Is everything okay?”

“He just came to see you,” her dad answered.

“Oh,” she said, looking between the two of us. Then she nodded toward the door.

“It’s always a pleasure to see you, Mr. Claire,” I said.

“You, too, River. Good luck in Colorado.” He hadn’t even looked away from the television.

I followed Avery through the hallway and up the stairs, my eyes front and center on the way her shorts hugged the sumptuous curve of her ass. Trying hard to do the right thing, I looked away, but that only took me to the tight, toned thighs that I was already picturing locked around my hips.

She led me into her room and shut the door behind us. I took in the space that still boasted high school and college pictures. “Nothing here changes much,” I said.

“It’s my own personal time capsule,” she replied, sitting on her bed.

I took the chair from her desk, swinging my leg over and sitting on it backwards to keep some kind of barrier between us. Ever since I knew I was leaving, it was like the control I showed around her—the constant checks I kept on myself and my need for her—was fraying, like my sex drive knew our time was limited. “I like it. It’s you.”

She laughed in a self-deprecating way that I hated. “Never changing, stuck, and gathering dust.”

“Steady and loyal.”

We locked eyes, and the zing of electricity between us was palpable. Did she feel it, too? If so, why would she deny it?

Because you’ve never given her a reason not to, asshole.

“I’ve been avoiding you,” she said, her eyes open and honest.

“I know.”

“I don’t know how to handle this, and it seemed easier to bury my head in the sand and just not deal.” She hugged her pillow to her chest.

“You talk to me. I talk to you. That’s how this friendship has always worked.”

“But how is it going to work with you in Colorado? I know I’m supposed to be happy for you. This is your dad’s crew, and I know what that means to you. But selfishly…” She shook her head.

“What? Don’t clam up on me.”

She shrugged. “It’s just… The day you bought the land to build your house was one of the happiest days of my life.”

I blinked. “Wait. What?”

“Stupid, I know.”

“I didn’t say that. I just don’t understand.” *Talk to me, Avery.*

“That was what? Three years ago?” she asked.

“About. You were dating that dickhead math major.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Good memory.”

“I remember everything when it comes to you,” I said, then cursed myself when her eyes widened even more. *Smooth. Real smooth.* “The land?” I prompted.

“Right. You buying that land felt like you were putting down roots. That you’d stayed when you graduated—when everyone else left—it felt solid. Dependable.”

“Are you talking about me or the house?” Those weren’t love words, or even attraction words. Hell, she’d just described my truck.

“You, and it’s a good thing. That moment felt like you would always be here, that you were the person I could lean on. I’ve never looked into my future and not seen you in it. This scares the shit out of me.”

I gave up the chair and sat down on the bed next to her. “Me, too. But I can’t not go.”

She leaned her head on my shoulder, and I rested mine on hers. “I’d never ask you to stay,” she whispered. “I know you can’t.”

“But I can’t imagine leaving you, either.”

“Then it seems, we are at an impasse.”

* * * *

The clock on my dash changed to 1:36 a.m. I’d been sitting in my truck for the last hour in front of the Golden Eagle Saloon, trying to figure out how to explain the crazy plan I’d concocted between the hours of leaving Avery’s house and sitting here now.

The bar closed in twenty-four minutes, so I had exactly that long to pull my shit together before I went in.

The door opened, and I stopped breathing until I saw that it was just two local girls. Kris waved and I unrolled my window.

She climbed up on my running boards and leaned her pretty face into the cab, reeking of alcohol. “Hey, River,” she slurred.

“Hey, Kris. What brings you out tonight?”

“It’s my birthday.”

“Happy birthday. So you’re legal now, huh?”

She slow-winked a brown eye at me and then blew her hair out of her eyes. “Yep! What are you doing?”

“Waiting on Avery.”

Her head lolled back in exasperation. “You two. Ugh. Why she’d keep a fine piece of man flesh like you in the friend zone is beyond me. I’d climb you like a ladder.” She snorted. “Like a ladder. Get it? Because you’re a fireman?”

“Absolutely,” I answered. The girl was three sheets to the wind, but I’d known her since she could barely drive.

“River, I’m sorry,” her friend Lauren called out. “She’s trashed.”

“I am not!” She licked her lips. “Want me to wait with you? I can keep you plenty busy.”

Usually I’d think about it. Kris was a gorgeous girl, and it wasn’t like I was celibate. But first, she was drunk, and that I never took advantage of, and second, well...she wasn’t Avery. I wanted Avery. “Not tonight, but happy birthday. Lauren, can you get her home?”

She nodded and guided her friend off my truck. “Stone-cold sober, no problem. Good to see you, River!”

By the time the girls piled into Lauren’s car and left, it was 1:45 a.m. My heart pounded, my stomach dropping slightly just like it did before I walked into a fire, before I took a step that had the potential to change my life.

I was already out of my truck, climbing the steps to the saloon, before I’d decided that I couldn’t wait until two. I couldn’t wait another second.

I swung the door open and Avery looked up, startled, from where she was washing down a table. “River?”

I didn’t answer her, just looked at Mike, who sat at the end of the bar as usual for a Tuesday night. “Mike, go home.”

“It isn’t two,” he said.

“Close enough.”

The forty-something guy got off his stool, tossing cash on the bar. “Thanks for the company, Avery.”

“No problem,” she answered with a smile.

“River,” he said as he walked by me.

“Thanks, Mike.”

He nodded and left, the door closing behind him. I knew he wasn’t drunk—he came here every night to escape his wife, had one beer around eight thirty, and then sipped soda the rest of the night.

Small towns, man. Everyone knew everyone’s business.

“What are you doing here?” Avery asked, licking her lips nervously.

“Are you alone?”

“She will be,” Maud said as she popped up from behind the bar where she’d obviously been stocking. “You two have fun.” She wiggled her eyebrows at Avery. “I’ll go out the back and lock it up.”

“Maud,” Avery pled.

“Nope, not listening!” she sang with her fingers in her ears like she was five. I knew I liked her for a reason. She sang her way through the back door, and then I heard the exterior door close, too.

Avery leaned back against the table, white-knuckling the edges. “So what’s so important that it couldn’t wait until morning?”

I leaned against the table opposite hers so that there was only a few feet separating us. “I know how to fix our problem.”

“Oh, do you? Because short of you not moving to Colorado, and then subsequently hating me because I took away everyone’s chance to have that team back, I’m really not seeing where there’s an option.”

“Option one: I could go seasonal. Live there during the summers and be back here for the winters.”

She shook her head before I even finished what I was saying. “Nope. You can’t afford that. There are no jobs up here that would take you on that stipulation, even your crew here couldn’t. Next brilliant idea?”

“Okay. Then you move to Colorado with me.”

Now I was the one gripping the table as her face drained of color. “What? Are you kidding?”

Fuck, was that my heart in my throat, or had I just swallowed something huge? “I’ve never been more serious.”

Silence stretched between us as she blinked at me, her mouth slightly agape, her unreadable eyes never wavering from mine.

“I’m serious, Avery,” I repeated quietly.

“I can tell,” she answered.

“I’ve thought it through—”

“Obviously, because I just talked to you twelve hours ago. Seems perfectly thought out.”

“You have always wanted to leave here.” I started laying out the reasons like I had planned.

“And you know why I can’t!” she shouted. “What are you thinking, River? I can’t just pick up and leave. I’m not you. I have responsibilities here. I have Adeline and my father to think of.”

“I know. I’ve watched you struggle every day that I’ve known you, and I’ve seen you grow into an amazing, strong woman.”

“Stop!” She put her hands over her ears and squeezed her eyes shut, little lines appearing between her eyebrows.

I crossed the distance between us, lightly pulling her hands away from her face. “Open your eyes,” I begged.

Her eyelids fluttered open to reveal blue eyes swimming with so much emotion that I nearly lost my breath. “Tell me one thing. If it wasn’t for Adeline, for your father, and every piece of obligation that anchors you to this place, would you want to come with me?”

Her eyes flickered back and forth, her tell for when she was hashing something out in her head.

Avery had always been immovable in her loyalty to family, her insistence that she was responsible for them both. It was something I’d always loved about her, but now I needed that to give just an inch.

“Would you want to come with me? Get out of here? The Rockies are just as gorgeous, and the sun is a little more dependable. And best of all, you’d have me.”

Her eyes flew to mine. “But I’m not free, no matter how pretty you make it sound.”

My thumbs lightly stroked the insides of her wrists. “I know our lives aren’t perfect, but I’m asking you, in a perfect world—I’m asking you to pretend—if you didn’t have the obligations you do, if it was just you and me making this decision, would you want to come with me? Would you take that leap?”

“To Colorado?” she asked.

“To Colorado,” I affirmed just in case she thought I meant back to my house for tea.

Her eyes slid shut. “Yes,” she whispered.

My breath abandoned me in a rush, my entire body letting go of the tension that had plagued me since Bishop told me we’d have to go. “Oh, thank God.”

“But it doesn’t matter,” she cried, her face distorting as she fought tears. “What I want doesn’t matter. That I would give anything to move somewhere new with a fresh start where I’m not ‘that drunk’s’ daughter, or to have the chance to keep you as my best friend...none of it matters. My life is what it is.”

“It doesn’t have to be.” I took her face in my hands, cradling the back of her head.

“It does. What about Adeline? What would she do?”

My chest tightened at the way she always put everyone else first. “She’d come with.”

Avery’s jaw went slack in my hands. “What?”

“Legacy has a great high school. Brand-new facilities. It’s a small town, but there’s a kindness there I haven’t seen anywhere else. Addy would be welcome there, with us, and so would you. Stop looking at me like I’m dreaming. This is possible.”

“You’d bring her with you? With us?”

“Of course. She’s a part of you, and she needs to get out just as much as you do.”

“And my father?”

My jaw flexed. This had been the one point that had been hard to swallow, but I knew I had to if I wanted to keep Avery in my life. And she was worth any hurdle I had to jump, or any length of broken glass I had to walk across barefoot. I had no doubt the girl standing in front of me was the key to the rest of my life.

“He can come, too,” I said softly.

“Now I know you’re joking.” She tried to pull her face from my hands, but I wouldn’t let her. “You hate him.”

“I hate how he treats you,” I corrected her. “I’ve never understood why you take it.”

“He’s Addy’s guardian,” I explained. “I could never abandon her.” No matter what I’d promised my mom—to keep quiet, to keep family business private—Addy came first, and if that meant I had to live at home and commute to college so I could provide some kind of future for her, then fine. It was a small price to pay.

“Then if he’s what I have to put up with to keep you in my life, to keep you near, then fine, I’ll do it. There are treatment facilities in Colorado, and maybe if we can just get him clean—”

She sobbed—one long whimper, which was the one reaction I wasn’t expecting.

“Avery,” I whispered. “Don’t cry.”

“Why? Why would you do that? Drag the worst part of my life into yours?”

A smile tugged up the corners of my lips as I wiped away her single tear that escaped. “Because I get you. I can’t leave you. It’s never been Bishop keeping me here. It’s always been you.”

“But why?” she squeaked.

“God, don’t you know by now?”

“No,” she whispered as something that looked like hope passed through those blue eyes.

“Yes, you do. You’ve always known, just the same as me.” I sent up a quick prayer that she wouldn’t smack the hell out of me, and then I kissed her.

She gasped in surprise, and I kept the caress light, taking my time with her lips as I waited for her

response. She was so soft. I ran my tongue along her lower lip, savoring the delicate curve. I sipped at her lips with soft kisses for so long that I was about out of hope. While she was letting me kiss her, she wasn't responding.

I pulled back slowly, scared to see what lingered in her eyes, and prayed it wasn't disgust. What the hell had I been thinking to kiss her like that? We'd never shown any signs of crossing the line, and I'd just jumped across it. Her eyes were closed, giving me no hint of what she was feeling. "Avery?" I asked softly.

Her pulse raced under my hand.

Her eyes fluttered open and there was no anger, just surprise. "You want me?"

"I have *always* wanted you."

With a soft cry, she met my mouth, opening hers in a hungry kiss. My tongue swept inside the mouth I'd dreamed of for years, and *holy shit*, she tasted even better than I'd ever fantasized. She tasted faintly of the peppermint tea she loved and pure, sweet Avery.

I explored her mouth with sweeping strokes of my tongue, and she rubbed back against me with every one, creating a friction that sent heat streaking through me, pooling in my dick.

My hands shifted, tilting her head so I could kiss her deeper. If this was the only time I'd get to kiss her, then I was sure-as-fuck going to leave her with a memory that haunted her at night the same way she already did for me. She melted against me, our bodies molding effortlessly into each other.

At some point I was hit with the stunning realization—*Holy shit. I'm kissing Avery.* And she was kissing me back like her life depended on it. One of my hands left the curves of her face and drifted down her back, giving her every chance to protest—she didn't—before I grasped her ass and lifted her up to set her on the table. I stepped between her outstretched thighs, and she ground against me, moaning into my mouth when she discovered my erection.

I'd never been so hard so fast for any woman in my life. But Avery wasn't just any other woman. She was everything I'd ever wanted. The woman I'd compared every girl to since I met her. The only one who had my heart without ever knowing it.

She threw her head back, and I pressed kisses down her neck, careful not to mark the tender flesh. We weren't eighteen anymore, and I wasn't going to paw at her like an inexperienced teenager no matter how loudly my body screamed at me that she was finally in my hands.

Her fingers threaded through my hair, and she rocked against my hips and whimpered my name. It was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard.

I brought my mouth back to hers for one last, long, luscious kiss, pouring everything I had into it. I almost forgot my own name as I gave myself over to everything Avery was.

Then, with the patience of a saint, I pulled back from her. She looked up at me with hazy, passion-filled eyes and kiss-stung lips. *Yup, sainthood.*

"River?" she asked, her voice husky and so damn sexy that I had the immediate urge to see what color her panties were and how they'd look on the floor of the bar.

Instead I kissed her forehead and took my hands off her—before I fucked my best friend in the bar that she worked at. Avery deserved so much better than that, and for how long I'd waited, I did, too.

"I want you," I said, my voice so low I barely recognized it.

Her mouth opened to speak, and I pressed my thumb against her tempting lips.

"Don't say anything. I just wanted you to know that you have options. That *I* am an option. And whether it's in friendship or something more, I want you in Colorado with me. I leave next week for a weekend there, and I've already bought you a ticket. It's just a weekend—not a lifetime commitment, but I want you to come and see if you could make a life there. A life with me or without me—that's your choice."

I stroked her lip with my thumb and leaned forward, stealing one more kiss. "God, I've waited so many years to do that."

"River..."

"Don't," I ordered softly. "Don't talk. Just think. I'll wait outside for you to lock up, and then maybe

we can talk tomorrow?"

She nodded, and I backed away slowly, refusing to notice the rapid rise and fall of her breasts, or that her lips were still parted like she was waiting for me to come back and kiss the hell out of her again.

Maybe I'd just fucked everything up. Maybe I'd thrown away the best relationship of my life by pushing for something that she didn't want, but when I looked back and saw her touching her lips as I walked out the door, I couldn't help but smile.

Maybe I'd just made the best decision of my life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Avery

I flipped through the magazine at Dr. Stone's office, not really seeing the print on the pages. My mind was too focused on River.

He'd kissed me. My eyes slid shut as I remembered his lips against mine, the feel of his tongue, his hands, his sweet taste. My fingertips slid over my lips like I could still feel him there.

How could one moment change everything?

Just like that.

It had been the best kiss of my life—hot enough that had he not stopped us, I wasn't sure where we would have ended up.

On the table. The bar. His bed.

I felt heat rush to my face and opened my eyes, smiling. God, he just made me happy, which was something I hadn't been in such a long time. Kissing him hadn't been the awkward first kiss of friends trying out something more. It had been like two magnets finally flipped so they were unable to do anything but collide.

"What has you all happy?" Dad grumbled, sitting on the exam table.

"River," I answered honestly. He'd texted me all day yesterday from work, but our schedules hadn't meshed and we hadn't gotten a chance to see each other.

His eyes narrowed. "Don't get too attached to that boy, Avery. He'll just break your heart when he leaves, and you'll be downright bitchy. Hell, it's bad enough already." He pointed at me. "Watch yourself."

I soothed my hackles, which begged to go up in my own defense. "Actually, I think I'm going with him next weekend to Colorado."

Dad's mouth hung open, his eyes ready to shoot fire. "You. Are. Not."

"I am," I said with a certainty I hadn't felt this morning when I woke up. *Guess you made that decision.* "It's just for a weekend, Dad. Aunt Dawn already said she'd come up and stay." She'd actually been all too happy to do so when I'd called her this morning.

"You can not put her out like that!"

"Dad, she lives thirty minutes away and she's retired. It's hardly putting her out to ask her to spend a weekend with her brother."

He grumbled, tapping his foot against the side of the exam table. "And what about Adeline?"

"What about her?" I closed the magazine, giving up any pretense of reading.

"Are you thinking of moving there? With him? Why else would you go?"

I should have waited until we were home to say anything, or told him before this appointment. "Let's just talk about this later."

"No, the doc is late as usual. Let's talk about it now." He crossed his arms around his chest. His fingernails were too long, but at least I'd gotten him to shower this morning.

For the smallest second, the potential of a different future washed over me—a future where every day wasn't fighting with him, where I could live for me, step fully into the independent adulthood I'd always been so scared to want. A future where River kissed me, where I finally allowed myself to really examine my feelings for my best friend.

"What if I wanted to move?" I asked softly. "What if I wanted to have an actual life, Dad?"

"One where you're not tied down by an invalid father? Is that what you mean?"

"You're not an invalid. And River already said you could come with us—"

"Enough!" he snapped. "I'm not moving to Colorado and neither are you. Your life is here, with me. I

know it's not the life you wanted, but this isn't what I wanted, either. We're in this together. It's always been you and me, Avery. What would I do without you? What would Adeline do? You know we can't make it without you. So you can go for the weekend and live out your little fantasy, but you know you'll come right back here, because you're not the kind of girl to walk out on her family."

He lifted his eyebrows, challenging me to say that I was.

Was he right? Did it matter what I wanted?

The doctor knocked, saving me from going down that tunnel.

"Mr. Claire," Dr. Stone said as he sat in front of the computer on the desk and flipped through the screens. "Okay, so how have you been feeling this month? Your weight is up."

"I like to eat," Dad joked, bringing out his charming side, the way he always did with Dr. Stone. After all, he had something Dad wanted.

He's playing you, too.

I kept my thoughts to myself as Dr. Stone examined him, prodding and asking the same questions he did every month.

"And how is your pain level?" he asked.

They had my full attention, now.

"It's bad, doc," Dad said, grimacing as he pushed against his lower back. "It's getting worse."

Dr. Stone nodded thoughtfully, rubbing his goatee. It was hard to believe he was the same age as my dad, or maybe it was just that there were healthy men that age, in general. "I'm not going to lie to you, Jim. The pain is always going to be there. There's no guarantee with a spine fused where yours is. I know it hurts."

"Can we up my meds? Give me a little relief?"

Dr. Stone sighed and sat back at the computer, going through the screens again. "I really think you're at your max on the opioids. I can't safely prescribe any more without putting you at risk for overdose."

"It hurts," Dad snapped, startling me. He never showed his angry face outside the house. No, that side of him was reserved for Adeline and me, of course.

"I know," Dr. Stone said, leaning back in his chair. "Maybe it's time to discuss other options."

"Something stronger?" Dad suggested.

For the love. If they got Dad any higher, he'd be an astronaut.

"No, but there are new methods out there. Ways of going directly after the nerves." He tilted his head. "And we should look at your weight. Other patients with this same fusion live relatively active, normal lives. Yes, they're still in pain—that is absolutely real, but we've been able to decrease pain meds by natural means."

"Well, I'm not interested in that. I want it to stop hurting. Now. So can you help me?"

Dr. Stone looked at me, and I dropped my eyes. The repercussions from outing Dad would be disastrous at home. "Avery, can I talk with you outside?"

"Why do you want to talk to her alone?" Dad questioned.

"Just some caregiver stuff. She still has your medical power of attorney, right?"

"Yes," Dad grumbled.

"Then there shouldn't be an issue, right? Unless there's something you don't want me to know?"

"It's fine," Dad answered.

Shit.

I didn't need to look at Dad to know that his eyes bore into me. Hell, I could feel the heat from here.

Dr. Stone shut the door behind us as we stepped into the hallway. "How is he, really?" he asked.

Angry. Drunk. Verbally abusive. Legally Adeline's guardian.

"Fine."

"Avery?" He gave me the Dad tone he'd probably used on his daughter Michelle...Michelle who'd gone to college in Texas after we'd both graduated. Michelle who, no doubt, had a life.

I could lie, send Dad further down the rabbit hole. Or I could take the smallest step to force some

change into his life. If not for my own good, then Addy's.

"He's angry," I said, my eyes dropping to the floor as I betrayed the only parent I had left. "He drinks too much, he won't get off the couch, and the farthest he'll go is for the remote unless we're coming here on our monthly trip to refill his meds."

"Jesus," he muttered.

"You asked," I said, raising my eyes. "He's destroying himself."

"And taking you down with him," he noted.

I shook my head. "It's not about me. But it is about Adeline."

He nodded slowly.

"I need you to keep this between us," I whispered.

He sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Okay. Thank you for being honest with me."

I took a deep breath and hardened my defenses as we walked back in. Between this and the bombshell of going to Colorado that I'd just dropped on him, I might need some of those pain meds for the headache all his yelling would give me.

"Well, Avery says nothing much has changed," Dr. Stone forced a smile. "We'll keep you on the same dose you're at. I don't want you in pain, but let's explore some of those other treatments, shall we? I really want you to go back to physical therapy. Really make a go of it this time."

"No," Dad said simply, like the doc had asked him if he wanted mashed potatoes with dinner.

Dr. Stone scribbled on his pad and then ripped off the sheet as he gave Dad a smile. "Well, I'm not asking. If you want me to refill this prescription next month, you'll call this number," he said, adding a business card to the sheet as he handed it to Dad. "Dr. Maxwell is great, and I'll check in with her to make sure you're attending whatever sessions she recommends before we meet again next month."

Dad's eyes snapped toward mine. "What did you say?"

"Dad," I pled. It was shitty enough having the hermit, drunk dad who everyone talked about, but public embarrassment? That was a new level of hell I hadn't had since I'd had to pull him off a barstool at the Golden Saloon when I was sixteen.

Now I worked there.

"She said you're doing well on these meds, but your pain has you uncomfortable, Jim," Dr. Stone answered. "This isn't a punishment. We're looking for a long-term solution for you to return to feeling fully functional. Physical therapy is going to help strengthen your back muscles and maybe lose a little of that weight. It will be good for you. Good for the girls who are taking such good care of you, too."

Dad grunted.

Because the truth was he hadn't cared about us in such a long time that I wasn't sure he knew how to anymore.

* * * *

"Oh em gee!" Adeline squealed and danced around me, acting every single day of her thirteen years.

"Shhh!" I said as we made our way out to my car.

"You can't shush me!" she said, taking the passenger seat as I climbed into the driver's side.

"I can, too."

"No way! You and River! Finally!"

I could practically see the hearts dancing above her head. "Stop!" I laughed. "Look, I only told you because I need to make sure that you're okay with Aunt Dawn coming up next weekend to stay with you."

"Absolutely. Dad will be on his best behavior with her in the house."

She chatted on, stating easily a dozen times that she couldn't believe it took us this long to get together. I reminded her every single time that it was just a kiss and we weren't together.

"Yes, you are. You're going away together!"

"I'm going with him to check out his home town and see where he'll be living. He doesn't know how

soon he'll have to move." *Too soon.*

"You should go with him," she said, playing with her phone.

"What?" I said, my hands tightening on the wheel.

"You. Should. Go. Get the hell out of here."

"Don't swear," I said automatically. "And that's a huge thing to even think about."

"Why? Because life is *so* great here?" She snorted. "Seriously. If you have a chance to get out, do it. I'm leaving the first chance I get."

"You're not happy?"

She shrugged, her eyes still on that damn phone. "Sure. But it's not like I have a ton of friends. Everything is"—she shrugged again—"stagnant. Nothing changes. It feels like one of those ponds that just grows crap and mosquitos."

"But there are good things, too, right?"

"Yeah, of course. You're here, and it's nice to see Aunt Dawn when she comes around. But I'm not going to stay here. I'm leaving for college, and then once I've seen what's out there, maybe I'll come back. But I don't want to feel like I stayed because it was the only option. You're not mad, are you?" She looked over at me.

"Not at all," I said as we turned onto her friend's street. "I had those exact thoughts at your age."

"But then Mom died."

I nodded slowly. "Then Mom died." *And my entire future went with her.*

I pulled into the driveway and put the car in park, quickly touching Adeline's wrist before she could open her door. "Addy, if it was your choice, would you go? If you were me?"

"In a heartbeat," she said without blinking. "Dad puts you through hell. Once River leaves...I just think you deserve a chance to be happy. Both of you do."

My heart stuttered, knowing I needed to ask her. I couldn't make these kinds of choices without her. "Okay, and if there was a way for you to come with me? Would you? I know it's more complicated than that, and that you have friends and a life, and Dad, but just for the purpose of this conversation, would you?"

She tilted her head in a way that reminded me so much of our mother. "I'd pack a box tomorrow. In theory."

"In theory," I repeated.

She lunged across the console of my SUV and kissed me on the cheek. "Don't hurt your brain, sis. Catch you later?"

"Yeah."

A couple I-love-yous later, I left her at Mandy's for the sleepover. My thoughts raced as I drove. What would it even take to bring her with me? *If you go.* I couldn't leave Adeline. I could barely process the thought of leaving Dad. It didn't matter how far he'd sunk, he was still my dad.

I would have given anything for five minutes with Mom. What would happen if I left here, lost him, and had that same regret?

I'd parked in front of River's house before I even realized I was headed there. I meant to go home, but I guessed my subconscious knew what I really needed.

Zeus didn't bark as I approached the door, so I knew he wasn't inside. That meant he was out for a run with River. My hand paused on the door handle. Was I allowed to just walk in anymore? I still had a key, of course, but we'd done some really weird transitioning, and I didn't know where we stood.

Keys for best friends? No big deal.

A key for your girlfriend? Huge. Like iceberg and *Titanic* huge.

Like moving to Colorado huge.

I opted for the three o'clock sun, which hung directly above me, and stretched my legs out on the steps that led to the porch. Peace seeped into me in the quiet, filling more of my chest with each breath, spreading through me in the way only being near River—or even just his house—could.

Gravel crunched nearby, and my breath caught as I opened my eyes. *Holy. Shit.* River ran with Zeus unleashed at his side, his strides eating up the ground as he came closer.

He was shirtless, all of that gorgeous, bronzed skin basking in the sunlight. I'd always known he was hot. I wasn't blind to the girls who flocked to him, or my own attraction. But my need to check my own drool level was new. The tribal tattoo that stretched across his chest rippled with his movements, and as he came toward me, I made out the tiny rivulets of sweat that slipped down the cut lines of his torso to his carved abs.

The man was a walking advertisement for sex.

I shifted my legs under me as he slowed, a smile spreading across his face. "Hey, you," he said, breathing heavily but not over-exerted.

"Hi," I said, suddenly shy. The last time we'd spoken had been right after he'd pulled his tongue out of my mouth.

The way he looked at me—blatant hunger in those brown eyes—made me feel like he was thinking the same exact thing.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked as Zeus licked my face.

"Waiting for you."

His forehead puckered, but he pulled me to my feet easily. "Good answer, want to come in?"

I nodded, and he led us inside, heading straight for the kitchen. He pulled two bottles of water out of the fridge and offered one to me. "No thank you," I said, scared that if I drank the water it would come right back up in a second.

"Okay," he said, then chugged the water.

Damn, even the muscles of his throat were sexy.

"So why were you sitting on my porch like some kind of stranger? You have a key," he said as he put the empty bottle into the recycling bin.

"I feel like that key just became complicated," I said, dragging my eyes up the muscles of his back as he turned away to grab the other bottle. I knew Bishop pushed him at the gym, but damn. Just... *damn*. In the past, he'd always thrown a shirt on around me unless we were at the lake, and to be honest, I hadn't looked.

No point wanting what you knew you couldn't have.

But now I could have him. It was like seven years of pent-up sexual frustration were hitting me all at once, hitting the walls of my defenses with a battering ram made out of pure steel...kind of like his body.

"Uncomplicate it. You have a key, so use it."

He hit me with those eyes, and I nearly melted. Was this the charm the other girls at the bar raved about? Had he simply never used it on me before?

"You gave it to me...you know...before."

"Before what?" he asked.

I blew my breath out through a rumble of my lips. "Come on, you know."

His smirk caught my panties on fire. *Good thing he knows how to put those out.* "Say it."

"Before you kissed me and I stopped being best-friend Avery and turned into...I don't even know. Kissable Avery?"

He stalked forward until he stood just a breath away, close enough to touch, but not. "You have always been kissable Avery, I've just never been allowed to kiss you like I wanted. You're also fuckable Avery—"

"River!" My cheeks ran hot.

His grin was wide and so very beautiful. "Oh no, I have nothing to lose. I'm done pulling my punches. Done being careful around you. Done trying my best not to let it show how badly I want you."

Oh God, he was *good*. His words alone had me ready to strip him in the kitchen. *Or maybe that's a year plus without sex.*

"Okay," I whispered. *Lame.*

He stroked my cheek with his thumb. "But you're still best-friend Avery. That's never going to change

no matter how many times I get to kiss you or how often you'll let me touch you. If you decide that was the only kiss we'll ever share, you'll still be my best friend."

The thought soured my stomach. "You'd be okay if I cut you off?"

"No. I'd just work my ass off to convince you otherwise."

"Oh."

"Oh," he repeated, and kissed my forehead lightly before backing away.

A stab of disappointment hit me right between my thighs.

"So what made you stop by?" He looked at his phone and put it right down. "I know you have to be to work in twenty minutes."

"I just kind of ended up here."

"That's okay. I like seeing you." He lifted the second bottle of water to his lips and took a sip, never once looking away.

There was something so ordinary about the motion, the ease there was between us that made me long for a different future—made me wonder if it was possible to change my course in life.

"I'll go," I said suddenly. "For the weekend," I corrected.

"Really?" His face lit up like the time I'd given him Mumford & Sons concert tickets for his birthday.

"Yes," I answered.

I was in his arms before I finished the word as he swung me around the kitchen against his very hot, very sweaty chest. "You're going to love it!" he promised as we spun.

Laughter bubbled from my chest, and I felt lighter than I had in years, like he'd picked up more than my weight—he'd lifted my soul.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked, his eyes dropping to my lips.

"Yes," I said. "But you'd better make it fast. I have to leave in five minutes."

I sighed when his lips brushed over mine, relearning the feel of them. Then our mouths opened, and the sweet kiss turned hot so fast my head spun.

Good God, the man could kiss.

He consumed my every thought, until my only concerns were how close I could get and how much deeper I could kiss him.

Finally he pulled my hands from around his neck. "You'd better go before I keep you here with me."

"I'm not sure I would mind."

He groaned and set me down, backing away slowly. "Go. Now. Just be ready for the perfect trip to Colorado, because then you're mine."

"I like the way that sounds...*mine*."

"Me, too," he said softly.

This was good. No, this was better than anything I'd ever felt. And when he looked at me like that—like he'd been waiting a lifetime to sample me and now he was planning his attack—I melted.

How had we done this? Flipped from friends to horny teens in the span of two days?

"Go, Avery." He ran his tongue along his lower lip, and I knew if I stayed a moment longer I'd never make it to work. Ever.

I ran.

CHAPTER FIVE

River

Damn, that thing was long. I looked back at the trench we'd dug in to the south side of the fire and examined it for weak spots. We'd chosen the only feasible place to dig in and tried to clear as much of the fuel as possible.

"You good?" Bishop asked, sliding his chainsaw into its case.

"Yeah, finished." Sweat ran in rivulets along my face. I couldn't wait to get down from this ridgeline and get my helmet off.

The fire was a small one compared to our last blaze, but when the call had gone out shortly after Avery left my house, I'd answered. I would always answer. I thought of it as my last hoorah with the Midnight Sun crew.

I'd also cursed like a fucking sailor. This fire, as small as it was, had cost me four days with Avery. Maybe in the larger scheme of things, four days didn't mean much. But when I was only guaranteed a couple of weeks with her, four days was forever.

"Let's get out of here," Bishop said, hoisting his chainsaw to his shoulder.

I gave the ridgeline one last look. Would this be the last time I was called to the Alaskan wilderness? It was a bittersweet thought. Next year this time I'd be on the Legacy crew, as long as we could pull back the numbers the council wanted.

"River?" Bishop called as the team started down the mountain.

"Yeah, I'm coming," I said, turning to join the line of guys. If we got down in the next couple hours, there was a chance we'd make it back in time for me to see Avery tonight.

"You ready to head home?" Bishop asked as I fell in next to him.

"Which one?" I asked.

"Both, I guess."

"I'm ready to see Avery."

A grin spread across his face. "So that's how it is now, eh?"

"To be honest, I don't really know how it is. She agreed to come to Colorado for the weekend, so I'll take it."

"And anything else she has to offer?" He shot me a little side-eye.

"I'll take anything she's willing to give," I answered softly.

Never one to talk about his feelings, Bishop's jaw tightened. His mouth opened and closed a few times, until it was downright painful to watch.

"For fuck's sake, just say it. Whatever it is."

"Do you want to reconsider the Legacy crew? You have a life here, a house, a great team, and a great girl. I wouldn't think any less of you if you didn't want to go."

I thought about it—the simple act of staying. I loved Midnight Sun, my house, the landscape...hell, even the crazy hours the sun kept were growing on me. Staying gave me a shot at keeping Avery, really seeing what we could turn into. If being in a relationship was as easy as being her best friend, then I knew we could be extraordinary. But as certain as I was of how perfect we'd be, I also knew that the actual chances of her moving with me were insanely small.

She'd never leave her father, and he'd never agree to move.

But if I didn't go, Legacy wouldn't get her Hotshot crew back, and I'd lose the last piece of my father. So would Bishop and every other Legacy kid.

So I was pretty much fucked either way.

“River?” Bishop asked again as we continued our descent.

“Sorry, just a lot on my mind. I haven’t changed my mind about the crew. I’m just hoping that visiting Colorado is enough to make Avery want to come with.”

Bishop whistled low. “That’s a lot to ask of a girl you’ve been dating for a week.”

Were we dating? We hadn’t really had the whole “what are we” talk. “It’s a Hail Mary. The whole thing with her is, but I couldn’t just leave and not try.”

“You’re in love with her.”

My grip tightened on the axe handle. “How long have you known?”

He shrugged, moving the chainsaw. “Since the first year we were here. I figured you’d get your shit straight sooner or later.”

“It’s pretty much the latest moment possible.”

“Yeah, well, we don’t remember the easily won games, right? The victories we remember are the ones where the outcome came down to the last minute, the overtime.”

“The Hail Mary,” I said.

He slapped my back. “The Hail Mary.”

* * * *

The bar was busy for a Tuesday, but it was Ladies Night, which brought the women out for the drinks, and the men out for the ladies.

I made my way through the crowd and took a tall table at the back, sitting so I could see Avery at the bar.

Fuck, she was beautiful. Her hair was up in a ponytail, swishing with her every movement as she poured drinks.

“So you and Avery, huh?” Jessie said, grabbing the empty chair to my right.

“How did you know?” I asked, my eyes still locked on Avery. She went up on her tiptoes to grab a bottle off the shelf, giving me a perfect view of her ass, and I sucked in a breath reflexively. We were in a room with at least thirty of our neighbors. Common sense told me that this wasn’t the place for me to ogle, let alone fantasize about propping her up on the bar and sliding her jeans down her thighs so I could taste her. I’d never had an issue controlling myself around Avery. Sure, my body had always reacted to the sight of her, but now that I’d had a taste and knew that she wanted the same thing...well, my body was trying to overrule my common sense.

And the bar really was perfect height.

“Please. Like you can keep a secret in this town? Just about everyone has seen the way you guys have been looking at each other these last few years. We were just waiting for Avery to find the courage to say something and you to stop fucking around in Fairbanks with co-eds.

“The way we look at each other?” I parroted, focusing in on Avery. I could see how I’d been obvious. Hell, I couldn’t take my eyes off her if we were in the same room—hence my cycle of breakups—but Avery had never once hinted that she wanted more than what we had. If she’d so much as breathed in my direction, I would have jumped before she said how high.

But she’d never thrown me signals. Maybe that was one of the reasons this whole situation was terrifying. Was she only kissing me back because she didn’t want to lose her best friend? Was I pushing her for something she didn’t really want?

Feeling unsure of myself was a foreign concept and damned inconvenient seeing as I had less than a week in Colorado to convince her to uproot her whole life for me.

“Please.” Jessie snorted, playing with her beer bottle. “You look at her like you’re ready to eat her alive.”

“Fair assessment,” I admitted, done hiding how I felt about her. I swallowed, my throat suddenly tight. “And her?”

“Seriously?” She arched an eyebrow at me.

“Seriously.”

“She looks at you like you’re everything she’s ever wanted, dipped in chocolate and ready for a tasty bite. Always has.”

I ripped my eyes from Avery to look at Jessie. She nodded slowly as she laughed. “You should see your face right now. If your jaw was any lower you’d be hitting the floor.”

My gaze went back and forth between the two women. Avery looked at me? Why the hell hadn’t I noticed? Was I blind? Or was she really that good at hiding her feelings?

“Never thought I’d see the day where River Maldonado was speechless.”

“First time for everything,” I said softly. Maybe this would work. Maybe she really did want me enough to leave. My mind raced with different scenarios as I swiped open my phone. She could stay through the school year if Addy needed that much time, or just to give her dad a few more months to come around, and be in Colorado by summer. I’d have the house set up by then, and they could stay with me until they figured out what they wanted to do.

Or maybe Avery would never move out. Maybe my house would become *our* house.

My chest tightened to the point of pain as she smiled at Maud. I couldn’t push her too fast—just because I’d been in love with her for the last seven years didn’t mean that she felt the same. But I didn’t exactly have another option with the deadline for the Legacy crew.

As much as I loved watching her, I also couldn’t wait another minute to get my arms around her.

River: what are you up to?

I hit send and watched as she pulled out her cell phone, grinning as her thumbs worked on the small device.

Avery: working. you? how is the fire?

River: fire’s one hundred percent contained. I’m thinking about taking this really hot blonde out.

Her eyebrows puckered together and her face fell.

River: it’s definitely the green ribbon in her hair that has me turned on.

Her eyes shot up, wide and excited as she scanned the bar, her ribbon moving with the swish of her ponytail.

She jumped when she saw me, racing around the end of the bar. I had barely pushed away from the table and stood when she was in my arms, all sweet-smelling and soft.

“Hey, baby,” I said into her hair as I held her to me, lifting her against my chest.

She wrapped those incredible legs around my waist and burrowed her face into my neck. “River.” She sighed my name like a prayer. “Why didn’t you tell me you were back?”

“I wanted to surprise you,” I said, easily supporting her weight and loving the feel of her pressed against me.

Her arms tightened around me, and her fingers moved through my hair, lightly scratching my scalp. “I was so worried.”

Damn, I loved her. “I was fine. Promise. I’m sorry we were out of service up there, but it really was an easy one.”

“Good. I didn’t know if you’d make it home before we had to leave.”

I urged her back and she met my eyes. “Nothing’s going to stop me from taking you to Colorado this weekend.”

Nothing. Not her dad, or even Addy—as much as I adored her. This weekend was for us.

Her eyes dropped to my lips and want slammed into me, more intense than any time I’d ever come home from a fire. “Keep looking at me like that and you’ll get kissed in front of all these people. I’ve never minded gossip, but you might.”

Her tongue snuck out to wet her lower lip. “I don’t care.”

Fuck it. My fingers threading through the base of her ponytail, I crushed her mouth to mine. I tried to remember where we were, that I couldn’t strip her down in the middle of a crowded bar. I tried to keep the

kiss short, just enough to satisfy the craving I'd had for her mouth since I'd been called away.

I failed.

Her tongue moved against mine and I was gone. I sank into her, tilting her head so I could find a deeper, sweeter angle, and I forgot where we were. Hell, I forgot there was anyone else on the planet besides us.

Her ass pushed into my hand as she arched, her breasts stealing my breath as they pressed against me. She made that sexy little noise in the back of her throat, and I was ready to carry her the hell out of there and take her in my damned truck if it meant the throbbing in my dick would ease up just a little.

Someone cleared her throat near us, and I remembered that we were, in fact, the very opposite of being alone. I pulled away, but Avery held my lip with gentle suction, her teeth grazing the skin lightly as she finally released me.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

My breathing was too fast, too uncontrolled, and I was way too turned on to be this public at the moment.

"Welcome home," she whispered, those blue eyes hazy with passion and happiness.

"I love the sound of that," I admitted as I let her down. Her curves rubbed against me every. Inch. Of. The. Way. "You're killing me."

"Feeling's mutual."

"It's about damn time!" someone in the bar called out.

He was followed by a round of applause that had Avery burying her beautiful, flushed face in my shirt. "Yeah, yeah," I said as the clapping died down.

"Oh my God," she mumbled.

I tilted her chin and kissed her scrunched nose. "I'd better get out of here and get packed for tomorrow."

"You are cutting it pretty close."

"Yeah, well, you know me. I have to do everything at the last possible second." *Like tell you that I want you.*

She grinned and kissed me lightly. "Pick me up in the morning?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

I kissed her goodbye just because I could, then made my way to the door before I ended up kissing her again. She waved when I looked back, and suddenly the eight-or-so hours I had to wait to kiss her again seemed like an eternity.

She was all I thought about as I packed a small suitcase, and all I thought about as I tried to get a few hours of sleep. After the last seven years, it was hard to believe that everything would come down to the next few days.

I had to find a way to convince her that she'd be happy in Colorado—that I was worth the risk. It wasn't a small thing I was asking. Hell no. I wanted her to uproot her whole life and transplant it thousands of miles away, all because I knew that the only way we'd thrive was together.

But what if her dad wouldn't come?

What if she wouldn't leave him?

The clock ticked steadily on the nightstand, reminding me that I had to be up in a matter of hours, but that didn't stop my brain, or the nauseating turn of my stomach that reminded me that no matter how much I loved her, she'd never abandon her family.

I couldn't let my dad's crew die before it even had the chance to be resurrected, but I also knew I'd be a shell of who I was if Avery stayed in Alaska.

I had to make these next few days as perfect as possible.

CHAPTER SIX

Avery

“What do you mean you’ve lost our bags?” River asked the airline attendant as we leaned against the counter the next day. After a delayed flight from Fairbanks, to running through the Seattle airport and barely making our connection to Denver, and then taking the smallest plane I’d ever been willing to get on to Gunnison...well, this trip was definitely off to a rocky start.

We’d been traveling for ten hours, and as happy as I was to be here and to see River’s hometown, I was also about to go full-on zombie apocalypse raid on that vending machine in the lobby if we didn’t find some food soon.

“I’ve tracked them as currently in route from Seattle to Denver, sir,” the small girl said as she pushed her glasses up her nose with a look that pretty much said, please don’t eat me.

Not that River was intimidating. Liar. River was huge and rather cranky at the moment. “It’s okay.” I put my hand on his bicep.

“It’s not okay,” he told me. “All your stuff—”

“I can buy what I need until it gets here.” I looked over to the girl who was furiously typing. “Can you have it delivered to Legacy when it gets here?”

She nodded. “Absolutely. The next flight comes in from Denver...” She typed, her eyes never going higher than River’s chest. “Tomorrow morning at seven thirty.”

“You have got to be kidding—”

I squeezed his arm lightly, then looped mine through it and hugged myself to his side. “That will be just fine.”

Her fingers flew over the keyboard as she took down our contact information. With each moment, River grew more tense, until I thought his muscles might snap under my fingers.

The attendant’s eyes widened to impossible dimensions when she looked behind us, and I turned my head. Bishop walked toward us, a scowl deepening with every step he took. Maybe I wasn’t the only one getting hangry over here.

“What’s wrong?” River asked.

“All the rental cars are gone. They overbooked or something.”

“How is that even possible?” River snapped.

“It’s pretty much just par for the course today,” I responded, laughter bubbling up.

They both looked at me like I was nuts.

“I called Knox, and he’s on his way here. We’ve probably got about another forty-five minutes before he shows up.”

“Perfect, just in time to grab food!” I said.

“Actually, the airport café closed about a half hour ago. I’m so sorry,” the attendant said, cringing as all of our gazes swung to her. “They close after the last flight of the day...which was yours.”

River’s jaw locked. “It’s only eight.”

“Small airport.”

“Let’s go wait outside,” I said. “I’ve never seen the sunset in Colorado.” Or anywhere outside of Alaska. I plastered a smile on my face and prayed it was enough to convince River to leave the poor girl alone. It wasn’t her fault that we’d had rotten luck today.

A slight tug on River’s arm and he followed me out, Bishop on his heels.

A Snickers bar later I felt somewhat human. River slipped my forefinger into his mouth, licking away the last of the chocolate on my skin, and my thighs clenched. He ran his teeth over the digit and released it,

smirking at the way my mouth hung open.

“I’m so sorry today has been a disaster,” he said, running his fingers through the strands of my travel-abused ponytail. The evening breeze wrapped a few strands around my neck, and he chased them as we sat on a bench outside.

“This isn’t a disaster,” I told him. “It’s just a kaleidoscope of inconveniences.”

“Kaleidoscopes are beautiful.”

“And so is this. Think of it this way. We just finished a delicious bit of chocolate as we’re watching the sun set behind the Rocky Mountains. The weather is gorgeous, and this just might be the best first date I’ve ever had.”

A corner of his mouth tilted upward. “First date, huh?”

“What would you call it?”

“A sneak peek.”

“At what?”

“Everything we could have,” he whispered and then brushed his lips over mine, his tongue tracing my bottom lip. Was I ever going to get tired of kissing him? I only craved more and more. For that matter, what was the appropriate amount of time I had to wait before I could kiss other places on his body? Where was the rule book that governed hey, I know we just got into a relationship, but I’ve wanted to lick your abs for years?

I sucked in a breath as he pulled away, my chest burning. “Wow, even just kissing you makes me breathless.”

He laughed. “That, my dear Avery, is the altitude. But I’ll absolutely take credit. We’re almost at eight thousand feet here, and almost nine where we’re headed.”

“Easier to get you drunk at,” Bishop said as he came around the corner.

My cheeks flamed, wondering how much he’d seen.

“No worries,” he said as if he’d read my mind. “I’ve been waiting on you two to get your shit together for years. And there’s Knox,” he said as a black SUV pulled up to the curb.

“How can you tell?” River asked.

“We’re the only ones here, and they locked the airport doors twenty minutes ago.”

“Good point,” River answered as we stood. When an incredibly hot guy got out and headed toward us, River pulled me under his arm.

Subtle.

“Knox,” Bishop said as the two shook hands and then hugged in that tight guy way with lots of back-slapping.

“Good to see you, Bishop.” Knox turned his eyes on River and grinned before pulling him into a hug. “River. Damn, you’re huge. What the hell are they feeding you up in Alaska?” he asked.

“Moose, mostly,” he joked.

Knox held his hand out to me, and I shook it as he made an obvious appraisal. “And who might you be?”

“Avery,” I said with a smile. The guy was gorgeous in a Scott Eastwood kind of way, with eyes that held laughter and the promise of a really good time.

“She’s with me,” River said, pulling me to his side.

“Obviously.” Knox grinned and nodded toward the car. “We’re about forty-five minutes from home. Let’s get you guys settled in and then figure everything out.”

We loaded into the back of the SUV, and as we pulled onto the highway out of town, the gentle hum of the car on the pavement sent my exhaustion into sleepville. When my head bobbed for the third time, River unbuckled my seat belt and slid me over to his side, buckling me in the middle.

“Get some rest,” he ordered softly.

My head hit the perfect place just under his shoulder. With his warmth and steady heartbeat, I was asleep before a second song could play on the radio.

I vaguely felt River's strong arms lifting me and the crisp mountain air brushing over my skin as he carried me somewhere. "It's okay, you can sleep. I've got you," he said, kissing my forehead.

A few blinks later we were in a hotel room. I brought the room into focus as he lowered me onto the bed. "Food or sleep?" he asked, setting my backpack down on the floor.

I weighed my options, but the three hours of sleep I'd had coupled with the long travel and altitude won out. "Sleep. What about you?"

"It's already ten. I'm game for sleep if you are." He leaned over me, brushing a kiss against my hairline. "I'll be next door with Bishop, just let me know if you need anything, okay?"

A sharp flash of panic hit me when he pulled away. We were in Colorado, where he would be moving, and while I had him now, nothing was guaranteed past this weekend. "Stay with me?" I asked.

"Avery," he whispered, his dark brown eyes soft in the lamplight. He stroked my cheek with his thumb.

"It wouldn't be the first time we've slept together."

A smirk played across his face. "Yeah, well..."

"That's not what I meant." But now that the words were out there...well, would it be a bad idea?

River was undeniably sexy. Hell, my heart rate picked up just thinking about what his hands would feel like on my body. His lips were sinful, and the look in his eyes told me he wanted me just as much as I wanted him. I knew, without so much as removing a single item of clothing, that we would be incredible together.

Explosive.

"River?" I whispered.

His eyes narrowed slightly as he decided. "You know how badly I want you?"

"I think so."

"I can control myself, Avery. I'm not going to pounce on you, but there's every chance that we could cross a line you're not ready for."

I ran my hands through his hair, the black strands stopping just above his chin. "I know. But if I only have this little bit of time with you, I don't want to give any of it up. Even if we're both sleeping."

He nodded slowly. "Agreed."

I cracked the unsexiest yawn in the history of yawns, and he chuckled.

There was a knock at the door and he answered it, taking a plastic bag from Bishop. "That's all they had downstairs, sorry, man. The bags should be here in the morning."

"I just wanted it to be..."

"Perfect?" Bishop asked, his voice low.

"Yeah, and it's anything but. Could one more thing get fucked up?"

"Let's not chance fate," Bishop said before saying a quiet good night and shutting the door.

River disappeared into the bathroom momentarily. "Avery, there's toothpaste and stuff in the bathroom if you want it, okay?" He said as he came back out.

Shirtless.

Holy shit. I'd always appreciated his body. How could I not? But seeing those yards of muscle and soft, inked skin, and knowing that I could touch them were two different things.

"Teeth. Right." I nodded, forcing myself from the bed. My feet felt like they weight a bajillion pounds, but I brushed my teeth with the new toothbrush and got ready for bed.

What the hell was I going to sleep in? Capris and a blouse weren't really conducive to the whole REM thing. River's T-shirt lay folded on the counter, and my fingers caressed the soft cotton. Perfect.

A few minutes later I walked out of the bathroom to see River sitting up in bed reading the book he'd brought along. He did a double take as I came into his line of sight, and warmth rushed through me.

He really wasn't faking it, trying to keep me as his best friend by feigning some kind of interest. He honestly wanted me.

I pulled back the covers, and his eyes followed every motion, heating more with every second. "I hope

it's okay that I borrowed your shirt.”

“Yeah. More than okay.”

He turned off the light as I slid into bed, pulling the covers up as my head hit the pillow.

“I'm so sorry today was a disaster.”

“It wasn't.” I remembered what he'd said to Bishop and scooted my back toward him until I was against his chest. His arm found its way around my waist, and I sighed in contentment as he pulled me closer.

His nose ran along the line of my neck, and I arched to give him better access. “It was.”

“Maybe,” I said, intertwining our fingers. “But this is worth it. This is pretty perfect.”

“Yeah, you are.”

His arms flexed around me and I melted. River relaxed me in a way no other man had. In so many ways this could still be just my best friend holding me, but it wasn't. Sure, it was still River, still the guy who had changed my flat tire freshman year, the guy who'd punched Troy Williams when he'd kissed me during sophomore year after I'd said no. He was the guy who had helped me with Addy, Dad, and my life in general.

He was my best friend.

But this desire to roll him over, climb on top of him, and explore every line of his body until I'd wiped away the thought of every one of those bar-bunnies he'd taken home over the years...well, that wasn't so friendly.

Was our friendship—and this blatant craving I had for him—enough to uproot my entire life?

“Avery?”

“Yeah?”

“Stop thinking about it.”

“How did you—?”

“Because I know you. Stop thinking there's any expectation for this weekend and just be with me, okay? Try to forget anything else. Can you try?”

If this was really my only chance to be with him, then I had to try. I had to throw myself into this headfirst and see what was really there, because if his leaving didn't kill me, then the never knowing would.

“Yeah.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

River

There was something to be said for waking up with Avery in my arms. She was soft, warm, and fit my body like she'd been made to do exactly that.

I'd already been up this morning, untangled her hair from the stubble of my beard and snuck off for a shower. Once I'd finished brushing my teeth, it was already eight thirty and she still wasn't awake.

I should have gone downstairs and found us food—I was fucking starving, but instead I crawled back into bed with her. As soon as I slid between the sheets, she rolled at me like a heat-seeking missile, using my chest as a pillow and tossing one of her thighs right across my dick.

Her best friend—I was.

A saint—I was not.

I wrapped my arm around her back, tangling it in the thick blonde strands of her hair. She felt perfect wrapped around me, and it was far too easy to envision this as our life.

My free hand rested on her knee, then lightly stroked the soft skin up her thigh. I kept myself to a six-inch limit, savoring the silk of her skin under my fingers but going no higher because I knew my shirt was bunched around her waist and there was nothing between my hand and her softness besides her panties.

When she'd walked out in my shirt last night I'd had a moment of primal possession, and it had taken everything in me not to send my hands beneath the fabric.

Even thinking about it had my dick hardening, or maybe it was the way her thigh moved against me. Either way, my body had zero issue reminding me that she was nearly naked, and so was I.

"Mmmmm," she moaned, moving even closer.

Her head shifted until her lips were pressed against my neck, and my pulse pounded beneath her innocent caress. If she honestly knew how badly I wanted her—the effort it took to keep my damn hands to myself—she never would have wanted me in bed with her.

Avery usually liked time to think things through. To examine every consequence of a possible action and then take the course she thought safest. I was damn lucky to have even stolen her away for five whole days, let alone be thinking of how easy it would be to slip my fingers inside her and bring her to orgasm before breakfast.

Not helping the hard-on situation.

She shifted again, lightly kissing my throat, and my hand tensed on her thigh, gripping the toned limb.

"Good morning." Her voice was husky from sleep and sexy as hell.

"Hey there," I said, waiting for her to understand the situation we were in.

Instead of moving away, she slid over until she rested on top of me, still pressing kisses to my neck.

"Avery." I groaned, my hands filling with the barely covered globes of her ass. Fuck me, her panties were lace.

"Hmmm?" she hummed, the vibration streaking through my nervous system and lodging in my dick. She rocked gently until I was settled directly against the heat between her thighs.

She was trying to kill me. That was the only logical explanation I could come up with. "Are you awake?"

"Yep," she said, her lips trailing down to my collarbone.

"Do you—?" I hissed when her teeth lightly grazed my skin. Damn, that felt good. "Do you know what you're doing?"

She slid farther down my body, the friction so good that my hips moved against her. Her fingers traced the lines of my abs. "Do you mean am I aware that I'm on top of you? Kissing you?"

“Yes, that.” One of my hands cupped the back of her head while the other fisted the sheet next to me.

“Do I realize that you’re hard for me?” she whispered, looking up at me under her lashes with eyes so blue they rivaled the Colorado sky.

“That, too.” My dick twitched in agreement.

“Yes,” she said, before kissing her way down my stomach.

Holy shit. Her lips on my skin were the most exquisite torture.

“I’ve always wanted to do this,” she said, just before tracing the lines of my abs with her tongue.

I sucked in my breath as every muscle in my body tensed. She was every fantasy I’d ever had come to life.

“Your body is incredible. I’m sure you’ve been told that a million times—”

Oh hell no.

I flipped her so fast that she landed with an *oomph* underneath me. Then I stretched both her arms above her head and settled in between her thighs. “Nothing mattered before you. *No one* mattered before you. Do you understand?”

She nodded, tugging her lip between her teeth.

I leaned down and sucked it free. “Speaking of incredible bodies…” My hands followed her curves, her gently tucked waist and the flare of her hips. “God, what you do to me, Avery.”

Her hips rolled in my hands, and I set my mouth to her neck, loving her gasp, the way she softly said my name. Every tiny motion or sound she made drove me higher, wound me tighter.

My shirt was bunched a little higher than her waist, leaving her stomach bare to my lips. I kissed my way down her belly, letting my tongue and teeth linger where she whimpered. The skin just along her hipbone was the most sensitive, and I had her squirming under me in a matter of minutes.

“River.” She moaned, her fingers in my hair, urging me on.

“I want to touch you so badly,” I admitted, breathing against the band of her blue lace panties.

“So touch me.”

Her words sent me into a level of need I’d never known before. I wanted to roar, to mark her as mine, to let the world know that this woman deemed me good enough to put my hands on her.

I ran my hand up the inside of her thigh, my eyes locked on hers to watch for the first sign that she didn’t want this. My fingers grazed the line of her underwear and then slipped under until—

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“No fucking way,” I muttered. “What?” I called out as Avery giggled beneath me.

“Mr. Maldonado? I’m from the airline.”

I left the warm haven of Avery’s body and strode across the room, flinging the door open. “Bags?”

“Here,” he said, his eyes wide. I took the bags from his hands and put them inside the door, well aware that my boxers weren’t doing a damn thing to disguise my erection.

“Can you sign?” he asked.

I scrawled my signature across the paper. “Thanks for bringing them out,” I said, and promptly shut the door.

Avery had sat up in bed, her hair a tousled, glorious mess, and my T-shirt pulled down to meet her thighs. I couldn’t wait to strip it off her. She grinned at me and crooked her finger.

Hell yes.

Another knock at the door sounded and I cursed. “What now?” I asked as I opened the door.

Bishop was already fully dressed as he stood there with his arms crossed. He glanced down and then back up, sighing. “Play around later, little brother. We have shit to do today. We’re meeting with Knox in half an hour.”

“Half an hour?” Avery squealed and ran for the bathroom, dragging her small suitcase in with her.

“You seriously couldn’t give me another hour?” I asked him as she shut the door.

“Consider this payback for cock-blocking me with Sarah Ganston.”

“I was fourteen!” I yelled as he walked away.

“Nothing personal,” he said, repeating my exact words when I’d been sent to find him for breaking curfew.

I dressed in clean clothes and then waited for Avery. We might have a full day planned, but the only thing on my agenda tonight was her.

* * * *

“This is amazing,” Avery whispered as we looked around the Legacy crew’s clubhouse as they affectionately called it.

“Bash pulled out all the stops,” Knox said as he gestured to the main room of the complex that boasted floor-to-ceiling windows and a kick-ass view of the mountains. “He wanted to make sure the Legacy crew had everything it needed.”

“What about people?” Bishop asked, his eyes taking in the row of glassed-in offices on one side and the huge dining tables along the other.

The complex was massive. Double kitchens, eating areas, offices, a great room, gym, and enough rooms in the downstairs walkout level to sleep every member of the proposed twenty-two member team.

“Not going to lie, we’re short,” Knox admitted. “But both Emerson and Bash are working on it, and we’ve called every firefighting Legacy kid. So far they’ve all said that they’re coming home, but we’ll find out tomorrow.”

“What’s tomorrow?” Avery asked, lacing her fingers with mine.

“The council meeting,” Knox answered. “We have to present them with the crew. If we have the numbers, we’ll take the Legacy name.”

“If we don’t?” I asked.

“Ever known Bash to fail?” Knox replied.

“Ever known any of us to?” I countered.

“Exactly.”

I could almost feel Avery rolling her eyes. “Okay, well let’s say hell freezes over and your unflinching masculinity isn’t quite enough. What then?”

Knox grinned at her. “I like you.”

“Don’t,” I said.

Avery looked between him and me. “Are all your friends this good looking here? Because if so, then maybe Colorado really is a good idea...”

My mouth hung agape for a second while she smiled up at me. “Maybe commuting from Alaska is a good idea.”

Knox laughed. “If we don’t have the numbers then we’ll still establish the team, it just won’t be under the same banner.”

“Your dad’s,” Avery said.

“Right.”

“Either way, we’re in,” Bishop answered. “Even if we don’t have the Legacy name, this is still their crew. Their mountain.”

“Good to know,” Knox said. “Now let’s get to the fun part. Follow me.”

He walked ahead, leading us to one of the offices with a map of Legacy on the wall. “You okay?” Avery asked quietly as we followed.

“Yeah.”

“You’re all tense.”

I tried to relax—and failed. “The only reason I’m willing to leave Alaska and risk losing you is that it’s Dad’s team. It’s the one they wouldn’t let us restart years ago, and if we have that chance now...”

“You have to take it,” she finished, looking up at me with understanding and a soft smile. “I get it. I respect you even more for it.”

“But if it’s not the real Legacy team, then what am I doing?”

She squeezed my hand. “Wait and see how it goes tomorrow, and then answer that question. For now...” She trailed off, looking where Bishop stood next to Knox at the map.

“What?” I asked.

“Can we just pretend for a couple of days?”

“Pretend what?” My free hand cupped her face, tilting it so she wouldn’t look away.

“Pretend that this is a given? That I’ll come here with you for sure?” A slight hint of panic crept into her eyes.

“Is it just pretend?” I asked softly.

“I don’t want it to be, but you and I know it’s so much more complicated than we’re willing to admit.”

I kissed her, letting my lips promise what terrified my heart. “Yeah. We can pretend. Maybe it will give you a better idea of what it would really be like if you opened yourself up to the possibility that life exists beyond the limits you’ve accepted.”

She swallowed, then nodded. “Okay. Shall we?” She nodded toward the office.

I squeezed her hand in answer and then walked in with her at my side.

“You two good?” Bishop asked, his eyes narrowing in my direction.

“We’re fantastic,” I said, leading Avery over to the map.

“Right. So here’s the fun part. Bash is beyond loaded now. He knew what it would take to relocate an entire Hotshot crew here, and once he realized it would be Legacy kids last week, well...he made a few calls to realtors.”

Bishop and I locked eyes. He shrugged.

“That means you can either take the signing bonus that will cover the house you’d like to buy, or he’ll sign you over one of the eleven he’s already bought.”

“No shit?” I asked, stunned.

“No shit,” Knox answered. “He wasn’t letting anything get in the way. Of course there are barracks here, but if you’re bringing your family”—he looked at Avery—“then he wants to make sure it’s a smooth transition. Trust me, this money is nothing for him.”

“Tech,” I answered Avery’s unspoken question. “He’s sold a few apps and invested really well.”

“Obscenely well,” Knox added.

“Apparently,” Avery said, her eyes huge.

“What do you say? Want to house hunt with me?” *Come on, Avery. Pretend.*

“I do,” she said with a smile that rivaled the sun.

* * * *

Five hours later, I’d fed her twice, showed her some of my favorite spots around town, and even walked her into the newspaper office.

Old Mr. Buchanan was still in charge, but he told her he was looking for a new reporter/editor/graphic designer.

“Small-town life,” I said to her as we walked back to the Jeep Knox had lent us from the crew’s new garage. The thing was brand new, and the weather was perfect for keeping the top off.

“I love it,” she said, dropping her sunglasses down as she buckled in to the passenger side. “And thank you for driving by the high school. Addy wanted pictures.”

“My pleasure,” I told her as we pulled out onto the main street. “How is she doing?”

“She says Aunt Dawn has everything under control. Then again, I’m pretty sure if the house was burning down she wouldn’t tell me right now.”

“She knows you need the break,” I said. “Where’s the next house?”

She gripped the paper tightly as the wind rustled it. “Six-fifteen Pine Ave.”

I entered it into the GPS and we turned left, heading for the edge of town. “I’m not sure where that is.”

“Has a lot changed since you left?”

“There’s more here. They’d finished a lot of the rebuild before I left for Alaska, but there’s been some growth, too. I bet we’re up to four thousand people by now.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said, her eyes on the mountains around us as we left the town limits.

“What did you think about the first six houses we saw?”

“They’re nice. Not exactly what I picture you in—us in,” she corrected. “A little trendy, a little too close to each other.”

“Agreed. I want an easy commute to the clubhouse, but I think Alaska spoiled me. I like being away from people.”

“You’ve gone savage,” she joked.

“Just a little wild,” I countered.

We followed the road deeper into the mountains until we were a good three miles outside of town. “Pine,” I said, turning onto a dirt road.

“Much more your speed,” she joked, reaching over to rub the back of my neck.

The road took us another mile before a house appeared on the left side of the road. “Wow,” Avery sighed.

Wow, indeed. We made our way up the lengthy driveway and parked. It was log-cabin style, similar to my house back in Alaska but bigger.

“He said it was new construction,” I told her as we got out of the Jeep. “Landscaping isn’t finished.”

She looked around the front yard. “You’d have to put in some beds there. I could plant some gorgeous flowers. The tall kind that would bring color up to the porch level.”

I intertwined our fingers as we took the steps up to the porch. “Rocking chairs?” I asked.

She shook her head. “A swing.”

“A swing,” I agreed as I punched the code into the lock box. It popped open and I turned the handle. Then, before I could stop to think, I swung Avery up into my arms, her weight slight against my chest.

“River!” She laughed. “We’re not married.”

“Pretend, remember?”

She looped her arms around my neck as I carried her inside. “Wow,” she said.

“You already said that,” I told her as we both took it in.

“I might say it about twelve more times.”

The entry and great room were open to the second floor, where there was a walkway that connected one suite of rooms to the others above us. There were more windows than walls, all looking out over the mountain range and forest.

“It’s like we’re the only ones on the planet,” she said as I set her down. We walked over the hardwood floors of what was staged as the living room, to take in the views from the windows and sliding door to the deck.

“Want to explore?”

She nodded in excitement and took off. As was par for the course in my life, all I could do was follow her.

There was a gourmet kitchen with full appliances, a dining room, a full, finished walk-out basement, and that was before we headed upstairs. The entire house had been staged to sell, and even though the furniture wasn’t exactly my style, the space was.

“Wow,” Avery said again as we walked into the master bedroom. It was separated from the other three by the bridge we’d passed under downstairs. There was a bed against the far wall, two walk-in closets, a giant master bath, and an entire wall of windows that looked over the mountains, mirroring the downstairs. A door led out to a private balcony, and we stepped onto it, both leaning against the railing that held us three stories up.

“I’ve never seen something so beautiful,” she said, tucking the stray strands of her topknot behind her ears.

“Me either,” I said, never looking away from her. She was still my Avery, but here, she felt freer, less burdened. I couldn’t help but wonder how she would bloom if she were allowed the freedom to define who she was without others telling her.

“I can see it,” she said softly, turning to face me.

“See what?” I was desperate to know how she envisioned life, what this house, this place looked like through her eyes, because all I saw was her.

“I can see living here. I could work at the newspaper office, and Addy could go to the high school. I see the fresh start as clearly as I can smell the new paint, and it’s...”

“Scary?” I offered.

“Beautiful. It’s such a beautiful picture. I can see you here, cooking in that kitchen, waking me up in the mornings with soft kisses.”

“That’s exactly what I want,” I said.

“This house is you. You should take it.” Her profile was framed by the sun-kissed strands of blonde in the afternoon light as she looked out over the sizeable backyard that ended in forest—trees and the mountains I loved almost as much as I loved her.

“This house could be us,” I said, taking her hand. “I want you here, sleeping in that bedroom. Kissing me in the kitchen, racked out on the couch while we binge-watch something awful on Netflix. I want to explore these mountains with you, talk to you, laugh with you, make love to you.” I brought her fingers to my mouth, kissing each one as her lips parted. “I want to make a life with you here. It’s not just about leaving my best friend behind, it’s about what we have between us—what we can be if we just give this a chance.”

My chest tightened as I waited for her to respond, her eyes moving between mine and the landscape. I’d been so careful with her these last seven years, cautious with my feelings and how much I let her know. But laying it all out on the line was both freeing and terrifying.

I’d rather be at a fire. At least those were the flames I knew how to battle—Avery I’d just let burn me if she wanted.

“It’s a beautiful dream,” she said softly.

“It can be reality.” *Don’t give up, Avery.*

She sighed. “And Addy?”

“You are under no obligation to live with me. You know that. But there’s plenty of room here. I want nothing more than to wake up next to you every day, and the bedroom down the hall on the left has a great view that I think she’d like.”

Her eyes swam with tears. “You’d do that? Live with Adeline?”

“Adeline is pretty much my little sister, too. I have no problem helping you raise her. You’ve done a damn good job already, and I’d love to ease some of that. Besides, the room at the end is a three-story drop, so it’s the hardest for a boy to sneak in.”

She laughed, two tears racing down her face. “I don’t know what to say.”

I brushed the tears away with my thumbs. “Say yes. Say you’ll make the crazy choice to come with me. Say you’ll jump with me. For once, let’s do something reckless.”

“How can you be so sure we’d work out?”

The fear in her eyes might have given me pause if not for that tiny glimmer of hope I saw there, and that was what I latched onto. “Because you’re already my longest relationship. You’ve always been the woman I’ve put before everyone else. I would never hurt you, never betray you, never stray from your body if I knew you felt the same.”

“How do you feel?” she whispered, opening the door I’d done my damndest to keep shut all these years.

“Avery, don’t you realize that I’m completely, madly, whole-heartedly in love with you?” I didn’t wait for her answer, simply sealed my mouth over hers and showed her that I meant every single word.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Avery

His tongue consumed my mouth the way his words invaded my soul—completely and without apology.

His confession had done what I thought was impossible and brought down every last one of my defenses against him. This wasn't some fling—this was River. My River.

God, could the man kiss. It was a blatant, carnal exploration that had me arching against him, reaching for his head to hold him closer. He grasped me under my ass, lifting me easily, and my legs wrapped around his waist.

He brought us into the bedroom and headed for the massive four-poster bed that took up the center of the room, never once breaking the kiss or pausing. He lowered us to the mattress, and my senses ignited. The feel of the fur coverlet beneath me combined with River's taste, his scent, the weight of him as he rested between my thighs all merged together to awaken every nerve ending. The need that had pulsed in me that morning came back tenfold, demanding appeasement.

He kissed me deeper, with care and carefully checked passion. I felt his restraint in the tension of his arms, the flex of his fingers. He wanted me, but he wasn't going to do anything I wasn't fully ready for. The knowledge was heady, relaxing and inflaming all in the same moment because I knew he would give me whatever I wanted.

And he loved me.

Sweetness filled my chest and expanded outward, lingering in my limbs until his hands stroked up my rib cage, and then desire overpowered it.

I stretched my arms above my head, silently urging him to take off my shirt.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“I want your hands on me,” I whispered against his mouth, gently tugging on his lower lip with my teeth. “Here. Now.”

This would be his home. I had zero doubt. For this moment, it was mine, too, because he was here. No matter what happened with us in the coming months, I wanted this with him. I wanted him to have a piece of me here even if it was only in memory.

My blue shirt came off with little fuss, and then River sucked in his breath. “Incredible,” he whispered as he framed my lace-cupped breasts with his hands. His mouth collided with mine, a new edge taking over.

His thumbs grazed my hardened nipples through the lace, and I pushed into his hands, needing more.

His hand slipped beneath my back as I arched, and with a simple flick of his fingers, my bra was undone. With a motion of my arms, it found its way to the floor, and then his mouth was on me, drawing my nipple into his mouth.

“River!” I cried out as he worked the sensitive flesh. My thighs restlessly rubbed against him. I'd never been so turned on from a few touches, never been so desperate to get a man naked before...but I'd never been with River.

“Off,” I demanded, yanking the fabric of his shirt.

He sat back on his heels with a wicked grin. “Your wish is my command,” he said, gathering the shirt by the neck and pulling it off in one smooth motion.

My brain didn't have words for him—for the cut of his muscles, the deep tan of his warm skin, the desire darkening his eyes. He was the definition of sex, and for right now he was mine.

I kicked off my flip-flops as he stretched out over me again, leaning his weight to the side so he didn't crush me. “You are exquisite,” he said, running his mouth along the underside of my jaw.

Chills raced down my body, my hips rocking involuntarily.

“So fucking sexy and finally mine.” His words echoed my thoughts as he kissed me again, robbing me of every thought beyond his body and the magic he spun around mine. If I was this lost after a few kisses, how would I feel when he—

“River!” I gasped as his fingers slid past the waistband of my shorts.

“Tell me no,” he whispered as those fingers reached my panties.

“But then you’d stop,” I said, my hips moving to meet him.

“That is the rule, yes.”

His hand paused just above where I needed him the most, where a dull throb had begun.

“Don’t stop,” I told him as my hands threaded through his hair. I loved the silky texture, the way it slid through my fingers.

“Avery.” My name was a prayer on his lips as his fingers parted me and brushed my clit.

I cried out, my hips moving, my back arching, my fingers tightening their hold.

His breath stuttered in his chest. “God, if you only knew how many times I fantasized about this.” He circled my clit again, then lightly rolled it.

I whimpered and kissed him as one of my hands dug into the muscles of his shoulder. “How does it live up to the fantasy?” I asked, barely able to hold on to a thought as he pressed down on me. Pleasure shot through me like electricity, tension coiling in my belly. The space was almost too tight, but he slid one finger inside me and my back came off the bed.

“There’s no comparison. You’re hotter, wetter…” He slipped his hand free of my shorts, then—holy shit—licked the finger he’d had inside me. “Sweeter than I ever imagined.”

“More.” It was the only word I could say because it was the only thing I wanted. I’d had sex before—I wasn’t a nun—but I’d never felt this driving need, this utter desperation for someone.

He kissed his way down my stomach, then flicked open the button of my shorts and slid them over my ass and down my legs. “These have to go, too,” he said, and my panties followed.

There was no shyness, no awkwardness as he looked me over like he needed to memorize this moment. The need in his eyes was enough to make me feel like a wanton goddess. His hands started at my breasts, squeezing with just the right amount of pressure, then slid down my curves, over the seam of my thighs until they reached under my ass.

He didn’t look away as he brought his mouth to my core. I screamed as he licked me, sucked at me, made love to me with his fingers and then his tongue. My mind lost all control of my body as he worshipped me. I rocked against his face, loving the scrape of his stubble against my inner thighs. My hands fisted in the sheets, then his hair, anything I could grip onto as I shamelessly reveled in every sensation skyrocketing through me.

He laved at me until my body grew so tense that I could barely stand it, my need for release pounding at me. It was so damn good, the pleasure nearly unbearable until I fractured into a thousand pieces of light, his name the only word on my tongue.

His lips made their way up my body, over my navel, between my breasts, until they found mine with a surprisingly tender kiss. “God, I love that,” he moaned.

“Which part?” My smile was weak as I struggled to find my breath.

“All of it. Your reactions, your taste, the way you say my name. God, especially that.”

“River,” I whispered and kissed his neck.

He groaned. “Yeah, that.”

“River,” I said again, my hands exploring the glorious muscles of his back. His skin felt like warm satin draped over knotted steel. He gasped as my fingers traced the fuck-me lines that led to his shorts. “Take these off.”

A few quick motions and he was naked, his erection hot and heavy where it rested along my thigh.

“Are you sure?” he asked, looking deeply into my eyes, his thumb stroking over my lower lip.

“Yes. I want you to be mine,” I answered, then kissed his thumb.

“I’m already yours in every possible way.” He kissed me, reigniting the flame I was sure my orgasm had doused.

A tear of foil, and we were protected.

He picked me up easily, flipping us so that I straddled his thighs as he sat. He gave me the precious gift of control, and I reveled in the ability I had to drive him wild. I ran my hand along his length, wishing I’d taken the time earlier to taste him.

He cradled my face in his hands as I raised up on my knees and guided him to my entrance. Eyes locked, breaths ragged, hearts hammering, I lowered myself slowly, taking him inside me inch by exquisite inch. He swallowed my cry with a deep kiss, and we were joined in every possible way. My flesh stretched to accommodate him, and he was utterly still as I adjusted to him.

But then still wasn’t enough. Not when he was this full, this hard inside me.

His hands kneaded my hips as I began to move, his grip digging into my flesh as I rode him. “You feel. So. Perfect,” I said between glides.

“We,” he corrected, kissing my neck. “We feel perfect.”

And we were. It didn’t feel like sex—more like fulfilling the union our bodies demanded because our souls had always had it. The lines of his face grew taut as he concentrated on our movements, sweat making our skin slippery as we rocked against each other, pleasure streaking through me with each motion.

His hand shifted from my thigh to strum his thumb over my clit, the nerves hypersensitive. “You don’t…” I gasped as he pressed, then circled again. I tried to gather my thoughts to speak again. “You don’t have to… I don’t think I can…”

“Yes you can,” he said, his breath warm in my ear. His free hand reached for my ponytail, wrapping it around as he gently tugged my head back. His mouth attacked my neck, licking and sucking every sensitive place. “I have seven years of fantasies, Avery. Seven years of imagining the way you’d scream my name, how tight you’d grip me as I slid into you. Seven years of waiting to feel you come around me. I have more than enough to get you there again.”

I groaned, already feeling that tension starting to ravel. He shifted our angle so he could stroke deeper, our bodies undulating in perfect rhythm. It was as if we’d been making love for years, already so in tune, in sync.

“I love you.” He groaned. “I’m never going to get enough of this—never going to get enough of you.”

Yes, more. I moved faster, until my world was a blur of sensation and River—his breath, his body, his scent, his heart. My orgasm built until I was ready to splinter. “River,” I begged.

“Yes,” he hissed, then brought his mouth to mine. A few deft movements of his fingers and I came apart, my cry swallowed by his kiss.

The moment I started to sag over him, he turned, putting me on my back. Our kiss deep, he drove into me, pounding out a rhythm that had me keening, my orgasm kicking back aftershocks.

He yelled my name as he came, his muscles straining above me, and through the haze of my pleasure I could think of nothing more than how beautiful he was.

A salty kiss later, he collapsed, rolling us to the side.

Our breathing was ragged as we stared at each other. “I think we might be pretty good at that,” I said.

He grinned, and my heart clenched, screaming out an emotion I couldn’t—wouldn’t—name.

“Yeah, but I think there might be room for improvement with practice.”

“Lots of practice,” I nodded.

“As much as you can handle,” he promised, kissing my nose. Then all traces of laughter faded. “That was… I don’t have words for it. Perfect isn’t enough.”

Earth shattering. Mind blowing. “Perfect is just about right.”

He kissed me, holding me like I was infinitely precious to him.

“Hello? River?” A female voice came from downstairs.

We scrambled for clothes, throwing them on while he called out, “Just a minute!”

I tripped trying to put on my flip-flop, River barely catching me before I tumbled to the ground.

“All I wanted was—”

“Perfection,” I said, kissing him lightly once we were right. “We’ve got it. Now let’s see who that is.”

We walked hand-in-hand down the stairs to find a petite, curvy blonde in the kitchen examining the refrigerator. She turned when she heard us, her green eyes wide with joy. “Oh my God!”

“Harper?” River asked.

By the way she jumped into his hug, I guessed she was.

He set her down and she turned to me, enveloping me in the same warm hug. “You must be Avery!” She pulled back and smiled. “Bishop said you two are pretty much fated for the diner wall. I’m Harper. Ryker’s sister.”

“Diner wall?” I asked as River slid me under his arm. “Ryker?”

River kissed the top of my head. “You haven’t met Ryker yet. He’s on a fire with Bash right now. They’re Bishop’s age, but I graduated with Harper. And the town has a little tradition where we carve our names into the diner wall when we’re ready to declare undying love.”

My heart melted. “That might be the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Harper sighed. “It really is. Until there’s a divorce or an affair and you see some crazed wife hacking at the wall with a pocket knife.”

River nodded. “It happens. I love seeing you, Harper, but what are you doing all the way out here?”

“Oh, well, Knox told me that the breakers weren’t on out here, and when you didn’t come back, they figured you might not want to stumble around in the dark if you stayed any later.”

“How did you know we were at this one?” he asked.

“I didn’t. I’ve checked four other houses,” she admitted. “Anyway, the breakers are on now, if you two want to get back to”—she gestured at us—“the amazing sex you were having.”

I sputtered, my eyes flying wide. “We weren’t…”

She waved us off. “Your shirt is on inside out. Anyway. Ceremony is tomorrow afternoon, and then the council meeting is tomorrow night, so you two can frolic all you like.”

I wanted to die. It was like that nightmare where you’re caught at school with no clothes…except mine were on inside out and this was real.

“Thanks for coming out to check on us. Does anyone deliver out here?”

She tilted her head. “Magnolia’s might. Should I tell Knox you’ll take this one?”

“Knox, huh?” River grinned.

She turned redder than the tank top she had on. “Shut up.”

River laughed, his entire chest rumbling. “Good to see not much changes around here. Has Emerson taken Bash back yet?”

“How did you know?”

“Oh, come on. Emmy and Bash are a given. Almost as much as you dancing around Knox and praying he and your brother don’t notice.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Ugh. You’ve been in town for all of a day.” Then she looked over at me, a small smile playing over her lips. “You and I are going to be great friends. I need someone on my team against this one.”

I nodded. “I think we can manage that.” I liked her openness, the way she didn’t beat around the bush, and I loved the way she didn’t flirt with River. Then again, I’d seen how hot Knox was, and if River was right, and that’s the way her world tilted, then I couldn’t blame her.

“Tell Knox we’ll take this one,” River said. “Do you think we have the numbers for this meeting tomorrow?”

Her smile faded. “We’ll have them, one way or another.”

The determination on her face was the same I’d seen on River’s over the years, the same Knox had shown when he’d led us on the tour of the clubhouse. There was a steel in this generation, a tenacity that I felt simply by looking at them.

I pitied anyone who stood in the way of them getting their crew back.

CHAPTER NINE

River

I traced the letters on her headstone, grief wrapping around my heart, uncaring that it had been eight years since we lost her.

“Man, I miss you,” I told her before looking up to where Avery stood, flowers in her arms. “She would have loved you.”

“I’m a hot mess.”

“You’re my hot mess,” I corrected her. After the handful of times I’d taken her in the last twelve hours I was pretty sure she’d have a hard time arguing that she wasn’t mine.

She placed the flowers on Mom’s grave as I stood, then stepped into my arms as I held them out to her. The cemetery was quiet, peaceful.

“I’m sorry you lost them both.”

“I’m glad they went close to each other. Losing Dad in the fire, that was brutal, but when cancer took her a couple years later...” He shook his head. “For a long time I wondered if I was cursed. If I wasn’t supposed to have anything good.”

“You deserve the best,” she said, her voice soft.

“It all changed when I saw you. Frustrated, ponytail a mess, fighting with the tire iron and rusted lug nuts.”

“Ugh. I’d been on the side of the road for a half hour.”

I brushed her hair back from her face, loving that it was down and free. “You were beautiful, and I fell in love with you in that moment.”

Her lips parted. “Because I couldn’t change a tire?” she whispered.

“Because you hadn’t given up. There was zero chance you could have gotten those bolts off, but you weren’t giving up. When I realized that you were raising Addy, caring for your dad...there wasn’t a force in this world that could have stopped me from loving you.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“You weren’t ready and I was terrified. I’d lost everyone I loved except for Bishop. When the wildfire came, when Dad died, there was a part of me that shriveled, that started to expect heartache. I couldn’t show it, of course. The whole town was in mourning, and there were sixteen of us left behind without fathers. Indigo was left without a mom. In our collective grief, we weren’t allowed to break down, not when there were so many eyes on us.”

“River...” she whispered, holding me tighter in her support.

“Then the rebuilding began, and Mom got sick. She died the summer of my junior year, and we had the new high school open by my senior year.”

“Then you and Bishop came up to Alaska.”

I rested my chin on the top of her head, loving how well she fit me. “And you know the rest.”

“I wish I knew how it ended.”

My heart sank, knowing as much as she loved pretending, she hadn’t really decided. Because as fierce as my love of this crew and my family was, hers was just as intense for hers, and she wouldn’t leave her father.

In a place that had always brought me so much loss, I couldn’t help but wonder if the biggest heartache was yet to come.

“Me, too, baby.”

* * * *

The ceremony was somber. Bishop and I took the wreath up for our father, and then placed it at the new memorial where it stood with seventeen others.

Ten years later, and I still missed him like hell.

He'd been larger than life, a force of nature. In so many ways Bishop was just like him, but the years of raising me had hardened him in ways Dad hadn't been. Where Dad was optimistic, Bishop saw the pitfalls of everything. Where Dad loved Mom with the same kind of intensity I felt for Avery, Bishop held himself away from everyone who could leave.

As I looked around at the other Legacy kids, the ones who had grown up without their dads or mom, I realized that the casualties of that day were far more reaching than the firefighters laid to rest in Aspen Cemetery.

The entire town had lost. Homes, businesses, and memories were ash by the time the fire had finished with us, but it always felt like we had lost a little more. We took our seats, and the bells rang—one for each loss, each sacrifice, each choice that had been made the day they headed up Legacy Mountain with the odds and the weather against them.

Avery took my hand, steadying me like always. I concentrated on the feeling of her fingers with mine and tried to keep the memories at bay. But the harshest ones fought through—the order for evacuation, the way he'd held us, kissed our mother. The way he'd told Bishop to keep me out of trouble while he was gone.

My resolve sharpened with each bell. The council could be afraid of the liability of having another Hotshot crew. They could deny us the Legacy name, and they could claim it was to salvage the tender hearts of this town.

But the Legacy crew had been family, and damn it, we were getting it back.

As the ceremony cleared out, the sixteen of us stood in a line facing the monument, from the youngest kid, Violet, who had never met her father, to the oldest, Shane Winston, who'd been away at college when it happened.

Those who wouldn't be joining us on the crew—the ones who were too young or who had no interest in firefighting—left, until it was just those of us who were.

"Are you sure about this?" Bash asked, Emerson by his side. Time had turned the dark-haired, reckless guy into a hell of a stubborn man.

I looked around as we all nodded.

"They're going to fight us tooth and nail," he warned. "They don't want this. They're terrified of what could happen." He looked pointedly at our youngest members who couldn't be older than twenty.

"We're with you, Bash," Bishop answered from next to me. "They're not taking this from us."

"We're with you," we all agreed.

Avery's soft smile was forced as I looked down at her, and I sent up a fervent prayer that she would stay, because I knew in that moment there was no way I could leave.

CHAPTER TEN

Avery

“So which one is that?” I asked Harper as we looked over the packed clubhouse.

The Legacy crew had gotten their needed numbers, and the council had begrudgingly approved the team after Spencer—the only surviving member of the original team—showed up and agreed to lead them.

“That’s Ryker,” Harper answered. “He’s my brother.”

“Right,” I said, trying to remember names with faces. “And the one standing next to River is Bash.”

“Yup. Sebastian Vargas, but everyone’s called him Bash since he was little. And Emerson is the brunette standing next to him. She’s my best friend.”

“Too many names,” I muttered.

She laughed and took a sip of her beer. “You’ll figure it out. Don’t worry. The crew is a giant family. We’re together a lot, so you’ll learn.”

If I’m here.

The longer we were here, the more I wanted to—hell, needed to. I loved everything about the little town, the people, the crew...and River. All I had to do was convince Dad to come, that maybe the change would be good for him, too. River was pretty much a saint to offer for Dad to live with us, but maybe he’d get to where he could live on his own...and I could have my own life.

The texts Addy had sent me said everything was under control, so maybe it was possible.

Yes. I could do it. Maybe.

“What’s up, Avery?” Bishop asked as he walked over.

“Can we take a walk?” I asked him, needing a sounding board that wasn’t River.

His forehead puckered. “Of course.”

He helped me up and we walked out the side door of the clubhouse. I sucked in a deep lungful of air, grateful for the quiet we had outside. My lungs burned, but I was adjusting to the altitude. Kind of.

“What are you going to do?” he asked, never one to beat around the bush.

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“What do you want?” he asked. “Not what River wants, what your dad wants...what do you want?”

I thought about the last two days. The peace, the freedom, the pure happiness I felt at the possibility of a fresh start with River. “I want to be here.”

“Then that’s your answer.”

I scoffed. “What I want and what’s possible are almost never the same thing.”

“Avery, if you’re willing to tear up everything, move from Alaska, and build something fresh, then you’ve already jumped the biggest barrier. Well, that and chancing your life on River’s cooking.”

My lips turned up at the corners. “Okay, there’s that. Do you really think I can convince my dad to come? Adeline is all for it, but it’s not just me in this decision. I can’t leave them any more than you’d leave River.”

His face scrunched. “Eh, you know, River is a grown-ass man. If he didn’t want to come here, I would have left him in Alaska. He makes his own choices. Of course, I’m glad he’s here with me. If he’s going to be firefighting, then I want him on my crew, but don’t think for a second that I wouldn’t have come without him. He deserves his own life, and you do, too.”

“And what if I come here, and it doesn’t work out with River?” I asked, giving voice to my biggest fear. “What if I leave everything I know behind, and come here, and we have a horrid breakup and then I lose him anyway?”

He grasped both of my shoulders and ducked to look in my eyes. “That’s a risk you’re going to have to

take. Nothing is guaranteed, not in life and sure as hell not in love. But I can tell you that he has loved you for as long as he's known you. There is nothing he won't give you—nothing he won't do to make this work. That kind of love, the one that's rooted in a friendship as deep as you two have...that's not easy to come by. It's worth the fight. I'll tell you the same thing I told him. You guys are worth the gamble."

"Thank you," I said softly.

"Don't thank me. You have a hell of a road ahead of you. I just wish that I could be there to help you with it."

"You're not coming back with us?" My stomach dropped.

"Nah. I boxed up my shit before I left. River is going to sell my truck and pack send up my stuff with his. Bash needs my help here. We have a ton of relocating to do, and there's not much up there for me anyway."

"I guess I thought when they told us you could have until spring..." My voice drifted off because we both knew where it was going. When Bash had gotten approval for the team to be together by spring, I figured we'd been given a reprieve. Another few months to work everything out. Time to convince my dad. Time to coordinate.

"River might take it," Bishop said. "Like I said, we make our own decisions. If he chooses to stay the winter in Alaska, then I'll support that. He doesn't have to be back until April."

"I just need time."

"I know that, and he does, too. It's just that time might not be something we have a lot of to spare right now."

The door opened behind us and River stepped out. "Hey, are you stealing my girl, or what?"

Bishop gave my shoulders one last squeeze. "Nope, she's all yours." He went for the door but turned before going in. "Remember what I said, Avery. His cooking really will kill you." He tossed a grin at River and went inside, leaving us alone.

"Asshole," River muttered.

"Are you going to take the time?" I asked. "Are you going to stay in Alaska until spring, or are you moving right now?"

His eyebrows shot high. "Well, I guess that's what you two were talking about."

"Answer, please? Because I'm kind of freaking out."

He took two steps and enveloped me in his arms, pulling me close. I rested my head on his chest, letting his familiar scent and heartbeat surround me.

"I'll do whatever you need," he said, his chin resting on the top of my head. "If you want to move now, we'll get Addy, your dad, and move. If you want to wait until spring, I'll have to come back a few times, but we can make that happen, too."

"You'd wait for me to get everything together?"

His arms tightened around me. "If I know that you're coming here, making your life with me, I'll wait forever."

I took a stuttering breath, knowing that what I was going to say would change everything. Then I looked up at him, meeting his dark eyes in the bright moonlight. "I want to come. I want to live here with you. Well, not here, here, but at our house here. I want to make this work. I'll do it."

Saying the words set my heart free in a way I'd never known. Every possibility for my future was so clear, so vibrant that I could taste it, and then River was all I could taste as he kissed me.

This was what I wanted for my life. River's kisses, his arms around me, his love. I wanted it all.

His kiss was passionate, claiming, and I found my back against the building as he pinned me between him and the wall. It didn't matter that I'd already kissed him dozens of times in the last week. Each kiss felt new, and at the same time like coming home.

"This is yours," he said, his lips brushing my ear as something cold and metal pressed into my palm.

"A key?" I asked, examining it in the pale light.

His smile could have lit the world. "I just signed for the house. This one is yours. No pressure. It's just

a key.”

It wasn't just a key. “I love it,” I said, my hand closing so tight the ridges bit into my skin.

“I love you,” he said.

My heart soared, erupted, as if by saying what I wanted, I'd finally cut loose the chains I'd tightly bound myself with. “River,” I whispered, pulling him back so I could look into his eyes when I said it. “I—”

My phone sounded with Addy's ringtone. Calling wasn't in her nature, she was more of a text girl, so it had to be urgent.

“Ugh.” I sighed, pulling my phone from my pocket. “One second.” I swiped the phone and answered. “What's up?”

“Avery?” she sobbed.

My stomach soured and my world narrowed to the small voice on the other end. “What's wrong?” I asked her.

“It's Dad. He...” Another sob came through, and I forced oxygen through my lungs. “Aunt Dawn didn't move the meds, and he found them.”

“Oh, God.” I would have fallen if River's arms hadn't caught me, holding me upright. “Addy, is he...?”

“He overdosed. They have him on a ventilator and they don't know...” Her voice faded into hiccupping sobs. “Can you come home?”

I looked up into River's eyes and realized he'd heard her through the phone when he nodded. The earth shifted beneath my feet; the reality I'd been so certain of a few minutes ago disappearing as a new one took its place.

“I'm on my way.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

River

I took another sip of hospital coffee and tried to stay awake. We'd been traveling sixteen hours, having driven to Denver the night before to get the first flight out. Avery couldn't wait to fly out of Gunnison in the morning.

We'd come straight to the hospital where her dad was in the ICU, and I'd been sitting out here for at least another two hours, just hoping that she was okay in there with him.

"They say if he makes it through the night, he should be okay," Adeline said, curled into my side.

"He's a tough guy, your dad," I told her. It didn't matter what an ass he'd been; no kid deserved to lose her father this way.

"I hate him," she whispered. "Why can't he just be like other dads?"

I put my coffee down and wrapped my other arm around her. "I know, and you know what? It's not fair. But I do know that you and your sister are some of the strongest, smartest women I know, and I think that has a lot to do with what you've been through. Don't hate him, Addy. He struggles with something we can't understand."

Problem was, I hated him. I hated that the moment Avery found out he'd overdosed, she'd clammed up. She went distant. Gone were the soft looks, the warm touches. Gone were the kisses, the talks about our future. She stared out the fucking window on every airplane and responded to questions in one-word answers.

My Avery was gone in the span of a heartbeat as we'd packed, driven, flown, and arrived. It wasn't even that she'd pulled away romantically that pissed me off. It was that she'd blocked me as her best friend. She'd closed herself down and built a wall so high I'd need a damn ladder.

"Do you want me to take you home?" I asked Addy.

"No. I'm scared that if I leave..."

He won't be alive when I come back. I heard it loud and clear without her uttering a word.

"I understand."

Another hour passed before Avery walked out.

I moved to sit up straight, but she shook her head. "He's still... He's alive," she whispered as she motioned to Addy. "How long has she been asleep?"

"About a half hour," I said softly.

She nodded, taking the seat on the other side of me. Her skin was pale in gross contrast to the dark circles under her eyes. The worst part was that they were flat, giving away no hint of whatever emotion she was feeling.

"How is he?" I asked.

"Stable." She shrugged. "Aunt Dawn is a mess. I never told her how bad it really was. Figured if I could handle it on my own, why air the laundry, you know?"

I threaded our fingers and squeezed lightly. "You've done a damn fine job. Better than anyone else could have. What happened here is not your fault. It's his."

She nodded slowly, repetitively, which moved to slight rocking motions. "I should have been here."

Boom. I heard my heart hit the floor with every word. "This isn't your fault," I repeated. "You have to know that or it will eat you up."

She kept rocking, but the head nod changed to her shaking it. "I should have been here. I know to move the meds. I know what he's capable of."

"Avery," I begged.

She stood up, dropped my hand, and walked back into the ICU.

* * * *

Two days later he was still alive.

I wasn't so sure about Avery. She was gaunt, quiet, and barely left his room unless the nurses told her she had to. She slept on the waiting room couches and only went home to shower.

I'd given up on trying to get her to talk to me yesterday. Avery would open up when she wanted to, and until then it was like chipping away at Fort Knox with a fucking toothpick.

So instead of sitting there for hours, waiting for her to realize I was right next to her, I started on the list Bishop had texted me.

"Friday is great," I told the moving company. "I'm just impressed you can get it done by then. Thank you."

I hung up and crossed coordinate movers off my to-do list as I chugged down a glass of water.

I'd already put his truck on Craigslist and had an appointment to show it to a potential buyer. Not bad for a Tuesday morning.

On the flipside, he was having the satellite installed at our new place in Colorado.

Is it ours? Is she even coming?

A knock at the door startled Zeus, but he was wagging like a puppy when I opened the door to find Avery standing there. Her hair was up in a messy knot, but it was clean, and her jeans and baseball tee were different than the outfit I'd seen her in this morning.

"Hey. You didn't have to knock."

She shrugged, preoccupied with petting Zeus. "I didn't want to barge in. Do you have a couple of minutes?" Finally, she looked up at me, but the cool, detached look in her eyes had my stomach somersaulting.

"Of course. Come on in."

She passed me in the doorway, careful not to brush against me, and my senses went on high alert, warning bells screaming in my ears. "Dad's awake," she said, crossing her arms in front of her chest. The move didn't look defensive, more like what she would do to hold herself together.

"That's great!" He was going to be okay. My relief was short-lived because when I reached for her, she stepped away. "Avery?"

She shook her head, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip momentarily. "Just stay over there. I can't think when you touch me."

"Okay," I said slowly, tucking my thumbs into the pockets of my shorts to keep my hands off her. She looked so small, defenseless, and it was ripping me apart that she didn't want me to touch her.

"He's awake and talking since this morning, right after you left, actually."

"That's good. What's wrong? This is good—no, great news. He's going to be okay. Maybe this will be a turning point for him."

She laughed, the sound bitter and empty. "He won't change. He's never going to change. And he won't go to Colorado. He refuses. Says that this whole thing was my fault for being gone, and that the minute I leave he'll do it again."

"Avery..." God, I wanted to strangle him with my bare hands. None of this was her fault, but he'd gotten it into her so young—the guilt, the obligation—until it became part of her very being.

"It wasn't even intentional, that's the kicker. He didn't take the whole bottle or anything, just upped his pain meds. But the dosage he was already on gave him an accidental overdose."

"This wasn't your fault. I will say it every minute of every day until you realize that. He's an adult. He made a choice."

"But it is my fault," she cried. "I left. I believed that someone else could care for him, and this is what happened. None of this would have happened if I'd been here—where I'm supposed to be, taking care of

my family.” She rubbed her hands over her bloodshot eyes, the blue even brighter than usual. “What was I thinking?”

I walked over to her, damning her instructions, and gently lifted her wrists so I could see her face. “You were thinking that you deserve happiness, too. You deserve a life, love, kids, a future that isn’t all about when he decides to go off the rails.”

“But I don’t.” Her voice was quiet, her eyes pleading for something I didn’t know how to give. “Sometimes we draw the short straw. You lost your dad, then your mom. Are you telling me you wouldn’t feel the same if it was them? If you had a chance to be there for them, would you leave? Or would you suck up the bitterness because it’s the straw you were dealt, and just be thankful you have them around?”

The small piece of hope I’d kept cradled close screamed out its defeat and died. “You’re not coming back to Colorado with me right now.”

She shook her head. “I can’t. Look what happened when I left him.”

I took a deep, steadying breath and pulled out plan B. “Okay, then we’ll spend the winter here, get him healthy, and talk about it again in the spring. By then maybe his head will be clear enough to make a better choice.”

“No,” she whispered. “He said he’ll die in that house before he moves. It’s where we all lived when Mom was alive, and that’s all there is left.”

“I typically draw the line at relocating an entire house, but I can make some calls,” I tried to joke. I was grasping at straws as they slid through my hands.

“He’s lonely. He said that I’m never there, and he’s right. Between working both jobs and seeing...”

“Me,” I offered, my tone tensing.

“You,” she agreed softly. “With all that, I’m not around for him, and there’s no one else he’ll let in.”

“What are you saying?” I asked, the pit in my stomach growing to black-hole proportions.

She looked up at me, the sadness of the world pouring out of her eyes, and I knew. I fucking knew. “You’re not coming at all.”

“I can’t. I would never forgive myself if something happened to him.”

My mind swam, trying to come up with plan C. “Okay, so I’ll go seasonal. I’ll work with the Legacy crew in the summer, and come back for winters. It will suck, but we can manage it.”

She shook her head. “No. It wouldn’t work. We’d both be miserable, and eventually you’d resent me. We’d just be prolonging the inevitable.”

“Don’t do this.”

She tugged her wrists free and cupped my face with her hands, scratching her palms over my day’s worth of stubble. “You are the most beautiful dream. What we could have had...that was another life, with another girl who could walk away from her responsibility. That girl is never going to be me. Maybe if Adeline was grown, but there’s just too much here.”

“I can call Bash. I’ll back out of the team. There’s one other guy they could call, and I’ll make sure he takes the slot.”

She brushed her thumb over my lower lip. “You staying won’t fix anything. I’d cost you the chance to be on the Legacy crew.”

“I don’t care. Nothing matters without you.”

Her hands fell from my face, and I realized that I was wrong. I wasn’t grasping at straws—I was desperately clutching at her, and she fell through my fingers like running water, impossible to hold and yet even harder to whisk away in its entirety. She’d already soaked into my soul.

“I can’t be with you, River. Not now. Not ever. I can’t go, and you can’t stay. Our dream was beautiful—the happiest few days of my life—but it’s time to wake up. I’m not a child. I can’t do selfish things, and not everyone gets the fairy tale.”

“You are my fairy tale,” I argued. “You are the only woman I have ever loved. The only woman I will ever love, and I’m not giving up that easily.”

“I’m not giving you a choice!” she yelled, backing away from me. The lack of physical contact felt like

having a limb severed. My nerves screamed to have her back. “God, can’t you see? I’m still the girl with the goddamned rusted lug nuts on the flat tire. I’m not going to back down. I’m not going to leave him. That’s not what good people do!”

I raked my hands down my face. “So what am I supposed to do? Leave you because you’re honorable? Because you stepped up to do what no one else would? Do you expect me to be less than the man you know by walking away?”

She shook her head, two crystal tears streaking down her cheeks. “No. I expect you to do what you need to for your family. Go to Colorado. Become what you were destined to be. Live in that house and be happy, River. Just be happy!”

“I can’t be happy without you! Is that seriously what you think of me? That I can move, start over? Forget that you exist? You’re in every single breath I take, every thought I have. I’m not leaving you here to carry this by yourself. To raise Addy, to take care of your dad, to work yourself to death. That’s not in my nature.”

“It’s not your choice to make,” she said, furiously wiping her tears away. “Whether or not you’re still here, we’re over. I won’t sit by and watch you resent me, watch you kiss that picture every time you come home from a fire. That will kill me far more than knowing you’re happy somewhere else...with someone else.”

Pure, white-hot rage choked me, and I had to swallow a couple times before I was under control. “If you think you’re that easily replaceable, then you never really knew me.”

“We only had a few days,” she said quietly.

“We had seven fucking years.”

“And they’re over. We’re over.”

“Avery...”

“What’s your solution, River? What happens if you stay here and Bishop is killed on a fire? You wouldn’t ever recover from that. The guilt alone would destroy you. What if I go there and my dad dies because I wasn’t here to take care of him? I’m his daughter. His flesh and bone. I owe this to my mother. I promised her, and as much as I—” My heart stopped as she sucked in a breath, closing her eyes for a moment. “As much as I care for you, it would turn to hate for putting me in that position where I have to choose to abandon my family to be with you.”

Hate. The word drove a knife through my chest, and as sure as if it was a physical wound, my heart bled out on my hardwood floor. “You’re really ending this.”

“I don’t have a choice.”

I shook my head. “No, you have all the choices, you’re just refusing to make them. I’m not saying they’re easy choices, but at least you have them. Me, on the other hand, I get to stand here while you shred me because you’re not willing to take a fucking chance!”

“There’s no chance to take! This is a certainty.”

“You have no idea what could happen over the winter. None. You’re letting him manipulate you, as usual. As your best friend, I stood by and watched you put yourself last over and over. But as the man who loves you, openly and out loud, I can’t stand to watch you do this to yourself.”

“I’m telling you not to watch. I’m telling you to go.”

“It’s bullshit that you think you get to make that choice for me!”

“You’re like this kid in a car, speeding toward the cliff, knowing that it’s coming but refusing to turn, or just stop.”

“And you’re too scared of the cliff to find another way,” I threw back.

“Do you realize what happens when you jump off a damn cliff? You fall. You die. The ground crushes you.”

“Or maybe you fly. Damn it, Avery, why do you make it so hard to love you? Why can’t you just let me love you?”

She looked like I’d slapped her, those eyes huge and pooling with tears as we stood facing each other,

the only sound in the room the pounding of my heart, the rush of blood through my ears.

“I never wanted it to end this way,” she whispered.

“Yeah, well, I never wanted it to end.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“That makes two of us.”

She nodded and walked to the door, pausing at the frame to look back. “Goodbye, River.”

I fought against every one of my instincts that demanded I go after her and kiss some sense into her, force her into seeing that we could make it. No matter how imperfect our circumstances, we were perfect for each other. But I was done forcing her to see the possibilities. This was her choice.

Every muscle in my body locked as I spoke the words she wanted.

“Bye, Avery.”

The sound of the door closing reverberated through every cell of my body. Only then did I say the word I needed.

“I love you.”

The future I’d planned, dreamed of, yearned for disintegrated in front of me. My heart shattered with the glass I threw against the wall, water dripping down the wall and soaking into the paint.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Avery

“I’m the one in the hospital, but you’re the one who looks like shit,” Dad said as I walked into his room.

“Get off her case, Jim,” Aunt Dawn said from the chair next to his bed. “Honey, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I replied, giving the same answer I had for the last three days since I’d left River.

I said it to everyone at work when they asked about how red my eyes were. I said it to Addy when she caught me staring off into space, thinking about him. I said it to myself every time I felt my walls crumble and the not-fine emotions surface.

“Fine or not, you look like crap,” Dad repeated, sitting up in bed with a wince. “I wish they hadn’t lowered my meds.”

“You have to be able to function,” I said. “Besides, with the new physical therapy, maybe we can wean you off them.”

“I’m not seeing a physical therapist,” he grumbled.

“Yeah, why bother with something that might help you?” I snapped. “Why not just up the pain meds until we’re here again?”

“Watch your tone!” He seethed. “Your mother would be ashamed!”

My mouth snapped shut, heat flushing my face. She had handled him with more grace than I ever would manage...and she had died for it.

“Jim,” Aunt Dawn warned. “Avery didn’t put you in this hospital. You did that yourself.”

Before he could snap back at her, the doctor came in to discharge Dad. I stared out the window in the direction of River’s house, wondering what he was doing, how mad at me he still was.

Did I make a mistake? I shut that line of thinking down before it could destroy me. There hadn’t been a choice to make. I had to set him free before we destroyed each other.

Too late.

I listened as the doctor gave the discharge instructions to my aunt. The pain meds he was allowed, the therapist he needed to see. It should have been me the doctor gave the instructions to. After all, I was the one who was responsible for Dad. But this doc wouldn’t know that. In appearances, it made sense that the fifty-ish woman was caring for the fifty-ish man.

Not the twenty-five year old.

A little over an hour later, we had Dad settled back on the living room couch. “Give me the remote,” he demanded when Aunt Dawn went to grab his bag from the car.

I handed it over without a word, too tired to fight with him over manners.

“Give me one of those white pills.”

“No, it’s not time yet,” I told him, removing the medication.

“You’re not the adult here!” he screamed.

“Of course I am!” I fired back. “That’s what you made me! You want to be the grown-up then you have to act like it.”

I put the meds in the small breadbox on top of the refrigerator, gripped the counter, and leaned over, trying to get a breath. Everything suddenly felt stifling, as if the walls of my life were suddenly moving closer—like I was stuck in that trash compactor on *Star Wars*.

But I’d let my Han Solo walk away.

Gasping for air, I stumbled to the front door, grabbing my car keys on the way out. I needed to see him. Even if it was only for a second. Even if he told me to go the hell away, I needed him.

“Avery?” Aunt Dawn bumped into me on the bottom steps. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I replied automatically, sucking in the clean, sweet air. “I just need to run an errand. Do you think you could stay with him?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you,” I said, nearly running to my car.

“Honey,” she called out. “You don’t have to do this—take care of him on your own. I didn’t know how bad it was, you were that good at caring for him. But I’m here now. I’m not leaving you to do this on your own, do you understand?”

“He’s my father,” I said with a shrug.

“He’s my little brother. He was my responsibility long before he was yours. Don’t you let your father’s actions stop you from living your life. Do you understand me? I won’t stand for it, and neither would your mother.”

I nodded, unable to think of anything to say, then slid behind the wheel. She waved before disappearing into the house, and I backed out of our driveway, more than desperate to get to River.

Maybe River was right. Maybe if I had Aunt Dawn to push Dad, he’d get better—at least well enough to move to Colorado. Maybe all he needed was the winter.

Maybe there was something at the cliff’s edge.

I sped across the back roads toward River’s house. I’d never gone this long without talking to him unless he was on a fire, and we’d never been in a fight this severe, but I knew it could be fixed.

He was River. I was Avery. It was as simple as that.

I pulled into his driveway and killed the ignition, running for the house before I heard the car door fully shut behind me. Zeus wasn’t barking, so maybe they were out for a run.

I fumbled with my keys, pulling out the small bronze one he’d given me years ago, and opened the door.

“River? I used my—” The air rushed from my lungs as I looked into his perfectly clean, perfectly empty house. “Key.”

Everything was gone. The furniture. The dishes. Zeus’s bowls. The house I loved had been transformed into an empty shell. Somehow I got my feet to move, to carry me to the kitchen counter where there was a stack of papers. There was a listing agreement and a note to Mindy Ruiz, a local realtor.

Hey, Mindy,

Here’s the listing agreement. Sorry I had to leave so fast. It just made sense to send all my stuff with Bishop’s. You’ll find his listing agreement under mine. If you need anything else, I’ll forward my new number from Colorado. All the keys are here except one. Avery Claire has it. Let her keep it. I’ll pay to have the locks redone when you find new buyers.

Thanks,

River Maldonado

He was gone. Really and truly gone. Because I told him to go.

My back hit the cabinet and I fell to the ground. Hugging my knees to my chest, I finally succumbed to my emotions, letting them out of the cage I’d locked them in.

I loved him. I’d always thought if I didn’t acknowledge that fact, it wouldn’t have the power to hurt me, but I was pulverized all the same. Whether or not I’d told him, or even myself, didn’t matter. The love was still there, and the ache was pure agony.

I’d had him. Touched him. Loved him. I’d held his heart in my hands and then thrown it back at him.

My sobs echoed through the empty house until my body ran out of tears. By the time I left, it was dark—and I was broken.

* * * *

“I want to move to Colorado,” Adeline said as she helped me load the dishwasher.

“They have some really great colleges there. Why don’t we do some research? It’s only five years away.” I slipped another glass into the top rack.

“Because I want to go now.”

My stomach tightened. “Yeah, well, we can’t. Look what happened when I left last time.” It had been three weeks since he’d overdosed. Two since River moved to Colorado.

One since he posted a photo of his new house on Instagram with the caption that he was home in Legacy for good.

“Where’s that beer?” Dad called out from the living room.

“That was his choice,” Addy whispered.

I grabbed a clean glass from the cabinet, filled it with ice and water, and walked out of the kitchen without replying. How could she understand? She was only thirteen. I’d been two years older when Mom died, and even then I hadn’t fully understood.

“Here we go,” I said to Dad as I put the glass within his reach on the coffee table.

“What is that bullshit?” he spat.

“That is water. Doc said no booze, remember?” I counted to ten in my head, reminding myself that he was an addict.

“I don’t give a fuck what that doctor said. Get me a beer before your aunt Dawn gets back from the store.”

“No,” I said with a shake of my head.

“Girl!” he yelled, and I heard Adeline go silent in the kitchen. The water was running, but no dishes clanked.

“I didn’t give up everything good in my life just so you could sit there and drink yourself to death,” I said calmly.

“Get me the goddamned beer! Gave up everything good? What would you know? Because you broke up with a boy who you dated for all of five seconds? I lost your mother!”

“I did, too!” I yelled. “You aren’t the only one who lost her!”

Something went sailing past my head and smashed against the wall. I spun to see water running down the wall into a puddle of ice and smashed glass.

“Clean that up!” he yelled.

“Clean it up yourself,” I snapped and walked away.

My chest heaved as I ran outside, gasping for the clean air as I sat on the front steps, my head in my hands. He’d fucking thrown a glass at me. What was next? Would he hit me? Would he hit Addy?

The doc had warned us that he would get worse before he got better. That weaning him down from the pain meds wasn’t going to be pleasant, but this was horrid. Maybe I needed to send Addy to a friend’s house for the next month or so.

The door opened and shut behind me and Adeline joined me on the step. “I want to move now.”

“I know,” I said, putting my arm around her. “But we can’t just leave him.”

“We wouldn’t be. Aunt Dawn is here. She’s already offered to take care of him, and let’s face it—she’s the only one he’s remotely scared of.”

“That’s true, but he’s our dad.”

“He’s never going to forgive us for Mom dying,” she whispered.

I wanted to tell her that wasn’t true, but I’d made a promise to never lie to her, so I stayed silent.

“Avery?”

“Yeah?”

“I did something.”

My stomach clenched. “Okay. What did you do?”

“You know my savings?”

“I do.” She hated that I made her save half of every birthday gift from our extended family.

“I spent it yesterday.”

Before I could flip out on her that she’d need that when she went to college, she unfolded a paper from her back pocket and handed it to me.

Doing my best to keep my hands from trembling, I opened it up. Then my jaw dropped. “You want me to be your legal guardian?”

She nodded. “There’s nothing left for us here, Avery. You’re already more of a parent than he is. This would just make it possible...”

“For us to move to Colorado without him,” I whispered.

“For us to be free.”

I hugged her to me, and for the first time in my life, I considered leaving him behind.

* * * *

“You’re sure you’re okay to get him to his appointment?” I asked Aunt Dawn.

“Yes, Avery. You go to work. Maybe stay out late? Go see a movie?”

It had been a month since River left, and I still hadn’t ventured out for more than work, groceries, or getting Adeline to school. Just like River’s house had become nothing more than a shell when he left, I was hollowing out on the inside without him.

I stalked his Instagram like a mad woman, savoring the pictures he took of Legacy, of the views from his run, or the deck. Where he told me that he loved me.

As much as those pictures hurt, it was nothing compared to the pain that ripped me in two when his house here sold.

As I reached for a pre-work snack, I saw a pamphlet on the counter. “LaVerna Lodge. What’s this?”

“That’s an extended rehab center,” Aunt Dawn said slowly. “I wanted to talk to you about it later. He’s not getting any better with how we’re doing things, and I thought maybe he needed a little more structure. A firmer hand.”

He hadn’t had another violent outburst, but he hadn’t cleaned up the glass he’d broken, either. He’d been careful with his words, especially when Aunt Dawn was around. Maybe Addy was right and I wasn’t what he needed to get healthy. “You think this is what he needs?”

She covered my hand with hers. “I do. I have the money, you don’t have to worry about that. But I think you both need to go. Him to the recovery center and you to that man you love so desperately.”

A lump formed in my throat. “That ship sailed.”

“Chase it down,” she said softly. “You have your whole life ahead of you. Let your dad get healthy. Right now he doesn’t deserve you, and there comes a point where you need to recognize that he’s not your responsibility, no matter how much you claim otherwise.”

Never tell, Avery. You can never tell. Mom’s words came back to me as I glanced at the pamphlet. “He’ll never agree. His addiction...it was something he would never let on in the public.”

“Now that, my dear, is a ship that’s sailed. The ambulance and hospital stay outed him pretty damn loudly. I honestly don’t know why you didn’t come to me earlier.”

“I...he...” I stuttered. “I did it for Mom, because I was scared that if I left, or I brought attention to it, the system would take Addy. She was so little, and I was still in high school.”

“You’re not anymore. You’d be more than fit as a guardian...if you wanted to be. I’m here. I’m not going anywhere, and if you want to go, I can take care of Adeline. Either way, we really need to get him into treatment.”

I nodded. She was right about everything. The same fear that had me covering his ass all these years didn’t come into play anymore. “Maybe I can talk to him about it.” A quick glance at my phone told me I had thirty minutes before I needed to leave. “Let me get dressed for work, first.”

Ten minutes later, I walked toward the living room but paused just outside the door when I heard Aunt Dawn talking with Adeline, and I shamelessly eavesdropped.

“They have a great pre-law program, and the campus is gorgeous,” Addy said.

“I’m sure it is, baby. I’m so proud of you for thinking ahead. Have you looked anywhere local?” Aunt Dawn asked.

Dad struggled to sit up, and Aunt Dawn helped him, propping a pillow behind his back.

Addy licked her lips nervously, her eyes darting toward Dad before answering. “Not really. I think I belong there. Colorado just kind of calls to me.”

I smiled at the wistfulness in her voice, the way her world seemed so open, everything possible. She had the determination to do it, too. Once Adeline put her mind to something, it was pretty much a done deal.

“What about Avery?” Dad asked, turning his eyes soft in a way I had only seen when he wanted something.

Chills raced down my spine.

“What about her?” Adeline asked carefully. “She loves Colorado.”

“She does, but she won’t leave here. This is her home—your home, too, but I understand you wanting to stretch your wings. Our little town isn’t for everyone, is it?”

“No,” she said quietly, looking at her hands.

“I guess...” He shook his head, and I leaned closer.

“What?” she asked in a small voice.

“I just guess I never saw you as being the kind of girl who would abandon her family.”

Oh, hell no.

“Oh, that’s not what she’d be doing—” Aunt Dawn argued, but the damage was done.

Addy’s shoulders slumped. “I guess I’d never thought of it that way.”

“I bet Avery has,” he said, reaching for her hand. “I don’t know how she’d get by without you.”

Every time he’d used those exact words on me flooded my head, the memories bringing with them the kind of cold rage I hadn’t felt since the night Mom died.

It wasn’t about family for him. If it was, he’d be content that I was here to take care of him and he would have eventually let Adeline go. No, it was about control.

And I was taking it back.

I walked to the hall table and calmly took out Adeline’s folded paper, then grabbed a pen and went back to the living room, Aunt Dawn following me with her head tilted.

“Avery?”

I ignored her and made a beeline straight for my father. “Addy, move,” I instructed her.

She jumped, moving out of the way. I didn’t look at her, instead I focused completely on the man who’d blamed me for his misery since I was fifteen.

“Sign it,” I said, handing him the paper and pen.

“What?” he scoffed, opening the paper. “Like hell am I signing this.”

“You’ll sign it,” I told him. “I’m taking Adeline to Colorado. She’s going to have a life. She’s going to finish out a real childhood and then be whatever the hell she wants when she grows up. She’s not staying here under your thumb so you can guilt her into spending her life in this house. I refuse. Sign the goddamned paper.”

“Have you lost your mind, girl?” he spat at me. “She’s my child. You want to leave? Go. No one’s stopping you. Good riddance. But she stays.” He pointed the pen at Adeline.

I sat in the chair, leaning close to him so only he could hear me. “You sign that paper, or I will tell her why our mother is really dead.” He tensed. “You were high while you were driving. You see, you can play off your addiction as the result of that crash and get all the sympathy, but I’m old enough to remember. We were at Grandma’s because Mom needed to dry you out before your work buddies realized what you’d become. I know because I wasn’t a kid when it happened, Dad. I heard her on the phone. I knew what drug paraphernalia looked like.”

“You wouldn’t,” he whispered, his eyes wide with panic.

“I would. For Adeline, I would. You can blame us for being born all you want, but you were an addict way before that accident. And I know that the only reason you weren’t put in jail was because you were on the force and your buddy figured losing Mom would change you. He didn’t want to take you away from us.”

“Avery...”

“I hated you, but I was also so grateful just to have you alive.”

“Please don’t...”

“But I don’t feel that way anymore. I have no problem writing a huge article about it for the paper. Sure, maybe no one will believe me, but chances are they all will—including Adeline. Sign the paper, Dad. Free her. Get healthy. Then come find us, and we’ll see if we can ever repair what you’ve systematically destroyed. Until then... Sign. The. Fucking. Paper.”

A simple movement of his wrist, and Adeline was free.

And so was I.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

River

My heart pounded as I finished my run. When the hell was I finally going to adjust to this altitude? I'd been running every day for the last five weeks and I still felt like I needed a lung transplant after four miles.

"It's embarrassing, Zeus," I said as we stretched out near the steps.

He looked up at me with an exasperated expression and laid down while I worked out my quads. I glanced over at the flower beds I'd put in last weekend and wondered what Avery would have planted.

Would she have wanted one around the mail box I'd just put in? Did it even fucking matter? I closed my eyes against the onslaught of pain I knew was coming. Every time I thought about her was followed by an exquisite ache somewhere in the vicinity of where my heart used to be.

I clicked my tongue and Zeus jumped up, following me into the house. All the furniture I didn't like had been taken away, but I was too damn lazy to pick out anything new. I'd donated damn near every piece that had come from Alaska. It just hadn't fit here. It was too much...Avery. I'd kept the bed, though. I couldn't bring myself to get rid of the one place I'd slept next to her, made love to her.

Maybe I should have told Bash that I wanted a different house, one she hadn't been in. He'd already been pissed at me for insisting on paying him for this one. Not that I cared. I wasn't going to live in a house that another man paid for—I didn't care if he called it a signing bonus or not. Maybe another house would have been better. One where I didn't see her smiling, crying out in pleasure, or picture her arching underneath me.

One where I didn't see her standing in my kitchen.

My heart stopped beating, my breath faltered, and the only muscle I moved were my eyelids, trying to blink away the vision of Avery standing at my stove, making breakfast.

Hell, I would have thought she was a mirage, if not for the smell of bacon and Zeus's excited yipping. Damn, that dog turned into a pitiful puppy when she was around...just like his owner.

"Hi," she said softly, the island between us.

"Hi."

She licked her lips nervously, her hair a wild tumble around her shoulders that I was desperate to slide my hands through. "So, I used my key."

"Finally. It only took me moving three thousand miles away to get you to do that." My feet were frozen. No matter how much I wanted to move, to get just the slightest bit closer to her, they wouldn't comply.

She forced a smile, and it was the most beautiful damn thing I'd seen since she'd smiled here six weeks ago. "I'm a little slow to act sometimes."

"Snails are faster," I agreed.

"I'm here," she said softly, her nervousness showing in the way she twisted the spatula in her hand.

"I've noticed," I said. Why? For the first time, I was scared to ask a damn question, scared that this was just a visit. Scared that all she wanted was my friendship when I loved her so much that I ached with it.

She swallowed, taking the rest of the bacon out of the pan and then moving it off the heat. "I thought maybe I was too late," she said, looking up at me as she came around the island in a pale blue sundress that matched her eyes to a T. "I wondered if you'd moved on. It's not like you're hard to look at," she muttered.

My forehead puckered, trying to figure out what the hell to say to her that wouldn't send her running back to Alaska.

"I had Harper drop me off. She has Adeline at the school right now, picking up enrollment papers."

My heart slammed to a beat again, life rushing through my veins. She was moving here. She'd brought

Adeline.

She was staying.

“And when we pulled up, I was terrified that I’d find some other woman here, you know? Because I was so fucking stupid to let you go.”

I stepped forward, and she put her hand out, taking a step back and shaking her head. “No. I told you once, I can’t think when you touch me.”

My feet stayed planted only with the utmost effort.

“But then I got out of the car and saw the flower beds,” she whispered. Then she smiled so brightly that her entire face lit up. “And I saw the swing you put on the front porch, and I knew.”

“Knew what?” I asked her, needing to hear the words.

“I knew that you hadn’t moved on. That this was still our house, even if I’d pushed you away. I knew that you still loved me.”

I almost laughed. Almost. “I’ve loved you for seven years. It would take a hell of a lot longer than a month to stop. It would take about seven eternities.”

Her breasts rose and fell quickly as she struggled for control. “Thank God,” she said as her voice broke. “Because I’m so in love with you that I don’t know what I’d do if you ever stopped loving me.”

Three steps and she was in my arms, my mouth fused to hers. The kiss was desperate, hungry, with an edge to it that I hadn’t intended, but it was there all the same. I picked her up, and she wrapped those legs around me, her bare feet digging into my back as I carried her to the counter and set her ass on it.

“I missed you so fucking much,” I told her in between kisses down her neck, the tops of breasts that peeked just above the fabric.

“River,” she moaned, her hands tight in my hair, threading through where I had it pulled back. I’d never heard a more beautiful sound. “I can’t think.”

“Good,” I told her, stroking my hand up her dress, caressing her thigh. “I let you think too much and look where that got us. From now on no head, just heart.”

Her hand covered my heart. “What does yours tell you?”

I smiled, happiness bursting through me in ways I never thought would happen again. “That I’m going to love you until the day I die.”

“Good,” she said. “Now you’d better be quick. You’ve got maybe an hour before Addy is back.”

“Welcome to life with a kid.” I laughed, kissing her as my fingers slipped under her panties. “I haven’t showered,” I told her.

“I could not care less,” she said, ripping my shirt over my head, then gasping as I parted her and ran my fingers from her slick entrance to her clit. “Just don’t stop.”

“There’s no chance of that,” I promised. “You’re all I’ve thought about since I left Alaska.” I stripped her panties off her and dropped my shorts to the ground, pulling her to the edge of the counter, my mind focused on getting inside her, fucking her until she couldn’t ever think about walking away from me again, and then making love to her until she agreed to marry me. “Shit. Condoms are upstairs.”

“I’m on birth control,” she said, her voice breathless as she brought her mouth back to mine. “Now, River.”

Raising her dress to her waist, I nudged her entrance with my dick and then thrust home.

Holy. Shit.

“I didn’t imagine it,” I said into her mouth between kisses. “We really are this good together.”

She rocked her hips against me, her feet digging into my ass for leverage. I groaned and gave up trying to talk. I used my body to tell her everything I needed to say. Every thrust was my vow of love, every kiss my plea that she never leave me again.

Every gasp from her lips told me how much she’d missed me. Every rake of her nails told me she was as desperate for this as I was.

I grasped her hips and pulled her closer, changing our angle to hit her where I knew it would make her writhe.

“Yes, River. Yes.” She chanted my name as I thumbed her clit, kissing her deeply, stroking her mouth with my tongue the same way I moved within her.

She was molten, pouring over me, setting me on fire as I thrust again and again, never giving her a chance to catch her breath.

She tightened around me, her cries growing louder, her breath catching and then holding as she came apart in my arms, arching against me. I was helpless against her, my orgasm ripping through me, shredding everything I was and rebuilding me as nothing more than Avery’s man.

It was perfection.

She was perfection.

Our breathing was ragged as she stroked my hair, my lips pressed to her neck. “Wow,” she said, reminding me of the first time she’d seen our house.

“Is that all you can say?” I asked her with a laugh.

“Do you have something better?” she asked with a grin as I pulled back to look in her eyes. She was so beautiful, her lips swollen from my kisses, her hair wild from my hands.

“I do.”

She arched a delicate eyebrow at me.

“Welcome home, Avery.”

EPILOGUE

Avery

Two years later

“Midnight. Do you understand me?” River’s voice was low and menacing.

“Y-y-yes, sir,” the boy said as he stood in our entry hall.

“I don’t care if it’s homecoming. I don’t care if you think you’re getting lucky tonight. You touch her in any way she doesn’t expressly ask for and they will never find your body.”

The kid paled, and I did my best not to sputter in laughter as I watched my husband from the stairs.

“Yes, sir,” he said a little stronger now.

“Do you have condoms?”

“W-what?” the kid asked.

“Do you?” River barked.

“No, sir?” The kid panicked, looking back and forth like there was someone who might save him.

“Is that because you don’t believe in safe sex, or because you are well aware that you won’t be getting anywhere near her tonight?” River snapped.

