

A
PEAK
PERFORMANCE

VICTORIA WILDER

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A RIGGS ROMANCE

BOOK 4

VICTORIA WILDER



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To all the women who love a fierce female main character, this story is for you.

And in case you need to hear it...

If you want to be a badass, then be her. Be the adventurer, the homebody, the introvert, the loudmouth, the quiet mouse, the one who gets the guy, the wing woman, the guide, only along for the ride, the ride or die, the loner, the bestie, the reader, the author.

Be whoever the fuck you want to be.

You're the main character.

Don't let anyone EVER tell you otherwise.

A NOTE TO READERS

A Peak Performance contains adult material. It's a romance with profanity and open-door sexual scenes.

There is domestic abuse (DA) and domestic violence (DV) discussed as well as on page. There are also instances of gaslighting and violence.

PROLOGUE

I WASN'T READY. I SQUEEZE MY EYES TIGHT. I SHOULD HAVE been, but I wasn't.

Dammit, it doesn't burn. I want it to burn. I want to be numb. Shove this sick, aching feeling so far down that it'll never surface. I don't want to feel it ever again. Not to heal. Not to repeat. This is how it tastes. And it's disgusting. Being lied to, vows ignored and realizing it's not something that just happens. It wasn't a mistake. It wasn't an agreement. It's been years of resentment. Months of satisfactory settlements. Days of self-doubt and gut feelings. Hours of emotions smothered in order to remain "happy." Minutes that have been blurred and swept under rugs. And seconds since I realized my life isn't what I thought it was. Or worse, it was exactly what I thought it was, but I've been conditioned to ignore it.

I've lost track of time, but at least it's still dark outside. The room is filled to the brim with middle-aged overachievers, horny co-workers, and a couple of groups of women on a night out. I've spotted at least three functioning alcoholics. I'm not counting myself. I never drink this much. And yet, it still doesn't feel like enough. How much bourbon will burn away the images? The sounds? Oh god, the sounds. I'd rather hear the first-class problems and the pitch of side hustles around me any day. Anything is better than the sound of betrayal. It's a distinct one.

Specifically, an echo of his grunts as he fucked her. Hard. Harder than he's ever fucked me before. Their skin slapped as the front of his thighs met the back of hers. And the sound of

his cock driving into her sounded like wet suction. A shiver of disgust works through me and settles in my stomach, coiling in response.

Her skirt was pulled up around her waist, and her pink blouse hung open, her bra covering one breast while the other was pulled out and being grabbed. Her chest was smaller than mine, but that didn't matter as he slammed into her. Her breathy moans were loud. It didn't even sound like she was faking it. Or that they were trying to be quiet. It's after hours, but I'm sure the cleaning crew and a few late-nighters are doing work somewhere. The company is filled with young go-getters. This is New York City after all. Case and point: my intern. The breathy one who was just being mounted by my husband. Another shiver rolls through me. I'm nauseous. My office. My company. *My intern.*

I bark out a laugh, startling enough that the crowd of twenty-somethings at the front of the bar turn to look at me. They study me, smirking back, trying to find what might be so funny or if they missed a punchline.

So, I raise my glass toward them. Two still stare and, honestly, I'm just drunk enough that maybe I'll take both of them home with me. That was the kind of woman I wanted to be—the badass who did what she wanted. Not because it was dictated or expected by societal standards. I made a raging left turn away from being *that* woman over the years, and right now, I can't figure out why.

I laugh again. A few more turn to look at me.

“Nothing to see. Just thinking about how my husband might have just made another woman come when he hasn't been able to do that for me in about two years.”

Lazy motherfucker.

My husband and, technically, my *boss* now. Appointed as CEO of the company my father built. A role that I thought I'd have someday. I worked hard, pitched big ideas, and put in my time. But deep down, I knew it would never be enough.

Instead, my husband was groomed for it. And I just let it happen. It wasn't that my father was blatantly sexist; it simply never crossed his mind that a woman could be in that role. The archaic ideas of my old man are disappointing at the least, and disgusting at most. But I let that ride. My sister never did. She told him to shove it years ago. I wonder now why I didn't follow her lead. When you're around stifling reminders of patriarchal hierarchy, it's almost possible to see it nurtured into your own thinking. And that's what has led me here.

I tip back the glass and it's empty. *Shit.*

My phone buzzes again. It's been ringing since I got here. I know he saw me. He saw me and he didn't stop. She saw me too. And there was no remorse. I know he will try to manipulate me into thinking it's somehow my fault that his dick was just buried inside my goddamn intern. I want to yell, scream, and cause a scene, but where will that get me? I'll be labeled as the jilted woman who couldn't keep her man's attention. *Classy.* I'm part of a society that doesn't automatically think he's the fucker, but instead assumes it may have been something I've done wrong or under-delivered. I can hear the gaslighting from my father in his thick accent now, "*Contessa, what did you do? He is a man, after all. It is your job as his wife to keep him from straying.*" Like that's a fucking excuse. Always put it back on the woman, especially when his protégé is the one in question.

"Would you like me to close out your tab, ma'am?"

Great, kick a woman while she's down by calling her "ma'am."

I don't smile. "I'll have another."

He leans in closer. "How about a water first?"

I stare at the chin pubes this guy is trying to grow as I mull around in the audacity of his suggestion.

"The lady asked for another. I'd suggest you get it for her," the person to my right interrupts. They must exchange a few additional words as I wipe beneath each of my eyes because the bartender doesn't move right away.

When I focus on the mystery man, I recognize him but can't place him. He gives me a kind smile that makes my eyes water all over again. I look up, trying to keep them from falling, and take a deep breath.

The bartender returns and places the bourbon on a fresh cocktail napkin. I take another sip. This time it burns even less. And all I can think is that the numbness is spreading. I glance over again, relieved he's focused on his drink instead of trying to save the old maid in distress.

"Give yourself time," he says in a quiet voice.

I study his profile. He's definitely older than I am, but I couldn't guess his age. Maybe late fifties. He's polished, but he's not wearing a suit. His cable-knit oatmeal sweater is designer. The watch that peeks out is a Mont Blanc. And paired with the way his beard is tightly trimmed to complement his mostly salt and pepper hair perfectly, it all screams money.

I keep quiet while trying to place who he is, because I *know* him. Somehow. My mind is a mess right now. If it's one of my father's friends, the last thing I need is to be seen blubbering at a bar and have that get back to him. I'm not *this* woman. I've never been *this* woman. The mess. The tragic cliché. I need to get away from here. Away from my husband. From my father.

I've been stuck in the shadow of a man for my entire life. The grossest part is that it was comfortable. Being my father's favorite felt like I had won something. And then, with Maxim, it was that same feeling—chosen, special, the protection of it. A stifled existence masked as comfort.

What's wrong with me that I didn't question any of it until now? Why did it take this moment for me to see exactly what I've been agreeing to? A supporting role in my own life. I'd be disgusted with myself if I weren't already so disgusted with the man I've loved for the past twenty years. I suppose I'll self-loathe when I'm hungover from tonight.

"I can't go home," I say out loud. I'm unsure if it's to myself or the universe, hoping for an alternate solution.

But then someone answers.

“Sometimes the best thing to do is disappear. Find yourself again and then decide who you want to be when you return,” the familiar stranger says as he sips his drink.

Why does that idea sound so appealing? *Disappear...*

I lean on my elbow and prop my head on my fist. “How does someone disappear?”

“Tessa, I would hope you have means. You could find a way.”

It takes me a moment to register that he knows my name. Then it clicks.

“Asher Riggs.”

“Took you a few minutes.” He smiles.

Fuck.

The enemy. The biggest competitor to my family’s company for as long as I can remember. They’ve been outpacing us for years. They make the kinds of moves I wish we did, but that fight wasn’t winning me any favors. And apparently, not fighting for what I wanted didn’t give me any either. Asher dances in the same circles professionally, but he and my father don’t get along. Socially, they’re never in the same room unless they have to be.

The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

“I can take a guess about who fucked up enough to have you this upset. But I won’t make assumptions about you, Tessa. I know you’re smart. I always thought you’d end up running everything over there. If you wanted it, of course.”

I don’t know why those words from someone I wouldn’t consider a friend hit me so hard. They validate. They help me breathe.

With a dry throat, I reply, “I thought so too.”

I take a deep breath in, then another sip. Still not burning enough. But, when I exhale this time, it’s not sadness that

pours out of me or even anger, but exhaustion. Maybe even a little relief that I don't need to pretend to be okay right now.

“Do what you need to do to get on the other side of what upset you. If you need to disappear for a little while, I'd be happy to help.”

I raise an eyebrow at the offer. My trust in anyone is at an all-time low. “Why would you do that?”

He takes a minute, staring ahead at the wall of liquor strategically placed behind the bar. The chandeliers hang low enough to allow the dim light to bounce calmly across the room. I almost think he was going to ignore me, but instead he says, “I've been destroyed like that before.” He tips his head. “You never forget how it feels. That kind of hurt or betrayal stays with you. You make sure you remember this feeling, so you never give yourself a chance to feel it again.” He turns toward me on the bar stool. “Take your time. When you're mad enough, I have a proposition for you. Something that I think you would be perfect for. And it'd really piss them off.”

Pulling out his phone, he types out a text or email. “There are no strings here. You won't owe me anything.”

When my phone buzzes, an unknown number shows up, confirming a flight to London. *How did he have my number?*

My eyes dart back to him. “I can't just leave.”

“Can't you?” Getting up from the bar, he signals the bartender to come over. As he signs his tab, I study him. A man who I've been told to dislike, but really, there's been no reason for it other than him being the competition. Asher Riggs has the reputation that he does because, at the core of it, he's smart, but I think it's more than that. He's honorable. A trait I'm not sure I'm qualified to recognize. “This is my place. A pied-à-terre, if you will. One that nobody knows about. You'll find the concierge can help you acquire whatever you need. My pilot is on standby. I'd suggest taking out some cash, not using credit, and to try taking your time. Find out who you really want to be.” He smiles and closes his eyes, like he's made an error. “But then again, you're a grown woman. Don't let a man tell you what to do.”

He smirks, as if he knows every thought that's been rummaging through me.

“Why? Why would you do this?” I ask. I still don't understand why he'd offer this, and of all people, to me. *Or why I'm considering taking him up on it?*

“If someone had offered me a time-out when I was in a similar place, my life might feel a little different.” He looks down, and warring emotions are etched around his face—sadness in his eyes, anger in his jawline, even defeat in the way the lines in his brow pinch. “I understand what it feels like to be broken. Betrayed. Guttled the way that it looks like you've been. And I know your husband. You outclass, outsmart, and can outdo him even on your worst day.”

A tear slips out and runs down my face, and I don't bother brushing it away. Not after that confession, or was it an observation?

“I pay attention, Tessa.”

“What do you get out of this?” Everything comes with a price. I'm drunk, not stupid.

“A phone call. From you when you're ready. You'll hear me out, and then you decide. Walk away or get ready for a fight. Either way, I am satisfied knowing an entitled asshole didn't completely destroy a woman he never deserved.”

I close my eyes and absorb what he's said. I'm spinning from the alcohol, the night, and what's just been thrown in front of me. When I open my eyes, he's gone. I would have thought I imagined the entire exchange, except when I ask to pay my tab, the bartender tells me, “It's been taken care of already. There's a car waiting for you out front.”

That night, I stumbled out of a downtown bar and into a waiting black car. I threw up on the way to LaGuardia's private hangar, where a jet awaited me. I dry heaved as it taxied on the runway for what felt like hours. Anger and nerves thrummed around my entire body. And then, I passed out for the entire seven-hour flight to Heathrow. I was hungover as a driver waited for me and took me to a beautiful

flat. And then I threw up again when I realized I just left my life behind. The nausea ebbed and flowed, but even after there was nothing left in my body, I still felt sick. I wondered how long it would take for anyone to notice I was gone.

I woke up on the cold marble floor of the bathroom and realized I'd just hit rock bottom and simultaneously had gotten the chance of a lifetime. To escape the life that I built on niceties and curtsies, and discover what I wanted. Far away from expectations or limitations. Build something new. Be a stronger version of who I was. Create a life where I took instead of gave. A life that looked exactly like the kind of woman I longed to be. One I could respect. And one that a man couldn't knock down ever again.

Law

“YOU GOING TO ASK ME TO TURN MY HEAD AND COUGH TOO, sweetheart?”

The joke is met with silence as this burly hunk of a security guard practically lifts and separates my ass cheeks. But before I can crack another joke, he stands at his full height, which is only a couple of inches taller than me—no need for the dick measuring. I have no desire to piss anyone off here. He puffs out his chest and demands my phone and watch. *Okay, big guy, I get it. I'm not amusing you.*

“These will be returned to you when you're ready to leave.”

Once I drop both into a black box, he escorts me to the next set of double doors. Then he scans the black card that is allowing me entry into this event. And from what little I know, or rather, what I had to do to get an invite to be here, it's exactly the type of night I've been craving—an upper hand.

The place is magnificent. The sprawling estate, which was pristinely manicured and lit, was in full view as my car pulled into the excessively long drive. I expected an old castle-like structure to come into view since everything in the countryside seems to be, but it was far more breathtaking. What, at one point, might have been something historical is now a modern,

immaculately erected villa, only eclipsed by the promise of what's happening inside its walls.

“Enjoy your evening, sir,” he says as I'm escorted into the open basilica, taking in the size and space. At the center is a long, rectangular bar with pristinely clean lines. Its shiny black top reflects the chandelier lighting that hangs throughout. The ceilings are so high it's an illusion that the massively lit crystals are suspended in the air. I've seen plenty of beautiful places and architecture, but nothing like this. I have a semi just looking around and I haven't even focused on the people yet.

If I kept skimming my eyes around the space without focusing, I would have missed the man to my left, in a tux similar to mine, on his knees in front of a woman with her leg draped over his shoulder. Her eyes are closed, with a drink casually held in her hand, as if his presence between her thighs is as simple as her cocktail—gin martini with a twist, if I had to guess. I can't fight the smile that tilts the right side of my mouth. It's a helluva vibe.

“Sir?” a voice beside me says, pulling my attention away from the couple.

A woman dressed in a black cocktail dress with a sheer black veil sheathed over her face shows me a palm-sized tray with an Old Fashioned in the center. “For you, sir.”

“Thank you.” My surprise is evident in my hesitancy to take the drink immediately.

“We make it our business to know what you'd like when you arrive. Will you require anything else, sir?”

“No. Thank you.”

I was given a small list of information after I received my invitation. Simple rules to play by if we want to be here. Staff are here for our comfort, but they're not to *play* with. Women will wear simple masks. Men will not. It's at the discretion of the women in attendance who will dictate what will happen. If a man approaches first, he will be asked to leave. There will not be a repeat invite. Essentially, it's ladies' choice and not just with partners. It's their choice in anything that happens

inside of these walls. Granted, we can say no, but I'm in a 'yes' mood tonight. The luxury of anonymity and blurred lines of thrumming sexuality linger in the air. All of it has my curiosity climbing.

A play party. That's what it's called. I've been to a couple over the past few years, but I never found much different I couldn't find at a club or bar. I'm so jaded at thirty-two years old that women and men usually only stay interesting for a short time. It always feels too easy. Slightly superficial. Most of the time, they know who I am before I approach them. There was a time when I craved that. But lately, that's been the turnoff. And not that this place isn't offering easy, but what I've been craving lately is more basic than that. I want chemistry. Something I haven't found that lingers much past one night, or hell, even one encounter. But that's only part of the reason I'm here.

I've joked with my brothers for years about going to a sex club, but I didn't want to walk into anything that might have been choreographed or rehearsed. I'd prefer real people to watch and maybe explore.

Every person here is high profile. Recognition isn't something you want, which is another reason some of the most well-known sex clubs in London are places I should avoid. I'm recognizable now. And if I want the things I've been busting my ass for lately, I need to start making smarter decisions regarding my personal life. My father and our board of directors haven't been in my corner lately, and I need them there. Pictures or rumors of me entering somewhere that resembles something the board would conclude as unsavory aren't going to win me any votes. And I need to be voted into the CEO position.

"Sir," a tall, slender older gentleman says, as he stands beside me. "We can take our rounds through the party if you'd like."

I nod and casually follow him. You're not allowed to wander here unless escorted by your personal butler. I'm assuming he is mine.

“You can tap your black card to alert me if you need anything or are interested in moving to another location,” he says.

“Thank you.” I tilt my head, looking for a name to tack onto my appreciation.

“You may call me Q.”

“Q? How very Bond of you,” I joke.

He smiles tightly—*tough crowd*.

“Under each archway are halls that will lead you into different types of play. So where we go will depend on your mood or what you might be looking for this evening.”

I look around the room and count eight archways.

“We are very organized, and everything is done with intent. All of it is so we might make it easier for our guests to spend their time appropriately instead of just *looking*.”

“What if that’s what I’d like to do to start?”

“If that’s the case, sir, would you like to watch one, partners, or multiple?”

I didn’t come here with a specific agenda. Merely bullet points. An invite came. One that I’ve been waiting a long time to receive, and that was it. I was on a flight. I have to be back home in a couple of days, but I wasn’t going to turn this down. It’s a bit of research and a bit of fun. What could go wrong?

“Might I suggest we take a round?” he asks politely. I can’t think about the fact that this isn’t just a tour of a home or a museum. It’s rooms and halls with people in all states of fucking each other or themselves. I can’t keep my smile from escaping. It’s a mix of nerves, the absurdity of where I’ve found myself, and the anticipation. A rush of adrenaline echoes through my body, and I shove my hands into my pockets.

“Multiple.”

“Sexual preference?” he asks as we start walking toward the archway with the deep red curtain pulled.

“Yes.”

He glances at me quizzically, and then the answer registers. He nods, and the curtain shifts open. The air is cool, but the scent is warm and inviting. It reminds me of a burning fireplace and if mahogany had a smell. Masculine and sweet.

I take a sip of my drink. I hate to admit it, but it's the best Old Fashioned I've had. That pisses me off because I thought I'd perfected my own, but mine doesn't hold a candle to this one.

We head past two sets of black double doors on either side of the massive hallway. I see another butler walking alongside a woman up ahead. Music plays throughout the space. I can't place the song, but it fits the vibe. Sexy, with a low bassline and no lyrics. It's loud enough to muffle the moans that linger from behind the next set of closed double doors.

Q slows as we approach the next room. This time, the doors are open, and it looks as if whatever is meant to happen here hasn't started just yet.

“Sir, you're welcome to view, but you are to remain on the perimeter of the space. You remember the rules?”

I take another sip. As it hits my tongue, I wonder if it's a combination of chocolate and orange bitters that are giving the drink this type of depth. “Remind me again.”

Q gives me a tight-lipped smile. I have a habit of annoying people. Q might be in that camp now as well. “Women are in charge. However, you must also consent verbally before participating in anything. You will not be permitted to join in what happens in the center of the room unless you are invited. If you want a larger participatory room, we can move along to the orgy corridor.”

Taking another sip, I mask a smile. I've been wealthy all of my life, but sometimes the audacity of the rich still shocks me, as if I hadn't just bought myself into a place that offers an entire wing dedicated to orgies.

I listen, but my attention moves around the open space. There is a clear dividing line between where people are to

watch and a sunken space where two men in suits stand and speak with one another. The conversation looks private, not only in the closeness of their proximity to one another, but also in the way one leans in toward the other.

“Might I ask a favor?”

“Of course, sir,” Q says as I hand him my card.

I look around the room again. Oddly, I feel like I’m the one being watched. But as I take a glance at each of the guests filtering into the space, only a few have looked my way. It’s a welcome relief not to be the center of attention here.

Just breathe. Nobody knows me here. Maybe I can get lost in this fantasy for a while. I can tell in the hour since I arrived that there are more men than women now. I guess it’s meant to be that way. Options for a party that caters to ladies’ choice. I can pinpoint the butlers and security by their attire, black, collared shirts and black suit pants. All are peppered around the room, prepared to step in where needed.

I let Q know what else I’m searching for.

“I’ll see what I can do, sir. Will there be anything else?”

I give him a head shake that I’m all set for now, and then return my attention to the space around me. It’s quite the affair. It has me wondering if there could be something like this orchestrated back home. There are plenty of clientele who would be open to the concept.

The men in the center of the sunken room turn to the double doors that have just closed. A woman confidently and casually moves toward them in a black dress that glimmers against the dim lights. It’s long, but the slit up the side cuts right at her hip. Long dark hair flows down her back, and from her profile, I can see her mask is a simple piece of sheer cloth just over her eyes.

My mouth waters as I watch her step down the few stairs in anticipation of how this all might play out. I wonder when she approached them, if the two men came here together or if they’re strangers. If they’ve done this before and if being watched is something that gets them off.

I look around the room's edges, and it's so dim that I can only see the outlines of bodies sitting in leather club chairs like mine. I can see the small, shadowed movements of some people draped in the chaise loungers in between.

The small breeze of someone moving closely behind me pulls my attention away from the men who have begun to undress the woman. At their proximity, a small current of awareness ripples across the back of my neck and down each shoulder. It settles in my groin, and I can't help but smile. I can feel them sitting behind me now, but instead of turning to look, I take a sip of my drink and keep my eyes trained on how the woman told the two men to stop and remove their jackets, shirts, and ties. When they stopped immediately, my cock stirred. It's not their undressing that piqued my interest, though. Some men are just as intriguing as women, but it's how she tells them what she wants, and they instantly obey. That power. The exchange of it. Fucking sexy as hell.

I've had a deluge of sexual encounters where not a single person I've been with told me what they wanted. As if it were my job to tell them what they needed. And while I don't mind leading—I very much enjoy it—I crave variety and the unexpected. There's a part of me that craves being told what to do by a powerful woman.

I feel someone move even closer to me from behind, possibly the same person that had just been there. Another roll of adrenaline flows through me, hardening my cock even more. I've almost forgotten that participation is possible with anyone around the room and I'm not just here to watch things unfold. If I want more...

"Is it the dominance or submission that has your pants getting tighter?" a woman's breathy voice asks. She's so close to my right ear that her words ripple against my skin, shifting my arousal to her instantly.

I look only with my peripheral vision and take another sip before responding. But she moves a few inches closer as I tilt my glass, pressing my lips to the rim, and as my drink hits my tongue, her sultry tone caresses my senses again.

“That looks delicious. May I have a taste?”

I hold it out to the side as my answer, keeping my eyes on the intimacy unfolding in front of me.

She brushes my hand as she takes the glass. Her fingers are small and cool as they skim mine, and a tingle travels down my spine at the brief contact.

I watch as the two men kneel before the fully dressed woman. She moves her hands behind her back and unzips her dress. Moments later, it pools at her feet, and she stands there in only the black heels that shimmer the same way her dress had. But my attention is more tuned into the small movements of the woman I can see from the corner of my eye. She took two slow sips.

She passes the glass back to me and returns it, the rim stained with red lipstick marks. I want to sip from the same spot. Taste where she had.

“I prefer bourbon neat, but the orange bitters have a nice bite.”

I can't help but smile and wonder, “Do you?”

She lets out a small laugh. Its throaty rattle is unbelievably hot and hits me right in the veins. “Do I what? Bite?”

I can hear the smile in her voice linger with the question, and for some reason, I like how that feels.

“It depends. If you mean literally...”

Oh, I like her.

“Figuratively?”

“Most people who know me now might say yes.”

“And, literally?”

“Only when asked,” she says as she shifts away.

My immediate thought is *yes, please*.

I lean forward, elbows on my knees, and bring my attention back to the scene before me. Merely thirty feet away, a woman is splayed out on a massive lounge, moaning in

anticipation as the two men finally push her legs wider so they can fit their shoulders in between. *Flexible.*

The woman tells them, just loud enough for us to hear, “Let me see you kiss him the way you plan to kiss my cunt.”

I relax back in my chair and adjust my semi-hard cock as I do. It’s a combination of her words and my curiosity if the temptress behind me is listening and watching too. Is it ridiculous to hope she’s still there? Is it even more insane to be turned on at the idea of her and less by the live action porn in front of me?

Probably.

I can feel my mystery woman tuck in close again, so I turn my head to the side and quietly ask, “Do you think they’re strangers?”

The woman down in front of us lies there, her body rising every time she’s licked. Her chest rises and falls in synchronization with how one man’s fingers thrust into her while the other’s tongue laves at her nipples.

“No.” I feel her rest her arms on the back of my chair as if she’s leaning in to watch more intently. “Look at the way the men are touching,” she suggests as I see hands dragging and gripping. “They know each other. And I have a feeling one of them is married to that woman. Or at least, is in a relationship of some kind with her.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Unless you really know a woman, making her arch for more like that is impossible. Or she’s putting on a show, but my money is on the former.”

“I don’t think that’s true. Maybe you just haven’t been with the right stranger,” I counter.

I can feel her attention shift to me. Her voice is so close as she asks, “Have you watched like this before?”

“Something like it, yes. Not in this setting, but I’ve watched people play together before.”

“Why would you do something you’ve already done when you’re in a place like this?”

Instead of turning around, I rest my elbow on the chair, and then drag my thumb across my bottom lip, weighing what I should do. Fall into the display of debauchery in front of me or find out if the woman who’s captured my interest wants to play? I didn’t come here to be comfortable. The entire point is to shock my system a little bit and enjoy things I haven’t found. And I’ve already taken more enjoyment from a few minutes of talking to this person than I have on long weekends with others.

I pull my thumb from my lip and bend my arm outwards with my palm up. It’s an invitation for her to touch me if she’s still there. And a part of me knows that she is because, as delusional as it is to think it, I *feel* her there. My hand rests mid-air, and my fingers flex slightly, perhaps just enough to distract her from the ménage à trois unfolding before us.

I wait.

The moans in front of us grow louder and deeper. Everyone is aroused, and that woman’s first orgasm should be cresting at any moment.

I feel a shift behind me again, then a light brush against my upper shoulders and the back of my neck. Her fingers dance across my palm, and I wait for her to lead, watching as they grip my fingers as her palm meets mine.

“Are you inviting me to touch you?”

I can’t mask my smile.

“I’m giving you my permission to be near me. Touch me. Kiss me. Fuck me. You asked what made my pants tighter, but you should be asking what it is that’s keeping my cock hard right now.” She leans in closer and smells so good that my mouth waters.

“Ask me,” I demand quietly as I simultaneously grip her hand and pull it toward my mouth. I brush my lips across her skin and can smell the faintest scent of vanilla mixed with her perfume. It’s more masculine, nothing floral or fruity. Spicy

like cinnamon, but sweet like sugar. And my guess is this mystery woman is exactly as she smells: distinctive, strong, and warm. It's fucking delicious.

“Ti Voglio (*I want you*)...” she breathes out softly, as if saying it to herself.

“You want me to do what?”

Her body freezes slightly. She either didn't realize she said it out loud or that I'd understand her—my Italian is passable. And anything insinuating sex or swearing, I know well.

“You want me to touch you?” I say quietly, dragging my fingers up her arm. So lightly that goosebumps appear in their wake.

She waits a few moments before responding. I'd like to think I disarm her like she's doing to me. But instead, she says, “Oh, silly boy, no, I want to touch *you*.” Her fingers skate across my collar and trail down my chest. The movement means her body presses into the chair and against me. I'm so unbelievably turned on and haven't even gotten a full look at her yet. I'm usually, like most men, visually stimulated. But the feel, touch, even the sound of this woman's voice, all have me on the precipice of not caring what she looks like.

I smile and tilt my head slightly to feel more of her. I breathe in the sex appeal that's billowing off of her. “You have permission to call me anything you'd like, *mí regina* (*my queen*), but I promise, the path you're following”—I nod down to her hand, which is just reaching the waist of my suit pants—“there is no trace of a boy.”

Her fingers skim my waistband. “Most men tend to be very disappointing.” She brushes her lips lightly right beneath my ear, and it causes heat to flash through me. Fuck, this woman feels dangerous, and I'm drawn to it. Her hand lowers even more, grazing the outline of my cock, which is so fucking hard at the moment, it's borderline painful.

Her breath catches for a passing second. “What a nice surprise. The equipment matches the energy.”

I've never preened so hard in all my life. This woman just copped a feel and told me I have a big dick. It's not a revelation or a statement I haven't heard before, but my fragile ego needs a boost every now and then. And right now, I'm about to twerk at the compliment.

I turn my head to the side to finally take more of her in. Her short blonde hair skims just below her chin, and her pouty, red lips starkly contrast with the black lace she has pulled across her eyes and the bridge of her nose. Her focus is on her hand that teasingly traces my length, and it allows me a moment to really look at her.

I lean into her, and my nose skims her jawline. The way I want her is animalistic. I want to rub myself against her and feel her in any way that she'll allow. A small gasp escapes her, and her lips part. I take the invitation and drag my lips along her neck. She melts into me, and it's like a reward I didn't know I wanted. I dart out my tongue between my lips and feel her skin, taste her. It only makes me want more. Her hands grip me tighter, fingers pulling at where they meet my shirt and pants like she wants or *needs* to grab me. To get closer.

I want to play.

“Tell me, my queen, are you as wet for me as I am hard for you?”

“That's a ridiculous nickname.” She tilts her neck up, and if I wasn't so turned on, I'd chuckle at her tone. Instead, I graze my teeth against her skin, and she sucks in an audible breath of air.

“So was calling me a silly boy, yet I've never been so ready to come so quickly.”

“That would be anticlimactic,” she teases, and I can feel her smile. Smiling against her skin, I lick a small path up the side of her neck, and then lean away, looking at the wet shine I left behind. Her skin has an olive tone and the goosebumps that I've just caused, urge my cock to flex again.

She stops her movements when she shifts her eyes, probably sensing my stare. The way she looks back at me,

though, it feels like I've somehow halted time. Her eyes, which, if I had to guess, are light blue or maybe even green, dance around my face.

Then she's promptly shifting back, pulling her hands away faster than they took to wrap around me. But she's not fast enough, and I catch her wrist by reflexes alone. Something changed, and now she's leaving. Retreating and eager to put space between us.

"Don't go."

Looking down at where I'm holding her, she doesn't meet my eyes. "Please let go," she whispers.

I release her right away. My response was a reflex, if anything. I'm not one to stop a woman from changing her mind. And without looking back, she moves toward the doors, but not before she shifts and speaks to the security at the door. It's dim enough on the perimeter of the room that her leaving doesn't disrupt what's happening in the middle, and as I look around, the silhouettes of viewers seem to have blended into grouped shadows.

I drain what's left of my glass and glance back at the doors with a heavy sigh. *What the hell just happened?*

I replay the way she felt. Why was that so damn hot? I've had plenty of women come on to me, but not like that. Teasingly. She initiated all of it. Hell, I didn't even get a full look at her.

My stomach sinks. She recognized me. And it scared her off. Whomever she was, she recognized my face when she really looked at me. I've never had someone pull away when they realized who I was. In fact, it's always been the opposite. When women discovered my last name or recognized me from photos or videos, they saddled closer.

I move so fast, I don't hear whatever it is that the security guard said to me as I passed through the double doors. When I walk into the dark hall, looking left, where I had come from, and right to more double doors lining each side, I catch a flash of red. I never planned to chase anyone tonight, but here I am,

actually running after a woman who took one long look at me and bolted. *It can't be her.*

“Sir,” Q says, coming up next to me. “The name you asked me about earlier?”

I turn my attention back to him. And I know what he’s going to tell me before he says it.

“She’ll be wearing a red dress. Short blonde wig tonight.”

Her.

“Thank you for the information, Q. I’ll have your affairs in order by tomorrow.”

“Thank you, sir,” he says, tipping his head down. “A pleasure.”

Tessa

YOU'VE GOT TO BE FUCKING KIDDING ME. ONE NIGHT. I wanted one more night to have some fun before I knocked myself back into reality. One that I'm realizing is going to fuck me sideways. And not in the good way. This may not be the first time I've been to this play party, but it was the first time I wanted to play with someone before thinking. To just act on impulse and lose myself for a little while longer.

I turn my head slightly when I feel like someone isn't too far off behind me. There's no way he's followed me. I told the guards at the door...

"Stop!"

I'm not about to be chased around this place or hide away for the night.

So I stop. He won't recognize me. He can't. I convince myself that between the lace covering my eyes paired with the wig, it'll be too hard for him to place me. And the small handful of times we've been in the same space, my husband or my father is always the larger-than-life presence. I'm barely seen. But still, I don't turn around; I let him circle me, keeping my head straight and eyes ahead. I roll my shoulders back. I'm not hiding. *I've done enough of that.*

"You know who I am?" His voice is much deeper than I remember.

“Turns out you’re not as dumb as they say, Riggs,” I quietly respond.

Dammit, why did it have to be... him?

He tries to mask his laugh. That caught him off guard. “But the question is, do I know you, *princess*?” He uses the nickname like it’s an insult. I’ve been called a princess by the men in my life for its entirety, and I’m over it—a term of endearment and ownership I’ve relinquished.

“Demoted to princess already? What’s the matter? Feeling threatened by authoritative women?”

He ignores me and tilts his head, and I know he’s raking his eyes along my body. I can feel the trace of it. His perusal slows as it nears my hips, dipping at my ribs, and then up the curve of my chest. It feels good to be studied like this—by him. The new me usually prefers to be the one giving attention and objectifying. It’s a simple role reversal that keeps me feeling in control. Nights like tonight are about my wants, not theirs. It’s stereotypical for the slighted woman to toughen and become a harsher version of herself, but it’s the only version that’s allowed me to exist without the constant tears and incessant self-deprecating thoughts. I’m better than that. It keeps me weighted to the ground. Steady. But his eyes on me right now are making me feel lightheaded.

“Left you speechless?”

Details are what I’m my best at. I’ve become good at noticing little things. I always have been. It makes me very good at my job. And it’s been easy to try to ignore them when they’ve told me what I didn’t want to know.

I noticed how his breath hitched as he looked at my body. There was a time when putting on weight from months of indulgence would have made me feel bad about myself, but not anymore. My red dress hugs the curves I’ve never had the luxury of employing, never mind showing off. Life was filled with too many back-handed comments and innuendos about empty carbs and thick thighs. Words that kept me from realizing that healthy looks different for everyone. The way

he's looking at me isn't critical. It's curious. Maybe even crude. *Why does it feel so fucking good?*

I stay quiet and let my silence intimidate him. But he seems unfazed. "Is there a name you'd rather I use then?"

"I was fond of queen, but I always prefer my name over some kind of bullshit cutesy endearment men use so they don't have to remember a woman's name."

"I'll keep that in mind."

He tilts his head as the expression on his face lets me know he's working through my words. *Maybe he's smarter than his reputation alluded to.* He doesn't say anything, but I can see he's trying to figure out who I might be. If I were smart, I'd leave. I wouldn't stay to entertain his guesses. But it seems tonight I'm batting a thousand in the smart decisions department.

"So you're *her* then?"

My head jerks up and my eyes find his. I wasn't expecting him to place me and then call it out so quickly. I stay quiet. *Her* could mean a thousand things and refer to plenty of people. I'm not about to jump to the one conclusion I'm slightly worried about hearing.

His voice is low, and its timbre feels deep and rugged, like syllables being raked over gravel. "Did you purposely seek me out? Or is this karma finally catching up to me?" His words bleed confidence. It's distracting and, quite frankly, annoying, to be turned on by an accusation.

I take in the man standing in front of me, returning the favor of a blatant perusal. He's nearly a foot taller than I am if I were to slip off my heels. His broad shoulders are rigidly postured, but his assured stature has a playfulness to it. There are many rumors about Law Riggs and his wildly carefree lifestyle; they outpace the conversations regarding his "visionary" approach to marketing his family's business.

With one hand slung in his suit pocket, the other glides along his chest first. It's not a typical nervous tell, but maybe it's his. And it's distracting as I watch his fingers rub along the

crisp white shirt. The urge to needle him is almost as strong as it is to touch him.

“Asking if I’m *her* seems like you might be looking for someone in particular. There are no particulars here, just bodies and curiosity. I wanted to touch you. It’s what happens here, in case you were,” I pause to poke at his calm and confident exterior, “unclear. Or new at this.”

He glares at me. *Aw, we don’t like that, do we now?*

“So...” I shrug my shoulders like it’s no big deal. “I asked for permission. Then I was done. It’s as simple as that. Now I’d like to move along. Excuse me.” I try to move around him, but he follows my move, stopping me.

“But you clearly know me. Am I not what you were expecting to find?” He smiles as he says it, amused by what he thinks he’s figured out. “Is that why you ran out of there?”

He steps closer to me. I take one step back. He pauses then—his attention on my movement away from him. A poker face isn’t his strength, because I can basically see his mind spinning from one look into his eyes. When he steps closer again, I do the same, only the wall is behind me this time.

“I don’t know you at all. Only the version you show off.” I swallow the lump forming in my throat, telling me to shut it and leave. But I ignore it. “I have no expectations. Of any man. Case in point, you’re not catching on that I’m bored and would like to do something else now.”

“May I join you?”

Oh, he’s dumb. There it is. The secret as to how he’s gorgeous, successful, and dripping in sex as if it were sauce. I stare at him for a beat. Such a bummer. “Are you having trouble keeping up here, Riggs?”

“I promise you, my stamina is excellent.”

Don’t laugh. Maybe dumb was the wrong word. The last thing he needs to know is that I find him funny. “*If you can make a woman laugh, you can make her do anything,*” and all that. I’ll be doing none of it.

That moment of distraction was too much. I wasn't paying attention to his proximity. To how much closer he got. He's only a few inches from me now. The coolness from the wall seeps into my back as the front half of me feels flushed and warm. I hate that I'm so drawn to him. It figures that I'd somehow seek out and make a pass at the *one* person I have no business being near in *that* way.

He smiles at me when he asks, "May I touch you?"

Persistent. But *is he kidding right now?*

"I can see you trying to figure me out under there. Trying to decide if I'm just dumb and pretty or if I'm absolutely nothing you expected."

"You're *definitely* not what I expected." He's got the pretty part down. I can't help the smirk on my face. He needs to be teased a little, "But I doubt you want me to answer if I also think you're dumb and pretty."

"What if I told you I don't care what you think of me? I'm only thinking about feeling your hands back on me right now." He grits his teeth. "How they make my cock so fucking hard that it hurts." I resent the way my thighs clench, thinking about how he felt beneath my palm. "Am I still what you're craving tonight?"

"And what is it that you think I'm craving?" I smile. I'm unwilling for him to see that he's gaining the upper hand. "Since I was very clear about what I wanted just a few moments ago."

But as I say it, he leans even closer, so close now his lips dance a breath away from mine.

"Tell me, *my queen.*" He smiles down at me. *Ridiculous nickname.*

Arrogance dances around him like it's his aura. And if I could see its color, it'd likely be bright red—the same color as all the flags waving so dutifully at me right now.

"If you forgot who I was tonight, would you let me taste your lips? Would they be sweet, like the way you smell? Or

would they be salty, like the attitude you're pretending to have with me?"

Are you shitting me? I need to get out of this. The more he opens his mouth with stupidity, the blurrier my resolve becomes—for some godforsaken reason. I'm not supposed to be here. Interacting with him like this. And I sure as hell shouldn't be liking it.

He looks down at my hands and drags his fingers along my wrist. The move draws chills up to my shoulders and heat down the rest of my body.

I don't want to know the answer, but I have to ask. "Who is it you think I am?"

"Exactly who I've been waiting for."

I lean into his touch. I know it's wrong. All of this. I'll be working with him. And yet, I can't pull my body away. Why does he feel so good to be near? It's not like I haven't been with anybody in a while. I've had a fabulous amount of revenge sex that has more than made me forget about the decade-long marriage where nearly half of it I was celibate.

I tilt my head back to look up at him. To read between the lines of what he's telling me. The hair from my wig brushes against the wall. *Don't close your eyes. Don't close your eyes.* But I close them anyway and ask, "And who have you been waiting for?"

"My competition."

My eyes flick open at his words. Anger floods me. He leans back, and a smile takes over his face like he's just thrown down his hand of cards and won the pot.

Dammit. He knows who I am. It wouldn't have been too easy to bribe someone here and ask for a name. It's against the rules, but I know everything has a price.

I'm tired of men feeling like they can have the last word. Law Riggs very well may have been the man I wanted to get lost in for the evening, but now things have changed. Now I just need him to get lost.

I take a step closer and reflect the same smile he's giving me. I'm very good at putting on a brave face and I need to do just that.

"I'm not your competition," I say as I step past him. And when I know he's turned to watch me walk away, I look to the side and call it like it is. "Silly boy."

I hear him hum a laugh to himself, and while a part of me feels accomplished at having the last word, I need to figure out how the hell all this just happened.

"Then who are you?" he yells after me.

I smile, because he'll know exactly who I am in less than a month.

"Your new boss."

Law

“IT’S BEEN A MONTH SINCE YOU TOLD ME YOU EVEN WANTED to sell. What do you mean it’s sold?”

“There aren’t too many meanings to it, Law,” Joanie says as she delivers the double bacon cheeseburger I’ve been waiting on. She gives me a sarcastic smile. I hate when people do that.

“I asked you—” I hold up my hand and squeeze my eyes shut. “No, no, actually, Joanie, I practically begged you to hold on to that cabin until after the holidays, and here we are—” I look at my watch to add to the drama of my statement “—December twenty-fucking-sixth, and you’re telling me you sold it. Like you’re one of the Property Brothers or something.”

She tucks her notepad back into her apron. “I do love those shows. The flips and negotiations. It’s very interesting.”

Yeah, real fucking interesting. I only bought my cabin in the first place because I also wanted the one that was connected to it. The investment in mountain property was too good to pass up, but it was only worth the money if I could own both homes built on the land.

I pause the temper tantrum I want to have, and instead, breathe in and out so I don’t react. I’m not the hothead in the family. I don’t want to be upset with her. I just wasn’t planning

on this news today. In fact, I'm so high-strung lately that I can only handle one dose of shit news per day. It's lunchtime, and I'd already met my quota when the snowmobile wouldn't start this morning.

I look down at the table to collect myself. Joanie doesn't deserve my attitude. Looking back up, I smile at my waitress, who has also been my neighbor for the past year. There's no reason why she wouldn't have discussed this with me first. I simply don't understand.

"Joanie, our cabins are connected by a shared room. A *really* fucking nice, fun room that I invested in with the very clear intention of sweetening you up for when you were ready to sell. And now you're telling me that it's already sold. Poof, just like that?"

"You can go ahead and leave right now if you're going to use that language with me, young man." She steps away and drops the typical line that I hear from most people who are older than me in this town. "And then I'll call your father and tell him exactly how respectful his youngest turned out."

This day is shit. I came here to lighten my mood a bit before today's meeting, but now I feel like I've been slapped.

"What did I do?"

"Nothing, sweets. It wasn't about you."

Bullshit.

"I must have done something that annoyed you enough to go behind my back and just sell it." I wince for effect, trying to make my point. "It's like I don't even know you."

She rolls her eyes as she walks behind the counter.

I yell, "Was it the midnight margs?" I run my fingers from my forehead through my hair and down to my neck. This isn't good. Let's put aside the part where a strange family will be moving in next door, but I'll need to figure out a new solution for my plans for the entire space. "It was the loud kitchen renos, wasn't it? My guy is the best, but he worked in the evenings. I asked if you minded. You said no."

She peers back at me. “No, honey. None of that. It was just too good of an opportunity. I had to say yes.” She smiles like this is amusing. Like I’ve missed the punchline.

My phone buzzes, and I know it’s either my brother or father, wondering why I’m not in the office yet. I’ve been split about how to feel today. Part of me is eager to be there. To see her. But the other part of me is pissed off that I have a new boss instead of a new title.

It’s a skeleton crew this week, but our guides and group expeditions are in full swing. Strutt’s Peak is a tourist town and Riggs Outdoor is the company and brand you seek out when coming here. As far as I’m concerned, we’re the best outdoor sports company in North America. When you want to play on a mountain, you come to us. And I’m not just talking about the typical skiing, boarding, and powder sports. We’ve also started rolling out excursions that outdoor sports lovers can only get here. It’s a part of our brand that has the most projected growth, even though it has the highest investment.

“Here you go, sweets,” Joanie sing-songs as she drops off my burger.

“Okay, so how long do I have to figure out what I will do without you?”

“Well, considering the new owner is eager to settle here, the move needed to be quick. I don’t have much to pack, so I jumped at it when they offered to handle all my moving costs if I was willing to rent to them until closing.”

This urgency gives me the gut feeling that I won’t like the answer to my next question. “Joanie, who bought the cabin?”

“Sweets, I gotta get back to work. Some out-of-towner is movin’ in.”

Then she immediately strides away. *What the hell?*

I get up and take my milkshake with me. “Joanie, can you please tell me what’s happening here?”

She clears her throat and starts cleaning off the counter in front of her.

“Listen, sweets, I’ve got my movers at the house now, and then I’m out of here. I’m meeting some girls from my divorcée support group in Tulum. Tonight.” She shimmies her hips. “We’re doing a whole *Stella Got Her Groove Back* thing.”

I know the look I’m giving her right now is one of horror because she gives it right back. “It’s fast, but it’s what was offered—” She puffs her cheeks and blows out a huff of air, ruffling her bangs.

“I offered a lot of things too, Joanie.” I smile suggestively.

“Law baby, we’ve gone over this. *That* offer was sweet, but my kids are older than you are.”

For as long as I’ve known her, I didn’t even know she had kids.

I clench my chest to be dramatic. “You wound me, Joan.”

She tucks her pen behind her ear. “I went on a few dates with your dad about twenty years ago. I couldn’t double dip with his youngest.”

My eyebrows shoot skyward. That’s news to me. “What? You did?” I clear my throat. “My dad?”

I’ve rarely seen my dad out with people he would consider a romantic interest. Most women in this town fell over themselves just to talk to him when we were growing up, but he’s never brought anyone around. I’m not sure exactly where my dad’s tastes lie in the partner department, but I’d like to see him happy with someone. Maybe when he slips into his semi-retirement phase, he’ll have more time to find that part of himself. I can’t hide my laugh. “You said double dip.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Not the point. I’m out of here, and you’re going to be fine. I promise. I have a good feeling.”

“I was also talking about a financial offer. I would have given you over asking,” I shout out, but she’s already moved on to another customer. *Fucking hell.*

My phone buzzes again.

MICHAEL

Why aren't you here yet?

LAW

I'm getting lunch. I worked from home this morning. I'll be there.

MICHAEL

You're acting like a child lately.

LAW

Awesome. Maybe your girl could come be my nanny.

MICHAEL

Watch it, fucker.

Michael went ahead and did the cliché thing and decided to fall for his kid's nanny. They were also friends for years before that, and she had been in love with him for even longer, but I like to piss him off whenever I can. And Grace is easy territory.

I take a bite of my burger and then snap a picture of it. Damn, the food here is some of my favorite. "Joanie, this conversation is far from over."

She drops the check on the table and then looks above me, out the window. "Sorry, sweets, I'm leaving in about an hour." Leaning in, she pinches my cheek.

The truth is, she became a good friend and would listen to me bitch about my family when I needed to vent. She doesn't gossip, unlike most of the people in this town, which always made it tricky to have drama spill outside the walls of my family. People eat up whatever drama we let boil over.

I'm a Riggs. Which means every member of my family is an attention grabber on some level. I tend to snag most of it lately, through blogs that focus on sports and celebrities specifically. I've attracted some attention from the women I've been out with—models, actresses, and a couple of musicians. That, coupled with some of my buddies, who play professional rugby and major league baseball, I tend to have pictures from events floating around the interwebs. There're also my social media posts, which tend toward thirst traps. But at one time, we were just Asher's kids. My father made a name for himself, coming to a tiny town and helping to make it a destination for outdoor sports. He planned on running a respectable storefront with Riggs Outdoor, and now it's a massive brand. He never said that he'd like us to take the reins of it all one day, but I know it would make him proud to see what we've built continue.

My sister, Everly, ditched the family business to pursue her own clothing line. A move that's been felt, but she found what she was meant for. My eldest brother, Henry, followed her shortly after and now has one of the most sought-after restaurants in the U.S. right here in Strutt's Peak. And while my brother, Michael, stuck with the business, he carved his own space here and runs the summer sports programs. He's also joined the pro-climbing circuit in his free time, which is laughable because he has my niece and nephew, Sammy and Miles. I still don't understand when he sleeps. And his girl, Grace, pulls in pro athletes and Olympic-level competitors within our sports therapy clinic.

It's an understatement to say that I'm surrounded by success. And while I'm not flailing, I'm not rounding out the roster when it comes to impressive life choices. I'm the fun one, the funny one. The baby. I killed it in advertising, but I always had wanted to come back to Riggs. I never thought I'd have the opportunity to run the show since I was the youngest, but then everyone in my family found their own successes. So, whenever my father was ready to fully retire, I decided I wanted to take the lead. That was the plan, at least.

My phone buzzes again. This time, it's my dad.

DAD

Showing up late today isn't going to win you any favors. Where are you?

“Joanie, when will you be back?”

LAW

I'm on my way. Truck had issues.

“Time for me to move on, sweets. I'm learning to see the signs when life gives me a new choice. So this one, I'm taking.”

DAD

You just posted a picture of a burger. And the board is waiting.

Shit.

The truth is, I haven't been sleeping well. Or sleeping around either. Since I came back from London last month. I've spent too much time trying to forget about the woman I'm supposed to be edging out of her new role at my company. But instead, the only thing I can do is think about her hands on me. The way she felt pressed against me in that hallway. The way her eyes seared into mine and her words made a lasting impression. Maybe it's that she's the one person I shouldn't think about in any other way than business, but Contessa Costa has messed me up. And now I have to officially meet her, according to everyone else, and I'm trying to remember all the reasons why she's my biggest problem and not my most overplayed fantasy.

Joanie holds her arms in front of her for a hug as I stand. She says to me quietly, “You're a good man, Lawrence Riggs. You remember that. Get out of your own way and see what the rest of us already do.”

“That I'm fucking magical?”

She pulls back and squeezes my forearms with a smile.

And because I'm really great at ruining kind moments, I tell her, "Be smart down there. STIs are real, even when you're pushing sixty, Joanie. No matter how many abs they have. Wrap it up."

She barks out a laugh. "Oh, fuck off, sweets."

Thirty minutes later, I'm pulling into the office, and I realize I overshot what would be considered acceptable for arriving late. The roads were starting to accumulate from the afternoon snow squall so it took a bit longer than usual. Fold that into the morning meetings I took from my home office and then the long lunch. I'm really late.

And now I'm staring at a ridiculous car parked in my usual spot. I pull my truck behind the cherry-red Fiat and hustle into the building. *Who drives a car like that here? In this town. In the dead of winter.* And my back straightens, realizing it's likely *hers*. There were easily two feet of snow plowed out last night, and by the time the workday ends, if another batch of weather comes through, another foot will have easily fallen. That car won't stand a chance.