“I...uh...I do believe in safe sex, I just haven’t had any yet,” the kid squeaked.

“Yet?” River barked.

“I’m not planning on starting tonight, sir!”

“Good answer. Midnight, or I come looking for you. I grew up here. I know all the spots, and I know exactly where your parents live. Do you understand me?”

“I do, sir.” The kid managed to stand upright, which I knew got him a little more respect in River’s eyes.

“Okay. As long as we understand each other, Devin.”

“We do,” the kid said.

“Is he done scaring him yet?” Addy asked, coming down the stairs in a silver, knee-length homecoming dress that made my little sister look like an angel.

“I think so. Maybe you should save him,” I suggested.

“Did you get enough pictures?”

I thought of the three dozen or so on my camera. “I think so. I sent a couple to Dad already, and he said you look gorgeous. Did you find your purse?”

“I did.” She hugged me. “Thank you.”

“I love you. Be safe. Call me if you need anything, do you understand?”

“I do,” she said.

Then she walked over to her date, kissing River’s cheek first. “I’ll be home by midnight, I promise.”

“Uh huh,” he muttered. “You’re more likely to break the curfew than he is.”

“Yeah, yeah. Love you,” she told him before they headed out to the dance.

I came up behind River as he watched from the front bay window. “He opened her door,” he said with approval.

Once they were out of the driveway, he pulled me into his arms. “She’s going to be the death of me. I swear.”

“You’re good at this dad thing,” I told River, reveling in the feel of him. A year of marriage and I still hadn’t tired of this. Longest honeymoon period ever.

“You think?”

“I do. And I’m glad.”

“Oh, are you?” he asked.

“Yeah, considering you’ll get to do it from the beginning in about seven months.” My teeth dug into my lower lip as I watched his every reaction.

He blinked down at me. “For real?” he whispered.

“Confirmed with the doc this morning,” I told him, tears prickling my eyes.

Sheer wonder filled his eyes. “A baby.”

“Our baby,” I confirmed.

He kissed me deep, his hand protectively covering my belly. “Amazing. Just...perfect.”

I sighed, leaning into his kiss. This was the kind of happiness I’d never dreamed of having, and yet here it was in overflowing abundance, filling every nook and cranny of my heart until I thought I’d burst.

His eyes flickered to the window and back to me. “Oh, God. What if it’s a girl?”

I laughed. “Would that be so bad?”

“I know you Claire girls. I’m going to need another gun.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t wait to see how much trouble a Maldonado girl will be.”

He paled. “Maybe two guns.”

He kissed me again, and I sank into him, losing myself in his love and the promise that forever gave us.

Moving here, choosing a life with River, it hadn’t just set me free.

It had brought me home.

The End.

ABOUT REBECCA YARROS

Rebecca Yarros a hopeless romantic and a lover of all things coffee, chocolate, and Paleo. She is the author of the Flight & Glory series, which includes *Full Measures*, the award-winning *Eyes Turned Skyward*, *Beyond What is Given*, and *Hallowed Ground*. She loves military heroes, and has been blissfully married to hers for fourteen years.

When she's not writing, she's tying hockey skates for her four sons, sneaking in some guitar time, or watching brat-pack movies with her two daughters. She lives in Colorado with the hottest Apache pilot ever, their rambunctious gaggle of kids, an English bulldog who is more stubborn than sweet, and a tortoise named Phillip who is faster than you'd think. They recently adopted their youngest daughter from the foster system, and Rebecca is passionate about helping others do the same.

Want to know about Rebecca's next release? Join her mailing list:
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WILDER
The Renegade Series
By Rebecca Yarros
Coming 9/19/16

He's Paxton Wilder.

Twenty-two- year-old, tattooed, smoking-hot leader of the Renegades.

Five time X Game medalist.

The world is his playground—especially this year—and for the next nine months I'm stuck as his tutor on the Study at Sea program.

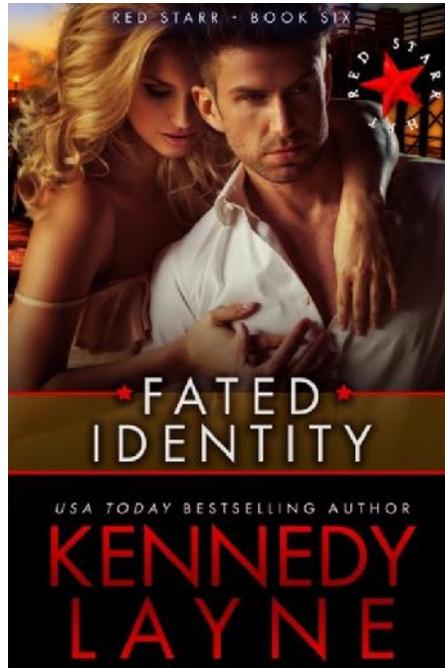
He's too busy staging worldwide stunts for his documentary to get to class.

But if I can't get him to take academics seriously, I'll lose my scholarship...if I don't lose my heart first.

Six unlikely friends on a nine-month cruise with the Study at Sea program will learn that chemistry is more than a subject and the best lessons aren't taught in the classroom...but in the heart.

FATED IDENTITY

Red Starr, Book Six
By Kennedy Layne



DEDICATION

Liz Berry and M.J. Rose—Thank you so very much for including me in such a talented group of women who make up the 1,001 Dark Nights Discovery Authors. I'm honored and appreciative of such a prestigious opportunity.

Jeffrey—Fate can be very fickle. I love that you are a part of mine and that I am a part of yours.

CHAPTER ONE

Grady Kenton stormed through the glass security doors of the CIA's Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis Desk in the Intelligence Division located in the maze of halls at Langley. He was looking for the one woman who could give him the answers he sought. He didn't care about the curious stares he was receiving as he made his way through the sea of cubicles facing the multitude of executive offices lining the outer wall. The analysts who worked here didn't get an office with a view—at least, not until they had been promoted to the level of their incompetence.

When Grady had a choice between the two separated hallways, he veered down the left corridor with a purpose. The office he was targeting was the last one on the left, offering a view out of the specially designed windows of multiple rows of pine trees. The vista was definitely a one-way experience, deliberately constructed to keep prying eyes from determining what was going on inside one of the world's most secretive buildings. It would also prevent anyone from seeing or hearing the upcoming argument that was about to ensue.

“Sir, you can't—”

Grady held up his agency identification badge dangling from his company lanyard without breaking stride, most of these employees knowing exactly who he was and the influence he had at the highest levels within the National Clandestine Services (NCS) Division at the Agency. He'd worked hard in garnering the rank of Lieutenant Colonel from his career in the Marine Corps within the Intelligence field and he'd been recruited as a senior planning and operations advisor to the CIA after his retirement from the military.

He was good at his job and worked closely with those within his particular department. This young administrative assistant was notably not among them, but at least he had the wisdom to step aside while lifting his coffee mug out of the way of Grady's headlong path.

It didn't surprise Grady to find the dark wooden door to Brienne Chaylse's office currently closed. Their paths had crossed numerous times throughout his years in the military, especially during his lead role in dismantling the fledgling IRG leadership cabal formed shortly after the invasion during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was always conscientious of their personal boundaries and it was rare he ever entered into the Intelligence Division's territory without at least a courtesy heads-up, but he was too irate to mind his manners or professional protocol at the moment. He glanced back at her assistant as the man buzzed him in and opened the door a little harder than necessary, but he might as well get his point across early on.

“When were you going to tell me, for Christ's sake?” Grady demanded, seeking Brienne out and finding her seated behind her cluttered desk as expected.

She'd been conducting a meeting with Bob Jensen, one of the other office POG analysts Grady didn't particularly like, when she broke off the conversation. The fact that she didn't seem too surprised to see Grady when he should be on a plane to Florida on a counterintelligence case told him all he needed to know about her motives. She'd gone behind his back with information related to an old friend's death and she hadn't had the decency to inform him.

Jensen immediately stood after clearing his throat, the slender man not needing an invitation to leave what he had to know would be a volatile discussion. He didn't lack common sense and ducked out of the office quickly, closing the door behind him as he muttered something about picking up the discussion at a later date. It would be a long wait if Grady had anything to say about it.

“I did everything exactly by the book, Grady,” Brienne informed him in a rather confident tone, which only made him more intent on forcing her hand on this one. She was too self-assured in what she'd done to see the irreparable damage she had most likely caused to a very dear friend of his. “It's my case. I dotted every I and crossed every T before I made that phone call. It was the right thing to do, given the situation.”

“For who?” Grady wanted to know, shaking his head at her naïve knowledge of the situation. It was times like these that highlighted their age difference and level of experience. His proficiency at the tradecraft required to operate in the field had taught him better than to react with emotion. “You? So you could claim you did your job well, according to procedure?”

Brienne leaned back in her chair with conviction brimming in her blue eyes over what Grady believed to be a terrible decision, looking every bit as poised as he knew her to be. Her long blonde hair had been pulled back into a bun, but in such a manner that a person could see the soft natural curls while she maintained her professionalism. Her features reminded him of the actress Gene Teirney, whose classic beauty reigned back in the mid-1940s. He had a penchant for the black and white films, and at the moment he would have given anything to go back to an era where things hadn’t been so complicated. Brienne had made a terrible mistake and it wasn’t something he could easily fix.

“Catori Starr is a good friend of mine...and that of the director’s as well,” Grady explained slowly, not telling Brienne anything she didn’t already know. He purposefully closed the distance to the front of her desk, leaning down to rest his knuckles on the hard surface. He needed to get across to her the damage she’d done. “Starr’s been through hell and back after losing her husband, and you calling to tell her about some outdated intelligence from an unknown source to give her an unrealistic hope he might still be alive wasn’t your best work, Brienne. And I will have to justify your position while discussing this whole incident with the director, because what you did affects operations. Starr is the owner and operator of Red Starr HRT, and she has every right to know that the bodies of her original team were never recovered because there *is* no official record of their deaths according to the Pakistani government. You have no idea what you have set into motion. You should know better than most.”

“Don’t you dare go there, Colonel.” Brienne abruptly stood, causing her black leather chair to roll into the windowsill behind her with a thud. Her white jacket was unbuttoned and revealed a red camisole he’d never seen her wear before. Another thing she never did was call him by his nickname used by those around the Agency, preferring to use his given name, but it proved he finally had her attention. Good, because her saying she’d just been doing her job didn’t cut it when it came to the shakers and movers within their community. Her hands started waving in her usual manner as she tried to explain a decision he would never agree with, but he didn’t think it was charming at the moment. “I’m not saying they are alive, but they were *not* killed the day they made their way into that Christian enclave to rescue those mission workers as we originally suspected. She deserves to know and more importantly, she has clearance from people farther up the ladder than I could ever hope to be. My hands were tied and I did what I had been directed to do. You don’t get to pass judgment on me for doing my duty. Besides, the intelligence I received was good or else I would never have forwarded it on.”

“Based on what? Who?” Grady shot back, demanding to know the identity of Brienne’s source. He had a personal stake in this and had every right to know where she was getting her information. “Starr and her team are a primary operational independent contractor for the NCS. You may have just fucked that up. We’re talking years old information and most likely from someone who’s requesting a lighter sentence in exchange for a pack of fucking lies. Hell, you weren’t even the chief liaison back then. And now you’re allowing this bastard to give false hope to a woman who’s already gone through the grieving process and picked up the pieces of her life and moved on. You never should have made that call without first talking to me.”

“Why?” Brienne countered fiercely, leaning down and setting her manicured hands in front of his. Her red lips, perfectly outlined with her favorite lipstick, were inches from his and her warm breath caressed his clean-shaven chin. Grady should have been more prepared for where she was going to take this, but her brutally honest words were still like bullets striking his hardened flesh. “Because you never got over the death of your wife?”

Grady couldn’t have heard her right, but damn if Brienne didn’t appear a little shocked at her own words. He pushed off of her desk as slowly as he could, doing his best not to pick up the clear paperweight she’d had in the same place for the last four years and throw it through the exceptionally expensive

electronic window behind her. He inhaled deeply to give himself balance and turned away from Brienne, not wanting her to see how her accusation stung. She knew based on personal facts better than most that he'd moved on with his life.

"If I recall correctly, it was *your* bed I left this morning." Grady was willing to fight fire with fire as he turned back around to witness Brienne's reaction. This was a battle she'd never win. "I'd say my grieving process has been quite comprehensive, wouldn't you?"

Grady hadn't meant for this conversation to come around to them, but Brienne had been the first one to throw down the gauntlet. Yes, his wife had died and left him a widower over five years ago now. Had he loved her? More than his own life, and he would have traded places with her in a split second if he'd known a suicide bomber was going to make his way into the makeshift hospital tent during one of Madison's mission trips with Doctors Without Borders. He'd grieved and he'd moved on...most recently with Brienne. They made excellent bed partners and both were happy with the way things developed, so he was confused as to why she would throw Madison's death into the conversation like she had. It was unfair and it was downright uncalled for.

"Touché," Brienne murmured with one brow arched higher than the other before she straightened from her desk and pulled her chair back in place. Grady would have sworn he saw a flicker of hurt flash in her baby blues, but her professional mask was back in place by the time she was seated. She gestured toward one of her guest chairs, but he walked to the corner window and stared out over the numerous rows of enveloping pine trees basking in the morning sun. He was still on edge and he needed time to collect himself. "Grady, this isn't about us. I had a job to do and I felt it in Starr's best interest she be furnished with all the available information on hand to do with as she wishes. It's pointless to even discuss this. Technically, the case has been reviewed by the after action board and closed. The original members of Red Starr HRT were officially declared dead for legal purposes a while back and we aren't pursuing this unless we are given a mandate or something more concrete is developed. It's over and done with."

"Which is precisely the reason you never should have communicated any further information to Starr. Did you know she and her team were the ones who rescued those Nigerian girls a couple of months ago? She received your message during that mission and it was a distraction we didn't need on our side of the house." Grady shook his head at this endless circle they were traveling in, deciding to appeal to Brienne's softer side. He knew it well and she wasn't the hardass her office personnel thought she was. "You know of my friendship with Red, as well as the fact that I keep in contact with Starr personally and not just professionally. I'm directly requesting you to keep me in the loop from here on out—before making any further calls. I'd rather she hear anything of importance from me than a—"

"Complete fucking stranger?" Brienne asked, not so subtly pointing out the barriers each had put into place back in the day. Grady shot her a cross glance, noticing she'd closed her eyes in irritation as if she were the one with the right to feel betrayed. The words she used in place of what he was going to say didn't sit well with him. "This is the way you wanted it, Grady. We lead separate lives, inside and outside of this office. My professional dealings don't always require your review."

Grady waited for Brienne to say more, but she fell quiet. It made him think she knew more than she was letting on. He could easily go over her head to obtain the means in which she'd acquired her intelligence, but he didn't want to have to do that. She'd been pulling away from him little by little this last year and he wasn't quite sure of the reason why. He'd actually put it on the back burner to deal with after his trip to Florida, which apparently wasn't going to happen now. He made a mental note to get in touch with the FBI Special Agent-In-Charge, because it was clear he was staying in Virginia to deal with personal matters.

"You want to know what I revealed to Starr? I was able to gather intel on the day Red and his team were supposed to meet with their contact at the rendezvous point near a village outside Islamabad. My source gave names, dates, and times corresponding with the hostage rescue mission Red Starr had been assigned to. Red and his team never arrived, Grady."

“We had solid intelligence Red and his team ran into a large group of well-armed insurgents,” Grady countered, wanting the name of Brienne’s source, but knowing she wouldn’t give it. Pakistan was technically considered an ally, but those within the Agency knew better. Any intelligence given on behalf of America always made it back to the factions who were closely related to those same terrorists the United States was fighting against. It made it very hard to get things done. “I was at Starr’s side when she received confirmation. Your guy doesn’t have the slightest idea what he is talking about.”

“My source is a woman and she’s not wrong.” Brienne picked up a pen from her desk and rolled it in between her fingers as she appeared to think over what she was going to say next. Grady leaned a shoulder against the windowpane, feeling the slight electronic vibration while studying her features and trying to get a fix on what was different today than any other for the past four years of their relationship. She was right, to an extent. They always tried to maintain their professional roles during work hours, but there was a chill in the air he didn’t like. “Should anything else arise as a result of this source’s information, I’ll judge then if it’s something you should know professionally.”

Grady stiffened at Brienne’s dismissal, not liking this side of her and not willing to let her put any more distance between them at the moment than he’d already allowed. He leisurely crossed her office floor and walked around her desk, leaning down until his hands rested on the arms of her chair. He always gave her his full attention and now was no different. He was at eye level and it took her a moment to meet his stare. It was then he realized she’d made another decision without consulting him...this time on a subject a little more personal, and he hadn’t thought that was possible.

Brienne was leaving him.

CHAPTER TWO

“This isn’t the time nor place for this, Grady,” Brienne said, her heart rate spiking at the way his dark eyes looked into her, past her carefully erected barriers. She’d thought she had the coming week to personally come to terms with her decision since he was supposed to be in Florida, but it looked as if she wasn’t going to get her anticipated reprieve. “We’ll talk about this later.”

“We’ll talk about this now. You want to tell me what is really going on?” Grady knelt in front of her so she couldn’t avoid the question. He was searching for answers, but she was very good at camouflaging her thoughts and eliminating her tells. She refused to get into their personal lives while at the office. She’d certainly had years of practice and she could prove quite the adversary when the need arose. The thing of it was, he wasn’t used to being in this position and it was clear he didn’t appreciate the sliver of unease she’d dangled in front of him. She hadn’t meant for the conversation to go this way. “You seemed fine when I left your apartment this morning.”

“Things haven’t been fine in quite a while,” Brienne said softly, doing her best to cushion the blow while avoiding the bait. She realized she’d surprised him by kicking her black heel against the clear mat underneath them, but she wouldn’t allow him to take control of this discussion like he had the tendency to do. She might like to give up some measure of control in the bedroom, but not when it came her professional life. She rolled her chair far enough away to regain the advantage of her personal space. She stood to her full height and tossed the pen onto her desk. The ball of anxiety she’d been living with started to unravel and she wasn’t able to suppress the words that spilled over her lips. “You still love her with your whole heart. You still love Madison. I could accept that if there was some room in your life for me, but there isn’t even an inch. I refuse to compete with a ghost from your past, so I’ve made some decisions for my own personal growth.”

It was a rare occurrence where Grady was ever speechless, but Brienne had apparently managed to render him so now. She hadn’t meant to hit him with something so far out of left field, but she was tired of fighting a losing battle. He unfolded his lean muscled frame and straightened his suit jacket, his sophisticated style being one tiny part of his overall charisma. She was younger than him by a good ten years, but never once had that made a difference in their relationship.

“My love for Madison has never been a problem before,” Grady reminded Brienne somewhat cuttingly as he walked back around to the other side of her desk as he seemed to reinforce his offense. His previous anger came back twofold, but she stood her ground. She had too much to lose should she give an inch at this juncture. It was time she changed the rules of engagement, in and out of the bedroom. “She was my wife. For you to ask me to forget her—”

“I never said you should forget her or that you shouldn’t have loved her,” Brienne sharply clarified, not wanting to revisit this recycled conversation and find that he’d put words in her mouth. She stepped around the desk and held her head high for a battle she’d long been prepared to have. “I accepted long ago that I was nothing more than a filler for Madison’s presence, and at the time I was more than okay with that, given both our needs. I’d just returned from a field assignment where I’d experienced things that still remain in my nightmares. You nevertheless manage to ease those terrors when they revisit me in the dark.”

“Then why are we even having this conversation, Brienne?” Grady ran a hand through his dark hair that was peppered with silver, clearly not understanding where she was heading with this. Part of her felt guilty for having kept the truth from him, but her time was running out and she needed to make a decision. “We’re both content with the way things are or were.”

“That’s just it. *You* are content.” Brienne closed the distance between them until she was able to lightly rest her hands on the lapels of his jacket and stare up into the dark brown eyes she’d woken up to every morning for the past four years. They had both kept their separate residences, taking turns staying the night

in each other's beds. It wasn't hard considering their travel schedule, but she was being offered something a little more permanent, which would essentially end whatever *this* was between them. "I need more, Grady. I've been trying to tell you that for a while now, albeit subtly. You've just turned a deaf ear to what I've been saying."

Grady gently placed his warm hands on either side of Brienne's neck and didn't stop the upward caress until he was cradling her face. The tender gesture was in total contradiction to the gathering storm settling over his features and her heart could almost feel the blow he was about to land.

"I've listened to every word you've ever said to me, sweetheart," Grady murmured, pulling her closer if that were even possible. She wished it were for something more intimate, but this was his way of making a point. "Never once have you said you wanted more than what we have had and I've reiterated multiple times that I could never bring myself to remarry after being widowed. You accepted that. So you tell me where my misunderstanding comes into play?"

"I guess it doesn't," Brienne whispered in regret, praying her heart didn't shatter into a million pieces while he looked on. She slowly inhaled, wishing now she hadn't as the sensual fragrance of his cologne enveloped her as if to remind her of what she would be missing so very soon. She gave herself a few more seconds before slowly pushing against him until his hands fell at his sides. She immediately missed his touch. She cleared her throat to say what she should have voiced long before now. "I've been offered a permanent position with the State Department Bureau of Diplomatic Security at our embassy in Cairo. You can understand how my current assignment uniquely qualifies me for the work that needs to be done there. I'll let them know my decision in the morning."

"Is there a reason you didn't share this with me when you were first given this new job proposal? It would seem that you've been keeping a lot of secrets from me lately." Grady's brown eyes became even darker if that were possible, with what emotion she couldn't say. It hadn't been Brienne's intention to hurt him, but neither one could continue with the way things were. "What exactly is it you want me to say to you? Of course I want you to stay here with me, but I wouldn't stand in your way if this could further your professional career."

Brienne would have laughed at the most appropriate of answers he'd just given her if she thought she wouldn't cry instead. Grady wanted her to stay, but yet he didn't want to hold back her career advancement of all things. He couldn't love her the way she needed to be loved, and therein lay the crux of the problem.

"I don't want you to say anything," Brienne said sadly, wishing she hadn't said anything and given them one more day. "My decision is made. I'm taking the position in Cairo. I'll be leaving at the end of the month."

"You don't need to throw away what we have." Grady wasn't a man to plead for anything, but Brienne could have sworn there was a hint of despair in his voice. "I want—"

"Brienne." Gus Wilson knocked impatiently on the office door after he'd opened it abruptly, not apologetic in the least for interrupting. The alarm written on his features conveyed the emergency. "We have a serious problem. There is chatter coming in over the wires and it's bad. I mean, really bad."

"What happened?" Brienne asked, reaching for her favorite coffee mug with the remnants of the cold liquid from the first pot still inside. She would take whatever reprieve Gus was offering her to get out of this office before she lost her thin veil of composure in front of Grady. She needed a better, solid emotional footing before she collected her things from his apartment. Her mind understood this was how things needed to be done, but her heart was obviously still protesting. "Are we talking about the mission in Kandahar or the one in Damascus?"

Brienne brushed past Grady, ignoring his penetrating gaze promising her this conversation was far from over. She was well aware of that, but this allowed her a brief reprieve, a moment to breathe and focus on something she had the ability to change. Critical missions, such as the ones in the Middle East or southern Asia, were vital in the success on this fight against terrorism. She had her professional priorities and right now...this took precedence. The ringing of Grady's cell phone aided her ability to follow Gus out of the office without having to say anything else.

“It’s neither,” Gus said rather distractedly, so unlike his usual demeanor. Her colleague was normally focused on the task at hand, and pulling his attention elsewhere was like pulling teeth out with nothing but her fingers. Right now, he appeared at a loss as he led the way down the hallway toward the Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility (SCIF). Every department within the Intelligence Division had their own satellite version of this secure area where sources and methods were stored, used, processed, or discussed. Had one of the embassies been attacked? “This is more of a personnel issue.”

Gus walked at a faster pace, his erratic movements telling her more than his words. He was leading her to Supervisory Special Agent James Telfer’s office located just outside the SCIF. The door was open and she could see the small gathering of other agents. Brienne crushed the anxiety that tried to surge through her body, but it didn’t prevent a fine sheen of perspiration to coat her skin. She was now wishing she’d left her coffee cup back on her desk.

“Agent Chaylse, we have a problem,” SSA Telfer explained without even glancing her way. He was in the middle of looking at his phone, but it was a blow to her chest when he finally did look her way. Jim Telfer was worried; therefore, she should be scared as hell. She tightened her fingers around her cold mug and braced herself. “Your personal identity as an agent for the Central Intelligence Agency has been compromised.”

No one else in the office said a word. As a matter of fact, only the muffled sounds from the bullpen could be heard through the door Gus had closed behind them. The other three agents—Samuel Frye, Connor Vaupel, and Chloe Hammond—all appeared stunned as they were apparently hearing this for the first time as well. It didn’t make Brienne feel any better to realize she wasn’t the last to know.

She took a moment to step forward and set her cup gently down on SSA Telfer’s desk, careful not to spill what little was left of the contents. She took notice of how organized the surface was maintained. Her life had been very much like that until this very moment.

The pencil holder must have been made by one of Telfer’s children, but it only held sharpened pencils and pens with black ink. The inbox had a few folders meticulously centered in the middle of the wooden container, while the outbox contained more files just as well-ordered. The mouse for his computer was centered on its pad parallel to his keyboard and his desk phone was within perfect distance of his reach at a forty-five degree angle.

What would it look like if she were to take an arm and swipe it across this immaculate surface?

Chaos.

Wreckage.

Her life—as it stood at this very moment.

“In what manner?” Brienne asked, grateful she was able to get the words out without hesitation. Depending on the leak, everything she’d worked for could be gone...depleted. “Is it something that can be mitigated?”

“There was an article published in the *Daily Express Urdu* newspaper today stating your name as the lead CIA liaison to the Pakistani government for the Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis Desk here at Langley,” SSA Telfer stated bluntly, cutting to the chase and giving Brienne what she needed to know. Her career as a covert agent for the CIA was officially over. “We’re doing what we can to locate the source of the leak, but you’ll be placed on administrative leave as the board reviews the damage this has caused to your current caseload, as well as to the other agents involved on your desk. You know the process and we’ll...”

Administrative leave. Brienne suppressed the manic laugh that built within her as SSA Telfer continued to outline her immediate future. Her employment—the very thing she’d invested her life in—within any branch of the United States government was now tainted. She was going to be terminated because of a simple article written in a Pakistan newspaper and there wasn’t a thing she could do to change that. She would deal with the emotional fallout in private. Right now, there were things that needed to be addressed and she would handle it like the definitive professional she was.

“I will turn over all of my files for...”

Three hours. That was how long it took Brienne to delegate her current caseload and her life's work over to her desk's executive replacement within her section's hierarchy. She hadn't allowed herself to comprehend the raw emotion burning inside of her or to acknowledge the compassion her associates were trying to convey. She would have completely come undone had she permitted anything other than maintaining a distant demeanor.

It was only when she was by herself that she leaned against her office door for support and laid a hand over her chest to prevent the physical pain from becoming overbearing. All she needed now was the courage to walk out of the Company with her head held high.

"Are you ready to leave?" Grady asked from his position by the window, only turning toward her after he'd spoken. It surprised her to find determination within his dark eyes instead of sympathy. His appearance was as immaculate now as it had been this morning and his composure was something to envy. It wasn't until he continued his train of thought that she understood the reason why. "We need to get in touch with Catori Starr. She has the contacts we need to take care of your problem."

CHAPTER THREE

The long, flat ride through downtown Washington D.C. was made in silence. Traffic was at the usual near stall rate, held up by the ever-present red stoplights and eternal flow of jaywalkers. The annoying sounds of car horns and shrilling brakes being applied too quickly were muffled by the premium ride package of his Mercedes-Maybach S600. The smell of vehicle exhaust was minimized by the cabin fragrance system injected through the vents as other vehicles crowded around, trying to cut in front of one another, jousting for position. These city people were like well-oiled machines as they gathered at the intersections waiting for the crosswalk lights to turn, allowing them to move in a somewhat staggered line.

City life. It wasn't for everyone.

It could raise anyone's blood pressure.

Grady gripped the Napa leather-wrapped steering wheel harder than necessary. It was better than the alternative. He wanted nothing more than to reach over the center console and hold Brienne's hand to let her know everything was going to be all right.

It wasn't.

At least, her professional life wouldn't be anything like it had been before. As for her personal life...well, she'd stated she wanted that to change as well. It wasn't fair to bring up their relationship given the extraordinary events that had transpired since her personal revelation. His brooding platitudes regarding her current situation weren't going to be welcome.

"What exactly do you think Starr can do to rectify my situation, Grady?" Brienne asked, her steady voice cutting through the relative silence of the car.

Grady admired Brienne's ability to keep her composure under the mounting stress, but then again, she'd been trained by the Farm. Grady applied the brakes and came to a standstill behind the navy blue Honda Accord he'd allowed into the flow of traffic a block back. He took advantage of the stop to look Brienne's way. She was holding herself together, considering the initial shock of her public outing as an agent was wearing off.

"It's over," Brienne said somewhat dejectedly. "My name is out there and now all of my cases are compromised, as well as possibly other assets who I work with. The only thing that matters at this point is finding out who leaked the information to the newspaper, how they uncovered my personal data to begin with, who else is next based on my association with them, and then try to prevent any further damage from happening. SSA Telfer has the Director's assurance that the Technical Collections boys from the Science and Technology Division is all over this. There's nothing Starr can do that our resources can't accomplish on their own."

"You would be surprised at what Starr can achieve," Grady informed her, catching sight of a grey Ford Focus pulling alongside of them a little too close for comfort. The man driving was singing along to his radio and clueless as to what was going on around him. "She has the seemingly magical ability to get things done in a timely manner without causing even a ripple in the water. You and I both know the CIA and the FBI have a tendency to overshoot these things and make the situation worse."

Grady admired Brienne's sense of right and wrong. She saw things black and white in a grey world, which was how she conducted her business. She fit right into the Agency's mold and was able to make calculated decisions based on the collection of solid, supporting facts.

It did run through Grady's mind that Brienne was handling their relationship in the same lock-step manner, but again, this wasn't the time or place to get into that. She was a true professional and this violation of her covert status was ultimately a tragedy for the Agency and a setback in the region her desk managed. Would he be able to convince her to make a mutually beneficial deal with Starr in an attempt to salvage her career?

“Grady, do you happen to have a backup piece on you?”

Brienne’s question was said with the calm of a seasoned field agent. No one else would have caught the concern lacing her soft-spoken words. It helped that Grady had already caught sight of the male figure beside them drawing his weapon a little higher than he’d realized, giving away the reason he’d furtively pulled so close to Grady’s vehicle. He’d essentially blocked Brienne inside the car. She wouldn’t have known that from the direction she was looking, though, meaning an additional threat was present and within her line of sight.

“Glove box. It’s condition one.”

Grady hadn’t finished saying his last word before Brienne had efficiently opened the compartment in front of her in one fluid movement. The weapon was smaller than his preferred Kimber 1911 TLE, as was par for the course when it came to a spare weapon. She would have known he’d kept a round in the chamber without his statement to that effect, which was why she didn’t hesitate to bring the Berretta PX4 Storm in .40 S&W up with a purpose. He’d already done the same and the discharge of both firearms inside such an insulated luxury sedan instantly compromised their hearing. Only time would tell just how much damage had been done on a permanent basis.

That didn’t stop Grady from reaching for his door handle, ignoring the shards of glass that had shattered everywhere upon the bullet’s impact with the vehicle’s safety glass. He rammed his shoulder into the door, confident Brienne had neutralized her target or she would have followed up with continued fire. She was an accurate shot, on and off the range.

The ringing in his ears overtook the city noise, as well as the construction zone up ahead. It was apparent from the way people were ducking down in their cars and running in a staggered fashion away from the scene that they were terrified about what had unfolded, especially with two men dead. He took hold of Brienne’s hand as she maneuvered herself across the driver’s seat over fragmented glass. He didn’t let go until they started to jog down the street against traffic.

There wasn’t a chance in hell they were going to wait around to see if more men showed up to try and finish the job. Brienne wouldn’t be able to hear what Grady said, so he motioned for them to head for Union Station. It would provide an opportunity to get lost in the general public, as well as give them the time needed to analyze the situation.

Grady could see from people’s expressions and the way they were craning their necks that the police were arriving on the scene. It wouldn’t be long before someone pointed in the direction they had taken, but they’d already made a right at the next block and were putting lateral distance between them and the carnage left behind. He needed to speak with either SSA Telfer or someone higher up the chain immediately. Brienne was being targeted, which meant that article in a Pakistani newspaper had a far wider reach than any of them had initially anticipated.

Brienne slowed down and took the time to hide the weapon she’d taken from his glove compartment underneath her jacket. She placed her fingertips against her ears with a wince and rubbed the areas as she examined their surroundings. He moved his jaw from side to side as well, trying to subdue the ringing. He took her cue to holster his weapon, albeit reluctantly. The less attention they brought to themselves, the better at this point. They were about a block away from Union Station, but it was enough of a distance to allow them to reevaluate.

“I think we need to catch a cab,” Brienne shouted, her words getting caught up in the incessant buzzing. It was apparent she was talking too loud and he signaled she needed to lower her voice. A few curious stares were shot their way. “Staying visible out on the streets will only put us and other innocent pedestrians in the line of fire.”

“We need to get you underground.” Grady noticed that Brienne’s attention was on his lips since her hearing had yet to fully return. He repeated his statement and waited for her to nod her understanding. “Stay close.”

Brienne’s quick nod of acquiesce had Grady changing direction. The adrenaline produced by what had just happened was starting to wear off. Damn, that was a close call. Had Brienne been by herself during

that ambush, she never would have had time to stop both converging tangos coming at her from opposite directions. He couldn't even fathom that scenario. *Why* was she being specifically targeted and not any other agents within the section?

The temperature was above normal for this time of year and the sun was beating down on the asphalt, producing an uncomfortable heat. The normally delicious aroma drifting from the hot dog stand did nothing but generate nausea. Once they were able to blend in with the crowd, people weren't watching where they were headed and Grady didn't have a spare minute for pleasantries. He was determined to get Brienne to safety and he didn't stop until they were at the Georgetown Law School off of New Jersey Avenue.

Grady didn't waste time heading directly for McDonough Hall, where the office of the Dean of Students was located. There were advantages to still being in the field, one of them being established contacts who were dependable.

David Pierce was the current Dean of Students, as well as a source for the FBI and CIA to tap into regarding foreign students coming into the university with less than stellar goals of education. The student visa ruse was usually quickly spotted and many a terrorist plot had been diverted using this method of detection. Dave was currently with another staff member, but quickly dismissed the younger man once Grady and Brienne appeared outside his door.

Dave's office was small, but the furniture was an immaculate red oak with ornate handles and matching bookcases off to the side. Literature and history books adorned the shelves, but it was the miniature metal models of World War II planes and tanks that gave the room a unique look. His office furnished the impression that the professor was a historian managing his own tiny museum.

"You're bleeding." Dave was already standing when he took some tissues from a box he kept on his desk, handing them over with a look of concern. Grady had dismissed the small cuts as insignificant seeing as it wasn't Brienne who'd been hurt. He could take care of himself at a later time, but he would clean up the best he could seeing as it was distracting Dave. "Grady, what happened? Do I need to alert security?"

"No," Grady replied, pressing the thin white material against the small cuts on his hand. The blood quickly soaked in, but the majority of the wounds were superficial. Only one was still bleeding. "I need your vehicle. I can't explain right now, but we're in a bit of a bind."

"Of course," Dave replied, his gaze drifting to where Brienne was looking at her cell phone. Grady had thought she'd left it in her purse back in the car, but she'd apparently had it on her person. She was holding it up before he could give her a dressing-down on security protocol. She'd already turned the device off, as he had done with his own back when they'd stopped running. "I'm parked..."

Dave continued to give instructions on how to reach his vehicle, leaving Grady to scrutinize Brienne. She was standing to the left of the door with her right arm straight at her side, giving her the opportunity to draw the weapon from underneath her white jacket with little effort should the need arise.

Brienne appeared calm and collected, her breathing even. There wasn't even a tremor in her hands, though there were a few smears of blood on her sleeve from when Grady had pulled her from the car. The pallor of her face had whitened and caused the red lipstick on her lips to become even brighter. He would have given anything to be able to pull her into his arms and tell her everything would be okay, but he made an effort to never lie unless it was a life and death situation.

"I appreciate this, Dave." Grady tossed the used tissues into the trashcan, taking time to pull the desk phone toward him. It was the standard black and silver model installed in most offices. He'd be able to place a call without turning on his own cellular device. "Would you give us a moment alone? We won't be long."

One of Dave's best qualities was that he never asked questions, though he was always willing to provide answers and toe the line. He vacated the office without a second glance. Grady had already dialed the number of SSA Telfer and pressed the speaker button before the door had completely shut.

Brienne hesitated and shot a sideways look at the doorknob. She most likely wanted to lock it, but Grady wasn't concerned with anyone walking in unannounced. Dave wouldn't have gone far and would be monitoring the traffic in and out of the department.

“Telfer.”

“We ran into a problem en route to our meeting,” Grady informed Brienne’s SSA, keeping an eye on Brienne to see if she wanted to add anything to the conversation. She stepped forward, about to speak when Telfer cut in with a directive no agent wanted to hear.

“Agent Chaylse is in the crosshairs of ISI. Bring her in now.”

The line disconnected, leaving Grady and Brienne to deal with the aftermath of such a decree. He didn’t hesitate to reach for her, bringing her into his embrace and wishing it were that easy to shield her from what was to come. The ISI was Pakistan’s premier military-operated intelligence service. These weren’t amateurs who were after Brienne and they had to have had help from inside the Agency to pull off what had almost transpired today.

“We’re going out on our own,” Grady murmured, pressing his lips softly against her temple. Brienne nodded slightly in agreement, because even she knew there was only one logical choice to make given their circumstances. “There isn’t a chance in hell you’re going back to Langley to ride this out.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Brienne removed her soiled white blazer and tossed it on the couch before sitting on the edge of the middle cushion. The décor of the beach house located on the Jersey shore was modern, but she was too exhausted to care if she scuffed the cream twill fabric with her dirt-stained pants. This morning's events had certainly put things into perspective. She rested her forehead onto the palms of her hands, wondering how her day had spiraled so out of control.

It had taken Grady and Brienne around six hours to reach their destination, but two of those had been used to switch vehicles at no less than three different locations. She'd only ever worked with Grady on overseas missions, so seeing his impressive reach with little to no notice here in their homeland was quite a sight.

It was no wonder the Agency, along with the FBI and other notorious government organizations, hadn't wanted him to retire. She would have taken the time to state how impressed she was had she not been so damned busy trying to figure out who was responsible for leaking her identity and doing their best to eliminate her.

"Why don't you go and take a shower?" Grady said, finally stepping away from the front door where he'd been resetting the security alarm code. The beach home they were currently using did not have a garage, so they'd left the last car Grady had borrowed near the boardwalk with hordes of other tourist vehicles. They eventually made their way to the beach and walked the winding sand trail as if they were nothing more than the typical vacationers. Her high heels had been dropped on the tile he was now vacating as he made his way to the kitchen. "I have a few calls to make."

"Don't you mean *we* have a few calls to make?" Brienne restated his declaration, finally having enough of the brushoff. She stood, in spite of the fact that her body protested, and made her way into the pristine cream shoreline kitchen with light gray granite countertops. Everything else in here was cream as well, if she discounted the bowl of green apples sitting on the stone-topped island. The owners could have done a lot more if the adornment was to add color. The somewhat sterile design matched her mood though. "I'm more than capable of conducting this investigation as if it were any other assignment. You need to trust me, Grady."

Brienne couldn't stand the clip in her hair any longer, especially considering the taut prongs were only adding to her pounding headache. Someone wanted her dead and it was all related to Brendan "Red" O'Neill. She had no other connection to Pakistan or to the ISI. She finally released the clip, running a hand through her hair and closing her eyes in relief as some of the built-up tension faded away as her hair fell.

"I never said you weren't capable, Brie. And you know for a fact that I trust you with my life."

Grady's affectionate nickname for her was unexpected. Brienne stilled her movements as their gazes connected across the small island and the little appalling bowl of green apples. His dark eyes were narrowed, as if daring her to dispute his statement. His normally immaculate suit jacket was wrinkled from the long ride and his tie was slightly askew. He'd been by her side this entire time, doing everything needed to ensure her safety. She had no doubt that he cared for her, but his love for Madison was holding him back from living his life with someone else.

"I know," Brienne admitted softly, conceding a bit and accepting the fact that she was relatively safe here. She'd always been independent, but she'd have to continue to stand on her own two feet now that she'd made the decision to be reassigned away from D.C. and the memories she and Grady had made together. Only she didn't have that escape route anymore. "I'm not a victim, Grady. I refuse to be a victim for anyone."

"But you *are* a target," Grady reminded her, taking the time to remove his suit jacket, fold the sleeves just so, and lay it across the counter. She couldn't help but look at the wounds on his left hand, wondering

if there were any shards of glass still embedded into his skin. She was surprised when he came around the island and tenderly slipped his fingers in her hair until his thumbs were underneath her chin. “Your safety is my primary concern. You. This is my specialty, Brie. I don’t mean to take over and exclude you from any decisions, but—”

“It comes naturally,” Brienne finished in a whisper, giving in to what she needed. The warm comfort of his touch was everything she required to breathe easy and release the built-up tension running through her. “I’m so scared, Grady. The ISI? What the hell did I get caught up in that would cause this kind of reaction?”

“Your source apparently had some very accurate and meaningful information, making the ISI a little too uncomfortable with what she revealed. The first thing we need to do is confirm she is still alive. There are too many balls in the air right now and some are going to crack when they hit the ground.” Grady smiled tenderly, the way he usually did when he told her he was leaving town on assignment. He didn’t say that this time, but instead leaned forward and softly brushed his lips against hers. “Go and use the SAT phone I gave you to make contact. I’ll follow up with Telfer, since he’s going to be rather displeased at the fact we didn’t follow direct—and might I add lawful—orders. We’ll then clean up and decide afterward what our next move will be.”

Brienne breathed deeply to capture the subtle masculine fragrance of Grady’s cologne. He’d worn the same brand since she’d known him...he was a creature of habit. She didn’t appreciate the emotional wavering she was experiencing at having made the decision to end their relationship. It was the right thing to do and yet the regret for what could have been was beyond anything she’d ever experienced. Her throat constricted when his fingers gradually drifted away from her. It was as if their ship had sailed into the mist and the gathering darkness was what was left of their relationship.

Grady moved silently across the tiled floor and into what Brienne assumed was the bedroom. The width of his back told her more than the size of his lean upper body, but of the baggage he carried from his past. Could he not see that she was more than willing to carry some of the weight?

Brienne hadn’t expected Grady to stop before crossing the threshold into the next room, but he paused and turned only enough so that he could see her expression at what he had to convey. She now wished more than anything that he hadn’t.

“You deserve more than what I’ve been giving you. On that we can both agree.”

Grady lifted one corner of his mouth as if to convey his understanding, but did he? Brienne couldn’t draw air until he finally turned on the heel of his dress shoe and quietly closed the door behind him. She continued to stare at the barrier, knowing there was much more than a wooden portal between them. Madison’s essence lingered like another woman’s perfume, but it wasn’t Grady’s wife who was the issue...it was his inability to let her go from his everyday existence.

Brienne wiped away a tear that had escaped and then did her best to compose herself. She’d always had the ability to mentally compartmentalize her life and she did so now out of necessity. She’d like to be alive come tomorrow morning to be able to face the same obstacles she was now. She wasn’t sure that didn’t make her an emotional masochist, but that was the only way she could view things at the moment.

“Get yourself together,” Brienne whispered to ground herself, sometimes wishing Grady wasn’t ten years her senior. Their age difference had never really played a part in their relationship, but his life experience far surpassed hers and she’d come to realize maybe that was part of the problem. He’d already experienced his proverbial love while she’d found hers too late. “Focus, Brienne. Stay alive to deal with this tomorrow.”

Survival had become day-to-day at this point. Brienne understood how this situation worked, seeing as she’d been a liaison to several missions with the same types of dangers they faced now. She identified what needed to be done and walked across the cold floor to where she’d set the SAT phone on top of her jacket. Grady had taken possession of them from the last person they’d had contact with, along with a go-bag filled with a change of clothing for each of them, weapons, plenty of ammunition, and a few additional items that might come in handy.

Brienne took a minute to rehearse what she would say over the line, hoping her contact comprehended the severity of what had taken place. She dialed the number that would connect her to another time zone in another country, another source, and the woman who might very well have information that could keep them both alive. It took over a minute for the connection to finally establish a link.

“Raheela,” Brienne started out, ensuring the tone in her voice conveyed conviction as she continued to nurture the personal connection she’d established with the Pakistani woman long ago, “there’s been a slight problem. Have you spoken with anyone else besides me in the last few months?”

Brienne listened carefully to Raheela, her broken English not too hard to understand if the time was taken to string the words together. It had taken a couple of years to form this give-and-take relationship. Raheela had become a very reliable source for the CIA, handing over information in exchange for cash payments in rupees. Whatever the woman was doing with the currency was of unimportance. That didn’t mean the CIA wasn’t aware of Raheela using the payments as a means to conceal the movements of women wanting to escape the tyranny of their families or their husbands.

“...you are in danger. The man was asking...”

Raheela’s broken words finally strung together at the end, giving off a dire warning that came a little too late. Brienne had learned a lot from this brief exchange, but not the name of the insider who’d leaked her identity. The more she thought about it, the more she realized there hadn’t been a cyber attack on the Agency’s network to uncover her identity. Someone had personally given up her name and it was only a matter of time before her source was eliminated as part of a mass campaign to eradicate her influence in the AOR.

“Raheela, I want you to cease contact with everyone,” Brienne stressed her order, ignoring the sound of Grady reentering the room. “You won’t hear from us again until it’s safe.”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Grady asked in a somewhat harsh tone, conveying his displeasure at the way she was managing the conversation.

Brienne turned her back to Grady to finish what she’d started. Another group of agents was already well-positioned within Pakistan and was currently using Raheela, along with several others, as their information source. Brienne didn’t have the authority to terminate such a viable informant, but she would deal with the fallout at a later time. Raheela’s life was in jeopardy and it was still Brienne’s duty to ensure this woman’s safety.

“I’m not sure who to trust on my side, Raheela, so you’ll have to do this on your own,” Brienne revealed, knowing that warning alone would be enough to make Raheela cautious. “I’d suggest implementing precisely what you’ve been setting up for other women. Good luck.”

The line disconnected and Brienne didn’t have to wait long for the censure.

“You don’t have the authority to—”

“I have every right to warn my source that she has a chance of being compromised in the same manner I was,” Brienne stated, spinning on her bare feet to face Grady and wanting answers. “What was Telfer’s explanation to our assertion that ISI was involved with this morning’s events?”

“Telfer wants you in protective custody, as well as a rundown on all your most recent dealings in Pakistan.” Grady wasn’t one to show his frustration, but he ran his fingers through his military cut and then rested his palm on the back of his head. The peppered grey on his sideburns only made him appear more distinguished, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t of some influence as well. “He’s under the assumption—”

“That I somehow foolishly let my source know my real identity,” Brienne finished, already seeing how this was going to play out. Only no one was aware that she was holding an ace. “I’m good at my job, Grady. Telfer knows better than that. Just as he knows there wasn’t a cyber attack on a secure network. As a matter of fact, my source had nothing to do with the leak, of that I’m certain. We were right all along with thinking there was a turncoat within the Agency, especially since those operatives had my exact location...which was with you.”

“I’ve already reached out to some people who can help with that, but it still doesn’t explain why ISI—”

..

“My source *is* the wife of an ISI Major. It’s the perfect framework to ensure my termination. I basically handed them both me and my contact over on a silver platter with all of the trimmings.” Brienne tossed her SAT phone back on the couch, wishing she could collapse into the cushion and hide away from the world in the same manner. She couldn’t and now Grady’s life was on the line as well. “You see, I’m the only one who is still actively engaged in trying to locate the remains of the former Red Starr HRT unit, which means someone within my own department is actively trying to prevent me from discovering exactly what happened to Brendan O’Neill on that ill-fated mission. Red must have discovered our turncoat and was eliminated to secure their identity.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Grady had already walked the property's perimeter, surveying the area for likely avenues of approach for threats along with making liaison with the special security firm he'd called in for extra protection. There was no immediate danger and he hadn't spotted any overtly obvious team members who should have moved into the area a few hours ago, but then again he hadn't expected to see any amateur bullshit.

Gavin Crest ran a tight unit over at Crest Security Agency, hiring only the best of the best from former military operators to men and women who had sharpened their skills in other paramilitary black ops teams serving the intelligence agencies. His old friend would see to it that Grady and Brienne could actually sleep tonight without fear of waking up with a gun in their face.

"I don't like delaying the inevitable," Brienne said tersely, taking the spatula and turning over the omelets in the large frying pan. She had already showered and changed into the pair of jeans and white T-shirt that had been in the bag Connor Ortega had given Grady. He'd been the first of CSA's agents to land on the ground, supplying Grady with what he would need over the course of the next few days. "We know it's someone on the inside. We should head back to D.C. and—"

"We're not going anywhere while your name is on the ISI's hit list. Apparently, they have moved a group of their own operators into Washington to finish the job." Grady understood the need to feel like he was contributing, but he'd learned a long time ago that some things were better handled when delegated to those who were more practiced at that particular skillset. Brienne needed to step back while those with that demonstrated capability got the job done. "We're staying put until we have enough information to confirm the identity of the leak, as well as possibly fix your long-term predicament."

Grady didn't blink when Brienne shot him a disbelieving look at the last part of his declaration. She reached across the stove and turned the dial with a little more force than necessary. She was sure there was some way to find a resolution to her career-ending problem. Her future ability to work at the Company after a fuckup of this magnitude was going to be difficult to overcome, but she didn't like going outside of her comfort zone by allowing someone else to do her own work.

Grady reached into the cupboard for what he was searching for, noticing Brienne's hair was still slightly damp from her shower. Her blonde hair had always curled into loose waves if she didn't immediately blow the strands dry. He personally liked it this way, loving the natural beauty as well as the silky texture when he ran his fingers through the tresses. She wouldn't appreciate the gesture now, so he refrained from reaching out to her.

"What if we—"

"Arguing won't change the fact that we have a few days to ourselves. Besides, we have things to discuss that affect our future." Grady finally set two glasses of ice on the small table overlooking the ocean. They'd closed the colorless blinds, but they could still hear the distant thunder of the waves crashing against the sandbar to only then dissolve as the tide pulled the water back into its endless void. His soul could relate to the infinite abyss, but maybe it was time to replenish it. "Unless, of course, it's too late."

Grady continued setting the table, not willing to let this slide when they didn't know what tomorrow would bring. The light noises Brienne had been making in the kitchen had gone relatively silent, but she'd yet to confirm his last statement. At least she'd acted as if she was willing to work with him.

"Let's eat before—"

"We lose our appetite?" Brienne said wryly, slipping one of the omelets onto the plate Grady had set down on his side before she did the same to hers. This place wasn't the most well-stocked safe house, but the kitchen had enough ingredients to keep them from starving. "That's already been accomplished."

"Eat anyway," Grady instructed firmly, taking the frying pan and spatula from her hands. He motioned for her to take a seat while he placed the items in the sink and retrieved the pitcher of sweet tea from the

refrigerator. He then joined her at the table, filling both of their glasses. “The first rule in a situation like this is to eat when you can and sleep if time allows. Walk me through the scenario of what you think happened.”

Brienne’s shoulders gave way a bit, telling him that she thought he’d want to talk about them over their meal. He did, but it wasn’t the type of conversation one could have while eating. They had too much at stake to discuss it as if they were talking about the weather and he would wait until they were more comfortable, thus giving her more time to acclimate to the fact that they needed to discuss Madison. He wasn’t sure he was ready. She was a part of him that was no longer here. That part of him was gone forever. That was a very hard concept to put into words.

“The Pakistani source I acquired was when I was a subordinate. The chief liaison officer was training me in the art of pulling together informants in specific demographics the Agency had been targeting. I managed to excel in that area and we were able to gather rather detailed information regarding the ISI from an insider.” Brienne picked up her fork, but had yet to take a bite of the omelet she’d made. Grady looked pointedly at her food, not wanting her to get so caught up in her theories that she didn’t eat. They paused long enough to make a dent in their meal before she continued, finally making the connections he’d only speculated on. “I had given this woman’s contact information to the chief of mission. I haven’t been inside Pakistan in a couple of years, my current assignments being elsewhere in the latest Iraq and Afghanistan wars. It was only recently that my informant reached out to me through one of the cultural attaché connections at the embassy. We were reconnected and then told about the possibility of locating the remains of the former Red Starr HRT’s unit.”

“Who was privy to your most recent conversation?” Grady asked, taking a sip of the sweet tea. He studied Brienne over the rim of his glass, her blue eyes darkening in determination to discover who had betrayed her so recklessly. Who was willing to throw his or her life down the drain by committing treason by betraying a fellow American Intelligence Agent? “Telfer, obviously. Anyone else?”

Grady didn’t want to believe that an SSA of Telfer’s standing would ever divulge the identities of his subordinate agents beneath him, but there had been far more devastating treason than that within the Agency over the years. There would have to be a money trail, which was why Grady had brought in CSA. Gavin Crest had just as many avenues to pursue those leads, but without the hindrance of being hunted.

“Samuel Frye, Connor Vaupel, and Chloe Hammond are the agents I worked most closely with, along with Gus Wilson and Bob Jensen. Pretty much the entire desk, along with the supporting analysis staff,” Brienne disclosed with a frown, lowering her fork after eating only half of what had been on her plate. She pushed it away, sitting back after she’d picked up her glass of iced tea. “I need access to the SCIF. There has to be a data trail to follow. We should head back to D.C. and—”

“I already told you that was out of the question.” Grady finished his meal, unable to give Brienne what she wanted. “The ISI will be watching every single location you might decide to show your face, and that includes all the roads leading into Langley. You’re not going anywhere near D.C. until we can confirm the leak’s identity and how to go about minimizing the damage. Your name is out there on the wind. Nothing can change that, but we can target the ISI in ways to shut down their team and prevent another physical attack.”

“Which coincides with Red Starr and Starr’s inquiry,” Brienne surmised, looking off into space as she continued to process the reasoning behind such an assault. “Why is it that the ISI doesn’t want us to have knowledge of the location of Brendan O’Neill and his team’s remains?”

“Numerous motives come to mind, such as the fact that maybe it wasn’t rebel insurgents who attacked the Red Starr team.” Grady started to clear the table, motioning that Brienne should stay where she was. This wasn’t uncommon, seeing as they used to confer with each other on numerous assignments. Having another viewpoint was an advantage. He didn’t want to lose this, but that meant making changes he wasn’t so comfortable with. “It appeared to be cut and dry, but it might be that something more is in play with what your informant has stirred up.”

“You think the ISI were the ones to attack Red Starr’s infiltration route?” Brienne asked, setting her empty glass on the table. She was biting her lip in thought as she slouched in her chair the way she was prone to do after a meal in the privacy of one of their apartments, crossing her arms in what looked like a petulant manner. It wasn’t. He couldn’t prevent a half smile at the habit that had been formed long ago. “What would they have to gain by eliminating a government contracted paramilitary hostage rescue team inside Pakistan who had ISI-supported intelligence about the terrain and local factions? I recall the hostages being with a mission group from the United States, so there shouldn’t have been any opposition from the Pakistani government or the ISI.”

“Have you considered the possibility that the missionaries weren’t taken by a group of insurgents, but instead the ISI had a part in it or were supporting the faction that did?” Grady set their plates into the sink. He didn’t return to the table, but instead walked the open layout of the small beach house to the living room. It was a better location to have the upcoming conversation he’d been waiting for. “It’s the only logical explanation for why the ISI would want to silence your inquiry.”

Brienne didn’t reply right away, which had Grady looking over the couch to see that she was still seated at the table. She was regarding him with wariness, her blue eyes tapered in the corners and deep in thought. Her blonde hair was wild with untamed waves falling around her shoulders and the beautiful sight before him was something he wanted to see for many years to come.

“Cairo is off the table now that your identity has been compromised and your Agency association has been revealed,” Grady said, starting down the path that was sure to be a maze of flickering, dangerous flames. He could handle the heat, so he forged ahead. “Does that change things for us in the near term?”

“You tell me, Grady.” Brienne uncrossed her arms and stood, taking her time as she slowly made her way around the couch to join him. Her chin was tilted up in a way that told him she wasn’t going to take any prisoners. That was good, because neither was he. “Is there any room in your life for someone other than Madison’s ghost and a house full of reminders of your life together?”

CHAPTER SIX

Brienne had been on pins and needles ever since she and Grady had set foot into this damned beach house that was more sterile than any hospital room she'd ever had the misfortune to be in. She wasn't one to shy away from confrontation and she stood her ground when she needed to do what was best for her. Why, then, did being completely honest with Grady make her experience vulnerability in a manner she'd never encountered? Maybe it had to do with the fact that no one possessed the ability to hurt her as much as he did at this very moment.

"Madison was my wife, Brie." Grady's tone of voice was as calm as ever, similar to when he was discussing politics. It grated Brienne's nerves at how composed and self-assured he was in himself. Maturity, maybe, but she would say it had mostly to do with how comfortable he was in his life. She disrupted that and he must have assumed he could domesticate her like some errant puppy. "She will always be a part of me."

"She *is* you," Brienne countered in understanding and acceptance. Could Grady truly not see it? "The two of you had known each other since high school. You walked by each other's sides hand in hand through the good times and bad. You molded each other into adulthood, and it was never my intention to change you to be anyone else. She had a great deal to do with making who you are today and I'm grateful for that, but you clearly do not understand where I'm coming from."

Brienne purposefully kept the couch between them. She couldn't be touched and it was more than apparent Grady didn't want to be either. She leaned up against the cream-colored fabric, resting her hands on the soft cushions when all she wanted to do was ball them into tight fists and continually pound the couch until all of her frustration faded away. It was so hard to breathe while describing what the coiled anger inside of her was doing to her.

"I was okay with a small amount of distance between us, Grady," Brienne admitted through the constriction of her throat. It hurt to speak, because she understood she was pushing him further away with each word. Maybe that was why she'd put off having this conversation and why she'd treated this perilous situation with more poise than what it called for. Anything was more bearable than witnessing the disintegration of their relationship "We both had our reasons to start out that way, but as with anything in this life...situations change. Your presence in my life wasn't just for physical pleasure anymore and the two of our lives integrated somehow, somehow, in a manner where *this* became more to me than just a casual relationship."

Grady remained silent, his stoic expression not changing in the slightest as he slipped his hands into his front pockets. The muscle in his jawline strained underneath his five o'clock shadow, the black whiskers peppered with a few bristles of grey. Even annoyed, his virility was unmistakable. He thought he had no control here, but she was more than aware that wasn't the case. Everything that made up who they were as a couple rested in the palms of his hands and had for quite some time.

"You have no idea..." Grady's voice faded away as he shook his head in what Brienne would have said was despondency. He shot her a sideways glance before turning away from her and walking to where the alarm system panel was in the small foyer. He stared at it for a moment and she was unsure of what the significance was until he ever so slowly opened a part of himself that she'd never witnessed before. "Word of the suicide bomber walking into that makeshift hospital tent made out of cheap canvas hit the airwaves while I was in the communications bunker in Kandahar. I didn't even pick up the phone when it rang. Why should I have someone tell me what I already knew? Just to hear the words I already understood to be the end of her? I'd never known pain like that...shattered, slicing agony to the point a person can't physically move."

Brienne wondered just how far her selfishness went as she held back her tears. She hadn't meant for Grady to share with her that devastating moment upon discovering his wife had died. All she'd wanted was for him to say there was room in his life for her. A happy ending. Wasn't that what she'd been brought up to hear?

Nothing was ever simple though. Grady was describing exactly what she would go through if he were taken from this life. Walking away was something Brienne could physically carry out, but to go through life knowing his presence wasn't somewhere in this world making a difference? That was beyond her ability to understand.

Grady removed his right hand from his pocket and pointed toward the security panel. He shook his finger as if he were admonishing the device and all it stood for. Brienne wanted to move closer, but couldn't bring herself to make the effort.

"Madison didn't know it, but I'd sent additional security for the mission she'd been assigned." Grady barked out a humorless laugh. The loud sound caught Brienne off guard and she realized that he wasn't even here with her. He was back there...in the darkness where she couldn't reach him. "The contracted agents all lost their lives as well, leaving behind wives and children. A mass loss of life on a scale that was beyond imagining, and yet I didn't think of them once that night."

The disparaging rebuke Grady had undertaken wasn't fair to himself, but Brienne doubted he would ever see the situation any differently. Those agents had understood the risk they were taking in the place that they found themselves. The only ones to carry the blame of lost lives were the insurgents, but they had been too busy celebrating to know that they had destroyed more than just a tent full of aid workers.

"I went through our lives together...memory by memory," Grady whispered hoarsely as he started to walk the perimeter of the room. Brienne wanted to tell him to stop, that he didn't have to talk about this anymore, but he cleared his throat and spoke over her. "I stared at Madison's photograph for hours, wanting to memorize each feature to ensure her image never faded from my memory. It didn't work. I lost the small imperfections first. There are times when I try to recall her face and it's blurred. I did that. You also had a part in that."

Brienne jerked back from her place behind the couch as if Grady had physically hit her. He might as well have. The accusation was like a direct blow to her stomach and she realized she could no longer do this. She desperately needed to leave and take a moment to regain her equilibrium, but he stopped her.

"Don't you dare walk away from this, Brie," Grady demanded in a voice filled with so much pain, Brienne could no longer hold back the tears. They slid down her face as she turned back to him, shaking her head in response. "You wanted this. I was foolish to think you wouldn't, but here we are."

"I wanted the chance to love you," Brienne confessed, choking out the words as she took a step closer to him. Grady's eyes were filled with so much pain that she stopped her advancement. "I wanted the chance to hold your hand through whatever the future holds instead of watching you from the distance that you insisted on. You were pushing me away, Grady. What would you have done if the roles had been reversed? I never meant—"

"To replace Madison?" Grady asked, getting to the heart of the problem. His lips formed the saddest of smiles and Brienne braced herself for the final blow. She'd known it would end like this, but imagining it and experiencing it were two very different concepts. "You didn't replace Madison and you certainly didn't erase her memory. We both had a hand in that, but it's the progression of life that is responsible for time passing and memories fading. *That* is what I'm having trouble accepting."

"You—"

"You're asking me to risk going through that again, Brie."

The brutal honesty of Grady's words stole her breath. He finally closed the distance between them and cradled her face in the palms of his hands in the tender manner she'd come to cherish. Brienne closed her eyes against the accusation in his, accepting the blame.

"Yes," Brienne answered genuinely as she opened her eyes to see Grady's acceptance and knowing from this moment forward that everything would be as it should be. He was willing walk through hell all

over again...for her. “Yes, that is what I am asking of you. But it’s nothing that I’m not demanding of myself, Grady. Horrific scenarios run through my head every time you leave my office, my apartment, the city, for another country where we walk around with targets on our backs. I can’t possibly imagine what it is like to lose the person you love, but I do know what it is like to have found him. The love I feel for you can physically bring me to my knees and I don’t want to live without that, Grady. I don’t want to walk through the rest of my life without you by my side.”

Grady pressed his forehead against hers, as this time it was he who closed his eyes against the emotional turmoil they’d brought to a boil. Brienne had thrown down the gauntlet at a time in which he feared the most—her life was in imminent danger. There wasn’t a thing either one of them could do about that at the moment. Her fate was out of their hands and yet she was still asking that he walk by her side through it all. Yes, maybe she was being selfish.

“Madison would have loved you, too,” Grady murmured, taking Brienne by surprise at his admission. He pulled her close to him, wrapping both arms around her so that she was tucked in nice and close against him. She rested her ear over his heart, listening to the reassuring rhythmic beat as the warmth of his body invaded hers. She hadn’t realized just how cold she’d been until this very moment. “She would have appreciated your sense of duty to others, your strength in commitment, and your unwillingness to settle for less than you deserve.”

Grady pulled slightly away until he could see her, shaking his head in what she assumed was wonder. He brushed away another tear from her face with his thumb and then did the same to her other cheek. The stuttered breath he pulled through his lips told her just how fragile his emotions were. They matched her own.

“I do love you, Brie. No more, no less, no different than the love I have for Madison.” Grady paused and it was apparent he was trying to form his words in a manner that wouldn’t offend her. Brienne could only nod her understanding. “My love for you is enduring, encompassing, and one that has the capability to destroy me if I lost you. I hope you understand the lengths I will go to in order to keep you safe and that you have the ability to forgive me for the damage I might have to leave in my wake.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Grady's mental struggle with allowing himself to truly and freely love Brienne was finally at an end. He experienced a freedom he'd never expected after anguishing over his decision, but there was also a fierce need to protect her in a manner he hadn't been cognizant of with Madison. He would try his best to not overcompensate, but he'd given Brienne fair warning and he wouldn't apologize for the lengths he'd go to in order to achieve his goal. He was a protector by his very nature...of his country and now of her.

"Make love to me, Grady," Brienne whispered with need, her hand on the back of his neck, drawing his lips down to hers. "Show me what it is like to love knowing it is both our futures from now until the end."

Grady bent and lifted Brienne into his arms, cradling her securely as he walked to the bedroom. He didn't stop until he was able to set her on her feet at the end of the bed. Without a word, he kissed her—passionately and possessively. He drank from her like he was stranded in a desert and she was his sole oasis. He would never satiate his thirst for her, but he would damn well test her reserves.

Brienne's long and delicate fingers slipped beneath the shoulder holster he'd secured to his chest earlier. Once he'd removed it and positioned it on the bed for easy reach, he allowed her to tug at the cotton shirt he'd put on after his shower. The soft fabric stretched and he pulled away long enough to draw the shirt over his head. He dropped it to the ground and then proceeded to do the same with her clothes. One by one, the articles of her apparel joined his. It wasn't until they were both nude that he slowly guided her down onto the bed.

Grady used one arm to hold himself up, taking in the breathtaking sight of Brienne's body. She might be blonde, but her flawless skin was exquisitely sun-kissed by those trips overseas. Her muscles were well toned from the training the Agency required of their field agents. She was able to physically keep up with him in a manner that didn't make him feel as if he would break her with his rough touch. Her breasts were ample enough and firm, filling the palm of his hand, and her mound was bare of any hair, as was her habit. The slight scar on the left side of her ribcage she'd gotten while protecting a child from a hand grenade in Damascus only added to her beauty.

"Wait," Brienne said somewhat breathlessly, her palm against his chest. Her blue eyes were clear of tears and only love remained. "Protection. I don't—"

"I do," Grady promised, rolling onto his back and taking her with him. Brienne's blonde hair fell all around them until he gathered the thick strands over one of her shoulders. He pressed his lips to her other one. "I have one in my wallet."

Neither one was sure how long they would be here, but one condom definitely wasn't enough. Grady would worry about that at a later time, needing this moment to love her like she deserved. What had she said? Show her what it was like to love knowing it will never end. He could do that for her, but she apparently had other plans first.

"Brie—"

Grady was cut off when Brienne trailed the tips of her fingers down his chest and wrapped them around his already hardened cock. Her lips slowly followed behind, leaving a trail of moisture from her tongue. She veered to his right, gently biting his pelvic bone. There wasn't a chance in hell she was going to suck him without him bearing witness.

He gathered up her blonde hair once more, keeping a hold of the thick mane in his hand. There was something about the intimacy in watching a woman love her man with her mouth that shouldn't be missed. Adding on his ability to control her movements in doing so was even more arousing.

Brienne's lashes lifted, those crystal blues connecting with his just as her soft lips sealed warmly over the head of his cock. Grady had to remind himself to breathe as she glided her tongue over the slit, gathering the pre-cum that had gathered from anticipation.

"What you do to me," Grady murmured, barely getting the words out after she slowly took the remainder of him into her mouth. The gradual insertion caused his heart to speed up its usual steady rhythm. "Brie..."

Brienne ran the tips of her fingers up his inner thigh until she was able to take his large sac into her hand, massaging him a manner that would end this act faster than he'd like. She sucked him until she was back at his tip, settling herself between his legs. He held onto her hair, not allowing her to take him back inside her mouth until he had himself under control. He ignored the knowing look she gave him.

Grady prevented himself from hauling her above him, flipping her over, and plunging himself deep inside of her. He didn't want this rushed and he wanted to deliver to her what he'd promised, but damn if she wasn't making that a hard undertaking to achieve.

Brienne pulled against his hold until he reluctantly allowed her to pleasure him the way she wanted. He closed his eyes against the wicked, delicious sight. Her tongue stroked against the underside of his shaft as she continued to take him to the back of her throat. It was one of his preferred sensations and when she swallowed, the soft pressure around his cock was euphoric.

Grady needed to control things from here, so he used the hold he had on her hair to set the pace of her pleasuring exploit. He started watching Brienne once more, taking in how her lips fit perfectly around his member as her cheeks hollowed in a sensual motion. She never stopped massaging his sac and it wasn't long before he could feel the gathering presence of his release.

"Stop." Grady had just enough energy to stop Brienne, wanting them to reach that blissful precipice together. He pulled her back up his body until he could roll her over onto her back. They were both breathing rather heavily, but that didn't stop him from talking. "It's my turn, Brie."

* * * *

Brienne grabbed the pillow above her head, giving herself something to hold onto. She arched into Grady as he took her breast into his hand, closing his lips around her nipple. The heat of his mouth was a drastic shock against her cool skin, hardening the peak even more. He stroked his tongue over the sensitive nub until she could literally feel the arousal travel from her breast to her clit like a bolt of lightning.

"Grady..."

Of course, he didn't answer her. Instead, Grady started to roll her nipple with his tongue in small circles. Every once in a while he would draw the delicate tissue in between his teeth. The pleasurable pain caused her body to spiral into an awakening, aided by the coarse brush of his five o'clock shadow against her skin.

Brienne wasn't sure how much more decadent indulgence she could take, so she released her hold on the pillow and wrapped her fingers around Grady's neck. He wouldn't budge and she swore she was going to come just from nipple stimulation itself. She cried out when he bit a little harder than usual, the sharp, arousing stinging sending her even closer to that edge.

"Damn it, Grady," Brienne cursed, wishing his hair was long enough so that she could use it like he did hers. That didn't stop her from trying to pull him away to give her a brief reprieve. She finally breathed a sigh of relief when he released her nipple, but she should have known it wasn't his intention to stop. "HmMMM."

That low moan was all Brienne was able to get out when Grady transferred his attention to her other nipple. It had been throbbing in the absence of his touch, but now the intense stimulation was almost unbearable. He had rolled to her side, giving him full access to her body.

"Open your legs for me, Brie. Put your arms back and allow me to pleasure you."

Brie recalled those words being said before. It wasn't easy for her to lay back and allow someone to pleasure her while she did nothing. Grady wasn't like the other men she'd been with. She wasn't sure if it was age, experience, or just knowing how to please a woman...but he excelled at it. He'd explained that he attained his pleasure through her and after experiencing firsthand his lovemaking...she had finally understood.

Grady continued to draw on her nipple, every so often using his tongue to stroke the tip. He waited until her arms were above her head before caressing her abdomen with his fingers. He didn't stop until his hand cupped her mound. She widened her legs and waited for...that. Brienne parted her lips in rapture. It was that moment where his middle finger dipped in between her folds and gathered her cream.

“Spread your legs wider, Brie. Give me what I want.”

Unprecedented access. Brienne widened her legs, only to find one knee captured by his. She tightened her grip on the pillow as he drew the moisture up and over her throbbing clitoris. Grady started to move one finger in tiny, tiny circles over the swollen nub. A whimper escaped her as he awakened more nerves, if that were even possible.

“Look at me.”

The directive shot a jolt of arousal through her, but it was nowhere near as stimulating as when Grady pressed even more firmly than before, initiating a small orgasm that took her by surprise. His watchful eyes took in every ounce of pleasure she experienced in this vulnerable position.

“I want more.”

With those three words, Grady lowered his mouth to her nipple before moving lower and positioning himself between her legs. He pushed her thighs even farther apart and licked away any trace of her original orgasm, from which she was still coming down. She tried to tell him that she was too sensitive, but the words never left her mouth as he ever so slowly slid two fingers inside of her.

Brienne wasn't sure how her nails hadn't punctured the pillow by now, because her grip couldn't get any tighter than what it was. Grady had bent his fingers slightly forward, stroking over that sweet spot at the exact same moment his lips closed over her clit. He drew the overly sensitive tissue into his mouth, sucking gently and yet firmly enough that it was as if her orgasm had never ended.

Grady took her higher and higher, to a point where Brienne was floating in something far beyond a mere awakening. Her mind had soared to another plane, although she couldn't quite reach that ultimate high. He maintained a slow, even pace that was, quite frankly, torturous. She couldn't even have described what he'd just done with his tongue, but it was enough to light the fuse of her impending explosion.

Brienne called out his name as she came apart into a million pieces. The shattering was an exquisite eruption of pleasure that lasted longer than anything she'd ever experienced at the touch of his hand. She was subjected to an indulgence that took on another meaning altogether—this was the reaction to unrestricted love.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Grady heard the ringing of his SAT phone right when he'd pushed off the bed to retrieve the condom he'd planned to put to good use. His gaze connected with Brienne's before he reached down to where his clothes lay. The black device had ended up near her shirt, so he immediately snatched it up and addressed the person on the other end after first glancing at the screen.

"Crest, what have you got for us?"

Grady motioned for Brienne to crawl underneath the covers, but she was too intent on hearing what was being said from the other end of the line. He couldn't blame her and sighed in resignation, coming to stand near the side of the bed where she'd come to rest on her knees. The sensual pose would have had him disconnecting the call had this not been such a dire situation.

"The entire family of Brienne's informant has been terminated."

Brienne slowly closed her eyes and then rested her forehead in sorrow against his chest. Grady wrapped one arm around her while keeping the phone upright in order for her to still hear the conversation. Loss in the field was never easy for an agent to accept because the people putting their lives at risk were doing so for the very families who suffered.

"And Raheela?" Grady asked, not even bothering to inquire how the murders were committed. It didn't matter. Death was death. "Was she among the casualties?"

"No," Crest replied confidently, delving into the next topic of importance. Grady could literally feel the relief wash over Brienne. "She's gone underground somewhere, but we have our contractors on the ground looking for her. I've also touched base with Starr, although the only thing I told her was that you were otherwise occupied and would be calling her soon. I want confirmation of the location of the lost Red Starr unit's bodies before going to her with this. We have the potential of recovering both Brienne's asset and the remains of the founder's unit if we have to do an amphibious operation in theater using those assets."

Starr wouldn't appreciate the gesture of protection Crest was offering her, but Grady agreed it was the right thing to do. There were too many irons in the fire and someone was bound to get burned. The Agency had all of its divisions searching for who could possibly be the one responsible for betraying Brienne, Telfer was taking a closer look in-house at his own team, and Grady had hired Crest to figure out a way to minimize the threat posed by ISI's mission to terminate Brienne. Several time-critical issues needed to be resolved before tugging on the string she'd started to unravel.

"Any progress with the ISI team?" Grady asked, backing up a step so that Brienne could move off of the bed. She made her way to the bathroom, retrieving both white robes he'd seen hanging behind the door. "Brienne informed me that Raheela is married to Shujaat Qalat, an ISI Major. The connection is there. Brienne and I went over some things this evening and we've come to the conclusion that members from ISI might have been the ones to halt Red Starr's insertion in the region and Qalat is doing his best to cover his tracks. It's the only reasonable explanation."

"It would also explain why Raheela was able to gather intel on such an old mission. Qalat has gone off the radar, but we'll find him wherever he ends up."

Crest didn't need to say it wouldn't be a legal interrogation. There was no physical evidence Shujaat Qalat had anything to do with Red Starr's fated mission or the threat on Brienne's life. It was all assumption through the bits of intel coming through. There were things that American citizens didn't need to know regarding the safety of the very Agents who worked to keep the United States free of terrorism.

"Raheela most likely already knows about her family, but she'll do what needs to be done to escape," Brienne offered up, knowing more about the underground conduit. "She uses the port of Karachi to slip the women and children out of the city. She's either close by Karachi or she's already at her destination."

Grady could tell by Brienne's voice that she wasn't sure where that final destination was located, thus not fully illuminating the path they had to follow. She had belted her robe and then handed him the other. She took a hold of the SAT phone, but he laid the garment on the bed. He wasn't one to wear robes. She still had enough spark in her that she lifted a corner of her mouth in humor as she watched him do nothing more than the pair of jeans that had been in the go-bag.

"We'll check that out immediately," Crest answered, covering his end of the phone to give the order to one of his agents. It was his next statement that caused Brienne to freeze in her steps. "I think we're all in agreement Brienne's name was leaked by someone inside the Intelligence Division. Raheela had too much to lose. As a matter of fact, it was most likely done by someone assigned to Brienne's own section."

"Telfer is taking care of that issue," Grady said, not bothering to hide his skepticism. It was damned hard to be objective with the piles of shit that were being dumped on Brienne's supervisor's desk. "He's solid, Crest. I can vouch for him."

"You and I both know he's not got the time to brush his own teeth, let alone find out who within his department is the guilty party."

"Brienne can't get within a mile of Langley without becoming a target in someone's scope, and you damn well know it," Grady asserted irritably, not backing down on this. It was apparent Brienne was actually giving it thought from the way she was touching the bracelet on her wrist, so he grabbed the phone from her and took it off speaker. "Find another way."

"I have," Crest replied without hesitation. This man was the embodiment of a warrior. If he said he had a solution, he did. It just wasn't what Grady had expected. "You, Kenton. You have to go back to Langley and finish this so Brienne can get her life back."

* * * *

Brienne recalled Grady's sentiment regarding the lengths he would go to in order to keep her safe. She understood at the time, but now it was different. She was a seasoned agent, this case was regarding her career, and her life was literally on the line...she had a right to hear the other side of the conversation.

"You have no right to cut me out of this, Grady."

Brienne had never had the pleasure of meeting Gavin Crest, or even Catori Starr for that matter. She was sure that would change, but right now it didn't matter. These people were making choices for her and that had to stop.

"Telfer is getting flak from the higher-ups within the Agency, especially those with important connections to the Pakistani government." Grady snatched his weapon, which was still in its holster, and walked out of the bedroom. Brienne's stomach rolled a bit as she realized Crest had told him something of importance. She followed close behind, not willing to allow Grady to make decisions without her. It was as if the last hour they'd spent together hadn't even taken place. "Crest is under the assumption he doesn't have time to flush out the guilty party."

"We're assuming the person responsible is within the section based on some reasonable suppositions," Brienne pointed out distractedly, already feeling their time together slipping through her fingers. She didn't want to be proven wrong and have her death occur before they ever stood a chance. She swallowed down the desperation and tried to compose her emotions. She needed to treat this like any other assignment. "It could very well have come from one of my own sources. I could have slipped and—"

"You didn't do anything of the sort, Brie," Grady replied, resignation in the tone of his voice. He set his weapon on the counter and then retrieved a bottle of water from the refrigerator before leaning back against the hard granite. He unscrewed the cap and took a long drink of water, a droplet of condensation immediately falling onto his chest. It trailed lower to where she'd been earlier, to when they'd pushed aside all that was wrong and loved one another. "Crest is suggesting I go into Langley."

"And do what?" Brienne couldn't believe Grady was even considering such a reckless motion. "The ISI already knows about our association. Either they will take you out on sight or they will have every

available source they have here in the United States glued to you, waiting for an opportunity to bring you in and do God knows what in order to get you to talk. You and I both know something of this magnitude takes time. Didn't you sit here during dinner and reiterate those same words?"

"We *don't* have time, Brie."

Grady was considering putting himself in the crosshairs of ISI to gain their attention...on purpose. Brienne needed to find a way to change his mind before he ended up being chained up to a ceiling, beaten, and tortured. That wasn't going to happen.

"You aren't going." Brienne was firm in her stance, ignoring the dark gaze Grady was shooting her way. He never did like being told what to do, but he wasn't calling the shots around here. Neither was Crest, for that matter. She crossed her arms and stood in the middle of the small kitchen, daring for Grady to argue with her. "I won't be responsible for the most likely outcome should you and Crest try to do this. Telfer might be dealing with his superiors and putting out the firestorm this has all caused, but he's good at his job. He will have people in place, such as those within the Technical Collections Section in the Science and Technology Division, to ferret out whoever disclosed my identity."

"This isn't a normal operation and you know it," Grady countered, slamming his half-empty bottle onto the counter. Water droplets sprayed and she wasn't surprised when the plastic practically collapsed beneath his grip. "Damn it, Brie, this is your life we're talking about. People are out there doing their best to see it snuffed out. Crest has multiple angles covered, but Telfer has a leak inside his section. How far do you think he'll get without knowing who he can trust?"

"ISI had to have bought the intel from someone and left—"

"A paper trail?" Grady was already shaking his head in response to what she was implying. "Those agents within your department are seasoned. There is no way in hell they left evidence of their ties to ISI. This is going to come down to traditional methods of investigation. I need to be onsite."

The evening had been an emotional rollercoaster and it was as if the ride had never been brought to a stop. Their coaster car was still on the tracks and about to go another round. Brienne wanted off, but Grady was in the first seat with his hands high in the air. She wouldn't allow him to ride alone.

"Brie, you and I know how this works." Grady was now standing in front of her, his strong arms pulling her to him. Brienne closed her eyes, wishing she had half the strength to physically prevent him from leaving this sanctuary. "Should ISI be monitoring the approaches to Langley, they'll eventually spot me. It's better we have the upper hand. Maybe they'll make a mistake and call whomever it is they have in their grip. Telfer has those tech boys monitoring every individual cell phone of every person you've ever had contact with."

They could stay up all night discussing this, but it wouldn't change a thing—at least the facts. Brienne needed time to mentally go through everything regarding Raheela, from every word spoken to those that weren't. Had she known? Had she already been in a safe place, knowing her husband was about to eliminate any remaining threat to a mission that had never truly been completed? Crest needed to reach the port before Raheela was able to fade into the masses as if she'd never existed. In the meantime, Brienne wouldn't allow the time she and Grady had left to be wasted by discussing what-ifs.

"Take me back to bed, Grady. Make this all go away for a few hours, at the very least."

CHAPTER NINE

Grady couldn't sleep at all. The sun was due to rise within the hour and he would soon need to leave for his trip back to D.C. He wasn't comfortable leaving Brienne here, even if it was with a high-powered covert action team assigned to one of Crest's best team members. What if this was what ISI was waiting for? What if they had gone even further in their attempt to eliminate Brienne and her informant? What if they'd manage to infiltrate the NSA and knew exactly where to look all along?

"I think we need to wait until Raheela is found and brought to safety before sending you into Langley," Brienne whispered, still using her finger to trace circles on his chest. She hadn't gotten much sleep either. Another phone call from Crest last night had their minds spinning with questions, so they'd ended up retracing Brienne's steps...only to end up in the same place they started. "Going into this thing blind, hoping for the best, isn't the answer."

Grady couldn't take hearing the strain of worry in Brienne's voice, so he brought her hand up and pressed a tender kiss in the center of her palm. He continued to trail his lips down her arm until he needed to flip her over to continue his progression. Her arms came up in acceptance and pulled him closer.

Neither of them had to say a word. They used to make love quietly on the nights one of them had to leave the following morning. It was a silent goodbye, just in case. He hadn't realized it then, but he did now.

There wasn't a spot on her body that Grady didn't stroke, touch, or caress with his lips and hands. He started with her front and then continued his exploration on her back. Her lower back had a sensual arch, but he spent more time at curve of her buttocks. Brienne was ticklish on the back of her thighs, but by the time he'd finished...she was more than ready to accept him into her.

"Not yet," Grady whispered, not wanting this to end as she turned to face him. If only he had the power to stop the sun from rising. "I need to taste more of you."

Grady trailed tiny kisses down her abdomen, cherishing the warmth of her skin. Brienne didn't hesitate to spread her legs and give him access to her most vulnerable region. He spread her folds, running his tongue over her swollen clitoris. He savored her sweet taste while taking his time enjoying this intimate act they were engaging in. They could live another two hundred years and it still wouldn't be enough time to love her the way he wanted.

Brienne's breath was becoming hitched as she continued to climb, but Grady didn't want her soaring without him. He slowed down, pulling away from her sensitive nub and gradually made his way back up to kiss her. He allowed her to roll both of them over, giving her access to the condom he'd placed on the nightstand. The sun was starting to shine through the slates of the blinds, kissing the areas of her body he'd already had the pleasure of touching.

Brienne tore the square foil package with her teeth, pulling the small disc out with the pads of her fingers. She placed the condom on the tip of his cock, ever so slowly unraveling the latex over his shaft. Grady couldn't help but stare at the beautiful woman above him. She was a sight that he would never tire of looking at, but it wasn't just her physical attributes that pulled him toward her.

The woman she had become through all her trials and tribulations, the unforgettable painful sights she'd encountered, and the harsh decisions she'd had to make along the way had only given her strength to succeed in her position...not just professionally, but in life. And she was here with him. She chose him to share her life with and it had taken him way too long to accept her love. It was remarkable.

"Take what you need from me, Brie," Grady encouraged lovingly, assisting her in straddling him. "I'm yours and you are mine."

“Don’t forget that when you are out there in the field,” Brienne whispered, placing the tip of his cock against her entrance. She closed her eyes as she ever so slowly slid down his shaft. Her sheath parted and her warmth surrounded him as she took every inch. “And remember what you have to live for.”

Brienne didn’t move right away, but instead started to slowly rotate her hips. The pressure she was exerting on him made it exquisitely difficult to refrain from having an orgasm. Grady evened out his breathing, reaching for the strength to control his physical urge to attain release. She wanted this and he would see that she got what she needed.

Grady lifted both arms and cupped her breasts, using his thumbs to caress her nipples. Brienne arched her back in pleasure, even leaning slightly back to rest her hands on his thighs. She never once stopped gyrating against him. A ray of sun moved slightly lower, shining on where they were now connected. Her clit was swollen and the base of his shaft glistened every time she lifted.

“Touch your breasts, Brie,” Grady urged, lowering his arms and licking his thumb. He waited for her to do as he instructed, in awe of the pleasure she was experiencing, before pressing on her clitoris. She was uninhibited in her quest for release, the guttural moan sending an ache directly through his cock. “That’s right, sweetheart. Roll your nipples for me.”

Brienne was mesmerizing as she pleased herself under his command. Grady watched her through hooded eyes, not wanting to miss a second of this sensual demonstration. Her lips were parted in a silent cry while she manipulated her hardened nipples. He could literally see the goose bumps forming on her silken flesh as they made their way straight to where he was touching her.

Grady pressed slightly harder, never letting up on the circular motions he was administering to her clit. Brienne lifted herself off of him by the strength of her legs, only to then take him back inside of her. She quickened her pace and her sheath started to press against his shaft in response.

“Don’t stop, Brie. Keep riding me until you come.”

Grady had no doubt the orgasm hit Brienne when she slammed down on him and his name fell from her lips. Her pussy contracted around him over and over, pulling at his seed until he spilled into the condom. She didn’t stop until they were both out of breath and she’d collapsed on top of him. He held her while they both recovered, not willing to give this up quite yet.

“I can’t let you go,” Brienne whispered, her warm lips moving against his neck. Grady was technically still inside of her and neither one of them made a move to leave the bed. That didn’t mean he wouldn’t when the time came. Seeing her through this threat was his main priority and he would do what had to be done, regardless of her protests. “We’ll figure out another way.”

* * * *

Brienne never let Grady out of her sight. They’d taken a shower together and he’d made them some pancakes while she literally went over every conversation she’d ever had with Raheela for the second time. She was the key and it was only a matter of time before the door was unlocked. It was going on zero nine hundred and he’d yet to leave, most likely waiting for another one of Crest’s team members to arrive. He could wait until hell froze over, but there wasn’t a chance he was leaving here without her. The things ISI would do to him if they captured him was unthinkable.

“Whoever it is didn’t necessarily need to know about Raheela,” Grady offered up, taking his coffee and peering out the blinds of the patio door that overlooked the ocean. They’d not been opened and they wouldn’t be, but she would certainly love to be able to breathe in the salt air. “Raheela’s husband could have been monitoring her calls and then made the attempt to uncover your identity. ISI is smart enough to know which department within the CIA was keeping tabs on Pakistani relations. From there, it wouldn’t take much to find a weakness among the personnel and then exploit them.”

“Threats?” Brienne poured herself more coffee out of the glass carafe. Even the cups were cream in color, matching the rest of the décor. The tedious design couldn’t prevent the delicious aroma from filling the air. “You know that all of us do our best to prevent that.”

“What about those employees who aren’t field agents? How about the analyst on your desk?” Grady stepped away from the closed blinds, turning back to face Brienne. He’d changed into the only other set of clothes given to them, which happened to be one of his preferred suits. The grey jacket was currently on the back of one of the chairs, but his blue and charcoal grey tie was perfectly aligned with the buttons on his white dress shirt. “Think about it. How many times have the IRS databases been breached by other countries or even the lowliest hacker who wanted to discover who held those kinds of credentials? With the right amount of time and the correct person at the helm, it wouldn’t be too hard to figure out who worked for the government in a certain department. From there, it’s a matter of pushing the right buttons, greasing the correct wheels, and using the appropriate people to get what they need.”

Brienne thought about the first time she’d been in contact with Raheela. It was years ago, offering up the timetable needed for such a coup against the CIA. Had her husband known all along and it had taken this length of time to actually locate Brienne? The question remained—why was the ISI concerned with Red Starr?

Brienne and Grady were making assumptions based on the last few transmissions she had with Raheela. The whole group of agency field assets stationed in Pakistan had used the woman more often on other related terrorist issues than what Brienne had done in the past. What if she was just a casualty because she’d been the one responsible for bringing Raheela into the fold to begin with? There were so many unanswered questions.

“Do you see why I have to go in?” Grady asked, coming up behind Brienne and kissing the back of her neck. She’d used her clip to pull her hair back, keeping it out of the way. He was using his affection to ease the difficulty of this situation. It wasn’t working and she turned around to face him. “Don’t give me that look, Brienne. This is our chosen profession and we knew the risks going in.”

“Technically, you’re retired,” Brienne countered, resting her hands on either side of his tie. She raised an eyebrow in challenge as she grasped for straws. “You don’t have to do anything. Telfer is my Supervisory Special Agent in Charge. He’s the one who—”

“Has his ass in a ring of fire right now,” Grady finished for her, not even coming close to using the words she would have. Brienne sighed in frustration, but refused to think that this was their only choice. “You and I both know the shitstorm that brews up within the Agency when an agent’s identity is leaked. At this point, we use whatever means necessary.”

The SAT phone rang, although not unexpectedly. Crest had radioed in that Connor would be arriving to relieve the night crew, allowing Grady to take his trip to Langley. Connor was to call right before he approached the beach house. It wasn’t Connor’s voice that came over the speaker, though.

“We have a bit of a problem. Starr is currently heading to Langley,” Crest informed them, his tone tight with worry. “I’ve held her off as long as I could. We’re about to have a third party enter the arena. The firepower she has at her disposal could take out a third world nation.”

CHAPTER TEN

Grady and Brienne had both agreed to allow Crest another twenty-four hours to speak with Starr, locate Raheela, and devise a plan that would lead them to who gave up Brienne's identity. Two of those three things had been accomplished and now it was time to make a difficult decision. Grady was ready to walk out the door and act as bait, but Brienne couldn't allow that to happen.

"We go into the city together." Brienne refused to budge on her position. It was apparent Grady was suppressing his annoyance at her deliberate resistance to what needed to be done. These four walls were closing in and she wasn't sure how much longer either one of them would last, but he didn't get to go off alone. "Or at least allow me to speak with Raheela first before you make the drive."

"Raheela is currently en route to a safe house outside of Karachi. That could take hours, which we can't afford to waste. Besides, we both know that there's nothing she can offer that she hasn't already supplied. The—" Grady would have continued had the SAT phone not begun to buzz again. This was becoming repetitive and something had to be decided one way or another. He answered the call on speaker so that both of them could hear the update. "Tell me something useful."

"Bob Jensen."

Brienne stood up from the middle cushion on the couch as the third item on Crest's list had finally been accomplished, wanting to throw her cup of coffee across the room. She needed to hear it shatter, see it being destroyed with as much desire as she wanted Crest to retract his declaration. Her team—make that her former team—was falling apart. She'd yet to fully realize the ramifications that her career was over and her life would never be the same. The safety of those men and women had always come first and she refused to believe Bob had anything to do with betraying her. He was a dear friend of hers.

"That's not a possibility."

"Brienne, they kidnapped his five-year-old son."

"Excuse me?" Brienne lost the ability to breathe as the pressure on her chest became real. Brutal images of what could happen to such a young child entered her mind before she could put those barriers up that she'd gotten accustomed to using during overseas assignments. She could only imagine what Bob was going through. Grady was by her side immediately, indicating she needed to keep grounded. "You're telling me that ISI took Michael Jensen? Is SSA Telfer aware of this? Do they have the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team assembled—"

"Yes, it's being handled," Crest advised over a loud purring sound that could be heard in the background. "Starr is using her operations group to assist in the rescue mission and we're hoping the element of surprise is enough to keep Michael alive. Jensen gave himself over when he was forced to kill one of Shujaat Qalat's lieutenants who wasn't happy with the answers he was being given. He made one too many threats and Jensen snapped. ISI isn't aware their source has turned and their handler terminated."

Crest didn't have to convey that those answers ISI sought had everything and anything to do with Brienne's current location. They were bound and determined to eliminate her for God knows what motive, which most likely added on to their desperation in being unable to locate Raheela. Qalat has lost control of whatever plan he had in motion and now a little boy's life was at stake.

"And what of Qalat?" Grady asked, motioning for Brienne to sit down. There was no telling how long they would be here now, but she couldn't bring herself to stay stationary. She handed the SAT phone over to Grady as she started to pace in order to ease some of her anxiety. She wasn't used to being on the sidelines during the homecoming game. "Do we know of his location?"

"Qalat is still in Pakistan, making it hard for us to reach his location. However, it also makes quick changes in directions difficult for our adversaries. His communications system is coordinated through several take-outs for security reasons. Chief among those was to escape detection by the NSA," Crest

explained, the whirring noise fading slightly. Brienne recognized the sounds of a turboprop driven aircraft. "Telfer is on his way there, working a deal out with the Foreign Minister, who the ISI doesn't have control of. In fact, we believe the ISI has been acting outside the government's control on this whole operation. Their government officials are trying to maintain peace within the region, and with the U.S. They weren't too happy to discover Qalat has been using resources for his own selfish means. They aren't willing to go as far as handing him over, but they are prepared to allow a witness when they take him into custody for treason. It's the best we can do given our tenuous relationship at the moment."

Brienne understood the significance of what Crest was saying. The Agency would be allowed to observe whatever interrogation methods the Pakistani officials authorized, designed to garner the desired intelligence. It was more than evident Qalat had a hand in aiding the rebellions and insurgents against the current Pakistani government. That was punishable by death, but the ISI had a unique level of influence when it came to dealing with its own government. They needed to maintain the military's support to govern the people and the ISI had direct ties to the military. The question remained if Telfer would be able to acquire any information regarding what truly happened to the Red Starr unit during that fateful mission. The dots were connecting and it was only a matter of time before the picture was complete.

"Where are you going now?" Brienne asked, turning back so that her words could thoroughly be heard over the satellite phone.

"I'm not going anywhere," Crest advised, his confidence coming across the line loud and clear. "Reinforcements just arrived with their equipment and I'm here to greet them personally."

"The cell that Qalat had managed to organize in the D.C. area has to be strained with trying to find my location while keeping Michael Jensen secure," Brienne said, thinking out loud. Grady was already motioning for her to stop with her train of thought, but she couldn't stand the concept of Bob's son being harmed in any way. "Tell Starr and the FBI HRT to hold off if they find Michael's location. Let me be the distraction the Agency needs to make a safe rescue. The bad guys should leap at the chance. It will put them off balance and weaken their defense of the safe house location where they're keeping Bob's son."

"No," Grady barked into the phone. It was already too late. Brienne had made up her mind and she had no doubt that Gavin Crest and Catori Starr would agree with the strategy. The location where Michael Jensen was being held needed to be thinned out to lessen the risk to his life. The only person capable of doing that was Brienne. "Crest, allow things to proceed as planned. Brienne stays here."

"You explained in great detail what it was like to lose Madison," Brienne exclaimed, not hesitating to cross that delicate line. There wasn't time for pleasantries, selfishness, or ignorance. Grady understood that, but his judgment was being slightly hindered from past experiences. "What exactly do you think Bob and Sharon will experience if their son dies today? Their innocent five-year-old child?"

Silence hung thick in the air and not even Crest ventured into the dampening cloud. Brienne had never seen such anguish in a person as she did with Grady at this very moment. Tears stung her eyes at what she was asking of him, but it was the right thing to do.

"Grady," Brienne whispered, stepping close to the man she'd come to love more than anything in this world. She raised an arm so that her palm rested against his freshly shaven skin, grateful for the warmth that penetrated her cold hands. "If this were any other agent, you would have suggested it out of the gate. Qalat's men are desperate because they've lost contact with the person pulling the strings and their source's handler. They are disorganized without senior leadership, and will most likely end up killing an innocent little boy unless we provide the necessary distraction and the only possible way for them to accomplish their mission."

Grady's jawline was as tight as a piano wire. It was a wonder his teeth didn't crack underneath the pressure. His dark eyes became almost black in his attempt at reconciling what Brienne was suggesting. He'd wrapped his other hand around her arm and his grip became even more constricting, as he had no choice but to accept her proposal. The struggle within him was strikingly obvious and she physically hurt for him. She would have given anything for them not to be here at this moment...but they were.

"This is what we signed up for, Grady. Isn't that what you said? We need to honor that fated identity."

“Alert Starr and the FBI HRT lead that we’ll be headed into D.C. within four hours,” Grady said harshly into the SAT phone before disconnecting the call. He glanced down at the device as if it was a lifeline, but he wouldn’t find the reprieve he was looking for. Brienne’s heart tore upon his next words. “That identity you’re talking about wasn’t written in blood, Brie. Mine was. Not yours.”

Grady turned and walked out of the room, leaving Brienne standing there alone as she pondered his words. Yes, he was the one who’d endorsed his life over to the United States Marines. He was the one who’d gone on countless deployments and combat tours, placing himself at the will of the Corps in many battles to defend his country. What he understood but didn’t want to accept was that she was bound by the same contract, regardless that ninety percent of the time she was safe behind a desk.

Brienne was dressed in the jeans she’d had on from yesterday, along with the camisole she’d been wearing upon arrival at this safe house. She reached for the matching white blazer, the blood spots still apparent on one of the sleeves. She’d done her best to wash it out, but to no avail. She stared intently at the small dots and even ran her thumb over the stains, recalling the terror she’d experienced when she shattered the window and killed a man. She wasn’t just scared about walking back into a similar situation...she was downright terrified of what was to come.

Brienne’s fingers trembled when she reached for her cup of coffee still sitting on the small table in front of the couch. How could she convince Grady that he shouldn’t be by her side on the drive into the city? It was pure hypocrisy, but she wouldn’t have to worry about him and he’d have a better vantage point of anyone coming her way if he were in a chase vehicle. She’d already accepted that it wouldn’t happen that way, but it was nice to imagine.

“You have absolutely no idea what you are asking me to do.” Grady had come out of the bedroom right when she’d reached the kitchen sink, his words barely above a harsh murmur. The raw emotion was evident and Brienne set her coffee cup next to the drain before pressing her fingers to her lips to prevent herself from breaking down. It had never been her intent to hurt him like this. “I will do this for the parents of Michael Jensen, but we do it my way. No more heroics.”

Brienne didn’t need to turn around to know Grady had come up behind her. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her back to his chest, resting his warm cheek against hers. She inhaled as deeply as she could, capturing his essence in hopes it would give her the strength to carry out the rest of this assignment. She leaned back and then tilted her face closer to his.

“I will agree to that on one condition,” Brienne whispered, closing her eyes to savor this moment. She refused to believe that they’d made it this far only to have history repeat itself. She needed something to hold on to. “From what you told me about Madison, she’ll be watching over you today. I want you to take me to her grave when this is all said and done. I want the chance to thank her for having a hand in the man you’ve become.”

“We can do that, if you like.”

Grady had granted Brienne’s wish, his relief evident at the fact that she wasn’t going to try something foolish.

She wouldn’t, because he would be there to prevent her from acting out.

Brienne had already accepted that Grady would be by her side today. She could only pray they made it through this alive.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The SUV's temperature was set at a comfortable seventy degrees. The vents were softly blowing the regulated air through the interior, doing nothing to alleviate the concern Grady and Brienne were currently consumed with. This was it. Today was the day this all ended.

Grady and Brienne had spent the first hour of the drive coordinating their arrival with Gavin Crest. His men were in position and they had already scouted the exact access road on which he and Brienne would enter, as well as the assembly site. This, of course, was all being organized in conjunction with the CIA and FBI.

The FBI had been briefed. It had two teams on the ground in two locations in the greater D.C. area, and were now the lead organization overseeing this part of the assignment, although Grady didn't have to wonder who was really calling the shots. The Agency had no doubt withheld specific intelligence, suiting their purposes and taking advantage of the additional reinforcements brought to bear by both private contractors present.

Everyone was waiting for Brienne to make an appearance, drawing the attention away from the location of Michael Jensen. Granted, this undertaking was already underway, but there were multiple goals that needed to be obtained—the main being to eliminate the cell Qalat and the ISI had managed to infiltrate so close to the heart of the nation.

Grady and Brienne had traveled at least a hundred and sixty miles before the critical update they'd been waiting on came through. The tension in the vehicle could have been cut with a knife, but the ringing of the SAT phone had done just as good a job.

"Starr has given confirmation," Crest relayed, being their person of contact. Grady wouldn't have it any other way. "Bob Jensen placed the call in to his contact thirty minutes ago, under the supervision of SSA Telfer. The connection was long enough that the technicians were able to trace the location of the group of men we're targeting within three meters of their cell phone. Not only were they able to trace the initial call, they were able to track others located in the same general area and listen in to the conversations in the vicinity of those phones."

Grady was pleased to hear the accomplishment of this morning's endeavor, but he understood all too well the events that had to take place afterward for this to be a true success.

"Taps were placed on all suspected phones," Crest stated, continuing with the updates. "Telemetry and velocity data were correlated by mainframe computers that tracked movements and placed the targets in surrounding buildings on a three-dimensional mapping system."

This was good. Even if the original caller removed the battery from his or her phone, it would be too late to avoid the collateral collection of all the other surrounding devices' information and location data. Grady appreciated the fact that something was going right today.

"The CIA, FBI, and Red Starr are now en route with precision location and targeting data being constantly updated to each participant's heads-up display on the intelligence network established for this specific operation. By the time they engage the targets, we should know numbers and likely avenues of approach on most of the tangos. Just prior to their assault, however, each of the attacking forces will go dark and their movements toward the two of you will be unseen."

Satellites and drones were deployed and tasked now that contact had been made, courtesy of the FBI and the CIA's Technology and Science Division. The buildings and outlying area where the call had been triangulated was examined in real time, as well as sensors employed for analyzing heat signatures.

Those signatures were cross-checked with the phone and electronic device collections. A real-time situation display of the area would then be developed. The location of Michael Jensen had finally been revealed and it was only a matter of time before a rescue mission commenced after the additional tangos

departed to attack the bait vehicle. Things were going as planned, but Grady was well aware it could go to hell at any moment.

“I take it Jensen gave the time and waypoint for Brienne’s return?”

Grady never stopped surveying the area ahead of them, regardless that one of the CSA team members was driving fifty yards in front of their vehicle. Connor Ortega was following fifty yards behind. Everyone was aware that the enemy wouldn’t show their faces until they had eyes on their target. The split seconds needed to identify all the attacking cell members would be crucial.

“Jensen played his part well, but he will still be held accountable.”

That was all Crest would say on the subject. Bob Jensen no longer had a career within the Agency. He hadn’t followed protocol upon his son’s abduction while at the same time putting another agent’s life in danger, though a felony was still a felony. No one, not even Brienne, blamed Jensen for his error. A parent would do whatever it took to safeguard their child.

“Did he sell it?” Grady asked, knowing that was the key to the success of this cleanup.

“Yes. Jensen was able to continue the charade and give them and us the time needed to put several plans in motion. He read the script where Brienne was turning herself into protective custody, but only into the hands of Gus Wilson. The FBI will cordon off the traffic to and from the Key Bridge just prior to the coordinated assault commencement. They are waiting for your arrival in the immediate area.”

Grady continued to drive while Crest gave updates throughout the remainder of the journey. Specific scenarios were proposed and thrown out as they all did their best to strategize the downside of the thousand ways this could possibly go sideways.

“Qalat’s men have now been dispatched and are heading toward the target location,” Crest advised, his announcement also reaching his team. His unit would be positioned throughout the target area to take out those they could positively verify as being a part of Qalat’s cell, but there would clearly be those that slipped under the radar. All of this was being communicated to the FBI’s On-Scene Tactical Coordination Center (OSTCC) and into CIA Headquarters where a maze of operations personnel would dissect every angle of every movement for future recrimination. “Eight tangos were spotted leaving, but we can’t discount there being more en route from another location. They have gone communications black on all cell assets. The locale where Michael is being kept has four tangos left inside—presumed to be heavily armed males.”

The Company usually stayed far away from domestic matters and rarely contributed to missions on U.S. soil, which was why the FBI had to be the lead agency. That didn’t change the fact that this wasn’t a typical hostage rescue mission. There would be no negotiating. The FBI and CIA contracted groups sent in to retrieve their objectives would complete their mission, eliminating every tango in their way. They took care of business in the most ruthless manner...in a way the majority of the population found contemptible.

“Please keep us updated on Michael Jensen’s safety,” Brienne instructed, sitting up a little straighter as Grady drove her closer to their destination. They were now passing by Georgetown University. No one spoke of what would happen should Qalat manage to get a call out to his people here on U.S. soil, either abandoning the plan to eliminate evidence or putting into place something bigger than any of them could imagine. “We’re switching to tactical communications. Earpieces in. Watch the hot mics.”

Brienne handed Grady one of the small earpieces that would connect them to the FBI OSTCC after they disconnected their hands free call with Crest over the vehicle’s Bluetooth sound system. She laid the small device in his palm and held on longer than necessary. He needed the intimate contact and lifted the back of her hand to his lips.

Grady wanted more than anything to turn this SUV around and take her far from here. He had a cabin outside of Ashville, North Carolina. It was hardly ever used since Madison’s death, but they could easily go there and live out their lives without any thought to anyone else.

Who was he kidding? Neither one of them were cut out for retirement and Brienne was certainly way too young to call it quits for the simple life in the western Carolina mountains. As for him? Well, Grady

would no doubt consult for the various agencies until they no longer wanted him and he hoped to have a colleague in that aspect of his life. He already had a partner where it mattered most.

“TAC one, this is Echo Five Charlie. We’re sixty seconds out.”

“Copy, Echo Five Charlie. Four heavy tangos in sight north side of the bridge.”

Grady’s grip tightened on the steering wheel in reaction to the summary. That meant at least four more threats remained that had yet to be observed inside the target area. That lowered their odds of getting through this unscathed, but the FBI and CIA teams were crawling all over the place.

“We’re making the right decision,” Brienne murmured, reaching for the weapon in her side holster. Crest had seen to it that she had her usual Sig Sauer P250 Compact chambered in .40 S&W. She confirmed a round was in the chamber and then slowly inhaled to seemingly give herself a moment of calm. “This will all be over in less than five minutes. Then we get to decide what to do with the rest of our lives.”

“I didn’t tell you?” Grady asked somewhat nonchalantly, having waited for just this moment to give Brienne something even more to fight for. She quickly shot a glance his way with a raised eyebrow. “Telfer needs another consultant. Obviously, it’s not as exciting as a CIA field agent and consultants are behind the scenes more often than in front of them, usually going over endless rows of files, but it passes the time. Oh, and the pay might be shit, but you do get to travel on the Company dime.”

Brienne lifted the side of her mouth in a half-smile. The voices coming through the earpieces were updating them on the whereabouts of the four heavily armed individuals within the sights of the snipers’ scopes. Grady continued to drive the vehicle onto the bridge where Gus would be waiting for them in the emergency pull-up lane mid-span. No doubt he was outfitted with a bulletproof vest, similar to what Brienne and Grady had on underneath their suit jackets.

“Is a companion written in that job description?” Brienne asked with not even a hitch to her voice when he stopped a good thirty feet behind where Gus was waiting for them. The CSA lead vehicle continued in the slow lane of traffic and the chase vehicle braked twenty yards back, effectively blocking any following traffic in their lane...of which there was none. The transfer would appear to go as planned until the FBI gave them notice of their assault. They were currently waiting for Qalat’s other men to make themselves known. “That’s my one stipulation.”

“Sweetheart, you can have whatever you want written in that contract,” Grady answered, leaving the vehicle running as he shifted the gear into park. Gus’ face appeared to be set in stone as he stared at them through the side view mirror. “Foxtrot Six, what is their position?”

“TAC One, Foxtrot Six. Tangos on approach twenty yards north. On my count, open the doors on the target vehicles. Five, four...”

The sun was shining bright, the vivid rays making it almost impossible to see in the direction the federal agent had indicated. Grady didn’t like the impediment currently blocking their view of the enemy. Their opponents had certainly done well choosing their advantage point. It would have gone their way had this been a genuine meeting point between Brienne and a colleague from her division.

As it stood, these men were about to be terminated with high-powered rifles with fast expanding mushrooming .308 caliber hollow point rounds. It wasn’t up to them to choose whether they would surrender of their own will or die today. Their fate had already been decided.

“Are you ready?” Grady murmured, bringing up Brienne’s free hand and pressing another kiss to the back of her fingers. He didn’t like how cool her skin had become and he swore when this was over he would take her to a place where the sunshine would make it impossible for her to be cold. Her blue eyes met his with a promise...an assurance she would do everything in her power to give them the life they’d talked about. “I love you, Brie.”

“I love you, too,” Brienne whispered, squeezing his hand before holstering her weapon. It wouldn’t do to give up their plan too early and she had to appear relaxed upon exiting the vehicle or Qalat’s men might react earlier than anticipated. She looked at him one more time before pulling on the door handle. “I’ll accept that consulting position when we’re back at Langley.”

Grady's chest tightened upon Brienne opening her car door after the FBI agent's countdown. He did the same, knowing he was on the side of where Qalat's men had stationed themselves—well, at least four of them.

The meeting was taking place in the center of Key Bridge, giving the FBI the advantage by restricting the ambush to two entry points. It positioned Brienne, to some degree, and other civilian traffic out of the line of fire while also providing the FBI and CIA the ability to spot the enemy on both sides of their likely line of approach.

“Weapons hot. Tangos are bringing their weapons up. Fire! Fire! Fire!”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Brienne had been in many dangerous situations throughout her career. There was that time in Damascus where she'd witnessed a young boy pull the pin on a hand grenade he'd found on the ground in the bazaar near where the local arms merchants' stalls were located. The split second reaction when she'd grabbed it from his small fingers and tossed it into an exposed sewage pipe had been one of the worst. Or when she'd been in Kandahar and the Humvee in front of her trailing civilian SUV had exploded into nothing but shrapnel, flesh, and bones from those Marines who had been inside.

This time? Brienne was the target and she had no doubt that the enemy had her mop of blonde hair within their crosshairs, their fingers on their triggers. All it took was a miscalculation of mere seconds on the part of the FBI and she wouldn't even know she'd been hit. The 7.62 x 39mm bullet would hit her head at just over twenty-three hundred feet per second and cause her brain to explosively depart her cranium through both the entrance and exit wounds.

Brienne didn't want to die today. She didn't want to be taken away from Grady, leaving him alone to bear more pain upon losing a woman he loved. He deserved better.

Then there was the flip side...the one she really couldn't fathom. What if Grady was the one killed today, leaving her to know without a doubt that she was to blame? He could have easily stayed behind with one of the FBI or CIA agents, overseeing things from a safe distance. She hadn't asked him to do that, because she wouldn't have done so either had the roles been reversed.

Brienne loved him...that meant they faced their enemy together.

"TAC One, four tangos down twenty yards out from the middle span. I repeat, four down."

That meant there were at least four more men at large. Brienne and Grady had stopped just outside of their respective doors on the SUV, still a good forty feet from where Gus was standing. She braced herself for the bullet, not knowing which direction it might be coming from. Where were the others?

The drone above them was scouting for possible sightings, whether it be by land or water. Both entry points were being canvassed and now it was only a waiting game. Hell, Grady and Brienne might actually make it all the way to where Gus was waiting for her without any other attempt on her life. Qalat might very well have reached out to his men here on U.S. soil before being taken into custody. There were too many variables to count, but that didn't mean this current mission could be halted.

Brienne took another step out, this one putting her directly opposite Grady's side of the vehicle and a bit forward toward the bridge railing. She hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath until his voice spoke inside her ears.

"Keep walking to the front of the vehicle," Grady advised, his soothing tone giving Brienne the encouragement to continue forward. She couldn't help but wonder where the next attack would come from. "Slow steps. We're almost halfway there."

The sun reflected off of something to Brienne's right, but she didn't take her eyes off of the agent in front of them. Gus must have noticed it from his location at the back of his vehicle as well, but he maintained position. It wasn't until another agent's voice shouted into their earpiece that all hell broke loose.

"RPG! Get down! RPG! Take cover!"

Fight or flight. Those instincts always managed to take over. As an agent, those reflexes were honed to initiate at the right time. It didn't always happen that way, but their training molded them in a manner where the percentage of success was in their favor.

This wasn't the time to fight. One couldn't fight a rocket propelled grenade. One also couldn't escape the damage that was about to be done. This was it. They would die together in the open between the two armored vehicles.

“Fuck,” Grady muttered over the whir of the drone as it repositioned overhead. The weapons that the teams would use to combat individual targets wouldn’t stop the oncoming boat below them. The likelihood they could eliminate the threat before the RPG struck was impossible. “Move!”

Grady grabbed Brienne by the hand and together they ran back toward the relative safety of the armored SUV without a snowball’s chance in hell of making it to cover before the hiss of the RPG ended in a detonation against the concrete and steel railing directly behind them and showering them with millions of white hot fragments of molten steel. There was absolutely no way they could outrun the shrapnel that was about to rain across the bridge directly into them.

So she thought.

Brienne hadn’t expected Grady to drag her over the knee-high cement barrier opposite their vehicle in the center of the bridge. Neither had she predicted he would use the momentum to take both of them over the tall greyish-blue steel railing on the other side, tumbling both of them off of the structure and toward the depths of the filthy water below.

The explosion that rocked the Key Bridge had most likely been heard for miles. It was the only sound that could be heard resounding through the air as Brienne and Grady continued to free-fall toward the churning brown water. She did her best to brace herself against hitting the cold water below, but nothing could prepare her for the impact of an eighty-five foot drop. She’d done her best to stay upright so that her feet hit first. She wasn’t so lucky and her thighs took the brunt of the bruising.

Even so, Brienne had little time to suck in oxygen as she was submerged in the cold, dark water. The shock had her fighting against the gravity and she immediately kicked her legs and arms, struggling to get to the surface. She tried her best to wrestle against the panic taking hold, as well as the need to breathe again.

Where was Grady?

Brienne couldn’t see anything in the darkness as she thrashed against the water. She was aware that she was rising to the surface, but she wasn’t sure it was fast enough. Her chest literally burned and the fiery flames began to travel up her throat, insisting she open her mouth for relief...not understanding it would be welcoming death instead.

Brienne finally broke the surface, her lips parting automatically and sucking in oxygen faster than her body could process. That didn’t stop her from frantically looking for Grady. She used her feet to spin in the water, her hands clearing away the debris floating around her while avoiding the rubble still falling from above. The churning of the water from their abrupt entrance, along with the boats, shrapnel, and whatever firepower the FBI had used to destroy those who’d had possession of the RPG made it difficult for her to focus on any one thing.

“Grady!” Brienne continued to yell for him over the engines and the whirling of the blades overhead. The pain and horror Brienne had faced in the water below was nothing compared to what she was experiencing now. “Grady!”

“Here!”

Brienne twisted her body, using what strength she had left in her arms and legs to face in the direction of Grady’s voice. There! His handsome, distinguished face was dripping with water, filled with worry, and the most beautiful vision she’d ever seen. He swam to her, pulling her against him as he reassured them both that they were still alive.

“We did it,” Grady professed with absolute certainty. “We did it.”

There was no time for crying, but Brienne couldn’t stop the sob that had gathered in her chest from escaping. She turned it into a laugh of victory, knowing full well she sounded as if she were losing her mind. She wrapped her arms around Grady’s neck and held on as tight as she could.

Life as Brienne knew it was over. She was no longer a field agent. She was no longer a liaison to the Pakistani desk at the CIA. She would no longer be an asset to her country the way she’d once been.

The chaos continued around them as Brienne clung to her future and came to terms with her past. There were no regrets. Her identity might have been compromised, but she knew exactly who she was and where she was meant to be.

Brienne released Grady enough to where their lips were inches apart and she could see for herself that he was all right. He was smiling brighter than she'd ever bore witness. His brown eyes were lit with triumph, happiness, and love.

They'd made it.

Grady kissed her without hesitation, with no regard to who was watching them. Brienne kicked her feet harder to stay afloat, not missing this adrenaline rush for anything.

By now, either the FBI or the CIA had a boat coming in their direction. The drone above was pulling away and sirens could now be heard in the distance. The fallout of this operation would be on the six o'clock news and it would fall on the FBI to do damage control. Nothing would be said in regards to Brienne, her identity leak, the CIA or Shujaat Qalat's role in all of this, or the fact that a breach had been made to recover a five-year-old boy from a group of ISI kidnappers. There was still one more mission to carry out—bringing home the remains of the former Red Starr unit.

The engine to a watercraft was upon them way too soon. Grady pulled away from Brienne to make sure they weren't in danger of getting bumped by the large boat. She took the time to glance up at the bridge, unable to see the extent of the damage on the other side. She was able to see Special Agent Gus Wilson looking over the railing, giving them a thumbs up that no casualties had taken place. Agents with FBI vests on their chest were reaching out for Brienne, who Grady had already turned and aided them by putting his hands securely underneath her arms.

Brienne grabbed the agent's hands and allowed him to pull her aboard, taking the blanket they offered with appreciation. She moved out of their way as they assisted Grady into the boat, but she didn't sit down until he was at her side. Together, they sat inside the small cabin and waited to be escorted to land.

"Michael Jensen. Was he rescued unharmed?" Brienne asked, directing her question to the agent facing them.

Grady wrapped an arm around her and pulled her closer, the warmth of his body invading hers. Her teeth immediately started to chatter, but she forced them tightly shut to hear the answer.

"Yes, ma'am," the younger agent responded, making a motion with his hand that the driver of the boat should proceed toward land. "The rescue mission was successful. SA Wilson will meet us on shore and you'll then be taken to Langley."

Brienne shared a victorious look with Grady, both of them grateful the various agencies had been able to come together to save the life of an innocent boy. Michael Jensen's life would never be the same, though. He'd had to face the harsh reality of what hatred could do to a group of people.

Bob Jensen would have to serve out a sentence for committing a felony for disclosing an active agent's identity to a foreign power, though Brienne would do her best to give testimony that there had been extenuating circumstances. She didn't blame him for what he'd done, although she did wish he'd trusted his own people to be by his side instead of choosing a path that could have taken many more lives, including her own.

"Are you ready to start a new life?" Grady asked as he spoke against her ear. "One with a man who's pretty well set in his ways?"

Brienne held up her right hand and waited for him to lace his fingers with hers. She tightened her grip on his and then gave her answer.

"I've always been ready, Grady. It was you who I've been waiting on."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Grady removed the change of clothes given to him by Gus Wilson back when they'd been at Langley. The pants hadn't been long enough and the dress shirt had been too tight, but the garments had been enough to see them through the debriefings he and Brienne had gone through. The day had been long and grueling, but it had finally come to an end.

Michael Jensen was back home, safe and sound with his mother, while Bob Jensen was being currently being arraigned. Grady and Brienne had yet to speak with Starr in person. She was busy taking care of paperwork since she'd been on hand to provide Red Starr's services. Every I needed to be dotted and every T needed to be crossed in order to show that no position of power had been abused to resolve the magnitude of the situations that had occurred in the past several days. As a matter of fact, Red Starr had not fired a shot during any of the recent exchanges.

As for SA Gus Wilson, he was awaiting word from SSA Telfer who had contracted CSA to secure Raheela at a safe house outside of Karachi. Everyone was waiting to hear what was occurring on their end. Qalat had been taken into custody and it was only a matter of time before the Pakistani government dealt out their punishment for aiding and abetting groups aligned against their government's official policy. Gavin Crest was in the process of reaching out to his contacts, who had found Raheela and were now moving her to another location. There was nothing for Grady or Brienne to do now but wait and see what would happen from here.

Grady opened the door to the master bathroom of his apartment. Brienne had not flipped the switch for the fan, so the steam billowed out once he opened the door. She'd been inside the shower for over twenty minutes and he didn't like her being in there for so long alone. Their adrenaline had worn off and exhaustion was settling in along with the reality of their insane adventure.

"Hey. Planning on using all the hot water?" Grady asked softly, opening the glass door and stepping inside the enclosure. Brienne had been standing underneath the hot spray with her eyes closed in a somewhat relaxing manner, telling him he didn't have to worry about her wellbeing. A smile lit up her face as she opened those baby blues and he realized he'd walked into her trap. "Oh, you were waiting for me to come in here, weren't you?"

"Absolutely, Colonel. And here I thought you were a bit sharper than that," Brienne murmured, sliding her warm hands up his now wet chest. She didn't stop until she wrapped her arms around his neck, bringing him closer. "You see, we'll probably both be in need of a really good masseuse come tomorrow. The impact my body took hitting that water is going to hurt like a—"

Grady kissed her before she could continue, not needing to hear how sore their muscles were truly going to be. He'd already set a bottle of ibuprofen on the nightstand with a glass of water. He made a mental note to call the masseuse Brienne preferred when he got a moment.

"So you decided we should make love in the shower?" Grady asked, finally pulling away and turning them so that his back took the brunt force of the spray. Brienne rested a cheek against his chest, lowering her arms so that they were wrapped around his waist. "I would have thought you've had your fill of fun in the water today."

"The heat feels too good to get out, so I had to wait long enough for you to catch on," Brienne explained, licking away a stream of water as it ran off of his shoulder. He hardened at the soft feel of her tongue against his skin. "Hmmm, it was apparently worth it. Our muscles are reacting just the way I'd hoped."

"I don't even have—"

Brienne held up a small package containing exactly what Grady had been about to name. She must have brought the condom in earlier, meaning this had been her plan all along. She wouldn't get an argument from him, as she knelt before him before he could take the foil from her hands.

"Brie, your knees—"

"Are just fine. Do you want to catch up here?" Brienne asked with a smile after she'd leisurely wrapped her fingers around his cock. She took her time stroking him, although she needn't waste the time. He was already hardening up just fine—ready and willing. Grady looked down to see her blonde lashes flutter against her cheeks as she parted her lips and licked his slit with her tongue. It was then he saw the towel she'd placed on the shower floor, but his thoughts were now in a different place. "Hmmm, you taste good."

"You can play around another time, Brie," Grady responded in a rather hoarse voice. He chalked it up to their bout in the water earlier. "I need you. Now."

Instead of seeing disappointment in her features, all Grady saw was longing. Brienne stroked him a couple of more times before ripping the foiled package open and tossing it toward the soap dish. She lovingly unrolled the latex as she slid the rubber over the head of his cock and down his shaft. The moment it was securely on, Grady pulled her up and turned her to face the wall at the rear of the river rock lined shower stall. He adjusted the selector to multiple sprays and several additional showerheads came to life.

"We're alive, Brie," Grady reassured her, knowing they would need to repeat those words several times over the next few days. Loving each other like this only solidified the fact that they still had a future ahead of them. He trailed his lips down her shoulder blade as he took hold of her hips. Brienne had already spread her legs and arched her back, waiting to receive him. She didn't have to wait and he thrust forward, seating himself deeply within her. "All we have to do is enjoy the ride."

"Yes," Brienne moaned, spreading her fingers out on the tile before them as she leveraged herself for his long, hard strokes. The wet strands of her hair flowed down her back and barely budged as he continued to drive in and out of her. This wasn't a slow and sensual act. The spray angled in front of her hit her nipples as he stroked away. This was a fast, hard, and well-deserved satiation. "Harder, Grady. Drive me home."

The heat of her sheath was hotter than the water. Grady never once let up the momentum and it wasn't long before their cries mingled together, joining the steam as it rose into the air. Brienne rested her forehead against her arm as she recovered from such a quick, loving incursion. He placed his arms on either side of her hips, doing the same.

"Ten years your senior," Grady said after a while, pulling her back against him when they'd recovered. Their breathing was still quite uneven and he had to laugh. "I'll have to work in a strict workout regimen to keep up with you."

"We could always work daily sex into the regimen," Brienne suggested as she rested against his chest. "That counts for losing calories and stretching muscles, you know."

Grady closed his eyes as Brienne started to talk about all the ways they could stay fit, giving him time to remove the used condom. He washed himself off, pondering if they should have another round. He decided against it, seeing as the water was cooling off and they really would be quite sore tomorrow given what they'd put their bodies through today. Still, he wouldn't change anything that had occurred these last few days.

Grady had been given the opportunity to truly love two women in this lifetime. Most men didn't get to say they found their soul mate even once and he counted himself twice as lucky. For all the sins he'd committed in the name of his country and his freedom, he wasn't certain he deserved such a gift. Either way, he wasn't planning on returning it.

Grady took his time drying her off with one of the extra soft towels he'd purchased just for her. Brienne loved the feel of the smooth Turkish 802 gram bath towel against her skin and he wanted nothing but the best for her. He'd just finished and was wrapping her body in the towel when a noise caught his attention.

“Grady, is someone at the door?”

He was still kneeling on the plush carpet and rested his head against Brienne’s abdomen. What she needed was rest. There was still a lot left to do regarding her position within the Agency, but none of that would happen until SSA Telfer wrapped up his own internal investigation. Grady was set to meet up with Starr and Crest tomorrow, so who could be here?

“I’m tempted to ignore whoever it is.” Grady sighed in resignation, knowing he could do nothing of the sort. He slowly rose off the floor and pulled Brienne close to him, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead. He would see to her first. “I laid your robe out on the bed. Go ahead and crawl underneath the covers. I’ll deal with whoever is here and then I’ll use those oils we bought a few weeks ago when we were in Annapolis to see if we can’t loosen up the muscles on the back of your legs.”

“How did you know—”

Grady just gave Brienne a tender smile. He knew her better than he knew himself. He took in every movement, every gesture, and every word that she emitted. She had a tell for every single thing that affected her and it was his duty to ensure her happiness. He had willingly taken that position and only death could take that responsibility away.

“I will always know, Brie.”

* * * *

Brienne tied the sash of her robe as she finally made her way through Grady’s apartment to his home office. He hadn’t returned immediately and she couldn’t help but wonder who’d been at the door. Her painted toes sunk into the luxurious carpet Grady had installed a while back, having done extensive upgrades to his place when she started to spend nights here in his apartment.

The office door was open, so Brienne didn’t hesitate to cross the threshold. She really wasn’t surprised to see a woman currently staring out the window overlooking St. Stephan’s Catholic Church across Pennsylvania Avenue NW in Foggy Bottom.

“Ms. Starr,” Brienne said, announcing herself. She wished more than anything she was wearing something other than a blue silk robe. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’d like to thank you for your support in Michael Jensen’s rescue.”

Catori Starr turned, her penetrating brown gaze immediately seeking out Brienne. Stunning was the only word to describe the woman in front of her. Long jet-black hair was currently flowing over her shoulders and the fresh white tailored blouse she was wearing. Her bronze skin practically glowed against the fabric, but it was her high cheekbones and her full lips that drew any admirer’s attention. The striking combination of Native American and English heritage had resulted in a classically beautiful, yet dominantly attractive, woman.

“Ms. Chaylse,” Starr countered with just as much respect, reaching out her arm. Brienne shook hands with the retired Master Sergeant, wishing there was more information she could provide about Starr’s husband’s final resting spot and that of his team. “Contrary to what Grady believes, I truly appreciate you keeping me up-to-date on a mission that ended so long ago.”

It hadn’t ended though, had it?

Brienne looked over to see Grady pouring two drinks of what appeared to be Crown Royal XR Canadian blended whiskey. The light auburn liquid splashed into the tumblers. She shook her head when he offered her some. She would only stay long enough to tell Starr what was taking place in Karachi, although she suspected that either Grady or Gavin Crest had no doubt already passed along her information.

“Gavin Crest currently has contractors taking care of Raheela. Once she is safe, I will see if she is willing to give up whatever intel she might have overhead from her husband.”

“Who is currently dead,” Starr shared as if she’d just announced it was raining, taking a step forward to accept the proffered drink from Grady. Brienne gave him a reassuring smile when he joined her, wrapping

one arm around her waist while taking a drink of his bourbon. “Shujaat Qalat will be of no help to us now that he is dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Brienne offered, knowing full well the Pakistani government had terminated the threat to their security before any information was compromised. It was the way these things were done.

“I must applaud you for obtaining Raheela as an informant,” Starr said, raising her glass in salute. Her smile didn’t reach her eyes and Brienne could only imagine the anguish Starr lived in every day knowing her husband wasn’t at rest. “You must have been very good at your job. The CIA has lost a valuable asset, although I do hear they are gaining a well-placed consultant.”

Brienne nodded her acceptance of such praise, only wishing she’d been able to do more. Raheela had aided the CIA in numerous missions, but it wasn’t until recently that she’d wanted more rupees to benefit the women currently trapped in horrible situations. Raheela had thrown out abundant facts regarding her husband, which had eventually revealed his role in eliminating the former Red Starr team upon their approach while rescuing mission workers.

“Grady wasn’t pleased with my role in this assignment,” Brienne revealed honestly, “and though I understand where he was coming from...it was still my duty to let you know Raheela wasn’t sure what happened to the bodies of your former team. With no bodies—”

“There’s no confirmation of death,” Starr finished before taking another sip of her drink. “Either way, when the time comes that you’re able to speak to Raheela, I would like to be kept apprised of any details she might have been privy to.”

“Of course,” Brienne responded, wishing she could do more to help Starr reach the peace that was currently out of her hands. There was no guarantee that Crest’s contractors would be able to relocate Raheela outside of Pakistan without considerable help. “I will—”

Grady’s office phone rang, cutting off Brienne’s promise to follow through on a case that she no longer had any influence over. She no longer held the position of a field agent and she certainly wasn’t a liaison anymore. She’d lost that privilege once her name was announced to the world. The ramifications of that hadn’t even hit the U.S. airwaves, but it would happen soon enough. Maybe by then she and Grady would be off to another country conferring with those who used to be her colleagues.

“Yes, she’s right here.” Grady had set his drink down on a coaster beside his monitor. He was watching Starr, but holding the phone out to Brienne. Her heart lurched slightly upon realizing this could very well be the final nail in the coffin. “It’s Crest.”

Had the contractors relocated Raheela to a safe house? Was Crest calling to tell her that the woman had been lost, never to be found again? There was only way to find out. Brienne reached for the receiver, grateful when Grady didn’t leave her side. Unfortunately, it might not be her who needed the support.

“This is Brienne.” She’d stumbled a bit over her name, usually referring to herself as Agent Chaylse.

“We have her safe and sound.”

Gavin Crest’s words literally stole Brienne’s breath away. She reached for Grady’s hand and held on tight as Raheela was finally put on the line, having been connected through a three-way call. She was naturally scared and only wanted to speak with Brienne, who’d been her main contact and had always kept her word. After taking the time to talk to Raheela and soothe her worries away regarding her husband and his tyranny, Brienne finally broached the topic for which she needed answers.

“Raheela, I understand why you only gave pieces of information at the time,” Brienne assured, opening up a dialogue that would give Starr the closure she needed. “Those women who came to you for help needed a way out. And you did that for them. But your life there is now over. You’ll be brought to the United States under an assumed identity once we have secured passage and documents for your new life. What I need to know is everything you can remember from when that rescue mission occurred. The one your husband prevented from occurring. What happened to those men in that Red Starr unit?”

Brienne listened intently, not truly believing what she was hearing. It couldn’t be. She swallowed over the lump in her throat, trying to confirm what Raheela had just revealed.

“Are you absolutely sure, Raheela?” Brienne asked after clearing her throat.

She sought out Grady's gaze. His eyes were filled with questions, whereas Catori Starr had gone completely still. There was no telling what the woman was thinking, but the lethal glimmer in her dark eyes was enough for Brienne to know she was glad she wasn't on the receiving end.

Gavin Crest had taken over the conversation, telling Brienne that he would be at Grady's apartment within the hour. They had work to do. She disconnected the line and finally revealed the truth of Brendan O'Neill's fate.

"Red's alive, Starr," Brienne divulged, a tentative smile forming on her face as her heart tightened with happiness. Raheela's new identity wasn't the only one to be established today. The gift of life renewed was in the air and now all that was left was for Starr to go and retrieve Brendan O'Neill from his bondage. "Your husband is alive."

~THE END~

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

First and foremost, I love life. I love that I'm a wife, mother, daughter, sister... and a writer.

I am one of the lucky women in this world who gets to do what makes them happy. As long as I have a cup of coffee (maybe two or three) and my laptop, the stories evolve themselves and I try to do them justice. I draw my inspiration from a retired Marine Master Sergeant that swept me off of my feet and has drawn me into a world that fulfills all of my deepest and darkest desires. Erotic romance, military men, intrigue, with a little bit of kinky chili pepper (his recipe), fill my head and there is nothing more satisfying than making the hero and heroine fulfill their destinies.

Thank you for having joined me on their journeys...

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THE SAFEGUARD SERIES

Brutal Obsession (The Safeguard Series, Book One)
Faithful Addiction (The Safeguard Series, Book Two)

BRUTAL OBSESSION

The Safeguard Series, Book One

By Kennedy Layne

Join me in a thrilling new romantic suspense series that will leave you on the edge of your seat!

Keane Sanderson never thought he'd survive to see a day past his latest deployment with the United States Marines in Iraq. That was six years ago and he's finally ready to ease off the accelerator. A unique opportunity to work for a top-shelf security and investigations firm in Florida is right up his alley.

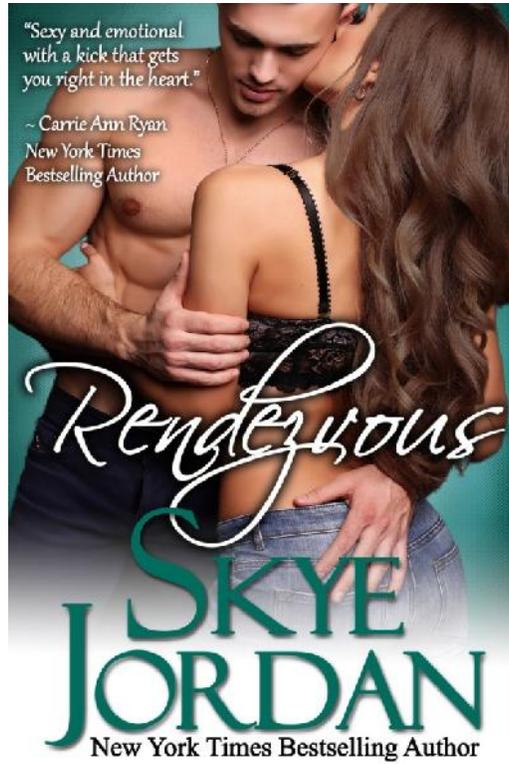
Ashlyn Ellis had everything she'd ever wanted—a high-profile career as a federal prosecutor, an upscale apartment in the city, and a beach house for when she needed to decompress from all the stress that accompanied the job. All three are threatened when she realizes someone has been following her every move for a very long time.

When Ashlyn comprehends the lengths her pursuer is willing to take things, she calls in a favor. She never expected her plea for assistance to materialize in the form of Keane Sanderson—the one man who had every reason to revel in her misfortune. She's finally given the chance to rekindle the flames of desire she never should have extinguished, just in time for it all to be taken away when the stalker takes his obsession a step too far.

Series Description: Safeguard Security & Investigations (SSI) is owned and operated by Townes Calvert, a retired Marine Gunnery Sergeant who returned home to the States a bit more damaged than he'd care to admit. Not that anyone could tell outside of a very select group of former active duty buddies. It had taken Townes quite a while to acclimate to civilian life and he'd kept himself busy in the interim working in treacherous situations with even more dangerous friends. The final result is a close-knit unit of highly trained former military men who have the experience to protect the innocent, investigate crimes on the gritty edge, and aid local law enforcement when justice has taken a back seat to political correctness. Follow along as Kennedy Layne conveys each of their gripping stories as they work together on investigations that lead them down perilous paths of passion, intrigue, and suspense...

RENDEZVOUS

Renegades 6
By Skye Jordan



One

Keaton Holt avoided the blonde's palpable stare by riveting his gaze to the ball game playing on the television above the bar.

"They're looking at bringing a big league to Austin," he told the newest Renegade, Cameron Riggs, sitting beside him.

"Your chatter ain't gonna work," Cameron said, humor bubbling in his voice.

Cam had been Keaton's fight protégé for the last six weeks. With sixteen-hour days on the same set, doing the same job, and staying at the same hotel, they'd been, more or less, in each other's face constantly. On the upside, they got along. On the downside, the guy had the opportunity to see the dark side of Keaton's love life, something he'd been trying to forget for the better part of several months without success.

"Manfred's talking about expanding the league by two teams," Keaton continued without taking his eyes off the game, slowly spinning his glass on the bar. "They're saying Montreal will get the first."

"You can babble all you want, but it ain't gonna keep her on the other side of the bar."

Cam thought it was funny. So did all of Keaton's other friends. And for years, Keaton had found it amusing too. He could walk into a bar, a party, onto a set, and for reasons he'd never quite figured out, the woman with the biggest tits, the wildest tats, the most piercings, or the most crazy filling the space between her ears would zero in on him. So crazy, the Renegades had collectively nicknamed the women who hit on Keaton "them crazy bitches," a la Buckcherry's song "Crazy Bitch."

But the novelty had definitely worn off. Even the entertainment value had plummeted. And recently, Keaton's interest had flipped a one-eighty and now bordered on derision.

While he knew acting absorbed in baseball and conversation might be a delusional attempt at discouraging the triple-E—tattooed from shoulder to wrist—from hitting on him, he hoped it would allow him to at least finish his beer before he bailed.

This might have been one of Austin's many trendy downtown hotspots, but Keaton liked the bar anyway. Corner was upscale but not pretentious. It had great food without the snobbish foodie flair, and a wide variety of clientele sans the lowlifes and the nerds. The drinks were strong, the bartenders were honest and the barstools had cushy leather pads.

The location was also awesome for people-watching. With two of the walls making up the building's corner location missing, the bar became a foot-traffic funnel. And he was more than a little annoyed he couldn't just come here after a long day on the set and enjoy Austin's beautiful early fall weather, a beer and a ball game without dealing with the inevitable bullshit some Crazy Bitch would come up with.

"Some think Austin's a sure thing for the second team," Keaton said. "Others don't think this town can support a major league ball team. They think it should go to San Antonio, where they have a proven track record with the Spurs."

Cam took a swig of his beer, then started laughing with the liquid still in his mouth—which was how Keaton knew Crazy Bitch was on her way over.

Dammit.

Cam swallowed and bent his head toward Keaton with a raspy "How do you *do* that?"

Keaton had wondered the same thing so long, he'd finally asked the most outspoken and streetwise of all the Renegades women—Rubi. When Crazy stopped to talk to the bartender, Keaton told Cam, "Rubi said I managed to pull off some sort of confidence that she says sends a fuck-you attitude. Says I intimidate people who don't know me."

"That's very true."

Keaton frowned at Cam. "What the fuck? Next to Wes, I'm the easiest-going Renegade in the bunch."

Cam lifted his brows. “To people who know you. Looking at you from the outside—especially when you’re working, trying to get a stunt down right—you’re intense, dude. Don’t you remember it took me a month to talk to you?”

“I thought that was because Jax always had you working with one of the other guys.”

“Some. But the other part was because you are fucking intimidating.”

He sat back and held his arms out. “How? I don’t have tats and piercings all over. I only have extreme haircuts when I need them to double someone for a long shoot. I shave my beard at least twice a week. I tip well. I say please and thank you. I open the door for others. I answer any question asked of me.” He absolutely *did not* get this. And if his mother knew, she’d be mortified. “How in the fuck do I intimidate people?”

“But you’ve got your share of scars, which are even scarier.” Cam grinned. “And look around you right now.”

Keaton darted a look around the bar and found several people shooting nervous covert looks his way. But Crazy had her gaze homed in on him like a target, a hot little smile on her lips.

He dropped his hands to the bar and leaned on his elbows. “That’s just ridiculous.”

“You’re built like a tank, but you move like a fucking panther. You’ve got a stare that could cut steel, and you use it whenever you’re thinking about something. And I can’t even tell you how many women who’ve told me how hot they think a guy’s scars are.”

Keaton cut a look at Cam. “Are you telling me I have perpetual asshole face?”

“Like that right there.” Cam chuckled and pointed at him. “I wish I had a mirror. And you carry yourself with a *don’t-even-think-about-fucking-with-me* air. A real one, not one you trumped up for the occasion. One that makes people take a step back. You’re just an intense dude, man. Nothin’ wrong with that. And it sure has been working like magic on the chicks.”

No, it worked like magic on the *crazy* chicks. The chicks who dug trouble and drama and extreme shit.

“What can I say?” he muttered. “It’s a fucking gift.”

One he wished he could regift to someone else.

Anyone else.

“I don’t get why you’re not jumping on that shit,” Cameron said. “Hey, I’m not complaining. I score every night you turn them away. But, dude, they’re smokin’ hot.”

Keaton looked at Cameron. He was in his midtwenties, built, talented, smart, and good-looking. Coming on board with Renegades as a stuntman was going to net the kid a shitload of women. Keaton had been there. Done that. And had a few dozen T-shirts to show for it. It had been fun for a while. Those women had introduced Keaton to a whole different side of sex. A whole different side of himself. But it wasn’t what he wanted anymore. If he were honest, it hadn’t been what he’d wanted for a long time.

But that didn’t keep the crazies from coming. And the really shitty part about that was the way those crazies killed interest from the normal women. Nice women. Women like his buddies had found. Like Jax’s Lexi, Wes’s Rubi, Ryker’s Rachel, Troy’s Ellie. Even the fucking OCD, pain-in-the-ass Marx, the Renegade’s risk assessment manager, had landed a sweetheart in Grace.

His mind drifted to Brooke and that brief moment when he’d thought he might have found that kind of woman too. He’d been on the verge of starting something with her when a crisis with Brooke’s sister had taken her back to Florida on short notice.

And Keaton went back to attracting these lunatics, like the tube-top, short-shorts, four-inch-platform-wearing woman now sauntering his direction.

Irritation twisted in the pit of his stomach. And something else. Something tight and vague and hollow. He’d never identified with the phrase “the one that got away,” but he’d wondered over the last year if Brooke might have been that woman for him.

Keaton sucked down the last of his beer just as the lunatic’s hip bumped the bar next to him.

She leaned close, giving Keaton a good whiff of cigarettes and powdery perfume. “Hi.”

He didn’t want to engage, but he didn’t want to be an asshole either. “Hi.” He didn’t look at her as he

pulled cash from his wallet and tossed it on the lacquered surface beside his beer to cover his bill. “I’m just on my way out.”

Her hand curved under his forearm and hooked on. Irritation jolted through his body.

This was another thing—the way women touched him, like they had the right.

“That works for what I had in mind,” she said, her voice sliding into a familiar, sultry tone. “Because since I set eyes on you, all I’ve been able to think about is strapping your hands to a headboard with your belt and giving you the best deep throat of your ever-loving life.”

All consideration for her feelings flew out of his mind. Keaton huffed what should have been a laugh but that came out sounding like disgust. They just got bolder and bolder. And when the hell did that start turning him off instead of making him hard? He couldn’t identify the turning point.

He met her eyes briefly as he pushed off the stool, and found them alight with the kind of raw sexual hunger that didn’t thrill him anymore.

“How much is that gonna cost me?” he asked her, partly just to see how she’d respond, partly to make her realize how her approach made her look—because, honestly, these were the same kinds of offers every guy got from hookers in Vegas. The fact that no money would change hands now didn’t make this offer feel any less sleazy.

His challenge took the edge off her cockiness. But instead of getting angry, she gave him a sassy “I’d ask that you return the favor.”

Keaton looked at Cameron and slapped his shoulder. “Have fun, kid. Just don’t miss the plane in the morning.”

He grabbed his leather jacket from the stool and wandered through the milling customers, ignoring her taunt at his back. “What’s the matter, stud? Don’t like the taste of pussy?”

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered, disgusted she’d said such a thing in public. If the situation was reversed and he’d done the same, he’d be in the back of a cop cruiser right now. But women could do any damn thing they wanted and men just had to be men and walk away.

So Keaton acted like a man, stepped onto the sidewalk, and started down the street.

The night was cool—a nice break from the heat they’d had here all summer—and he relaxed as he put distance between himself and the bar. Between himself and that ugly feeling he couldn’t quite understand or escape lately.

The thought of heading home to LA and his friends helped smooth his rough edges. He let the soft air whisper over him as he rolled his shoulders, shook out his arms, then paused for a quick stretch of his calves against the curb, groaning at the relief sliding through his muscles.

It was a good hurt. The kind that confirmed he was learning and growing. That his skills were getting better. But it still hurt—even after he’d already taken a hot shower, stretched completely, and rested ice packs on a few key joints before coming out for dinner with Cameron.

“It’s an ibuprofen kind of night.”

It was also good he had some time off to look forward to. They wouldn’t start filming the next season of this series for another three months, which would give Keaton time to switch up his workout to build different muscle groups.

He continued toward the river and his hotel, wondering how a guy got the wrong women to leave him alone and the right women interested. But based on Rubi’s and Cam’s assessment, it was beginning to sound like Keaton would have to change some very elemental parts of himself to accomplish that. Because how did you get other people to perceive you differently? It wasn’t like he had control over others.

He paused as he passed a little restaurant called Vic’s Diner, where the trunk of a live oak created the perfect place for Keaton to stretch his shoulders. With his hand planted firmly on the rough bark, his body set, he twisted away from the tree. The muscles across the front of his shoulder stretched from his pecs all the way to his biceps. It felt so good, his eyes fell closed on another moan. When the muscle released, Keaton worked the other arm.

The new position turned him toward Vic’s, and as he stretched, his gaze focused on the warm glow

inside, where a waitress stood at a table, chatting. She was middle-aged and African-American, with a round, youthful face and big, dark eyes. But what struck Keaton was her laughter—it lit her up and highlighted her animated, relaxed posture, making Keaton smile.

Another waitress joined the first. A younger, girl-next-door blonde, delivering apple pie smothered in vanilla ice cream to the table. She was as happy as her coworker and stayed to chat.

When the two girls broke out into laughter so loud Keaton could hear it through the glass, he couldn't help but grin. He pushed his hands into the pockets of his jeans and wandered a little farther along the sidewalk, curious about the person they were talking to.

Their customer was another woman. Her hair was long and dark and waved loosely past her shoulders. She had her head bent in laughter, her hair hiding her face, but Keaton guessed she was closer to the younger waitress's age. She held a spoon in one hand while she held her head up with the other, her shoulders shaking with humor. And whatever the three women were talking about had to be universally funny, because even customers in booths around them started laughing and joining in the conversation.

Keaton found himself smiling and leaned his shoulder against the tree. The light, fun, easy atmosphere playing out inside the café churned a yearning inside him. What they were laughing about didn't matter—he knew with a certainty that this was what he wanted more of in his life. More normal. More sweet. More real. More hometown and apple pie.

He was done with superficial and temporary. Over being judged based on an expression or the way he carried himself. He wanted someone who really knew him. Someone who really got him. Someone who wanted more than a good or kinky or rough fuck. As much as he loved all that, *just* that wasn't enough anymore. And he certainly needed it with a whole different type of woman.

More laughter erupted inside the café among both workers and customers. The woman at the table was laughing so hard, she dropped her spoon in the dessert. A woman in the next booth reached out and clasped the hand of the older waitress, who was grinning when she said something in response.

The joy inside the restaurant was palpable and made Keaton smile even though his heart felt heavy. “Shit. Maybe I just need to start eating in cafés instead of bars.”

The waitresses moved off to help other customers, and the woman at the table lifted her head, pulling her hand through her hair at the crown, exposing her face in a slow sweep.

As Keaton took in her face, Brooke filled his mind again. This woman was pretty, like Brooke. Her face open, happy, and glowing like Brooke's. Her skin smooth, her cheeks rosy, her lips full like Brooke's...

Keaton's smile faded. A lot of emotions conflicted at once—confusion, hope, denial. He tipped his head and narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing her face harder. He wasn't sure if his brain was distorting the woman to fit his memory of Brooke or if the woman was truly Brooke's doppelgänger, but it didn't matter. The sight sent Keaton's mind back to that night on the beach in Malibu, the night before Brooke had gotten that job offer in Florida. Strolling with her on the shore, under the stars. He remembered the full moon. The sound of the ocean.

Damn, he could almost feel the warmth of her mouth beneath his...

The ache tugging in his gut pulled him from the memory, and Keaton rubbed a hand down his face. He took a deep breath and reset his thoughts. Then laughed at himself. He couldn't remember much of anything about the women he'd slept with between the time he'd last seen Brooke and now. But he remembered every fucking detail of that one kiss on the beach with her?

Yeah, he was definitely ready for a life change. Unfortunately, that wouldn't help him where Brooke was concerned. His one revelation didn't change the distance between Florida and Los Angeles. But then he thought about Austin and how often he came here. About Austin and its development into nothing short of a mini Nashville, steeped in the music industry. Maybe that job she'd taken brought her to Austin occasionally. It wasn't a huge leap.

The city was also quickly becoming a mini Hollywood, with more television series and more movies being filmed there every year. Hell, maybe he and Brooke had already been in the city at the same time and

didn't even know it.

He should just reconnect with her. See how she was. Check into her schedule. He had a good startup conversation. *"Hey, just saw your doppelgänger in Austin and thought about you. Was wondering if you ever get out this way."* Casual. Noncommittal. Good way to get back in touch.

He pulled out his phone, and scrolled through his contacts.

He found her name in the D's, and just the sight made him smile. "Brooke Dempsey."

So many fun memories flooded in from their few short weeks of knowing each other—dancing all night with friends, talking until sunrise, laughing, playing practical jokes, hanging out, barbeques, so many stories.

He might have gotten nothing more than one starlit kiss on the beach before she'd taken that job and disappeared to Florida, but looking back, Keaton was pretty damn sure they were some of the best weeks of his life.

He wasn't smiling anymore. "Fucking Florida."

Florida was the reason he hadn't stayed in contact with her. It was the reason he shouldn't call her again now. But after seeing this woman who brought Brooke's memory back so vividly at a time he needed it so badly, the urge to hear her voice overshadowed reason. And he hit Dial.

He exhaled and cleared his throat as he lifted the phone to his ear and looked up. The woman in the café was looking up now too, listening to the older waitress as the woman spoke. Keaton lost track of his phone call. A zing of excitement burned down his sternum. Even from where he stood, he could see the sparkle of the woman's bright blue eyes. Then she smiled, and dimples carved into her cheeks.

"Holy shit..." An ache pulled deep in his gut. "That couldn't be..."

She looked down and searched through her purse. The waitress wandered off. And Brooke's doppelgänger pulled out her phone, lifted it to her ear...

"Hello?"

Brooke's sweet voice vibrated against Keaton's ear at the same time the woman inside the café spoke.

Shock ricocheted through Keaton's system. His mouth dropped open, but no words came out.

She pulled her phone from her ear and frowned at the screen, then brought it back with a worried "Keaton? Keaton, is that you? Are you okay? Is everything okay? Can you hear me? *Keaton?*"

"Yes," he finally spat out. "It's me." Excitement, joy, relief, emotions he couldn't begin to identify, rushed through him with an intensity he didn't understand. "What the hell...? You're in Austin? How often do you come to Austin? How long have you been here? How long are you staying?"

Then he realized it was his last night, and all his excitement bottomed out. *Fuck.*

Brooke glanced around the restaurant, which was when Keaton's brain kicked in and he realized he was still standing outside.

"How do you know I'm in Austin?" she asked.

He started around the building toward the entrance. "Because I'm here too. I'm coming in."

Pocketing his phone, Keaton paused a millisecond before pulling open one of the double glass doors.

Keep it together. Don't embarrass yourself. She hasn't called you since she left either.

That helped him cool the flash fire in his veins.

He pulled the door open and turned toward her booth. She was frowning at her phone, then glanced over her shoulder at the door. Keaton's feet halted, stopping him in the middle of the restaurant, and it took a long moment for his brain to catch up with his body to understand why. His conversation with Cam floated into Keaton's head. Then all the things Rubi had said. And he worried that seeing him again so unexpectedly, so suddenly, might frighten Brooke.

The thought was both stupid and real, making his usual rock-solid confidence waver. *Goddamn*, she looked amazing. And it felt freaking *euphoric* to have her eyes on him again.

"Oh my *God.*" She turned and pushed from the booth, and for a sickening second, Keaton was convinced she was going to freak out—and not in a good way. His heart dropped, and he started to lift his hands with words of reassurance forming on his tongue. But her shock flipped to excitement. The kind that

bubbled into her laughter and sparkled in her eyes. “*Oh my God. Keaton!*”

Instead of putting up a wall or acting skittish, she ran toward him. Just freaking sprinted at him and jumped right into his arms, wrapping her arms around his neck, like this was some fucking romance movie set.

Catching and holding her took almost no effort. And it was all he could do with his brain shocked into shutdown by her reaction. Cascading warmth suffused his chest and loosened all the muscles strung tight with tension over the confrontation at Corner and Keaton’s stress. He closed his eyes and held her tight, soaking in the beautiful feeling of her against him. He’d never even held her that night on the beach, and she’d left town so fast, he’d barely gotten a chance to say good-bye.

God almighty, she felt like wicked heaven beneath the smooth, silky fabric of the thin dress he’d barely had time to see. Only knew it was light with dark polka dots and ended midthigh. Her curves were supple and warm and couldn’t have felt any more perfect if she’d been a supermodel instead of an assistant to celebrities of that caliber.

“I can’t believe it,” she kept murmuring at his ear. “I think about you all the time. I can’t believe you’re here. It’s so good to see you.”

“I was just thinking the same thing.” God, he’d needed this. Hadn’t known how badly until that very minute. “I was calling to tell you about your doppelgänger in Austin, then you answered the phone.”

She laughed. A light, happy little giggle. She knew him. She got him. And when she pulled back to look at him, there wasn’t a trace of fear or a nasty thought brewing in her eyes. Christ, her eyes were so blue. And so bright. And so much happiness lived there, just looking at her made him happy too.

And then she hugged him again.

Brooke was pure honey—fresh, real, raw goodness and sunshine. She instantly lightened the weight in his heart. And if she could do this for him after not seeing her for almost a damn year, he couldn’t even imagine what his life would be like to have someone as awesome as Brooke around him every day.

This was exactly what he’d been missing for so long. Brooke was everything he wanted and needed all wrapped up into one sweet little package.

It had just taken him a year and three thousand miles to figure it out.

TWO

Brooke had to let go. She knew it. But the last time she let Keaton go, she'd lost track of him for almost a year. Partially because all the Renegades were impossible to track, partially because she'd meant to. She'd had to.

"Am I choking you yet?" she asked, hoping to hide her painfully intense joy with a huff of laughter.

"Never."

His deep voice rumbled in her ear, and he kept his thickly muscled arms doubled around her, twisting just enough to rock her a little, as if hugging her wasn't quite enough. As if he could hold her forever. As if the overt show of affection in the middle of a café didn't embarrass the hell out of him. He made her feel safe and accepted and treasured, things she needed so desperately right now, it brought tears to her eyes.

She pressed her mouth to the soft cotton tee covering his shoulder and breathed in his scent. The smell of leather and wood and citrus and Keaton brought back a rush of wonderful memories and a sudden spill of emotion. "Damn, I've missed you."

They hadn't been lovers. They hadn't even dated. If Brooke had to put a label on their prior relationship, it would have to be friends, though she'd known from their very first meeting there was something special between them. Looking back, it had worked out for the best given how quickly she'd had to leave and move across the country.

And even though they hadn't acted on their mutual attraction—short of that one starlit kiss on the beach—she'd fallen a little bit in love with Keaton during those weeks. So holding him now brought both pleasure and pain.

He dropped his head back and smiled up at her. A relaxed, dreamy smile that turned Brooke's stomach into an Olympic gymnast and made her want to kiss him so badly, she ached.

"You're even more beautiful than the last time I saw you," he told her.

She laughed. "And you're even more charming." She glanced toward the restaurant's main door, and when she didn't see anyone standing there, she asked, "Are you in town for work?"

"Yeah. You too? That gig you took in Florida?"

He remembered. A little thrill bubbled in her belly. "Yeah. Can you stay? I'd love to catch up."

His smile was wide and warm. "I'm all yours."

Hers. Keaton Holt, all hers.

In her dreams.

Literally.

He lowered her feet to the floor, and Brooke soaked in every delicious inch of his body rubbing against hers. Especially the generous swell in the range of his zipper.

She slid her hands down his solid arms, curved her fingers around his, and stepped back, taking her first quick but full glance over him. Hunger stirred instantly. All the chemistry they'd built up in LA rushed back as if no time separated them.

She released him and turned toward the table, but Keaton grabbed one of her hands back and pulled her close again. "I'm not letting you go too far." He wrapped her close by his side before he moved forward. "You're like a leprechaun, disappearing just when I think I'm going to catch you."

That was an interesting choice of words, but she wasn't going to dig into them now. Not when she could slide her arms around his waist and press her head to his shoulder. "I'm certainly not going to argue."

He gave her a squeeze as they reached the table, then released her so she could slide into the booth. But when she expected him to take the seat across from her, he sat next to her instead. Angling to face her, he bent one knee, resting it on the cushioned bench, and laid his arm across the back of the seat.

Brooke was a little overwhelmed by his complete and focused attention. She hadn't had anyone this

interested in her since...well, since him. She'd tried dating a couple of times in Florida, but between work, her sister, and her nephew, she just couldn't balance. And the men hadn't warranted enough interest to try.

Keaton inspired enough interest to get Brooke to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

She didn't even think about reaching out to touch him, she just did, laying her hand on his bent thigh. "So talk. Tell me everything I've missed. What movie are you working on? Who are you doubling? How long are you here? What's new? How is everyone?" She laughed at his growing smile. "I want it all. I have all night."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she heard their double meaning. But she didn't backtrack, because both translations were true.

Before Keaton could answer, movement at the edge of the table drew Brooke's gaze.

Lashonda, the sassy and utterly sweet waitress Brooke had been joking with earlier, paused at the table, and her dark gaze slid between her and Keaton. "Well, this is an interesting choice of company, Miss Brooke." To Keaton, she used a dry, deadpan tone to tell him, "I hope your sense of humor is as good as Brooke's, 'cause if it's not, you're gonna have to leave."

Instead of taking offense, Keaton started laughing, and the rich sound shivered through Brooke. He covered the hand she'd laid on his leg with his own and twisted toward Lashonda, turning on the charm he seemed to save for special occasions. "Now, why are you so nice to Brooke and so surly to me? I saw you through the window. I know how big that beautiful smile of yours can get."

A spark of surprise cut through Lashonda's dark eyes, and a reluctant grin tugged at her mouth. Keaton's intense exterior caused a lot of people to step back from him. He was a big guy and built like granite. And unless he was laughing or smiling, his expressions were serious, bordering on pissed off, when in reality, he was just thinking. On a lot of levels, Keaton Holt was one of the deepest men Brooke had ever met—and she'd met a lot of men in her time on the road with Ellie.

While Keaton tried to charm Lashonda out of her suspicion, Brooke's gaze drifted to the sight of her hand swallowed in Keaton's. His was big and scarred and tanned. He had a complex heritage of Japanese and Italian in his background with a smattering of European and Irish. She'd first set eyes on him at one of Ellie's mixers in Las Vegas. He'd been with his Renegade buddies at the time, and a little on the drunk side too. And with all his defenses down, the man was devilishly charismatic.

His olive complexion was already darker than Brooke's fair Irish skin, but his work outdoors made it that much richer and more golden. The contrast was striking.

"Brooke's been in for a couple of days, now," Lashonda told Keaton. "But I've never seen you."

"I'm sincerely sorry about that, and I'll make sure it doesn't happen in the future." He offered his free hand to shake the waitress's. "I'm Keaton. An old friend of Brooke's."

"Lashonda, and I like your manners." She shook his hand with the apples of her cheeks rounding as her smile grew. "Since Brooke seems to like you too, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt for now." She took her hand back. "Would you like a menu, Keaton?"

"No, thank you, but water would be great." His gaze settled on the mush that had once been a beautiful pie a la mode that Brooke had been looking forward to all day. Now, she didn't want anything but time with the man sitting beside her. "And how about a new...whatever that was before I interrupted Brooke?"

"Oh no." Brooke quickly dismissed it. "That's okay. I wasn't going to be able to eat it anyway."

It was a damn good thing she didn't have a wooden nose. She'd been so depressed before Keaton had walked in, she'd planned on eating the whole damn thing. In fact, she'd been threatening to buy out the restaurant so she could bring it back to her hotel room and bathe in their homemade apple pie and vanilla bean ice cream.

"I can," Keaton said. "It looks amazing. And I bet I can sweet-talk a few bites into you too."

Lashonda gave Keaton her full, approving grin and used her order pad to point at him. "It's official—I like you, boy."

He gave her that movie-star grin, complete with a knee-melting dose of charm. "Well, I like you too, Lashonda."

Their waitress broke into laughter and wandered toward the kitchen, muttering something about Keaton being a character.

He turned his attention on Brooke with a sigh. “Damn, I wish I’d found this place four months ago.”

“You’ve been here that long?”

“Mostly.” He kept one hand curled loosely around hers and used the other to scrape his fingers through his hair. His smooth, thick, jet-black hair. Hair she’d only felt between her fingers that one time on the beach. “I’m doing the fight and stunt scenes in *Rogue Justice*. Have you heard of—”

“Really?” She almost screeched, barely pulling her voice back a notch in time to save her dignity. She slapped a hand over her mouth and darted an embarrassed look around the restaurant. “I can’t believe I just did that. You’d think I’d never met anyone famous before.”

That made Keaton laugh, and Lord, when the boy smiled, really smiled, Brooke’s heart could have been directly attached to a power plant. His looks put the man solidly in the tall, dark, and panty-melting category. Sometimes he looked Italian, sometimes Greek. His Asian characteristics were there—in his high cheekbones, in the slight taper to his eyes—but no one ethnicity ruled his looks. Not like Brooke with her dark hair, blue eyes, and white skin that burned before it tanned, instantly tagging her as one of the black Irish.

But what made Keaton unforgettable to Brooke was this quirky, funny, warm, intricate side of the man she’d gotten to know during her weeks in Los Angeles.

“I’ll take your fangirling any day of the week,” he told her.

“I love that show,” she said. “Oh my God, I wish I’d known. I can’t believe Ellie didn’t tell me during one of our conversations. Now I’m *totally* going to marathon the whole season and fast-forward to the fight scenes just to watch you. That’s so awesome. Wow, and intense,” she added, thinking back through the episodes of the action-drama built around a political conspiracy plot. “Those fight scenes are...complicated and violent and *long*.”

“Tell me about it.” He rolled his right shoulder. “My body is screaming in agreement with you.”

“Oh...” She winced, wishing she could massage out every last ache. “Ouch.”

He waved it away. “Nothing a few meds can’t fix.” He wrapped both his big hands around hers, his fingers loose and warm—like his body. He had a way of being so alert, so intense, so focused, while also being so completely relaxed, so utterly comfortable in his own body. It was the sexiest thing Brooke had ever seen. “Let’s talk about you. Tell me about this new job. How long are you in town?”

Oh yeah. That. That tedious part of her life that had driven her to the apple pie in the first place. The one that felt like an anvil locked around her ankle. She hadn’t been proud of having to take the first and best-paying job she could find, and she was even less proud of who she’d had to take the job with, so she’d asked Ellie to play it down if anyone asked. Evidently, she had, and if Brooke didn’t have to get into the ugly details of it with Keaton, she’d prefer not to.

“We’re scheduled to be here eight weeks,” she told him, pausing while she searched for ways *not* to talk about a subject so central to both their lives—work.

“Then back to Florida?” he prodded.

She smiled and nodded. “Yeah.”

“So...?” he said, grinning in a *what’s up?* sort of way. “You’re awfully quiet. We always used to talk over each other. Tell me about this new gig.”

She went for a vague approach. “It’s the best-paying job I’ve ever had.”

“Sweet.” He paused, waited, lifted his brows. “But...?”

“Let’s just say she’s no Ellie.”

His mouth compressed into a commiserating smirk, and he nodded. “Ellie does leave some pretty big shoes to fill.”

“I guess a country music blockbuster with a heart of gold is a little hard to follow.”

“And you hooked up with her from the very beginning. That creates a special bond. You can’t expect to have that with every boss.”

She nodded, dropped her gaze to their hands, and added her free hand to the pile, covering his. “You’re right.”

“You two were also more friends than employer-employee.”

“True, but she was good to everyone.”

“She still is. She’s an amazing person. As are you,” he said with a squeeze of her hand. “Which is why you two were so good together.” He drew a hand from their knot and tucked her hair behind her ear with the softest look in those dark eyes of his. “Change is hard.” He paused, searching her eyes, then asked, “Are you seeing anyone?”

She didn’t understand at first. “As in dating?” When he nodded, she shook her head with a laugh. “Me, no. No time. Between the job, and my family...” She shrugged. Then forced herself to ask the same, even though she really didn’t want to hear the answer. “You?”

“Nah.”

When he blew off the idea, Brooke dug a little deeper. “Should I translate that into you’re still just sleeping around.”

He laughed. “If I had any kind of morals or values, I’d be hurt.” But there was something subdued in his tone, and she wondered if she had actually hurt him. Before she could apologize, he added, “But, seriously, no, I’m not seeing anyone, even casually. I’m in...”

“A funk?” she asked with a grin, trying to lighten the discussion a little.

“More like a transition,” he said.

Lashonda returned, interrupting the connection forming between Brooke and Keaton. He leaned back as the waitress set a glass of ice water in front of him, then a slice of golden-brown apple pie, partially hidden beneath a mountain of vanilla ice cream. She laid two spoons and extra napkins on the table.

“Good Lord,” Brooke said. “It was supposed to be a *piece*, not a *pie*.”

Lashonda propped her hand on her hip. “That’s not what you were talking about earlier. Besides, that’s a growin’ boy right there. I got me three of ’em. I know one when I see ’em.”

“Biiiiig tip comin’ for you, girl.” Keaton’s greedy grin made Brooke laugh. He lifted a fist to Lashonda, who bumped it. “Biiiiig tip.”

Lashonda nodded, then winked at Brooke and added, “That one’s a keeper,” before she moved to another table, still grinning.

Keaton already had pie and ice cream on a spoon, lifting it toward Brooke, but he called to Lashonda. “Keep talking, beautiful. I’m just gonna leave my credit card on the table here for you.”

Both Brooke and Keaton were laughing as he brought the spoon to her lips. She leaned back, shaking her head. “I can’t.”

“Oh, I think you can.” He purposely bumped her bottom lip with the spoon, leaving ice cream there. She automatically licked at the cold spot, and the humor in Keaton’s eyes converted to heat, his gaze clinging to her lips. “Open that pretty mouth, Brooke.”

His low, suggestive tone, and the unmistakable sexual hum, licked Brooke’s chest like flame. She opened and took the dessert from the spoon, and swore the world slowed to a fraction of normal speed.

Keaton’s dark eyes watched every move of her lips and tongue—before, during, and after he’d delivered the bite. Brooke had never been so intensely aware of her mouth before. Never imagined she could be so wildly turned on by watching a man watch her mouth as she ate.

But she was so distracted by Keaton that the flavors of the pie and ice cream snuck up on her, coalescing all at once. Cinnamon and sugar. Butter and vanilla. Tart apple and sweet pastry. Pleasure overwhelmed her taste buds in one rich hit.

“Oh my God.” Her eyes closed, head tilted back, and orgasmic, gooey bliss overtook her mouth. She moaned as she finished the bite. “Keaton, you have to—”

“—*taste this*” evaporated as soon as she focused on his face. He was still staring at her, but with a very different look. His that’s-kind-a-sexy interest had turned into something she could only label as animalistic white-hot lust. But it wasn’t a look she’d ever had leveled on her before. In fact, she’d never seen such an

intense display of desire on a man's face—in movies, on television, hell, not even in a porn video.

His mouth hung open a little, the tip of his tongue resting at the corner of his mouth, his eyes blazing with a savagely starved look of hunger. Brooke felt the heat of it all the way to the soles of her feet, and her body mirrored the craving.

When it came time to swallow her bite of pie, Brooke struggled against an extremely tight throat. Then cleared it before she tried to speak. "It's amazing. You should try it before it melts again."

"I really should," he agreed emphatically in a soft rumble.

Brooke got a very clear impression he wasn't talking about the pie. He was throwing off crystal clear, hard-core messages. Messages Brooke didn't quite trust, because she'd never had them directed at her before. Especially not by a man like Keaton. And definitely not when, from what she understood, Keaton went for a very different kind of woman than Brooke had ever been or would ever be. She wasn't even sure how to address the messages, let alone what to do with them, and wondered how long she'd have to figure it out. Because she really didn't want to pass up this chance with him again.

She put her hand on his thigh and, with her stomach knotting, asked, "Keaton, how long are you in town?"

His eyes came into sharp focus. Thoughts churned. Then he looked down at their joined hands with a look on his face that conveyed the same feeling she'd had when he'd asked her about her job.

His voice was soft when he said, "We wrapped earlier today."

Which meant he'd be on the next plane out of town. Her heart deflated and dropped like a rock. Just her damn luck. But she forced a laugh. "Man, the universe does not want us spending time together, does it?"

He cut off another bite of pie and picked up some ice cream with the tines of the fork, then brought it to her lips again. But this time, he met her eyes. "Fuck the universe. We have all night, right?"

He popped the bite into her mouth and went back for another forkful for himself, asking, "Tell me all about life in Florida. How's your sister doing?"

Brooke kept the talk about Tammy's recovery from her husband's tragic death on an oil rig in the Persian Gulf short. Brooke didn't want to drag the conversation down, so she focused on the great strides her sister had made. And when she could, she steered the topics back to mainstream interests, which for her and Keaton was easy. They settled into a comfortable conversation that meandered like a stream, with no direction.

They talked about Keaton's many travels and his work. The people he met and the jobs he'd done. About the friends they had in common, the Renegades stunt company, its expansion and the jobs coming their way.

The pie was long gone by the time the topic came back around to how Brooke was adjusting to living in one place after traveling around the country with Ellie for so many years.

"I thought I'd go stir-crazy, you know?" she said. "But I love it. Not Florida as much as just finding roots. It probably seems weird, but just knowing the people you pass on the street, knowing the names of the waitresses who serve you breakfast, the clerks at the grocery store, the postman, the crossing guard, Justin's teachers, it's...comforting. Grounding. It's...hard to describe. But it feels good."

"Doesn't sound weird at all," he said. "I'm looking forward to going home for the same reason. I mean, not about the crossing guard or the teachers..."

She laughed, but the realization that he was leaving in the morning after she'd just reconnected with him sucked so hard, it created a physical pain beneath her ribs. One she tried to ignore, because there was nothing she could do about it, and she didn't want it to ruin this small window of time they did have.

"And your nephew?" Keaton asked. "How old is he now?"

Just the mention of Justin made Brooke grin. "Eight. He's so awesome."

Keaton looked concerned. "Hard time to lose his dad."

"It was. But he's adjusted well. Marc died his sixth year overseas, so he really spent most of Justin's life away. I don't mean to say that makes it easier to have your dad suddenly taken. Tammy said they

Skyped almost every night, and Marc helped him with homework and read to him. But somehow that distance created a gap that allowed Justin to disconnect.”

“And your sister? You sort of skated over all that in the beginning.”

“Yeah, well, I feel a ticking clock on my time with you. I was trying to keep the conversation light.”

“You’re still always thinking of other people first. I’m sure that makes you an awesome assistant.”

Brooke grinned and tipped her head both ways. “My current boss would probably disagree. But then she disagrees for the sake of disagreement, so…” She shrugged. “Honestly, Tammy’s doing well, considering she’s raising her son on her own with next to nothing. In fact, she just started her second year of nursing school. I’m really happy for her. She’s got a rock-solid future ahead. I’ve just got to see them both through this last stretch.”

“Damn impressive.”

“Very.” Brooke lifted her brows and shook her head. “The sheer number of hours she studies boggles my mind. She has classes on top of that, and her internship. It would overwhelm me.”

His smile was soft. “I meant you.”

Brooke laughed and was about to tell him that Tammy did all the work, but Lashonda stopped by the table.

“All right, lovebirds,” she said, “I’d love to watch the stars twinkle in your eyes all night, but I’m sure you two have somewhere better to be locked up all night than here.”

Brooke tapped the face of her phone and read the time: 12:05 a.m. “Oh my God. I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize—”

“It’s all right, sweetheart,” she said, her voice smooth and sweet. “You two made my night. Haven’t seen a couple as happy as you two in so long, I’m gonna be floating on air for a week. Now go on an’ take all that lovin’ home.”

Embarrassment slid through Brooke’s skin and heated her cheeks, but Lashonda’s comment made Brooke realize that the instant heat between her and Keaton upon meeting again had cooled back down to a comfortable simmer while they’d been talking.

Keaton stood and took out his wallet. Brooke slid from the booth and put a hand over his as he placed three twenties on the table. “Keaton, no. Let me—”

“Sweetheart,” Lashonda said, tapping her arm. “This is Texas. Let the boy pay.”

She didn’t have much of a choice unless she wanted to stand there and argue, which was the very opposite of how she wanted to spend any of her time with Keaton.

As they left the restaurant, Keaton swung his arm across her shoulders, and they started toward the sidewalk. Brooke thought ahead and realized if she wanted more than an awkward good-bye in front of her hotel, she was going to have to brush some of the cobwebs off those seduction skills she hadn’t used since well before she’d moved to Florida.

THREE

Keaton held back a moan of pleasure as Brooke leaned into him and wrapped her arms around his waist, but he closed his eyes, squeezed her shoulders, and pressed his face to the top of her head, inhaling the sweet scent of her shampoo.

Then asked, “Which way? Where are you staying?”

“Right. Four Seasons.”

He let one of those “aren’t you fancy?” sounds roll from his throat as he turned that direction down the sidewalk and strolled past the darkened commercial businesses toward the river. “Certainly coming up in the world, Miss Dempsey.”

“If I could work for someone like Ellie again, I’d take a Motel 6 in a heartbeat.”

He’d noticed that she’d shied away from any kind of negative conversation tonight. And he still couldn’t believe they’d sat there and talked for three hours. *Three freaking hours.* He didn’t talk to *anyone* for three hours. Not even his Renegade buddies. Not even about their jobs. Which were like a religion to them. Yet the time with Brooke had flown by. Just as if the year since they’d seen each other had never happened.

Keaton couldn’t remember the last night he’d enjoyed as much as this one. If they only had more time. Or lived closer. Or...shit. He didn’t know. So he stuck with safe subjects.

“Your boss is that bad, huh?” he asked.

She didn’t answer right away, and when Keaton looked down at her, she had her face twisted up in a way that made him laugh.

“Shut up.” She laughed. “I’m trying to think of something good to say.”

“Stop trying and just say the first thing that comes to your mind.”

Brooke groaned and said, “She’s a crazy fucking bitch.”

Humor exploded at the center of his chest, and Keaton burst out laughing. He laughed so hard, he stopped walking and pressed his free hand to his thigh to stay upright. He had the perfect image of the woman Brooke worked for in his mind. And he knew exactly why Brooke was so miserable. It wasn’t funny. It was just so damned ironic.

“What did I say?” she wanted to know, half laughing at him as he caught his breath.

He shook his head and straightened. “Oh, this industry. I think it exposes us to more than our fair share of the crazies.”

“Amen.”

They’d reached the end of the street, where the pavement gave way to a trail leading along the river. One that also connected their hotels. He took her hand and started down the stairs.

“Hmmm, the river trail at night.” Her hand tightened in his. “I wouldn’t do this with anyone but you.”

That made a few of his male feathers fluff. “Our hotels are only a quarter mile apart. With all the exterior lights between the two, the path is lit up pretty well.”

“Where are you staying?”

“Radisson.” He pointed down the trail on the right. “Can’t really see it, but it’s just right there. I’ve been running the trail in the morning.”

They reached the bottom of the stairs, and even though the path was well lit, she released his hand and slid both arms around his waist, cuddling into his side. “I’d still feel better closer to you.”

Damn, she felt so good. All soft and warm and curvy. She smelled like flowers and vanilla and honey. And then she tilted her chin up and the smile she gave him was so beautiful, it made Keaton think about things he’d never thought about—like more of these quiet walks along the river. Made him want things he’d never wanted—like the same woman to take those walks with every day.

“Baby,” he said, “you *definitely* feel better closer to me.”

She laughed and stroked one hand over his belly and up his chest. The move was innocuous in his world of casual sex with highly sexed women. But right now, with Brooke, the touch opened a floodgate of fire through his body. And even though he kept telling himself he wanted something different, even when his soul ached for more connection and more meaning, his body pushed lusty thoughts into his head.

After years of sex with uninhibited, wild, inventive, kinky, risqué women, Keaton’s mind twisted toward adventurous sexcapades with Brooke, right here, right now—out in the open, up against a tree, at the risk of having anyone walk by. Sitting her on the dock railing, lifting that pretty skirt and burying his face in her pussy until her screams broke the night’s silence. Letting her ride him on a bench along the path—

“Keaton?”

“Hmm?” He jerked himself out of the fantasies. “Sorry, what?”

She was standing in front of him, her body pressed against his in the sultry night. It was no wonder his mind had drifted that direction. She felt delicious against him. Like he-wanted-his-mouth-all-over-her delicious.

“Where were you?” she asked, her voice soft, laced with desire.

Or was that his imagination? He couldn’t tell anymore. “Oh, you know. The end of filming, I’m a little brain dead at this point...”

“Are you? Because tonight sort of reminds me of our last night together in California.” She grinned. “If, you know, you take away the humidity and the bugs...”

Keaton laughed.

Her hands trailed up his arms as she stretched up his body and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Keaton’s arms automatically circled her, pulling her close, and he groaned at the feel of her curves pressing against him.

“Mmm, baby.” Fire spread between his legs, lit up his spine. He dropped his face to her shoulder. “You’re going to blow my circuits.”

Her fingers combed into his hair. The scrape of her nails on his scalp made his eyes roll back in his head.

“Do you remember?” she asked at his ear. “That night?”

“Can’t forget.”

“Is that where you were a minute ago?”

He shook his head.

“Then where were you?”

He shook his head.

“If you weren’t there,” she said, “where’d this come from?”

She rocked her hips against his erection, and the direct pressure pushed lust through his system. The kind of ecstasy that made him needy and hungry and a little crazy.

He growled and fisted his hands in her dress.

“Where?” she whispered at his ear. “Tell me.”

“Right here, thinking dirty thoughts about you.” He lifted his head, gripped her waist, and stepped back. “Which is why you need to go up to your room now.”

Keaton looked at the winding stone staircase that led to a patio and an entrance into the Four Seasons. He knew because he sprinted these stairs in the morning.

“Those will take you to the lobby.” He released her waist and fisted his hands to keep the hunger in the pit of his stomach from driving him to grab her back.

She stared at him as if he’d spoken a foreign language for a moment, then extended her hand. “Come with me.”

The offer was so...sweet. It encompassed everything Brooke was—real and loving and warm and caring and honest. It encompassed everything Keaton thought he wanted.

“I...” He raked a hand through his hair, struggling against his habit to give in to desire whenever it suited him. “I can’t. You’re too...”

Her hand dropped, and a little frown creased her brow. “Too...?”

“Too sweet. Too good. Too important to me. Just *too*.”

She exhaled, closed the distance again, and pressed her body against his.

Keaton closed his eyes on a moan.

“Some men say,” she told him, her voice a sultry hum, “that there’s nothing like a good girl with a dirty mind. Where you’re concerned, my mind is good and dirty.”

Fire flared through his groin, and he forced his eyes open.

She was looking up at him with a gaze like the sparkling Caribbean rimmed in thick black lashes. Eyes he wanted to see in every stage of pleasure. He wanted to watch her eyes light with fire as he teased her with the promise of wicked excitement. Soak in the need drenching her expression as he pushed her past her comfort zone until she begged for him. Lose himself in the wild passion unleashed inside her when he drove her to ecstasy. And finally, the shock and awe of bliss as she recovered.

But this was Brooke, not a casual hookup. If their situations were different...

But they weren’t.

“Stop fighting yourself,” she said. “I can see your thoughts battling behind your eyes. If you aren’t interested, just say you aren’t.”

“I *am*,” he said immediately, vehemently. “I’ve wanted you since I met you in Vegas. I wanted you in California. I want you now. But I’m backing off for the same reasons I did then. Because I’m me, and my life is this, and you’re you, and your life is...”

He heaved a sigh, disgusted that he could talk endlessly and flawlessly about shit that didn’t matter, but now, when he needed someone he cared about to understand, his words got all tangled.

“Okay, stop,” she told him, her voice compassionate. Then she pressed her cheek to his chest, tightened her arms, and said, “Just stop talking and hold me.”

He closed his arms around her and laid his head on hers, his gut aching with regret. “I’m sorry—”

“Shush.” She cut him off. “Now count to twenty slowly.”

“What?”

“Just do it.”

She had to be the sweetest drill sergeant ever. So he did it. But somewhere around nine, her hands found their way under his tee, and her nails scored gentle patterns on his back, draining the stress from his body. And he lost count.

After another moment, she pulled back to look up at him. “Let me put something into perspective for you. We haven’t seen or spoken to each other in a year. After tonight, I won’t see you again for a long time. Neither of us knows how long. It could be another year. It could be longer. So the idea of not being together now to keep a vital friendship intact isn’t very realistic.”

He frowned, mulling that over.

“I think the reason you’re twisted over coming upstairs with me is because you’re a really good person and you don’t want to hurt me. But I’m a big girl, Keaton, and I’ve been navigating my way through hookups for years. I may be sweet, but I’m very open to being whatever you want or need for the night.”

Holy shit. Keaton’s mind strayed deeper into those sexual thoughts again—undressing her, getting his hands on her bare flesh, pushing his hips between her thighs, having her completely and totally wrapped around him...

His resistance slipped a notch.

He lifted one hand and rubbed his face, hoping to pull himself from this haze. “I can’t think.”

“That’s a good thing.” Her hand slid down his chest, his belly, rested on the waistband of his jeans. “You’ve been thinking too hard.”

And she flipped the button open.

Excitement stoked his blood, but Keaton’s hand dropped to cover hers. “Brooke, slow down—”

“Is that really what you want?” She tugged her hand from his. “I think the best thing for both of us would be to push this, see where it takes us so neither of us spends another year wondering.”

And she slipped her hand inside his jeans, beneath his boxers and covered his erection. Pressure, heat, contact—it all coalesced and flooded Keaton with lust. His eyes rolled back and closed.

And he and Brooke moaned at the same time.

The sound of her pleasure at the feel of him snapped Keaton’s control.

He released her hand, cupped the back of her head, and held her steady as he kissed her.

She felt even better than he remembered. Her lips were full and plush and velvety soft. As soon as he eased the pressure, she didn’t just open, she tilted her head back offering her mouth. And when he took her up on that offer, stroking his tongue into her warmth and circling it with hers, she instantly gave back with a purr so rich and so wanton, Keaton had to fight the need for instant gratification.

Just when he thought he had himself under control, she sucked on his tongue at the same time her hand made some sort of twist on his cock. The combination shot sparks off behind his lids and lit off warning signs in his brain.

He pulled out of the kiss and dragged her hand from his pants. But Brooke pushed up on her toes, leaned close, and rasped, “I’m hungry,” against his neck, kissing him there and sending shivers over his skin. “I need a midnight snack. And I don’t want to wait until we get inside.”

She *did* have Keaton’s dirty mind. How fucking dangerous was that?

“Jesus Christ.” He was out of breath. The man with nine percent body fat, who ran five miles a day, worked out fighting twelve out of a sixteen-hour day, six days a week, was out of breath, all because Brooke had been kissing him, what, sixty seconds?

And what had happened to his brain? He couldn’t find it in all the haze filling his head. The man who was always on, always focused, who could make split-second decisions on the fly couldn’t even figure out what to do with her now.

“Brooke—”

“I have been dreaming about getting my mouth on you for *so...long...*” The way she moaned the last words made Keaton’s cock surge. “Let’s go out on the dock where no one can see us.”

“No.” Finally, some decision-making skills had returned. This was too much. He needed her too badly to walk away. She was right—he didn’t want to go another year regretting not taking this chance with her. But he was going to do it right. “I need you in bed. Damn, I *seriously* need you somewhere private where I can focus on nothing but you.”

Brooke stepped back and held out her hand. “I can arrange that.” She smiled, a sultry, sexy smile he’d never seen on her gorgeous face before. One that showed him a whole different side of her. “And I will do my best to fulfill any other requests you have tonight, Mr. Holt. So, I hope you will make them, because it would absolutely thrill me to please you.”

He took her hand and followed her up the stairs, watching her short skirt bounce around toned, creamy thighs.

When they reached the landing, he paused and pulled from her grip. “I probably shouldn’t walk into the freaking Four Seasons with my pants tented and undone.”

“You certainly wouldn’t be the first.”

His hands froze, and he looked up, brows lifted. A laugh bubbled out of him. “Excuse me?”

“I’ve seen plenty.”

He smirked and finished securing his pants, then grabbed her and swung her around in his arms, making her squeal and laugh. “Seen plenty, huh?”

“Uh-huh.”

He kissed her. Kissed her again. Loved the way she framed his face, pressed her forehead to his, and smiled into his eyes. “Did you *cause* any of them?”

“Would it matter if I did?”

A distant pinch tugged somewhere deep in his body. A completely foreign sensation that he still

somehow identified as jealousy.

And wasn't that a conundrum?

He cupped her cheek and gave her the only possible answer. "As long as what you're doing makes you happy, no, it wouldn't matter."

"Hmm." She kissed him. "I'm not the only sweet one around here." Then she turned and started toward the lobby with an extra sassy sway in her step. "But it wasn't me. Must have been another tramp stirring up the hopes of some celebrity loser staying—"

He caught up with her before she finished the thought and slung an arm around her waist. She was already laughing when he pulled her off her feet and hauled her back up against his chest. "Did you just call me a celebrity loser?" She giggled in answer. "Because I am *no celebrity*. And *don't you forget it*."

She laughed so hard, he had to put her down so she could catch her breath. Only when he opened the lobby door for her did he think of the security cameras. "I'd better behave, or we might get a visit from Austin's finest over a misunderstanding."

She followed his eyes to the security cameras. A soft gasp pulled Keaton's gaze to the alarm in her eyes. "Oh, my boss would *not* be pleased if I were involved in anything that could reach the public."

He squeezed her waist. "Don't worry. I'll be good." He pressed a kiss to her neck below her ear and whispered, "In public."

She shot him a sidelong grin and crossed the lobby to the elevators. The hotel was quiet, with just one desk clerk on duty as they passed. Keaton moved behind her and pressed his body against hers. He loved the way she leaned into him.

"What floor?" he asked, barely above a whisper.

"Nine."

"Mmm. After you get on and the doors close," he said at her ear, "take off your panties."

She turned her head just enough to lift a brow at him.

"I'd do it," he told her, "but...cameras."

She grinned. "But it's okay if I do it."

"You'd be way more discreet. I'd get...distracted."

The elevator dinged, and the doors opened. When they entered, Keaton waited for Brooke to meet his eyes, then darted his gaze toward the camera's location. Grinning, she moved to the corner mostly hidden from view. And Keaton leaned back against the opposite wall, crossed his arms and watched this sweet thing inch her hands beneath her skirt, showing a little more of those luscious thighs. With her lip between her teeth and her beautiful eyes shining with the most adorable mix of both mischief and nerves, she tugged a pair of ocean-blue lace panties down her thighs and let them fall around her feet. Then exhaled and closed her eyes a second, as if that had been the biggest feat ever.

And Keaton softened to her just a little more. Which he couldn't afford—as she'd so accurately pointed out. He was leaving, and they didn't know when they'd see each other again.

But she was definitely his tonight. And he was definitely going to reward her for whatever that little escapade had cost her in dignity.

He pushed off the wall, dropped his arms, and crossed the elevator. He put both hands on the railing behind her and looked directly into her eyes. "Knowing you're standing here with nothing on under that dress is *unspeakably* sexy."

She smiled. A giddy, I'm-so-glad-I-pleased-you smile. The experience was so fresh, it shot a thrill up Keaton's spine.

He lowered the hand out of the camera's view to her side and slid it to her hip as he kissed her. "Are you wet, Brooke?" He kissed her again, not waiting for her answer, letting his hand drop until his fingers skimmed her thigh. "Can I feel you?"

That was something he did wait to get permission to do.

Her eyes darted over his head, then back. "Cameras?"

"I'm blocking the view."

She licked her lips. “Then, yes. Please.” Her eyes closed briefly in a look of need, and one hand closed on his tee. “I ache.”

Emotion surged through his chest. Desire, affection, things he couldn't name. She could make him feel so much with such little effort, it floored him. On some level, it scared him. But he'd think about that later. His physical need was too intense to worry about it now.

He held her gaze as he found the edge of her dress with his fingers. Delighted in the quickening of her breath as his fingers skimmed up the inside of her smooth thigh. Drank in the sight of her lips parting at his first touch between her legs. Savoring the heaviness in his gut as he eased two fingers between her closed thighs to stroke her.

Warm. Silky soft. And when his fingertips found her center, she soaked them.

“Fucking beautiful.” He dropped his forehead to hers and lost himself in the slick feel of her, swollen and soft beneath his fingers. He didn't have room to do much more than stroke and rub and slide his fingertips between her warm folds, but she still clenched and gasped and moaned, making him high.

“Keaton...” She kept whispering his name, pulling at his shirt.

He followed every cue, tested out slow versus fast, steady pressure versus teasing, whispering touches.

“Jesus...Keaton... Oh God...”

“Are you a talker, Brooke? I hope so. I want to hear every little sound.”

In the very short ride, her clit swelled beneath his thumb into a perfect plump pea. Her teeth worried her lips, turning them puffy and slick. Keaton's mind strayed toward pushing his cock between those lips, watching her suck and pleasure him. But when a surge of need shot up his spine and exploded at the base of his brain, blinding him with stars, he tore his thoughts away.

Plenty of time for that. All night, in fact. He needed to focus.

“You're so perfect,” he murmured. “I can't wait to get you under my mouth.”

“Oh my God.”

“I can't even count how many times I've imagined tasting you.”

“Keaton...I'm—”

She pressed her face against his shoulder, and a sound rolled from her throat. The arm around his neck—when had she put an arm around his neck?—tightened, and her body quaked while her pussy clenched.

The floor button dinged, and the elevator doors slid open. Keaton felt like he'd been thrust into the light from a dark cave. He'd been so lost in her sweet body, he'd not only lost track of where they were, but he'd missed the fact that Brooke had just climaxed in record time. And still hung on him, shaking and panting.

The elevator doors started to close, and Keaton stuck his foot out to block them. At least some of his brain was still functioning.

He drew his hand from between Brooke's legs and gripped her waist. “I'm gonna pick you up.”

Her head wobbled as she tried to lift it from his shoulder. “What?”

“What room, baby?”

She wrapped her legs around his hips, laid her head on his shoulder, and sighed, “Nine-oh-nine.”

Keaton might have been aching and tired when the night started out, but he couldn't have been wearing a bigger smile or sporting a heart filled any fuller right now. And Brooke had just given him the energy to run all fucking night.

FOUR

Brooke dug her hotel key from the outside pocket of her purse. Keaton swept it from her fingers and opened her door, all while carrying her. And he did it all with the same grace and ease and expertise he did everything—including bringing her to the quickest orgasm of her life the first time he touched her. In an elevator for God's sake.

She should have known he wouldn't have to ask any questions. Should have known he would be a master at everything involving women and sex and pleasure.

When she'd first moved to LA and stayed with Ellie and Troy, Brooke had listened to their stories about Keaton's exploits with lurid unable-to-look-away-from-a-train-wreck fascination. Back then, she'd been half-grateful she hadn't slept with him in Vegas and become just one more story, half-disappointed she hadn't gotten the chance to experience him.

But after a few days of hanging with Keaton along with the rest of the group, it was clear women were drawn to him. Not a surprise. Women were drawn to all the rugged, sexy Renegades. But according to the stories, the women who flocked to Keaton were all at the extreme end of the rough, risqué, and wild scales. The Renegades joked that the women Keaton had dripping off every limb were every man's fantasy—ridiculously hot, overtly willing, and eager to be wickedly naughty.

The real surprise had been learning Keaton had been wanting Brooke, little Miss Vanilla, the same way she'd been wanting him.

The door closed behind them, and Brooke rolled her head on his shoulder to press her lips to his neck. Tonight, vanilla was going to blend with rich, exotically spiced rum from some remote corner of the world where women like her rarely tread.

"I think this is bigger than my place in LA." His voice vibrated beneath her lips, and his view of the suite made her smile. She always left a light on somewhere in her hotel rooms, because she never knew what time she'd be back. This morning, she'd left on a small side table lamp, which was barely enough to throw a shadow.

"Probably costs as much for a night as you pay for a month," she said.

"*Why?*"

She laughed, knowing he was asking why anyone would need to stay somewhere so extravagant, not why it was so expensive. And she loved the way he didn't dwell on what just happened in the elevator. She hated men who were so insecure, they had to constantly check in for reassurance on their performance. Or worse, gloat over it.

She glanced over the living area, complete with a dining table and four chairs, a sectional sofa big enough to seat six, and a sixty-inch flat screen covering the wall over the fireplace. "Because this is where the high-maintenance stay. You have to pay people well to put up with annoying eccentricities."

"Well then, you..." He eased her to her feet, slid his hands up her back, under her hair, and cupped her head, "should stay everywhere free, because I've never met anyone easier to be around."

And he kissed her. "Can't believe how lucky I was to find you here."

And kissed her. "You're so beautiful."

And kissed her. "God, I love your mouth."

He made her feel like she was floating. Made her mind disconnect from everything but him. And with all the stress and turmoil in her life, that was the biggest gift anyone could give her right now.

When he pulled back again, she said, "Good. Because this mouth is going to be all over your body in about sixty—"

He growled and kissed her again, licking into her mouth with a strong, skilled, hot, playful tongue she couldn't help but want between her legs.

Inch by inch, he pulled her skirt into his hands, until his palms found her bare ass. He gripped her with both hands, and her skin tingled and heated beneath his fingers. A fresh wave of desire flooded her sex. His hard erection and rough jeans rubbed against her sensitive spots, covered in nothing but a thin layer of rayon.

She definitely needed to get him out of his clothes.

Pulling out of the kiss, she dragged at his shirt. “Naked, Holt. Now.”

He laughed and let the shirt slide off his shoulders, over his head.

She leaned in to press her mouth to his chest, but paused and pulled back, looking at all the ridges over his abdomen. She’d seen him in swim trunks at least a dozen or more times in the weeks they’d been in California together. When he wasn’t working, he seemed to live in them, but she’d given up hope of ever getting the chance to touch them or kiss them or lick them.

So she started by skimming her hands over his abdomen and experienced the unique sensation of warm skin over steely muscle...

Swoon.

God, she never swooned.

Over anything.

Or anyone.

After so many years in the music industry, it took a lot to impress Brooke. And Keaton knocked her for a loop in so many unexpected ways, she’d lost count.

His hands had found their way under her dress again, and stroked everywhere he could reach. His lips and tongue laid hot trails down her neck and across her chest as he stepped her backward until her thighs pressed the arm of the sofa.

With his hands at her waist, he leaned her backward over the arm.

“Keaton...” She laughed his name, clinging to his arms, but that didn’t keep him from laying her back.

With her shoulders against the sofa cushions, Keaton stepped between her thighs, pressing them wide. He looked down at her with such blatant and overwhelming desire, her belly fluttered and her chest tightened. His dark gaze followed his hands down her body. He cupped her breasts, then caught the hem of her dress already at her hips thanks to gravity, and moved it up to her ribs in a deliberate shove. Brooke pulled in a breath of surprise and curved her hands around his forearms as Keaton’s hot eyes raked her nakedness.

A long, low sound of hunger ebbed from his throat as he lowered his head and pressed his face to the soft space just beneath her ribs. The pressure and warmth, the intimacy, made her shiver. He pressed kisses to her skin in a direct line south. His earlier words echoed in her head—“*I can’t wait to get you under my mouth*”—and the fire in Brooke’s body flared into an inferno as she pushed her hands into his hair.

But he straightened, pulling out of reach to wrap his arms under and around her thighs. Without warning, he hauled her hips higher on the sofa arm and spread her thighs wider. His gaze remained rapt between her legs, and Brooke’s breathing broke into another sprint.

He lowered his head again, pressing a kiss to her belly right below her belly button. Then lower. And lower. And lower.

Brooke curled the fingers of one hand into the sofa cushion at her side and reached forward with the other, combing her fingers through his dark hair. Loving the thick, soft feel of it while Keaton’s kisses grew hungrier.

And he used his mouth like his hands, patiently, but with clear, deliberate purpose—to drive Brooke insane with pleasure. Each lick or swirl of his tongue made her tighten her grip on the sofa cushions. Every suckle made her arch and reach overhead, using the sofa to push toward him. Until he ate at her like he’d never get enough, driving her to a place where she bordered on insanity and writhed with need. Where the peak was so sharp, there was no way one orgasm would be enough to satisfy it.

When he drove her over the edge, Brooke fisted the cushions over her head. She arched and cried his name. The pleasure seemed to spike through her, ricochet, then hover, making it impossible for her to pull

herself fully back to the present. To reality. To his fingers digging into the flesh of her thighs, his mouth eating at her with a ferocity that mirrored the hunger in her own body. But even when she was sure she couldn't climb another peak, he led her there a different way, drawing more pleasure from her body than she ever fathomed it could even possess let alone exude. Brooke continued to rise and break. Rise and break. And each climax brought something different, something new, something she'd never experienced before.

Then she felt the exquisite pleasure of his fingers joining his mouth. The tips stroking and rubbing, shooting a fresh thrill through her sex while his tongue lazily laved her, adding heat and pressure and friction. She was already choking out a moan and writhing toward his touch when the pressure of his fingers penetrated her body. Then moved inside her. And, bam, ecstasy slammed her like hurricane winds, knocking the breath from her lungs.

"So good..." She arched, dropped her head back, and moaned, "Oh fuck, don't stop."

He did the opposite. He created more pressure inside, teasing her outside. The multiple sensations were too much for her brain to absorb all at once, and it felt like it took forever to rise to climax. By the time she did, she was absolutely delirious with lust, swamped in a depth of pleasure she'd never experienced, and—she already knew—addicted to it.

"Keat—" He closed his mouth over her and growled. The sound vibrated through her. So erotic, so wild, she was out of her mind. "Need...it. Keaton, please..."

He added suction with his mouth, movement with his hand, and launched Brooke into the stratosphere.

The pleasure was so intense, Brooke's body exploded in a cluster of orgasms that wiped out her mind and ravaged her. She went limp. Her butt drifted off the arm of the sofa, and she sank into the cushions. Her breathing raced and her heart galloped. She had enough brain function to realize Keaton had moved away from her, but didn't have the strength to make her mind think about where he went.

The rip of paper pulled her mind into the present and brought her eyes open. "Keaton?"

"Right here." He bent over her, gripped her waist, and moved her up the sofa.

His jeans hung lower on his hips, and he pressed one knee between her thighs, shoving all the loose pillows to the floor. Then he lowered his hips between her legs and propped himself up on his elbows. Brushing the hair from her face, he kissed her, slow and deep.

His hips moved against her, and the feel of skin against skin made her moan. He pushed one hand between them, stroked her with his fingers, then with the head of his cock.

"I put a condom on," he murmured.

Brooke tightened her arm around his shoulders. "I've waited so long for this."

"Me too." He dropped his forehead to hers. His eyes filled with lust, his kiss with affection and hunger. He brought his free hand to her breast, still covered in her rayon dress, stroked and squeezed. "I wish I could wait longer. I want to eat every inch of you, but you make me *insane*." His voice was raspy and more serious than she'd ever heard the lightest of the lighthearted Renegades. "I need you *now*."

His hips thrust, and his thick shaft penetrated her. A sound ebbed from Brooke's throat before it closed. Before her body arched in both pleasure and pain. Her head fell back, her mouth dropped open. And she could only describe the sensation as searing pleasure radiating along her walls. Burning through her sex.

Keaton's big body curved over her, every muscle taut beneath her hands where they dug into his shoulder.

"Ah, fuck, Brooke," he murmured against her exposed throat, his voice rough and strained. "*Fuck*."

She clutched at his shoulders with one hand, his hair with the other, caught up in the mind-bending thrill of all his sweat-slicked muscle sliding along her skin. Of his cock stretching her. Of his big body trembling with the effort to hold back.

He withdrew slowly, and the motion washed so much pleasure through Brooke's body, she moaned, delirious. Keaton's lips moved on her throat, and he kissed a path to her mouth, where his tongue dipped in to swirl and tease. Eyes open, tongues spiraling, he pushed back inside her. Stretching her until her breath

caught. Then he held her gaze...and pushed even deeper.

The sound that rolled in her throat was almost animalistic. A sound she'd never heard come out of her mouth before. But she'd never been this...taken, this deep, this intimate with a man before. Because this wasn't just about the sex. The way he looked at her, the way he held her, the way he *owned her* went much deeper than the physical.

He pressed one hot palm to her thigh, spreading her wider. Wound his arm behind her knee and leaned in, hitching her leg higher. Wedged his hips farther between her legs. And penetrated even deeper.

"Fuck," she breathed, the word hardly a whisper.

"Too deep?" he murmured, showing no sign of backing off as a trickle of sweat slid down his forehead, hit his brow, and veered along the top until it reached his temple.

"Just...so...much of you."

"You don't have it all yet."

"Jesus."

"Before I ask if you want me to back off, let me show you something I think you'll like."

He lifted one brow in a silent request for permission. When a smile quirked her mouth, Keaton used his body weight to push until she felt like he was so deep, he was at the back of her throat.

"Ah God..." she moaned.

And then he did...something...with his hips. Some dip or rock or...something that made shards of ecstasy rip through her sex. Her mouth dropped open, and sounds rolled out of her. Hungry, oh-my-God-don't-you-dare-stop sounds. She writhed toward him and dug her fingers into his skin, needing more of whatever he was doing.

"Keat..." She couldn't talk, couldn't think. Her mind and body were absorbed with seeking more and more of the intense pleasure. She tried to lift into him, but he had her pinned to the sofa.

"Brooke, baby..." His voice was a breathless rasp, and his micro-thrusts grew faster and stronger and longer until they weren't micro anymore, but burning ecstasy through her with each stroke. "*God...you feel like fucking heaven.*"

Her orgasm grew inside her like a bomb. It was nothing like anything she'd experienced before. And her whimpers grew louder and louder...

"Don't...stop..." She didn't know what she was begging for, just knew she needed more. "Don't—"

He drew farther out, then hammered a couple of full thrusts home, surprising a cry out of Brooke. But before she tumbled over the edge of ecstasy, Keaton changed the rhythm with one slow torturous deep drive into her.

"Oh my God... Keaton... Please..."

Reaching overhead, he threaded his fingers with hers and looked directly into Brooke's eyes. "I'm only going to last...for one..." He dropped his head and wiped his brow on her dress. "But I promise...more...after you let me...rest."

"Then give it to me." She flexed and tensed her fingers around his. "Because the sooner you get rest...the sooner I get more."

A split-second smile flashed across his mouth, before his lips crushed hers and his tongue worked her mouth the way his cock worked her body. He smothered her cry just before the climax hit, and Keaton pulled back, greedily drinking in the sight of her as the orgasm finally shook her to the core. Blinding light filled her head while wild pleasure zapped every nerve ending in her body. And for those extended seconds, Brooke lost herself in the absolute present—no future, no past, just that moment of utter bliss.

She was still clinging to Keaton when his orgasm swept through. The force of it, of the way it rocked his powerful body, humbled her. The way it drew guttural, savage sounds from a man she'd always seen as fun-loving and easy-going, surprised her. And the way it so completely took him over moved her.

Keaton released his grip on her hands and eased most of his weight onto one arm. He rested his face against her neck, and his hot breath came in quick, heavy pants. "Can't remember...last time I...couldn't fuckin' hold myself...together."

Her brain wasn't fully functioning yet. And she loved the feel of him against her. His heartbeat against her ribs, his belly against her belly, his soft hair against her neck.

She combed a hand through his hair. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I can't believe we're still dressed."

He lifted his head, laughing. "*That's* what I'm talking about. You had me so twisted around, I was too impatient to wait. You turned me into a fuckin' teenager again."

It took a second for his meaning to register. When it did, she turned her head, looked at him directly, and said, "Really?"

He propped his head on his elbow. "What do you mean 'really'? Is sex always this passionate for you?"

A laugh bubbled out of her, and one of his dark brows winged up.

"I'm sorry. You make it sound like I do it regularly." She stroked his face. "And I was asking because, honestly, I'm surprised I would be someone to instigate that reaction, considering who you usually hook up with."

He brought a hand to her face, cupped her cheek, and stroked it with his thumb. "That's exactly why. But..."—he winced a little—"can we not call this a hookup?"

"Um...sure." She drew out the word. "Why?"

"It's just... It doesn't fit us. Whether we ever do this again or not doesn't matter. You could never be just a hookup."

That spot inside her that warmed every time she thought of him opened and ached. And the affection in his expression seemed to take on more weight, causing Brooke a little bit of alarm. "You're right," she admitted, then pushed some of the hardest words she could imagine from her mouth. "But, just so we're on the same page, as much as the idea of something beyond a hookup intrigues the hell out of me, you know this can't be any more than tonight given our responsibilities. Right?"

His mischievous grin appeared and sparked her playful side. The one she'd put on hold last year. The one that had to stay on hold for a while. "That intrigues you, huh?"

She laughed but gave him the we're-adults-we-have-to-be-serious-sometimes look and repeated, "*Right?*"

He sighed, and his smile lost some sparkle. "I guess."

She stretched up and kissed him. "Now go clean up so I can officially undress you."

* * * *

Keaton was damn glad he didn't have to work today, because he'd be fuckin' useless.

He turned his head away from the sight of the sun rising over the Colorado River through the French doors of Brooke's suite and focused on the strands of her hair he was twirling round and round his finger. Rich, chocolate brown, with an occasional streak of deep red. As soft as silk.

He was propped against the headboard, and Brooke had fallen asleep halfway on top of him, which gave him an incredible view. He could never get enough of the sight of her body from shoulders to ass. Of the white sheets tangled around her, framing her creamy skin. Of her chocolate hair spilling over her shoulder and down her back. Of her head resting on his belly, one rosy cheek, plump, pink lips, and long dark lashes accentuated in the morning light.

She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his entire fucking life.

He'd already taken so many pictures of her, his phone had run out of storage. He wanted some way to capture the night.

"Dammit," he whispered, dropping his head back against the headboard and squeezing his eyes shut.

He didn't want to go home.

No, that wasn't right. He *did* want to go home. He *didn't* want to leave Brooke. And who in the fuck expected *that* to happen?

He sighed and rubbed his eyes, shifting his hips to alleviate the nagging morning hard-on that obviously hadn't gotten the memo that he'd had more sex last night than he'd had in the last three months.

And every moment of last night had all been a-freaking-mazing. He couldn't say that about any of the sex over the last three months.

A phone rang, jerking Keaton from his thoughts. He sat forward, searching for the source, to silence it so Brooke wouldn't wake. But her head popped up before the second ring.

"What time is it?" she asked, her words slurred, voice groggy.

"Five thirty."

"You've got to be kidding me." She half crawled, half slid across Keaton to reach for the phone. "*Crazy. Fucking. Bitch.*" Then answered, "Yes?"

She listened for a moment. "You can call— I understand that, but you're just telling me instead of—"

She hung her head, exhaled, rubbed her eyes. "Of course."

Keaton stroked her back, following the curve of her spine that he'd been admiring while she slept. So warm. So soft. So beautiful.

With other women, it was one-and-done. But Brooke kept refilling his tank, making him need her again and again.

"Mmm-hmm," she said into the phone.

She sighed and rolled her head, putting his erect cock directly in her line of sight. And even just having her eyes on him made his ache intensify. Brooke's hand swept that direction, her small, warm palm stroking his thick length like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Before he knew it, Keaton found himself focusing on her nicely shaped, nicely toned ass, then dipping his hand between her legs and brushing his fingers across the sensitive skin at the tops of her thighs, teasing her until she lifted and wiggled.

"Yes," she said, a little breathless now.

He rewarded her with a fingering treat that made her cover her mouth with her free hand.

His cock, standing at full attention now, drew her gaze, and she angled that direction so she could slide her free hand over his length. Sparks shot through his cock.

When he flinched, her bright eyes sparked, and she shifted position, sliding her belly down between his thighs. The little smile that turned her lips told him she knew he was hungry for her mouth. He'd become addicted to the way she gave head within two minutes of the moment she took his cock between her lips. Brooke was generous and erotic, and she loved it. And he craved her mouth the way she craved his fingers.

With her gaze on Keaton's, she took hold of his cock like a joystick and pulled gently, drawing his sac up until she could take one side into her mouth.

And erotic shock jolted Keaton to the soles of his feet. While her hand stroked the shaft, her mouth sucked and licked the sensitive skin of his sac, and his hands fisted in the sheets. "*Ah...God...Brooke...*"

He tried to stay quiet, but he really didn't have much control. Over anything.

She let him slip from her mouth, released his shaft, and Keaton experienced two seconds of relief from the intense pleasure.

Into the phone she said, "Okay."

Then moved the receiver away from her mouth to circle his head with her tongue and suck the tip in and out between her lips until Keaton's hands were tangled in her hair.

"Get off the phone," he whispered. "I have more important uses for your mouth."

She grinned, and into the phone she said, "Look, it's really early. Can we talk about this at breakfast? Great. See you then."

Brooke disconnected, tossed her phone on the nightstand, and took Keaton's cock in both hands with a sigh. She stroked him with loving intensity, "Now this is where I really want to concentrate my focus this morning."

She rocked to her knees, smiled into Keaton's eyes with so much affection, his heart swelled. Then she lowered her head, plunging Keaton's cock deep into her mouth.

Warm, wet heat. Pressure, friction, suction. They pushed pleasure through Keaton's package. His whole body quaked. Moans rolled out of him on waves, and he let them come, knowing the sound turned Brooke on. His vision doubled and blurred. "Ho-oly fu-u-uck."

She sucked. And sucked. And sucked. The amount of pressure Brooke could create with her mouth made his toes curl and his eyes cross. And she did it all while watching his reactions. All with affection and desire drenching her expression.

Keaton would drop to his knees and beg this woman to use her mouth on him. But she gave it willingly. Eagerly.

She closed her eyes and hummed, long and low, and the vibrations tore through Keaton's cock. "Brooke..." He curled toward her and slid his hands up her arms. "Come here."

She took her mouth off him long enough to say, "No more condoms, remember?"

"Ah, *fuck*." And dropped back, forearm over his eyes. He'd never used all his condoms in one night.

Ever.

Brooke laughed and pressed her flat tongue along him from his balls to his tip. Keaton shuddered and slid his arm to his forehead to watch. Her hungry eyes stayed pinned to his as she loved his cock with open lust and erotic intensity.

The connection he found in her bright blue gaze tugged in the center of his chest, and it was more than physical. Pleasuring him was her gift. One she went to great lengths to give well.

Among other things he'd learned over the last six hours, Keaton had discovered how to let down a few walls during sex. One of those walls was expressing his pleasure. There had been too many times when women had used pleasure as a carrot or a bribe or even a weapon, so he'd learned to keep that physical thrill hidden behind a wall of lust.

But Brooke gained so much joy and excitement from Keaton's pleasure that he did his best to show it. As a side benefit, the more excited he got, the more excited Brooke got. Which was why he hadn't been to sleep, why they didn't have any condoms left, why his cock hadn't been fully soft since he'd set eyes on her in the café, and why he rose to climax too damn fast now when he wanted to savor these last moments with her.

But as the affection in her eyes and in her touch joined his own feelings and drove him too high too fast and too soon, he said, "Brooke...baby...I'm gonna—"

She slipped her mouth off his cock, surged up the bed, and covered his mouth just as his orgasm broke. His brain whited-out. She drank in his growl of release and kissed away his groans of pleasure while continuing to pump him.

Then kissed lazy trails along his neck and over his chest as he sank against the bed and caught his breath.

"Baby..." he panted, letting his eyes fall closed as he stroked his hand over her hair and down her back. "I'm...never gonna...be the same."

He already wasn't the same. And he didn't fucking know what he was going to do about it. But he had about two hours before he had to head to the airport, which gave him very little time to convince Brooke to reconsider her "this can't be any more than tonight" so they could figure out how to see each other again.

They showered together, something Keaton hadn't done with a woman in eons. And the shower they'd shared was something Keaton had never done—a slow, drawn-out exploration of bodies with hands and mouths and finally soap, leaving them both starry-eyed and grinning.

While Brooke dressed, Keaton turned on the news and made coffee. He stood in the middle of the living area, looking out at the Colorado River, breathing in the scent of coffee. With the sounds of a woman getting ready in the other room, her voice touching his ears as she spoke with her boss, Keaton should be itching to get out of here. Should be feeling some sort of knot in the pit of his stomach over how he would end this cleanly.

But all Keaton felt deep inside was...

Stillness. Comfort.

Fuckin' joy.

Jesus Christ. He couldn't be more domestic or happier right this minute.

And who the hell had ever imagined that would happen?

"Are you a CNN guy?"

Brooke's voice pulled his gaze. The sight of her knocked all his thoughts out of alignment. She was wearing a sleeveless little black dress that fit her curves perfectly and ended at least four inches above the knee. And her black heels made her legs look like they went on forever.

"Whoa." He made a full turn and looked her up and down. "Hell-o, gorgeous."

Her makeup was soft, but it made her beautiful blue eyes pop and added color to her cheeks and lips. All that gorgeous brown hair had been straightened, parted on one side, and smoothed into a sleek knot at the base of her neck.

Smiling, she came to him, wrapped her arms around his waist. "Hell-o to you too, handsome." And she rose on tiptoe to kiss him. "Thanks for the coffee."

She turned, pulled two mugs from the cabinets, and poured, repeating her question. "Are you a CNN guy?"

He glanced at the television and shrugged. "I don't know, why?"

"Because I'm a FOX girl. I thought we might have finally found something to argue about."

Keaton laughed.

"How do you like your coffee?"

"Black is fine."

She handed him a mug, then slipped into a cropped taupe blazer with black piping. Damn, she looked stylish. She looked fuckin' New York City stylish.

Shit, he couldn't *get* used to this; Keaton was *already* used to this. "Those are some seriously hot work clothes."

She giggled and sipped her coffee. "Well, thank you."

"You have to dress up for this gig?" he asked, just holding his cup.

"Yes," she said, sounding less than pleased. "Especially when we're meeting a crew for the first time. Only after that will she let me dress down. Lately, she's been easing up. Even said I could do casual Friday."

She took another sip, then reverted to holding her cup as well. Their gazes held. And the gorilla that had been hanging on the chandelier all night, the one they'd successfully ignored until now, finally jumped down and faced them. It was time to say good-bye. And Keaton felt the physical drain of happiness as it slowly leaked from the room.

"You don't want to say it any more than I do," he finally said.

She pushed her mouth into a cardboard smile that lasted two seconds. Then glanced down at her coffee. "Sometimes we have to do things—"

Her phone rang. Again.

Brooke clenched her teeth and closed her eyes.

But Keaton's frustration spilled over. "You don't have to live like this, Brooke. Why don't you find another job?"

"It's not that easy. I—"

His phone rang. It was the first time the damn thing had made a sound since they'd been together, but it was still shitty timing.

"Sonofabitch." He set his coffee down on a side table, rubbed his eyes, and drew out his phone. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "No, go ahead."

He glanced at his phone with his hopes of seeing Brooke again plummeting and found Jax's name on the display. "Guess it's call-the-employee morning." And answered, "Hey, boss."

"Hey." Jax sounded upbeat as usual. "Great job on the series. Talked to Drogan last night. They want

you back next season. But you probably already know all that.”

“I do, but it’s always nice to hear it from you,” he told Jax while he watched Brooke wander to the kitchenette’s counter and lean her hip there, scrolling through messages on her phone. “What’s up?”

“Drogan’s jumping over to the Avengers movie that started up a few weeks ago there. He’s working with Copalli.”

“Uh-huh.” There were half a dozen series and movies being filmed in Austin at any one time. Keaton had run into crews and actors working on the newest Avengers film in town.

“You know Dupleaux, the stunt guy from France?”

“Uh-huh.”

“He took a bad fall yesterday. Drogan and Copalli want to know if you’ll step in until Dupleaux’s ready to jump back in.”

Hell yes. The reaction was instantaneous, and excitement bolted through his body. He darted a look at Brooke, who’d abandoned her coffee and was staring off into space, looking restless. A sliver of insecurity opened in his chest. Was she ready for this to be over? He pushed the split-second thought aside. It didn’t matter. He wouldn’t say no to Jax either way.

But he answered with a far more subdued, “Of course.”

After agreeing to check in on the set first thing to run through the day’s stunts and meet with the actors and directors, Keaton disconnected.

Brooke looked over and smiled, but the sparkle in her eyes was gone. He hoped this news replaced it.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

“Better than okay.” He strolled toward her, hoping his heart didn’t get trampled in the next two minutes. At the counter, he pulled her into his arms. “Jax said another stuntman here hurt himself, and they want me to step in until he’s back on his feet.”

Brooke inhaled sharply. Her eyes brightened. Her hands curled into his shirt.

And just like that, Keaton’s heart grew wings.

“Does that mean...?” she asked excitedly, then pulled back. “Wait. *What* does that mean?”

“If that spark in your eyes is any indication, it means I’m going to have to invest in a very large box of condoms at some point today.”

Brooke broke into a smile and laughed. “So you’re staying? How long?”

“Don’t know.” And right now, he didn’t care. More time was more time. He cupped her face in his hands, kissing her. “I’ll know more after I work with the crew today.”

She pulled on his shirt to drag him into another kiss, her mouth open and warm. “Mmmm,” she murmured between kisses, her lips curved with a sweet smile. “So happy.”

Her phone rang. Her shoulders slumped. Her head dropped back. “Oh my God.”

Keaton laughed and kissed her neck. Then murmured in her ear, “Rendezvous with me at the steps on the trail after work, and I’ll make you forget all about her for the rest of the night.”

FIVE

Brooke sat across the limo from Jillian, trying to hold on to her patience in the face of almost no sleep and Jillian's unreasonable demands.

"Ms. Dempsey?" The secretary for the *Entertainment Tonight* reporter they were supposed to be on their way to meet said on the other end of the line, "Are you still there?"

Brooke opened her eyes. "Yes."

"I'm sorry, but this morning is Hugo's only opening for the next six weeks. Are you sure Ms. Bailey can't make it?"

"Um..." Brooke's gaze skimmed across the limo to Jillian, and she tuned in to her boss's conversation with Charlotte, Jillian's agent.

"Look," Jillian was saying in her you-work-for-me, how-can-you-be-so-stupid tone, "this is very simple, Charlotte. It's not a negotiation. How many times do we have to go over this? You tell Blue Sky Airlines that if they want my face representing them, then free first-class airfare wherever they fly in perpetuity is part of the contract. Period."

"No," Brooke told the woman on the other end of the line, simply not up for attempting to rationalize her boss back to the interview today. "I apologize for the schedule change, but she's not going to make it."

"Oh, it's not a problem for me." The woman was perky and friendly. "That means I can grab a latte from the barista next door, who also happens to be *really* hot."

Brooke thought of Keaton and smiled. "Lucky you."

She disconnected and double-checked the rest of Jillian's appointments.

Jillian didn't say good-bye to her agent. The only way Brooke knew she was done talking to her was the long-suffering sigh from across the car.

"Honestly," Jillian said. "The incompetence in this industry is unfathomable. I don't know how so many people make so much money."

Brooke had learned to stop commenting on Jillian's statements within the first week of working for her. She'd also learned which questions to answer directly, which questions to answer with questions, and which questions to ignore completely.

The ping on Brooke's phone hadn't even died out before Jillian barked, "What's that?"

"Confirmation of your cancelled interview with *ET*," Brooke replied smoothly as she read the text from her sister.

Another long night. These fall allergies are so hard on Justin.

That news made Brooke's heart sink. She instantly pictured her nephew curled up on the couch watching cartoons with an oxygen mask on, coughing and wheezing. And while Jillian bitched about something that didn't matter, Brooke asked her sister: *Are you seeing the doctor today?*

Yes. Follow-up appointment with the allergist. He's consulted with the pulmonologist who saw Justin in the hospital, so I'm anxious to hear what kind of treatment plan they put together. I'll get the final report they sent Provident too, but not for another week. I'll likely hear from the program before I get the report.

Tension crept into Brooke's shoulders. That report was the last element they needed to complete the file for Justin's entry into the bronchial thermoplasty research study for children. A procedure that offered Justin one last hope at a normal childhood.

Fingers crossed. Keep me posted, and hug Justin for me.

Will do. Don't kill you know who. At least not until after we find out about the program. If he doesn't get in, do what you need to. I'll always help you hide a body.

Brooke huffed a dry laugh. *Will do my best.*

"Are you texting privately during work hours?" Jillian wanted to know.

“No, ma’am,” she lied.

“Then why are you laughing?”

Brooke lifted her gaze to Jillian’s. Her boss’s eyes were blue as well, light blue to Brooke’s dark. And Jillian was a blonde. While the other woman was also twelve years older than Brooke, she looked the same age. Her skin was alabaster perfection, her makeup applied in a rigid routine every morning. Jillian was media perfection personified. The woman was absolutely gorgeous. And her body was as flawless as her face. Her looks had won her a lot of roles and earned her a lot of money. The glamorous facade had left the woman beneath bitter and bizarre and lonely.

“I was laughing because Hugo’s secretary was all but licking my boots to get you back for the interview.”

At first, the ease with which Brooke had learned to lie to Jillian had unnerved her. But she’d quickly realized that what she did and who she was with Jillian didn’t affect who she was with the real people in her life.

And when a slow, haughty, satisfied smile came over Jillian’s beautiful face, Brooke relaxed.

Someday, Brooke would get caught in a lie. And when she got caught, she’d get fired. Vanity wasn’t Jillian’s worst trait. Vengeance was. And for Jillian, vengeance stemmed from insecurity.

But if Brooke just kept all that in perspective, did her job, and watched her back, she’d make it through another year.

And that was all she needed. One more year.

Then she could take Keaton’s advice and find another job.

“Rendezvous at the steps on the trail tonight.”

Remembering his words murmured against her ear sent shivers through her again. She bit the inside of her lip to keep her smile at bay opened the cover of her iPad, and tapped into Jillian’s calendar.

“I cleared your schedule this morning, but I haven’t filled in this extra time on the set.” Brooke glanced at Jillian, who was inspecting her manicure. “Did you have specific people you’d like me to contact for meetings? A schedule you want me to put in place, track, follow? What’s the purpose of this change? And of going in early?”

Jillian’s lashes, woven to extend them to a ridiculous length, lowered. Her lips, filled every three months with Botox, pursed, hiding a secretive smile. And Brooke knew with absolute certainty that whatever came out of Jillian’s mouth next would be a lie. So she closed the cover on her iPad and waited.

“I heard someone special was going to be on the set. I thought we could scope things out.” Jillian’s foot swung a little, and her gaze traveled out the window with an evil little gleam. “There are a lot of big names and handsome men starring. I hope you won’t get distracted.”

Brooke had lost count of the number of movie sets, parties, and events she’d attended in Jillian’s shadow, but never once had she acted inappropriately. And, oh, the opportunities... They appeared around every corner. This business was second only to a brothel in sexual activity.

Don’t kill J. At least not until after the appointment.

Brooke ground her teeth and pictured her nephew.

Another year for Brooke was nothing. Justin still had a lifetime to face.

“You’re always my first priority, Jillian.” Brooke forced a smile and held Keaton in the back of her mind. Knowing she’d get to see him tonight would be what got her through another trying day. “I haven’t heard you talk about anyone special in a while.”

“Hmm. I *reconnected* with him last month at Steven’s birthday party in Beverly Hills. The one you didn’t attend because your nephew had a little...contest of some sort, remember?”

It had been a robotic competition that Justin had been working toward for six months, and he’d won first place in his age group for the entire county. So Brooke smiled at Jillian’s attempt to make her feel jealous over missing Steven Spielberg’s birthday party, which couldn’t have meant any less to her. Nothing against Steven, but she’d never met the man. Justin, however, would have been crushed if she’d missed his competition.

“I do,” Brooke said, remembering how excited Justin had been that day. And she also knew what Jillian meant by reconnecting, but she wasn’t touching the topic of her boss’s sex life, so she refocused on work. “I can check around when we reach the set to see if we can get some promo shots today, how does that sound? You look gorgeous today, and photos of you in blue always make your eyes pop in magazines.”

“That’s a nice idea,” Jillian said, staring out the window. “Even nicer if we can find my friend. I’d love to get some...suggestive...candid with him.”

Brooke frowned. Jillian was in a drawn-out divorce from a billionaire entrepreneur who had turned Jillian in for a much younger, perkier model two years before. It didn’t help that the soon-to-be-ex himself was also younger than Jillian. Or that Jillian was struggling against a bulletproof glass Hollywood ceiling where the age limit was set so low, anyone too old to limbo might as well lie down and die.

But Jillian’s narcissism had perpetrated a lot of her own problems. That coupled with vengeance for her husband taking up with a younger woman... Well, simply put, nothing good could come of Jillian’s desire to see this mystery man—today or any day in the near future.

“At our last meeting with Charlotte, didn’t she say it would be better if you didn’t—”

“Charlotte doesn’t understand publicity.” Jillian waved Brooke’s comment away.

In fact, Charlotte was one of the best publicists in the industry. And she’d told Jillian to lay off the younger men—for her career and her divorce. Pictures of herself in “suggestive candid” with this guy were Jillian’s way of walking into the fire because she needed to feel the burn to know she was alive. She could be self-destructive in a lot of ways. This was only one.

“You two, I swear, you’re both so young.” Jillian sighed in exasperation, then looked down at her hands with an expression Brooke had never seen before. Confusion? Pain? “You’ll both understand someday. It’s not easy to get old. Especially in this business. It strips you down. Takes everything. Leaves you with nothing.”

A pang of pity pulled in Brooke’s chest. Pity was an emotion Brooke rarely experienced. Everyone had problems, and everyone chose how they dealt with them. She didn’t have a lot of sympathy for people who simply chose poorly and wanted to sit around and complain about it.

But from Brooke’s perspective, Jillian’s life was hard in a lot of ways that weren’t visible to the naked eye. She may have money, but money didn’t provide the kind of security Jillian needed—job security, emotional security. Everything Jillian produced for her job came from inside her. Jillian created something out of nothing but raw Jillian. And when a person gave and gave and gave without some other source of support, without some other way to refuel and refresh their soul...shit happened. Addiction, depression, and suicide happened. Crazy happened.

Brooke had seen it in the music industry over and over.

“Sometimes you’re put on a trajectory with the people you need most, right when you need them. Sometimes even before you need them,” Jillian said, looking out the window, her gaze distant. “The perfect time, the perfect place, the perfect second chance. That’s what this feels like.”

This was stolen wisdom—it certainly wasn’t Jillian’s. Brooke knew if she pressed Jillian on what those words meant, she wouldn’t be able to answer. Most of the time, Brooke felt like Jillian was living from the pages of a script, even when no one else was around.

But she didn’t challenge Jillian or even speak to her for the rest of the short drive. Instead, she thought of Keaton. Of how their paths had collided. But this wasn’t the perfect time or place for the two of them to connect. And they’d never had a real first chance, so this couldn’t be the second.

Still...there was something magical about meeting up with him again. And about connecting so instantly and completely. Her travels with Ellie had introduced Brooke to a lot of people. More than she could ever count or than she’d ever remember. Yet she couldn’t say she’d been so comfortable so instantly with many people in her life.

The limo turned into a lot and stopped. Their driver, Henry, spoke to the guard at the gate, and Brooke lowered a window so she could show the guard their passes. As soon as the glass was back in place and the car started moving again, Jillian had her mirror out to check her perfect makeup, searching for reassurance

and accolades from Brooke.

And once the primping was done, the plotting began.

“Now, you just stay with me. Once I find him, you can make arrangements with a photographer.”

As soon as Henry opened the door, Jillian hopped out and was gone. The older man offered his hand, and Brooke took it as she climbed out.

“Whoa,” she said, tucking her arm through Henry’s and pulling her sunglasses over her eyes. “I just stepped into the oven.”

“Gonna be a hot one today.”

She frowned at Henry. “Do you have a cool place to hang?”

“Yes, ma’am. A café about a block over. Free refills on iced tea, and they let me sit there as long as I like.”

She smiled. “Okay, but only one glass of sweet tea. The others are unsweetened. Can’t have your blood sugar spiking.”

He chuckled. “Yes, ma’am.”

They both squinted against the Texas sun toward Jillian posing for paparazzi with their lenses sticking through a side fence.

“I think she found the photographers,” Brooke said.

“Some of ’em anyway.”

Brooke felt tired today. Not sleep-deprived tired, though she was that too—pleasurably so. But worn-out tired. “How much longer are you going to drive for Jillian, Henry?”

“Just between you and me, Miss Brooke?”

“Always.”

“Another year.” He turned his head and smiled, his weathered face crinkling everywhere. “Till my youngest grandson graduates medical school. I’m helping out.”

“That’s fantastic.”

“How about you?” he asked.

“Just between us, Sir Henry?”

He laughed at the nickname she’d given him on her first day. “Absolutely.”

She returned her gaze to Jillian, who was now chatting with various people outside the studio in the warehouse district of downtown Austin.

“A year,” she told Henry, then grinned at him. “Till my sister graduates nursing school. I’m helping out.”

Henry laughed and nodded. “You’re a good girl, Miss Brooke.”

“Thanks, Henry. I needed to hear that today.” She squeezed his arm. “Wish me luck.”

“You won’t need it, honey.”

Brooke followed Jillian, knowing Henry was wrong, but she appreciated his faith in her. She scanned the staff clustered and milling outside the warehouse where parts of the latest Avengers movie were being filmed, but didn’t recognize anyone right away. Brooke had looked over the names of the people involved in the film at the higher levels and knew about half by name, another quarter by reputation. But she usually worked hand in hand with the people who were never listed anywhere other than someone’s payroll roster, which was always where most of the real work got done.

She paused a few feet behind Jillian as her boss sweet-talked an assistant director who had a tendency to hit on Brooke when he was drunk. That wouldn’t have bothered her quite so much if he weren’t married to a lovely woman with three adorable children at home.

With one ear on their discussion, Brooke scanned the area where crews moved equipment, a food cart worker stocked drinks and snacks, and staff conducted impromptu meetings in gaggles of threes and fours.

“We’re doing some staged filming in warehouse B,” Rob, the assistant director, told Jillian, “and there are several smaller mobile stages set up in warehouse A. The stunt crew is blocking out some scenes in there right now.”

Brooke instantly pulled Keaton's handsome face to mind. She let the director's chatter about other resources fade, tapped the face of her phone, and wrote a quick message to Keaton.

Hope your new job is going well. I didn't get a chance to ask you what movie it was before I had to run. Can't wait to hear about it when I see you tonight. She paused, grinned, and added, *And I hope you won't need much sleep for your day tomorrow.*

"Judging by your grin, *that* text isn't about work."

Jillian's voice made Brooke want to roll her eyes. Instead, she hit Send and turned off her screen. "It's just *ET*, forlorn about missing out on your interview."

That got a placated smile from Jillian. "This way."

Jillian sashayed toward warehouse A like a queen bee. Brooke followed, curling her iPad toward her chest with one arm.

Rob's gaze latched on to her, and he stepped halfway into her path. "Brooke, I didn't see you." His gaze purposely roamed her, openly hungry. "You look...amazing."

"Hi, Rob." She intercepted his hand on its way to her hip and took it in a deliberate grip, shaking it firmly. "How are Amanda and the kids?"

The mention of his family seemed to knock him off balance. "O-oh. They're...good. Good."

"Great. Tell Amanda I said hello."

As she continued on, she heard his faint, "Uh...right...sure."

Walking into the warehouse momentarily blinded Brooke. It took several moments for her eyes to adjust from Austin's bright morning sunlight to the dark warehouse. Once she'd focused, it took her another couple of minutes to get her bearings. The space was cavernous, with several huge areas in the roof where the ceiling had been replaced with some kind of translucent material, so the sun filtered through, giving the warehouse an eerie, sci-fi sort of glow.

As the director mentioned, the warehouse had been broken up into different sets where various lighting and filming setups were arranged, but only the one taking up half the rear of the warehouse was being used.

Brooke took a deep breath and relaxed into the setting. Here, Jillian would be swept away by the activity, the energy, the excitement. The burden of coddling and soothing and entertaining wouldn't be on Brooke's shoulders. For a few hours, she could be free of those demands, and she anticipated the relief with a Pavlovian response.

She let her mind go and followed Jillian from person to person and group to group, where she was greeted with excitement and reverence. An action scene was obviously being blocked out at the back of the warehouse in a crazy maze of dark, multilevel metal madness. Brooke paused a good distance away from the action, her gaze wandering over the two smashed cars, the varied platforms of metal grates, the stairs...

"Hey, there."

Brooke turned to the female voice and found a production assistant she worked with often and who shared Brooke's affinity for chocolate, smiling at her.

"Hey." Brooke hugged her. "Great to see you."

"You too. Here for the duration or just a cameo?"

"Duration. You?" Schedules often fluctuated in this business with staff getting put on, pulled off, and moved around jobs as the norm rather than the exception. And actors' schedules were even worse.

"Same," Brooke said. "We'll definitely have to find a time to get together and scope out the best chocolate around here."

After Keaton leaves.

Brooke wasn't giving up a minute of the short time they had left. After that, she'd *really* need chocolate.

"Deal," she told Stacy. "So, get me up to speed on the film." Brooke's gaze strayed toward the back of the warehouse again, where several men planned out some kind of attack on the set with the filming crew. Jillian stood near the stunt crew, speaking with another director.

"The first thing you need to know," Stacy said, "is that we're behind schedule."

Brooke's attention was pulled from the shadowed corner. "Oh no."

"I know Jillian's going to be a bitch about it. I would have called you, but it just happened. Our stunt guy took a bad fall..."

The rest of Stacy's words faded in shock. The shock gave way to excitement. And giddiness was bubbling in Brooke's belly when she cut her gaze back to the darkened corner of the warehouse, where one of the men stood on top of a smashed military-type truck. But it wasn't Keaton. Her gaze dropped to the man pacing out in front of the truck. He was shirtless, well built, and had dark hair, but that's all she could see from where she stood.

Someone from the sidelines called, "Ready."

The dark-haired man dropped into a runner's stance and shook his body loose.

"Go."

He ran. Long, loose, easy strides that ate up the distance to the truck. One foot took a step to the bumper. The other foot leapt to the hood. One more effortless hop and he executed a jump-turn-kick move so fast, Brooke almost missed it, and the other guy on the roof of the truck flew backward.

Brooke knew in an instant the shirtless man was Keaton. She'd never seen him work. She'd never seen him fight. And during their weeks together in Los Angeles, she'd only seen a sliver of his abilities when he'd been goofing around with the other Renegades, but she knew without any doubt that was Keaton standing on that truck. Which meant not only did she get to have him in her bed at night, she also got to watch him work during the day.

She had to have excitement oozing from her pores, and she didn't have the first idea how she was going to lie about this to Jillian.

Up on the top of the truck, Keaton offered a hand to whomever he'd just knocked down, and the two busted up laughing about something. The rich, buoyant sound of Keaton's laughter inflated Brooke's chest with joy until it spilled over in her own laughter.

In that moment, the fluttering giddiness in Brooke's heart made her realize she wasn't just taking a swim with this guy the way she kept telling herself. She'd already jumped in the deep end.

"I want to be a stuntwoman when I grow up," Stacy said. "I've never seen anyone have so much damn fun at work."

"Right?" was all Brooke could think of to say.

"Brooke," Jillian said, tearing her gaze from where Keaton and another guy climbed from the top of the truck and dropped out of sight.

"The fire-breathing dragon beckons," Stacy said. "Good luck with that."

By the time Brooke reached Jillian, her excitement shifted to alarm over the deviously pleased glint in her boss's eye.

Jillian slipped her hand around Brooke's forearm and turned her toward the stunt set. "He's here, and he's even more delicious than he was a few months ago when I saw him last."

As they approached the set where cameramen and assistants and other staff gathered, Keaton and another man strolled out from around the side of the vehicles, talking to each other. Keaton used his T-shirt to wipe his face.

The sight of his chest and belly shining with sweat shot a streak of wild lust straight through her sex. Images from their night flashed in Brooke's brain—the way they flexed every time he thrust. The intensity in his expression every time he drove deep inside her. The darkness of his eyes as he watched every flash of pleasure slide over her face. The hunger in his mouth, in his hands, in his body...

Oh. *God*...

"If you don't want me to kick you on your ass," Keaton was saying, a grin splitting his handsome face, "then take three steps back like I told you."

The other man looked younger than Keaton. He was also very handsome, with more of an iconic American look with ash-blond hair and a square jaw. Definitely Jillian's type. And age-wise... Well, she'd been going for them younger and younger lately.

“Last time you told me to take three steps back,” the younger man said, “I dropped ten fucking stories.”

Everyone around them laughed.

Keaton shook his head and slowed as he came to the camera station with a playback screen. “I should have sent you home when—”

His gaze lifted and casually scanned the people around them, pausing on Brooke. Time stopped for a split second. A split second when she saw him in exquisite detail—his hair damp with sweat around his face, his dark skin glistening, his expression filled with joy. Pure joy—for his work and the people he worked with.

Then she saw a spark of excitement flair. And that lifted her happiness to new heights. It was the same spark she saw in Justin’s eyes when she returned home from a trip, the same spark she saw in Ellie’s eyes when they met again after being apart, and, she’d discovered over the last year, it was what life was really about.

“Hey,” he said, drawing out the word with a little wait-you’re-not-supposed-to-be-here confusion that transitioned into excitement as the realization she’d made a few minutes before hit him. “Are you—”

“Keaton Holt?” Jillian’s overly excited voice cut through the myriad conversations, and she moved through the staff and crew as they parted like the Red Sea, allowing her a path toward Keaton.

Alarm skittered through Brooke’s heart, and her gaze cut to Jillian.

“What are you doing here?” Jillian’s face shone like a diamond. The picture of utter perfection. It was her all-in smile. Her nothing-can-compete-with-this smile. Her nothing-I’ve-done-wrong-in-the-past-matters smile. And she had 500 percent of her focus homed in on Keaton. Not the blond he’d been working with. The blond who was now wandering away like the rest of the crew, hoping to escape unnoticed while the she-devil was licking her chops over a different morsel.

“I reconnected with him last month at Steven’s birthday party in Beverly Hills.”

Denial hit Brooke fast and hard.

Oh no. No, no, no.

Not Keaton. Not Jillian and Keaton. She could have anyone else. He was Brooke’s only selfish desire. And they had so little time together.

Holding tight to the last flicker of hope, she darted a look at Keaton—and her stomach dropped to her feet. All the excitement there a moment ago—all the humor and life and happiness—gone. All locked behind a cool wall. One Brooke had seen others use when they were unpleasantly blindsided in public. One that often appeared in awkward and tense situations.

His reaction to Jillian confirmed the truth in Brooke’s gut—Jillian and Keaton had been together. When, where, how—it didn’t matter. Somewhere, at some time, they’d been together.

The images that flashed in Brooke’s head made her stomach clench and burn. She purposely refocused somewhere else in the room to clear her head. Because this was a problem. A really big problem. A potentially *disastrous* problem. A cut that had the potential to bleed her dry if she didn’t stem the bleeding.

She pulled her iPad into her chest and crossed her arms, as if that would help.

Jillian’s reputation had preceded her, as usual, and the crew had skittered off in different directions. But Keaton was too much of a gentleman to bail, even though the look on his face told Brooke there was nothing he’d rather do right that moment.

“Jillian,” was all he said.

And his voice was so deep and so cold, it made Brooke’s stomach quiver. It made her hope she and Keaton never reached a point in their relationship or their friendship where he ever used that tone with her. Even the possibility stabbed at her heart.

But Jillian didn’t seem to notice the antagonism. She swayed toward him like she moved toward everything she thought she owned, and Brooke’s muscles tightened, preparing to witness them kiss.

But Keaton caught hold of her biceps when her lips were still inches from his. And Brooke stood several feet away in the most impossible, most awkward position of her life. If there were ever a moment

she wished the earth would open up and swallow her, this would be that time.

“What...do you think...you’re doing?” Keaton’s voice was private, but filled with who-the-fuck-do-you-think-you-are menace.

Before Brooke could excuse herself, Jillian performed the perfect backpedaling, smooth-it-over routine. “I was just saying hello, of course. We *are* old friends after all.” She pulled out of his grip but kept her voice light and adoring. “I’m sorry you’re having a hard morning.”

Keaton’s jaw pulsed, but when Jillian didn’t make another aggressive move, he shook out his T-shirt and tossed it over his head. Brooke’s gaze slid down his torso on the way to the floor again, pausing on red marks. Red...scratches.

Her face bloomed with heat. Her sex followed. She hadn’t seen those in the shower this morning. But she sure remembered making them last night. And *good God*, now she couldn’t think of anything else.

Straddling his lap, his knees spread so wide, her hip joints ached, he thrust with all the strength in his butt and thighs. Unrelenting, consistent strokes that hit their mark and hammered whimpers of desire and cries of pleasure and screams of ecstasy from her.

With one arm wrapped around his neck, the other at his ribs, she’d been digging into him because, one—he’d been so sweaty, her grip kept slipping, and two—she’d needed the grip against the force of his thrust, and three—she’d needed the leverage to pull herself back into him so his next stroke would hit the same out-of-this-fucking-world spot inside her again.

“*Come for me, Brooke,*” he’d demanded against her neck, even as she was just recovering from her last orgasm. “*Come again. So good. Love the feel of you coming around me. Come on, baby. Give it to me. Ah, yeah. That’s it. Mmm, so good. Come on, baby. No limit. Give me another one.*”

She shivered. Curled her fingers around the edges of her iPad until they numbed.

“Since we’ll be working together...” Jillian’s voice refocused her. “I certainly don’t want to start out on the wrong foot. Brooke, this is Keaton Holt,” she said, her tone light and charming and—dare she even think...sweet? “The only man who’s ever truly stolen my heart. Keaton, this is my assistant, Brooke—”

“Yeah, I—” he started.

“Dempsey,” Brooke cut in forcefully. She pried her hand from the computer and offered it to him. “Brooke Dempsey. It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Holt.” She pulled her hand from Keaton’s overly hard grip and smiled at Jillian. “Mr. Holt and I met briefly in Los Angeles about a year ago. A friend of a friend.”

He stared at her, lips parted as if he’d stopped before the words had come out. His dark eyes sharpened, flicked to Jillian, then returned to Brooke. And they were hard. He closed his mouth and rolled his shoulders back. Now he looked just as displeased with her as he had with Jillian. And yeah, she knew she deserved it, but shit... The way he closed off made it impossible to read his expression, and it hurt. Hurt like hell. She felt like she’d already lost part of him.

“Miss Dempsey,” was all he said. Brooke could only thank God his voice didn’t hold the same frigid ring as it had when he’d said Jillian’s name.

She gave Keaton a nod and hoped he could read the gratitude in her eyes, but she’d never seen him look so miserable. Which seemed like the mood of the day.

Except for Jillian. The emotional undercurrents were lost on the narcissist. “Keaton, since I have time now, I thought we could block out the first stunt scene we’re in together.”

He planted his hands at his hips. “We’re not in *any* scenes together.”

“Oh, Copalli didn’t tell you?” Jillian asked.

“What?” Brooke asked, frowning at Jillian, but her boss ignored her, and by the purse of Jillian’s lips and the jut to her chin, Brooke knew Jillian was going to color outside those lines again.

“Told me what, Jillian?” Keaton asked with an I-know-what-you’re-gonna-say-and-it’s-going-to-start-a-fight tone. “Because if you think you’re going to do your own stunts, I can tell you right now, that’s not going to fly past risk assessment.”

Jillian laughed softly, clearly happy with the fact that she’d ticked Keaton off. “We’ll just see about that, won’t we?”

Brooke was ready to climb out of her skin. She couldn't watch these two together anymore. She couldn't look at Keaton anymore, knowing the plans they'd had for tonight, for any night in the future, were history.

The day suddenly seemed to stretch out in front of her as ten, twelve, sixteen...long, hot, sticky hours of misery.

She cleared her tight throat and told Jillian, "If it's all right with you, I'll go check in with the production assistants now." Without waiting for her answer, she reminded Keaton of her need for their relationship to remain secret with, "It was good to meet you again, Mr. Holt."

SIX

Keaton didn't know where the hell Brooke was or when she was going to come back to the hotel. And he felt like the biggest fucking loser on the planet waiting outside her room. The only reason the Four Seasons security hadn't called Austin Police on him was because Jax, the Renegade who was a Four Season's frequent-flier, had called and personally vouched for Keaton.

Which meant if he did anything to get into trouble, he'd get his ass royally kicked by Jax. And the only Renegade who was as good a fighter as Keaton was Jax.

He pushed to his feet and paced the hallway again, pausing at the end to stare out at the Colorado River reflecting the moonlight. Too bad he wasn't in a romantic mood. Once the shock of Brooke denying knowing him wore off, frustration set in. Frustration developed into anger as she went through the day without ever even looking his way. As his texts over the course of the day for explanations about her behavior went unanswered. As his question of whether or not they were going to meet tonight as planned was ignored.

And none of the images that kept floating into his head from the day were helping calm him down. The memory of her face floated into his head—of how happy she'd looked when she'd first seen him, contrasted against the shock and hurt in her eyes after she'd figured out he and Jillian had slept together.

"*Fuck,*" he bit out. That had been so goddamned long ago. He'd made some stupid decisions where women were concerned, no doubt. But Jillian was definitely one of his worst. It would have to be that one to come back and bite him in the ass.

And her stupid comment—*stolen her heart?* What a bunch of fuckin' *bullshit*.

The worst part was, he had no idea what was going on in Brooke's head. Could only guess why she'd played the "Hi, I'm Brooke Dempsey" card today, and absolutely hated the idea that she planned on pretending they didn't know each other while they were working together.

Talk about torture.

He wandered back toward her room, paused at another window, and pressed a fist to the ache in his gut, one created by a combination of acid from the stress and pure pain from the thought of losing Brooke so soon after thinking they'd get a chance to develop something.

Movement made him look left.

Brooke turned the corner, looking down at a keycard in her hand. She was wearing another dress. Black. But this one was more casual than the one she'd worn earlier. And sexier in a far more playful way. It had spaghetti straps and was fitted from her breasts to her hips, then flared into a short skirt. And it laced up the front through a double row of eyelets.

He wasn't feeling the least bit playful or lighthearted, and even though the comparison between the mood her dress evoked and his current mood was absolutely ludicrous, it still added heat to his anger. So did the fact that she looked ridiculously sexy in the damn thing. And the way his body surged at the sight of her.

It all blended to throw his emotions into a gear he didn't even know he had, let alone a gear he knew how to operate.

When he straightened from the window, she looked up and stopped. A gasp passed through her lips, and she darted a look over her shoulder.

His temper flared.

He didn't even *have* a fucking temper until today.

"Good to see you too," he said. "Been waiting all fucking night."

She turned back. "I was going to call you," she said, her voice hushed. "It's just, Jillian—"

"Isn't here. I made sure she left the building before I came. And I've been here over a fucking hour."

Had my phone the whole time.”

As if on cue, her cell rang. She exhaled, her shoulders rising and dropping. While she answered her own phone, she slid the keycard into the lock and opened the door to her room. “Hey, honey, I’m a little busy right now. Is everything okay?”

She had to be talking to her nephew.

“Okay, sure. I’ll help you with that. Can I call you back in a little bit? Okay. Love you too. Bye.”

She sighed and walked into the hotel room.

Still standing in the hall, Keaton was struck by an epiphany. He knew right that second exactly why he was so damned pissed. Because he didn’t do this to women. Ever. He was up-front with them before they ever got close to a bed or an alley or bathroom or wherever they went to fuck. They knew when the fuck was over, *they* were over.

Brooke hadn’t done that.

The realization made hurt ooze out beneath the anger, and things inside him got volatile. Keaton needed to downshift this shit and coast out of here.

He followed her in, saying, “Look, I wouldn’t have liked hearing that we were done this morning, but I would have accepted it. What I don’t like is having you act like you wanted things to continue and then pulling the shit you’ve been pulling today.”

She put her purse and keys on the side table and turned to face him.

“I’m not pulling anything. I’ve been working my ass off all day. *Someone*, who shall remain nameless, put Jillian in a *mood* this morning, and she’s been *bent* on taking it out on *me*. Suffice it to say, Jillian has been the crazy fucking bitch *from hell* today. And God forbid she settle for just any hairdresser. No, Jillian Bailey has to have the woman who did Mariah Carey’s hair for the Oscars. Which means *I* have to fly her in, and *I* have to pick her up at the airport, and *I* have to settle her at the hotel. So forgive me if I’m not the picture of patience right now.”

She crossed her arms and balled her fists, plumping her breasts over the edge of her dress and adding another edge of heat to Keaton’s frustration. “And I didn’t answer your texts because Jillian is the queen of paranoia half the time and the queen of micromanaging the other half. I didn’t want her reading over my shoulder.”

“You seemed to be able to text me just fine before you got to the set this morning...while you were *in the car* with her.”

“That’s before *I knew*,” she yelled.

“Knew what? That I slept with her? Is that where this is really going? Is that what we really need to talk about?”

She made a face and closed her eyes. “No. Don’t.” She shook her head. “I don’t want to think about you with her. I don’t care about that.”

She didn’t care? If she didn’t care... He took two steps toward her, put his hands on his hips when he really wanted to run them over her body. “Then why did you pretend not to know me?”

“Because Jillian’s a vindictive bitch, and, apparently, you are”—she rolled her eyes—“the only man who’s ever stolen her heart. If she thought you were interested in me over her, *I’d* be the one to suffer.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were working in the movie industry? I thought you’d signed on with another singer like Ellie.”

“Because I didn’t want to talk about work. Or about Jillian. I just wanted to forget about it all for one night.”

That didn’t ease his frustration. In fact, it made him angrier.

“So I was an escape.” He moved closer until his body brushed hers. Until she had to tilt her chin back to look up at him. And Keaton could not fucking believe how badly he wanted her. His entire body surged with the raw need to feel Brooke again. “But now I’m a problem. So this is how it’s going to be? You’re just going to prance around the set in all these sexy little dresses and pretend I don’t exist every fucking day?”

She pressed her lips together in determination, but her eyes closed in a look of pained desire. Then she stepped back and braced her hand on the dining room table. She took a slow deep breath and said, “If that’s what I need to do to keep my job.”

Anger spiked again. “Priorities. Is that it?”

She nodded.

That stubborn line of her jaw irked something deep inside him. He leaned in and pressed both hands to the table, flanking her. His body came into contact with hers—thighs, hips, chests. She let out a breath carrying the softest moan, it fizzed through Keaton’s blood and made him high.

With his lips at her ear, he murmured, “So, what about me? What are you going to do about all the things I’m thinking during the day, watching you in these sexy little dresses?”

“Oh God...” The high-pitched words came out as barely a whisper, but they sang through Keaton’s blood with the power of an opera.

“Sixteen hours a day. Every day.” He pulled back to look into her eyes and found them drunk. He skimmed his gaze over the open neckline of her dress and all that creamy skin. “All that time just to watch you move, look at your body tucked into these”—he lifted a hand, pressed one finger to the side of her breast, and let it follow the curve of her body to her hip—“sweet little dresses.”

“Keaton...” Her eyes opened, flooded with heat and lust and frustration. Her chest rose with quick breaths, and her breasts strained against the top of the dress.

“With skirts like these and all the hidden spaces around the warehouses,” he said, “I could give you my hand and my mouth and bring you heaven in five minutes any time you wanted it, all day long.”

“Oooooooh...” she groaned, her eyes sliding closed.

“You want it, don’t you, Brooke?” he whispered.

“Yeeees...”

The sweetest high flooded Keaton’s chest. He lowered his lips to her temple and kissed her. Brooke leaned into his touch, hummed with desire, and fisted his T-shirt. Keaton was instantly high. “You want it now, don’t you, baby?”

“Fuck...” Her hands tightened and twisted the cotton of his tee. “Yes...”

Keaton’s eyes slid closed. He dropped his hand, found the hem of her skirt, and slid his hand up her thigh. “You’re so warm.”

The press of her lips against his brought his eyes open, and he found Brooke’s rich blue eyes, heavy lidded and filled with passion and the same affection that had been there that morning, staring back at him. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about this all day.” She kissed him softly, sliding the tip of her tongue along his lip and setting him on fucking fire. “*I ache.*”

The breathy words, the insinuation that she needed him, wanted him, had waited for him, thrilled him beyond words. He kissed her back, teasing her lips while he held her gaze and slipped his fingers under her panties.

He passed a whispery touch over her, and she shivered. She was already on the edge. The fact that she was there because she’d been thinking about him all day turned a lot of his anger and hurt into pure, raw lust.

Starting with one finger, he moved over her. She was slick and hot and swollen, and suddenly all Keaton could think about was getting in there with his hands, his mouth, his cock.

“Oh my God... Yes. Yes, yes, yes... Mmmm.”

“You like my hands, don’t you, baby?”

“*Love* your hands... Mmmm... God... So good...” She whimpered and shivered.

Fuck, she was a goddamned drug. And Keaton was going to be addicted if he didn’t back off the candy. Fast.

Brooke opened her eyes, tipped her head back, and looked up at him, lips parted, big bright blue gaze dripping with lust. “Make me come... Need it...”

That hit went straight to his fucking vein. Keaton pushed his fingers deeper, rubbed and stroked and

pinched, purposely avoiding her clit to prolong this little treasure as long as possible.

“Ah God...” She rubbed all up on him, wrapped an arm around his waist, took his tee between her teeth. “Keaton... Pleeeeeeease...”

She was fucking delirium personified.

Maybe he'd quit tomorrow.