I always admire the sight when I pull up to the buildings. Riggs Outdoor headquarters outgrew its storefront on Main Street when I was still in college. That's when my dad expanded, and in the decade since, we've taken over this part of the mountain. We transformed four massive warehouses into one space that's divided between our offices—where I spend most of my time—the indoor climbing and gym facility, the sports therapy and spa facility, and then the indoor Olympic training arena. Each building is a key component of our business and it's ever evolving. My dad opened a storefront for winter sports gear and apparel before we were born. I don't think he ever planned for it to turn into the beast that it's become. But it's a beast that I want to run. I'm ready to prove to my father and to the board of directors that I'm exactly who they'll want to step into the role when my old man is ready.

Except there's one small hurdle to getting there. It's why I've been avoiding showing up to mingle and being here for longer than necessary. I already know the comments and questions that I'm going to get.

Boon cuts me off at the lobby, asking, "Why are we getting a new CEO?"

"President," I correct him.

"They called her the interim CEO, so I feel like that's her—"

"Boon, she's not. My dad is CEO. She's just coming in to shake things up."

He holds up his hands in surrender.

"Sorry, man, I'm just getting in later than I planned," I counter. I'm not interested in being a dick to him. He just doesn't know the game that has to be played. They're not going to just hand me the job.

I would have taken a bump from the Head of Marketing to President to hold me over, but I didn't get a say in the matter. I hate how much that stings. I've had my hands in every facet of the business, from research and development to operations, over the past year. Making it my business to learn more about how this ship moves. And while marketing is my sweet spot, I knew I needed to have my hands everywhere if I wanted the seat at the helm.

Of course, where I thought I was being proactive, my father said that I've spread myself too thin. "*You need to focus on your job. Do that. And do it well, then we can talk about what that means long term.*"

Michael, who is perfectly content on his side of the summer sports business, keeps telling me I'm young and I'm just not ready for more. I read between the lines. He's telling me I'm not mature enough. That I'll be in over my head. But I'm thirty-two and "too young" is a bullshit excuse. I still want it. And everyone's doubts only make me want it more.

Barks of laughter greet me as I move toward the office suites. The office is a state-of-the-art space that can rival even

the most beautiful big city offices, but people work at open-space desks, couches, and lounge areas to increase creativity. On top of that, no one wears much business in the business casual dress code. Especially in the middle of a snowstorm happening outside. Which in our stretch of Colorado happens pretty often.

When I view the central conference room, the board meeting that was supposed to start at 4 p.m. looks like it's kicked off early. *Shit.*

I push the door open and take a quick survey of the room. It doesn't look like a meeting is starting early. It looks like it's wrapping up. What. The. Fuck.

"Law," my dad shouts and waves me to the semi-circle he's huddled in, where another bout of laughter echoes around the table's front half. As I make my way around, I shake a few of the board members' hands, and that's when I see her. My heart rate kicks up just by looking at her. She's fucking stunning. Even more so in the light of day. I knew the short blonde hair was a wig. When I got the details about her back from my investigator, the pictures of her had shown a woman with long dark hair. It's what I was looking for at first. Today, it's pulled back into a low knot. I'm a sucker for long hair, and I immediately picture what it would look like wild and out of place. How it'd feel to dig my fingers into it and use it to pull her close so those beautifully plush lips can wrap...

I pinch myself through my pocket. That train of thought isn't going to get me anywhere good. I know that. And I'm in so much damn trouble, because being professional is the only option for getting through this interim bullshit. I know more about her than I'm sure she would be comfortable with, but at this moment, all that disappears. The details of who she is, where she's been for the past year since she left Manhattan, and what she's been doing in London. I should only be looking at the polished princess dressed in a power suit swooping in and stealing what's mine. Instead, I see the woman I met at that play party. The version of her who's below this boardroom surface. I'd have done it differently if I could return to that night. Follow her and finish what we both started. Maybe I'd

be able to move on if things hadn't been left that way. I don't want her here, but holy fuck, do I still want her. Now I have to pretend like I haven't been thinking about her and dissecting everything she said that night.

I clear my throat and try to knock myself back into reality. She's disrupting my plans. Stepping into a job I've been working toward for too damn long. I stop staring momentarily and look around the room—all eyes are on her, which isn't surprising. She's the shiny new toy that everyone wants to impress.

My father's voice interrupts.

“Law, you're here. I didn't realize you'd be able to get back from the excursions in time.” He gives me a look, and he didn't need to do it, but he covered for me. The fact that I've slacked here sinks my stomach. I've let him down. Again. “I'd like you to meet Contessa Costa.”

“Ms. Costa,” I say, nodding at her.

“You already know this, Son, but she's here to help us push forward. Hit some new milestones.”

Hiring the daughter of our largest competing sports brand? Yeah, that'll shake things up a bit. Not to mention, she was married to the current CEO of said company. It's a ballsy move, but I know my dad. He's thought this through. He has a plan, and I'll bet it runs deeper than the optics of a competitive advantage. I just don't know hers.

“For the next year, and possibly longer...”

Hah! Not a fucking chance.

I didn't say it out loud, but my response to that must be written all over my face, because he says, “She's here as interim CEO.” He looks at me hesitantly, as if I haven't heard him telling me this for months. I'm not worried. She impressed him somewhere along the way, but she never made it very far at her last company. It had to be for a reason and I'm banking on her lacking abilities to peek through sooner or later.

She stands and holds out her hand as she moves closer. “Law. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Oh, we’ve met. You know that. I look down at her hand. She wants to play this off.

“I’ve heard some excellent things about the excursion program you’ve been testing. You’ll have to fill me in on how you’re building that out.”

Those big blue eyes meet mine and they knock me back momentarily. It’s my first time really seeing her. No masks. At least not the kinds that can be easily removed. Her beauty is obvious, but there’s more. She has a presence; even in her short stature, she takes over the room. The confidence that ripples off of her, the way I have this urge to make her smile at me, it’s overwhelming. Like it would be a personal triumph to earn that from her. But her extended hand, and the way we both know she’s met me before, forces my armor forward. I want to fuck with her. Just a little. See if I can make her squirm.

I give her my best, most charming smile. The kind that comes right before a jab.

“Ms. Costa, you must be forgetting that we’ve met before.” I look at her hand again and don’t move to shake it right away. Instead, I keep my hands in my pockets. She stops her movement, and for a brief moment, the look on her face is the fastest transition from frightened to ferocious, as she must be internally screaming every threatening word she can think of.

I wonder if it’s in Italian.

She drops her hand from hovering between us. “I’m sorry, you’ll have to remind me. I’ve met so many people over the past year.” She smirks, as if insinuating that there are *plenty* of people she’s met in the same way.

I fucking doubt that.

“Was it an industry event or a *show*?” I brush my thumb across my lip. “Oh, maybe it was the X-Games a few years ago. When you were still with your husband’s company.”

“Ex-husband. And it’s my father’s company. Technically.” She doesn’t hesitate to correct me.

“But no longer yours. Because you’re...here now?” I look around the room. Everyone knows her background and where she was prior. The fact that she’s not only left her family business, but came here, to their largest competitor, is audacious and disloyal, if I’m being honest. But nobody asked me. *That’s* why I have no interest in being accommodating to her arrival. She’s swooped into a role that she hasn’t earned, and I’m not convinced she won’t drop this one for whatever self-serving purpose she might have for being here.

“That’s right,” she says in a clipped tone. I’ve struck a chord. “Will this be a problem for you?” She smiles, but it’s not the kind I want to see. It instantly pisses me off, dripping with sarcasm and meant to shut me up.

“Not a problem. Just seems like a conflict of interest. I’m curious how we got you out of your non-compete.”

My dad claps his hands. “Alright. I’ll let you two carry on with the interrogation once we finish up here.”

But Tessa intercedes. “I never signed a non-compete. That’s how. They never expected me to leave.”

Well, I suppose she got me on that one. I tilt my head. “But you’ve signed one here?”

She lifts her chin, and I have to hide my smile. She’s not interested in backing down from me, even in front of an audience. “That’s between HR and me, but if it’ll make you feel better, Riggs, yes, I did.”

Dad cuts in again, “I think that clears it up then.” He gives me a glance, one that my dad uses often. The one that says, “*Shut it and act like an adult.*” Moving along, he holds the door to the conference room open. “Tessa, I’d like for you to tour the new Olympic facility before we reconvene for drinks and dinner. Michael?”

My brother stands and pockets his phone. I’ve been ignoring mine buzzing like crazy in my pocket. He gives me his typical judgmental glare. *Yeah, I know I was late.*

“Michael is going to test out some of the new equipment, and Grace, our Director of Sports Therapy, will talk with us about the recovery and physio programming that we’ll roll out this spring.”

“Excellent,” she says, smiling. I watch her tuck her laptop into an oversized bag, and then glance my way with what looks like a glare.

The rest of the board makes their way into the hallway, moving on to the dog and pony show that they’re calling a “tour.” I realize she’s staring at me and, for some reason, the daggers she’s shooting my way give me a little thrill.

“Ms. Costa,” I say, finally extending a hand to shake.

She grabs my hand and grips it tight, giving it a little tug. With her smile intact, she says, “I’ve had a lifetime of men thinking they have the upper hand over me, so when I tell you that I’m not interested in whatever game you’re playing, I mean it.”

“Testy, testy,” I tsk with an easy smile of my own. “I have no interest in gaining an upper hand over you.” I shrug. “If we were talking about getting over or under, I do prefer women on top.”

“That’s cute.” She huffs a laugh that’s devoid of humor. “Predictably condescending and borderline sexist. I thought I left that behind.”

“Surprised it didn’t earn me a curse word.” I quirk a brow, which she mimics with a shake of her head.

“I have plenty of big words for you. Many you may not understand, so I’ll keep them simple.” She looks down my body and up again, meeting my eyes. “We both know you’ve never been with a woman. Plenty of girls, from what I hear, but not women. And you can pretend all you want to not appear rattled by me being here, but I see it.” Even though there’s not an ounce of desire in her gaze, it doesn’t matter. Her eyes on me feel too damn good. “You want to hit below the belt? I’ll hit you right back. The difference is, it’ll hurt you

more than me. I'm used to people underestimating me, the same way you've been overestimating your place here."

And with that zinger, she strides out of the room, and as I turn to watch her go, I'm smiling. Like an idiot, because she just verbally spanked me, and I've never been more turned on. I pull out my phone, already knowing that there are plenty of messages from my brother waiting for me.

MICHAEL

You're shitting me.

You know her. Holy fucking hell, Law. Did you fuck her?

Is she the reason why you've been so off lately?

I'm watching you look at her as if you want to rip her head and clothes off.

Get it together, little brother.

You're so fucked, aren't you?

Yup. You are.

I'm not going to respond. Because he's right. My focus should be on getting her out of town and taking over her role as soon as possible. Not on going toe-to-toe with her about when we met and all the ways I want to finish what we started that night. I'm fucked.

Tessa

“I THINK WE CAN ABSOLUTELY REACH OUR SALES GOALS AND build brand recognition internationally if that’s the bigger picture goal this year. Law may be overzealous with the marketing spend, but—” I shift my eyes across the round table and find him scrolling through his phone, yawning. But the mention of budget and his name gets me a flicker of attention “—I have some ideas about how we can spread the budget more efficiently and perhaps get out of the same loop that all the other sports brands are doing with their branding.”

Asher takes a sip of his drink. “I like where your head is at, Tessa. A fresh perspective is exactly why you’re here.”

I look to the other four board members nodding in agreement. It’s been a long day. Between a full day of traveling and having to be “on” since I arrived, I’m surprised I’m still standing. Never mind, charming this crowd. But I trust Asher. So when he suggested we grab a bite for dinner to stroke some egos and coddle those that were apprehensive about my hire, I stifled the exhaustion and found a second wind.

“Let me work on some ideas I’ve been playing around with regarding industry shifts,” I say with a smile. “I can present them to the company and see what the collective group might think.”

I know Law has a marketing plan ready to roll out. My guess is that it's exactly what I'm assuming. A play to gain pro-athletes' endorsement of the brand. Then adjust marketing and creative around whomever we can land. It's tired. Boring. And exactly what I left behind. I have no interest in doing the same thing, just at a different location.

Asher tilts his head toward his son, who is finally pocketing his phone and focusing back on the table filled with his colleagues. "Perhaps you and Law might work through these together. Ideally, I'd like you both on the same page in our next meeting."

Law barks out a laugh. "Dad, that's not going to work. Marketing already has a plan. We'll present it and see how it stacks with what Ms. Costa has been playing around with." His lips lift with a devilishly handsome smile. It distracts me for just a minute, lifting my guard slightly before he raises it right back into place. "You all may have all been persuaded into believing that she's here to shake things up or push us forward." His eyes flit over to me. "Maybe it'll piss off the competition. But that type of pettiness isn't going to boost sales. And I'm not convinced she's fully capable of reworking an entire marketing and branding campaign, which will inevitably create more work for us in the long run."

That. Son. Of a...

I smile, because nothing stings more than a smile that comes in response to an insult. Instead of reacting with what I'd like to say, I focus back on Asher. The look on his face reads as frustrated. Perhaps even embarrassed that his son doesn't filter his words. Or the lack of maturity in thinking it's going to make him look anything less than petty that he'd want to throw down during a casual business dinner. If I'm starting to understand what's happened and why Law isn't sitting in my role right now, it's because he likes being in charge but is rarely willing to pivot. It's a mentality that keeps people from leadership, or at least leadership that's been earned and maintains respect.

"Whenever you're ready, my calendar is open to discuss the concepts I mentioned."

His shoulders shift up like he finds that amusing. It wasn't a funny suggestion. Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls his phone back out, his fingers typing and scrolling. If his reputation is accurate, then he's shifted focus to his after-dinner plans, likely with the number of leggy blondes he's typically photographed alongside. His attitude screams pouty man-child, which is nothing like the man I encountered in London. Maybe I should be relieved.

Michael excuses himself from the table and shoots me a small smile as he passes behind Law's chair. I'll take that gesture as a win from the quiet Riggs brother.

Asher and the rest of the team start talking about the heli-skiing adventure they had done the day before, thankfully taking any attention away from the friction now taking up space among our group.

I've decided I am not interested in placating the one person I'll never admit I wanted to see. I had hoped I'd have an ally in him coming on board, but it seems like he's nowhere near that camp right now. And I don't want any blurry lines left between us. I need to be crystal clear with him. If he's going to be difficult, then I'll be happy to meet him there.

I get up, toss my napkin on my chair and walk around to his side of the table.

His fingers stop moving. He knows I'm coming for the empty seat to his right because he kicks it out for me—*such a gentleman*.

I sit, cross my right leg over my left, tug my skirt down so it doesn't ride too high, and lean toward him. "Riggs, I'm going to be really transparent with you."

He doesn't meet my eye, but instead leans forward, picks up his glass, and sips the dark caramel-colored liquid. "I'm listening, Ms. Costa. I love a good transparency warning."

Such a prick.

The sarcasm dripping from his words has me clenching my fists. I didn't want to be easily rattled by entitled men anymore. But here we are. Plans ruined by one should-be

harmless, arrogant playboy. But I can dish it right back, so I pluck the glass from his hand and finish the shot that's left. I keep my focus on placing the now empty glass back on the table and say, "I know nothing about you. The same way, you know nothing about me. Bringing attention to the first time we met is unnecessary, but I have no embarrassment about how I choose to live my life, just so we're clear. So any threats you may have regarding that do not affect me." Before I can take another breath or gauge his reaction, he's speaking. Like he's been waiting for this.

"I know you're here in a job you haven't earned. And I have every intention of making *that* transparent to every single person around this table." He leans closer to me, and as much as I despise how he nearly brushes my cheek with his, it still makes my skin heat and my stomach drop. "But you know plenty about me. I'm guessing you've done your homework. How many videos have you watched of me, Ms. Costa?"

I finally turn my head at that and stare at his annoyingly blue eyes, then at the small laugh lines around his mouth. A mouth that shouldn't be this enticing. I uncross my legs and watch his attention flick to them before meeting my gaze again. *We can both play this game.*

"I have zero interest in watching videos of a grown man getting half naked, working on snowboards, and pretending it's for work and not attention."

"You like the snowboarding series, then?"

Shit.

My face gets hot, and I do my best to keep an unaffected expression, when inside I'm silently kicking myself for watching incessantly over the last month as he reworked snowboards shirtless, jumped rope in nothing more than mesh shorts and sneakers, and chopped wood like he was some kind of rugged lumberjack and not the smug businessman he is so clearly playing now. I'll give him props; he goes all-in on his tasks.

"The way your neck," he says quietly, huskily, as he leans toward me, "and your cheeks just turned a nice shade of pink,

I'm guessing you've been obsessing about me since London."

I smile. A slow-growing, tight-lipped smile. "You think so highly of yourself. It's a nice quality, self-esteem. But I didn't think about you until today. When you so rudely strolled into a meeting when it was already over." My mouth is far too close to his, but I'm not about to back down from this game of proximity chicken he's playing. "Your presence in London was an odd coincidence, but I forgot about you as soon as I left and found myself exactly the type of evening I was hoping to."

The smirk that played across his face drops at my last comment.

Got you.

I stand and meet the group at the front bar where they've migrated. It's the perfect time for me to leave. I hadn't planned to make it personal again, but if he wants to go there, then fine by me. I'm not about to be walked all over ever again.

"Ms. Costa?" he calls after me. "I don't know your tells just yet, but I will. And I have a feeling once I do, I'll discover that you just lied."

I turn back toward the bar and keep walking. Even though I'd like to flip him off with two very enthusiastic middle fingers, I refrain. Now it's just clearer than ever that things need to remain professional. I've never wanted to punch, kiss, then flip someone off all within ten minutes' time. And the only way I'm going to avoid all of those is by avoiding spending any extra time than necessary with him.

No more dinners like this where he's involved. I'll only interact with him at the office and I'll keep it minimal. I need to make what I just said true. Forget about the uneasiness that night left me in, and focus on finally being where I want to be—confidently in charge.

Tessa

FAKE IT. I'M GOOD AT FAKING IT. I PROMISED MYSELF I'D STOP faking things, but here we are, the first day in my new town—new life—and I'm already so deep into faking it that now I have to convince myself that I won't freeze to death inside this Polly Pocket-sized car. Which is embedded in a quickly growing snowbank as beeping and flashing lights assault me.

I smack the steering wheel with the heel of my palm.

“Snow tires, my ass,” I mumble to myself. I knew this car was a ridiculous choice, but I needed to get to the office after my flight delays, and a rental was the only way to get around. The cute red Fiat was exactly what I wanted and also the only thing left that I could afford, but it's not meant for this weather. I'm smarter than this. I push my head back against the headrest and take a deep breath.

Okay, you can fix this.

I look around the car. Everything fell out of my purse and work bag. One of my suitcases busted open. I have underwear on my dashboard, books spilled onto the floor, and fuzzy socks all over the passenger seat.

I see my phone in a pile and think for a minute about who I could call. Normally, it would be my father if it was car related, but that's no longer an option. My sister is in another country. I don't have a towing service membership. I don't

think this warrants an emergency 911, but do I call the police or the fire department? I pump the brake and hit the ignition button, but nothing happens other than every light on the dash blinking. It's quiet, and if I don't come up with a plan very quickly, then I'll start panicking.

Okay, it'll have to be 911, but just as I hit the green icon, the *blip blip* of a police siren has me looking up and out of my rear-view. Bright headlights and flashing red and blues blind me. And, of course, he leaves them on. Like I'm a perpetrator of some kind when it's the damn snow that's assaulted my car. The knock on my window comes with a flashlight shining into my eyes.

"You alright in there?" the officer yells. I can't roll the window down, and when I try to open the driver's side door, it won't budge. I must be wedged in here. It was a slow-motion 360 and a soft bump into a snowbank. Or so I thought.

"The windows won't roll down," I yell back. "The door is stuck. Can you dig me out?"

I wipe the fogged window, but it doesn't do much good. He's crouching down to hear me, and I can only see his eyes and a jacket with an embroidered Sheriff's badge on the left side of his chest. When he stands up, I'm at eye level with the gun holstered to his hip.

He takes another minute to walk around the car. As he comes back to my side, he yells, "Unlock it, then open the trunk if you can."

It doesn't automatically open when I hit the button, but he gets it open from the outside, and a freezing gust of wind rolls through the car, making me suck in a breath. I see my puffy coat on the floor and throw it on quickly, then twist my body to make my way through the short length of the car and out of the trunk.

"Thank you. Oh my gosh, thank you, Officer."

"Not a problem, ma'am. Let's get you where you need to be, and I'll have Jonas head up here to tow this thing out once the squalls stop. Should be in a few hours," he shouts over the

wind that kicks up the snow around us. I can't tell if it's still snowing or just windy and drifting what's already fallen.

It takes me longer than him to make it to his truck. Once I'm inside, I look down at my feet, which are now burning from the wet and cold. I'm still wearing my pumps from the office. Novice move. I should have commuter snow boots. I know better. But today was long and exhausting. I didn't have a minute to breathe—my flight was delayed, then once I picked up that red death trap, I found the office and held my breath, knowing I was going to see Law. Then there was dinner. Now this. I'm tired and feeling a little defeated.

“You okay? I don't see any cuts or bruises, but did you hit your head?”

I laugh and shake my head. “Probably. But not from that. It was a slow skid and then a thump into that snowbank.” I point to the mess.

Inside, the police truck is warm, and it smells like peppermint. The officer removes his hat and winter face mask, and my breath catches in my chest. *Jesus, what's in the water here?*

“Do you want me to take you to the ER to get checked?”

“Not needed. But thank you.”

He hits a few keys on his tablet that's propped on the center dashboard and says, “You must be here on vacation?”

“No. I live here. Just moved. Today, actually.” Wow, words are hard.

“Well then, welcome to Strutt's Peak, Miss...”

“Costa. Tessa. Tessa Costa.” I roll my eyes at myself.

“Ah, yes. Miss Costa. I've heard about you,” he says as he backs the police truck out.

“Oh?” That has a nervous laugh bubbling out of me.

He flicks his attention to me and smiles. *Holy hell.*

“Small town. And I'm close with the Riggs family. I've known about you for a while. Ash mentioned you when he

returned from New York about a year ago. He was hoping you'd eventually call him. End up here." He looks back at me, with a wave of his hand at my snow-covered car. "Well, not here. But you know what I mean."

I smile at hearing that. The kindness that Asher's shown me still feels overwhelming. And I feel undeserving of it.

"You didn't hear that from me."

I shake my head. "Nope, the secret is safe, Officer?"

"Sheriff Muldowney. But I'm not technically on duty right now. So it's just Callen."

"Hi. And thank you." Leaning forward, I hold my hands in front of the warm air coming out of the vents. I look out the window, and the dark sky has a deep purple hue, but mostly, all I can see is white. "Callen, I could use a ride to my new place, and then I can always figure out what to do about the towing in the morning."

"Not a problem, Tessa. What's the address?"

I pull it up in my phone, and he smiles at me when I show it to him. The man's teeth are perfect. His dimple digs into his cheek deeper every time he smiles. "Oh, yep, I know the place."

A twenty-minute, slow-paced drive later, we pull up a short driveway that splits into two. Mine is on the left, positioned in front of a single garage and walkway that leads to the front door and curves around to the back. A wave of contentment passes through me just by seeing it. A place to call mine. There hasn't been anything that's been mine. I may not own it outright yet, but I will.

This wasn't the most conventional way to find a home or a new job. Hell, even a life do-over, but when I spoke with Asher almost a year after he offered me his place in London, I was ready to get a jumpstart on my own life. And I knew it was coming, but he made me an offer to come on board at Riggs Outdoor, a step into the kind of job I knew I was more than capable of doing. We both knew it would cause massive disruption, but I was ready. I am ready. A career that I can

cultivate and a life that isn't based on anything other than hard work and smart decisions. No more favors and family friends to handhold. No more sitting in the wings as men stepped over and above me.

“Wow. This is much nicer than what I had expected.”

“The previous owner, Joanie, did you meet her?”

“Just over the phone.” I don't tell him that Asher helped me find it. Made it a part of my signing bonus. “She was really accommodating for moving out so quickly. I expected to have to stay in a hotel for a little while, but she was eager to travel. Or so she said.”

“This is a prime location with the ski-in, ski-out feature. Not too many properties have that mountain access.”

I look at him and smile—I have no idea what that means. And my face must say that loud and clear, because he laughs and says, “You can ski or board right onto a trail from the back.”

“Ah.” I nod. “I don't really ski.”

His eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. “Tessa, I guarantee that you will. And your neighbor...” He shakes his head and smiles. “He'll push you to do it.”

I smile politely. “I'm not interested in being pushed anymore.”

Callen nods, offering an apologetic smile. I think he understands what I'm saying, even if it's not loud and clear. “He's a good guy. A bit over the top, and this place definitely shows it. This is the nicest block of cabins on our mountain. He's made sure of it.”

The cabin is much larger than I thought it would be, but I suppose that's the risk I took by saying yes before I saw it in person. A cabin sounded cozy. Compact. But this is modern, with its dark, planked siding and cable railings that surround the upper-level balconies. The uplighting that shines through the rounding mounds of snow make it appear cozy, but it's substantially more house than I expected.

“When do your movers show up?”

I pull out my phone and look for the email with the code to get in.

“No movers. Everything I have is in the back of your truck or tucked in that snowbank we just left.”

He laughs. “You’re serious?”

“Yes. I was living abroad for the past year. And everything I accumulated before that, I left back in New York.”

“So it’s a fresh start then?”

“Yes,” I say on an exhale. Before I open the door, I smile at him. I spent the last year mostly alone. I wanted it that way, unless I was craving a certain kind of company. I mostly spent my days trying things I hadn’t before, reading, even cooking. But now, a fresh start feels like a way to build the life I want. One that looks different. Maybe even with relationships that aren’t transactional. Every friend I had, with the exception of my sister, was either connected to my ex-husband or consisted of nothing more than surface level brunches and advantageous charity events.

“I have the morning off tomorrow. If you’d like, I can swing by around nine and bring you to the body shop?”

“You wouldn’t mind?” I ask, surprised at how nice the offer is.

“Not at all.”

If this is what small-town life is like, then I might not be the city girl I thought I was.

“That would be great. Thank you.”

“Let me grab your bags for you.”

I stop him. He’s already done enough. “I’ve got ’em.” I look down at my thawing feet, and he must follow my train of thought, because he reaches back and pulls a pair of work boots from behind his seat.

“These are going to be way too big, but they’ll be better than those.” He nods to the wet and cold patent leather

Louboutins in my hands.

He's right; they're huge, but I'm not going to turn them away. They'll keep my feet dry for the next fifty feet between the passenger seat and my front door.

I lace up the boots and open the door, draping my two bags on my shoulders. "Thank you again. And it was nice to meet you, Callen," I say, but before I shut the door, I lean back in. "Oh, I didn't ask. Who's my new neighbor? Your friend."

"He's really more like my brother. And you already know him if you were at Riggs today."

My stomach tightens, readying for a punch, because I have a feeling I know who he's going to say.

"Law Riggs."

Law

“THERE ARE PLENTY OF WAYS TO ADD LUBRICATION,” I SAY AS I glide my hand across the surface of our newest high-end snowboard. “But this is one of those scenarios where wetter isn’t better.” I wink at the phone and laugh at my joke. Because really, I’m talking to an audience of...okay, wow, about two-thousand people watching this LIVE right now. Those are pretty decent numbers for me. Let’s see if I can boost it if I get rid of my shirt.

I pull my Henley from behind my neck and over my head. It’s warm enough from the fireplace going in the corner of the room, despite the weather outside. My phone is stationed on a tripod a few feet away from the sawhorses I have my snowboard on. With the snow and moonlit mountain behind me, it’s the perfect backdrop for these how-to videos. I never planned on them delivering a decent revenue stream for us. I started out of sheer boredom, and then figured I’d join the thirst trap parade and show off the body I work hard to maintain. It boosts my views, which expands the audience and brings more attention to my family’s company.

“We’re going to add a hot wax and then scrape, getting everything from last season off and ready for this season. But we’ll remove our bindings first. Let’s try the step-in bindings we just rolled out and see if they keep as good of a hold as the buckles.”

I look at the tablet to my right with a chat open from the live video, and there are plenty of responses. “Looks like LunaTink84 wants me to remove more than the bindings.” Grabbing the screwdriver, I start loosening them. “HarrisonForward69 said—” I bark out a laugh. “Okay, in the mildest way possible, he’s suggesting I lose my pants. I think I’ll keep my pants on tonight, but maybe we’ll do a pants-off dance-off when I show off the new hand and head warmers that will be restocked later this month.”

I have zero apprehension about being objectified in these videos. It builds up the brand. Regardless of what my brothers think. Or anyone, for that matter.

It’s also a total departure from my day. I’m trying to ignore the fact that I messed up. Missing the board meeting all because I was trying to avoid seeing a woman was not a good look. It wasn’t my finest moment, and I’m still pissed at myself for it. I won’t win any votes at running the brand if I keep doing shit like that. I know better. Then dinner. I hate that it has me smiling, seeing her feathers ruffled. *Fuck, did I like pushing her buttons.*

She charmed the entire board with inquisitive thoughts about brand growth and the unique things that Strutt’s Peak offers. By the end of our dinner, I was so riled up by her being there that I was trying to find anything to distract me from staring at her. She’s taken what I want. Everything I said to her, no matter how much it may have stung saying it out loud, is true. I’m not convinced her being here is anything more than a way to get back at her ex-husband. That doesn’t sit well with me. I won’t be anyone’s pawn or allow my family’s company to be collateral damage. Tilting my neck, I shake out my shoulders. The whole thing has me so damn tense.

I wrap up the social live event an hour later, and when I check the click-thru rates from what I was working on and compare them to our direct sales, it’s an excellent percentage.

The clock on the microwave reads one-thirty a.m. I drag my hands through my hair, letting the exhaustion seep through. But then when I hit the switch for the lights downstairs, I catch an entry alert on the home hub system.

Looking outside, I see that the snow is still falling around the exterior lights. An intruder would have to be completely stupid to try to burglarize anywhere in this weather.

I hope it's not an animal. Plenty of moose and bears are up this way, but smaller animals aren't usually coming out in weather like this. At night, no less.

Joanie had better not have left anything open in her cabin.

The open concept of both cabins gives a direct line of sight into the connecting shared space that I've dubbed "the fun room." I don't see any movement around the dimmed blue lighting that's edged into the crown molding. But then headlights shine and move, backing out of the driveway. *Strange.* I look out the back windows. There's nothing I can see from here. It could have been the snowplows making their runs. And the heavy winds could have activated the alert.

But something has me looking back again, just before I make my way up the stairs to my bedroom. It's dark, but my eyes have adjusted, and I can see someone there. My stomach sinks for a minute, and I run through my options. It's going to take too long for the police to show up. I could call the sheriff directly.

Taking out my phone, I pull up the cameras I've placed throughout the space. Might as well see what I'm dealing with and if this is a hide-and-wait situation or a get-in-there-and-threaten scenario.

"This has to be..." I breathe out as I take in the image of the assailant. Short, soft curves, no visible weapon. "...some kind of joke." There's no way she's breaking and entering, which means only one thing. Contessa Costa is my new neighbor.

I open my connecting door, but the sound of the filter from the lap pool on the far side of the room drowns out the noise it should have made. She doesn't turn around. I watch her move around the edge of the room for a few moments, looking for the light switch. She won't find it on a wall. It's a touchpad on the stairs she waltzed down from. There's nothing wrong with having a little bit of fun. She damn near had me reevaluating if

I should install a panic room in this place or purchase a taser. *Maybe both.*

She says to herself. “I thought this was a cabin... What did I get myself into? A pool?” She stands in the room with her hands on her hips, trying to study the amenities that come with this spot. With only the dimmed blue hue and the light from her cabin spilling into the space, I can see she’s still wearing her clothes from earlier today. The only sign that she’s even slightly relaxed is that she’s barefoot. I don’t fully understand why I like that she’s so short. “It’s a lap pool. And yeah, the place is technically categorized as a cabin.”

She stops moving, her body going rigid, but she doesn’t turn around.

So I keep talking. “Couldn’t stay away?” I move down the steps. “I have that effect on people. I’m happy to show you—”

She shakes her head, effectively cutting me off, still facing away from me. “Nope,” is all she says, and then she’s moving back the way she came and up the stairs to her place.

I couldn’t help but laugh because that was not what I expected her to do. I liked the idea of startling her as she did to me back in London. Maybe jump at being caught off guard. But I didn’t even get a grumble when she realized it was me.

“That’s it? Just *nope*? That’s not very neighborly, Ms. Costa.”

She keeps walking up the stairs. It’s impossible not to watch her hips tick back and forth like a metronome that’s hypnotizing me. It’s been a minute since I’ve slept with anyone. Before I met her, now that I think about it. I’m not that much of a lush about women. I can see someone walking away without packing chub and swaying like a drunk. But here I am, standing in the dark, watching a woman disregard me, and it’s fueling an intrigue that doesn’t seem to want to go away. Nobody, especially women, downright ignore me. But seeing her walk away from me for a second time now drives me forward, and I can’t help but push a bit more.

“Is this an unfortunate coincidence, or are you spying on me?”

She stops at the top of the landing. *There we go.*

“I told you this already, but I’ll repeat myself. I understand if you need that kind of assistance.”

I smirk at the jab.

“You’re not important enough for me to think twice about.”

Ouch.

“And as far as spying or trying to gain an upper hand, you’re the one who was just edged out of the job you wanted,” she adds with a bite in her tone. “What am I spying on? How not to be promoted?”

“That wasn’t very nice.” I frown, but even a sad face won’t work on her.

“When did we agree on being nice?”

The mouth on her—she’s got a response for everything. And she’s right, we never agreed on nice. “I was here first. Built the room you’re running out of too.”

She looks around for a brief second. “Figures. It looks like a man-toddler would have masterminded this space.”

Fucking hell.

“Everything in here is high end and meant for entertainment,” I spit back.

“I didn’t even turn the lights on, and I counted four gaming consoles, a full wall that’s empty, so likely there’s a drop screen or massive flatscreen that’ll pop out of the entertainment center. A basketball shooter, Ms. Pacman arcade, and far too many snowboards that are doubling as decor on that wall.” She nods to her right. “And I bet if I look in that fridge more closely, there will be an array of IPAs and energy drinks.”

Stingingly accurate.

“It’s a *fun* room. Everyone, and I mean everyone, enjoys the OLED screen that retracts into the ceiling.”

“I don’t know what those letters mean,” she mumbles, turning back toward her stairs.

“It’s a space for entertainment. It has a wow factor.” I’m frustrated at defending this place, but I can’t help myself. “And IPAs are for a refined palette,” I say in a huff. And I realize I’m the one getting flustered now. *How did she do that?*

“Oh, did I hit a nerve?” She smiles and shakes her head. “Silly boy,” she says quietly.

“For someone who hasn’t thought about me, you sure like to remind me about the first night we met.”

She smirks. And fucking hell, it pisses me off because it’s so goddamn sexy. She’s declaring war without even realizing it.

“I can see you’re having a moment there, so I’ll leave you to it.”

And before I can even respond, her door is closed, and the deadbolt locked.

She’s dangerous. A succubus. I don’t think I realized how much she’s fucked me up until this moment. Every damn time I see her, I can’t make up my mind if I want to piss her off so she’ll dish it back or if I want to spank her peachy ass and fuck her just so she’ll say my name. I need to get my head on straight, because the woman I’m supposed to be outsmarting is the same woman who has rendered me stupid since the first moment she touched me.

This level of mindfuckery has never happened to me before. And right now, I don’t have the luxury of being anything other than strategic if I’m going to get what I want. The problem is, she’s a sweet gesture and a smile away from me forgetting what that might really be.

Tessa

“DID YOU GET A CHANCE TO SEE THE MOUNTAIN YET?”

“I just got here yesterday. And Rina, to be fair, your version of ‘seeing’ the mountain and mine are very different.”

The last thing I need is my sister to give me an earful for not checking out the ski conditions and how I would like winter sports if *I just tried a little harder*.

“How’s your time looking after the qualifiers?”

I have plenty else on my mind, and the only thing to keep my sanity in check is talking to my sister about her life, *not* mine.

“Really good.” She’s quiet for a second, and I know it’s because she never likes to say what she wants to have happen. She’s a firm believer in karma and fate. I think it’s just her being superstitious. “It’s going to happen this year, Tessa. I can feel it. This is the last hurrah, but I know it’s the one I’ve been waiting for. Working for.”

I pull open a few drawers on the kitchen island, hoping some kind of stick or utensil is left behind to stir the sugar at the bottom of my mug. I don’t know what urged me to pocket a few pink sugar packets and tea bags from the office kitchen yesterday, but I’m glad I did. It also makes me feel slightly pathetic.

“I have a good feeling, Rina.” And I do. She’s worked so damn hard to get to where she is. Even with a broken collarbone earlier last year, she’s still managing to smoke the racers who are twenty years younger.

“It’s the last one. If I want that gold, then this is my last chance.”

“I know. I’ll be there to celebrate with you when you do.”

A movement from the connecting “fun room” catches my eye, and I can’t help but watch as Law climbs out of the lap pool, water trailing down his body in what seems like slow motion because the glimmer of the water accentuates every lean muscle. My stomach swoops, I don’t want to dissect why I shouldn’t be gawking, but holy shit. I blink my eyes shut. It’s like I’ve never seen a hot man before. I feel like it just got hotter in here. I fill up a glass of water from the sink. Maybe tea wasn’t a good idea. All on their own, my gaze finds its way back to him. I’m not going to focus on how those swim trunks are suctioned to his thick, toned thighs and provide a very detailed outline of a very nicely sized cock that my hands remember all too well. My fingers skate across my collarbone. If I wore pearls, I’d be clutching them right now.

The fact that there are no blinds or drapes in front of these floor-to-ceiling windows will be a problem. Who has a shared space like this with a neighbor anyway? It’s borderline stupid, except for the infinity lap pool. In the daylight, the view of the mountains makes it postcard worthy. I like the idea of waking up and swimming, being able to see that each day.

“I can’t wait to see you. I miss you, Tessa.”

“We’re going to celebrate with drinks and abs—”

She laughs, which snaps me out of my trance. “Abs?”

I wave at the air to wipe away the visual and to keep thoughts from wandering about what it felt like to touch him that night. “Sorry, I’m clearly not multitasking very well. The hot neighbor is making himself a spectacle.”

“Okay, soooo, I’m going to need more details. You’re not mic-dropping that you have a shirtless hot neighbor.”

“We can talk details in Italy.”

A shiver runs over my arms. With the exception of that brief hot flash, I haven't been able to warm up since last night. I do love winter weather, but after trudging in knee-deep snow in heels, I could do with a hot bath. Of course, it's the one thing this place doesn't have. There's a massive shower, but no bathtub. I look past Law at the lap pool. That'll be my substitute.

“You know Dad is coming? His assistant left me a message requesting a dinner.”

I freeze for a second thinking about my father. I've tried not to since I left. “I know. I figured he would be. You talked to him?”

“Just those few times when he was looking for you. After I wouldn't tell him where you went, he stopped calling. Now I only get random email check-ins about being ready for the gold.”

I exhale and feel how much that stings. Finally, I get how it feels to not be favored by him. Rina's never been his favorite. That was always me. “I'm sorry, Rina.”

“Don't be. Your drama with Dad didn't change my relationship with him; he only called when you reminded him to. I'm the outcast, Tessa. Not you. That ship of disapproval sailed a long time ago, and I've made peace with it.” As much as it sucks to hear it, she's right. “Unless it's an Olympic year. Then I hear more from him, because having a daughter competing makes him and Costa Athletics look good.”

“How's therapy going?”

“Shut up.” She barks out a laugh. “And it's going great. I'm fucking perfect, obviously.”

“Obviously.” I tilt my head back and exhale. It feels good to breathe again. “I need to find a therapist.”

“You do. And you already know this, but Dad is who he is. I'm just sorry I couldn't tell him off after he suggested you forgive that dipshit husband of yours.”

“Ex-husband.”

“Good riddance, asshole.” I smile at how she has no issue with hating him as much as I do. It’s embarrassing what I had to agree to, even though he was the unfaithful one. I’m really hoping that karma is exactly what Taylor Swift and the rest of the optimists in this world promise. If it is, then Maxim Cavanaugh has it coming to him in spades.

A whistle and chime from the home system interrupts, along with a double tap of knuckles on the front door.

“Rina, I gotta go. The hot sheriff is here to pick me up so I can retrieve the car I may have driven into a snowbank last night.”

“Um, what?! See, these are the kinds of things you start the conversation with, Tessa. You’re calling me later and filling me in on abs-neighbor and this hot sheriff.”

We say our goodbyes, and I look up and out the glass doors to find Law staring right back at me, my calming ease instantly veering toward annoying complication.

He adjusts his swim trunks lower, so they hang on his hips, showing off his well-defined V-cut. It’s impossible not to watch him do it. I lick my lips, thinking how much I’d like to look at him for longer than this passing glimpse that I need to play off. I’ve always been exceptional at showing no emotion. So, I give him my best resting *I don’t give a fuck* face and turn on my heel toward the front door where the second most handsome man in this town is waiting for me.

I pull on my sweater, then my puffy coat and hat as I make my way to the door.

“Cal, what are you doing here? Did Ms. Costa already get in trouble?” I hear volleyed across the space, and I roll my eyes to myself.

When I open the door, Law stands on his front steps, hands on his hips, looking equally confident and ridiculous. Still shirtless, with his towel around his neck and boots on his feet. I give him an exaggerated, sarcastic smile when his eyes flicker over to me. The drifting snow and wind are making it

easily in the negative temperatures out here. He must be freezing.

“Taking the new girl to breakfast and to snag her car. No trouble,” Callen shouts back from a few feet in front of me.

Law looks again at me, brows furrowed, pausing for a minute. “Since when are you the welcoming committee, Cal?”

Callen smiles at me and just shrugs his shoulders. “Since now, apparently.”

Law takes a sip from his mug as he leans in his doorway. “Brews & Books?”

“Course.”

“Ms. Costa,” he juts his chin at me, “bring me back a Kouign-amann.” Then he turns to walk back through his front door. “On second thought, make that two,” he adds with a wink, brazenly looking me up and down, like he’s earned the right to look and talk to me like that, then shuts his door behind him.

I don’t fucking think so.

“You’ll get used to him,” Callen says as we trek to his truck. “He’s a good guy. He just likes poking people a bit.”

“Let’s hope not,” I say quietly. “Ah yes, there’s nothing I love more than the idea of getting used to someone’s annoying behavior.”

Callen smiles at my sarcasm.

“And there’s no way I’m bringing him back anything.”

“He’s not nearly as much of an asshole as he pretends to be.”

“I can navigate assholes.”

He barks out a laugh.

“That came out wrong.” I laugh back, scrunching my nose.

“It’s forward, and fast, Tessa, but...”

I cut off his teasing. “I just meant, it’s more the entitled, cocky vibe that grinds at my nerves. Anyway, thank you for

coming to get me.”

“Anytime. I’m not too far from here.”

He’s intensely attractive and nice. The caliber of men who live here is almost laughable. As we drive through the freshly plowed roads, he tells me all about our area of town. His place is just a couple of miles north of mine. A small ranch where he has two horses, a dog, and three cats.

“Where do they go when the weather is like this?”

“I built a barn so that the horses would be warm but still be able to move around. It’s fully heated. The cats tend to go in and out between there and my house. My dog is inside with me. Sometimes, I’ll bring him to the station if I have some long shifts. Law actually pops in and checks on them if I can’t get back for any reason.”

He looks over at me, and when I meet his smirk, I can’t help but smile right back. “What? Go ahead, tell me what you think you know.”

“I don’t know anything.” He laughs.

“But you know a bit about me?”

“I do.” He smiles again, but this time he focuses on the road in front of us. It’s still barely plowed, and with the snowdrifts, it could be dangerous, even in this massive truck. My little car is going to struggle in this weather.

“Is that small-town gossip at work?”

“Nah, nothing like that. Well, not yet, at least. You’re absolutely going to be a topic of conversation, I’m sure.” He glances over at me then. “The Riggs family and I are close. I grew up with them. They were my neighbors. Went to school with ’em. Been a part of their family in some way or another for most of my life.”

I stare at him for a minute, taking in his profile. He’s a bit mysterious. The nice-guy town sheriff with no wedding ring or chip on his shoulder. There’s more than what’s on the surface.

“You didn’t mention a partner.”

He gives me a side-eye and a dimple-popping smile. “I didn’t.”

“Interesting...”

“I’m not that interesting, Tessa, I promise.”

“I doubt that,” I push back.

“But you, on the other hand. The new girl who happens to be working at the biggest company in our small town, fresh from her life in big, bad New York City. That’s pretty damn interesting.”

“Nice pivot,” I tease. I keep my attention on the mountains in the distance, the way the peaks are hidden by the clouds, the gray sky that’s still fluttering out flakes. I suppose it’s still beautiful, even if I can’t see the full view. “I’d much rather talk about what’s ahead instead of what’s behind me, if that’s okay.”

“More than okay with me,” he says, shifting the truck into park. “I don’t offer this often, but I’m a decent listener. And I should also mention that’s not a pass at you. You’re beautiful, but I’m more in the market for a good friendship.”

I wasn’t expecting him to be so matter of fact. But I like it. Honesty. “I’m in the market for the same. Haven’t had one in a long time. Is that what adults do? Just declare they need a friend?”

“No idea, but I’m banking on the fact that you’re new and I can dupe you into it.”

“Persuade me with breakfast.”

“Exactly. And then we can figure out what to do about your car.”

“I wanted something economical and fun...”

“It’s a fun car, but I’d consider that more of a summer-time ride. And you owe Randy a cinnamon bun and black coffee.”

“Randy?”

“Tow truck driver. Woke him up to dig it out this morning. He was cranky, so I told him you’d snag him something from

Brews & Books.”

“I love the name. Tell me it’s exactly what the name says.”

He smiles. “Sure is. Coffees, pastries, teas, and books. But most of the books are romance themed. Some good ones too. A lot of indie authors. They also do microbrews, cocktails...”

“So heaven? You’re bringing me to heaven.”

He laughs again.

It feels good to make someone laugh. To meet someone without them knowing anything about who you were. I spent the last year healing on my own. With company when I wanted it, but no relationships of any kind. Only self-discovery.

I land in at least three feet of snow when I jump down from the cab of Callen’s truck, but the amount of people walking in this real-life snow globe are traipsing around like it’s an average Saturday morning. Maybe here, it is.

There’s a boutique clothing store, a trendy tattoo shop, a florist, and even a small Riggs Equipment storefront. Every shop along this block is open and busy. A snowstorm even remotely close to this in New York isn’t necessarily uncommon. If you live there long enough, they happen maybe once every couple of years. But it’ll usually shut the city down. At minimum, in the morning hours, and most definitely on the weekends when the bridge and tunnel crowd are home in the ’burbs snow blowing their driveways. In Strutt’s Peak, it seems like the whipping winds and muted overcast sunlight are the alarm clock that lets everyone know their day can begin.

It’s refreshing to be somewhere that operates so differently. It’s another reason I’m relieved I said yes.

The bell on the door chimes, but I barely hear when we enter because I’m pleasantly assaulted by a wall of warmth and even more decadent smells. The scent of caramel and coffee is mixed with a vibrant room lined with books and dotted with plush couches and chairs. It’s such a contrast to the outside that’s blanketed in white and gray snow. In here,

splashes of textures and jeweled tones have my shoulders instantly relaxing.

Callen walks ahead of me and joins the line that's only three or four people deep. "Are you in desperate need of coffee or...?"

"I'm actually a tea person."

His eyebrows raise. "Wouldn't have guessed that about you. You give off a dark roast, no creamer type vibe."

I laugh at the assessment, because a year ago, he wouldn't have been that far off. "I'm not very predictable lately." I smile, because I like this version of me so much more, even if we're just talking about beverage choices. I like that I'm different now. And still changing. I didn't like where I was, in a marriage I wasn't happy in, a relationship that was toxic and sometimes abusive, a job that had me riddled with responsibility and nothing to show for it. I was a shell of who I wanted to be. And as much as seeing my husband cheating so blatantly had gutted me, it forced me to feel something again. To stop making decisions about my life based on other people's desires and approval.

"I was a *stick an IV of iced coffee in my veins* person for most of my life, but then I spent the last year in England, and tea kind of just seeps into your soul." I lift my shoulder. "It stuck."

Within twenty minutes, we're biting into flakey croissants infused with vanilla-bean sugar that are the elusive Kouign-amanns that Law requested I bring back for him.

"What do you do on your weekends, Callen? There's likely not a new girl in town you're rescuing regularly. Unless that's your thing?" I tease.

"That might be his thing," a smooth, deep voice behind me interrupts.

Callen's smile takes over his entire face when he looks over my shoulder.

When I turn in my seat, I'm greeted by the polished silver fox that is Asher Riggs. His well-fitting jacket and jeans, snow

hat that somehow makes him appear younger, and tightly trimmed salt and pepper beard surround his warm smile.

“Asher. Hi.”

Is it too over-the-top to think that this town feels like it’s mimicking the Avengers? Specifically, when they’re all called to one location to assemble, but instead of superheroes, it’s dashing handsome men, who are equal parts successful and seemingly kind. I’m so fucking far away from what I used to call home. I love it.

“Looks like you found one of our gems.”

“The sheriff or the coffee shop?”

He laughs, and then a smile passes between Callen and him, one that I recognize. An appreciative smile when you see a person you respect, care about, and maybe even put on a pedestal. He clears his throat. “I’d say both.”

“Were you able to settle in a bit last night? I know you wrapped things late with some of the board,” Asher asks as he sits in the empty chair across from our couch.

I glance at Callen. “My car had a bit of trouble getting me to my cabin, and Callen had to help me out. But yes, I got there. Eventually.” I sip my London Fog and pause. “A heads up about my neighbor would have been nice.”

He gives my lifted brow a coy smile. What are you scheming, Asher? “Are you two having trouble finding footing already?” He takes a sip of his coffee. “Law has a way of lightening things up. I thought you might want some of that when you got here.” When I give him my emotionless stare, he laughs nervously. “But by the look on your face, maybe that wasn’t a good call.”

“He’s not thrilled to have a new boss.”

“If you’d like to talk about relocating, there’re a couple of options at brands I respect that I know will open up come spring. I can ask around for you, if you’d like?”

I think on the offer for a moment. I should take the out. Lessen the complication of being in such close proximity to

Law Riggs and his judgy, smug, disarmingly pretty blue eyes. And his arrogance that shouldn't feel like a sexy challenge, but somehow is. So instead of saying yes, I decide I'll torture myself for a little longer. "I'm sure I'm just overthinking it. It'll be fine."

"If you decide otherwise, then talk to me, okay?"

I give him a smile, nodding yes as I take a sip of my tea.

"I know you haven't settled in yet, but if you're up for it, I'd love to have you over for Sunday dinner tomorrow."

I still feel indebted to him. For all of the things he's done for me. In many ways, Asher Riggs helped me pick myself up and gave me a way to start over again. I don't know how you repay someone for that, but I'll never stop trying.

"I'd love that. Can I bring anything?"

"Just yourself," he says as he pulls out his phone, his attention focused on whatever is there. "I have to run, but Law can give you a ride if you're still having car trouble. See you tomorrow night around six." He points to the sheriff. "Cal, you coming too?"

"I have to work, but I'll catch up with you."

We both watch Asher leave, stopping at another table to say hello to a few people, and then waving goodbye to the kid behind the counter making drinks. He's a presence. They all are, from what I hear. Every Riggs member.

"He knows everybody here, doesn't he?"

Callen leans back in his seat, eyes still on Asher. "He makes it his job to know a little bit about everyone who lives here, yeah."

"And how *exactly* do you know each other?" I ask with a smile.

He takes another sip of his coffee. But he doesn't answer. "It sounds like you and Law have gotten off to an interesting start."

I rest my elbow on the arm of the couch and prop my chin on my fist. “What are you asking, Sheriff? Because I asked if the hot sheriff is more than friends with Asher Riggs, in case I was being too coy.”

He clears his throat as he stands up. “Fair enough.”

As we walk toward the front door, he leans closer to me and says, “You only get details if you’re willing to share some too, Tessa.”

And it’s not that I don’t mind sharing secrets, it’s just that it makes me remember how many had been kept from me.

“Are you even listening, Tessi?” Maxim squeezes my hand tight. “You need to have lunch or some bullshit with the wives.”

“Max, you’re hurting my hand,” I say, trying to pull away.

He grips me tighter. “You’re hurting my chances to get in with the Rombergs. Do you have any idea how much pull they have with professional football? I need to get on the green so I can do my thing. Which means you need to play your part.” As he pulls me behind him into the country club, I wince at the way his face turns sweet at the greeting from the girls behind the front desk. He doesn’t smile at me like that anymore.

Maybe if I was just honest with him, it’d make him less annoyed at me. “I really don’t like the wives. They want to gossip and talk about events they’re hosting. All the time. The last time I asked why they were hosting if they hated it so much, they looked at me like I insulted them.”

“Because you did. They need something to stay busy while their husbands work.”

I smile at the maître d’. “You realize how condescending and sexist that sounds, right?”

“You’re the one assuming they don’t enjoy hosting things. I’m sure some of them work. Stop assuming you know all of them.”

Maybe he has a point. I am being judgmental.

We stand there, hand in hand, waiting to be seated for Sunday dinner at the club. I hate these forced optics. I'd much rather make something at home and enjoy what's left of the weekend before Monday hits.

Maxim gives me a sideways glance. "I know that Midge, Bart's wife, volunteers at a gallery in the West Village."

"Why would you know that?"

But before he can answer, we're interrupted by four women who are just coming in from the tennis courts. Midge is one of them. Two others I've met before, but I can't remember their names. But it's the fourth who has me questioning how I know her. Or where I've seen her before. "Oh my goodness, Tessa and Maxim, how lovely to see you," the tall blonde says.

I must look at her like I'm trying to place her. "It's Bijou. We met last year at the Halloween party."

I remember. That was the Halloween party that Maxim left. The same party that someone had said he left with a woman dressed like a nurse.

Bijou confirms what I thought. "You both were dressed like superheroes or something."

"I was a librarian," I deadpan.

Maxim squeezes my hand tighter.

She looks at my husband, and that's when I see it. The look I'm forcing myself to ignore. The reason I hate these appearances of friendship when all of it is fake.

"What were you dressed as again, Bijou?"

Midge chimes in, "Look, our table is ready. Tessa, you'll have to join us for drinks this Friday. We're hosting a game of bridge here at the club."

"No—"

Maxim interrupts. "She'd love to."

"Tessa? You okay?"

I give Callen a nod, trying to stifle the memory.

“Here,” he says as he gives my phone back. “Text me when you need to be rescued again. I don’t have many people who don’t already know everything about me or what they think they know about me. I really could go for a new friend.”

I look down at my phone to see he’s programmed his name as Callen “Hot Sheriff” Muldowney.

We both smile, and I have a feeling, out of all the things that’ve come out of the last couple of days, the only certainty is that I may have just found myself a new friend.

“I could go for one of those too.”

Law

APPROVAL FEELS GOOD. BUT WHEN SOMEONE IS PROUD OF ME, praises my hard work, it makes me want more. I want to chase that feeling.

My eldest brother Henry and I are finally in a place where we consider each other friends. It wasn't always that way. A lot of stupid choices when we were younger left him blind in one eye and forced him to leave his career in the Air Force. He blamed me for a long time, and I hated him for it, but the funny thing about that much anger and emotion, when you're ready to let go of it, it's freeing. I also don't have the need to seek approval from him or try to tone myself down. My family accepts who I am, but I know I can be a lot. But for some reason, with Henry, it doesn't feel that way. I can tell him things I can't always tell the others.

"You're too fucking slow around those turns, Law," he shouts as his snowmobile slows to pull up alongside mine.

"I'm not about to smoke you, old man. The last time I did, you didn't talk to me for a week. Damn baby," I shout.

"Say that to my face when we don't have a fuck-load of snow and these machines between us, pretty boy." He squeezes the accelerator and takes off, leaving a wake of snow kicking up after him. *Fucker.*

We spent most of the afternoon running down fresh trails that lead right to my place. One of the perks of my place is that it's a ski-in, ski-out property, so I can access our mountain any time I want, whether it's to snowboard, fat bike on trails, or take the snowmobiles out. There are only a few spots in Strutt's with this type of access, which is what makes it prime real estate. Another reason I wanted Joanie's property next door. I lived with my sister and brothers for a few years, but slowly each of them found their partners and moved on until I was left with a massive house I didn't really love all that much. I loved it when they were in it, but after they moved out, it was just a house.

"I heard the board meeting went well on Friday," Henry says as he pulls out two beers from the refrigerator.

He passes one to me, and I take a sip. "I need to tell you something, but you need to let me get it all out before you start grunting at me."

The bottle pauses halfway to his mouth. "I'm going to need the game on and those wings to be ready before I hear about whatever bullshit you've inflicted on yourself."

He turns and heads back up to my cabin, and I pull up the remote for the wall screen and get everything in the room turned on. The surround sound is fired up, with college football running. I also flip on the pool lights, heater, and the hot tub outside. I haven't noticed if Tessa's come back yet, so it'd be nice for her to see this room in all of its glory. It bugs me that her first reaction was that it's ridiculous. Today is exactly the kind of day this room was built for—winter fun outside and then you can come back and enjoy every amenity possible.

"Okay, double dirty wings. This side is the sweet with hot honey." Henry points to the right side of the massive platter of wings he brings in from the kitchen. "That side is buffalo, but I gave it an extra punch." He looks at me. "You might cry."

"That was one time. And you didn't tell me that if I coated the wing in the seeds of the habanero, it was going to burn its entire way through my body."

He laughs at me, and it takes two wings before he says, “So, is this about the new CEO?”

“Interim. But yes. She’s also my new neighbor.”

This time when he laughs, it’s almost uncontrollably. “What the heck happened to Joanie?”

“Fuck if I know.” I take a pull of my beer. “She decided to leave town pretty quickly, and then last night, I’m thinking I’m possibly being robbed or a bobcat found a way to get into this room, but no, it was her. Getting acquainted with her new home.”

He hasn’t stopped laughing. When he finally does, he says, “Ah, yes, what’s that saying again, *‘when the wind is out of the east, it’s never good for man nor beast?’*”

“That’s not everything.”

Leaning back, he readies for what he knows is going to be an earful. I have plenty of tells when it comes to the levels and ways I may have messed up and this one feels equal parts epically stupid and slightly out of my control. “Law, with you, it never is. What’d you do?”

I kick my feet up onto the coffee table.

“Dad and Michael had been talking about bringing in an interim CEO for the better part of last year. I knew it was coming, and I wasn’t focused on all the reasons why they, and the rest of the board, didn’t feel like I was ready for it.”

He clears his throat. “I don’t think it’s just you. I think Dad isn’t ready to hand everything off just yet. And,” he pauses to soften what I already know he will say, “you’re really good in the creative roles, even operations. You know our brand. And you’ve got these big-picture ideas that, quite frankly, scare everyone with a stake in the company.”

“I want this, Hen. There’s nothing that’s going to change that.”

“Okay. Then I’m just going to say it.” I wince. “You act like everyone’s buddy. You slept with a good chunk of people who run the adventures program.” I give him a look. “And you

weren't discreet about it. You're a liability, Law. But you should be more concerned with the fact that people don't take you seriously. You have a lot of leeway, because everyone assumes you're the good-time guy."

Hearing my brother say that hurts. He knows that's not me. Right?

"Geez, Hen. Don't hold back," I breathe out.

"Fine. Then you're lucky you're the son of the CEO, because if this were any other big-named brand with the kind of recognition we pull in, then you would have been excused a long time ago. Great ideas or not."

"That's not true," I argue.

"It is. And you know it."

I rub the back of my neck. I knew some of this. The fact that some of my ideas for the brand are too risky and that I have a very honest outlook on how I interact with people. My openness about sleeping around. But hearing this summary, it stings. And apparently, the reputation I have is that I'm a good time. But not serious. And not built for leading.

"Okay, well..." I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding, and then close my eyes. "I knew they were planning to hire someone externally, and I knew Dad wasn't going to be forthcoming with the information, so I may have followed him to New York a few times."

Henry stares at me, blinking, waiting for more. I can tell he's going to listen, but I'll most likely get a hell of an earful when I'm done.

"And then London."

He doesn't say anything.

"I hired a private investigator and had him look into the common denominator of the two places, and he came back to me with Contessa Costa. So I knew she was going to play a role, but it wasn't until I followed *her* around a bit more and realized that she wasn't in London with her husband. Or her father. In fact, she hadn't spoken to them in months."

He leans forward on his elbows, eyes narrowing slightly. “You’re telling me that you stalked your current neighbor and boss from New York, and then followed her to another country.”

“I mean, I didn’t say it like that.” I tilt my head. “But yeah, okay. That’s what I did. But that’s not all. This is where I actually have a problem.”

He nods, waiting for what else I’m going to say. I shouldn’t be telling him this.

“You can’t repeat this. Especially to G.” I point at him. “Promise.”

“Can’t promise that. I’ll do my best not to bring it up, but if she asks or puts me on the spot, I’m not lying to my wife.”

“Okay, fine. I followed her to a few clubs and a play party, because I was curious about her, and then when I finally got my own invite to this upscale play party, she came on to me. And...”

“Just so I’m clear, we’re talking about Tessa?”

“Yes. Keep up.”

He shakes his head and kicks his feet up too. “So many questions, but go ahead. And...”

“That was well over a month ago now, and I can’t stop thinking about it. About her. And I knew, I knew...” My voice kicks up, but I’m on a rant now, so I keep going. “I knew she was going to be at the company. I knew she was going to be my boss, to a degree.”

He interrupts, “She is your boss, not just to a degree.”

I flip him off.

“But now she’s living next door. And honestly, I don’t see this ending well for me. She pisses me off. I don’t trust that she’s not here as some kind of executive spy to take ideas back to Costa Athletics. She doesn’t think I’m funny, which is pretty ridiculous.” I lift my arms up and flap them at my side, because I don’t think he’s understanding how fucked I am. “And I’m going to try to fuck her. I’ve already been thinking

about how many places I'd like to see her bent over. And I have to call her boss."

He squints at me. "You don't actually have to call her boss."

I ignore him and continue my rant. "Do you know how just the thought of that is giving me a chub. But then, put all of that aside, I'm supposed to figure out a way to outsmart her so I can swoop in and take over the role I know I'll be so fucking good at."

I'm out of breath.

He starts laughing. Again.

"It's not really that funny," I grumble.

He slaps me on the shoulder as he stands up, laughing.

"So what the hell am I supposed to do? Because I want to hate the person sitting in that CEO role. I want to ignore her and show everyone that I'm best suited to run this business."

Henry pulls out two more IPAs, and handing one to me, he says, "I have no idea what you do about Tessa. Maybe don't try to sleep with her? But if you want that CEO job, then you start thinking more seriously about your life. They're not going to appoint someone who looks at life like you do."

What the hell. "How do I look at life?"

"Like it's a joke. Everything is funny or expendable to you. You can be fun and funny without being the joke."

"Just mic dropped that."

"Pretty good, right?" He smiles.

"I hate you a little bit right now, but that's nothing new."

I hear a small commotion and muffled voices. Looking over my head, he waves, his smile growing wider.

"Is that her?"

"Sure is."

I don't turn around. Instead, I let some of what Henry said settle. It would be easy to ignore her presence and just focus

on doing my job. That would be the mature thing to do; I know that. I'm not an idiot. But for some fucking reason, when I look at her and start talking, all I want to do is fight with her. Or rip her clothes off. The second is a bigger HR issue that I don't think will earn me any points.

"Hey, Hen," Cal says. "Have you met Tessa?"

My brother shifts his eyes to me. Don't you fucking say anything, Henry.

"We were just talking about you, Tessa." Traitor. He stands and shakes her hand as she comes around to the front of the couch where I'm sitting.

"Good things, I hope," she says. Her blue eyes catch mine, and I can't help but give her a charming smile.

"Only that you won't be here all that long." I look her up and down, taking in the tight jeans tucked into her snow boots and the puffy black jacket that has her looking less out of place than that skirt and heels in our board meeting yesterday. And while she wore the hell out of that skirt, it's the jeans that are making my throat dry and neck feel warm. She looks relaxed and less intimidating. I don't like how much I like this version of her. Standing in my space, arms crossed, ready to fire back. In goddam jeans and boots.

She gives me a short-lived, tight-lipped smile. "That's very mature." She snaps her fingers and points up at the ceiling like she forgot something and just remembered. "Oh, thank you for the recommendation on those pastries, by the way."

Henry asks, "Which ones?"

"The Kouign-amanns," Cal answers. *Why is he taking her out for breakfast? And why is he still here?*

I give him a look that nonverbally is supposed to read, "*What the fuck are you doing?*"

"Where are mine?" I shift my glare to her.

She smiles all too sweetly this time, and I already can feel it. She purposefully didn't get them. "Oh. You were serious?" She laughs. "You'll need to ask nicely next time if you want

anything from me.” And with that, she erases the fake as fuck smile she had plastered across her puffy lips, and we both just stare at the other. A silent challenge, waiting for me to bite back. Maybe she’s as caught up in this moment as I am. Either way, it ends quickly when Cal clears his throat.

“Henry, we sparring tomorrow before I head to work?”

“Sure thing. You going to be able to make it for dinner?”

“Not tomorrow, but Tessa will be there,” he says, giving her a wink. The fuck was that? I don’t like it.

“You’re coming to dinner?”

She only nods, but the expression she wears is full of condescension. I swear I’ve never wanted to shove someone’s ego down their throat in all my life. I don’t know what annoys me more, the fact that I want to hate it, the snarky tilt of her lips, or that I look forward to pissing her off enough that she’ll dish it right back.

Less than a minute later, Cal has left and Tessa is back in her house, so I pull my focus away from the spot on the floor that I’ve been using as an escape to collect myself. And Henry is smiling at me. The man doesn’t usually smile more than once per day. At this point, he’s met his quota for the week.

I point at him. “It’s not fucking funny.”

He grabs the remote from me and laughs. “Oh yes, it fucking is.”

Tessa

TODAY WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A LAZY DAY. I WAS GOING TO relax and read with a breakfast pastry that I brought home from Brews & Books in one hand and a nice cup of tea in the other while I watched the snow blow around outside. Then, I was going to shop online for a mattress, because sleeping on the floor is already destroying my lower back and neck. I can only turn my head to the left from the kink that feels so tight it hurts to swallow.

I could buy a few sensible outfits for the office with the little bit of money I have left from Rina, but that's going to have to wait. All of it is going toward the comfiest mattress I can find under a thousand dollars. I snort a laugh thinking about how I spent just over twenty-three thousand dollars for the mattress I bought with Maxim right after we were married. How that type of frivolousness wasn't anything out of the ordinary. To buy whatever I wanted for whatever the price dictated. I grew up wealthy and stayed that way for a long time. Until recently. I've never been this destitute. But then again, I've never stood on my own like this. And I'm genuinely happy. Broke, but even more proud of myself. Go figure.

Except at this moment. I tilt my head back and look up at the reddish pink sky, my breath puffing out my visible frustration because it's so damn cold. I remind myself this is

my fresh start. And fresh starts are supposed to be uncomfortable. But my fingers are starting to go numb, and no matter which way I turn these knobs to the double balcony doors, it's not changing the fact that it's locked. I've locked myself out of my own house.

“Shit, shit, shit. SHIT!”

The balcony off the bathroom has no stairs to climb down, and I have no idea what the hell I'm going to do.

“Is that a New Yorker's version of sun salutations?” a deep voice calls out, making me yelp as I just about jump out of my skin.

I clap my hand over my chest and grip the knot of the towel that's draped around my body. “Cazzo (*fuck*),” I mumble.

“Not this morning, but it's still early, Ms. Costa. Might need to sweet talk me a little first.”

I refrain from rolling my eyes. I forgot he knows a little Italian.

I turn my head to address the snarky charmer, and if I had been drinking anything, I would have choked on it. He's not wearing a shirt. And I know what you're thinking: so what? It's just a bare chest. Big whoop. But that's not the worst of it. His hair is messy and ruffled from sleep or from running his fingers through it. And he's wearing thin black-framed glasses. Men in glasses are my kind of kryptonite. Add that to the black sweatpants hanging low on his hips, and I've forgotten what I was going to say in response. I close my mouth and swallow as it waters. I hate how good he looks and how much I like looking. I always thought my ex was a good-looking man, his features more severe than what is considered handsome, but I found him attractive when we were younger. Law Riggs is in an entirely different sport, never mind game. It's easier to be annoyed at how equally sexy and boyishly cute he looks standing there right now.

The wind swoops again and snow drifts from the railings to the tops of my thighs.

“Law, you can use my first name. I mean, look at us.” I wave my hand in front of me, up and down. It’s obvious we’re as informal as we can get without being naked with each other right now. This is an awful time for wandering fantasies.

“It’s a helluva morning greeting, you in that towel.” He moves his eyes slowly from my bare legs back up to meet my glare. I work really hard to ignore the warming of my cheeks at that comment. I hate how much I liked hearing it.

“I locked myself out,” I say more loudly than necessary. *Shit, I sound nervous.* I bristle that down and push my shoulders back. “I need you to figure out how to break into my house and let me back in.”

He smiles at me, and it’s a big grin. One that creates crinkles in the corners of his eyes and one that I know is going to be followed up with some comment that’ll piss me off.

I brace for it.

“You’ll have to ask me nicely,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest.

I sigh out a breath, because his smug smile is making me want to smile right back. I bite the inside of my cheeks to avoid that from happening. “Will you break into my house and let me back in?”

“Say please.”

I stare at him from across our two balconies. He’s serious.

Another gust of wind kicks up more snow around me. I’m past the point of being really fucking cold; it’s entering into wet numbness territory for all of my exposed body parts. Which, thanks to this sorry excuse for a bath towel, there’s a lot. I came out here only wanting to see the view. And maybe get a sense of the size of this little outdoor space. Eventually, I’d like to add a heat lamp like Law has set up on his, and maybe even a lounge. I didn’t realize the doors would lock when the wind closed them behind me.

I huff, because I have no other choice. I need his help. There’s no way around it. “Okay, please.”

“I’m sorry, what was that?” He shoves his hands into his sweatpants pockets. What I wouldn’t give to have pants on right now. And pockets.

This situation is ridiculous, and so is that too pleased and too handsome face of his. I mask my laugh by biting my lip and exchange it for an insult, but a small smile still breaks through. “You’re a dick, and I’m freezing.”

“That didn’t sound very sincere, Ms. Costa.”

I cross my arms and try to make myself as small as possible because the wind keeps swirling around me. With every brush of it against my body, I blow out a light breath just to steady myself so I don’t cry. I’ve never been this cold in my entire life.

Only a couple of minutes later, the French doors swing inwards to my bathroom and warm hands pull me back inside as big arms wrap around me. My teeth are chattering, my eyes watering. I’m sure I’m quite the sight. I’ve moved past shivering and right into full body shakes. The cold marble floor feels hot compared to where I was just standing. My slippers are soaked.

He closes the doors behind us, and the warmth feels so good that I need a minute for it to seep in further before I can thank him.

“Are you okay?”

I nod, my teeth chattering. “Ye–yes.”

From behind, he guides me to the vanity. He raises his hands and brushes them up and down my upper arms and across my shoulders, trying to warm up my skin.

“I–I’m good,” I stutter out just as another cold shake travels across my back and through my entire body. The cold escaping or the adrenaline waning, I can’t decide which one is causing me to shake this hard.

“You’re not.” Stepping away, he turns on the shower.

“I’m f-fine. You can l-leave now.”

When he turns back, he grabs me at the waist and lifts me to sit on the counter. “No.”

The ease at which he moves me and tells me no makes my breath catch. His legs spread to the outside of mine as he leans forward and pulls my hands together, cupping them around his mouth. I try to pull them back. “What are you—”

He looks me in the eyes as he blows his warm breath into my palms. I very well may be drunk off the feeling. The man makes me feel a roster of emotions that are a lot like whiplash or, at the very least, leave me without complete control of how I might react.

The right side of his mouth kicks up, just hinting at a smile, when he asks, “What were you doing out there in a towel?”

I just shake my head no.

His voice gets quieter, lower. “You like to say no to me.”

I watch as he blows into my hands again, only this time, his blue eyes move and never leave mine. Why does this feel so good? His mouth near my fingers. I’m not this starved for attention. There’s just something about him that pulls me. It’s the way he doesn’t shy away from looking at me and keeps eye contact. I don’t intimidate him, as he blows and holds on to me with only confidence and contentment. I’m in a fucking trance.

“It’s not a bad way to wake up,” he says between exhales. I think he’s referring to me being outside and having a morning rush of cold, fresh air, but then his voice gets a little deeper. “You swearing out my window in just a towel.”

My foot brushes his leg and the drenched frosty cold must reach his skin through his pants because he looks down and doesn’t think twice about crouching down and taking off each slipper.

He walks the wet slippers over to the sink and wrings them out, placing them on a dry towel once he’s done.

My shaking has slowed to more of a shiver now, and my cheeks are hot from the temperature change. When he returns

to where I'm perched, he picks up my right hand. "Your fingers are still freezing." He looks down the length of my towel, and I suddenly remember that all I'm wearing is a damp Turkish linen towel—at least if it had been a thicker cotton, I'd feel less exposed.

He takes his pointer finger and pushes my right knee gently to the side, giving him just enough space to wedge his hips in between my legs. This isn't how colleagues act. I should stop this. I clear my throat.

But before I can shut this down, he says, "Don't worry, Ms. Costa. I'm only trying to warm you up until your shower is ready."

I sit up a little taller as he cups both of my hands in his again and blows. He smells like mint and deodorant. Woodsy and masculine. This isn't helping. But I can't seem to stop it. I should get off the counter. Push him out of my space. Tell him this isn't appropriate. But I like how he feels near me. I like how I feel when he's this close.

The steam from the shower starts to move closer to where I'm perched. And now the damp air is warmer as it spreads across my arms and neck. It makes his glasses fog up. Without thinking, I pull my hands from his and slide the glasses off his face. I instantly realize my mistake, because we're both still. I only wanted to say thank you and see him when I did it. But neither of us move a muscle, and I'm hyper aware of where his hands fell when I pulled mine away. A towel is the only thing separating his palms from the goosebumped skin on the tops of my thighs. His tongue darts out, licking his bottom lip, and it takes every ounce of sanity to keep from swiping my tongue across the same path. Maybe in a different situation, I could. One where I'm not his boss and he's not trying to edge me out of a job I so desperately want to succeed in.

"Thank you," I say, barely louder than a whisper. I'm not stupid, this moment is dangerous. Instead of leaning into it like every fiber of me wants to, the level-headed businesswoman in me cuts the line. I wipe his glasses off with a piece of my towel, playing off what was just starting to happen. "You can go now."

He leans in, just a fraction of a movement that wordlessly questions if it's what I really want. So I lean away, my back hitting the mirror behind me.

“Is that what you'd like right now? For me to go?”

It'd be so easy to say no. To lean in and taste. To run my hands down his carved chest and his arms. “Yes.” I clear my throat. “What else would I possibly want from you?” I hate the harshness of my words, but this moment needs to pass.

He doesn't linger or push. He gives me one curt nod that he understands, and then backs away. It's obvious that if I'm going to survive this job, enjoy this new life I'm trying to build with minimal drama, then the last thing I need is to get tangled up with the boss's son, the younger neighbor and an entitled slacker who's gunning for my job. At least those are all the things I need to believe about him in order to keep him exactly where he belongs—out of my head and as far away from my body as possible.

He raps his knuckles on the door, slightly startling me out of my daze and internal battery of questions that ranged from “*was that too harsh?*” to “*how would it feel to be fucked by him on that vanity?*”

“You probably want that ride.”

I raise my eyebrows. “I'm sorry?”

He licks his lips, his eyes tracking down my front and back up to meet my eyes again. “To my dad's house. Dinner, tonight.” He smirks. “What other kind of ride would you think I meant, Ms. Costa?”

But before I can say anything back, he leaves with a smile, and I watch him saunter off like he just won a game I hadn't realized I was playing.

Law

“WHY DO YOU LOOK LIKE THAT?”

I drag my hands through my hair. “Like what?”

“Like something serious just happened,” Michael says. “What did you do? Did Grace exclude you from her girls’ night again?”

I don’t tell him that I just had to sit in the car with a woman I’ve been half obsessing over and half trying to figure out how to run out of town. All the while, she stared out the window, ignoring me for the drive, except for when she asked me to turn the heat down. I’m just supposed to forget what happened this morning. Put her lack of clothing aside and how I could practically see the perfect curve of her tits. I wanted to kiss her so fucking badly. And I know...I *know* it’s a bad idea, but I can’t for the life of me seem to care.

I scoff at my brother. “For the record, that was only once that I wasn’t included in the girls’ nights. And now I have a standing invite. I’m a good time.” I wiggle my eyebrows just to annoy him. “I bought us a pottery wheel for when we watch *Ghost* again.”

Michael pops a grape into his mouth, smiling at me. He’s doing that more lately. Smiling. Both of my brothers are much happier and, dare I say, easier to be around, now that they’ve each found their person. “You’re ridiculous, which is nothing new. But, you seem...” He tilts his head to the side, studying me. “*Off*.”

I glare back at his needling. The truth is, I’m all messed up about a girl, but I can’t tell him that. Not when the girl is across the living room, at least.

“Uncle Law, Uncle Law!” my niece, Sammy, shouts as she jumps onto the same chair I’m sitting on. “Can we do a sleepover soon?”

“Course.”

She shouts again in my ear, “Miles, he said yes!”

I look over to where her brother is perched, and like the little ladies’ man he is, he’s convinced Tessa to play a round of ‘Guess Who’ before dinner. I was a little surprised she said yes right away. She wasn’t looking for an out and didn’t placate him with a “maybe later.” Instead, she called the red board and told him she was a master at the game.

My niece and nephew have the same power over me; it’s impossible to tell them no. I’m exceptionally good at winding them up and having a blast, then dropping them home. Michael and Grace are never fans, which is why now they all prefer sleepovers, because then I’m left cleaning up the chaos of my choices. And it gives them a break so they can enjoy some time, just the two of them.

“Can we maybe stop at Sugar Valley, and then do a fort in the fun room?”

“Absolutely.”

“Gracie, can we do a sleepover at Uncle Law’s?”

She quirks her eyebrow at me and smiles. “Does Uncle Law want to do a whole weekend later this month so your dad and I can hitch a ride with Uncle Jack and Aunt Everly to one of those elusive weekend trips they keep flaunting in our faces?”

Everly yells from the kitchen, “Yes, I heard that, Grace. Yes, Uncle Law will take them for the weekend.”

“Seriously, why is everyone yelling and eavesdropping?” Michael asks next to me. “You don’t have to say yes if you don’t want a whole weekend with them.”

I look around at their eagerly smiling faces. How am I supposed to back out of this now? “No way. I got ’em.”

“I can help if you need—” my dad chimes in.

“Thanks, Dad, but I can handle it,” I cut in. I’m capable of handling two kids for a weekend.

“Well, I’m around if you need me. Oh, you need to talk to me about the land down by the falls. I didn’t realize you were

buying it,” he says. And I hadn’t realized he was going to find out about that so soon. Sometimes this small town gets on my nerves.

“Just a side project. Let me get my bearings on it, and then I’ll share what I had in mind.”

He pauses, sipping his drink. “If it’s not associated with the business, that’s fine, Son. I just assumed it was. No need to tell me if it’s something else.”

I nod, because it has nothing to do with our business, but I leave it at that. I don’t want to talk about it with everyone right now.

The room smells like basil and freshly baked bread. I’m always a fan of what Henry cooks, but it’s even better when he and Giselle make Italian. Henry yells out, “Time to eat, everyone.”

“They always have fun at your place.” Michael says. “It’s easily the most fun out of all of our houses. Between the new indoor pool and all of the gaming systems.”

Tessa walks toward us, in her painted-on jeans that flare out at the bottom, but it’s not even the way the faded material hugs her round hips that has my pulse kick-starting. It’s the red oversized sweater that hangs just off her shoulder. I’ve never wanted to touch, bite, and lick a shoulder so much in my whole life. I can’t help the smirk that’s taken over my face from just imagining it. “Can you say that again, Michael?”

He looks at Tessa, and then back at me, and slowly repeats himself. “Law, your place is like a dream for the kids?”

She smiles at me like she’s about to bitch-slap me verbally. “It’s such a great spot for kids. The big one who lives there keeps telling me how amazingly fun it is too.”

“That’s not—” I start to say, but she’s already walking away. Michael watches with me as she takes a seat at the table.

“Stop smiling like an idiot,” he says. “She just insulted you. You realize that, right?”

I flip him off.

The truth is, the way this woman insults me is better foreplay than the women who feed my ego. That doesn't deter me. If anything, it gets me hard and has me thrumming with renewed motivation. Maybe she's not the enemy after all. Maybe she's my muse.

He swats at my finger. "You're going to be smart. I know you and you want that job eventually, so you're going to be smart. Right?"

He's right. I want the job. The only problem is that no matter how much I push back or push buttons, I want her now too. Her opinions, her approval, and for her to look at me the way she did this morning when I warmed her hands. When she took off my glasses.

She's been here for forty-eight hours, and she's already becoming the only thing I see.

Tessa

I'm sitting right next to Law.

I tried to sit next to the kids and create a buffer between Law and me. Plus, I like playing with them. It's been a long time since I've been able to play games and not overthink what I'm going to say. I always liked that about kids. What you see is what you get. But then Asher wanted me to sit near him and that meant I was next to Law. After this morning, I wanted to put some distance between us, but here we are, sharing a car ride to dinner and now an arm's length away from each other once again.

"You can't tell me that you've never heard about guiche piercings."

I snort, because really, the last fifteen minutes since we've started eating, I've nearly choked on my food twice while listening to what's come out of Giselle's mouth.

"Also lovingly referred to as grundle," she says as she talks with her hands.

Law chimes in after a bite of bread. "You know, Ev, the taint? The glory strip? The bum runway?"

I don't want to laugh, because I'll just be encouraging him, but a tiny snort comes out.

He heard it too, because I see him side-eye me and smile.

I look toward the other end of the table, where the kids are ignoring what we're talking about, thank goodness. Michael lasers a glare onto the side of Law's face, because he can hear all of this.

Everly opens her mouth, making a shocked face, finally registering what Giselle was talking about. "*That's* become a more requested location than the belly button?"

I butter the piece of Italian bread and listen aptly. I feel very out of the loop with expressive trends like tattoos and piercings.

I feel Law lean in closer and, for some reason, my face flushes with warmth. “That’s my sister-in-law for you. Her table manners are even better than mine.”

I whisper back, “I like her.”

With a mouth full of pasta, she says loudly, “I like you too, honey.”

Everly smiles at me. I haven’t spoken to her much, as she isn’t involved with Riggs Outdoor since she started her apparel line. It’s her husband, Jack, who spends more time with the Riggs brand. “How’s the transition from New York to Strutt’s Peak for you? I had to straddle the two for a while, and it’s incredible how different life felt every time I stepped off the plane.”

“It’s not New York City; that was very evident the second I landed. Seeing mountains and not the Hudson. But I haven’t been here long enough to really explore yet. So far, it’s been...” I pause for a minute, trying to find the right words for this whirlwind. “A little chaotic and nothing I was expecting. But I like it.” I look down and to the side, noticing Law’s attention on me. He’s added to the unexpected chaos.

“Are you a skier or snowboarder?” Miles yells from the other end of the table.

I take a sip of the red wine in front of me. This is the one question I wasn’t looking forward to answering. Usually, I gloss over it or change the subject, but there are ten people staring at me, waiting for an answer.

“I’m not really either.”

I’m met with mostly quiet and the clattering of forks—this was going to come up eventually, but I was planning on it taking a little while. The fact that I don’t do outdoor sports. I’ve never been good at it. I’m not coordinated and spend more time trying to avoid getting hurt. It’s not fun, so I stopped trying to make it a thing. It was never an issue with my father’s company, because I still loved the passion behind a sport that can be recreational or made into a career, but still evoke that same level of excitement either way. I also believe I

can be exceptional at my job without living or breathing the industry it serves.

I hear Asher laugh under his breath, and I can feel the stare of Law to my right.

“What do you mean?”

I look across the table at Everly. I know for a fact that she’s a skier, as she’s been photographed and featured in plenty of media outlets with her husband on mountains all over the world. She’s not going to rescue me here.

Blowing out a breath, I sturdy myself for this. “I’m more indoorsy,” I say as I nonchalantly cut my piece of chicken parmesan. “I like the routine of the gym and keeping myself in shape, and I love to swim, but my sister got all of the athletic genes. Especially when we’re talking winter sports.”

“Rina is a force. I’m feeling so good about her at this year’s games,” Grace says to me. Hopefully, that’ll pull the attention toward my sister.

I smile at her. She helped Rina in trials training to erase the handicap her injury left her with. Rina looks at Grace like some kind of miracle worker. And from what I hear among other athletes, her program is causing a stir. “Me too,” I say back to her.

Law interrupts, “You don’t participate in any of the winter sports our brand caters to?”

I smile. I don’t even bother responding with words since he heard me loud and clear. I’m annoyed by his comment because he’s insinuating that because I don’t ski or snowboard, I won’t be able to do my job. “I haven’t tried everything we offer yet, so maybe I’d like some summer sports. Michael, maybe we can talk about that next week?”

He nods, but doesn’t say much else.

Okay, then.

“I’m in the same camp, Tessa,” Giselle says. “I love all the after-sporting events. Après Ski is my specialty. Give me all

the drinks by the fire, charcuteries savory and sweet, oh, and the hot tub! That's my speed."

"What snacks?" Sammy asks from the far end of the table. "Dad, I ate all my pasta. I want the snacks with Auntie Giselle."

Giselle points at Law. "As soon as your hot tub is working, I'm coming over to use it."

I can't help but smile at the liveliness of the table, everyone just talking and interrupting. I don't ever remember having this kind of family dinner.

Asher's hand wraps around my forearm. "We're a loud bunch. I probably should have warned you in advance."

"I think your family is wonderful. Thank you for inviting me." His warmth and love for his family are painted all over his face in how he looks at every single one of them. It feels good to be surrounded by it. This time last year, I was never in the company of this many people, never mind in this way, and it feels good.

Giselle breaks off another piece of bread. "Costa?"

I nod.

Taking another bite, she looks around, and since there are other conversations happening, she says, "Possiamo parlare di merda in italiano insieme?" *Can we talk shit together in Italian?*

"Sì."

Law interrupts, "Whatever is happening there—" he points between the two of us "—I already know it's not going to be good. I'll revoke the hot tub invite."

Giselle flips him off. "Tessa will let me use it."

"It's not in our shared space, it's off of my back deck."

She ignores him and takes another bite of food.

Law looks at me, catching me smiling at his sister-in-law. "Wait a minute, your sister is Rina Costa? The Olympic Alpine Skier who's supposed to take gold this year?"

“Yes.” I’m surprised he didn’t know this. Everyone at this table should have known that, while hiring me would make waves because of my father and ex, there’s also a benefit to my sister’s connection to this year’s Olympic Games.

“Why hasn’t this been mentioned?” Law says, looking at his father first, and then Michael.

“Maybe you’ve been distracted, man,” Henry adds, and gives his brother a look that I can’t exactly decipher, but it has Law sending him a glare before he turns his body toward me.

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten about that indoorsy comment,” he says, quiet enough that it was just meant for me to hear. “Dad, were you planning to go to Italy for the games?”

“I wasn’t. I thought you should probably take it,” Asher says, as he leans back in his chair and sips his wine.

That stops my chewing for a second. I wasn’t planning on Law being there, but then again, I hadn’t had much time to really think about Italy in too much detail since I’ve been in Strutt’s.

“I’ll be there anyway to support my sister. I’m happy to represent the brand and take any meetings you may have set,” I offer.

“I think the two of you there makes more sense. But we can discuss it more on Monday. No more work talk while we’re eating,” Asher says, looking pointedly yet playfully at me and Law, then he dismissively stands, unofficially declaring the conversation over. “Who wants to help me set up the s’mores bar outside while the rest of these guys clean up?”

I wipe my mouth with my napkin. “S’mores bar?”

“Oh, honey, just wait,” Giselle says as she stands, grabbing hers and Henry’s plates.

Henry stands with her. “I got it, baby. You go hang with the girls for a bit.” She kisses him, and I’ll be honest, I even swoon a little over it. Small gestures, the ones that don’t take up space, but the ones that make the other feel cared for, are the ones I never realized I was missing in my marriage.

My eyes shift to Law's profile. He's watching them too. There's something contagious about witnessing people love each other so openly and unapologetically. It's just a moment's glance, but it's enough to notice the weekend stubble on his jawline and the way it fades so effortlessly into his sideburns. How close he was to me this morning. How concerned he was at making sure I was okay. Seeing him in this environment, with his family, and then remembering how he made sure I was alright before I told him to leave, makes me wonder if *this* is who he really is. The doting brother. The joking friend. Instead of the young, arrogant, flippant player he likes to lean into and even amplify.

"I am incredibly handsome, aren't I?" he says without even shifting his focus. He says it just loud enough for me to hear. At least he's embarrassing me privately.

"If you need someone to stroke your ego, you're looking at the wrong person." I brush the side of his cheek with my thumb, pretending like I'm removing something from it. I don't know what possessed me to touch him, but this is twice in one day that I've done it. And now I'm regretting it with the way he's looking at me—questioningly, challenging me to elaborate or yield.

"I've had my ego stroked enough. I'm just reading your body language now."

I wipe my finger before he can see there's nothing there. "Sauce. It's been there for a little while. Surprised you didn't feel it."

My cheeks must be pink for being called out. I can feel the heat of it. And this time, I don't have the luxury of blaming it on being locked out in the cold.

He stands up from his seat, but before he walks away, he leans into my space. It's impossible not to inhale the delicious scent of him. I suck in a breath at his unexpected proximity. "Oh, I felt it. And I have a feeling you did too, Contessa."

Before I can respond, he claps his hands loudly and says, "Sammy and Miles, let's go see the horses and make sure they have their blankets before we tackle the s'mores."

When I look across the table, Michael and Henry are both looking at me with matching smirks on their faces. They just watched that entire interaction. *What the hell am I doing?*

We spend the next few minutes helping bring out blankets and pouring after dinner shots of limoncello that Everly and Giselle demand needs to be savored since it's a homemade batch. The way they've folded me into their night has me feeling so good that I forget I'm just a stranger to them.

When I look around more closely, I can't help but notice all the details that make Asher's house truly spectacular. Heat lamps strategically placed above us on the archway. A bar across the patio, completely stocked and ready to serve out snacks and drinks. Speakers placed on the corners of the house to filter in soft music. Around the firepit are oversized Adirondack chairs draped with faux white fur throws, keeping my bottom as warm as my chest after sipping on the tart, lemony drink. I feel relaxed. Even surrounded by new people. Co-workers. And even a man who should have me on edge.

"When are you going to marry my brother?" Everly asks Grace from across from the firepit.

Grace smiles. "Just waiting for him to ask."

"How long have you two been together?"

"Officially? I guess it's only been about a month or so," she says.

The look of surprise is obviously all over my face.

She lets out a light laugh. "But I've been in love with him since I was about sixteen."

I understand finding yourself enamored with someone at a young age. That's how I felt about Maxim at first.

"He's older than I am, so it wasn't something he ever entertained. But we were friends for a long time. He put me in the unpopular friendzone for years. Then last year—" she shrugs her shoulder "—I had enough of waiting. And then so did he."

Giselle says, "Earmuffs, Everly."

Everly rolls her eyes. “Oh please, I’m only grossed out when you want to give me descriptive visuals about Henry. This is fine.”

“Okay, fine,” Giselle says, turning her attention to me. “She made a list of all these kinky things... What was the one you said kick-started your all-nighter recently?”

“G!” Everly shouts, and then covers her ears. I can’t help but start laughing. These women feel so good to be around. Laughing with them and their stories is refreshing.

Grace leans closer to me. “It was the restraints.”

“Really?” I bark out a laugh. “On you or him?”

All three of them start laughing. Everly holds up her shooter glass in salute. “I feel like you’re going to fit in even better than I thought, Tessa.” She gives Giselle and Grace a quick glance and says, “You should come out for one of our girls’ nights.”

The broad, easy smile that takes over my entire face is impossible to stifle. “I’d love that.”

The glow from the fire mimics the shades of sky. I tilt my head back on the headrest of my chair to enjoy it. The sun sets earlier this time of year, but these colors have been lingering since we stepped out the back doors. Deep ambers and a few strokes of pinkish red. It’s the first time I’ve seen a sky like this. It’s breathtaking. I’m not sure if it’s the view or realizing that this is what it’s like to connect with people who don’t have an ulterior motive, but I’m contently happy. It’s been so long that I didn’t realize how much I craved connection or maybe just finding a new view. Maybe it’s both.

“I look up whenever I can here too.” Giselle shifts in her seat, pulling the heated blanket tighter over her. “A scattering of particles and light reflecting off of it. It’s different every time, but fuck, it’s more beautiful here than anywhere else.”

I smile at that. It’s the wide-angle view mixed with the mountain peaks and the company. It’s one of the best nights I’ve had in a long time.

Grace asks, “Tessa, are you seeing anyone?”

At the same time, Asher comes outside with a tray of drinks. “Ladies, I’ve got s’mores martinis for each of you. And then I’ll go smoke the bourbons for the guys.” He smiles at me. “Tessa, I just assumed you’d want one of these, but if you’d like, I can do the bourbon for you too.”

I scrunch my nose, because the old me would have drunk the martini, even though I want the bourbon. But I’m not her anymore. “I’ll take the bourbon, if that’s not too much trouble.”

“None at all.” He winks.

I sit back in the chair and take in the ranch. It would be incredible to have some place like this. So much land and space; it’s so different from the minimal real estate I’d always been accustomed to in a big city. It takes me a moment to realize the girls are all staring at me, still waiting for me to answer the question about my relationship status.

“I’m not seeing anyone.” I weigh whether or not I want to elaborate any further, but I go with it. Maybe vulnerability is easier in a cozy setting. “I was married.” I look over to Everly, and then Grace. “You probably knew that already, considering you knew about my former company.” Then I look at Giselle, since she wouldn’t have had that knowledge if someone hadn’t told her. “My husband, ex-husband,” I correct, “is CEO at my father’s company. Anyway, it wasn’t an amicable divorce. I have no interest in being in a relationship after going through all of that. So, I’m single and more than happy to keep that status.” I offer them a tight smile. But even as I say it, the words “single” and “happy” feel sour. Like a lie I didn’t know I was telling. I never want to feel hurt and lost like that ever again.

Sammy and Miles run over to us and each jump onto Grace’s and Everly’s laps. I smile when I see it. I haven’t hung out with any kids since I babysat in high school. Maxim always said he didn’t want kids right away. And we were so young when we met, that having kids seemed like something we would just talk about more later. Later for me always meant after we lived life a bit and reached whatever goals we had set. And now I’m in my late thirties and I feel like it’s just

not an option for me any longer. I haven't decided how I feel about that. But I'm happy I don't have any now. If I had, I wonder if I would have stayed and tried to look past all of the infidelity and other issues. I'd like to think I would have stood my ground and would have still ended up right here, but who knows. So for that, I'm grateful we never figured out when "later" was.

I observe Asher and Law walking out onto the patio. They seem to be discussing something that looks a bit heated, but when Law's eyes meet mine, he smiles. There's something about the way that man smiles that softens me. The lightness of him is contagious and his attention feels easy-going. Simple. Which is ridiculous, considering there's nothing simple about who we are to each other and how often I've found myself touching him. Even when I know now that it's the furthest thing from the right call.

"Tessa," Asher says, handing me a weighted crystal glass with three fingers of bourbon and a layer of hovering smoke. When I bring it to my lips, I can smell the cherry wood undertones of the burned wood chips. I prefer the heat and the bite of this over the sweetness packed in a dessert-style martini.

He sits on the arm of Everly's chair, facing me and taking his first sip. "The smoker with this particular batch, I think makes it..."

"Perfect," I finish his sentence. "All of this has been perfect."

Asher smiles at me. The warmth that comes with it makes me think he knows exactly what I mean. But I owe him more than assumptions. "Thank you. Not just for the invite, but for everything."

He gives me a wink, and then turns his attention to the rest of the group. "Who wants a s'more? I picked up chocolate from Sugar Valley. I've got chunks of milk, dark, or there's fudge."

I suppose he's tired of hearing me thank him for stepping into my life when he did and for showing up when I needed. I

still don't understand it. But it just reminds me that I owe him at least a year in this role as CEO to help his company reach the goals they've set.

I load up an oversized marshmallow onto the long wooden skewer and hold it over the heat of the fire. Rotating it continuously for a golden brown, I watch as Law's catches on fire, but he smiles as it does.

"Don't judge my 'mallow, Contessa."

"I wasn't," I say, side-eyeing as he lifts the burned layer off and pops it in his mouth, returning the now white center to the dancing flames.

Mine is perfect. The graham cracker topped with dark fudge waits for me, and I smush the gooey 'mallow on top. The first bite is always the best. The crunch of the graham, the sticky, warm marshmallow, and this one in particular has a smooth, melty chocolate layer. "Mmmhmm." I close my eyes to enjoy it.

A thumb swipes at the corner of my mouth.

My eyes shoot open and Law hovers at my side, seemingly almost as surprised by his gesture as I am.

"Marshmallow," he says quietly as he crouches next to my chair. His eyes lock on mine as he sucks the same thumb into his mouth.

My body shivers at the sight. The one person I need to steer my traitorous, tingling skin away from, and then he swoops in again, doing something seemingly kind, and my body leans into it. *Fuck, get your head on straight, Tessa!* This needs to be the end of whatever's going on here. And I need it to be clear.

Law

“I’M NOT INTERESTED,” SHE SAYS AS SHE TURNS DOWN THE music.

Tessa was quiet for a while when we first started driving. I assumed she was tapped out from my family but, apparently, she was working out a way to slam her foot down. I don’t have any plans to make this easy.

“In?”

“The marshmallow and then whatever happened in my bathroom this morning. And I’ve caught you looking at me a number of times tonight. You smile at me way too much. And—”

“And?” I can’t help but smirk at the look she shoots my way.

“And stop it. I’m calling it out and telling you I’m not interested.”

“You were interested in London,” I counter, though I know it’s pointless. I just want to see how much I can get out of her.

“I didn’t know who you were that night. You were a stranger to me, and I was attracted to *that*.”

“Yes, but you’re still attracted to me now,” I push, glancing her way with a tilt of my head.

She turns her attention toward the window and says, “Was. You know what you look like. How you hold yourself. The way you...” She stops her thought, and then looks at me. I keep my focus on the road.

“The way I what, Contessa?”

“Stop fishing for compliments. There’s plenty of women I’m sure you could text right now who would be eager to stroke that ego of yours.”

“Probably, but what if I want you to stroke me?” I hear her push out a breath, like a scoff and a bit of surprise mixed

together.

It takes her a minute to respond, but I didn't miss the way that caught her off guard. And when I look to see what she's staring at, my eyes meet hers and she doesn't look away. The eye contact between us, no matter how brief, is like flipping a fucking switch. I feel it everywhere. Up the back of my neck. Pressure in my chest. Heat across my face. An instant hard-on. Jesus, what she's capable of doing to me without even trying is unreal.

"No."

"So that's it?"

"Yes," she says back quickly.

I shouldn't keep pushing this, but I can't fucking help it. "What if I told you to give me ten minutes. Ten minutes and I'll change your mind," I say with a smile.

"Get over yourself."

"Does it make you nervous? The fact that you're wondering what I could accomplish in ten minutes? A free pass for both of us to do exactly what we want. Just like at that play party. No repercussions or judgment. Just you, submitting to me for ten minutes."

"Ten minutes sounds like you leave a whole helluva lot of women very unsatisfied."

"So you want to go there?" I say with a glare.

She can't help but smile in response.

"I didn't say anything about sex. I said ten minutes and I'd change your mind. About me. About what this is between us."

"It's not happening. And *nothing* is happening between us."

"Liar," I say on a sigh, leaning on the divider.

She shifts, just a fraction of a movement, like the proximity of my body is too much for her to deal with. It's infuriating. I'm so fucking drawn to her, and she wants nothing more than to add distance between us. She's being

smart, but I'm reaching my limit of trying to justify why staying away from her is really the best option.

"Why were you in London?"

"Why were you?" I retort. I'm not ready to confess that I had been following her, that my plans were to figure out who was taking this job out from under me and then find their weakness. Play dirty and take back what I've earned. But then she turned all of that on its head.

"Your dad gave me an out when I needed one." She clears her throat. "He said no strings, but I think we both knew that I would owe him. I took it anyway. I needed to get my head right after finally seeing who my ex-husband was and how much of myself I had lost in the years we spent together."

I'm taken aback by her candidness. I didn't expect it. And I had assumed it was her shitty ex that drove her out of town, but hearing her confirm it makes me incredibly angry. I clench my jaw, trying to bite back my new disdain for the man. "I had some interactions with him. Maxim," I say to clarify. "He's..." I already know he's a scumbag with women, but I wonder if she knows just how much. I don't want to hurt her by saying much more.

"A liar. Cheater. Massive manipulator," she says like she's ticking off a shopping list. With minimal emotion, she sounds like she's already felt the hurt and has moved past not caring. "And then my father..." She pauses, but I'm curious because I didn't realize there was more. "Let's just say, my father didn't choose me when I needed him to." That has her voice giving way at the end. Like the emotions with this admission might still hurt. "He hadn't been for years, so I don't know what I was expecting." She shifts her body to face me, and I can feel her looking, so I glance back. "I needed to distance myself from all of it."

"So you're pissed and looking to get even?"

When she doesn't say anything back right away, I look over again. Her attention tilts upwards toward the darkened sky.

“I’m pissed, yeah. You could say that.” A smile lifts her lips, though, and I can’t help but smile at that too. I like that she’s mad. Anger has a nice way of allowing shitty people to find their place.