* * * *

He was torturing her on purpose.

She probably deserved it.

God, this was an impossible situation. A situation she couldn't even think about because of what he was doing to her. And she didn't know how he did it. She'd touched herself; this sure as shit never happened.

He growled and pulled his hand from between her legs. Brooke's sex clenched at his absence, and a slice of irrational panic cut through her. “No, no, no...” she whispered, breathless, pulling at him. “Come back. Come back.”

His gaze was so hot. So edgy. It probably shouldn't thrill her, but it did. This was a whole different side of the man. And, God, she should walk away. He was right. She should have just let him go this morning.

He had the right to be angry. Worse, he was hurt. She wanted to make it better, but she couldn't, not right now. The day had taken a physical and emotional toll on Brooke. One only Keaton could make her forget. He wanted it too. Wanted to know she wanted him. Wanted the distance and uncertainty that had built up between them over the day gone. Otherwise, he wouldn't be here. And he wouldn't be mad. And he wouldn't be pulling out his wallet.

The crinkle of foil made her need surge. Made her head go light, and she greedily jerked at the button of his jeans. She'd never wanted anyone like this. Never known she could. Knowing how badly it would hurt when things went south or they both went back to opposite sides of the country, or both, made her press her face to his chest and choke out a groan of distress.

By the time his hand moved under her skirt again, she had his jeans open, her hand around the cotton-covered heat of his erection. He pushed under her panties and between her legs with swift efficiency. A flash of cold shocked her. Made her gasp and brought her head up.

He had an unopened condom packet clenched between his teeth, making her realize he'd opened one of the little packets of lube he carried along with the condoms. Then his fingers glided over her sex, the lube instantly warmed by her body and his hand. Her eyes locked on his, and rough sound came from her throat.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck...” Her muscles clenched and quivered. Her eyes rolled back in her head.

His other hand gripped her jaw and gave her a shake. She gasped, opened her eyes, and curled the fingers of one hand around his wrist. But he pulled away, took the condom from his mouth, and tossed it on the table before closing his fingers on her cheeks again.

“You know why I love touching you?” His eyes were so close, she almost couldn't focus. His lashes were long, his brown eyes black in the dim light, all the angles of his face sharper with intensity. “Because of this. Because I can watch everything on your face. Watch all the pleasure you get from my touch slide through your eyes. Because I know *I'm* giving you that, and I can watch every...single...second of it.”

The fact that he derived such a thrill out of delivering pleasure was a wicked turn-on. How many men cared that much about a woman's pleasure? She didn't know any. At least not intimately.

“And because your pussy is so...fucking...perfect.”

Slow, deep slides. Shallow, stretching circles. A tug, a pinch. But nothing direct. Nothing repetitive. And nothing that would make her come. She was shaking and panting, leaning her butt against the table because her legs wouldn't hold her up.

She whined and rocked her hips into his hand.

He laughed. He fucking laughed. Low and rough. And reduced his touch to one finger. “Tell me what you like about it.”

“You’re...so good...at it.”

A hot smile flashed over his face, and he rewarded her with a few direct, maddeningly gentle circles directly over her clit before sliding backward again and pushing inside her. God, it wasn’t near enough. “What else?”

“Naughty.”

“You like naughty?”

“With you.”

His angry lust softened a little. “You want to be naughty tonight, Brooke? Want to be naughty with me?”

Her head dropped back, and a delicious stream of lust and desire and relief and excitement coursed through her. “God, yes.”

A sound ebbed from his throat. His hand tightened on her face and jerked her gaze to his again. His hand stopped teasing and started driving. And where a feather-light touch might have lifted her to climax, this hard, demanding push and pressure worked her into a slow spiral toward implosion.

“Oh God... Oh God... Fuck, fuck, fuck...” She gripped the edge of the table. Fought to find the peak. Whimpered when it still didn’t come. “Mmm... Please, please, please... Don’t stop, don’t stop... Ah...God...”

He dropped his forehead against hers and rasped, “We’re gonna do this all fucking night.”

She dropped her mouth open, panting. Her muscles burned. She was already sweating. “Can’t.”

“Oh yes you can. Because I know you. You’re going to need to come again right after you come now. Once isn’t going to be enough.”

She whimpered. He was right.

“And when I push you back on this table and put my cock in you, you’re going to need to come again. And when I hover over you and kiss you, and kiss you and kiss you, you’re going to beg me to hammer into you.”

She dropped her head back. “Oh my God.”

How had he figured that out in one night? Was she that predictable? Even she didn’t know she was going to do that until he said it. Until it rang so true, she knew it was exactly what she would want.

“But I know,” he said sliding his fingers deep into the folds on either side of her clit and stroking back and forth. Back and forth. Brooke’s breath stuttered. “How easily and hard you come after the first. And since you’re feeling naughty and frustrated tonight, I’ll throw in a twist for you. Literally. We’ll see how you like that. What do you think?”

His fingers tightened on the bud of her clit and gave a little twist one way, then the other.

“Ah...”

Tug, twist, twist, rub.

“Oh my God...”

Tug, twist, twist, rub.

“Ah...ha...ha...God...” She bowed backward as the orgasm took over, ravaging her like a hungry monster, and Keaton just kept feeding it and feeding it.

And just as he predicted, he’d spent so much time building her up, that even the release wasn’t enough to satisfy her completely. Just the feel of his big hand still between her legs made her want more.

She groaned, rocked into him, and opened her eyes to his smug smile. “I hate you.”

“Tell me that again in ten minutes, thirty minutes, ninety minutes, three-hundred minutes—”

She laughed. “Shut up.”

The first smile she’d seen since he’d first set eyes on her in the warehouse that morning quirked his mouth. And it was hot. “Shut up and make you come, right? Shut up and fuck you?”

She was about to tell him that wasn’t what she meant, but he pushed a full, leisurely stroke between

her legs that made her eyes cross and slid the lube over her perineum and the pucker of her ass. “Ooooh...”

“Luckily,” he murmured, easing one of her ass cheeks to the edge of the table and settling his fingers into a new and incredibly erotic exploration that tightened her throat. “Those are both extremely easy demands to fill.”

Her breath came in sharp little pants as his touch pulsed surges of heavy pleasure deep into her pelvis. With his free hand, he took her face again and lifted it to his.

“Oh...God... Oh...”

He touched his lips to hers. Licked her upper lip. Sucked it. “Like it?”

She whined in response. Gripped the edge of the table with both hands to stay balanced while she writhed—because she couldn’t hold still. He pulled her mouth to his with a hard hand on her jaw and kissed her. His tongue took hers hungrily with a matching, impatient groan, and he ate at her, while his touch revealed none of that. His fingers continued maddeningly slow and tantalizing circles and strokes, circles and strokes, circles and strokes.

Keaton pulled out of the kiss with a breathless, rough “Would you like me doing this while I sucked on you?”

“Oh my God.” The thought was too incredible to fathom. She knew if she said yes, he’d drop to his knees right now. And, wow, part of her wanted that. *Bad*. But a bigger part was too anxious to get to that hammering part he’d mentioned. God, he made her so...fucking...what? She didn’t know what to call it. But she felt a little rabid. “I need you inside me. So bad.”

“I have the perfect solution.” He withdrew his hand and stepped back.

“What—”

Both his hands disappeared under her skirt and dragged her panties down her legs. Then he gripped the back of her thighs behind her knees and lifted, taking her off her feet while spreading her at the same time.

“Keaton!”

He only lifted her to the edge of the table, but kept a grip on her thighs that turned the flesh white under his fingers. “We interrupt your regularly scheduled naughty program for a little extra naughty...”

He dipped his head beneath her skirt. Wet heat and pressure and movement assaulted her sex in the most decadently erotic way. Words and phrases and sounds spilled out of Brooke. She arched and gripped the table. Her head fell back, mouth dropped open, eyes closed. She cried out, shivered, shook, gritted her teeth.

The orgasm slammed into her and sent her spinning. Her hips lifted and spasmed, and Keaton continued to eat and eat and eat. And orgasm after orgasm after orgasm pummeled, rattled, and ripped through her body.

When Keaton rose from his knees, Brooke lay back on the table, shaking, one hand fisted in the hair she’d pulled over her face, the other white-knuckling the table edge.

“Oh my God...” was all she could manage. Her mind was completely white. She couldn’t think at all. Her body was so completely aroused. Every nerve she owned felt like it was on the surface of her skin, just waiting for Keaton to stroke it. And he planned to do just that, judging by the condom he rolled onto his erection, so ready it arced toward his belly. And Brooke wanted it so much, she could taste it. She covered her mouth. “Oh my God.” What had happened to her? She moved her hand to her tight throat. “Oh my God, want it. Want it now.”

He stepped up to the edge of the table, reached for her, and dragged her to him by the waist. Lifting her, he pulled her upright until they were face-to-face, kissed her slowly, deeply, passionately.

When he pulled out of the kiss, he murmured, “Here’s the naughty twist.”

And he flipped her onto her stomach. For a shocked second, she stared at the wood. Then he tossed her skirt up, and a breeze of cool air licked her skin a millisecond before his hand cracked across her ass.

Brooke’s gasp cut into the quiet and stalled her response. She pushed up on her elbows just as Keaton grabbed the flesh of her ass and hauled her to the table edge, impaling her with his cock.

And all Brooke’s thoughts evaporated. All thoughts other than—perfection, ecstasy, bliss, thick, hot,

huge, mine, and orgasm, orgasm, orgasm...motherfucking *orgasm*.

The first of those orgasms hinted almost immediately. Keaton used the skirt underneath her to slide her across the table while he thrust and hooked one hand over her shoulder to both pull her into him and hold her while he hammered. His cock had to be the perfect size or shape or length or *something*, because she'd never been able to skyrocket like this. And unlike clitoral orgasms, multiple full-body orgasms weren't painful. They were...well...or-fucking-gasmic. And, she was discovering, addictive.

Highly addictive.

Like *majorly*.

In fact, she couldn't get enough. And when Keaton slowed his thrusts to drag at the straps of her dress and yank the bodice to free her breasts, Brooke rose to her hands and knees and rocked back, pushing his cock deep.

"Oh, yeeeeees," she moaned. Gritting her teeth against the need eating her up inside, she used the edges of the table to push herself back and onto his cock. *Bang, bang, bang...* "Ah God."

Keaton bent over her, cupped and squeezed her breasts, bit her shoulder, then soothed it with his tongue. "You need it, baby?"

"Need it... God, need it, need it, need—"

He bit her neck, and pain made her complain. Then he released one breast and cracked her ass. *Hard*.

"Ah!" Her head fell forward, her mind spun with the shock, interrupting her rhythm. The sound split through the room, and the sting sang through her skin and sank deep into her ass cheek. Into her pussy. And melted into a pleasure so intense, she couldn't begin to describe it. She trembled, and whimpers hummed from her throat.

And when Keaton rasped, "Naughty girls, get spanked," at her ear, excitement spurted through her body and drenched her pussy.

He growled and dug his hands into her flesh, one at her hip, one at her breast. "That is *so...fucking...hot*." He pulled out and slammed into her with a satisfied hum.

Pleasure spilled through her.

"Yes, yes, yes." She was insanely single-minded. She *had* to satisfy this craving. It was a necessity. And she put all her focus and energy on driving Keaton's cock right where it needed to be—hard and deep inside her.

Keaton gripped her hips and hauled her back against him. The rhythmic slap of flesh echoed the spankings he'd given her and shot sparks through her blood again. "Mmm, it's coming... Don't stop, don't stop..."

"You're fuckin' crazy sexy." His hand slid up her spine, collected her hair, and pulled her head back, arching her, forcing her ass higher. "Like that?"

"Yes... Oh God..."

He released one hip to smack the flesh of her ass, then dug his fingers in again and pulled her into him harder.

She cried out as the first wave of the orgasm hit, but kept pushing back into him, "Don't stop, don't stop, don't stop... *Fuck...*" And screamed as the next wave immobilized her.

But Keaton knew exactly what she needed. He wrapped one muscled arm at her hips and continued to thrust, igniting multiple orgasms like starbursts clustered together to explode in strings of ecstasy.

Keaton pressed his face to her neck. "Brooke, baby, so fucking good."

She closed her fingers in his hair and kissed his temple just as a violent climax slammed through him, drawing forth the brutally serious side of a man she was just realizing she'd only begun to know. The same way she was just coming to realize there was a whole side of herself she hadn't fully known about. One he'd only just introduced her to.

SEVEN

Keaton tried to massage conditioner into Brooke's hair, but she was so limp, she kept moving every time his hands moved. "The sooner you hold your head still, the sooner you can get out of here and lie down."

She groaned and let her forehead fall against his chest. He laughed. Then an unexpected rush of emotion swamped him, and he pressed his cheek to her head, wrapped his arms around her, and held her as tight as he could. Her hands circled his waist and hugged him back. And they just stood there like that in the elaborate Four Seasons shower, letting the hot water stream over them.

After a couple of minutes, she turned her head toward him and rested her cheek against his chest. "I'm sorry."

It was a big apology. An apology for everything that had happened, everything that had gone wrong that day, all that could still go wrong.

He lifted a hand and stroked her wet head. "Me too."

"It's just... It's so complicated."

The inflection in Brooke's words made it sound as if her inner landscape were all fire and brimstone. She'd never struck Keaton as the dramatic type, but it had been a year since he'd seen her, and she had been working for Jillian.

"I know Jillian can be self-involved," he said, "but I'm sure she'll understand once—"

Brooke pulled back and looked at him a little wild-eyed. "I hope your next words weren't going to include 'tell her.' Because we are absolutely not telling her there is anything between us."

Keaton let the rest of his breath release from his lungs and clenched his teeth in frustration as Brooke dropped her head back to rinse her hair. He felt like a rubber band continually being stretched to one extreme only to be snapped the other direction.

"This is ridiculous," he told her when she pulled her head from under the spray. "It was so long ago, I don't even remember anything about the night we were together. Like..." He fought to think back. "Hell, I don't even know how long ago it was. Before she was married to that billionaire asshole."

"In the limo this morning, she mentioned seeing you a few weeks ago."

He pounded the shower control with a fist, shutting it off. "If you knew about me in the limo—"

"I didn't know you were you. I mean..." She rubbed a hand over her face, pushing water from her eyes. "She didn't say a name."

He pulled a towel off the top of the door and wrapped it around her from behind, securing her in his arms. He pressed a kiss to her temple. "Unless you're going to tell me that what we've got here is over and we're never doing this again, which I'd never believe, she's going to find out eventually. Better to just deal with it up front."

"It's not just about her." She turned in his arms, and the deep apprehension darkening her pretty face worried him. "I need this job. I can't afford to risk that. And I know her. I've been with her day and night for a year. I know what makes her tick. And what makes her snap. And right now, with what's going on in her personal life, I guarantee even a *hint* of something between you and me would break her trust in me like a toothpick."

She pushed the shower door open, grabbed another towel from the rod, and handed it to Keaton. Tightening her own, she waited as he dried off.

"I thought having you in town longer would be a really great chance for us to spend more time together, but..." She ran both hands through her hair and shook her head, misery plain on her face. "How did everything go so bad, so fast? She can make the very best situation so damn miserable."

"Hey, hey..." He tightened the towel at his waist and stepped over to her, taking her in his arms again. "If she does this to you, why do you stay with her? Why haven't you found another job?"

She curled one arm around his lower back and the other up and over the back of his shoulder, as if she couldn't hold on tight enough. And Keaton's rubber band snapped the other direction again.

"Because it's not that easy," she told him, her voice tight with distress. Her phone rang in the bedroom, and she jumped like a plucked cord. "Oh, crap. What time is it?"

"Baby, relax," he murmured. "It's too late for Jillian to be calling you. Let it ring."

"It's not Jillian. That's my sister's ringtone." She turned out of his arms. "I didn't call Justin back. It's probably my sister, checking in." She tapped her phone and looked at it when she answered, but gave a surprised "Justin? What are you doing up so late? Where's your mom?"

"She's sleeping." The boy's voice that came over the line was definitely young, but he also sounded sick. Like he had a cold.

"Hold on a second, buddy, I just got out of the shower." Brooke put the phone on the bed and looked around, grabbing the first thing she found, which happened to be Keaton's T-shirt. Pulling it over her head, she picked up the phone and sat cross-legged. "So, what's going on? Why are you up while your mom's sleeping? Is she okay?"

"She's tired."

Now Keaton frowned. The kid sounded really sick. Brooke must have noticed it too, because her face creased with worry. She rested the phone on her bent knee, used both hands to rub her face, then propped her elbow on her thigh and her head in her hand. "Okay, I need really straight answers, Justin. Can you do that?"

"Yeah."

"Is your mom just tired? Or is she sick?"

Keaton finished drying himself off, knotted the towel around his waist, and leaned against the bathroom doorframe.

"Just tired I think," Justin said.

"Can you bring her the phone?"

Hesitation. When he spoke, he whispered. "But she'll get mad that I'm still awake and that I used the phone without telling her."

Brooke laughed a tired "Baby," and covered her eyes.

The amount of affection in her voice made Keaton smile, despite his lingering frustration. And fuck if everything inside him didn't go all warm and soft.

She uncovered her face. "Okay, just be really, really quiet," she said, lowering her voice to his level, "and point the phone at her so I can see she's okay. And then leave the room, and we'll talk more when you're in the living room."

"Okay."

Quiet fell. Brooke curled one hand into a fist and pressed it against her mouth, the other against her chest. After a moment, a smile curved her lips, and she exhaled heavily. She nodded to her nephew.

Then she smiled over at Keaton, and he saw tears glistening in her eyes. "She fell asleep with her anatomy book open and her glasses on," she told him, still whispering, and laughed softly as she dried her eyes on the shoulder of his tee.

Oh, man. This woman held a lot more inside than he'd realized. In fact, she probably had nerves of steel. At least until he walked into her life and upset the balance.

Keaton wandered into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Okay," she said to Justin, "now, where's your inhaler?"

"In my pocket."

"Then why do you sound like that?"

"Dunno."

Brooke sighed. "What happened to straight answers, Justin?"

"I really just need help figuring out what I'm going to do for the science fair." Now the kid sounded upset too, and when he got stressed, the wheeze in his lungs got worse.

“Okay, okay.” She held up both hands. “Don’t get worked up.”

“But Derrick’s doing skateboarding and physics, and he’s calling it Popping an Ollie. It’s all about doing these cool tricks. Trevor and his dad are building a freaking hover board. A hover board, Aunt Brooke. I have to turn in a paragraph on my project idea tomorrow, and I don’t have one. I’ve been asking Mom to help me, but she never has time. She promised to do it with me tonight, but then she fell asleep.”

“Oh my God,” Brooke muttered, then closed her eyes, and framed her face with her hands. She pulled in a breath, blew it out, and said, “Okay, buddy, give me a minute. It’s been a long day, and we all know I’m not that great on the fly. Let’s think about this. Uuuuum...”

Keaton had heard countless friends and staff talk about this—their kids coming to them at the last minute with an assignment or project due the next day. In this case, it wasn’t the child who’d procrastinated but the adult who didn’t have the resources to provide the child the help he needed to do the work. And here this poor kid was, sick, up late, fighting to do his homework instead of blowing it off. That was a fighter. A kid with grit. One who could really make something of his life because he had the will. The determination. He also had a mom trying to get through nursing school to make a better life for all of them and an aunt who’d sacrificed part of her own happiness to provide security for him.

This was an amazing little family. And suddenly, Keaton felt selfish for wanting Brooke all to himself.

“I’m gonna fail...” Justin’s pathetic wail pulled Keaton back and tugged at his heart. Especially when the kid started coughing. The raw sound made Keaton wince.

“Oh, come on. Stop,” Brooke told him, but gave Keaton a helpless, pained look before telling Justin, “What about that one last year, where someone showed how a tooth disintegrated when it was left in a cup of Coke? You could do that...um, maybe. If you could get a hold of a tooth...”

Keaton made a face at the premise.

“Ew, Aunt Brooke...” Justin said.

“Okay, okay.” She pressed her hands to her head. “It was just a suggestion. I’m still thinking. Take another hit on your inhaler, kid. Your Darth Vader impression is a little unnerving.”

The combination of Justin’s illness, the topic of a science fair, and her sister being asleep in the house was obviously unsettling for Brooke. Keaton didn’t doubt she was also feeling the weight of another two months away from the boy on her shoulders right about now. If their situations were reversed, Keaton would be.

He reached out and clasped her foot, offering a reassuring squeeze.

She glanced at him and gave him a two-second smile, before telling Justin, “I’m not exactly a science genius. Maybe we should wake your mom.”

That sounded like a cry for help to Keaton.

“You wouldn’t say that if you saw the mood she was in before she fell asleep,” Justin said.

Brooke laughed. “You can sound so old and wise one minute and like a whining two-year-old the next, you know that?”

“Whatever.”

“And pissy teenager the next,” she added.

“Mom doesn’t like that word.”

“I thought Mom was asleep.”

While they sparred, Keaton found a notepad and pen, scribbled *What’s he into?* and handed it to Brooke. Then he opened her iPad and googled science fair projects.

She handed back the answer. *Computers. Hates sports.*

Keaton nodded. With lungs like that, who could enjoy sports? Man, that made Keaton sad. He searched computer-related projects while Brooke and Justin continued to brainstorm a few minutes. But when the boy started coughing, the sound was so raw, it made Keaton pull his shoulders up around his ears and rub his chest.

“Baby, what’s going on with your asthma?”

“You have to ask Mom.”

“How long has it been this bad?”

“Just today.”

“How long has it been getting a little worse every day?”

She'd obviously seen this pattern before, and Keaton was getting a deeper view of why she'd moved in with her sister. Brooke wasn't just a means of emotional support after the death of her brother-in-law. She obviously had a deep investment in her nephew, whose school and health took considerable time. Keaton's little fantasy of hooking Brooke enough to keep seeing him after his role in the movie was over, faded fast.

“Maybe a week?” Justin said.

“And your mom knows it's this bad?”

“Yeah. She talked to the doctors about it. They're trying something new. And before you ask what, I don't know. You really have to ask her.”

Brooke sighed. “I want you to sleep in her room tonight.”

“Oh, Aunt Br—”

“I know you hate it, but I hate the way you sound more. And if you don't sleep with your mom, I'm going to worry. If I worry, I'm not going to get any sleep. And I have to work tomorrow, buddy.”

Keaton found a few video game-related projects and started scanning through them. He needed one the kid could do on his own, one that didn't cost much, one that didn't take much time...

Brooke got a long-suffering sigh from Justin, then a disgusted “Fine.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise. But I might not be sleeping anyway. I *need* a project.”

Keaton spun the iPad toward her and pointed at the screen.

“Hold on. Might have found...” She scanned it, her brow furrowed, and she gave him a confused, are-you-crazy look. “What...?”

He smirked and lifted a shoulder.

“What?” Justin echoed, drawing her attention again. “Is someone with you?”

Which earned Keaton the most adorable look-what-you've-done look from Brooke before she told Justin, “I'm just chatting with a friend online. I'm going to put you on hold a second while I talk with them about this to see if it will work for you.”

“Okay.”

Brooke tapped a button and set the phone aside so she was out of the camera's view and groaned, covering her face with both hands. “I don't know how parents *do* it. He's so damn smart, it takes everything both Tammy and I have just to keep up with him.” She scraped her fingers through her hair and scanned screen Keaton had pointing to. “I don't know anything about computer games. What's this?”

“It's an intermediate-level project studying animation and how its structure and implementation affects the viewer's perception of action in the game.”

Brooke's eyes glazed over, and she gave him a pained look. “You lost me at intermediate.”

Keaton grinned and shook his head. “He's a boy, he's into video games, and he's a brain. Trust me, he'll like this.”

“Fine, whatever.” She waved her hand over the screen as if to clear the whole idea from her mind. “You obviously speak his language. Why don't you just explain it—”

“Because you need to be the one to help him. He called you for help, and you need to be there for him and answer that call. It doesn't matter what source you get the answers from, what matters is that you bring the answer back to him.”

Her eyes closed, and her breath leaked out. “I'm so tired.”

“I know. This is going to be easy. I promise.”

He gave her a quick rundown of the information available on the site and how Justin could use it to get his paragraph due tomorrow finished in ten minutes. Then Justin could dig deeper into the information to start building the project. And he told Brooke to give Justin his cell number and email to contact for support.

“And if he wants to whip the pants off that school, all I have to do is whisper the words ‘secret project’ to Rubi, and all hell will break loose.”

Mention of their friend and computer guru Rubi Russo, girlfriend to Renegade Wes Lawson, made Brooke break out in laughter. “Oh my God. Rubi would probably make the animations come to life.”

Smiling, Keaton cupped Brooke’s face and stroked her cheek. “That’s better.” He kissed her forehead. “Now tell Justin what to do, and then tell him to get his sick ass to bed. Because you need to get your tired ass to bed.”

Keaton stayed there while she explained the project to Justin, his hand covering one foot, his thumb massaging her instep. He had to hold back his laughter at Justin’s excitement over the project idea, the amount of information on the website, and the fact that Brooke had a stuntman on call to help Justin out.

“Oh my God, Aunt Brooke, this is going to be the best project *ever*.”

Both she and Keaton were smiling, but the sound of Justin’s voice when it strained with excitement made them wince.

“Okay, okay. Ten minutes to write a few sentences, then bed. *With Mom*.”

“Okay.” He didn’t sound as upset about it anymore. “Thanks, Aunt Brooke. You’re the *best*. I love you.”

Brooke’s eyes sparkled with joy. “I love you too. Tell your mom to call me tomorrow, okay?”

He promised he would, and they disconnected.

Brooke sighed. “Disaster averted.” Her gaze swung to Keaton’s and held. “Thank you. You saved the day and made me look like the hero at the same time.”

“Oh, baby, you are definitely the hero.” He shook his head. “I don’t know how *you* do it.”

“I’m not going to say it’s easy, but it’s definitely worth every minute.”

“I didn’t fully appreciate how much Justin and your sister depend on you until just now. I’d just like to see you working for someone who makes you happy, or at least doesn’t make you miserable. It’s hard to imagine you couldn’t find someone who would pay you—”

“Like I said, it’s complicated.”

“Explain it to me.”

She heaved a breath. “I told you, Jillian pays me well. Still not enough to put up with her bullshit, but it doesn’t matter, because I know how difficult it would be to find another job that pays me this well, or one that lets me live in Florida. And we *need* the money.”

The way she said “need” told Keaton the financial situation wasn’t just tight, it was dire. “Living is cheap in Florida. At least compared to California or New York where most big actors and actresses live. If Jillian pays you so well, the three of you should be able to live comfortably off what you make, even without Tammy working.”

“It would be for normal, healthy people. But we’re not normal, and Justin’s not healthy.”

It took Keaton a second to connect Justin’s poor health with money problems. This was completely outside his healthy bachelor-oriented mind. “What do you mean? Justin doesn’t have health insurance? Can’t *everyone* get health insurance? Isn’t that why we pay all those goddamned taxes?” Keaton stretched his mind to understand, but couldn’t. “Don’t all states have programs for kids whose families don’t have the money for health insurance?”

“Like I said, it’s complicated.” She heaved a breath, the sound a combination of resignation and frustration. “When Tammy’s husband died, she took the extension policy Brian’s company offered to bridge the gap until she could find another solution. But the initial stress of Brian’s death took a toll on Justin’s system, and he got really sick. The gap policy had high deductibles and didn’t cover some of Justin’s medications.”

Keaton’s whole view shifted. His mouth dropped open. His breath left his lungs. “Oh, shit...”

“Between Justin’s doctor visits, his treatments, his meds, and his hospital stays, the life insurance Brian had was gone in a matter of months. When she went for public aid, she was told she didn’t qualify because the life insurance was considered income and put her above the need threshold. And because the

system looks at your income for the previous calendar year to evaluate need, that meant Tammy and Justin would go uncovered for an entire year before she would qualify for coverage.”

Keaton’s stomach knotted and he rubbed his face with both hands. “You weren’t fucking kidding. This is worse than complicated.”

“Justin’s been sick since the day he was born. Tammy never had a chance to go to school or start a career. She couldn’t go out and get a job that would have paid enough to cover the specialty childcare he would have needed, let alone provided decent health insurance. She called me in California, bawling her eyes out because she got an eviction notice and was going to be out on the street in a matter of days. She’d stopped paying rent so she could hold on to the health insurance. She was terrified she’d be living on the streets with a sick kid. Terrified the courts would take him away from her. She never even had a chance to mourn Brian because she was always putting out fires and trying to take care of Justin.”

“Jesus Christ.” Keaton sank to the edge of the bed. The impossible situation crippled his mind. He couldn’t even imagine a life so limited. “Is he covered now?”

“Yes. Ellie gave me the money to get them stabilized. When I got there, we found a little ramshackle house for the three of us. We found a better insurance policy that would cover Justin’s meds and treatments, but it costs as much as the rent on the dump where we live every month.”

“Which is why you took the highest paying job.”

“And it’s also why I can’t lose this job. Because Justin was recently accepted into the final round of possible candidates for a research study. If he can get in, he’ll get a procedure that, until now, has been reserved for adults with asthma. The doctors go into the bronchial tree with a laser and burn some of the lining out, making more room for air to flow. It’s permanent and could promise Justin his only shot at a normal life.”

Hope flared inside Keaton. “That’s incredible.”

“It is, but it’s also expensive.”

Keaton smacked a hand to his forehead and groaned. This family couldn’t catch a break.

“Experimental procedures aren’t covered by any insurance company,” Brooke said. “Participation is an out-of-pocket expense.”

“I’m afraid to ask, but…” He winced. “How much?”

She sighed. “The procedure alone, which is done in three different stages with a month in between each, costs twenty thousand.”

“Ouch.”

“Then there are additional medications and follow-up visits. We also have to agree to keep Justin in the study for the entire year so the researchers can gather their test data. In the end, it ends up costing sixty grand.”

Keaton’s mouth dropped open. “Holy shit.”

“And to show we’re committed, we have to pay half up front.”

“Oh my God, Brooke…” Keaton had no words.

“I almost have it saved. I’m really close. A couple more paychecks and we’ll have half. The rest can be paid over the course of the treatment, which will still make life tight for us. But after that year, Tammy will be out of school. She’ll get a well-paying job with benefits, and she’ll be able to stand on her own the rest of her life. She’ll be able to provide for Justin until he can provide for himself. But I have to *get them there*. And if that means putting up with Jillian twelve more months, then I cross every day off on a calendar with a big black sharpie and suck it up.”

“Jesus.” He exhaled the word and sagged on the bed until he pressed his forehead to her foot. “I can’t even imagine.”

“So, now you know why I did what I did today,” she said, her voice soft and sad. “And why we can’t keep seeing each other.”

He lifted his head. “What?”

“You’re right. If we keep doing this behind her back, Jillian will eventually figure it out. We should

have ended things this morning anyway. It's temporary, and our friendship—even if we only see each other occasionally—does mean a lot to me.”

“Whoa. Slow down. Back up.” His gut tightened. “When did we decide this was temporary?”

“What do you mean?” She stared at him with a confused look. “Temporary is all you do.”

He pushed upright. “That’s all I *did*.”

She shook her head. “Did you hear any of what I just said?”

“Did *you* just hear me say I don’t want to let you go?”

Anger and fear pushed his voice up a few octaves, and his words continued to ring in the silence. Their gazes held, and for the length of two extended heartbeats, Keaton wasn’t sure who was more stunned by his admission—Brooke or himself.

Fear burned a circuit through his body, then vanished, mellowing instantly into warmth. Yeah. He was sure. He pushed himself up and slid his hand around her neck. Her eyes were still shocked and now watering.

“Brooke, I didn’t mean to yell. I just... I’ve never, you know, done this before, so I’m probably not going to be very good at it for a while.”

She closed her eyes, and tears spilled over her lashes. Fucking perfect, he’d made her cry. But she leaned into him, pressed her face to his shoulder, and wrapped her arms around his neck. And now Keaton’s eyes stung. He pulled her onto his lap, rolling his eyes to the ceiling to banish the burn.

“Baby, you’re different. You’re special,” he said into her hair. “I care about you, and I don’t want to hurt either you or Justin. But, baby, I don’t want to just let you go without trying either.”

She sighed against his neck. Her body softened, and she melted against him. The feeling was so heavenly, Keaton moaned.

“How often do you get to Austin?” he asked her.

“This is our first trip.”

“Does Jillian have the next year scheduled yet?”

“Mostly.” She lifted her head and looked at him. Her dark lashes were clumped with wetness the way they had been in the shower and made her eyes look even bluer. “Where are you going to be?”

The fact that she asked shot a thrill through his heart. “Here until the other stunt guy comes back, then LA until they start filming here again, which will be about three months. In those three months, I’ll probably be working close to home. Then between here and LA for the following three to four months of filming. Rinse. Repeat.”

“I know Jillian’s going to be in LA a few times, but I’d have to look at her calendar to know when.” She sounded tired, but she was still talking. “I know we’re in Vegas in a few months. I think we’re filming somewhere in the Midwest in the winter...” She heaved a sigh, her shoulders sank, and she shook her head. “Keaton, this is so unrealistic...”

“Like you moving in with your sister and nephew, and paying all their bills to provide them with a place to live and the opportunity to live happy, successful lives? I bet that didn’t sound very realistic when the idea came up either. But I know you’re doing it, and I know it works. You don’t plan to do it long-term, right? But it works for now.”

When she didn’t argue, he said, “Tell me this.” He paused, mentally preparing himself for an answer he didn’t want to hear. “Do you care about me enough to want something beyond temporary?”

Her eyes fell closed in a look of pain, and Keaton’s protective wall started to crumble. But when she looked at him again, so much affection floated in her eyes, his heart flipped a somersault. “I have been crazy about you for a very, *very* long time. There is nothing temporary about my feelings for you.”

That made Keaton’s lungs release a breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding. Made a shaky smile ease the tension in his face. Filled his chest with joy and sent a calming warmth into his belly. He gathered her close, and rocked her, releasing a relieved breath.

Then fell back on the bed with her, stroked her hair off her forehead, and kissed her. “Then let’s not worry about the rest right now.” He ran his fingers over her cheek, twined his legs with hers, and just

enjoyed looking at her beautiful face without a stitch of makeup. So fresh and real and honest. “We’ll just have to manage as many rendezvous as necessary to keep us going until our situation changes.”

EIGHT

The parking lot's disintegrating asphalt crunched beneath Brooke's sandals as she crossed the yard housing the actors' trailers.

She headed toward Jillian's trailer with her cell at her ear, her sister's groggy voice answering, "Hello."

"Oh my God, I'm sorry," Brooke said. "I didn't realize you'd be sleeping. I'll call back."

"No, it's fine." Tammy yawned. "I was up with Justin. How's the she-devil treating you?"

"Same as always, but I have a little reprieve. She's got meetings all morning." Brooke glanced at her watch. She had at least three more hours before Jillian would be back. "I talked to Justin last night, and he sounded awful. That's why I was calling. I wanted to find out what the doctors figured out. He told me they were changing his medications? Trying something new? But he couldn't say what. Told me I had to ask you. And, God, Tammy, he sounded awful. It broke my heart to hear him like that again."

"I know. It's a hard transition."

"Transition to what?"

"That's the good news. I heard sooner than I expected. He was accepted into the first stage of the children's program for the bronchial thermoplasty. In anticipation of that, the doctors changed his medication, and that always throws him."

Brooke's feet stopped dead in the shadow of the trailer. She gasped, and a balloon of excitement instantly filled her chest. "Oh my God. He got in? Tammy, that's *fantastic*." In the next breath, she said, "Why don't you sound more excited?"

"Probably because I'm exhausted. And because when I looked over the final documentation for the study, I discovered just how strict the guidelines are. He has to pass every segment of the study to continue on and get all three procedures."

When Tammy outlined all the hurdles, Brooke's excitement waned a little too. "You medical people," she teased. "You're all Debbie Downers, you know that?"

Tammy laughed again. "More like Realist Rosies. It's just part of the program—literally. And Justin's been through so much already. I don't want to get his hopes up with such high chances that he might not make it through—especially when he has no control over whether he makes it or doesn't."

"How frustrating," Brooke said. "This is supposed to be exciting."

"It *is* exciting. They're only taking fifty kids into this study, so the fact that he got in is all *very* exciting."

Brooke smiled and climbed the stairs to the trailer. "Yeah, I guess it is."

She pulled the door open, took the last two steps into the luxurious space—far nicer than the house Brooke rented with Tammy and Justin—and her gaze immediately drifted to a vase of vivid red roses on the granite counter in the kitchenette.

"Justin told me about the science fair project you helped him figure out," Tammy said. "Thank you for doing that. You have been such a lifesaver this year. You know when you leave, he's going to want to move with you, right? I think he's forgotten which one of us is his mom."

Brooke almost ignored the flowers but then saw a tall cardboard coffee cup and a pastry bag sitting in front of the crystal vase. Flowers for Jillian were common. Coffee and pastry were not. In fact, that was downright odd.

"Oh, stop. I'm the one who keeps leaving him for all these stupid trips. You're the one who's there with him every day. That's what really matters."

Brooke tucked the phone between her shoulder and cheek and peeked into the pastry bag. A note blocked the view of the pastry. She pulled it out, and even before she read the note, she recognized the

handwriting from the night before when Keaton had scribbled on the Four Seasons tablet.

For an extra sweet start to your day.

Her heart swelled and ached. Brooke laughed softly. Extra was right. He'd already started her day off as sweetly as possible by showing her just how many different kinds of sex he specialized in, and made sweet love to her before he'd disappeared from her room at daybreak.

"Brooke?"

"Hmm?" she said, tuning in to her sister's voice. "Listen, I'd better go. Lots of work to finish before the She Wolf returns to the den—"

"Not before you tell me about the stunt guy."

Brooke froze and thought back, wondering if she'd said something aloud to tip Tammy off about Keaton. "Uuuuh...?"

"Man, your head is really somewhere else." Tammy laughed. "The stunt guy you said Justin could call for help? He is so pumped over that. And I know you wouldn't give him just anyone's number, so what's the scoop?"

Brooke slid the note into the pocket of her jean shorts, then leaned in to smell the roses. Their rich scent instantly improved her mood. "Do you remember that guy I told you about from LA?"

"The one who's friends with Ellie's guy. The one you were hoping to hook up with before you moved?"

Brooke had told her sister about Keaton months after her move during one of those late nights, long after Justin had fallen asleep and the two of them had polished off a bottle of wine.

"Yeah, him. He's here. The project idea for Justin was actually his. So if Justin runs into problems, Keaton's happy to talk him through as much as he can. And if Justin gets stuck with any programming problems, we've got Rubi on call."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Tammy said. "We'll get to Rubi in a minute. Let's go back to Keaton. What's going on there?"

Brooke exhaled, nervous to talk about it, almost as if it would jinx their possibility at happiness. She also didn't like having to put everything into concrete words, because then it all became so unrealistic again. "I'm not sure. We're both interested, but there are a lot of roadblocks. The biggest of those right now being Jillian."

"Jillian? How is that bitch a roadblock?"

Brooke winced and closed her eyes. "She slept with Keaton once upon a time."

"Ew."

"It was a long time ago."

"Okay. I'll give him a pass on one ding. How is that creating a problem now?"

"She still wants him."

"God, that woman..." Tammy took an audible breath and let it out slowly. "Well, on the upside, that means he's über hot, or she would pretend he doesn't exist like she does with everyone she has no use for. But, yes, that could be a real problem."

Brooke heard the underlying guilt in her sister's voice and purposely forced herself to be positive. "But not your problem, because we're handling it. Keaton and I are on the same page. He doesn't want to do anything that could hurt Justin, so we're keeping things between us quiet. And to be honest, Tammy, I don't even really know what's between us. He's not a serious kind of guy, if you know what I mean. He's always been a typical breed in this industry."

"So were Jax and Wes and Troy—until they found the right woman. And not so typical if he's willing to hide in the shadows to protect a kid he's never met."

That was a good point. "One day at a time," Brooke told her sister. "Hug Justin for me, and keep me posted."

“If you’ll give Keaton your all.”

Brooke grinned. “I’ll take that deal.”

Before she’d said good-bye, the door to the trailer swung open, and Jillian stepped in, startling Brooke. She turned her back on the flowers, coffee, and pastry with a streak of fear shooting up her spine.

“Oh my God, Jillian.” She pressed her phone to her heart, frowning at her boss’s sudden appearance. “What are you doing here? You should be in a meeting with Phil Shriver.”

“Phil canceled,” Jillian said, her distracted gaze roaming the space. “Something about a sick brat at home. And Copalli wants to add in a shoot this afternoon.”

Shit. Anxious to get her out of the trailer, Brooke turned her attention to her phone. “Let me call Jeannette and see when she and Percy can get you into hair and makeup—”

“The security guard said Keaton brought something in here earlier today

Fire filled Brooke’s belly. Her mouth fell open to lie, but Jillian took the last step into the trailer and Brooke knew she’d never be able to hide the gifts from her boss.

While Brooke was still trying to figure out how she was going to spin this, Jillian pointed at the table behind Brooke. “What’s that?”

Fuck.

Brooke pushed her mouth into a smile, stepped aside, and did her best Vanna White impression. “Your surprise.”

Jillian’s eyes sparked to life. But as she approached the table her expression slowly soured. She propped a hand on her hip. “Is that it?”

“What do you mean?”

Jillian made an air circle around the gift. “That. Is that all he left?”

All? Brooke wasn’t sure if she wanted to laugh or slap Jillian. She shrugged. “I just got here.”

“Was there a card?”

“No. No card.”

Jillian pursed her lips in one of those how-disappointing expressions. “Men.” She shook her head. “Oh well. He’ll make up for it in bed. He always does.”

That grated along Brooke’s already exposed nerves. “Oh, yeah? I’ve never had a guy like that.”

At least not until Keaton. And she wondered for a distracted moment if she’d ever find another.

“Oh, honey.” She gave Brooke a condescending, pitying look. “They’re the only kind of guy worth spreading your legs for.”

The image of Jillian spreading her legs for Keaton made Brooke’s breakfast roll toward her throat. She shook it from her head and tapped into her phone. “If you say so. Let me give Jeannette a call—”

“I’ve already talked to her,” Jillian said. The edge in her voice exposed her annoyance with Brooke’s dismissal of a topic her boss obviously wasn’t done talking about. “Keaton may not look like much in the grubby clothes he wears on the set. But, oh”—her voice turned dreamy and dripped with lust—“that man is a dark Adonis in a tux. Hair cut and styled, clean-shaven, smiling, those perfect teeth contrasting against his skin, those dark eyes of his twinkling with mischief...” Jillian put a hand over her abdomen and sighed a moan. “The man is irresistible.” She tilted her head and smiled at Brooke. “I may not be the only woman who thinks so, but I’m determined to be the woman keeping his off-hours occupied during the next eight weeks. I’ll have to talk to Copalli about holding him on the movie.” Her gaze went distant as she pulled the top off the coffee meant for Brooke and lifted it toward her mouth. “The real trick will be keeping the other sluts’ hands off him.”

Brooke’s stomach twisted tighter. “You don’t think he can be a one-woman man?”

Jillian sipped from the coffee, made a disgusted face. “Godawful. That man is going to have to become my sexual slave to make up for this. She dumped the coffee in the sink, and Brooke fisted her hands in anger. “As for being a one-woman man, I couldn’t care less. I only want him to distract me during this shoot. Besides, he’s in his prime. And I mean *prime*. He’s young, he has plenty of money, no responsibilities, and an exciting career. He travels everywhere, rubs elbows with all the most famous and

wealthy, and the most beautiful women all over the world want to sleep with him—because he is truly a hell of a fuck. And unlike in the movies, that’s a lot harder to find than you think. Oh, yes, he’s the whole package.” She met Brooke’s gaze. “If you were him, would you want to settle for one woman? I wouldn’t.”

Brooke didn’t know. She’d seen the uglier side of that beautiful fast life, and it didn’t suit everyone. She and Ellie were perfect examples. Of course, they were also women. After so many years on the road with Ellie, behind the scenes in the music world, Brooke thought she’d seen a lot. Then she’d been introduced to Hollywood and realized she hadn’t seen the half of it.

Now she wondered if she was being naïve by letting Keaton sweet-talk her into investing too much of her heart, when he really didn’t know what it took to make a relationship work. When he himself admitted he’d never done anything but temporary before. Who was to say that in one of the millions of lonely moments they would spend apart, he wouldn’t simply say yes to one of those hundreds of beautiful women who hit on him? And who was Brooke to ask him not to? These were the best years of his life. He should be out doing everything he ever wanted to do, not struggling to fit in a sketchy rendezvous with a part-time girlfriend on the fly.

“Is that what went wrong between you two?” Now Brooke’s gut burned. She opened her iPad and clicked into Jillian’s schedule to keep her hands busy and hide the emotions rising to the surface. “Why it didn’t work out? Because he was always looking for the next woman?”

“Keaton?” Jillian asked, laughing softly. “No. Most men with his looks and confidence and swagger know they hold the keys to the kingdom.” Jillian ran her fingertips over the edges of the rose petals. “They lie, they manipulate, and they use. They play games to keep themselves entertained at the expense of others. But Keaton has always been...just Keaton, which is probably why he’s held my interest so long.”

A strange discomfort settled in Brooke’s chest. She opened her mouth to change the subject, but Jillian spoke again.

“Yesterday, for example. He didn’t pull any punches when I tried to turn on the charm. He doesn’t like me because I’ve spent my life acting much the way all those other people act. Any other man in that studio would have hugged me back, made a date for drinks, schmoozed me up and down.” She lifted her brows at Brooke. “I am a movie star, you know.”

“Then...you’re in it for the chase?” Brooke frowned, confused by Jillian’s perspective. “Why chase if you already know he doesn’t like you?”

“Oh no.” Jillian laughed, low and husky. “Hell no. This isn’t about the chase. This is all about the catch. This is about the sex. And the sooner I get that boy into my bed, the better. He may think he’s above all the bullshit that goes on in this business, but underneath that upstanding, solid, honorable facade, he’s still a man. A man with a voracious sexual appetite. And I’m still the most gorgeous woman within a fifty-mile radius—maybe more. Even a forthright, tell-it-like-it-is, no-sugar-coating, up-front guy like Keaton wants to get laid. And the hotter the woman, the better.”

Laughter bubbled up inside Brooke. Jillian might be beautiful on the outside, but inside, she was as ugly as a tar pit. And so damn superficial she couldn’t even see there were people who valued inner beauty more than the outer beauty. “So, you think he’ll overlook the fact that he doesn’t like you or the way you operate, just to fuck you because you’re beautiful?”

“Hell yes. He did it once, didn’t he?”

“Once?” Brooke tried not to sound accusatory. “I thought you said you reconnected with him a month ago.”

“I did. Just not the way I would have liked. I plan to change that this time around.”

A knock on the door broke into Brooke’s thoughts.

“That’s Jeannette,” Jillian said without making any move toward the door. “Percy’s coming right after to do my hair.”

Brooke moved to the door, greeted Jeannette, and stepped aside to let the slender woman in her fifties pass through the tight space so she could set up at the dining table.

“Where are you filming?” Brooke asked.

“Warehouse B.”

Good. That meant Brooke could hang out in warehouse A and watch Keaton work. The thought made her smile. She could watch Keaton all day long and never get bored.

“Run along,” Jillian said, dismissing Brooke like a child. “And double-check my massage, manicure, and pedicure appointments for tomorrow. I don’t want anything to go wrong with my spa day after a hard work week.”

The woman’s condescension after she’d just confided in her like a quasi-friend fried Brooke’s last nerve. She wanted to tell her boss a hard work week was spending two shifts on your feet at the hospital taking care of others, another twenty hours in the classroom cramming information into your brain, another thirty studying everything you’d learned over and over, and the remainder of the time raising your severely asthmatic, terribly brilliant eight-year-old when you had to calculate how much you could spend on dinner every night so you didn’t run out of money before you could get a full-time job. With no fucking spa day in sight.

Instead, she offered a dutiful “Of course,” exited the trailer, and headed straight toward the person who always made her feel better. About everything.

* * * *

Keaton wiped his hands on a towel and slipped his gloves back on. He glanced up and found Brooke still sitting off in a corner, talking on the phone, her face illuminated by the screen of her iPad.

He wished he had his phone so he could text her right now. Ask her to go out to dinner with him tonight. He wanted to take her somewhere nice. Somewhere she could wear a pretty dress and heels. Where they could get a bottle of wine and appetizers and sit for hours. Talk and eat and laugh and hold hands and kiss.

But it was just as well that he didn’t have his phone. Because he couldn’t ask her to do that. There were too many members of various film crews swarming this town to risk someone seeing them alone together. They couldn’t chance starting a rumor. Their rendezvous would have to be private for the time being, which was fine with Keaton. There was nothing he wanted more. But he also wanted Brooke to know that this was about more than just sex for him. That he’d meant what he’d said last night.

Cameron came up to Keaton and offered him a bottle of water. Keaton took it and tipped it to his mouth, drinking deep.

The stagehand belaying the ropes for Keaton’s fight sequence, Russ, approached to get Cam’s news.

“Our stunt double’s currently stuck in the Calgary airport,” Cam said, taking a swig from his own water. “Her plane needs a part for the tail. And since it’s a Swedish airline, and it seems there is only one of these parts currently in existence, take one guess where that part has to come from.”

“You’re fuckin’ kidding me,” Keaton said.

“Nope. And that one thing is backing up all the flights, so she can’t get even get a decent standby spot until tomorrow.”

“Where’s FedEx when you need ’em?” Russ asked.

Cameron laughed. “She’ll be here tomorrow.” He looked at the set, then told Keaton, “I guess we could just skip over that part of the stunt and practice the ending fight.”

“The last fight is easy. We barely need a run-through to be ready there. I want to get this film back on schedule.”

Russ scratched his head and glanced around the warehouse. “What about pulling in a replacement? We’ve got a lot of fresh meat to choose from.”

Keaton thought about that for a moment. He glanced at the maze of metal, then scanned the catwalk to the jump point. From there his gaze darted to the landing point. “For you to get the pull on the ropes just right,” he told Russ, “it would have to be someone very close to Jillian’s weight. Otherwise, we’d be wasting our time. And Jillian’s skin and bones.”

“She’s not that small,” Russ said. “She’s tall, so her weight is distributed, but I’d bet she weighs a solid one hundred and twenty. She was in here yesterday bragging about her weight-lifting routine.”

Keaton huffed. Whatever. He wasn’t even going there.

“Okay, who have we got?” Cam said, turning to scan the other staff and crew. “Alana? Grace? Hell, I don’t think Mack weighs over a hundred and ten.”

Keaton’s gaze darted to Brooke. She was perfect. And just the thought of hooking her into safety lines and flying across the warehouse with her gave his belly a tingle. She would love it. But they were keeping their distance at work. So he said, “Sure, any one of those should—”

“I’d rather not use Mack,” Russ told them. “Men are just denser than women, and it may sound weird, but I’ve worked these cables a long time, and there’s a difference when I try to lift them. I think Alana’s about twenty pounds too heavy, and Grace is a serious lightweight. She might be ninety-eight pounds soaking wet.”

Keaton heaved a breath and rubbed a hand over his face, then pointed to a young intern. “There’s Logan.”

“Nah, too heavy.” Russ said. “Hey, didn’t I see Brooke over there in the corner? She’s just about right.”

There was no “about” to it. Brooke was perfect—in more ways than how her weight would work for this stunt. But Keaton wanted to keep her just right, so he said “She wouldn’t be interested—”

“How do you know, man?” Cam said. “You haven’t even asked. Yo, Brooke,” he called before Keaton could stop him. She looked up. “Can you come over for a second?”

She hesitated, glanced around the warehouse, then stood and started toward them. She’d dressed down today—casual Friday, she’d told him last night—in jean shorts and a sleeveless blouse that gently followed the curves of her breasts and abdomen, stopping just beyond the low waistband of her jeans, teasing Keaton into believing he’d get a glimpse of skin if she moved just the right way.

The filtered sun from the skylights above created an ethereal halo around her. Her sandals made the softest clip, clip, clip across the cement and sparkled in the scattered light. She’d pulled her hair up into a ponytail, played down her makeup, and looked so fuckin’ adorable, Keaton wanted to eat her alive. He wanted to take her somewhere tropical and secluded where she could dress in string bikinis—or nothing—twenty-four hours a day. Where they could lose themselves in each other for an entire month. In fact, he never wanted to let anything get between them again.

She slipped her hands into her pockets and came to a stop in front of them with a sweet smile on her beautiful face, her bright eyes alight with her characteristic eagerness to please. Keaton’s heart rolled in his chest. He’d found his girl. His very own perfect match, the same way so many of his Renegades buddies had finally found theirs. He knew it with complete certainty, and the realization created an effervescent sizzle over his skin.

In that moment, as she shared a secret smile with him, everything inside Keaton calmed. And with all the chaos quieted, his emotions came forward, taking center stage, telling him that Brooke wasn’t just his girl. Brooke was *The One*.

“What’s up, guys?” she asked. “Can I grab you some water? Do you need a lunch run?”

“No, no,” Cam said. “We actually need you right here.”

“Um.” She smiled, shrugged. “Okay.”

“Not if you’re in the middle of something,” Keaton added. When she met his gaze, he said, “We know your work for Jillian comes first.”

A smile lifted her lips, and she gave him the slightest nod. “I’m okay there.” Then to Russ, she asked, “What do you need?”

Keaton watched her expression as Russ explained the stunt. Her gaze met Keaton’s, searching for security, then lifted to the catwalk, twenty feet in the air, and followed it to the end. “Out there? You want me to stand out there?”

“You really don’t—” Keaton started, but she put up her hand.

“I’m just asking questions.”

Cam shoulder-cocked Keaton a couple of steps sideways, then put a hand in the middle of his back and shoved. “Let’s find a harness that will fit her.”

Keaton twisted to knock Cam’s hand away, and found his fellow Renegade grinning. “What are you smiling about?”

“Never seen you caught up in a chick. It’s fuckin’ funny, man.”

“Shut up. And don’t even think about starting that rumor.”

“Are you kidding?” Cam said, bending to pop the top on an equipment vault. “The way that cougar licks her chops when you’re around? She’d eat Brooke as an appetizer on her way to you. I may be young, but I’m not stupid. I saw that triangle when Brooke and Jillian stepped in the door and both of them looked at you.”

Cam pulled out a harness, tossed it aside, searched through, and grabbed another. Keaton knew this gear blindfolded. He pushed his hand into the dredges of the container, felt around, and pulled their smallest harness from the bottom.

Cam stood back, his face slack with awe. “How the fuck do you do that?”

“Practice. Years and years of practice.” He looked up at Cam. “Can other people see it?”

“What? That the cougar has a hard-on for you? Or that Brooke is head over heels?”

Head over heels? Keaton darted a look over his shoulder. Russ was talking a blue streak, but Brooke didn’t look like she was paying attention. She had a dreamy smile on her face, and her gaze was fixed on Keaton. The look ignited a burst of heat at the center of his body. One that filled his heart.

God, he hoped Cam was right. It would make getting Brooke to work with him on figuring out how to narrow their damn three-thousand-mile gap.

“Never mind,” Keaton told Cam. He stood and closed the gap between them. “Just make sure you keep your mouth shut. Jillian will fire Brooke if she thinks there’s something going on between us, and Brooke needs this job for reasons I can’t explain right now.”

“Sure, man. Okay. I get it.”

“Not a word.”

“Less than a word,” Cam said, serious. “I understand confidentiality.”

Keaton’s vision cleared, and he saw the steadfast, confident, former marine standing in front of him instead of his happy-go-lucky fellow Renegade.

“I’ve got your back, dude,” Cam said. “And I like Brooke.”

“I know you do.” Keaton exhaled. “I’m sorry. This situation sucks.”

Cam brought up his smile. “Brooke seems like the kind of chick who would dig this stunt.”

Keaton laughed. “She is.”

“Then let’s have some fun.”

When they returned with the harness, Russ was still explaining the stunt’s short clip, walking her through the steps. By the time they returned to center stage, Russ moved off to talk with the cameramen, Cam grabbed cables, and Keaton fitted Brooke’s harness.

“This is really a lot like zip-lining,” he told her, fastening the straps along her ribs, lowering his voice to murmur, “Damn you smell good.”

“I’ve never been zip-lining. And so do you.”

“I do not,” he laughed. “I’m sweaty and disgusting.”

“I like you sweaty.”

Her hungry whisper shivered down Keaton’s spine.

He met her eyes, their blue hue bright and sparkling with mischief and desire. “I like you making me sweaty.”

He finished with the last buckle and asked, “You’ve really never been zip-lining?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, well, I kind of under-exaggerated anyway. It’s really like zip-lining on drugs. If this feels

overwhelming at any time, you just tell me and we'll stop."

He crouched to pull another strap between her legs and fasten it behind her. She turned her head and gave him that sexy smile. "I'm excited."

Grinning, he checked the harness over and over. Every clip, every buckle, every tie.

Cam came up behind her and hooked cables to the D-rings on the back of the harness. "I think someone's got that spark of adrenaline in her eyes."

She laughed. "I don't know about that." She ran her hands over the harness. "It's fun to watch, and I'm excited to try it, but...I'll leave the everyday life-defying acts to you guys."

"Have fun," Cam said before he moved to Russ's side off stage.

"Hey, where's your phone?" Keaton asked her.

"Oh, right." She pulled it from her back pocket. "Probably shouldn't have this on me."

"It would be cool to have one of the crew video it so you can show it to Justin."

"Oh my God." Her eyes lit up, followed by a gorgeous smile. "Great idea."

"God I want to kiss you so bad right now," he murmured.

Her gaze went soft, and her eyes lowered to his mouth. "I wish."

"Where's Jillian?" he asked, taking Brooke's phone.

"Next door, filming."

He nodded, then called to a stagehand. "Mack." He offered Brooke's phone. "Can you get a couple of good clips of this run-through for Brooke's nephew?"

"Sure."

Everyone moved back into position, and Keaton took Brooke's hand as she climbed the stairs to the catwalk. Since they weren't filming today, there was no director around to tell them what to do, so Keaton walked her to the end of the platform and up the steps at the end that led to nowhere and dropped off into nothing.

"Whoa," she said with a tight laugh as she reached the end. "Why does this look so much higher from up here?"

"Always does." He pointed at the blue mat covering the floor below. "If you fall, it's like a pillow."

"If you say so."

"I'm going to race down this ramp, jump these stairs, grab you, and launch myself across the opening and to the other side." He pointed to the other half of the ramp, which had been displaced six feet higher. The cables are going to help me make that leap. The finesse comes in on the landing. I need to land on the lip of that top step to start the next fight scene. Which is why practicing with the right weight is important for both the crew and me. Then we'll all know exactly what we need to do to make the landing right with the fewest takes. When the stuntwoman gets here tomorrow, we can film and move on."

"Okay, got it."

"I'm going to be coming at you hard and fast. I might knock the wind out of you."

She laughed softly, and her eyes heated. "I know the feeling, and I could never get enough of it."

A buzz kicked up in his belly. "Man, I like the sound of that. So, are you okay? Are you ready?"

"I'm always ready for you."

He laughed, joy sizzling through his veins. "Baby, you've got me juiced."

"Then let's do this."

He positioned her looking out at the warehouse and curled her fingers around the thin railing. "Don't hold tight, okay? You've got to let go when I grab you."

She nodded.

Keaton jogged back to his starting point. He would never have believed having Brooke on the other end of a stunt with him could have brought such a thrill. But he was seriously stoked.

"We're ready," Russ called.

"Ready here," repeated the cameraman who'd be taking the test film.

"Here we go," Cam called.

Keaton shifted on his feet, scraped his running shoes against the metal until they gripped, and dropped into a ready crouch with his gaze on Brooke. And he definitely had a little extra fire burning at the center of his chest.

“Ready...” Cam said. “And... Go.”

Keaton dug in and pushed into a sprint. He used his breath to take him the distance strong and fast. As he approached Brooke, he noticed everything in split seconds even though it was all happening at once—the whites of her eyes as they widened, the way her body tensed just before impact, the way her head ducked and her eyes scrunched closed as he grabbed her.

Her squeal vibrated in the air as he locked her body against his with one arm and launched from the top step with complete and utter faith in the men handling the ropes. And just as his foot left the rail, his harness pulled, his body lifted, and the cables carried him upward.

But Keaton immediately knew the guys handling the cables had used too much strength, and he and Brooke overshot the platform.

“Dammit,” he muttered as they swung back toward the main stage. But as they dangled like a pendulum on their way to the ground, he added, “Oh, well, that just means we get to do it again. And again, and again, and again until we get it right.” He tightened the arm at her waist, pulling her ass into his groin where heat and sensation tingled through his cock. “I’m all about getting it just right.”

She sighed a little moan and slid her hand over his arm. Turning her head a little, she asked, “Are you going to get a break? I really want a secret little rendezvous with you right now.”

Her eyes were wide and excited, her cheeks flushed, and her heartbeat pounded quick and hard against her ribs beneath his arm. The only thing that distinguished between fear and thrill was the sparkling smile cutting across her face.

“Uh-oh...” he teased, smiling at her. “Do I have a little adrenaline junkie on my hands?”

“I don’t know about an adrenaline junkie, but you might have a nympho. Because, wow, that is a serious turn-on.”

That struck a funny bone, and Keaton threw his head back and laughed. Which made Brooke laugh. They were just setting their feet on the ground and catching their breath when Keaton said, “Can you get away tonight? If we go out of town, we could find a place for dinner—”

“What in the hell is going on?”

Brooke’s whole body went rigid at the sound of Jillian’s harsh voice, and she whispered a tight, “*Fuck.*”

The sound of her voice saturated in dread lifted the hair on the back of Keaton’s neck. Cameron was already approaching Jillian with his all-American country-boy charm to explain the delay with the stuntwoman as Russ approached Keaton and Brooke.

“Let us take the heat,” Keaton told Brooke, his voice low. Russ unhooked the cable at his back. “You didn’t do anything wrong. Don’t act like you did.”

He started to step past her, but Brooke grabbed his arm. Tight. She didn’t look up. “Please don’t do anything to upset—”

“Nobody commandeers my assistant without asking.” Jillian was slamming Cameron with condescension and attitude. Keaton started toward her. “Brooke,” Jillian scolded, “what do you have to say—”

“Jillian.” Keaton’s tone cut her off and drew her gaze. Her anger turned sullen. “We didn’t exactly give her a choice. And we did it to keep this film on schedule for you. Having this stunt ready to go when the stuntwoman comes will help get the film back on track.”

Brooke came into his peripheral vision, and Keaton purposely kept his gaze riveted to Jillian.

“If you needed a stand-in, you should be using me. Brooke’s hardly a substitute.” Jillian rolled her shoulders back and added a little more attitude to her stance. Her gaze sent a clear you-stepped-out-of-bounds message to Brooke, and Keaton felt horrible for the stress he knew had to be boiling inside Brooke right now. “She can barely keep my schedule straight.”

“You’re not cleared for stunt work.” He said it with a bite to draw her focus off Brooke. “The insurance would never allow it. And you should be filming right now.”

“*Hmph.* At least the insurance company recognizes my value.” She crossed her arms. “And one of the cameras is down next door. They’re repairing it, so they gave us a break. I thought I’d come over and stay warm by watching you work. But you’ll have to find another substitute for my double.” She turned another one of those barely tolerable looks on Brooke that made Keaton fist his hands. “Brooke has more important things to do.”

“I confirmed all your appointments,” Brooke told her, voice level. “Answered all your mail, and completed the projects we talked about.”

A slow smile curved Jillian’s lips. A tight, you-little-bitch smile. “Great. Then why don’t you go clean my trailer?”

The order took Keaton aback. Apparently it did the same to Brooke.

“Excuse me?” she said.

“Clean. My. Trailer,” Jillian repeated, enunciating the words as if Brooke were an idiot. “Jeannette and Percy left it a mess. And since you dressed like trailer trash today”—Jillian’s icy gaze roamed Brooke’s outfit—“it fits.”

Sonofabitch. Keaton’s temper raged beneath his skin.

But Brooke just offered a subdued, “Yes ma’am,” and walked back to the corner of the warehouse to collect her things. With her head down, she hurried to exit through a side door.

“Who the fuck have you become?” Keaton crossed his arms, set his feet, and stared Jillian down. “Is this what divorce does to you? Or is it the fame? Maybe the money? It has to be something that happened in the last few years, because you weren’t like this when I met you.”

“Like what? Strong, confident, straightforward? Oh, yes, I was. And you liked it.”

“I also like common decency and compassion and kindness, which you don’t have a trace of now. Now you’re just *mean*. You’re straight-up cruel. I hate this word, and I rarely use it, but, baby, you are a royal *bitch*.”

She laughed, as if his slight meant nothing. “I’m a bitch because I discipline my staff for goofing off on my dime?”

“She *wasn’t* goofing off. Didn’t you hear me tell you why we put her in that harness? Didn’t you hear her tell you she’d completed all the work you’d asked her to do? Then to send her on such a menial job to satisfy your own frustration—that’s just sadistic, Jillian.”

Her eyes narrowed. “So this is about Brooke.”

“There’s that hearing problem again. *No*, this is *not* about Brooke. This is about *everyone* here.” He held his arms wide and realized everyone was listening and watching. Which was just fucking fine with him. “You talk down to *every* employee here. You complain about *everything*, no matter how well something is done or how hard anyone tries to please you. You ignore anyone and everyone else’s needs and feelings. The truth is you don’t give a fuck about anyone but yourself, and you do your damndest to make everyone around you feel as small as possible. And I am fucking sick of it.”

Rob, the assistant director, came up to them, alarm clear on his face. “What’s going on?”

Jillian looked at Rob, then at Keaton. “Keaton was just telling me how thoughtless, rude, and bitchy I am.”

Rob’s gaze turned on Keaton with a please-tell-me-she’s-kidding look.

“You’ve worked with me,” he told Rob. He wasn’t pulling punches now. “And you know I won’t put up with this diva shit.”

“You don’t have to work with her,” Rob said, then turned to Jillian. “You should be in the other warehouse, filming.”

“They’re fixing a broken camera.” She turned her attitude on Rob. “As the director, you should know that.”

Keaton pointed at her but spoke to Rob. “Attitudes like that kill morale. And you know as well as

anyone that bad morale translates into the film.” He held his hands up in surrender. “Not my problem. I’m out of here when Dupleaux recovers. Just keep her away from me.”

He turned and stalked back toward the metal jungle, passing Cam with a grouchy “Let’s get back to work.”

NINE

Brooke stood at the French doors to her suite, watching the sun set over the Colorado River and wishing she could appreciate the beauty, but her nerves felt like they'd been double knotted all over her body.

"Tammy told me Justin was accepted into the program," she said to Lydia, the liaison within the research team handling the bronchial thermoplasty trial. "I can't tell you how grateful we are."

"When I saw his name on the final list I was thrilled." Lydia's warmth and enthusiasm touched Brooke. They'd built up a friendly rapport over the last six months since Tammy had discovered the project and Brooke had taken over management of the paperwork. Brooke and Lydia talked so often, Lydia felt like a friend now. "I was so excited when his name was chosen that I took a bathroom break just to go out in the hall and jump up and down."

Brooke laughed, and tears burned her eyes. Tears of joy. Tears of fear. "You've been so sweet to us, Lydia. I honestly don't know what we would have done without you through this process. You should be the poster girl for patience."

"Awww, thank you. I really haven't done anything but monitor the process, but I'm happy I could help. So where are you now? You're always in some exotic location, doing something exciting."

Not with Jillian. But she knew her life looked glamorous from the outside. "Not this time. Austin, Texas."

"Hey, almost out our back door." The research team was based in Oklahoma. "If you ever get up my way, you have to call. I'll take you out to lunch or dinner. I'd love to meet you in person."

Brooke smiled, and some of the chill Jillian had produced earlier in the day melted away. "I will absolutely do that. I'd love to meet you too. I feel like I already know you."

"Right?"

They laughed.

Brooke sighed, closed her eyes, and took the uncomfortable plunge. "Lydia, I have a hypothetical for you."

"Sure."

"Now that Justin's been admitted to the program, what would happen if, say, worst case scenario, I lost my job?"

A little gasp sounded over the phone, and Brooke's stomach fell.

"Are you afraid that might happen?" Lydia asked, her voice filled with concern.

"Oh, you know. These actors can be pretty temperamental. No matter how much you do for them, sometimes it's never enough."

"Oh, Brooke, I'm so sorry."

"Well, it hasn't happened yet. And I'm going to do everything in my power to keep it from happening, but I was hoping there would be a way to keep Justin in the program if my worst nightmare were realized."

"To be honest, it would be a real problem. The guidelines require payment in full or half the payment upon entrance to the program and a solid credit background and sufficient income to provide payments for the remaining half. That requires a solid work history and a current job that's secure."

Brooke winced. "What would be considered secure?"

"Employment with the same company for three years. If it's less, you'll need to have a letter from the employer stating that your employment is secure for the coming year."

Her stomach sank a little lower, and desperation released into her system. The thought of borrowing more money from Ellie made Brooke sick. She opened her eyes and found the sun gone, the night as dark as she felt inside. "I see."

"Let's take things one step at a time," Lydia said, her voice gentle. "Maybe things with your boss

aren't as bad as you think."

Oh yes. They are.

"Sure. You're probably right." Brooke pressed fingers to her watering eyes. "I'm just tossing around what-ifs. I like to have all my bases covered, you know?"

"Of course."

"Okay, I'll talk to you soon then. And I will definitely call you the next time I get close to Oklahoma so we can meet."

They said good-bye, Brooke disconnected and pressed her free hand to the railing of her balcony. She took a deep breath, exhaled and accepted her reality. She just had to learn to live with Jillian treating her like dirt. And she'd have to keep a bigger distance between herself and Keaton.

Brooke had never been as mortified as she'd been earlier when Jillian had called her trailer trash in front of Keaton. The rest of the crew too, but Keaton...

She pressed her hand to her face, burning with shame. The memory still made humiliation swirl in her gut and rise in her throat. She wanted to get mad. She wanted to get spitting angry. She fantasized about telling Jillian exactly what she thought of her, about what Jillian could do with this miserable job—

Her phone vibrated in her hand.

Brooke pried her eyes open, took a steadying breath and looked at her screen, hoping it wasn't another apology from Keaton. Or another plea for a phone call. She couldn't even bring herself to talk to him. Not yet. Not until she faced Jillian again to get a feel for where she stood.

The text was from Jillian and simply said, *I'm back.*

Which was a summons. Jillian had been at dinner with a big producer who was passing through on his way to Los Angeles. Normally Brooke would have gone along to take notes, but since her fall from grace, she hadn't been invited.

She was definitely being punished. But instead of doing what she wanted to do, which was to walk in and quit, Brooke picked up her iPad and her notebook. At the door, she paused and checked her reflection in the mirror, smoothing her hand down the front of her straight navy skirt. She was back in full business dress, even though it was nine p.m.

Brooke kept her focus on getting from moment to moment. She strode to the end of the hall murmuring, "It's not a big deal. I'm going to pretend it didn't happen. By now she's probably drunk on wine and high on attention."

Stopping in front of Jillian's door, she paused, took a steadying breath and knocked.

"Come." Jillian's buoyant voice floated through the door and had Brooke raising her brows.

"Okay..." So she wasn't in a foul mood.

Brooke stepped into the suite and caught the tail end of Jillian's side of a telephone conversation.

"That sounds *heavenly*. Lord knows I'm going to need a vacation when this is over."

Amen. Brooke would get a vacation just by having Jillian take one. She stood in the foyer for a moment while Jillian stared out at the night, pulling off her earrings and laughing at something the person on the other end of the phone was saying. She'd been back in the hotel room for at least a little while, because she'd changed out of her dinner attire and donned her black silk robe. Her colored and frosted hair was down, rolling in a smooth tumble past her shoulders.

A flash of Jillian, dressed like this, wrapped in Keaton's arms, one of his big hands tangled in her blond hair, the other locked around Jillian's small waist, assaulted Brooke out of nowhere. An ugly chill shivered through her body, but Brooke refocused on the Impressionist painting dominating the wall in front of her and shook off the insecurity. There was no mistaking how Keaton felt about Jillian now. And Brooke had made her share of less than perfect choices when it came to one-night-stands.

"I know, I know," Jillian said. "And I agree, Anguilla would be lovely, but I've always been partial to Barbados. There's always Bermuda... Oh, please," she laughed the words. "It is *not* the Hamptons of the Caribbean. Okay, okay. We'll talk soon. Bye-bye."

Jillian kissed into the phone and Brooke was so grateful her boss was in a good mood, her knees

weakened with relief.

When Jillian didn't immediately launch into a tale about her night or the vacation she'd just planned or start issuing orders, Brooke clicked into work mode and moved to the sofa, perching on the edge of a cushion.

"I've printed out your schedule for tomorrow." Brooke opened her leather portfolio and pulled out a second copy, laying it on the coffee table. Normally, she would have asked about Jillian's dinner, let the woman preen about whatever she wanted to preen about. But after today, Brooke just wanted to find level professional ground again. "All your spa appointments have been confirmed and Henry has your schedule."

Jillian turned from the French doors and wandered toward the sofa.

"You have four hours between your last spa appointment, which is your massage, and your first interview. I've left a two-hour break between your massage for Jeannette and Percy to get you ready for your photo shoots."

Brooke paused and checked Jillian's expression. She stood beside the arm of the sofa with that cool holier-than-thou smirk, one hand absently twirling the tie to her robe. That gave Brooke another sliver of relief. It was Jillian's norm, and right now, Brooke would take the miserable known to the turbulent unknown in a heartbeat.

"I've laid out the periwinkle Vera Wang suit for your five o'clock interview with the *Austin American-Statesman*," she went on, returning her gaze to tomorrow's schedule even though she had it memorized. "The tailored red Donna Karan for your six thirty taping with *Access Hollywood* and the black sequined Anne Klein for the live cocktail party interview segment at nine."

She laid the paper on the table and lifted her gaze to Jillian's. "Jeannette and Percy have cleared their schedules and will be wherever you need them when you need them."

"Of course they will," was Jillian's response. "But your choice of outfits is all wrong."

Brooke mentally reached for some of the armor she'd let slide off. Jillian had never questioned Brooke's wardrobe choices before.

"I'll be wearing the periwinkle to the *Access Hollywood* taping, because, as you said earlier today, my eyes pop when I wear blue. And there's certainly no point in wearing something that makes my eyes stand out when I'm interviewing with a newspaper reporter from the *American-Statesman*. In fact, it really doesn't matter what I wear to that interview, so I'll be dressing down. Pull out my favorite jeans and one of my Marc Jacobs sweaters."

Jeans?

Brooke wasn't sure which fire to smother first—explaining that the journalist Jillian would be interviewed by was the stepson of a Los Angeles movie production mogul? Or reminding her that the ex-Miss America who'd be sitting in the chair opposite her on the *Access Hollywood* set always wore some shade of blue for the very same reason? And to knock the girl on her ass, Jillian would have to wear something stunning?

"Oh, well, um..." Brooke started.

But Jillian was done with the conversation and was already strolling toward one of the bedrooms.

"Get ahold of whoever you have to get ahold of at the hotel and tell them I still don't have the right flavor of Perrier in the refrigerator," she complained, her voice huffy, as if even having to address it was a ridiculous waste of time. "And if that maid comes in here before ten a.m. again, I'm going to have her fired."

"Wait, Jillian..." Brooke stood.

Jillian paused at the dining room table, turned and laid one hand on the back of a chair. "Oh, and speaking of fired, contact an employment agency and put in my request for a new assistant."

Shock hit Brooke like an ice storm and stole her breath. The freeze started at her shoulders and moved rapidly down her body. "Wh—what?"

"A new assistant," Jillian repeated. But the look on her face now was sheer ice. Lids low, jaw tight. "One who doesn't go behind my back and betray my trust. Put in the order, and I'll give you a decent letter

of recommendation.”

Brooke had a momentary battle between fury and terror. One thought of Justin and fear won out. “Jillian, what happened today was really just a misunderstanding.” She rounded the sofa, clearing all barriers between them. Brooke knew Jillian responded to begging, but it went against everything Brooke was. Everything Brooke believed. “You know how badly I need this job. You know I would never do anything to jeopardize it.”

Jillian crossed her arms and lifted her chin. “And I know Keaton. We’ve both been in the business a long time. I know his reputation, and I’ve worked with him often enough to know how he behaves. Which means I also know you’re sleeping with him.”

Brooke shook her head. She opened her mouth to tell Jillian it wasn’t true, but the words wouldn’t come out. It felt just as wrong to deny loving Keaton as it did to allow Jillian to treat her this way.

“You’re a fool, you know,” Jillian said in Brooke’s silence. “He’s the same as all the other men in this business. He’ll fuck any decent looking woman who’s available and suits him at the time. The bigger issue here is that I confided in you and you went after him.”

“No I didn’t—”

“That’s deliberate betrayal.”

“It wasn’t, Jillian. You’re wrong.”

Her eyes flared with icy anger. She unfolded her arms and planted her fists at her hips. “Are you going to stand there and tell me you didn’t fuck him?”

Brooke’s words tangled in the barbed wired cutting her gut. “I...we...it wasn’t like that—”

“I’m not an idiot, Brooke. I know exactly what it was like by the way he defended you after you left. Did you two lay in bed laughing at how gullible I am?”

“Oh my God, Jillian...” Brooke pushed a hand into her hair. This was ridiculous. Part of her wanted to slap the woman and tell her to pull her head out of high school. The other wanted to drop to her feet and beg her to understand. Then more of her words sank in and more confusion leaked through the dizzying combination of panic and frustration. “Defended me? He had nothing to defend me against. They asked me to help them out. I was done with the work you’d given me so I helped them out. That’s all there was to it.”

“If that was true, he wouldn’t have berated me for belittling you in front of the rest of the staff.”

Brooke pulled in a sharp breath. *That’s* what this was about. Keaton standing up to her in public. Keaton taking Brooke’s side over Jillian’s. Keaton doing exactly what Brooke had asked him, told him, not to do.

Now her anger had a whole new target. And her pain dug deeper.

“You know me, Jillian. You know I would never do something so hurtful. And Keaton was having a bad day. The movie was behind when he stepped on the set. He’d just received word your stunt double wasn’t going to make it. He was already tired from his previous job. He simply lost his patience.”

“Neither of you looked the least bit unhappy when I walked in.”

She collected tolerance she didn’t even know she had—for Tammy and Justin. “I understand that you’re angry right now, but I wish you would just sleep on it. Just let your temper settle. Once you consider all the circumstances I’m sure you’ll see things differently.”

When Jillian remained unmoved, Brooke resorted to pleading. “You know how much I need this job. I just found out Justin got into the children’s research program for the bronchial thermoplasty treatment. He’s just a little boy with a long life of struggle ahead without this procedure. Please don’t take that away from him. I’ve been a good assistant.”

“I’m taking nothing from your nephew. You alone are responsible for that, Brooke. You and Keaton.”

“I won’t see Keaton again.” She pushed the words out, confused with all the emotions swirling inside her—loss, pain, anger. But none of that mattered now. Justin had to come first. “Please give me another chance.”

“If you want that letter,” Jillian continued, dismissing Brooke’s plea, “make a clean break with Keaton. Make sure he understands that what you had was a fling and that it’s over. And you’re not to contact him

again while he's working on this set. I'll give you ninety minutes to get your things together and hunt Keaton down to say good-bye. He's probably out at the bars with the crew, hitting on the hottest woman within reach. Then Henry will take you to the airport."

Brooke panicked. Everything that mattered was crumbling around her. "Please, Jillian. Can't we discuss this?"

"We have." She turned and sashayed down the hall toward the bedroom. "And the discussion is over."

Fury consumed Brooke. Fury and fear.

"Fine," Brooke said. "But since you aren't willing to consider my wants or needs, I'm not willing to consider yours." Jillian stopped in the hallway. After a moment, she spun slowly to face Brooke. And the woman's hate-face was cemented in place. Brooke's stomach fluttered with anxiety.

"Excuse me?" Jillian said, her voice ice-cold and cutting.

Brooke's heart thundered in her ears and pounded in her chest. "Your letter of recommendation means nothing. We both know you'll be badmouthing me behind my back. We both know that when you feel betrayed, you're irrational and vengeful. And that if you had your way, I'd never work in this industry again."

Jillian crossed her arms. Her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed. "You've certainly earned that by talking back to me."

Brooke's emotions spiked past anger. Now she was livid. She took two steps toward Jillian before she forced her feet to stop. Before she forced self-restraint to kick in. "I've earned nothing but respect," she told Jillian in a low tone dripping with finality. "I've done everything you've asked and more. I've gone above and beyond to be the best assistant you could possibly want."

"You're the worst kind of assistant—the untrustworthy kind."

"And you're the worst kind of employer—the narcissist. And let me tell you exactly what's going to happen, Jillian. I'm going straight to Keaton, and I'm going to tell him everything. I'm going to tell him how you've treated me. I'm going to tell him what you've accused him of and exactly how you see him—as little more than a gigolo."

"Ha." Jillian huffed a disgusted laugh. "As if I care what he—"

"You should care, because everyone in the industry loves Keaton, and everyone in the industry hates you. Keaton is on every studio's list of the most desirable stunt fighters. There are a lot of beautiful actresses, Jillian, but there's only one Keaton Holt. So when a studio has to choose between you and Keaton because he refuses to work with you, who do you think they'll pick?"

Brooke was shaking with fury. But she was also bluffing—big-time. She had no control over Keaton. Nor would she ever tell Keaton those hurtful things. And she knew studios couldn't care less about the bullshit that went on between actors. Brooke was just hoping Jillian was insecure enough to believe it.

Her eyes narrowed; her jaw tightened. "You wouldn't."

"I would, and *I will*."

"I'll make sure you never work in this industry again."

"You're already going to do that," Brooke said, "so I've got nothing to lose."

Jillian fell quiet. Her jaw pulsed. "What do you want?"

I want you out of my life. I want the last year erased from my mind and heart. I want to forget I ever met you.

Brooke felt like she was going to shatter. She drew a slow breath and reached deep for the courage to make her final demand. "I want a letter. And I want that letter to tell 'To whom it may concern' that my employment with you is solid. I want that letter to say you have absolutely no intention of letting me go within the next year."

Jillian laughed, the sound condescending and nasty. "Never."

Brooke turned on her heel and took two steps toward the door.

"Wait," Jillian said.

But Brooke didn't wait. She was done taking orders from Jillian.

She had her hand on the handle of the door when Jillian said, “Fine, you can have the letter.”

Brooke paused, but she didn’t turn around, waiting for the other shoe.

“But you’ll talk to Keaton first,” Jillian added.

Brooke shook her head and pulled the door open.

“Fine,” Jillian said, her voice rising with urgency and anger. “But here’s my final deal. I’ll give you the letter. Then you’ll sign another releasing me from responsibility for your salary for this fictitious year. And all this will stay between us. If you don’t go to Keaton tonight before you leave, or if you tell him you leaving was my fault, you’ll be hearing from my lawyer.”

Brooke squeezed her eyes closed—in both relief and misery. Justin was safe, but Keaton would be hurt. She fought to shove her own loss aside, gather her frayed composure and turned.

And she told Jillian, “You’ll write, print and sign the letter—*right now*.”

TEN

Keaton stared at the monitor above the bar in his hotel's lounge, but he wasn't watching the game. His mind kept twisting and spinning all the possible reasons Brooke hadn't texted or called him back yet. His fingers wound around his phone in a death grip so he'd feel it vibrate in case he couldn't hear it ring above the noise around him.

Still, he kept checking the screen.

Still, no contact from Brooke.

He hadn't decided if that was good or bad, but he was leaning toward the latter.

"Stop with the gloom and doom," Cam said before tossing another few kernels of gourmet popcorn in his mouth. "Cruella DeVille is probably punishing her by forcing her to polish all her shoes or making her clean out the chimney or something."

"That's only one of the options I'm afraid of."

"When she calls, she'll be a whimpering mess, and you can bring her to your room and make her feel all better. Think about that and stop pouting."

"I'm not pouting. I don't fucking pout."

Cam laughed, turned his head to the woman sitting next to him, and said, "Hey, gorgeous. Do you have a mirror I could borrow for a second?"

The woman grinned, her eyes bright. She'd been waiting for an hour for one of them to notice her. "Um, I think so..."

When she started looking through her purse, Cam said, "Good. I want to show this idiot what pouting looks like."

"God, you're an ass," Keaton told Cam. Then said to the woman, "He owes you a drink." He glared at Cam. "Buy her a drink, you idiot, and apologize."

"That's okay," she said, drawing Keaton's gaze. "I was really more interested in you. But I was hoping you weren't quite so...nice."

A hoot of laughter rolled out of Cam and fisted in Keaton's gut.

He turned on his stool and faced the woman. "What the hell is it about me that makes you think, at first glance, I wouldn't be nice?"

The sweet exterior melted away as the woman pulled out her attitude. She slid off her stool, crossed her arms, and tilted her head as she approached. When it was obvious she had no intention of stopping until she was between his legs, Keaton put out a hand and stopped her at arm's length.

"That rock-hard body. The grungy jeans and boots." Her hand took a fold of his light leather jacket between her fingers and rubbed. "The way you wear leather. The way you walk, the way you sit, the way you drink. Your scowl, those dark, intense eyes." She laughed softly, sensually, with a small shake of her head. "A better question would be what about you *doesn't* make me think rough, hard, screaming-great sex? Mmmm, and these scars. God, I love the scars..."

She lifted one hand toward his face.

Keaton grabbed her forearm, and her eyes widened a little. "Did I give you permission to touch me?"

A low laugh bubbled up from her throat. A hot, I-knew-it, you're-exactly-what-I'm-looking-for laugh that added fuel to Keaton's anger and hurt to his impending loss. Because if he couldn't work things out with Brooke, this was what waited for him.

Superficial, hedonistic fucking for physical release.

After experiencing the kind of connection he'd craved for years yet not even known he'd needed until he'd found Brooke, the thought of hooking up with strangers again left him absolutely hollow. The fact that his past and his actions today might have pushed him closer to that barren place tested his temper's limit.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice low and hot. “Just like that. But let’s do it upstairs—”

He shoved her hand away and opened his mouth to tell her to go to hell.

“Mr. Holt.” A man approached, breaking Keaton’s focus and defusing his frustration. He looked into the very familiar face of a desk clerk named Leroy. The man’s dark eyes held Keaton’s purposely, but the easy Southern air he always had was still in place. “A word?”

Cam took over with the woman, buying her a drink. Keaton turned his back to the others. “Hey, Leroy. What’s up?”

“You okay, son? You looked like you were about to start a fight off the set.”

By now, Keaton was on a first-name basis with everyone at the hotel from the managers to the maids. Leroy might have been a decade younger than Keaton’s own father, but the man still called him son. “It’s just been one hell of a long day. What’s going on?”

“This was just dropped off for you.” He held an envelope. “I saw you come in here, and I was on my way out, so I thought I’d swing it by on my way to the car.”

Keaton exhaled and frowned, taking the envelope from him and looking at the smooth, swirly handwriting on the front. Even though the hotel was filled with movie people—production assistants, crew, minor cast members—only key people had his cell number. This could be anything from an interview request to a schedule change to a script modification someone wrote down at the last minute and asked their assistant to hand off to him.

Even though there was only one assistant he cared about right now, Keaton pulled open the unsealed flap and drew out the folded paper inside. “Know who it’s from?”

“Pretty little thing. She came into the lobby, asked to leave it for you, and…”

Leroy’s words faded as Keaton scanned the note and focused on the signature: Brooke. A lick of alarm burned in his gut, and he was on his feet, turning toward the hotel lobby, even while he read the note.

My time in Austin has been cut short. It was fun, but I’m on to my next adventure. Take care. Brooke

“What the…?” He looked up and scanned the hotel lobby. “Where? Where is she?”

“I don’t know,” Leroy said in that slow Southern drawl. “She was headed out when I started over here. Got waylaid at the door by one of those director types…”

Keaton rushed to the opening between the hotel lobby and the restaurant, but Brooke wasn’t among those milling there.

He scanned the front doors and sprinted that direction. He hit the metal bar on an exit door, slamming the door open and scanning the drive. A black Lincoln town car sat off to the left, the engine running.

And Keaton caught the split-second sight of Brooke’s dark head disappearing inside. Disbelief clashed with confusion and exploded in anger. He sprinted to the car as the driver turned to look over his shoulder, preparing to pull away from the curb.

“Stop!” he yelled at the same time he slapped his hand against the windshield on the passenger’s side. But he didn’t even pause to see if the driver looked his way before he lunged for the back door handle. “Brooke?”

And when he dragged it open and found a stunned, borderline-angry Brooke staring back at him, the wall Keaton had erected to hold his hurt back crumbled.

“*What in the fuck* is going on?” he demanded.

“Hey,” the driver yelled back at him. “Get away from the car—”

“Henry,” Brooke said to the driver. “It’s okay. I know him.”

That—like everything at the moment—hit Keaton wrong. “You *know* me? What, like you know the valet? Like you know the desk clerk? What does that mean?”

“Keaton, please don’t—”

“What the hell is happening, Brooke? Why haven’t you returned my calls? Why are you leaving? And were you seriously going to bail with nothing more than a *fucking note*?”

The truth showed on her face. She'd been about to do exactly that. But she didn't look guilty. She released her seat belt and stood from the car with an air of let's-get-this-over-with dread.

And when she met his gaze, those beautiful blue eyes that had always held such a spark or passion or affection were now flat and resigned. The sight stabbed at his heart. And he knew instantly what had happened.

"Jillian fired you, didn't she?"

Her gaze slid away, and she drew a deep breath to speak, but everything in her expression, everything in her posture, told him she was already gone. She'd already shut him out.

"It was inevitable," she said. "Bad timing, but there really wouldn't have been a good time."

She was working that positive streak hard, but she still sounded miserable. As miserable as Keaton suddenly felt.

"Why didn't you call and tell me?" he asked, guilt flooding into his gut. "I can talk to her. If I can't get her to change her mind, there are other avenues, Brooke, legal avenues—"

"No." Her rejection was sharp and resolute, and it sparked anger in the pit of his stomach. "You *cannot* talk to her. It's over. She's made up her mind." Brooke lowered her gaze, took a breath, and softened her tone. "Look, our time together was great, but we both knew it was ending soon. Like I said in the note, it's just time for me to move on."

"Move on?" The sparks inside him caught fire. He stepped around the door, took her by the arms, and turned her to face him. But even without the door between them, there were still barriers. Her barriers. "So you can find another *adventure*? Is that what I've been to you?"

"Keaton, this isn't a big deal." But now she sounded a little more like Keaton felt, distressed and upset. She tried to pull away. "Tomorrow you'll find someone new, and—"

"Don't." He held tighter, desperate to get her to listen. To admit she didn't want to walk away from him. "Don't minimize what's between us. I know it happened fast, but you know it's real. This isn't you. This is her. Don't let Jillian do this."

Brooke's gaze cut to his, and a flash of hurt there burned so deep, it stole his breath. "No, Keaton, *this* is *you*. *You* did this." Hurt gave way to anger, and she yanked her arms from his grasp. "You know what she's like. I warned you what would happen. I asked you not to confront her, but you did anyway. And just like I said in the beginning, if she caught even a hint of favoritism toward me, I would be the one to suffer."

"I *didn't* show favoritism. I purposely made a point to include her treatment of everyone on the cast and crew so I *didn't* look partial. You think I'd do that?" That cut him. Deep. "You think I'd deliberately hurt you?"

"Brooke, honey..." Their gazes both swung toward the driver, who was standing in the open driver's door. "We have to go, or you'll miss your plane."

She nodded and turned back around but didn't meet Keaton's gaze. "None of this matters..." Suddenly, she sounded broken, as if the bottom had dropped out of her fight, and another wave of guilt crashed through Keaton. "This is why I left you the note. Because I knew this would happen. Because I didn't want to end things like this."

"Miss the plane, Brooke," he pleaded softly, running a hand over her hair. He craved the feeling of her leaning into him. Yearned to hear the word "*Yes*" from her lips. "Let's talk about this."

A sound escaped her, part exhale, part sob. She shook her head, straightened her shoulders, and met his eyes in a soldier-like way that left Keaton bemused. "Sorry, I can't. I have to get home. I need to get back to my family."

Another stab cut Keaton, this one dead center through his heart. She turned away, but he grabbed her arm to stop her. "I'm only asking for enough time to talk this through, Brooke, because I already think of *you* as family."

A tremor passed through her small frame. Her free hand gripped the doorframe, and she turned back to him with the strangest expression, one he could only identify as a mix of agony and affection.

"It's over, Keaton..." Her voice shook, but the words cut Keaton straight down the middle. "Let me

focus on what matters.”

ELEVEN

Brooke wandered down the hospital hallway toward the new room assigned to Justin on the pediatric floor of Shriners's Hospital for Children, with two sodas from the vending machine in one hand, her phone in the other, and knots all through her stomach.

She stared at Keaton's name in her contact list and chewed on the corner of her lower lip, which was swollen and sore by the time she gave up on making the call—for what felt like the hundredth time over the last month.

Turning into Justin's room, she found Tammy in front of the IV pole, checking the monitor's settings. Her sister glanced over her shoulder, and her gaze sharpened. "That was way too fast." Her voice was lowered so she didn't disturb Justin's sleep. "You didn't call, did you?"

Brooke's mouth twisted in self-disgust. Instead of providing the obvious answer, she offered Tammy her favorite drink.

Her sister took the Dr. Pepper, then used it to point at Brooke. "You're just making yourself miserable by dragging it out. It's eating you up, Brooke."

"I know." She stuffed her phone into the back pocket of her jeans and paused at Justin's bedside to gaze down at him. "God, I still see him as a baby when he's sleeping. Did they say anything else before they brought him up?"

Tammy smiled down at her son and brushed his hair off his forehead. "Just that he was talking about gummi bear angels right before he went under."

They both broke into laughter.

"One of the OR nurses saw me as we were coming up and told me it was another successful procedure. She said their other children have experienced an exponential improvement in their breathing capacity after the second treatment, something they haven't seen to the same degree in adults."

"Really?"

Tammy nodded, then shrugged. "No idea if that will continue to grow with the last treatment or not, but they're hopeful."

A giddy mix of excitement and relief jumped in Brooke's stomach, and her eyes stung with happy tears. "Oh my God, think what that could mean for millions of kids with asthma. That's so awesome."

Tammy turned to Brooke and pulled her into a tight hug. "*You're* so awesome." Her voice filled with tears. "He would never have had this chance if it weren't for you. And I wouldn't be halfway through nursing school either."

"Hey," she soothed, hugging Tammy back. "I love you guys. We're family. We stick together."

Tammy leaned away, smiling with tears sliding down her cheeks. She rubbed them away with the back of her hand. "We love you too. Which is why I want you to get on that phone and *call him* already."

"I will," she said, frustrated, then hedged with reservations, "...maybe..."

"Maybe? What's this maybe? We've talked this out. We agreed you'd—"

"I know, I know." She turned away, popped the top on her soda, and wandered to the window to look out over the lush green lawns surrounding the hospital. "I just...I wonder if it would just be better to leave it alone. I mean, it's been, what, over a month? Five weeks? He's probably forgotten all about it. Calling now and bringing it back up just to apologize seems..."

She released a frustrated breath and shook her head. Beyond smoothing over some hurt feelings, it seemed pointless. It wasn't like he'd want to see her again after she'd explained. And even on the one-in-a-million chance that he did, her new job involved just as much travel as her last. They'd never be able to make something long-term work. Brooke just wasn't sure if opening that door by calling without the possibility of something more was good for either of them. Then she realized how presumptive that was

and got confused all over again.

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea,” she said, agonizing over the decision the way she’d been agonizing over it for weeks—ever since she’d gotten the new job with an income to cover Justin’s procedure and didn’t need to abide by Jillian’s brutal, self-serving rules. “And I still don’t know what to say or how to say it or if it’s even something I should say over the phone.”

A beat of silence passed while Brooke worked over the conversation she wanted to have with him in her mind. But the thought of hearing that deep, rich voice over the line and not being able to see him or touch him... God, the pain ate at her. And it just kept getting worse as time passed instead of fading.

“You’re right.” The male voice sent a shiver down her spine. “It’s not the kind of conversation to have over the phone.”

Brooke’s heart thumped hard. She pulled a sharp breath and turned.

Keaton stood just inside the door to Justin’s room. He wore jeans and a black, hooded sweat jacket that zipped up the front, a white tee underneath. The sight of him made her feel like electricity arced through her body.

“Oh my God.” Her gaze jumped from Keaton to Tammy, registered her well-you-don’t-get-a-choice-now-do-you look, and back to Keaton. “What are you...? How did you...?”

She forced her mind to stop spinning, but that made her heart ache and yearn and hope. And God, that terrified her. What added to that fear was his expression, one she couldn’t read. He didn’t exactly look angry, but he definitely wasn’t happy. Sober? Serious? Edgy? She wasn’t quite sure, and that alone dragged Brooke’s feet back to the ground—like a rock.

Regrouping, she dropped her gaze, and noticed something in his hand. A rectangular box about the size of a book, wrapped in bright paper.

A gift. For Justin.

Of course.

She’d almost forgotten about Justin’s continued communication with Keaton until the science fair project had been completed. One that had brought Justin stardom throughout the school and earned him an A plus.

Brooke swallowed the lump of disappointment, set her soda on the window ledge, and crossed her arms.

“I...um...” Tammy said, lifting her can of soda, “...think I need some ice for this. Text me if you leave or if Justin wakes up, but he should be out for another couple of hours.”

On her way out, Tammy closed the door behind her. For a long moment, Brooke and Keaton just looked at each other. She swore she had a magnet the size of a football lodged beneath her ribs drawing her toward Keaton like a steel rod. And her chest ached with the effort it took to stay put.

She was just about to tell him how great he looked when Keaton’s gaze slid toward Justin, and he asked, “How’s he doing?”

The sound of his voice, lowered for Justin’s benefit, moved something inside Brooke. It brought back memories of his voice beside her in bed from their short but intense time together and thickened her throat.

“He, um...” She took a steadying breath. “He was only awake briefly after the procedure, just about an hour ago, but they say it went great. Aftereffects of the surgery are minimal, and side effects of the new medications are manageable.”

She realized the clinical approach wasn’t going to work. Not when he was just two steps away. Not when she had to dig her fingers into her arms to keep herself from taking those two steps and throwing herself at him for the sheer relief of feeling his arms around her, feeling him supporting her again.

“So...” She took another breath, slow and deep, trying to keep her emotions from spilling over. “He’s doing really, really well.”

Keaton’s gaze returned to her, still veiled. “Then it was all worth it.”

His response hammered her composure. The answer was yes and no, but she didn’t begin to know how to convey the depth of what seemed like such a simple answer on the surface into something sufficient to

mend the rift she'd caused between them.

Only now did she realize why it had taken her so long to contact him again—because no matter why she'd done what she'd done, she'd still hurt Keaton in the process. And she knew in her heart there was nothing she could say to make that go away. It had happened. He'd felt it. The break between them had been made.

Words would not turn back time. Words would not change reality.

And the heaviness of that exhausted her.

“Is that for Justin?” she asked, weary and heartbroken over the potential of what they'd lost. “I'd be happy to give him the gift when he wakes up. You don't have to stay.”

“If I just wanted to give him a present, I would have sent it in the mail. I'm here because Dupleaux returned to the set. I'm not working on the movie anymore.”

She lowered her arms and pressed one hand to the foot rail of Justin's bed, trying to clear her mind enough to think straight. “I don't understand how that relates to—”

“Neither do I. At least not anymore.” His jaw ticked. “I *thought* that was part of the agreement you made with Jillian—not talking to me while I was working on the set.”

Oh shit. He knew?

He moved to the tray table against the wall where Tammy had piled her textbooks to study while Justin slept and set the gift on top of the stack. Then he met her eyes again.

“I'd planned on coming find you so I could tell you how sorry I am for fucking things up between you and Jillian. Because you were right. When I thought about it, I realized I did defend you a little too hard that day. And even though I tried to cover, Jillian saw through it. So that was my mistake, and staying away from you so you could abide by the agreement you made with Jillian and get the care Justin needed was my payment for that mistake. I almost ruined that for both of you once. I wasn't going to chance it again.”

He wandered to the far wall, leaned his back against it, and crossed his arms, his gaze roaming the room. “But when I called Troy and Ellie to find out where you were, I heard about your new job. The one that's making this treatment possible and the one you had within a week of being fired. His eyes narrowed in consideration, or maybe discomfort; Brooke couldn't tell. “I didn't want to believe that you would stay away from me when you didn't have to. I didn't want to believe that you wouldn't contact me to tell me about the procedure and how Justin was doing when there was nothing stopping you.”

He cut another look around the room, and there was no mistaking the raw hurt in his expression “But it looks like that's exactly what you did.”

Her breathing hitched, picking up speed. Her mind started another spin cycle. “You...waited?”

He returned his gaze to hers and held it a long second before he said, “Yeah.” A flash of pain shone in his eyes and cut straight through Brooke's heart. “But it's pretty clear you didn't. So you probably had it right. This probably wasn't the best idea.” He straightened away from the wall. “At least you know I didn't forget.”

He turned and was halfway out the door before Brooke managed to grab a handful of his jacket. “Wait.”

His free hand gripped the doorframe, and his body hummed with tension.

“Don't go.” Brooke glanced at Justin to make sure he was still resting, then stepped close to Keaton and wrapped her free arm around his waist, squeezed her eyes closed, and pressed her head to his back. “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for things to—”

Keaton turned, breaking her hold. Then his arms closed around her and hauled her up against him so hard, all her air whooshed out. He pressed his face to her hair and exhaled heavily, the sound part agony, part bliss.

“Knock, knock.” The soft, cheerful voice of the nurse on duty—Brooke was beginning to believe she knew them all—sounded as she passed into the room, as if she were knocking to interrupt their embrace, not to enter the room, because the door was still propped open by their bodies.

Keaton lifted his head and loosened his arms but didn't let Brooke go, and she wanted to weep with

relief, with joy, with so much love, it swamped her. She kept her face pressed to his chest, where she breathed in the spicy, male scent of pure Keaton.

“Why don’t you two take a break?” the nurse said. “Tammy’s in the cafeteria. I have her number. I’ll call y’all if Justin wakes, but I suspect he’ll be out for most of the afternoon.”

“Thank you.” Keaton’s fingers slid down Brooke’s arm and clasped around her hand. “We’ll be back.” He pulled Brooke from the room and looked both ways down the corridor.

“The elevators are—” Brooke started.

But Keaton turned the other direction. “I don’t want the elevators. I want privacy.”

Brooke wouldn’t have been able to keep up with him if he hadn’t been dragging her. She avoided the curious stares of hospital staff, her mind darting all over the place at dizzying speed. Within seconds, Keaton pushed through the door to a stairwell, and pulled Brooke out of the doorway and into his arms again. With his arms wrapped tight around her waist, he bent to pull her so close, their bodies connected from knees to shoulders, and he dropped his face to the hollow of her neck again.

“I’ve fuckin’ missed you *so bad*.” His rasped words echoed the pain aching inside Brooke, and before she could respond, he pulled back and pressed his lips to hers.

Brooke hummed with relief so deep it was painful. Tears spilled from her eyes and added a salty poignancy to the moment. He tilted his head and kissed her deeper, and the hunger and longing Brooke had been stuffing away to get through every day overwhelmed her. She tightened her arms around his neck and opened to him the way she’d dreamt of kissing him every spare moment for the last month.

Keaton moaned into her mouth, lifted one hand to the back of her head, and caressed a hand over her hair. The sweet move choked Brooke with emotion, and she broke the kiss with an urgent need to explain everything, even though she knew it wouldn’t erase the pain.

“I left Austin because she forced me to choose. It was horrible. I was torn apart. And there was no right answer. No matter what I did, someone I loved was going to get hurt. So I sided with Justin. I had to. It’s who I am.”

“I know,” he said, wiping at her wet cheek. “It was the right thing.”

“As soon as I got home,” she said, “I called Ellie. I had to get a job so I could pay for the rest of this procedure. Ellie and Troy went to Jax. They put their heads together and got me a couple of interviews...”

She paused her ramble to draw air. “I’ve been crazy. I feel like I’m spinning. Trying to get used to someone new, still walking on eggshells, waiting for the next trapdoor to open under my feet, hoping I can get Justin through program before anything bad happens. I’ve wanted to call. I’ve had my finger hovering over the Send button a hundred times since I left—”

He kissed her again, this time gently, his lips lingering in a way that made the stress drift from Brooke’s body and allowed her to lean into him. Finally finding a place to rest after doing so much on her own.

He lifted his lips from hers, pressed them to her forehead, and pulled her close again.

“I didn’t want to hurt you, and I knew telling you I was sorry couldn’t fix it. I didn’t want to reopen a wound that I had no way of healing.”

Footsteps on the stairs drew their attention, and Keaton moved them aside so the man in scrubs could pass. Then he sat on the steps near the wall and pulled her into his lap. “Ellie told me where you were, but she didn’t tell me about the job. Who’s it with?”

“Will and Leslie Crow.”

“Oh, yeah. I’ve worked with Will,” Keaton said. “Nice guy. Intense, yeah, but that’s what makes him such a good actor.”

Brooke nodded. “Definitely demanding, but also reasonable and appreciative and generous. They’ve given me the time I need to be with Justin during the procedures, and pay me well enough to make ends meet and still pay the monthly payment for the program. It’s only been a few weeks, but they’ve been straightforward and honest.”

“Refreshing.”

“Right?” She laughed the word, relaxing into their conversation, into the feeling of having someone other than her sister to share her life with. “I’m cautiously optimistic. His wife Leslie is a fashion model, but she’s pregnant with their first baby right now, so she’s limited her jobs to maternity shoots until after the baby’s born. They live here in Tampa, so I don’t have to deal with the tiny airport in the Keys like I did for Jillian.”

He frowned. “Did you move here?”

She nodded.

“That must be hard on Tammy and Justin.”

“They moved too. The Keys are an expensive place to live. Tammy didn’t want to leave the doctors she had established for Justin right after Brian died, and then I came and had the job there with Jillian, but—”

“Now there’s nothing keeping you there.”

“Right. Prices here are so much cheaper which makes everything easier on all of us.”

“What about Tammy’s school?”

“They have a campus here—a bigger, nicer campus, actually. She just transferred.”

He smiled and ran his knuckles over her cheek. “That’s fantastic.”

What was fantastic was the way she felt right this minute—so beautiful and wanted and loved. She covered his hand with hers and turned her head to kiss his palm.

A doctor in a white lab coat passed on his way up the stairs.

When he was gone, Brooke asked, “Did Ellie tell you about the arrangement with Jillian? Because she swore she wouldn’t.”

He wiped at her face a little more and tucked her hair behind her ears. “No. I heard about it on the set.”

Shame burned in her gut, and Brooke’s eyes slid closed. “Oh God.” She shook her head and looked at him again. “I know it’s your career and what you do is awesome, but that industry is not my favorite.”

“I get it. Jillian never could keep her mouth shut, and it’s going to come back to bite her big-time because her new assistant is the worst two-faced brownnoser I’ve come across in a long time. What happened with you was out within days of you leaving. How long do you think it will take for Jillian’s deeper, more damaging secrets to come out?” He shook his head. “You were the best thing that ever happened to her.”

She smiled and kissed him. “Thank you.”

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me too, baby. And I know I may not look real smart, but I’m not as thickheaded as Jillian”—he combed one hand into her hair, caressing her cheek with his thumb—“and I’m ready to do whatever it takes to keep you.”

She sighed and covered his hand with hers. “Realistically, that’s going to be a pretty tough gig.”

“I’m aware. I’m also aware of these frequent-flier miles weighing down my airline account. And these lulls between jobs when Jax forces us to take R&R so we’re sharp and fresh for the next job.”

Brooke searched his eyes.

“Come on, baby, jump,” he murmured, a smile sliding over his handsome face. “You know you wanna.”

She laughed and cupped his cheek. “I really wanna.”

He repeated the gesture she’d made just moments ago, covering her hand with his and turning his head to kiss her palm. “I know it’s scary. And I know what a big jump this is for you.” He curled his hand around hers and held her gaze. “But I know, together, we can make it work. And I can promise you, I’ll never let you fall.”

Her heart pulled, her stomach flipped. “Keaton, I can’t move again. At least not right now. Between Tammy and Justin—”

“I’m not asking you to move. I would never expect you to move. You’ve made enough sacrifices. I think it’s time someone went that extra mile for you for a change.”

She tilted her head, frowning a little. “What do you mean?”

He grinned and ran his thumb over her bottom lip. “I got a hotel room nearby.” His gaze lowered to her mouth, and his own lips tipped up in a hot smile. “I’d love to show you exactly what I mean first. We’ll have plenty of time to talk over the details later.”

A heat wave swept through her body. She lifted her brows. “You got a hotel room?”

“Yep. I was going to stay here as long as it took to convince you to give us another shot.” He lowered his head and pressed his lips to hers. “But I’ll keep it for as long as we need to negotiate the terms of the agreement.”

Her heart filled. That giddy thrill fluttered in her stomach. “I do believe we have a perfect window of opportunity to start that negotiation right now.”

Keaton’s arm tightened around her waist, and he stood, carrying her with him. Brooke laughed in surprise as he set her on her feet. “You don’t have to make that suggestion twice.”

He took her hand and started down the stairs. Brooke had no idea where these side steps led and thought of her car in the main parking lot. “My car is—”

“My rental’s right downstairs,” he said, jogging the steps and pulling Brooke with him. “And my hotel is a block away. You can text your sister in the car.”

She laughed with a fresh new joy filling her chest. They reached the ground floor in seconds. Keaton hit the landing three steps ahead of her and snatched her into his arms before her feet had a chance to touch the last two.

He kissed her long and deep, pulling away to set her on her feet.

Breathless and a little dizzy, Brooke leaned into him. “I’ve never looked more forward to a negotiation in my life.”

Keaton grinned, the grin Brooke knew. The grin Brooke loved. The grin that set her world right and chased all the problems away, making room for hope and joy.

“Get used to it, baby,” he told her “This is your new adventure.”

TWELVE

Seven months later

The cool ocean breeze blew gently across Brooke's face where she sat at a table on the patio of Jax Chamberlin's home on a Malibu beach in California. The setting should have eased her jitters, but tonight, she doubted there was anything short of a miracle that would make that happen. Watching Keaton and a couple of other Renegades work with Justin on fight moves wasn't helping.

"I'm not sure if I should be happy or terrified." She smirked at Ellie, who sat beside her, legs crossed, bare foot swinging, a hard lemonade in her hand. "Are they helping him or creating a monster?"

Ellie's smile widened. "Mmm, probably a little of both."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

She lifted her drink toward Brooke. "One of these would help you relax."

She smiled. "Not tonight, thanks."

"You okay?"

Brooke nodded. "Just tired."

"You've been tired a lot lately."

She shrugged. "Stress."

"You should get in to a doctor, Brooke. Make sure you're not anemic or vitamin deficient."

"Yep." There would be a lot of that in her future. "I will."

The summers in Southern California might be absolute perfection, but on the shore, when the sun dropped and the fog crept closer, Brooke found herself reaching for Keaton's sweat jacket. The one he'd brought especially for her even when she'd insisted she wouldn't need it. And tugging the jacket on reminded her it always took her a couple of weeks to acclimate from the East Coast's humid heat to the West Coast's dry warmth. Keaton seemed to know her better than she knew herself.

Keaton crouched and extended a hand toward Justin, palm out. "Aim and kick."

Justin tilted his body backward to balance on one leg and used the other to hammer a quick, hard strike. The slap of flesh against flesh sang on the breeze.

"Nice." Rich approval in Keaton's voice made a smile break through the concentration on Justin's face and warmed Brooke's heart.

All the guys were good with kids, probably because they were really just big kids themselves. But she'd been both impressed and moved when he'd stepped into a position of male role model for Justin so fluidly, so easily.

"Now pivot and jam Troy with a palm strike," he told Justin.

Her nephew's moves were strong and practiced. Moves Brooke had been watching him make for six months now. Ever since he'd recovered from his last procedure, his lung capacity had blossomed and Justin had taken up an intense interest in Keaton's love of martial arts.

Justin turned, set his bare feet in a solid scissor stance, and drove the heel of his hand up and into the hand Troy held just below his chin. Another slap of flesh sounded in the night, but Troy hammed it up. Performing the perfect stuntman's impression of a real hit, Troy snapped his head back with a grunt, reeled backward, and fell to the ground, rolling away.

The melodrama started Ellie giggling.

"Oh God," Lexi said with here-we-go lightheartedness. "Ellie's giggling."

"And after a couple of glasses of wine..." Rubi shook her head. "It's going to last the rest of the night."

"Come on, he's funny," she said in defense, and started laughing again as she pointed at him rolling

around on the grass, holding his face and moaning. “Look at him.”

Jax chuckled and wrapped his arm around Lexi’s shoulders. “He’s an idiot.”

“Yeah,” Ellie admitted, “but he’s an adorable idiot.”

Troy went limp in the grass and looked at Ellie upside down. “Hey, you’re supposed to be on my side.”

“I am, babe. I said you were adorable and funny.”

“This is no time to mess around.” Keaton drew Justin’s attention from laughing at Troy. “You’ve still got a guy at your back.”

Before Justin could turn, Wes, who had to be ten times Justin’s size, closed a forearm around his throat with a cartoonish growl.

“What the hell?” Rubi, Wes’s girlfriend, made a face. “Was that supposed to be a pirate?”

Wes turned his head toward Rubi. “Baby, you don’t watch near enough movies. Remember we had a talk about unearthly beings in sci-fi—”

Justin crossed one foot behind Wes’s, ducked from under his arm, and used it to push him backward, tripping the Renegade. Wes landed on his ass. One second Wes was standing, the next he was on the ground. It happened so fast, Brooke’s mouth dropped open in shock.

Keaton howled with laughter. He doubled his arms over his stomach and stumbled back a step, then bent at the waist, barely able to hold himself up.

“Oh my—” Brooke started, sitting forward in her chair.

“You little...” Wes laughed the words, jackknifed into a sitting position, and reached for Justin.

Justin screamed and jumped away, but Wes got ahold of his T-shirt and hauled him back. Justin was already laughing when Wes grabbed his waist, but then the tickling began. Justin squealed and giggled and cried for mercy.

Everyone was laughing—the guys even harder than the women. But Brooke heard a little rasp in Justin’s cries that made alarms ring in her head, and she pushed from her chair. “I think that’s—”

A hand closed on her shoulder. “He’s fine.”

Her sister’s voice jerked her attention to the right. She was in a different pair of scrubs than she’d gone in to work wearing, and she looked tired. “Don’t you hear—?”

“That’s because he’s screaming,” Tammy said, her smile relaxed and happy. Which helped Brooke relax.

Until Justin’s “No, no, no!” shivered over her spine. And she turned to find all three giant Renegades carrying a tiny Justin toward the pool.

All of Brooke’s muscles tightened. She pulled in a breath to tell them to stop and took a step that direction, but again Tammy stopped her. “Brooke. He’s fine. You’ve been so overprotective lately.”

And just like that, her emotions went completely haywire and a push of irrational tears burned her eyes.

Shit.

The splash made her head swivel again, and Brooke piled her hands over her heart, caught between angst over the unknown happening in her body and more angst over Justin’s ability to breathe. After so many years of watching Justin struggle for every breath, she still had a hard time embracing the fact that he could now act like a normal kid.

But all three men stood at the pool’s edge, their humor now faded into intensity as their gazes homed in on the boy beneath the water, ready to pull him out on a second’s notice. And a wave of deep, moving emotion rolled beneath her hands, rocking her foundation.

These men, really nothing more than acquaintances to Brooke, Tammy, and Justin, had taken the three of them in as if they had always been part of this ever-growing Renegades family. Brooke had experienced a sliver of this, just one way they showed their all-encompassing loyalty to each other, when she’d lived briefly with Ellie and Troy after Ellie had quit the road. But the way they’d taken Justin in like their own nephew and treated Brooke and Tammy like sisters for no other reason than because they were important to Keaton humbled Brooke.

And she was pretty damn sure this emotional roller coaster was going to kill her long before she ever found the courage to tell Keaton...

Justin's head broke the surface, his lungs filled with air, and the first thing he did was burst out laughing. The second thing he did was splash all three of the men standing there. Brooke released her own breath—air she hadn't realized she'd been holding—and her body sagged with relief.

Ellie walked to the pool edge with a towel and waited while the guys dragged Justin out of the water by the arms, then she wrapped the fluffy terry around him. Justin's face glowed with vibrancy and life and joy.

And tears swelled in Brooke's eyes out of nowhere.

"You're tired." Tammy rubbed her back and walked her a few steps toward the pool, frowning with concern.

"Me? You're the one who's been on your feet all day." She worked up a smile for her sister. "So? How was the first day at the big, fancy teaching hospital? What's with the different scrubs?"

Tammy's smile beamed, and she rolled her eyes. "It was amazing. All except the part where my last patient threw up all over me—hence the replacement scrubs."

The mention of vomit made Brooke's stomach roll toward her throat. She curved her lips over her teeth and focused on controlling the wash of nausea.

"But I'll tell you all about it later," Tammy said as they approached the guys and she thanked Ellie for the towel. She rubbed her son's wet head. "Time for this one to get to bed."

"Did you see me, Mom?" Justin chattered with excitement. "The guys taught me..."

Tammy walked back to the table with Justin, Troy, and Wes. Keaton stepped up to Brooke and reached for the zipper of the jacket, tugging it into place. "Cold?"

She snuggled close to him with the first real fear of driving a wedge between them since they'd gotten back together. "A little."

He turned her toward the house and wrapped an arm around her. "You don't feel good, do you?"

He didn't sound particularly alarmed, and Brooke felt guilty. This had suddenly become her new normal, which she neither liked nor could control. They stopped at the table where everyone except Tammy was comfortably seated again, opening another round of drinks.

"I'm fine," she told him, forcing a smile that seemed to drain her strength. "Just tired."

"I think we all need some good sleep." Tammy pulled a Renegades logo sweatshirt over Justin's head and smiled at Brooke. "Ready?"

Brooke hesitated. She hoped she would find a moment to talk with Keaton alone tonight. Between the move, Justin's school, and Brooke's, Tammy's, and Keaton's schedules, they hadn't gotten much more than a few stolen moments together.

He'd just returned from a shoot in the Mojave Desert this afternoon and had a new shoot starting tomorrow on the other side of the LA basin. That meant he'd be working sixteen-hour days, six days a week.

Which left Brooke holding this secret time bomb until she saw him again.

That led her to fear and doubt and anxiety of how they would ever make this work. Spiraling into panic that she might have moved her sister and nephew to California only to have her relationship with Keaton fall apart when he found out—

Keaton gave her shoulder a squeeze. "I'll take her home."

It took a second for her to untwist her mind only to get confused again. "I live the opposite direction—

"Yeah, well, I've been wanting to talk to you about that."

He used his foot to angle a chair and eased into it, pulling her onto his lap. Brooke couldn't look away from his face, from the intensity in his eyes. He was focused in a way that told Brooke this conversation had a very specific purpose. The fact that everyone else was also listening should have been weird. Brooke should have told him they'd talk about it privately, but instead of the others' presence feeling invasive, it

felt supportive. Nurturing. And Brooke realized this was probably a lot like what it felt like to have a big, close family always butting into your business.

God, she understood why Ellie loved it so much. Brooke did too.

He pulled out his wallet, opened the fold, and drew out a key. "I think it's about time you gave your sister and your nephew some space." He grinned. "And come crowd me instead."

Her mouth dropped open, a fist of emotion grabbed her heart, and her eyes instantly blurred with tears.

"Awww," Ellie said. "That's so sweet."

A murmur of agreement passed among the other women while a mess of emotions jumbled with just as many conflicting thoughts.

"Oh my God." The words came out in a choked whisper, and she covered the tightness at the center of her chest with one hand. Tears spilled over, and embarrassment clouded the joy. She covered her face with both hands and huffed, "I'm sorry."

"Mom," Justin's bewildered voice cut into the moment. "Is Aunt Brooke moving out?"

"Shh," Tammy told him. "Let her answer."

"But she's crying," Justin said. "Can't we just have Keaton move in with us? I'd share my room."

Everyone busted up laughing, including Brooke. And when she cleared the tears from her eyes and looked at Keaton again, he was sharing one of those guy smiles with Justin. "Because I am just that cool, aren't I, Justin?"

"Totally," he said, utterly serious. "Aunt Brooke, I'd even clean the toys out of my closet to make room for his clothes."

"Dude." Keaton fisted the hand holding the key and held it out to Justin. "You are so freaking awesome." Justin beamed as he met Keaton's fist. Then Keaton gave Justin a secretive look and tilted his head toward Brooke, whispering, "But if Brooke comes to my house, then you have two places to live. How amazing would that be?"

His eyes went wide. "Oh, yeah."

Brooke turned into a broken faucet. More tears leaked from her eyes. She tented her hands over her mouth and murmured, "God, I love you so much."

He lifted the key again and gave her that look. The one that always floated in his eyes when he told her he loved her too. "Which is why you should take this. Because people who love each other should be together."

"Mom says that all the time," Justin agreed.

She reached out and stroked Keaton's face. "I need to talk to Tam—"

"No, you don't," her sister cut in. "You should do it."

"You should totally do it," Justin agreed.

Keaton's face broke into a beaming smile, and he laughed.

"Take it already," Ellie said. "What's wrong with you?"

"Thank you," Rubi said, her voice brimming with attitude. "I almost split a seam holding that in."

"Shush," Brooke told everyone. "Jeez. Keaton's spinning my head fast enough."

"Welcome to Los Angeles," Rubi whispered with an evil little edge. "Jump into the fire, it's warm down here."

"Baby," Wes murmured, "save that good stuff for the bedroom."

"Hello," Tammy said, a reminder to Justin's presence.

"Gah." Wes rolled his eyes. "Kids."

And more tears burned Brooke's eyes. "Keaton," she said softly, "I think we need to talk before—"

"Okay, okay," he said with a dramatic you're-crushing-my-jam flair. "Girl, you're always demanding my A-game."

His fingers disappeared into his wallet again and emerged this time with...

A ring?

Brooke gasped, along with every other woman at the table. Her heart jumped, tripped, tumbled, then

got up and did it all over again. “What... What...”

Wes, Troy, and Jax pushed to their feet simultaneously as if they were choreographed and leaned in.

“Is that a fucking ring?” This from Troy.

“Mom,” Justin complained. “I can’t hear.”

“That’s the point,” Tammy told him. “Now be quiet so I can.”

Brooke pried her gaze from the gorgeous sparkling band she couldn’t even see because of the tears blurring her vision. Man, this wasn’t falling into the right fairy-tale order of progression at all, yet that didn’t make her want any of it less—no matter what order it came in.

“You bought her a ring,” Wes accused, “and you didn’t tell us?”

“What the hell?” Jax wanted to know.

“Girls, girls,” Rubi told the three of them in her sweetest tone, “don’t get jealous. You’ll all get yours when the time is right.”

Wes spun around and picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. Then smacked her ass. Rubi squealed and laughed, and as the other twittered with teasing and excitement, Brooke leaned in, pressed her cheek to Keaton’s, and said, “We need to talk.”

Rubi pushed against Wes’s back, struggling to shoot a glare over her shoulder at Keaton. “You, mister, had better get that fine ass of yours out of that chair and drop to your knees. As in now.”

Wes spanked her again. “Who’s ass are you calling fine? Those words have my name stamped all over them, so don’t be applying them to another guy. Understand?”

Brooke laughed at their antics, but everything inside her vibrated and jumped and snapped. She pressed her hands to her cheeks, utterly overwhelmed, whispering, “Oh my God, Keaton...”

“My knees are busy at the moment,” he told Rubi without looking away from Brooke. “What’s going on, beautiful? Talk to me.”

“Do you feel those daggers piercing your skull?” Jax asked Keaton. “Cause I’m pretty sure Rubi’s eyes are registered as lethal weapons with every branch of special forces in the military.”

“It’s true,” Lexi agreed. “You should really just do what she says. Besides, it’s a photo op, and you know we always need promo material for the website.”

“Hell no,” Jax disagreed. “Don’t you dare let our groupies know Keaton’s off the market. We’re droppin’ like flies.”

“And what, exactly,” Lexi wanted to know, “is the problem with letting ‘groupies’ know you’re off the market?”

“The more you’re around them,” Keaton said, referencing the other Renegades and their girls, “the easier they become to ignore. But the natives are getting restless, so you’re going to have to tell me pretty quick, because the girls can only play smoke and mirrors for so long before those guys cut themselves loose again.”

“Oh my God...” She curled his T-shirt into her fingers. “I don’t think doing that here is a good idea. I’m not sure how you’re going to react—”

“To you being pregnant?”

Brooke’s breath caught. Her eyes locked on his. No one else seemed to hear what he said. They continued to chatter and tease, but it faded as a bubble seemed to close around Brooke and Keaton. Then her heartbeat grew really loud in her ears. And every breath she took sounded like a rasp across sandpaper.

“You...? How did you...?” Her stomach flipped so hard, she winced and covered it with her hand.

“That’s one of the ways,” he said. “Your exhaustion was another one. All these tears spilling out of you—when you’re happy, when you’re sad, when you’re mad, when you’re confused. The way you forget your keys and your phone. The way you keep knocking over your drinks at restaurants.”

“That doesn’t... How the hell do you...?”

“My sister is pregnant,” he said. “I may not have mentioned it because I only found out about two months ago and I only remember it when I call home, which is usually when I’m on the road, because that’s when I have time, hanging out in the hotel room. And every time I call home, all I hear about is the

misery she's going through, which sparks tales of how hard my mother's pregnancies were with us. That, along with the way you've been feeling for going on two months, adding in that broken-condom episode about three months ago... Yeah, I've been suspicious for about three or four weeks. I've been pretty damn sure for about two."

"Jesus." She squeezed her eyes closed and rubbed her forehead. "I didn't even figure it out until yesterday."

"You're juggling a shitload of stress, Brooke. Your mind is in a dozen other places, and you always put everyone else first. It doesn't surprise me that your own needs weren't on your radar."

When she opened her eyes, the first sight that registered in her brain was his soft smile. "You're...not, I don't know, upset?"

"Hell no." God, his eyes sparkled with excitement. "I can't fuckin' wait."

Relief washed in. Only to be followed instantly by the realization that his proposal had been prompted by the pregnancy.

Fuck. This. Roller coaster.

"Well," she exhaled and pulled her whiny, pansy ass back into line. "That's good news."

"So..." He lifted his brows. "You're happy about it too?"

That wasn't exactly the right word. Shocked, terrified, already in love with the idea of having his child...but happy? She released a breath, and a smile fluttered over her lips. "Yeah." Then she added, "But, look, I don't want to rush into anything. Our schedules are crazy, we haven't been seeing each other when we live in the same town... Maybe we should just stay where we are for a while and see how things go."

A tarnish dulled his smile, but he ran a hand over her hair. "I bought the ring four months ago, Brooke. Long before any thoughts of kids came to mind." His fingers came around and slid over her jaw. "I knew those first few days after you'd left Austin, I wasn't going to be able to live without you. Like I told you in the beginning, I'm not good at this, and I'm going to make mistakes, but one mistake I will never make again is letting you go. Because I love you more than anything."

She dropped her forehead against his and started bawling.

And Keaton started laughing.

"Hold on," Ellie said. "I'm not tipsy enough to be hearing things. And I'm pretty darn sure I heard someone say pregnant."

"What?" A chorus of voices followed, both male and female.

Then hugs and high fives went around the group, while Brooke rested her head on Keaton's shoulder and let him support her and take care of her. And the feeling of having him there, wanting to be there for her, for them, for the family they would soon become...completed her in a way she'd never even known she needed.

And finally, Keaton pressed a kiss to her temple. "Are you ready to go home now, princess?"