“It’s a vindictive move. Coming to their direct competitor. Accepting help from my father.” I mean it as a compliment, but it sounds more like an accusation. I understand her motives for being here, but the reality is, it’s messy.

“You can call me, call this career move, whatever you want to make yourself feel better. But if I were a man, the opportunity and decision to come in as CEO here would be considered strategic.”

Fuck.

“I should have said that it was a shrewd move.”

“Shrewd?”

Shit. “Tactical.”

She scoffs and leans on the door, as far away from me as humanly possible without throwing herself out of the moving vehicle.

I try to fix it, my chest tightening at the thought of insulting her unintentionally. Especially after she just opened up to me. “The opportunity was there. And I respect that you took it, even though I don’t like what it means for me.”

She ignores my backpedaling.

And just when I think she’s done with the conversation, tuning me out, she says, “If it had nothing to do with catching my husband fucking someone else at the office or running me out of town, then it would be less scandalous, but that’s the reality. I was looked over for roles that I earned because I wasn’t a man. My father did that. It was ingrained into me to believe and justify that I wasn’t on the same level somehow.” She shakes her head, almost shaking out the concept from her mind.

I hate that the men in her life did this. That they didn’t treat her or respect her the way she should have been. That

they, for one second, thought they could even remotely surpass her in any way.

“I don’t need sympathy, but I do require respect. I’m not about to rub your back and help you feel better about my role at this company. I’m not in the business of making women more palatable for men. I had an entire life before I came here where that was my job. But now, my business is to make Riggs Outdoor exceed our goals for this year and then set expansive ones for the next few. I owe your father the best of what I’m capable of doing. So I’m going to do it. You can work with me or against me, but either way, I’m doing it. You decide what role you want to play in all of it.”

We pull up the driveway, and I feel like I could fucking cradle her after hearing that. “Tessa,” I breathe out.

She pauses before opening the car door, but before I can say more, she gets out and walks up her front pathway. I watch her stride away from me again, putting distance between us, and I hate it. I’ve never had a single moment when my dad made me feel inferior. Even after being passed up for this CEO role, he talked to me about it and warned me it was coming. But he never told me I wasn’t good enough, just that I wasn’t ready yet.

Maxim Cavanaugh has a shitty reputation in every circle he runs in. I’ve had a number of colleagues talk about his lack of ethics, his condescending business approach, and even the way he gets rough with women. The guy is bad news, and it digs into me thinking about Tessa being tied to him.

After her front door closes behind her, I sit with some of what she said. She doesn’t want my sympathy, but my support and respect. It’s not a lot to ask, and I feel like a real piece of shit for not giving that to her from the start.

I spend most of the night reflecting on our interactions. And regardless of how she makes me feel, I have no intention of making her feel or appear less than she deserves.

The next morning, I make my coffee as usual, read through my emails over breakfast, and shower while listening to a true crime podcast. And somewhere along the way, I decide to

back off from being a prick. Where's it going to get me? Thinking she was an enemy was reactive. I refuse to fall into any category where being threatened means I get to be an asshole. She doesn't fucking deserve that.

When our Monday morning briefing kicks off, the marketing team rosters off all the athletes we plan to approach for endorsement contracts. Everyone on the marketing and advertising team is chomping at the bit to bring some of the best in the NHL, MLB, and NBA on board to wear our brand logo.

Tessa sits in on the meeting, taking notes, but never interjects.

"I still don't understand why we'd want someone who plays baseball to wear our logo and be a focal point for our paid content."

"We're talking about visible athletes who are recognized, respected, and mimicked. Why wouldn't we capitalize on that? We need to throw our hat into the ring with big brands associated with sports," I reply back to our social media manager.

Tessa lets out a small sigh that grabs my attention immediately.

"Do you have something to add?"

"Just that I'm in agreement with social," she says, squaring herself toward me. Like she's ready for a fight.

I raise my hand, stopping her right there. "I'm not saying we do a stale ad campaign or something that's been done before. The team has some excellent ideas about how to fold these players into our winter sports. Show them on our playing field."

"I'm not discounting the ideas for implementing the concept. I'm just pushing back on the overall concept."

"Do you have a better plan?" Leaning back in my chair, I'm not sure if I'm ready to hear her answer.

“I have another take on it.” She looks around the table at each of the marketing team. “You’re all doing good work here, and I like the way you’re planning on capitalizing on every dollar we spend.”

Then she looks at the social media group, a small team of four, who typically takes the lead from me and asks, “What do you think?”

They each look at each other as if nobody has asked them this question. And instantly, I’m realizing, I certainly haven’t. Tyson, the self-appointed leader of the team, starts to speak up. “I think there’s a number of athletes we don’t consider. Some who tag us repeatedly just because they like our brand.”

She smiles at him. And it has me wondering why he got a smile so easily. “And, Sienna, right?” she prompts the quiet assistant media manager. I’ll be honest, I thought her name was Santana.

The young girl nods.

“There’s a ton of traction from Law’s TikTok content, but—” she looks over at me, weighing what else she should say “—if we used more tags, and even encouraged some athletes to remix his content, then there’s more opportunity to have it go viral. It becomes less about the brand on the surface, but...”

Tessa cuts in, “I like the thought process.”

She turns to me. “Can they come with me? I’d like them to weigh in on my plans before I present it at Friday’s meeting.”

I give her a nod. The way she owns the room when she speaks has me practically bowing when she stands to leave. I don’t feel threatened, but instead energized. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt that way about work. We’ve done well over the past few years, but just hearing her feedback makes me feel like I’ve been missing that push and pull that fuels new ideas. Maybe I can keep things in the respectful, platonic category after all.

I haven’t even noticed the black leggings. Or the way her sweater skims just below her ass. Nope, I didn’t notice that at all.

Law

“YOU GOTTA COME OUT, MAN. I’M IN TOWN FOR ONLY A handful of days. You want to talk about the season, and I’ll scope the bunnies? That’s fine with me.”

“I can’t,” I tell my buddy, Sean. I peer into the fun room and see Tessa’s still there.

“Give me one good reason why not. I haven’t seen you since Halloween and those twins.”

I smile at the way she’s sprawled out on the floor. Like the massive sectional couch wouldn’t be comfortable enough for her. “I can’t. I have a big presentation tomorrow that I gotta be prepared for and need a good night.” I leave out the part where I’d rather go and figure out a way to clear the air with my boss in the next room than drink and get fucked.

“What’s going on, Law? You finally tryin’ to earn that paycheck.”

The fuck? “I’m going to forget you said that and remind you that you’re on my mountain. Also, fuck you.”

“Don’t be like that...”

I hang up on him, coming down my stairs and into our shared room. Tessa is relaxed on a sea of pillows and blankets with a few books opened face down and her Kindle in hand. Her legs are propped up on the wall, hair wild around her, and the oversized pale pink sweatshirt that hits just above her thighs has me wondering if it shifted just a little higher would there be anything on beneath it.

“Don’t you ever take a break from work?”

She smiles at the question. “That’s what I’m doing.”

I walk past her, trying to get a better look at what she might be reading, and flip the switch for the fireplace. I came home about an hour ago after a bite to eat with Everly, where she proceeded to ask me a thousand questions about Tessa.

“You’re into her.”

I mixed an Old Fashioned and barely gave her anything in response. Which was hard to do with my sister. She always has a way of pulling details out of me without knowing. The only problem is, I don’t know what I am. Into her? Sure. But also, proactively trying to get a fucking grip on work and respecting her request—*“You decide what role you want to play in all of it.”*

This week has been a bit of a clusterfuck. I’ve been trying really fucking hard to keep my distance. Keep Tessa in the platonic, colleague category, but now that I catch a glimpse of the word “cock” on a page of her book, and the way she’s smirking at her Kindle, I’m re-evaluating the roles I want all over again. What time is it? I feel disoriented. I only came in here to tell her that as much as I want to be respectful, I’m still gunning for her job. Now I’m wandering around the room like a damn idiot.

It very well could be the lack of sex in my life. But I’m trying my best to ignore the bombshell boss of a woman living mere feet from me, dripping in some kind of pheromone that smells like vanilla sugar. My mouth is watering.

“Why are you circling me?”

I sit down in her cozy set-up. I’ll take her question as an invite, and pick up one of the books she has opened.

“You’re reading all of these?”

She eyes me from behind her reading glasses, the clear rims and oversized style making her eyes look bigger and the rest of her tiny. Fucking hell, they look really cute on her. I know she wasn’t expecting me to sit down, but I’m barely hanging on to my dignity here.

“I couldn’t decide what mood I was in, so I started a couple, but nothing is hitting right.”

“You were smirking at your Kindle.” Her eyes dart over to mine. “Seemed like something was hitting right.”

She can’t hide the smile I just pulled from her. She tried to hold it in, but I caught her. Why is it so addictive to get her to

respond to me like this?

I look down at the pile and grab the book on top. “The Count and his Maiden,” I say, reading the title.

“Historical romance.”

Leaning over her waist, I reach for the other opened book. I had to put my hand on her hip in order to keep me from toppling onto her. She stares at where I’m touching, and I realize pretty quickly that she didn’t give me permission to do it, so I back off.

I clear my throat. “This one looks appealing.” I flip it over. “December Midnights. Tell me they do something really dirty in this one.”

She smirks at me, quirking a brow. “You’re not allowed to make fun of what I read.”

I laugh. “I’m not. I promise. I just assumed you were reading a QED report or something boring. This sounds much more interesting.” I clear my throat for theatrics and glance around the page she had opened. “There was nothing sweet about the way she licked my neck and squeezed my cock...” I raise my eyebrows and lower my voice when I say her name. “Contessa...”

She doesn’t even bat an eyelash when she responds. “It’s romance, Law. Some are dirty. Some are sweet, but I like the ones that are both. That one, I’ve already read. It’s more of a holiday read. There’s a good scene in the snow that—”

I’m smiling at her as she opens up. It’s the easiest conversation we’ve had. I like it. Just talking and teasing.

She glances at me and instead of making this moment one that she’ll pull away from, I move my attention back to the book. I can feel her watch me as I read a few more lines.

“Men would learn a thing or two if they read what women like to read.”

“You’re probably right. Can I borrow it?”

She barks a laugh, but when she realizes I’m serious, she stifles her smile. I like surprising her.

“My sister, G, and even Grace—now that I think of it—all read this stuff. Might as well see what the big deal is.”

“I have two big boxes of books in my house if you get through that one.”

I look around the room and try to think where she might be able to put some of them. She didn't come with sports memorabilia to add to the wall or video games to contribute to the tower next to the entertainment center, but maybe I can make a space for what she likes here too.

“Why are you in here and not your place? You're not taking advantage of the furniture in here, so...”

“The sun sets from the back windows—” she tilts her head toward the far back wall that's floor-to-ceiling glass, just on the other side of the pool “—are too good to miss. So I'm using your fun room to do what I consider fun.”

“I knew you'd come around. See...” I enunciate my next words. “Fun room.”

Her blue eyes meet mine, and then she smiles, giving me a small nod.

“And it's not just mine. It's ours. Just as much your space as it is mine. You look comfortable here.” I sound like I'm nervous. “I like you out here.”

I'm met with silence, which honestly is a good thing. Now is a good time to clear the air a bit. “I still want the job. Your job. My plans haven't changed, so you're still going to get pushback when it's warranted or if we disagree. But I think you have the ability to put the brand in a good place before you leave. And you have my respect. Always have, really. But I wanted you to know that.”

She stares back at me, her eyes moving around from my eyes to my mouth. It's impossible not to smile and wordlessly convey, “*I want that too.*” But instead of making any kind of move and allowing this moment of a truce to resonate with both of us, I get up and walk back to my side.

Just as I get to my door, she says, “What if I stayed longer than a year? If the CEO position is more permanent than

interim.”

I turn back to where she’s now sitting up, her reading glasses perched on her head, the sweatshirt falling just off one shoulder. The sight of all these pieces of her makes me hungry, primal even. Like I’d devour anything she’d be willing to give to me. And even then, it might not be enough. The way I want her just gets stronger the more time I spend around her. The feeling is a complete contradiction to what I’m forcing myself to say next.

“Then you had better be ready for a fight, Contessa.”

She looks down at her watch, seemingly ignoring what I’ve just said. “By the way, you just had your ten minutes.” She shrugs her bare shoulder. “Meh.”

“You’re not playing fair.” I point at her, shaking my head, but I can’t help but laugh.

She fucking smiles, and I both love and hate when she does it. She uses it like a weapon. She smiles the sexiest smile, and then turns back around to read her book as if I didn’t just somehow have my ego slapped and my threat thrown back at me.

She exhales loudly and says, “Silly boy. Nobody said anything about fair.”

I look up at the ceiling, because two very real things just happened: First, my dick punched me in the leg. Nothing new, but it was like it was so impressed, it needed to be sure I heard her correctly. Which I did. And second, she just gave me an excuse for when I need it. And I have a feeling, I’m going to use it.

“Hope you’re ready then, Ms. Costa.”

Law

JUST LIKE EVERY MORNING THIS WEEK WHEN I PULL INTO THE office, Tessa's ridiculous red Fiat is parked in my spot. I pull out my phone.

LAW

Stop parking in my spot

TESSA

Callen?

Seriously?

LAW

It's Law.

TESSA

So it's not the police?

Phew. Then no, I will not stop parking in that spot. I didn't see your name on it. And you're not the cops telling me otherwise, so it looks like it's MY spot.

I close my eyes and breathe. It's too early for this shit.

"Law, there's a discrepancy with the budget we outlined for the third quarter." That's the next comment to greet me as I round the corner to my desk.

"Nick, email me the latest deck you're working from and let's see what needs to be tweaked."

"Law. Law. Listen, man," Boon shouts after me. "Someone just told me you're going to Italy for the Olympics? You're supposed to be here for that bachelor party."

"Can you handle it if I'm not?"

“Dude, seriously?”

I stop just outside my office door. “Boon, if you think you can handle it, then I trust that you will. If you need someone to support you, I have someone who can help.”

But I don’t hear what else he says after he mumbles, “Nah, I’ve got it.”

When I get to my desk, there’s a pastry box sitting in the center and a handwritten note that reads: “Ready.”

When I open the top, there’s a half dozen fresh Kouign-amann pastries from Brews & Books. They smell like sugared vanilla. *Like her*. I can’t stop the smile that takes over my face considering these have to be from Tessa.

I look at the note again: *Ready*. It’s like a challenge and an olive branch.

But before I can get a bite in, my dad interrupts as he lingers in my office doorway. “Law. You ready? The board just arrived. And I’ve got our management and adventure team all set in the great room.”

“Yeah, all set.” I follow him into the space. It’s the first time that we’ve done an all-inclusive event like this. It’s an opportunity for everyone to weigh in on the directions we want to take the brand. Some may say a lot of opinions equals chaos, but I think the only way to keep everyone loving the brand they work for is to keep them involved.

Everyone settles down with conversations as my dad stands in front of the big screen. Most of our employees are perched on the stairs in the amphitheater-style space.

“It’s peak season and I know this is pulling everyone away from something important today, but I’ve got a taco truck parked out front for when this wraps up. It’s on me today.”

A nice round of hoots and hollers echoes throughout. It’s hard not to smile at it. The culture he’s built. The excitement and genuine care it’s taken to grow from a storefront to a big brand. It’s inspiring and makes me proud to be a part of it.

I look around the room to see everyone, but I'd be kidding if I said I wasn't looking for one person in particular. Tessa's standing directly across from me, talking quietly with Ross from the social media team. I'd never looked at Ross before, but he's good looking and in his early twenties. He's got that boyish, *I can't grow facial hair even if I tried* vibe. But I've always liked him. A little cocky, but smart about TikTok trends. Some of which have helped to boost my own channel. But right now, I'm not a fan of how closely he's talking with Tessa. I'm not a fan one bit.

My father's voice interrupts my burgeoning hate for the baby-faced Ross. "We have two takes on what's going to push Riggs Outdoor forward this next year." He looks at me first, and then over at Tessa. When her eyes meet mine, I purposely let mine fall down the front of her body, taking in the tightly fitted black V-neck sweater. Fuck, it's tight. She's a short and curvy package that has every fucking inch of my skin hot thinking about seeing her like this—wearing sweater and jeans to fit in with the team, but it makes her stand out instead. I drag my attention back up, meeting a pair of blue eyes that are locked on me. Her chin lifts as she squares off, having just watched as I checked her out. The funny part is, it was meant to intimidate her, but somehow, I'm the one that's affected. My palms are sweaty, my mouth watering. Jeans growing tight, as usual.

"Law is going to take us through the details of the pro-athlete proposal he's been working on with some of the marketing team. And then Tessa has a take on things that I think is worth all of our attention. I want to hear knee-jerk reactions. I want to hear questions. And since our board members are here, they're going to think about it from an industry perspective. While the rest of you are going to think about it as both consumers and internal team members." He claps his hands. "Great. Law, it's all you."

Time to turn on the charm. This is where I flourish. Connecting with a crowd, taking a big idea and trying to articulate it so that it feels like I'm presenting it as a conversation and not talking at them.

“There are twenty athletes who span the globe who I would consider the best of the best. The types of players who change the sport they dominate and make it something entirely new for new generations of fans.”

I stare at smiling faces for the next thirty minutes. We talk about the target athletes and how we might convince them to try an up-and-coming brand. The prospect of it gets the room energized, because there are names across sports that everyone recognizes. There’s something powerful in being able to attribute our brand to those big names. It has me feeling good as I take my spot to the side of the room, giving Tessa the floor.

She gives me a tight-lipped smile as we pass, and it’s the first time I notice that the smiling faces are only the teams I’ve been working with—most of our marketing managers and some of the R&D crew. But when I look further, the social media team, the adventure recruiters, and the board all look... unenthused.

With their arms crossed, mixed with the whispers to my father, I’m quickly second-guessing the approach. And it hits me. It’s not good enough. And recognizing it has me questioning my instincts. Maybe I don’t have what it takes to make this brand grow. And maybe I’ve been distracted, but I’ve never had this happen—where my ideas don’t stick and don’t feel good enough.

“I love the concept of targeting elite-level athletes, but I want to piggy-back off the idea and take it a slightly different way,” she starts. Smart to compliment the competition. And maybe this isn’t a competition, but I’m built that way. It’s always a game. A healthy fight. But I can tell she means it, and so can the rest of the room, because they’re instantly ready to hear what she’s going to say next.

It’s been a little over a week and she already looks like she belongs here. She stands tall, chest out, and looks every bit the part of boss. The entire sight makes me want to kneel in front of her and ask, “What can I do for you, *mí regina (my queen)?*”

“What can I do for you?” she asks, as if she can read my thoughts. I stare at her as she connects around the room. “It’s the simplest question. And yet, we are the only brand that has the ability to ask it because we can actually offer more to athletes and the general public than money or sponsorships.” She pauses, and for dramatics, she looks at my father. He’s smiling like a damn child who just found out that his newest toy works. And works well.

“We have this place. Strutt’s Peak is nothing like anywhere I’ve ever been. And I’ve been to plenty of places around the world. But there’s nothing like here.” She points to where she’s standing. “The mountains, the fluidity of small-town vibes mixed with this very lavish feel of a big, immersive city. And the options that you all have cultivated here are remarkable. You have the classics: skiing, snowboarding, snowmobiling, cross-country. But then you went ahead and kept up with the trends. Sport climbing, fat biking, sleigh-rides, snow cats... What am I missing?”

“Heli-skiing,” Boon yells from the back.

“Spiritual walking and fishing tours,” Lenny grumbles from the far side of the room. It garners a chuckle from everyone, because everyone knows how much she *loves* the bowl chimes and chanting on those tours.

Tessa looks at me and smiles. “I need to try that one.”

“Plus, you have the curated adventures,” she points out, like she’s thinking as she’s speaking. “There’s more that can be done with those. Outside the box too.”

When she says it, new ideas start flickering. It’s like a dam breaking, because I’m flooded with concepts that speak to exactly what she’s saying.

She smiles as everyone chatters. I can hear ideas being whispered. It’s infectious. Creative ideas and the excitement for it.

“You have all of these things. And not a single competitor in this business has it. Not one. Everyone wants to be the next Nike or Adidas, but what makes those brands truly great isn’t

just the athletes who wear their logos, it's what they do to push their brand forward. As exciting as it might be to focus on the elite athletes, my vote is to focus on those who aren't in the spotlight, or at least *that* bright of a spotlight."

I lean against the wall and cross my arms. I'm as intrigued as the rest of the room now. If not more, but I can't show it.

"I don't think we should venture into baseball, rugby, hockey, or any sport that's going to have a consistent spot on ESPN. I vote that we target athletes who have influence, yes. But I'm talking about the seasoned Olympians, the ready-to-retire athletes, I'm even talking about non-professional athletes. The men and women who run those insane Iron Man events, the BeastMaster competitors on Netflix. There's a roster of social media influencers who would love to travel here and get out of their comfort zone, try something new, and show it to their audience. Let's play up the tourism aspect of where this brand was built. We play up our roots. We treat Strutt's Peak like our greatest asset and use it."

"It's not like we haven't dabbled in this over the past few years, but if I'm hearing you correctly, you're saying to abandon the efforts to approach those big-named athletes?" Michael asks next to me. *Thanks, bro, but she won me over too.*

"Yes." She surveys the room. "Everyone knows my last name here."

Someone from the back of the room barks out, "Costa," making it sound like a snoozefest, which, honestly, most of their marketing campaigns have been. Yet, somehow, they capture and sponsor some big franchises.

She smiles and cuffs her hair behind her ear. "Costa Athletics. Exactly. Let my former company and the rest of the big sports brands play together. We can be fans and respect them, but why are we playing the bidding game? Because Riggs..." She pauses for a smile that the entire room eats up. *Fuck, that smile.*

I can't help but roll my eyes at her showmanship right now. It's the damn cherry on top of her moment here.

“Riggs Outdoor has the ability to triple its growth this year alone with a pivot in focus. Then in three years, we can have athletes’ agents approaching us for brand sponsorship.”

You’re not going to be here in three years, but that’s another conversation. Instead, I decide now’s the right time to show my father that I can play well with others. And this will throw her off a bit. “I like it.”

The room quiets for a moment. Nobody expected that to come from me. But even despite the fact that I need to play well with others here, I know when I hear something that’s exceptional. And this, this is exactly what we’ve all been skirting around. Maybe we just needed an outsider to remind us of what we have here. I hate that I like it, but I do.

“There needs to be an angle. Something that’ll stick. Something intriguing and unexpected, but I like the direction.”

“So do I,” my father responds. “I’d like to see the plan of action. Law and Tessa, please work on that with the rest of the team before you leave for the Winter Olympics. I’d love to figure out our actionables and move forward.” He pauses, taking a look around the room. “Unless anyone from the board has any objections?”

The handful of advisors, along with Michael, Jack, and Henry, shake their heads, and I can tell they’re ready to see how it works, as well as see some numbers, to back it up. That discussion will happen later, but for now, it looks like Contessa Costa just showed everyone the force I thought she might be. One Riggs is lucky to have at its back. Now I need to figure out where that leaves me. I pull out my phone and type out a text.

LAW

Remember that chat about threesomes?

JUNE

How could I forget?

LAW

Meet me for a drink?

JUNE

Of course, darlin'.

Tessa

“I’VE HEARD NOTHING BUT INCREDIBLE THINGS ABOUT THE magic your hands apparently wield.”

Grace smiles as she stirs her coffee. “Rina said this, I assume?”

“My sister has been singing your praises for weeks, but I’ve also heard it here too.” If there was ever the definition of a hometown sweetheart, it would be Grace. There’s something sweet and kind about the way she approaches everyone. That part of myself, I lost. The piece that welcomes instead of intimidates. I’m still not sure if I miss it, or if this new version of me is who I always really was. Beneath the niceties. Behind the men who took up so much space.

“You’ve lived here all your life. Worked for Riggs for almost as long, and I’m curious what you think about my presentation today. It pulls attention away from the athletes you obviously want to get here.”

I pour the hot water from the teapot that Benny just brought over into the oversized teacup. The blend of jasmine, cherry, and vanilla instantly hits my nose, and it forces me to smile. If London did anything for me, it was learning to appreciate a good afternoon tea.

“I think you won over the people you needed.” She leans forward. “And you got the boys’ club to stop for a minute and see that we don’t need to play in the same sandbox as everyone else. Not when we have all of this.” She points to the front window of the coffee shop. It’s not even the best view in town and you can still catch a glimpse of the sun dipping below the mountains. “Having a woman back at the helm is refreshing. When Everly left, I felt it. This is absolutely a male-dominated arena, so when I heard you were coming on board, I was relieved. Maybe even a little excited.”

I smile and make note of the sentiment. The environment is diverse at Riggs, but with what we’re going to be adding,

we're going to need to hire more people.

"How are you settling in? I would guess that it's a big adjustment from New York City."

"It is, but I was in London for the last year," I tell her.

She raises her eyes from her cup, a quiet ask if I want to elaborate. And it's easy to want to with her.

"I don't know what to call it. A year of healing. Dare I say the cliché thing and call it my year of self-discovery?"

"I get it. I spent my undergrad in Europe. It's a refreshing breath to be somewhere different. New people. New ways of thinking, or at least different ways to approach life and work balance." She nods to the cup of tea. "I never continued that, but it was a really nice break in the day. Later dinners. I loved all of it."

I think about how much that time filled up parts of me that I hadn't realized I was missing. And not just the part that had to do with ending a marriage, but relearning what I liked. Who I wanted to be. It was lonely and hard, but I like where it led me.

"So, did you?"

"Discover myself, you mean?" It's hard not to divulge all of the details, so I settle on, "Yes. I had been in a relationship for so long, right after college, that I couldn't even remember what I did for fun anymore. It was either work related or what my husband liked."

I usually don't connect with women so easily. My sister is the only other person I tend to talk with about life. *Maybe that's something worth looking at differently too.*

"Like what?"

"I remembered that I loved to swim. I love to read. And I love to cook, but I never had time to enjoy doing it. So, I spent all my time, well, most of my time, doing those things again."

"Then it's perfect that you have that lap pool in your new place." She smiles, and I know what's coming next. She may

not be officially a Riggs yet, but she operates like one. Curious, borderline invasive. “How’s that working out?”

“You’re referring to my neighbor?”

“Obviously.” She sips her coffee again, and I see Michael come into the shop from the corner of my eye.

She follows my line of sight and smiles wide.

“Ready to go?” Michael asks.

“Yes.” She smiles as he leans down to kiss her forehead. When she blinks her eyes open, she turns back to me. “Can we give you a ride back home, Tessa?”

Michael nods at me with barely a smile. I can appreciate that at least one person in this town is weary of the newbie.

“I’m going to take a gondola ride in a little while. You go ahead. Thank you for the company, Grace.”

“You too,” she says and leans in for a hug I wasn’t expecting. “You can tell me more about it next time. I’m glad you’re here, Tessa.”

And something about those words, as simple as they might seem, causes a heaviness in my throat. I give her a polished smile as she leaves, and when I let out the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding, I remember the last time I heard those words.

“Contessa, I’m glad you are here,” my father says as he gets up from his leather chair. When he faces me, he finally notices my splotchy face and lack of make-up. And I see something register on his face. Something that alarms me and tells me he isn’t going to do what I’m asking.

“I want Max gone.”

“You cannot come into my office and demand that. He is vested and we have a team of people who wouldn’t appreciate him being fired without the proper reasoning.”

“How about how he was fucking one of the interns on office property.”

He waves me off, like I'm overreacting. And it ignites a fire within me. One that I know will not end well today.

"That seems like reason enough."

"Contessa, please. Are you surprised?"

I jerk my head back as if I've been slapped. In many ways, I have been. I blink at the man in front of me with his black hair peppered with silver, the white collared shirt and black suit that he wears like a uniform. I feel like I'm seeing him differently and for the first time.

"Am I surprised that my husband was fucking another woman—"

"Language," he interrupts.

But I keep talking. "MY intern, I might add. So openly in our conference room? Yes, Dad, yes, I'm surprised."

"Jesus, you're drunk," he mumbles.

"Obviously, I'm drunk. Did you not hear what I just said?" I lean against the wall, because tonight has been such a convoluted mess and now the room is starting to spin.

"I'm not firing your husband. You will work it out. Men have appetites, Contessa. You know this. Unless you keep up with them, they'll look elsewhere."

I open my mouth, but words can't form when you're this shocked to your core. Not necessarily at the patriarchal chauvinist mentality that most women have to deal with at some point in their lives, but the fact that it's being spewed by my father. As if that's just a small issue we'll work out eventually. My stomach rolls. My mind jumps to all of the horrible things he used to say about my mother.

I raise my chin and meet his stare, eyes watering.

"If you don't remove him, then I will remove myself."

My father studies my words. I can tell he's weighing if this is serious or an empty threat, but it's very clear that this ruling emotion won't disappear any time soon. I'm furious. I'm hurt. And I know what he's about to say even before he starts to

speak. I should have expected this, and maybe I did. Maybe that's part of the heartache I feel right now.

I've done everything he's ever asked of me. I sat to the side when Maxim was being groomed for the role I worked hard for, the job I wanted. But I trusted my father. I trusted that the choice to hire my husband as CEO was what was best for the company. Right now, I just wonder if it was because I didn't have a cock hanging between my legs.

"You're emotional right now. Take some time and calm down. You don't have to stay with him if that's what you decide, but I will not fire him over this personal matter."

"Personal matter? PERSONAL MATTER? Daddy, are you fucking hearing yourself?"

"Language."

"I quit. Effective immediately."

"Don't do something you will regret, Contessa. This isn't business. Your life with Maxim is your life; it has nothing to do with the business."

I widen my eyes at that. The man who built the business. The same one who has majority share. The one whom I've respected for my entire life just jilted my world in a way I wasn't ready for. I swallow the scream that wants to escape, blinking back the next wave of tears that are edging toward falling. I decide in that moment I no longer know the man in front of me. I always knew people are never wholly good nor bad, that there are parts that we may not like and parts that we love. But tonight, the two men who have so effectively shaped my life have made me feel so less than. I start to shake, but instead of unleashing it all, I turn around, walk out the door, sit in the waiting black car, and leave my life behind.

I wipe away the tear that escaped the corner of my eye. I'm not interested in crying anymore about my life before here. The view on the gondola makes me feel like I'm capable of anything. Being somewhere this beautiful and seeing the way its beauty changes after a storm makes me think that healing

doesn't mean erasing anything. But weathering it and finding a new view.

I pull out my phone and decide it's time to open up a bit more.

TESSA

Want to come over and make pizza with me?

CALLEN 'HOT SHERIFF' MULDOWNEY

Working, but how about a raincheck?

TESSA

Deal.

CALLEN 'HOT SHERIFF' MULDOWNEY

When do you leave to see your sister?

TESSA

Next week.

CALLEN 'HOT SHERIFF' MULDOWNEY

If I get out early enough tonight, I'll bring you some dessert. The ladies from Bingo Night dropped what was left at the station.

TESSA

The way that entire sentence screamed, "I now live in a small town..."

CALLEN 'HOT SHERIFF' MULDOWNEY

Watch out. If you stay longer than a year, you're considered a townie.

The funny thing is, I like how that sounds.

Law

“THIS IS THE LAST CALL FOR FLIGHT 929 TO MILAN.”

“Shit.” I pick up my pace. I knew I should have just left the office when she did, but I had a few things I needed to wrap up with the marketing team before I was gone for an entire week in a different time zone. This trip might be for business, but that means I’m still out of town for that long and plenty of things can fall through the cracks. I have a lot riding on an idea I’m about to pitch.

“Excuse me,” I say as I knock shoulders with a number of people trying to make it to my gate. The airport is packed. Everyone is trying to get out before the next storm comes in and grounds everything. I’ll be in Milan first for the Opening Ceremony and a formal event that greets all of the sponsors and media. An over-the-top evening that makes everyone who’s not an Olympian at least a fraction as important. From there, we’ll travel to Cortina for the Alpine event. Bishop Jones is one of our athletes. He trains on our mountains and carries a lot of influence, not just in the sport itself, but among a number of influencers across markets. I’m here to support him, check out who else might be an asset for us and, of course, see what I might be able to accomplish when I corner her on our flight.

“Sir, welcome aboard. May I get you something quickly before we start taxing?” I give the flight attendant a quick smile and then look around. I spot her dark hair right away. She’s focused on something and hasn’t seen me yet. “I’ll take a coffee black with one sugar.”

I take my seat in business class and look to my right. She’s not paying attention to the seat next to her. She’s not going to be happy, but this means I have more than ten minutes. And I’m going to need it, because I’m going to try to do the ambitious thing. Win over my new boss, and then eventually take her job.

My phone buzzes just as I find my seat. It isn't until I've stowed my suitcase and pulled out my phone that she acknowledges me.

"The hell are you doing?"

"That's no way to greet your seat neighbor, Contessa."

"How are you on my flight?" She shakes her head, and I can't tell if she's really annoyed or just pretending to be.

"I'm just trying to get those ten minutes."

She turns her head so she's looking right at me. And I know just by the way she's erased any trace of emotion from her face that she did not like that.

I read the text message waiting for me. Of course it's from my HELM group. Henry, Everly, Law, and Michael. They hate the group name, but I thought it was genius.

HENRY

Law, I hear you're going to Italy to probably do something stupid.

EVERLY

Oooo, tell me. Tell me! This about Tessa?

MICHAEL

Do not, I repeat, do NOT do something epically stupid like try to sleep with your new boss.

HENRY

Too late.

EVERLY

Law!

Wait, did you two sleep together? Are you seeing her?!

Why is he being silent?

MICHAEL

If you'd stop skipping the gym, maybe you'd have a clue, Ev.

EVERLY

I've been busy. Let me steal your kids for an overnight, then you can give me the deets.

MICHAEL

Your negotiating has really gotten bad.

Instead of indulging them, I pocket it for now. I'll talk to them when I land. I don't need my family berating me over text. I have a plan. And she's going to spend this flight hearing me out.

The portly man who's crammed into the window seat next to her, clears his throat, seemingly overhearing the conversation we're having probably a little too loudly.

I lean forward. "Hello, sir. Would you like to swap seats?"

"What?" she asks too quickly. "No. You're not sitting there."

The man leans forward. "That would be nice, if you wouldn't mind. I do prefer the aisle seats on a red-eye."

"Not at all," I say, gathering up my things. It's not a coincidence that I'm in the aisle across from her. I put the interns to work to figure out her flight details, and after that, it was a fairly simple task. I have a pitch, and I want her to hear it. Plus, I hate flying alone.

"Do you want me to climb over you too, or did you want to get up?" I ask, smiling down at her. I haven't been this close to her since I snatched that dirty book from her hands. When I look at her again, it's impossible not to notice that she really is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Above any model or

athlete. She's the kind of beauty who has people stopping to stare. Even when the glare she's giving me is meant to intimidate.

I smile at her and ignore the pursed lips and crossed arms. "Have it your way," I say as I start to slide my body in front of her.

"No. Hold on." But she says it too late. And I can hear her breath catch as she stands, just as I slide in front of her.

Tessa

I get a face full of his navy-blue sweater, and I'm assaulted by the masculine smell of a campfire that's been doused in cologne. It's a stark contrast to the recycled cold air inside the airplane. *Fucking hell, that's good.* I close my eyes on the inhale again. I've been trying to put some space between us. I really am far too turned on by this man to be this close to him. And that's one of the reasons I booked my own travel. I didn't want to ask anyone else to do that for me and, more importantly, I wanted to travel alone. Avoiding this exact scenario was my entire plan. I don't understand why, no matter which way I turn, he's there. I pull out my bottle of water and tuck it into the cup holder of my seat. Then I quickly close the air vent above me, because as usual, I'm freezing.

"You want me to blow on your hands? I know how much you liked that."

I bite back the laugh that I want to let loose and ignore him.

The pilot gives us the rundown of our place in line for take-off and the flight attendants go through their safety agenda. I flip open my Kindle and realize that I haven't heard a peep from my annoyingly handsome seat neighbor. When I turn his way, though, it's not what I expect to see. I've taken enough flights to recognize someone who doesn't like to fly, and Law is showing off every single tell.

White knuckles grabbing onto one of the arms of the seat. Earbuds in and eyes closed. One eye cracks open as the plane stops moving, and he looks at me.

"I'm not a fan of take-off and landing. I know, it's ridiculous, but I get lightheaded and feel like I'm going to pass out."

It's not a normal sight, a serious, and dare I say, nervous version of Law Riggs. I reach over and touch his fisted hand. It's been a long time since I've tried to soothe anyone, touched

anyone in a way that didn't have another motive. I spent the last week trying to avoid being near him. I know what I feel when I'm alone with him and it's not smart, never mind entirely too dangerous, because I'm starting to like it here. Strutt's Peak. My new friends. The life I'm building. I'm not looking to step on a landmine. And Law is exactly that. An explosive mistake just waiting to happen.

Instead of letting my hand rest on his, he turns his fist over, opens his palm, and snakes his fingers through mine. Shit. The warmth of it seeps into my cool hands, and a moment later, the plane jerks forward and starts moving at a faster speed, readying for take-off. A small squeeze of his hand, and I watch as his eyebrows pinch at the bridge of his nose. I rub my thumb gently along his. His skin is rougher than mine, but I like that it's different. He's so different from the men whose hands I've held before. Maybe everything would be different.

If this were anyone else, I would have kept my hands to myself. I'm failing wildly at my plan to keep him at an arm's length. With my thumb gliding back and forth, I decide I like touching him. I want to forget about being smart and cautious. So when the plane stops climbing, and the pilot alerts the cabin that we're at the preferred altitude, even when the "fasten seat belt" light turns off, I don't let go.

At some point during the climb and the cabin pressure, he fell asleep. His worry calmed, and then I noticed his measured breathing, felt the small twitches of his fingers, and finally looked over and watched his lips part slightly. I take in the size of him, his broad shoulders practically consuming his seat. He's so much bigger than me, which isn't all that hard to accomplish, but his size has me feeling...safe.

His sandy brown hair is perfectly styled. His beard is always trimmed tightly so that it looks more like a five o'clock shadow than kept facial hair. I take in all of it. Even asleep, he's like a magnet—I feel so drawn to him. And yes, he's the prettiest man I've ever seen, but it's not just that. There's a lightness to him that the heaviness in me wants to experience.

But I can't. And it's more than the fact that we'd be crossing professional lines. *I* can't. I can't get involved or

give-in to this. And I will not lose myself to someone again.

“You’re crazy,” he says with an impassive voice. Like what I’m saying is just as trivial as why I’m saying it.

“Max, don’t say that. Like what I’m saying doesn’t make any sense.”

“Tessi, you’ve been working your ass off. Nobody is taking that away from you, sweetheart, but I’m just telling you that there’s no way you’re going to take on the vice president role with such little experience.”

“Max, we have the exact same number of years at this company under our belts. You went toward sales, and I went with marketing, but that doesn’t diminish the years put in. Why wouldn’t he promote me?” I ask him. I hate that I sound like I’m having a temper tantrum right now, but I’m so upset to be looked over again.

“Baby, first of all, your ideas are good, but they’re not hitting the bottom line. Not like what I’m doing,” he says, unbuttoning his top collar. He kicks his feet up on the chair and pats his knee, like I should obey like some kind of lapdog. When did I stop liking that?

“I’m in my role right now as VP of Sales because I’ve hit my numbers and then exceeded the projections for next quarter. That’s the level of above and beyond that gets you into this role without the number of years of experience to back it up.”

I hate that he sounds right.

He pats his lap again. “C’mere, baby.”

I don’t move. I’m trying to hold my ground right now and understand why it’s sounding like a comparison game instead of a way for me to vent to my partner.

“Fine. You don’t like what I’m saying, so you’re going to let it bleed into our personal time together. You don’t want me to touch you?”

“That’s not—”

He cuts me off. "If you want to take some time apart, just say the word."

"Max. That doesn't need to be the alternative. I'm just—"

"I know, baby, but I feel like you're punishing me for having more success. You know your father adores you and he's been thrilled about the new athletes you've recruited."

I shrink back at the compliment, because I didn't recruit anyone. I didn't like the direction the team wanted to take our marketing dollars. I advocated for a different approach, numerous times, because we're spending money on sponsorships because it's what's always been done. We won't make the return, not on the investment, and most certainly not on brand awareness. But nobody cared about the bottom line when the team heard players from New York and Boston were ready to wear our logos.

"Tessi, it's Friday night. Let's forget the week and fool around, baby."

"I'm not in the mood, Max."

He scoffs at me. "Fucking figures." Then he gets up, and without another look back, slams the door behind him.

I jolt awake. My blanket falls to my waist. I look to my right and see Law is awake, watching a movie. "Your hand was really cold. So I figured a blanket couldn't hurt, since you said no to the blowing before," he says, smirking at his own words without taking his eyes off the notebook in front of him. I watch as he sketches out lines and blocks with his pencil.

"You also talk in your sleep." He shifts his eyes, and I'm locked in those blue eyes for just a moment. "Sounded pretty intense. You okay?"

"Fine." I sit up and pull the blanket off of me. Although, it's a lie. Any time I have a dream about Maxim, it takes a while to move on from it. I'm really not looking forward to seeing him in person. Everything regarding our divorce was done remotely while I was in London. I had no interest in seeing him, and if it were up to me, I'd never have to ever again.

I move over and peer over his sketch.

“Bookcases.”

“What?”

“Bookcases for the flat wall in the ‘fun’ room.”

I blink for a minute at the sketch of the shelves and design, along with measurements that take up two pages in his small moleskin notebook.

“You’re going to build these?”

He smiles, like I’m ridiculous for asking. “Yes, I’m going to build these. It may surprise you that I’m more than just ruggedly handsome.”

“Usually, guys like you hire people to do that kind of thing.” It’s what my father and ex-husband would always do.

“Contessa, there are no guys like me.”

I’m starting to realize that too.

“Plus, it’s good content.” Then he ruins it.

“We should talk about that, by the way. Your content.”

“You don’t approve? Are you going to tell me it’s not a good look for the brand?”

“I’d rather look at the numbers and let them decide.” I pull out my phone and take a look at the social engagement and correlating sales numbers. “You’ve already done it, haven’t you?” I smile as I look up at him.

“Of course. If I’m going to objectify myself, I want to make sure that we’re reaping the benefits of it.”

And without thinking because, apparently, I woke up without a filter, I say, “I’m sure you reap plenty of benefits from your videos. What is it they say, sliding into DMs?”

When I look up from my phone again, he’s smiling at me, giving me a knowing look. “Don’t pretend like you don’t know that phrase. I’m sure you’ve slid into plenty of DMs.” Charming is too easy of a word. Disarming is more like it, with his full attention and flirtatious attitude focused on me,

my cheeks heat. I feel flustered as I take a sip of my water. “People sliding into DMs aren’t a quantifiable number that I’m interested in hearing about.”

“You seem interested.”

I lean toward his seat. If he thinks he’s the only one who can play this game, the one where we try to make the other uncomfortable to gain the upper hand, then he doesn’t realize I’m becoming far better at it. “You would know if I were interested in what you had to offer, Riggs. But I don’t play with boys. I already told you that.”

I unbuckle my seat belt and stand. I can’t read his face as I take a quick glance, but it doesn’t matter. I need a minute away from him. I need to stand and move around. I need to figure out how I’m going to handle the next week, because all of a sudden, the man I just walked away from has completely thrown me off my game. And now, more than ever, I need to stay sharp.

When I’m back at my seat, he’s snacking on a bag of chocolate chips and popcorn.

“Want some?”

I shake my head no, but he pours a little bit of both into his empty cup and passes it to me.

“Can I tell you something without you getting pissed off at my existence for a minute?”

“I don’t make promises I know I can’t keep.”

A laugh escapes him. “I’ve been working on an idea, but it isn’t going to be an easy sell.”

“That’s not a strong start.” My eyes narrow, but he’s piqued my interest.

He looks me in the eyes, and the sincerity of it makes me want to take him seriously. “It’s a build on your presentation.”

“I’m listening.”

“The curated adventures that we plan are exclusive. They were always meant to operate that way. We’d be able to offer

something unique to high-end clientele who wanted something that nowhere else could offer. We partner with the resorts and also offer it independently. It's been working."

I nod, knowing those adventures are one of the creative ideas that made me want to join the company. Nowhere else does it the way Riggs Outdoor is doing it. It's usually something a resort would accommodate. Like a high-end concierge, but not a sports brand. It's a concept that Law led. "Those adventures are what got me thinking about how to utilize Strutt's Peak more efficiently in our marketing campaigns. I think there's a way they can evolve so that we can include and entice tourists who are less inclined to want to do outdoor adventures."

"The 'indoorsy' crowd."

He smiles at that. I'm part of that crowd.

Turning in his seat, he then passes the bag of chocolate chips to me. He takes a deep breath and says, "I went to a party when I was in London..."

I stop from grabbing any more from the bag, my heart stuttering.

"No."

Law

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, NO? YOU JUST PROCLAIM THAT BEFORE you’ve had a chance to hear me out. There is a healthy appetite for activities that occur after dark.”

She stares at me. Not a single emotion on her face—her superpower. And it unnerves me, which says a lot, since not much can usually rattle me.

“Of the sexual variety,” I add, which doesn’t help.

Her eyebrows raise. I’ll take it as my cue to continue.

“There’s not a single play party, fetish club, burlesque show, or even a couple looking to fly under the radar to host something exploratory within a hundred miles of Strutt’s Peak. I’m not saying this is for everyone, but there have to be plenty of tourists, and plenty of locals even, that would find an offering like that intriguing. No?”

“No.”

I glare at her. “You know I’m right.”

She studies a spot on the leather seat in front of her before she says anything else. It’s a lot of silence that I’m not the best at keeping, but I’m hoping it’s a sign that the next words out of her mouth won’t be “no” again.

“Okay, say this is something that’s...” Searching for the right word, she clears her throat. “Curated.” She looks at me then, taking a breath. “The type of event we went to in London was intensely private. It’s not the type of thing you could offer to tourists. The safety factor would disappear and—”

“Okay, ignore the idea of a play party then, and the logistics and legal hurdles for just a second, and tell me it wouldn’t give us an edge.”

“Of course it would, but I don’t see how you’ll get board approval, and then try to keep it under the radar, but also discoverable. Complicated doesn’t sound appealing to me.”

She looks me up and down quickly, but I catch it. I know that's what we are to each other. Complicated.

“There's a woman.”

She blinks at me.

“No. Not like that. Someone who's performed at a couple of bachelor parties I've been to.”

“Elaborate.”

“She's been a burlesque performer for years and has a very healthy perspective when it comes to sexual exploration. So, I asked her to find out if there were more burlesque shows, dancers she knew, all male reviews, play parties, or even adult toy stores in the area. It's not something a web search found for me, so I went to someone who had more of a connection. She also wouldn't raise any flags by asking around, whereas I would.”

“I'm still waiting for the rest of what you're pitching.” There's no movement in her expression, but the fact that she wants to hear more has a thrill rushing through me.

“Anyway, nothing until you hit Nevada. There are plenty in bigger cities and heavily populated areas, but not out where we are. And I'm not saying this should be a focus for our brand, but it got me thinking about the types of excursions we might be able to offer if we had more of a nightlife variety to choose from.”

She looks away from my eyes for the briefest moment. They flick to my mouth. If I had blinked right then, I would have missed it. I like how it feels to impress her. I like her looking at me like this. I've never felt so starved for someone's attention the way that I am for hers.

“I hate that I like it.”

I throw my fist in the air. *Fuck yes.* “Don't get ahead of yourself. I like it, but you're talking about investing in something that has to remain separate from the brand. It'll make it messy if it's not.”

“But you still like it.”

She tries not to, but she smiles anyway. “I do.”

We spend the next few hours discussing what this could look like, how it could factor into her influencer weekend, as well as the types of precautions we’d need to take so that it doesn’t tie directly back to our brand. The gain would be worth it, and the brilliant part about all of it is that it’s an untapped market of possibility.

“You’re going to run with this and find out every possible hurdle we might hit along the way and have a contingency plan for every single one. The details here are important.”

“Already working on it.”

“The woman?” she says hesitantly.

I nod. “June. She’s a bit of a nomad, but she’s been in and out of Strutt’s Peak for the past year. We hit it off one night after one of the bachelor parties I threw for a friend.”

Tessa gives me a questioning look. She knows I’m trying to be vague.

I speak more quietly when I confess, “Threesomes. We were talking about threesomes.”

Her eyes widen slightly. I guess she didn’t expect me to go there. The same way I don’t expect her response. “Have you had one?”

I guess we’re toeing over this line we keep trying to stay behind, and I’ll take the bait. “Yes. You?”

Her hand comes up to her mouth as she tries to hide her smirk. Her response is muffled, but she says, “Only watched. It was on my London to-do list. To participate, but it never happened.”

“I’d like to know what else was on that list.”

That smirk slides to me. “Foursomes are fun.”

Well. Fuck. Me. Senseless.

It takes me a second to even respond. I wasn’t expecting the confession, but I’m absolutely turned on by it. Fuck, it’s hot on this plane. I reach above and turn the air on higher.

“You?”

She smiles. Just a smile, nothing else. No response. And I probably knew this long before our flight and the foursome discussion we just blew past, but that smile just confirms that I’m in so much damn trouble.

I point at her, wiggling my finger. “Not playing fair.”

Her body moves a fraction closer to me. One leg is tucked under her while an elbow leans on the armrest between us. If we were in coach, we’d be on top of each other. It’s the only time I don’t appreciate my flight status.

“Is that why you chose the room you were in? The multiple players?”

“Yes.” She takes a sip of her water, and then says quietly, “I was curious about everything. And then something caught my eye.”

She looks at me through her thick dark lashes, and I swear it’s the sexiest eye contact of my life. And I can’t help myself. I have to push. “Something or someone?”

“We just danced over a line, so let’s not play dumb,” she says matter-of-factly.

I nod because she’s right. But if we’re going to play around across this line, then I want to keep her talking. I know the answer to my next question, but I wonder if she’ll tell me the truth. “Was that your first time at a play party?”

“No.”

Truth. I don’t know why I like that she didn’t think about it. She just answered.

“Did you go back after the night we met?” I don’t know the answer to this one. If she did, my investigator didn’t add that detail.

“Yes.”

My eyebrow raises, and I try to play it off as a nonchalant response.

“I was pissed off that you knew who I was. I tore the organizer a new asshole.” She shrugs her shoulder.

“There wasn’t another reason you would have gone back. Or maybe someone?”

She knows that I’m asking her if she went back to find me, but I already know she’s going to say no, before she says, “Nope. No other reason.” Her coy smile gives me hope that maybe she’s not the only one who felt shook from that night, and I’m holding on to that.

Talking about sex with someone connects you to them. Even if you’re not attracted to them, which is definitely not the case here. I’m *insanely attracted*. Listening to her talk about sex and intimacy is one of the most mature conversations I’ve ever had with someone I wasn’t already sleeping with. It crosses every line she’s tried to draw since she’s been in town, but that’s alright with me. I’d happily watch her draw them all over again if it meant I could keep talking to her like this. Walls crumbling. Shell softening. Showing me more of just her.

“When I first went, I was curious. I wanted to do things I never expected of myself.” She shifts her body again, and the confidence that still pours out of her is addictive and so damn sexy. “My ex-husband was very vocal about how much I didn’t want to—” She clears her throat slightly. “How basic we had always kept things. I was okay with basic, but he never told me he wasn’t. He liked to remind me how much better or smarter he was than me, and after enough of it, I started to believe it.” She cuts herself off, smiles, and pushes back the vulnerability. “It’s not exactly the kind of feeling that evokes confident, sexual energy.”

“He sounds like a catch.”

Her laugh is too easy to get used to. She nods, agreeing with my assessment of her asshat of an ex-husband. “This is so far beyond an appropriate conversation between colleagues.”

“Tessa...” I lean closer. “I think we can agree that we’re a bit more than colleagues.”

She smiles, eyes on mine. “Neighbors?”

“Exactly.”

She cuffs her hair behind her ear—she does it when she’s nervous. It’s her only tell I’ve been able to observe. I’m not interested in pushing her to tell me anything else personal if she doesn’t want to. Hell, I’m surprised she shared what she did.

“I haven’t seen him.” She looks back at me as she pulls the blanket over her lap. “I left town the night I caught him with my intern. Then I disappeared for a year,” she confesses. “And then resurfaced as interim CEO of his largest competitor.”

Now might not be the best time to tell her I already knew all that.

“I know I’ve already told you this, but your father gave me an opportunity, and I took it. And I’ll never be able to pay him back for it, but I’m going to try, regardless of what happens.”

I like hearing how much she respects and appreciates my dad. He’s the best man I know.

“I think you have something really good here. So let’s see if we can make it work. If it’s too far of a departure from our core brand, then we leave it.”

I rest my head on the chair’s back, watching her sincerity and honesty. She’s a natural leader. It’s been evident in her presentations, the way she’s been connecting with different teams in just a few short weeks, even what she just said. She knows the risks, but she’s being pragmatic about it. Maybe she *is* more suited for the role of CEO...

“I know how it feels to be swindled out of a job you had your sights on. But I never planned to take something away from anyone, Law. The opportunity was there, so I took it.”

“I respect that.”

She laughs. “But?”

“But nothing. I respect where you are.”

“But you’re still trying to figure out how long I’ll be here so you can take over this role.”

I give her a half smile because, while she’s not totally wrong, I wonder if maybe I’m coming at it incorrectly.

“I think a little healthy competition is never bad, Contessa. The same as knowing when you’ve won a battle. I won this one. I’ll take the win.”

She reaches up and shuts her overhead light. Then, pulling up her blanket, she reclines her chair.

“That’s it? Now you’re going to sleep? No last word?”

She smiles and closes her eyes, and as soon as I turn away from her and flick my light off, she says, “That took more than ten minutes.”

Tessa

THE BEEPS SOUND OFF, COUNTING DOWN UNTIL THE FINAL buzzer signals her to go. She sways left and right to get her mind into the movements of the slalom. The sun is bright on the mountain, reflecting off of the snow. I'm squinting even with sunglasses on, but it's not as frigid as yesterday when we watched the men's alpine team on the same mountain. Team USA took silver, but it was down to milliseconds.

She clicks her poles twice—a ritual she's done since she started competing. Then she pushes off from the tip of the hill just as the final buzzer sounds. I suck in a mouthful of cold air and hold my breath. The spectators are silent as she takes the first two turns. This is her last run, and if she can pull a better time than her previous one, she'll easily be the time to beat for gold. She flies down the mountains with what the announcers say are really nice technical turns, and they're right; she's skiing clean and tight. Rina tucks her poles under each arm and shaves milliseconds off her time when she's not turning. She's only five gates from home, and she's going to set an Olympic record time. *Holy shit, she will take gold and set an Olympic record. That's my fucking sister.*

“Let's go, Rinaaaaaaaa!” I shout at the top of my lungs.

She comes around the last flag and takes air. I look at the clock and then back to her landing, hearing the NBC announcers yelling into their headsets from their booth to my right. The crowd cheers just as she lands and kicks up powder across the finish line. She thrusts her poles into the air. She knows she just beat the odds. A year out from an injury that should have ended her career, and the oldest Olympian on the women's alpine team. She plows to a stop and crouches down, and when her coach rushes out to her, I can see her head nodding. She did it. My sister just fucking won a gold medal and broke the Olympic record.

Years, hell, the majority of her adult life, she's been working toward this, and now she has it. My eyes are wells of

tears. I'm so proud of her. She did it even when everyone told her it wasn't possible. Our father, when she chose training over finishing her degree, her former coach when he told her she should retire, and every sponsor she had who pulled their contracts with her when she got injured. She just won gold and made it look like an average run down a mountain.

"I had a feeling this would be her year." My shoulders tense at the sound of his voice. I didn't want to be emotional when I saw him, but he knew when to approach me. At a high moment, and this is definitely one of them. I turn my head and find my father to my left, clapping along with the rest of the crowd as the next skier from Denmark readies for her run. I turn my attention to my sister as she skis off to prepare for the podium. This last skier is competing for bronze at best.

"Contessa, I'd like to speak with you."

"That's nice." I start to make my way to the opposite side to snag a better view of the medals podium.

"Please talk to me."

I can see him following me when I turn my head. I don't want to do this with him right now. "This isn't about you or me, Dad. I'm here for Rina."

"Are you going to avoid me for the rest of your life?"

I hate how that feels—the idea of ending my relationship with my father. "I'm not avoiding you. I'm choosing to do what's best for me. And that doesn't include you. Not right now, at least."

He doesn't like that at all. And if there weren't people who overheard it, I wonder if he would have just let it lie. But he doesn't. If I got anything from him, it was the need to have the last word.

"You're acting like a petulant child, Contessa. I raised you better than this."

I spin around, trying to add more distance between us.

"You'll regret cutting me out of your life," he says.

That stops me. He still doesn't see how much he hurt me. "Let me ask you this, Dad. Do you regret choosing *him* over me?"

"Your marriage and its failure have nothing to do with me, Contessa. Maxim runs the brand that I've built. He was the best person for the job. It's that simple."

It's not that simple.

"I came to you that night, and you told me, in not so many words, to fix it. And that you wouldn't choose me. ME!" I say louder. "You didn't care that my husband had hurt me, betrayed our vows, and did it in *our* place of work. You practically defended him."

"You were drunk and emotional. Blowing things up, as women do," he barks back. "You're my daughter, and I love you, but you asked me to make a business decision because of a personal problem."

What do I say to that? He still doesn't see that when I needed him to comfort me, to choose me, he didn't. Nothing that I can spit back at him, no matter how hurt I am, will change his fractured perspective about women. It won't remove Maxim from a pedestal in my father's eyes. And most importantly, it won't make me feel any better.

"You were a good father for a lot of years, Dad. But the type of love I require now isn't the type you can give. Whatever it is you want from me, I'm not interested in giving."

I ignore his comment about ruining the family name. I even brush off the snide remark about only being hired at Riggs as a pawn. I walk away. If he won't choose me, then I will. I won't carry on a relationship because of who he is to me. I don't want that kind of life anymore. I focus on pressing my tongue to my lip to stop my chin from wobbling. I will not cry.

It's not until I've put a few feet of space between us that I notice the audience we've garnered. A few cameras click off, but that's not what makes me feel like running. It's the pair of

pale blue eyes that connect with mine from across the pathway. Law Riggs looks surprised, maybe even angry.

I smile at him, a placated signal that tells him, “*I’m fine.*” Even though I’m not. But he doesn’t shift. Instead, he keeps his stare on me, unblinking, until the U.S. National Anthem begins to play, and I look away. My shoulders relax just enough to know it’s going to be okay.

“I’m going to need to leave you for a little bit,” Rina says, as she clasps her bracelet. “My agent has a few brands that want to talk before the end of cocktail hour.”

“I think I can handle myself.” I smile at her in the mirror as I smudge my liner under my lash line. “Are you sure you don’t want me to do your make-up?”

“I’m keeping it simple tonight,” Rina says as she lines her lips in a nude shade. She has the same dark hair as mine, but hers is cropped short in a pixie cut. “I’m putting on those stilettos you bought me. That’s enough of an effort.”

I smile. “You’re the gold medalist. You do whatever the hell you want.”

“Exactly. And if I play my cards right, I’ll walk out of this party with at least one big brand to help pad my retirement fund and someone absolutely delicious who’ll worship me later.”

“Anyone in particular?”

“One? Oh please, Tessa, tonight there needs to be celebrating, and in my humble old lady opinion, celebrations need to be as big and bold as winning a gold fucking medal.”

I snort a laugh. “I support that.”

“Good. I’m going to need you to do the same.”

I instantly picture pale blue eyes. The way they watched me today. The way I keep finding them on me. The way that he keeps eye contact, but every so often, drifts his attention to

my mouth. I know I think of him far too often. And not just since I came to Strutt's, but since the night I felt him under my hands.

And like she can see where my head just went, Rina says, "Law Riggs is better looking in person."

"No," I bite back. The last thing I need is her pushing that. I don't want to share anything about his and my situation.

"No?" She laughs. "Why not?"

"He is very pretty. He's also my coworker. And I'm not about to trade one workplace relationship disaster for a new one. Plus, he's my neighbor."

"Law Riggs is hot abs guy?"

Shit.

She starts cackling like this is the funniest news of the day.

"I'm ignoring you."

"Are you? Or are you picturing those abs?" *I hate her.* "And from what I've read, he's *very* experienced."

I give her a bored stare that wordlessly asks if she's done now.

"It might be just the kind of experience your life needs right now. Have some fun. If you don't, someone will. I'm borderline calling dibs."

I don't mean to do it, but my head whips around when she says it.

She squints at me and sticks her tongue.

"How do I look?" I give her a little turn so she can see the long gold chain that daintily falls down the open back of my dress. The front is fairly basic, a black cocktail dress that halters at the neck, but the back is wide open and cuts off just above where my ass starts to slope.

"I knew that would look amazing on you. My agent sent over way too many outfits that are more your vibe than mine," she says with a big smile. "You sure you're going to be okay?"

I know she's asking because Costa Athletics is the main sponsor of tonight's party. Both Maxim and our father will be there. "Yes. If I could avoid seeing Maxim for the rest of my life, I would, but that's not my reality. So—" I raise my shoulders "—hopefully, plenty of distractions will keep him away."

She claps her clutch shut and takes one last look in the mirror. "Good. Now let's go celebrate how I just won a gold fucking medal."

We approach the resort's main entrance less than ten minutes later. This cocktail reception is specific to the U.S. Alpine Team. There will be another for all of Team USA when they return to the States, but in this part of Italy, where the Alpine events are taking place, it's a way for attending brands to congratulate and meet the medalists. Every industry that touches athletes and the Olympics is here. Brands from sporting apparel and equipment, to supplements and drinks. Everyone will be here looking to rub elbows and offer partnerships.

At the end of the day, it always comes down to numbers. Who will offer the best contracts, but sometimes establishing a relationship, or at least a positive rapport with an athlete at an event like this, will help gain favor between brands when it's time to.

When the car door opens, flashes start popping off at all angles. My sister is the most talked about Alpine athlete at this year's games. Between announcing that this will be her last Olympics, her injury comeback, and now, what she's accomplished today, everyone will want a slice of her time tonight.

"Have fun," I tell her and squeeze her hand.

"I will. You too." And then a massive smile takes up every inch of her face. I don't think I've ever seen my sister this happy. "Shit, Tessa. I fucking did it."

"Yes, you did. Now go celebrate. This is your night."

There's a large sectioned-off area for photographers, and it's packed with every major U.S. Network as well as a few Italian and Canadian news outlets. The truth is, the Olympics aren't filled with glamorous parties and extravagant affairs. It's extensive hours of hard work, lifetimes dedicated to mere minutes on a clock, and the insurmountable drive of every athlete who puts their sweat and tears toward it. But tonight, they've more than earned the glamour and deserve every moment to feel worshipped.

As I watch from the bottom of the stairs that lead into the venue, Rina's name is shouted from all directions. It's the kind of attention she hasn't had since first competing. Back then, she was the youngest prospect of the Olympic Games, and I was so jealous of how our father would talk her up to his friends. It took a long time to realize that was all for show. He didn't like that she defied him and competed instead of finishing school. And he hated that she wouldn't automatically promote his company when she built a name for herself.

I walk up the first flight of concrete stairs, and as soon as I reach the red carpet, I hand my coat to the attendant and wait my turn to move along. Up ahead, a few bobsled teammates are holding up the procession because of frenzied requests for interviews and photos. Rina is right behind them.

I lean forward slightly to watch her charm the on-camera reporter, but my view gets blocked by a black suit that shifts slightly to the right. It's not until I focus my attention that I realize it's not just Olympians causing a stir on the carpet.

"Law. Law, over here," a couple of photographers shout.

With his attention on the cameras, I get a moment to watch him. Dressed to perfection in what is likely a custom suit. His hair cut tight and styled. His posture is strong, but not rigid. Confident and dominant. If you haven't met him, he's an intimidating presence, even in the company of some of the best athletes in the world.

I watch as his jaw flexes, and he gives the photographers exactly what they're after. A handsome face mixed with his special brand of sexy. Arrogantly funny. If they're lucky,

they'll get him to talk about something unrelated to the Olympics or the Riggs brand. He's the last sibling to be paired off, and the media eats up his bachelor status. As if a good-looking man being single and wealthy is a masterful ruse or accomplishment. He fuels it with his social media influence and the type of content he creates. I've watched plenty of it and read an unhealthy number of comments. People love him.

I can't take my eyes off of him. I'm borderline comatose, frozen in place, and enamored just by the way his hand is slung so casually in his pocket. His other hand brushes up and down his white shirt. *Are you nervous, pretty boy?* The way he offers the reporter a confident smile as she shamelessly flirts with him says otherwise, but I'm starting to read his body language. When I look around, it's hard not to notice how much attention is focused on him.

It's why I'm not prepared. I don't feel the shift settle next to me. I was distracted.

"You're looking different, Tessi."

I turn my head and am met with Maxim's uninvited perusal of my body. A man whose attention I was always eager to have. Someone who's looked at me for so much of my life, but right now, it feels like an invasion of privacy. My stomach sours at the way he looks around my body, interested in finding an imperfection to focus on.

"Much fuller than you used to be," he says in a deceptively charming tone. An insult disguised as an observation. Fuck him.

I don't answer him, instead I look at the familiar ornament on his left. I can't say I'm surprised. He doesn't warrant a hello or even a backhanded compliment, but I can't help myself.

I flick my eyes around his face and down his slender frame. "You're looking older."

He smiles at that, but I know it cut him just a bit. Maxim is nothing if not vain. How did it take me so long to notice all of his red flags?

I flick my eyes to the woman I recognize from our former country club. “Bijou, I hope you’re getting paid for your time.”

She raises her left hand. Sure enough, a big, obnoxious diamond is on her finger. Payment, apparently.

Don’t react. Don’t react.

“Bargain shopping?” I ask him. She gives me a glare and stares at her ring. Yeah, that was mine.

He barks a laugh, like my insulting them is amusing. *Idiot.*

“Where did those fangs come from, Tessi?”

I turn back around, away from them. I’ve had enough of this. But as I step forward, Maxim cuffs his hand around my upper arm. And I tense instantly. His grip is tight, and unfortunately, the hold is familiar. He never liked when I would walk away from him.

He pulls me back slightly as he leans forward. His words are too close to my ear. The tone clipped and direct. “You ignored me for a year, and look where that got you. Not in a winning position, that’s for sure. You’re broke. Borderline fat. Looking for attention from anyone who’ll feel sorry for you. That’s what Riggs did, you know. Asher and his fucking bleeding heart gave you a job you never earned.”

I know that comment is nothing more than ramblings of a complete asshole, but it creeps into the few cracks of self-doubt that still linger.

“Don’t think I’ll allow you to make a fool of me.” He clicks his tongue, like shame on me for leaving him.

“You look like you’re doing that all on your own. Recycling mistresses into wives now?”

He grips my arm tighter, and as much as I would like to raise my chin and tell him to back the fuck off, I start to panic. Why is he even bothering with me? I’m out of his life. I want nothing to do with him. My eyes shift around us to see if anyone is paying attention. My bravado is starting to fade.

I look around for my sister, but I don't see her. Instead, my gaze connects with Law's. His blue eyes look around my face, trying to read the situation. Then they shift down to my arm. When they dart back up, it's as if he's asking, "*You okay?*" I'm not. But I look away when I think about how this must seem.

Maxim leans closer to my ear, and my whole body recoils from his proximity. A man who I once vowed to love for my whole life, I'm now physically repulsed by.

"Are you with him now?" He juts his face toward Law as he moves closer to where we're standing. "Does he know what kind of cold fish you are in bed, yet? That you're not even worth your trust fund anymore, since that's mine now."

I try to pull my arm away again, but he grips even harder. It's going to leave a bruise.

"I didn't plan to take all your money, Tessi. Just what we built together."

"Let go."

"But then you left. Do you know how that made me look? My *wife* leaving. I had no fucking clue where you were. Your father called the police."

I'm a little surprised to hear that. I knew my father was looking for me, but I didn't want to acknowledge anything from either one of them.

"So I asked, and you stupidly agreed to hand over everything. I took the houses, the car." He squeezes tighter, and I can't stop my wince. "All those designer handbags and shoes have been re-gifted or sold. You wanted out so badly, you couldn't even show up to sign the fucking papers."

I knew appearances and ego were the only reason he cared where I was. *Fucking prick.*

I try to yank my arm back with more force this time, but it barely jerks him. I keep my emotions in check, but my body is screaming to get away from him.

“Things could have been amicable, Tessi. You could have kept your lifestyle and kept ignoring my extracurriculars. But instead, you ran to your daddy. It took months for me to get back on his good side.”

A small part of me is happy that my dad gave him a hard time about me disappearing. I wonder if he knows Maxim took what he did.

“And then you go to work for fucking Asher Riggs. The attention you need is pathetic. Did you think that would bother me?”

“I don’t care anymore, Max. You were fucking my intern.” I grit my teeth together.

“I was fucking a lot of people.”

I knew it, yet I ignored it until I couldn’t any longer.

“Get your fucking hands off of her.” I turn and find Law standing within a foot of us.

I finally jerk my arm again, and he loosens his grasp. In its place, Law’s warm, welcome hand wraps around my lower back. He pulls me into him and says quietly, just for me, “Tell me you’re okay.”

I blink. And blink again. I feel frozen and embarrassed. How much of that did he hear?

I give him a nod yes and his lips brush lightly along the side of my temple.

“Touch her again, and I’ll add castration and murder to the list of shit I wouldn’t think twice about doing with a satisfied smile.”

“Go ahead. About a half-dozen people just heard that empty threat.”

“I don’t make threats. Just promises,” he says with a charming smile. And I can’t stifle mine. I hate that this is happening, but I feel safe. Safer than I have in a very long time.

“Interesting move, Tessi. Fucking the young ones now. See? They’re fun,” Maxim says, amused at the situation.

But without missing a beat, Law looks at me, his hand and fingers spread across my bare lower back, making his hold as strong as possible. “Do us all a favor, Maxim. Stay the fuck away from my girl. And I can guarantee that anyone you’ve pumped into a half dozen times wouldn’t have considered it fun.”

Max clenches his jaw. Oh, he didn’t like that one bit.

Law smiles at me and winks. He fucking winks. I’m at a loss for words or even a response to what I say or do next. Everything that he’s insinuating is a lie, but it feels too good to correct. Too easy to lean into.

He extends his free hand toward Maxim’s date. Or fiancée, apparently. “Bijou, you’re looking well. I haven’t seen you for quite some time.”

She smiles at him, and right there, that look, I know that look. It’s the *I’ve seen you naked* look. I didn’t think it was possible, but I hate her even more now.

“It has. We should catch up sometime.”

Dammit, my mouth is dry. I feel like the floor is spinning. But when Law responds, all of that jealousy dissipates. “Bijou, isn’t that what we just did?” He nods to her hand. “Congratulations. You two very much deserve each other.”

He leans down and kisses my shoulder. It’s a simple brush of his lips, but it leaves a wave of relief and tingles in its wake that tracks all the way down my arms. He starts to move us away from them, kisses my temple again, and says, just loud enough for them to hear, “Let’s go, Bunny.”

Absolutely not.

I clench my teeth. “Bunny?”

And as many emotions as I’m feeling right now—pissed off at the ridiculousness of the nickname, sidelined by the bruise that’s forming on my arm—the one that’s most surprising is protected. With Law’s arm wrapped around me, we put space

between every ugly thing that just happened. We make it about ten feet before I realize the depth of what he's just done.

His arm smooths down the length of my back, his fingers ghosting against my waist as he pulls me close to his side. This time when he leans down, his mouth hovers close to my ear, and he says, "Hope you're ready for a performance."

I tilt my head to look up at his face, questioning what he's suggesting and hating what he's assuming I'm going to do.

"Think you can pretend you want me?"

But that's when the cameras start flashing, and the attention of the entire paparazzi is now focused on the two of us. I wasn't aware of the first few flashes when he came over to me, but now that I think back to it, the entire interaction must have been captured. And my biggest problem is, as frustrated as I am at the situation he's now dropped us into, I'm not going to have to do much pretending.

Law

SHE'S GOING TO KILL ME. I'VE SEEN HER ANGRY GLARE, HER annoyed face, hell, even her *I haven't had my tea yet* stare, but right now, I'm getting some real murder-y vibes. But I don't regret my instant reaction to all of it. I read her body language loud and clear. Tensed shoulders, schooled panic, and when I saw his hands on her, I didn't think twice. I know this woman doesn't want rescuing, but I couldn't help but interject the only way I knew how—by declaring her off-limits. Telling that shit ex-husband of hers that he's no longer allowed to touch her. Not that he ever had the right, but now, if he tries to, there's going to be much more than hell to pay.

“Law! Over here,” the photographers shout. I pull Tessa in tight to my side. If I'm going to make this believable, at least for tonight, then I might as well enjoy the benefits of being close to her. Fuck, I've been thinking about it for months now.

The reporter who writes lifestyle, and borderline gossip, for a number of websites, is squared off and ready for me to indulge her. She ran a spread I was in on *Thirst Trap Influencers* last summer. She smiles, eyes darting between Tessa and me when she says, “Please tell me this is the woman you were being so secretive about during our chat earlier.”

I look at Tessa, and as she looks back at me, her eyebrows raise, silently asking me what this reporter is talking about. The kicker is, when the reporter asked if there was a special someone who's taken up residence in my life lately, it was her I was thinking about. How could it not? The woman has invaded every part of my life. *And I can't seem to keep her out of my head, even when I try.*

“This is her.” I smile, but I don't stop for more questions, so I move us along the carpet. I can feel by the way she's tensed up that keeping up this lie in front of the media right now is making her uncomfortable. That, or she's winding up for a verbal assault.

I hear the reporter shout, “Oh, c’mon, you gotta give me more than that.”

Tessa whispers, “Do you have any idea what you’ve just done?”

We finally cross the room’s threshold, and it’s buzzing with conversation and music, but instead of moving ahead toward the bar and high-top tables, Tessa grabs my hand and drags me toward the right side of the room. She pulls me down a long corridor away from the red, white, and blue uplighting that patriotically bathes the space. I took a long look at her from far away, but up close, as I move behind her, the dress she’s wearing fits the curves of her body with precision. A long, thin gold chain sways down the center of her back, her long dark hair swept to the side. The urge to pull it and bring her close to me again so I can lick a pathway from the curve of her ass all the way up to her neck is so strong that I let go of her hand. If I touch her, I’m going to do it. Wherever we’re headed, she’s clearly bringing me there to ream me out. She stops and grabs my hand again, pulling me along like I’m a misbehaving child who can’t keep up.

“Where are you taking me, Bunny? This isn’t the place for this,” I tease with a smile, making a spectacle as two women come out of the restrooms we pass. They both smile at me, and I hear them whisper, trying to guess who we are and where we might be going.

She stops at the end of the dimly lit hall, spins to face me, and whisper-shouts, “What the hell are you doing?”

Her tone tells me she’s far past the point of pissed off, maybe even genuinely upset.

But I’m not going to apologize for it. “You needed to get out of that situation. And he needed to back the fuck off.”

She laughs, but it’s not the good kind. It’s not quite maniacal, but it definitely scares me.

Why do I love working her up like this?

“So you thought, what? That you’d rescue me? And then just tell the world that we’re a thing?”

I move closer to her and place my hand on the middle of her chest. Right in between her magnificent tits. Her heartbeat is racing, but I flatten my hand and guide her backwards. We keep moving until her back hits the wall. *Nowhere left to go, Bunny.* Maybe I didn't think this through, but how could she think I would just allow that to happen? That anyone would see the way that fuck manhandled her and would ignore it? No fucking way. "Relax, You're safe with me."

Her breath catches, and by the rise of her chest and how she's searching my face for more, I can tell her adrenaline is running wild. But I need to make a couple of things very clear.

"First of all, I never. I repeat, *never* will be okay with a man putting his hands on a woman the way your fucking ex-husband just did to you. My guess is that's not the first time, either. But we can talk about that later."

I move closer, and her breathing picks up, deeper and faster, like she's about to let me have it. But I'm not done yet.

"And you have no idea what I'm thinking when I look at you." I inch closer so that all it would take is for her to lean forward in order for me to taste those pouty lips of hers. But she needs more than that right now. She deserves more. So I pull my attention away from her lips and back to her beautiful eyes. Blue pools with too many emotions as they search mine for some answers. "You want to be angry? Fine. Be angry. You need to cry? I'm right here, Tessa. But don't think I would see something like that and do nothing. So you let out whatever you need to. I'm right here. Do not expect an apology for what just happened."

She stares at the center of my chest. Maybe absorbing all of what I've said or maybe making her own decision about how she wants to play this. Because seconds later, she lifts her body from the wall, forcing my hand down, her chest pressing against me. I almost forget where we are—that I just promised her I'd be there for her. And seconds later, I practically forget my name just by feeling her. Wanting her.

Then she steps around me so that it flips our positions. My back hits the wall as she brings her arms up to either side of

my head. Her voice drops, tone deceptively softer, as she looks up at me. “You will do *more* than apologize. I’ll make sure you learn your lesson.”

Instant. Fucking. Hard-on.

My mouth tips up on one side. The way this woman knocks me on my ass is ridiculous. “Don’t tease me, Contessa. That threat doesn’t do what you think it does.”

She looks down at my body, and her attention lingers on the very thick and obvious reaction before she drags her focus back to my mouth first, and then my eyes. “Oh yes, it does.” And she smirks. *She fucking smirks.* And then pulls away. My chest is heaving in and out. I realize I’m the one out of breath now.

Looking over her shoulder as she starts to walk away from me, she says, “Let’s go. Time to play up the lie.”

Goddamn. So, I listen to my boss. I put on the mask I always wear, which shows the pulled-together businessman. The cocky bachelor. The one everyone wants or wants to be. I take a deep breath and push off the wall, buttoning my suit jacket and pushing one hand into my pocket.

I pick up the pace, and just as I reach her, I grab her hand and lace my fingers through hers. She takes it like holding my hand is the most natural thing, and what that does to my chest affects me even more than what’s straining against my pants.

The space is bustling when we move into the large ballroom. Most of the attention is focused on the athletes, so we make our way through various conversations, and with each one we leave, eyes and whispers follow. Clearly, the rumors have already started bustling about us.

“I’m going to grab a drink. Do you want anything?” I ask Tessa, but she’s absorbed in a discussion with an investor. When I reach the bar’s edge, I catch a glare from Maxim Cavanaugh again, as well as the lingering looks from his new fiancée. Bijou worked for one of the sports talent agents I knew. She’s very beautiful, but she’s the perfect example of a status seeker. Jumping from one person to the next, always

looking to level up. First time I met her, she came on strong during the X-Games a few years ago. We had a drink together, when she pushed to take a selfie and then proceeded to lick my face. Then she posted it. It left me with having to play clean-up, which is the only reason why I remember her. She let people believe there was more between us, but there wasn't.

“Smooth move, by the way.”

I look to my right and find Rina Costa biting an olive from her martini.

“She would have told me if something was happening between the two of you.” She side-steps closer. “Which means—something happened in the last hour that I missed?”

There's no need to keep up the lie with her. “Her ex happened. Had too tight of a grip on her arm, so I diffused it the only way I could think of without putting my hands on him.”

“So now you're going to let everyone think you two are together?”

I can't tell if she's pissed off or amused but, apparently, the crowd behind her that's buzzing and eager to talk to the U.S. Olympic Gold Medalist doesn't matter. She wants to make sure her sister is okay.

“I made a move.” I signal the bartender for another drink.

“I'm not going to do the protective sister bit. But I'd like to make a request.”

“Okay...” I laugh because I wasn't anticipating that.

“Make her have some fun. And I don't just mean the sexy fun she had in London.”

A streak of jealousy runs through me, thinking about what that means. I never get jealous; my attention is never focused for too long to have that strong of an emotion. But right now, the idea that Tessa was enjoying her time in London with people other than me feels like I've been punched in the gut.

“And yes, she tells me everything.” She raises her eyebrows, answering the unasked question about me. “She

spent the last year trying to glue herself back together. And before that—” She looks down at her drink, trying to find the right words. But I have a feeling I already know, because the small snippets I caught today, first with her father and now with her ex-husband, it screams toxic. “If anything, remind her that she has nothing to prove. You probably already know she’s smarter than most people, creative, and will run the hell out of your business, but she needs a break from that too. She needs something that’s easy and fun. You up for that?”

I sip my fresh cocktail. The warmth of the scotch coats my tongue, and I can taste the bitter orange that lingers afterward. I let the question settle. *Can I do that? It’s my usual game, but she’s not the usual player.*

Turning around, I find Tessa in the crowd. I watch as she laughs with the small group that’s formed around her. She speaks loudly with her hands, and it’s captivating to see how they respond to her. I’ve always been good at commanding an audience, but she wins over people with personality and charm that leaves them smiling long after she’s finished talking. It’s impressive. She’s impressive.

A double pat on my chest knocks me out of my head. “She may only be able to give you easy and fun,” Rina says as she watches her sister.

“It’s my specialty.”

“Good.”

But I’m lying through my teeth, because light and fun won’t be enough. I’ve been trying to figure out why this woman has such a spell on me, and while I’m not any closer to the answer, I do know that I can’t just be fun. Maybe I want more than fun for the first time ever.

Before Rina walks back to a large group of people looking at us, she says, “I think you’re going to be good for her, Law Riggs.”

“Nice to meet you, Rina,” I yell after her.

When I look around the crowd, Tessa finds me. She doesn’t smile, just stares back at me as another man to her left

asks her something. I can tell it's regarding me or perhaps her new relationship status because she nods toward me. When the man looks my way, he nods and lifts his drink. Giving him a polite smile, she excuses herself and comes my way. There are plenty of high-profile names in this room. Beautiful men and women are peppered throughout, but she's the kind of beauty that outweighs the rest of the noise. The kind of woman who can wear a dress like that and make my pulse jump. The kicker is that I don't think she even knows it. There's something about her unawareness of the attention she grabs and eyes that follow her, wanting to be her or be with her, that has me in a chokehold. Even after that bullshit on the red carpet, she still is the most confident looking person in the room. That level of self-awareness and esteem is fucking poetic.

“What was my sister talking to you about?”

“Us.”

She leans against the bar, lifting a hand for the bartender. “That moved fast. I haven't had a chance to talk to her.”

“She found it amusing.”

That gains her attention.

I lean in closer. “Just wait until we get back home. I guarantee that's nothing compared to the rumor mill already starting there. If any of those outlets post pictures of us tonight, my phone will be blowing up by the morning.”

With my back to the bar, I look around the crowd. “I think this relationship could play in our favor in a few ways.”

“You think so, huh?” Her head tilts as she narrows her eyes on me.

“For you, miss,” the bartender says as he approaches her.

She looks at me with a sense of surprise. “Figured you could use one when I saw you talking to that rep from California.”

Taking a sip, she moves a step closer to me. I like surprising her. Anticipating what might impress her and

potentially making her smile. “How did you know what I wanted to drink?”

“Awe, Bunny. I know what you like,” I say teasingly. I offer her a smirk as I turn toward her. And the way her blue eyes follow mine as she sips on it, she knows exactly what she’s doing with that look and the confident way she holds my contact. She’s flirting, and it washes over my body, making me feel flushed.

The lounge music transitions into a more club-like feel, meaning the drinks are about to be poured stronger, and anything revolving around business dealings is ending. The rest of the night will be spent celebrating the Olympians and their teams of people who helped get them here. They can relax and get a little messy. Most media will be escorted to leave shortly if they haven’t already. However, plenty of pictures and videos from phones will surface after tonight’s party. Most of these athletes, except Rina, aren’t interesting enough for anyone to care. But it’s an opportunity for us.

“Do you trust me?”

She steps away from me slightly as she places her drink on the bar. “Of course not.”

I correct the distance she’s made by moving closer. My arm brushes hers and I lean down, close enough so that only she can hear what I have to say to her. She smells so good, a sugared vanilla I don’t think I’ll ever be able to not find mouth-watering. She sways with the music, just enough so we invade each other’s space fully. I want her to hear me, feel me.

“You’re the sexiest person in this room. And plenty of people have noticed.” I stare at her beautiful mouth and the way she liked hearing the compliment. “We can use the buzz of our relationship in our favor. The teaser about our *Adventures After Dark* just posted on our social media. I guarantee that plenty of people will be curious. The same way that plenty of people will gossip about the sexy woman I’m dating who also happens to be running the brand.”

“You think what we’re doing, this lie, will tie into the After Dark idea?”

“I think people make trends, but to get there, they pay attention to the way they feel. We pay attention to moods and energy. It’s what gives brands so much power. How they make people feel, not just what they make people buy. Those are the ones that last.” She knows this; I’m just repeating what she’s presented to make my point. “If we want this campaign to feel different than what we’ve done in the past, then let’s focus on this intriguing—” I lower my voice deeper, moving closer to her neck so that my mouth touches her skin with every tick of her pulse “—sexy vibe that we’re looking to offer to tourists. Let’s play up what happens when they choose to be indoorsy. Let’s use this chemistry that you know we have as a way to show off the sexier side of Riggs Outdoor.”

She leans into my words. The weight of her body is the only indication that I’ve got her. She doesn’t say anything, but I know I’ve got her. So, I take the lead and remove the drink from her hand and put it on the bar top behind her. I notice the two women with their phones out and attention on us at the other end of the bar. *Perfect.*

“You may not trust me, but I can almost guarantee you will kiss me back.”

I run my fingers along her jaw. She follows my line of sight to the phones pointed at us.

She whispers, “Don’t you fucking do it.”

I hover closer and rub my thumb along her lower lip, wiping off whatever was left of her gloss. And I’m mesmerized at how the rest of the room has faded into white noise. “You sure about that? Because I think your mouth... it’s so fucking irresistible. The way I’ve thought about it. The things I want to do to it. The things it’s already doing to me.”

“I bite,” she whispers back, sending a shiver through my body.

“Oh, I know,” I say, smirking at the thought.

Her fingers touch my stomach, but she doesn’t push me away. The tips graze along each peak and valley of my abs as my chest rises and falls.

It's one of the most sensual moments of my life, and my lips haven't even grazed hers yet.

"This right here is doing the job. At least half a dozen people are taking pictures of how much you want this. So whether you kiss me or not, we've already got what we needed. So what do you say?" I lean forward and press a soft kiss right next to her ear. "Let me have a taste of your lips."

And I know by the hitch of her breath and the way she's leaning into me that she's doing her best to hold herself back. "I'll pass."

I smile at her stubbornness. And glide my thumb along her lip again. "You'll be begging me soon enough."

She clears her throat and smiles at me as if the rest of the room is watching. "When are you going to realize—" she snakes her hand down my stomach, just enough to hit the tip of my hardened cock "—I'm not like the rest of your girls? I don't beg for things that I can easily demand."

Then she turns around, grabs her drink from the bar, and joins her sister on the dance floor. And I'm left again with a hard-on and a smirk on my face.

Why does this lie feel like the best foreplay of my life?

Tessa

HE WAS RIGHT. IT WORKED. MY SISTER DIDN'T WANT TO HEAR the details. Only told me that her one request was that I had fun and she'd see me in a week when she flew in for the influencer event we'd planned for Riggs Outdoor.

“It's not what you think, Rina.”

She rolled her eyes at me, gave me a hug, and said, “It's exactly what I think.” Then she waved from behind TSA as I boarded my flight back home.

The rumors of our fake relationship reached Strutt's before we did. The second I stepped foot back in my house, my phone was buzzing. First from Callen.

CALLEN 'HOT SHERIFF' MULDOWNEY

You've been busy.

TESSA

You heard?

CALLEN 'HOT SHERIFF' MULDOWNEY

What happened to you calling him a man-child?

TESSA

I'm not convinced that assessment isn't still accurate.

I don't want to get into the details over text. Not to mention, I need to clarify exactly who gets to know the truth about what we're doing.

My phone buzzes again.

CalLEN 'HOT SHERIFF' MULDowney

I was just informed by 3 different people at Brews & Books that you and Law Riggs are engaged. The President of Strutt's Elementary PTA mentioned she heard you were already married.

TESSA

I'm not married. That's certainly never happening again.

As soon as I send it, I try to brush off the fact that I just lied for self-preservation. The idea of being stuck in a marriage with Law made me laugh. And then, like how it sounded. Him off limits to every other woman in Strutt's Peak. Thank goodness Callen wasn't standing in front of me as I smile at the thought.

The office was buzzing too on Monday morning.

I overheard two girls in the restroom gossiping. "There's no way he will settle down with her. He's not the type. Everyone knows that." While the other was adamant about Law texting her just last week. I would have thought he'd be smart enough to keep his sex life out of the office, but I look at what we're trying to convince everyone of. I tried to play it off as gossip, but hearing their assumptions about him made me want to say something. To tell them that they don't know him at all. But I didn't. Because I don't either. I stopped myself before I inserted my foot in my mouth. Maybe he did text her.

I pick at the stitch coming out of the button on my cuff. Twisting it around my finger, I really think about why that makes me angry. I'm not about to feel stupid all over again. Not this time, especially not when this relationship isn't even real. I'm so pissed off that I storm out of the bathroom, march into his office, ignoring the interested glances, and slam the door shut behind me.

"This is only going to work if you don't continue to text the twenty-somethings that you want to hook up with them."

He stops typing away on his computer and looks up at me.

“If you think I’m going to play along with this and just be okay with you hooking up on the side, then you’re even more...”

But that’s where I stop ranting. Because he’s smiling at me.

Shit. He didn’t text anyone.

“I’m even more what, Bunny?” He stands up from his seat. I need to backpedal.

“Stop calling me that. Where’d you even get that stupid nickname?”

He pushes up the sleeves of his dark gray shirt, and I look quickly at the way his forearms flex with the movements. The leather cuff on his wrist matches the one I saw on Henry and Michael’s. I hate that I think it’s cute how he and his brothers have something like that together.

“You’re cute.”

“I’m not.”

“You’re this delicious little package I can’t figure out, but you’re also *so fucking cute.*”

I’m instantly hot at the attention and the assessment. I push my sleeves up. I can’t think of anything to say.

“Rules. We need rules.”

He comes around to the front of his desk. Pausing for a minute, he looks at my pushed-up sleeves, my neck, and then my mouth. Then walks past me. He locks the door and flicks a button that whites out the glass walls of his room.

“Whatever you’re doing, don’t,” I say, my hand coming up in front of me to stop him.

But he keeps walking forward until my hand is on his chest.

“Rule number one.”

His low tone cuts me off when he says, “I think about you in that towel. How easy it would have been to rip it off of you.

Finally see how much of those perfect tits will spill out of my hands.” The traitorous spot between my legs tingles at that image. He tilts his head down to look in my eyes that have now blurred, staring straight ahead at his chest. “Finally feel how wet I make you when I’m close to you. Would you have let me, Bunny?”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

“I think about how you would have let me do it,” he says, and he’s right. That realization snaps me out of it.

“Rules.” I swallow the desire away. “We need to have them.”

He licks his bottom lip, and it makes me want to suck it into my mouth. I squeeze my eyes tightly closed, desperately clinging to my lame attempt at creating boundaries.

“The way I’m forcing you to see it too. Sharing the same fantasy, I’d bet. And all I can think about now is how could a woman as fucking sexy as you be cute too? You’re a goddamn dream, Tessa. And right now, I get to pretend you’re mine.”

If I thought I was speechless before, now my brain has melted. And so has my body.

I don’t know when he pulled my hand from his chest, but he holds it in his warm grip and glides his finger along my wrist. I practically pant at the promise of what he’s saying, at the softness of his touch.

“So yeah, I think I’ll call you *Bunny*. Even if you hate it, because it just reminds me when I’m swept up in how fucking beautiful and smart you are, when you’re putting me in my place, that there’s a layer in there that, every once in a while, you let people see. Because you’re strong and sweet... and when you’re looking at me like you are right now, it’s really cute.”

“Like you’re an idiot?” If my words were spoken above a whisper, they may have had a better effect.

He smirks at me and leans in so close I can only see his lips as he whispers back, “No, my queen. Like you’re begging me to fuck that attitude right out of you.”

I'm not going to focus on the sopping wet panties that I'm standing in. I need some kind of control over this. And we *need* rules. I won't survive this, not if he thinks he can say those things to me.

"Rule number one." I lift my chin and open my eyes to find his dimple and those damn baby blues just waiting for me to backpedal away. "You will not say things like that to me unless it's meant to play up the visuals of this relationship."

He crosses his arms as he takes a step back.

"Rule number two..." I really should have made a PowerPoint. I cuff my hair behind my ear and remember exactly why we need to do this. "Rule number two: there is no permitted touching, kissing, or anything else you have cooked up in your imagination."

He raises his eyebrow at that and starts to say, "What if--"

I point at him. "Only if it is necessary to keep up the lie."

"Fine." He smiles, and I know he's going to give me pushback on the next one.

"Rule number three: you're not seeing anyone else. Not while people think we're together, at least. So end or pause anything you had going on with--" I move my hands around in front of me to bat away the idea of how many he'll need to alert "--however many you had..."

"You jealous, Bunny?"

"Oh, please. I'm not jealous. I just have no interest in being in a position where people think I'm being cheated on if you're seen with someone. Or texting with someone."

"Same would apply for you then." He tilts his head to the side, trying to study me. "No play parties or late nights with people who might be assumed as social."

"Fine," I agree, mimicking his folded arms. "Rule number four--"

"No. I think three is plenty, Bunny."

"No more pet names."

“Not agreeing to that one.” Shrugging, he opens the office door. Then he leaves me with a charming smile, while I’m stuck reeling.

Around 3 p.m., an afternoon tea and sandwiches were delivered to my office, but with no note. Just the almond vanilla Earl Grey I’ve been getting at Brews & Books, with an assorted mix of tiny sandwich squares. I know he sent them. And I’m nervous that this entire fake relationship is being taken far too seriously. That should have been rule number four: no sweet gestures to blur my opinion of you.

By Wednesday, we had to sign a relationship awareness contract with Mona from Human Resources, declaring our relationship status and “agreeing” that we each entered it freely. Apparently, the whited-out office windows, after my aggressive march into his office the day before, had plenty of people gossiping enough that HR needed to make it official. I felt like a liar, especially when Mona said, “You’re the best-looking couple I’ve ever seen. And, Law, that’s saying something, because your family is chock full of stunners.” She smiled and filed the form, then said, “I’ll be waiting on my invite to the wedding.”

Sorry, Mona, there won’t be a wedding. But I signed it anyway.

That was only midweek. I avoided him at the house. I stayed out of the fun room and only swam when I knew he was out. Then Thursday happened.

Lenny, one of the tour guides, called me out of my office on Thursday afternoon. It wasn’t uncommon for people to do that here. Most of the time, the casual vibe of the place looked more like friends working together instead of manufactured company culture. It was so different from Costa Athletics, which is also why I loved it.

She stealthily slid beside me as I came through my office. “Two o’clock.”

“What?” I looked at where she jutted her chin, and sure enough, there was a very leggy blonde in black snow leggings

and a bright pink half zip, that barely contained her cleavage, waltzing toward Law's office.

"Is that?" I asked, but before I could say it, Lenny chimed in.

"Last year's frequent rider. Met him during New York Fashion Week. Some kind of dancer. Performer type. I guess Law and Ash were there for some meetings, and she was a souvenir. I haven't seen her here in a while. Not since last November." She waves at the air in front of her. "Anyway, thought you might want to know she was here."

It's a good feeling, having someone at your back. I've only spent a handful of hours with Lenny since I've been here and she's already given me more of a heads up than any of my old "friends" while I lived in New York. "Thanks, Lenny."

"I'm not sayin' you need to be worried. But, if that—" she tips her head toward the woman "—was coming near anything I was sleeping with, then I'd sure as hell would want to know about it."

We both watch as she taps on Law's office door. The room is lined with windows, like mine, which give everyone a full view of whatever is about to unfold. Plenty of people in the marketing pit are pretending not to pay attention.

"I appreciate it," but after I say it, it makes me feel like I really don't have a leg to stand on with this woman being here. For visual purposes, it's not good since I'm supposed to be with Law. But really, we're in an agreement, not a relationship. So why does this piss me off so much? Why do I want to march over there and tell her to back the fuck off?

He looks up from his laptop and sits back in his chair as she enters the room. She's pretty obvious in what she's trying to do. The whole sexy snow bunny thing works for her. A part of me wants to yell out that "*I'm his fucking Bunny*," but I stifle down the cringeworthy idea that I want to battle her for a nickname.

He looks unfazed by her.

Lenny leans closer to me. “This might be a good time to go piss on his leg.”

I snort out a laugh. “I don’t need to, Len.” But even after I say it, I’m nervous that I’ll be eating those words. I hate that my thoughts return to how I used to feel. Always never enough. Would it have even mattered if I had shown more affection in my marriage? I know it never would have mattered. And that’s the part I need to remember.

I don’t notice Law stand right away or even move past her without so much as a few words. I do, however, realize when he’s coming straight toward me.

“I’ll take that as my cue,” Lenny says as she walks away.

I try to appear unaffected and hold up three fingers, reminding him of rule number three. Leaning against the doorframe of my office, I ignore the spying eyes that track his move to stand before me.

“Is she one of the influencers on our list?” I ask as I glance to his left, peering over his shoulder back to where she stands, her arms crossed.

“Bunny, are you jealous?” Smiling, he leans in closer to me, dangerously close. “It’s okay if you are,” he whispers. “I won’t tell anyone.”

I look him in the eye and lie through my teeth. Because I am. A little bit. “This arrangement was your idea. I’m just playing my part of the jealous girlfriend. Or the curious one, at least, since we have rules. Remember?”

His lips brush my neck, and I hadn’t expected it, so when I lean into it, he snakes an arm around me and does it again, grazing his teeth along the same path his lips just took, making me shiver. I can only hope he didn’t feel it.

“I remember. She made an offer, and I happily declined. You taste as good as you smell, by the way.”

I ignore the words, but everything he said makes me feel sexier and more confident. At least more than I did a few minutes ago. “A shame you had to swap out a night with that for playing pretend.”

He steps back, smiling at me like I've missed the joke. "I'm not missing out on anything. And in case you haven't noticed, Bunny, I do exactly what I want. I'm exactly where and with whom I want."

When he walks away, I look around the office, and most people aren't fast enough to act like they haven't been watching. Asher included, who takes a sip of his coffee and smiles at me. It's only been a few days pretending to be with Law Riggs, and a part of me is starting to believe the lie.

Law

“I WANT TO PLAY MINECRAFT INSTEAD.”

“You will play the new Super Mario Brothers like a good little human. Now sit down and watch a master at his craft.”

I can see him roll his eyes. Then Sammy stops playing with the fidget spinner she always keeps in her pocket. “I’m bored.”

Pausing the game, I scoff at my niece and nephew. “You guys have been here for, like, an hour. You can’t be bored already; we have the rest of the weekend until your dad and Grace are back. And there’s so much to do here.”

They both look at each other, and then, in unison, ask, “Can we go swimming?”

I peer over their shoulders to the lap pool and watch as Tessa glides through the water. The glass doors are pulled closed, but I can still hear the muffled audiobook playing. She’s been in there for the past two hours, and I’m not about to have the kids interrupt with a cannonball.

“Tessa is using the pool right now, but what if we do something else until she’s finished. We can make ice cream with my new maker. Or I can order pizza first. There’s plenty of fun—”

Sammy catapults off the back of the couch and dashes across the room, knocking on the doors to the enclosed lap pool.

“Sammy—”

I see Tessa’s head whip around in the water, and she waves Sammy in while I see her call out for the sound system to pause. Thank goodness, I didn’t want to have to explain anything regarding anatomy this weekend from something they may have overheard in one of her romance books she was listening to. I almost choked on my English muffin when I

overheard during my morning workout. I also bought it once I figured out the title.

The doors close behind Sammy, and I observe for a minute as Tessa smiles up at her. I'm slightly jealous of how easily Sammy got that smile.

They chat for a couple of minutes before I decide to walk over. Of course Tessa picks that moment to get out of the pool, and I swear to everything that is good and horny, she did it on purpose. There's no way this woman doesn't know what she does to a mere mortal like me. The water drips down her chest and into the drenched red one-piece that shows off every delectable curve of her body. It reminds me of the dress she wore the night I met her. *What I wouldn't give to be in that moment with her again.*

"Why are you looking at her like that?" Sammy asks, back in front of me somehow.

I rip my eyes away and feign surprise. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Sammy Jammy." When I look back at Tessa quickly, she's watching me with interest. No smirk or smile in sight.

"If you'd like, I'll make pizza with them."

"No plans?"

"Callen may stop by later, but no plans right now."

And I know Callen is gay. It's been public knowledge for more than two decades now. The guy is practically like a brother to me, but when I hear she's spending time with him, I don't like it. It's ridiculous, I know, to be jealous of them spending time together, but I still want to tell him, *"Back off, I saw her first."*

She smiles like she knows what I'm thinking and just caught me red-handed, wanting to hijack her plans with anyone else. "Miles, what do you like on your pizza?" Tessa shouts around me.

"I'll do bacon," he yells back.

"Oh yes, bacon," Sammy echoes.

“Hey, I said no Minecraft until you play Mario,” I shout to him, making my way over to the couch.

My phone buzzes. It’s the group text with my family, which has been a never-ending string of questions about Tessa and me since Italy.

MICHAEL

Remember the Gremlin rules. They apply to kids too.

LAW

I’ve done plenty of sleepovers. I think I can handle it.

MICHAEL

Think or know?

HENRY

You’re sounding like a crazy parent.

MICHAEL

Don’t get me started on you and G doing a morning FaceTime with your dogs.

LAW

I’m not even doing takeout for dinner. We’re making pizza.

EVERLY

That sounds like fun.

MICHAEL

Stop now. We don’t have a fire safety plan for your house.

LAW

You're a dick. And Tessa's cooking.

EVERLY

ohhhhhhhhhh really?

HENRY

Don't mess it up.

LAW

The pizza or things with Tessa?