"Princess?" She laughed the word. "No one's ever called me princess."

"Well, get used to it," he said, his cocky attitude swaggering through his voice. "Because you're going to get treated like effing royalty now, baby."

She was smiling when he set her on her feet, then dropped to one knee.

"Rubi has a point," he said. "We're only doing this once, so we should do it right." With his eyes on hers, he said, "Are you ready to do this with me? This crazy life? Together? Forever?"

She choked out a laugh. "As long as we're together forever—absolutely."

"Then let's get some princess-level bling on this pretty finger."

He slipped the sparkling band with a center diamond she'd have to appreciate in detail another time—maybe in another month or two when the hormones leveled out and she could stop crying at every little thing—onto her left ring finger so gently, she almost didn't feel it. But she felt a shift inside her. A grounding force. A deep and honest love.

And when he tilted his head back and looked up at her with the same love filling every inch of his expression, Brooke wished she could capture the moment in time.

He sighed, an utterly content sound that resonated inside Brooke. “I love you—”

She cupped his face and bent, pressing her mouth to his. When she pulled back, the cheers of their friends and family filtered in, and Brooke matched and finished Keaton’s sentiment with, “—so very much.”

ABOUT SKYE JORDAN

Skye's *New York Times* bestselling novels are all about enjoying that little wild streak we all have, but probably don't let out often enough. About those fantasies we usually don't get the opportunity to indulge. About stretching limits, checking out the dark side, playing naughty and maybe even acting a little wicked. They're about escape and fun and pleasure and romance. And, yes, even love, because Skye is ultimately a happily ever after kinda gal.

Skye is a California native recently transplanted to the East Coast and living in Alexandria, Virginia, just outside Washington DC with her husband of 25 years. She has two grown daughters in college in Colorado and Oregon. In her free time she's always taking classes and attending seminars. She currently loves rowing on the Potomac, exploring new places via writing retreats with friends, and classes in watercolor, baking and cooking.

Make sure you sign up for her newsletter to get the first news of her upcoming releases, giveaways, freebies and more! <http://bit.ly/2bGqJhG>

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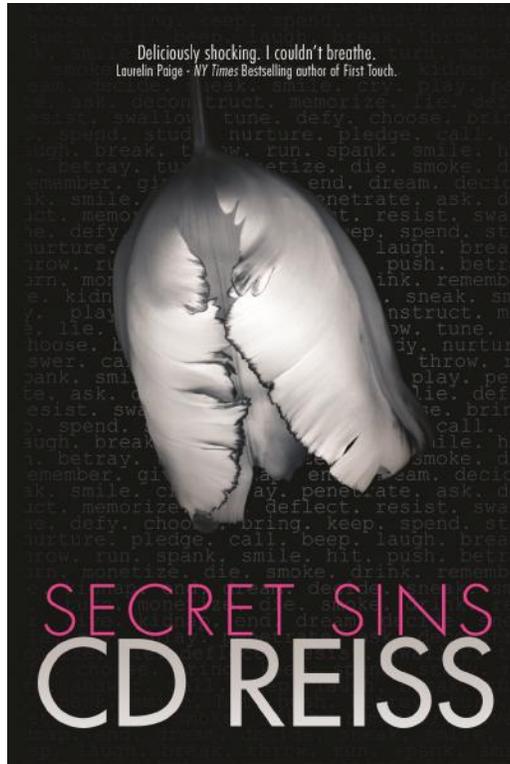
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SECRET SINS

by
CD Reiss



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I was pretty terrified to have this beta'd, since the secret, while pretty shocking to most readers, would knock fans of *The Submission Series* right over. I didn't want it to get out. So thank you to the Camorra for their tight lips.

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My Goodreads group, CD Canaries, has a theory thread with spoilers and story possibilities for all things Drazen, especially Daddy/Declan Drazen. I hear it's razor sharp.

All the authors who blurbed, thank you.

The author community is shaken up regularly, and I'm thankful to the women and gentlemen who keep it about what's on the page.

CHAPTER 1

1982

“How old are you anyway?”

The guy asking had long strawberry-red hair and wore only shorts and a single sock. He'd tattooed a treble clef on his Adam's apple that started a symphony of notes all over his chest and abs. His name was Strat, and whenever his shirtless torso showed up in *Rock Beat*, Lynn went crazy trying to play the song he'd had drawn on his body. It sounded like crap.

“Eighteen, asshole,” I snarled, letting loose a yard-long cone of cigarette smoke. I stamped out what was left of my cigarette. “You going to call or what?”

He and Indy snickered. I saw them look at each other over their cards. They thought they had my bra off next. They were wrong. Only two hands beat a full house, and if one of them had a straight flush or four of a kind, I was tits to the rail.

“I'll raise you.” Strat tossed a ten in the center of the table.

We'd been going for four hours already. Indy had met me on the beach and, after a short chat, invited me to play poker. Yoni and Lynn were already in the hotel room for the possibility of a threesome, which was how I'd ended up on the beach alone. But poker? I could do poker.

My friends hadn't lasted long. Yoni and Lynn had passed out when they ran out of cash. Keeping up with a couple of cash-rich rockers who didn't know what to do with their first chunk of advance money was hard.

Indy/Indiana McCaffrey played guitar for Bullets and Blood. I'd met him on the beach first. I'd stayed cool even though he was completely gorgeous and charming, but when Strat came into the hotel suite, I almost had a coronary. I was a huge fan. I'd played their debut album, *Kentucky Killer*, for two weeks straight until Dad took my cassette. Took the Walkman too. I bought another of each but hid them.

“Call,” I said, tossing in my ten.

Indy threw down his cards. “Y'all are too rich for me.”

Indy had sun-kissed brown hair and a ginger beard. He was down to his skivvies and a bandana around his neck, toned and tan from head to toe. I'd taken all of his money, and Strat and I had been pretty equally matched. Now I was going to break him.

“Too rich and too young,” Strat said, popping a peanut.

Lynn coughed on the couch. Stretched.

God, please don't let her puke.

“I told you. I'm eighteen.”

I don't know if I mentioned this. I wasn't eighteen. I won't say if I was younger or older. You can go figure it out.

Strat laughed. “Flygirl...”

Flygirl was a pretty common way to address a girl in the eighties, crossing race and geography, but I still felt as if it made me attractive to him. Strat chewed his peanut as if it had the mass of a pack of gum, chin up, looking at me in my bra. I felt naked.

I was naked, but I hadn't felt like it until his eyes swung around the curves of my body. I wanted to tell him to go fuck himself, but he finished before I could get a mental jacket on.

“You got a mouth like an old lady,” Strat said.

His stare froze me in place. The backs of my thighs got sticky on the pleather.

“Never heard a girl talk like you.”

Green was the rarest eye color, and his looked like precious Chinese jade.

He was so hot.

A hot rock star.

I put my cards down, snapping each one in the fan as I laid them out. “Aces full of sevens. You got anything in your hand besides your dick?”

Indy whooped. “She’s got you, Stratty-boy. The pot and... what do you have left? Pants and a sock, bro. Go for the sock.”

Indy was an amateur. He was beautiful and brilliant, but he didn’t act twenty. He acted like the guys my own age.

Eighteen.

Or whatever.

Strat hadn’t taken his eyes off me. Hadn’t even glanced at my full house. Didn’t even look down when he laid his cards on the table. I couldn’t move for too many seconds. His look wasn’t a look. It was a black hole. All gravity.

I tore myself from his gaze and looked at his cards.

Four deuces.

Fuck.

Losing to deuces was insulting.

Strat leaned back, the coils of his song all over his ripped body. The pot was his, but he didn’t reach for it. He just worked me over with his eyes, arm over the back of his chair, knees apart, daring me to search for the bulge in his shorts. I breathed deeply but couldn’t get enough air. My lungs had shrunk.

Indy looked at me under the table. “No socks, man. Shit. You’re down to not too much.”

I was in over my head. Way fucking over. Yet I liked it. More than liked it, I was comfortable when I was out of my depth. All the moving pieces, the inconsistency of the cards, the mess I was making excited and soothed me, a contradiction that translated into *belonging*.

I could fix it. I fixed it every time. My grades were amazing. I was the liaison for the Suffragette Society. I ran the school stage crew like a military operation. It was too easy. If you wanted an omelet, you had to break some eggs.

I’m not saying I chased musicians around after the sun went down because I sat on the edge of my bed and decided to make a mess of my life in order to fix it back up. Insight like that is no more than Monday morning quarterbacking.

I stood and put my hands behind my back, reaching between shoulder blades.

Strat licked his lips, taking his eyes from my crotch and leveling them on mine. I looked right at the motherfucker and pinched my bra hook. He was going to see my tits. The nipples were already hard from his attention. I had pretty good odds on a little damp spot where my panties had been on the pleather.

“Why don’t you stop for a minute there?” he said.

I stopped. I didn’t have to. Rules were rules. The bra came off. But he was effectively changing them.

Also, I didn’t want to take my bra off.

Strat leaned forward a little. A blade of copper hair slid off his shoulder and swung in front of his cheek.

“What?” I asked. “Scared of a little tit?”

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Cinnamon.” I flicked my head a little, and my own red hair got out of my eyes. “But you can call me Cin.”

“Yeah. No. You got backstage last week from the admin office. I know you didn’t fuck Herve Lundren to get there either. Then you and your friend show up places you shouldn’t be. The loading dock behind the Wiltern. The thousand-dollar-a-plate dinner at Vilma. And Indiana here fucking stupids right into you.”

“Stupid’s not a verb, asshole,” Indy said.

Strat didn’t get distracted. Indy could have broken into the “Star-Spangled Banner” and it wouldn’t have snapped the drum of energy between Strat and me.

“Cinnamon’s not even a name,” Strat added.

“Your mother name you Strat?”

“*Rolling Stone* revealed my name three months ago.”

“Stratford Gilliam,” I whispered.

He leaned back again, but he didn’t spread out. He crossed an ankle over a knee. “Something’s up. You have cash. Enough to play with us. No eighteen-year-old has a wad of twenties inside hundreds.”

“I’m a fan. I like your music.”

“What’s your name?”

“You deaf? Cinnamon.”

“I can call you Cin.”

I touched my nose.

“Tell me your name,” he said, “and you can keep the bra on.”

He’d read me like a street sign. I didn’t want to take that bra off. I wasn’t ready for what that would lead to.

Yet I’d wanted to see if I could get out of it.

Dad asked me once why I loved trouble. Why I seemed to enjoy it so much. Why I made my own if I couldn’t find it in the wild. I had no answer. Still didn’t.

I didn’t want it to get out that I was in a hotel suite with Bullets and Blood. If I told this guy my name, I could get into trouble, and not the enjoyable kind.

“Your name.” The word *name* was silent on his lips.

My hesitation didn’t seem to bother him. He played me at the right tempo, continuing when I thought I’d break and just snap my bra open.

“I’ve seen enough tits in my time,” he said. “But you. Maybe you’re a fan, but it’s something else. You’re different.”

Show him your tits.

My fingers twitched on my sides. I was throbbing everywhere. My body wanted him, and my mind was running a four-minute mile in the other direction. I’d lost control of the situation, and as much as I dabbled in trouble, I never lost control of it.

Lock it down. Don’t even think your name. Don’t even think it. Don’t even.

“What’s your name?” he asked again.

I swallowed and decided to take off my bra. He’d try to fuck me, and we’d see where that went. I’d fought off men before. My hands crawled to my lower back.

He blinked, and in that split second his jade eyes were hidden from me, I changed course.

“Margaret Drazen,” I said, putting my hands on my hips and leaning hard on one foot. “You can call me Margie.”

“Nice to meet you, Margie.” He lazily picked up the deck of cards. “Your deal.”

CHAPTER 2

Five things about being me.

1. I come from a long line of money. I've got more money in my trust than most people see in a lifetime. I've never worried about having it or getting it. I don't have to work, but I like to. Really like to.

2. I'm connected. If I don't know who I need to know, my father does. I've never had much cause to call in favors or know the right people, except to get into concerts and parties when I was younger. But I can. And knowing that makes all the difference.

3. I grew up quickly. I was born mature. Strat had it right when he said I talked like an old lady. He said that before I was fed shit on sterling silver spoon, then the talk got real and I saw life for what it was. So the politics and backstabbing in law school were child's play. Intra-office bickering is white noise. I win. End.

4. Bullshit makes me really impatient, and drama is bullshit. Drama's never about right and wrong. It's about *feelings*.

5. Feelings are for children. See #3.

CHAPTER 3

1994

Law offices are snake dens. I learned that at Stanford when I butted up against the old boy network for an internship at Whalen + Mardigian. But I didn't bitch about the partners inviting the guys to a strip club and pulling interns from the group there, because I had the luxury of my own privilege. I felt bad for the women who didn't have my smorgasbord of options, but see... that was a feeling. See Chap. 2 - No.5

So I clerked at Thoze & Jensen, a multinational firm with twelve offices in the States and an impressive presence overseas. Tokyo. Frankfurt. Dublin. Johannesburg. Hong Kong. But the firm was still as backward as a third-world country. An impenetrable fortress for anyone outside the Harvard/Princeton/Yale Testosterone Mafia, meaning—women. All women, with or without Ivy League degree. We could clerk and we could be associates, but we'd never partner.

We'd see about that.

They hired me as an associate right out of law school but I had to clerk until I passed the bar. Until then, I got a six-figure salary even though I didn't need it.

How?

Easy. I brought them a client.

You thought it was going to be some scandal.

It could have been, but when choosing between sugar and vinegar, just remember vinegar works best as a preservative.

I was a clerk until I passed my bar, and despite what you may think, I couldn't buy that. Nor did I want to. I rented a house in Culver City and covered it in sticky notes. From the table where I kept my keys, (*Strickland v. Washington. Test for ineffective assistance of counsel. Performance objectively unreasonable. Reasonable performance would have gotten different result.*) to the bathroom mirror (*Ford v. Wainwright. No death penalty for mentally deficient*). Even my car had a note stuck to the windshield (*TORTS – Tarasoff v. Regents. Responsibility of psychiatrist to warn potential victims of harm. Responsibility can be litigated with commensurate award for damages.*)

I didn't have time for men or friends. No one understood me anyway. No one but my family, which was more than enough. I had six sisters and a brother. I was the oldest, and I'm still not telling you my age, or you'll start doing math in your head instead of paying attention.

* * * *

I was heading for a meeting with the senior partner on a copyright case I'd just been put on, rushing through the waiting room, which was a shortcut to the conference room, with an armload of depositions and pleadings, rattling hearsay exceptions in my head. There were ten categories, and I always forgot one. I walked across past the white leather couches with my folder, feet silent on the grey carpet.

Excited utterances.

Dying declarations.

Declarations against interest.

Present sense impression.

Present state of mind.

Doing good. Almost there...

Prior inconsistencies.

Public records.

Business records exception.

Ancient documents.

And...

And I beat my brain for the last one.

The man pushed himself off a couch as I was looking in my head for the tenth exception instead of out of my eyes for tall guys in suits.

I was midair, shouting, "Family records!" as if getting backed into reminded me that families couldn't be trusted to keep a story straight. The folder I was delivering to the conference room went flying. A shoe fell off. I landed on my butt bone with my legs spread as far as the pencil skirt allowed.

"Oh, shit, I'm so sorry!"

I put my knees together and got back up on my elbows to get a look at the clod who had knocked into me.

He was a god. The kind of guy who could model but didn't because it was too boring. Clean-shaven with brown hair pushed to one side. A bottom lip that had the same fullness as the top. Blue eyes. I had a metaphor for the color tooling around somewhere in the torts and procedures, but it all went blank when he put his hand down to help me up, and I saw a tattoo creep from under his cuff.

I looked at him again.

He looked at me.

"Cinnamon," he said.

"You can call me Cin." The words came automatically, as if coded in my myelin.

I took his hand, and he helped me up. My response might have sounded smooth and mature, as though I wasn't thrown off at all, but it was the opposite. I'd memorized that answer sober, drunk, and dancing. I even said it in my head when someone mentioned the spice. Back when I was a stupid, reckless, wicked girl, it was a calling card.

I got up, not making eye contact with the stares coming from the entire waiting room.

"I'm fine," I said, acting meek. When all the clients returned to staring at their magazines, I turned to the man who had knocked me down. "You going to stand there and let them trample my case file, Indiana McCaffrey?"

I smiled a little, and he smiled back. Wow. Had I been so unconscious when I met him that I'd thought he was only okay-looking? A close second to Stratford Gilliam? Seriously? How had he matured from twenty into this perfectly-chiseled version of a man?

I bent down to get my papers, and he put his hand on my shoulder.

"Let me be the first to get on my knees," he said, crouching before I could respond.

I couldn't believe he remembered me out of the thousands of girls who had thrown themselves at him. I knelt next to him and scooped up papers.

"I go by Drew now," he whispered. "My middle name."

"I go by Margie. My real name."

"I remember."

"I didn't expect you to," I said quietly.

He tilted his head just enough to see me, then he went back to picking up the files. I could see the tiny holes in his ears where he'd let his piercings close up.

"Who could forget you?" he said.

"Oh, please. Flattery only soils the intentions of the flatterer."

"Where's that from?" He tapped the stack on the carpet in an attempt to straighten them.

"My head."

He handed me his stack, and I jammed it into the folder.

"You haven't changed a bit."

I swallowed hard. I didn't have a problem with most of my misspent youth. I'd had fun and finished the job before I completely ruined my life. But I worked in an uptight law firm with a brand made of sedate blues and sharp angles. Former-rock-and-roll-groupie heiress wouldn't look good on them.

“Miss Drazen?”

It was Ernest Thoze standing by the reception desk, senior partner and my boss ten times over. I could have bought and sold him, but that wasn't the transaction I had in mind. I wanted to earn his respect.

I glanced at Drew then back at Thoze. Shit.

Thoze the Doze + Drew the Screw = I-Had-No-Rhyme-For-How-Much-I-Didn't-Want-That.

Thoze tapped his watch.

“Six minutes,” I said. “I got it.”

Thoze nodded and paced off. I was always ten minutes early, and fucktard over here had just given me seven minutes of reorganizing to do.

Fucktard smiled like a rock star. I remembered why I couldn't keep my eyes off of him or Strat.

“I knew you were meant for big things,” he said.

I turned to face him, getting close enough to hiss. “It's been real fun reminiscing, but let's cut it short. I have a meeting. I'm sorry about Strat. That was fucked up. I wish I could have been there for you, but I didn't know until it was too late.”

I didn't wait for a response, because seeing him made me *feel* things. Physical things. Emotions. Perceptions. He made me wonder if my hair looked all right or if my skirt showed enough/too much leg.

I paced off to my meeting, listing all the ways people could tell lies of perception.

Excited utterances.

Dying declarations.

Present sense impression.

He must be a client.

Present state of mind.

Prior inconsistencies.

Gotta be a hundred copyright claims after Strat split.

Declarations against interest.

Business record exception.

Just keep cool and don't give anything away.

Public records.

Ancient documents.

And motherfucking family records.

Boom. I pushed open the glass door to the conference room with finality.

I reorganized all the packets and laid one at each of the six seats with thirty seconds to spare. I opened the blinds that covered the windows looking out into the hall, letting everyone know the room was ready.

Life wasn't like books, not that I had time to read. But in books, there were fake coincidences and chances that changed fake lives. In real life, things happened because you made them that way. I'd never expected to see Indy again because I wasn't looking for him, and when I did see him, I assumed he was a client.

When he walked in ahead of Thoze and four other lawyers, plopped his briefcase down at the head of the table and smiled at me. My heart sank.

Not a client.

CHAPTER 4

1982 – BEFORE THE NIGHT OF THE QUAALUDE

It was the era of the deLorean with a car phone the size of a loaf of bread. The era of payphones and beepers. Reagan, *E.T.*, *Rocky III*, poisoned Tylenol, and Love Canal.

I lived all of it and none of it. I looked at the world through a peephole in the front door, outside to inside. Everything was tiny, far away, and in full focus.

My friend Lynn was the lens. She was a card-carrying groupie. She'd gone to Carlton Prep, same as me, and she was, unfortunately, dumb as a box of rocks. The product of two beautiful, stupid people who made a ton of money for being beautiful despite their stupidity.

She was entertaining as hell though. Connected. Older. Fully-sexed. I didn't want to be her, but I knew I had to go through her stage in life. And she needed me because she had a habit of getting her ass in trouble, and I had a habit of creating ways to get her out of it.

The Breakwater Club used to be stuffy and traditional but had changed to a venue for hip Hollywood parties on weekends. They let you smoke anywhere outdoors, but not inside. Which was annoying, especially on March nights when it could get down to fifty degrees by the beach.

Lynn struck a wooden match, hands shaking. She leaned on a concrete planter and cupped her hands over the flame. The corner of her cigarette lit. She sucked hard to pull the cherry. Behind her, the ocean crashed and the sand darkened close to the waterline.

"So fucking annoying," she said. "Like second-hand smoke ever killed anyone."

The guy smoking next to her checked her out with a smart smile. She wore a tube top and a skirt so short that her underwear showed when the wind blew.

I took the lit cigarette from her and pressed the tip to my own, filling my lungs with delicious nicotine. Yoni and Fred were inside.

"Are they both in there?" I asked.

"Yeah. The two of them. The hot ones."

That would be Strat and Indiana. Vocals and guitar, respectively.

And hot, for sure. Lynn and Yoni had been chasing them around for a week. Lynn had taught me so much about how to get through doors. How to ask person A for a favor because they knew person B.

I took it all back. She wasn't dumb as a box of rocks. She was dumb as a box of fox.

"I think tonight's the night," she said softly, leaning into me. She held up three fingers and twisted them around in a bastardization of "fingers crossed." Code for a threesome, which the two boys were famous for and what she had been trying to get herself involved in for a week.

"It's, like, fifty percent more romantic," I said.

She blinked. Didn't get it. I sighed.

"Yoni's in for girl-on-girl," she said. "I'd ask you but—"

"No thanks. Not tonight."

Not yet. I wasn't ready for that kind of thing. I'd done some low-level groping, but nothing close to the intensity of what Lynn chased after.

Yoni poked her head out. Her furry blond bob was held up with a big lace bow, and she wore fingerless, elbow-length gloves with dozens of silver bracelets at the wrist.

"Lynn," she said sotto.

Half the people on the smoking deck turned at the sound, then back to what they were doing.

"What?" Lynn asked.

We stepped to the door, and Yoni came out.

"They have a suite upstairs. Talking about a poker game. You got cash?"

“Yeah,” Lynn answered.

“I’m in,” I said.

Yoni’s gaze sizzled over me, and I realized my error. I was going to be a buzzkilling interloper.

I stamped my cigarette out under my short boot. “Never mind. I’m going to take a walk. See you guys later.”

I didn’t wait for a response. If Lynn wanted to screw one or both of those guys, I could get a cab home. I didn’t go to the street though. I went down the wooden steps to the beach. My feet felt the cold of the sand even through my boots. It had rained earlier in the day, and my steps made half moons of darker sand visible in the floodlights. I walked to the waterline out of reach of the light, not looking back, and sat with my knees to my chest, hugging myself against the cold.

The light disappeared and the night took over a few feet from the line where the sand got flat and wet, streaked with the movement of the tide and punctuated with intestinal piles of seaweed.

I didn’t have any feelings one way or the other about the orgy. I wasn’t interested. But I liked poker.

I dug my heels in the sand. Fuck this. I didn’t know what to do with my body, with my place in the world, with my family. I was trapped in all of it. The water broke, foaming and hissing, a few feet from me. I didn’t know if the tide was rising or receding. Didn’t matter.

I didn’t know what I believed in.

Desperation defined the lives of my friends. They were desperate to fit in, to make their families happy, or to decide who they were immediately. I didn’t understand the hunger for approval or validation. The backstabbing and garment-rending over people with dicks made me uncomfortable. Men motivated tears and anguish that seemed unjustifiable. Weird. Out of character. I had friends who were normal one minute then started to have a freaking embolism when their bodies changed.

I felt it too. But we all took the same courses in school. We’d all known it was coming. Why act as if it was a shock?

I’d backed away slowly until I didn’t have friends who couldn’t cope. No one knew what to do with me. I didn’t even know what to do with me. I knew I didn’t fit in, and I didn’t care. Maybe it was my version of rich girl ennui. Maybe I was just too smart, too good at too many things. Or too acerbic to make those warm girly relationships. I depended on no one. Didn’t feel useful.

I felt as though I had more going on in my head than most people, then I thought I was out of my mind for believing that. So I reached out, trying to make more friends. Then I realized how empty relationships were. I realized I really did have more going on in my head than most people, and I started the cycle over.

Lynn had disappeared into the club, on her way to the suite to have a threesome or foursome, and I was left on the beach. I could have made it a fivesome, and why not? What would be the difference either way?

Screwing one or ten people didn’t need to be an earth-shatteringly meaningful experience, but I should know why I wanted to besides boredom.

“It’s not ennui then,” I said to myself.

My face squeezed tight, reacting to having sand thrown in it before my brain fully registered that two shirtless men had run past me, kicking up sand. They dove into the freezing surf.

God damn. Los Angeles was pretty warm in March, all things being equal, but the water was fucking cold.

They swam to the place where the waves rose cleanly and treaded water, looking toward the horizon. When a big one rolled in, curling at the top at just the right moment, they flattened their bodies and rode it in. They got lost in the white froth, then they came up sitting. They high fived. The wave they had ridden continued past them, past the boundary of wet sand, to the dry line six inches from my boots.

Tide was coming in.

One of the men came toward me, pants heavy with water, hair dripping, short beard glistening in the lights of the boardwalk. “Got a towel?”

“No.”

“Fucking cold.”

“Shoulda thought of that before you went in.”

Behind me, the other guy snapped a white hotel towel off the sand and gave it a shake before putting it around his shoulders. He had music tattooed all over his chest. That would be Stratford Gilliam. Unbelievable in person. Even in the dark.

“She’s got a point,” he said and darted back to the club.

The guy with the ginger beard was Indiana McCaffrey, and he was supposed to be fucking Lynn and Yoni. Instead, he was standing over me, shivering.

“I have fire,” I said, handing him my cigarettes and lighter.

He took them and sat next to me. “Thanks.” He pulled out two cigarettes, handed me one, and lit both with trembling hands.

“You should probably get inside.”

“I like being cold.”

“Sure. That’s why people move here.”

He blew out a stream of smoke. It took a hairpin turn two inches from his lips when the sea breeze sent it behind him.

“You from here?” he asked.

“Los Angeles born and raised. Fermented in Pacific brine and air-dried in the California sun.” I flipped my hair so the wind blew it out of my face. He was more beautiful in person than in any magazine. I didn’t know how I got to be sitting on the beach with Indiana McCaffrey, but once the cigarette was done, he was probably going to split. Every second counted. “Your Southern accent’s mostly gone. You could be a newscaster.”

He nodded, or he could have been shivering. “My father didn’t like me sounding like a hick, so he beat the accent out of me.”

“What else did he beat out of you?”

He glanced at me. “Besides the shit?”

His pupils were dilated eight-balls with blue rings. He was on some sensory-enhancing drug. Quaaludes maybe. Supposedly the blue capsules made you horny and happy enough to melt the awkwardness out of the threesomes. That’s what Lynn said. She got blued whenever she could. I kept away from blues. I didn’t need to be any hornier or happier.

The top layer of his hair had dried, and it fluttered in the wind as he looked down, rolling the tip of his cigarette against the edge of the sand.

“Shit’s the first thing to go,” I said.

He smiled, looking up at me with a cutting appreciation. As if I’d touched him in a way I hadn’t even tried. Asked him something real. I’d just been fucking around, but I’d hit a nerve, so I didn’t shrug it off and ask something different or dismiss the question.

“Came a day,” he said, putting the filter to his lips. “Came a day I stopped feeling anything good or bad. He’d beaten that out of me good. I like or don’t like things. But everything else?” He flattened his hand and cut the air straight across our eyeline.

“I get it,” I said. “I have the same thing. No beatings though.”

“Everything’s better with a beating.”

I laughed, and he laughed with me. For a guy who had no feelings, I kind of liked him.

“I saw you play the KitKat Lounge the other night,” I said. “And the party after.”

He twisted his body to face me and looked me in the eye. “I knew I’d seen you somewhere.”

“I didn’t want you to think I was pretending to not know who you were.”

“Fair enough.”

“But you don’t have to stay here to be polite. It’s cold.”

He shrugged. The shivering had slowed, and his skin had dried. “My friend’s upstairs with a couple of girls, and I’m not in the mood tonight.”

“I think those girls might be friends of mine.”

He turned back to the ocean, mimicking my posture: knees bent, elbows wrapped around the peaks of his legs, shoulders hunched. “You want to go up there, it’s room 432.”

“I was on the beach to avoid that scene.”

“Why’s that?”

“Wanted to see if you two idiots would get hypothermia.”

He turned to me again, chin at his bicep, hair bending over one dilated blue eye. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen. Why?”

“We’re getting a poker game together at midnight. You in?”

I had nowhere to be until morning. And because I didn’t give away my hand with my voice or body, I was very good at poker.

“I’m in.”

CHAPTER 5

1994

The copyright case was pretty simple. Bangers, a UK-based pseudo-pop-rap band, had used a few bars of Haydn in their breakout song. Haydn wasn't protected under US copyright, obviously, but Martin Wright was, and he claimed Bangers had used his recording of Opus 33 repeatedly in the song.

Bangers countersued for libel, denying the claims and producing proof that they'd hired a string quartet to play the piece. Martin Wright couldn't prove it was his recording since he claimed they changed the speed so that they wouldn't sync up.

"By way of introduction, everyone, this is Drew McCaffrey," Thoze said.

Drew nodded at everyone, and I thought he lingered on me, but maybe I was mistaken. Maybe I lingered on him.

"Mister McCaffrey is here from the New York office, where he represents the interests of... god, how many musicians?"

"All of them, if I could."

Ellen giggled, sighed, caught herself. She was newly divorced, in her mid-thirties, and suddenly giggling. She was tall and attractive. Well put-together in her daily chignon and Halston suit. Closer to Drew's age and expertise. I had the sudden desire to lick him so I could call him mine.

Thoze continued. "Martin Wright, the cellist, was LA-based at the time of recording, and he's trying to bring this through a favorable court system. Thank you for bringing this to us, Mister McCaffrey, but no one has a case." Thoze closed his folder. "I say we send Mister Wright on his way."

"They stole it," Drew interjected.

"You can't prove it," Peter Donahugh said, brushing his fingers over his tie to make sure his double-Windsor knot was still where it ought to be. "No one can. The cost to the client would outweigh the award."

Drew put his pen on the table, taking a second of silence to make his case. I'd known a musician puffy from drugs and alcohol. The guy across from me, taking three seconds to get his thoughts together, had the same blue eyes, but he also had a law degree. He still had guitar string calluses on his fingers and a tattoo that crept out from under his left cuff.

The *Rolling Stone* piece I'd read hadn't gone past Indy's devastation over Strat's death. I never heard about Indiana again. Didn't know his career choice post-mortem.

God damn. This suited him.

He pressed his beautiful lips together, leaned forward, and turned his head toward Thoze the Doze. I could see the tendons in his neck and the shadow the acute angle of his jaw cast against it.

I remembered how that neck smelled when I pressed my face against it.

"It was the most popular recording of Opus 33 when the song was mixed." Drew laid his fingertips on the table like a tent. "These guys, Bangers, didn't have a peanut butter jar to piss in. Moxie Zee charged an arm and a leg to produce, but he's a lazy snake. He billed the band for hiring a quartet that never existed, and I know him. He isn't searching out the least-used version of Haydn's Opus."

"A case is only as good as what you can prove," Peter said.

Drew kept his eyes on Thoze when he answered. "He's produced a bunch of paper. Not one actual cellist."

"We're not in the business of proving what isn't there." Thoze wove his hands together in front of him. "Absent something that proves malfeasance, we have nothing."

"What am I supposed to tell Martin? We don't care?"

"Tell him we're looking for something we can act on."

Thoze stood. His assistant stood. Peter and Ellen stood. I took the cue and gathered papers. I looked up at Drew to see if he was going to react at all, and he was reacting.

He was looking at me as if I had an answer. I couldn't move. Ellen tried to linger in the conference room, but in our shared stare and shared history there sat a thousand years, and Ellen didn't have that kind of time.

She cleared her throat. "Margie, can you grab me a coffee from the lounge on the third floor?"

"There's coffee right there," I answered from a few hundred miles away.

"It's better on three."

"I'm going for breakfast," Drew said, not moving. "I'll grab some coffee. Donuts too."

"Send the clerk. That's what they're for."

Was Ellen still talking?

"She can come."

Ellen paused then slinked out.

As soon as the glass door clicked, Drew spoke. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I had no idea you had a brain in your head."

It really was amazing how his lips were so even, top and bottom. How had I not seen that? Or the way his eyes were darker at the edges than the center?

"Things changed a lot since then."

I was feeling things, and now with his voice sounding like a cracked sidewalk, I knew he was too. That wouldn't do. It made me uncomfortable, as if my skin was the wrong size.

"I'm sorry. About Strat. I know you guys were close."

I'd broken the spell.

Drew pulled his gaze away and put his briefcase on the table, snapping it open when he answered. "Thank you."

"Was it bad?" I had no business asking that, but I had to because I should have been there. I should have done the impossible, leapt time and space, presumed a friendship I might have made up, and been there for them.

"It was bad."

He plopped his briefs in the case. I was supposed to get up and straighten the room out, but I couldn't stop watching him, remembering what he'd been to me for a short time and how those few weeks had changed me.

"What studio did Bangers record in?" I asked.

"Audio City." He slid his case off the table and went for the door.

Just as he touched the handle, I spoke. "Have you done a Request for Production?"

He didn't open the door but turned slightly in my direction, curious and cautious. "I don't see what that would prove."

I stood. "I'm only a clerk."

"I'm sure that's temporary."

I pushed the chairs in, straightening up as I was meant to. I didn't want him to feel pressured to take advice from someone who hadn't even passed her bar yet. Someone who had been no better than a smart-mouthed groupie all those years ago. But I wanted to be heard.

"You want to scare the hell out of them, you call in some favors at Audio City," I said. "Take Teddy out for some drinks. Be seen. And you file a Request for Production to aid discovery. Teddy hands over the masters."

"They'll be mixed down. They're useless."

"There's more to a tape than the music. There's pops and scratches. Match them to Wright's master. It's like a fingerprint."

"That's not true."

"It's true if you believe it is. You're not trying to prove anything. You're trying to get Moxie Zee to

crack.”

He took his hand off the door handle. I noticed then looked away.

“What you want,” I continued, trying to sound casual, “is for your client to be paid for his work, right? I mean, cellists make a living but not that much.”

“Not Drazen money.”

I ignored the jab. One, he smiled through it. Two, though I tried to be as anonymous as possible in the office, it was nice to be known.

“No.” I pushed the chair he’d sat in under the table. “Not Drazen money. If Moxie Zee is caught lying, most of his artists won’t care. Some will think it’s cool. But he works for Overland Studios as a music supervisor under his real name. Overland’s risk averse. They’re not keeping a guy who might have already exposed them to a lawsuit.”

“And you think Moxie will pay off Martin under the table over a fingerprinting technique that doesn’t exist?”

“People are pretty predictable.”

He nodded, bit the left side of his lower lip, tapped the door handle three times, then looked me up and down as if he wanted to eat me with a dick-shaped spoon.

“You’re still crazy,” he said softly, as if those three words were meant to seduce me.

They did. He was half a room away, and every surface between my legs was on fire. I would have swallowed, but I didn’t even have the spit to do it.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Eighteen.”

He walked out, letting the door slowly swing shut behind him, and I watched him stride down the hall in his perfect suit.

Men loved tits, legs, ass, pussy. Men loved long hair and necks. They loved clear skin and full lips. But some men, the right men—men like Drew and Strat—loved cutting themselves on sharp women, and I hadn’t been loved for the right reasons in a long, long time.

CHAPTER 6

1982 – BEFORE THE NIGHT OF THE QUAALUDE

Bullets and Blood was on the verge. *Kentucky Killer* had caught fire and made the small label enough money to keep the lights on. But then the Big Boys went after Bullets and Blood, sending hip-looking A and R guys around with pockets full of promises. They introduced them to music legends like Hawk Bromberg, with his little flavor-saver and sideburns, who talked up his label and everything they'd done for him.

This was background noise in the weeks following, but the morning after I cleaned them both out at poker, I knew nothing. I'd kept my bra on, put my shirt back on, and stretched on the couch for a few hours. Woke up with a headache and a throat that felt like a bag of dry beans.

I had to get to school.

Lynn was gone. So was Yoni. The hotel room looked over the beach and, in the yellow of the rising sun, seemed expensive and luxurious in a different way than the night before.

"Morning," Strat said from the balcony. He leaned on the doorway in a shirt and stonewashed jeans.

Behind him, Hawk smoked a stubby brown cigarette as thick as a middle finger, looking at me as if he was eight and I was a piece of birthday cake. He was a legend, but I wasn't flattered. I was disgusted.

"Where's Indy?" I asked.

"Out for a swim."

Had Strat even slept? He still looked perfect, but maybe my standards were skewed. He looked as though he partied all the time, and that was what I found attractive about him.

"I gotta go."

"You should come around later."

Hawk nodded, picking the slick brown butt out of his teeth. He sang about heaven and earth with a voice like a fist, but I wasn't loving his real presence.

"Sure." I didn't have time to chitchat. My father was coming back from a business thing in Omaha, and I had to be home.

"Do you have my beeper number?"

"No."

I didn't have time to scabble around for a pencil and a piece of cleanish paper so I could set off the little black box on Strat's belt. He wouldn't even answer it. He was a rock star.

"Eyebrow," he said. "Six-oh-six E-Y-E-B-R-O-W."

"Six-oh-six? Kentucky? I thought you guys were from Nashville."

"The beeper's from Kentucky."

I didn't move. Just waited for the long version.

"My dad moved to Kentucky. He's a doctor. He upgrades every six months."

Mister Big Rock Star was either too frugal or too busy to get his own damned beeper. Or too much of a kid. Or too attached to his parents.

No matter what angle I looked at that from, no matter how the light hit it, I found it charming.

* * * *

I had no intention of using that number for anything, though I'd never forget it. My driver was off. So I got a car at the hotel's front desk and sat back for the short ride from Santa Monica to Malibu. It was six thirty in the morning. I had ten minutes to get back.

Nadia, Theresa's nanny, would be up because she didn't sleep. Hector, the groundskeeper, was

probably already working. Maria, Graciella, and Gloria. Definitely rousing Carrie, Sheila, and Fiona for school. Dressing them. Making sure homework was done. Deirdre, Leanne, and Theresa would be causing havoc. If I got right in the shower, there was a pretty good chance no one would notice I had even been out.

Except Mom. She was a wild card. She usually slept until eight, but if she drank the night before, she actually woke up earlier. And if she caught me out, she was unpredictable. She'd been pregnant six times since I was born, so she always seemed to be in a constant state of flux. Big. Little. Tired. Energized. Horizontal. Running. One person. Two. She was as likely to lock me out and act as if everything was normal as tell my father, which would be bad. Very bad. All bad. He did not like losing control. He seemed to have two emotions: cold calculation and satisfaction.

I loved him. I loved both of them. But I never knew what to make of them. In the end, I realized they didn't go on and on about how they felt but concerned themselves with actions. I respected that. It was what I thought it meant to be an adult.

I knew I'd pushed it. Playing strip poker with two guys in a semi-famous rock band in a semi-luxurious hotel room? And telling them my name?

My God. I didn't know what my parents would do to me, but everything about it was trouble. Dad cared about what people thought. He cared about appearances and chastity. Even if he wasn't in town, he had the nannies dress us all up and take us to church on Sunday. He made sure we had ashes on our forehead and palm crosses in our hands. He never mentioned God at all, but the Catholic Church always loomed as the ultimate authority.

I'd asked him why, and he said something odd.

He said, "Invisible gods are ineffective."

I had to hope that Strat and Drew had no reason to find out who the Drazens were. How old their money was. They wouldn't. I wasn't anyone to them. I made myself invisible in my mind when the cab got to my house. I gave the cabbie one of Drew's hundreds, ran into the side door, and made it into the bathroom without being seen.

I washed the night away with scalding water.

Six-oh-six eyebrow.

Go over pre-calc in the car.

History

Comp

Stupid's not a verb, asshole.

Forty minutes to memorize a hundred Latin conjugations

Tennis

Photography

Eat something

What's your name?

Catholic Women's Club

Chess Strategy Club

Then?

Then?

Then...

CHAPTER 7

1994

“I know everything comes pretty easily to me compared,” I whispered to Drew/Indiana in the hall before swiveling into my cubicle. I had to pick up my things before doing Ellen’s donut run. “But I put some work into being here. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention we knew each other eleven plus years ago.”

“Am I so embarrassing?” He smirked as if he had me over a barrel.

Typical man, thinking it was all about hard work now/today/this week. If word of our history got out, I’d be a slut and he’d be a hero. I’d be fending off advances in the copy room, getting censured for shit I did a decade ago, wondering why I never got the good cases, and he’d fly back to New York and get promoted.

“It’s not shame and never was.”

“That’s my Cinnamon.”

“It’s Margie now.” I spun to face him, my back to my desk and spoke quietly. Terry, the other clerk, was a foot away through the grey half-wall. “Full-time. This is my life. Like I said. I have plenty of privilege but no dick.”

“It’s 1994.”

He said it as if we had entered the modern era and his dick didn’t make a damned bit of difference in the workplace. Only a man could think something so utterly incorrect.

He must have seen me boil, because he put a hand up before I could explode. “I’m just giving you a hard time. I never intended to say a word about anything, but I’m in town for the week.”

I opened the bottom drawer of my desk and got my purse out. “Fine.” I slapped the drawer shut.

“Fine?”

“I have no feelings about it one way or the other.”

“Good to see you haven’t changed.” He winked and slipped out.

CHAPTER 8

1982 – BEFORE THE NIGHT OF THE QUAALUDE

I didn't have to remember E-Y-E-B-R-O-W or six-oh-six, which I happened to know was a Kentucky number from a friend at Carlton Prep. I got a beep in the middle of chess strategy with a Nashville call back number. An hour later, I was in the passenger seat of a Monte Carlo driving into Pacific Palisades. Strat was behind the wheel, and Indiana was in the back with Lynn and Yoni.

I had no idea why I was there. I wasn't the prettiest girl who hung around them. I hadn't screwed either one of them, though apparently Yoni and Lynn had had a fine time with Strat before the poker game had gotten under way. I didn't understand why I was there because I didn't understand men.

Yet.

It came to me many years later, while reading *Rolling Stone*. During the interview, Indy was sitting in front of a mixing board they'd installed in the Palihood House (He was "producing" because that was always the story arc. Small-town beginnings>cohesion of the group>artistic satisfaction>commercial success>drug use>break up>The Bottom>redemption>rebuilding/branding). His hair was scraggly but intentionally so. His shirt was clean. He'd lost the puff around the eyes, and he was talking about Strat.

"He was like a brother to me, but more. A partner. And when he died, man, it was like someone ripped me open."

In the passenger seat of the Monte Carlo, with the two of them still poker-playing strangers, I didn't know they were like brothers. Years later, reading the *Rolling Stone* article, that Monte Carlo ride came back to me.

I'd been so clueless about how close they were and how lonely they were.

I always assumed I was brought into this world fully formed. Maybe I wasn't. Maybe I didn't understand people the way I thought I did. I chewed on that then forgot it, because it only turned up the heat on a cauldron of stew that had everything and nothing to do with the Bullets and Blood boys.

Indy leaned forward and pointed at a locked gate closing off a road into the foothills of the Palisades. "Up here. Code's fifty-one-fifty." He turned to me, and I could feel his breath on my cheek. "Wait until you see this place."

"It's nice up here," Lynn said before cracking her gum. She was in a black lace corset and tiered skirt. Red, red lips and black, black eyeliner.

"This is the ass-end though," Yoni chimed in. "It's the Palihood."

"Yeah, anything east of the park."

"South."

"East."

I rolled my eyes.

Strat ignored them. "He can't afford it."

"We just got a quarter-million dollar contract." Indy leaned back and kicked Strat's seat.

Strat shook his head. "Have you read it?"

"You don't read Greek either."

Driving up the hill under the clear spring sky, the fact that he'd read the contract and understood it made me look at Strat's arms, his music tattoos, the muscles of his legs, and respect him with a sexual heat.

We pulled up to a house made of glass and overhung with trees and surrounded by tall bushes. When we got out of the car, the shade was a welcome respite from the blasting sun, and the birds cut through the white noise of the freeway.

"It's nice," I said.

"And I can afford it." Indy pointed at Strat as he headed for the front door.

“Fuck you can,” Strat muttered.

Yoni and Lynn had no interest. They’d started bantering about the coyotes in the hills, bouncing with excitement, as we went up the cracked steps onto the pocked flagstones.

“Ye of little faith.” Indy opened the door. “I have the down payment next week. Made escrow already.”

The black linoleum floors shined, and the sightline went through the house, over the west side, and to the ocean. Yoni and Lynn were already checking out the bean-shaped pool in the back.

You’d think a musician on the cusp of fame wouldn’t want to be tied down to a house. He’d want to ride the tour bus and fuck a few hundred girls. That was the norm. But Indy stood in the empty space between the front door and the horizon and lit two cigarettes before handing me one.

“I can move in next week.”

“Dude,” Strat said.

“Dude,” Indy snapped.

Strat turned to me, hands out, pleading. On the whole ride up, I’d wondered why they brought me, and I feared at that moment that they’d gone to the library or talked to their lawyers and found out who I was. Now they were going to ask me for money, and I couldn’t give it to them. There was no other reason to put me in that car.

I liked them, but that house had to cost two hundred grand.

Would they threaten to tell Daddy things? The poker? The bra? The smoking? Would they tell him I drank and I kissed? Or that I was a cocktease?

When I brought the cigarette to my lips, my hand was shaking. I didn’t know which scenario terrified me most. I inhaled the nicotine and blew out rings as if I had control of this. Whatever this was. It was my first cigarette of the day, and it made my palms tingle.

“Why the fuck am I here?” I asked.

Strat stepped forward, finger pointing at me then Indy. “Keep me from killing him.”

“Fuck you,” Indy retorted.

I didn’t have anything much more intelligent to offer. “It’s a nice house. Needs work. Get an accountant to tell him if he can afford it.”

“Let me give you the short version.” Strat’s comment was directed at me but meant for Indy. “Two fifty minus fifteen percent to WDE. Two twelve and a half. Eighty-three grand. Minus three points to our producer. Two-oh-five. And by the way, we, you and me and Gary—the *band*—we have to recoup *their* points.”

“We will. I’m telling you.”

“Two-oh-five divided by three? Sixty-eight thousand dollars for a three-year contract. And you haven’t even paid your taxes yet.”

I rolled my eyes and looked at the ceiling. If Strat and/or Indy noticed me acting my age, they didn’t say anything.

“There’s income, fucktard.” Indy patted his pockets and found a thick marker best suited to sniffing and writing graff. “I need a napkin. Fucking find me a napkin. An envelope. I gotta write on the back of it.”

“Fifty grand for the studio we gotta pay back,” said Strat the Sensible. “Recoupable. Producer. Recoupable. Equipment rental. Re—”

“Stop it!” I shouted.

I’d had it with the two of them. I didn’t know much of anything. I didn’t know how to run a business or how to make money, but I knew how to think like a rich person. Maybe that was why they’d brought me.

“You guys. You’re so cute with your middle-class shitsense. You act as if it’s money to spend. It’s not. It’s money to make more money. You.” I pointed at Strat. “You move in here with Indy. You take your sixty grand, and you set up a studio in the garage or the living room. I don’t care where. You.” I pointed at Indy. “Get a commercial loan. You lay down the next record here and collect the fifty grand instead of paying it in recoupable expenses. You rent it out to your other musician friends and let them pay your

mortgage, and you pay down that fucker because at eighteen percent interest, you're getting killed."

I took a pull on my cigarette. It was so close to the filter that my fingers got hot. Jesus, figuring that out felt good. Whether they did what I said or not, putting it together had been damn near orgasmic. "I need a fucking beer."

CHAPTER 9

1994

The San Fernando Valley, Van Nuys in particular, was a hell of parking lots and freeway-width avenues. Everything looked new yet coated over in beige dust. Drew and I had split right after the meeting, slipping down the back elevator. It was like the old days when I had a ten o'clock curfew I ignored.

We pulled into the back of Audio City, where the entrance was. Drew put the car into park and leaned back.

“You gonna open the door?” I asked.

“I haven't seen these guys in a long time. Give me a minute to think.”

“Get back into your rocker head?”

He smiled, and something about that made me feel really good. “Yeah.”

I switched my position so I was kneeling on the seat, facing him. I yanked on his lapel. “Take this off. You look like a fucking lawyer.”

“Right. Okay.” He wrestled out of his jacket and tossed it in the back. His shirt had light blue stripes and a white collar, and his tie was just skinny enough to be stylish without crossing the line into new wave.

I grabbed it and let it go so it flopped. “Come on, take this off.”

He undid it. “I forgot how bossy you are.”

“I still can't believe you even remember me.”

“You're not forgettable.”

“Please,” I said. “There were hundreds of girls.”

He yanked at the tie, slipping it through the knot. “I was obsessed with you the second you opened your mouth. You scared the fuck out of Strat. He thought he was going to lose me to you.”

He leaned his head back on the seat, raising his hand languidly and touching my chin. My eyes fluttered closed, because I'd been too busy to let a man touch me in years, and this man knew how to touch. He ran his finger along the edge of my jaw, down my neck, and I grabbed it before it could move lower.

“We're working.”

“What happened to you?” he asked in a whisper.

“I went to law school.”

“Before that. You split. We couldn't find you. Strat hung out outside your house. We went to all the clubs. Your friends didn't know where you were.”

He didn't know what he was asking. He thought he was going to get some reasonable, sane answer, but there wasn't one.

“It had nothing to do with you,” I lied. It had everything to do with him. Every single thing.

“What did it have to do with, Cin?” His voice dripped sex and music, and I wondered if that was just his way of getting back into character.

I reached for his collar and ran my finger under it, revealing the stand of tiny white buttons. “The collar comes off.”

“You need to tell me where you went.”

“I took a trip.”

“We waited, and you never showed up.”

He moved his fingertip down my shirt. My breath got short, and I couldn't take my eyes off of his lips.

“Sorry. I flaked. You guys were too intense for me.” I didn't know why I had to make it obvious that it was more than that. I could have kept my voice flat and subtext-free, but my inflection got away from me. If he couldn't tell I was hiding something, he was an idiot.

And he wasn't an idiot. That was shit-sure.

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?” he said.

“No.”

He took his hand away. Relief and disappointment fought for dominance inside me as he flipped his stiff collar up and unbuttoned it.

“We had a good time,” he said. “Good coupla months.”

“Seven weeks.”

“I wasn’t even thinking about how long it was going to last. But I was so fucking stupid anyway. Strat was smart. He played at being a reckless musician, but man, he was sharp and fifty years older in his mind. He told me to chill out. He told me the thing we were doing was temporary, and I argued with him like a moron.” He shook his head at his stupidity and got the last button undone, snapping the collar away from his neck.

“Looks better,” I said, smoothing down the Mandarin.

He took my wrist and sucked me in with the tractor beam of his gaze. “I thought I’d be the one to lose my shit when it ended. But it was him.”

I pulled my hand away. I couldn’t pretend I didn’t care for another second. “What happened?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“You could.”

But he didn’t, and I opened the door to end the conversation.

CHAPTER 10

1982 – AFTER THE NIGHT OF THE QUAALUDE

Rich family. Pig rich. Six nannies, two cooks, and a cleaning staff rich. Multiple estates. We were our own economy. My dad wouldn't experiment with losing a chunk of it for another twenty-plus years.

My father had two brothers, and my mother had a sister she barely spoke to. She'd never said why. She never said much that was worth listening to. She hadn't seemed young to me until the autumn of Bullets and Blood.

This realization happened at a party. We had two hundred people in the house for my parents' anniversary. String quartet. Black tie staff. Open doors to our swimming pool with lotus blossoms and candles floating in it. Attendance was mandatory, so I had to tell Indy and Strat to get their laughs elsewhere.

All the family and business partners were there, all the wives clustered around the couches and most of the men hovering around the bar. Except Aunt Maureen. She never hung around the women. She was my "cool aunt" who ran a business and told the guy she'd been with for the past ten years that she saw no point in getting married. She was talking to my dad and a few guys in suits I knew by sight but not name. I was close by, hanging on every word, when I heard her say something about negotiations with a blue chip company. It was a bunch of numbers and percentages I understood because I remembered everything the adults in my family said about business. But at the end, she laughed.

The sound had a clear, tinkling quality her voice usually lacked. She sounded so young.

Wait. She *was* young.

She was eighteen years older than me. A little less, give or take. And that made my mother fifteen and change when she'd had me.

Over the ice sculpture and through the floral arrangement in the center of the ballroom, I looked at my father and did more math.

I almost laughed at the symmetry of it.

But it wasn't funny. It took me too long to realize what had gone on, but I told myself I wasn't going to be like my mother. I didn't hate her, but I didn't respect her either. She was from a good family. She was beautiful and smart. But she was nothing. She did nothing. Her life was a vacuum that purpose had fallen into, never to be seen again.

I wasn't going to be that, but I was already on the way.

Me in my blue dress and little gold hoop earrings, dressed like a prim little miss. A chiffon-and-silk lie I let them believe. I felt sick.

I was thrown off balance by the impact of a small child. Fiona was five, and she had her arms wrapped around my legs. The others followed. Deirdre and Leanne hugged my legs too. Carrie and Sheila, at nine and eleven, stayed close, looking excited. I was only missing Theresa, who was a year old and had started walking two weeks ago. They looked up at me with eyes in varying shades of blue and green, hair from strawberry-blond to dark brown red. That was what happened when a redhead married a redhead, and my insides curdled like milk on the stove.

"Who's watching you guys?" I was talking about everyone but directed the question at Carrie, the oldest of them and most likely to put together a coherent sentence.

"Everyone's outside. Are you having cake or not?"

How long had I been staring into the middle distance?

Long enough for everyone to move to the garden, leaving a few clustered stragglers by the French doors. I let my little sisters lead me outside, where sibling hierarchy was determined by proximity to the cake. I'd lost any will of my own and hung behind all of them. I didn't really want cake. I'd been sick to

my stomach for days, fighting a headache, feeling tender everywhere, but I had a compulsion to act as if dessert mattered.

My mother and father stood behind the cake, smiling for the professional photographer. He wore an *LA Times* press pass. The camera was nowhere near me, but I felt exposed. They'd want a picture with me, and I couldn't. I just couldn't. I could stay relatively anonymous in the world, but people read the pages of news about the Reagan presidency, Beirut, Studio 54 closing, and Hollywood celebrities. After those, but before the stock ticker, came the society page. Weddings. Anniversaries. Deaths of monied men.

My father tapped his glass with a spoon. He was over six feet tall and looked every bit the oligarch he was, with a full head of dark-red hair. My mother was more strawberry, and she held her head high when he was nearby. On that night in particular, she beamed a little brighter.

The guests quieted, and even the photographer put his camera down when Daddy raised his whiskey.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, projecting to the back of the room, "thank you for coming. I hope you're all having a good time celebrating this, my anniversary with my beautiful bride."

A chorus of tinkling rose as more spoons met glasses.

A great sound, I thought. They should try it in the studio.

My sinuses filled up, and I almost started crying, but my father kissed my mother quickly and went back to his speech.

"We have an announcement!"

Let's hear it, Declan!

Hear! Hear!

"Eileen is about to make me a father for the eighth time!"

"Get off her, for Chrissakes!"

The shout from the back ended in uproarious laughter and cheers from everyone but the children, who didn't understand it.

Except me. But I wasn't a child. Never was, and never would be.

The photographer started snapping again. Dad and Mom indicated we should come behind the table so we could all smile in dot matrix patterns for tomorrow's paper, and I couldn't.

I'd hit my limit. I was going a hundred miles an hour, and the brick wall had appeared inches in front of me, without warning.

I'd taken a pregnancy test that morning. I'd put it away without looking at it and decided I wasn't going to think about it. Not until after the party. Pretending bad things weren't happening wasn't like me, but then again, nothing bad had ever happened to me.

I'd bought it as almost a joke because my period wasn't that regular. But it wasn't funny.

The compulsion to look at the results weighed like a rock in my chest, exploding in slow motion. I had to hide before the shrapnel shredded me from the inside.

My room was a good three-minute expedition across the house, and I took it at a run, slipping on the marble and righting myself. I was crying hard by the time I reached my hallway. Somewhere in the journey, I'd let it go. Everything.

Oh god oh god oh god

I was a sensible person. I knew I had options, and the first step to exploring them was to know what was happening. The nausea and headaches. The tender breasts and belly. The feeling at the root of my hips that something was *happening*. I had to scratch pregnancy off the list so I could move to the next possibility, but I knew I wasn't scratching shit off any list. I just knew.

And when they'd announced Mom was pregnant (again), I couldn't wait another second.

When I got to my room, breathless in my pale blue dress, I slapped open the medicine cabinet where I'd left the little plastic jar. If the liquid was one color, I could forget the whole thing. If there was a brown ring at the bottom—

"Are you all right?"

I spun at the voice in the doorway, leaving my back to the open cabinet. My father stood in the

doorway, still thrust forward from his run up the stairs.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“Your mother thought you’d take it hard. I told her you were made of steel.” His smile was one hundred percent pride.

“I just ate something that didn’t agree with me.”

I spun and snapped the medicine cabinet door closed, but it bounced back, leaving an inch of the inside exposed. I turned back to my dad, hoping I wasn’t disrupting the liquid. Taking the test with eyedroppers and test tubes, I’d felt as if I were in lab class. I didn’t want to do it all again. And I didn’t want Dad to see it. And I didn’t want to be pregnant. And I wanted to rewind the whole thing, so I didn’t stupid my way through life.

“You’ve been so busy with your extracurriculars, your mother is worried.” His eyes left mine and went to the medicine cabinet. He wasn’t looking in the mirror. They traced the edge, moving up and down.

“I’m a little tired. Can I skip the cake?”

“Be back down in half an hour for pictures.”

His sharp expression meant that was an order. I could be green around the gills, and I’d be expected to smile for the camera.

“Okay.” I wanted him to go away.

He looked from behind me to my face, scanning it. I felt made of thin blown glass, hollow and transparent. Too fine. Too delicate. Worth too much to be broken without everyone I cared about getting upset over the loss.

I tilted my head down and went around him, to the doorway, where the promised comfort of my bed waited. He’d have to follow me out and leave me alone for thirty minutes. I could do a lot of calming down in half an hour.

I’d just stepped onto the carpet in my room. It was mauve and grey. And by the second step, the colors became a woolen blur as I was pulled back and spun around.

Dad’s face was beet red. He held a clear plastic vial in his left hand as he gripped my arm with his right. “What is this?”

“You’re hurting me.” I tried to squirm away, but he only gripped me tighter.

“What have you done?”

I was so scared I could barely think. My father had never raised a hand to me, but I’d always known there was an ocean of violent potential under his smooth veneer. A cold, deep sea that remained placid but was ever-threatening.

“It’s negative!” I shouted, not knowing if that was true. I hadn’t gotten a look into the vial before he stepped in.

“This?” He turned the vial toward me, open top to my face.

The yellow liquid had been slipped down. At the bottom, a brown ring of thicker membrane slid down, going elliptical before drooping into a line of accusation.

I didn’t have an answer. Not an excuse or reason. Nothing but an explanation of what I’d been doing with my free time, which I was sure he didn’t want to hear.

“Who is he?” Dad growled.

Wasn’t that the question of the year.

“Let go!”

“Were you raped?”

“What?”

“I’ll kill whoever did it.”

“Dad! No!” I was crying now. I hadn’t had enough time to process what I’d done to myself. I felt the spit and tears as if they were someone else’s. Dad’s face was lost in a wet, grey cloud, and my breath came in hard sobs. I choked out what I thought was a bit of reassurance. “It wasn’t rape.”

He twisted me around until I was facedown over my white footboard, the thin wood painful on my

abdomen. While I was trying to navigate around that and the tears that flowed with the force of a storm, I felt a sharp pain on my bottom.

A strange clarity cut through my sobs, and my crying stopped as if I'd skidded to a stop at the edge of a cliff while the tears dropped to the bottom.

Dad spanked me again, and the impact turned breaths into grunts. I tried to turn, but he held me and whacked me again. I was confused, pinned. I looked around at him. His hand was raised with fingers flat, and elbow bent to strike me again, and he was looking at his hand as if it had done something he didn't understand.

Then in that split second, he looked down at me, and we made eye contact. He saw me but didn't. I didn't know what he saw. I didn't know what math he was doing in his head. The violent sea within him didn't calm. It didn't drain into a huge funnel and gurgle away, but the tide changed and moved like a lumbering beast, receding over the horizon to a place I couldn't see.

He let me go. I slumped over the footrail. I took two deep breaths, and only the first one was an incomplete hitch.

I had neither choices nor time. My family, for all their money, was very Catholic, very rigid, very traditional. I had tons of privilege but no rights. So if I was going to abort this baby, it was now or never. Let them disown me.

I had to run away.

CHAPTER 11

1994

Business had been rough for a few years, but Audio City was still the best music studio in Los Angeles. It had a certain something. Reputation-plus-talent-plus-acoustics-times-equipment-equals-hotter-than-hot. Before my parents' anniversary party, information like that had mattered to me. But sitting with the head engineer in a soundproof room that smelled of stale sweat and cigarettes, all that mattered was the plan—a ruse to get a settlement—and the client, a cellist who might have been ripped off by a wealthy producer.

“You were the only band in our history who canceled studio dates,” Teddy said.

I vaguely remembered him. Back then, before *Bullets and Blood*, I'd slinked in with Rowdy Boys. Teddy'd had a full head of hair and a smile full of straight white teeth. When I sat in the booth with him and Drew (née Indy), Teddy was made of comb-over and nicotine stains.

“We got our own place,” Drew answered.

“Still running from what I hear.”

“Yup. Switching over to digital.”

Teddy shook his head and snapped a pack of cigarettes off the mixing board. “Fucking digital.” He pushed open the pack with his thumb and offered me one.

I took it. Then Drew surprised me by taking out his own pack and lighter.

“It's the future,” Drew said, shaking out a smoke.

“Fuck the future.” Teddy lit mine then his own.

I pulled on it, tasting the dry heat of tar and letting the nicotine run through my blood. I hadn't smoked in umpteen years, and I'd forgotten how much I liked it.

Teddy picked a little piece of tobacco off the tip of his tongue. “Digital wouldn't help you with your cello problem.” He flicked the speck of a leaf away. “It's those pops and hums that make magnetic tape sound warm. It's what got you here. If we recorded on digital, it wouldn't mean shit.”

“Yeah,” Drew said.

“Digital's gonna kill music.”

“Sure.”

“But you don't care no more.” He flicked his hand at Drew, from his fancy shoes to his conservative haircut. “Lawyer.”

“Douche.”

Teddy surprised me by laughing. “Yeah. Know thyself, right? I got it. Give me that production request or whatever you call it, and I'll show it to our lawyer. He'll get back to you.” He held out his hand to shake Drew's.

Here was the problem. The request for production wasn't worth shit because the fingerprinting thing was made up. Even a shyster lawyer would figure that out.

“How about a deal?” I said.

Teddy's hand froze midway up, and he looked at me. Drew looked both surprised and curious.

I swallowed hard. “Let us down into the master archives for a *Bullets and Blood* record. The debut was recorded here, right?”

“Right.”

“We'll just peek at the *Opus 33* masters. See if it's worthwhile so you don't have to blow two hundred an hour on a lawyer. In return, Indy here will show you how they're going digital. Show you the right equipment. So you can decide for yourself if you can switch.”

Teddy stubbed his cigarette into a half-full ashtray. I glanced at Drew. His head was tilted down and toward me, thumb to forehead to hide his expression. His cigarette burned hot to the filter as he smiled.

“Yeah,” Drew said, looking up. “We’ll do a consult. Above board. You can probably go digital without switching completely. I know you get people and lose people because you’re analog. Let’s see if you can’t do both.”

Teddy considered, looking away, then back at us. Shifting his box of smokes, shaking his foot, then nodding to himself.

“Yeah, why the fuck not?” He stuck his hand out again, and Drew grabbed it. “Why the fuck not?”

CHAPTER 12

1982 – BEFORE THE NIGHT OF THE QUAALUDES

They started getting that studio together almost immediately. They had recording and tour dates to keep. So during the day, the house was filled with workmen, artists, and sound engineers in leather Members Only jackets.

I was confused about Strat and Indy. For the next week or so, I was with them all the freaking time. Like a piece of furniture for the new house. Sometimes they beeped me, and sometimes I E-Y-E-B-R-O-Wed them. I met them wherever they were, and we proceeded to act as though we were all in some kind of relationship.

But they didn't make a move. Strat had eyes like fingers—they had a way of getting between my skin and my clothes. But he never did anything about it. Not in the week after I told them how to have their house and live in it too.

Once, when we were at a party in Malibu, Indy put his hand on my shoulder and said something in my ear. I don't even remember what it was, but the music was loud, so he had to talk in my ear if he wanted me to hear him.

Strat came up right after that, like a hawk, and put his finger in Indy's face, lips tense. Indy shrugged. It was the first time I saw them act like anything but best brothers.

Indy put up his right hand. "Pledge, asshole."

"Fuck you." But Strat put up his right hand. I could see the matching snake tattoos inside their forearms. "Pledge open."

"Nothing," Indy spat. "Nothing, okay?"

"Closed, dude. I'm sorry."

They put their hands down and hugged, back-slapping as if they'd had a whole conversation.

"What was that about?" I asked when Strat drifted off.

Indy shrugged, and someone came to talk to him. Male-musician-slash-producer-slash-A and R guy. Thirties. Black plastic sunglasses with red lenses hiding his blued-out dilated pupils. Cartoonishly hip. Guys like that were always talking to Strat and Indy, and they had a way of making sure I was treated like a life support system for a pussy. It would take three minutes for him to angle his body so that he was between Indy and me, then he'd turn his back to me.

Like clockwork, I was looking at the back of his jacket.

Fuck this. I didn't understand any of it. I went inside, picking my way through couplings and conversations on my way to the front door. I'd opened it, letting the cool West Side breeze in when Strat caught up.

"Where you going?" he asked, nipples hard from the night air.

I let my hand slip from the doorknob. "To buy you a shirt."

He gave me that look. The one that made me warm and tingly. The room was full of women wearing strings and little triangles, yet he was looking at me as if he wanted to devour me skin to bone.

Yes, it turned me on, but it also annoyed me.

"What was that about back there? With Indy?" I asked.

"What was what?"

"Fuck this."

I opened the door, but I didn't get far. He leaned over and pressed it closed.

"You don't know?" he asked. "You can't tell?"

"Since the first day you brought me to this house, you've treated me like a little sister—"

I had more to say. Much more. A speech worthy of Ronald Reagan, but he laughed. I just ate those

words, chewed and swallowed them, because I'd seriously misread something. He opened the door, still smiling like a fuckhead.

"Beep us," was all he got to say before I left.

I had an orange button on my beeper. I pressed it, and my driver pulled up. Like magic. His job was to take me to and from whatever activity I had going on. His job wasn't to tell me where to go or tell my family where I was. I barely made it half a block back toward home before I knew I'd beep six-oh-six E-Y-E-B-R-O-W. Or Indy. It didn't matter. I was addicted to them the way Lynn was addicted to blues. The excitement of their company was the best drug in the world.

CHAPTER 13

Here's a comprehensive list of what it means to be mature for your age.

1. You see people through their lens, not yours. So there's less getting offended. Less reactive bullshit.
2. You have perspective but not experience. You know it all shakes out in the end. So small problems are small, and big problems are small.
3. You get cocky because you're mature and you know it. Stupid mistakes are other people's problems.
4. Your body is still a slave to your brain, and if your brain is thinking about grown-up shit, like sex, your body is going to be a hotbed. And if your body matures early... well, follow the yellow brick road. The Emerald City has its legs spread for you.

CHAPTER 14

1982 – BEFORE THE NIGHT OF THE QUAALUDE

The house in the Palihood had a thousand square feet of unpermitted add-ons. Some even made sense. Most didn't. One bedroom was five feet wide and had outdoor wood siding on one wall. One add-on was only accessible via five treacherous two-foot-high steps to an attic the shape of an inverted V, and another bedroom was only accessible from the outside patio and through a closet.

I arrived one afternoon after a respectable activity I could never recall in black pumps and a Chanel jacket. The house was dead except for the open door and obscure punk playing from the sound system the boys had installed over the lead-painted walls and chipped molding.

I didn't announce myself. I never did. I was a piece of furniture, more or less. I heard voices from one of the spare rooms. I passed through the third bathroom, into the closet, and almost opened the louvered door to reveal the sound when I stopped. A cry had come from the other side of the door.

The louvers gave me a choppy view, but I saw enough skin to make me take a step back. I heard panting. Groaning. A man's voice. Strat. I took a second step back. Stopped. The doors had a space between them, and I leaned forward and looked.

I recognized the girl from her silky brown hair. When she moved, it swayed over her shoulders. She was on her hands and knees. Strat was behind her, fucking her so hard my face flushed and my body's heat level went deep in the red. I could smell them. Their sweat and something funkier. The scent between my legs plus a man. I touched the wall. I needed it to hold me up.

Leave. Turn around.

"Take it, baby," Strat muttered, hands gripping her ass. His skin was satin with sweat.

I wanted him. I wished I was the girl with the brown hair, taking it. I shifted a little so I could see the place where their bodies met. His cock sliding in and out of her.

God god god I want it.

I was blocking the way, but I didn't want to go back and I couldn't go forward. All I could was hope that no one wanted to go into the spare bedroom right then. I shifted, nervous someone else was near me.

The second woman had curly blond hair and generous naked hips. I wished I was her, naked with them. Laughing about some whispered words.

You're nuts. This is so past what you're ready for.

"You want to eat her out, baby?"

"Yes," said Straight Brown Hair. She turned to Luscious Hips, still getting fucked, and her eyes lingered on the louvers for a moment.

She saw.

"Let me kiss your pussy."

No. She didn't.

Luscious Hips sat right in front of Brown Hair and spread her legs. I didn't think my clit could have been more engorged or my pussy wetter. I was glued to the scene as she laid her face between her friend's legs. I couldn't see what she was doing, but Strat, that voice...

"Eat her hard. Suck on it. *Mmf*. Yes. Make her come."

"I'm so wet. So wet," Luscious Hips shouted.

Strat put his hand between mouth and cunt. I didn't know what he was doing, but the intersection of those three things aroused me so much. I did the unthinkable. I stuck my hand under my skirt and tore my panty hose open to get under my cotton briefs.

I nearly collapsed at my own touch.

"Get it wet," Strat commanded as the girl on her hands and knees sucked his finger. "It's going in your

ass.”

Did he say that?

I think I'm going to die.

The girl who was getting fucked had her face in Luscious's pussy as Strat stuck one finger in Fucked Girl's ass.

“Yes!” she looked up long enough to affirm.

Strat put in two fingers. She shouted, face planted in pussy. Luscious had Fucked by the back of the head, pushing her mouth into her cunt, pumping her hips across Fucked's face while Strat pumped away and got three fingers into her ass.

Oh god, I want that I want that.

But I didn't want to come. I pinched my clit to shut it up. I had more to see.

Luscious came, crying, “Eat my pussy eat me god yes baby yes eat me.” She groaned and threw her head back in relief.

God, that was hot. I wanted someone to eat me out.

Strat held out his hand and said something to Luscious. She reached into the night table and pulled out a bottle of baby oil.

What are you doing, Stratford?

He poured it on Fucked. Down her back and in the crack of her ass. Then he massaged it inside.

“You ready?” he said, handing the bottle back to Luscious.

“Fuck me in the ass.”

I swore the backs of my thighs tingled, and every nerve ending between my legs nearly exploded.

He pulled his dick out of her and moved it up between her ass cheeks.

He's going to do it.

Fucked's face tightened and she grimaced, eyes shut, teeth grinding, as Strat slowly but purposefully put his dick in her ass.

“How you doing, baby?” he asked.

“All the way,” she said. “Take my ass.”

I watched his dick disappear in her asshole, and I squeaked.

They didn't hear me.

I thought they didn't.

Luscious put her hand between Fucked's legs.

I didn't see the rest. I heard the squeaking bed, the shouts and moans, Strat barking when he came in her ass. My eyes were closed as I stroked myself to the most explosive climax of my young life.

As soon as it was done and the three of them were laughing and panting, I pulled my hand out of my panty hose. A line of pussy juice stretched between my second and third finger. I curled them into a fist and backed out of the closet.

Strat was right. I couldn't handle him.

CHAPTER 15

1994

“Aa-choo.” I was on my fourth or fifth sneeze.

Audio City kept a rust-painted trailer-slash-shipping container in the north corner of the back parking lot. Teddy had given us the padlock key, and when we opened the back doors, we found a wall of banker boxes stacked to the ceiling. They were ordered by date, with the older shit deeper in the back, except when they weren't. We had to look at every box and hope that the label was correct. We found Martin Wright's Opus 33 sampler master box pretty quickly, about a third of the way through. It was labeled with his name and the year. Drew put it on a low pile and wiggled off the top. The box had become misshapen from dampness. The smell of mildew got sharper with every pile we unearthed.

Contracts. Invoices. Master tapes. A pencil case.

“That's weird,” I said.

Drew handed it over. Shiny orange vinyl marked with pen. I pulled the zipper open. It was empty inside but dusted with fine white powder. I held it open for Drew.

When he looked, he laughed. “Of course. We could probably open up all these boxes and sell coke out of the back of this container.”

I zipped it closed and tossed it back in the box. “He's a cellist. I can't even imagine what the rest of these have in them. We taking the whole thing?”

“More likely than not.” He jiggled the top back on.

We'd found what we came for, but we were both hesitating. He looked toward the back, where another ten feet of solid banker box stood. A thick wall of musical history.

“You're thinking what I'm thinking,” I said flatly. The container was hot and oppressive, yet I didn't want to leave it. “We did come for the *Kentucky Killer* masters.”

“You have to get back to the office.”

“More likely than not.”

“You can't stay here with me. Already you've been with the visiting attorney too long.”

“And a law clerk can't call in sick for the rest of the day or anything.”

“You'd have to make it up over the weekend.” He put his hands on a high box and slid it down, then he put it in my outstretched arms. It said “Neil Young – 1990.”

“Yeah. I hate working weekends.” I put the box with the rest of the early nineties. “Maybe five minutes. Then I'll grab a taxi back to the office.”

“You should run into the office and call. I don't want you to get in trouble on my account.”

He had dust on the shoulders of his shirt, and he'd rolled up his sleeves, exposing the tattoos on his inner arms. I'd done a good job stripping the lawyer costume.

“Five minutes.” I held out my arms for another box. “Ten. Honestly, I already told Dozer traffic might keep me here. And I have a family dinner tonight. So they don't expect me until tomorrow.”

“Saturday.”

“Come on, you know the drill. Six days a week, et cetera.”

He slid another box off the top. I'd never heard of the artist. He put it gently in my arms, still holding it. “I'm glad you got your shit together.”

“You too.” I whispered it because I wasn't just returning a nicety. I was speaking a deep truth.

Seeing him again wasn't just a happy coincidence. He scared the shit out of me. I didn't do feelings. They didn't rule me. I did what I wanted, when I wanted, how I wanted. But I was scared, and fear made me uncomfortable.

I decided discomfort was all right though. I wanted to be around him.

His fingers grasped my elbows while he held the weight of the box. “I’m not together. I just have a law degree.”

He wanted to tell me something, and I wanted to tell him something. We couldn’t. We were different. We didn’t know each other and we never had, but the pull was there. I wanted him to know me. I wanted to tell him my secrets. Not because of who we’d been, but because something about his puzzle pieces fit my puzzle pieces. I felt a clicking, like the snap of one piece into another.

I stepped back with the box, and his fingers brushed my arm as I pulled away.

That felt nice.

I turned away and put the box on the pile. Fear was uncomfortable, but the rainstorm between my legs wasn’t much better.

CHAPTER 16

1982 – BEFORE THE NIGHT OF THE QUAALUDE

I happened to know that most stars, real stars, didn't get mortgages. They paid cash or had their corporations loan them the money, so they paid interest to themselves. But Drew and Strat, and Gary to a lesser degree, were normal guys on the brink of becoming real rock celebrities.

We lived on chips and pretzel rods because we were young and skinny. Indy lounged on the blue velvet couch, plucking on his guitar, and Strat scratched his head over the papers laid out over the coffee table. I had my legs slung over the arm of a matching blue velvet chair.

"Can you start booking the studio in August?" I asked.

Indy strummed his twelve-string. Even without an amp, the sound was thicker than a six-string, and he got his fingers into the narrow spaces between them as if he'd been playing since he was seven.

"Yup," Strat said.

He didn't have a shirt on, and I tried not to look at him. Strat was so beautiful it hurt. The promise of sex had diminished since poker night. Part of me said to hell with them, and the other part just wanted to know why.

Indy, Gary, and Strat were tight. Real tight. They'd grown up together in Nashville. Only sons in their families. Graduated from their local suburban high school. Like cupcakes dropping out of the same pan. Different, but all from the same batter.

An empty pack of Marlboro Reds landed in my lap.

"We're out," Strat said.

"There's a carton in the fridge," I said.

His knees bounced, and the swirls of musical staffs buckled where his body folded. A snake coiled around his firearm, biting inside his wrist. Gary and Indy had the same snake tattoo. Gary had married young and fathered up quick, so he wasn't around unless there was music to be made.

"Tell me what that snake's about," I said. I wanted to get him a box of smokes, but I didn't want to do it because he'd told me to. He was a bossy jerk. Sexy and powerful, but jerky.

"It's about you getting a fresh pack."

I didn't move. Indy ran his pick over his twelve strings. I didn't think he was paying attention.

"You all got matching tattoos so you could be a fucking asshole? Shit, I can get one too."

"Why? When you're a bitch already?" Strat's words and tone didn't match. The words were cruel and divisive. The tone was warm and friendly. His face invited me to kiss it, as if he was the only one who would tolerate Margie-the-bitch instead of Cinnamon-the-groupie.

It took me a split second to put together a snappy retort, but Indy cut it off by putting down his guitar and standing. He shot Strat a dirty look and paced out of the room. Strat watched him.

Something was going on, and Strat was too cool a customer to tell me.

I bounced off the chair and followed the guitarist. The house was barely furnished or painted. The guys didn't have the money or time to do the fancy stuff. They had parties, but everyone sat on the floor and in folding chairs. I crossed to the south side of the house where I could see the pool. They'd had that cleaned and finished because to have a party, you needed a pool.

The kitchen had nothing of use in it. Paper plates and plastic forks. The gas was hooked up but was used to light cigarettes and heat spoons of white powder. The fridge had beer, vodka, cigarettes, and a china tea saucer with blue pills arranged around the center circle.

Indy stood in front of the fridge, pulling out a carton. He flipped his wrist, and the box spun midair, dropping on the island counter with a *slap*. Red-and-white packs swirled out. I grabbed one before it fell off.

“It’s not your job to do what he tells you,” I said.

“Can I ask you a question?” He took a pack for himself and cracked the plastic, letting it flutter to the floor without a second look. Both of them were fucking slobs.

“Sure.”

“What do you want?”

“Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?”

He didn’t respond, verbally or otherwise. He just wedged out two cigarettes and held the pack to me. I took one.

“Stop the bullshit. You’re past that.” He took a zippo from his pocket and clacked it open. “*We’re past that.*”

He lit me. I blew out a stream as he tilted his head to light his own, cupping it as if we were in a hurricane instead of a kitchen. He was unselfconscious in that second, and I admired his face and shoulders.

“Be more specific then,” I said.

He clattered a glass ashtray between us. “You don’t wonder what’s going on here?” He pointed his finger down and made a circle.

Here. I knew exactly what he was talking about, yet he was so vague I could have kept the game going on long enough for Strat to stroll in for his smokes. But I couldn’t. I was as tired of this shit as he was. Both. Neither. All. None. The space between them was getting uncomfortably tight.

“You mean that you guys are always beeping me, and you keep me around but no one’s fucking me?” I ask.

“There you go.”

“Yeah. I wonder that.”

I wondered it at night, when I was home alone with my hands under the sheets. When I felt inside myself, the edge of the unbroken membrane tight on my finger. When I imagined some composite of the two of them was on top of me. Or one or the other. Or they fought over me, and both won. I didn’t know what or who I wanted, but my body got wet for both Sexy Strat and Sincere Indy. Not that I knew what to do about it. I was old for my age, but there was nothing like actual experience.

“Little Stratford and I, we don’t fight over women.”

“Okay.”

“That’s the deal.”

“You’re implying you’re fighting over me,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“You know what that does for a girl’s ego, right?”

I didn’t actually believe him. That was the problem. I was cute as hell, but come on.

“When I needed Strat, he was there for me. My father was a drunk fuck.” Indy rolled the ashes off the tip onto the amber glass of the ashtray. “Still is. I needed this house for a reason. The guest house in the back? It’s for my mother. To get her out of there. So when I finally talk her into leaving him, she has somewhere to go where she feels safe. If I’m hotel to hotel on a bus, that’s great, but it’s like leaving her to rot. And the guy in there”—Indy jerked his thumb toward the living room, where his best friend was probably still looking over paperwork—“he gets it. I can’t do any of this business shit without him. My head’s not in it. He’s giving up a chunk of his advance to make this house and studio happen.”

“I’m glad, Indiana. Really. He’s a great friend.” I stamped out my cigarette. “What do you want out of me?”

His frustration was bigger than anything we said. His fingers curled, and his teeth gritted. He stepped forward and put his hands just under my chin, an inch from touching them, as if it was as close as he could get. As if his palms and my jaw were the north sides of two magnets.

“I’m fucking nuts about you,” he growled, then leaned down, so his face was level with mine. He smelled like tobacco and cologne, with a hint of music and risk. How many times had I watched his fingers on a guitar and wished they were on me? “You have to make a move,” he said more softly but with

urgency. “You have to choose.”

“You’re not supposed to have feelings.” I said it as if “supposed to” mattered at all.

Strat’s voice came from the patio. “Dude.” He took the length of the kitchen in three steps, snapped up a pack of cigarettes, then pointed at Indy with the same hand. “Watch it.”

“Is he telling the truth?” I asked. “You have a deal about me?”

“A deal?” Strat asked, ripping the plastic off his pack. “I wouldn’t call it a deal.”

“What do you call it?” Indy asked. “A pledge?”

“Call it a fucking truce.”

“You guys are both...”

Insane.

Annoying.

Beautiful.

Looking from one to the other, knowing I could have either, I couldn’t pick an adjective, much less a man.

I’d never liked feelings, even before I consciously pushed them away. They made me feel like seven people living in the same skin. Now I had these two guys looking at me as if I was supposed to say something.

What did they want out of me?

One or the other?

What was normal about this? I hadn’t kissed either one of them.

Or anyone.

I threw my hands up. “Fuck you both.”

I walked out. I didn’t want the car to get me. I wanted to walk this off. This bullshit. This pressure. I couldn’t admit I was in over my head. I’d never admit a situation existed that I couldn’t handle, especially not something as basic as two guys wanting me to choose between them.

I was warmed by the setting sun, but the air chilled my skin. Good. I wanted sensory distraction. Anything to make this shit run in the straight line.

What did you expect?

Nothing. I hadn’t expected anything.

No, I’d expected them to choose. I’d suspected that one of them liked me, and the other one kept me around as a courtesy to the other, and I expected that the one who liked me was Indy. And that brought about the bigger question.

Which one did I want?

Both. Neither. Either. Some fourth choice.

“Hold up!”

I thought about not turning around. Just walking to the nearest cross street and calling the driver. I got three steps while deciding what to do. I heard the footsteps quicken behind me, and I turned to see Strat. He was wearing the jacket he kept by the door.

“You got dressed. Nice going.”

“Hold up,” he repeated, grabbing my elbow.

I yanked away. “You guys need to work it out and get back to me.”

“No, baby. You need to wake up. That guy back there? You’re not going to find anyone better in your life. You turn your back on him, and you’re an idiot.”

I was surprised. Here he was, the god of them all, lean and sharp with a voice like a fallen angel, advocating for his friend.

“Why do I feel like a pawn in some game you guys got going?” I asked.

“It’s not a game.”

“What if I want you?” I didn’t mean to say I wanted him, even though I did. I didn’t mean to imply I’d made a choice because I hadn’t even known there was a choice to be made.

“Sorry,” he said, narrowing one eye and shaking his head slightly. “I’m not that kinda guy.” He started to walk away.

“I saw you,” I called, and he stopped. “With two girls. Couple of days ago.”

“Yeah?” He tilted his chin up as if I could swing at it if I wanted, he didn’t care.

“It was hot.”

“That shit’s not for you, Cin. That’s a couple of blues and boredom. Not your scene.”

“How do you know?”

“You’re too good for that shit. He’s too good. This is fucked up, the whole thing. I don’t know who you are or what planet you’re from, but it’s not mine. It’s his.” Without another word, he walked back up the hill, long hair flipping as he stepped into the wind.

I watched him turn into the gate, then I hit the little orange button on my beeper. If I went right home to change, I could make it to the Suffragette Society planning committee. I needed to get away from this weird fucking scene.

CHAPTER 17

1994

I'd stopped sneezing. Either we had gotten so deep into the trailer we hit ancient allergens I didn't react to, or my body just gave up.

Drew's arms and shirt front were covered with dust, and he had a war-paint-shaped grey streak across his jaw. It was getting late and his cheeks were getting a dark shadow. I felt as if we were no closer to the box for Bullets and Blood, and I was close to giving up. But every time I thought to mention it, I stopped myself. I enjoyed Drew. His connection to my life before. The pain we shared. Even the shared pain he didn't know about.

"I kept the business going, even after the band broke up," he said. "Gary wanted to find another lead, but I was done. I just wanted that house." He picked up a box. Looked at the label. The handwriting had changed an hour earlier. Someone must have gotten another job.

"Did your mom ever move in?"

"Yeah. After my dad died of liver failure."

I took the box from him. *Rick Springfield*. "Fuck him then."

Drew laughed. "Yeah. Fuck him."

I laid Rick's box on top of the others. We'd developed a quick system so we could get all the boxes back in place, but it would still be a big job. We were deep into the woods.

I went back in to meet him. I was going to say something like, "Hey, I think we gotta ditch this," but he stood over an open box, looking at the contents with silent reverence, and I knew. I stood next to him. It was late, and the trailer's fluorescents flickered blue.

"Is this it?" I said, standing next to him, staring at the box's contents.

Master tape boxes. Ampex. Four of them. A folder. An envelope. He put his hand on a box marked *Kentucky Killer*. They'd recorded it for Untitled Records at Audio City before I came into the picture.

"Nothing happened," he said, more to himself than me. "When we did this, we could have been anyone. But nothing happened."

"You're not the first."

"Remember his voice? The way he grumbled then sounded clear in one breath? He developed that here. Before that, he sounded like a girl all the time. See, he could imitate any voice perfectly. Any accent. He could repeat Russian back to a Russian perfectly and not understand a word of it. But he didn't want to sound like anyone else. So he was trying to create this new sound during that first session, and he sucked. So bad. All over the place. And we were so fucking high. Really high. Everything sounded like shit. The studio smelled like pot and donuts."

He took a break to smile into nothing. He was beautiful. Radiant.

"What changed?" I asked.

His eyes moved toward me, and the answer was in his intensity.

"After you left?"

"His voice. What changed his voice?"

"We were laughing at Gary. He was doing an imitation of his kid. She was two and said pickups instead of hiccups and fillops instead of flip flops. And..."

A smile spread across his face. He pinched the top of his nose between his thumb and first knuckle.

"Strat couldn't breathe. We thought he was still laughing but he was choking on a fucking donut." He took his hands away and looked at the ceiling. "Oh my God, what happened? I remember. I gave him the Heimlich. He spit up this wad of donut that looked like an oyster. We're laughing. I nearly broke his ribs and we were laughing. But his voice...his esophagus must have gotten shredded or something. Or his throat

felt different and knew how to do it. He had a way of hearing that went right to his lungs. He did it once and never forgot it. Fucking gift.”

He tilted his head back to the box and slid out a set of reels.

“You miss him. I’m sorry.”

“I wish I could have stopped him.”

I didn’t expect him to put his arm around me, but he slid it over my back, up my spine, and over my shoulder, then he pulled me to him. I watched as he took the top off the smaller box. Inside was a clear plastic reel with brown magnetic tape. It didn’t look magical, but to him it was, and we stood in silence for a minute as if praying to it. Then he put the top back on as if shutting out a thought.

His arm tightened around me until I had to loop my arm around his waist. From there, the rest was a dance. He turned. I turned with him. He bent down. I leaned up.

He smelled different. He was cologne and tweed. Sharp and clean.

I turned my head before our lips met, and though that movement came with the knowledge that I didn’t know this man, I considered telling him what had happened to me.

CHAPTER 18

1982 – AFTER THE NIGHT OF THE QUAALUDE

I didn't know what to pack, but I knew I had to go. I yanked my smallest Louis Vuitton suitcase from the back of my closet and slapped it open. I didn't know what to put in it, so it was first-grabbed-first-served.

Outside, the anniversary party was breaking up. Long black cars headed down the drive, just moving dots of white and red lights. I didn't have much time.

I had to get out of there.

Out of that house and to an abortion clinic. I'd come to terms with being disowned. I wasn't having this baby. Not now. Not scared in my room with a party going on downstairs. Not with my mother getting a hundred congratulations for being just as pregnant as I was. Not with the spanking I'd just gotten still stinging my ass.

He'd never done that before. Would he do it again?

I picked up the phone to beep... who? Lynn or Indy or even Strat, who was the last guy I'd beep unless I was desperate.

Which I was.

Desperate.

Time was slipping away, and the consequences of my stupidity were going to land like an anvil in a cartoon. I'd be flat. I didn't know what my parents were going to do, didn't know if my father had even had a chance to tell Mom anything. But I couldn't get the last half hour back. I'd spent it staring out the window, trying to sort my head out. Identifying feelings for what they were. Useless.

This is fear.

Ignore it.

This is shame.

Pat it on the head and send it away.

This is regret.

Kick it.

I tapped the headset on my upper lip. Lynn's family knew my family. All my friends were from the same circle. I'd be sent right back home.

E-Y-E-B-R-O-W

I dialed so fast my fingers slipped on the buttons, and I had to start over. *Ring. Ring.* Three beeps.

I put in my number. They wouldn't know it. I'd always called from the car phone or a phone booth. Never from home. They didn't know where I lived. Smartest thing I ever did on one hand, because it protected them. On the other hand, when the beep came through, he wouldn't know who it was from.

So I waited.

When the phone rang, I picked it up in a rush. "Strat?"

He was outdoors. I heard traffic whoosh and the sound of music far away. A party? A show?

"Cin? What's up?"

His voice was rock candy, sweet and rough, making a beeline to the part of my brain that didn't do any of the good thinking. He must have caught the remnants of panic in my voice, because he didn't sound like his usual casual self. And what was up? What could I tell him over the phone from my own house?

"I need you to meet me at Santa Monica and Vine at midnight. At the gas station."

"What's wrong, baby?"

"Don't call me that." As I was finishing my sentence, the doorknob to my room turned.

"What—?"

I hung up before I heard the rest of the question.

CHAPTER 19

1982 – THE NIGHT OF THE QUAALUDE

Palihood wasn't even a word before my friends got snobby about the wrong side of Pacific Palisades. But it took Palihood House a week and a half to get a reputation, which Strat shrewdly made work in their favor.

Sound Brothers Studios. They trademarked it on a Tuesday and filed corporation papers by Friday. The sound boards weren't even set up yet, and they were already stealing business from Audio City.

Their parties were riddled with musicians. Some were at the height of their careers. They expected blowjobs. Hawk Bromberg could scream over classical guitar, which qualified him to get his dick wet within minutes of arrival. It was an entitlement, and that night, he got a look at me in my cutoff shorts and Marlboro miasma and decided he was entitled to me.

I clapped the heel of my denim wedge against the shag carpet and listened to him talk to me as if I wanted to fuck him. I didn't want to fuck him. I wanted Indy and Strat. I had the keen and unpleasant sense I'd lost them both by not choosing.

Hawk was telling me something about how record execs are all assholes and sellouts. Those cats weren't artists. They didn't understand the process (man) and those dudes are about money and not the music (man). Did I dig?

I did dig. His eyes were wet and his lips were dry, and I could dig it. I was as relaxed and happy as I ever got. Tiptoeing through fucking tulips.

"They got a bathroom in this place?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure. I'll show you."

I was like the lady of the house, even though I wasn't screwing either of the men who lived there. I was polite, I kept my pants on, and I kept my blood alcohol level low. I got to be in love with both of them without having to choose between them.

I wove through the crowd, Hawk behind me with his hand on my back, which I thought nothing of. He just didn't want to get separated. Indy saw me through the crowd, out of the corner of his eye while talking to Willie Sharp. Lynn winked at me when I passed her. We had to stop a few times to say hi to this one or that, but I was mindful of Hawk's needs and pulled away quickly to reach the quiet part of the house. Strat was in the kitchen, sitting on the counter with his feet on the island while two girls giggled at his side. One had her hand on his leg.

I told myself I wasn't jealous because jealous was a feeling—and I didn't have those. Also, Stratford Gilliam wasn't mine to get jealous over. That had been established.

The line for the bathroom was down the hall. I would have told him to just go pee in the bushes like all the other guys, but he'd said bathroom, not bushes. Maybe he had to do a sit-down session. Maybe he had a phobia.

"I'll take you to the bedroom suite," I said.

You're rolling your eyes.

I'm rolling my eyes too.

There are some mistakes you only make once because the stakes are so high, you don't know how to make them a second time. This was one of those mistakes.

I took him through the closet to the louvered doors. The bedroom had a futon and a night table from a thrift store. White blinds over the windows covered the view to the overgrown side driveway.

I pointed at the half-open door to the bathroom. It was done in pink marbelite and floral wallpaper. The house hadn't been redone since the 1960s, and the new owners were soon-to-be rock stars blowing their wad on converting half the building to a studio. No one had time for swanky bathrooms.

Hawk smiled at me and flipped his sunglasses to the top of his head. His eyes were red-rimmed and

older than his years.

“It’s over there.” I pointed again and turned to walk back into the hall. I wanted to see what Strat was doing. It was a compulsion I didn’t understand, but if he was going to fuck someone, I wanted to see it. See her. Or them. Just to make sure I’d completely lost him.

Hawk didn’t go to the bathroom, and I was so lost in my own thoughts and intentions—again, you could see this coming a mile away—that when he grabbed my arm, I was annoyed, not scared.

“What?” I was still being polite, so I cut the sharpness out of my voice.

“You’re really cute,” he said, lightening his grip a tiny bit.

“Thanks.”

“Sexy. Got a really smart mouth. I like that.”

“You can let me go now.”

He did. I was relieved about that for half a second because he closed the patio door.

I crossed my arms and leaned heavily on one foot. “Dude, I’m not watching you pee. Not my thing, all right?”

“What’s your thing?” He stepped closer to me, tongue flicking his bottom lip the way it did when he played guitar. The girls loved that. They went nuts. But he wasn’t my thing.

“My thing is getting a beer.”

Oh, Jesus, that was what he was after? My thing. Indiana was my thing. Strat was my thing. Those two assholes made me feel so damn good and they barely even touched me.

“How do you like it?” His hand reached for me, and I curved away.

“I like it on Wednesdays. Today’s Saturday. Sorry. My legs are closed for business.”

I tried to get around him, but his hand shot out and gripped my jaw. He pressed his fingers together, and my mouth opened. I bent my knees trying to get away, but he held me up.

“Your mouth’s open like a dick-shaped hole.”

Did I mention he was a brilliant lyricist?

I grunted and pushed him away, and he slammed me between the wall and his body, his erection pressed against me. The first hard-on I’d ever felt. I squeaked.

He held two little blue capsules in front of my eyes. I tried to focus, but my entire face hurt from his grip.

“You’re going to love this.” He popped one capsule in his mouth and jammed the other one to the back of my throat. “Swallow.”

I shook my head, trying to scream and failing. He pressed my jaw closed. I tried to breathe, letting the weight go from my legs, but he wrestled himself down with me. I slapped his face, and he took it with a snarl.

“You like it rough. I knew it. I could tell.”

I couldn’t move. We were crouched in a corner, his knees and the hand on my mouth leveraged against the wall. His face was slick with sweat, and his tongue kept licking a dry spot on his lips.

I *hmped* against his hand. If I spit enough, maybe it would slide off of my face. Maybe someone in the party would hear me scream over the music. But the extra spit dissolved the gelatin capsule, and my mouth was flooded in bitter juice.

“Good girl,” he said.

If I’m so good, why are you still holding me down?

I couldn’t say that with his hand over my mouth. If I could move before the Quaaludes took effect, I could get to Strat or Indy and they’d protect me. But once they were in my blood, I’d be high and horny. I wouldn’t be myself. I’d probably open my legs like it was Wednesday.

He could fuck any girl he wanted. That party was full of pussy for guys like him. Why me? I wanted to ask, but he still had his hand over my mouth. The other hand pulled my knees apart.

“You’re such a pretty little thing. Think you’re so tough. Everybody wants you. Did you know? We talk about it. How we want you and you don’t give it up. Well, now we can talk about how I got you to give

it up.”

I breathed hard through my nose, my hands curled into his jacket. I didn't know how to get away as he kept saying things meant to flatter and arouse me.

“I see those nipples under your shirt. So tight. Baby, you're so sexy. You're gonna want it so bad in a few minutes. You're gonna beg for it. Don't fight it.” He pushed his hand up the inside of my thigh, fingers reaching into my shorts, touching my skin. My actual pussy.

I kicked, and one of my denim wedges came off.

“See?” he said. “Not dipped in gold.”

I squealed and squirmed anew, and he got the crotch of my shorts in his fist and pulled. I slid onto the carpet, and my shorts came down to mid-thigh. I opened my mouth to scream, but he shoved four fingers in it, blocking the sound.

There was a slap from somewhere, and I thought he'd hit me, but I was wrong. I could smell and hear the party, and suddenly Hawk was off me. I gulped for air. I pushed him away but only swung in the air. I was just completing an action I couldn't a second before.

“Hey, man!” Hawk shouted, but it was too late.

He bounced off the closet door, and Strat punched him in the face. The two girls from the kitchen were in the doorway. The one with a lipstick-smear on her face ran away, and the other stood in shock and horror as Strat pulled his fist back again. The muscles of his back tensed and stretched, moving the musical staffs like undulating waves.

It landed with a crunch. The girl screamed and looked at me, which was when I realized my shorts and underwear were right above my knees.

“Tell him you wanted it!” the girl screeched from the doorway.

“What?”

“He's gonna kill him!” she shouted.

As if in answer, I heard a crack and the closet doors rattling. I tried to get up, and my hand landed on one of my denim wedges. I landed on my elbow.

I didn't feel anything. That was my normal state of being, but this particular numbness covered confusion and hurt. I got to my knees as Strat hit Hawk again.

The girl who had been in the doorway was pretty brave. She got between the two and tried to push Strat away. She definitely made it harder for him to get a clear shot, and the time she bought was enough to get Indy in the room.

It all happened so fast, with such complexity, that my shorts were still down. That's what stopped Indy in his tracks. Not the blood smeared across the Grammy-winner's face. Not his partner's pulled back fist. But me. My naked body.

Shit.

I pulled up the shorts.

Indy turned to Strat and put his hand on his shoulder and pushed, wedging himself between Strat and his punching bag.

“What's happening?” Indy said it so gently, it was a harmony of a hundred thousand heavenly tones.

“Fuck him.” Strat spun to me, and Indy followed.

I was on my knees, butt-to-heels, arms crossed over my chest. “I'm fine.”

“You are not fine.” Strat's words were clipped.

With his eyes, Indy took me in, then his friend, then turned to Hawk, who was just getting his feet under him with the help of the girl with the smeared lipstick.

“Get out,” Indy said, swinging his arm wide. “All of you. Out.” Indy helped me up. He looked me in the eye. “What did he give you?”

“Lude.”

He shook his head. “I wish Strat killed him.”

Oh fuck. Was I going to cry?

For the love of fuck.

Stop it.

He put his hand on the back of my neck. The next thing he said was so gentle and strong, and his voice sounded like a layer of gravel floating on the deep blue sea.

“You’re safe now.”

The sea rose, moved forward, curved to bubbling white at the top, and dropped on me. I couldn’t stop the stream of emotions any more than I could have used matchsticks to hold up a tidal wave.

* * * *

Feelings. Joy. Lust, fear, gratitude surprise arousalhatedisgustangerlovelovelove.

Lubricated with Quaalude and a narrowly avoided rape, they crushed me into sentence fragments. I couldn’t get anything out that made sense. I was crying a flood of shit I’d held on to for months. Maybe years. Maybe forever.

The room was empty except for Indy and me. Strat had taken Hawk out by the collar. Indy had shouted *out* and closed the door behind all the gawkers.

Indy took me by the chin and looked in my eyes. It was getting dark, and I was covered in tears, but he saw enough to let my face go. “They’re dilating already.”

I’m fine. I thought it but couldn’t speak.

He picked me up from the shoulders and under the knees. My other wedge fell off as he carried me *where are you taking me*

to the futon, where he tried to set me down

I don’t think so

but I held onto his neck and pulled him down until his face filled my vision

see? I’m not crying anymore

and he put me down but stayed close. He looked reluctant, but his pupils were like bowling balls. He was with me on whatever plane I was on. The pupils didn’t lie. He’d popped whatever I’d been fed, or some other inhibition-reducing drug.

is it now? Make it now

He smelled like a man. My brain wasn’t making sentences but

musk and sweat and chlorine from the pool

the scent alone drove a spike of desire between my legs so hard it was almost painful. I arched my back from it, and my eyes fluttered and my lips parted and

“It’s the lude, Cin.”

everything felt good while the potential for more good feeling seemed like a limitless void I could fill right now, right there. I put my hand between my legs and rubbed myself over my shorts because

oh God so good so good

all the void was inside me, and I had to fill it up. He had to fill it up. He had to. He was beautiful, and I loved him. The little voice inside my head that said that was the drugs talking. I knew that voice was on to something, but I didn’t care.

I took Indy’s hand and put it between my legs. I was so hot he sucked air between his teeth when his fingers landed there.

“I want you,” I whispered, suddenly aware enough to put together three words.

“No, you don’t. It’s the—”

“The lude. I know. I can say what I feel.”

I spread my legs and

are you really doing this?

moved his hand under the crotch, and his fingers pushed the rest of the way through, until he felt how wet I was.

“Holy—”

“Oh my—”

“—shit.”

“—God!”

He ran his fingers along my seam, and the second time over my clit, I exploded, mouth open, silent, muscles tightening, knees bent.

It was the most powerful, yet unsatisfying orgasm I’d ever had. I needed more. I was empty. Full of emotions. Full of joy and lust and a swirling ambition, and in the vortex of those was a centripetal void shaped like his body.

He thought for a second/million years and put his lips on mine, opening his mouth, giving me his tongue.

This is it.

I trusted him. The weight of his body, the thrust of his hips pushing the shape of his dick to me. I grinded against him as if it was my job. I was going to come all over again, clawing at his shirt, pulling it over his head. The arousal was so deep I couldn’t see past it.

“How old are you, Margie?”

“Eighteen.” I pulled off my tank top. “Give or take.” I wasn’t in the habit of wearing a bra, and I didn’t even have the shirt all the way off before I felt his teeth on my nipples.

“I’m twenty,” he said.

“Nice to meet you.”

He pulled my shorts and underpants off in one move and kneeled between my open legs. His bare chest had a dusting of brown hair and a tattoo of a treble clef with a bird over his heart. I reached for his waistband, but my arms weren’t long enough.

He grabbed my wrists and put them over my head, pressing them to the wall, and kissed me. “I’ve wanted you for a long time.”

“I know.”

“I shouldn’t,” he said. “You’re not straight.”

“Neither are you.”

“True, true.”

He rolled off me and lay on his back. He hooked his thumbs in his shorts, picked up his butt, and pushed them off.

His dick.

My heart dropped to below my waist. I wanted that beautiful thing. Maybe I did have a dick-shaped hole because it went on fire at the sight of it. I straddled him as soon as the shorts were off.

It was the lude. I couldn’t even think. He pushed me down, the length of him on the length of my seam, rubbing where I was wet. I slid up and down, a tease of the act itself.

“Ludes make you come so many times,” he said. “So do it. Come now.”

The words. I didn’t know what words could do. The permission cast a shadow with the light of inhibition. I ran myself against him, clit to cock, and came again, fingers digging into his shoulders. I took a breath to wonder if I was doing it right. I looked to him for cues and knew I must be all right because he was biting his lower lip, pushing against me.

Sex was so good, and I was still a virgin.

“Yes,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“You’re so hot. So hot.” He took his dick by the base and shifted it to me.

I positioned myself over him then

this is it, Margaret

pushed down. His face knotted with concern when

now or later but now is better

we hit resistance but

“Wait,” he said.

I pushed down hard, and something ripped. Something hurt. I froze for a second with him buried inside me, surprised at the stretching pain at my opening and the snug fit inside.

“You didn’t tell me.” He breathed it, gritting his teeth not in anger but a need to keep his head on straight against the knowledge that his head wasn’t his own.

I needed him. I couldn’t pretend I was experienced or even competent. I’d seen what I’d seen and knew what I knew, but it wasn’t enough. The Quaalude made me eager and optimistic, flooded with the feeling that nothing could go wrong.

“Show me what to do now,” I said.

He took me by the back of the neck and pulled me over him until I was an inch from his 33rpm eyes and I could taste the whiskey on his breath.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’ll already remember you forever. You gonna make it count or what?”

He stroked my cheek with his thumb. His words were hard, but his tone was a caress. “Are you sure you don’t have a set of balls somewhere?”

“You should be the last one to ask that.”

“You’re really special, Margie. You don’t need me. You don’t need anyone. That’s what I was afraid of all this time, that I’d end up inside you and I’d never see you again.”

How many minutes had passed since Hawk made me swallow? Fifteen minutes? Twenty? The room had gone from deeply angled sun to a wash of blue, yet time was nothing.

I didn’t understand any of what I was feeling. The unmotivated elation caused by the drug I’d been force-fed was a bucking stallion behind a wood fence. With every kick, the lock bent. Soon the fence was going to crash down in a splintered heap and I was going to promise him an eternity together for another and another and another orgasm.

“Do I move like this?” I shifted my hips in a circle and drove down until I felt a pressured pain deep inside and my clit rubbed against him.

He groaned. That was good. He took my hips and shifted me up then down again.

“Like that,” he said, hands running up my waist to my tits. He pinched them, and a new shot of pleasure ran down my spine.

I moved up then down until he was deep in me.

“Push against me here.” He took a hand off my tit to press the front of me against him, so my nub rubbed against his body.

I gasped.

“When you come up, angle yourself so you get it the whole way. Go.”

I did what he said, letting my clit feel the length of him. “Oh, God. That’s. Fuck.”

We moved slowly, up and down, pressing deep, the friction and pressure bringing me close to a third orgasm.

“If I make you come on your first time—”

“Gold star. Fuck. God. Gold star it’s so good.”

“You have to come soon. Please come soon I’m so-close-no-I’m-there.” His eyes closed, and his jaw got tight.

I thought the drug had made me feel good already. I thought it had aroused me more than normal, but I wasn’t even halfway there. The bucking stallion of emotion broke through the gate, and I was blindsided by a rush of joy. I cried out from the chest-bursting, brain-exploding emotional high. My world washed bright yellow, and as I dropped down on his dick, deep and hard, my orgasm flooded orange, deep red, explosive, centered on cunt and mind, mixing at the heart of something so vivid I couldn’t see who I was past it.

I dropped on top of him, barely breathing. His chest heaved under me.

“Gold star,” I gasped. “I’ll remember you forever.”

He laughed. “You haven’t even started to remember me.”

CHAPTER 20

1983

Strat died about six months after the last time I saw him, and I found out about it six months after that. I was in the library, catching up on schoolwork with a newfound ambition.

The library magazine rack was in front of my Debate Team materials, and I stopped when I saw Strat's music-strewn bare chest on it. I bit my lower lip. I'd been home a month and hadn't called him or Indy. I didn't want to explain about the baby or whose it was (or wasn't). I didn't want to revisit any of it. I was a new woman.

But he was majestic, and the photo was dark in a way that made it mysterious. I was curious.

CHAPTER 21

1982 – THE MORNING AFTER THE NIGHT OF THE QUAALUDE

The morning after I'd had a Quaalude shoved down my throat, I woke up on the couch with a headache. Indy was already in the kitchen, slogging down a glass of water.

"Where'd you go last night?" he asked.

"Good morning to you too." The light tasted too yellow. The air hurt. The floor and sky were too loud.

"Here." He shook three aspirin out of the bottle into my palm. The circles were too perfect and too white, the big B etched into them too capitalized.

He filled a glass of water for me. I washed the pills down and drank the entire glass.

"Thank you," I said, handing the cup back.

He took it then took my wrist and pulled me toward him. Bone creaked on bone, but it didn't hurt. I let myself lean on him.

"I have to tell you something." He spoke into my ear and stroked my back. That didn't hurt either.

"Mmm."

"I want to take another crack at last night, but without the ludes."

"Mm-hmm."

"Or Strat."

I swallowed.

Jesus.

Last night.

I hadn't forgotten as much as I'd woken up feeling like I had Dengue fever or something. But, yeah. Last night had happened.

I leaned back until I could see his eyes. "I think I just need to sleep today."

"Are you okay to stay?"

I shook my brain. Yes. I was supposedly on a camping trip. I hated camping, but I'd had to lie.

Right? I had to wrap my life in lies.

"Indy, I have to tell you something. After I tell it to you, you're never going to want to see me again."

He did something that took my breath away. He leaned over and swept my feet from under me, getting his arm under my knees. "Never tell me. Never say it."

His lips tightened a little, and without saying a word, I was sure he knew.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

I help up my hand. "Open pledge."

He laughed, and though it was loud, it didn't hurt my head. "My hands are occupied. Assume it's up."

"Swear you don't want to know. Swear you're already okay with whatever I was going to say."

"I do. Close pledge."

I slung my arm around his neck, rested my head on his shoulder, and let him carry me to his room.

I had a life in the weeks that followed, but not much outside Indy. I helped with the studio, hammering and painting, getting boxes and running cables. I could have done that forever, lost the world and gained my soul.

But there wasn't a soul to be had.

CHAPTER 22

1994

“Evidentiary privileges,” Drew said, sliding a box up high.

I gave him the next one. It was after dark, but we were almost done. I’d spent the entire process watching the veins on his forearms, the way his biceps strained his shirt, the movement of his lips when he spoke.

“I just did that one,” I complained.

“You don’t get to stop until you can bill two-fifty an hour. Evidentiary privileges.”

I picked up another box and brought it to him. They weren’t heavy. “Attorney-client. Doctor-patient. Spousal. Priest-penitent.”

He pushed the box to the topmost position in the pile, and I gave him the last one.

“Done.” I slapped my hands together.

“Contracts, quick—”

“You can’t go from evidence to contracts like—”

“Construction. Give me rescission remedies.”

I put my hands on my hips. He was making it hard, and I loved it. “Builder in breach. No remedy. Owner in breach. Builder gets market value of work done.”

He stepped toward me. “Land sale,” he said in a velvety, non-demanding tone.

“Payments less land value.”

He touched my elbows, pulling them toward him, so they weren’t impatient angles on my hips. “Sale of goods.”

I let my arms go around his waist. I wanted him right there, on a stack of boxes, breathing mildew and old air. I’d been with a few guys since Ireland, but I’d never felt so comfortable. Had he only been back in my life a day? Had it been just that morning when he knocked into me in the waiting room? I felt as though we’d picked up where we left off.

“Are we still in rescission?” I purred.

“You’re really cute when you’re buying time.”

“The contract is canceled and either party can sue for breach.”

I tilted my head up, breathing in his Drew/Indiana-ness. I could practically taste him.

“Not quite.” He spoke in breaths, his lips grazing my face. “Non-conforming goods need to be established before cancellation and injunctive relief.”

Our lips were going to touch on “injunctive.” I was on my toes, leaning up, my hands feeling the tightness at his waist.

But when thunder ripped through the air and rain suddenly pattered on the windows, I jumped too far back for him to reach.

“Crap,” I said.

Without a word, we scrambled to the two boxes we’d put outside. He put them into the trunk of his Audi rental, and we scrambled inside.

“Where are you staying?” I asked. “I mean... just...”

“They have me in a condo in Century City.”

The firm had apartments for visiting clients. They must use them for visiting attorneys as well.

“That’s across town from the office,” I stated the obvious. For clients, Century City made sense. For an employee, it was stupid.

“I get the real Los Angeles experience, traffic and all.” He started the car. “Where are you headed?”

“I live in Culver, but my car is downtown, and I have a family thing tonight in Malibu.”

“That’s a mess,” he said.

“I can get a cab Downtown.”

At rush hour, then I had to head west. I’d get to dinner with everyone after ten, and I wouldn’t see my brother. He was having trouble at school, and though it wasn’t my job to correct it, I was the only one he listened to.

Mostly, I didn’t want to get a cab downtown. I wasn’t done with Drew.

I spoke before I thought it out. “Are the partners taking you to dinner tonight?”

“That was last night.”

“Come to dinner at my family’s place then. You can ogle the size of it. We have a great cook, and I have seven siblings to play with. If you like kids, that is.”

“I love kids.”

Of course he did.

CHAPTER 23

1982 – FIVE WEEKS AFTER THE NIGHT OF THE QUAALUDE

The pregnancy test was in my bag, a big square lump on a heavier lug of books. I didn't usually carry all my things. We usually bought a separate set of textbooks for home, so all I had to carry were my notebooks. But I had to hide that stupid test. The nannies and housekeepers had started looking suspicious of my comings and goings, and I never knew when one of them was going to innocently (or not so innocently) slip or snoop.

The band had gone to Nashville to meet with a producer. Two weeks. Perfect. I was supposed to get my period in that time.

But I didn't.

On the day the boys were set to return from Nashville, I got a beep from the Palihood house number. I went up there with my backpack and without a plan. I didn't know what to tell them. I couldn't even take the test until the next morning, so what did I expect? What did I want? Should I even tell them I was all of nine days late for my period? I mean, so what? I'd been late before. My schedule was all screwed up. What was the point of worrying them into thinking I was going to ask them for anything besides the number of an abortion clinic?

The side door was unlocked, and I walked in unannounced as always. I thought of putting my bag by the door, but the elephant in the room had been zipped into it, so I kept it slung over my shoulder.

I was about to walk into the kitchen because the beer and cigarettes were there, but I felt a vibration in the floor. Standing still, I listened. Birds. The freeway. The ticking of the clock. Men talking behind walls. And music.

I went to the side of the house I'd only seen down to the studs.

The studio was sheetrocked and painted. Floors down. Gold record and band photos hanging in the hall. The window to the isolation booth sealed and egg-carton-shaped soundproofing on the walls.

Strat stood in front of the mic, copper-gold hair tied at the base of his neck, unleashing a note I couldn't hear. The door to the adjacent engineering room was ajar. I peered inside. Indy sat at the control panel while a goateed guy I'd seen around untangled some wires.

"Dude," Indy said into the mic, looking at Strat through the window.

"Dude," Strat said into his own mic. "Really?"

"Warm as the girl in the middle," Indy replied joyfully.

My heart twisted once, sharply. I reprimanded myself. It was a metaphor, for Chrissakes. I told myself I didn't care. I had no feelings on the matter one way or the other. I liked Indy and he was fun, but only until he wasn't.

I didn't need to be special to him.

How much longer are you going to tell yourself that?

I opened the door before I could answer myself.

Indy turned. Then the engineer. The man whose baby I could have been carrying jutted his chin toward me in greeting then turned back to the egg-carton-lined room.

"Give me the next verse, Stratty." He jotted something in a notebook, not even looking at me when he said, "Close the door, Cin."

I closed it quietly and gently placed my bag on the couch behind the board as if a sleeping monster were inside it.

Strat wore a white T-shirt and black jeans with a chain that made a U from his front belt loop to his back pocket. It swayed with him as he sang. His voice was magic. It had been too long since I'd heard him.

"I need to talk to you guys," I said.

“I think we need to kill the preamp,” Goatee said.

Indy moved a lever so slightly it could have been nothing at all. A low-level version of Strat’s voice filled the room as he hummed to himself near the mic.

“No,” Indy said, not even looking at me. “Make it work. We’re not cheaping out on vocals.”

“Sure, but...” a pentameter of technical terms I didn’t understand followed.

Indy parried with another jumble of engineering nonsense, and Goatee thrust with his own as he counted a bunch of bills he’d pulled from his front pocket. My request for an audience had been denied apparently.

In the booth, Strat jotted notes, tapped his foot, and hummed verses.

I’d never felt like an outsider with them before, but I’d never seen them working either. It was a bad time. I’d come back after I did the test. Or not. But either way, I was doing what I had to with or without their permission.

I picked up my bag. When the handles got taut from the weight, I had to exert a little more energy to pull the whole thing up, and I wished I could lean on someone. I wished I hadn’t always been so far removed, so cold, so non-demonstrative. I wished I was used to emotions because I was having them and I couldn’t define them. They were moving through me so quickly I couldn’t define them, much less cope with them.

I slung the bag over my shoulder and saw myself in the glass’s reflection. I was translucent. Overlaid onto Strat’s indifference.

I hated this. Needy. Childish. Whining. Grasping. Desperate. I saw myself from the outside. Out of control. Floundering. Hungry for validation. A few synonyms for “it’s going to be all right” wouldn’t cure me of the problem. Not even a little. So why did I want them so badly?

When I opened the door, Indy spun in his chair. “Didn’t you want something?”

“It can wait.”

I left, saving myself from myself. I could handle emptiness. I could handle solitude and isolation. This rush of neediness was going to kill me. If either one of them had started patting my head and saying he was going to help me/be there for me/whatever you want, baby, I would have told him to fuck off.

So when I heard Indy’s voice behind me, I was tempted to just keep walking down the hall. But the needy part won. I turned to at least tell him, “No worries. I’m good.” His posture, half in and half out of the engineering room, told me that would have been a welcome dismissal.

But I couldn’t. That hot bubbling mess inside me wouldn’t be silenced.

“You all right?” he asked.

I think I’m pregnant.

I’m sick in the morning.

“I’m fine. Welcome back.”

“Thanks.” He leaned back into the engineering room, and I took the opportunity to walk a few more steps down the hall, rescued and abandoned at the same time. “You coming back tonight?”

“Why?” I didn’t turn around, keeping him at my back.

“Why?”

I didn’t know how to answer. Didn’t know how to move or think. I only knew how to blurt out my problems.

Something inside me feels like turned soil.

And I’m late.

And I knew how to shut myself up. I barely knew how to breathe without feeling the tension between breath and words.

“Yeah,” I said. “Why?”

“Because we’re back, and people are coming over. What’s the problem, Cin?”

He wanted an honest fucking answer. He knew my fucking name, but he wouldn’t even fucking use it. Cin.

Cin, my ass. My fucking left tit. Taking my stupid stunt of a fake name and throwing it at me like a bucket of ice.

“You’re working. We’ll talk later.”

If I’d been able to just walk away, things might have been different, but we were young. I had to offer him one chance to give me what I needed. But no, that wasn’t to be. Indiana Andrew McCaffrey had to stake out his territory.

“Maybe.” He waved at me dismissively, and with that, the potential to have my needs met went down the shitter.

“What do you mean maybe?”

“People come over, and it gets hard to talk. So it’s cool.”

I threw myself down the hall toward him, the weight of my bag pushing me forward, finger extended. “It’s cool?”

He shrugged and looked back into the engineering room as if he was dying to get back in there. I’d never felt so alone in my entire life.

“Yeah.”

“Don’t you dare tell me you won’t make the time to talk to me. I’ve never asked you for a goddamn thing, you—”

“That’s fucking right.” His tone was a cinderblock wall, and I shriveled inside even as I kept my own wall high and hard. “Look, if you’re gonna turn crazy, you won’t be the fucking first.”

“What?”

“I’d be surprised. You didn’t seem like the type. But before we ‘talk,’ I’m going to pull out what we said the night we met. Feelings aren’t real, so we don’t bother. Right? You’re not getting crazy. Right?”

Crazy. The world and everyone in it was crazy. Because I had feelings. I didn’t know what they were or who they were even for. Maybe I had feelings for a way of life that was about to end.

“Look,” he said, rubbing his lower lip with his thumb. A little swipe of discomfort. “We’re really busy right now. There’s no time for this.”

Whatever my feelings were, Indy wasn’t going to help me sort them out, and fuck him. I didn’t need him or his help. He didn’t even know what to do with his own damned feelings.

“Better get back to work,” I sneered.

I took my crazy and went down the hall without looking back.

Fuck him seven ways to Sunday.

Fuck both of them.

CHAPTER 24

1994

The Audi cut through the rain like a machete, and Drew drove as if he lived in a place where it rained more than two months out of the year. I felt safe. Again.

“I saw you in *Rolling Stone*,” I said as if I was just trying to make conversation. I flipped through a black wallet of CDs. Doubtless a small fraction of what he had at home.

“That was such a joke.”

“Too redemptive?”

“I did half the drugs they said I did.”

“That’s still a lot.”

He smiled. “Yeah. There was plenty. It was the eighties. What can I tell you? I was a wreck. *Sound Brothers* was making a ton of money, and I was wrecked over Strat.”

I slid a disc from the sleeve. *Kentucky Killer*. The album that turned me into a groupie and got them the deal that financed the studio. The one with the masters in the trunk of the car.

“I’m sorry about that,” I said.

He shrugged and looked in the rearview before changing lanes as if he needed something to do with his hands and mind. “Yeah, thanks. I just... I didn’t know. After you were gone, we started fighting. Bad shit. Fistfights. I don’t know what was wrong with him. Or me. Maybe it was me. I think about it a lot. Was it all really my fault? I mean, he blamed me for letting you go. He said he wouldn’t have. So I shut down. I didn’t even want to look at him. I got very involved with the studio. He had the business head, and I kept just wanting to do shit my way.”

“You made the studio a real success.”

“I never felt like that without him. Feels like I’m treading water most days. He said the studio should be passive. It should run itself while we made music, and I just kept getting more and more involved in the day-to-day. I could barely show up to our own sessions, and Gary had a kid, so he was checked out. Strat just lost it. Went back to Nashville.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“It wasn’t. He had a bad heart. Congenital aortic valve something. If he knew, he might have decided to take too much heroin instead of amphetamines.”

“Was that supposed to be funny?”

“Yeah.”

“It was.”

I’d mourned Strat’s death. He’d died from only a slight overdose of uppers. His heart couldn’t take it. I’d thought about that too deeply, reading too much into a heart that couldn’t stand the exertion. I sought out details about his demise to avoid the sadness. I told myself he was a jerk, that he didn’t matter, that he was in my distant past. But it did matter. A haze followed me, because he was indeed my past. I’d owned that life, that past, those stories that built me, and it all went and died while I wasn’t looking.

“He cared about you,” Drew said, glancing at me before he put his eyes back on the freeway. “We went to meet you on Santa Monica and Vine. And that neighborhood...” He shook his head. “Of all the corners to pick. We didn’t know if you’d been dragged into an alley and murdered.”

I shot out a laugh at how close to the truth he was. “I’m sorry I flaked.”

“You didn’t flake. We went to your house—”

I sat ramrod straight, eyes wide, adrenaline flooding my veins. “You did not.”

“Did. We got a lawyer to find out where you lived, and we got ten different kinds of runaround. Then a guy with a gun and a badge opened the door. He flashed an order of protection and made threats. We

stopped coming around.”

“They never told me.”

Of course they hadn’t told me. I was indisposed and powerless.

“I’m sorry,” I said, looking at my open hands as if I was trying to set the past free. “I just couldn’t take it anymore. I…”

Deep breath.

This is important.

“I just needed to start over.”

“I was an asshole to you,” he said.

“You were fine. It was me. I was in over my head.”

“We figured you weren’t dead, so we just... well, we didn’t forget. I let it go, but I didn’t forget. Figured it was the way I’d talked to you the last time I saw you. Strat was pissed off. He was the one you called, and he insisted you sounded upset. I told him Cin didn’t get upset. Cin is together. She never lets her feelings get the better of her. But he swore up and down. He paid a detective to watch the house until the day he died.”

“Eight months after I flaked.”

“You didn’t flake.”

“How do you know?”

“I know you. If you needed to get away from us, I get it. That’s not flaking.”

I made a breath of a laugh. He knew me. Sure. I always did what I said. If I said “meet me at Santa Monica and Vine,” then I was going to get off the bus at Santa Monica and Vine with my smallest Louis Vuitton suitcase.

The rain pounded the windows, marbleizing them to opacity. The windshield wipers did nothing to break the stream. I gripped the edge of the leather seat because the red lights ahead of us got too big too fast.

Drew snapped the right blinker on to get off the freeway. It was miles too soon, but it was the only safe option.

He would have been a good father.

I covered my face with my hands. Did I steal that from him?

Note to self: “Not feeling” stuff doesn’t mean you’re not feeling it. Being unemotional and cold doesn’t mean you don’t have a pot full of emotions waiting to boil over. It means the heat hasn’t been turned up enough, and the pot just hasn’t been there long enough. It means the pot hasn’t reached capacity.

But it will.

And your heart will beat so fast and hard you’ll want to die. Your eyes will flush with tears, and your throat will close like a valve’s been turned. Regret will fill you on a cellular level until the very tips of your fingers tingle with self-loathing.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He parked the car and shut it off. “You didn’t make the rain. Just give it ten minutes.”

“No. I’m sorry I didn’t flake. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you what happened. I’m sorry I left you there. I’m just sorry for everything.”

“Margie? What’s happening?”

He put his arms around me, but I pushed him away violently. Once I told him, he would be sorry he’d ever touched me.

“I was pregnant.”

I could see the entire diameter of his blue eyes as he looked at me in surprise, jaw slack, expression otherwise empty. Was it surprise? Was I wrong in thinking he already knew? Or was that wishful thinking?

I swallowed putty, looked into the pouring rain, and ground my teeth until I could breathe enough to speak. “I was going to meet Strat and get an abortion because I didn’t want you to talk me out of it, and I was so damn mad at you. After I called, I tried to get to you. I climbed out of my bedroom window, but my

parents caught me in the driveway and sent me away.”

He shook his head, eyes narrowed as if I'd just dropped a bomb in his brain and he had to make sense of the pieces.

“Do not pass Go,” I continued. “Right to LAX. A fucking convent in Ireland. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I should have called when I got back. But I was fucked in the head, and I couldn't deal.”

He got a white handkerchief out of his pocket, and I snapped it away to wipe my eyes. It didn't even begin to do the job.

“Where's the baby?” he asked, pointing at the elephant in the room.

“Adopted.”

“Where?”

“Jesus, Indiana! How the fuck should I know?”

He looked out his side window, probably so he wouldn't have to look at me.

“My parents came to Ireland during my last trimester to set up the adoption, so the baby's probably there.”

Funny how I still thought of it as a baby. He or she had to be Jonathan's age already.

Drew looked back at me, all the surprise and distance gone.

“My mom was really pregnant too, which was just great because she hated me for getting knocked up at the same time. She had her baby in the hospital, then I had mine in the convent, and Dad just took it. I didn't even hear it cry. A week later, they took me home. Mom had post-partum. Dad acted like the whole thing had been a fun trip and the bad shit never happened. Which, you know, I'll admit that worked for me.”

The shadows of the rain fell on the curves of his beautiful face in an overlay of wrinkles and age. Yet he looked twenty again, an overwhelmed artist on the verge of a life of riches and fame. A kid with nothing but mistakes to make. He'd seen a lot. He'd lost his best friend. Faced the death of his father and the surrender of his mother. He'd been strong for his family even when all the perks and goodies of a life in the spotlight tempted him away.

And I hadn't given him a thought.

I'd been so wrapped up in my own problems for eleven years that I hadn't thought about what he would have wanted. Wasn't he as much a part of this as I was? Didn't he have the right to know? To claim what was his?

Well, there was that.

“It should have tried to find you. I was thinking about what was easy for me. And even when I saw you in the office... I was still thinking about myself. I'm sorry.”

I didn't want him to speak, but that was the problem, wasn't it? I'd never wanted him to speak. I'd wanted him to go away. In the front seat of his rented Audi, with the rain pounding the glass, that changed. I wanted to know what he thought. I'd suffer the slings and arrows he threw at me if he'd just say what was on his mind.

He opened his mouth to speak, and I'd admit I flinched a little.

I wanted him to like me, to want me, to love Cin again and learn to love Margie. I should have felt like a little whiney bitch for that, but I didn't. I didn't have the energy to berate myself for wanting to be wanted.

“And...” he started, and I braced myself, “who were you thinking about when you invited me to a family dinner?”

It was crazy to laugh, but I did. I wasn't used to having this fucked up soup in my guts. I was off balance from the pendulum of emotion. Walking on a lubed-up balance beam. Of course I fell, but at least I fell on the side of laughter. If I cried another tear, I was going to have to wring out his hankie.

“Me!” I said. “I wanted to spend time with you again, and I was totally thinking of myself. But you look different. And we can call you Drew and never even talk about what happened. They won't know.”

“But I'll know.”

I stopped in the middle of a lateral mood swing. Just froze.

He wasn't talking about the baby and whatever right he had or didn't think he had to it. No. His face wasn't hurt or victimized. It was rigid with rage.

"Don't pretend it's about me," I said.

"Why not?"

"Just don't." I was almost screaming. I sounded crazy. Drunk on *feelings*.

"It's about you."

"No, it's—"

"Did anyone stand up for you? All this time? Has anyone—"

I couldn't hear another word. I yanked the door handle. It slipped with a deep clack. I grunted and pulled it again, even as Drew reached over to close the door.

Neither the downpour nor the unknown neighborhood slowed me down. I didn't care about my work shoes or the cold rain that soaked my white shirt. I was sodden before I got three steps away from the car.

I didn't expect him to pull away and leave me there. I figured I'd grab a cab or find a payphone while he stayed in the car and followed me. Because who would run out into this shitstorm? What normal person would leave the car running, the headlights on, and jump into a fucking monsoon to grab my arm?

"Let me—"

"Shut up!" he shouted, already soaked, hair flat on his scalp, eyelashes webbed with water. His shirt stuck to him, translucent enough to reveal the treble clef over his heart. "For once, shut that mouth and listen. I never forgot you. Never. Not a day went by in that studio without me thinking about you. How you think. How you talk. How you felt when I was inside you."

"You shut up! You forgot me, and you should have."

"I didn't."

"I was nothing." I jabbed my finger at him. "I was a short-term habit."

He continued as if I hadn't even spoken, water dripping from the angles of his face, along his cheekbones and jaw, meeting at his chin and falling in a constant silver line. "When Strat died, I couldn't save him. I wanted you there. I needed you. As soon as you called him that night, I should have had the balls to go right to your house and get you. Now that I know what happened, I know it was the biggest mistake of my life. I'll always regret it."

"Then you're a fool."

"I am."

In the urban dark of the street, with only the headlights of the Audi illuminating the diagonal sketch marks of rain, I didn't see him move, but I tasted rain warmed by the heat of his mouth. He was too fast and was kissing me before I knew what was happening.

He kissed my breath away.

He kissed my defenses to dust.

His lips dared me to feel nothing.

He turned me from solid to liquid.

One hand cupped my chin, and the other pulled me close from the back of my neck, and fuck him fuck him fuck him because I put my hands on his chest again, to his shoulders, his neck, the back of his head. My fingers dug into his wet hair. I felt close to him again, as I had all the years before, when I held his heart in my hands and someone else threw it away.

"I'm not abandoning you again," he said between kisses, running his face over my cheek like the water that spilled over it.

"Don't be stupid."

"Please. Let me earn this."

I pushed him away. His right eye was crystalline in the headlamps, bathed in light and rain.

"You've lost it, Indiana."

"I have. Slowly. Since I saw you this morning."

My teeth chattered as I looked him up and down. I didn't know what to make of him. I didn't know what to feel.

"I used you," I said, speaking the truth to myself as well as him. "I was looking for bad things to do, and you were there. I used you to fuck myself up."

"I know." His treble clef heaved under the wet fabric, a scar from a dream he'd once had. The footprint of a thing he'd loved and lost.

"I can see right through your shirt," I said. "It's indecent."

He pulled me to him, and we ran back to the car. He opened the door for me, and I leaned over inside and popped open the driver's door. It had barely closed behind him when he stretched across the seat and kissed me again. I put my hand on his wet chest, and he put his up my skirt. I let him, wrangling my body around his, opening my legs for his touch.

"That's not the rain," he said, sliding a finger inside me.

"God, no," I groaned. "It's you."

He drew his knuckles over my clit. "Look at me. Open your eyes and look at me."

His beard was soaked to dark brown, and droplets of water clung to his lashes. His hair stuck to his forehead.

"You're beautiful," I whispered. Then as he rubbed me again, I groaned, driving my hips forward. "Take me."

I reached between his legs and felt him. He sucked a breath through his teeth.

"We're not done." He yanked his belt open. "I'm going to fuck you right here, right now. But it's not the last time. Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

I would have promised him beachfront property in Nevada, especially after he took his dick out.

I wiggled out of my underwear while he reached into his wallet for a condom. Good man. No need to make the same mistake twice. I swung my leg over him, positioning him under me.

He pressed the head of his cock at my entrance with one hand, and with the other, he took my jaw. "This is not the last time. Say you understand."

"I do. I get it. I swear."

Was I lying? Maybe. But he was pressed against me, and every nerve ending between my legs vibrated for it.

"Say it."

"This is not the last time."

He pushed me down, entering me slowly.

"Look at me," he whispered again.

"You feel so good. It's hard to keep my eyes open."

"Feel it, Margie. Feel it."

He pushed me onto him, driving down to the root, every inch a reminder of what we'd had and what we were—a reimagined beginning with a past that ended us.

CHAPTER 25

1983 AFTER IRELAND

Eighteen, give or take. Mostly take. I could get away with a lot because I looked and sounded like an adult, and in a lot of ways, I was. I didn't take shit, and I knew my own worth. That went a long way, but I was still as greedy as a child. I craved experiences. New things. Broken. Unraveled. Unwound. I could test the world. See what I could make anew.

I would have been a sociopath if I hadn't learned to give a shit when I got back from the cold stone convent in the old country. I'd eaten the shit sandwich I'd been fed, shed my rock groupie skin, and I acted like the oldest of eight.

The first time my mother put Jonathan into my arms, she looked nervous. She hadn't wanted me to touch him for the first week. Anyone else could, but not Margie. Maybe because he was the precious only boy of her eight children, but she handed him over as if I'd drop him or something. Or my irresponsible behavior would rub off on him. I didn't take it personally.

Post-partum wasn't properly diagnosed back then, so she was treated like a hysterical female, and I wasn't treated at all. I felt as if my guts had been ripped out and replaced with sawdust. I didn't eat. I didn't talk much. We were both in deep pain and acting as if nothing had ever gone awry.

Eventually I took Jonathan from the nurse while Mom napped. He was everything. He had a little tuft of red hair and crystal-blue eyes that would eventually turn green. I'd held just about all of my siblings, but there was something about Jonathan. And the smell. Baby smell wasn't new, but his was different. It was the scent of heaven and earth. He held my finger with his tiny hand, and it didn't feel as though he did it out of newborn reflex. His grip felt like a plea. A connection. A deal rubbed with the salt of the earth.

I was going to make it my business to be there for him. To make myself useful if not to my own child, then to the brother born at the same time. I pledged it to him.

I straightened out so quickly, my family got whiplash. I never spoke to Lynn or Yoni again. I didn't make friends, but I made a few appropriate acquaintances.

It wasn't even hard.

"Did you breastfeed any of us?" I asked as Mom popped the bottle from Jonathan's mouth.

He was three months old, and I was still acclimating to my new life. Or my old life, depending on how you looked at it. It was the life a normal person my age should be living, not the life of someone who'd been whisked away to a foreign country to be tutored by stiff Irish nuns so she could secretly give birth to a baby she would never hold.

"Heavens, no. Why would I do that?" Mom handed the baby to the nanny to burp.

Her name was Phyllis, and she held her arms out but looked at me. She and I had set a pattern. Mom left before the baby kicked up his milk, and as soon as she was gone, Phyllis handed him to me. I slung him over my shoulder and patted his back, pressing my cheek to him so I could get a whiff of his baby smell. Best in the world.

I knew I was making Jonathan a replacement for the baby they gave away, but I couldn't help it. He smelled so good.

"I'll protect you, little brother," I whispered then put his little hand up against my own as if swearing on a stack of Bibles. "I pledge it."

I studied and behaved. I was a model of good and right behavior. I won my parents' trust back by staying in, helping my sisters with their homework, and finding a deep well of ambition.

You might think I was somehow browbeaten into good behavior. That I resented it. That I lost a wild part of myself to meet the expectations of others.

But it didn't feel like that. I felt wonderful. I helped Carrie and Sheila with their homework while Dad

was off doing business and Mom was in her room. I wiped chocolate off Fiona's hands when she found the baker's cocoa in the back of the cabinet and ate the whole box.

I did everything but feed Jonathan. Mom insisted on feeding Jonathan until he started walking, then she abdicated, like with everything else. She was a figurehead, and oddly, I was okay with that. I loved her arm's-length parenting because she gave me room to fill my days with something meaningful to me.

Daddy was not an affectionate person, but after he spanked me for getting knocked up, he was never closer than half a room away. Even when I struggled in the back of the limo on the way to my flight to Ireland, he left the manhandling to an Italian bodyguard. He watched from the seats across with his jacket in his lap.

"One day," he'd said as Franco held me down, "one day you'll see this is for your own good."

I stuck my middle finger out at him.

"Who's the father?" he asked. "Who did this to you?"

I got my hand from under Franco's arm and stuck up my other middle finger.

"I'm going to find out."

All he'd have to do was dig around the groupie scene and he'd know, but he was so far removed from it, and I'd kept it so far away from my regular life, that I had hope he'd leave Strat and Indiana alone.

He sat next to me during the whole flight over. Just him, and he scared me. He checked me into the convent and left. They sent letters Sister Maureen made me answer. I said nice things, but I was shut down until he and Mom showed up three months before the baby was due.

"You look good," Mom had said. She was farther along than I was.

I felt gross being next to her like that. "So do you. How do you feel?"

"Better than ever." She smiled and rested her hand on her belly. She loved being pregnant. I didn't know how she felt about raising children, but she loved carrying them. "We found a family for your baby. They live here. It's a good home."

"Thank you."

I hadn't fought that part of it. I didn't want to be a mother at that point, and I had no choice anyway. I was sure they'd done all the diligence in the world.

"Your friends miss you. They come by to let us know."

"Who came?"

She rattled off a few girls I knew from the Suffragette Society and Jenn from the Chess Strategy Club, then she looked at Dad.

He sat in the corner with an ankle crossed over his knee, staring at me. The movement of his head was barely perceptible, but he gave her a definite no to whatever she was asking. Mom was a lion when it came to everything except Dad. So she acted as though no one else had come, smiling as if our family dynamic was as normal as peas and carrots.

I went into labor three days early.

Dad was there when I gave birth, not Mom. I hadn't expected him to be in the room. I tried to ignore him, and once the pain got really bad, I could pretend he wasn't there. The midwife handed him the baby still slimy with goop.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" I'd asked, trying to catch my breath.

He didn't answer. No one answered. Sister Maura just shushed me, and Dad took it away. By the time I delivered the placenta, I knew they'd never tell me a thing.

I'd flown home alone. My sisters had greeted me like a long-lost child. Even my mother had been overcome with happiness when I walked in the door.

Dad seemed cautious. He treated me as if I were a museum artifact behind a velvet rope.

When I got into Wellesley, he congratulated me with a handshake and a genuine smile, but he never touched me again.

I had to hang up a lot of my family duties when I went to Stanford Law, but I was always there. I called teachers when Fiona didn't understand her homework, chewed out Father Alfonso when he fire-and-

brimstoned Deirdre, and tried to keep Jonathan inside the lines as he proved, time after time, that he could push every boundary with a cocky smile.

By the time I was studying for my bar, I felt as if the eighties were behind me. My parents had done their best, and I had a good life ahead. Sometimes I even felt gratitude.

CHAPTER 26

1982 – THE NIGHT OF THE QUAALUDE

I became enamored with the taste and feel of his nipples. The odd red hairs on his chest next to the brown ones. Quaaludes made you horny and happy, and we laughed a lot. I was getting ready to let him fuck me again. It hurt in a different way when he touched me. I was sore. But the internal pain had left.

I laid back and bent my knees, swinging them, smoking a cigarette. The cheap quilt under me felt good. Soft. Warm. Made for my skin.

And him. He was good. Very good. Kissing between my tits and down my belly. He was going to do to me the thing the girls had done with Strat. He was going to taste me. I tucked the cigarette between my teeth and put my fingers in his hair, spreading my legs for him.

When the door opened, I looked to see who came in but didn't move otherwise. I didn't jump or act ashamed, and neither did Indy.

"Dude," Strat said.

"Dude." Indy propped himself up on his elbows. "You get rid of Hawk?"

"Yeah. Party's over." Strat leaned down, plucked the cigarette from my lips, and put it between his own. He had no shirt, and the musical notations across his body curved around his nipples in a way I wanted to taste. "Said he gave you a blue lude. Looks about right."

"Yeah. Blue."

He blew out smoke.

I looked down at Indy, and he looked back up at me with a wicked smile.

"Naughty," I purred, reading his mind. I turned back to Strat and stretched, elongating my body, luxuriating in my nudity. I knew it was the drugs, and I didn't care. "You gonna give that back?"

He put the cigarette back in my mouth, peering down at me, through me, making some kind of calculation. I inhaled the delicious nicotine without touching the cigarette. Just sucking. Then I jutted my jaw at Strat. He took the butt from me and stamped it out in the ashtray on the floor.

"You're both luded," Strat said.

"Yup," Indy said then turned back to my belly.

I patted the mattress, staring at Strat. His long copper-red hair fell on each side of his face, and his jaw was rough with a day and a half of growth.

"Don't be a stranger," I said.

Strat glanced at Indy, who looked back at him intently and said, "You heard the woman."

The singer hesitated, looking from Indy to me. I'd never seen him hesitate before.

"I know you want to," Indy said. "One less thing to fight over."

In the seconds that passed, those two men who had grown up together and sacrificed for one another had a conversation without words. There had been a pledge, I knew that. But what was happening now?

I waited for what felt like hours but was probably breaths, and put one hand in Indy's hair while holding out the other to Strat. "Come on. It'll be fun."

I didn't think about the role reversal until years later, when I read about his death in *Rolling Stone*. Even then I smiled. I could practically taste him.

"Do what you want," Indy said. "But I'm eating this pussy right now."

And he did.

He opened my folds, exposing my clit. Even that felt good, but when he laid his tongue on it, my neck arched.

"Oh, *God!*"

As if called by my prayer, Strat leaned next to the bed and kissed me. Not just kissed. He put his

tongue in my mouth and claimed me. Indy brought me to orgasm with his mouth while I cried out into Strat's, a conduit from man to man. I lay there gasping, wanting more.

"Yes," Indy said, kneeling.

Strat was over me, pants down, cock out. So fucking hard and straight, I had to reach for it.

"You sure, Cinny?"

"Yes." I stroked him. I didn't know what I was doing, but it couldn't have been that bad.

"I want your ass. I'll try to make it good for you."

"I know."

Indy pulled me up to my knees, and I kissed him.

"Say you're sure to me," he whispered. "It's a lot for your first time."

"I want it now."

Behind me, Strat kneeled on the mattress and stroked my body. I felt his erection on my lower back.

"What about you?" I asked Indy.

"Yeah. But, Cin. Margie. I'm crazy about you. This doesn't change that. I want to know you."

I didn't tell him I wasn't knowable because the ludes made me feel elated and open, with years ahead of me that were going to start with these two men, on this mattress—now.

"Okay."

He smiled then got me under the arms and threw me on my back. "This is gonna be fun."

I laughed, and the next minutes were spent in some kind of heaven. The two of them covered me with their mouths and hands. Strat put his fingers in my mouth and I sucked them, groaning for him while Indy sucked my nipples to exquisite pain.

"Wet, Cin. Make them wet."

I did, licking between his second and third finger.

Strat pulled them out. "Good. You ready?"

"Yes."

I didn't actually know what I was supposed to be ready for until he bent my knees so deeply, Indy had to get off my tits and my hips lifted off the mattress. I was completely exposed, and they looked at me. Both of them. Indy played with my cunt, and Strat rubbed my ass with his wet finger. They watched my face.

The finger pressed forward, and my asshole yielded. I felt it everywhere. My entire body reacted with a shudder, tightening around him at the same time as my clit engorged. Indy slid two fingers into my pussy and leaned down to kiss me. I took the kiss, ate it, moaned into it, even when Strat got two fingers in me, burying them inside.

"Going for three," Strat said a million miles away. "Relax."

I'd never been so relaxed in my life, but that third finger broke through the high with a shot of pain. I tightened.

Indy took his mouth off me and turned to Strat. "Lube, asshole."

Strat flicked his hand at the night table. The same one the girl with the luscious hips had opened. Indy opened the drawer and found the same bottle of baby oil. He handed it over.

Strat popped it open. "Open up."

I lifted my knees, and Indy leaned over me and spread me wide. Cold, dripping oil fell on me, and the two of them spread it around, inside, outside. Making sure I was slick and ready, talking like two lawyers making sure every t was crossed and i was dotted.

I felt like the center of the known universe, swirling a galaxy of pleasure between my legs.

"Guys," I groaned. "That's so nice. Please."

"She's ready," Strat said to his childhood friend. He scooted back until he was sitting against the wall, cock out like a flagpole.

Indy helped me up. "Okay, face me on your knees."

He maneuvered me until Strat was behind me and could get his hands on my waist.

“Open,” Strat said. “Pull it open.”

My ass cheeks were slick with oil, but I dug in and opened them as Strat put pressure on my hips to lower me.

“Slow,” Indy said.

“Slow, baby,” Strat said.

Indy kneeled in front of me, eyes still dilated black, biting his lower lip as I went down until I felt Strat’s dick against my ass. It seemed no different than the last barrier I’d broken that night, so I pushed down.

“Slow.” Indy demanded when he saw my face. “We have all night.”

It was different.

“Relax.” Strat reached around and gently rubbed my clit.

Between the baby oil and my body’s arousal, I was so wet that I didn’t feel the least bit sore, and the pleasure relaxed me. My ass opened a little, and I bore down until the head was in. I stopped. Gaped.

“Can you take it?” Indy asked.

“Yes.”

I got myself to a crouching position and lowered myself completely. Strat’s cock went in all the way, and I continued down, down, stretching, taking every inch inside me. A sharp breath shot out of me with a crack of pain, but I didn’t stop until he was rooted in my ass. Then I smiled, because I was stretched and full.

“So hot,” Indy muttered, stroking his own cock.

I raised myself, feeling the sensation against the walls of muscle, then I went down again.

“That’s it, baby,” Strat said from behind me. “Take it. Take it hard.”

“Indy?”

He took a deep breath and leaned forward. We shifted, realigned, and got my pussy right to take him. One hand on the wall behind us, one on my shoulder, he got his dick in.

It was a feeling I would never forget and one I never could repeat. All I had to do was stay still as they fucked me like two musicians with the same beat. One in, one out. Then both in at the same time.

Complete fullness. Stretched to my limit. Desired. Loved. Fucked endlessly everywhere. Both goddess and vessel.

“Touch yourself,” Strat said. Neither of them had a free hand in the balancing act.

I jammed my fingers between Indy and me. I let out a long groan when I was close, but it was taking longer than I thought. It was too much. The pleasure wouldn’t center where it needed to.

Indy put his nose astride mine and grunted into my cheek, exploding inside me.

I didn’t think it was physically possible to feel any more pleasure or another slice of sensation, but I did, gathering vibrations between my fingers.

“Come, baby,” Strat growled. “I want to feel it.”

Indy pulled out and leaned back. His dick was slick with me and still stiff. “I got it.”

He leaned down and flicked my clit with his tongue, then he sucked it hard as Strat pinched my nipples.

That was it.

As I screamed in pleasure, Strat pulled me down until he was deep inside me, and I came, ass pulsing around his cock.

“Ah, that’s it,” he groaned. “Fuck yes.”

My orgasm was barely over when he pulled me up then slammed me down. Three, four, five times, then he came into me.

I leaned forward into Indy’s arms, and we fell together, resting for fifteen minutes before we fell asleep in a heat of slick, euphoric flesh.

CHAPTER 27

1994

“I thought you were going to be the easy one,” I said. The rain had lightened to dime-sized splats and rushing veins on the windshield. The inside of the car smelled of salt water and sticky tar.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Drew asked, brushing his fingers through his hair as he drove. It had loosened from its stiff lawyer-do and fell in his face the way it used to.

I’d settled into a mellow trust with him. The same zone as I’d fallen into eleven years earlier. “Strat was like an animal in a jungle. You were comfortable. Accessible.”

“Accessible? That sounds a little demeaning.”

“Just a little? Shit. When that flew out of my mouth, my subconscious was going in for the kill.”

He smirked, elbow on the edge of the door, rubbing his thumb on his bottom lip. Had he done that before? At the Palihood house? I didn’t remember. He seemed pensive and maybe a little hurt. I felt protective of him, even if I was the one I was protecting him from.

“If it’s any comfort, you were the one who hurt me most.” I put my hand on his knee. He put his hand over mine and squeezed my fingers together. “After that night, when it was just us, I really started to like you.”

“That’s no comfort whatsoever.”

“Didn’t think so.”

The rain stopped as if God had flipped a switch. If it were daytime, the sun would have come out.

“I wasn’t out to hurt you,” he said. “I was out to not get hurt.”

“Get off here.” I pointed at the exit, holding my next thought until I knew he wasn’t going to drift on the slick road. “You know you don’t have a case. Your cellist.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Make a left here. And you knew I was working in the LA office.”

“Read it in the company newsletter. Fine print on the last page. New hires.”

“Martin Wright? Does he really think he was ripped off?”

“Every couple of weeks. Especially when he doesn’t take his meds.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. If I was being honest with myself, I’d known it all along. The case was built out of ice cubes and set on a frying pan. He didn’t have to come to Los Angeles for it either. He could have managed the whole thing with faxes. So why? I’d gotten easier to find. There were a few hundred TV channels and libraries had computers now.

Fuck it. He was a goddamn lawyer. He could have found me anytime.

“What do you want?” I asked.

His Adam’s apple bobbed down and back up with a deep swallow. He squeezed my fingers again. “Something came across my desk. I don’t do international cases, but I was helping an associate, and I saw your name.”

“House at the end of the block with the hedge and the gate. Where did you see my name?”

“It wasn’t yours. Your family’s.” He pulled up to the gate and stopped. The gate was closed, and outside his window sat a wet keypad waiting for my code. He put the car in park and shifted to face me. “I didn’t think it had anything to do with you. I came to LA to see if you’d thought of me at all. Strat had all the girls. I did all right, but...”

“But? What came across your desk?”

“You were different. Cin—sorry. Margie. I never stopped thinking about you. When I saw your name twice in a month, I had to do something. I should have sent an interoffice or something, but I didn’t want to freak you out.”

“This has been so much more successful.”

“Did you think about me? All that time? The baby—”

“No.”

He looked stricken. Or maybe confused. Then he tilted his head a little as if he didn't believe me. Fuck him. But gently and sweetly. Again.

“Between having the baby and crashing into you in the hall, I didn't think about you once.”

“Not once?”

“When I read about Strat dying, of course. Sometimes ‘Blue Valley’ comes on the radio. But otherwise, no. Not really. You haven't even existed to me.”

Behind him, a tiny light in the corner of the keypad went from orange to green. The camera was on. There was a disembodied *bleep* a second later.

“Enter my code, or security's going to be out here with an agenda.”

He rolled down the window.

“Sorry,” I said. “I'm just telling it like it is.”

“It's fine.” He stuck his hand out the window. If his posture and tone were any indication, it wasn't fine. Not at all. “What's the code?”

“My code. We each have our own.”

“Okay. What is it?” He looked at me expectantly, fingers poised an inch from the keypad.

I choked back a sob that nearly broke the speed barrier rushing up my throat. “Fifty-one-fifty.”

I pressed my lips together to hold it all back and squeezed my eyes shut until little bursts of light exploded in the darkness.

“Just press it,” I said, running my words together. “Just do it. I didn't forget you. I thought you didn't want me, and I was okay with that. I just took my lumps, but I think about you every day. Every time there's music anywhere. Jingles in commercials. Muzak in the elevator. You're there, and sometimes you're mocking me and sometimes you're holding me, but you're there. I didn't want you to know that. Ever.”

He squeezed my hand, flipped it on his knee, and put our palms together. I didn't open my eyes, just felt him there. Heard the clicks and beeps of the buttons. When I opened my eyes, the windshield was clear, but my vision was fogged.

Drew leaned over and ran his thumb under my eyes. I pushed him away and flipped out his hankie. He smiled. I sniffed as I wiped my face.

“It's okay,” he said. “It was a crazy time. We were both kids. And you had a lot on your plate. I should have been there for you.”

The gate creaked open. God, the last thing I wanted to deal with was my family.

“I don't know how I feel.”

“But you feel something.” He rolled up his window.

“Yeah.” I sniffed as he pulled forward.

“That was all I wanted to hear. Because I'd hate to think fucking in the front seat of a rental was our last time together.”

* * * *

Drew pulled around the circular drive and planted the Audi close to the front door. The stones were wet and glistening in the front lights. The fountain tinkled, and the spring flowers leaned against the direction of the wind. Cars lined up on each side of the drive, and the valet staff hung out under the eaves.

Harvey, our butler, ran out with a black umbrella and opened my door. “Good evening, Ms. Drazen. I'm afraid they started dinner without you.”

“Thanks. It's fine.”

“Watch your step.”

“It’s not raining anymore.” I indicated the umbrella.

“There’s mist.”

I’d grown up with this type of attention and found it was always best to let people do their jobs the best way they knew how.

Drew stood by the trunk of the car, trying to not look off-put by the butler and the huge span of the umbrella. But I knew better. Whenever a regular person saw the Malibu house and the staff, they had to hide their reaction.

I was about to tell Harvey that the fountain sounded louder than usual when Drew looked down. Water was pouring from the trunk.

“Crap,” I said, keeping it clean for Harvey. “Aren’t these things waterproof?”

Drew didn’t know how sensitive the butler was, so he cursed up a storm as he opened the trunk. Three inches of water sat at the bottom, soaking the bottoms of the banker’s boxes.

“We’d better bring them in,” I said then turned to Harvey. “Can you find us some dry boxes?”

“Indeed.”

I took his umbrella, and he dashed inside.

“Well, now your case against Moxie Zee is really dead,” I said.

“And to think I was betting my career on this fingerprinting technique.”

He picked up a box from the bottom. I held my arms out, and he placed it on them.

“Let’s go in the side door. Avoid everyone. This way.”

Drew took the second box and closed the trunk. “I was looking forward to meeting your family.”

“No, you weren’t. Trust me.”

I took him to the side of the house, through the five-car garage I rarely saw because we had a valet to move cars around, to the part of the house the eight of us hid out in. The real kitchen. Not the ones the caterers heated up stuff in, the one everyone could see. But the kitchen the cook and his staff used. We curled up in the pantries and cooled off in the walk-in fridge. Sheila had made herself an apprentice and actually learned to cook there.

“Margie!” Orry shouted with a thick French accent, a clump of his grey comb-over flying up as he jogged to me. It looked like a parking barrier going up and down. He’d been our family chef for as long as I could remember.

The kitchen was alive with shouts, flames, *chopchopchop* for the night’s dinner.

“Hey.” I turned my cheek to him so he could kiss it. “This is Drew. He...” I caught myself. I didn’t want to send the staff buzzing. “He works with me.”

“Nice to meet you. You’re not putting those on my butcher’s block.”

“I thought your bed would—”

“I’ll laugh in advance. You can go in the wine cellar. Shoo. Before Grady forgets the blue in black and blue. *Grady!*” Orry was off, shouting to his grill chef about the temperature of the sea bass. Dad was picky about his blacks and blues.

“You running a restaurant?” Drew asked, juggling the box to keep stuff from falling out the bottom.

“It’s Good Friday. Day of fasting and woe followed by gorging on fish. Come on.” I jerked my head toward a narrow, half-open door and headed for it. He followed.

The lights were already on, which was good because I didn’t have a free hand. We walked carefully down the creaky wood stairs to the cold, dry cellar, into the tasting room. It had only a few racks of seasonal wines that the sommelier decided should be consumed sooner rather than later, clean glasses, a refrigerator for cheese, and a metal table with stools. I put my box on the table, and Drew put his next to mine.

“Feel like a drink?” I said.

“Actually, yes.”

I picked up two glasses and a bottle at random while he unloaded a box, laying the masters out in a line. The labels had fallen off.

“Are they ruined?” I asked, popping the cork.

“Yes, but no one cares about Opus 33.” He found a file and opened it. Half-wet contracts. Runny-inked documentation. A package of bowstrings. “They must put away anything left in the studio. I had no idea they even cleaned the place. Ever.”

He slid the top off the second box. Deep breath. His history was soaked inside.

“Here.” I handed him his wine and held mine up for a toast. “To... I don’t know what.”

“To Stratford Gilliam. May he rest in fucking peace.”

We clinked glasses. I looked at him over the rim as I sipped the red nectar. It went right to my head.

Stratford Gilliam.

May he rest in peace.

CHAPTER 28

1982 – THE NIGHT OF THE QUAALUDE

Six hours before I crawled out from under Indy, I'd been a drug-free virgin. But in the early morning hours after Hawk got kicked out of the house and I fulfilled a fantasy I didn't know I had, I had a sore asshole and a sour feeling in my bones. I'd seen Lynn's grouchy ass after she was luded, and I empathized for the first time.

The Palihood house was dead quiet and lit only by the moon through the windows. I padded to the kitchen naked, bold in my crankiness. I wasn't doing that blue shit again. Feeling scrambled and rancid afterward wasn't worth the happy hornies. I could get horny on my own, thank you. And happy was pure bullshit anyway.

At least that was done. I didn't have a single virgin part of my body anymore.

I filled a glass with water and slogged it. Refilled. Drank. Refilled. Drank more slowly.

The pool lights were on under the perfectly flat bean shape. Maybe a swim would cheer me up. It wasn't until I got to the screen door that I saw the orange pin of a lit cigarette making an arc from Strat's mouth to the side of the couch.

"I hear you, Cin."

"How did you know it wasn't Indy?" I asked from behind the screen.

He arched his back and neck until he could see me. "He walks like a fucking elephant." He lay flat again. "You're naked."

I opened the door. "Yeah. My ass hurts."

"Bad?" He looked over the pool and dragged on his cigarette.

I took his pack off the table. "No. Just irritated." I sat and lit one.

"That can't happen again."

"Did I blow your mind?" I dropped his lighter on the table with a *clickclack*.

"That guy's like my brother. He cares about you. Really cares about you."

He had a towel over his waist, but the rest of him was bare. The musical staffs on his chest rippled. I hadn't tasted them. I hadn't done much of anything but received him. I felt cheated.

"And what about you?" I said.

"He and I have a deal."

"Oh yeah?"

"You're his."

"You flip a coin or something?" I said it without breathing, half joking, half too far on the wrong side of a lude to be anything but negative. I emptied my lungs, letting the nicotine rush make my hands tingle.

"Played a few hands."

"You serious?"

"He pulled a straight."

I leaned back on the couch. "You could have asked me."

He stretched his arm out to the ashtray. The muscles were given definition by the tattoo. What a gorgeous thing he was.

"Nah." He stamped his butt out with a flutter of orange embers. "We didn't want to fight."

"How do you explain your dick in my ass then?"

He shrugged. "One night."

I leaned on the arm of the outdoor couch and stuck my cigarette in my teeth. Fuck them. I wasn't a baseball card to be traded around. "Fuck you guys."

"You did." He got up and stood over me. The towel was gone, and his cock stood straight and hard

between us.

“One night,” I said. “Did you agree ahead of time?”

“If the situation came up, yeah. That was part of the agreement.”

“Fuck you twice.” My voice dripped with honey. I hadn’t intended it, but the sore feeling in my ass had abated, and the poor judgment of my cunt went live.

We regarded each other, above and below, half-drugged and young, looking for stupid excuses to do stupid things.

“You might get your chance. It’s still night.”

“For a few hours. Then, yeah, I’m his.”

He touched the inside of my knee. No pressure, just a touch. “Open your legs, Cin.”

I pulled my knees apart slowly. He kneeled on the couch and spread them, tilting forward to kiss me. He kissed like a man. As if he was marking territory with his tongue. I wrapped my arms around him.

Just once, I told myself. Just the once, I could trade them the way they’d traded me.

I let Strat take me. There was no other way to describe the way he held me down, pushed on my clit until I was close, then slowed down to keep me on the edge, kissing me tenderly right before I came and he exploded inside me.

Only then was I satisfied.

CHAPTER 29

1994

The wine was going to my head. It seemed as if Drew pulled the Bullets and Blood masters out with special reverence. I'd laid a towel out to soak up the water, and he placed the boxes on them gently.

I was going to have to tell him that the baby that had split us apart might not have been his. We'd been careless with our bodies then.

But when I saw him pull an envelope out of the box and I felt the bond that he'd had with his friend, I felt a real pull to tell him and a stronger pull to just bury it forever. Why bring it up? To what end would I risk hurting him with his friend's betrayal? I didn't fool myself into thinking I meant so much to him that my betrayal was equal to Strat's. The only thing I risked by telling the truth was damaging his memory of his best friend. I didn't want to turn that bond into a lie.

I was a coward. I owed him the truth.

"Drew. Indy... I—"

A young man's voice came from the top of the stairs, yelling in French. Orry shouted back. The door slammed. Feet scuffled along the wood, and a boy barreled into the room, shirt half untucked, ginger hair askew.

"What the—?"

"Jonathan," I said, noticing his frozen, terrified features.

"Margie. When did you get here?"

"This is Drew. He works with me."

They nodded at each other, practically grunting like apes. Little Jon was a man already, too tough for his own good.

"What's wrong?" I said. "You look like you just saw a ghost."

He swallowed. The kids came to the wine cellar when they needed to get away from the bullshit of the huge house. Sometimes to hide. Sometimes to sulk. I knew where to find Fiona during report cards' week, Leanne every twenty-eight days, Carrie whenever Dad was home.

"I'm all right." He started back upstairs.

Drew thumbed through an envelope.

"Wait," I said to Jonathan. "Try this."

I handed him my glass of wine. He was in fifth grade, but he was allowed to sip, and I wasn't ready to let him go back up to whatever was bothering him. He took the glass. Treating him like a grown-up worked, and he seemed calmer when he handed it back.

"It tastes fine," he said.

"Come in the storage room with me for a sec. I want to talk to you. Drew, do you mind?"

"It's fine." He looked up from a wet, runny nose for a second and locked eyes on Jonathan.

I thought nothing of it. Not Indy's slack jaw or the way his eyes went a millimeter wider. I just pulled my brother into the inner chamber and sat him on a case of ancient vintage.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

"Nothing."

"Jon."

"What?"

"Let's be efficient with our time. You're going to tell me. Might as well get it over with."

He pursed his lips, crossed his arms, jutted his jaw. I leaned on a low shelf and waited.

"You can't tell," he said.

"You know I won't."

“You need to really swear.”

Jesus. To be in grade school again. To make the big little and the little big. To think you had control when you didn't and adulthood was just childhood layered over with manners and privilege. When lies seemed like easy answers to uncomfortable truths.

“All right,” I said. “Let's do this. Let's take a pledge. We hold our hands up and swear anything we say is secret. When we put our hands down, we lock it closed and go back to normal.”

He thought about it for a second, then with a short nod he said, “Okay.”

“But there's another thing. We cannot lie. Not when the pledge is open.”

“Fine.”

I held my hand up, and he mirrored me.

“Pledge open,” I said. “What happened?”

He took a deep breath and looked at the corner of the room. “Kerry and I were outside when it started raining, and we got stuck in the pool house.”

Kerry was the daughter of one of Dad's associates. She was a year older than Jonathan and pretty smart.

“Go on.”

“We started doing stuff.”

Jesus Christ, use a condom.

He's not ready.

He glanced at me, tearing his attention from the corner for half a second, then planting it back. I didn't answer the glance or egg him on. I knew what was coming, more or less. Mom and Dad weren't very forthcoming about sex with the kids, thinking my early knowledge led to my early downfall.

He spit out the next line. “I think she broke it.”

“Broke what?” I knew the answer, but my mouth ran before my brain caught up.

He wouldn't say but pointed at his crotch with both hands.

Do. Not. Laugh. Do. Not. Laugh.

“What makes you think it's broken?”

“She touched it. It got... it got weird then...” He looked at the ceiling.

I had to finish for him. Putting him on the spot wasn't working. He was in fifth grade, and though he'd started getting big, he was still a child.

“It got hard then felt tickly then white stuff came out?”

His eyes went wide. “Yes.”

“It's not broken.”

“How do you know?”

“Aren't you and your friends talking about this amongst yourselves? Girls? Sex?”

“I didn't have sex with her!”

I waved it away. “I know. Okay. I'm just going to assure you, it's not broken. You're fine. But tomorrow, let me take you to lunch and I can tell you why. All right?”

He took a deep breath of reprieve. “Yes.”

“Until then, keep away from Kerry O'Neill.”

“All right.”

“Tuck your shirt in.”

He did it, jamming the shirttails into his waistband as if Daddy was in the other room. He took a step toward the doorway.

“Jon. Stop.”

“What?”

I put my hand up then down. “Close pledge.”

“Close pledge.”

We went back into the tasting room. Drew leaned on one of the benches, hair flopped over his face like

a rock star, shirt dry like a lawyer, with a manila envelope in one hand and a white rectangle in the other. He looked at it then Jonathan.

“What?” I said.

Drew just shook his head as Jonathan bolted up the stairs with barely a wave.

“Strat mailed stuff to Audio City. I don’t know why.” He put down the manila envelope. Old stamps. Crap handwriting. He laid out the contents. “A note for me, and pictures of when we were kids. He was... he was so hurt. He couldn’t show it because you were mine. But...” His voice drifted to silence.

“Drew?”

“When you left, he acted like it was nothing.” He pushed the runny letter toward me.

I couldn’t see much but my name, my real one, and phrases... *she was yours but... never wanted this... like a brother to me...*

“I knew about you and Strat. He told me in pledge,” Drew said.

“In Nashville.”

“Yes, but I—”

“That’s why you were such a dick when you got back.”

“I regret that.”

“I deserved it.”

He looked at the picture, shook it, pressed his lips together, and gave it to me as if it was the hardest thing he’d had to do in his life. I took it but kept my eyes on his. I had no idea what he could look so distressed about.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Just tell me what you see.”

I looked at the picture.

Two boys about twelve years old, arms over shoulders, a suburban sidewalk stretching behind them. I recognized young Drew McCaffrey by the flop of his hair and the shape of his eyes.

And the other boy? I recognized him. I knew who he was. He was Stratford Gilliam, a kid with only a few more years to live, but that wasn’t the kid I recognized. He looked like the three-dimensional kid had been transported from my house onto a two-dimensional surface.

I swallowed. None of this computed.

“It’s a coincidence,” I whispered.

Not unless Stratford Gilliam fucked your mother.

I couldn’t do the math in my head.

Twelve-year-old Strat was a clone of my brother, Jonathan.

No. The other way around. Jonathan looked exactly like Strat.

I looked up from the picture. Drew stood above me, confident and together as if he knew something I didn’t.

“Your family name came up in the Dublin office. Your baby’s adoptive family is suing your father for breach of contract.”

“I don’t understand.”

Don’t you?

“They never had your real name. I presume it was to protect you. It took that long to find him.”

“There would be two babies.”

“We checked the public records. Your mother’s eighth child was stillborn.”

I took a step back, covering my mouth so I wouldn’t scream. The calculus suddenly made sense. A sick fucking sense.

“I didn’t know what I’d find here,” Drew said. “But I didn’t think this. I thought it was simpler. Not until I saw—”

I didn’t hear anything else. Just my little brother’s—
son’s

—voice in my head as he spoke French with a perfect ear for tone. As I saw the lines of his body superimposed on Strat's—

his father's

—and the face which was unmistakably from the same gene pool.

I did the math with my senses. Heard the voice and saw the face. Smelled the new baby smell that seemed of my own body and knew, just knew, he was mine.

“I can't.” My breathing got choppy. I was shaking.

Drew grabbed my wrists. “Margie.”

“I can't tell him.”

“You don't—”

“Oh, God.”

“*Shh*. It's going to be all right.”

He tried to gather me in his arms, but I pushed him away and I ran. I flung myself up the narrow stairs into the chaos of the kitchen. How many people were in the ballroom? Fifty? A hundred?

“Margie?” Orry asked, a piece of raw fish in his thick hands.

Everyone in the kitchen was looking at me, sauté pans frozen mid-agitation, break knives up, colanders dripping starch-thickened water into drains.

I heard Drew clomp a couple of elephantine steps up from the cellar.

Cornered.

Your brother is your son.

I didn't even know what I was running from. I was a spider in a tub. I couldn't get up the sides. Couldn't get away, even on eight legs, from the glass bowl coming down.

“Margie?” Drew called.

A second had passed, and in that second, every feeling I was supposed to have in the past few decades dropped on me. I felt my shell break under the pressure as my insides got bigger than my outside, slowly giving way to hairline fractures. I couldn't do this here. I couldn't break with the kitchen staff staring and Drew climbing the stairs.

I ran out of the kitchen, following the map of my childhood.

Through the morning room, the library, the kids' playroom, and the breakfast room to the back deck. I threw myself down the wooden stairs to the beach where I almost collapsed on the cold sand. I got my feet under me and ran toward the wall of sound and water. The horizon. The darkness on the outskirts of the lights of civilization, where the water flattened the land.

I fell with my knees in the water and the rush of the tide in my ears. I stayed there and wept. I wept for what I'd done to sweet Drew. For acting as though Strat had no feelings. For my son who I was never, ever going to hurt by telling. For my misguided parents who had lost a baby and taken mine into their hearts.

The lip of the next wave reached me, soaking my calves and the top of my head. I wasn't mature enough for any of this. No one was. But I didn't cry for myself. I cried for everyone I'd hurt.

The water got louder than I thought possible, blowing at my ears so much that my lungs felt the pain, and the earth went out from under me. I spun in space, clawed the wet sand, tasted rough salt and foam. The sea wrapped around me like a vise, yanking me against it, pulling me to the air, where Drew had me in his arms.

He put me on the sand, and his voice became the sense inside the ocean's chaos. “Margie?”

He was cloudy and grey. My eyes couldn't focus. My chest couldn't hold my lungs, and I coughed. Sucked in a breath. Was I drowning or crying so hard I couldn't breathe?

His hands on my cheeks.

“Talk to me,” he said.

“I don't know what to do.”

“I know.”

“I want to claw my heart out of my chest.”

I realized I was gripping the front of my shirt as if I meant to literally claw through skin and bone.

He took my hands, leaning over. "It's all right. Margie. Can you hear me?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I was young. I put you in a terrible position."

"No. Don't you dare. Don't you ever blame yourself. Ever. I was the one to blame. I should have known better."

"I never admitted I loved you."

"Neither did I."

"I was scared."

"I don't want you to be scared. Not ever again."

I reached for him, and he held me on the beach. I was cold, but I wasn't. I was hurt, but I was healed. I was alone, but no, I wasn't. Not at all. I pressed my face to his neck and let him encircle me so tightly I thought he'd break me.

"I'm so sorry," he said.

I couldn't see his face in the embrace, but mine was scrunched with the push of sobs.

"I didn't tell you what I knew the minute I came to LA. I didn't know what I was walking into. I was afraid you'd shut down. I was afraid I'd still have feelings for you. And I do, Margie. I do."

I nodded.

"I know you just got blindsided tonight."

I choked out a laugh. We loosened our hold on each other until we were face to face. I brushed the sand from his cheek.

"Blindsided," I said. "Good word."

"I had no idea. I want you to know. I had pieces but didn't know the puzzle."

I nodded. "No one would believe the truth."

"What should we do?"

I knew he'd asked a broad question. He was talking about us, the world, the firm, my family, our past, our future. But I couldn't think past the tide of feelings. They may have gone back out to sea for the moment, but they'd be back. If I knew anything about emotions (and I didn't know a damn thing but this), they'd be back.

"Let's slip around the side and go to my place," I said.

"You've got a crappy track record of sneaking out of here."

"This time I have you with me."

He smiled and shifted a strand of hair from my face. "You do. You have me."

He kissed me with the passion of a promise. We stood and walked off the beach together.

CHAPTER 30

1994

Kentucky. More than halfway to New York.

I didn't dig graveyard scenes or talking to guys who weren't really there. I didn't understand putting flowers down for a dead guy who hadn't seemed to like them when he was alive. The young groupie hated downer shit, and the jaded law clerk—no, lawyer—didn't have the time.

And there was still the whole issue of feelings.

I told Drew when he opened the car door for me, "Doing something for the express purpose of making yourself feel sad is fake. The thing is fake, and the feeling is fake."

"The lawyer doth protest too much."

He held his hand out for me, and I took it, letting him pull me out of the car. I didn't need help, but he liked helping. Didn't take me long to figure that out, and who was I to refuse him his pleasure?

He'd given me too much in the past six months. He'd stood by my decision to let Jonathan stay my brother, to let my parents think I knew nothing about their loss. Though my father had masterminded the entire fairytale, his scheme to keep his grandson in the family was meant to protect my mother.

I couldn't refuse my father that, but mostly, I remained silent to protect my son, Jonathan. I'd die with that secret. I'd sew my own mouth shut before letting it pass my lips.

The only other person who knew was the man holding the flowers in the parking lot of a Kentucky cemetery.

* * * *

The little notes all over my house were long gone.

"I'll end you," I whispered to Drew one night, wrapped in sheets and darkness, my voice shredded from crying his name too many times.

He kissed me. I could taste my pussy on his face.

"You always threaten me before you fall asleep."

That was when the worry swept in. The worry that my family would be upended. That my brother would lose his mind. That my mother would go off the deep end. And my father, ever unpredictable, would hurt the messenger if the messenger wasn't me.

"You're the only one who knows." I touched his face in the dark. "I trust you. But I will end you."

He pinned my hands over my head. "I'll end you too."

We'd had this discussion a hundred times. In bed, over dinner, in earnestness and in jest. "I'll end you" wasn't a threat. Not really. It was a way of telling him how deeply I trusted him.

"Not if I end you first," I said, pushing my hips against him.

"How are you going to do that, Cinnie-sin-sin?"

"Test me."

He let my hands go and wrapped himself around me. "Never."

"Smart guy."

He didn't move and barely paused. "Come back to New York with me. I can't live without you. The city feels like a tomb."

I sighed. We'd been long distance for too many months. "Speaking of testing... I'm sitting for the bar in February."

He got up on his elbows, eyes wide and blue, shocked and delighted. I'd waited to tell him so I could drink in that expression.

“The New York State Bar?” he asked.

“No, asshole, the old man’s bar on Seventh and B. Of course the New York State Bar.”

He was off me like a shot, sitting straight, suddenly awake. “You have to study. Have you been studying? We have to get on it.”

“Relax. It’s easy.”

He scooped up my entire body and covered it in happy kisses.

I hadn’t forgotten what had brought us together, but it was all drowned out by a feeling of safety and joy. I had to admit, as feelings went, those were pretty good.

* * * *

The parking lot of the Kentucky cemetery was empty but for a few beat-up trucks. Our shiny black Audi was the brightest object for miles. Drew had parked it in the middle of the lot, away from the wooden poles poking out from the earth at odd angles. The rusted chains between them were shaped like kudzu-wrapped smiles, one after the other on the edge of the rectangle—smile, smile, smile. The sky was the color of the asphalt, and the freight train clacking at the river’s edge lumbered slowly, as if showing off its eternal length like a peacock showing off his blues.

I’d passed the New York bar six months after passing the California bar. I threatened to rack up forty-eight more states for fun, and Drew threatened to tie me to the bed.

That had worked out well.

Everything had worked out well. I was leaving. Maybe for a few years, maybe for good, but I was going. I never imagined I’d leave Los Angeles, but the thought of such freedom made me feel silly and lighthearted.

Me. Margaret Drazen.

I got goofy in the weeks before we finally left. Daddy hadn’t been happy when we told him, and he eyed Drew as if maybe he remembered him from twelve years before, when a young man had shown up at the door asking for his oldest daughter.

But, you know, tough shit.

When Drew insisted we take 70 (apparently, I wasn’t supposed to say *the* 70. Just 70 without the article), I didn’t think anything of it. But he swung off the interstate and went south into Kentucky.

“Six-oh-six E-Y-E-B-R-O-W,” I said from the passenger seat.

He glanced over. “I need to.”

“I know.”

We stopped at a light and he put his hand over mine. “I went to the funeral, but I didn’t visit the... you know. The thing.” He looked away.

“There’s a florist up ahead. You don’t want to show up empty-handed.”

He’d bought a bunch of yellow flowers because they looked fresher than any of the others. Stillness shrouded us on the way to the cemetery. I pressed my hand on his, rubbing the rough patch on his fingertip where guitar strings had calloused the skin.

I took his hand again in the parking lot, and we walked down the gravel path, counting lanes and ways against our printed map.

We found the grave exactly where it was supposed to be. Just another stitch in the houndstooth pattern of grey stones on the grassy hill. It said what it was supposed to say. His name. The relevant dates. Where the others had their defining roles—Father, Wife, Mother, Son, Baby—Stratford Gilliam had a clef like the one on his neck, short five-line staff and a quarter note tucked between the two lowest lines.

“I feel stupid,” he said. “It’s just a rock and dirt.”

“Yeah. It’s stupid.”

That was why we were together. We shared a cold, calculating cynicism. We were immune to sentiment.

“I like the musical note,” I said. “It’s cute.”

“I picked it. I drew it for his dad and faxed it over.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s...” He swallowed hard. “It’s F. The note.” He blinked. Smiled with his lips tight in a thin line. “It’s so dumb.” His voice cracked.

“I bet.”

He looked away from the grave and shut his eyes. “I picked F for...” He shook his head, shot a little laugh that was sticky with sadness. “Friend. I needed it to be F for friend. Like I was in kindergarten.”

I put my hand on his cheek, thumb under his eye, ready to catch the tears that I knew were coming. “I’m embarrassed for you.”

He opened his eyes. So blue. Bluer than the cloud-masked sky that day. He wasn’t the man I’d met so long ago. The musician on the edge of fame. So close to the dream. So close he could save the world with it.

But he was. That man was still in him. Sometimes I forgot about that twenty-year-old with the potential he had a lifetime to fulfill.

He laid the flowers down. I rubbed his guitar callouses as we walked back to the car.

“You should play music again,” I said.

“No.”

“You’re not doing him any favors.”

“It’s not about Strat.”

That was a lie, but I couldn’t prove it.

“You’re right. The world is better off without you making music.”

He laughed a little and wrapped his arm around my neck, pulling me close and kissing the top of my head.

“I mean it,” I said. “You’re sexy with a guitar. Chicks dig it.”

“You sure you could stand the competition?”

“Have you met me? I don’t have competition.” I walked backward in front of him, each of my hands in his. “You don’t have to be a rock star. Just write some songs. See how it sounds. You might like it.” I bit my lower lip. “I might like it. I could be your groupie all over again. I’ll let you fuck me if you play.”

He pulled me to him. “You’re going to let me fuck you whether I play or not.”

“I hear South Dakota has the easiest bar exam in the country.”

“I’m not moving to South Dakota.”

“Then you better get that guitar out, Indiana McCaffrey.”

“You’re threatening me,” he growled with a smile. “You know what that does to me.”

“What?” I reached between his legs, and we laughed.

I ran back to the car, and he chased me, pinning me to the driver’s side door with his kiss. I pushed my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer. I wanted to crawl inside him and live there forever.

He ripped his face away from mine long enough to speak. “I love you, Cinnamon. You’re too precocious. Too smart. Too much of a pain in the ass, and I love you.”

“Even in South Dakota?”

“I’ll play again!” He laughed. “I’ll play if you love me.”

“You bet your ass I love you.”

“Case closed.” He kissed me again, pushing me hard against the car with the force of his erection pressed against me.

I groaned into his mouth.

“There was a hotel behind that florist.” He spoke in gasps. “Wanna go make the bed squeak?”

“Yes.”

We kissed again with an urgency that defied logic, as it should.

The freight train finally lumbered away, the bell on the last car dinging in victory. On the other side of

the tracks, the rolling hills dissolved into infinity, and we drove right into it.

THE END

ABOUT CD REISS

CD Reiss is a USA Today and Amazon bestseller. She still has to chop wood and carry water, which was buried in the fine print. Her lawyer is working it out with God but in the meantime, if you call and she doesn't pick up, she's at the well, hauling buckets.

Born in New York City, she moved to Hollywood, California to get her master's degree in screenwriting from USC. In case you want to know, that went nowhere, but it did give her a big enough ego to try her hand at books.

She's been nicknamed the "Shakespeare of Smut," which is flattering enough for her to put it in a bio, but embarrassing enough for her not to tell her husband, or he might think she's some sort of braggart who's too good to chop a cord of wood.

If you meet her in person, you should call her Christine.

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Forbidden

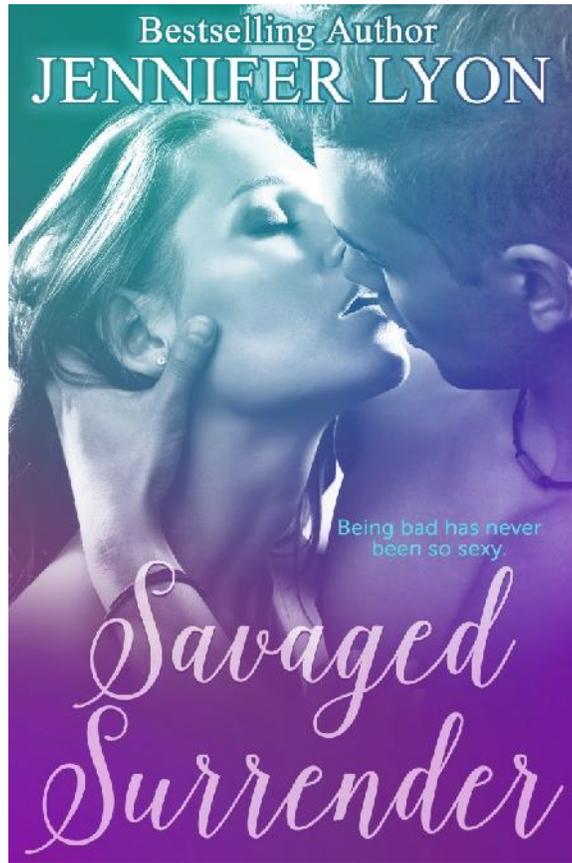
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SAVAGED SURRENDER

By Jennifer Lyon



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CHAPTER 1

For a few hours Ethan Hunt was living the dream by cooking in the kitchen of Stilts, the newest upscale restaurant that stretched out on pilings over the bay in San Diego, California. Surrounded by gleaming stainless-steel worktables, industrial stoves, wicked-sharp knives and the drone of voices yelling out directions, he got to work with the one thing he loved most in the world—food. All under the watchful eye of Chef Zane.

The frenetic yet focused energy in the kitchen was similar to being in the gym back when he'd trained to be a mixed martial arts fighter. That was before he'd fucked up so royally that he destroyed his reputation, his ability to fight professionally ever again, damn near ruined his health and earned a pile of debt as deep as the sea.

"How's this?" His assistant for the day held up a pan.

He glanced over and couldn't bite back his grin. Ana Kendall was a mess. Her dark-rimmed super-cool glasses were askew on her face, dark-blond hair scraped back into a ponytail, and her white apron was covered in...hell, what was that? She must have spilled virtually every sauce in the kitchen on herself. Knowing her, she'd managed to taste all of them in the process. But she proudly held up the pan of crusty rolls he'd had her hollow out to toast for his goat cheese bruschetta.

"Perfect." He'd fix the uneven rolls when she got distracted by something else.

Chef Zane snorted behind them.

Ana shot him a look over her shoulder. "Still want that premium suite at Petco Park?"

The man's judgmental scowl morphed into a contrite expression. "Best work I've ever seen."

She nodded. "Thought so."

Ethan narrowed his eyes. "You offered him your dad's suite at Petco Park?" In trade for Ethan's chance to cook with Zane? Her dad had passed away suddenly less than two months ago. The shock and grief had rocked her, although in typical Ana fashion she was bouncing back quickly. But this? Her dad, a former professional baseball player, had prepaid for a suite at Petco Park baseball stadium for several of the Padres' home games. She was giving that away? "Ana—"

She cut him off with, "I need to change clothes."

Right, not the time to bring it up. Whatever she'd done to get Ethan this chance to cook with one of the best chefs in San Diego, he couldn't alter it now. Nor did he want to upset her in front of Zane and the staff by talking about her dad. He focused on her comment. "Why change? It's just us." He was cooking dinner for the two of them, and he didn't care if she wore shorts and a T-shirt. "Take your apron off and you'll be fine. Oh, and you might want to wash off the..." he reached up, rubbing his thumb over the smudge on her smooth cheek, "...soy sauce?"

Her brown eyes sparked, and a grin curved her mouth. "Chocolate. While you made the potatoes, Zane let me taste some desserts."

Figures. Ana's genuine friendliness and curiosity attracted people, and Zane was no different. Of course he wanted to show off his kitchen to the pretty girl. "You're supposed to be my assistant, little traitor."

God, he was going to miss her. Over the last few months, she'd become his closest friend. He could talk to her about anything. Well, almost anything; some subjects were off-limits. She didn't see the ugliness in him, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Ana sighed. "I'll make it up to you by eating the food you cook." Raising her eyebrows, she added, "Even if it tastes awful."

Her smart mouth amused the hell out of him. He leaned down, his face close to hers. "You'll eat it and love every mouthful." She always tasted every single dish he attempted. Ana was pretty fearless when it

came to food and anything athletic.

Challenge gleamed in her eyes. “Or what?”

“No dessert.”

Outrage yanked up her shoulders and puffed out her chest. “You can’t do that. I have connections.” She looked at Zane for help.

Ethan stepped in front of the man, cutting off her view. He easily had a foot in height and a hundred pounds on the little fireball. Not that he could intimidate her; she’d figured out quickly he’d never hurt her.

“I’m the chef tonight. I decide if you get dessert.” Oh yeah, he loved taunting her.

“Is that right?” Ana’s mouth quirked. “FYI, Chef Ego, I have frosted sugar cookies at home. I was going to be nice and send them with you to eat on your flight tomorrow. But you continue irritating me, and I’m going to keep them for myself.” She turned and flounced out, her hips twitching in her shorts.

Ethan yanked his gaze away from her ass. Nope, not looking. *Friends*. They were friends. Ana wasn’t some chick he’d bang and never think about again.

“Damn, she’s cute.”

Ice slid into his veins at Zane’s comment. The man had to be a decade older than Ethan’s twenty-two years. “Get your eyes off her ass. She’s too young for you. Still in college.” He didn’t care if Zane was the toast of San Diego’s culinary culture and becoming a cooking celebrity, he wasn’t good enough for Ana.

The man rolled his eyes in his signature dramatic fashion. “I wasn’t the one staring at her ass.”

A guilty flush steamed his skin and irritated his conscience. *Off limits. Ana is off limits.*

“Are you two dating?” Zane asked.

“We’re friends. I’m leaving town tomorrow.”

“Right, she mentioned that. But...” Zane’s attention drifted to the door, and his brows drew together. “She went to a lot of trouble to make a special evening for the two of you. I don’t normally allow anyone in here to cook other than my staff, but she swore you have some cooking skills and won’t annoy the shit out of me.”

An odd sensation raced down Ethan’s spine. Ana had given him friendship when most people avoided him after the news exploded that the up-and-coming MMA fighter had had a heart attack from steroid use at twenty-one years old. Called him a cheater, an ungrateful thug, a loser, a dangerous jerk...

And he was all those things. Every one of them. But sweet and sassy Ana Kendall befriended him and stubbornly defended him.

She was his sunshine. He’d been in a pit of black despair before she’d decided they’d be friends. And tonight she’d given him an opportunity to experience what it’d be like to achieve his dream of becoming a chef someday.

Zane went on, “That girl believes in you, man. It’s more than friendship for her.”

“It’s not like that between Ana and me.” He and Ana had agreed they were just friends. Ethan left tomorrow to join the protection and security team for the rock band *Savaged Illusions*’s yearlong world tour. He wasn’t sure he’d ever come back.

Probably not. His notoriety here in San Diego was another stain on him.

“Zane, got a problem,” one of the other cooks called out.

“Be right there.” The chef shot a look at Ethan. “Never seen any girl go to so much trouble for a *friend*. Might want to make sure you’re both on the same page before you leave tomorrow. Because that girl? *Special*.” He stalked off.

Special. Exactly. That was the reason he refused to feel anything more for her. He wouldn’t be able bear the look in her eyes if she found out about his past. Sure, she knew he’d been a runaway living on the streets. But she didn’t know what he’d done to eat. The old shame slithered and mocked, the taunting female words echoing in his memory. “*Once a whore, always a whore.*”

He squeezed his eyes shut and breathed to control the rage that had once driven him. He knew what he was—dirty. No decent woman would want him to touch her. Not in public, anyway. And most definitely not Ana. The girl was too damned good for him. He’d known it the second he’d seen her in *Sugar Dancer*

Bakery where she worked helping customers, taking extra time with the lonely older folks, making kids smile and just being Ana.

Then she'd turned all that sweet attention on him, and he'd been like everyone else who came into contact with Ana—helpless to resist her. So he'd compromised and walked the line. Friends. He wouldn't cross it.

They were fine. And tonight, he was cooking the best meal ever so they could enjoy their last night of companionship before he moved on to his new job. With renewed determination, he set about finishing the meal. He poured all his passion into the task, plating the crusted ahi and grilled sliced steak, potato and bacon au gratin, caramelized Brussels sprouts and the goat cheese bruschetta.

He took it all to a table against the glass wall of the open-air deck, surrounded by the bay glistening from the setting sun. It had to be perfect. His original idea was to bring Ana here for dinner, but she'd hijacked his plan, arranging for him to cook with Chef Zane. Now he wanted to give her the most delicious meal he'd ever prepared.

Something she'd remember when she thought of him, of their friendsh—

“Ethan.”

Ah, there she was. After arranging the plates, he turned and froze.

Holy shit. Ana's hair fell in sultry waves around her face, and an electric-blue dress wrapped around her lithe curves. The hem ended midthigh, leaving too damned much of her tanned and toned legs bare, right down to her silver strappy heels.

His breath locked in his chest, and a buzzing filled his head. *Look away. Stop ogling her.*

But he couldn't stop. His control was taking a hell of a beat down. It wasn't just the dress—Ana was hot no matter what she wore. Nope, what blew his restraint out of the water was that Ana had taken off her glasses.

Her black-framed spectacles shouted *good girl* to him, and were a visual reminder that she was smart, sexy and way out of his league.

Unable to help it, he demanded, “Where the hell are your glasses?”

* * * *

Okay, that growling reaction wasn't exactly what Ana had hoped for. “I'm wearing my contacts.” Zane had let her use his office and private bathroom to clean up and change. She'd meant to dazzle Ethan into yanking her out of the friend zone and into his arms.

He didn't appear dazzled. The light from the sinking sun caught the golden hues in Ethan's blond hair and highlighted the harsh lines of his strong cheekbones and rigid jaw. His blue eyes darkened as he glared at her. Backed up by powerful muscles packed into his six-foot-five frame, his stare alone was usually enough to stop huge men in their tracks.

But Ana wasn't a man, and she was damned tired of waiting for Ethan to pull his head out of his ass. He thought he was ignoring the attraction between them for her own good.

Screw that.

She wanted him to get on that plane in the morning and go do the job. How could she not support his goals? Of course she did. The same way he supported her goal to earn her degree and even teased her that one day she wouldn't just work for Sugar Dancer Bakery, but she'd be part owner with her boss and friend, Kat. He wasn't wrong. She'd make herself so indispensable to her boss, Kat would beg her to be a bigger part of the company. That was how Ana did everything, full-on and making herself too valuable to ignore.

But before he left, she wanted to show him he had a reason to come back—her. Once the band's world tour ended and Ana had her degree, they could give a relationship between them a chance.

“Why?”

His sharp question cut into her spinning thoughts. “Why what?”

Ethan regarded her for a beat, then grabbed a chair and pulled it out. “Sit.”

Ana strolled over and settled into the seat. She carefully spread the napkin over her lap, aware of Ethan standing at her right shoulder.

Dropping his hand on the table by her filled plate, he leaned down, caging her in. “Why are you wearing contacts?” His gaze tracked over her bare throat and shoulders before his jaw tightened. “And that dress?”

She tilted her chin up. “To remind you I’m a grown woman.” Oh look, he doubled down on his glare by adding a squint that made him appear even more lethal and totally terrifying. Or it would be if she didn’t know for a fact that he’d never hurt her. She pulled out her perkiest smile. “Is it working?”

“This isn’t a date.” His jaw worked as he enunciated each word. “Just in case you’re confused.”

Heat rolled off him, along with the scent of food and pure, clean male. She loved Ethan’s competitiveness, his fierce determination to pay off his debts and make his own way in the world. His quick humor and patience also appealed to her. But it was the slightly dangerous glint in his eyes that sparked erotic shivers in her belly, and a heated desire to challenge him. It was the sexualized version of the same drive that had her trying to beat him on their bikes and playing video games.

“Well then, since you picked me up and drove me here—” because Ethan was insanely protective and had insisted, going so far as to borrow a car since he’d sold his, “—should I get a ride home with someone else? I could ask Chef Zane.” She worked some real evil into her grin. “Then we can be sure it’s not a date.”

His mouth twitched. “Smartass.” He took his seat across from her, then poured some wine in their glasses.

“In a hot blue dress,” she added, and sampled a small sip of her wine. She was still acquiring the taste, but she didn’t think her beloved orange soda would really pair well with dinner. “You could be a little threatened that I might pick up another man.”

Setting his glass down, he lowered his chin. “Try it and I’ll toss your ass in the car and take you home. Now.”

His words hung there, tempting the hell out of her. What was wrong with her tonight? But she knew—she couldn’t bear the idea of losing Ethan. It just really hadn’t hit home until the last few days that he was leaving. “That’s kidnapping.”

“And? Think there’s a law I wouldn’t break to make sure you’re safe? Zane’s a good chef, but that doesn’t make him good enough for you, sunshine.”

Her pulse skittered up, and flutters winged around her belly. Part of her wanted to surge up and run toward the kitchen just to test him on that. But since she wasn’t two years old, she controlled the impulse and teased him instead. “However will I protect myself once you’re gone? I’ll be bored and probably date all kinds of nefarious bad boys.” She broke off a small piece of bruschetta and popped it into her mouth. The warm bite of bread topped with bright tomatoes, spices and a crumble of goat cheese made her moan.

He reached for his water glass. “Have you lost your mind? You’re not dating bad boys.”

She fought a laugh at the ridiculous order and dug into her ahi. So good, it practically melted on her tongue. “You’re right, maybe it’s better to skip dating and just hook up.”

Ethan choked on his drink and slapped the glass down. “Hell, I deserved that. I can’t tell you who to date, I just...”

She leaned toward him, desperate to hear his answer. Did he feel that sick sting she did when she thought of him with other women? “What?”

His jaw tightened. “Let’s talk about something else. How’s your dinner?”

She wasn’t giving up but let him change the subject for now. Focusing on the food, she enjoyed the flavors and textures but most of all, she swore she could taste Ethan’s passion for cooking in each bite. “Amazing. I love it.”

He set his fork down. “Thank you, Ana. I wanted to bring you here for dinner, but this...” He lifted his hand. “When you told me to come over early because you had a surprise, I never thought it’d be a chance to cook with a master chef.”

Hot pleasure warmed her. She loved making him happy. “Today was fun for me too. Some of my best memories are of us cooking together.”

“Us cooking?” He squeezed her hand.

“Watch it, dude. I’ve chopped a lot of onions for you. When you’re famous someday, I could probably claim a percentage of your income.”

He rubbed his thumb over her wrist. “My cooking helped you study and will ultimately lead to your success. I could claim a percentage of your future income. And I saved your life when you were dying of strep throat.”

“Oh, now I was dying?” God he made her laugh. Ethen had shown up at her house to check on her, didn’t like how dog sick she was and hauled her to urgent care. “I was fine in a couple days.” After antibiotics and a lot of sleep.

“Pretty sure the doctor said you only had minutes to live.”

Ana rolled her eyes. He’d make a totally exaggerated boast like that, but whenever Ana brought up the day he’d helped rescue her boss from a madman with a knife, he shrugged it off.

“But heroics aside,” Ethan said. “I’ll never forget this chance to cook with Chef Zane. Or you.”

Do it now. I have to tell him how I feel. Her heart thumped. “I can’t ever forget you.” All her practiced words fled as a knot of desperation lodged in her chest. But she didn’t want to lose this moment, and forced herself to go on. “I—”

“I’ve brought dessert and coffee.” A smiling server carried a tray over. “Key lime pie and molten chocolate cake.”

Ana resisted the urge to snap at the woman for interrupting them. The server was doing her job. Besides, the thing that kept them from crossing the line to lovers was that Ethan believed her too good for him. Talking wasn’t going to convince him otherwise.

She had to show him she had a bad side too. For that, Ana needed privacy.

An hour later, he parked the borrowed Mercedes in one of her guest spaces, and they headed inside her condo. She loved her little home, but right now it felt too small and tight, like her skin. Her nerves pulled taut.

“Cookies are on the counter if you’re still hungry.” She gestured to the pastry box and headed to the fridge. Snagging two cold bottles of water, she inhaled a breath of cool air. When she turned around, Ethan was right there, looming only feet from her. She heard the soft whoosh of the refrigerator automatically closing behind her.

“I don’t want cookies.” He dragged his hand through his hair, his shirt pulling against his chest. Finally he dropped his arm. “You’re my hardest goodbye, Ana. I’m not sure I’d have made it through these last months without you. You’re my one good thing.”

As she stood there with a bottle of cold water in each hand, her throat swelled. For seven years, she had done everything she could to make her dad and stepmom proud and never regret all they’d done to get Ana out of a bad situation and have her come live with them. Since that day, she’d been the ultimate good girl, always in control. It was exhausting, but with Ethan, she’d been able to let go a little bit. Yet the times when Ethan had almost kissed her and stopped, Ana hadn’t pushed. Nope, she’d been the good girl, letting the man decide.

Either she took the risk of showing him how much she desired him, or she lost him because she really was exactly what he thought—too good of a girl to take a risk.

Setting the waters down, she hopped up on the counter in the place she’d sat many times while Ethan cooked. “This isn’t goodbye.”

Ethan settled his hands on either side of her hips, caging her with the force of his sharp attention. “Then what is it?”

Her mouth dried, and blood pounded in her ears. All the muscles in Ethan’s arms bunched and strained. Power, restraint and a vibrant hunger pulsed into the air around them. He hadn’t even touched her and her body hummed. A bright and fiery need throbbed low in her belly, making her want to break his

rigid control and free them both.

Swallowing, she lifted her hands to his face. "This." She kissed him.

Ethan sucked in a breath and went utterly still.

Oh God, what if he rejected her? What if he hated that she threw herself at him? *No, don't give up.* She feathered her lips over his, pouring her caring and longing into each touch. All the days, weeks and months of yearning for his kiss flooded her system.

Ethan's control shattered on a groan. He sank the fingers of one hand into her hair, and plunged his tongue into her mouth. His palm slid down her back, gripping her ass and pinning her in place.

Yes. Her blood raced, heating her entire body. Sexy chills skated over her skin, and everywhere he touched left a blazing trail. Driven by a fierce urgency, she thrust her tongue against his, the wet slide sparking a fierce hunger.

Or was it the way he held her trapped where he wanted her? Not recoiling at her aggressiveness, but meeting it with his own? Wanting to get closer, she wrapped her arms around his neck. Her nipples ached, warmth swamped her belly, and deep between her thighs, insistent need pulsed.

His palm on her ass dragged her forward, shoving her skirt up and pressing her center flush to the thick ridge of his cock trapped in his jeans. The hard pulse against her panties tore a moan from her throat. Ana gripped his shoulders, rubbing along his shaft, desperation pitching up too fast and brutal.

"I knew you'd be like this." He skated his lips down her throat. "One taste of you and I'd lose my fucking mind."

His words and the warm, wet trail of his mouth sent more shivers from her nipples to her clit. She tunneled her hands beneath his shirt to feel his fevered skin over granite muscles.

With a low growl, his fingers on her hip tightened as he rocked his length along her cleft. Every thrust pushed her higher and she could feel his cock growing thicker, longer and more demanding. A reserve that had ridden her for years melted away, leaving her free to go after what she wanted.

Getting a hold of his hair, she angled his head up to kiss him again. She tasted their shared dinner and Ethan, the deeply male flavor that made her crazed for more. "Touch me. I can't bear it."

He wrapped his hand around her hair, restraining her. His eyes burned like a blue flame as he scraped his fingers up her thigh. "You have no idea the ways I can make you scream in pleasure."

She tilted her hips up, desperate to find out. When he didn't move fast enough, she caught his thick wrist, pulling his hand where she craved it.

The rough glide of his fingers over her swollen bud sent shocks of pleasure arcing.

"Ethan." Her cry ripped out. This was everything she'd dreamed. The ache ramped up to unbearable. She couldn't survive without him doing that again, harder and longer. She rubbed against his hand, chasing that rising desire with a wantonness. Only with Ethan could she be this free and wild. "Please. No one makes me feel like you do."

He jerked back, eyes nearly feral, cheeks flushed. "Goddammit." Fury swelled his shoulders. He clenched and unclenched his fists.

Her hands fell to the granite, and her stomach plummeted, all her hope crashing down into a pile of twisted pain. "What did I do wrong?"

She hated the weakness, the tiny part of her still desperate to just be enough. A little voice in her head said, *What did you expect? You're a pathetic little attention seeker, begging for it. He didn't really want you. You just imagined it.*

Stop it. This wasn't the same thing. Needing reassurance, she forced herself to look at Ethan.

Ruthless determination and regret dug into his face, making him appear older and harder. "Nothing. I'm the one who doesn't do relationships. Ever. I fuck, leave and never think about the chick again. Go find yourself a man who's good enough. I'm not that guy."

He snatched his keys out of his pocket and strode to the door. Opening it, he looked back for a breath of time.

Then he left, closing the door and breaking her heart.

CHAPTER 2

As part of the protection team surrounding the band *Savaged Illusions*, Ethan Hunt took the lead, walking in front. The group headed down the hallway of the concert venue to a private elevator.

“Did you see the packed house? The audience was sick! We were on fire!” Lynx, the drummer, high-fived the bassist, River.

“Hell yeah,” River agreed.

Ethan tuned out their talk as the car shot up. When the elevator doors opened, he and Hank exited first, scanning the Skylight Lounge located at the very top of the concert venue. Floor-to-ceiling windows revealed the Tampa skyline lit up against the night. About fifty people, all with VIP passes, lounged in plush gray couches and chairs grouped around a sleek black bar draped in soft lavender lighting. Once they heard the elevator arrive, every eye turned to them.

Ethan focused on the lead bodyguard in the VIP section. At his nod that everyone in the upscale bar had been cleared, Ethan stepped aside.

Instant pandemonium erupted as the crowd surged toward the band. Cameras flashed, people laughed and yelled. He recognized two well-known actresses and a football player. A few familiar groupies, including the head of their fan club. Two men in suits and—

No way. Whipping his gaze back, he homed in on the small, pretty woman staring at him. His entire body vibrated with surprise.

Ana Kendall. The spitfire of a girl who’d haunted his dreams and invaded his days. No matter how many women he’d hooked up with or how far he traveled, she was there in his mind.

What the hell was she doing in Florida at a VIP afterparty for *Savaged Illusions*? He hadn’t seen her in eleven months.

An uncertain smile wavered on her lips before fading.

For a second, everything around him was drowned out by a crash of memories and regrets. His muscles twitched with the urge to go to her, touch and tease her until she smiled and laughed the way she used to with him.

Ana looked away, breaking eye contact to talk to another person.

Ethan automatically took note of her two friends, Franci and Chelle, hovering by her.

Ana was here. He couldn’t get his brain around that fact. But he didn’t have time to dwell on it as the band headed straight for the bar. Snapping out of his shock, Ethan moved with them, taking up a stance at the edge of the bar to keep watch.

The others in security settled around the room at their assigned posts. With the band’s fame skyrocketing, the security team took zero chances. After Ethan checked the position of all five members of the band, another man caught his attention. Young twenties; longish, dark hair; blue eyes; thin build in an expensive V-neck shirt; tight black pants and high-end suede sneakers all screamed money. But the way he stared at Justice set off Ethan’s internal alarms.

If there was going to be trouble, this nervous kid would be it. He hovered at the edges of the crowd around the band, barely blinking, his eyes following Justice’s every move.

Otherwise, everything appeared to be under control. The servers were all cleared and familiar with working VIP parties, and the guests were behaving. Ethan did another room scan, keeping his focus on the job.

Not on Ana in that pretty green dress, ordering a drink.

A current of awareness sizzled through him. Ana was watching him. Damn, she looked sweet and sexy. Her dress dipped between her small breasts, fit her waist and flared out around her thighs. He couldn’t figure out why she was here. The need to talk to her formed an internal push. He ignored it to do

his job and visually swept the room.

Unable to resist, he stole another look at Ana.

But she'd slipped away to talk to her friends.

A half hour later, his neck muscles were cramped from the effort of keeping his focus on his job, not Ana.

Justice lifted his hand in a signal to Ethan and headed to a private hallway. Damn it, the man knew to wait for him. Ethan strode after him, and noted the nervous kid following Justice. Getting between the possible trouble and the lead singer, he keyed the mic on his headset. "Hank, escorting Justice to bathroom. Possible shadow." He described the kid.

"See it. Stay with Justice. I'll find out what the shadow's up to."

"Right." He keyed off and said to Justice. "Go straight into the private hallway." This wasn't the time to get waylaid by fans.

The lead singer glanced over his shoulder. "Trouble?"

"You had a shadow." Ethan shot a quick look back to see Hank had stopped the kid. A heated conversation broke out.

Justice nodded, used to security controlling his life. Even things like taking a piss became an ordeal. Ethan nodded to the security guard watching the hallway to keep fans and staff out.

Once in the hallway, Ethan went into the bathroom with Justice to make sure the room was clear then headed for the door to wait in the hall.

"Ethan," Justice said.

"Yeah?"

"Give me a few minutes."

He got it. Sometimes it was a phone call one of the band members wanted to make, or even just a few minutes of no one pulling at them. "No problem." Ethan stepped out to the hallway and stopped in surprise at the girl talking to the other security guard.

"This is a restricted area." Josh told her.

Unable to resist, he crossed to them. "What's going on?"

Ana shifted her gaze to him. "Ethan, I, uh, wanted to say hi. I know you're working so maybe later."

He couldn't let her walk away and touched Josh's shoulder. "It's okay, she's with me."

The other guard nodded and Ethan led her deeper into the hallway where he could keep an eye on the bathroom door and Ana. "I can't believe you're here. What brings you to Florida?"

"Vacation with Franci and Chelle. We're staying at the Tradewinds Resort in St. Pete's." She licked her lips and shifted uneasily. "You look well."

The dress pulled tight against her breasts, and damn it, he didn't want to notice that. Or think of that last night when Ana had kissed him and he'd lost his mind. Two more minutes and he'd have had her panties on the floor and been balls-deep inside her.

Answer her. "Thanks, you too." She looked so damned good he had to dig his fingers into his palms to keep from touching her, and remember he was on the job.

"Franci and Chelle surprised me with the tickets to the concert and the VIP passes. I almost didn't come."

Because of him and the way they'd last parted? "What changed your mind?"

A grin touched her lips. "Franci and Chelle went to a lot of trouble to get the tickets and VIP passes, and I didn't want to ruin that for them."

How could he feel that pinch of disappointment when he was the one who'd pushed her away? What did he want, for Ana to have been sad all these months? God he was a selfish bastard. "How are you, Ana? The way I left—"

"I'm fine," she cut him off. "I graduated, and Kat promoted me at the bakery to the publicity director."

She seemed tenser, edgier than he remembered. Was it unease from seeing him again and the awkwardness stretching between them? Or something else? But the part about her finishing her degree and

getting a promotion pulled a smile from him.

“Congratulations. You’re a college graduate.” While all he had was he GED, a certificate from culinary school, and his colossal failure as an MMA fighter. “I’m proud of you, sunshine.” His old nickname for her slipped out before he could think better of it.

“Thanks. I’d love to hear about how you’re doing.” She swallowed and blurted out, “I was hoping if you have time, we could grab some coffee or lunch? I’m here all week. I don’t know how long you’re staying.”

She wanted to meet? Before he could formulate an answer, his earpiece crackled. “Ethan, threat has been neutralized. Stay with Justice until he’s back in view.”

So either Hank had determined the boy wasn’t a threat or had removed him altogether. Ethan touched the mic and answered, “Got it.” He gestured to his headset. “Sorry, work.”

“Right, you’re busy. Well, you know my cell number, if you’re around. Nice seeing you.” She started to turn.

Unable to help it, he touched her shoulder. Her soft, warm skin beneath his palm sent a zap of heat straight to his dick. Memories pressed in and woke up the ache in his chest. Damn it, he’d missed her.

“Ana, wait.” He dropped his hand.

Her shoulders tensed, but she faced him.

He didn’t know what to say. Did he want to see her?

Hell yeah.

But should he? “I’m here all week too. The band’s taking a break after the show tomorrow night.”

“Really?”

The spark of hope in her gaze made him pause. “Yes.” He wanted to see her, but that last night in San Diego had made it clear—their attraction was so damned strong that with enough time together, they’d end up in bed. “But nothing’s changed with me. I’m still not a relationship guy.”

A flush crawled up her throat as she rocked on her heels. “I got that eleven months ago, loud and clear.”

He’d embarrassed her. What was it about her that made him stupid?

“But things have changed with me.”

Her words punched right into his chest and brought out his protectiveness. Changed, how? Ana didn’t need to alter anything about herself. She was sweet, caring, ambitious and funny as hell. Why would she change? “What do you mean?”

She lifted her shoulders, every line of her small frame vibrating with resolution. “I grew up. I’ve been working hard to be what everyone else needs me to be. And that’s okay, that’s what I do. But right now, this is my vacation, and for a week, I’m looking for a chance to let loose and be a little bad with no strings attached.”

Stunned, he struggled to think. “You want to be bad.” With him? Jesus. No strings attached? Was this a prank? Or was this some kind of revenge? “Are you propositioning me?”

She compressed her lips. “God I suck at this.”

He’d feel sorry for her if he had any idea what was actually going on. “At what?”

Sighing, she fiddled with the small purse hanging from her shoulder. “I wanted to meet and catch up, and if we still have an attraction, then yeah, I guess I’m propositioning you. But this time I’m not looking for anything more than a sexy fling and we go our separate ways.”

He couldn’t formulate an answer. Thankfully Justice was still in the bathroom, and no other band members had come into the hallway. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Right, okay.” She forced a small smile. “If you decide you’re interested, let me know.” She turned and walked out of the hallway.

Did that just happen? With Ana? He got propositioned by groupies all the time. Sometimes he indulged and forgot them.

But Ana?

His muscles twitched with the need to go after her, drag her someplace private and find out what the hell she was thinking. But he couldn't; he had to stay outside the bathroom door and wait.

Frustration screamed in his brain, and hot need pulsed in his gut.

What was he going to do?

* * * *

Ana could feel Ethan's scrutiny searing her spine as she walked away. *Don't look back.* Her heart pounded from seeing him and the way she'd mangled that conversation. What was wrong with her, just blurting things out like that? She'd thought she'd been prepared to see him. But when all six feet five inches of him stepped off that elevator, it had been a punch straight to her heart. She'd missed him so much.

But she meant what she'd told Ethan, she'd grown up. She'd been out of line that night by trying to naively pull her friend into a relationship he didn't want.

Yet Ana had kissed him.

That humiliation still stung. And the way they parted—him walking out in anger and disgust was an ache that wouldn't quite heal. What if they could do it over? Recapture some of their friendship and all of that sizzling attraction? But this time Ana wouldn't push for a lasting romantic relationship. Instead, Ana and Ethan would both walk away with good memories. All she had to do was convince Ethan that she truly was ready to be bad while on vacation. But she'd handled that reunion with him almost as terribly as she'd handled that last night in San Diego. Clumsy and coming on too strong.

Franci approached her as soon as she got a few feet from the hallway. "Did you talk to him?"

"Yep." She'd rarely seen Ethan so shocked. Or maybe he'd just been struggling with how to turn her down.

"Well? Did you guys make plans? The band is on a break after tomorrow's show and staying in Florida for a week. It says so on their website."

"Stalker," she teased. Both Franci and Chelle had gone to a lot of trouble for tonight. Planning this trip to coincide with Ethan's schedule, buying the tickets and securing the passes to this afterparty. Their plot was a bit insane, but their hearts were in the right place.

"Hijacker. We had the perfect plan to help you. But no, you stole it."

Amused, she said, "I'm a hijacker?"

Franci nodded, her brown eyes full of alcohol-fueled sincerity. "You illegally seized control of our plan, which is hijacking. And you stole the keys to the rental car out of my purse. So you hijacked the plan and stole my keys."

Unable to help it, she tilted her head and said, "Are you sure I didn't illegally seize control of the rental vehicle, thereby hijacking it too?"

Franci chewed her lip. "The argument could be made... Hey. You're distracting me."

"Cause I'm beautiful?" She was probably going to hell for toying with her somewhat inebriated friend. It was only fair since Ana had assumed the role of designated driver by swiping the car keys. Everyone knew the DD got teasing privileges.

"Funny. Our plan would have worked if you weren't a control freak who had to butt in and take over."

Ana laughed, even if there was an uncomfortable grain of truth in that statement. "Or maybe I came up with a better plan of being honest."

Franci raised her eyebrows. "Okay, so you took over. How'd that work out for you?"

Ana forced a brilliant smile. "Great. He's going to call me." Maybe. Okay probably not. Heading for the bar, she added, "Come on, let's have some fun." She'd tried, and Ethan would either call or he wouldn't. Either way, she'd handle it and be fine.

Franci joined her, ordered a vodka and cranberry, and then shot her a smug look. "Bet you're regretting your hijacking ways now. If you'd stuck to the plan, I'd be the DD."

Ana ordered an orange soda. "I'll be glad when I don't have a hangover tomorrow."

While they waited for their drinks, she watched as Ethan returned and took up the same post at the end of the bar she'd seen him at earlier. He stood with his legs spread, arms crossed and giving off an alert-and-ready-for-any-trouble vibe. She couldn't tear her attention from him. In eleven months, she'd never tried to contact him—not even in her most terrified moments. Oh she'd thought about it, and in a strange way that comforted her. Telling herself that if she truly needed him, he would come.

She wouldn't ever have called though. It was only a fantasy to get her through the nights of worrying.

Now she just wanted a chance to break out and, well, be bad. Safely. For so long, she'd done everything right, struggled to be perfect.

Would Ethan be interested? Could he see her as more than that college girl he'd known?

His gaze slid to hers, and her stomach flipped at the sheer intensity.

“Do you know Ethan?”

The voice startled her. Ana forced herself to turn to a woman with long blond hair flowing around her sculpted face and memorable brown eyes. “You look familiar... Oh! You're Chef Siena Draco.” Ana loved her show on the Food Network.

“Guilty. I noticed you talking to Ethan earlier. So you know him?”

It seemed odd that anyone paid attention. Curious, she said, “He's an old friend. Do you know him?” What if they were lovers? She hadn't asked Ethan if he was involved with someone. The thought hurt way more than it should.

“Yep, we met at one of my restaurants.”

“Wow.” A celebrity chef was familiar with Ethan?

“Ana!” Chelle caught her arm, her blue eyes dancing with excitement. “Come meet the band. I just talked to them, they're awesome. I told them you know Ethan, and they want to hear all about it.”

Siena laughed. “Apparently, I'm not the only nosey one.”

As she was swept away, Ana looked back at Ethan.

He was watching them, his mouth flat. She could almost feel the heat of his gaze sizzle over her skin. *Possessive*. Her stomach fluttered again. Was it just his old protectiveness? Or was the attraction still there between them?

Would he call her?

* * * *

It'd been an hour since Ana's bombshell proposition that left Ethan buzzing with conflict and struggling to stay focused on his job. And lust, but that wasn't a surprise. He'd been attracted to her since the first time he'd seen her.

It was that good-girl thing.

And tonight? She'd just upped that to girl good wants to be bad. With him.

Seeing his boss striding toward him, he asked, “What's up?”

“Everything's quiet. A few people getting shitfaced, but no trouble. Go take a break before the band leaves. I'll cover your post.”

Hank was a stickler for security getting a chance to stretch their legs, grab something to eat and let down their hypervigilance for a few minutes. Normally Ethan would snag a water and go outside.

But tonight, he had another goal and headed straight for the woman dominating his thoughts. Weaving through people clawing for the band's attention, he wrapped his hand around Ana's arm. “I'm on break, can we talk?”

She turned, her eyes wide. “Uh, sure.”

He led Ana across the room to a high table tucked in a corner by the floor-to-ceiling windows. Holding her chair, he tried to ignore the enticing way her dress slid up her thigh. Why did he remember exactly what her skin felt like, and her shivers as he kissed her, his fingers trailing higher on her leg? The way she'd gotten demanding, needy, triggering a fierce urge to give her everything she wanted.

“You can say whatever you wanted to tell me,” Ana said. “If you’re not interested in seeing me, I’ll accept that.”

He clenched his jaw at the uncertainty swimming in her brown eyes. What had it cost her to come here tonight, face him and make the proposition of a no-strings-attached fling?

“I think about that kiss,” he admitted.

Her mouth parted, and her tongue darted out to touch the tip to her plump bottom lip. “You do?”

“Yes. And I think about you.” He ran a hand over his head. Did she have to look so damned beautiful and sleek? By most standards, Ana was cute, with her heart-shaped face and tiny stature. But to him, she was gorgeous and untouchable. “But the reality is, I’m still bad for you.”

Her chin notched up. “Bad is what I’m searching for right now. Short-term bad.”

Heat blazed over his skin at the idea of Ana, his sweet girl, wanting to be bad. “Why?”

“I’m tired of being good, of always trying so hard, and worrying that I’m falling short. I’m ready for some fun, but I don’t...” She looked away.

She’d been honest with him right up until now, so why was this hard? Or did she fear him rejecting and hurting her again? Catching her chin, he turned her face to see her expression. “Don’t what?”

Her eyes shimmered with a need that nearly undid him. “I can’t seem to find the guy I want to be bad with. Except for you.”

Hell. He stroked his thumb along her cheek. “Ana. You don’t even know what you do to me.” He’d struggled every damned day they’d spent together battling their growing attraction. Now she was offering herself to him, with no strings and no guilt. How could he resist that?

Tugging his hand away, he searched for a distraction before his control could snap and he kissed her.

Not here. Not now.

He focused on her empty glass. “Can I get you something from the bar?” That would give him a minute to get his head on right.

She wrinkled her nose. “Nope. I’m DD tonight, so just sticking to orange soda or water, and I’ve had my fill of both.” Shifting her attention on a point past him, she waved at a group. “They keep toasting me with their shots.”

He followed her gesture to see Franci and Chelle laughing around Lynx, River and their entourage of the usual party chicks. They raised their glasses of whatever they were chasing the shots with, and made kissing faces at him and Ana.

“How did you end up DD, and why are they taunting you if it lets them have fun?” The Ana he remembered didn’t drink much, especially for a college-aged girl, but he was curious.

“I foiled one of their insane plots.” She shrugged. “This is their payback. But we’ll see who’s laughing in the morning. I’m so setting my phone to blast music at six a.m.”

A chuckle rumbled up his chest at her gleeful voice. “I’ll have one of the limos drive you back to the resort if you want a drink.”

Surprise registered on her face. “You can do that? What about our rental car?”

“We have extra limos on hand tonight, it’s not a big deal.” He’d check, but if it wasn’t being used, his boss Hank and the guys in the band wouldn’t care. There were perks to the job. “I’ll drive your rental to the manor where we’re staying and bring it to you at the resort tomorrow.” Ethan usually rode in the limo with the guys, but someone else could do it tonight.

“All the way to St. Pete’s? It’s a half hour to forty minutes from here.”

Ethan leaned his arm on the table, enjoying being this close to her. “It’ll give us a chance to catch up with each other. And talk about you wanting to be bad. With me.”

“You’re interested?”

He couldn’t lie to himself or her. “I walked away once, and it only made me hungrier for you. But there’s no future, Ana, not for you and me. That will never change.”

“I know.”

Her simple acceptance nagged at him. Why did she want this? Fast and hard sex and nothing more?

For him, it was all he knew. But Ana...shouldn't she look for a real relationship? He started to ask her if everything was okay, but stopped himself. Once she'd have trusted him enough to tell him if something more was going on.

But now? After he'd left so abruptly that night, and then hadn't talked to her in nearly a year?

Yeah, time to ease up and give them both a little space. Instead he asked, "Want that drink now?"

"I think... Oh hell." Ana shoved off the high barstool.

Ethan shot up, automatically on alert. "What?" But he instantly saw the problem. Franci and Chelle were stripping off their tops.

Ana rushed over, pushing through the people gathering around. "Hey! Stop it!" She grabbed Franci's shirt, which was tangled around her neck, and forced it back down.

Ethan quickly caught the edges of Chelle's opened shirt and began rebuttoning it.

"No. We're shashing clothes."

He squinted, trying to make out the slurred words. "What?"

Furious, Chelle twisted in his hold, damn near ripping her shirt. "Ex-shash-ing."

It took him a second to work it out "Exchanging? Like trading clothes?"

"Yes! What I said."

"No," Ana said. "You can't exchange clothes with Franci."

"But we have a plan." Chelle stuck her bottom lip out.

Ana glared at him. "Don't you dare laugh."

"Too late." He couldn't help it. He saw this shit all the time. Ordinarily it was annoying, but Franci and Chelle weren't doing the usual dancing naked, swimming naked, trying to get screwed naked, or his least favorite, the dramatic female meltdown or temper tantrum. These two were original—they wanted to change outfits. Ana's friends were funny drunk or sober.

"Need a hand?" Hank asked Ethan, while two more security guards urged people away from the scene.

"I'm sorry," Ana said. "We'll leave. I didn't realize they'd had so much to drink."

Ethan stopped laughing at Ana's obvious distress. "Hey, no one's mad. They didn't hurt anything."

She nodded. "I'll get them back to the resort. Thanks for helping."

He caught her arm. "Take a limo. You can't handle them both while driving the car, and the driver can help you get them in the room." Chances were good the girls were going to pass out in the limo at some point.

Gratefulness filled her eyes. "Are you sure it's okay?"

Hank cut in. "It's perfectly okay, and Ethan's right. It's better you're not trying to drive and handle double trouble here." A smile twitched the man's mouth. "And don't look so distressed. These two were having fun. I've been watching them since they began doing shots. They had some plan for a fashion show..." He gave in and laughed.

Ana flushed again. "Thank you, uh..."

"Hank."

She straightened, obviously regaining her poise. "Hank. I'm Ana, and I appreciate your understanding."

He smiled at her, then said, "Ethan, help Ana get her friends packed up and on the road. Use Barb's limo. She can manage any problems."

"Limo!" Franci shouted.

Ethan nodded at his boss. "Got it." Together, he and Ana herded the girls down to the car. After coaxing them inside, he took Ana's arm. It was early morning, around one a.m., and the moonlight cascaded over her. "Text me when you're safely in the room and the details to bring the car back tomorrow."

"We'll be fine tonight, but I'll text you."

God he wanted to pull her against him and kiss her. But he was still on the job, and past experience warned him that a kiss with her could get out of control in seconds. "Ana."

“What?”

“Let me take you to lunch tomorrow. We’ll talk and catch up, then if it’s really what you want, we can move on to discussing the ways you can be bad.”

Her eyes glinted with something. Curiosity? Mischief? “We can eat at the resort.” She leaned toward him when noise from inside the car cut into the moment.

Franci and Chelle pressed their lips to the window, making exaggerated kissing gestures. Ana sighed. “It’s going to be a long drive. They apparently aren’t too drunk to remember Operation Kiss 2.0.”

“Say what?” She’d lost him with that comment.

Ana caught his expression and laughed. “That’s the name for their insane plot I mentioned earlier. They got the tickets to the concert and party, then planned to sneak off and leave me here so you’d have to take me back to the resort.”

“They’d do that?” The idea of Ana stranded infuriated him. “That’s dangerous as hell.”

“They were going to tell you on their way out they had an emergency and ask you to get me back to the resort. They thought if we spent time together, we’d recreate the kiss of our last night together in San Diego.”

She couldn’t be serious. “The one where I walked out on you?” Ana and her friends teased each other, made hysterical bets with one another, but they’d rip apart anyone who dared to hurt one of them.

Ana’s face flushed. “They don’t know that part. I told them it was a hot kiss but we both decided the timing wasn’t right since you were leaving.”

“Why?” He didn’t get it.

“Because they would have tried to find a way to get revenge on you if they thought you’d hurt me. This was simpler, better. Except now the tour will be over in a month and they assume you’re coming back to San Diego.”

Ethan glanced over at the two drunks now licking the window in a distorted parody of French kissing. Her meaning sank in. “Oh shit. They’re matchmaking.”

Ana nodded. “Yep. But it’s fine. If we do have a fling, I’ll tell them it just fizzled out. And if we don’t, I’ll tell them the chemistry died. See? Easy.” Banging on the window had her sighing again. “I’d better get them back to the hotel.”

Pulling open the door, he held it while she shooed Franci and Chelle back and climbed in. Ethan closed it and stepped aside as the limo slid away.

Why did he think letting her go a second time was going to be anything but easy?

CHAPTER 3

“You guys going to be okay?” Ana snagged a bottle of Gatorade from the fridge in the kitchenette of their fourth-floor suite. The sun streamed in through the opened slider, along with the sound of the beach just steps away.

“Are you laughing?” Franci demanded. Both of them were sprawled on the couch, dressed in shorts and T-shirts, still looking pale with dark circles under their eyes.

“Not since six a.m.” Ana held up her hand. “Swear.”

“Bitch,” Chelle snarled. “That was evil.”

She poured the drink into two glasses. “It was funny as hell.” She really had set her cellphone for one of *Savaged Illusions* hard rock songs. It blared out at the stroke of six. The girls had begged her to make it stop. “I can show you, I videoed it.” She handed each of them a glass of the sports drink.

Franci shot her a glare. “I have footage on my phone from your birthday.”

Okay, that was low. One look at that recording of her attempting to sing at a karaoke bar had cured her dream of stardom. “Fine. Truce?”

“For now,” Franci agreed. “But you owe us. Our plan worked. Operation Kiss 2.0 was a masterful plan. Right, Chelle?”

“Hell yeah.” She dropped her head to the back of the couch. “God I am never looking at tequila again.”

Ana had coaxed them into drinking some water and Gatorade in the limo, and dosed them with Advil too. Overall she didn’t think their hangover was that bad. They’d be raising hell in a few hours. “Wrong. I’m seeing him because I hijacked your plot and did the cleverest thing of all by asking him if he wanted to get together and catch up.”

Chelle got up and crossed the room to touch Ana’s shoulder. “We’re trying to help you. We weren’t there for you when you found that lump. You went through a lot in the last weeks, and...” She looked away, her eyes wide with regret.

“I’m fine. I’ve told you guys that. I showed you the lab report.”

Crossing her arms, Chelle pointed out, “You didn’t show me, I found it in your bedroom. We wouldn’t have even known you had a biopsy.”

Ana took a breath, hating the cold loneliness that made her feel like the outsider. She’d tried to tell them, but Ana didn’t get to have problems. She had to be perfect, the girl who solved everyone else’s crises. *That’s not fair, and you know it. People can’t help if they don’t know.*

She fought down her misplaced anger and tried to soothe Chelle with, “I would have told you guys if they found something. There’s no cancer, I’m fine. And damned lucky.” Too many people in the world got the bad news. Ana had been very fortunate and had no right to the little pity party trying to suck her in. She was on vacation to celebrate her good health.

Chelle softened a bit. “I just feel awful. I know you tried to tell me, and I was so panicked over work and—”

A knock on the door cut her off.

“Chelle, stop.” She and Franci had been alternating between guilt and anger at Ana for not making them listen. “It’s over, okay?” She didn’t want to dwell on it. “That’s probably Ethan now.” She narrowed her eyes. “Be good, and don’t bring up the biopsy.” Ethan wasn’t there to listen to her problems. This was for fun, nothing else. She wanted to feel like a desirable woman and push her boundaries a little bit.

She went to the door and opened it.

“Hey.” Ethan took off his sunglasses and did a slow study of her print silk shift dress in island colors, legs bare all the way down to her flats. “Now that was worth the drive.”

A flush warmed her against the room’s air-conditioning. She looped her purse over her shoulder and

called out, “We’re leaving.”

Franci rushed up to them. “Hi, Ethan. Thanks for saving Ana from us last night.”

“No problem.” He tossed her the keys. “Here’s the car back.”

Franci caught them, then frowned. “How are you returning to your hotel?”

Oh crap. Ana hadn’t even thought of that. “I could drive you.”

He waved it off. “I had a rental car meet me here. I’m good. Come on, let’s get something to eat.” He held out his hand.

Franci bumped her from behind. “Two words,” she whispered. “Vacation sex. Chelle and I are going shopping. You can have the room all to yourself.”

One look at the grin on Ethan’s face told Ana he’d heard. She put her hand in his and hurried out the door. It was either that or slam the door so she didn’t have to face his teasing.

Ethan squeezed her hand. “It seems Operation Kiss 2.0 has been upgraded.”

Once inside the elevator, she went for bluntness. “Despite Franci and Chelle’s shenanigans, you’re perfectly safe with me. If you decide this isn’t what you want, we’ll both walk away.”

He stepped into her space, raising their joined hands over her head. “What if it’s you who’s not safe with me?”

Her breath caught as Ethan loomed above her in the glass elevator. There was nothing threatening in him though, it was...protective. “In what way? You’d never hurt me.”

“I walked away eleven months ago because you were still in college, your father had passed weeks before that, and you were too damned vulnerable. But my restraint just ran out. Understand that once our time here in Florida is over, I will leave again. Don’t mistake me for a good guy. We both know I’m not. So the question is, can you handle that?”

The elevator lurched slightly as it stopped. Ana stood perfectly still, relishing in the feel of Ethan’s hand bracing hers against the elevator glass, and his eyes eating her up. Could she handle it? Damn right she could. It might hurt—okay it *would* hurt—but she understood that she wasn’t going to come first with Ethan. He’d made that clear.

Tilting her head back, she arched a brow. “Now that you’ve done your grand speech, can we have lunch?”

The edges of his eyes crinkled. “You always were impatient to eat.” He tugged her out of the elevator. “You have someplace in mind?”

Regaining her wits after that display of caveman sexiness, she answered, “I’m taking you to the Flying Bridge. It’s a dock out over the Gulf. It’s too pretty a day to stay inside.”

People wandered around in bathing suit cover-ups, shorts and sundresses, a few playing miniature gulf, splashing in the pool, some kids chasing each other and laughing. Once they got their seat on the dock and ordered, she let her curiosity surface. “Do you like doing security for the band?”

“I’m good at it. We’ve had some crazy stuff. Stalkers, psychos, one guy starting fires, and the women.” He rolled his eyes. “I’d rather deal with a knife-wielding crazed man than a woman bent on trapping a rock star. They are devious little shits. The stunts they’ve pulled are insane.”

“Wait, have you dealt with a knife-wielding crazy?”

“It’s rare.” He paused while the server set down Ana’s Mediterranean vegetable wrap and Ethan’s Philly special. After topping off their drinks, she left. Ethan took a bite. “This is good.”

Worry for Ethan blared in her head. “But there have been knife attacks?” She knew his job had a dangerous element to it, but she hadn’t dwelled on it.

“Had a guy with a knife go after Gray. We were hanging out in a hotel bar, but it was over in seconds. I saw the guy before he got close, shoved Gray down into a booth and disarmed the attacker. No one was hurt.” He flashed a grin. “Okay, that’s a lie. I caught Gray by surprise, and he smacked his face on the table. Had a bloody nose. Dude was pissed about that.”

Oh God. “You weren’t hurt?”

He gave her a look. “One guy with a knife, Ana. I saw him coming. If I’d been hurt, I’d have deserved

it.”

“I know.” Ethan was capable and strong. He’d worked hard to shift his MMA experience into becoming the best security possible, including intensive weapons training. She was confident in his skills, but he was still her Ethan, and she couldn’t help worrying. To distract herself, she picked up her wrap and took a bite.

Ethan stole one of her fries. “Stop fretting. The guy wasn’t trained, just a nut. He believed that every time Gray chose to play the piano instead of keyboard, he was summoning the devil. Which is pretty funny because of the five of them, Gray’s the most civilized.”

“Civilized how?”

“He usually doesn’t get into fights, trash hotel rooms, leave groupies suicidal or enraged the morning after, that kind of thing. Dude’s not perfect though. He’s our ghost.”

Fascinated, she swallowed another bite and asked, “Ghost?”

“Disappears and we have no idea where the fuck he is. All of us on the team have lost Gray at one time or another. A knife-wielding psycho isn’t as likely to take me down as Gray disappearing on my watch.” He rubbed his chest. “That damn near gave me another heart attack.”

She tried to keep a wince off her face at the mention of his heart attack. He’d been physically cleared to work on the security detail. “You look good. Strong and healthy.” More than healthy. Unable to help it, she eyed his thick, muscular arms in his T-shirt. He’d worn shorts, revealing his powerful thighs and calves. She’d seen women eyeing Ethan as they walked to the Flying Bridge.

“You checking me out, sunshine?”

Ana lifted her chin. “Just making sure you haven’t gotten fat without me around to motivate you.” Ethan was as competitive as her. She missed trying to keep up with him on the bike or kicking his ass on rollerblades. She could beat him in the batting cages, too, but anything else he’d leave her in his dust and laugh. She’d loved that too. Ethan never held back in competition with her. Nor did he get pissed when he lost.

His mouth curved. “I’m doing double duty as a trainer for the band. I work out with them as a group and individually around my bodyguard duties. It keeps me in shape. And since four of them have some skills in martial arts, we spar. It’s fun.”

“You do all that?” She had to admit she was impressed.

“Yep. It’s helped me to pay off my debts faster, and I like it.” He stole another fry. “Now it’s your turn. Tell me how it’s going for you.”

She set down the second half of her wrap. “You ordered fruit instead of fries, eat it.” She reached her fork over and speared a juicy chunk of melon. “I told you I graduated and that Kat offered me a promotion. She expanded from her original San Diego bakery to open branches in San Francisco and Los Angeles, and I was in on all that. Developing and implementing marketing plans for each one is a challenge.” Excitement bubbled just talking about it. “I travel more and more now. Plus we’re working on a Sugar Dancer product line of bake-at-home products, so I’ve been meeting with reps of various retail stores, pitching the idea, talking about possible deals. I’m learning so much.” She cut herself off. “Anyway, that’s my life.”

Ethan snagged yet another of her fries. “You love it.”

“I do. It’s gotten even crazier with Kat and Sloane’s wedding only a month away.” Her boss was marrying Sloane Michaels, the man who’d found Ethan living on the streets as a kid and took him in. While officially Sloane, a former UFC heavyweight champion, had done it as part of the Fighters to Mentors program, the reality was Sloane had finished raising Ethan and was more of a brother than mentor. She asked, “You’re coming to the wedding, right?”

Ethan set his iced tea down. “Yes. But I’ll probably be leaving soon after that.”

“But isn’t Savaged Illusions’s tour done then?” It took everything she had not to cringe with embarrassment. “I wasn’t hinting that we could go together or anything like that. You’re close to Sloane and I know he wants you there, that’s all I was thinking. I wasn’t suggesting anything more.” She got it, they weren’t dating. Ana had learned an important lesson that night when Ethan walked out—she had no

right to use sex as a way to make someone want to be with her.

“I didn’t think that, and yes the tour will be over. But I have a shot at an apprenticeship with Chef Siena. You met her at the party last night, right?”

That gorgeous, funny woman? He’d be working with her? Ana’s food suddenly tasted like dry sand, but she managed to nod.

“I haven’t signed the contract yet, but it’s a fantastic opportunity. I’d get to work in several of her restaurants, travel with her and appear on some of her shows.”

“Oh, Ethan, that’s wonderful.” It really was, even if she had a pang at the thought of Ethan spending so much time with the beautiful chef. “Where did you meet her?”

“A big party at her restaurant in New York. I was there as security for the band, and that night the band had me sitting with them because they know I like to cook. Siena came out of the kitchen to meet the band, and we started talking. She showed me her kitchen, and one thing led to another.”

Incredible. Even she’d never imagined such a huge opportunity for Ethan. “You’re going to be a real chef someday.” Unable to help herself, she added, “Do you think you’ll ever come back to San Diego? Maybe open a restaurant? You know Sloane would invest in you.”

He leaned in close to her. “I screwed up, Ana. I let down a hell of a lot of people who believed in me, spent money and time on me, who were invested in my success as an MMA fighter. It wasn’t just Sloane, but all my trainers…” He trailed off, clenching his jaw so tight it bulged at the joint. “I’ll pay off every goddamned cent I owe, and I’m not taking another penny from Sloane. There are others out there who deserve his help. I had my chance.”

The blazing cold anger at himself ringing in his voice made the fine hairs on her arms prickle. It killed her that he couldn’t see how amazing he was for the very fact that he owned his blunder and was trying to make amends. “It was a mistake.”

“Don’t do that. A mistake is choosing the chicken when you crave a hamburger. Injecting steroids on a concise schedule is a choice to cheat. Don’t make excuses for what I did.” He looked out to the Gulf, his eyes hard. Unforgiving.

Ana couldn’t bear his self-recrimination. Yes, he had screwed up, but he’d paid the price. He’d cooperated with the police in every way, and he’d been working to pay off his debts. How could she not respect that?

Ana laid her hand over his fist clenched on the table. “What I know is that you made a bad choice, and when it blew up in your face, you could have been an asshole. Instead, you took complete responsibility down to working your ass off to pay Sloane back when we both know he didn’t ask it of you.” Kat had told Ana that, but Sloane was extremely proud of Ethan for doing it.

His brutal gaze softened. “You always see the good in people, stubborn girl.” He rubbed his thumb over her skin.

Wrong. But Ana didn’t want to get into old crap. “How long before you have to leave today?”

“Couple hours.”

Smiling, she asked, “How do you feel about paddleboarding?”

Ethan hit her with an inquisitive stare, then seemed to make a decision and leaned in. “Does it involve you in a bikini?”

He’d never seen her in one, had he? “One way to find out. We’ll stop by the resort shops and buy you a pair of boardshorts.”

He leaned closer, his face inches from hers. “I want to see your bikini.”

Her mouth dried. He was so close she could see the faint scar beneath his left cheekbone. His hand covered hers, his thumb stroking her wrist. His touch ignited the warm desire already pooling in her stomach.

This was her chance to experience Ethan. To indulge her fantasies of the one man she wanted.

Short term. This fantasy had an expiration date, and then she’d be alone again.

* * * *

Ana was taunting him as they took their paddleboards around the Gulf. Her hair blew around her shoulders and face, and her skin glowed from the sun and lotion she'd spread all over to prevent a burn. Her sapphire-blue bikini top formed enticing triangles over her breasts, then bared more skin down her belly to her tiny boardshorts. Long, lithe legs braced apart to balance on the board as she paddled near the shore.

He really needed to think about something else besides how hot Ana was. "How's your stepmom?"

Ana smiled. "Linda's good. She turned forty this year. To celebrate, she and her sister are in Italy. It's a special trip for her. Honestly I think it's the first time she's truly enjoyed herself since my dad died."

Her dad's unexpected death had been hard on her. "How are you doing?"

She glanced over. "I miss him, but it's tougher on Linda. I had moved out, had my own life, and getting back to my routine helped. But Linda...well it took a while. Anyway, she's loving Italy." Her smile was sad. "Dad would be happy to see her living again."

She meant that. Cared that much about her stepmom. He'd asked her about their closeness after her dad's funeral. She'd said that Linda saved her when she was a teenager, but hadn't explained. He debated asking now, but let it go and instead said, "The band played a couple concerts in Italy. Beautiful country, and the food is incredible. Of course we went to Taste of Siena too. If your stepmother is in the Tuscany area, she should try it." He couldn't help but add, "I was invited to cook with Siena there."

"What was that like?"

"Amazing. She's bigger than life in the kitchen, a lot like you see on TV. Passionate, charismatic and very sensual. We both have the same love for food, for creating an experience that feeds more than just the stomach." How could he tell this girl what it was like to feel empty and unloved, and then discover that feeding yourself and others filled a void? "Creating a meal is an expression. Like fighting or sex. When a mother loves a child, she feeds him. When a man romances a woman, he feeds her. At every major celebration, food is central. Being in Italy, cooking in her kitchen, it felt...like home." He clamped his mouth shut. What was he doing going off on a tangent about his obsession with food or what it meant to him?

Her silence stretched before she turned and gave him a brittle smile. "I'm happy for you. You're going to be famous, and you're doing what you love."

Yet her strained smile didn't match her warm words. What was going on with her? "I'll stop talking about cooking. I'm boring you."

"No, don't stop." Her smile grew into a real one. "I want to hear it. I guess I'm a little jealous."

"Of what? You said you love your job."

She nodded. "It's silly, but some of my favorite memories are all the times you used to cook in my kitchen. Now you have these amazing experiences that trump those. In a few years, you won't even remember me at all. I'll be that girl claiming that I used to know you and you cooked in my kitchen and everyone will roll their eyes and beg me to stop talking about it."

The memories assaulted him. He'd show up with groceries, Ana would dig through the bags, excited to figure out what he was going to try making. She never shied away from tasting. Or if he forgot an ingredient, she'd run to the store, sometimes several stores.

And by the end of their meal, as they cleaned up, the scent of the food he'd cooked would cling to her skin. Marking her. Making him crave a taste of Ana, to kiss and lick her. Consume her. "I'm not going to forget that, or you. I had fantasies about you. I could smell my food on your skin, and it made me hungry for you."

Ana's eyes widened, the blazing sun brightening the brown to gold. "What kind of fantasies?"

He debated for a second. His fantasies were a tad rough. But that night when she'd kissed him and he'd taken control—okay lost control—she had responded. "I wanted to push you over the counter and hold you down. Ask you if you got off on teasing me."

Ana blinked, her mouth parting slightly with a huff.

Ethan waited, giving her a chance to see if she liked the idea. Her sexual experience had been fairly limited from what he could tell, maybe two intimate boyfriends before she and Ethan had become friends. She might not be comfortable with rougher sex. Except she'd said she wanted to let go and quit worrying. He could give that to her.

A challenge glittered in her eyes. "I was a good girl, remember?"

"What I remember is how goddamned sexy you were without even trying. And today? Look at you." He tracked his attention down her, taking in the tiny swimsuit over golden skin all the way to her toes with the blue polish. He lowered his head a fraction to lock stares with her. "You're not being good now, are you, Ana? You're purposely taunting me, getting me hard."

Her smug smile answered him.

He loved that she didn't hide it. Why should she? "Is that your fantasy? Driving me out of my mind?"

"Is it working?"

Ana deserved to have a fling as much as anyone else. And as long as it was with him, he'd make damn sure she was safe and satisfied. "You keep this up in the room when we're alone, and I'll show you what happens to bad girls who tease me."

"What?" Her fingers tightened on her paddle. "Tell me."

"Think hard, sunshine, because if I get you in that room and you taunt me, I'm pushing you up against a wall and those bottoms are coming down to your knees. If I touch your pussy and you're wet, I'm not waiting for permission. I'm going to bury my cock inside you. Hard, Ana. And you'll take it, all of it, and I'll make you come, over and over. Or maybe I won't...until you apologize for making me so goddamned hard for you day after day and burn for you every damned night." He heard the rough frustration in his voice, the truth of it. Even after he'd left, traveled the world and had plenty of women, it was Ana he wanted. Craved.

She shuddered.

Ethan searched her eyes, looking for fear. Nope, he didn't see it.

"What if I won't apologize? Maybe I'm not sorry."

He froze, going so still he could hear his own heart thumping in his ears. "Provoking me, sunshine? You don't want an orgasm?"

Her chin went up. "I know how to make myself come."

Christ. The very thought of her touching herself, showing him she didn't need him, inflamed his lust. But the defiance in her eyes intrigued him more. There was some need he couldn't define. Not yet.

"Hard to do if I have your hands pinned behind your back, fucking you slowly, keeping you right on the edge. Whispering in your ear to give in, just surrender and I'll let you come." He wanted that, forcing her to give him everything. The one girl he couldn't have, and he'd damn well have her.

Temporarily. That harsh reminder did nothing to dampen his lust, it just added a layer of desperation to it.

"You still want to taunt me?" Jesus, what was he doing here? The more he let loose on the reins of his control with her, the more his desires for Ana surfaced.

Her eyes glowed with a blatant dare. "Two things."

"What?"

"I'm on birth control, but I want to use condoms. I'm not risking an accidental pregnancy."

He'd never take her bare. Ever. Ethan knew what he was—an ex-whore who didn't deserve to touch her. But since he was going down this path, he'd sure as hell protect her. "All of us in the band and security have routine blood tests. I'm clean. And I always use condoms, no exceptions."

"Oh, I—" The first sign of doubt clouded her expression. "I haven't had sex in a couple years."

Two years? And he thought he was going to take her hard? Hell no. He'd still give her the experience, but he was damned glad she'd told him that. It didn't change how much he wanted her; if anything it made him want her more. It just meant he was going to enjoy getting her ready. Driving her to the brink with his fingers...

Enough. He had to get them in the room before he was too hard to walk. “You said two things. We discussed birth control. What’s the other thing?”

“Yes.” She put her paddle into the water and pushed off, heading for the shore.

Confused, he called out, “Yes what?”

She glanced back over her shoulder, a sexy smirk riding her mouth. “I still want to taunt you.”

Oh her ass was his now. Temporarily. He couldn’t forget that. A few days, and he was gone and out of her life. He’d never risk his past rising up to hurt and humiliate her. Nor would he be able to bear that look of disgust toward him in Ana’s eyes.

CHAPTER 4

Ana slipped into the room just ahead of Ethan and rushed past the two queen beds, through the dressing and bathroom area into the living space.

She grabbed a plastic container from the fridge, snatched up a fork, and hopped up on the counter by the small sink.

Her heart thumped, and chills broke out on her skin as Ethan strode into the room. He didn't look at her, but walked straight to the huge slider and pulled it open. He stayed there, hands hanging loose at his sides as he focused on something outside.

What was he thinking? If he dared to change his mind now, she might just push him off that railing outside the sliding door. Ana wasn't up for another rejection. But she had an idea of how to regain his attention. After popping open the plastic lid, she dug her fork into the rich pie that just happened to be Ethan's favorite.

He spun around. "What are you doing?"

"Eating." She shrugged, trying to appear casual. "I got hungry."

He stalked toward her. "Is that key lime pie?"

Ha, she had him now. "What, this?" She stuck the fork in, gathering a creamy piece along with a bit of whipped cream and crust, and held it up between them. "Why yes, it is. I always heard Florida has the best, so I thought I'd try it."

"Right now? While I was standing there at the window, trying to keep from ripping off your suit and fucking you blind, telling myself to slow down because you haven't had sex in a couple years and might need a little tenderness...you got hungry?"

Did he just growl that last part? The realization that she hadn't lost his attention, but rather he'd been struggling for some control, sent a wave of triumph through her. And affection that he'd thought he had to slow things because of her dry spell.

"Yep." She slid the small chunk into her mouth. It really was excellent pie.

His eyes heated to pure blue, like the center of a gas flame. He slapped his hands on the counter, bracketing her hips. "Are you going to share?"

"Nope." She scooped up another bite and got it halfway up, when he caught her wrist and tugged it to his mouth.

Damn he moved fast. Before she could recover, his lips closed over the forkful. A low sound of pleasure vibrated in his throat.

Ana couldn't tear her gaze from him as he slowly savored the morsel. Heat radiated from the pit of her belly. "That was mine."

He dipped his finger into the whipped topping and spread cool, sweet cream over her mouth. "And this is mine." He swiped his tongue over her lips, lapping the treat.

The warm, wet licks sucked the air from her lungs.

Ethan tangled his fingers in her hair, holding her still as he cleaned off the whipped topping with an intensity that shivered through her. Not enough, it wasn't nearly enough. After dropping the pie on the counter, she sank her fingers into his thick hair and darted her tongue out to meet his.

Ethan groaned and deepened the kiss. Sliding his hand to her jaw, he tilted her head back and demanded she give him full access to her mouth. Wild need surged, and she couldn't get enough of his taste or the feel of his skin still hot from the sun.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, almost climbing up him.

His chest heaving, Ethan gripped her sides, pushing her back onto the counter. Breaking the kiss, he glared down at her. "No you don't. You're done teasing. I'm barely holding on to any restraint. We're

doing this slow.”

“I don’t want slow.” She wanted to just lose control and wipe out her ability to think or worry.

“Tough.” He settled his hands on her bare thighs and skimmed his palms up. “I’ll give you what you want if you tell me you’re sorry for teasing and promise to be good.”

The bastard was goading her. Paying her back. Given his massive hard-on, she knew she could push him over the edge of control. Reaching behind her back, she released her strap and yanked her top off.

Her freed breasts tingled from the cool air and Ethan’s heated stare.

“Or, I could do this.” She sank a finger into more of the whipped cream. She’d never done this kind of thing. But now? She had nothing to lose and could be as bad as she wanted. There were no emotional consequences. It didn’t matter if he secretly thought she was asking for it. Hell she *was* begging for it.

And it was amazingly freeing.

Ana painted the dollop of cream over her nipple, making it pebble and her belly tighten.

Ethan grabbed her hand and closed his mouth over her finger to lick it clean. A second later he had both wrists pinned behind her hips, forcing her into an arch. “You’re so going to be pay for that. I’m going to make you beg me to fuck you.”

The helpless feel of his fingers locked around her wrists caused an excited rush straight to her core. She squirmed as her entire body pulsed with anticipation. She’d never been this needy before. But Ana loved it.

Ethan latched on to her nipple and sucked, his tongue lashing the sensitive tip.

Ana bowed at the sensation, struggling to free her hands. But it was useless, he was too strong. That thought made her clit swell and ache. She squeezed her thighs around him, desperate for relief.

After releasing her nipple, Ethan took her mouth, tangling their tongues in a frantic dance. His free hand clamped on her hip, dragging her to his hard cock and rocking against her.

“Let go.” She wiggled, attempting to free her hands so she could touch him. Maybe push those boardshorts down and—

His dark chuckle sent shivers along her spine. “Nope. Not unless you really want me to release you, and we both know you don’t.” A smile curved his mouth, and his tone gentled. “You’re beautiful, Ana. You always were, but like this? Hair wild, your skin glowing from the sun and desire. Nipples wet and puckered from my mouth...”

The tenderness in his voice breeched her defenses, causing something thick and scary to grip her throat. His gaze on her was too much. Too intimate. She tried to twist out of his hold. “Ethan.”

Catching her chin, he kissed her then said, “Are you going to be good? Let me take you slowly? Lay you down, pull off those bottoms and make you come? As many times as it takes, to get you ready for my cock?”

A voice in her head tried to tell her to say yes. Stop this wildness. But she didn’t want to back down. She wanted to drive them both higher. “Not a chance. If you can’t handle it, then you know where the door is.”

His fingers tightened around her wrists. “Bad Ana.” Kissing a path along her jaw, he said, “Ask me to fuck you.” He slicked his tongue along the shell of her ear. “Nicely.”

Who knew Ethan could be so evil? She liked it. But she wasn’t surrendering that easily. Instead she sank her teeth into his shoulder.

When he jerked, she laughed. “I don’t surrend—” Before she could finish, his mouth was on hers, fierce, demanding.

She dropped her head back as he licked down the curve of her neck.

A noise echoed in the room. With her heart slamming in her chest, her body humming and needy, Ana struggled to focus. “What’s that?”

“My phone. I have to check it. I’m technically on duty.” Letting go of her hands, he strode to the table, snatched up the device and read something. “I need to go back.”

The cold air chilled her overheated skin. Ana slid off the counter, found her top and retied it.

Disappointment weighed her down. “Okay.” What else could she say? Work came first. Looking around the room, she realized she hadn’t planned this very well anyway. Franci and Chelle could return at any time.

“Ana.”

He stood right in front of her. She’d been so fixated on the thoughts, she hadn’t heard him move. Steeling her spine, she got over her frustration and smiled. “Operation Kiss 2.0 is thwarted again. Some things just aren’t meant to be.”

“It doesn’t have to be over.” He leaned closer. “I’m not ready to call it quits. Come with me.”

“With you? Where? To the venue?”

“Back to where I’m staying at Bayside Manor. Come to the show with me tonight. I’ll get you VIP tickets again, and then after the show, we’ll go back to the manor. Spend the night with me.” He laid his hand on her cheek. “We’ll have more privacy in my room there. And more time to explore this need of yours to be my bad Ana.”

The enormity of the invitation left her spinning. He was giving her more than she’d even hoped for. They’d actually spend real time together.

But was this smart? What if she couldn’t really handle having sex and sleeping with him?

Really? Ethan’s giving you what you wanted, and now you’re getting cold feet? What did she think would be better? Have sex, then him walk out? That wasn’t what she wanted either. Yeah, she accepted that they weren’t going to have a future romantically. But if she truly wanted to be bad with Ethan and make some memories for both of them, why not take this opportunity and enjoy it to the fullest?

She could do this, and more importantly, she wanted to. Ethan was making a sincere effort for her.

“I’d like that.” The logistics of the plan took shape in her mind. “I need to tell Franci and Chelle where I am. Are you sure it’s okay if I stay? Is it a hotel?”

“Private manor we rented. Let me check with Hank, but I’m pretty sure Franci and Chelle can stay at the manor too. That way you won’t be alone at the concert, and you’ll have more fun with them around.”

A million thoughts skidded through her head, but one stood out. “I’m not sure we can afford the cost. The tickets, the rooms at the manor...maybe we should just—”

“There’s no cost. I can get you the tickets free, and the manor’s already rented.” He leaned down, brushing his mouth over hers. Raising his head, he said, “Say yes. The place is huge, right on the bay with a boat and watercrafts. There’s a big home theater, a game room, walking trails, you guys will love it. You don’t have to rush back here. We can have some fun.”

The fact that he actually desired to spend time with her stirred something that had gone cold and sad the day she’d sat alone in her doctor’s office, waiting to hear whether or not she was sick. For the first time in a while, Ana felt wanted.