HENRY

I was talking about the pizza.

EVERLY

No he wasn't! He wants to see you actually end up with someone good enough for you. She's pretty spot on.

LAW

Go back to your frozen drinks on your lame couples retreat.

“Can I help?” Sammy asks as they stroll toward her door.

“Just be careful,” I shout. She gives me a wave, like she's got it. I like seeing her with my family. And how easy they are with her. The twins, especially.

“Of course you can help.” She smiles at Sammy, and then flits her eyes over to mine, and it hits me square in the chest. Fuck, I like seeing her do that.

“I have a pizza stone if you want to use that?”

That surprises her. “You do? You cook?”

“I wouldn’t say I cook. I can do a few things pretty well, burgers, breakfast, but if you show me a pantry of ingredients, I’m not going to come up with anything good.” I rub my chest and tell her, “Never used the pizza stone, but I’m up for trying it. If you are.”

“I think we’ve already established that I like trying new things.” And with that, she moves up the stairs and into her house. I can’t help the overly aggressive smile that takes over my face. I think about the London play party, what else she tried there. What kinds of things she likes. Is she someone who likes to lead or prefers to be told what to do? All I know is, I like getting to spend more time with her. Like this, unfiltered, no faking. Just us. Well, us and two kids who are borderline hangry.

“Uncle Law, I want a snack.”

“Dude, we’re making pizza right now.”

“But I’m hungry.”

Tessa and Sammy come over a few minutes later, Tessa with a bag of ingredients in one arm, a bottle of sparkling water in another. And Sammy has a handful of herbs in one hand and a bag of skittles in the other.

“The pizza won’t take long, but I thought they might be hungry.” She looks over to Sammy as they drop the items on the island counter. “A cute lady wearing a green velour jumpsuit and matching crocs—”

I nod. “Wanda.”

She tracks my movements as I pull out the cutting boards and knives. “Yes, that must be it. She said Skittles were your favorite and gave me a bag to give to you. But I forgot.”

“Wanda’s the best. She remembers everyone’s favorite candy. Runs Sugar Valley downtown.”

Sammy chimes in, “Grace and Dad only let us go on special occasions, but it’s the coolest place ever.”

Miles sits on the stool. “Can we have some now? I’m starving,” he whines.

“Go. Fine.”

They both pour out heaping handfuls that’ll leave me with barely any.

“It’s important to have a snack while you cook. Makes it so you don’t rush the process.”

She winks at Miles.

Over a mouthful, he mumbles, “Are you going to marry my uncle?”

She looks at me with a panicked glance, wordlessly asking, “*How do I answer this?*”

And I’m still me. I like this woman, but I still like making her squirm, so I stay silent. I’m curious about what she might say. I tilt my head to the side, waiting for her to answer.

She looks in the cabinet to the right of my refrigerator, hunting for something, but doesn’t find it there. In the next, she opens to the glasses and pulls out four.

“I’ve already been married once,” she says, with no trace of sadness or a sigh. “I didn’t really plan on doing it again.”

Sammy widens her eyes. “Never?”

Tessa lets out a little laugh as she cuts into an orange with a dark purple center. “I think people get married for a lot of reasons. But I don’t know that any of them make sense for me anymore.”

Miles sucks on one of the wedges she’s just cut. “But don’t you love him?”

She looks at me again, and I’ve let her sweat it out for long enough with these two.

I grab the pile of herbs. “Are these for the pizza or the glasses?”

She surprises me when she ignores my question and answers Miles. “I like your uncle.” Her eyes are on me when she adds, “But I love myself more.” I can’t help but smile at that. When a woman like her doesn’t just exude it, but declares it. I want to hate what she’s going to tell me next, but really,

how can I? “So...” She shrugs. “Not going to marry anyone. Unless you’re asking, Miles. I might make an exception for you.”

“Ew, gross. You’re pretty, Tessa, but I do *not* want a girlfriend.”

She nods and barks out a laugh. “I totally understand.”

I watch as she shakes the bottle of soda water and pours it evenly into each glass. She instructs Sammy to squeeze an orange wedge into each next, and then places a slice on top. I think about how much I wasn’t looking for a girlfriend either, but here we are, acting more like a couple with every glance.

“Stop staring at me like that, Riggs, and break off some of those mint leaves.” She nods toward the mound of herbs on the counter.

I pluck a few leaves and listen to Tessa tell Sammy and Miles about how she loved making Italian sodas with her cousins when they would all be at their grandparents’ house.

“My sister, Rina, never liked the super sweet sodas, so we would try to make up flavors that were sweet and savory.”

“Savory?” Miles asks.

“Like salty and flavorful, kind of the opposite of sweet,” I answer.

“Like skittles and pizza,” Tessa says and smiles at Miles. When she meets my eyes, I know I’m practically pouring my hardcore crush on her into the way I’m looking back at her. As she keeps my eye contact for a few beats, it rolls across my skin and seeps right into my gut. She makes it easy to be around her. She’s good with people, in different ways, but the more of it I see, the more I want to be near it. Near her.

She finally keeps telling the twins about her soda making. “The best, I think, was peach and basil. Oh, and jalapeño and watermelon. But we forgot to take out the jalapeño seeds one time and then didn’t wash our hands before playing. So much burning.” She laughs at her own story while Sammy and Miles mimic her.

The four of us spend the next couple of hours making pizza and devouring every last piece. Four pies and not a single slice left at the end of it.

“That was really good,” I say, wiping my mouth.

She nods in agreement as she finishes her last bite of crust. “I was the roommate in college who always made food. I was in a six-person suite, and I loved doctoring up ramen or just making up a new dip for French fries. And then I didn’t do it anymore.” She stands up to clear the plates, but I take them instead and bring them over to the sink.

“I got it.” I want to hear what else she wants to share with me.

“I stopped cooking. We had a private chef, so there wasn’t a need for me to do it.” She leans against the counter, and I start rinsing off the plates to put them into the dishwasher. “It was one of the things I did when I was in London. I started cooking again.”

“What kinds of things did you make there?”

“All kinds of things. At first, just what I knew. And then I’d experiment trying to pair foods with certain drinks. It was like therapy for me.”

“I just invested in a bourbon distillery in Kentucky—some of the best I’ve tasted. What would you pair with some great bourbon?”

When I look over my shoulder, she’s perched on the counter, just staring back at me with a wistful look dancing around her features. She likes talking about this with me. And I don’t want her to stop.

“Can we watch a movie, Uncle Law?” Miles shouts, interrupting from the living room.

I give her an apologetic smile. It’s the territory when these guys are here. Interruptions and snacks are plentiful. “Yeah, buddy, but you have to agree on something. Go pick it.”

I shut the dishwasher and then notice a spoon behind her, so I reach around behind her and grab it. Only, I didn’t realize

what I was doing until I look at my hand and how close I am to her. I take my time leaning back, and I can't help but graze against her as I straighten back up. Her breath catches, I can hear it. I want to tug on her shirt so I can drag my lips again along her shoulder, which peeks out ever-so slightly. Her mouth is silently screaming that it's ready to be devoured, or maybe ready to do the devouring. But instead of doing any of that, I remember where I am, who's here, and stifle all of it down. I clear my throat to get the words out, but they come out gruff anyway. "Want to watch a movie with us?"

"I have some work I need to get through."

"It's the weekend, and I bet it can wait." I smile, brows lifting in encouragement. "C'mon, watch a movie with us."

She bites her lip and looks at me for longer than I think she ever has. "Okay," she says, and it damn near lights me up.

"I'm sitting next to Tessa!" Sammy proclaims, as she strolls back into the kitchen to snag the bowl for popcorn.

"Me too," Miles echoes.

I wanted to sit next to her.

Just as the opening credits end, my phone buzzes on the arm of the couch.

TESSA

Something salty.

I know she's answering my question about the bourbon, but I can't help myself here.

LAW

I like salty.

I like to savor and take my time. I like to learn the signs and the sounds.

She looks over at me, a kid between us, and smirks. It's enough to prompt me to keep going.

LAW

What do you like, Bunny?

I reach across the back of the couch and let my fingers graze the nape of her neck. Her eyes blink closed and mouth opens just slightly. Dragging my thumb down along the column of her neck, I feel her pulse kicking up. I let my thoughts wander into a fantasy that I'd like to spell out for her.

LAW

Would you like it if I took you in the pool? Or how about just as you're drying off? Would you let me yank your swimsuit to the side and drive my tongue into you? If I play with your clit for too long, will your pussy weep for the attention?

Her eyes shift to her phone and back to me, turning her neck slightly so I can move my thumb higher along her jawline. It would be so easy for her to slip my thumb between those lips and suck. I can't decide if she likes it and wants more, or is establishing the best way to slap me. There's not a single tell.

TESSA

I was referring to bourbon pairings.

I smirk at that, but I take my hand and arm away.

LAW

Fucking liar.

I'm supposed to be a responsible adult watching my niece and nephew right now, not getting a hard-on for the woman on the far-side of the couch.

TESSA

But to answer your question. I'm still learning what I like.

LAW

Sounds like a challenge.

TESSA

It wasn't.

LAW

We need to work on your sexting game.

She turns her head and smiles at me. I couldn't begin to know what that smile meant, but getting her to do it feels damn good.

Halfway through the movie, just when Peter starts remembering who he was, Miles asks, "Why did he ever leave Neverland? I don't see what the big deal is about growing up."

I look at Tessa and find her smiling at me. I know what she's thinking after hearing a question like that. It's what everyone thinks about me. I'm the perpetual bachelor. The youngest who never needed to grow up fully. I've always fed into it, because I never saw the appeal. Taking life seriously, at least seriously enough to forget what it's like to appreciate and enjoy it.

"Yeah, I never understood it either. But I get it now. He left because of Wendy. He wanted the girl. The full life. He got to be a dad, find a way to earn a living, and have purpose, but he got to be loved too. He chose the girl."

Tessa doesn't miss what I'm saying. It's impossible to not read between the lines. She holds my eyes, searching my face for more. I search hers for any indication that she feels like this could be real for her. Because maybe that's what I want too.

"I think I'd stay and fly. Fight Hook."

Sammy laughs and says, "Me too. Flying would be so cool."

Tessa's phone buzzes, and I watch her as she looks at the screen. I can't see who it is, but I also don't overdo it by trying to look. I'm feeling a little vulnerable after that little bit of word vomit. I'm not going to push the jealousy card on top of it too.

"Guys, I'm going to go talk to my sister. Thank you for making pizzas with me."

I go to stand, but she waves me off. "You stay. I'm good. I know how to get back to my house." She looks at my mouth, then back up to my eyes. Then she licks her lips right before she says, "This was..."

I nod, and fill the silence with, "Yup." Before she turns around, I give her a salute, because I'm fresh out of smooth moves, apparently. And I watch her walk away.

Sammy gets up and moves to the other side of me and snuggles in. "Uncle Law?"

"Yeah, Sammy Jammy? Need more popcorn?"

She ignores my question and answers it with her own. "Is Tessa your Wendy?"

I take a deep breath and blow it out. Leave it up to kids to see between the lines. "I..." Why lie? "Yeah, Sammy. She might be my Wendy."

Miles asks, "Can I be Hook?"

"I'm Hook!" Sammy shouts back.

"I thought you wanted to be Tinkerbell?"

"Why, because I'm a girl? You can be Tinkerbell, Miles."

"Hey, hey." I wave my arms above me and stand in front of the TV. Grabbing the glass soda bottle still filled with the carbonated water, I hold it out. "I'm Tinkerbell. You better run, because I'm going to spray you both with my Pixie Dust!"

I douse my niece and nephew with "pixie dust," along with my couch and living room, but it was worth the laughter. When I sop up the mess after they head to bed, my head runs

right back to Tessa. I'll never want to end this; I already want to keep her. Every day, that becomes more obvious.

Fucking hell. I heard her loud and clear. She has no interest in being kept.

I went from losing a job I wanted, right into another losing game, but... I still want to keep playing.

Maybe I am an idiot.

Law

“THEY NEED TO BELIEVE THE LIE. AND PEOPLE WILL ONLY believe it if they see it.” I bend down and grab my jump rope. “There aren’t photographers here like there were at the Olympics. The limelight that led to us, to this isn’t here anymore.”

I swing the rope around me and start moving. I love how many shades of pink her cheeks turn when I do this in front of her. I’m already sweating since the glass doors to the lap pool are open. The sun hasn’t peeked over the mountains yet, but it’s starting to.

We’ve been working out in the mornings here together since we’ve been back. And by working out, I mean, she swims laps, and I jump rope on camera for about a half an hour before I head to Brews & Books for coffee and then into the office.

My views are up. The Olympics caused a lot of interest in my personal life. Even more than what existed before. But more and more, the comments in any videos I post revolve around her. “*Where’s Tessa?*” Propositions for threesomes left and right. And I even have a recurring request for just a video of us playing footsies with each other. The point is, this fake relationship has people interested.

“Then let’s call it,” she says as she sheds her robe, toeing her foot in the water.

The rope gets caught under my foot. She never swims in anything too revealing, but today might be the day that she pushes my sanity to the limit. Or maybe it’s all part of her plan to keep seeing how much she can push. I’ll go toe-to-toe with her any day when it comes to verbal sparring, but when she lets me see pieces of her that are underneath the buttoned-up executive role she owns, that’s where I don’t stand a chance.

“Call what? You think we’re going to throw in the towel now?”

Her white one-piece is cut high at the thigh and pinches in the back, giving the most perfect focal point—her perfectly peach-shaped ass.

“No way. We can talk about it when the *Adventures After Dark* are done.”

“What do you mean, talk about it? This isn’t a long-term thing, Law.”

I smile at her and chew my gum with a bit more bite, ignoring her statement. “You standing there in that bathing suit looks an awful lot like the fantasy I texted you about.”

Her cheeks pink as she blinks at me, trying to appear unfazed. “Funny, you standing there with a jump rope looks like an excuse to see a woman in a swimsuit.”

Shrugging one shoulder, I keep chewing my gum with a smile. I turn back toward my set-up and hit record and then start the rope back up again. I’ll post this video as soon as I’m finished, so I jack up the music and get moving. If nothing else, it’ll help me work out this pent-up energy my new *fake* girlfriend contributes to.

After a set of five songs, I slow it down and pull out my ear bud. When I turn around, I practically jump out of my skin.

“Jesus Christ, woman,” I shout. “Don’t sneak up on me like that.”

She looks me up and down, and I know what I look like. Even on my worst day, I’m nice to look at. Call it cocky or arrogant, but I just call it like it is. And right now, I’m dripping sweat, with the newest cut of shorts for spring and summer we’ve started hyping hugging just right. The waistband is low enough that the deep cut of my lower abs is on very distinct display.

Having her eyes all over me is like fuel. I’m not shy, so I mimic her move and rake my eyes slowly down her body. Then I snag the towel from around her waist and wipe the front of my chest.

“What the hell?”

“You should stop looking at me like that, Bunny. You don’t want me to get the wrong idea and start treating you like a real girlfriend.”

She squints her eyes at me, trying to glare or be intimidating, but all it really does is make her look vulnerable. And cute, as much as she’d hate that.

“I’m not looking at you like anything.” She’s so easy to bait sometimes. So I walk toward the fridge, where I’ve now started stocking aloe-infused water alongside my IPAs.

“Oh, Bunny, you may think I’m dumb and pretty, but I know when a woman is looking at me like she wants to mount me.”

I toss her one of the waters. “Nice catch.”

She laughs short and light, like she’s not really all that amused. “Stop calling me that, first of all.” She points a reprimanding finger my way, then opens her water and takes a sip. “And second, I have no interest in being a real girlfriend, or mounting you. I was thinking, and you were in my line of sight.”

“Okay.” I shrug. “If that’s how you want to play it, I’ll play along.”

I take a sip of my new favorite aloe water and look at the way she’s biting her lip. Like she’s nervous, or worse, really wants to end this. I haven’t thought that far ahead yet. What happens when this has to be over? If by then, she still doesn’t want me back in any way. “Why are you really upset? Is it because you’re looking at me differently now? That I’m starting to get to you?”

She doesn’t like hearing it so much that she puts on a serious face and looks down at her fingers. She fiddles with the cap of her drink, like she’s trying to focus on something other than me.

I don’t like where this is headed. I’m not ready for this to be done. Why is she?

Wiping her mouth, she says, “That was before.”

And because I can't stop myself, I correct her. "There's no before. And no matter what you say or want to erase, there's something happening here. And I'm not calling it."

She rolls her eyes at me.

"Do you have any idea how many influencers and celebrity couples have jumped on board since we made that little spectacle of ourselves in Italy?"

She huffs out a breath. "No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"Twenty. And I know that doesn't seem like all that much, but we have a handful of celebrity-level couples coming out this week because we've pushed the couples angle."

I'm not convincing her. I need to convince her that this isn't done yet. That it can't be done yet.

"It's the best kind of advertising. Influential marketing that shows off exactly what makes our brand different, like you said. Let's get through these new excursions, make a show about each other and how you're obsessed with me..." She tilts her head like I'm pushing it. Which I am, I know that. "And then we can ease out of it."

I watch as she cuffs her hair behind her ear and thinks through everything I'm saying.

"Don't worry, I won't make a spectacle at the office."

"What I say goes this week."

I smile. "Bunny, how is that different from any other day?"

"You're not going to argue with me or undercut me in any way. Because this relationship doesn't look good for me."

"How so?"

"Because... no matter how much I hate it, or feminism makes headway, you're the guy. It'll always read differently for you. To the outside world, you bagged the boss. Stole a competitor's wife. But if people focus their attention on me, it looks like I was in bed with the Riggs family and *that's* how I got this job." She starts walking toward her double doors, and

then turns to level with me. “So, what I say this week goes. You’re going to go along with all of it. Understand? I don’t want anyone questioning who’s in charge.”

Anyone who’s been paying attention knows that she’s the one in charge. Whether she owns the CEO title or not. I hate hearing how things for her could be perceived. So, I don’t push any more.

“Loud and clear, boss.”

Four hours later, and I’m in the last of my morning meetings when my dad decides to sit in on marketing’s plans for the upcoming week. The office normally has a good vibe, but since I’ve been back, and we’ve started to move this influencer activation along, the teams all the way from marketing to research and development are buzzing. The good kind of chatter, too. Sometimes, it’s a little gossip about Tessa and me, but mostly, it’s about who’s coming to Strutt’s Peak and how we’ve paired them for our adventures.

“Tell me what you guys need from me, and I’ll make sure you have it. The board is intrigued about how the investment of the Adventures Projects are going to pay out on returns.”

“Public relations just sent me a full recap of all the buzz you’ve managed to build.”

I give him an appreciative nod. “We have leads for each portion of the following four-day event. Lenny and Boon will take the Outdoorsy Adventures—nothing new there. They’ll ski, snowboard, heli-ski, and fat bike. Then we’ve enlisted Grace and Michael to handle the Indoorsy Adventures. We’ll see who might be willing to hit the rock wall, the MMA gym sessions with Mac, and then we’ve bulked up Grace’s team for massages. Additionally, Brews & Books is hosting a Thriller and Romance event, and Henry has agreed to open The Lemon Tree for us exclusively. He’s curated a tasting menu, and we’ve partnered with Strutt’s Peak Brewing company for beer, and I had some Foxx Bourbon flown in from Kentucky for a

spirits pairing. All in all, it's going to be a handful of days highlighting everything that makes this town one of a kind, and I can't wait to show it off.

My father smiles, looking around the room and at the plans laid out on the walls. "And what about Adventures After Dark. That's where most of your budget went, if I read the plans correctly."

A few people around the room are eager to hear more as well, since I've held this one a little closer to the vest. "There's a level of anonymity to what will transpire in the evenings. It's important that people feel like they're safe when they participate in any of these. Each one will be offered to everyone, but they'll only be given a high-level description. If they're not comfortable with signing NDA agreements and forfeiting their phones to participate, then they can join our boozy sleigh rides and winter film festival in town."

Tessa comes into the conference room as we continue our run-down.

"I think the Toy Rodeo might be the most popular. A cowboy themed night, where people can have an overview and demo of sex toys and props? I mean, it's over-the-top, but the majority of our female influencers have been gushing about what it's going to be like. I think with some of the new artists and June making a show if it, the whole thing is going to be the highlight."

"What about the rest?" she asks, clearing her throat.

I can't help but smile at her when I ask, "Do you mean the burlesque show?"

Bartlett from legal chimes in, "I just want to mention again that all of these evening things are not an entity of Riggs Outdoor. We're simply the gateway between those activities and the guests who have hired us to procure adventures for them."

I follow-up, "Bartlett is right. And while I think we're leaving money on the table with that model, it keeps our brand

out of the thick of any potential legal issues... at least for right now.”

My dad waves it off. “I’m not worried. We’ll handle any issues that may arise. I like this. It was a fantastic idea, Tessa.”

She smiles, but interjects right away. “This was Law. His concept and execution. I simply had the idea of offering an ‘indoorsy’ option, but the rest was his. Start to finish.”

“Idea is only as good as how it comes to fruition,” I chime in. “Every person in this room is making this happen.” She’s not the type to take credit for other people’s ideas, but I still like that she put me in front of this. It was a boss move. She could have easily called it a team effort and left it at that.

Dad knocks his knuckles on the conference table. “Law, come see me in my office when you all wrap up here.” He stands up and makes his way out. “Nice work, everyone.”

Tessa and I look at each other. It’s a win. Now we need to get through the next four days to make sure all of this works the way I’m anticipating.

Law

“OKAY, WHAT’D I DO WRONG?” I ASK AS I SWING MY DAD’S office door shut behind me. I’m nervous about why he’s calling me in here. Usually, he’d just come to my office to discuss whatever he was thinking. Rarely will he call me into his office to shoot the shit.

He laughs and holds up his finger, telling me to hold on a minute. With his phone tucked against his ear, I overhear him say, “Yeah, that sounds nice. I’ll call you later.”

When he hangs up, he says, “Why do you think it’s about something you did wrong?”

“History.”

With another laugh, he doesn’t add anything else, because it’s true. “I wanted to talk to you about Tessa.”

“Ah, yes. Took you long enough, old man. I thought maybe you were just waiting to see if it was going to fizzle out.” I lean back on the couch and kick my feet up on the coffee table.

“Stop with the old man shit,” he says, mimicking my move. “And I didn’t need to see the pictures or hear the chatter to know when something, or rather, *someone* good has happened to my son. Am I wrong? Is it going to fizzle out?”

Shit. He’s usually an A+ bullshit smeller. I half expected him to ignore this fake relationship as long as we didn’t flaunt it in front of him. But now I feel guilty about the lie, because it sounds like he likes this idea. I move my eyes around the room. I can’t look him in the eye and lie to him. While I have feelings for Tessa, we’re not actually anything, and she’s yet to give me any inclination that we could be.

“I’m proud of you.”

Kill me now.

But he doesn’t stop there. He really piles it on when he says, “I had this notion that you were going to be my kid who

just didn't want to slow down. I hadn't shown you what it looks like to love in that way, and I thought maybe you were content with the lifestyle you were living."

"I want this, Dad. I have ever since Everly stepped away."

"I haven't seen a drive in you, at least not the one that's necessary to run what we all have built. This isn't a small storefront anymore. It's much bigger than that. And your creativity has always been what sets you apart, gives you the edge to be where you are now, but that's not the only thing you need to be aware of when you're making decisions that'll affect every employee here."

"I don't understand what you're getting at then, Dad."

"I'm saying, the details it's taken to make sure this risky concept pans out for us were done well. I'm thinking that you took extra care in making sure that happened. And I know that she helped push you to make sure of it. You make a good team."

I bark out a laugh, because if she heard him say that, she'd give him the biggest stink-face in response. "Listen, Dad, this thing between Tessa and me. I don't know what the shelf life will be, but that doesn't change the part where I still want the job."

A part of me hates saying it out loud.

He leans on his elbow, like he's listening, but the way he's smiling at me is telling me that he's got other thoughts. "I know. But I sense a but..."

"There's no *but*, only that I've been planning on being CEO for far longer than she's been in the picture."

He doesn't say anything for a few beats, but my dad isn't the best at keeping his emotions in check. So his warm smile and deep sigh have a lingering feeling. Especially when he says, "Sometimes you need a new picture."

A double tap echoes from the other side of his door. He stands up and pats my shoulder. "Don't let old ideas get in the way of something new." Then he turns and calls out for whomever is on the other side to come in.

Boon peeks his way inside.

“Hi, Asher.” He smiles, and then looks around for me. “Hey, man, sorry I knew you were in here, but a bunch of the social media team members are buggin’ out about something you did that’s apparently gone viral?”

The rest of the workday flies by with a flare of excitement running wild. We’ve managed to book out the rest of our spots with another influencer and two celebrity couples.

After I make a few calls and stop off at the hardware store, I’m a few beers into my night when Tessa comes home and makes it a point to pop into our shared space. I’m keeping track of how quickly it takes her to come and see where I am after she gets home.

Today it was under five minutes.

“It smells awful in here. You need to open a window.”

“I would have, but I was cold.”

“What are you doing? Shouldn’t I get a say in what monstrosity you decide to buy or build in this place?”

“I heard you. What you said about the tipped scales. I know that’s how the world has been built, but I don’t subscribe to that perspective. So—” I clap my hands in front of me, trying to get to my point “—since I can’t change everyone’s opinion all at once, I figured I’d start small and make our ‘fun room’ a little more Tessa-friendly.”

She looks around at the new wall. “You’re handy?” she asks accusingly, like it’s a shock.

“I’m an original. Charming, handsome, articulate, obviously handy. I can do lots of things really well, Bunny. Most of them with my hands.”

“Arrogant...”

“Be nice.” I point at her with my drill. “I thought it might be nice to reap some benefits of having a fake fiancé.”

“Boyfriend.”

“Tomato, potato.”

“That’s not—” She huffs out a breath. “Are you telling people we’re engaged? Jesus, Law.”

“Calm down. I’m only kidding.” I drag the pencil from behind my ear and measure out the right length that I’ll need for this last stretch of wall.

I look at her from the corner of my eye as she surveys the frame I’ve built out. “Are these...?”

“Bookshelves. And a little nook for you to sprawl out and read.” I drill in the first bracket for the top shelf.

“The sketches from the plane.”

I smile to myself. I feel like I just earned a damn badge by her seeing me do this. “I keep finding you curled up on the floor with your book. So I figured you’d want a place to keep them, since they are your entertainment.” I turn and look at her. “This is an entertainment space and all.”

Sometimes it’s so hard to read her. She looks all around at the progress I’ve made, the boards that are still drying from the dark stain. But when she looks back at me, her eyes appear glassy, almost as if she might cry. “You’re building this area *for me*? You’re moving the pinball games in order to build me bookshelves?”

Why does she look upset? Shit, did I mess up here? I turn toward her and move a little closer, tucking my pencil back behind my ear and setting the drill down on my makeshift tool bench.

I reach out to her and grab her hand. “Listen, if this isn’t—”

“No,” she says quickly as she looks down at my fingers looped around hers. “I’m just surprised.”

I pull her closer to me and smile. “Good surprised?”

She doesn’t resist the movement and smiles back. “Good surprised.”

I kiss her fingers, but I don’t let it linger. I drop them quickly and turn back toward my project. If I don’t focus back on this task, then I’m going to end up ruining how good it feels to hear her approval. To surprise her and have it be

something that makes her happy. If I didn't drop her hand like it was on fire, I would have kissed her fucking senseless and then fucked her right in front of these bookshelves.

“Stop staring at my ass, Bunny. I know this is a whole vibe. Sexy construction worker, but I'm very focused.”

I hear her snort a laugh, but I don't turn back to look. Not until I remember that I have some good news.

Tessa

LAW SHOUTS OVER HIS SHOULDER JUST AS I'M ABOUT TO GO inside my house. "This morning's video I posted is trending, by the way."

I turn back and take a seat on the steps to hear more.

"My morning workout. And yours," he says, wiping his forehead with the bottom of his shirt. And it gives me the perfect glimpse of his lower abs. Not a single warm-blooded person wouldn't have looked.

"So jumping rope is the new chopping wood?" I won't tell him this, but it's addictive to watch. I don't understand how he moves the rope that fast, and also topless. I never thought I'd be so thirsty for it. "You're really talented, Riggs. You may want to consider a career shift."

"That's sweet," he says with a sarcastic flair. "But it's not trending because of my bouncing titties. Though my chesticles are very defined." As he says it, he brushes his hands down the front of himself.

He has no filter.

I tuck my lips into my mouth, because it's impossible not to laugh at that. I'm at my wit's end trying to keep a straight face when he says shit like that.

I just shake my head. And really, I'm all out of sorts. Between the bookshelf situation and him dressed like a construction worker stripper, I'm struggling to keep my emotions in check.

"Stop trying to pretend like you're not totally amused by me, Bunny. You're not as good at hiding it as you think you are."

I sigh, disregarding his observation. "I'm pretty sure those go viral because of the body and the humor."

His mouth drops open. "Was that a compliment?"

I rest my forearms on my knees and shrug. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“We can come back to that.” He points at me with his pencil. “But everyone is up in arms about a certain woman in my life hangin’ out in the background, dripping wet in a white bathing suit as she eye-fucks me.”

Immediately, I’m holding my hand out to see the video on his phone. I watch it and it’s absolutely me staring at him as if I want to ride him, eat him... I don’t know what.

I shrug my shoulders again, staying casual, and hand his phone back. “Your interpretation.”

He snorts a laugh, like that’s ridiculous. And it is, but I need to hold on to some dignity here. “Mine and about 1.2 million other people’s interpretation.”

“It looks like I’m just playing my part,” I say with a saccharine smile.

“That you are, Bunny.”

That stupid nickname.

“Okay, I’m hungry, and I need a glass of wine now. Goodbye,” I say, backtracking into my house. I need to put distance between this man and me.

TESSA

Please tell me you’re not working tonight and you can bring wine.

CALLEN ‘HOT SHERIFF’ MULDOWNEY

Red or white?

TESSA

Yes.

I'll be there in twenty.

“So, you’re really dating him?”

I’ve been trying to avoid the point-blank question as best as I can, but right now, I have a very interested police officer with impeccable interrogation skills asking, and I’m not sure how to play it.

“It’s complicated.”

“Well, this video, which has over a million views, seems to support the idea that you are.” He scrolls up. “Have you read any of these comments?”

“No, I don’t need someone making me feel like I don’t look hot as fuck in that bathing suit.” I laugh and snag my phone back from him.

“You do,” he agrees with a laugh.

I wink at him. “I knew I liked you.”

“I can read people and situations pretty well, Tessa.” He sips his beer, tossing the phone down and kicking his feet up on my new coffee table. “If I remember correctly, you couldn’t stand the man, but then you come back from Italy and now, you’re what? In love?”

I scrunch my nose, making a face before I can stop myself.

He hums in amusement. “Okay, you’re at least fucking then.”

I wish.

At this point, I’m not getting any of the benefits of a fake relationship. And I know how that complicates everything, but he’s delicious and I’m very hungry.

“I need to use the bathroom. Will you pour me another glass?” I scurry off to the bathroom before he can say anything more, pulling out my phone as soon as I close the door.

Callen shouts from the couch, “I know what a stall tactic looks like, Tessa.”

TESSA

When are you telling your family the truth?

Or have you already?

LAW

Hello, Bunny.

TESSA

Stop it. I need to know how long we're keeping it from family and close friends.

LAW

Is there a man over there?

Rule #3 remember...

TESSA

No!

LAW

Don't lie to me, Bunny. I saw a certain sheriff pull up an hour ago. Do I need to come and mark my territory?

TESSA

You're an idiot. Please answer my question.

I wait another minute, and then throw my hair into a high knot. This should have been discussed when I was laying out the rules.

I take off my bra, because it's well past 9 p.m., and I'm another glass of wine away from having one helluva sleep wherever I land. I look in the mirror and wash my hands. Then I swipe deodorant under each arm, buying a minute of time for a response from Law. Between the wine and this sudden realization of how much I don't want to lie to a police officer and my new friend, I'm sweating. Why haven't we laid out the details better than this? Usually, I plan way better than this.

I hear laughing from the living room when I come out of the bathroom. I should have figured it out on my own. As I turn the corner, I see Law lounging on my new couch, shirtless, in nothing more than a pair of navy joggers, a pair of glasses, and with a beer in his hand. I'm so weak. My mouth waters at the sight.

"You can look at me like I'm crazy all you want," Law says right before he sees me. When he does, his eyes and face light up in a big, beaming smile. "Bunny!"

Callen chokes on his beer.

"No." I point at him. "I'm not lying to my *one* friend here."

"The nickname?" He shifts his attention to Cal. "Okay, she doesn't like the nickname, but I feel like it fits, ya know. She's so little and cute."

Callen holds out my glass of red wine. "Thank you."

He holds out his beer, and we clink our drinks in cheers, his expression filled with too many questions. It's almost comical. *Almost.*

Law shifts after staring at me and says, "My sister interrogated me, and I told her exactly what was happening."

I'm surprised, because I would have thought he would have discussed it with me first. I'd like to keep track of who knows what version of our story. But then he finishes his statement with, "...that we're in a casual relationship where

you pretend not to want me, but we're very much obsessed with each other."

I shake my head rapidly. "Nope. No. That's not what's happening."

He shrugs. "My *interpretation*."

"There's not an interpretation," I tell him, annoyed that he's throwing my words back at me. I look at Callen with exasperation. "He stepped in and let everyone believe that there's more here than there really is."

He mouths out, "*She's lying*," to Callen. And then says, "Everyone seems to think we're a sexy match. You don't need to be embarrassed."

I grasp at straws, trying to shut this down. "I don't find you attractive."

"Your nipples say otherwise."

I look down, and sure enough, my girls are waving like pageant queens right at him. I'm not about to cover myself up in my home, so I stretch my arms along the back of the couch to dish it right back.

"Callen is—" I drag my eyes around his gorgeous face "—well, look at him. They're just enjoying the view of my very attractive new bestie."

Callen clears his throat, huffing out a wary laugh. "Don't put me in the middle of *whatever* this is."

Law wiggles his eyebrows at Cal. "You sure? Might be a good time."

I level my glare at the shirtless wonder. "Get out. I'm having a quiet night with my friend. I didn't invite you over."

He tilts his head to the side and smiles, and oh, how I hate when he does it, because the small dimple just to the right of his mouth makes an appearance, amplifying how distractingly handsome he is. Add that to the fact that he's wearing glasses, and my body is buzzing louder than a hive, every part of me eager for some extra attention.

“I came over for two reasons.” He holds up one finger. “One, you texted me.”

I shift my eyes to Callen, and he’s giving me a *you just got called out* smirk.

“I wasn’t sure if you meant it as a sexy text.” He cuffs his hand over his mouth like he’s trying to tell Callen a secret. “She’s working on her sexting game. It could use some improvement. She’s very to the point. Not enough descriptive words. Uses punctuation.” He waves his hand in the air. “It’s a whole thing.”

Callen must think this is hilarious, because he is nearly out of breath from laughing. And I’m trying really hard to sit here and seem annoyed, but honestly, I’m fighting back laughter too.

Oh, I hate how easy it is to laugh with him.

Law shrugs. “So I figured I’d come over to decipher what she was implying.”

I give him my best blank stare. *Don’t laugh.*

“No? Okay. And the second reason—” he holds up two fingers “—is that your influencer program is now at maximum capacity. We just got a bunch of requests for extended invites, which means people are already chattering about it.”

“Good. Did the invites include your ideas about—” I shift my eyes over to Callen “—the after-dark activities?”

“The sleigh ride, toy rodeo, and burlesque shows will be introduced once all of our guests arrive. They’re going to be the most intriguing, but I want them looked at as a benefit and not as the focal point.”

“Toy Rodeo?” Callen asks.

Law wiggles his eyebrows. “Rechargeable toys.”

Callen nods, with a knowing, “Ahhh.”

“Plus, all I hear lately is that girls are in their cowboy era, so rodeo felt right.”

I am, again, trying not to let a smile crack. He's equal parts amusing and ridiculous, but also really damn smart and good at what he does when he puts his mind to work. I hate how much I like it, how much I like a lot of things about him. And tonight, my fight to not show him is waning.

Callen interrupts, "Are these after-dark activities something I should be ignoring?"

"It's all legal, if that's what you mean. I've had Jack look into the details to ensure I'm not crossing into lawsuit territory. We should be fine."

We decided that while we didn't want the full awareness of the board of directors on these after-hours activities just yet, we did need the support of Law's brother-in-law, Jack, to properly vet if we were going to run into any legal issues. He has plenty of teams that can tackle those details, so that June and a small team of others could handle the logistics of location and attendee preferences.

"Should be?"

"We will be fine," he restates.

I give him a nod, because I trust him. I like being in the know and having a big picture view of what's happening, but his job is to make sure the details are executed. This is the kind of event where the details matter. It's about the experience, so if it feels in any way disorganized, it'll tank. Law knows that.

We both know that's not why he came over, though. He leans back and drapes an arm along the back of the loveseat, and I have a front-row view of his body. The sudden quiet makes me realize that he was looking for an excuse to come here. And I practically gave him an invite. I'm only human, and as much as I don't want to, I can't help but drink up every inch of exposed skin. Goosebumps rise along my arms. I drag my eyes up from his chest and over his shoulders to his Adam's apple and mouth. His lips spread into a wide smile, which just tells me I'm caught.

“Okay.” Callen claps, and then stands up, draining what’s left of his beer. “I need to get home.”

I pout, and as soon as I do it, I recognize that I’m definitely one glass past smart decisions. “It’s so early, and we didn’t even talk about you. Stay.” I pat the couch cushion. “I want to hear what happened with that mystery guy. And you were smiling more today than the last time I saw you.”

“Cal? Do you have a sex life? Spill, please,” Law says, just as interested as I am.

Callen’s face instantly breaks into a nervous smile, cheeks pink, but he doesn’t give us anything remotely close to an answer. Instead, he winks at me and bends over to kiss my forehead. “Next time, I’ll give you the full run-down.”

He clap-shakes Law’s hand.

“What about me? Where’s my kiss?”

I point at Law. “You’re leaving too.”

“I’m not done with my beer yet. Don’t be rude, Bunny. Plus, we should talk about sleepovers.”

When the door closes behind Cal, I bring my attention back to my remaining houseguest. I don’t like the idea of being alone with him. Especially right now. He looks too good. And I’ve had too many glasses of red to pretend like I don’t want him.

“You keep checking me out like that, and I won’t be leaving here at all.”

I shake my head at the cockiness. “So full of yourself.”

“You’re looking at me like you wouldn’t mind being full of me.”

My face is hot, just like the rest of my body, at a few insinuating words.

I raise my glass in front of me and point to him. “I was simply looking at what was displayed in front of me. You should have worn a shirt if you didn’t want to be looked at. Aren’t you cold?”

“I run hot. Want to feel?” He smiles with a wiggle of his brows, goading me.

“I’m good.”

I’m so not good.

“You sure, Contessa? You look like you want a touch.” He says it playfully, then his eyes drop to my chest, and then farther down to my very unimpressive choice of loungewear. And I know it’s a combination of the wine and his proximity, but my filter lifts. Let’s see if he can take it as good as he can dish.

“I do. I absolutely want to touch.” I run my free hand along my collarbone and down the valley between my breasts. “Myself. So please leave so I can play.”

He blinks at me. Silent, for once. I’ve surprised him, and it’s so damn satisfying.

Licking my lips, I take the last sip of my wine. Then I lean forward, put my glass on the table, and keep my eyes on his. I’m not backing down. He likes to tease. So I’ll tease right back. There’s been enough sexual tension between us that it was bound to spill over at some point. I can blame it on the wine if I need to. I think I’ve forgotten about the kind of woman I’ve become. I’ve been so worried about keeping up appearances that I have been stupidly ignoring the benefits of our situation.

“I’m going to need a clear picture here, Bunny. Would you like me to leave or prefer if I stay?”

I glide my fingers across my tank top and over the curve of my breast. But I don’t answer him. And I can tell my movement and lack of words have instantly worked him up.

The lines we’ve been toeing over since Italy have never been truly crossed until now. But what I’m craving at this very moment will leap far enough over that there won’t be much confusion left.

He clears his throat, the words still coming out slightly strangled when he says, “I think you’ve been drinking, and if I touch you—”

I cut him off, “No, no, silly boy...” His smirk comes back. “I’m not inviting you to touch me. If you want to stay, then you will have to follow my direction. My rules.”

I won’t sleep with him. That would be too much to come back from. I can do *this* and still walk away.

“I don’t do well with being bossed around, Contessa.”

“You sure about that?” I size up the hardening cock that’s outlined through his pants.

He clears his throat. Twice. And red creeps up his neck and to his ears, skimming his cheeks. He’s the cute one now. Let’s see if he’s a fan of hearing some filthy words instead of just spouting them.

“I bet that beautiful cock of yours is just dying to show me how hard it gets when you grip it tight.”

Sucking in a quick breath, he audibly exhales, looking up at the ceiling. “Fucking hell, she has a dirty mouth.”

He drags his fingers from the front of his hairline all the way to the nape of his neck, then settles his back into the couch directly across from me.

I smile as a small fire starts in my lower belly. Because the way he’s looking at me says that he’s ready to devour anything I offer him.

“It’s just as eager as those pretty tits are to meet my mouth,” he says, and having him join in does more for my arousal than I could have thought possible. “I want to suck on them so badly. I bet they’re as perfect as I’ve pictured.” His chin tilts up toward me. “Show me, Contessa. I need to see them so I can picture fucking them later.”

Pulling the neckline of my tank down just enough so that it skims the top of my nipples, I pass my fingers across them lightly. The sensation mixed with the way his eyes can’t look away drives a streak of heat through my body.

“Tease.”

“You’re not in charge.”

“Yet,” he says.

I lift a shoulder. I’ll argue that another time, but right now I want to tell this insanely beautiful man what I want and how I want it.

“Stand up.”

He listens, and I get an even better view of his body. I smile. I can’t help it. His chest and shoulders are broad. There’s just the faintest bit of dark hair around his chest and down the front of his stomach. I don’t know why that turns me on more. I’ve been with plenty of men since my husband, but nobody has had a body like this man. His shoulders are rounded, and as I look down his arms, they curve with muscle from his back to his biceps. It’s not too much, but enough to know he could lift me easily. Even his forearms, each garnered with a couple of tattoos, are strong and corded with lean muscle. My mouth waters. And I’m aching to feel how wet this has made me. My nipples brush along my tank and even that has me hyper aware of how good he could make me feel.

He smiles and says, “This making you wet, Bunny?” The playfulness that’s ever present in his tone has been replaced by pure lust.

As his eyes skate down to my bottom half, I slowly untie the drawstring of my soft gray pants. Then I’m pushing my hand underneath and between my legs.

“You’re beautiful,” I tell him. And from the way his hardened cock moves beneath his pants, it’s obvious how much he enjoys the praise. “Just looking at you has my panties soaked.”

“Show me.”

Oh god. I hesitate, but only for a second. The confidence pouring off him has me so turned on that any hiccup in my own has me feeding off of his.

“Contessa, I need to see how wet you are. So you either show me, or I will come see for myself.”

I rub two fingers along my lips and clit and slowly pull them from my waistband, extending them up to show him.

“Let me taste.”

“No.”

His nostrils flare, and I know he doesn't like it, but instead of breaking the moment, he says, “Then taste them yourself. Shove those fingers in your mouth and show me how good you are.”

In one mindless motion, I push my fingers between my lips and lap my taste. It's the dirtiest move I've made so blatantly with anyone. It's pushing me to an edge I've never felt before. It feels like intimacy and vulnerability, but sexier. And then I hear him say, “So fucking sexy,” under his breath as he stares at my fingers, licking his lips like he's starved for a taste.

“Tell me,” he demands. His hand glides over his thickened cock, above his pants. It juts up as he slowly moves his palm up and down the material. I want to touch him. To feel him gliding across my tongue. “I can smell how turned on you are. My mouth is watering from it.”

“Sweet,” I answer. “And maybe a little salty.” I look at his hand again as it moves along the length beneath his pants. “I want to see your cock.”

“Show me yours, and I'll show you mine.”

“I'm sorry, I don't have a cock.”

“Funny.” He looks away from my fingers, which have moved back down my body. When his eyes connect with mine, he says, “You know what I'm asking.”

I tilt my head to the side, trying to play dumb and get him to use his words.

“I want to see that pussy, Bunny. If you're not going to let me taste it, then let me see it. She's so wet, isn't she?”

I slowly nod. “Pull it out and let me see you first,” I demand.

He stretches the waistband down and under, freeing himself.

I don't mean to do it, but my mouth opens slightly, and a small sound escapes. If there was ever a way to flood a man's ego, it's to react to his dick like I just did.

He smiles proudly, and he should, because it's thick and so fucking hard. Men with cocks like that absolutely know how to use them. My guess is, he doesn't leave many people unfulfilled. My pussy flutters just looking at him.

No touching, I repeat to myself.

“Show me that pussy right now, Contessa.”

I smile at how on edge he is, and it fuels me to see how we're affecting each other the same way. My walls are down, and his calm, joking demeanor is long gone.

I slowly stand across from him and push my pants down my legs. Stepping out of them, I lower myself back to the couch, kneeling high so I can touch myself more easily. I want to ride my hand as I watch him make himself come.

“You're not playing fair.” He shakes his head, and I lift a brow.

“It's not about you. I told you I was going to play. I'm being kind by letting you stay and watch.” It's impossible not to imagine his fingers brushing against my clit on each pass. “It's your fingers that I'm pretending are working me over so well,” I tell him.

He groans, biting back a smirk. “They can be.”

I move my head back and forth slowly, telling him no.

“Is that what you like? Teasing your clit like that in small circles. Or do you like to fuck your fingers more?”

“I like all of it. Circles, fingers, toys...”

“Show me how many fingers you like.”

A small moan escapes at his words, and I thrust two fingers into my pussy.

“You like that, don't you? Me telling you what to do. You don't want to like it when someone is else in charge, but you do. You like taking direction.”

“Yes,” I breathe out quietly.

“Are you going to tell me what to do, Contessa?” He sucks in a breath and exhales his next words. “Because I’m so fucking hard right now.”

“Grip your cock hard and jerk yourself slow. But don’t touch the tip. Let me see how long you last without touching where you want.”

His hand wraps around his cock, and he chokes it. He does exactly as I instruct. His pale blue eyes lift from watching my hand move in a rhythm between my legs to my eyes. The sexy ease with which he moves is smooth, tantric even. His fist and forearm contracts simultaneously with the muscles along the sides of his stomach. The tip of his cock glistens with his eagerness for release.

One taste would be okay, wouldn't it?

I lick my lips. I want to taste him so badly.

My breathing picks up, and he takes that as his cue to talk me over the edge.

“That’s it. Work your fingers through that perfect cunt of yours. Such a pretty, needy little thing, isn’t she? Do you have any idea how good she’ll feel stretched around my cock?”

Another moan escapes, but I couldn’t care less.

“I know exactly how good, because just the thought of sliding into her right now has my cock fucking weeping.”

“Brush your thumb over the tip now,” I tell him.

He groans as he obeys.

His hand works faster, and I can tell with every slight pause and inhale that he’s edging himself back.

“Show me you could take me. Push another finger into your pussy. Stretch her for me. It’ll feel so tight, so fucking full.”

I smile as my eyes close and picture exactly what he’s telling me. And it does. So fucking full.

“Law,” I say breathlessly.

“Go ahead and say my name like that again,” he says, his voice growing husky.

I open my eyes again to see him jerking his hand faster. He tilts his head back like it’s taking everything to keep him standing there instead of rushing to me—to do exactly what he’s describing.

So I say his name again.

“Law,” I say on an exhale. And within seconds of letting the gasp of his name escape, I can feel my orgasm crest. It works through my body like a small current brushing past my arms and legs. It forces my eyes to drift closed, so powerful as it unleashes and plummets through the rest of my body. I fall over the edge with a whimper, and my pussy pulses around my fingers as I let go. The sound around me is muffled, and my body jerks as a final shiver runs over my skin.

The room is so quiet, and it takes me a second to realize the only sound left is my heavy breathing. When I open my eyes, he’s stopped moving. His cock is still hard, hand wrapped around it, but his focus is only on me.

“Why did you stop?”

“What?” he asks, dazed.

So I ask again, brow furrowed. “Why did you stop?”

“Why did I stop?” He looks at me like that’s an insane question.

He pulls up his shorts over himself and turns away toward the kitchen and our connecting door. But before he makes it there, he turns around, clearly angry or maybe just frustrated. “I just watched you come. And it was so fucking sexy, Tessa. How the fuck am I supposed to do this with you?”

“I feel like it was pretty self-explanatory.”

But he cuts my sarcastic remark off, “No. Don’t do that.”

I’ve sunk back into the couch, my hand still covering my pussy, my orgasm slick on my fingers, and he’s getting serious

on me. I can't handle that. Not right now, at least.

"You know what I mean. This back-and-forth. This." He points between us. "You and me."

I swallow roughly, but don't give in.

"Do whatever you want, Riggs. I don't know why I even asked. It's on you if you'd rather watch the show than participate."

Looking up at the ceiling, he takes a breath. "Don't fucking play with me, Tessa." He turns back, ready to leave.

I don't want him to. It feels wrong, selfish even, to see him walk away from me. Hearing him like this makes me feel bad. This wasn't supposed to make him mad. *Or was it?*

"But that's what we do. We play, and push, and piss each other off." Heart thumping, my voice raises when I say, "That's our relationship. *That's* the part of it that's *not* fake."

He turns around and rushes back to me. In less than ten strides, he's hovering above me. He cages me in with one arm resting on the back of the couch while the other pinches just below my chin. I feel like I can't catch my breath.

"You're right, this isn't fake," he says. Releasing my chin, he grabs my hand, and presses it against his still-hard cock. If I wasn't so caught off guard, I'd be moaning in relief at the feel of him.

He inches closer, making it impossible to look away from him. His blue eyes are pleading, his mouth inches from mine as I drink in every line etched into his brow, the small scar on his chin, the laugh lines that shouldn't exist on someone so young yet, but they're embedded into his skin. A man who likes to laugh and smile. A man so different from what I was so used to, so different from whom I've become, or what I thought I deserved.

"There's nothing fake about how much I want you right now. You can feel that. You can see *exactly* how serious I am."

I shift my eyes, but he doesn't allow it and moves so I'm unable to look anywhere else.

“I want you to yield.”

I scoff at that and sarcastically laugh, like he’s crazy to even say that word.

“Yield, Tessa,” he whispers, his mouth so close to mine that I can’t think anymore. I want him so badly. I’ve wanted him for so long. Quite literally since I laid eyes on him. And I’ve been pushing it away. For what? I can’t remember the reasons anymore. Why should I push away what I want?

So, I make a choice.

“Kiss me,” I whisper back.

And that’s all it takes. One simple request for exactly what I’ve been craving so desperately.

His mouth crashes onto mine. And I meet him with the same intensity. Our lips press and find an instant rhythm. I capture his top lip. He pulls my bottom into his mouth. I welcome his tongue as it brushes against mine. It’s pure fucking passion, and I’m lost in it. The way his fingers snake into my hair and his hand grips my neck. He pulls me to exactly where he wants. There’s no hesitation or asking. Only taking. Only giving.

I’ve molded my body into his as we explore what it feels like to finally let go, fall in, and consume the other. No more barriers, only what we’ve both been craving, what we’ve both been dancing around since the first moment I touched him.

This isn’t the kind of kiss you break. You savor it. Pin it to memory. So I sink into it more. The tempo of his lips. The way he tilts his head, as if he can’t get enough. I follow. The way his tongue rolls with mine. It’s intense, on the cusp of overwhelming even.

He pulls back, jerking me out of it, and helps me to stand. Leaning down, he pushes his shoulder into my hip and lifts me off the ground, his forearm snug against the back of my thighs.

“What are you doing?” I screech, and then can’t help but giggle. His ass is upside down, but it sways in front of my face as he carries me. “Put me down,” I say with a pinch to his cheek.

He sinks his teeth into my hip in response.

I yelp. That's going to leave a mark.

"I'm taking you to my bed."

"Law, put me down!"

"Shut up, Bunny. I've wanted this for far too long. We could just make out, for all I care, but I'm not doing it on that cramped couch. I want you in my bed so I can see and touch every fucking inch of you."

"You could just fuck me anywhere. It doesn't have to be in your bed."

"I'll take you up on that invitation at a later date, you dirty girl."

"This had better not be a sweet gesture."

Slap.

The heat comes first and then a small sting on one ass cheek.

"There's nothing sweet about what we're going to be doing."

"You're still going to do exactly as I say," I grunt out as he carries me through his house.

Slap.

Heat again, but on the other cheek this time. I can feel myself getting wetter.

"You can tell me to do whatever the fuck you want, Bunny. As long as you keep asking nicely."

"I'm not asking nicely for any—"

Slap.

"Ouch. That one stung," I whine out. And because I have the inherent need to try to piss this man off, I laugh while saying, "Spanking is on my preferred list. You're inadvertently giving me what I want."

He groans at my confession, and then bites my hip again. He's made his way into his master suite, and then drops me on the bed. I land with a bounce.

"I want to lick those pretty tits of yours. They've been begging for my mouth. Lose the shirt."

I like this version of him almost as much as the one who does what I say.

I lean up on my elbows as he sheds his pants again. Still hard, and still one of the most beautiful cocks I've ever seen. He pulls my ankles so I'm closer to the edge of the bed.

"Take. Off. The. Shirt," he orders, kneeling on the edge, waiting for me to do as I'm told.

I just smirk at him. The buzz I had from the wine has been replaced by the electricity humming between us. We've gone from fun to feral in the span of a conversation, and I'm not about to overthink any of it. I'm so turned on and eager. If I'm being honest, he's too much fun not to push, even in this setting.

"Okay, I asked nicely twice," he says as he reaches for the top of my tank, and with two firm grips, he tears it from top to bottom, right down the center.

"Oh, fuck," I gasp.

"We're getting there, Bunny."

I'm not even mad. It was the hottest demonstration of strength, pushing him to a tipping point, that I've experienced. I think I should buy more tanks just like it so I can see him do it all over again.

Seconds later, even before I can fake being mad about my shredded shirt, he grips around the curve of my tits and laps at my right nipple with a wet and warm flattened tongue, and then sucks it firmly into his mouth. I nearly buck off the bed from it.

I moan at the sensation while his free hand plucks and pinches my other nipple. I writhe underneath him, looking for any type of friction. He moves his mouth to my other breast,

and with the same moves, he laps at my peaked nipple, and then sucks on it so hard, it pulls a needy whine from my chest. Licking a path in between my breasts, he moves above me, returning to my lips.

“I’ll spend the rest of the night feasting on every single inch of you if you let me. Or you can be the boss of me in here too.” *Kiss.* “Tell me what you want. I’ll play anyway you’d like.”

Then his lips are on mine again, and I smile into his kiss. He mimics it back. I can’t help it; there’s no more veil or need to hide how easy it feels to be with him.

“Bunny, I haven’t even fucked you yet, and you’re already smiling.”

“We can forget the fact that I hate that nickname,” I say as I reach down and grip his cock. Now that I’ve touched him, I want to taste him too. I don’t think I’ve ever been so eager to suck someone off. But here we are, wanting and craving all sorts of new things with this man.

“But you’re funny.”

Kiss.

“And you’re easy to be around. I hate how easy it is to be around you.”

Kiss.

He pulls me closer and kisses me harder, his tongue moving with mine. The way he bites my lip, pulling it into his mouth, makes me needy for more.

I push his chest. “I want you on your back while I see how far I can fit your cock down my throat.”

He groans in response. “I’m going to come so fucking fast.” Gripping my chin, he starts to move. “This mouth on you is going to kill me. I fucking know it.”

He growls as I squeeze and grip him once more before he’s moving to his back. I straddle my legs around his hips and lean down to kiss him again. I’m smiling like a fool into the kiss as I whisper, “Now be a good boy and hold on to the headboard.”

Law

“OH, FUCKING HELL,” I GROAN OUT. BUT I DO EXACTLY AS she tells me. There’s something so fucking sexy about having a confident woman tell you exactly what she wants and how she wants it. The only thing left to do is obey her.

“The first time I felt you, I knew you were big, but I don’t think I realized how wet you’d make me just by touching you.” She moves down my body, her hand wrapping around my cock as her mouth trails a path down my chest and stomach.

“I don’t need you to sweet talk me, Bunny. I’m a sure thing right now.”

She grips my cock, firm and tight, her delicate hand barely fitting around me. I love how sinful her body is. When she licks from the base of my shaft all the way to the tip, it feels so fucking good, my breath catches. It’s not going to take much here. Between the lack of sex from the past few months, and the amount of fucking foreplay she’s been delivering, I’m going to spill down her throat in seconds.

“If I let you come, are you going to pass out on me?”

“If those lips of yours wrap around my cock, I might pass out, yeah. I’m so fucking turned on right now.”

As she swirls her tongue around the head of my cock, every thought escapes me. She plays with my balls, licks the shaft. “Dammit, Tessa, you give full-service head.”

She lets out a small laugh as her mouth closes over me again, but then something clicks as to why she might be asking if I’m going to pass out. She needs reassurance that this isn’t only about getting off. Not for me, at least.

“I plan to fuck you at least twice after this. You’re forgetting...” I groan because her tongue flicks just below the head of my cock.

She tries to fill in my words by saying, “I’m forgetting that you have experience? I know.”

She does it again, and I groan again. *Fucking hell.*

“No. Fuck, Tessa. You’re forgetting a few things.”

She raises her eyebrows, waiting for me to say it so she can get back to her current job.

“One.”

Lick.

“Holy fuck.” My head drops back for a second. “You’re going to learn that,” I grit out as she slides my cock into her mouth, “I won’t stop until you’re satisfied.”

My cock hits the back of her throat, and she gags.

I growl. “Fuck, let me get this out before you destroy me, woman.”

She slides her mouth off of me and smiles, her puffy lips wet with my arousal.

“Two, I have a big appetite and really fucking great stamina.”

She licks the tip.

“Wait.”

She smiles. “You sure?”

I close my eyes for a moment to keep my shit together. When I open them, I smile back at her. Even the sight of her mouth hovering near my cock nearly has me exploding.

“Three.” I reach forward and rub my thumb along her perfect lips. “I’m so fucking obsessed with you, Tessa. That there’s no possible way you and I will be sleeping tonight.”

She rests her chin on my thigh. Seriously, this woman is destroying me with every move she makes.

“Are ya done now?” she asks, her mouth moving closer to my length.

I smile at her as I fold my arms behind my head, and grab back onto the headboard like she so kindly requested so I can properly see her work me over. “You gag a couple more times, and I will be.”

She pulls me into her mouth and sucks.

I nearly die. White light flashes. I may have seen some kind of entity, it’ll never be clear. The only thing I can do is get lost in the feel of her. Her wet lips and warm tongue drag from the tip of cock to the base of my shaft. She gags only once more, and then relaxes her throat and swallows. I don’t even know if I moan or shout, because I may have blacked out as I spill down her throat. And the dirty fucking boss that she is swallows every damn drop. When I open my eyes, she’s grinning up at me. She kisses the tip of my cock sweetly, like it’s her new pet.

To be clear, it abso-fucking-lutely is.

She tries to sit up and move away from me, but I’m too quick. I flip her over so that she’s flat on the bed and I’m hovering half over her while the rest of me starts stirring back to life. So fucking ready for the next round. She lets out a laughing scream that turns into her giggling. I don’t know what it is about seeing her smile and hearing her laugh that fills me, but I feel fueled by it. I kiss her chest, right in between her gorgeously big tits.

“I love these. I just met them, and I fucking love them.” I push her tits together and lick each nipple, giving each one the attention they deserve. She smiles down at me at first, and then arches her back, pushing them forward and farther into my mouth.

“Law,” she whispers.

“Yeah, baby?”

Lick.

Suck.

“Tell me what you want. Go ahead,” I say as I move down, leaving a trail of open-mouthed kisses along her stomach. I

swirl my tongue around her belly button, and then nip at her skin below—closer to where I know she wants me.

“You’ve been dying to taste. So taste. I need your mouth on me.” She’s writhing as she says it.

“I’m so fucking hungry for it, Bunny. But I need to look at this pretty pussy for a minute. Damn, she’s beautiful. Needy. I bet she’ll do exactly what I want, won’t she?”

“Oh god,” she whispers with a hum.

I press my nose right into her and suck in a deep breath. I’m still so turned on, I want to be surrounded by the smell of her. It’s like a warm, sweet and salty cookie that I’m going to enjoy.

“You smell so good.” I reach up and push my thumb into her mouth and she sucks on it like I’ve just awarded her the best fucking treat. It takes every ounce of willpower not to eat her out like she’s my last goddamn meal.

So I tell her what I want. What I’ve been waiting on for a little while now. “Say please.”

She lifts her head, and when I drag my thumb down her chin, she smirks at me. “You’ve been waiting for that one, huh?”

I kiss her inner thigh. “You smell so fucking good, Tessa. Say please, baby.”

Smiling, she brings my thumb to her lips again, dragging her tongue along the tip of it. My cock is very aware of where her mouth is right now and he’s really jealous.

She likes the praise. She likes hearing how much I enjoy her.

So I pull my hand back so I can spread her lips. I rub the sides of my thumbs up and down to spread around her arousal. “Your pussy is so fucking juicy, it’s begging for my tongue.”

She opens her mouth and lets out a small moan. Finally, she whispers, “Please. Please. Make me come.”

There's a time for teasing and lightness that can drag out moments, but this is *not* that time. I flick her clit with my tongue, which makes her legs fall open even more. Pulling her hips to my mouth, I flatten my tongue to lap up what she's giving me. The way she reacts to every bit of it has me hard and eager to feel her. Fill her. Fuck her.

She's so much smaller than me that it's easy to loop my arms around both of her thighs and flip us over. My back flat on the bed now while she sits on my face.

She starts laughing. "Law, holy shit."

But she knows what I want her to do. "Grind your pussy on my mouth, Tessa."

She looks down from above me, smiles like I've just given her the best invitation of her life, and starts to roll her hips along my mouth and chin. I let her find her rhythm before I grip her ass and pull her harder against me. Sucking her clit into my mouth, she moans so fucking loud that I know she's close. Her movements become less sensual and more erratic. I pull her against me harder and stick out my tongue so she can use me however she wants. I'll let this woman use me whenever and wherever. It only takes a few more seconds before she sings out.

"I'm going to come! Oh, Law, I'm going to..."

She comes on my tongue as her body jerks forward. I pull her down, practically smothering myself, but I want to keep the rhythm she had so I can drag out the sensation. The sounds she making and the feeling of her completely letting go feels like one of my greatest wins. It's the hottest thing I've ever heard—Tessa coming. Even before she's finished, I already know I need to hear it again and again.

She slides down my body and settles next to me on the bed. The way she's dazed and smiling makes me feel like a damn hero.

I get up and move into the bathroom, splashing some water on my face and wiping off the mess we made. When I come back into the room, I take in the sight of her. Sprawled out on

my bed, like an offering, just waiting to be ravaged again. I've never been so ready to please anyone. Or so turned on by another person. The things she says, the way she moves, the shape of her body, and look in her eyes.

"You realize that's my new favorite thing," I say as I lie on my side, propped up on an elbow. I glide my fingertips along the curve of her tummy.

"Me shutting you up with my pussy in your mouth?"

I bark out a laugh. "Oh, she's funny too?" I pinch her side, making her laugh with me. "I didn't realize all I needed to do was give you a decent orgasm and then you'd be funny."

When her laughter slows, it gives me a moment to look at her. Those blue eyes are locked on mine, and it's not lost on me how much I've wanted this. The sex, definitely, but a moment like this one where I can be close to her, touch her, and be able to stare for as long as I can.

I drag my fingers along her shoulder and across her collarbone, mapping the small beauty marks peppered along the path.

She stares up at me and mimics the movements as her fingers graze along my arm and toward my chest. "Don't."

I whisper back, "Don't what?"

Her eyes close when she says, "Don't be sweet."

I'm not going to read between those lines. I'd rather follow her request. I move my fingers higher and rub my thumb along the column of her throat. Back and forth, watching as the tick of her pulse starts thumping faster, and then I cuff my hand around her neck.

"I'm going to fuck you bare. Tell me that's okay," I demand as I kiss her lips.

"It's okay, as long as I don't end up with an STI as a party favor."

I slap her pussy, and she yelps, laughing for me again.

“I haven’t been with anyone since London. And you know that I needed to be tested before stepping a foot into that party.”

“Good. Me neither,” she says back.

That has me stopping my movements. I don’t know why that surprises me and sends a wave of happiness along with the confirmation that I was right. She was as thrown off as I was when we first met.

I drag my fingers along the hood of her pussy, and then give it one more slap before I thrust two fingers inside. She moans at the intrusion and searches for my lips.

“Please,” she breathes between kisses. “I want you so badly. Please.”

I love that I’ve made her so needy for me.

“Such a good fucking girl asking so nicely.”

I prop myself up and then nudge her legs wider with my knee so I can settle in between her thighs. Gripping my cock with one hand, I rub it along her pussy.

She pushes against me, meeting the friction.

“Look at me,” I tell her.

She tilts her head back down and opens her eyes. Those beautiful blues meeting mine, practically pleading for more. For me to fuck her so good she forgets anyone before this. With her eyes on me, I tap her clit.

Once.

Twice.

Then I slide into her cunt in one hard push all the way to the hilt. *Fuck. It’s so fucking good.*

She sucks in a breath, her mouth opening, but nothing comes out. Only breathy punches of air before she says, “Fuck. Oh my god. Yes. Fuck me, please.”

I can’t help but smile at the polite demand. I pull my hips back and do it again. The same punishing movement of a slow

pull and one hard fuck forward. Her pussy grips me so well. A few more times, and I'm edging her close to another orgasm as she grinds into me after every ending thrust. It's not going to be much longer for me, but I'm not coming until she does, so I grab behind her knee and drape her leg over my shoulder. I need to get deeper.

She grips the sheets in her fists. "Yessss," she moans as I hit the exact spot I want. I pick up the pace slightly, pulling back and only pushing in halfway. I'm edging her as much as I'm edging myself here. A few more deep fucks, and I'm going to spill.

Her skin is slicked with a sheen of sweat, just like mine. Her nipples are hard and every muscle engages each time I push into her. It's so fucking dirty to watch her so close to an orgasm, and I'm loving every moment of it.

"Do you know how beautiful you look?"

She smiles with her eyes closed and moans as I pull back.

I grunt out a breath as I drive my cock back into her. "You're the sexiest woman I've ever met. And this pussy feels like perfection. I bet it's never been fucked this good."

She opens her eyes, and as soon as she does, I let go and fuck her hard. Deep and unrelenting until I feel her legs quiver around me and her pussy pulse just once around my cock. As soon as it does, it unleashes my orgasm. I groan and growl into her neck like the animal she's turned me into. The impact feels like a weight slamming into me. And then I feel the euphoric pulsing of her pussy unraveling, followed by a scream as she wraps her hands around my shoulders, nails digging into me. It's at least a minute later before our panting breaths slow and soaked limbs gain feeling. And then she makes a liar out of me.

I pass out.

It could have been an honest to goodness blackout, but I'll never know. I only come back to consciousness with a dumb smile permanently plastered on my face. Her fingers drag

around my hair as I feel the steady movement of her chest, which I'm half sprawled on.

"The sky looks exactly how my body feels right now," she says. And when I tilt my head up, I'm met with her satisfied smile. I turn over to look at where she's looking.

"Yeah, how does your body feel right now?"

"Like it's on fire," she says as she stretches.

I kiss her side, just above her perfectly curved hip. "Want me to start the shower for you?"

"In a little bit. I want to enjoy this before I have to start overthinking the last handful of hours."

I kiss her side again. Her skin is so warm. I don't tell her to not overthink. Or not to worry about anything. That always seems like a pointless thing to say to someone who will do it anyway. I have more respect for her than to be condescending. Because truthfully, I don't know what this all means. I just like it.

"It has a name." I nod toward the floor-to-ceiling windows. "The sky lit like that."

"I saw something similar at sunset when I was around the firepit at your father's house.

I try to remember my Italian. "I might butcher this, but it's...*enrosadira*."

She looks at me, trying to place the term. "Your Italian isn't horrendous. But tell me again or in English."

"Alpenglow."

She smiles. Taking a minute to assign the word with the image, like she's absorbing the word with the view.

"Here, it's not just red skies. When you add the mountains to when the sun is just breaching the horizon, we see the color differently. If we were anywhere else, not a mountain in sight, it'd just be a sunrise. Or a sunset. Maybe a beautiful one, but not like that." I nod to it again so she doesn't miss a second of it.

If it were anywhere else, it would be something different.

“I like it here,” she says quietly as she moves her body back and closer to mine, burrowing into my space. It might be my favorite move of hers yet.

“Where here?” Wondering if she means in Strutt’s or in my bed.

“Just—” she inhales and then exhales “—here.”

I snake my arm under her breasts and scoop her closer. If she’s not fighting it, then I’m going to soak up every moment of her nuzzled into me. I’ve never been such a slut for a cuddle. It’s not until she says my name that I realize I fell asleep for a few minutes.

“Law,” she says softly.

I don’t open my eyes, just answer, “Yes, Bunny.”

“That’s not going to be a thing.”

“Agree to disagree.” I lean in and kiss the back of her neck. Her hair covers my face, the smell of it surrounding me. I don’t brush it away, instead I inhale again, trying to be present in this moment with her. It’s not a place I usually find myself. Content and at ease, holding someone else.

“Now what?”

I ignore the layers of the question and just think about the now. “Now, we shower. And if I’m lucky, you’ll let me fuck you in there before you decide to leave and pretend like you hate me again.”

She laughs. “That’s not what I meant. And, I don’t hate you.”

I keep my path of kisses moving down and across her shoulder. She shifts to her back, forcing me to shift up and over her. Her lips quirk into a smile as I brush a piece of hair away from her forehead. “Agree to disagree.”

Kissing the tip of her nose, I pull together what’s left of my energy. I’m content with being tired for the rest of my life if I can have more nights like this with her.

I get up and stretch. “To answer your first question, I don’t know. I’m not going to pretend like I don’t expect you to back up and want distance. But if you’re asking me what I want, it’s pretty simple. You. I want you, Tessa. As often as you’ll allow. And however you might let me.”

“That’s not—” She shakes her head as she sits up, taking the sheet with her to cover herself. “That’s not what this was to me.”

I try to make light of what she’s saying, even though her words feel like the equivalent of being politely bludgeoned. So I shrug my shoulders and find the most upbeat tone that I own and say, “Okay.”

I know she expected more than that, because she studies my expression as I move away from the bed and into the bathroom.

I start the shower, pull together towels, and grab a spare toothbrush from under the sink. When I come back out, she’s standing in the middle of the room with the sheet wrapped around her body.

Walking right in front of her, I cuff a piece of hair behind her ear and pull her chin up to look at me. “Your shower is ready. I have an extra toothbrush for you. I’ll put out a t-shirt for you to wear back to your place.” I kiss her swollen, pinkened lips with one quick peck.

I don’t know if it was between that kiss and the kitchen, or the first crack of the egg to when I folded the spinach into the omelet, but I make up my mind that I meant what I said.

However she might let me.

Tessa

“HE MADE ME AN OMELET.”

“What? Hold on, I need to finish this set.” Rina squats double her weight, but she moves so fluidly you’d never know it. She barely sweats, and she’s already finished her leg workout. I ease myself back to a sitting position from the plank I was in on the floor.

“And then right around 4 p.m. yesterday, this young kid from Brews & Books shows up at the office with tea—an Earl Grey with lavender and orange this time. And a scone with a side of lemon-infused clotted cream.”

She stares at me, working through what I’m telling her, without inadvertently telling her. “So you slept with him.”

I close one eye and say, “Yes?”

“Good. I was afraid you weren’t going to see it.”

I stand up and follow her to the front of the gym. She throws her towel over her shoulder. We both smile at a group of young twenty-somethings who are setting up their phones to record their workout.

“See what?”

She stares at the younger guy, who is very obviously checking out my sister. He’s one of the few influencers who is also an athlete. A rugby player, I think. She smiles at him, and then very blatantly says to me, “I will take that for a ride later.”

“Fine. You can do whatever you want. I’d say capitalize on the vibe after the burlesque show.”

“Ooooh, good idea. That Polynesian God-like man will be my plan then,” she says as we push through the double doors to the sports spa area. “And don’t play dumb, Tessa. You don’t need to push that man away. He’s nothing like Maxim. I’d argue he’s the polar opposite of that shithead.”

“I know that. You don’t think I know that?”

I stop moving for a minute, and I’m annoyed. She knows what I was like. How far I’ve come since leaving.

“Just because he’s decent,” I pause, thinking about all of the things he is. “Smart, and sexy.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. “And funny. That doesn’t mean I should be with him. Why would I want to get into a relationship?”

“You’re already in one. Hello? So reap the benefits. Allow him to show you that there’s more to men than the terrible examples you’ve been given.”

And I know my sister is right, but I’m so anxious about all of it. What happens if I lose who I’ve become? I like this version of me. I’m proud of this one.

“Oh my gosh, Rina?” We both turn around as Grace shouts from across the lobby. Rina and Grace worked together in New Zealand for summer training. “You were absolutely magnificent on that last run. I knew, I just knew, you’d bring home gold.”

They hug each other, and when Grace pulls back, she greets me hello. “Tessa, please tell me we’re going to see you at Sunday dinners now,” she says with a wink. I forget for a moment that she, just as much as everyone else, believes that Law and I are dating.

I smile. “Of course. Okay, you’re in great hands, Rina. I’ll see you for the sleigh ride.”

“I’m so jealous. I wanted an invite,” Grace says.

“You do?”

She nods and smiles.

“I just assumed you’re more of the outdoorsy, skier type. But please, come. It’ll be so much fun. Why don’t you come to the Toy Rodeo, too?”

She raises her eyebrows. “I am outdoorsy, but a sleigh with beverages sounds like perfection. And I don’t have any clients today. Did you invite Giselle and Everly? They will never forgive me if I’ve scored an invite and they haven’t.”

“They’re already on the list. Giselle is the one who connected me with one of the toy designers.”

Grace laughs at that. “Of course she did.”

We spend the next few minutes talking about what to expect during tonight’s festivities and how many people are attending. With just over one hundred influencers and their plus ones, the town looks even more touristy than it usually would at this time of year.

It’s just after noon before I take a moment to look up from my computer and out the window. Riggs Outdoor sits up higher on the mountain from downtown, but it’s close enough to see trucks driving, gondolas running, and plenty of people lining the streets. It’s incredible how quickly it’s felt like home.

“The sleigh rides, heli-skiing, and snow cats are just about to kick off the afternoon,” Law says from my office door. I smile before I turn around. I had a feeling I’d see him sooner rather than later today.

“I heard the snowmobile rides in from the airport were a hit.”

He moves inside from leaning on the doorframe, smiling flirtatiously. “How did you hear that?”

“Boon texted me. He said it was a helluva spectacle and totally worth it.”

“First of all,” he says, closing the door behind him. “Why does Boon have your number?”

I clear my throat, because the look he’s giving me has me feeling all sorts of things that are definitely not office appropriate.

“He’s on the team, and anyone who wants it, can have it.”

He stops in front of my desk. Eyebrows raised at that comment.

“Not the way I can have it.” He smirks.

And it's not even worth trying to mask the smile that he pulls out of me.

"That's what I thought." He rounds the front of my desk and comes to my chair, turning it so he can look at me. "And second..." I do my best to appear unfazed, but it's been less than twenty-four hours since I was very naked with this man, and holy hell does my body remember. "I was distracted this morning. I was so busy making you a ridiculously good breakfast," he pauses as I look around the office, and there's nobody close by to have heard that. Not that it would matter; we are supposed to be in a relationship, "I didn't bring a lunch." I don't understand what he's getting at until he pushes my chair out and sinks to his knees.

"No," I say, trying to sit up higher in my chair.

He flicks the button that whites out the windows looking into the rest of the office. It's a nice feature and now I'm realizing it has another great benefit.

"This..." I look around his face, his mouth curved up just right that his sexy dimple cuts into his cheek. "This is *not* on the menu." But even as I say it, my body knows I'm lying. My legs widen all on their own as his hands grip the tops of my thighs, his thumbs curving inward. I reach out to brush the curved piece of hair away from his forehead, and he leans into my touch, closing his eyes for just a moment. I preen at the feeling of witnessing the same kind of want that I have for him. How it feels so good to have someone focused on you.

"But I'm so fucking hungry for it, Bunny," he whines in a sexy, deep tone that manages to tune out what's around me.

It's fun to play. So I keep up the facade. "This isn't happening. Plus, I'm wearing pants. There's nothing easy about this right now."

"Then let's take them off."

"I'm not taking off my pants in the middle of the workday in my office."

He leans up and kisses me. "Do I need to remind you what happened last time you refused to take off an article of

clothing?”

My mind flips back to the way he tore my tank top right off of me down the middle, from top to bottom.

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would. And I could. The seam of these pants would be easy to rip. Your call. I’m a growing boy, and I’m getting hangry.”

He’s not bluffing. If there is anything I’ve learned about Law Riggs, it’s that he doesn’t bluff. I look at him in his crisp white collared shirt as he rolls up his sleeves like he’s readying to get to work, and I suddenly want nothing more than to do this. So I abandon the idea of pushing him away.

I smile at him and say, “Go lock the door.”

He rocks back and stands, hustling to my door.

“I don’t think I’ve ever noticed how good you look walking away, Riggs.”

He stops in his tracks and smirks at me. “My ass is very bite-worthy, Bunny. If you’re a good girl, you just might have a chance to try it for yourself.”

“Noted for later.” I tilt my head to the side. “Contrary to popularity, if you want to make me really wet, call me your dirty girl instead.” I stand up and flick the button on my trouser pants.

He’s back in front of me in seconds, dropping to his knees and yanking my pants and undies down to the floor. He pulls me to sit back in my chair and yanks my ass toward the edge. Before he gets to work, he kneels high and rubs his thumb along my lower lip, and I lick the pad of it. He groans out, and then leans forward, kissing me and pulling the same lip between his teeth before letting go and sinking back so he’s eye level with my waist.

“You let me call you ‘my girl,’ and I’ll tack on any fucking adjective you want, Bunny.”

Dammit. It’s shit like that that’s going to make me fall for this idiot.

He peppers kisses along my inner thighs, and then drapes one leg over each shoulder.

I rest my head back as he takes three quick swipes of his tongue, and then a fourth long, languid drag of his now flattened tongue so he can hit every fucking spot. I can't help or hold back the moan that leaps from my throat. I brush the back of my hand over my mouth to muffle anything else.

The way this man has learned exactly where to focus his attention is an art form. He drags his tongue up, and then sucks on my clit, humming into my pussy like he's truly eating his favorite thing. He's so eager and focused, it has me already grinding my hips around his mouth.

I drag my fingers into his hair and grip tight. He pulls back slightly, only to tell me, "My fucking queen, that's it, grind that pussy on my face."

I like that too much.

"Oh fuck," I breathe out. I can't help myself now. Between his filthy words and the way his mouth is working me over, I'm already about to come.

He swirls his tongue around, and as he moves to suck on me again, he thrusts his fingers into me and curls them in such a way that I let a small scream escape as my orgasm barrels through my core and across every limb of my body. I keep my mouth covered as best as I can while I ride out the rest of what just completely annihilated me.

I look down in a smiling daze as he peers up at me, with my orgasm painted around his mouth. "My favorite fucking thing, Bunny."

He starts to pull back, when a double knock on the door has us both freezing.

"Hi, Tessa. It's June. Are you in there?"

He got up to lock the door, so there's no need to pretend to be quiet. "Yes, I'm in here. Just finishing up...lunch."

Law smiles and whispers out, "And it tasted so fucking good."

But before he stands, the door starts to open, and I push myself to sit higher in my chair, knocking him back to the floor.

“Hi. I’m so sorry to interrupt. I had a quick meeting I needed to do with Law about After Dark Adventures, but I couldn’t find him.” She puts her hands on her hips and continues, “Anyway, thought I’d try in here.”

She glances at my desk, but I don’t follow her line of sight. I don’t want to draw attention to the very large man currently crouched on the floor, leaning against the drawers of my desk.

“I need to make sure Law is going to be okay with being my support guy during the burlesque show. I always have a male counterpart and, unfortunately, I wasn’t able to secure one this go around. I’d have another woman who could help, but I feel like for this female-heavy crew, a good-looking man folded into the show wouldn’t hurt.”

When I start to answer, “Sure,” I’m interrupted.

“No problem.” His voice sounds from the floor.

My eyes widen in horror.

But she just smiles at me, a big grin stretching ear-to-ear. “I have an entirely new level of respect for you.” She holds up her fist. “Demolishing the patriarchy one under-the-desk meeting at a time.” She spins and yells over her shoulder, “See you two later.”

“I thought you locked the door,” I whisper-shout at him.

“You complimented my ass and then my brain turned off after that.”

“Oh my god,” I say as I pull my pants back up.

“We’ll make sure you’re saying that for an entirely different reason tonight, Bunny.” He walks closer to me and holds my chin between his thumb and pointer, lifting just enough so I’m forced to look at him. He smiles, and I can’t help but smile back. “You taste so fucking good. I’m doing that again. The face-full of your pussy, obviously, but also the lunchtime treat.”

I should push back. I should say this won't be happening again. I should stick to my self-preservation mantra that I was trying to get behind, but then he leans in and kisses me. And I let him. I do more than let him, I fall into it. My taste still lingers on his tongue as I wrap my hand around his wrist, holding his hand in place. The way he touches me, it's careful and confident.

And I forget why I'm supposed to not want it.

Tessa

IT'S INEVITABLE THAT WHEN IMPORTANT THINGS ARE happening, or if you're just stuffed to the brim busy with things to do, something out of left-field will cut in and try its hardest to get you to stumble. Hence, the texts that began filtering in from my father early this morning.

DAD

I've been hearing and seeing a lot of good things coming out of Colorado in a very short time.

Congratulations, Contessa, you're doing well out there.

Then right around the time I hit the coffee line at Brews & Books, there were two more in succession, because my father is, if nothing else, impatient when it comes to a response.

DAD

I don't even get an acknowledgement that you got my message? I know you're still angry with me.

I want to discuss when you're going to be done out there. Things are starting to unravel here, and I fear I've made an error in judgment.

And while that one made me curious, I don't answer. I've made my decision. Real space for a while. Especially after seeing him at the Olympics, I made peace with the fact that I'm not interested in keeping a close relationship with my father.

I look up from my phone and spot my sister talking with Giselle, both of them laughing loudly and talking with wildly flailing arms. I had a feeling if they'd met, they would hit it off right away.

“Oh my gosh, the way that man just slipped his thumb there. I didn’t even realize what was happening...”

Rina starts slapping Giselle’s thigh. “I know. Oh my gosh, I know. And then it was like I saw the closing scene from *A League of Their Own*. I cried. I didn’t even know why I was crying, but it was intense waterworks. And then I had just come.”

I look back and forth between them. Giselle’s wild blonde hair moves with her while my sister’s laugh draws the attention of every person sitting within ten feet in all directions of where we’re gathered.

“Me too,” Giselle says as she pats Rina’s arm.

“Are you two talking about a guy you have...in common?”

“Yes!” they answer in unison. Maybe this was a bad idea. These two together.

Rina kisses me hello and squeezes my arm. “Tessa, do you remember the baseball player? The shortstop. Before he hit majors.”

I laugh, because, *oh*, do I remember the baseball player. She didn’t shut up about him for weeks. Every time I’d call her when she was training in Maine, she’d mention how she would see him at the gym and then out sometimes, but he never smiled or flirted. “What the hell did you call him?”

Giselle chimes in, “It was his nickname for some sort of way he threw the ball or swung or something, but then the girls who would hook up with him would talk about how he’d flip them over and then drive his thumb...or was it his ring finger...”

“Giselle!”

“Okay, that’s our order.” She scoots up from the couch and gives me a hug as she passes. “Your sister is as awesome as you are, by the way.”

I wasn’t expecting her to say that, and it makes me feel unexpectedly good.

I smile at her, and then turn back and give Rina the *what did I just walk into* look.

She smiles and shrugs. “Turns out, we both managed to have out-of-body experiences with the same man.” I widen my eyes, and she squints at me. “Not at the same time, but, like, some years apart. It’s not clear. Anyway...she’s a riot,” she says as she thumbs in Giselle’s direction.

“She is. And now I know who should not be left alone together.”

She gives me a sarcastic smile back as Giselle returns with their coffees and my tea. “Okay, so are you going to let me do a tattoo on you while you’re in town, Rina?”

“You have time for it, Rina,” I tell her. “The sleigh tasting we’re doing isn’t until later this afternoon.”

Giselle pulls out her phone and types away. “Tessa, whatever you just said, I want in. And so does Everly; she just doesn’t know it yet.

“The sleigh tasting? Absolutely. I’ve already invited Grace.”

“Sleigh as in sleigh ride?”

“Yes,” I laugh.

“Totally my idea. And also, tasting as in... wine or?”

“We chose tequila. So, palomas, margs...”

“Say no more.” She raises her hand. “The day has just completely turned into heaven,” Giselle says, looking up. “Honest to goddess perfection.”

Rina sips her coffee before she asks, “So what’s a Toy Rodeo, and what am I supposed to wear?”

In this part of Colorado, you’re not likely to find cowboys. Strutt’s is known for its mountain sports and modern restaurants. There was nothing resembling a honkey tonk dive

bar here a week ago. But somehow, with a little investment in a vacant storefront on Main and a family friend named Mac, I could be convinced I've been transported into a rowdy spot in Nashville.

There are currently sixty-three women and ten men who decided they wanted to be a part of this evening's after-dark adventures. Each and every one of them not only showed up ready to have a good time, getting a full education in the latest adult toys, but most are either sporting cowboy boots or hats. Everyone leaned into the rodeo theme. Hard.

The five of us, Rina, Giselle, Everly, Grace, and me, spent two hours being pulled along trails and sipping on tequila-based specialty cocktails for one of the best guided tours I've ever been a part of. It wasn't that the excursion was original, but the knowledge the guides have of this town and mountain, the few dustings of snow that happened along the way, paired with the mixologist, it was all incredibly well done. Law's team perfected each and every detail.

"Oh my gosh, that was such a blast, wasn't it?" I overhear from the group that just came in. I recognize two of the women from the social media profiles that the marketing team had highlighted. One of them focuses on mid-sized fashion and the other is a DIYer who flips old campers into high-end tiny homes. Normally, a place like Strutt's Peak wouldn't be on their roster of places to visit or talk about on their feeds or pages, but that's exactly who we want our brand to be introduced to. Mainstream consumers and not only those who are focused on mountain sports.

Every high-top table is packed, and a few people linger around the bar. The waitstaff are fully dressed in their cowboy and southern style too. It's a nice touch.

The *tap, tap* of the mic grabs everyone's attention, and June waves back the hoots and hollers. "Good evening, you sexy as hell people! Oh my gosh, ya'll have definitely had some drinks if I'm already getting a welcome like this."

I know Law's here somewhere, but I haven't seen him. So I pull out my phone and send a text.

TESSA

What's your stance on toys?

LAW

Is this the toddler man-child kind or the kind that go buzz in the night?

I lean into Grace and ask, “Do you know June? I saw you chatting with her earlier.”

Grace whispers back, “You could say that. She’s been friends with my mom and her girlfriend for a while.” I feel like there’s more there, just based on the tone of how she says that, so I ask, “Law brought her in to host these after-dark events. Good call, or?”

“Great call. She’s one of those people who brings that fun vibe wherever she goes. No wonder he wanted her for this. She’s just like Law.”

I don’t like the way that sounds. And even more, I don’t like the way that hearing it makes me jealous at the idea of him being suited for anybody else.

“Oh, Tessa. Not like that. They’re very much alike in a lot of ways, but I always think the best matches are between people who are different. More exciting that way.”

I smile at her. I know she didn’t mean it in any way that insinuated anything. And to be fair, I have no business getting salty. We’re just sleeping together. Right? My phone buzzing on the table interrupts the thought.

LAW

Making selections? Anything remotely close to as beautiful—your words, not mine—as my cock??

I don’t even realize I’m smiling until my sister elbows me, saying, “That man can sure make you smile.”

I curl my lip under my teeth and give her my best snarky gopher face in response.

She mirrors it, and we both start laughing. *God, I love having her here.*

“Rina, if I end up staying here—” I shift closer to her so nobody else overhears me “—making this interim job more of a long-term thing, would you consider retiring out here?”

LAW

I’ve rendered you speechless already?

TESSA

June is just kicking things off.

If anything is remotely impressive, I’ll be sure to send pics.

LAW

I wouldn’t mind if you sent me pics of you.

TESSA

Just to be clear, these are dick pics. I’m sure you’re familiar.

LAW

We’ve already established you don’t have a cock

TESSA

Still bummed?

LAW

Did anyone tell you you look pretty tonight?

I like the back-and-forth we have. He pushes and I push back. It’s a nice rhythm to have with someone. But saying

something sweet isn't our usual banter. I didn't think I'd be such a sucker for it.

LAW

Well, you do. And the way you're smiling at my message makes you look even hotter now that I know it's me who's making you do it.

I laugh and look up from my phone and around the room. I turn toward the bar, and sure enough, Law is leaning against it as if he doesn't have a care in the world. With Michael and Henry as bookends to him, they're getting plenty of attention, regardless of if June is priming everyone for the night to begin.

The Riggs men carry themselves in a certain way that it wouldn't matter what they're wearing, since they look so good. They're a mix of rugged sex appeal and polished edges. I haven't met anyone else quite like them.

"Alright, I'm going to need two volunteers," June calls out, bringing my attention to the front of the room and on the raised platform.

Giselle shoots her hand up high and waves it fast. Everly laughs and says, "You need to calm it down tonight. I'm going to end up having to call my brother to pry you out of here, aren't I?"

Grace chimes in, "He's already here. Michael too."

"You do realize every single person who has gone up to your boyfriend over the past hour, they've either walked their rejected ass back to their table or struck up a conversation with someone else at the bar."

I look over my shoulder, trying to appear unfazed by any of what she's insinuating. But I've watched at least six women, none of whom have breached the thirty-year mark, make an effort to talk and flirt with Law in the past few minutes since I knew he was back there. Any time I've looked, he keeps his eyes on the stage or on me.

“Is that where we are in society now? We applaud a man already in a relationship for not entertaining the advances of other women? That’s a fairly low bar, Rina.”

“Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“In a relationship?” she asks as she sips her Tequila Sunrise.

“According to everyone in this room, I am.”

“But according to you?” she pushes. “I don’t think you need to be in anything. If you told me, ‘*Rina, I’m going to fly solo for the rest of my life,*’ I’d support you. But I wouldn’t understand it. Not after the way I’ve seen you with him. Now that I have—” she lifts her shoulder “—I don’t think finding someone like that happens more than once.”

“I’ve had someone, Rina. And at first, he was great too.”

“First of all, he wasn’t. Maxim was a douchebag since the moment I met him. You haven’t been with someone who drives you to the brink of rage like you have with him.” I give her a curious glance, but she’s not done. “You try and fail miserably to not smile or laugh when Law’s near you. He’s successful, can go toe-to-toe with you, which is impressive, because you’re the smartest person I know. And he looks at you like you’re a goddamn sunrise.” She nods in Law’s direction. “And he behaves more like a man in a respected, committed relationship than your husband ever did. And you’re trying to tell me it’s not real?” Giving me a leveling stare, she tries searching my face for a reaction. But really, I’m stuck. Everything she’s saying is true. I know it, but it’s hard to hear. I don’t feel like I deserve it. “He hasn’t so much as looked at another woman, never mind stopped looking at you to see what you’re doing. The man is into you. And I think you’re at least already halfway in love with him.”

That’s not what I came here for. I can’t feel that.

“Rina.” I close my eyes. “I can’t go there. Not right now.” I look around for our waitress. I need a drink.

“Don’t be so busy pushing away the good things, Tessa. You’re allowed to have good.”

I wince at hearing that, because I know she’s right. I’m a smart woman, but I still never planned for this to happen.

I decide not to wait for the waitress and head to the bar. I don’t want to be having this deep conversation with her tonight. I step on the rail beneath the bar and lean to grab the bartender’s attention. When he sees me and comes over, I don’t realize I’m right next to Henry when I ask, “Can I get five drafts and ice waters?”

Henry clears his throat and asks, “How drunk are you girls?”

I catch all three of the Riggs boys waiting for me to answer. “I think the waters will help, but we’ve been sipping on something since noon.” I look at Henry when I say, “Giselle has stuck with tequila. And Grace, now that I think of it, she was chugging water, mostly.”

Law saddles up next to me. “I think tonight’s a hit, don’t you?”

I nod and change the subject. I’m not interested in talking shop. I’m not sure what I’m feeling after talking with Rina. But I also don’t want to be his boss right now. I just want to be near him.

“Do you like my boots?”

He looks down at my body and pulls back to take it all in. The red boots with the leather skirt and the Stevie Nicks Tour cropped t-shirt that Giselle demanded I wear has me really feelin’ myself tonight.

“I like a lot of things right now. Those boots are rounding out at number five.”

I lean closer to him. “You’ll have to tell me about one through four later.”

“I can show you right now, if you want to ditch this.”

I give him a smile. I love leaving him wanting more from me. This push and pull feels like foreplay. So, I grab the tray

of drinks and walk back to my table. And I know his eyes are on me the whole time.

About an hour or so later, the crowd is loud and laughing. There's so much talking between tables and people taking videos to capture their night, I can barely hear June running through features of the latest rodeo-themed toys. But it's exactly what we want; clips that can be highlighted and reposted. This is exactly the kind of event we'd promote for a girls' weekend, bachelorette party, or big birthdays, and if we couple it with the boozy sleigh ride from today, it's a great package deal.

TESSA

Are you riveted by the display and array of vibrators and dildos?

LAW

This crowd seems riveted, particularly by that last blindfold and the restraints demo.

I'm partial to a certain lace mask.

TESSA

And what would you do if you saw that mask again?

I bite the tip of my nail, wondering if I'm up for this. When I casually look over to where he's leaning, I take all of him in. The way he leans so confidently, his dark jeans molded nicely to his muscular thighs, cuffed just once at the bottom. His boots are worn, but still, they work for him. He's not usually someone who wears plaid, but tonight it's doing all sorts of things to me.

My phone vibrates in my hand, bringing my attention back to what we're starting.

LAW

I'd rip it off of you. Tie your hands to my headboard. Eat you out until you scream my name. Fuck you senseless. Tease you all over again until you begged me to shove my cock right back where it belongs.

“Rina, I gotta go. A little work thing.” I put my phone in my clutch and whisper to the rest of the table, “Girls, I gotta dash. I’ll catch up with you all this week.” And before I even hear a response, I turn on the heel of my red cowboy boots and hustle toward the smirking man holding my coat for me.

“Let’s go, Bunny.”

Law

“THIS IS NOT WHAT YOU WERE ADVERTISING,” TESSA SAYS with a pout. I’m not a fan of pouty women, but with her, I know a zinger isn’t far behind. Plus, she’s so fucking cute.

“I want a refund. And a ride back to the bar. Apparently, I do need a new vibrator after all.”

“Arms up,” I say, grabbing the hem of her shirt. She reaches above her head, and I take her shirt off. “My plan was to tuck you into my bed and make you sleep, because I know how much you haven’t been the last few days.” Mostly my fault, but I’m not apologizing. “Just trying to get you to slow down.”

She looks at my chest. “You look like a cowboy with this shirt.”

“I bought you one.”

She raises her eyebrows in surprise and smiles. “A flannel?”

“No, that little toy shaped like a flower. Lots of suction. Seemed like it would suit your preferences.”

“That’s every woman’s preference.” She laughs and slides her sexy-as-sin skirt down her legs. She’s quiet for a minute before she says, “I never had this before.”

“A man undressing you? I doubt it.” She unclasps her bra and throws it at me.

“No. Yes? Actually, I don’t think like this. Without an ulterior motive. But that’s not what I meant.”

“I’m really rethinking my motives with your tits looking at me like that,” I say as I look her up and down. Her body is so enticing that I hook my finger around hers and pull her closer. Leaning lower, I wrap my arms around her waist as hers fall to my shoulders.

“I mean the way I can say things to you. I don’t overthink. I just say what I want. Even talking about sex is easy,” she says.

“I’m easy,” I say jokingly.

She smiles, ignoring what I said. “You’re easy to be around.”

“Watch out now, it sounds like you might like me,” I tease as I sink to my knees in front of her. We’re practically eye-level like this. “I had more honorable intentions, but the way this pair of red lace panties look on your fine ass with these boots.” I blow out an exaggerated puff of air from my chest. “It’s a fucking fantasy that I never knew I had until a few seconds ago.”

“I do like you,” she admits softly.

I realize her day-drinking and lack of sleep might be playing a part in this conversation. So I play along, because I’ll take whatever level of heavy she’s able to give. I don’t know when it happened, maybe in London or when I finally kissed her, but this was always real to me. Impossible to ignore. Continuously evolving. Different from what I thought would happen for me. But never fake. It wasn’t ever fake for me.

Leaning back, her eyes drag to mine and then up to my hair.

“You’d look more like a cowboy if you had a hat.”

I move down her body and settle on my knees. I kiss above her belly button. “I’ll wear whatever you want, Bunny. Hat, boots, assless chaps, I’m in for it.”

“You make me laugh. Even at the very least, you make me smile” She combs her fingers through my hair. “That part isn’t fake...”

I skim kisses along the line of her panties. “None of it feels fake at the moment.”

Her body stiffens slightly. If I wasn’t touching her, I may have missed it, but I expect the pushback to follow. “This

complicates it. Sex makes it confusing. This is still supposed to be a fake relationship.”

“It is.”

“But our fake one is better than the decades-long one that I thought was real.”

It’s like a crowd-lifting-me-on-their-shoulders moment. The way it feels to hear that is better than any approval I’ve gotten in the past. I may have just fallen harder. It feels so good. Like the best win I’ve ever had to make her happy like that.

I lean back to look at her, my arms hugged around her thighs, and she brushes my forehead, running her fingers through my hair again. I can’t help but close my eyes. To be touched like this, it feels like I’m appreciated, respected. Even shades of love. Her nails drag lightly through my hairline and back. I lean into her touch. It feels too good to ever consider it temporary. To never compare it to anyone who would try to come after. Well, that would be the biggest lie of all.

Because, I don’t want anyone after. I just want her.

“Sounds like you’re falling in love with your fake boyfriend, Bunny,” I dare to say.

When I open my eyes and meet hers, she doesn’t look away, and I think for a quick moment that maybe she’ll admit it. Admit that she would want this to be more than some oddly fucked-up agreement.

But she smiles, like she knows she’s about to let me down with how she’s going to respond. And it’s not what I want to hear, but I’m happy to take what I’ve gotten tonight. “That nickname is really killing your chances of getting laid tonight, Riggs.”

I grab her by the hips and turn her around, then continue kissing along the waistline of her panties, down around the two dimples right above each ass cheek. I drag my mouth lower. Her ass is so fucking perfect. Full. Bite-worthy. I grope her other cheek hard, and then slap it as I drag my teeth along her skin.

“How tired are you right now?”

Breathily, she says, “Tired of you thinking I’m sleeping any time soon.”

I smile against her skin, and then snake my hand in between her legs. Curling my fingers into the top of her panties, I twist so the fabric pulls tight, wedging between her pussy lips and taut against her clit.

“I’m going to need you to put your mouth to better use,” she whispers.

“Where’s that, boss?” I push. I love it when she talks dirty.

“Painting my pussy with your tongue. And I want you to be messy. No staying inside the lines, Law.” She drags her hands up to her tits, and I can see her playing with herself from the reflection in the mirror across the room. It’s a sight that won’t easily be replaced. Her confidence. The way she knows what feels good and chases it. It’s an addictive attraction. One that makes me feel powerful, that I can play the catalyst in helping her feel that good.

She grinds into my grip, and then reaches forward to steady herself against the bedside table. Rocking into it, she knocks the lamp to the floor. But I keep my grip. I’m not about to let a little toppling furniture stop any of this.

I lick a path to the seam of her thong and decide that I’ve had enough of this material, so I untwist my fingers and yank. It takes that one good tug to rip, and as soon as it does, it’s like hearing a shotgun start. “That was a very expensive pair of underwear.” She pushes her ass back. Fuck, I love how she wants to grind into me.

“Shut up, Bunny. You know I’ll buy you more.”

Growling into her hip, I nip at the skin. I’m feral for this woman. I have no interest in teasing. I push her forward so she’s bent over the bed, then spread her legs wider with my shoulders and hold her ass apart so I can make that path she requested. My tongue glides wildly, trying to get to every place that’ll make her moan just the way I like. I lap up higher

over her clit and circle it, sucking it into my mouth. She's already soaked.

"Don't stop," she whispers, and then grants me that moan. *There it is, the type of begging I've been needing.*

I drag my tongue back down, and then dip it past her pussy. Then I tilt her ass back so I can glide it right over her asshole.

"Holy fuck," she screams and jolts as I do it.

"Just say when and I'll happily hit that spot too if you'd like," I say with a smile.

I flip her over. I need to see her when I tell her what I want from her. Her face is flushed red, hair a beautifully wavy mess around her head, as she looks at me with the sexiest bedroom eyes.

"Tell me you want me."

She smiles, but she doesn't answer.

Still kneeling in front of her, I kiss the inside of her thigh, and then lick her pussy again. She lets out a long sigh that has me smiling into her skin. Her legs fall open wider, but I know something's changed. Her breathing is deeper. The little sounds she makes when I squeeze her thigh after I flick her clit with my tongue aren't there. I'm met with quiet.

I kneel higher to see what might be going on.

She's asleep.