But it was only temporary. She couldn’t forget that as she had no intention of getting her heart broken. Again.

* * * *

She hadn’t been sure what to bring, but finally she and Ethan were out the door and heading down in the elevator. Franci and Chelle had returned right after she texted them, and they’d all been running around the room, changing and packing. The two girls would drive the rental car to the manor once they were all set to go.

Ethan’s voice cut in to her thoughts. “Is it always like that?”

She glanced over at him. “What?”

“That...chaos?”

Chuckling, she said, “Three women trying to pack and get ready in one contained space? Yep, that’s usually how it goes. I’m guessing you don’t have any sisters?”

“Nope.”

Ana peered at him as the elevator stopped and opened to a courtyard. “Do you have any siblings?” All he’d ever told her was that before Sloane found him, he’d run away from home, lived on the streets and sometimes did underground fighting to survive. But he’d shut her down if she asked anything else.

“No.” He laid his hand on her back as they walked, hauling her suitcase behind him.

There he was, quiet Ethan. She could feel the second he pulled away from her. When he withdrew like that, it burned. Worse, she could sense the pain that he held onto with an iron fist. It tugged at her need to fix things.

Despite his hard jaw and straight-ahead stare, she asked softly, “What happened to—?”

“Ana!” a male voice called out.

Surprised and confused, she spotted a dark-haired man dressed in tan slacks and a polo shirt striding up to them. He shot a quick look at Ethan then settled his brown eyes on her.

It was so unexpected, it took Ana a second to place who he was. It clicked finally, and despite the slightly humid air, goose bumps rose on her arms. “Gregory? What are you doing here?” She barely knew him, and she really wanted to keep it that way.

A grin tilted his mouth. “I’m as surprised as you are. In fact I wasn’t even sure it was you when I called out your name. I’m here on a business trip and staying at the Guy Harvey Outpost. What are you doing here?”

Business trip? And why was he practically bouncing on his toes like a two-year-old waiting for a cupcake?

Because he was waiting for you.

Ana rubbed her arms, suddenly cold despite the blazing sun. What were the chances that the man she’d been trying to avoid for the last two weeks had shown up in another state the exact same time she did?

“You knew I was coming here. You were in the bakery the day I booked the flight.” She remembered it because Gregory had overheard her on the phone and commented on her trip. *You can use the plane ride to Florida to read my book.*

Gregory waved a hand. “Oh, right, you’re on vacation. Actually that’s a lucky break then. You’ll have time to discuss my mom’s book and a contract to write your dad’s biography. Why don’t we meet for drinks and—?”

“Ana doesn’t have time. She’s with me.”

She stiffened at Ethan’s ice-cold voice. Shooting him a glare, she said, “Quiet.” It was bad enough she hadn’t handled things with Gregory as well as she should have. Okay, she’d been avoiding the problem. But she didn’t need Ethan taking over. She’d fix it.

“Who are you?” Gregory asked.

“Her date.”

Gregory eyed the suitcase, then shifted to Ethan. “Ana and I are friends, and we’re working together on a project.” He returned his focus to her. “You’ve read the book, right? And my proposal? We should get started right away on your dad’s story. I know I can get a big publisher to pay attention to a story about Roger Kendall, the home run king.”

Unbelievable. It was like Gregory had rewritten reality into a version he liked. Time for her to be absolutely clear. “We’re not working together. I told you no, and I meant it. I’m not going to read the book you wrote or hire you to write my dad’s biography.” She didn’t know how to be more specific than that.

He stopped bouncing. “But you said you would. This is my big chance. Publishers wouldn’t even read my mom’s biography, but they’ll fight for your dad’s. This will get me in the door. You have to—”

“Stop.” She’d had enough. “The answer is no. It’s not changing, and you need to leave me alone. Don’t email, call, text or wait for me in the bakery.” Frustrated, ticked and a little frightened that Gregory had actually arranged to show up where she was on vacation, she stomped away.

“Listen to her, or you’re dealing with me,” Ethan added.

Ana struggled to calm down and think. She’d talked to Gregory twice before he sent her his book through email. That was the moment she’d realized that he’d mistaken her casual chatter as something

more. She'd told him she wasn't interested and avoided him after that. Ignoring him hadn't worked, so what should she do next? Should she call her dad's lawyer that had helped Ana and Linda settle his estate? Absolutely, she'd do that today. What about notifying the police? But Gregory hadn't made any threat, so...

"Who is that?"

Ethan's sharp question slowed her spinning thoughts. "Gregory Yates. He calls himself a sports biographer, but I think the only thing he's written is a book on his mother, who was a professional tennis player before he was born."

"So this guy's been bugging you, and you didn't say anything? What the hell, Ana?"

Like she wasn't concerned enough? Yeah she'd seen that Gregory continued to hang around the bakery, trying to talk to her. But Ana had been sidetracked and a tad more worried about the lump in her breast than a customer who didn't understand boundaries. She didn't need Ethan in her face about it now.

She walked faster, her irritation ramping up. "Why would I tell you? And what was that back there with you acting all caveman proprietary? '*She's my date. She's with me.*' You don't get to lay some claim on me when it's convenient but ignore me when I need..." Her eyes started to sting. *Shut up. Just shut up.* He hadn't even known, so she didn't get to lay that on him.

And jeez, get over it already. She'd had a little scare. Big fucking deal. People out there had real problems. Right now, she needed to focus on her more pressing issue of Gregory, not her self-pity because she'd faced a tiny ordeal alone.

"That wasn't a coincidence back there," Ethan nearly shouted back. "He was waiting for you to walk by. I saw him before he called out to you. He was watching, Ana. Are you hearing me?"

She'd already figured that out for herself, but he didn't give her a chance to answer.

"A man followed you from San Diego to Florida, and I'm supposed to stand there and let him believe you're unprotected? I don't think so. I need to figure out if he's dangerous. Hell, what am I saying, he fucking followed you. He's a stalker. Jesus, how did you get involved with him?"

"I didn't get *involved*. I talked to him in the bakery because he looked lonely. His mom died, my dad had died, and we talked about it. He told me he'd written a book. It was two conversations and suddenly he emails me a book and a proposal to write my dad's biography."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "You gave him your email address?"

The aggravation in his voice snapped the last of her patience. "It's on my business card." She stopped walking, realizing they were already in the parking area. "I'm not explaining myself to you. I didn't do a damn thing I should have to defend, but even if I did, it's none of your business. Either you want a few days of fun, or we call it quits right now."

His hard face softened. "How about a two-for-one deal? A few days of sexy fun and a friend who's concerned. Because that shit that just happened with Gregory has stalker written all over it. The guy followed you on your vacation. Let that sink in. Followed you from California to Florida, checked into the hotel right next to you and hung around until he saw you."

A chill rippled down her spine. "It's creepy."

He wrapped an arm around her, pulling her against him. "Stay at the manor for a few days. He should get the message. And if he calls or texts, ignore him. Don't feed whatever delusion he has going on."

That was very sound advice. "All right. Thanks. I'll call my dad's lawyer once I'm settled in. He'll know the best way to handle this." Ignoring Gregory hadn't worked, so she had to get proactive. It sucked to deal with it on her vacation when she'd hoped to get away from responsibility for a week.

Ethan opened his mouth, but Ana cut him off, done with Gregory. "I'll take care of it. Up to now, he's been annoying, but he crossed a line today. I'll give everything to my lawyer and handle it. Gregory will soon learn I'm no one's victim."

Nope. She'd lived through that once, and when she'd asked for help from her mom, all she got back was accusations. Yeah, her dad and stepmom rescued her, but at a high cost to them, one she wasn't really able to pay back.

So now? Ana rescued herself.

* * * *

Ethan glanced over at Ana in the passenger seat of the Jaguar convertible. With the top down, the wind blew her hair, and she was struggling to tame it into a ponytail.

A gust tore the band out of her hand.

As she reached into her purse, fishing out another one, Ana's laughter pealed out.

That sound went right to his dick. So much better than her earlier worry and the sudden harsh withdrawal from him when Gregory confronted her. Ethan had automatically stepped in, making it clear she was his to protect. He didn't care if this was temporary. Someone threatened Ana, they dealt with him. It was that simple, except to Ana. She'd shut him down hard. Yet she'd had no problem letting him touch, kiss and restrain her wrists. That thought unleashed another torrent of lust. He'd always been attracted to her, but this? Christ, she was hitting all his buttons, the ones he purposely ignored.

His fantasies about forced seduction weren't a bad thing, but he avoided the intimacy that kind of sex game would require. It'd take real trust for a woman to allow him to hold her down, force her to climax for him and then bury his cock in her, wringing more orgasms from her, proving she wanted him.

"Your knuckles are white."

Her soft voice dragged him out of his introspection, and he loosened his hold on the steering wheel. He was too worked up. When he'd gotten the text calling him into work, he'd had the urge to ignore it. Turn off his phone and focus on Ana. He couldn't walk away from her again, not like he had eleven months ago. When she'd agreed to come to the manor with him, it had been an instant relief to know they'd have more time together. But right now, he had to distract himself from thinking about getting her naked.

Casting around, he searched for another subject. "You don't wear your glasses anymore?"

"Nope, I got LASIK."

She'd been cute in her glasses, but he liked her either way. "So are you still living in the condo? Or did you use some of your inheritance to buy another place?"

She sighed. "I'm so tired of everyone thinking I'm suddenly rich. Everything went to Linda. It's her money, not mine. Why don't people get that?"

He'd assumed Ana had inherited at least a portion of her dad's estate. She was his daughter, after all. "Some people might resent their stepparent getting all the money. Does it bother you?"

"No. I wish he'd lived. That bothers me. But Linda was the love of his life and more of a mom to me than my biological mother. I knew what was in my dad's will. None of this is a surprise or feels wrong to me."

Ethan studied her in between watching the road. She tucked the flared skirt of her sundress—the same one she'd been wearing earlier—tighter beneath her thighs to keep the wind from catching it. A bit of sadness clung to her, the grief for her dad.

But she really didn't care about the money.

Something else nagged at him. "Who else is bugging you about the inheritance?"

Her face twisted. "After years of near silence, my mom's been calling and texting me."

He never quite understood what happened with her mom. He knew Ana'd lived with her until around fourteen, then went to live with her dad. "Your parents never married, right?"

"Nope. That part of my mom's plan failed. My dad wouldn't marry her when she got pregnant. So she went to plan B, soaking him for child support. He paid, getting only minimal visitation in the deal."

"You don't like your mom much, do you?" Something he understood all too well.

"She's a gold digger. She married another rich guy just before I turned fourteen and moved us to Washington, making it even harder for me to see my dad."

"Why's she contacting you now?"

"Because she thinks I'm suddenly wealthy. Her latest thing is pressuring me about going up there for

her husband's fifty-fifth birthday party."

"You going?"

"No." She fisted her hand on the leather seat.

Hmm. "You don't like him?"

"I'm not getting within a hundred feet of him."

The hairs on the back of his neck rose. Ethan steered around a truck then turned to her. *I'm no one's victim*. She'd said that a few minutes ago in reference to Gregory, but had she been her stepfather's victim once? Rage simmered along his nerve endings. If that bastard had hurt her... "What did—?"

"I don't want to talk about my parents." She forcibly relaxed in her seat and raised an eyebrow at him. "Unless you want to tell me about yours?"

Hell no. He didn't ever want Ana to know about that. He shut up and drove.

CHAPTER 5

“This is Bayside Manor?” Ana blurted out in awe. The massive gates slid open, and they drove up a long, winding road through lush lands and passed a few buildings. “What are those?”

“Recording studio with offices, and three casitas are scattered around. This place is owned by a record label.”

Wow. The scope of the life Ethan was living sank in. Finally they reached a huge, multistory, sand-colored mansion overlooking Tampa Bay. The building had curving lines that made her think of a gentle wave. “This beats the hell out of a hotel.”

Inside the house was even more breathtaking, all done in whites, ocean blues and sea greens. “How big is this place?”

“Not sure. Big enough for ten bedroom suites.”

She crossed the cool marble floor, barely noticing the pristine couches stacked with blue pillows, to the wall of sliding windows that had been opened, leading to an outdoor room complete with a kitchen, thick-cushioned couches and chairs, a pool, and beyond that the bay and dock.

Back inside the house, she eyed the spectacular gourmet kitchen boasting two sinks, double ovens and even a pot-filler faucet mounted over a six-burner stove.

“Ethan,” a new voice said. “I saw you come in on the security cameras. I have the tickets for Ana and her friends set aside for tonight.”

It only took Ana a second to recognize the man striding toward them as Hank from the VIP party last night

“Chelle and Franci are on their way.” Ethan checked his watch. “Probably ten or fifteen minutes behind us.”

“Sounds good.” Hank smiled at her then returned his attention to Ethan. “Preshow meeting in an hour at the Hyatt. The threat called into the venue has been checked out. No validity, but they brought in bomb-sniffing dogs anyway. You and I are going over there for a final update.”

Ethan nodded. “Let me get Ana settled, grab a shower, and I’ll meet you at the hotel.” He guided Ana across the great room to an elevator.

“Why are you meeting at the Hyatt?” She had too many things she was curious about.

“The rest of the security team, staff and road crew are staying there. We’ll go over everything for tonight’s show.”

The elevator doors parted to reveal another beautiful foyer.

“We’re this way.” He led her down a hallway and opened a door.

Ana walked into a living room with a TV, couch and a two-sided desk. She headed into the bedroom, taking in the huge king-sized bed covered in a thick white comforter. Her stomach fluttered. Going to the French doors that opened to a balcony overlooking the bay, she thought about all the effort Ethan had gone to for her, even inviting her friends. He was giving her everything she’d once dreamed of.

Ethan settled his hands on her shoulders. “Second thoughts?”

“None.” She turned to face him. “Thank you for all this. You’ve gone to a lot of trouble. You didn’t have to do this.”

Surprise softened his face. “I’m happy to. That last night in San Diego, I wanted to do something nice for you, but you hijacked my plans and turned it into the most amazing night of my life by giving me a chance to cook with Chef Zane.”

Part of her rejoiced, and the other part wanted to flinch in embarrassment at her stupidity later when she’d kissed him. But at least he had some good memories of that night too. It made her happy to believe she’d helped him see he had options. Back then, Ethan had been, well, depressed. If she’d helped him to

heal and move on, that was good. “You’re doing so well. Kat had told me you’re happy, but I’m glad I have a chance to see it for myself.”

He fingered a lock of her hair. “You worried about me?”

Every day and night. “Nope, I forgot all about you. Kat would bring you up, and she’s my boss, so I had to pretend to listen.”

He smiled, and he tugged her against him. “I’m going to make damn sure you never forget me.” He lowered his mouth to hers in a slow kiss. Tender. The word slid into her brain, and sparked a need to push away the vulnerability that came with it. She didn’t need slow and tender, that was for people in love. She and Ethan were just old friends indulging in a fling. Wrapping her arms around him, she kissed Ethan back, capturing his tongue, and sucking.

Breaking the kiss, he caught her hair, his eyes intense. “When you fight me for control, I’ll fight back. And I’ll win.”

The knot that had tightened after seeing Gregory loosened. She didn’t have to hold back as much with Ethan as she did with everyone else. He was only interested in sex and fun. “Can’t handle it?”

Moving fast, he spun her, wrapped an arm around her and pinned her back against his chest. “You don’t learn, sunshine.”

Ana squirmed, but he had her arms locked to her sides.

“Still want to tease me?”

Oh yeah. “Thought you had to go to work?”

He slid his hand up her thigh. “If I find you wet, baby, I’m going to take you right to the edge...” He kissed her ear.

Ana tilted her head, giving him access to the curve of her neck.

“...and leave you like that.” He tunneled his fingers higher up her leg, his cock long and thick against her back.

The feel of him surrounding her fueled her lust. Part of her wanted to rip her panties off and beg him to touch her. But she wanted to prove she could make him more crazed.

Forcing a laugh, she said, “So? I told you, I know how to make myself come.” Lowering her voice, she added, “Want me to describe it?”

“Fuck.” His hot breath feathered over her neck, and his arm banded tighter. “Witch. You’re going to plead for mercy.” His fingers edged over her panties when her phone rang.

Ethan tugged his hand out and growled his frustration.

Ana couldn’t believe this. “I hate technology right now.” She snatched her purse off the mattress, fished out her phone and looked at the screen. “It’s Chelle.” Trying to calm the lust searing through her, she put the phone on speaker and struggled for a normal tone as she said, “Hi, Chelle.”

“We’re here at the gate. How do we get in?”

Ethan took out his phone. “I’ll open the gate for you.” He punched in some numbers.

Ana added, “I’ll come downstairs. This place is awesome. See you in a bit.” She hung up.

Ethan tugged her back into his arms. “After the concert, no more interruptions. The only thing that will stop me is you.”

She shivered, liking this demanding side of him. “Do you see a stop sign on me anywhere?”

“I’ll definitely do a thorough search tonight.” He stepped back. “Go get your friends. I need to take a shower, get dressed and go over threat assessments. I might not be back for dinner. Will you guys be okay? The cook will make something. You can eat with the band or scrounge up what you like in the kitchen.”

Ana cleared her brain of sex. He had a job to do, and he was serious about it. It hadn’t escaped her notice that Ethan was part of the band’s inner circle. That he could just bring her and two of her friends here said a lot.

“We’ll be fine. Thanks.” She headed for the door.

“Ana.”

She looked back. Her mouth dried. He’d stripped off his shirt and untied his boardshorts.

“Sure you can find your way?” He slid them down. Slowly.

His cock popped out, fully erect, long, thick, the head nearly touching his stomach.

Dear God. Still clutching her phone, she took a step toward him. Ethan stood there, sunlight haloing him, hair spiky from the gulf water, wicked-ass grin on his face. Her nipples tightened, and air locked in her lungs. She’d never seen anyone so magnificent. So big...everywhere. Not perfect—he had scars that marked him as a man who’d survived things she couldn’t even imagine.

But damn.

Finally she drew in a breath. “Uh...”

“Uh isn’t an answer.”

She forced her stare up to his face.

“You teased me by taking off your bikini top and doing naughty things with the whipped cream. Thought I’d even the score.” He wrapped his hand around the base of his cock. “Is it working?”

She wanted to touch every inch of him. Heat flooded her body, making her wet. So wet. He was showing her a side of him that enticed her mercilessly. She gripped the doorway between the two rooms. Erotically torturing each other was a game she’d discovered she liked. Ana upped the ante with, “Did I mention the dare?”

His hand slicked up to the head of his penis. Down. “No, I don’t think you did.”

“Last week, Franci and Chelle decided to get Brazilian waxes. They dared me to do it too.”

He stopped jacking his dick, but he didn’t let go. “Did you?” The words came out harsh.

“You’ll have to find out for yourself. Later.” It took everything she had to turn and walk away.

His dark groan followed her.

* * * *

Ana was still buzzing from the concert. She’d had as much or more fun than last night. But now she was thrilled to be alone with Ethan while the others went out clubbing.

Ethan unlocked the door to their room and stepped aside for Ana to enter.

She uttered a soft gasp. The coffee table in their room had a silver bucket, champagne and two flutes flanked by a tray of intricately designed chocolates and a second tray with chocolate-dipped strawberries. The candies were exquisitely crafted—one tiny square had a delicate lavender butterfly on the top of it. Another was white chocolate with dark chocolate latticework.

“You did this?”

Ethan closed and locked the door. He walked past her and called out from the bedroom, “I stopped by a chocolatier when I was out today and ordered this for you. Staff put it in here, along with the champagne.”

His thoughtfulness touched her. She chose a dark chocolate topped with a swirl of white and red. She bit into it... Oh God. Luscious chocolate with notes of amaretto and cherry gave it a decadence that had her closing her eyes to savor it.

“Good?”

Lifting her lids, she got an eyeful. Ethan had stripped off his clothes and was yanking on a pair of sweats. She assumed he’d wanted out of his work clothes.

“It’s delicious. And romantic.” As soon as the word left her mouth, she regretted it. This wasn’t a romance.

He tugged the champagne out of the ice, wrapped it in a towel and opened it.

“You’re pretty good at that.” She indicated the champagne bottle he’d expertly uncorked. He’d developed a sheen of sophistication over the last few months, but that shouldn’t really surprise her since he’d journeyed a lot of the world in that time.

After pouring out the golden liquid, he handed her a glass. “Practice. I’ve tried to learn as much as I can in our travels. This is an exclusive Krug champagne. I think you’ll like it.” He selected a strawberry

coated in a white chocolate. He held the fruit out. "Open."

She parted her lips, the delicate shell giving way to sweet, tangy strawberry.

"Romance isn't my thing, but sharing things I enjoy with you is. That hasn't changed even if we're crossing the line from friends to lovers." Ethan brushed his thumb over her lip. "Watching you eat has always turned me on."

Her chest filled at the depth of his words. Not romantic? That was the most sensual thing anyone had ever said to her. "You realize I'm a sure thing, right?" She wasn't going to change her mind.

"I know. But I hurt you once, and I'm not doing it again. I don't mean sexually. You want it hard, I'll give you that. I mean when this is over in a few days or a week, you're going to know you were more than a girl I fucked then walked away and forgot about. Is that clear enough for you?"

The flutters turned into full-fledged wings beating in her belly. This was what she needed and why she came to him. But what killed her was the torment in his eyes, the belief that he really wasn't good enough for her.

You're not here to fix him, she reminded herself.

"Crystal clear. Your turn." She chose a dark chocolate berry and held it out to him.

He leaned forward, biting into the treat.

She took a sip of her champagne, enjoying the crisp bubbles with a hint of...hell, she didn't know. All she could think about was the man in front of her. He was what she wanted. Craved. The wine could be vinegar for all she cared. "Like the strawberry?"

He set his glass down and turned all his focus on her. "Good, but it's not you."

A buzz raced over her skin, and her nipples tightened. "You want to taste me?"

"Taste is too tame a word." Stepping closer to her, he slipped the flute from her fingers and set it aside. "I'm not tame, baby."

Something dangerous glinted in his eyes, like a wild arc of electricity that couldn't be captured, there and gone. It tugged deep inside her, igniting a need to chase it.

He framed her face in his hands. "You've taunted and teased me enough. You ready to behave?"

That question kicked her heart rate up. Going up on her toes, she kissed him, unleashing an aggressiveness that surprised her. Demanding access, she thrust into his mouth, appreciating the sweetness of the fruit she'd fed him.

It wasn't enough. She ran her hands over his shoulders and down his chest, eager to feel every dip and valley, to know him as no one else did. Her Ethan. *Hers*. Gliding her touch over the ridges of his abs, she relished the twitch of his muscles. She kept up the torment until her fingers brushed over the engorged head of his cock. Hot skin beaded with fluid.

Ana's pulse ramped up at the sight of his erection, so big and hard his cockhead had pushed out of the top of his sweats.

Unable to resist, she stroked the crown, spreading that bead of fluid and—

A hand clamped down on her wrist. "No."

Stabs of pleasure shot out from his hold on her arm.

"My cock is off-limits until you show me." The growl in his tone stroked her internally, while his firm grip touched a secret yearning buried inside.

Ana tried to free her hand as a test. No give. He didn't hurt her, not even a twinge, just held her trapped. A wicked flash of heat snaked through her, tweaking her nipples and sparking a throb between her legs. How far could she push him? Raising her chin, she said, "Show you what?"

His mouth curved, and he tugged on her wrist, dragging her off balance. Before she could catch herself, Ethan snapped his arm around her waist and lifted her off her feet so they were face-to-face. "Ask me again. Do it."

The feel of him locking her against his powerful body had her panting in excitement. Why did it turn her on? Easy answer—she didn't have to hold back. "Show you what?"

His eyes darkened as his other hand wrapped in her hair, preventing her from moving. He leaned a

fraction closer. “Your pussy. It’s mine tonight, Ana. You’re mine.” He slanted his mouth over hers, kissing her with a torrid fierceness.

Ana slapped hands on his shoulders, unsure if she wanted to try to fight him or yank him closer. Fire spread until she rubbed against him, desperate to relieve the growing ache in her nipples. What was he doing to her?

Ana broke the kiss. “Put me down.”

He did as she requested and stepped back. “More than you can handle?”

After tugging off her shirt, she tossed it aside. “You’re a lot of talk. I’m more a girl of action.” She undid her bra and slipped it down her arms. “See, I don’t make all these dire threats then never follow through. *‘I’m going to make you pay. Make you beg,’*” she mimicked him. “And yet here I am, still waiting.”

His gaze traveled down her throat, fastening on her nipples. “Keep going. Find out what happens.”

She undid her jeans, shimmied them down and stepped out, revealing her black lace string bikini panties.

For one heartbeat, his eyes flamed hot enough to make her belly tremble. This was what she craved, to be the center of that intense regard. Knowing that in this moment he truly wanted her fueled her courage.

She slid the panties down her thighs.

“Bare.” He took a shuddering breath and moved in a blur, scooped her up in his arms and strode from one room to the other.

Startled, she asked, “What—?”

He dropped her on the soft bed, leaned over and kissed her, hard, his mouth no longer savoring hers, but owning. Tongue demanding. Once he conquered her mouth, he went to the spot on her neck just below her jaw that made her moan. He kept going, kissing and sucking her nipples until she writhed with madness, each pull of his lips arcing straight to her clit.

“Everything, Ana. Show me everything.” Not giving her a chance to think or answer, he pushed her back and knelt on the floor. His large hands caught her knees and pried.

Ana instinctively fought, not from embarrassment, but need, an unsettling impulse to see how far he’d go if she resisted.

Ethan’s eyes blazed a challenge. “No more warnings.”

She firmed her muscles to provoke him.

In one fluid movement, he shoved his hands beneath her thighs, yanking her legs up and apart.

Her breath whooshed out of her at how easily he had her at his mercy.

He draped her limbs over his shoulders and pressed a hand to her abdomen, imprisoning her on the bed. Slowly, he lowered his attention to between her widespread legs. “Look at you, so bare, wet and pretty.” He glided a finger through her folds. Shudders wracked her as he buried his face between her thighs, his tongue exploring while he eased a digit inside, stretching and pushing deeper.

It’d been so long, Ana couldn’t fight the sudden buildup of clawing need. “Ethan, please!” With nothing else to hold on to, she clutched his hair. The tension mounted, her belly drawing tighter, all her muscles clenching. Sounds spilled out, and she arched her back.

He latched on to her throbbing bud.

Ana exploded, her climax slamming into her. Hot, wild pleasure gripped her.

When she regained her breath, Ethan loomed over her, his eyes wild, jaw clenched. Tendons stood out on his neck. “More, Ana. Can’t stop.” His naked shoulders bunched, the power in him tightly leashed. “Don’t say no.”

Say no? Her desperation matched his. Ana shoved his sweats down and wrapped her fingers around his cock. “Now. I want to feel you inside me.” She guided him to her.

His cockhead pressed against her opening. Ana dug her fingers into his back.

He groaned and began to push in. “Damn, you’re tight. And wet. Christ.” His jaw bulged as he tunneled in another inch. Then two.

The stretch as he filled her, the soft burn of her flesh yielding, fired her nerves. She lifted her hips, trying to get more of him.

“Never felt this good, this— Oh fuck.”

Ana froze at the snarl. “What?”

CHAPTER 6

What the hell was he doing? He yanked out of Ana's sweet pussy and fought to get his breath. He'd never been so damned stupid before. He didn't deserve to touch her bare, to experience her wet heat gloving him with no barrier.

"Ethan?" The uncertainty quivering in Ana's voice spurred him into action.

"Condom." He shoved up, kicked off his sweats and grabbed the packet off the bedside table. After quickly sheathing his cock, he touched her mouth. "You tasted so good I lost my mind for a second."

Slow down. He lined up and began pushing in. Ana was small, tight and so hot, he shuddered. Sweat broke out over his flesh, and need clamped his muscles.

"Now. Hurry." She gripped his butt, showing him how badly she wanted him. "I need to feel all of you."

Inhaling her scent shoved him over the edge of control. He surged inside, going balls-deep. "Mine, Ana. Right now, tonight, you're mine."

She hadn't bought him like those other women and didn't need anything from him but this—letting go together. With him, only him. The thought of anyone else having her, even touching her, ignited a torch of possession.

Her gorgeous eyes turned fierce. "I always wanted to be yours."

Oh fuck. That shredded him. Ethan had never had anyone for his own. Ever. Fire seared his belly, while lust singed his balls. "Then give it to me. Come again."

He gazed down her hot little body, her stomach straining as she rose to meet every thrust. He could feel the slick walls of her pussy clenching around him in vivid need for more release. So damned gorgeous. Dropping to his elbows, he changed his angle, forcing his pelvis against her clit.

Her eyes widened. "It's too much. Help me."

Just like that, she gave herself over to him. He thrust again and again. He slid his hand down to her ass, tilting her hips, and Ana's eyes rolled back.

"Yes. God." She came apart, her walls gripping him in spasms.

His fingers dug into her skin, pinning her to the mattress while he pounded into her. His climax raced down his spine, driving him deeper into her, then exploded. He came so hard, the world blurred.

Except for Ana.

* * * *

Ana jarred awake, startled by the feel of a huge, warm body behind her and an arm draped over her side. Ethan. Realizing he was there drained some of the tension from her nightmare.

"You okay? You were thrashing around in your sleep," Ethan said.

"Sorry." She blinked to clear the cobwebs from her brain. "What time is it?" The room had blackout drapes, so she couldn't tell. But they hadn't gone to sleep until after three.

"Eight. What were you dreaming about?"

She sank back against him. "My dad on the roof, then it turned into you. I kept yelling at you to get off, but you laughed and said you don't have to listen to me. I just knew something bad was going to happen. You started to slip, and I woke up."

He wrapped her snugly against him and kissed her hair. "Do you have that kind of dream about your dad often?"

She didn't need her psych classes to tell her she already dreaded Ethan leaving her again. "Hardly ever. Go back to sleep."

“Yeah, like that’s going to happen when I have your naked ass pressed against my cock.”

His voice slid down her back, warming her. “Well now—” She tried to turn, but he held her firm.

“Stay put.”

Surprised, she craned her head around to see him in the soft gloom. “Why?”

“Because I like holding you. Not rushing. This isn’t something I get to do.”

She could just make out his eyes. But it was the tone of his voice that made her think a part of him longed for something—maybe a connection that went deeper than sex? “Wake up with women?”

“With you. I never wanted to wake up with another woman. Right now, you’re mine.”

Not just any woman, but her. How could she not feel special with him? He’d always made her feel like she mattered. The warm, contented feeling of his arms around her added to the sensation. The truth was she craved this comfort as much as she did the sex they’d shared.

“There’s something I need to know,” Ethan said.

“What?” She rarely hid anything from him. He just never asked a lot.

“Did your stepfather touch you?”

This time, the shiver that slid down her spine was anything but sexual. “No. And it’s gross to talk about him while we’re in bed.” Or ever.

“I don’t give a shit. We’re talking about it. There’s nothing you can tell me that will change how much I want you. But if he hurt you, I need to know.”

“He didn’t.” Old anger simmered up. “I didn’t give him a chance.”

Ethan threaded their hands together by her belly. “What happened?”

“I was thirteen, almost fourteen when they married. I didn’t like him much and just stayed out of his way. But he started watching me.” This time she couldn’t repress the quiver of distaste.

“I’m right here. No one is going to touch you but me.” He tucked her closer.

The sensation of Ethan wrapping his huge, powerful body around hers made her feel safe. “He started *accidentally* walking in on me taking showers or while I was getting dressed. He’d come into my room, shut the door, and when I’d be outraged, he’d say, ‘*It’s no big deal, we’re family now.*’”

Would Ethan believe her or think she’d asked for it? And why wouldn’t he? Hadn’t Ana all but begged him to screw her? Sick anxiety ballooned in her chest, making it hard to breathe. Why had she told him?

“He’s a predator. That’s a form of grooming a victim.”

The words came out harsh, but the fact that he understood eased her fear. “You believe me.”

He pushed up on his elbow and stared down at her. “I believe he tried it, and you refused to be his victim. I hope you kicked his balls into his throat.”

His belief in her was so vivid, she blurted out the unvarnished truth. “I didn’t fight. I felt trapped and scared, so I ran.”

“Do you feel trapped now? The way I’m holding you?”

She didn’t know how he could be this understanding. “I feel protected. Not trapped.” It was so easy to talk to him she kept going. “One day he came home from work early when my mom was gone. He knew she was gone. I panicked and left. Went to my friend’s house and called my dad.”

“And?”

“He was traveling, and I couldn’t reach him, so I called Linda instead. She told me to stay where I was until she got there. My cellphone started blowing up with calls from my stepdad and later my mom when she got back home. But I didn’t answer. Linda flew to Washington and arrived at my friend’s house. I told her everything. Then she took me home.”

“With her?”

“No, back to my mom and Don’s, where Linda confronted my mom. Don was out, supposedly looking for me. Anyway, my mom denied it and said I was trying to get attention.”

“Bitch.”

“Yeah.” Ana knew exactly what her mom was. “Linda didn’t back down. She believed me and told my mom that I was going home with her. Of course my mom said no.”

“Child support.”

“Yep, she still had four more years to collect. So Linda pulled out her phone, accessed her bank account, and said, “How much for Ana to go home with me? You’ll relinquish custody and can have visitation in San Diego. But never with Don, or we’ll make public accusations that he’s a creep intending to molest a teenage girl. I’ll destroy both your lives. That’s the deal. How much? I’ll make the transfer.”

Ethan shifted slightly behind her. “That’s why you love your stepmom so much. I always wondered how you formed that bond with her.”

Ana would give Linda a kidney in a heartbeat. “I had no idea she’d even help me, but what she did—no hesitation. She left work that day, got on a plane and came to my rescue. So yeah, I love her, and I’ll do anything for her.”

“So why pay your mom? Why not just threaten to expose the bastard?”

“Because Linda and my dad didn’t have custody or any legal standing. They could have fought, of course, but the system is slow, and there wasn’t any real proof. It was my word against my stepdad’s that he was coming on to me.”

He squeezed her hand. “Got it. So how much?”

“Almost a million. Linda made the first payment that day but obviously couldn’t move all of it in one transaction. But it was enough to get me out of there. The thing is, my dad had money, but not enough to toss away almost a million dollars.” She turned her head back to see him. “Do you see why I didn’t want his money when he died? He was my hero when I needed him—both he and Linda. Why would I want more?”

Ethan studied her for a beat. “Some would. But not you.”

“I don’t. I was happy with them. And I tried to be a daughter they’d be proud of.” She’d worked so hard to be perfect, to never ask them or anyone for help again. Deep down she’d feared that one day her dad and Linda would come to resent her, to think that maybe she’d been looking for attention as her mom said. Or...

She shut it down. Going over old stuff was a waste when she was here with Ethan for only a short time.

“Let’s talk about something else.” She lifted their joined hands, and a patch of rough skin on his palm stirred another memory. Tracing the scar with her thumb, she said, “Remember the time you tried to cook roast duck?” They’d almost kissed that night, but her smoke alarm had gone off, jarring them out of the moment.

He buried his face in her hair, chuckling. “I deserved to burn the fuck out of my hand that night. I was so close to kissing you, I didn’t even smell the smoke or realize the bird was burning.”

“It’s funnier now than it was then.” She didn’t care about the duck or her oven, but she’d been devastated that they’d lost the moment. Then once he burned his hand trying to get the sizzling pan out, she’d been worried about Ethan and hated his pain. Ana had insisted on taking him to the emergency room. “It’s a pretty deep scar.” She traced it along his palm, wishing she’d stopped him from grabbing the pan without a potholder.

“Battle wound, but I can cook a duck now. My sour orange duck is exquisite.”

She laughed, leaning back against him. “You really do still love cooking, don’t you?”

He was quiet for a minute, then said, “I told you I lived on the streets before Sloane found me.”

Her stomach clenched, hoping he’d tell her more. “Yeah.”

“I was hungry a lot. I’d hang out by dumpsters in the back of restaurants sometimes. They’d give me, or any of us hanging around, food. But anytime they opened the door, I would catch the scent. It was the sweetest torture. These amazing smells of roasting meats, herbs, citrus. I became addicted to them. Once I had real access to food, I wanted to recreate those smells. Only this time, I could eat it.”

It killed her to think of him like that. She had to swallow against the pain. Food held such power for him. When he cooked, it brought out the youth in him, a joy. But how had he ended up starving and so desperate? “Why, Ethan? Where was your family?”

His fingers tensed around hers. “No family. Just my mother.”

Ana stilled, barely breathing. That was the most he’d ever told her, always shutting down if she asked how he ended up a runaway. “What happened? What made you take off by yourself?”

“I ran away. Leave it alone.”

The bitter ice in his voice chilled her, a stark contrast to his warm body and the soft bed. “You demanded to know my ugly stories but won’t share yours.” Despite his being right there with her, loneliness closed in.

“Shit.” He took his hand away, rolled off the bed and went to the window, shoving open the draperies.

Light flooded in around Ethan. He stood there naked, his huge shoulders flexed, muscles standing out along his back down to his tight, round ass and powerful legs.

And yet, for all his strength, a thick desolation surrounded him.

After throwing off the sheet, she crossed to him. Regret and shame pressed down on her. She was trying to force something from him he didn’t want to give her. Ana edged up next to him and laid her hand on his back. “I won’t ask anymore. It’s okay.”

He turned his head, his eyes seeking hers. “My past won’t stay there. People know. I haven’t really kept it a secret, I just never wanted it to touch you.”

Her breath caught at the turmoil churning in his eyes. What haunted him so? “Why not me?”

“Because you’re my one good thing. When you look at me, you don’t see that I came from a cesspool. My mother was a high-class call girl who eventually lost her earning power. But she noticed women taking an interest in me.”

Horror seeped into her blood. “How old were you?”

He turned away, looking out to the water. “Twelve.”

Nausea hit her belly. “She didn’t.”

“Oh she did. She created a whole market. She’d rent me out as a boy toy. Soon I became really popular among the rich and bored. They fucking owned me for however long they booked me for. My mother didn’t care what they did.”

Ana’d had no idea...none. His mother forced him to have sex with other women? At twelve? “She should be in prison. Tell me she’s in prison!” Fury ate at her.

“She’s dead. Overdose a year or so after I ran away.”

“Good.”

“Doesn’t matter if she’s gone.” Ethan stared out the window into the blindingly bright sun. “I’m still a whore just like her.”

“You’re not! You got out of it.” Her heart pounded at the quiet agony in him. “Ethan, it was abuse and not your fault.” Didn’t he see that?

He turned then. “I ran. Then I got hungry, really fucking hungry. And guess what I did to eat? I tried underground fighting and roughly half the time got my ass beaten. Mostly because I couldn’t control my fury at being so powerless. And those damned sex vultures loved it when I came slithering back, begging to let me be their little fuck toy.” He rocked, as if trying to escape a memory. “I can still hear them. *‘Once a whore, always a whore.’*”

His shoulders swelled, and color stained his face. His body vibrated with anger. A rage he’d controlled ruthlessly around her, and now she was seeing it. Seeing more of the real Ethan.

She didn’t know what to say to him, how to help. Yet everything in her wanted to take the pain away. “It’s not who you are now. Look at you, Ethan. You’re protecting the most famous rock band in the universe and on your way to being a chef.” Now she understood his drive, the need to gain power in a world that abused him when he’d been powerless. “You’re the man I admire and want.”

He stalked her to the wall. “It’s exactly who I am. It always will be. It’s why all I can offer you is to be your dirty fantasy for a few days.” He smiled sadly. “Just like you’ve been my fantasy of what I wish I could have.”

“You can.” Didn’t he get this?

He shook his head. “I won’t do that, ever. People knew what my mother was. No other moms would let their kids play with me. When I was still in school and ran into a woman who’d bought me, she was horrified that I was in the same school as her two kids and told me to never talk them, ever. I shouldn’t be there at all. That school was for decent folks, not trash.”

“She paid for sex with a child and judged you?” Outrage exploded, making her head throb. “That bitch should be in prison, and a woman who loved you would stand by you. You’re not trash, and there’s nothing dirty about you.”

“Wrong. I was born dirty. The kid of a whore and a man who paid her. I ran away to escape that, thinking I was better than her, and ended up selling my services just to eat. Don’t you see? I repeated the pattern. Then later when I got a chance at becoming a MMA fighter, I cheated with steroids, making me a whole different kind of dirty.”

Anger and self-disgust hardened his voice, and turmoil churned in his eyes. “I’m breaking the cycle, here and now. I’m going to make something of myself, something that’s not about using and degrading people or taking shortcuts. Once I’ve redeemed myself, then if I run into someone who knows my past, it won’t matter so much. I’ll have proved I’m better than just a whore and cheater.”

The irony was so bitter, she almost wanted to laugh. This was the very thing she loved about Ethan, he had the integrity to own his mistakes like using steroids and fix them. But that same integrity kept him from letting her close to his heart.

Or more likely, while he cared about Ana, he just didn’t care enough. One day he might find a woman he loved enough to take the risk of finding out if she’d stand by him.

All Ana could do now was be his friend and support him. Touching his arm, she said, “You’re going to make it as a kick-ass chef. And one day you’ll see yourself as I do. A man I respect, care about and trust enough to ask him to help me be bad for a while.”

He opened his mouth—

“Wait. If there’s anything I can do to help, Ethan, all you have to do is call me. I meet a lot of people in the food industry in my job. I even see Chef Zane, who was very impressed with you. If you need connections or anything like that, call me. Keep in mind, I’ve gotten Kat on baking shows and other opportunities. I’m pretty good at what I do.” She added a smile. “No strings attached. I know our little sexcapade is a one-time thing.”

Sexcapade—the word was so stupid and shallow, not even close to what Ana felt with Ethan.

Cupping her cheek, he tilted her face up. “There’s my good girl, always trying to help.”

Not good enough. No matter how hard she tried, she always seemed to end up alone. But that was her problem, not his. She’d be fine, she always was. “I’m not here to be good now.”

“No you’re not. Lucky for you, I’m excellent at being bad.” Gathering her hands in his, he raised them over her head and kissed her. Once he had her breathless, he leaned back, studying her. “Tell me how you want to be bad. Specifically.”

She had nothing to lose by revealing the truth. “I like making you work for it. And I love making you lose control.”

His fingers twined with hers tightened. His cock brushed her belly, hot, long and thick. “You do that. Last night, when you showed me your bare pussy, all I could think about was I had to taste you.” His voice dropped to a growl. “Then you fought me. Refused to open your legs. Teasing me.”

The memory of the way he’d taken what he wanted made her excited. Wet. “You know that feeling when you and I used to race on roller blades or bikes? You wouldn’t give in, and neither would I? We fought all the way to the finish line.”

“Adrenaline rush.” His eyes darkened, and his cock branded her belly. “Is that what you felt when I forced you to give me what I wanted, then made you like it?”

Need splashed so hard, she trembled. “Yes. When you do that, I stop thinking and just feel. And part of me wants to go further.”

Ethan pinned her hands firmer against the wall. “How far?”

“I don’t know, but I want to find out.”

Lowering his mouth, he kissed her again then picked her up and laid her on the bed. “We’re both too raw for that right now. I’m going to be gentle with you. I need to show you that side of me, before I show you just how far and bad I can be—if it’s what you really want.”

“I do.”

“Then give me this. Last night I told you that I need you to know you weren’t a woman I’d fuck and forget. I need the same thing back from you—to know I’m more than just your dirty fantasy. Let me show you tenderness and pleasure, and then we’ll explore any fantasies we both have.”

Her stomach liquefied with desire and more. He’d been badly used and yet he cared enough to want to share with her a side of him he hadn’t shown anyone else. She tugged Ethan into her arms.

And too damned much of her heart.

CHAPTER 7

“Hold on,” Ethan shouted, taking the watercraft into a tight turn that sprayed up a wave right at Franci and Simon. The lead guitarist of *Savaged Illusions* coughed out a mouthful of water, totally making Ethan’s day. Bastard had already showered them twice.

Behind him, Ana’s laughter peeled out. His cock jumped. He’d missed her competitiveness and the way she threw herself into everything. Having her body pressed against his back, arms wrapped snugly around him, wasn’t a bad way to spend an afternoon.

The sound of an engine to his left jerked his attention from Ana and his dick. A second later a wall of water slammed into them.

“Ha! Payback!” Chelle shouted. Lynx sat behind her on the machine, laughing his ass off.

Ethan chased them down, the wind whipping around, water spraying, the guys trash-talking while the girls plotted shenanigans and revenge. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had so much fun.

Getting low on fuel, he gestured to the others that he was going back to the dock. Once there, he secured the craft and gave Ana a hand to help her up. He kept hold of her hand as they walked back toward the house.

He wanted to keep going, get her in their room, strip those bottoms off her and bury his cock in her.

Again.

Being with her, hearing her laugh, her hand in his made him feel clean. But he wasn’t. He’d never outrun his past, and he refused to let that shame taint Ana. He’d done the right thing telling her. Now she’d understand why this couldn’t last more than a week.

Ana dried off. “I’m going in to use the bathroom and check my phone.”

Concerned, he asked, “Have you heard from Gregory?”

“No. Stop worrying, I told you my lawyer notified Gregory that any further contact with me must go through the law office. And security at the resort also talked to him. They took my concern seriously, and informed Gregory that if he bothered me again, he’d be removed and banned.”

Although impressed that Ana wasn’t messing around after that confrontation with Gregory, Ethan still worried. “He could escalate. Stalkers tend to get pissed when they can’t get to their target.”

“He can’t reach me here. The whole place is gated and guarded.”

True, which meant he had to keep her here with him. “Don’t go back there. You guys can stay here until you need to go home.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ll stay while we’re having fun, but I’m not here to be a burden. If you and I call an end to this between us, I’ll have security escort me, Franci and Chelle to our room, pack and we’ll move hotels. I’ve got this handled.”

She kept saying that, and it was getting on his nerves. Couldn’t she just let him take care of her a little bit? Right. Like the time she was sick and told everyone it was just a sore throat? By the time he got to her condo to check on her, she’d been burning with fever and scared the fuck out of him. He’d been damned closed to calling nine-one-one. After he’d dragged her to urgent care, he’d spent that night on her couch, not giving a shit that she insisted she’d be fine.

Fine his ass.

But arguing wouldn’t do anything but make her more stubborn. “I need to check the duck.”

She shot him a grin. “You just had to prove your duck dominance, didn’t you?”

Ethan lifted an eyebrow as they walked in the house together. “You dare to question my duck dominance? You’ll be eating those words, sunshine, when you taste my culinary delight.”

“I tasted one of your delights this morning.”

The image of Ana kissing down his chest and stomach to lavish attention on his cock seared his brain.

His blood heated, and his dick engorged with a throb. She'd taken her sweet time torturing him, learning what he liked... He had to stop thinking about it.

Yanking her off her feet and up against his body, he fisted her hair, careful not to hurt her. "Making me think about you sucking my cock was evil, little witch." He pressed his hard-on into her belly.

Challenge gleamed in her eyes. "Don't burn your duck."

"Right now, I don't care if the whole house catches on fire." Not when he held Ana. Sweet and sassy as hell, and so giving it made his chest ache. "You keep it up, I'm going to drag you to the nearest private space, rip those shorts off and make you come."

"Tell you what. If your duck is as good as you claim, then I'll let you have your way with me. Anything you want."

Raw lust lashed through him. After she'd told him this morning she liked the adrenaline rush of a little force, he'd been thinking about it. "Careful with those promises, baby. I used to daydream about you in the bakery. I'd ask you out, and you'd tell me no. There are customers and your boss around, so I have no choice, I leave."

"That's a daydream? I think I've had sneezes more interesting."

He tightened his hand in her hair. "That's not the interesting part."

"What is?"

"I come back later, when the shop is closed, and it's just you in there all alone. No one to save you. Then I dare you to tell me no again."

The skin across her cheeks warmed to a golden color, and challenge sparked in her stare. "Maybe I'll make promises and change my mind. Once you're all hot and ready, I'll say no."

A shudder went through him. What was it about her? Before Ana, sex had been a cold itch to scratch. Emotionless. He never treated a woman badly, ever. He made sure they both got what they wanted and walked away satisfied. With Ana, it was a hot, fiery ache. "Think you can stop me? You taunt me enough, and I'll take you and make you like it."

Ana caught a handful of his hair. "Maybe I'm looking for payback. Eleven months ago, you left me after telling me I was too good for you. But do you know what I felt? Huh? Not good enough. I'm tougher than you think, and I might just lock myself in a bathroom and tell you to go fuck yourself."

He vibrated with the impact of her honesty and courage. She was a powerful combination of sexy vulnerability that captured his attention and wouldn't let go. It also fueled his need to make her forget her pain and scream his name in pleasure. Ethan nearly shuddered beneath the power of his desire for her. Would it ever recede? Or just get stronger?

One thing he knew for sure, if she wanted this, he'd give it to her. "I'm going to get us one of the casitas to spend the night in. It's secluded enough no one will see or hear us, so you won't have to worry if you want to scream, or even run out the door." He leaned closer. "Later tonight, you'll go there first. Then I'm coming for you, sunshine." He lowered his head, holding her tighter in his arms. His cock surged against her, but what mattered was Ana. They could surrender to what they wanted...as long as they both wanted it. He set her down before he lost the last shred of his control. "It's up to you if you want to yell at me or surrender."

She flashed him her megawatt smile. "If you want me to be in that casita tonight, your duck better rock my world, Chef Sexy." She spun and hurried off, her ass swaying in her tiny excuse for boardshorts.

Witch. Yet as he headed into the kitchen, trying to will his cock into submission, Ethan grinned. Ana needed him to want her so badly that he took what he craved from her.

The girl was turning him into a sap, making him wish he could be good enough for her.

* * * *

Everyone gathered around the big table, diving into dinner and chattering.

Ana took a bite of the duck nestled in a crepe. Her mouth sent up a *hold the phone* signal. Her taste

buds danced with excitement. She barely swallowed before taking a second bite. The rich duck meat married to the bright citrus embedded in a savory crepe ranked high on her best-thing-she'd-ever-tasted scale.

On her right, Ethan leaned close to her ear. "How's the duck?"

Tingles raced down her body from his sexy whisper. Swallowing, she faced him. "It's not the worst I've ever had."

His mouth curved with blazing confidence. "No?"

He knew how good he was, damn it. "But it's definitely the best. You've proved your duck dominance." Just saying it made her shiver more. "You win the prize."

His gaze burned with hunger. "I have the casita. The key—"

His cellphone went off.

Ethan frowned, leaning back to drag the device out of his pocket. Surprise registered on his face. "Siena is at the front gate. I see her on the cameras."

"The chef?"

"Yeah. Hang on." He put the phone to his ear. "Siena, what's up?"

Ana resisted the urge to lean closer. She could hear a voice but not make out any words.

"I see. I'll let you in." He fiddled with the screen then set the phone down.

"What's going on?"

"She came to work on the cookbook." He shifted uncomfortably. "We had a loose arrangement to do some work while I'm here, but I had no idea she'd just show up."

Disappointment settled hard, but she realized he was in a tricky position. "Thought you hadn't signed the contract yet?"

"I haven't. My lawyer's looking it over, and we've gone back and forth on a few issues. One sticking point is if I'm helping develop and refine recipes for the cookbook, then my name goes on it. So..."

"You're between a rock and a hard place." Oh she got it. If he wanted a guarantee of his name on the cookbook in the contract, he'd better damn well be ready to work when Siena called. She forced a smile. "I understand."

"I'll grab another place setting." Ethan got up and headed into the kitchen.

River shoved back a length of the long dark hair the band's bassist was known for. "He and Siena talked about it at the VIP party after you left. But I don't think he knew then that you'd be here."

Ana nodded. "Should we leave?"

"No," Lynx said. "Hang out here. It's not a big deal. I rented an indoor climbing facility tomorrow. You don't want to miss that. It has a trampoline room too."

Ethan laid out a new place setting just as a bell rang. "That's Siena. I'll let her in. You all keep eating."

Ana watched him walk away, a sinking sensation in her stomach.

Ethan returned with the beautiful blonde next to him. Ana hated the wave of insecurity that passed over her. She'd quickly showered, leaving her hair to air-dry and skipping makeup. She wore shorts and a cute top, while Siena had her long hair clipped over one shoulder in a sleek style, polished makeup and a gorgeous shirt paired with white pants.

Siena smiled. "I didn't realize I'd caught you at dinner."

"No problem." Ethan led her to a chair. Once she sat, he filled her wineglass.

"Ethan, did you cook this?" Siena asked. "Duck and crepes?"

He held up the serving plate for her. "Yep. I made it for Ana."

She flushed with pleasure.

"Really?" Siena smiled at her. "Do you cook, Ana?"

"Only enough to stay alive, and I can bake if I'm following a recipe." She couldn't resist adding, "Ethan made the duck tonight to prove to me he could. The first time he tried to cook duck at my condo, he nearly burned the place down."

The entire table laughed.

“It’s funnier now than it was then. He burned his hand pretty bad.”

“Ah. That explains the scar on your palm.” Siena took a bite of the duck wrapped in the crepe.

Ana tried not to feel a twinge of jealousy. Of course Siena’d seen the scar, it was right there on Ethan’s palm.

“The two of you have been friends for a long time. And now...?” She raised her eyebrows.

“Operation Kiss 2.0 is a success.” Chelle lifted her glass and tapped Franci’s.

“That’s right. They’re more than friends these days,” Franci said. “If my law career and your graphics design business don’t work out, we should opening a dating service, Chelle.”

Ana wavered between embarrassment and exasperation. “I don’t think Chef Siena—” she used the woman’s title, trying to convey to her two friends that the woman was important to Ethan’s career hopes, “—wants to hear about my and Ethan’s friendship.”

“Really?” Chelle ask. “Then I probably shouldn’t have tagged Ethan’s Facebook page with the posts of the two of you kissing out on the dock today. My bad.”

Ana knew exactly when that had happened. She’d raced him to the Jet Ski—first one there getting to drive—and he’d caught her on the docks. Swinging her up and twisting her in his arms, he’d kissed her, hard and long. “You didn’t!”

“Oh she did,” Ethan said.

Pivoting around to Ethan, she muttered, “Sorry. You deleted it right?” Ethan used his Facebook page to showcase his cooking.

“Nope.” He rubbed her back and grinned. “You’re the one who told my potential employer I burned my first attempt at cooking duck.”

Crap. She had done that.

Siena’s laughter rang out. “True. She’s probably not who you want to put down as a reference.”

Her embarrassment deepened. Before she could think of a way to redeem herself, Siena said, “This duck is very good.” The woman leaned toward Ethan, touching his arm. “Tell me your recipe. What method did you use to render the fat? And your orange sauce, there’s an extra tang to it. What is it?”

Ethan explained, and the two of them launched into a detailed discussion.

Ana picked at her food as everyone else around the table talked about the rock-climbing outing tomorrow. She tried to focus on the topic and not on Ethan and Siena huddled together talking. Finally dinner was over, and staff magically appeared to start clearing.

Siena rose. “I’m going to go get my notes and computer out of the car. Is there a place we can work? We’ll get it all sorted tonight and plan a time to test the recipes.”

Despite the staff going in and out, Ana stood, scooping up her plate and walking into the kitchen. It was huge, with an industrial fridge, two ovens, wraparound counters and a big island, all overlooking the deck, pool and bay. The view did nothing to tame her disappointment over her and Ethan’s cancelled plans.

“I’m sorry. I’m going to try to wrap it up soon. Just an hour or two, and I’ll be all yours.” Ethan stood so behind her, she could feel the heat of him spreading over her.

She turned. “Would it be better if I left? Franci, Chelle and I can go back to the Tradewinds and give you some space to work.”

“Hell no. You’re not going back there, remember? Not with Gregory around.”

He was right, but that wasn’t his problem. “We can find another place to stay.” She couldn’t bear the idea of being in the way.

Misery clouded his eyes. “Don’t go.” He leaned down, kissing her. “Please. I’ll get away as soon as I can. We’ll save our casita plans for another night, but we can go for a walk or hang out in the hot tub, even go down to the game room. Anything you want.”

He was trying, and that meant a lot to her. “Okay. Chelle wants to check out the theater room. I’ll watch movies with her and Franci.”

Relief curved his mouth. “Perfect. There’s a selection of prerelease movies in there. A fully stocked wet bar, candy counter and popcorn machine. I’ll come find you when we’re done here.”

A naughty thought crossed her mind. “Any porn down there?”

Grabbing her waist, he pressed her against the counter. “What are you suggesting?”

“I haven’t seen much porn. Maybe once you’re done, I’ll throw my friends out, then you and I can research the racy movies. And if we get warm in there...”

He dropped his forehead against hers. “You’re making me hot. And you know it.”

“Okay here’s my... Oh sorry.” Siena walked into the kitchen, carrying a computer bag.

Feeling much better, Ana grinned. “Work fast.” She strolled out with the sensation of Ethan’s heated stare following her.

* * * *

It was after midnight when Ethan finally broke away from Siena. They’d done some good work, but he got a real sense of how demanding she would be. Which wasn’t bad—she was going to pay him well, and a lot of doors would open for him after a year as Chef Siena’s assistant. He’d be legitimate. The stain of his past as a whore and a fuckup would lessen.

Right now, he just wanted Ana. He headed to the theater, anticipation quickening his pace. The wall sconces cast low light in the large room. Ethan walked down the aisle between the sets of oversized recliners and spotted her.

Sound asleep.

He couldn’t help but grin. Ana lay curled on her side, one hand tucked beneath her cheek. An empty bottle of Merlot and boxes of candy—including Ana’s favorite Milk Duds—told him the girls had had a little party.

He assumed Franci and Chelle had gone to bed.

But Ana had stayed, waiting for him. Regret stabbed him that he’d let her down. Leaning over, he scooped her up.

“Ethan? What are you doing?”

“Taking you to bed.”

“But I waited.”

More regret piled on. “I know, baby. I’m sorry, I got tied up.”

She rested her head against his shoulder. “I can walk.”

“I’ve got you.” He didn’t mind. Up in their room, he laid her down, stripped her to her panties and grabbed some ibuprofen and water. She didn’t seem that drunk, but he didn’t want her waking with a headache. Once she’d taken the tablets and drank most of the water, he turned off the lights and climbed into bed. Gathering her against him, he stroked her back.

She went completely limp. Asleep.

Despite his aching cock, warmth spread in him. He liked taking care of Ana, liked that she curved against his chest, soft and trusting.

For eleven long months, there’d been an empty place inside him. Then she showed up, and it was like someone turned on the lights. He called her sunshine for that reason. He’d been in a dark place when she swept into his life, bringing a ray of light and a thin strand of hope.

This time next week, he’d be alone again.

He tugged her tighter against him, not wanting to let go.

But he had to. One day, his story would come out. Professionally, he’d handle it. Hell, in the culture they lived in these days, he’d probably be more successful.

But personally? It would hurt Ana or any woman. The stain of his past would mark them in the eyes of the world.

He wouldn’t let that happen. Especially not to Ana.

His one good thing.

* * * *

Ana woke up alone and blinked the haze from her brain. After sitting up, she glanced around and spotted a note.

Went running, back soon with croissants. Be naked.

Still lethargic from the wine and candy, which upon reflection was not an ideal pairing, she got out of bed and stumbled into the bathroom, where she brushed her teeth and took a shower. The multiple jets blasting her skin chased off her sluggishness. Feeling much better, Ana wrapped in a towel and went back in the room to look for clothes.

Her phone vibrated on the nightstand. Picking it up, she frowned at a text from Gregory.

Why is your lawyer threatening me? I don't understand, you and I are friends, and we're going to be business partners. Oh wait, it's that guy that was with you, isn't it? I bet he's jealous of our friendship, so you had to act like it was no big deal. Look, I don't care about him, but you know how important this is to me. Those agents and publishers won't take me seriously, but they will now! And don't worry, I'll give you credit in the book too. We just need to get this deal finalized ASAP. I'm emailing you another copy of the proposal for your dad's biography, and a simple contract. We'll meet to sign the agreement and talk about the book. Call me soon.

Her stomach knotted, and she had to sink down on the bed. How had she not realized that Gregory and reality weren't well acquainted? Her palms were slick as she checked her email server. A new one from Gregory with attachments.

"Ana."

She jumped at Ethan's voice. He filled the doorway between the bedroom and sitting room. His white T-shirt was flung over a shoulder, leaving him in only running shorts and shoes. She tracked down his sweat-sheened chest, over his ripped abs, then caught sight of the white pastry bag in his hand. "Oh hi."

"You didn't hear me come in the room." Setting the bag and shirt down, he dropped onto the bed next to her. "What's up?"

She showed him Gregory's text. "I'll forward it to my lawyer, but you heard me, I told him no."

His loose mood iced as he read the message. "He's delusional and dangerous. He was really fixated on you in the conversation at Tradewinds. We'll go to the police here and tell them you've asked this guy to stop contacting you. Then once you're back in San Diego, if he contacts you again, you have some groundwork to hopefully have him charged with stalking."

How did it get this far? "I thought I was being nice. I felt sorry for him." That was the only reason she'd talked to him, and now she had a stalker who'd followed her to Florida. She forwarded the messages from Gregory to her lawyer.

Ethan rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Let's eat, and I'll grab a shower, then we'll go to the police station. After that, we can enjoy the rest of the day."

Right. Enough of her problems. Getting to her feet, she shook off her mood. "I'll make some coffee."

Ethan caught her hand and tugged her onto his lap. "I want to help you solve this before you go home. I need you safe. You get that, right?"

Warmth chased out her worry. This was exactly what she'd needed—to just feel important to someone for a little while.

CHAPTER 8

“After we go to the police station, we can meet everyone at the rock-climbing gym if you want to,” Ethan said.

Ana pushed the elevator button. They’d had croissants and coffee out on their little balcony and now were on their way down to the first floor to see what everyone else was up to. “It would be fun, unless you have a better offer?”

“If you want to go, we’ll go. Or—” He cut off when the doors slid open.

“Or what?”

He tugged her inside and pressed her to the wall. “While they’re all gone, we’ll use one of the casitas.”

Her heart jumped a beat. “Casita.” The idea intoxicated her more than the wine she drank last night. “I want that. With you.”

He sucked in a breath. “You’re making me hard again. I swear I can’t get enough of you.” The doors slid open, he took her hand and they walked into the great room.

Ana couldn’t wipe the grin off her face. She loved that he wanted her, that she was exciting him as much as—

“There you are. We need to get going.”

Ana stilled, her smile freezing. “Siena? When did you get here?”

“Good morning, Ana.” The woman nodded at her. “I stayed in a casita last night. Didn’t Ethan tell you?”

She blinked, turning to look at him.

Ethan ran a hand over his hair. “She said she wanted to work on the descriptions for the recipes and review what we wrote together yesterday, so I offered her a casita.” Shifting his attention to Siena, he asked, “Go where?”

“I had this fabulous idea. The kitchen here is quite adequate, so why not test our recipes? Let’s hurry, though. We need the absolute freshest produce and seafood. By the time everyone returns from rock climbing, we’ll have several dishes ready, and they can test them for us.”

Ana couldn’t believe it. “Now?” She ignored Siena to concentration on Ethan. “I thought we had plans.”

“We do,” he assured her, and said to Siena, “Let’s do this tomorrow. I didn’t realize you were coming last night, but I made time. I promised to spend today with Ana. We have some important things we need to take care of.”

The woman’s face tightened slightly. “I only have a few weeks to get this cookbook finalized and in to the publisher. One of the recipes I want to test is yours. If you want your name on the book, we need to focus on it.” She turned to Ana. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

Ethan’s hand stiffened in hers.

Ana could feel the tension bleeding off him from the implied demand in Siena’s tone and comments.

With a pained expression, he said, “We could shift our plans to tonight.”

Part of her wanted to say no, but she was being childish. “Sure.”

“Wait, we need to make that report.” Ethan eyed Siena. “I have to take Ana to—”

“No.” She didn’t want Siena knowing her business, nor did she need Ethan going with her. “I’ll take care of it.” Releasing his hand, she said, “I’ll go find Franci and Chelle and have them come with me.” She headed for the doors to the deck and stepped out into the balmy air.

Chelle sat on a padded lounge chair, her hand moving in graceful sweeps as she drew something in her sketchbook. “Where’s Ethan?”

Dropping onto another lounge, Ana tried to swallow her disappointment. “Going shopping for the

freshest produce and seafood.”

Chelle’s charcoal pencil stopped moving. “Is he making you a special dinner? That duck last night was good.”

“No. He’s cooking with Chef Pain in My Ass.” Oh yeah, that didn’t sound bitter at all.

“Seriously? I saw her skulking around the kitchen this morning. Thought she left last night?”

“Me too. We have a change of plans.” She told Chelle about Gregory’s text, that Ethan thought she should file a police report, and her lawyer had agreed when he texted her back.

Chelle shut her sketchbook. “I’ll get ready, but back to Siena. Ethan didn’t tell you that she spent the night?”

“No.” This morning, Ana truly had felt like they were getting closer, then they’d come downstairs to reality.

Why hadn’t Ethan told her Siena was staying at the manor?

* * * *

A day later, Ana, Franci and Chelle explored the game room and got into a heated battle playing a virtual reality dance game until Franci won.

“Pay up, girls,” Franci taunted as she held up her phone.

Sighing, Ana looked at Chelle. “We may have been a tad overconfident.”

“You think?” Chelle turned back to the camera and held up her sign that read, *This is my Loser Face*, then made a sad face.

Ana did the same.

Franci laughed and took the picture. “Posting to Facebook now.” Looking up, she gave them her sweetest smile. “I’m tagging you both, of course. I wouldn’t leave you out.”

Chelle tossed her sign and pulled out her phone.

“No deleting,” Franci said. “That was in the bet.”

“We deserve it for making a bet with a law student,” Ana muttered as she got out her phone and accessed her page. When the picture appeared, she couldn’t help her laugh. “God, we look pathetic.” She headed to the big sitting area.

“Oh, dolphin watching.”

Confused by the abrupt shift in topic, Ana looked up at Franci. “What?”

“I have it on my agenda on my phone. I forgot about it with all the excitement, but I’d like to go. How about this afternoon? It’s not too expensive.”

Ana was torn. “Let me talk to Ethan when he gets back.”

“Humph.” Chelle sat on the arm of the leather couch. “That barracuda has her claws in Ethan—you’ll be lucky to get him back in one piece. She’s downright possessive.”

Ana’s stomach tensed. Siena was gorgeous, but even more importantly, she and Ethan shared the same passion—cooking.

“I have to agree with Chelle,” Franci said. “You saw her at the wine tasting. She kept Ethan’s attention focused on her.”

Last night at dinner—which she almost hated to admit had been a spectacular array of Italian dishes Ethan and Siena had prepared—Chef Barracuda had announced that she’d arranged a private tasting with a wine broker to go over some pairings. Then she’d graciously invited Ana, Franci and Chelle along for the tasting. It’d been fun, but Siena had done exactly as her friends said, hovering over Ethan like a dog guarding its bone. They’d gotten home late, and Siena had insisted she and Ethan get all their notes together for the cookbook.

Ana’d ended up going to bed by herself.

This morning, Siena had snagged Ethan for a Skype meeting with their lawyers to work out the language of adding Ethan onto her cookbook.

Ana was really starting to hate that cookbook.

She stared at her phone when she noticed a new comment on the photo Franci had just posted. “Gregory.”

“What?” Chelle said.

She shook her head in frustration. “He commented below the pic Franci just posted on our pages. ‘Ana, as the daughter of a star athlete, you should know the three traits of a winner: Hard Work, Discipline and Ruthlessness. I outlined those in my mother’s biography. She lived by those, and so do I. And now you will too. You’ll see, you’ll be much happier and productive, and I’ll help you. Call me, we’ll get the contract signed and start work.’” She shuddered, a sensation of being watched creeping up her back. “He’s not giving up.”

“Who’s not?” Ethan strode into the massive game room.

“Gregory.” One look at Ethan, and her crawling-skin sensation calmed. Ana stood and walked to him. “He commented on a picture on my Facebook. I should have unfriended him, but he never contacted me through Facebook or even liked my posts, so I didn’t think about it.” She held out her phone.

Ethan tensed as he read it, his eyes cold and pissed. “Where’s that book he sent you?”

“I deleted it.” Had that been a mistake? At the time, she thought he’d go away. And really, she’d had other things on her mind.

“Screenshot this, add it to your file. Have the police talked to him?”

“Yes, but he told them it’s a misunderstanding, a coincidence that he’s there at the resort at the same time as I am.”

His eyes narrowed in concern. “Maybe it’s time I go see him.”

Ana laid a hand on his arm. “No. That’ll only complicate things, and he could file some kind of harassment report. The police said no contact except through my lawyer for legal matters.”

Anger flickered in his gaze. “What if he doesn’t give up when you return to San Diego?”

It wouldn’t be Ethan’s problem, that’s what. The emptiness loomed like a wave rising up, ready to consume her. *Get a grip, I’ll figure it out.* “My lawyer is getting the request for a restraining order ready. He says the fact that I’m Roger Kendall’s daughter will help with that.” Before Ethan could form arguments, she went on, “But right now, I’m here. Franci, Chelle and I were talking about going dolphin watching.” Ana wanted to spend time alone with Ethan, but she also didn’t want to abandon her friends.

His jaw hardened. “I can’t. Siena is insisting we go to her restaurant to tape some test videos to see how I do on camera.”

“Well, that’s a no then.” She refused to look at her friends, not wanting to see their anger or pity.

“I came to ask you if you want to come. We’ll have a late lunch or early dinner there.”

“Just you, me and Siena?” Huh, good to know her sarcasm was in perfect working order.

Tense silence hung between them before he said, “I’ll try to get her to leave us to eat alone.”

He looked harried and tired, but enough was enough. “She won’t. And I’m not going to be a third wheel.” Again. Nor was she going to sit here and sulk. “Franci, Chelle and I are going dolphin watching. It’s a couple hours’ tour. Will that be enough time for you to get the video shoot done?”

His forehead creased. “Yes, and this should be it. I think Siena’s leaving tonight.” He pulled her in for a kiss. “I know this isn’t ideal, but hang in there, I’ll get rid of her soon.”

Ana wasn’t so sure about that.

* * * *

Ana came downstairs freshly showered after their dolphin-watching expedition, and caught sight of Ethan in the great room. She stopped, absolutely stunned. He was dressed in a tailored suit that set off his shoulders while emphasizing his narrow waist and hips. He suddenly looked older, sophisticated.

The strain on his face melted into pleasure when he saw her. “Hey, did you see the dolphins?”

“Yep.” But she wasn’t interested in dolphins right now. “You look amazing.” She’d never seen him

dressed so sharply. He wore the suit with a naturalness that exuded power and confidence.

“We did some of the video test in chef whites and...” he glanced down, a wry twist to his lips, “...this.”

“A formal suit? Is it new? Doesn’t seem like something you’d have on hand as a bodyguard.”

“Wrong. I often work close protection for formal events, and it’s better if I blend in.” He strode up to her. “Since Siena wanted formal, I figured this would work.”

Oh it did. “You look awesome.” Jealousy flickered. She wished she were dressed up and going out with him. “Maybe we should put that suit to good use. Go out to dinner?”

A real smile curved his mouth. “Anywhere you want. Even if they’re booked up, I’ll use Justice’s name to get us a table. Have anything in mind?”

“Not really.” A frown weighed down her face. “I don’t think I brought anything dressy enough to—”

“Ethan.” Siena walked in on stilettos, wearing a black dress and her hair done up in a lovely twist. “Oh hi, Ana.” She turned to Ethan. “My lawyers have the revised draft of the contract. They’ve sent it to your lawyers, and we have a meeting at the law office in an hour.” She glanced at her watch. “We need to get going soon before the rush hour traffic. Hopefully we can get it finalized and have that done.”

Oh come on! Ana stared at Siena’s oh-so-serious face, then Ethan’s tight one. She already knew how this was going to play out because, hello, anyone else seeing the pattern here? She almost opened her mouth, but clamped it shut instead. If she forced a choice, she knew how that would end. She was the girl he was screwing for a few days, while Chef Schemes-A-Lot held the keys to his future.

“No,” Ethan said. “First, I haven’t talked to my lawyers or seen the revision. I’m not signing it without a thorough review.”

“I would hope not,” Siena responded. “But it’s the exact changes we discussed. Your lawyers are reviewing it, and a representative from their Tampa office will be there. The others will join us via Skype. You can go over it yourself in the car. I’ll drive.”

“Second,” Ethan ignored her and went on, “I’ve promised to take Ana out, and that’s what I’m doing. She’s put up with enough interruptions. I already told you that in the car.”

Surprised pleasure that he was choosing to spend time with her soothed Ana’s irritation.

Siena straightened, and iron determination radiated from her. “Business comes first. The publisher wants an answer from me about the names on the cover, and I can’t give it to them until we have a signed contract.”

Ethan turned to Ana, his jaw rigid. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Disappointment crashed into her chest. “You’re actually going.”

His mouth flattened. “It’s business.”

Indeed. “All right.” She headed toward the elevator. The tightness in her throat made her mad.

“Wait, Ana,” Siena called.

The click of the woman’s heels on the floor pounded in Ana’s head. She had loved Siena on TV, really enjoyed her fiery personality and flare. Watching her show, it was like she cooked with her entire soul.

Much like Ethan.

Now Ana’d definitely soured on Chef Siena Draco.

“Ana, please.”

Fine. She fought to get the bitterness and jealousy out of her expression as she turned. But one look at Siena and Ethan brought home a harsh reality. The two of them were wearing beautiful, sophisticated clothes, while Ana’d put on shorts and a tank after her shower, her hair scraped back into a simple ponytail.

Which one of the three of them didn’t belong in this picture?

Siena touched Ana’s arm, and the scent of jasmine washed over her. “Ethan told me in the car that he was devoting his whole evening to you. Believe it or not I feel bad about this, and I know I’ve monopolized Ethan. To make up for it, I’ve made reservations for two at Nadine’s Steak and Seafood. It’s right on the bay. The food is amazing. It’s on me as a thank-you. The two of you will have the entire night to yourself, I promise. No more interfering. But I just need Ethan for another couple hours, including the drive time.”

Startled by the kind sincerity in the offer, Ana tamped down her earlier frustration. “That’s very generous of you.”

“Not really. I want Ethan happy working for me. And you seem to be a big part of his happiness. Anyway, the reservations aren’t until seven. There’s plenty of time if you’d like to go shopping for a new dress or get your hair done, whatever you like.” She flashed her charming TV smile. “Forgive me for my workaholic ways? And forgive Ethan too? I’m not really giving him a choice here.”

Before Ana could answer, Siena faced Ethan. “There? See, I’m not a total dictator. Now you can finish business without feeling torn and enjoy your evening. I’ll wait in the car.” She sailed out.

Ana stood there, still fighting the sting she didn’t want to feel, hurt at always coming in behind another priority. Even her dad and stepmom put each other first, before Ana. Not in a cruel way, but the reality was there. However her baggage wasn’t Ethan’s fault. “Okay, well, I’ll see you later.”

He strode to her, pulling her into his arms. “I swear I’ll get rid of her this time. We’re going to have our night. Dinner out first.” His eyes darkened. “But I’m paying for it. I’m not taking you out on my future boss’s dime. And then we’ll come back here to our own private casita. I’ll be back here at six thirty on the dot to pick you up.”

Relief soothed away the sting, and anticipation bubbled beneath her breastbone. But she wanted to make a point. “Don’t let me down this time.”

Ethan slid his hand down to wrap around her hip. His thumb dipped beneath her shirt to skate over bare skin. “I’ll be here and all yours.” He kissed her and left.

She desperately wanted to believe him, but Siena really did have her claws in him, and how could Ana fight that?

She couldn’t.

* * * *

Ethan refused to be bullied. “No. I own my recipes.” The contract put his name on the cookbook as promised, but added a clause that Ethan couldn’t prepare the recipe outside of Siena’s restaurants or shows, unless he gave credit to Siena in perpetuity.

“Ethan,” Siena said, her eyes flat. “You’re getting exactly what you asked for, your name on the cover and credit for the recipes in the book. But I own them, that’s how this works.”

He leaned back in his chair. “Fine. Buy the rights from me or split the royalties on the book. My lawyers will draw up the contract.” He’d expected hardball and silently thanked his mentor for teaching him how to play. Yeah, he risked the whole deal, but while he was willing to pretty much sell his soul for a year, he wouldn’t give up his rights to his recipes. “You already have my agreement not to republish the recipes for profit for a term of seven years.” That he deemed fair.

Two hours later, he won the battle, with the language hammered out. When he checked his watch, it was six fifteen.

Fuck. Ana. He’d sworn to be to be at the manor at six thirty to pick her up. No way could he make it now. He stood, grabbed his coat off the chair and looked at Siena. “I’m late, we need to leave.”

She raised her eyebrows. “We’re nearly finished. They’ll hold your reservation. Text her, tell her to wait.”

His patience snapped. Ana had waited, over and over. For two days, he’d put business and his ambitions first. Not completely unreasonable if she was just some girl he was screwing, but Ana was more. A woman who’d been there for him when his world went dark. Now he was stringing her along like some meaningless hookup.

On top of that, Siena was fucking with him, manipulating to get between him and Ana. He’d begun realizing it yesterday but had wanted to let it play out to see how far she’d go. Pretty far. That meant she saw Ana as a threat to Ethan signing the contract, and she was willing to fight dirty. But Ethan hadn’t intended to let Ana down again tonight, and guilt stabbed him.

“I’m done now. You have my terms. Meet them or the deal is off.” He yanked open the door.

“Ethan, you can’t leave. We came together in my car. You don’t have a ride.”

He refused to answer and left. Once he made his way out to the front of the building, he called for an Uber, then dialed Ana.

She answered with, “Are you going to be late or canceling?”

Another guilt-blade dug in. He’d make it right. “I’m leaving now. An Uber is on the way to pick me up.”

“Why an Uber?”

“Because I just walked out, and an Uber car is close by. Can you meet me at the restaurant?”

“You really walked out?”

“Yes. This is our night, Ana.” Low panic burned in his guts, and his neck muscles ached with the fear that she was done and would leave.

“I’ll meet you at the restaurant.”

Relief untangled his biting tension. “Perfect, my ride should be here any minute.”

“Okay, but if you need something to entertain yourself while waiting, check out my Facebook page.” She hung up.

Ethan pulled the phone away from his ear and loaded her Facebook page. A stunning image formed of her dark blonde hair, straight and sleek around her face, long neck and shoulders bared in a shimmering metallic gold dress that molded to her body and exposed her legs down to killer heels.

The second picture showed her back bared to her waist except for the straps riding over her shoulders and meeting in a twist at the center. That pretty dress cupped her ass, ending with a tantalizing slit. Ana looked back over her shoulder with a sexy grin that made his cock twitch and thicken.

Jesus, he couldn’t breathe. All his ambition coiled into a knot of need, low in his belly, for only one thing:

Ana.

CHAPTER 9

Ana arrived at the restaurant before Ethan. The steak and seafood house had a huge wall of fish tanks with brightly colored creatures swimming lazily, creating a soothing atmosphere. Soft music played in the background, and white tablecloths with gleaming silver added to the ambiance. Ana settled into booth. She pulled out her phone.

Would Ethan show up, or would Chef-Cock-Block find a way to stop him?

Her answer arrived one minute later when Ethan strode toward her. He tugged off his suit jacket, the shirt clinging to his shoulders and arms as he tossed the garment on the opposite seat then slid into the booth next to her. His huge body took up three quarters of the seat, while his scent—warm and spicy—made her want to lean in to him.

Wrapping a hand around her nape, he tugged her to him. Heat simmered in his blue eyes. “Those pictures were hot, but you’re more stunning in person.”

Another first for her as she never posted sexy pictures. “You liked them?”

“So much that I’ve been walking around with an aching cock.”

“Would you like to start with a cocktail or glass of wine?” Their server appeared tableside.

Ana repressed a laugh. Had the woman heard? She didn’t look outraged if she had, so no harm done.

“They have an excellent Wagyu steak cooked on hot stones. Or did you have something else in mind?”

Ethan dragged his thumb over her jaw, apparently unfazed. “Anything you want.”

“The steak sounds good. Can they cook mine closer to medium?”

He gave the order, and once the waitress left, he said, “Tell me about dolphin watching earlier. I need to think about something else besides kissing you and how good you look in that dress.”

Ana told him stories, showing him pictures of dolphins through the appetizer course. After a couple sips of the smooth Malbec, she got up the courage to say, “So, what happened in your meeting with the lawyers?”

He told her about the sneaky clause giving Siena ownership of his recipes.

“You stood your ground.”

“On my rights? Hell yeah.” He poured a bit more wine in her glass. “Then I looked at the time and realized how late it was.”

“I thought you were cancelling.”

His fingers clenched around his wineglass. “I was furious at myself. I got caught up in the fight and didn’t watch the time. When Siena pulled her crap, she meant for me to let you down again. I was done.”

Concern edged into her. “Will she rescind the offer?” Ana didn’t intend to come between him and the job he wanted so badly.

His jaw tightened.

The server returned, bringing their stone-cooked steaks, the aroma wafting into the booth. “Is there anything else I can get you?”

“We’re good, thank you,” Ethan answered.

Ana stared at her meat sliced on a bed of greens, surrounded by baby potatoes and broccoli. It looked delicious, but Ethan’s earlier silence left her uneasy.

“She overplayed her hand.”

“Siena?”

He nodded. “The last two days, yeah. All the games to keep you and me apart. Obviously she saw you as a threat. Then the changes in the contract today trying to tie me to her indefinitely by owning my recipes. That tells me how important I am to her.” Cold, brutal ambition hardened his voice and made his eyes flat, icy.

Ana leaned back. “How can I be a threat to you signing the contract? We’re not even together. I mean not really. Not after this week.”

He raised his eyebrows. “She doesn’t know that. Once I sign, I’ll be traveling all over with her, and most girlfriends would object to that.”

Doubt crawled in, and she didn’t like it. “Why does it feel like I’m a convenient pawn in your contract negotiations?” *Really?* She knew Ethan better than that. Okay he might use a situation to his advantage, but then, so would she when working to get deals for Sugar Dancer Bakery.

The chill in his gaze cracked as surprise and regret took over. “No. Jesus, Ana. It’s a coincidence that you and Siena are at the manor at the same time. It just worked out this way and gave me an opportunity to see that she is serious about signing me.” He frowned. “You knew this was my goal.”

The words hit her like a reality slap. She didn’t have any right to feel hurt or possessive. She was the one who’d approached him with this temporary fling proposition. If it came down to a choice between Ana or his job with Siena, his choice was clear.

“Forget business.” Ethan stroked her face. “Right now I’m only interested in pleasure. Our pleasure.” He cut a piece of her steak and held it out. “Try some meat.”

Ana took a bite, consciously letting go of her insecurities to enjoy the food. Their time together was about sex and fun. The tense moment melted as they talked and ate. Finally she said, “I need to use the restroom.”

Ethan slid out. “I’ll pay the check.”

Ana stood and hesitated. “I—”

He kissed her before she could speak. “I have it, Ana. I want to buy dinner. You’re not a pawn to me. You’re my lover and friend.”

The sincerity riding his low voice reassured her. They were getting a second chance to redo the past and give each other good memories of their friendship.

You’re such a liar. You’re more in love with him now than a year ago.

Don’t think about that, she told herself. Not now. Smiling, she said, “Thank you. It means a lot to me.”

Rushing away, she remembered a small detail and glanced back at him. “I have the key to one of the casitas. Hank gave it to me.”

It didn’t take her long to locate the hallway that led to the ladies’ room. Once she was finished, she paused in the small foyer that separated the bathroom from the door, and surveyed herself in the mirror.

Ana saw a deep fatigue in her eyes. She desperately wanted to just let go for a little while. She’d been holding on so tight, trying to make herself useful enough to the people she cared about so they wouldn’t leave her.

Ethan *would* leave. There was a freedom in knowing that right up front. No matter what she did, he wasn’t going to care enough to stay, so she could just be herself. For tonight, he was hers. Anticipation simmered in her belly.

Feeling a bit lighter, she stepped away from the mirror and opened the door.

A hand slammed into her chest and shoved her back.

Ana stumbled, her heels sliding on the slick floor. Shock confused her. What was happening? Struggling to catch her balance, she grabbed the wall dividing the bathroom area from the foyer. She jerked upright in time to see Gregory turning the lock on the door.

“What the hell are you doing?” She couldn’t believe this.

He spun around, latched onto her arm and dragged her toward the three stalls. He kicked every door until he determined they were alone.

Ana regained her wits enough to yank on her arm. “Let go of me.”

His fingers bit into her skin. “I thought you were so nice when I met you. And now I see you have a discipline problem.”

Discipline? At six feet tall, Gregory was long and strong. He didn’t have Ethan’s muscle, but he was solid enough to overpower her. “You’re hurting me.”

He bounced the same way he had when she saw him at the resort. “I don’t want to. When I first met you, I didn’t think I’d have to. Your father’s a star athlete, I thought you understood.” He yanked open the handicapped stall door.

Oh hell no, she wasn’t going in there. She clutched the edge of the stall.

Gregory reached his arm out to the right.

Ana started to turn to figure out what he was doing when a force hit the back of her hand. Oh God, pain exploded out. A scream tore from her throat.

His palm clapped over her mouth. “Shut up. There’s no crying or screaming in discipline. You’ll learn. Work comes first, not partying and goofing off. Work. Now sign the contract.”

What contract? What is happening? She pressed her throbbing limb against her belly. It took her a second to figure it out—he’d slammed the stall door on her hand.

He dragged her to the counter. After releasing her mouth, he slapped a piece of paper down, then a pen. “Sign. Now.”

Ana stared at the black ballpoint lying on a typewritten sheet of paper that had fold marks in it. In the mirror, she eyed the reflection of her injury. Carefully she moved the fingers. The pain had lessened but it still hurt.

Gregory jerked her arm. “Do it, pick up that pen.”

She reached out with her good hand and fisted the pen. She had one chance—

A loud pounding sounded. “Ana?” Ethan called out. “You okay?”

Gregory grabbed her sore hand and tightened his fingers in a threat of more agony. “Say yes. Get rid of him.”

Like hell. Ana bent her elbow, then snapped her fist down hard, jamming the pen into the lunatic’s thigh. At the same time, she yanked her arm free and screamed, “No! Gregory’s in here!”

Run. Don’t look back. She hauled ass for the exit.

“Stay back. I’m coming in,” Ethan yelled.

Ana skidded to a stop at the exact second the door flew open, banging against the wall.

Ethan stormed in, menace on his face. He didn’t slow, but leapt into a flying tackle, hit Gregory and both of them slammed onto the tile floor.

Before Ana could blink, Gregory lay facedown. Ethan had one knee on the man’s back and his arms pinned behind him. “You move, I’ll rip your arm out of the socket.”

“My leg. She stabbed me.”

Ethan glanced at the bloody pen on the floor, then her. “You okay?”

She was still trying to take in how fast Ethan had moved. And the door... “You kicked it open. It was deadbolted.”

“Look at me.”

The gentle command pierced the wild pounding of her heart and buzzing in her ears. She focused on Ethan. Even in a half crouch over Gregory, strength exuded from him.

“Good. Now tell me if you’re hurt. Where did he touch you?”

“My arm.” She looked down at the angry red fingerprints. That would leave a bruise. “Slammed my hand in a stall door.” She held up her arm and eyed it. No blood, but it was swelling and throbbed.

“Ana.”

She blinked and returned her attention to Ethan. Shock, she wasn’t focusing. “Sorry, I’m okay.” She glanced at the doorway filling with people gawking at them.

A woman pushed through wearing a uniform. “Police. What’s going on here?”

A cop already? “That was fast.”

“I was in the area when a call came in. What happened?”

Ana filled in the police officer while the efficient woman checked Gregory for weapons and cuffed him.

“She stabbed me,” Gregory whined. “Arrest her.”

“You attacked me,” Ana snapped.

Gregory glowered at her. “If you’d just read the book, you’d understand. Hard work, discipline and ruthlessness. I failed as a tennis player because I wasn’t ruthless enough. Now I am. I won’t fail, you’ll see. You’ll all see. When I write Roger Kendall’s biography—”

“Not going to happen.” Ana cut off his ranting. “Not now or ever.”

Ethan wrapped his jacket around her shoulders, while keeping his scrutiny on Gregory. “How did you know where Ana would be?”

“It’s on her Facebook. Bragging about her new dress for her date at Nadine’s instead of working with me. I just had to wait for her to use the bathroom to get her alone.”

Figured. Every time she tried to get a little bad, a little wicked, it bit her in the ass. “You need to get help, Gregory. And leave me alone.”

* * * *

Ethan drove the car through the quiet streets with Ana in the passenger seat. She hadn’t said much, but she had to be tired. It had taken a while to give their statements, then the hospital trip to X-ray her hand. Thankfully it was only bruised, not broken. Ethan regulated his breathing, keeping a lock on his emotions. He’d take her to the casita—not for their fantasy game—but so she could rest without a bunch of questions.

She could have been hurt worse. The sound of her voice yelling, “*No! Gregory’s in here!*” beat over and over in his head. What if he hadn’t realized something was wrong in the bathroom?

As he turned onto the street leading to the mansion, more anger leaked through his control. He tapped his thumb on the steering wheel. Ana had no idea how close he’d been to ripping that bastard’s arm out of his socket for the pleasure of hearing him scream.

She belonged to Ethan. She’d belonged to him since the day he’d seen her in the bakery. *Mine*. He knew damn well he couldn’t have her. The stain of his past was a black mold that would grow and fester in the dark corners of her mind. It’d eat away at her feelings for him until she had nothing left but an ugly disgust.

“How’d you know something was wrong when I was in the bathroom?”

Her voice pulled him out of the pit, and he glanced over. She sat still, with the cold pack resting on the back of her hand.

After stopping at the wrought iron gate to the manor, Ethan used his phone to open it, then drove through. “A woman tried the door and found it locked. I heard her telling the manager.” The hairs on the back of his neck had stood up as all his instincts went hot. “I knew something was wrong.”

“Oh. Well, thank you. I’m glad you were there.”

“What if I hadn’t been? You weren’t going to make it to the door. That bastard was right behind you when I got in there.” That anyone would hurt her enraged him. “He’s crazy and completely fixated on you.”

“I’ll handle it.”

His control cracked. “Really? Because you’ve been doing an awesome job of it so far. Did you walk right by him in the restaurant and not even notice? He had to be by that bathroom watching for you. Oh and posting exactly where you were going to be at a specific time online? Genius. Fucking genius.”

Silence spread between them, and Ethan clamped his mouth shut. He took the smaller road to the private casita then turned to Ana. She stared out the window at the two-story building in the glow of ground lights, her face pale, strained and remote.

He was an ass for yelling at her after she’d been accosted in the bathroom. He wasn’t mad at her, he was worried and frustrated. “I’m sorry, that came out harsh. I have a lot going on. We’re finalizing all the security on the last leg of the tour, I’m playing hardball on contract negotiations that can make or break my career.” But what happened if Gregory got out of jail and returned to San Diego? Would he go after Ana? His aggravation at the situation built and shot out of his mouth. “The last thing I need is to worry about your safety.”

“Then don’t.” Ana released her seat belt and faced him. “It’s time to cut bait. This isn’t working between us. I’ll stay in the casita tonight, then fly home tomorrow and take care of myself. I always take care of myself.”

Go home? She was leaving him? Panic closed in on his chest. Tonight, when he’d realized she was in trouble and a locked door stood between them, something had snapped in his brain. He’d have killed in a second to protect her. He didn’t want to let her go. Struggling to breathe past the building pressure, the need to find a way to have her while proving himself to the whole damned world, he said, “Ana—”

She turned away from him and shoved open the door. “You’ll be free to focus on the important stuff. Thank you again for dinner and helping me tonight. I told the restaurant to charge any damages, like the door, to me.” She banged the car door and darted up the stone walkway.

Christ. He’d handled that like a champ. After ripping off his seat belt, he jetted out of the car and yelled, “Damn it, stop.”

She spun around. “Go back to the house, Ethan. I’m done.” She vanished inside, closing the door on him.

Who was the fucking genius now?

It took all his will to get in the car and drive away.

This was better for Ana. It didn’t matter how much he loved her, it’d never work. His past would be exposed, people would gleefully dissect it, and Ana would feel the shame. He couldn’t—

He hit the brakes so hard, the rear tires skidded, taking him into a spin. He gripped the steering wheel, hands sweaty, heart pounding and a crackling in his ears. His training kicked in, and he got the car under control.

Loved her? He’d always cared, but what did he know of love? Enough to love Ana, apparently.

After parking in front of the manor, he glanced in the rearview mirror and didn’t like what he saw. A man who’d left the woman he loved alone, a woman who’d been hurt and terrorized tonight. But not before he’d made it clear that his job and his chance at an apprenticeship were more important than her.

No wonder she’d wanted to leave him. He was an asshole and clearly not good enough for her. He’d more than proved that this evening.

He should go in the house, tell her friends she needed them, and they’d go take care of her. If Gregory got out of jail, Ethan would do anything he had to in order to keep her safe, including break his contract with *Savaged Illusions* to protect her himself. Yeah, he’d be a fuck up professionally, but Ana would be safe.

That’s what mattered.

Go inside. Yet, he couldn’t. How much time had passed since he’d left Ana? Fifteen or twenty minutes?

The front door opened, and Chelle stormed down the steps toward their rental car when she spotted him. Pivoting, she jogged to the passenger side of Ethan’s car, ripped open the door and dropped into the seat. “You’re a jerk.”

Ana must have called her friends, and Chelle had probably been on her way to the casita. “I know.”

“I’m not done. I’m guessing Ana didn’t tell you, or maybe she did but you’re so busy with your new exciting life you don’t care.”

His guts clenched, and dread dug in. “Tell me what?”

The anger drained out of Chelle, leaving her pale. “Ana’s fine. But for a couple weeks, she was scared to death that she had cancer. She went through it all alone.” Chelle’s eyes welled with tears. “We never knew. But the worst thing is she tried to tell us, but Franci and I were so busy dumping our problems on her, she never did. She went through finding a lump, the doctor’s exam, mammogram, biopsy and getting the results by herself.”

Jesus. He couldn’t get his head around it. “I don’t understand, how could she not tell anyone?”

Chelle looked away. “Because I’d gotten in way over my head with my graphic design business, and my boyfriend dumped me. Ana spent several nights working with me on QuickBooks so I could invoice

customers correctly. She loaned me money to get me through. I'll pay her back. I swear it."

Guilt bore down on his chest, tightening it until he could barely breathe. Ana had been fucking scared, and no one had been there. But it made sense why she hadn't realized how much Gregory was fixating on her in San Diego. She'd been distracted.

"And Franci's dad found out her mom was cheating. Ana helped him find a good lawyer and stood by Franci as she was torn in two by her loyalties to both parents. Plus Franci's been worried about paying for law school."

Ana hadn't said a word to him. Nothing. But she had told him repeatedly that she took care of herself. Obviously she had. Another thought hit him. What if the doctors had found something and she wasn't telling them? "Are you sure she's okay?"

"Yes. I only found out about the whole thing because I was at her condo and saw the biopsy report. She's clear, no cancer." She scrubbed the palm of one hand on her thigh. "She had no one. Ana refused to tell Linda about her cancer scare for fear she'd cancel her trip to Italy."

Ethan closed his eyes, knowing exactly why she hadn't told Linda. In Ana's mind, she owed her stepmom for helping her when she needed it. She wouldn't burden her again. God. He rubbed his chest.

"And tonight you told her she was too much trouble. All she asked was for you to make her feel alive and wanted for a little while. Like maybe she didn't have to be so damned perfect all the time. Ana's done this for so long, she doesn't know how to let someone else take over and help her anymore."

Her words slammed into him. All this time, Ana'd been telling him that. Asking him to let her have this fantasy with him where they could both lose control for a while. But he'd been too busy struggling with his demons and going after his big dream to really hear her. She'd been asking him for help, and he'd let her down.

Just like everyone else.

Then tonight, he'd been scared, worried, and lashed out at her, basically telling her she was a burden. No wonder she told him to leave.

"I'm going to her now, while Franci packs the rest of our things. We're getting her out of here, away from you, tonight."

Chelle's words snapped him out of his thoughts. "No, wait. Give me another chance. Please, just let me go to her now."

She lifted her head, eyes blazing. "Finally pull your head out of your ass?"

He blinked. A lot of people mistook Chelle's creative flightiness for stupidity. That was a mistake. The girl was smart and caring. She'd seen through Ethan when even he couldn't admit the truth.

"You either get real here and figure out you love her, or you let her go. What's it going to be?"

He'd known it the second Ana'd called out to him behind the locked bathroom door. He loved Ana, but would she give him another chance?

CHAPTER 10

Ana sat on the couch in the pretty casita with her knees pulled up to her chin, scanning the airline flights for tomorrow on her phone.

She couldn't concentrate.

"The last thing I need is to worry about your safety."

Ethan's voice rang in her head. Her throat ached more than the throb in her arm and hand. She wanted to hate him, but instead it just hurt. It was worse than when her mom refused to listen to her about her stepfather. She'd always known she was nothing more than a pawn to her mom.

But Ethan...deep down she'd thought he cared. Idiot. Hadn't he made it clear eleven months ago that she wasn't important enough to keep? Pressure built behind her eyes. She wished she could cry, just break down and let go for a while. Get some release from the swelling pressure inside her.

But she couldn't. Not anymore.

She hadn't cried since that day she left her mom's house. She'd tried hard to be good, not a moody or difficult teenager. No dramatics, no sobbing over boys or arguments. She'd trained herself not to break down. Yet the pressure inside kept growing. It freaked her out.

Like she was cracking inside where no one could see.

She glanced at the door.

She'd told Franci and Chelle what happened, but then insisted she was fine and would sleep here.

But wouldn't they check on her?

You told them you're fine. Why would they?

There was really something wrong with her. She didn't know how to ask for help anymore.

Except with Ethan. That twisted inside her, pain so deep she squeezed her eyes shut. *Help me.* The words had come out when he'd been deep inside her, driving her to pleasure so intense, it was the flip side of the pain she felt now.

And she'd had that same sensation of not being able to let go. But he'd helped her.

Later, she'd told him about her stepfather, and he'd believed her.

Then tonight he'd saved her.

And decided she was too much of a burden.

A click echoed in the room. Ana jerked her head up. What—?

The front door opened. She shot off the couch, her skin prickling. The terror drained once she recognized who was coming in. "Ethan." She didn't understand; he'd left, she'd heard the car drive away. "What are you doing in here? How?"

He lifted a key. "Master." He tossed it on the table and prowled toward her. "I'm sorry for being an ass tonight." He settled his hands on her face. "No job is as important as you are. The truth is, when I realized you were in trouble in the bathroom and that door was locked, I freaked the hell out. Something in me broke—I'd have killed anything that got between you and me."

"I don't..." She backed up, backing away from his touch. This wasn't real. She'd learned that lesson twice with him, and it had finally sunk in. Trapped between the couch and coffee table, she had nowhere to go. "Don't do this because you feel sorry for me. I'm fine."

His jaw flexed. "No, you're not. You were attacked by a crazy bastard and I blamed you. Yelled at you for not seeing him in the restaurant. Which, by the way, I should beat my own ass for that. I'm trained to spot trouble, and I didn't see him."

She didn't know what was happening here. "Okay. But it doesn't change anything. I need to go home. I know it was supposed to be just sex, but there's something wrong with me." She didn't want to tell him she was breaking inside. That she loved him so much it hurt to breathe. She'd been a fool, lying to herself

and him. “I can’t do this. I can’t.” She fisted her hands, then winced at the pain in her left one.

Ethan caught her hand, gently caressing her fingers. “Aside from your injuries from tonight, there’s not a goddamned thing wrong with you. You’re the bravest person I know. I’m the coward here, so afraid to admit that I’m in love with you. I kept telling you I was protecting you from my past, but it was me that was afraid to take a risk. But you? I rejected and hurt you once, and yet you tried again. That’s brave.”

She’d been desperate, not brave. Like she was too close to the edge of a cliff and had no one to catch her before she fell over.

Ethan went on, “You’re my one good thing, and I was too fucking stupid to hold on to it and fight to keep you. Please, just stay a few more days, and I’ll prove it to you. I’ll talk to Hank—”

His boss? “For what?”

“I’ll leave the job and help you get through this ordeal with Gregory. You’re going to have to fly back here for depositions and trial if it goes that far. Or if he gets off by some fluke, I’ll be there to protect you.”

“Ethan, no.” He was upset and feeling responsible for her. “You’re making promises you don’t mean.”

“Let me take care of you for a few days, will you give me that?”

Say no. Just go home. Stop this now. “I can’t.”

He looked down. “Okay. I’ll make the arrangements for tomorrow afternoon. I’ll fly with you on Savaged Illusions’s jet, then meet with Sloane. He’s going to make sure you’re safe if Gregory is released and allowed to leave. Right now, let’s get you to bed.”

He was giving her up that easily? He really hadn’t meant it. “I don’t need you to stay.”

“Too bad. I’ll sleep on the couch, but I’m staying.” Before she could form a protest, he got her up into the loft, helped her change, and tucked her into the soft sheets and thick comforter. Her head was spinning from the adrenaline crash, vulnerability and the pain pill he’d coaxed her into swallowing.

“I’ll be right downstairs. No one can get in without going through me. Go to sleep.” He kissed her forehead.

She didn’t want to be alone. This was her last night with the man she loved. *You’re not making sense. One moment you can’t be near him anymore, and the next, you can’t let him go.* But right now, he was all she had to hold on to. “Will you sleep with me?”

The harsh lines of his face softened. He climbed into bed and pulled her against him.

Ethan’s warmth surrounded her as the drugs kicked in, pulling her under.

“I’m right here, I won’t leave you. You’re safe, Ana.”

How was she going to face the rest of her life without him?

* * * *

Ana stumbled down the stairs toward Ethan’s voice. Who was he talking to?

“I want to meet with you alone first.” Ethan stood in the small kitchenette, his shoulders tense as he held his cellphone to his ear.

Who did he want to meet with? *Siena?* Pain stabbed her chest and she hated herself for it. She knew how important the apprenticeship was to Ethan, yet she was jealous and wishing she could be that significant to him. But she wasn’t. Her nose clogged and tears she couldn’t shed burned her eyes. Her head ached.

Ana had been going to the coffeemaker, but she changed direction and went to the couch where she found her cellphone. After sitting, she unlocked the screen and stared in surprised. She had a dozen missed calls and texts.

“What’s wrong?” Ethan moved up to sit on the coffee table directly in front of her. He grabbed a throw pillow, slid it beneath her injured hand, and arranged a cold pack over it.

She hadn’t heard him finish his call. Had he just hung up? “My stepmom tried calling several times.”

“News broke overnight that Roger Kendall’s daughter was attacked in a restaurant bathroom. She probably heard and is worried. You need to call her.”

“I will.” She didn’t want Linda upset.

“How’s your hand?”

Beneath the ice and ace bandage, she gently flexed her fingers. “Little sore. It’ll heal.” She made herself look at him. *Tell him goodbye.* “It sounds like you have a meeting. I’ll call Franci and Chelle—”

“Franci will be here in a few minutes,” he cut her off. “I didn’t want you alone while I’m gone.”

Surprised, she blurted out, “You talked to them?”

“Chelle caught me last night as she was rushing to the car to get to you. I begged her to stay at the house and let me take care of you.” He swallowed. “I’d hoped you’d change your mind and stay. Give me another chance.”

Elation sprang up in her chest, but Ana shut it down. Hadn’t she lied to herself enough? She was always going to come in second, and if she got in the way of his career, he’d resent her. It’d be like this week with Siena pulling him one way and Ana the other. And which way did he go each time? Siena. Ana wasn’t enough. “I can’t.” Everything hurt at letting him go, but it’d be worse later when he finally realized he just didn’t love her enough. “I’m sorry. I—”

“Don’t apologize. You gave me two chances. I have to prove myself to you before you ever give me another.”

Prove himself? She didn’t know what he meant by that.

“We’ll fly home this afternoon on the band jet. It’s all arranged. I’ll make sure you’re safe in San Diego.”

“Gregory’s in jail here. You don’t have to do that.”

He smiled sadly, and leaned forward to push a strand of her hair back. “I want to. Please, Ana.”

Then he’d be able to walk away with a clean conscience. Ana loved him because he was this man who would go to all this trouble. But then he’d go on and become Siena’s apprentice. “Okay.”

His eyes burned into hers. “One more thing. I’m sorry I wasn’t there, that you didn’t think you could call me and I would come. It doesn’t matter what I say now, you won’t be able to believe me.”

“There for what?” She couldn’t keep up.

“When you found the lump. For all of it. I can’t believe you didn’t tell anyone.”

Stunned, she drew back. “You know?”

“Chelle told me last night right after she ripped me a new one for being a jerk.”

Now it made sense. Why he was so upset and gentle last night. Between the attack and finding out she’d had the little tiny cancer concern, he’d felt sorry for her. *Tell him it’s fine, that you’re fine.* Instead she blurted out, “I almost called you. The night before the biopsy, I couldn’t sleep and sat there holding the phone opened to your number.” She slapped her good hand over her mouth. What was wrong with her? “I shouldn’t have told you that,” she whispered, her voice thick and raw. She was making him feel worse.

Ethan slid his hands beneath her and lifted her into his arms. “Ana.” His chest rattled against her cheek as if he drew in a ragged breath. “I fucking hate that you were alone.”

She had to fix this. Fisting his T-shirt, she raised her head. “I’m very lucky. Not everyone gets good results. But coming here to you, this was wrong, Ethan. I was using you, trying to heal something broken inside me. But you can’t do that, only I can. And this—we’re hurting each other. I know you care, but you have dreams.” She loved him enough to want him to be happy. “Go after them and be successful. You have a meeting with Siena, right?”

Something fierce flickered in his gaze. “Yes.”

She scooted off his lap and grabbed her phone and ice pack off the floor. “I’ll call Linda and then get my stuff together.”

Ethan rose and went to the small dining table. He scooped up his wallet, phone and keys then looked her. “I get why you can’t trust me, why you didn’t call me when you were scared. You were afraid I’d let you down.”

She opened her mouth, but he went on.

“Hush. Give Linda a chance, Ana. She loves you. Think about how you’d feel if she kept something

like a breast cancer scare or a stalker from you. What if she was in trouble and didn't tell you?"

The realization hit her dead center. "I'd be upset." She was beginning to realize just how much she'd hurt her friends too. She should have made them listen, and they would have. "I'll call Linda. And apologize to Franci and Chelle."

Relief eased a fraction of the tension in his jaw. "I'll be back."

She clenched her sore hand, the physical pain better than the ripping sensation in her heart. He was going after his dream exactly as she'd told him to. Every step he took toward the door cut deeper. She managed to say, "Good luck."

Ethan paused at the door, his gaze locking with hers. Then he nodded once and vanished.

Ana sank down on the couch and stared at the phone in her hand. Desperation clogged her throat. She needed help and reached out to the one person who'd rescued her in the past.

As soon as Linda answered, Ana spilled out everything from the moment she found the lump to now in a torrent of words.

"Honey, why didn't you tell me?" Linda asked. "I'd have cancelled my trip. Nothing is as important as you. You're my daughter."

She couldn't breathe past the swelling in her chest. "Linda. I—"

The door opened, spilling in Franci. Her friend's dark gaze swept over her, saw the phone in her hand and she waved an acknowledgement that Ana was on a call.

"Honey," Linda went on in her ear. "If you need me, I'll get on a plane and be there as quickly as I can."

Give Linda a chance. Half her instincts screamed to assure her stepmom that she was fine. But she wasn't. A man she barely knew attacked her, and Ethan...oh God...he'd told her loved her and she was terrified to believe him. A merciless fist in her chest squeezed her heart. "I don't know what I'm doing anymore. I love him too much."

"Ethan?"

"Yes. He said he loves me, but how can I know?" Unbearable agony swelled in her throat. "I really messed this whole thing up." The words clawed her throat. "He's feeling guilty or some responsibility and—"

"Wrong," Franci interrupted, striding up to stand over her.

Ana jerked her head up. "Linda, hold on, Franci's here and telling me something about Ethan." She faced her friend. "What do you mean?"

"He told me outside before he left—he's meeting with Chef Siena to turn down the apprenticeship."

"Wait, what?" Ana shot up to her feet, unable to believe it.

Franci touched her shoulder. "He's hoping it'll convince you he'd choose you over anything else. Even his shot at being a chef."

No. That's what Ethan had meant that he'd prove it to her. She'd refused to believe him when he told her he loved her, so he was giving up his dream for her. Sick agony pounded in her chest. She clutched the phone. The need to get to him gripped her. "Linda, I have to go save Ethan from a huge mistake."

"I heard. I love you honey. I'm booking a flight home, I'll call you later."

Ana stopped halfway up the stairs. "I love you too, Linda. I called you today because I needed my mom. That's you."

"Damn right, and don't ever forget it again."

That made her smile despite the urgency beating at her to get to Ethan. "I won't."

* * * *

He'd let another woman come between him and Ana. That ended now. Siena might be able to give him a career, but Ana owned his heart. He didn't know if he could ever heal the damage he'd done to her trust. He'd finish the tour and pay off his debts, then go home to San Diego. He'd find a job and work hard to

win Ana back no matter how long it took.

After parking, he headed into the building and straight to the conference room.

Siena waited by the window. “Why did you insist on this private meeting before signing the contract?” She strode to the table and slapped her hands down. “I’m not accustomed to demands from my apprentice. Before we do sign, you need to be clear, I expect you to be one hundred percent dedicated and passionate about the job. No distractions.”

He stayed at the other end of the table. “Like Ana?”

“Exactly. I don’t care if you’re screwing random women, as long as they don’t interfere with the job.” Straightening up, she added, “You ever walk out of a meeting as you did last night, I’ll fire you on the spot.”

He narrowed his eyes and stayed silent. From a business perspective she had a point. But she’d been the one to arrange the reservations for him and Ana, making a big deal of reassuring Ana he’d be done by then. “You set it up to make me late or cancel.”

“Damn right I did. From the second I met Ana at the party, I knew that girl was messing with your head. You have a huge future in front of you. The video tests showed you’re amazing on camera. Your cooking is very good, though you need more experience, but that’s something I can give you. You have a fresh, creative flair I’m looking for. But I won’t accept you being distracted or telling me you have other commitments. For one year, you’re mine. Choose—the girl or your career.”

The ultimatum hung in the air. A week ago, cold dread would have filled him at the idea of failing to secure this apprenticeship. And this morning? “Thank you for the opportunity. I’m choosing—”

The door burst open. “Don’t do it!”

Whipping around, he blinked in surprise. Ana stood there, her face flushed, hair wild, and wearing the dress from last night.

She rushed up to him and gripped his arm with her uninjured hand. “Don’t. Franci told me what you’re doing. Please, this chance means everything to you.”

She’d come down here to stop him?

“Listen to her,” Siena interrupted. “I’ll open doors for you all over the world.”

Yeah, she probably would. Ignoring Siena, he smiled down at Ana. His one good thing. “I don’t want it. I want you.”

“I’ll wait. If you really want me, it’s only a year. I’ll wait.”

The impact of her words sank in. Ethan was afraid to believe it. “You’ll give me another chance?”

“Yes, but you don’t have to give up this apprenticeship.”

He pulled her against his side and turned to Siena. “I’m choosing Ana.”

Ana stiffened. “Ethan, no!”

“Yes.” He kissed her forehead. “I don’t want to be away from you for another year. I’ll get a job, I swear. I’ll put in a call to Chef Zane to see if I can get a job as one of his line cooks. Or I can work for Sloane’s security team, or another place. I’m going back to San Diego once the band’s tour is over. I’m going to prove to you—”

“Touching.” Siena cut him off. “But I wonder? Does Ana know all about you? I do. I had you investigated.”

Ethan stilled, a vile taste slicking his tongue as a low drone of fury rumbled like distant thunder. He’d signed papers for a background check. Taking his arm from Ana, he faced the woman he’d once admired. “The steroid scandal is public knowledge.”

“Yes it is. But this…” Siena picked up a dark gray folder, “...is not.” She slid the folder across the table.

He raised an eyebrow, refusing to show a reaction, while his mind blared, “*Once a whore, always a whore.*” Were there pictures in there? The idea of Ana seeing him that way, a kid servicing women, exploded in his head, nearly making him vomit. All his instincts screamed to grab that folder and destroy it.

But he didn’t move a muscle. To win Ana’s trust, he had to give her his. And that meant trusting her

with his worst moments and biggest regrets.

“Go ahead.” Siena gestured to the file. “Show your girlfriend the investigator’s report. You were a—”

“Child.” Ana snatched up the folder, waving it in front of her as she stalked to Siena. “I know Ethan’s truth. And I know this—if there’s one picture, even one so-called testimony of someone who abused that boy, I’ll have you arrested and charged with trafficking child pornography. I’ll ruin you in ways you haven’t even thought of. So tell me, Chef Siena, should I look in this folder?”

Siena’s eyes rounded, and she stepped back. “Are you threatening me?”

Ana smiled. “Consider it an ironclad guarantee. You can’t imagine the misery I’ll rain down on you if you release this stuff. And I won’t stop there. I’ll rip your world apart until I find who took any pictures or told any stories of child abuse. Those women were all adults hiring a child. I’ll destroy them too.”

Ethan couldn’t tear his gaze from Ana. She all but stole the words from his mouth, but coming from her? Defending him? It was a thing of beauty and filled his throat with so much love, he grabbed the back of the chair to keep upright.

“It’s just a report,” Siena blurted out. “No...no pictures. I—”

“Ethan, check.” Ana held out the folder to him. “Let’s see if we have the chef dragged out of here in cuffs today or not.”

She didn’t want to look for herself? He took the folder and flipped through the three pages. “No pictures. Only rumors and bullshit.” He couldn’t even be relieved, there was no room with so much love and amazement filling every one of his cells. It finally hit him—his past was just that, his past.

But Ana was his future.

“We’ll take that copy as insurance.” Ana turned from her stare down with Siena and walked out.

Ethan faced Siena. “You want to come after me, bring it. But you try to fuck with Ana in any way, I’ll destroy you before she gets to you.” He strode out and caught up with Ana in the parking lot.

She had her uninjured hand pressed against the side of the car, leaning over, panting.

He set his hand on her sweaty back. “You okay?”

She looked up, her eyes fierce. “I almost killed her. I could actually visualize myself doing it—leaping over that table, grabbing her throat and slamming her head onto the table. I was so mad. You were a child, and she tried to use that to hurt you. I hate her.”

He kept rubbing her back. Her reaction wasn’t surprising given her past. Ana had run, but she never got to face down her abuser. Today she’d faced down a woman that represented the ones who’d abused Ethan. “I’ve never seen anyone as amazing as you were in there.”

Sucking in another breath, she stood up and touched his chest. “What about you? I’m so sorry. I know that was your worst nightmare.”

The concern in her eyes reached into his heart. “I thought it would be. But seeing you go all Rambo on her ass, standing there defending me, no one’s done that.” How did he tell her what that meant? “For the first time in my life, I didn’t feel dirty.”

“I’ll defend you. Every time.”

He believed her. “I have to ask you something though. You handed the folder to me. Why didn’t you look for yourself?”

“I don’t need to. You told me what happened, and I didn’t know what was in there. If there were pictures, why would I need to see those?”

This was what love felt like—this clean acceptance. He’d never known how freeing it was. He stared into the eyes of the woman who’d stood up for him. “I’m in love with you, Ana. You’re my brave, beautiful and bad girl. If you need more time, I’ll wait. I’ll spend years proving myself to you if that’s what it takes. I love you too much to give up.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I don’t cry. I never cry. I can’t—”

“Yes you can.” He pulled her against him, stroking her hair. He didn’t care that they were out in a public parking lot and people might see or hear. Ana was his, and she’d been too perfect and alone for too damned long. “You’re mine now, sunshine. Let go, baby. You can always let go with me.”

He held her close, the gift of Ana's love and trust seeping in to heal his heart. Once he was nothing more than a commodity to women, but to Ana?

He was the man she loved enough to defend, fight with, surrender to and trust with her most vulnerable moments.

Once Ana had been his one good thing, but now? She was his everything.

CHAPTER 11

One Month Later:

“Are you really okay with the plea deal?”

Ana shifted in the passenger seat of the car to look at Ethan. She’d returned to Florida to meet with the District Attorney’s office regarding the case against Gregory. Refusing to let her handle this alone, Ethan had flown in first, picked her up from the airport and went with her to the meeting where they’d learned the DA was offering a plea deal to Gregory for probation and mandatory treatment to be served in California. “I’m glad it’s over, so yeah. Gregory’s family lives in Los Angeles. He’ll be settling there, and that’s three hours away from us, depending on traffic.”

Us. Ethan had been on the road for the last few weeks, but she flew out for long weekends with him. Next week he’d be coming home for good.

“How about you? Are you excited to start working for Chef Zane at Stilts?” Zane had offered Ethan a position as his apprentice. It would be long hours and hard work, but Ana was delighted for him.

“I can’t wait. I like this job, and it’s taught me a lot. But cooking is what I love.” He took her hand. “Not as much as I love you, though.”

She knew that. True to his word, Ethan had flown home to San Diego with her after her vacation ended last month, stayed a couple nights until Linda got home from Italy and demanded Ana stay with her a few nights. Turns out the two of them had anticipated Ana would have some nightmares in reaction to her attack, and they were right. Franci and Chelle were there too, along with Kat and Sloane.

She opened her mouth to tell him how much she loved him when he pulled up to a gate. “Bayside Manor? But I made reservations at the Marriott.”

“I cancelled them and changed our plans.”

“But…” Why was she surprised? Ethan had powerful friends. He just so rarely used them, and when he did, well it was almost always for her.

Ethan guided the car through the gates. “No one else is here at the manor, no staff or security, just us for the night.” He turned off the main road that led to the house.

Ana recognized where they were headed and her heart started to thump. Her pulse jumped. “We’re going to the casita.”

“Yep. I made you a promise of capturing you, holding you down and taking you so hard you’d never again doubt who you belong to. I didn’t make good on it, and that’s unacceptable. I don’t break my promises to you, ever. So I hijacked your cute little romantic night of dinner and sex for this, Operation Savaged Surrender.”

Ana took off her seat belt, went up on her knees and braced a hand on his shoulder. “You did this for me?”

“For us.” His blue eyes burned with intense love, filling Ana. “When I promise you something, it will happen. You can count on that.”

She realized that now. “Why Savaged Surrender?”

His mouth tilted up. “Because we’re giving in to our savage sides and surrendering to each other. Totally surrendering, even me. What’s the one thing you’ve been asking me for?”

Hot excitement shuddered between her legs. “Bare. I want your cock inside me without a condom.” In the beginning, she’d wanted a condom in addition to her birth control as another layer of protection. In the last month, Ethan had shown her a love that was about true trust. If her birth control failed, the two of them would handle it together. But it went deeper for Ethan—taking her bare, especially in forced seduction, meant she accepted all of him, including his past.

“When I catch you tonight, you’re mine. You’re going to get all of me, sunshine, right down to my unsheathed cock.”

His trust wrenched her heart and ignited her desire. Both of them were letting go on the deepest, most intimate levels. Ethan had feared his past while Ana had feared her inner bad girl. Tonight, they would truly surrender the last of their fears to an all-consuming love. Ana took his face in her hands. “I’ll run and fight. You so sure you can catch and tame me?”

One of his hands curled around her hip. “I’ll always catch you, but I never want to tame you. I love you exactly as you are.”

Had anyone ever loved her this way? Before they lost themselves in this moment, she wanted to tell him how she felt. “For years, I got it in my head that people would leave me if I was bad.”

Ethan closed his eyes for a second, then opened them with so much love it floored her. “You’re not bad, sunshine.”

“But I’m human. I just didn’t realize people would love me even if I wasn’t perfect. You gave me that. You showed me that I could relax and be myself, and you’d still love me.”

“Every damned day.” His fingers glided over her cheek in a reassuring touch, but one that sank into with her the knowledge that this was what love felt like. Safe and free to be herself.

“You’re the strongest man I know. You survived a life I can’t even bear to think about to become the man who is my friend and lover.” She kissed him and added, “I love you.”

“I love you too. So much.” His jaw hardened, and a wicked gleam flashed in his eyes. “You have five seconds. Run.”

A sense of freedom and joy exploded through her, propelling her out the car door and running full bore. It didn’t matter how tonight played out.

She’d already won because she had Ethan.

ABOUT JENNIFER LYON

Jennifer Lyon is the pseudonym for USA Today Bestselling Author Jennifer Apodaca. Jen lives in Southern California where she continually plots ways to convince her husband that they should get a dog. After all, they met at the dog pound, fell in love, married and had three wonderful sons. So far, however, she has failed in her doggy endeavor. She consoles herself by pouring her passion into writing books. To date, Jen has published more than fifteen books and novellas, including a fun and sexy mystery series and a variety of contemporary romances under the name **Jennifer Apodaca**. As Jennifer Lyon she created a dark, sizzling paranormal series, and *The Plus Once Chronicles*, an emotionally sensual adult contemporary series. Jen's won numerous awards and had her books translated into multiple languages, but she still hasn't come up with a way to persuade her husband that they need a dog.

Find out more about her at <http://jenniferlyonbooks.com/meet-jen/>

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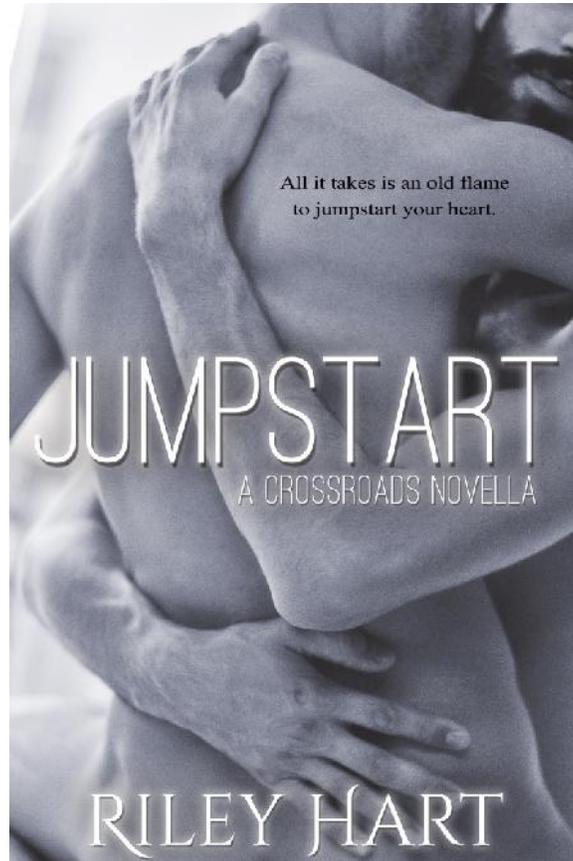
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JUMPSTART
A Crossroads Novella
By Riley Hart



SPECIAL THANKS

Special thanks to my husband for making me fall in love with motocross. I never thought I would enjoy it like I do. It's even more special since I get to share it with you. And hey, I made you a trainer!

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CHAPTER ONE

“Supercross Champion Beckett Monroe is Gay!”

Beck looked at the news article from his phone and groaned. “I’m bi, you dickheads,” he whispered softly.

“Excuse me?” the older woman in the first class seat beside him asked. She looked up at him sweetly like the grandmother from a fairy tale who was sugar and spice and everything nice, and here he was calling people dickheads.

“Nothing. Sorry.” He didn’t add anything else. He was no doubt a bear to be around and the woman didn’t deserve his surly attitude, but he couldn’t help it. He was pissed.

He’d known news would break today—known shit that shouldn’t be headlines would be—but knowing ahead of time didn’t edge his anger. Part of it was his own damn fault. He knew it was. If he’d been honest about himself from the start, there wouldn’t be headlines right now.

Actually, that was just him lying to himself. There would have been headlines when he’d come out and headlines after. The world was shitty like that. He didn’t believe anyone should *have* to declare their sexuality if they weren’t straight, but the fact was, they did, he hadn’t and now there was a shitstorm of publicity because god forbid a motocross star liked dick.

And he did. He liked dick a lot.

He’d also been ready to let the world know who he was because he was tired, so fucking tired of keeping that part of himself a secret. It’s the reason he’d gone to the gay bar that night when everyone was in town for the race. It’s why he’d given his name when people asked. It’s why he’d let it slip in mixed-company what he was in town for. He hadn’t given a shit anymore.

Still, it pissed him off that every major motocross magazine treated his sex life like it was important to anyone but himself and whoever he was with. The world had a whole hell of a lot more important things to talk about than who he happened to be fucking at the moment.

He glanced at the article again before exiting the screen and powering down his phone as he waited for the plane to take off.

As soon as they began taxiing down the runway he closed his eyes, hoping to take a nap and get his mind off everything. Not just the headline and his family’s reaction but also his career that, despite his wins, hadn’t felt right for a while now.

His eyes were only closed a moment when he felt a light tap on his shoulder. *Damn it.* He tried not to groan before opening his eyes to look at the woman beside him.

She gave him that sweet smile again, making it hard to be frustrated with her.

“I don’t understand it.” She shook her head before nodding at his phone, making his hackles immediately rise. Of course she’d seen what he’d been looking at, and of course she had to tell him her opinion about his life. Why should he believe otherwise? The universe obviously wasn’t very happy with him right now.

“With all due respect, ma’am, there’s nothing to understand. I’m not expected to understand why you’re straight so why should you have to understand why I’m bisexual?” *With a heavy lean toward men.*

Her smile was different this time—full of mischief as her eyes sparkled. “Well, that’s not very progressive of you. If straight shouldn’t be the default, why do you assume I’m straight?”

Okay...well, she had him there. Who the hell was this lady? She had to be at least seventy-five years old. It showed in the wrinkles on her face and the tremor in her hands, but he had a feeling she could give anyone a run for their money. He had to bite back his smile. “You’re right. I apologize. What don’t you understand, then?”

“Why it matters. Why we have to have headlines like that. The world is a funny place, isn’t it?”

“You can say that again.” Beckett blew out a deep, frustrated breath.

“Margaret Edwards,” she told him.

“Beckett Monroe, ma’am.”

“So tell me about yourself, Mr. Beckett Monroe.” As nice as she was, Beckett wasn’t really in the mood to talk right now. He felt like that’s all he’d done recently—talk to his parents on the phone, talk to his sponsors, his team. Right now, he just wanted to *be*.

The plane rocked, the familiar feel of turbulence shaking them. Margaret’s trembling hand shot out and grabbed his wrist. She closed her eyes, took a couple deep breaths and when the turbulence stopped, she looked at him again. “Sorry about that. I hate flying. I lost the love of my life in a small plane crash.”

His heart ached for her, and it made him wonder where the hell the rest of her family was. They shouldn’t leave her to fly alone.

When the plane bounced again, Margaret clutched him a second time as the pilot spoke on the overhead about keeping seatbelts on and the ride being a bumpy one. Beckett opened his mouth and said, “Well...I’m a professional motocross racer, but I guess you know that already.”

The distraction seemed to work. Margaret winked at him and said, “A *gay* motocross racer.”

“Actually, I’m bisexual, but yes.”

“And you have a broken heart,” she whispered.

“Huh?” He shook his head. “I don’t have a broken heart.” He was angry, confused. Tired of talking about his sexuality, tired of explaining himself to his family and friends. Frustrated over the passion he’d felt in the dirt being dimmed the past year or so. Dirt bikes had always been his life. He didn’t understand why the same adrenaline didn’t pump through his veins when he rode or why flying over jumps didn’t feel the same.

“Sure you do. People with broken hearts always recognize each other.”

Her words slammed into his chest. Beckett looked at her, opened his mouth then closed it again, not sure what to say. He didn’t have a broken heart—not after all these years. “I don’t...I’m not...”

The plane bumped around in the air again, this time worse than the other two. Margaret sucked in a sharp breath and it was Beckett who reached for Margaret’s hand.

She squeezed his hand, closed her eyes, and he let her hold him. He tightened his grip and before he knew it, he found himself saying, “I don’t have a broken heart.” He didn’t really have the right, considering it was his fault they weren’t together—or at least his fault that they hadn’t tried. “But there was someone...a long time ago. He was never really mine though, and I’m the one who ruined it.” He shook his head, tightening his grip on Margaret’s hand. “We haven’t seen each other in years. It was over a long time ago.”

He shifted, uncomfortable with the conversation.

“What does time have to do with anything?” she asked and Beckett didn’t have an answer for her. But the truth was, he still thought about him. He still missed their friendship.

“What’s his name?” Margaret asked.

“Christian.”

“And what happened between you?”

“I hurt him,” Beckett said truthfully. “I didn’t stand by him the way I should have and then I cut contact with him.”

He would always regret that. No matter what, they’d been friends and friends didn’t treat people the way Beckett had treated Christian.

Beckett cleared his throat, sat up straighter. “What about you?”

Margaret rolled her eyes at him. “I’m boring. You’re the bisexual dirt bike racer, let’s talk about you.”

He couldn’t help but chuckle at that...and he also couldn’t help but talk. He told her about riding, about getting his first used bike at four and falling in love. About everything his family had sacrificed for him to ride, for him to go pro. They hadn’t had the money and his parents had worked hard for Beckett’s dream to come true.

He even spoke a little about Christian—how they'd been best friends all their lives and all the trouble they used to get into together.

Before he knew it, the plane was landing in Norfolk, Virginia, where he would get his rental car and drive out of the city to where his friend Landon lived. They'd met in Florida. Landon was a motorcycle mechanic who had done some unofficial work on one of Beckett's bikes.

Landon had moved back to where he was raised when his sister got married. He worked in a shop and had gone and fallen in love with a man who ran an adult novelty store. Beckett hadn't met Landon's partner, but he knew his friend was happy. He couldn't wait to spend some time here and to unwind.

As they waited to deplane, Beckett couldn't help but watch Margaret. She had only her small purse with her. He wanted to know what she was doing here. If she was coming home or leaving.

Going off instinct, he grabbed a napkin and asked, "Do you have a pen?"

Margaret retrieved one from her purse. He took the pen, wrote his phone number on the napkin and handed both to her. "I know this is a little strange, but...I just want you to have this, in case you ever need anything. Please, don't hesitate to call."

Margaret's eyes became slightly watery. "Thank you." She took the napkin from him. As the people in front of them began to deplane, she added, "Being alone is no fun, Beckett Monroe. You fix that broken heart of yours, okay?"

He nodded and then Margaret stepped into the aisle and walked away. He wanted to. He really did. The only thing was, he didn't know how to fix it. He didn't know what was wrong with him or how to make himself feel whole again.

* * * *

"Supercross Champion Beckett Monroe is Gay!"

Christian Foster read the same headline three times. He tossed the magazine to the table and whispered, "He's bi, you dumb shits," before he immediately leaned forward and picked it up again. He had to check out the full article. There was no way he couldn't read the whole damn thing. Beck was the reason he had a fucking subscription to *Motocross Today* in the first place. He'd never been into bikes quite as much as Beck was. Sure, he'd enjoyed riding when they were kids. It was a rush in a lot of ways but in others he'd done it because that's what Beck was always doing and they'd been best friends their whole childhood. Where Beck was, Christian wanted to be.

Or at least he used to always want to be where Beck was. That was a long time ago.

Christian read the article detailing Beckett's night at a gay bar, that and the blurry pictures of him kissing a man outside made his gut twist uncomfortably. Jesus, it read like a soap opera or something. It wasn't as though the magazine never ran personal stories about riders, just usually nothing like this.

No one else outside the moto world would know—or give a damn. This was a first for the community though, and as much as he didn't want to, he couldn't help but wonder how Beck was dealing with it...how his team and sponsors were dealing with it. Then he wanted to burn the fucking magazine because it shouldn't matter. There shouldn't *be* anything to deal with.

Beck's family was a different story. They loved him. There was no doubt about that. Christian didn't think they would do anything foolish...but Christian remembered how awkward things had been when he'd come out—or been dragged out—before he was ready by a stupid letter written in teenage angst about loving another boy. It had been a shock to his parents and Beck's as well. Since they were so close, the first question had of course been...is this about Beckett?

They'd assured their families that it wasn't even though it really fucking was *and* had been mutual. Beck had continued his career and left for training—Christian had come to California for college; he and Beckett had stopped speaking.

"Fuck." Christian dropped back against the couch and groaned. It had been a long time since he'd let Beck in his head like this and he didn't like it. He could always call his mom to ask if she'd spoken to

Beck's parents.... "No. I'm out of my damn mind."

"Talking to yourself is one of the signs." Quinn walked out of Christian's room wearing nothing but a pair of underwear. "Are you coming back to bed?" he asked.

He probably should. He needed the rest, but he shook his head and held up the magazine. "He's out. I'm not sure how it really happened, but he's out." It wasn't as though most motocross riders were recognized on the streets like other sports stars—that's why he didn't understand how this had even happened.

Quinn sighed, walked over, and fell on the couch beside him. "Your teenage crush-slash-love of your life who likes to play in the dirt?"

Christian couldn't help but chuckle. "Yes." He sighed and dropped his head on Quinn's shoulder. He'd been Christian's first friend when he moved to California. They'd met in college and he helped Christian acclimate to life here. They were close. The only person Christian had ever been closer to was Beckett, but there had never been anything other than friendship between him and Quinn. Most people didn't believe that, but it was true.

"You sound sad, boo."

Christian rolled his eyes. He was going to fucking kill Quinn. "Don't call me boo."

"Would you prefer bae? I don't quite get that one but I'd be willing to use it for you."

He knew Quinn was just trying to make him laugh, but he couldn't. He felt ridiculous that after all these years, Beckett's life still had an effect on him. It wasn't that he was in love with Beck anymore but... "It's hard to explain. Until I was eighteen years old, every major event that happened in my life—hell, most of the minor ones too—involved him in some way. Then I realized I was gay and had feelings for him and I was scared out of my damn mind. I did everything I could to hide it from Beckett and everyone else."

"And then things changed between you and he was part of you accepting who you were and then he broke your heart. It makes sense that Beckett finally being public about who he is would make you think some thoughts."

Again, Christian chuckled. "Think some thoughts, huh?"

"You know what I mean. I'm tired. You and your damn insomnia."

Quinn was right. He just needed to go back to bed and quit thinking about Beckett Monroe. He'd done fine without him for ten years. "Come on. Let's go."

But Quinn didn't get up. He set a hand on Christian's thigh and squeezed it. "You know you can always call him. Or hell, go see him. It's not as if you can't take the time off. You deserve a vacation, as hard as you've been working, and it *is* understandable that he might be struggling a bit. If he wasn't ready to come out, then that article can't be a good thing. There's nothing wrong with being there for an old friend."

Again, Christian didn't understand it. How something like that could have happened. Still, what was he supposed to do? Track Beckett's phone number down through their parents? Beckett hadn't needed Christian in a long time and he sure as hell didn't need him now.

CHAPTER TWO

Beckett had gotten into town late last night. He'd rented a car so he wouldn't have to depend on Landon to help him get around. He would no doubt be busy with his partner, Rod, and working at the motorcycle shop—which was where Beckett was headed now. They'd decided to meet there and then grab lunch together. He was excited to see his friend. It had been too long since they'd hung out.

Landon had always loved bikes the way Beckett did, and nestled deep inside him was the hope that spending time with him would remind Beckett why he'd always lived and breathed being on two wheels. It was different than talking shop with his trainer or his crew. Landon was a personal friend. They were both bisexual men. He knew Landon on a different level than the guys he rode with—even though he did love the hell out of them. It was just a different kind of love.

The GPS on his phone told him where to go as he made his way to the shop Landon worked at. It was about forty-five minutes from him.

When he pulled up in front of the white building with the stalls open and filled with bikes, he saw Landon standing outside. As he put the car into park and got out, Landon pushed off the wall. They met in front of the vehicle and he immediately pulled Landon into a hug. "It's good to see you, man," he said.

Landon squeezed him back. "I heard what happened. You okay?"

Beckett pulled away and nodded. "Yeah...yeah I am. We'll talk about it over lunch." Sure, things were awkward. He had a lot on his mind. He didn't know what the fuck he was doing. But he was okay.

"Let's get out of here then," Landon told him. "My buddy Bryce—he owns the shop—isn't in today. He's going to lose his mind that he missed you. He nearly had an orgasm when I told him I know you." Landon laughed as they climbed into the car.

Even after all these years it was a strange feeling to have someone excited to meet him. To have someone want his autograph. "It's so odd."

"I know. I told him you're probably the biggest dork I know, but he just mumbled Monster Energy Cup and Supercross champion."

Beckett playfully rolled his eyes. He was damn proud of everything he'd accomplished. He'd never expected it. He'd grown up dirt poor. His parents had sacrificed a lot for his career—taking him to races, extra hours at work to buy him bikes. He'd gone pro as a teenager and it hadn't been easy. To think about how far he'd come...it blew him away sometimes but then, why did he feel such emptiness inside? Why did it keep growing inside him like some kind of fucking cancer or something?

He didn't understand it.

"Eh, I'm nothing special, but I'd love to hang out with him sometime. I want to meet your friends and that man of yours. Holy fuck. I never thought I'd see the day you'd settle down."

"I never thought I'd see the day either. He snuck up on me, that's for sure. Rod's fucking crazy and I love it. He makes me laugh like no one I've ever known." Landon was still smiling to himself as he gave directions to the diner down the road.

Beckett could hear the love in Landon's voice and he felt a small twinge of jealousy in his chest. *Huh. That was odd.* "I'm happy for you."

He drove them to the diner. It was an old fashioned, yellow building that looked like it came from the fifties. He was comfortable in places like this because he'd grown up in a small town in Georgia that was full of them.

It was pretty slow inside. They were seated, had their sweet teas and ordered before Landon said, "You were tired of hiding, weren't you?"

He leaned back in the matching yellow booth and gave a simple nod. It was more than that, though. Since he was bi, there was a part of him that had always told himself when he was ready to settle down,

he'd eventually be able to do so with a woman he loved. But then the older he got, the less women he dated or slept with until he knew it would never happen. It hadn't been a conscious decision, he didn't think, or at least he just didn't want to admit it. Still, he'd never really seen himself coming out. The whole thing was just so fucking odd to him, having to declare to people who he found attractive and what he wanted.

"I'm not sure what's going on with me."

"You were tired of living a lie," Landon told him.

"True," but... "it's not only that. I just feel... off. I've never loved anything the way I love moto. You know that, Landon—and I still do. Jesus, there's nothing like being out there in the dirt but on the other hand, it's—fuck, I don't know." He ran a hand through his dark hair as he struggled to put into words something that he didn't understand. "I guess it feels lonely lately and I don't know why." Which he was aware sounded all sorts of fucked up. Motocross was a one-man sport but it had never made him feel alone before. That's why he hadn't ridden as well this Supercross season. It had to be. He'd won the championship last year. This year, he was third in points. It had just suddenly stopped feeling the same.

Landon opened his mouth to respond, just as the waitress brought their food over. They'd each gotten a burger and fries. She asked if they needed anything else and when they said no, she left them alone again.

"That's because there comes a time when it's not enough. Whether it's bikes, art, fucking cross-country skiing, I don't know. Whatever it is that you love, eventually you need *more*. That doesn't mean you don't love it. It just means you're ready to let yourself love more than just that thing. Congratulations Beckett Monroe, you're all grown up now."

Landon winked at him and Beckett couldn't help but let out a laugh.

Whatever it is that you love, eventually you need more. That doesn't mean you don't love it. It just means you're ready to let yourself love more than just that thing.

He had a feeling his friend was right.

* * * *

"Your cell is ringing," Quinn called from the living room. Christian stood at the bathroom sink, towel wrapped around his waist, shaving. Quinn didn't live with him, but he might as well with all the time he spent at Christian's place.

"Grab it for me and tell whoever it is I'll call back." He ran the blade down his jaw again before rinsing it and then tossing water on his face and wiping the shaving cream away.

It was less than half a minute later when Quinn rushed into the bathroom holding his phone out to him as though he'd just received a call that he won the lottery or something.

"Who is it?" Christian asked and turned off the water.

Quinn looked at him with soft brown eyes and somehow he knew, *fucking knew* that it was Beckett. That the man was calling him for the first time in ten years. He felt ridiculous when his pulse sped up. But then...this wasn't about him. If Beckett was calling, it was because something was wrong. Quinn had no doubt been right that Beck was struggling.

"*Fuck*," he cursed softly before taking the phone from his friend. Quinn winked at him before he walked out of the room, giving Christian privacy. "Hello?" he said into the phone as he made his way to his bed and sat down.

There was a pause. He heard Beck breathe and then... "Hey. Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. Jesus, this is fucking awkward and a really bad idea. I don't know what in the hell I'm doing."

"I heard," Christian said before he could hang up.

"Small town gossip back home? I'm sure the news made it through the grapevine and back to your family. They're definitely putting second thoughts into all those sleepovers we used to have when we were kids."

And there was Christian's stupid letter. He didn't bring that up, though.

"Nah, they've become surprisingly progressive since getting used to having a gay son. They don't pay

attention to childish gossip. I have a subscription to Motocross Today,” he admitted.

It surprised him that after all these years, he could notice the amusement in Beck’s voice when he said, “Do you, now? That’s interesting.”

“I’ve always enjoyed the sport. If you remember, I used to ride with you quite often.” There was an elephant on the line with them they were both obviously trying to ignore. They were doing a decent job until Beck spoke again.

“I remember, Chris. I remember everything.”

Yeah...yeah, Christian remembered too.

“I don’t know why I called,” he confessed. “I thought maybe my mom had given me the wrong number when your boyfriend or whoever that was answered. She had to call your parents for the number. I suddenly feel like I’m in a romantic comedy. Or, you know, twelve or something.”

Christian didn’t correct the boyfriend comment. He gave a soft chuckle at what Beck had said and replied, “His name is Quinn. I was shaving and my phone was in the living room with him. It’s fine that you called, though. How you doing, Beck?”

“I’m good.”

Christian blew out a breath.

“No, I really am. It was time...past time, honestly. I have two weeks before the outdoor season starts. I’m in Virginia, of all places.” He gave Christian the name of the town and then they both went silent. So he’d taken a break between Supercross and Motocross seasons. That made sense. Christian wasn’t sure what else to say, and it was Beckett who continued the conversation. “Just getting some much needed R&R and thought—hell, I don’t know what I thought. That maybe I should call my childhood best friend who I haven’t spoken to in ten years, for absolutely no reason. That wouldn’t be awkward at all.”

Christian let out another laugh. Beck had always been good at making him smile.

“Now that I’ve made myself look like an idiot for shits and giggles, I should let you go.”

“It’s okay,” Christian told him. “I’m pretty sure we’ve both looked like idiots around each other too many times to count. Ugh. Remember the first time I got drunk and I fell asleep in my own vomit? We’d snuck into my house and I got sick and my mom came in and saw me in the morning. You told her you’d gotten a stomach ache and thrown up on me. Why did you do that anyway? It would have been just as believable that I’d thrown up on myself.”

“I choked! I just knew she was going to take one look at me, know I’d been drunk and call my parents.”

They’d been ridiculous. That was one of many stories Christian remembered. “You never had a real good poker face, did you?” Beckett was a terrible liar. All it took was one look at him to know when he was being dishonest.

“Not about most things,” he acknowledged. They both knew the one thing he had been really good at lying about. “I should let you go,” he said again.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Beck?” He couldn’t keep himself from asking again; he knew to the marrow of his bones that something wasn’t right.

“I’m good. I’m twenty-eight years old. It shouldn’t have taken me this long.”

But there was more, there was more and Christian knew it but he wouldn’t push. It wasn’t his place. “Call anytime, all right? It was good talking to you.”

Beckett breathed into the line a couple moments before he said, “It was good talking to you too, Chris.” He hung up the phone. Christian tossed his cell to the bed just as Quinn came in.

“It was good talking to you? That’s all you had to say?”

Christian threw a pillow at his head, which Quinn dodged. “Nosy bastard.”

“I like to call it being a good friend.” He flopped down on the bed beside Christian. “That didn’t go anything like it does in the movies.”

“You’re insane. And what movies are you watching? All LGBT movies end without a happily ever after.” Not that he was looking for that with Beck. It had been too many years for that.

“You’re right. That needs to change.”

“Very true.” Christian sighed. “That was odd. I never expected Beck to call. Never in a million years.” He’d sounded...different. Not just because it had been ten years but as though there was too much weight on each of his words. As though he was tired.

“You’re familiar to him. Sometimes we just need something or someone who makes us feel safe.”

He rolled his eyes and pushed to his feet. “I am not what Beckett Monroe needs. As long as he has a four-stroke bike and open space, he’s okay.”

“Can’t talk to a bike.”

“As long as he can ride, he’s good.”

“Then you’re a two-fer! He can ride you *and* talk to you!”

He wished there was another pillow nearby that he could throw at Quinn. But the truth was, Quinn was right. He thought Beck did need something familiar. If not, he wouldn’t have called.

Christian sighed. “Fuck. *Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.*”

“That’s my boy.” Quinn stood, knowing Christian all too well. “Go get dressed.”

Without another word, Christian headed back to the bathroom to do just that.

CHAPTER THREE

Beckett sat on the back deck of the house he'd rented. It was a small, two-bedroom cabin with a fireplace that was too warm to use, nestled between trees that kept the property shaded.

The humidity wasn't as bad as it was in Florida. He was used to it, having lived in humid environments most of his life. It was a plus when he raced this direction because not all riders did well in humid conditions.

He had his eyes closed as he relaxed into the porch chair. There was a cooler on the deck with him, a cold beer beside him and nothing but birds chirping and the sound of nature around him.

He needed this. He needed it badly.

When his cell rang on his lap, Beckett tensed. He wasn't even one beer in yet and didn't want to deal with anyone. It was likely his mom again...or one of his sponsors...or someone from his team....Jesus, he should just throw the fucking phone into the woods. But when it rang again he forced himself to open his eyes and pick it up. He frowned when he saw Christian's name on the screen. He'd saved his number when they spoke earlier that day.

His gut twisted as he remembered the completely ridiculous phone call. He'd felt like a sixteen-year-old calling his crush. Still, he swiped his finger across the screen and said with forced confidence, "Your turn to take a walk down memory lane?"

"Eh, more like my turn to embarrass myself because I have no fucking clue what I'm doing, why, or how you'll feel about it. I have a layover in Dallas. My plane lands in Norfolk at ten fifteen tonight. Can you pick me up?"

Beckett's pulse raced, that same feeling he got when his bike accelerated as he fought for the holeshot. He loved getting the strongest start, but the best finish was even more important. He leaned forward in the chair, thinking he must not have heard Christian right. "Excuse me?"

"You know what I said, Beck. Is this a good idea or a shitty one?"

Honestly...? "I don't know."

"Yeah...yeah, I feel the same," Christian replied.

"But I want to see you." His gut coiled tight at the thought—both nerves and excitement fueling him. It had been a long time since he saw Christian—too long.

Christian went quiet for a moment and Beckett wondered what he was thinking. Wondered why in the fuck he was coming. At the same time, he couldn't help being glad his old friend was visiting.

"Most people do," he finally replied, making a smile tug at Beckett's lips.

"Cocky motherfucker." He'd been the same way when they were kids, but playfully. He hadn't always been that way with Beckett though, because Christian had known he could be himself with him the same way Beckett didn't have to build himself up with bravado around Christian. They teasingly competed but it was all in fun between the two of them.

"I learned from the best."

"Pfft." Beckett rolled his eyes. "Don't blame me. That was all you."

The tight twist in his stomach began to unwind. It felt good talking to Christian. Even in just the few minutes they were on the line together he found himself wishing he hadn't lost this—hadn't lost his friend.

"Will you come?" Christian asked, some of the seriousness back in his hoarse voice.

"Yeah. Of course." He had to know that, right? Had to know that Beckett would want to see him and that Beckett would go get him...but then, maybe he didn't know. It wasn't as if he hadn't left Christian hanging once before, though he'd spent the last ten years regretting it.

After Christian told him the airline, they got off the phone. It wasn't until he leaned back in his chair again that he remembered the man who'd answered Christian's cell earlier. He wondered who they were to

each other, if he had a right to have a say in Christian coming here or not, if he'd ever been serious about someone or if he was now. Did he like California? It was a whole hell of a lot different from where they'd grown up.

There were so many things he didn't know about his old friend and it was his own damn fault.

* * * *

Okay...so this might be a little weird. Jumping on a plane to go see a friend he hadn't spoken to in ten years, and who he'd had a not-so-pleasant last meeting with, wasn't something Christian did every day. For the hundredth time since Quinn dropped him off at LAX he wondered what he was doing. Yes, Beck sounded off-kilter during their first phone call and yes the thing that Beck had feared happening when they were kids had recently occurred in his life but the truth was, that had nothing to do with Christian. Not anymore. What did he expect? To come here and save the day? To show Beck that he might not be a Supercross champion but that he'd made a good life for himself? That he was happy? As much as he hated to admit it, that likely had something to do with it.

That, and the truth was, he'd likely always come if he thought Beck needed him. That's what friends did for each other, or at least that's the way Christian saw it. Despite the time that had passed, he couldn't turn off the part of him that considered Beck one of the most important people in his life. He wasn't sure if that made him a saint or someone who really needed to get over the past.

The Norfolk airport was rather small. Christian had to grab his checked bag, but it wasn't long until he stepped outside the glass doors just as a blue SUV pulled up. Before he saw the driver, he knew it was Beck.

A strange discomfort settled at the base of his spine, making him tense.

The passenger-side window rolled down. His dark hair was only a couple inches long. He had a matching beard that hid the jawline Christian had always enjoyed looking at. He gave Christian a smile but it didn't reach his eyes. Still, there were small wrinkles around them that hadn't been there before—smile lines from the years of laughs he'd had that Christian hadn't been a part of.

A melancholy sort of heaviness weighed him down because he'd never seen that happening between them. Yes, it had been ten years and he knew that but seeing Beck again in person made it all the more real.

As if he could sense something was wrong, he cocked his head slightly. Was he thinking the same thing? Did he have any regrets? Christian didn't really think he could. All of Beck's dreams had come true.

He fought to shake those thoughts from his head as he walked the short distance from where he stood to the vehicle. He opened the back door, tossed his bags in and then climbed into the front. "You look old," he teased and Beck barked out a rough laugh.

"Fuck you. I'm tired. It's been a long week." He eyed Christian up and down. Christian's light brown hair was shorter than it used to be. He was clean-shaven, wearing a polo shirt and jeans. *Did Beckett think he looked different?*

"You're very polished. Los Angeles took the *good ole boy* out of you, didn't it?"

"That shit was exorcised out of me a long time ago." It wasn't that he didn't love where he came from. He did. Christian hadn't had a bad childhood—he'd had a pretty fucking good one—but he'd also never felt like he fit in. "That likely started the first time I jacked off to a picture of a boy in a magazine, though."

He clicked his seatbelt into place, but Beckett didn't pull away from the curb. Christian knew he should turn and look at him. Knew they should say something important. There wasn't a part of him that doubted that Beck's eyes were on him right now. It wasn't until Beckett whispered a soft, "I can't believe you're here," almost as if he really didn't believe it, almost as if he thought Christian might disappear. That's what made him turn to look at him.

Christian fought the urge to tell Beck he wanted to make sure he was okay. Fought the urge to say it hadn't felt right not to come because why in the hell should it matter if he was here or not? Instead he just grinned and tried to play it off. "Where in the fuck is here, anyway? I mean, why Virginia? And you might

not be so glad that I decided to come because I haven't even booked a room yet. I wasn't sure where you were staying. I thought it might make things easier if I got a room wherever you are."

"We're going to play it like that, are we?" Beckett asked.

Damn him for calling Christian out on his avoidance of the heavy stuff. "We are."

"Yeah," Beck replied. "Yeah, maybe that's smart. I'm not sure why I couldn't reel that in." He looked to make sure no cars were coming and then pulled out. "Here is...somewhere I've never been before. I have a buddy; his name is Landon. He's a mechanic I used to hire to do some private work for me when I didn't want to go through the factory. He moved here a while back. I needed to get away. He was the first person I thought to call, so here I am."

The words were like a jab to his heart. He'd come here because he thought Beck might need someone. Jesus, did he really think Beckett wouldn't have other friends to support him? He really was a cocky motherfucker. Christian hadn't been the person Beck went to when he needed a friend in a long time, just like Beck was no longer that person to him—speaking of, he pulled out his phone and shot a quick text to Quinn—I'm here—and then he shut his phone down, not wanting Quinn's answer right now.

"Fuck, I should have thought about that. It makes sense that you would come here to see someone." A thought slammed into him. "Jesus, did I cockblock you on a hookup?" But then...Beckett *had* called him.

"What? No. It's not like that. I mean, it *was* like that once but Landon is just a friend. Plus, he's crazy in love with his partner, Rod."

"Thank God." Christian let his head rest against the seat. "I was going to feel like the world's biggest asshole. So, hotel? Do you think they have vacancies?"

"No hotel," Beckett replied before making a left turn. "I'm staying in a rental. There's an extra room. You'll stay with me." He spoke as if that was law, as if there were no other options...and Christian didn't argue.

CHAPTER FOUR

Beckett couldn't keep his eyes to himself. Every couple minutes he found himself glancing Christian's way. He felt an unexpected calmness inside him, like he was in the eye of a hurricane where the chaos of all his recent thoughts—the way his love of motocross felt muted, coming out, his family adjusting, thoughts of his career, and the fact that he wasn't riding like himself—couldn't reach him. They were still there, twisting and turning around him but right here, right now, they were quieted by the fact that his oldest friend was here. That he'd thought Beckett might need him and he'd come.

They were silent most of the ride to the house. It was surprisingly a comfortable sort of quiet. He hadn't expected that after all this time. There was a whole lot of shit between them, things that needed to be discussed but it was as though they both managed to put that aside and it was only Christian and Beckett in the car right now. How many times had he heard that yelled over the years? *Christian and Beckett!* Most of the time, they were getting into some kind of trouble.

He let out an amused chuckle.

"What?" Christian asked as they pulled into the driveway of the cabin.

"Just thinking about all the trouble we used to get into. About how many times we heard our names getting yelled by someone frustrated with whatever antics we'd gotten up to that time."

"Oh God. Don't remind me. You were such a bad influence on me."

Beckett cocked a brow at him. "I'm pretty sure you have that the wrong way." But really, he just thought trouble came looking for them when they were together. He couldn't let Christian blame it on him without blaming it on Christian, though.

"I think you might have hit your head a few too many times during crashes." Christian stepped out of the car, then opened the back door. "I was a good boy. You were always the one saying, '*Let's take the bikes on this path, Chris. Who cares if it's private property? No one will catch us. Let's try this jump, Chris. Oh, we can steal some beers and drink them in that abandoned house, Chris.*' I just went along for the ride." He grabbed his bag and grinned at Beckett. Christ, this felt good.

"You have selective memory, but I'll let it slide for now. It's the least I can do after you came all this way." Once he was out of the car, they went for the steps that led onto the small front porch of the cabin. "Are you hungry?"

"No. I could use a drink though."

"Beer?" he asked as he unlocked the door.

"Perfect."

They made their way inside. "I'm staying in the room at the end of the hall. You can put your bag in the first room on the left and change or whatever. We can head to the back deck, watch some TV inside, or if you just want to take your drink and go to bed, I understand. You had a long day of traveling."

To Virginia to see him. He still couldn't believe that Christian was here with him now.

"Some fresh air sounds good," Christian replied, and then they stood there looking at each other without moving. His eyes looked bluer than Beckett remembered. They were like the ocean in a painting—bright and magical.

He had a small mole next to his eye. A fading scar on his chin from when he went off his bicycle on a ramp and hit the concrete. Memory after memory slammed into him, washed over him like waves in the same ocean he was just thinking matched Christian's eyes. Christian represented a part of him that was real and honest in ways Beckett never let himself be. Even when he'd meet a man on an app or at a club it wasn't honest. They didn't know each other or care about each other or keep each other's secrets. They hadn't laughed together or gotten scared together or even held each other while they cried.

That was only Christian.

Christian who broke their silence with, “Well, this is awkward. I think we just had a moment there. It’s a little too soon for that. I’ll put my bags away and be right back.”

Damned if a warmth didn’t spread through his chest and a smile tug at his lips, and if all those questions about his career and what would happen and where his passion was going didn’t bury themselves a little deeper. Christian had always been good at making him forget things.

“I’ll get the beer.”

“You do that.”

“I will,” Beckett said and then he rolled his eyes. “I think we somehow went through a time portal and we might be sixteen-year-old kids again. Christ, you’re making me act weird.” Before they continued to play the staring game, Beckett turned and went for the fridge to get their beer. He heard Christian’s footsteps get farther and farther away until he didn’t hear them at all anymore. That’s when he breathed.

* * * *

Christian tossed his bag onto the bed and rubbed a hand over his face. He’d expected the awkwardness to lie heavily upon them but it was different to know something than to experience it. They’d left a lot of things unsaid ten years ago. They were both different men—they had to be—but when he looked at Beck, he wanted to see his childhood friend. The person he’d gotten in trouble with and laughed with. The one who he’d thought would always be in his life. The boy he would have done anything for...the boy who hadn’t been able to say the same about him.

Grow up, Chris. That was a long time ago.

The truth was, he might have come here for himself just as much as he’d come for Beck. This was a way to make peace with the past. A way to move on, and maybe become friends again.

Christian picked up the bag again and made a quick trip to the attached bathroom, where he changed into a t-shirt and a pair of basketball shorts so he’d be more comfortable. After cleaning up he forced himself to shove all the thoughts about Beck, their past and the tension between them to the back of his mind and made his way to the living room.

There was a sliding glass door off the back of the room decorated in earth tones. The glass was open, a screen between him and the outside where he saw Beck sitting on a reclining lounge chair. There was a table beside him and a matching chair on the other side of it. Circular lights hung from various beams around the deck giving off soft light. Beyond the deck, all he could see was darkness and the outlines of trees and nature in the distance.

“You’re being very creepy standing behind me like that,” Beck’s voice drifted through the screen door.

Christian chuckled. “You think you’re funny in your old age, do you?” He took the last few steps and then opened the door before going outside to take the other seat.

“Old? You say that again and I might have to kick your ass. You have no idea how much I get that at the track. I’m one of the old guys.”

Young men often dominated the sport but, “You’ve won how many championships? You’re in excellent shape. I don’t think you have much to worry about. You’re out there schooling those youngsters.”

Beck turned his head, still letting it rest on the back of the chair and looked at him. “Thank you for defending my honor—and I’m in excellent shape, huh? I think I might need you to expand on that a little bit. Exactly what is it about my shape that’s excellent? As many details as possible please.” He rubbed his beard, no doubt hiding a smirk. That was the Beck he knew. Playful, flirty and a little cocky.

“I’m not making your head even bigger than it already is. Now where’s the beer you promised me?”

Beck chuckled and then reached into a cooler on the other side of him. He pulled out a bottle of dark brew and handed it over to Christian. He opened it, took a long swallow, quenching his thirst before he set it on the table.

And then it was quiet as they looked out toward the pines. It sounded as though there was possibly a river there, too.

“It’s nice out here. It always takes some getting used to when I head home for a visit, or hell, anywhere outside of the city. It’s like the whole world is asleep.”

He heard Beck let out a deep breath, then he took a drink of his beer. “Yeah, yeah it is.” He took another drink. Christian watched his Adam’s apple move as he did. “Tell me about your life. You’re making games just like you always wanted.”

He smiled at that, because he was. While Beck had always wanted to ride, Christian had always wanted to get lost in the world of video games. It was then that a thought steamrolled him and he couldn’t help but get a kick out of it. “It’s funny that we both just wanted to grow up and play.”

“Is there any other way to live?” Beck asked, with amusement in his voice.

“Hell no.”

“But it’s hard work, too. Both of us...we work hard.”

“We’re lucky we get to do what we love,” Christian countered. “Not everyone can say that.”

He glanced Beck’s way, waiting for a response, waiting for him to agree, for his eyes to light up and for his body to nearly glow with the passion for riding that he’d always shown. Christian loved a lot of things. He loved games and creating but he’d never had the passion for anything that could hold a match to the fervor that Beck had for riding.

One beat, then two and three. Seconds ticked by with no response. Beck finished his beer and then set the bottle down on the table, but still, nothing.

“What is it?” Christian asked, a heaviness in his gut. “Does this have something to do with being outted? Did it cause problems in your career?” Or hell, maybe the fact that after winning Supercross last year, it had been expected for him again this year, but hadn’t happened.

“No, no.” Beckett shook his head. “It’s not that...and I’ll admit something to you, Chris, I wasn’t outted. Not really. Would anyone outside the MX world really know me well enough to take a picture of me like that?”

He’d wondered the same thing. But still, he didn’t get why Beck didn’t just come out, if that’s what he’d wanted. “What’d you do?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t do much of anything. I went out after a race, wanted to get laid. It wasn’t something I put a lot of thought into I just...let go. I was tired, Chris, so fucking tired of sneaking around and being elusive. I met a guy, danced with him, he asked what I did and I told him I’d just won a race that night. I didn’t get as many first place podiums this season as I’d wanted and needed to celebrate. It was like...” He went quiet for a moment. Christian watched him, waited, heard the wistfulness in his voice when he spoke again.

“It was like I could breathe. I know that sounds crazy and maybe a little childish, but it’s true. It was like my anchor had been lifted. I hadn’t realized how heavy it was, Chris. The guy I was with, he thought it was cool that I’d just won a race that night and he was talking to everyone about it. Each person we spoke to, I just kept getting lighter and lighter. That night, I felt better than I had in a long time.”

He looked Christian’s way, his brow furrowed. “Does that sound crazy?”

Christian wanted to know everything. If there was more to Beck not agreeing with him on loving their careers than whether he was out or not. If there was something he was holding back. But he didn’t ask those questions. He just reached over and squeezed Beckett’s hand. It was bigger than his own, slightly rough, with prominent veins. “No. Of course it doesn’t sound crazy. It has to wear you down, keeping a part of yourself in chains your whole life.” He couldn’t imagine the feeling. When he’d first been accidentally outted, he’d been devastated. It wasn’t long before he was thankful for it.

“I knew you’d understand,” Beckett told him. The truth was, they might not have spoken in ten years but he still felt like he knew Beck. This moment on the deck was just as comfortable as it would have been when they were teens.

“I do. And don’t think I forgot that you changed the subject about loving our jobs. I won’t let that go for long.”

“There’s not a part of me that doubts that.” Beck chuckled and then, “I love riding. I’ll love riding until

the day I die.”

“There’s not a part of me that doubts that,” Christian returned his words back to him.

Beckett nodded, opened another beer and took a sip. “Remember when we used to sleep in your back yard on the trampoline all night?”

Christian smiled at the memory, saw it clear as day in his mind. The dark sky, dancing with stars. They spent most of their summers sleeping outside. “I do. We used to stay up most of the night talking.”

“With *wake-up flips* thrown in between.”

A laugh formed in Christian’s chest, and he let it out just as Beck did the same. They’d get up and do back flips and front flips on the hour to keep themselves awake. Otherwise...they’d just talk.

He thought maybe he wanted that again—minus the flipping part. He’d likely break his neck now. Christian had a feeling Beck wanted it too.

“What’s your favorite track you’ve ridden?” he asked.

“Oh that’s easy...” They went from tracks to trainers. From video games to dancing. From movies to clubs in LA. Friends and restaurants. Books and vacations. They let each other experience the last ten years of their lives. They relived them until the sun started to peek over the horizon in yellows, pinks and oranges.

When the sun finally made its grand appearance, they decided it was time to get some sleep. Beck stood, stretched. Christian took in the view as his t-shirt pulled up, showing a muscular stomach and a dark trail of hair that disappeared under his jeans.

He wanted to know what it tasted like. How his skin would taste and how Beck would smell. He wanted to experience those things they hadn’t really done when they were younger. Back then it had been nothing but kissing and rubbing off on each other through their clothes.

Beck cleared his throat. Christian let his eyes lazily rise to meet Beck’s, not hiding the fact that he appreciated the view.

“Thank you,” Beckett said softly. “Thanks for coming...for talking. I missed you, Christian.”

A knot formed in Christian’s chest, one that was hard to speak around because even after all these years, he’d needed to hear that. Needed to know Beck had missed him the way he’d missed Beckett. Christian stood. “I missed you too.”

He stepped forward, wrapped his hand around the back of Beckett’s head and pulled him closer until he could press a kiss to Beckett’s forehead. Then without another word, Christian headed into the house and went to bed.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was good to be home.

It had been eight months since he moved to Florida to live with his trainer. His parents had wanted to come but they couldn't afford it. They had their home in Georgia, one they couldn't sell, so as hard as it had been, they'd let him move, live in a different state and homeschool all in the name of motocross. It would be worth it in the end though. It would be worth their sacrifices—driving a car that often broke down so Beck could get a new bike and equipment. The distance, the hours worked, it would all be worth it. Just a few more amateur wins and he would be moved up to Supercross at eighteen years old. He would spend the rest of his life making sure their sacrifices weren't for nothing.

Their small house had been full of people all night—a welcome back and congratulatory party all in one. As awesome as it was, he really just wanted to spend time with Christian. They spoke on the phone or emailed almost every day but this was the first time he'd gotten to see his best friend in months.

Beck couldn't stop himself from watching him at the party—he danced and laughed. Made other people laugh. His pulse went crazy every time he looked at Christian.

He's beautiful, Beckett thought and then shook his head at the notion. It felt strange to think of Chris as beautiful, but really he was.

As always, Christian's parents were the last to leave. He tensed up when he felt Christian's hand rub his as he walked by and said, "Hey, Ma, can Beck come stay over like old times? We can sleep outside on the trampoline."

She gave him the evil eye that even scared Beckett. "Not if you think it's okay to say, Hey Ma, to me."

He knew Chris well enough to know it was a struggle for him not to roll his eyes right now.

"Yes, ma'am. Can Beck come over tonight?"

"That's better," his mom smiled and two hours later they were at Chris's house, in his enclosed backyard. It was at an angle where his parents couldn't see it from their bedroom. The house was already dark and had been for a good hour, as they lay there, looking up at the stars.

"You're really gonna do it, Beck. When we were kids, no matter how many races you won, it was like a dream. But you're really gonna do it. Your dreams are gonna come true," Christian said softly from beside him.

They were both on their backs, the netting on the trampoline providing them with what almost felt like a barrier to the outside world.

"Yeah...yeah I am. I can't fucking believe it."

"Are you scared?" Chris asked.

"Kind of...but really, I just want it. There's nothin' I've ever wanted more." The statement made his gut clench, though he couldn't say why.

The trampoline moved beneath him, and then Christian rolled over onto his side. He leaned on his elbow so he could look down at Beckett and damned if his stomach didn't start doing backflips. Looking at Christian always made his insides go haywire. Christian said looking at him did it to him as well. "I wish you could come with me. Maybe we could find a way—"

"I got accepted to USC. I'll be going to Southern California."

Surprise punched him in the gut. He didn't even know Chris had applied.

"Wow...that's...wow...." And then, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know," he answered simply. "Maybe because I never thought I'd get in. I'll be the first person in my family to go to a university. I can't wait around here for you, Beck. And I can't follow you around the country like a lost puppy dog or something. That's lame. I have dreams too."

Anger took the place of surprise, blazing a path of fire through him. "What the fuck, dude? I would

never ask you to wait for me.” Still, he couldn’t believe Christian had applied for college in California and not told him. Plus, it’s not like he thought he and Chris would be together forever or something. They were just messing around. Beckett liked girls, too. He’d always planned to marry a woman one day.

But as sadness flooded him, as it took him over, made his breathing feel bumpy like he was riding on a track that was too rutty, he realized he wasn’t ready for that yet. He didn’t want to call off the secret make-out sessions he and Christian had. He wasn’t ready to stop messing around with him and just go back to being friends again.

“Southern California has one of the biggest motocross scenes in the United States. I’ll be out there all the time. My trainer has a facility in Riverside County. It’s like two hours from LA, but we can still see each other. We can still keep doing...this if you want to.”

And then he held his breath, waited and embarrassingly hoped like hell Chris would say yes.

“Secretly date Beckett Monroe, the next big name in motocross? Fuck yes!” Christian teased, making him laugh.

“It has to stay a secret though...I can’t risk my career before it even happens. My parents have dedicated their whole lives to my career and—”

“I know, Beck. I just...I wanna be with you...however we do it...”

And then Christian leaned forward and kissed him. It was just like riding—wild and exciting...freeing. Everything he loved felt like it was wrapped in this moment. He and Christian could keep doing this. They could hide together and enjoy each other a little while longer.

Beckett’s eyes jerked open from his dream, an incessant ringing in his ears. It took a second for him to make sense of where he was, for his eyes to adjust to the bright yellow light beaming in from the curtains he’d forgotten to close and for him to realize it was his cell going nuts on the bedside table.

He reached over and picked it up to see that it was just past eleven and Landon was calling.

He swiped his thumb across the screen and then almost fumbled the phone as he put it to his ear. “Hello?” His voice was rough, his throat dry.

“Oh, shit. I didn’t mean to wake you. I’m off today and tomorrow so I wanted to see about getting together. I’d like you to meet Rod.”

Beckett really wanted that too, but then he thought about the man in the bedroom down the hall. The one who’d jumped on a plane to come and see him after Beckett called him for the first time in ten years. “Christian’s here.”

There was a pause and then, “We’re talking about the Christian you told me about, right?”

“No, a Christian I picked up at church last night.”

Landon was the only person he’d ever talked to about Chris. He was the only person besides Christian who’d known that Beck was attracted to men other than guys he picked up and then never saw again.

“Wow...okay then. I’ll leave you to it today. My brother Justin invited us all over for a barbeque and swimming tomorrow. He and his partner Drew just got a new pool put in.”

Justin and Landon were half-brothers. They hadn’t known each other existed because Landon’s father had cut all contact when he left Landon’s mom. He’d had another family and when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer he’d come clean with Justin, before the two of them made the trek to Virginia to make peace with Landon and his sister. It had been hard on his friend. “Damn. I didn’t realize there were this many out, gay or bi men in Small Town, Virginia.”

Landon let out a stiff breath. “You can say that again. I guess we’re just lucky. We don’t let anyone steal our sparkle here.”

They both laughed again and then Beckett told him he’d talk to Christian about tomorrow before they got off the phone. He wanted to go. He’d missed spending time with Landon and that had been the point of coming here, but then, he hadn’t expected Chris to be here either.

Spending time with Christian last night had soothed a restlessness inside him that he hadn’t known needed soothing. It was as though no time had passed. Like they could step right back into each other’s lives and be friends the way they’d been so many years ago.

Or hell, maybe he just really fucking wanted that so badly that it clouded his vision. But he did want it. He wanted his friendship with Christian back.

He pushed out of bed and went straight for the bathroom. After taking a piss he washed his hands, brushed his teeth and then headed for the door. When he hit the hallway he realized the door was open to the room Christian was staying in.

“Up already, huh?” he peeked his head inside the room and saw Christian at the desk there, with his computer out and various equipment around him.

“Yeah, I don’t sleep very well sometimes. I figured I’d take advantage and get some work done.” He ran a hand through his dark-blond hair and looked Beckett’s way.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt. I’ll go make some coffee.”

He turned to leave but Chris’s voice stopped him. “No, it’s fine. I’ve been at it a couple hours now. Coffee sounds almost as good as sex.” He pushed to his feet, stretched, and then followed Beckett out of the room.

Chris sat at the cherry-wood table while Beckett put the coffee grounds and water into the machine. “So what are the plans today?” Christian asked. “Are we going to play tourist? What’s there to do in Virginia?”

Beckett turned to face him, while leaning against the counter. Now that he thought about it... “I’m not sure. I didn’t get that far.”

Christian playfully rolled his eyes. “Well you sort of suck at vacations then, Beck.”

A laugh jumped out of Beckett’s mouth. Jesus, he’d missed this man. “In my defense, it wasn’t supposed to be a real vacation. I just wanted to get away.”

“Excuses, excuses.”

“How long are you here?”

“It depends. I wasn’t sure how it would go, honestly. I can’t stay any more than five days though.”

A cold ache settled into his chest. Five days. It wasn’t as though Beckett had much longer, but it felt like it was only a blink of time.

“Speaking of home, I should probably call Quinn.”

Beckett’s eyes shot up at that. The ache in his chest spidered out, infiltrated his veins. It was a ridiculous reaction. He had no right. Plus, he’d only spent the last twelve hours with Chris in the past ten years. It shouldn’t matter who Quinn was or wasn’t to him, but somehow it did.

As Christian pulled out his phone, Beckett grabbed two mugs from the cabinet and filled them. He heard Christian behind him saying, “I can’t believe you didn’t answer. Unless you’re pouting because I didn’t talk to you last night. Knowing you, I’m sure that’s it.”

Christian had that familiar playfulness in his voice as he spoke to Quinn’s voicemail. They were obviously close. Maybe dating. Another thing Beckett had denied himself. It wasn’t very easy to date someone when no one could know. Sure, he’d seen a few women over the past ten years, maybe a part of him had even hoped it would turn into more than just dating, but it never had. He’d never felt that connection he couldn’t deny. A connection he’d only ever felt with the man in the room with him right now.

Jesus, what’s wrong with me? He was turning into a sap. “How do you take it?” He asked as he set a cup down in front of Christian.

“Bitter like my soul.”

Beckett shook his head. “You’re so weird.”

“You like that about me.”

And Beckett did. He doctored his own coffee while Christian drank his black. He joined Chris at the table a moment later, as the man sat there scrolling through the phone.

He held it out so Beckett could see too. “Come on. Let’s find something for us to do today...oh look! There’s fishing.”

He couldn’t tell if Christian was serious or not. He had a feeling Chris wasn’t so sure himself. “I

haven't been fishing since I was a kid."

"Me either," Christian replied and then, "I'm not letting you anywhere near a fishhook!"

The old memory came roaring back to him, like a summer storm in Florida. "Oh fuck. I forgot about that." They'd been planning a fishing trip when they were fourteen. Beckett had gotten new lures. He'd opened the packages, somehow dropped a treble hook in the floor, which Christian had stepped on with no shoes. Beckett had walked into the room to see the hook hanging off his toe, and they'd spent the morning at the emergency room getting it removed instead of fishing.

Hell, maybe he'd wanted to catch Christian even back then. "You know we have to go fishing, don't you?"

"I'm a city boy now. I don't fish."

Beckett nudged him with his arm. "Come on, Chris. For old times' sake. I swear I won't hook you."

Christian grinned, rolled his blue eyes and said, "Fine. You spoiled bastard. You always get your way."

When he looked at Chris, all he could think was, not always. Though that was likely his own damn fault.

CHAPTER SIX

Christian was playing this all off like it was a lot easier than it really was. On the one hand, it was almost as though he and Beck fell flawlessly back into their friendship like nothing had happened. And maybe it should be that way because they'd been kids when Beckett had walked away from him. He'd been protecting himself, doing what he saw as protecting his family and Christian got that. Plus, who didn't fuck up when they were young? Christian still fucked up almost daily as a twenty-eight-year-old man, but he also had to admit that Beckett had hurt him. Regardless of the why of it or how old they'd been, he still felt like Beck left him on his own back then. He'd covered for himself, and let Christian deal with the rest.

He wasn't quite sure how he felt about those thoughts, so he tried to ignore them. He could handle that for a few days.

They'd both gotten ready quickly, before looking up a sports store and heading there for supplies. Afterward, they went grocery shopping and filled a Styrofoam cooler with food, drinks and ice before they made their way to the lake. He wasn't sure why they didn't go to the river behind the cabin but he just let Beck lead and he followed. The day was more than halfway over by the time they settled in at a quiet spot on the lake in cheap plastic chairs.

"It's hot. Why did we decide to do this again?" Christian teased, though he knew the answer. He'd always had a hard time saying no to Beckett Monroe.

"Because we haven't seen each other in ten years and the last time we tried to go fishing together, I left a fishhook on the floor that ended up in your toe. I'm making up for my mistake."

There was a sort of melancholy tone to Beck's voice. It made Christian wonder how hard the past ten years had been on him. No one would know it, not when they saw him tearing it up on the track. Not when they saw him hit the podium week after week as he racked up the wins. Even this last season. He knew third in points would feel like a disappointment to Beck, but it was still an amazing accomplishment. Christian wanted to know what was going on beyond the surface. If Beckett was somehow trying to make up for the past.

"How did your family take it?" He asked as he watched his bobber float in the water. There wasn't a part of him that thought either of them would catch a fish today, but he also didn't believe they were really out here for that.

Beck sighed. "They're doing okay. It's harder on Dad than Mom. She feels guilty...like she should have known. Especially after you. Every time I talk to her, I have to assure her it wasn't her fault I didn't say anything. That it was all me, all up here." He tapped his temple.

"You thought you were protecting them, in a way, Beck. You did it because you worried their hard work would be for nothing if it caused problems in your career." Regardless of why he'd done it, that hadn't meant he'd had to sever ties with Christian though. No matter what happened between them, he never should have done that.

"That was my excuse at sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, but what about later? Make no mistake, part of it was my own weakness and fear. There's no denying that."

"It's not always an easy thing to do—especially in the sports world."

Beckett glanced his way and gave him a sad smile. "You always used to do this."

"What?" he asked, really not knowing what Beckett meant.

"Make excuses for me. Cover for me. Do whatever you could to make me feel better. I'm a big boy now, Chris. I need to take responsibility for my own shit."

It was almost as though the whole world stopped around them as they looked at each other. Beckett was right. It was still a reflex for Christian to want to take care of him.

He nodded and turned back toward the lake, surrounded by greenery he didn't often see in Los

Angeles. “And your dad?”

“I’d be lying if I didn’t admit he’s a little uncomfortable. I hear it in the stilted way he speaks to me over the phone. It’s going to take some getting used to, which is sad, but what can you do? Mostly he doesn’t understand, I guess. He thinks the way I did when I was a kid...if I’m bi, I can just choose to settle down with a woman. I can choose to pretend I don’t want men. It’s hard to make him realize it doesn’t work that way. Sure, if I fell in love with a woman, that would be different—I’d be committed to her. But I can’t force myself to only seek out women—to pretend that side of me doesn’t exist.”

Christian didn’t envy him, that was for sure.

They were quiet for a moment, as they pretended to care if they caught fish or not, when Beckett said, “I’m sorry.”

There was no doubt in Christian’s mind exactly what Beckett was apologizing for. Maybe he shouldn’t, but after all these years of hurt, he’d needed to hear it. “It was a long time ago.”

“So? That doesn’t change the fact that I did it.”

He closed his eyes, remembered what it felt like that day. It was when Beckett had come back for a visit from Florida. They’d had a party at Beck’s house and then they’d gone to Christian’s to sleep outside. He’d told Beck about getting accepted to USC and they’d decided to keep seeing each other. All teenage Christian had known was that he loved Beck and he would take him any way he could get him. That wasn’t him anymore.

They’d gone riding the next day. He watched Beck fly as he went over jumps and corners perfectly. He had always been incredible in the dirt.

When they went back to Christian’s house, Beck’s parents had been there. They were sitting in the living room waiting to pounce. Christian’s parents had found a letter Christian had written about being in love with a boy. A letter that was about Beckett but one he’d never been able to read.

“Is it you? Christ, Beckett, are you sneaking around with Christian? Do you know what this could do to your career? We put so much work into it! So much fucking work.” Beck’s dad paced the room and Christian thought he would throw up.

“Earl, calm down,” Beck’s mom told him.

Christian’s mom cried. His dad wouldn’t look at him.

“Is it you?” Earl yelled again and Beckett didn’t respond. Their arms touched they stood so close to each other and Christian could feel him tremble.

“It’s not him. He doesn’t know...I never told him, I’m gay...” Christian looked toward the ground, waited for Beck to reply, waited for Beck to stick up for him, but the words never came.

And that was when Beckett Monroe cut contact with him. He’d sat quiet while Christian had to defend himself, and then he’d avoided Chris when he called, until he made a call of his own to Christian, just yesterday.

“I hated myself for a long time after that. I just fucking rode—trained harder than I’d ever trained. I think I believed if I did well, if I succeeded at motocross, it would have made the sacrifice worth it, it would have meant I did it for a reason.” He paused, shook his head, and then continued.

“It didn’t change anything though, Chris. Not a day has gone by in my life that I don’t regret leaving you to handle that on your own that day. Not a day has gone by that I don’t miss your friendship, or regret walking away from it. You were always my best friend—from the time I learned to speak until this moment right now—even if I didn’t show it.”

Christian let those words swim around his chest. Let them sink in because a part of him really needed to hear it.

When he didn’t reply, Beck asked, “Can I admit something else to you?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve been getting to the point lately that I’ve lost the joy in it. I think that’s why this last Supercross season went like it did. There’s a part of me that knows it’s in there—that passion I’ve always felt as I grip the handles and the dirt bike roars under me. That love is still in there, but it’s been hard to find the past

year or so and it keeps getting worse.”

Beckett leaned forward, and let his elbows rest on his knees. “It’s like the weight, the denial, all that shit just kept getting heavier and heavier to carry. The more I struggled with it, the harder it was just to feel pure fucking joy in anything anymore. I’m so damn scared of losing that joy, Chris. Who is Beckett Monroe if he’s not the guy who loves motocross more than anything else in the world?”

There was the truth Christian had been looking for last night—why Beck hadn’t been able to say he loved what he did even though Christian knew he did.

“I don’t know, man. That’s what you have to figure out.” But Christian did know—he was the man who loved riding, who wanted to take care of his family, who had a work ethic like no one Christian had ever known. He was Christian’s best friend, the guy who made him laugh and shared so much of his past. He was a terrible fisher, and a bad liar. He hated TV unless it was MX related and never understood Christian’s love of games. It was up to Beckett to discover himself, though.

“I’m trying to. That’s why I did what I did. That’s why I’m here. I think it’s why I called you. I always knew who I was with you.”

Christian closed his eyes. Tried not to curse. He didn’t know if he was ready to hear things like that from Beckett again or if he ever would be. The thought of caring for Beck again scared the hell out of him, but on the other hand, it almost felt inevitable.

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, Beck. You never did. I have no doubt you’ll figure it out, and would have without me.”

“Thank you,” Beckett said softly...and then they were quiet again. A frog croaked in the background and Beck began to reel his line in.

Finally, Christian told him, “It was a long time ago. I forgive you.”

He likely had the second he heard Beckett Monroe’s voice on the phone, but to say it out loud released something inside of him that he’d held onto for too long.

CHAPTER SEVEN

They only spent a couple hours at the lake. They had dinner and then headed back to the rental house. Chris was a little quieter than he had been before. Beckett wished he hadn't had to bring up his behavior when they were younger but it was important to him to apologize. If they were going to have any kind of friendship from here on out, it was imperative.

Eventually things began to lighten up. The conversation was likely still on both their minds but they had a good night.

It was like old times, in a way. They drank a few beers out on the deck again. When they wanted a snack, they popped a frozen pizza into the oven.

They played cards and talked shit and just spent another night getting to know each other again. In a lot of ways, it felt like they'd never stopped knowing each other.

This time, they headed to bed around eleven. Beckett found himself wondering if Christian was able to sleep any better tonight than he had last night before he dozed himself.

The next day they lounged around part of the morning before showering, eating breakfast, and heading to Landon's brother's house.

"You don't know any of these people, right?" Chris asked as they drove.

"Not except Landon," Beckett shook his head. "I know Rod will be there. Rod's his partner. He said it's Justin's house and he lives with his partner too. I can't remember if he told me the guy's name and then there's Bryce. He owns the motorcycle repair shop that Landon works at. I don't know if there will be anyone else there."

Christian nodded and then looked out the window. "It's so damn green out here. It really is beautiful."

Justin lived outside of town. There'd been nothing but trees for miles as they weaved their way through the countryside. "You sound like you forgot what the country is like."

"Nah. I remember. And don't get me wrong, I love Los Angeles. I'm not sure I could live anywhere else permanently again but I do miss this sometimes."

Beckett thought about Florida, where he'd made his home for over ten years. He liked it there too, but he didn't feel the same passion for it that it sounded like Chris felt for LA. "You're really happy there."

"I am," the answer came immediately. "I found my tribe out there—friends from work, the apartment complex where I live, Quinn. Took me a little while to settle in and realize it was okay to be myself. Moving to California helped with that."

Beckett tried not to let the sadness weigh down his bones. He was happy for Christian...but he wanted that too. He should have had it ten years ago. He wished he could have experienced it with Christian when they were young, the way it should have been. Beckett wanted that *and* motocross.

He fought hard not to let himself focus on Christian's mention of Quinn. Fought not to let out a possessive growl, because Chris wasn't his. He'd given him up a long time ago.

"*In five hundred feet, turn right,*" the GPS on his phone told him.

"Looks like we're there," he grunted as his jealousy of Quinn, of what Christian had, flooded his over-stimulated body. He'd gone through a hell of a lot of emotions in the past couple weeks.

"Looks like we are," he replied as they pulled into the driveway. "Jesus, his house is gorgeous." It was a large, colonial-style house with beautiful beams, and a wrap-around porch.

"Yeah, it is." They got out of the car and headed for the house. They'd stopped on their way to grab a pair of swimming trunks for each of them, since they hadn't brought any along. When they stepped up onto the massive porch, Beckett could hear music and laughter coming from the back yard. He raised his hand to knock just as the door was pulled open.

"I was instructed to keep an eye out for you," the dark-haired man in the doorway said. "I'm Justin,

nice to meet you.”

It was odd to see him. He looked a lot like Landon. Beckett couldn't imagine going through what their family had. “Beckett, nice to meet you.” They shook hands. “This is my friend Christian. He came out from LA to spend some time with me.”

It was then that another man walked in from the back of the house with what looked like a lab-mix by his side. As soon as the dog saw them, it came bounding for them, tail wagging and tongue sticking out.

“Ireland, come here, girl.” The guy with the backward baseball hat called just as she jumped onto Christian, her front paws on his belly, demanding attention.

“Shit, sorry. She's a little spoiled,” Justin told them.

“She's a sweet girl,” Christian said, rubbing her head as she fought to lick him like crazy.

Beckett chuckled. “I get it, girl; I like him too.” He reached over to pet the dog and Christian winked at him.

“Hey. We're glad you could come. I'm Drew,” the newcomer announced. The guy was all muscle—wearing swimming trunks and no shirt. It was obvious he spent a lot of time working out, which Beckett could appreciate. He'd fallen in love with it through his own training.

They made their introductions before Justin and Drew led them into the house. Pieces of the puzzle began to click into place from previous conversations he'd had with Landon. He remembered Landon telling him that Justin had fallen in love while here before their dad passed and then packing up and moving in with Drew.

Ireland bounded beside them as they made their way through the house and toward the back door. He saw the pool, which was currently empty, a hot tub, a deck, and another dark-haired man he didn't recognize.

“Look who we found,” Justin said as they stepped out. Beckett's eyes hit Landon first. He sat in a chair with who Beckett assumed was Rod, on his lap. He was smaller than Landon, younger, with short hair and dark eyeliner around his eyes.

Rod put his hands on his cheeks like the kid from Home Alone, jumped off Landon's lap and shouted, “Oh my God! It's Beckett Monroe!”

Beckett felt his face warm up. Landon shook his head and chuckled. From everything Landon had told him, Rod kept him on his toes and he could see that his friend hadn't exaggerated.

Rod grinned, “I'm kidding. I don't know shit about motocross. I just didn't want Bryce to feel alone if he nearly blows his load in your presence.”

Landon couldn't control his laughter now, as he held his stomach and leaned forward in the chair. The man sitting beside him was cracking up too, as Beckett's eyes darted between all of them, not sure what to say or how to react. “Um...”

“Excuse us while I drown him and then hide the body.” The man who'd been pacing swooped in and scooped Rod into his arms.

“How many times do I have to tell you? I'm not interested in you that way, Bryce! Before Landon, yes, but it's too late now,” Rod told the man who apparently might be jerking off to thoughts of him later today and Landon laughed harder.

“We can't take you two anywhere,” the man beside Landon said, before both of them stood up. “Put him down, Bryce.”

“But I really want to drown him.”

“Not with all these prying eyes,” the man told him.

“Please, Nick? Please can I drown him?” he asked before setting Rod down and saying, “You never let me have any fun.”

Landon reached him by then, his face red, Beckett assumed from laughter. “Sorry, my crew is crazy and Rod is the craziest of them all, especially when you get him and Bryce together. This is obviously Bryce who may or may not be a big fan of yours. He promised me there would be no jerking off, though.”

“Everyone thinks they're a comedian,” Bryce responded before holding out his hand. “They're clean.

I'm really not as bad as they say."

"Eh, I get the allure," Beckett teased, wanting to play along. Landon introduced Nick next. He was the man who'd been sitting beside him. He and Bryce were together, and Nick was apparently a chef and had made some of their food for today.

"And this, of course, is Rod," Landon introduced him last.

Rod gave Beckett a smile as bright as the sun. "Sorry, I couldn't help myself. It's great to meet you, though. Landon has told me a lot about you."

"It's good to meet you too," and it really was. "This is Christian. He's...my oldest and dearest friend."

Everyone said hi to Christian and then Landon wrapped his arms around Rod from behind, and whispered something in his ear. Rod laughed. Drew pulled out a few more chairs and Justin and Nick were obviously ribbing Bryce.

He realized then that just like Christian, Landon had found his tribe, his crew. Beckett had that in the moto world, but not in his personal life. It wasn't the same...but he wanted it. He really fucking wanted it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I really need to get you to LA,” Christian told Rod as they sat at an outside table. “You’ll have a blast. One night in West Hollywood and you’ll fall in love.”

“He’ll get you into trouble,” Landon countered.

“That’s not a bad thing.” At least, not in Christian’s mind. He really liked everyone here. It had been a couple hours since they’d arrived. He wasn’t sure he’d ever laughed so hard in his life. Bryce and Rod’s back and forth was hilarious. They always seemed to be trying to one-up each other. Apparently they met when Nick and Bryce went shopping for sex toys at an adult store he worked at. Christian was shocked to discover that being with each other, was Nick and Bryce’s first time with another man. He could only imagine how that trip to the *romantic gift store* had gone.

Rod now had his own place called Rods-N-Ends.

There was a lot of motorcycle talk. Bryce and Landon were in love with being on two wheels the same way Beck was. They both mostly rode street bikes but enjoyed motocross too, which meant Beck was in heaven. Drew owned a gym, Justin was going back to school, and Nick obviously loved food and feeding people who were important to him. They were a mishmash group of people, but you could tell they all loved each other. They were a close group of friends.

Christian couldn’t help but direct his eyes toward Beck. Did he have that? People he knew he could be himself with? People who would stand by his side, no matter what? Christian hoped he had that within the motocross community but the truth was, he just didn’t know. He knew Beck’s past. He even knew who Beck was. Ten years apart hadn’t changed that but he didn’t know Beck’s day-to-day life.

The thought made him frown, put an ache in his chest. And when Beckett looked his way, he could see the questions there, in his dark, soulful eyes. Saw that Beck realized Christian was wrestling with something...and he was. Because he realized now that he couldn’t lose Beckett Monroe again. He’d be the friend who Beck always had in his corner.

Christian reached out, and squeezed Beckett’s thigh, and then he didn’t pull his hand back. Beckett gave him what was almost a shy grin, then set his hand on Christian’s before joining the conversation with his friends again.

* * * *

“The first race of the upcoming outdoor season is in Texas, right?” Bryce asked as they ate. They’d gone swimming for a little while, and then gotten out to finish cooking. Nick had taken care of a few things inside while Drew had the grill going for the ribs. They said Nick had marinated them in a homemade sauce. They nearly fell off the bone and had a sweet, tangy taste that Beck couldn’t get enough of.

“Yeah. No rest for the wicked. We ended up with two weeks between Supercross and outdoors this year. I should be training right now but they gave me a few days considering everything that’s going on.” Which actually made him feel like shit. He shouldn’t have to take a break. Especially with how he’d ridden during Supercross season.

“You’re the fastest, most skilled rider there is right now. Taking a few days off won’t hurt,” Christian told him.

“I didn’t get here by taking time off, though. I stay on top of my game because I’m the last guy to leave the track every day.”

“I know.” Christian eyed him, but Beckett couldn’t read what his expression meant. The air around them did feel heavier though. “I remember. And that’s a good thing, but there’s more to life than motocross. Don’t forget that.” He didn’t smile, didn’t look away from Beckett and he could see the

seriousness in Christian's stare. He now saw how much Christian wanted to make sure Beckett got the message. Christian wanted him to have a life outside of motocross.

"Wait. There is? I didn't know that," Bryce teased.

"Shh! They're having a moment," Rod teased and then Justin promptly started choking on his food. Drew hit him on the back as the table burst into laughter again.

"I guess we'll finish this conversation later," Beck winked at him.

"Sorry, we typically keep them locked away. They haven't acclimated to spending time with adult humans yet," Nick added. They were a riot—all of them. Beckett turned toward Christian, who grinned at him. He had a light dusting of dark, blond hair along his jaw, obviously having skipped out on shaving this morning. Beck wanted to feel it against his skin. The last time he'd kissed Christian, he had the smooth face of youth, as had Beck himself. He wondered if Christian would enjoy the feel of his beard against his flesh as well.

He cocked his head at Beck, and he couldn't help but wish Christian was having the same thoughts—which likely made him an asshole since there was a Quinn out there.

Beckett turned away from him just as Landon asked, "Do you have time to take a quick walk?"

"Yeah, sure." He turned toward Chris again. "I'll be right back."

Landon kissed Rod's forehead and then the two of them went down the stairs from the deck and toward the back of Justin and Drew's lush property.

"Now that you're here, I hope you plan to come back to visit," Landon told him.

There was no question he would. He felt like he fit in with Landon's friends in a way he desired in his life. "Absolutely...you're happy."

"I am. Are you?" he asked.

"I love what I do." And he did, regardless of the emptiness he'd felt lately.

"That wasn't my question."

"Fucker," he teased. Of course Landon wouldn't let him off easily. "I'm trying to be," is the reply he settled on.

"You also have feelings for Christian." He cocked a dark brow.

Beckett waved him off. "He's been back in my life for a couple days after not seeing him for ten years."

"So?" Landon asked. "People are so strange. We try to put rules and regulations on everything. You can't do that with feelings. There's no specific time it takes to fall for someone—or at least to want them." He grinned and Beckett couldn't help but remember when Margaret had said, *What does time have to do with anything?*

Landon continued, "Plus, you've likely always had feelings for him. I knew it when you told me about him years ago and I see it now when you look at him."

The truth was, Landon was likely right. He'd never gotten over Chris, he'd just tried really fucking hard to pretend he had. "I'm pretty sure he has someone."

Landon kicked a twig that was on the ground as they walked. "Well, that might complicate things a little. It's funny though...the way he looks at you? The way his eyes are always seeking you out and the way he smiles at you...it's not the look of a man who has someone else."

Beckett didn't respond. He wasn't sure how to. His life was slightly a mess right now. He wasn't sure how the outdoor season would go, how things would be with his team. Hell, he was scared to death he ran the risk of falling out of love with something that had always been his life because right now, he resented it. It wasn't until this moment that he realized that's what it was. He resented motocross because in it, he'd hidden part of himself.

"Sorry, it's not my place to butt into your life. But you're my friend, Beck. I just want you to be happy."

"I'm trying to be," he repeated, before his mind went right back to Christian again.

CHAPTER NINE

“I had fun today,” Christian told him as they pulled back into the driveway of Beck’s rental. He hoped Beck made it a point to come and see them more often. Christian thought it was good for him.

“Yeah, I did too. They’re a good group of guys.”

The door of the car squeaked when Christian opened it. He stepped out just as Beckett did.

“I want to try and make it out again. I miss seeing Landon.”

A small twinge of jealousy itched at the middle of his chest. Forget that just a few seconds before he’d been hoping that Beck came to see his friend again and that Landon was obviously one hundred percent in love with Rod.

He didn’t reply as they took the stairs leading to the cabin, as Beck unlocked and opened the door.

“He’s always been a good, loyal friend to me even when we both kept each other at arm’s length because of personal shit. I could use more of that.”

He closed the door. The sound sort of echoed in Christian’s head. The twinge of jealousy started to spread out, to rapidly grow, a disease taking over his body inch by inch.

He would have been that same thing for Beck if he’d been given the chance. He wanted it right now. Wanted more than that if he was being honest. Christian wanted to know if he still tasted the same—mint and spice. If he still smelled the same—like trees with the teasing scent of motor oil.

He wanted Beck to think about spending more time with him and desired to do all of the things to Beckett Monroe they were too scared to do as kids.

And this was his chance to do it.

“I was thinking we could—” Christian silenced him with his mouth. He’d taken Beck by surprise. It was obvious in the tightness of his lips and the way he held his hands up like he wasn’t sure what to do.

But then? Then he was kissing Christian back. His hands were on Christian’s shoulders, pulling him closer as Beckett’s back hit the door.

He still tasted the same. It went straight to Christian’s head, he still smelled the same and Christian wanted to inhale him. To engrain the scent even more fiercely into his memory. He felt the burn of Beck’s beard against his face and the bite of Beck’s blunt nails digging into his arms and *fuck yes* Christian wanted to devour him. To wrap himself up in Beck. To taste him everywhere. To bury his dick in Beck’s ass and feel the sweet burn of Beckett doing the same to him.

His cock hurt it was so fucking hard, ached. He rubbed his hand over Beck’s erection. Ate the moan Beck let go into his mouth as he hungered to feel Beck’s prick there, while he took him all the way to the back of his throat.

So he started kissing his way down, licked the Adam’s apple he’d just been admiring a few days before. “Wondered what that tasted like,” he whispered against Beck’s skin.

Beck groaned, dug his fingers into Christian’s arms again. He shoved his hands under Beck’s shirt, pushed it up, wanting to feel his heat against him, wanting to lick and suck and trace every one of his muscles with his tongue.

Beck lifted his arms, and Christian shoved his shirt off. He sucked Beck’s neck into his mouth, began kissing his way down Beck’s chest, while letting his fingers make a path to the other man’s shorts.

“I’ve been wondering for more than ten years what it would be like to have your dick in my mouth.” Christian rubbed his hand over Beck’s thick erection again, watched as he dropped his head back against the door and closed his eyes.

“Chris...”

He was breathless and Christian loved it. “Feels like a nice fucking cock, Beck. I’ll take good care of you. I love giving head and I’m telling you now, I’m really fucking good at deep throating.”

Beckett trembled, let out a stream of curses, but just as Christian was about to fall to his knees, he whispered...“Wait,” then grabbed the hand Christian had on his prick and said, “fuck, I hate saying this but wait...”

Christian tensed—surprise, confusion and a little bit of hurt all swimming together in his brain.

“What about Quinn?” he asked.

Christian felt his own face scrunch up. “Huh?”

“I want you. Jesus, I want you so fucking bad, I feel like I’m going to lose my damn mind, but what about Quinn? I can’t do this if you’re with someone else.”

He smiled. His pulse went a little crazy. “Honorable Beckett Monroe. I always loved that about you. Quinn is my friend—nothing more and he will always be that. He helped me adjust to living in LA. He will always mean the world to me, but we’re not that way. I forgot I let you believe that.”

“Oh...I thought when he answered your phone...”

“I won’t lie. He stays at my place often. When he does, he sleeps in my bed, but it’s not about sex and it’s not my story to share.”

Beckett gave him a small nod. Grabbed ahold of Christian’s hips, as he looked down on him. He was a good three or four inches taller than Christian was. His tongue snuck out and traced his lips, a familiar spark of mischief in his dark, brown eyes. “Then get on your knees for me, Chris. You have no fucking clue how many times I dreamt about taking that sweet mouth of yours. Show me what you can do with it.”

Christian grinned. “You’ll lose your motherfucking mind.”

“Cocky.”

Christian palmed Beckett’s dick. “You’re one to talk.”

And then he did as both he and Beck wanted. Christian went down on his knees for him. He shoved Beck’s shorts down, and he stepped out of them. His dick sprung free—tall and hard, the head purple and leaking. It was everything Chris wanted it to be.

He rubbed his finger in the pre-come at the slit.

“Fuck...” Beck groaned out as he put a hand on the back of Christian’s head. “Please...please, Chris. Need to feel you.”

“You will. This moment has been a long time coming; let me play, Beck.” He palmed Beck’s balls. They were heavy, full but hung low. He didn’t know why but he’d always had a thing for low hangers. He was full of thick, pulsing veins. The hair around his prick just as dark as the black hair on his head and covering his jaw.

Christian leaned in, nuzzled him. Breathed in Beck’s scent. The hand on the back of his head gripped him harder, pushed him closer until Christian could breathe nothing except Beckett’s scent.

He let his tongue sneak out, lashed it across Beckett’s sac, before he sucked one of his balls into his mouth.

“Oh fuck, Christian. Jesus, I hope I don’t embarrass myself.”

Christian smiled into Beck’s crotch before he pulled back far enough so that he could look up at Beck, who stared down on him, as he ran his tongue from the base of Beckett’s shaft to the tip.

The other man let out a guttural cry as Christian took him deep, worked Beck as far into this throat as he could.

“Yes...Chris, you feel so goddamn good.”

Christian savored the taste of him, the scent of him, the feel of Beck’s heavy cock in his mouth. He pleased him as best he could, like his fucking life depended on it—alternating between sucking, licking, and swallowing around the fat head of his dick.

He wanted to taste him, wanted to swallow him down. Beck’s hungry sounds got louder and louder. He pumped his hips and Christian took it, let the other man have his way with his mouth. Just when he thought Beck was going to let loose, he jerked out of Christian’s mouth, pulled him to his feet and then lifted him in his arms.

Christian let him, wrapped his legs around Beck’s hips as he made his way toward the hall.

“I’m not ready to come yet. I want your dick, too.” And then his mouth crashed down on Christian’s. He kissed the hell out of him as he walked them to his room. It was messy and frantic, filled with ten years’ worth of hunger.

In the back of Christian’s mind, he wondered if this would be enough to sate him...if this would be enough to sate either of them.

* * * *

There is no Quinn.... Well, there was a Quinn but there wasn’t a Christian and Quinn. That pleased Beckett probably more than it should. Still, as he squeezed Chris tight, as he savored the feel of him writhing against him as he devoured his mouth, he realized there was nothing he’d ever been more thankful for.

Chris wasn’t with someone else.

And he wanted Beckett, at least right now he did.

When they got to his room, he went straight for the bed, lay Christian on his back off the edge, and went down on top of him. He rubbed himself against Chris’s shorts. Wanted them gone but wanted to keep his possession of Chris’s mouth too.

He’d wanted this for so long, wanted Christian for so long.

He nearly came when Christian’s hands went to his ass, as he squeezed the globes to pull Beckett closer.

He wanted that too, wanted Chris inside him, wanted Chris to drive him out of his mind as he fucked him.

Beckett pulled back. “As much as I want to keep kissing you all night, this might end before we get to the good stuff if we don’t hurry.”

Christian chuckled as Beckett slid down his body. As he went down to the floor between Chris’s legs. “Ass up.” He swatted Christian’s leg. He lifted himself and Beck pulled his shorts down, had to maneuver himself out of the way so he could get them free. Chris pulled off his shirt next and then Beck was there, kneeling as Christian sat on the bed, with his legs hanging over the side, his prick right there for Beckett to take.

“You’re beautiful.” He wasn’t embarrassed by the awe in his own voice. Chris wasn’t quite as long as he was, but he was thick—thick and swollen. Clear pre-come dripped from the slit and down his cockhead. His pubes were trimmed in a way Beck’s weren’t, light brown in color. His balls were tight, swollen.

“No need for the compliment. You already got me into bed.”

“Hey, I’ve waited a long time for this.”

“Are you going to continue it?” Chris asked and he was, he so fucking was.

Beckett immediately began to suck him off. The carpet rubbed against his knees. Christian’s dick jerked in his mouth. He worked him as best he could. He let his tongue circle Christian’s cockhead before he took him deep again, bobbed his head up and down in Christian’s lap, loving his place here.

He held Christian’s slender waist, heard him growl above him and Beck knew he was close. He was stuck between wanting to finish him off and having Chris inside him. “Fuck me,” Beck said when he pulled off him. “Wanna feel you inside. Wanna feel you let loose inside me.”

He was jerked toward the bed then. He felt like his muscles had turned to mush as he fell to the bed.

He lay on his stomach and then Chris was there, between his legs and kissing his neck. “Condoms and lube?” he asked before his teeth gently bit into Beckett’s right shoulder.

“Bag by the bed.”

“Thank God, I don’t have to go far,” he teased and Beckett smiled.

Christian leaned over the side of the bed. Beckett heard him rummage around in the bag he was also thankful he left there. Just a few seconds later, he rested between Beckett’s spread legs. He trembled when Christian ran his hands over his globes.

“This ass, Beck. It’s so fucking sexy. I can’t wait to take it.” He ran his finger down the crack and on

reflex, Beckett undulated his hips. Jesus, his dick hurt so bad, but the friction of rubbing it against the bed helped.

“You’re hungry for it, aren’t you?” Christian asked as his finger slipped between his cheeks.

“I’ve been starving for a taste of your dick for ten years, Chris.”

He wasn’t sure if it was an admission he should have made because Christian went rigid over him. His finger stopped moving for one beat, two, and then...“Yeah, yeah me too.”

Beckett heard the condom wrapper rip. Heard the bottle of lube open. He looked back, over his shoulder and watched Christian wet his finger. His heart jackhammered. His dick leaked all over the bed. He spread his legs wider, as Christian slipped a slick finger between his cheeks. “Such a tight little hole, Beckett.”

He rubbed Beckett’s pucker. He couldn’t stop himself from thrusting, from fucking the bed and then his bones melted when Christian pushed a finger inside. He’d always been one for ass play. He’d let Christian play back there all night if he wanted, all damn day tomorrow too, but he also really, really wanted Chris’s cock.

“I’m good. Christ, that feels fucking incredible, but I want more. Give me more, Chris.”

Beckett didn’t have to ask twice. Christian squirted more lube into his hand, and stroked it up and down his sheathed erection.

And then he lay down on his side, beside Beckett. Pulled Beck so he was on his side too, his back against Christian’s chest.

Christian hooked his arm around Beckett’s top leg, holding it up, opening him up so he could get inside. It was awkward but he was able to use his other hand to guide his prick, and then he was there, pressing against Beckett’s hole and slowly easing his way inside.

There was a slight burn, a stretch—but it just made Beckett’s dick get harder, made the need to come ratchet up to new heights. “Do it, Chris. Fuck me.”

Christian kept going, worked his way inside until his pelvis was flat against Beckett’s ass, buried as deep as he could go.

They were breathing heavily, their breaths alternating as they adjusted to the sensations that were no doubt wreaking havoc on both of them. At least Beckett knew they were turning him inside out and he hoped they were doing the same to Chris.

Christian pulled nearly all the way out, and then slammed forward again. He worked himself into a groove. Each time he thrust in, his dick rubbed against Beckett’s prostate just how he liked.

“Oh fuck, Beck. Wanted this for so damn long. I don’t know if I can last.”

He liked hearing that, liked knowing he was driving Christian as wild as Christian drove him. Beckett wrapped a hand around his prick, held tight and started to jerk himself off as Christian railed into him from behind.

The whole bed shook. Pleasure shot through him with every pump of Christian’s hips. When he turned his head so he could look up at Chris, he smashed his mouth down on Beckett’s. Pushed his tongue into his mouth the same way his dick owned his body.

Beckett’s balls drew tight. He couldn’t hold himself back anymore, and he gave into the pleasure. His body felt like it broke apart, shattered into a million pieces as he shot, as he came all over his hand.

Christian kept going, kept slamming into him until Beckett felt him surrender. Lost his mouth as Christian pulled back and came, a loud roar in Beckett’s ear before he dropped Beckett’s leg and his arm came down, a heavy weight over him and his face buried in the back of Beckett’s neck.

That wasn’t enough. That wasn’t nearly enough. Now that he’d had Chris, he wasn’t sure if he could ever get enough of him.

The way Christian held him, Beckett wondered if he could possibly feel the same.

CHAPTER TEN

They slept together in Beckett's bed. At one point in the middle of the night they'd woken up, Christian had sucked him to a climax, while jerking himself off, and then they'd eaten half a bag of chips before passing out again.

Beckett couldn't remember when he'd felt happier...when he'd felt more like himself. Sure, he felt happiness and contentment every time he was on a bike but there was still a part of himself that he'd held back, a part that made it feel tinged with dishonesty.

When they woke up in the morning, he knew exactly what he wanted to do—what he might need to do with Christian before he left the following day.

He didn't know what would happen between them after Chris left. Beckett would be heading to Florida to train and Christian home to California, but he tried not to focus on that. Right now he just wanted to be in this moment with Chris.

Beckett ran a hand over Christian's short, dark-blond hair as he slept. Christian didn't move, didn't seem to notice him. He touched his collarbone next, ran his finger across it. Brushed his thumb over one of Christian's nipples and then the other one. He had such a beautiful body—lithe, with tight muscles beneath his pale skin.

Beckett felt this relentless need inside him for Christian that he couldn't dim. It kept getting hotter and hotter, brighter and brighter, even as he logically told himself not to rush, that there was so much on his plate right now.

But still, he just wanted Chris.

He couldn't stop himself from leaning forward, letting his tongue rasp over one of his nipples. Christian shifted so Beckett did it again, and pulled away just as Christian's eyes fluttered open, their blue irises on him.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," Beckett told him.

"Here I had my best night's rest in weeks and you decide to wake me up."

Beckett frowned at him. "I'm sorry."

"I'm giving you shit. You're horny. There's no need to apologize for that."

"That's not why I woke up. I mean, I am horny and I'm down for whatever you want to do, but I also have a request. I want you to go riding with me today."

Christian's eyes widened at that. "As in on a dirt bike? The last time I did that I was with you and we were eighteen years old. I might kill myself."

Beckett chuckled. "You won't."

"You'll feel guilty if I do."

"But you won't," Beckett told him. He didn't know why, but he really needed to do this. "Please? I'll do whatever you want...I'll suck your dick again."

"Yeah, but you'll do that anyway."

Christian was right about that. "Come on, Chris. It'll be fun. It'll be like old times." That, he realized, was why he needed to do it. To feel like they could go back before it all went to hell. Where there was no time, or betrayal or anger between them. When they could forget there was a world outside the two of them and just have fun together.

Beckett thought Christian might see it, see his need because he nodded his head. "Yeah, of course, I'll go riding with you."

Beckett smiled, kept his promise and sucked Christian off, and then they were on their way.

Beckett had brought gear with him, because of course he would take motocross gear with him everywhere he went. But then, Christian couldn't really blame him since he'd taken his computer with him, too.

Christian on the other hand, didn't even own gear, so they'd had to make a quick trip to the motosports store. They'd gotten everything Christian needed to ride, found out about a quiet riding trail that wasn't too far from them, and were lent bikes from a contact that Bryce had. It was amazing how quickly things could be put together when your name was Beckett Monroe.

Before he knew it, they were pulling the truck Bryce had loaned them off a dirt road next to a trail that lead off through the grass and brush.

"I can't believe you're making me do this," Christian told him as they changed into their gear by the truck. Really though, he was excited about it. He'd never been half as good as Beck was on a bike, but he'd always loved riding with him—the loud, *braaaaap* of their bikes together as they flew through the dirt.

"You used to love riding. I can't believe you don't do it at all anymore."

Christian hesitated for only a second before he gave Beck a dose of honesty he wasn't so sure either of them were ready for. "I used to love riding with *you*. It wasn't as much the riding as being a part of..." He thought and then just went for it—*balls to the wall*. "I guess a part of your heart. It's always been made up of a four-stroke engine."

Beckett looked up at him as he was tucking his blue jersey into his moto pants. He was fucking gorgeous in his gear. There was something sexy as hell about the rough, blue pants and matching jersey. "You've always had a part of my heart, Chris. Always. Even when I fucked up. Even when we weren't talking, you were always there."

The truth was, there wasn't a part of Christian that doubted that. Maybe he had in anger when he was younger, or hell, maybe even a week ago, but he believed Beck. Trusted him. He couldn't deny the connection that had always been between them. Still, he teased, "Aww, stop before you make me blush."

"I'm serious."

Christian gave him a simple nod. "I know you are. And you know it's the same for me."

They stared at each other for a moment, the past blending with the present, binding them together in a way they'd likely always been, a way they'd likely always be. They couldn't lose each other again. Christian wouldn't allow it, and somehow he knew Beck wouldn't either. He didn't know in what capacity their relationship would be, but they would have one.

And then, before they ended up rolling around in the brush together, riding each other instead of the bikes, Christian changed the subject. "I forgot how uncomfortable all the gear is." He wore knee braces, pants, boots, a chest protector, neck brace, his jersey and still needed to add his gloves, goggles and helmet.

"You get used to it," Beck told him.

"Yeah, I know. I'm going to have to get another suitcase to put all of this in to take it home with me."

Beckett cocked his head slightly. "Are you going to ride when you get home?"

Christian winked at him. "Maybe."

"I'll come to California and drag your ass out there. You live in one of the best states for motocross. It's a crime you're not on the track."

"I guess you'll have to come out and make sure I'm out there then." He pulled his gloves on.

"Guess so," Beck replied and then ran a hand over the bike. "She's not a Yamaha, but she'll do. Do you need a crash course, or are you good?"

"I almost want to kick the shit out of you for that question." Did Beck really think he'd forgotten how to ride?

Beckett held up his hands. "Hey, I'm just asking. You're the one who said you might die out here."

"That's because I was in bed with a sexy man, sleepy and horny. At the time I just wanted to fuck, nap, and then fuck some more."

"Why did we come out here again?"

See? Now Beck saw his logic. "That's what I was wondering." But then, he shrugged and added, "I

really do want to ride with you. We can get to the sex again later.” Then he pulled the helmet over his head. Beck did the same. Once they each added their goggles, Christian kick-started a bike for the first time in ten years, next to the man who had been his best friend and first love.

The man he likely had never stopped loving.

“Let’s do this!” Beck shouted at him. Christian nodded as if to tell him to go first. Their bikes made the familiar *braaap* that Christian had heard so much in his life, and then Beck was off. Christian twisted the throttle and raced behind him like he’d done so many times before.

The wind rushed around them. Leaves flew as they raced through the brush. Beck was going easy, Christian knew that. He would have already left Christian in the dust if he rode the way he did in a race. He allowed Christian to pull up beside him. He glanced Beck’s way just as he did the same and Christian had no doubt he was smiling behind his helmet.

The bike vibrated beneath him. He got it when he was out here, understood Beck’s love and the freedom he felt. The rush of adrenaline that flooded his system was euphoric and he didn’t have half of the love for it that Beckett did.

In this moment, the only thing that mattered was the two of them and the bikes beneath them. Hell, it felt like they were the only people in the whole fucking world.

Beckett and Christian, the way it was always supposed to be.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They rode for most of the day. They took breaks back at the truck but then were back on their bikes again. Beckett enjoyed watching Chris ride—the set of his body and the way he automatically remembered to keep his elbows out. It was almost as if he'd picked up exactly where he'd left off.

The passion Beckett had always felt for riding burned through him, a wildfire he couldn't control but one he didn't want contained. It jumpstarted some of the emotions that had felt dormant inside of him for too long.

He remembered what it was like to feel alive.

He wanted to hold onto that feeling with everything he had, everything he was.

They leaned against the truck after their last moto. They were both sweaty and dirty. Christian breathed a little heavier than Beckett did, since he wasn't used to riding anymore. "It feels different to ride with you," he admitted.

Christian's brows pulled together. "Different than it used to?"

"No. Different from riding with anyone else. I'm just Beck when I ride with you. I missed it."

Christian's eyes lit with understanding. He wrapped an arm around Beckett's shoulders, pulled him close, and kissed his forehead. "Yeah, I missed it too."

It was as though the reality of their situation suddenly bore down on both of them. This trip was about fantasy. They would be both leaving that fantasy tomorrow to head back to reality. It was there waiting, the fact that they'd been separated for ten years, that they lived on opposite sides of the country, that Beck had come here because he'd faced an upheaval in his life, even if it was of his own making, that he had to deal with. It was easy to forget all of those things when they were together.

"What are we going to do?" Beckett asked him. "After tomorrow?"

Chris sighed. "I don't know, Beck. We have to be realistic. We've spent four days together in the last ten years. Our lives are completely different. You have a lot to deal with right now—getting ready for the outdoor season, not just being Supercross champion Beckett Monroe anymore, but Gay Supercross champion Beckett Monroe, because as shitty as it is, we both know that's who you'll be, at least for a little while." Christian was right about that. His sexuality would be an identifier now—and even though he was bi, it would be gay. That's just how everyone would see it.

"I think you need to focus on that reality right now before anything else," Chris added. "You have a big season coming up. I know you and I know you're going to want to do well because you consider coming in third as a failure when it's not. Your mind needs to be on motocross and getting comfortable with yourself."

Beckett had spent too many years lying. He wouldn't do that anymore. But he also knew Christian was right. "I don't want to lose you. I need you in my life."

"Shucks, I'm touched," Christian teased. When Beckett didn't laugh he nudged his elbow. "You won't, Beck. I'll always be your friend. We'll figure out the rest of it later—let's get you through the twelve weeks of outdoor season. I'm not going anywhere. Plus, no matter how we feel right now, it's been ten years, Beck."

Fuck. Beckett was tired of waiting. Tired of just letting things go, but he thought Christian was right. At least they were on the same page this time. He nodded.

"Last race of the season is at Glen Helen. Will you come?" Glen Helen was in San Bernardino County in Southern California. It would be close to a two-hour drive for Christian from LA, but he hoped like hell he could make it. Hoped Chris would make that commitment to him.

Christian turned and faced Beckett so his side was against the truck. He crossed his arms. "I have a confession to make."

Worry stabbed at his insides. “Yeah?”

“I watch you ride every time you’re in Southern California, Beck—San Diego, Anaheim, Glen Helen.” A chill of shock and satisfaction went up Beckett’s spine as Christian continued. “When you’re local I’m there and if you’re not within driving distance, I watch you on TV. I always watch. Quinn thinks I’m obsessed.”

Beckett nearly growled at the mention of Quinn’s name. They might only be friends, but Quinn had him all this time when Beckett didn’t.

“It’s because of him that I’m here.”

Beckett smiled. “I like him.” But then, “You really watch me race?”

“Always.”

He realized it then, as his pulse sped up and his chest felt full—he was still crazy in love with Christian and he always would be.

* * * *

It had taken them quite a while to get back to the rental by the time they’d returned the bikes, the truck, and grabbed some dinner.

When they’d gotten back to the cabin, Christian showered while Beck made phone calls to his trainer and team owner. He had no idea what they’d said. Beckett had seemed like everything was fine when Christian came out of the bathroom. He wanted to believe it was, that there would be no problems for Beckett, but sadly, you just never knew.

Beckett had been in the bathroom for the last forty minutes now, while Christian lay on the bed in his room, wearing nothing but a towel.

The second Beckett had called him, a part of Christian knew they would end up here—twisted together in their emotions and their realities. When he’d gotten on the plane, he’d confirmed it. He might not have admitted it, even to himself, but there had never been another option for him as far as Beck was concerned, and he knew that.

A sound came from the other room and Christian realized Beckett must be finished showering. He turned, got off the bed and headed for Beck’s room. When he rounded the corner, he saw Beckett sitting on the edge of the bed, a towel wrapped around his waist just as Christian had. His dark hair glistened with wetness. Water dripped down the side of his face. Beckett lifted his right hand, and rubbed the dark beard on his face and then said, “Come here.”

Christian went easily. He stopped in front of Beckett, who flicked at Christian’s towel, making it open and fall to the floor.

Christian was already half hard, and Beckett wrapped his arms around Christian’s waist, pulled him close. He leaned his head against Christian’s stomach. Christian ran his fingers through Beck’s hair. “Did everything go okay?” he asked.

“In the shower or on the phone?”

He rolled his eyes. “On the phone, smart-ass.”

“It went fine. They assured me they don’t give a fuck who I sleep with. We’re a team and they need me to be a part of it. Yada yada. They said the same thing from the get-go. In reality, I know they mean it, but it’s also just words. I should have been training this week. Everyone knows it. I think they’re worried about my state of mind, but it’s fine.”

Christian hissed when he felt the warmth of Beck’s hand cup his sac. His tongue darted out and licked the head of Christian’s erection that had grown to full mast. “I’m not thinking about my team or even motocross right now. I’m thinking about you. Come here.”

Beckett leaned back slightly. When he did his towel opened, revealing his prick, thick and long against his stomach. He still sat up as Christian did as he was asked. He straddled Beck’s lap, wrapped his arms around Beckett’s shoulders just as a pair of strong arms wrapped around him.

They moved, causing their cocks to rub against each other. Christian looked down; pre-come leaked from both of them—a beautiful fucking sight. He curled his hand around their swollen pricks and jerked them both, loving the feel of them together.

“Fuck,” Beckett groaned into the space between Christian’s neck and shoulder. “You drive me crazy, outta my fucking mind with how much I want you.”

Then, they were kissing—teeth clanking, tongues gnashing, urgent, hungry, kissing.

Christian thrust against him as Beckett devoured his mouth. Both their dicks fucked into his hand but it wasn’t enough. He wanted inside of Beckett or Beck inside of him. He pulled back, licked at Beck’s mouth and asked, “What do you want?”

He rubbed a hand up Christian’s back, grabbed onto his shoulder from behind. “You. Want you to fuck me until I can’t move, until I can’t see straight.”

Christian trembled. His dick jerked, very much liking that idea. “Such a greedy little bottom. Who knew?”

It was then he realized a bottle of lube and a condom already sat on the bedside table. “I like a man who comes prepared.”

“Then stop wasting time and get in me,” Beck said before he swatted Christian’s ass.

He laughed and then climbed off Beckett’s lap. As Christian went for the bottle and the condom, Beck leaned back against the pillows, legs spread wide. “I could get used to this—your thick, muscular legs spread wide for me.” He climbed between them and kneeled there.

“Don’t think I won’t want your ass too,” Beck threw back at him and Christian’s lust exploded to new heights.

“I’m counting on it...but for now”—he squirted lube onto his finger and then rubbed Beckett’s rim—“such a sexy, fucking hole. I want inside it.” He pushed his finger in, past the ring of muscle and watched Beckett’s eyes roll back, as he arched up toward him.

Fuck, yes. He loved driving Beckett Monroe out of his damn mind.

Christian pushed his finger in deeper, rubbed Beck’s prostate as he leaned forward and licked Beckett’s nipples the way he’d done to Christian just that morning.

“Oh fuck, Chris. Yeah, right there.”

He smiled around Beckett’s small nipple. Thrust his prick against Beck’s as he kept fingering his ass. “I’m going to want to stay in here all night, Beck—my finger, my cock, my tongue. Such a nice, fucking ass. I’m gonna live right here as long as I can.”

He thrust his finger deeper. Beckett let out a guttural groan. “Let’s get started with the dick, first. Jesus, I want you.”

“Bossy motherfucker,” Christian teased him even though he wanted that too. His cock ached, throbbed with the need to feel Beck from the inside again. “Don’t move.” He pulled off of him.

“Who’s the bossy motherfucker now?”

“Both of us,” Christian winked at him. He ripped open the packet and rolled the condom down his prick, before lubing it up. He pushed Beck’s hairy thighs toward him, making sure he was open. He was still in the same position, on his knees, between Beckett’s legs, but he scooted closer, so the top of his thighs touched the back of Beck’s.

He squirted lube onto Beckett’s swollen erection, and Beck immediately started stroking it as Christian slowly worked his way inside Beck’s hole. “Oh fuck,” he shuddered. The head of Christian’s dick was inside him, Beck’s ass squeezing him, milking him. “Jesus, it’s so goddamned tight inside of you. So fucking hot and tight.” Yeah, he definitely wanted to spend his night here, playing with Beck’s ass for as long as he could.

“Fuck me, Chris. Christ, get in me.” He let go of his own cock to grab Christian’s ass and pull him forward and then Christian was there, buried balls deep. They both breathed heavily. Christian pulled almost all the way out, before thrusting forward again.

“So good,” Beckett rasped out. “So fucking good.”

Christian pushed Beck's legs farther up, opened him more and held them there as he leaned forward and took Beck's mouth. His tongue made love to it the same way his dick made love to Beckett's body.

Beck held his ass. His fingers were calloused, rough pads against his skin.

He gave Beckett everything he had. Sweat ran down his forehead and onto Beck. Christian slid his hand between them, stroking Beckett's dick as he continued to make love to him.

He rolled their bodies, managing to keep himself inside of Beck as the other man ended up on top of him. From his position on his back, Christian grabbed Beckett's ass as Beck rode him. He moved expertly, rising up before lowering himself onto Christian's cock...the cock that was damn close to shooting.

"This has always been my fantasy," he admitted and Beck smiled down at him, obviously knowing exactly what he meant.

"To be taken for a ride by Beckett Monroe."

"No," Christian shook his head. "Just by Beck."

There was a spark in Beck's dark eyes telling him that was the right thing to say. Christian wrapped his hand around Beck's prick again, knowing that his own balls would let loose at any second. He jerked Beck three times before his hole clenched around Christian's dick and his cock spurted once, twice, two thick jets of come landing on Christian's stomach and running down his fingers as he continued to work Beckett's erection.

Then he felt his own balls draw up, felt them give into the pleasure as his hoarse voice called out in an orgasm of his own.

Beckett fell on top of him. Christian wrapped his arms around him, their bodies slick with sweat.

It took them a few minutes to catch their breaths and when they did, it was Beckett who spoke first. "You're mine now, Chris. Maybe we have to take things slow for a while, feel things out and figure out how we're going to do this, but we are going to do this. You're mine," he said again and Christian didn't argue.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Beckett looked up at the sign his trainer held as he sped around the track. He was two seconds faster this round than he had been earlier today.

He wanted to be faster.

He leaned the bike into the turn, put his leg out as he took it and then twisted the throttle on the straightaway. His bike flew through the air at the jump.

His pulse went faster than his bike. His body felt amped up, but his mind was also at ease.

Beck felt a fire burning through him, one that hadn't fully ignited in years. He fed off of it, it pushed him, made him completely focus as his bike bounced over the whoops—he'd always loved racing over the small hills—and then he took up the speed again.

The passion he used to ride with reignited within him. Everything he loved about riding was intensified, an explosion inside of him. When he finished the last lap, and pulled up to his trainer, team and team owner as they watched on, he felt invincible.

As invincible as he felt, he knew there was a reason the Rush Racing team owner was here. The truth was, he couldn't find it in himself to worry. Not anymore. He was a Supercross champion. He was the fastest guy on his team, even if he hadn't ridden like it last season...and he was bisexual, and hoped to be in a relationship with a man. They would have to accept that.

"Christ, you're smoking out there, Monroe. You can tell you're really feeling it. That's the Beckett we know! Where was he hiding?" Bill, the team owner said as Beckett pulled his helmet off.

"Thank you. I feel better than I have in a long time, if I'm being honest. But I can be faster. I know it."

"If you were doing what you were doing while not feeling good," Bill said, "I sure as hell can't wait to see what you can do now."

The men all laughed, but Beckett just waited for him to get on with it. He wanted Bill to say whatever he'd come all the way out here to say.

As if he sensed that Beckett didn't want to beat around the bush forever, he said, "Listen, I just want you to know, you'll always have a place with Rush Racing. I know we said it before, but I want to reiterate. You're part of the team...of the family. That's all that matters, Beck. We take care of our own at Rush, and you're one of us."

"Agreed," his trainer, Dom, told him.

The three other members of the Rush Racing team chimed in around him.

Just like that, any residue of worry melted off of him. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

"It's sad that in this day and age, we even have to say that. Not quite sure how any of it has to do with how you race, but sports are funny like that." Bill shook his head. Unfortunately, it wasn't only sports where people felt that way.

"Thanks, man," Beckett said again. He probably should have realized he'd still been worried about it but he was likely in denial. He wasn't worried anymore.

Bill nodded. "I'll let you boys get back at it." And then he was gone and Beck wanted back out on his bike. Wanted to beat his last time, work out, and then head home so he could call Chris and tell him how his day had gone.

He wished like hell he could tell him in person.

* * * *

"Did he win yet?" Quinn asked Christian from the other side of the couch. Christian sat with his ass at the edge, leaning forward, his leg bouncing up and down.

“You look like you’re going to try and jump through the TV. Don’t try and jump through the TV, please.”

Christian looked over and rolled his eyes at his friend. “He crashed. Beck never crashes. That knocked him down to tenth place.”

“But he’s in sixth place now.”

“I know he’s in sixth! That’s why I’m losing my fucking mind. Oh fuck! He just passed Edwards!” Christian shot off the couch as though that would help. “He just passed Edwards,” he said again. “Now he’s in fifth.”

Christian kept his eyes glued to the television. His heart threatened to burst through his chest, it beat so damn hard. Beck would be devastated if he didn’t at least get a podium today. He’d won the first three races of the season. He was the points leader. While not taking the first race today wouldn’t be the end of the world, he would see it that way.

“Jesus, you’re really in love with this guy.”

Christian didn’t turn away from the television when he said, “No shit.”

“I knew it. I always have. It’s just good to see you at peace with it.”

And he was. He really was. They spoke every day. He felt like he was in a romance novel every time he saw Beck’s name light up on his phone. It was ridiculous really, but he didn’t care. It was as though he found a piece of himself he hadn’t realized he’d needed so damn badly. He’d always known he missed Beck, that he cared for him, but having him in his life again felt like he’d been put back together when he hadn’t known he’d been broken.

Not that he would tell Quinn all of that...but he also knew he had to tell Quinn something or the man wouldn’t leave him alone.

“Being at peace with something or knowing it’s true still isn’t a guarantee, Quinn. You and I both know life doesn’t always work that way. I want him. There’s not a doubt in my mind he wants me.”

“Cocky.”

“Confident for good reason.” He grinned at Quinn. “We have a lot to figure out. It’s been pretty much an unspoken agreement that we don’t make any decisions until after this season.” It wasn’t something they brought up when they talked, but that truth was always there on the line with them. “Now can we stop with the mushy shit? I’m trying to watch the race.”

Quinn dropped against the back of the couch and laughed. “Sorry. Me man. Must watch race. Is that how I’m supposed to sound?”

He rolled his eyes and couldn’t help but chuckle too.

“Oh shit. You’re laughing. That means I need to work on being *masc*, right? Should I lower my voice?”

Christian sat back down onto the couch with his friend. He wanted Beck to meet him so badly. He was lucky to have both of them in his life. “No,” Christian told him. “You’re good the way you are. Now watch the fucking race before I kick you out. Holy fuck, he’s in third! See what you made me miss?”

And then the two of them were both on edge, both cheering on Beckett Monroe as he did what he did best, and pulled out a win.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Beckett hated when they raced in Colorado. The elevation really got to him. It affected most of the riders who didn't grow up riding where the air was so much thinner.

He felt like shit. He'd taken second in the first race today and first place in the next one. He was still the man everyone was racing to catch, with a small points lead over Meyers. He felt like his old self out there and he loved it...but it was a long season, too. They were on their eighth race out of twelve. Eight weeks out of twelve and even though he'd gone ten years without seeing Christian, the last two months had felt like the longest of his life. It didn't matter that they talked every day. He needed to see him. To hold him. To claim him.

Those five days in Virginia had changed his life, but it was that logic that told him he needed to slow the hell down and not jump the gun. Five days. They'd spent five days together in ten years. They lived on opposite coasts.

Neither of those things seemed to matter when it came to Chris.

He rolled over in the hotel bed, and reached for his cell. The second he did, the damn thing rang like it could read his mind. Unfortunately, it wasn't Christian's name that showed up on the screen.

"Hey, Ma," Beckett said into his cell.

"How's your breathing? Was it bothering you up there today? Dad said he could tell you were struggling a little bit."

"Don't tell him that, Nansi!" his dad said in the background and Beckett smiled.

"Pick up the phone, Earl," she called back to him and he waited while they bickered—his mom wanting them both to talk and his dad making excuses why they shouldn't. His dad had never been a fan of them both being on the line at the same time but he usually did it. Beckett couldn't help but wonder if he wouldn't now because he still wasn't sure how to talk to him. As if he thought Beckett was suddenly a different man.

"Tell him I said to pick up," he told his mom. She paused for a moment, likely surprised, but then did as he asked.

"Beckett wants to speak to you, Earl."

There was a pause. The sound of a hand over the phone. And all he could do was close his eyes and shake his head. He'd always been close to his dad. He knew his dad loved him. It shouldn't be hard for him to speak to Beckett now.

A moment later, he heard the clatter of the other phone being picked up. They were the only people he knew who regularly used landlines outside of work. His dad was pretty anti-cell phone. He only had one because Beckett and his mom had forced it on him.

"So you could tell through the television that I was struggling, or what, old man?" Beckett teased, trying to break the ice. He wouldn't let things be awkward between them. He wanted to make sure his dad knew nothing had changed.

"Who you callin' old man?" his dad replied. "And I just know ya. That's all. You kept riding and you pulled out the win, though. That's all that matters."

"Agreed," Beckett told him and his mom gasped before speaking.

"That and the fact that he could breathe! Geez, I don't know how I made it raising you for twenty-eight years. You're going to give me a heart attack one of these days."

"What did I do?" Beckett asked and the three of them laughed. No matter what had happened in the past they were good parents and Beckett knew they loved him.

They spoke a little bit about the season so far. It felt like it used to when he talked to them—like his parents still felt like they knew who their son was and he didn't feel like his father was carefully navigating

what he said so he could avoid the topic of Beckett's newly outted sexuality.

The league had been better than he'd expected when it came to labeling him any time they spoke about his racing or standings. He didn't give a shit who knew anymore, he just didn't think it had anything to do with motocross.

But this? Talking to his family was different. He'd hidden Christian from them before and he didn't plan on doing it again. He always flew his parents out for the last race of every season and this year it would be in California. This year, Chris would be there with him.

"Christian is going to come to the final race at Glen Helen."

The line went quiet—the kind of quiet that slithered down his spine. It was of course, his mom who recovered first. "That's good. I'm glad to hear the two of you are talking again. His parents will be glad to hear it, too. It's a shame you boys got too busy to keep up your friendship. You know I've always liked Christian. Isn't that good, Earl?"

His dad cleared his throat. "Yes...yes, that's good. Are you sure it's a good idea for him to go to the final race? It won't distract you? Meyers is awfully close to you in points."

He could hear the change in tone of the conversation. Even through the line he felt the heaviness of it. "It'll be fine. He won't distract me. I want him there. I need him there. And we didn't lose touch with one another because we were too busy. I think both of you know that."

"What's between you and Christian is between you and Christian. You don't need to tell us about it," his dad blustered.

"Would you say that if I were talking to you about a woman?" Beckett asked. The silence on the line was the only reply he needed. "I'm not going to go into detail about my relationship or lack thereof with Chris...but it's important to me that you know I care about him...that I'd like to have a relationship with him. You're my parents and I love you. You both sacrificed so damn much for me. You would have given anything for me to have my dream. There's nothing I can do to repay you for that, but I'm asking you for something else too...I'd like your support in this. Not having it won't change who I am or what I do, but I love you, and I plan on being with Christian. I want your support."

And then, Beckett waited. He heard his mom's soft cries in the background, but it was his father who spoke first. "We will always support you in anything you do, Beck. I'm sorry if I led you to believe otherwise. All we've ever wanted is for you to be happy and if Christian makes you happy then you go for it, you make it happen like you've done with everything else in your life."

Those words were like salve to his heart. "Thank you," he whispered.

The truth was, Beckett wanted Christian, wanted him more than he'd ever wanted anything, more than motocross. It didn't matter where they lived or how they made it work, all he knew was one way or another, he would be with Christian.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Christ, there are a lot of pretty boys here. Why didn’t you tell me so many pretty boys like to play in the dirt?” Quinn asked Christian as they made their way through the pit. There were factory tents, signings, and other activities going on before the first races began.

The air was stifling hot as they were so far inland. It was dusty and barren with the constant buzz of bikes and people in the background. Christian had to admit, he loved it.

“Because you’re obsessed with pretty boys,” Christian told him. “And that always gets you into trouble.”

“Pretty boys are obsessed with me. That’s not my fault. And you’re obsessed too. At least with one pretty boy.”

He didn’t bother to respond to that.

Christian had made sure they weren’t around when Beckett was signing. He wanted to give him his space before the race, even though it had been twelve weeks since he’d seen him and it was killing him. He figured it might already be awkward for Beck with him here and he didn’t want to make that worse. He probably shouldn’t have taken Quinn with him because he had a habit of sticking his foot in his mouth but it was too late now.

“If we see Beck, don’t piss me off.”

“Come on, Christian. You know me better than that—oh shit. There’s a fucking jersey with his name on it. Your boyfriend has a goddamn jersey with his name on it. I’m buying it.”

“Oh fuck. I knew I shouldn’t have brought you. The first race for the 250 class is about to start. Let’s go watch.”

They headed toward the area Beckett told him to go watch. The bikes with 250 and 450cc engines had two, thirty-minute races each—plus two or three laps, depending on when the winner crossed the finish line. It might not seem like it but that was a long time when you were out there holding onto a bike that was bumping through a rutty track.

When they made it to where Beck told him to go, Christian realized a few things at once: The fucking podium was right there, as was the finish line, and the area was roped off. Security guards were at each of the four corners. He had no doubt the people behind that rope were friends and family of the racers.

All those things hit him before he saw Beckett’s parents behind that very rope.

He stopped dead in his tracks, Quinn running into him from behind. “Oh fuck,” Christian whispered. He didn’t know why he was surprised, but he was. This was...this was a big fucking deal for Beck to have done. His chest immediately felt full while his stomach tied into knots.

“He’s making it official, Christian.”

“No shit.”

“This is big.”

“You think?” Christian asked.

“I do,” he replied and Christian wanted to fucking kill him.

He also wasn’t going to stand here all day. He wasn’t sure exactly what Beck might have told them but it was obvious the people behind that rope had to be expecting him or Beckett wouldn’t have told him to come over here. He knew Beckett’s parents must know he was coming, even though he hadn’t known about them. He might have to kill Beckett for that later. “Let’s go,” he said and then they made their way toward the roped off area.

When they got to the right corner where there was an opening and one of the security guards stood, he said, “My name is Christian Foster. Beckett Monroe told me to come over here to watch the race.”

The man uncrossed his arms, looked at a clipboard in his hand and said, “Two?”

“That’s me,” Quinn piped up from beside him. The guard nodded, and unlatched the hook so they could pass. “Are your in-laws here?” Quinn whispered.

“They’re not my in-laws, you bastard, but yes, they’re here.”

The announcer went on in the background as they made their way toward Nansi and Earl. There were oversized screens not only here but all throughout the track so they could see the whole course.

Just as he made it to them, Earl turned his way. Christian paused, but then the older man smiled. “Christian, you made it just in time. It’s good to see you.”

His overfilled lungs finally deflated.

“You didn’t expect us?” Nansi said before pulling him into a hug. He should have. It made sense they would be here.

“No, I didn’t...but it’s good to see you.”

She squeezed his hand. “It’s good to see you too, Christian. I was so glad to hear you and Beckett reconnected.”

Earl cleared his throat before saying, “We were both glad.”

That was their blessing. It filled his chest to capacity. They knew he wanted to be with Beck, and they were okay with it. “Thank you.”

He introduced them to Quinn before they settled in beside them.

People screamed and cheered. Drank beer and talked riders and the season, Beck’s name popping up more than once.

It was surreal being on this side of it, being here as Beck’s guest, when for years he’d watched from the outside.

Christian wanted nothing more than to see him race tonight. Wanted nothing more than to see Beck be the first man to cross the finish line, and win the motocross championship, because he knew that would happen. They’d dreamed about this when they were kids. Sure, this was nothing new for Beckett, but for Christian it was because now he felt a part of it. Now, it was the way they had always said it would be.

“Hey,” Quinn nudged his elbow. “You good?” he asked softly.

“Yeah,” Christian told him. “Yeah, I am.” He felt incredible.

* * * *

“He got the holeshot. He got the fucking holeshot!” Christian threw a fist in the air and cheered. Quinn watched intensely beside him.

“That means he has the strongest start, right?” Quinn asked and Christian only nodded, unable to take his eyes away from Beck. He was out front, but Meyers was right behind him. He was second in points for the season and too close for comfort. Outdoors were Meyers’s thing. He’d won the past few years because he excelled at it more than he did Supercross, but this year, this year was Beck’s and Christian knew it.

His chest felt like it would burst open each time his heart pounded against it. He could hardly stay still as he watched Beck’s bike bounce over the whoops. “I fucking hate those. It’s hard as hell to hold onto the bike. Watch Beck though. He’s fucking great at them,” he told Quinn as Beckett sped over them like they were nothing, all fluid movement like he was one with the bike. He gained a few tenths of a second on Meyers.

His bike leaned as he cut a corner, making Christian hold his breath. He took a straight away before owning a double for his first trip around the track.

Meyers tried to get around him, tried to cut him off, but Beck held him off. “He wants Beck’s line,” he said to Quinn without looking his way. “Come on, come on, come on,” he whispered as though Beck could hear him. “Keep your line, Monroe.”

And Beck did. Over thirty minutes later, Beckett Monroe flew over the finish line, his bike and arms in the air as he took the first race of the day and everyone around them jumped and cheered.

Finally, Christian could breathe.

* * * *

Beckett sat in the tent, elbows on his thighs, looking down at the ground.

People moved all around him. His trainer went on and on about trying to get the inside line. He and Meyers were neck and neck. Beckett was ahead but just hardly. He had to finish better than Meyers to win.

“Beck. You hearing me?” Dom thumped him on the head.

“Yeah. Fuck. I’m concentrating.”

“I know you are, but I need you to listen to me. The track is ruddy as hell. It’s gotten torn up since your lost moto. The whoops are a mess. How are your hands doing?”

“Fine,” he shook off the question. He was lucky. He didn’t have a problem with his hands like a lot of riders got.

“Good. All right, you gotta get your ass out there. Your head in it?” he asked.

“Fuck yeah.” It was. The title was fucking his. He would make sure of it.

Beckett pushed to his feet and made his way to his bike and threw his leg over it to sit down. It was already running. They would have just started it for him so it could warm up.

He pulled his helmet on, then his goggles. Dom handed him his gloves and he pulled those on too, before making his way to the starting gate.

He felt like there was an earthquake going off inside of him—a constant shake that wouldn’t go away. Having won the last race meant he’d gotten to pick his starting spot first, so he sat in his sweet spot, the bike vibrating beneath him as he waited for the gate to drop.

His eyes found their way to where Christian would be watching with his parents. He’d wished he’d been able to see him before the race. It likely would have calmed his nerves. He probably should have told Christian what he was doing but he’d wanted to keep it to himself. Hopefully, he enjoyed the surprise.

He made his eyes look to the front again. There was so much energy inside him he felt like he could burst open at the seams. This felt different than any other championship race he’d ever ridden in. Like the stakes were higher, like this was just the beginning to the next chapter of his life and he knew that had to do with Christian.

The gate dropped and Beckett twisted the throttle. *Holeshot. Just have to get the holeshot.*

He always saw a race in sections and not a whole. He had one race to win, then he’d move to the next.

His pulse jumped when he hit the corner first and started to pull out in front of the pack. The crowd cheered, then *ooohed* and he knew there was a crash behind him. After a while he’d learned to read the crowd. Some guys tuned them out, but for Beckett they were not only fuel, but extra eyes on the track.

His brains rattled when he went over the section of whoops. His bike jerked, shook as he sped over the ruddy track. It wouldn’t deter him though. He wouldn’t let it.

As he stuck his leg out and leaned the bike to make a turn, he tossed a quick glance over his shoulder. Meyers was right on his ass and he wasn’t surprised.

Just keep going. One lap down, now time for the next.

Beckett’s tire hit a deep rut. He almost lost control of the bike but managed to keep it steady. It was just the mistake Meyers needed to pull in front of him.

Motherfucker.

Come on, come on, come on. Just get around him. Get around him and I’m good. That was the only race he was in right now, getting around Meyers. Once he accomplished that, he’d be going for the title again.

Meyers pulled farther ahead. As he made a turn, he glanced at the board held up for him. *One second. I got this. He’s only one second ahead.*

Beckett twisted the throttle more. Leaned with the bike, stood as he went over a jump. Found the line he wanted as he passed a lapper, who rightfully moved out of his way.

He didn’t ride the same line through the whoops this time.

He was closer to Meyers than he had been before. Mud shot onto his goggles and Beckett ripped one of the peel-aways off to clear his vision again.

He watched Meyers at the track. Studied them both. He stayed behind Meyers for three laps before the other rider changed his line. It was the mistake Beckett needed to shoot around him on a corner and then pull ahead.

Don't fuck up, don't fuck up, don't fuck up.

All it would take was one slip-up for Meyers to be in front of him again.

The longer the race went, the lighter Beckett's body felt until it was almost like he was part of the bike. They moved together, worked together as he saw a sign that told him he was now a little over a second ahead of Meyers.

The other rider didn't let up. He gave Beckett competition until the end. He could have lost it at any second. His brain told him that over and over again until he took that last jump, flew through the air and over the finish line.

Yes! He'd done it. He'd fucking done it.

He couldn't wait to share it with Chris.

The second his bike pulled to a stop, his trainer nearly tackled him. His owner cheered. People grabbed at him, hugged him, screamed for him until he felt dizzy.

Where was Christian? He just wanted to share this moment with Christian.

He was suddenly off his bike, but he didn't know how or when it had happened. His helmet was off too. The crew tossed an energy drink at him—one he was supposed to hold when he went to the podium.

People were pulling on him, leading him to the podium while his eyes frantically darted around.

The second he was pulled onto the stage there was a woman and a microphone in his face. His owner was right beside the stage, his trainer too, the whole fucking crew. His mom was there. She was crying and so was his dad. Still, he kept scanning the crowd. Where was Christian? He had to have come. He wouldn't have left Beck like this.

"How does it feel to be the AMA champion?" the woman holding the microphone asked him.

Beckett opened his mouth, not sure what he would say until the words came out. "Good, I think. Right now...right now I just really want to know where my boyfriend is."

The reporter chuckled, with a friendly smile on her face. It was the first time he'd acknowledged his relationship status—the first time he'd confirmed that he was indeed attracted to men on camera. "Well, I'm sure he's going to be happy to hear that the first words out of your mouth after winning the championship were about him!"

It was all about him. This moment was more real because of him. His whole fucking life was.

That's when Beckett saw him. Chris stepped up beside Beckett's parents, the sun glinting off his too-blue eyes. He smiled at Beckett and it damn near stole his breath. Jesus, he loved this man. Wanted to spend every moment of the rest of his life loving him. A grin split Beckett's face.

Christian nodded as if to tell him to continue.

"I just...I want to thank my team—Rush Racing. My trainer, Dom. Everyone who's stuck by me. My mom and dad, friends, the fans I..." He made eye contact with Christian again, Chris's eyes firmly on him, just as Beckett was handed the flag. He couldn't believe he was standing here with Christian in front of him. "And Chris...thank you for giving me a second chance. Thank you for loving me. For giving me the jumpstart I needed, without even realizing you were doing it." He'd won titles before and while they all meant something to him, none of them meant what this one did. Motocross was his dream, his career, his passion, one of his loves, but he hadn't been fully living, not before he was honest about who he was, not before he had Christian back.

"Thank you," Beckett told the reporter. "Thank you all," and then he stepped down from the stage and went straight for Chris. He wrapped his arms around Christian's waist, pulled him into his arms, as Christian's went just as tightly around him.

"We did it. We fucking did it, Chris," he whispered into the other man's ear.

“I’m pretty sure you did it,” he replied, but Beckett knew Christian got what he really meant.

“I thought these twelve weeks would kill me.” He kissed Christian’s forehead. Rubbed his face into Christian’s neck. “I’m so fucking in love with you. I don’t want to be without you anymore. I don’t care where we live or how we make it work, just promise me we’re going to make it work, Christian.”

“Yeah, you know we will. We’ll make it work. I love you too, Beck. You know I’ve always loved you.”

He let out a sigh of relief, just having needed to hear the words.

The space around them got tighter and tighter. More people filled around—laughing, talking, congratulating until they had no choice but to pull apart. When they did, Beckett saw his parents standing there...and it was his dad who hugged him first.

“I’m so damn proud of you, Beckett.”

There was no question in his mind that his dad wasn’t talking about the championship, but Christian.

“Thank you, Dad.”

His mom pulled him into a hug next. “I love you,” she said through her tears. He consoled her, told her he loved her too.

From there it was interviews and more congratulations. He got to meet the infamous Quinn, who made them all laugh, and also happened to be wearing a Monroe jersey.

Beckett soaked every moment of it in, lived it, breathed it, the way life was supposed to be, the moment made even sweeter because he had the man he loved by his side.

EPILOGUE

Beckett set the last tray of dip on the table before the doorbell rang.

“I got it,” Chris called from the other room. It was a cool November day in Virginia and they were expecting their friends to come over to see their place. They’d decided to get a small house in Virginia. It wasn’t where they would live most of the year. It just wasn’t feasible. Christian loved California and worked there. It made the most sense to spend the majority of their time in California since Beck could train there as well. Still, they’d wanted somewhere else that could be theirs. A place to go in the off season, for vacation, or just for much needed rest and relaxation and this seemed like the best spot.

He only had a year left on his contract and who knew what would happen after that? Maybe he would sign another one. Maybe he’d stop racing and take up training, which honestly was the most likely answer. He could help another kid who loved racing as much as he did. The only thing he did know was whatever he did, he would do it with Chris by his side. Nothing would ever come between them again.

Beckett looked over as Chris opened the door. On the small porch stood Landon, Rod, Drew, Justin, Nick and Bryce. Their friends.

“Hey, thanks for having us,” Landon told Chris as he walked inside, followed by a trail of men behind him. He was pretty sure they might be in the gayest town in Virginia and he fucking loved it.

“I brought some food.” Nick held up a pan, the light reflecting off the gold engagement band on his finger. Bryce had proposed to him a few weeks before. Landon had said it was pretty incredible. Beckett and Christian hadn’t been back yet so they’d missed it.

“Thanks.” Beckett walked over and took the dish from Nick. He wanted his ring on Christian’s hand as well, and it would be one day. There was no doubt about that. Right now they were just living, though. Enjoying life and loving each other. The rest would come.

“Am I going to see you tomorrow?” Drew asked Beckett.

“Absolutely.” He was going to teach Drew some of the workouts he used while training. The man was always looking for something new to do.

“Are you coming with him?” he asked Chris, who shook his head.

“No. I have a conference call with Quinn and I need to get some work done.” He was only working part time with Quinn at the moment but he was also able to do some other contracted work. The spare room was set up as an office so Chris could still work when he was away from LA.

Their lives would be hectic for a while, filled with a whole hell of a lot of traveling, but they’d make it work.

They had a great evening with their friends. Beckett couldn’t remember ever laughing as much as he did with this crew together. How could you not with Bryce and Rod in one place? They talked about Rod’s store which was thriving and Justin’s plans after graduation. Nick’s hopeful remodel of the restaurant, and an upcoming weekend spent with his nieces and nephews.

He realized the people in this room were all a family, and they’d invited him and Christian into it.

He was happier than he’d ever been. Despite how hectic their lives were, he was more stable than he’d ever been too.

This was the life he’d always wanted. He had his dream, yes, but he had more than that. He had a world outside of motocross, which was what he’d been lacking before he made the call that had brought Chris into his life again.

They had a good visit with their friends for a few hours, before everyone started packing up to head home.

He and Chris cleaned up and then headed to bed for the evening. The next day, he spent a few hours at the gym with Drew, before he stopped off at the store because Christian called him asking for eggnog. He

hated the shit but he remembered back from when he and Chris were kids, he'd always drank it around this time of the year.

As he browsed the aisles for his spoiled boyfriend's treat, he heard, "If it isn't Beckett Monroe," come from behind him. At first he froze up. It wasn't often that he was recognized, but then the voice struck a chord with him from a day on a plane when his life had been so fucking up in the air.

"Margaret." He turned to look at the older woman. He'd wondered about her more than once over the months. Had wished he'd gotten her phone number rather than just giving her his.

He'd wanted to check on her, wanted to make sure she was okay...but he'd also wanted her to know—"You fixed your broken heart," she told him without Beckett having to say it.

"I did."

"I saw it on the TV." She smiled at him. "But even if I hadn't, all it would have taken was one look at you to know it. Congratulations."

"Thank you," he told her, pulling her in for a hug. She returned it, her shaky arms going around him. "Do you live around here?" he asked her. "I wondered about you."

She pulled away, a sadness in her eyes. "No. My Lizzy is buried in town, though. I come to see her often...the way I should have done when she was alive."

He closed his eyes. He'd always wondered if that was the case. If she'd lost the woman she loved...if she had regrets the same way he used to have when it came to Chris.

"It was a long time ago. I married. Had kids. Lived a happy life. It's hard to have regrets about her, when so many of the things I have now wouldn't be in my life if I'd been able to keep her."

He understood that. He didn't know if his life would have been any different if he'd admitted to his family he loved Chris when he was eighteen. Maybe he wouldn't have had his dreams come true. Maybe he would have. Or maybe he and Christian would have just accomplished different dreams together. All he knew was he felt damn lucky to have him now, and he wished there had been a way Margaret could have had everything she did now, and still have Lizzy.

"You can have everything in the world and still have a broken heart. You can still be happy and have your dreams but still wonder, *What if...* I'm glad you don't have to wonder *What if* anymore, Beckett Monroe. I wasn't brave enough to go for mine while Lizzy was still alive and now it's too late. I'm doing my best to make it up to her now."

He couldn't help but pull her into another hug. He held her too long, too tight. When they parted, he invited her for dinner, but she declined. He asked her to please keep in touch, but he didn't know if she would.

He thought about her the whole way back home to Christian. When he got there, he filled a glass of eggnog and took it to Chris in his office.

"What's wrong?" Christian asked the second he laid eyes on him.

So he told him—told him about Margaret and their flight. How she told him to fix his broken heart and he had. He then told Christian about seeing her tonight, and about Lizzy.

As soon as he finished his story, Chris pushed to his feet and walked over to him. "You and that big, fucking heart of yours." And then he kissed him. It was a slow kiss, full of love, of life, of possibilities and their future.

"I love you," Beckett told him, so fucking thankful to have Chris in his life again.

"I love you too."

"Hey...I always wanted to ask you, what was in that letter back then? The one you wrote when we were kids?"

Christian's eyes darted away, and he actually looked embarrassed. "This...I just talked about this...having you. Being with you one day. Knowing you would always be mine. Wanting to spend my life with you. All that sappy shit."

Beckett would never get tired of hearing things like that. "You're stuck with me now. You're never getting rid of me."

“Don’t want to.” He nodded toward the door. “Come on. I kind of want to fuck you now.”

Beck couldn’t help but laugh. “What about your eggnog? I went all the way to the store to get it for you.”

Christian took a sip of the drink. “I know. Now it’s my turn to thank you for it.” He winked at Beckett and then it was Beckett dragging Christian to their room, and Beckett who worshiped Chris’s body, the way he planned to do every day for the rest of his life.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Riley Hart is the girl who wears her heart on her sleeve. She's a hopeless romantic. A lover of sexy stories, passionate men, and writing about all the trouble they can get into together. If she's not writing, you'll probably find her reading.

Riley lives in California with her awesome family, who she is thankful for every day.

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ON BEHALF OF 1001 DARK NIGHTS,

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