Her head is tilted to the side, eyes closed, and the remnants of a smile rest on her lips. I'm still deciding if my ego just took a major hit, or if I should feel good that she's so comfortable with me that she fell asleep. She looks so damn content right now, but I have a feeling once she wakes up, she'll be embarrassed. And I'll never let her live this down. So I do what every good fake boyfriend would do; I lift her legs and get her settled on the bed. Then I drape a blanket over her and press a kiss to her forehead.

"G'night, Bunny," I whisper.

It takes me four trips and another thirty minutes before I'm finally making progress with the front panels of the unfinished project off the back deck of our shared space. I should have hired someone to do this. Or, at the very least, asked for some help. I've been wanting to get this thing up and functioning for a while, but it's been finally warm enough this week so I could fill it. The round cedar hot tub is filled to the max line, the water is heated, but the front panels need to sit flush against the deck, and it's just not happening. Something isn't lining up.

"Come on, you fucker," I grunt out and finally resort to jabbing my elbow against the seam of the two front pieces.

"Your dirty talk is usually better than that, Riggs."

I jolt, not expecting anyone to be around right now. When I turn to look at Tessa leaning against the slider, the panel clicks in place. *Finally.*

I'm surprised she's standing there. I thought she was out cold for the night. "It's so good that it lulled you to sleep."

She slaps her hand over her eyes. "I was so relaxed. It wasn't you," she backpedals, her eyes peeking through her fingers. "Oh my god, I'm so embarrassed."

I hop down from the stair I was perched on and close the distance. Walking right up to her, I don't stop. I sweep her up in my arms, lifting her right under her arms, legs dangling. Then I'm kicking the slider closed when I cross into the room and kissing her beautiful mouth.

"You never have to be embarrassed with me." With her lips tipped up in a smile, her arms wrap around my shoulders as I hold her close. She doesn't say anything in response. Instead, she kisses my nose. "Your nose is cold."

I move us to the couch and prop her right on the armrest. Something's different. The easiness, closeness. It feels like this is how we're supposed to be.

“Was the hot tub here when you moved in?”

“No, I added it. I’ve had it a while, just never finished setting it up. I had a big idea when I bought it to build it on my social channels, but—” I shrug my shoulder “—now I just want to use it. Thought you might too.” I cuff a wild wave of her hair behind her ear. “I wasn’t tired, so I figured I’d try to finish the project.” She kisses my chin and leans back to give me a broad smile. Fuck, this woman and the way she smiles at me. “Why are you smiling at me like that?”

“Are you in the habit of buying really nice and expensive things and just not using them?” The question has me thinking of one very massive expense that I have big plans for, but just haven’t done much with yet.

I don’t want to tell her about it. Not tonight, at least. That’s more of a show versus tell situation.

“Not really. I tend to use everything I buy. Eventually.” I shed my jacket and hat. “What about you?” I ask teasingly. “How many bags and shoes have you bought that you never use?”

She surprises me when she says, “Almost all of them now. Those things stayed in New York when I left.”

I look around her face, because the easy smile that was just there is gone. And she looks upset, or worried even. Her eyes shift around the room, and I can tell she wants to say more, but maybe isn’t sure if she should.

I step in closer and push her hair behind her, kissing her neck as I ask, “Where’d you just go?”

She gives me a head shake.

“You can talk to me, but you don’t have to.”

“I know I can.” She kisses me, and then presses her forehead against mine. She waits another minute before she says more. “I gave him everything.”

It guts me to hear how much that fucking ex-husband of hers took from her. “I know.”

She shakes her head again. “No. I mean, I gave him everything I owned. Every last property. Penny. Even my company shares.”

I pull back to make sure I understand what she’s saying. “I don’t...” I’m at a loss for how that would even be possible. She should have had a pre-nuptial or, at the very least, a decent attorney in the divorce. Her father is wealthy. She came from money.

“If I were my sister, I’d probably have taken every last cent of his and fought for even more. But I’m not her. I didn’t know who I was. Just that I was done. With him. With the life I had built. The concessions I became okay with giving in to over the years, and what I tolerated, not even as a wife, but as a woman. All of it was—” She bats away a tear. “So much of what I had was his too. We were together since college. And I didn’t have it in me to fight for things. I just wanted to be done.”

I bite back my anger at hearing this. I’ve never tried so hard in my whole life to remain calm when every ounce of me is wound tight. That fucking asshole took everything from her?

That is not going to be how that situation ends. No fucking way.

“Rina gave me some money when she found out.” She laughs. “Don’t worry, I got an earful about how stupid that decision was from her. Repeatedly.” I’m shaking my head before she’s even finished.

“I don’t think you’re stupid at all. I think your ex, and your father, if I’m being honest, are world-class pieces of shit.” I rub my thumb along her cheek. “But your choices. Leaving, starting over, it’s brave. Brass balls kind of brave.” She sucks in a breath, and her face starts to squint, readying to cry.

“No, no, no, Bunny. Don’t cry.” I pull her into me closer, and she nestles her head right into the crook of my neck. Rubbing her back slowly, I just wait it out. I stifle down my anger at the situation and try to absorb what’s pouring out of her.

A couple of minutes pass before she pulls back to say more. “Asher saw something in me and trusted it. I don’t know when, or if it was just on a whim that he was there. I’ve never in my whole life been given that kind of trust before. And he didn’t know if I’d just disappear after using his place in London, but I knew I’d never feel right until I did my best to pay him back.”

She fiddles with the hem of my shirt she put on. “I know you still want my job. And this—” she searches for the word “—lie is going to end up hurting someone at the end of it, but please...”

All I can think is that when my dad finds out about how we tried to use a relationship to boost interest as a marketing stunt, he’ll be disappointed in me. To lie about something like this to him, he won’t understand, even if it’s not really a lie anymore. Maybe the chivalrous way it started, he’d get, but not the part where I lied to him.

She looks at me pleadingly, eyes glassy with tears. “I wanted to prove that I could do this. Sit in this role. But my need to do this job, here at Riggs, is my way of trying to pay back a favor that has forever changed the course of my life.”

Fuck. The weight of all of this just feels exponentially heavier. How do I do anything other than give her the space to do exactly that? What may have started as a competition has turned into something bigger. More important than a job. One that I’m not even sure I want anymore... and maybe it wasn’t meant for me.

But the woman in my arms, I believe she is.

I look over her shoulder and see it’s well past 2:30 a.m. We both need to sleep. “C’mon, beautiful. It’s late.” When she tries to move, I stop her. “You’re in my bed tonight.”

She gives me a smirk.

So, I hold her hand and brush my lips across her knuckles, “We’re sleeping, though.” I look down at her fingers laced with mine, and the only thing I know for certain is that I love this more than any job I’d ever want.

Tessa

THE FURNACE TO MY BACK HAS ME STICKY AND SWEATING AS I peek my eyes open. I look over my shoulder and find Law breathing deeply as he sleeps. And as much as I'm liking being wrapped in his arms, I'm eager to shed the oversized t-shirt I went to bed wearing. I shift my body slightly to escape his hold without waking him.

"Come back here, Bunny," he says in a monotone voice that's blanketed in a morning rasp.

I slink away as I whisper, "I'm sweaty, and I need to use the bathroom." I'm usually freezing, but apparently not when I'm with him. When I look over my shoulder, half his face is buried in the pillow while the other half is smiling, one eye open, taking in my body.

"You better come back. I have a morning present with your name all over it."

I bark out a laugh when I shut the bathroom door. I quickly do what I need to, and then wash my hands and squirt a bit of toothpaste on the toothbrush he had given me—sitting in the holder next to his. As I look at myself in the mirror, my eyes are still a bit red from sleep and perhaps from crying last night.

God, how did this happen? It felt so good to tell him everything. To take the mask off for a little while. I laugh to myself, even though none of this is funny. I went ahead and found the job I've always wanted. And then a guy. Possibly even, THE guy. And I know I can't keep both of them.

A position as CEO feels right. It's what I should be doing. To have found a company in the industry I know, and then figure out what I've spent years working toward wasn't for nothing. I'm good at this. Exactly how I knew I would be. It's almost too hard to explain without sounding trite or whimsical. But I found my thing. So, how do I walk away from it?

I rub my eyes again, blinking at my reflection. I like this view. This is me. The real me that I've been trying to find

along the way. And I still kind of feel like a mess, but I found her.

I like who I am when I'm with him. But we'll never work if I stay. He wants the job. And if we try to stay together, I'll want him to be happy too. And I can't do that again—step aside because of a man.

The door opens, and Law comes in, wrapping his arms around me from behind. He leans into my neck and kisses me.

When I feel his lips on me, I melt on contact. Closing my eyes, I sink into his grasp and push away the uncertainty. At least for this moment, as I relish his hold.

I smile into the mirror, watching him nuzzle farther into my neck in the reflection. “Don't you knock?”

“My bathroom. And I heard the toilet flush. Figured you were brushing your teeth or playing with your tits in the mirror or something,” he says.

I laugh as he wraps one arm tighter around my waist and uses the other to massage my breast. He rolls his fingers forward and plucks at my nipple.

“Your nipples got hard the second I touched you.”

He kisses my shoulder, and then looks back at me in the mirror. His pale blue eyes and perfectly placed dimple are swoony, even before sunrise. “Did your pussy tingle and get wet too?”

I smile. Because, yeah. It did.

“Tell me how much I turn you on, Bunny.”

“Can I show you instead?” I ask softly.

“Can we play a game?”

I wait for the rest of his request, my body instantly buzzing with the suggestion.

“I tell you what to do and you do it.”

I smile at the familiar rules. Because I requested, or rather demanded, the same thing from him not that long ago. “Tell

me what to do then,” I say, turning in his arms.

He grabs a towel from the shelf to his right and drops it to the floor.

“On your knees.”

My tummy flutters, and the demand sends a shiver across my shoulders and down my arms. I like being told what to do.

I sink to my knees and peer up at him.

He takes my chin between his fingers and rubs his thumb along my lips. “Your mouth turns me on more than every other perfect part of you.”

I suck his thumb into my mouth, but he pulls it out. “No. I didn’t tell you to do that, did I?” I can’t hide the smile that comes from being reprimanded. “Do it again and you’ll get punished.”

There’s a part of me that wants to listen to him just to hear the praise. But there’s another part of me that’s curious about what he considers punishment. And if I’d like it...

“Take out my cock.”

I pull the waistband of his shorts down just enough so I can reach in and remove it from the confines of the material.

“Now put your hands on your thighs,” he says in a deep, controlled voice. This version of Law is something new and I’m on fucking fire for it.

His cock twitches in front of me and my mouth waters at the promise of what pleasuring it does to him. The way his mouth opens just before he comes. Or the way he grips me hard as he lets go. I’m wet just thinking about what he wants from me in order to get there again.

“Open your mouth and stick out your tongue.”

I obey. Locking eyes with him has him growling out his approval. “You know how beautiful you look right now?”

“No, sir.”

His eyes widen at that and a small smirk quirks his lips. I'm taking this new game seriously now. So let's do it right. I almost forgot how much I enjoy discovering new things. We've been so wrapped up in this attraction, I think we both forgot that there's more under the surface for each of us. We did meet at a play party, after all.

He grips his cock at the base and pumps himself once, beading a drop of precum right on the tip. When he taps the head of it on my tongue, I hum at the taste of his arousal. He lets a breath loose, and I can tell he's loving the sight and the newness of this. He glances up in the mirror, taking in the image of me on my knees and his power stance with his cock in hand.

"Fuck," he exhales. "You ready for my cock, Ms. Costa?"

He hasn't used that name for me since before Italy, but in this situation, I like how it sounds. The formality of it. The way he's *using* his boss however he pleases. When he rubs the head of his cock around my lips, I let him. It's his lead, and the only thing I need to do is whatever he demands. He nods at me, wordlessly asking for my permission. And when I give him a tiny nod back, he pushes his cock past my lips. Slowly. I relax my throat as he fucks my mouth. With each push forward, he tests how far back he can go.

As he hits the back of my throat, he says, "Relax it, baby. Breathe for me."

So I do just that.

"Now swallow."

I obey. And he groans at the sensation. My eyes water, but I stay exactly where he wants me. When he pulls out, I gasp out a breath. But I'm ready for more. I open my mouth again and take him in, sucking until he pulls out. He pumps back in, shallow this time. One, two, three pushes in and pulls out before he decides he wants more.

"Tell me how much you love my taste, Ms. Costa."

But before I can say anything, he lets me have another. He glides slowly in, but as he starts to pull back, I decide I want

more. I move my hands from the tops of my thighs to the back of his and stop him as I lean forward. His cock hits my throat. My eyes water, but I want to hear that groan again, so I swallow.

“Oh, fuck,” he grits out.

When I pull back, I tell him the truth. “You’re the most delicious thing I’ve ever had. Now stop teasing me and give me more.”

Reaching down, he pulls me up off my knees and lifts me right off the floor.

I wrap my legs around his waist. My wet pussy rubs against his stomach as he praises my good work. “You may have been on your knees, but you’re my fucking queen, Tessa.”

He brings us right to the bed and asks, “You still good?” as he brushes my hair from my neck. I smile at how much that small gesture melts me.

“Mmhmm.”

“Good,” he says, followed by a quick kiss. When he pulls back, the game we were playing is back on when he drops me onto the bed. “Turn over. On your knees.”

I move to follow his direction, my body buzzing for what’s coming next. His hand glides up my back, between my shoulder blades, guiding my chest toward the mattress. “Ass up nice and high, Ms. Costa.” He groans as I do it. The way this man is so turned on by my body makes me feel so sexy and powerful. He runs his thumbs along the lips of my pussy, rubbing my arousal around and teasing my clit. I feel him shift, expecting for his cock to finally glide in, but it’s his face that moves into me first. His nose and mouth nudge into my ass and his tongue laps at my pussy. I yelp at the feeling of it. The anticipation of what he’ll ask of me and the way his tongue flicks my clit has tingles working their way throughout my body.

When he pulls his mouth away, he rubs his cock where his tongue just was and says, “You don’t come until I say you

can.”

I hum at the direction. I don't know how that's possibly going to work, but I'll give it my best. I'm already so damn close.

“I need that ‘yes, sir,’ Ms. Costa,” he growls out. His voice is low and so close to my ear as he leans over me, that a shiver rolls down my spine.

I smirk, because I know I'm going to get it. “Yes, sir, Ms. Costa.”

Slap.

He shoves into me so fast that I can't catch my breath, between laughing from the slap on my ass to my cunt choking on his cock. “Go ahead. Be a brat. I'm feeling really fucking good punishing this sweet pussy right now.”

That has me complying. “Yes, sir,” I basically moan.

He juts forward, already fully inside of me, and he hits some kind of new euphoric field of dreams because I feel my orgasm coming on quickly. I'm not sure I could hold it off, even if I wanted to. And he must feel it too, because he immediately pulls out. The loss of him makes me feel empty and abandoned. As he does, he pulls me up with him so my back is pressed against his front. He snakes one hand around me just below my breasts and the other up to my throat, where he grips me tight. I'm so fucking ready to come, I'll do anything and everything he asks.

“Do you know how good you feel just before you come, Ms. Costa?”

“Please,” I plead as I try to rub his cock against me. “Please let me come.”

He moves one hand down to my pussy while the other is like a collar around my throat, keeping me pinned in place. I let him move me however he pleases. Orchestrate whatever tune he chooses. His fingers reach my clit and rub in furious circles.

“Please. Please,” I whisper, straining to hold myself back.

He groans into my ear, breathing heavily. “You wait until I tell you, Ms. Costa.”

I nod as I bite my lip and give myself completely over to him. His fingers keep moving, slower at first, just as he pushes his cock between my legs and back into me. I feel so full. Like I’m surrounded by him, and I have to keep control. My skin is damp like his, and I can feel the way he’s just barely holding on too. The grip his hand had on my throat moves to my breasts, grabbing so tight, I whimper and feel myself clenching around his length. His body tenses as he rolls his hips into me. No matter how much I want to obey his request, I’m going to topple over any second. My pussy is practically pulsing numb with the need to let go.

His breathing is faster, his mouth opening as his lips fall to my shoulder, and just before he groans out his release, he demands mine.

“Now, baby. Come. Come for me, *now*.”

I come so hard that no sounds escape my lips. Every part of me that was wound so tight releases and the orgasm rings out through every inch of me, but the only thing I hear is him. The roar of a moan that feels like he came just as hard as I did. His breathing heaves behind me as he lets us both fall to the side, still wrapped in each other. Limbs of sweat and the sweetest scent of being fully ravaged and satisfied. I don’t remember falling asleep again, but I wake up, maybe only a handful of minutes later, as he twirls a piece of my hair with his fingers.

When he sees me looking at him, he asks, “Are you okay?”

I give him a nod. I’m still not sure I won’t slur my words if I try to speak.

“Was *that* okay?”

I know why he’s asking. All of that was more aggressive than how he has been. I liked it, though. Giving into submissiveness isn’t something I thought I’d enjoy. But, like everything with him, it was fun and really fucking hot. I knew he’d take care of me. Giving myself over to him felt natural.

“That was more than okay. I’d like to play that way again. If you want to, that is.”

“Oh, Bunny, you bet your sweet ass I want to,” he says with a lazy smile.

“I like what being submissive feels like with you.”

“I like the way everything feels with you,” he says, searching my eyes for a reaction that tells him that those words were okay too.

But I give him a kiss instead, hoping that’s enough for now.

“Unpopular opinion,” he pauses, his dramatics flaring up again, “vanilla is the superior flavor.” His fingers caress up and down my arm. “And don’t tell me it’s boring. It’s a baseline.”

“That’s not unpopular. I’d say vanilla is very popular. I think there’s something to be said for vanilla. And you’re right, it’s the baseline. I’ll never choose vanilla ice cream, but I love the smell of it while I’m baking. And the flavor of it in my lip balm. But I’m a chocolate girl, if given the choice.”

“Hold on. Back up, buttercup. You’re telling me that you bake?”

“Of course I bake. I like cooking. I told you that.”

He groans like he’s in pain at hearing me confess about a hobby.

“Yes, but cooking and baking are not the same. I can cook a good steak. I can make a mean sandwich—”

“A sandwich is not—”

“The way I make sandwiches, it’s an art form. Do not knock my abilities until you’ve witnessed and tasted. Same thing with the way I make an Old Fashioned. Artform. Now back to the baking thing.”

I tilt my head back to look at him again. The way this man looks in the morning, after only a few hours of sleep, is dangerous if productivity is on the agenda. He's making it impossible to come up with a reason to get out of this bed.

As his hand moves up my arm to my shoulder, he tugs on my hair playfully. "You're not getting up yet, so stop trying to escape. Tell me your favorite thing to bake."

I close my eyes and really think about it. I don't know that I've ever really thought it through until right now. So I take a minute and picture what I like to have on warm days outside with my sister. "In the summertime, it would be a pavlova, and then top it with strawberries, zest a little lemon, and shred some mint. Or maybe some peaches with honey and a pinch of fresh basil."

I think about sweater weather and cardigans next. Halloween too, as I tell him, "I love fall baking the most. When it's just starting to feel cold out, everyone expects that if you bake, then you're going to be great at pies. But I can't do the crust very well. And it takes longer. So I prefer making a crunchy and crumbly apple crisp."

"You're making my mouth water."

"Top with vanilla ice cream..."

"Obviously," he says as he links his fingers through mine.

I can almost smell the cinnamon and taste the cardamom I sneak into the brown sugar crumble. I smile at the thought of it and the feel of him.

"Will you make that for me?"

I don't overthink his request. "Of course. As long as you bake at least one cookie with me at Christmas."

"I can do that. Although, my brother and G overload the family with Christmas cookies. We might have to fight them off if we want to bring any to Christmas Eve."

And there it is. The moment that we started talking about the future—and *I'm* the one who did it first. As if this is going to be more than the present. A present that's been wrapped in a

lie. But then, it felt more like we had just been lying to ourselves. I push away the voice telling me how different life could look if I wanted to stay. Because that voice forgets how much it'll hurt when it eventually ends. And it'll end. We want the same thing, and one of us will have to concede. And that will end it. My heart doesn't seem to approve of that outcome, as I feel a pang move through my chest at the thought.

I smile and look up at him. My head rests on his lap, and even though my alarm will be sounding off any minute, I can't find it in me to move. I'm far too comfortable. *In so many ways.*

"Do you spend Christmas with your family?" he asks.

"Usually, yes. The past couple of years have looked different. This past year, I stayed in London. I came here a couple of weeks after. But you already know that. And, I haven't been back to New York in a while now." A twinge of guilt hits me for steering my life so far from my dad. And I know it's the smartest move for me, but I still feel sad about it if I focus on it for too long.

He brings my focus back as he runs his fingers across my hairline, dragging the tips of his fingers from front to back in light, languid strokes. It feels so nice that I don't tense up when he asks, "Did you ever talk about starting a family? When you were married."

I reach up and touch his hand, lacing my fingers with his. "When we were first married, it sounded like we were on the same page. Establish our careers first, and then settle in. See if we wanted kids. But time just got away. There were always big things coming up that seemed to take priority over even talking about it. After a while, I stopped trying to bring it up. And now, looking back, I wonder if I knew then that I didn't want to raise a family with him."

"Makes sense to me."

I hadn't pictured having this conversation with him, but here we are. His blue eyes stare at his fingers wrapped in mine, while I just drink him in. "What about you?"

I know it's dangerous to talk about these things with him. False assumptions, but I'm genuinely curious.

"I like kids. I feel like I could do it. But if I found someone I loved, and they didn't want that kind of family, then I'd be okay with being a dynamic duo."

"Dynamic duo," I repeat with a smile. "I like that."

"Your dad never remarried?" I ask, curious about Asher now too.

"Never. It took him a long time to talk about my mom. He'd never shy away from questions we had, but I know she hurt him. It made me mad that she hurt him like that. I think he was happy, and it gutted him to realize that she wasn't. He loved her, and even after she left, I think he loved her for a long time. Still might." He pauses for a moment, like he's now just as curious as I am about his dad. "What about yours?" he asks.

"My dad?"

He hums a yes.

"Had a few girlfriends who made appearances around holidays and on vacations."

"Hope that was choreographed well," he mumbles.

I crack a smile. "No, not like that. But it wouldn't have mattered. No one ever stuck around for long. My father was barely tolerant of Rina and me. I don't think he ever stopped being bitter about my mom dying." I scoff at the idea. "Like he was mad at her for leaving him with us. I don't know that they had a wonderful marriage before she died either. It's taken me a long time to realize how impossible he is to please. But my mom was wonderful. Warm. And I think she softened my father's edges."

He grips my hand a little tighter.

"Do you miss him? Working with him?"

"I miss the idea of him. But I don't miss the feeling of never being good enough. Of always trying to prove

something. And I absolutely don't miss working for him. It was always *for* him, never *with* him."

"We have very different dads," he says, brow furrowed just slightly.

And I laugh at how obvious that statement is.

"I love my dad. Asher is a force, a big someone in a small town. But he's impossible not to love. He's one of my best friends. But I know how you feel. The feeling like you need to prove yourself part, at least."

I sit up and move in closer to him, brushing my lips against his softly. It's the way he pulls me closer that I realize I could never stay here. I care about him. I've already been falling for him, but now, after all of this. I could never take this job for the long term. He wants it for reasons that I understand all too well.

"He really thinks this relationship between us is real," he says, waiting for my reaction. "I didn't correct him because, honestly, I couldn't handle him being disappointed in another one of my choices." He shifts, and I can tell he doesn't like the way this feels. Misleading someone he respects. "He equates some of the good things going on with branding and marketing to you and me being together. He said that you have me paying better attention to detail."

I laugh and say, "That wasn't me. That was you."

"Oh no, Bunny, you're frightening when you're pissed off. I absolutely paid more attention to the details when you threatened me to not let things fall through the cracks." He takes a breath, and I know he has something else to say by the look in his eyes.

"You said you took the job to pay back my father, and I understand that, I do, but I think it's more. You're so good in this leadership position. People think you're incredible. *I* think you're incredible. You've been here for just a few months, and the teams vibe with you the same way they do with my dad. There's respect and camaraderie. It may have started as a way

to pay him back or even prove to yourself that you could do the job, but you're doing it. And doing it really well."

I smile and lift my chin at the compliment, at how genuine he is when he says nice things. It warms me all over.

His phone buzzes on my side table. When he picks it up and texts back whoever is on the other end, he says, "You're with me today."

"What? No, I'm not. I have way too many things to do." I look at the time on his phone. "And I'm going to be late for a chat with the summer Olympics committee if I don't get in the shower."

"All set, rescheduled. I cleared your calendar today. The only thing that we both have is the burlesque show tonight. I've got marketing and social doing a full presentation on where we're vetting out with coverage from the influencers. And I heard from Michael that his summer schedule is booked. We need to hire more guides if we want more business."

I smile at that. "It's the kind of problem we wanted."

"It is. And we'll deal with it. Later. But today, you're mine."

I blink at him. I like how that sounds. Being *his*.

"I'm going to need food first and this better not be anything outdoorsy."

The way he smiles against my lips and says, "Don't worry, Bunny, I got you," it's my favorite thing. And on top of my new favorite things, I hate how much I love how him taking care of me sounds.

Law

“THERE’S NO WAY WE’RE TAKING YOUR CAR.”

She stops in her tracks.

Okay, I know, not the best choice of words with her.

“It’s not practical. I get that, but it’s my car. And it’s all fixed. I’ve been driving it to work just fine.”

“No.” I point at her. “You shouldn’t be driving it at all right now. I’m going to buy you a truck—a really big, obnoxious one, so you don’t careen off the side of the mountain in that roller skate.”

I walk to the passenger side of my truck and open the door, waiting for her. When she finally realizes I’m not going to fold, she marches over.

“You will *not* do that.”

I give her a smile and her ass a nice little slap as she hoists herself inside.

“What are we doing anyway?”

She’s not going to like it, so I just tell her, “We’re going for a ride, but I need to tell you something first.”

When I get into the cab of my truck and look over at her, she’s waiting for what else I could possibly say.

“You’re really shitty at preparing people for touchy conversations. You know that, right?” She smiles and now I’m internally freaking out that what I’m about to tell her might end up with her really fucking pissed.

I pull onto the road and exhale before I say, “I should have told you this a while ago.” When she doesn’t say anything, I keep going. My nerves skyrocket at how this drive could end.

“I hired an investigator to dig up everything he could on you.” I look over, and she’s plastered her blank face on, and I

can't read a damn thing that she's thinking. "I had him follow you in London. It's how I knew about the play party."

She stays silent for a beat, and then looks out her window. Silence is never good. I'm better when she's fighting with me.

"At first, I wanted dirt on my competition. Then I was intrigued. You're a fucking knockout, Tessa. I wanted to see who you were. What you were like."

"If you could fuck me," she adds, and I'm hoping like hell that was a hint of playfulness I detect in her voice.

I open my mouth, but I'm not interested in making excuses for myself, so I tell her the truth. "Honestly, I was too angry to want you. I wanted to fuck you over more than anything." I drag my hand over my face. Fuck! I'm fucking this up. "But then..."

She cuts me off, "But then I came onto you."

I nod and look over at her. "Then you came onto me. And well, you know the rest of it."

When I look back toward the road, and then to her again, she's smiling. My mouth kicks up to the side in response, a weight crumbling off my shoulders. She unbuckles her seatbelt and says, "Pull over."

I check my rear-view and pull off to the side. I start to say, "Tessa you can't get out here, the roads are not good for walking—"

But instead of leaning toward the door, she slides over the console and unbuckles my seatbelt, taking the words right out of my mouth. Smiling, she straddles my lap and kisses me. My arms wrap around her waist, tightening my hold, trying to show her with each soft brush of my lips how I feel about her. How much has changed since we met. We make out for a good five minutes before she pulls back, her forehead resting on mine. She rubs her thumbs along my scruffy jawline. "I had a feeling. It was too much of a coincidence for you to be there that night. And you've met me. Do you think I would have shown up here without doing some digging of my own?" She kisses my lips one more time and then gets back into her seat.

“What kind of digging?” I ask, quirking a brow.

She just smiles and then looks out the window. This woman is damn near perfect.

About twenty minutes later, I pull around the circular driveway to my dad’s ranch. There’s only one car out front, and that’s Callen’s, which isn’t all that surprising, since he’s here all the time. He boards one of his horses here, not to mention he and my dad are close—have been for a long time.

“You were all about riding me last night.” I smirk as I look at her. “Thought you might want to do some real cowboy things today and take one of the horses out.”

“To ride?”

I laugh at her tone. “Yes, to ride.”

“This is outdoorsy, Law.”

“I know, but we’ll go slow, and if you don’t want your own horse, you can ride with me.”

She gives me a leveling glare. “I want my own.” *Could have called that.*

“Good. Sugar is the sweetest horse here. She’s older and will take it easy on you.”

“Is this something you do often?”

“Yes, my horse lives here for now. I don’t have the set-up for him yet. Cal boards his here too. My dad has always had horses, and he added the ponies for my niece and nephew.”

She laughs. “He bought them ponies?”

“Oh yeah. My dad spoils the shit out of those kids.”

I don’t usually knock, but since I have Tessa with me, I give a courtesy double-tap before I open the side door to the house.

“Dad?” I call out as I make my way through the kitchen. “Cal? You guys here? Tessa and I are going to go for a ride this morning.”

I ignore Tessa whispering my name, because right then, my dad comes around the corner from his office. There normally wouldn't be anything peculiar about that, but this time, he's got a coffee mug in each hand and no shirt. I look down, and he's only wearing a pair of black boxers. He stops dead in his tracks, and the usual warm, welcoming smile I get from him is eclipsed by a nervous energy that has me on edge now too.

"Law," he pauses, looking over to Tessa. "I didn't hear you two come in."

"You don't have pants on."

"This is my house. You don't live here anymore." The way he says that makes me feel like I've absolutely just intruded on him. *Shit.*

"I'm sorry." I feel bad for barging in on him now, with a guest, who also happens to be his employee, no less.

"Morning, Tessa, good to see you," he says, leaning over to kiss her cheek in hello.

And if I stood there a little longer, piecing the situation and *off* mood together, I probably would have guessed exactly what I was walking into. But I didn't. And about five seconds later, all of our attention is dragged to the loud footfalls coming down the stairs across the open living room.

"Baby, I can't find my hat..." Callen says, and then tries stopping dead in his tracks, almost falling down the last two steps. Also, he's shirtless, I might add. Jeans. At least there's pants. It's not the average attire for winters in Colorado, no matter how many fireplaces are burning. Especially at just after seven in the morning.

"You guys just have a titty and guns party that I didn't hear about, or am I reading this situation correctly?" I look back and forth between them, my eyes wide.

Tessa hooks her finger on my pinky, and I quickly move to clasp my fingers around hers. The closeness of her and the way she's trying to soothe me, just as I'm starting to realize

what I'm walking into, isn't lost on me. She's worried that I'm going to be upset.

My dad isn't sweating the same way Cal is, but that's just my dad. He's always pretty calm in most scenarios. I'll be honest, I had my suspicions, but my thought was when he brought someone into his life, then he'd tell us when he was ready. He never did, in the thirty-two years I've been kicking. I hadn't ever remembered my dad with anyone. Even my mom. So, I never went out of my way to push the topic.

I turn to Cal with a smirk. "So you aren't trying to fuck my girl, then?"

He stares back at me, then his eyes dart over to my dad's. And they exchange some sort of wordless agreement.

Cal drops his head back and looks at the ceiling with a laugh. "Law, I've been trying to fuck your dad for most of my adult life."

"Huh..." I do my best to make an intimidating look up and down his frame.

I see my dad smirk and shift next to me.

"Dad, it makes a lot more sense now, but also," I pause, because I really hadn't planned on walking into this today. I hold my hand up high, palm out, "the man is hot. Good taste."

He high fives me back, huffing a laugh.

"Wait, who else knows? About you two?"

They look at each other. "Officially? Just you and Tessa."

"Fuck that. Nope." I put my hands on my hips and shake my head. "You gotta tell the rest of the family." I slam my foot down. "I will not be the one to slip up and say something. Then you'll both be mad at me for eternity. You figure this out. Right. Now."

"It's not your story to tell, so if it comes up, you don't have to deny anything, but I don't want you holding a town hall either," my dad says as he moves toward the kitchen.

“You do know how hard that’s going to be.” I watch my dad as he throws on a t-shirt that’s draped on the counter. “I like town halls.” I look next to my foot, and there’s Cal’s hat. I think if I looked around at the random display of clothes around the kitchen and living room, that maybe I would have had a better sense of what I had busted into. Maybe that’s what Tessa saw when she whispered my name.

“Want some coffee?”

Cal adds, “Tessa, he has some tea.”

She smiles and gives him a knowing look. I hear her say, “So this is the *someone*...”

He smiles back at her.

“We won’t stay long. We’re taking the horses out this morning.”

My dad turns on the kettle and grabs the French press, scooping out coffee grounds, and then snags a tea bag from the back of the spice cabinet. “Tessa, you okay with English breakfast?”

“Absolutely,” she says.

Cal sits next to her, and I give him a side-eye.

“You’re very distracting without a shirt on. I don’t think I noticed before, but you’ve got the whole Superman thing going for you.”

He cracks a smile. “Cavill or Reeves?”

“I’d say a smash between Cavill and Cain.”

He laughs. “I’ll take it.”

My dad laughs too. “I’m sorry. This wasn’t how I planned on telling you what was happening here.”

“Dad, it’s not my business who you sleep with, or date, or...?”

I look at Cal again, and the way he’s looking at my dad, I feel like I should have noticed. That’s the kind of thing a son

should notice. And maybe if I wasn't so wrapped up in my life, still playing the role of the youngest kid, I would have.

“Are you more? I mean, Cal, I'm not calling you Daddy. So you better get that out of your head right now.”

They both bark out a laugh.

Cal rubs the back of his neck. He's always been a private guy. Even growing up, he got in some trouble with my brothers here and there, but he always kept the drama to a minimum. And he never talked about who he was seeing.

“You two look bright this morning.” Cal looks at Tessa. “I'm surprised he's getting you on a horse.”

“He's pushing me. But I'm a bit obsessed with what's happening here,” she says, pointing between the two of them, “so I'm too distracted to overthink it.”

I smile at hearing the confession, but when I look at my dad, a wave of guilt settles right in the center of my chest. I hate that I've been lying to him about this. About Tessa, and what it is we're doing.

My dad looks between both of us. I need to tell him what's been going on. If he's going to be honest with me about him and Cal, then I can tell him how things started with Tessa. I hate lying to him. And maybe I hate not being able to share with him that I've fallen for her.

So, I squint one eye. “Dad, don't be mad.”

“Okay, I'm getting something stronger to top off my coffee.” He jogs into the living room and pulls his blue label from the bar and grabs four glasses with his fingers.

“Is that really necessary? It's a bit early, no?”

“Any time the words ‘don't be mad,’ leave your mouth, I always wish I had sipped on something beforehand. So no,” he shouts from across the room, “it's not too early.”

While he's doing that, I lean over to Cal. “You hurt my dad, I hurt you. I don't care if you're the sheriff. You understand me?”

He smiles. "I understand you."

Tessa's smiling at my threat too.

I nod just as my dad comes back.

"Okay, go ahead," he says as he pours a finger of scotch in each glass.

"This thing between Tessa and me," I start. When I look over at her, her eyes widen, like she wasn't expecting me to address this right now. *I wasn't expecting a lot of things, Bunny.*

The tea kettle starts to whistle, interrupting my confession.

I widen my eyes back at her. "What?" I whisper. "I don't want to lie to him." I look over at Cal, who's sipping his water, very obviously not looking at us, but definitely trying to listen.

Fuck, my dad might already know. If Cal said anything...

When my dad turns back, he passes Tessa her cup. He brings over the French press and stirs the coffee grounds after he pours. "Okay, what do you *not* want me to be mad about?"

I clear my throat. Here it goes.

But before I can say anything else, Tessa stands from her seat and then pushes her body into me, forcing me to push my chair back. She sits on my lap and says, "We wanted to apologize for not coming to you about it first. About us."

What is she doing? "We met when I was still in London. And then when we were in Italy, things just ended up moving fast. And I know it's not the most professional scenario, but it's the one we're in. And we wanted to apologize for not letting you know about it first."

I look at my dad, and he meets my eye. The corner of his mouth ticks up. He knew. He knew this wasn't real. At least not until she just said it was.

I smile at him, and then blow out a breath, leaning my forehead into Tessa's back. Because none of that matters anymore. This woman, who's been pushing me away as best she can, just took the reins and decided that the performance is

over now. And, I don't think anyone has ever stood in for me the way she just tried to, albeit without need, but she's doing it, nonetheless.

"I'm really happy here. And I hope you don't feel like this jeopardizes anything regarding the business." She peers back at me, and I bite my lip, because I want to kiss the shit out of her. But instead, I just pull her closer to me and wrap my arms around her tight. "We'll figure out how to get what everyone wants." And all I can think after she says it is, *I already have what I want.*

My dad looks between Tessa and me, and then says, "I was in New York. It was for fashion week. Everly had a show happening, and I wanted to be there to support her. It also happened to be right after I had gotten into it with Law about what he'd been spending his time on. He was distracted by social media, women were in and out of his life, and I had thought maybe that's what makes him happy. But he never finished anything. He'd start projects and abandon them. He'd gain the marketing team's trust, only to disappoint them by pawning off his work for a new opportunity." He looks at me and says, "You were slacking. You were losing the respect of your coworkers, never mind the consideration for CEO." Then he asks, "You remember what you said to me?"

I shake my head. I don't remember. Only that I was pissed off that he was considering an external hire for a position I wanted.

"You told me I'd never find anyone who deserved that CEO position more than you."

He leans back and looks at Tessa before he says, "I thought it was a very entitled thing to say, and it didn't sit right with me. You did deserve a shot. I had planned to come back and give it to you. See how you did if I threw you into it. A sink-or-swim might have worked for you. Plus, I wasn't ready to fully retire yet."

I drag my hand through my hair and rest it on the back of my neck. I hate hearing how he viewed me. How I came across. It's not who I am. Not the man I want to be.

My dad smiles at Tessa. “But then I sat next to a woman in a bar. And found the one person who probably deserved a shot at it most.”

He shifts his attention back to Callen, and it’s impossible not to see the connection between them. *How did I miss it for so long?*

“My kids, my company, are what kept me happy. I made it so that was my focus. So much so that I didn’t look around and see another type of happiness right in front of me.”

He looks at Callen and smiles.

“I knew how Cal felt about me. I ignored it and pushed it off, but then he kissed me. Right before I got on the plane to New York.”

He looks to Tessa and says, “I hoped you’d call when you were ready, and that you’d want to come on board at Riggs. You were getting severely overlooked at Costa Athletics. It was a waste of your talent. Abuse of it, really.”

Then he looks at me and pauses before saying, “And I knew what bringing Tess in would do to you.”

The weight of that hits me in the chest. That he did it anyway. And that I’m glad he did.

I laugh. “Piss me off and make me feel like a flailing idiot?”

“I knew she’d push you. It’s in her nature to be a fighter. And I had a feeling you’d meet her punch for punch. And whether you want to believe it or not, you’ve been working smarter, not just harder. Some of the creative ideas you both have been batching out are going to only amplify what we’ve been building. You’re better since she’s been here.”

“So the part where I’ve fallen for her is no big deal then?”

She tenses when I say it. I know she doesn’t know if I’m playing along anymore or being truthful. But for now, I ignore it, and soothingly rub my hand along her thigh.

“I didn’t plan on that part, but what would be bad about that? Having someone who pushes you. A partner.” He smiles

at me. “That doesn’t sound bad at all.”

Cal laughs next to me. When I give him a questioning look, he just shakes his head.

“Sorry, that’s just a summary of my life, coming from the man I’ve been in love with for far too long.”

“Love?” I look at Cal, and then back to my dad.

He smiles at Cal. “Yeah, Son. Love.”

Tessa

“BOOBY TASSELS.”

“No, I’m not wearing tassels to the burlesque show tonight,” I yell.

He pulls his horse back to wait for me. “I meant for me, Bunny. Really cute red ones. With sequins. You know how much I love red.”

I can’t with him. I bark out a laugh. “You’re ridiculous, you know that.”

His smile beams wide, dimple and all. “Yeah, but you love it.”

I swallow hard at the admission. A relationship and admitting to being in one is one thing—I’ve been easily falling for this man, and I couldn’t just let him tell his father it was all a lie. Because it’s not anymore. I just don’t know how it can work. If I say the things I’m feeling, they’ll lead to compromise and life-changing decisions. My life is barely settled after the last one.

After a decent trek, Law leans over and grabs the reins of my very slow, golden horse. “*A palomino,*” he told me is what her color is called when I said, “*She looks like a golden retriever.*” She seems as sweet as one too as she moves us along the thick snowbanks.

I squint at the open land. The snow on the ground and the blinding way that the sun reflects off of it make it feel ethereal. So much open space, it’s overwhelming how much I love it here. A city girl who loves the mountains far more than Manhattan and Manolos now.

“Did you mean what you said?” His blue eyes plead with mine.

I search his face for the lightness and humor that always seem to rescue me when things are too heavy. My eyes water

in response to how much emotion and weight that question carries.

“How are we going to do this?”

He looks out at the field, and then down at his reins. “This terrain is easy for them. Just follow my lead.” Moving ahead, he takes it slow down the small embankment.

“You know that’s not what I meant,” I shout in front of me. I dig my heels into my horse to urge her to follow him, and she does. She makes a snorting sound as if she’s telling me to lay off, because she knows what she’s doing.

At least one of us does.

When I catch up to him, I look out into a small valley, the sun bouncing off the snow making it so bright. A stream runs down the center while the mountains hug either side. It’s breathtakingly beautiful.

He points to the right. “That’s about a half a mile to downtown Strutt’s. There’s not a road out here yet, but that’s not too hard to figure out.” He says it like it’s totally normal to make a road just appear out of nowhere.

This is so far from the type of life I came from.

“I bought this property a few months ago. It drained my savings, but the other properties I have are keeping me afloat. Plus, my salary with Riggs. But this—” he juts his chin out and takes in the valley “—is mine.”

I smile at how proud he sounds saying it. Claiming it. “That’s a lot of land. What are you going to do with it?”

I expect him to tell me about a resort idea or perhaps even an extension to downtown nightlife that would pay for itself in a few years.

But instead, he says, “I liked living on a ranch growing up. I moved to Boston for school, and then came back and shared a space with my brothers and sister. But I always knew I wanted to have something that was big.”

I blink at the type of “big” he’s referring to. It scares me how much I like the look and sound of it. Whatever hidden

meanings lurk under the surface of the word too.

“This is where I’d like to be, eventually. And it’s not where I thought I’d end up. But when I saw it, it felt right.”

I’ve had the same feeling before. In London, when I saw him.

“Come on, I want to show you something.”

I can’t help but laugh. “There’s more?”

He calls backwards, “Tessa, you should know this by now, with me, there’s always more.” His dimple pops with the smile that follows that statement. It’s impossible not to swoon over this man. And even more so when he so confidently knows what he wants.

Our horses traipse through the deep snow. The quietness is only eclipsed by our movements and the sound of the water that’s running through the stream to our left. When he comes to a stop, there’s a small formation of rocks. He points toward it and says, “There’s a hot spring right over there, where the snow looks like it’s steaming. It’s hitting the water and melting what’s collected on the bank around it. In the springtime, that whole field is filled to the brim with wildflowers.”

I smile, trying to picture all of it. How all of this white could be splashed with color and turned into something completely new. I picture greens and yellows, peppered with pinks and purples in all different hues. I wonder if it’d smell like flowers and dirt, or if the air would carry the strongest scent. “It’s beautiful.”

He’s looking at me when I pull my attention away from the land and snow. “You’re beautiful.”

I can’t keep myself from smiling at hearing that from him.

“This is just a place. And I know me showing this to you might be scaring you, but I’m showing you because I want you to know that I want more.” He clears his throat. “I am more than what everyone assumes of me.”

“I’ve realized that,” I admit. I smile at him as he leans close to me, meeting him halfway to kiss him.

“You’re going to freak out,” he says. “Promise me when you’re done freaking out, you’ll talk to me.”

“You really need to work on your set-up. Your conversation kick-offs read like blaring red flags.”

He smiles at me, and it eases the way I know I’m not prepared for what he’s going to say next. I take in how beautiful this man really is. His insanely sexy smile that makes its way into his blue eyes. The perfect picture of a troublemaker and golden boy wrapped into one. It doesn’t hurt that he’s on top of a horse, looking like some kind of Joan Wilder romance novel hero. But it’s the way he lightens things. How he loves his family so fiercely and wants nothing more than to prove he’s worthy of them.

“I’m in love with you, Bunny.”

My heart stutters, stomach swooping. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Instead of words, tears blur my vision, and I realize I wasn’t prepared for him to say he loved me. What the weight of that word implies.

“But I’m mean to you,” I counter, shaking my head.

He shrugs his shoulder. “I’m into it.”

I squint and look up, trying to keep the tears from falling. I don’t even know why I’m crying. It’s ridiculous, really. “It’s only been, like, a minute since we decided this wasn’t fake.”

“It’s been real for me for a long time, Tessa.”

“I’ve only known you for a few months.” I swallow roughly.

He smiles and looks down at his gloved hands. “I didn’t realize there was a timeline of when feelings were allowed.”

I’ve learned his facial expressions well. I can tell when he’s being flirtatious or mock-annoyed with me. When he looks genuinely happy or impressed and put in his place. And right now, it’s none of those. He’s trying to smile through it. Through my pushback. And I hate myself for it. I can’t be ready for this—for big gestures and declarations of love. *Right?*

“Okay,” he says, and then leads his horse in a circle away from mine. With a double click of his tongue, both horses are moving back the way we came.

“That’s it? Okay?”

He yells over his shoulder, “Yeah, Bunny. It’s okay.”

And it’s the first time today, maybe even since I came to Strutt’s Peak, that things don’t feel okay. Not even a little bit.

I yank my front door open. My sister hasn’t even raised her hand to knock yet, and I’m on the intercept. “Rina, get in here. Now.”

“Hello, sweet sister. How are you?” She looks around my face, which is slightly sweaty and definitely confused when she says, “Okay, feeling aggressive, I see.”

I drag her coat down her arms.

“Okay, sure. Take my coat. Thank you.” She looks around the room. “I’m not late, right? You said to come over around five for a bite to eat and then—”

I cut her off, “Yes, yes. Then we can get ready together.” I walk toward my kitchen and the mess that I’ve torn into. I hold my hands out in front of me. It’s an awful and, quite frankly, frightening, Vanna White impression.

“What? You need help unpacking still?”

“No,” I bark back at her. I traipse across the bubble wrap that’s been thrown around the floor. It pops like bang party snappers with every step. “This. *He* bought this.”

She starts laughing, like it is the funniest thing in the world. I laughed too, with every box that I unwrapped, I laughed a little harder. And then I started crying.

“Law?”

I nod.

“Law bought you bakeware, and this is...?” She pauses, searching for what word she should use. “Won—”

I blurt out, “Bad.”

As she finishes, “...derful.”

She starts laughing again. “Clearly not what I was thinking.”

“Rina! This is not funny. This means he listens. This means he *is* fucking wonderful, and I cannot have this. Not yet. I’m, like, a year out of divorce. And this one...” I shake my head left and right. “He’s not the kind of guy who won’t completely consume me. I should be in my fuck-around-with-fuckboys phase still. Not this.”

“Then don’t let him.”

I widen my eyes. “Don’t let him what?”

“Consume you. You are a stronger person now than you were when you married Maxim. You’ve learned. Evolved. You decide how to be with him.”

It’s that easy, right? She makes this sound so easy. But in my mind, it’s too good. All of this is too good. When does the other shoe drop?

She stares at me like I’ve lost it. Maybe I have.

“He showed me a piece of land today, on horseback, I might add.” I cross my arms, my knee bouncing up and down at a frantic pace. If I wasn’t already flipping out, it’d be making me nervous. “Like he was a cowboy or some shit.”

“Wait, *you* were on a horse?” She smiles, trying to picture it.

“A really pretty gold one named Sugar. She was like a big dog. Super sweet, and I didn’t hate it. But it gets better. He’s showing me this insanely beautiful land that he bought. Like, just bought, so he’s way fucking richer than I assumed he was, but let’s leave that part out. He told me that he wants to build a ranch and make it his home.”

“Sounds like a lot of upkeep.”

“And...he told me he loved me.”

She stops moving and blinks a few times. She looks frozen, like I’ve just short-circuited her brain from too much information. “You had a big day.”

I snort a laugh. “Fucking A, right?”

We both start laughing. Oh god, does it feel good to laugh with her right now. She hurdles over a box and a set of sifters to the refrigerator, going right for the door where she knows I’ll have a bottle of champagne. She always told me, “*Have champagne on hand and chilled, because you never know when you’ll need to celebrate.*” It stuck with me.

“You’re freaking out.”

She pops the cork on a mediocre bottle of sparkling wine, but for some reason, today does feel like it should be celebrated and not put down.

“I’m freaking out.”

“No flutes or coupes?”

I shake my head. “Not yet.”

She pulls out two mugs. “And then he bought you bakeware.”

I wipe away the tear running down my cheek. “And a standing mixer. And, like, every measuring thing and spatula I could ever use. Honestly, I don’t know what half of it does.”

Facetiously, she asks, “Why would he do that?”

I pinch between my eyebrows. “I told him I love to bake. And cook.”

She sucks in a dramatic breath. “The audacity. Buying you things for a hobby you like.”

She’s right, I’m freaking out about an incredible person who happens to have pummeled through my life. “I know you’re making fun of me right now, but I don’t have the energy to dish it back.”

She hops up on the counter next to me, and then holds out her mug and tilts it to cheers with mine. We both take a sip and sit there quietly for a moment. I look around at the things that are going to fill my kitchen and my eyes water again.

She nudges my shoulder. “Not ready to be treated insanely well by someone who’s clearly head over heels for you?”

“Yup.” I blow out a breath and shake my head. “I hardened my shell. I was so ruined, Rina. I didn’t even like myself again until a few months ago. And I decided I was going to have my boss-bitch era.”

“You still can.” She rests her head on my shoulder. “You can be more than one thing. I know the world tells us to choose who we want to be, but it’s not that simple. We’re complicated and the furthest thing from boring.”

I hate when she makes so much sense that I have to abandon a feeling so completely. “Can you let me have this freakout before you say something that’ll rein me back in?”

She nods, letting me continue.

“After Maxim, and then dad, I just wanted to feel less. Tuck away anything deeper than surface-level. I didn’t want to experience hurt like that ever again. That kind of stupidity and...” I shake my head.

“Tessa, you were never stupid. You thought you had a partner. You trusted him. That doesn’t make someone weak. That makes you brave, and to stay, even when it wasn’t good, that makes you loyal. That makes you the kind of person people want in their corner. It’s what makes me lucky to always have you in mine.”

I laugh as a few tears escape. “You were smart. You left. And did something ridiculously amazing like becoming an Olympic Gold Medalist.”

“Yeah, but you stayed. You tried with Dad. You stuck around longer than most people would have. And even longer when you factor in how Maxim leveraged your relationship to get where he is. Or was.”

I wipe under my eyes.

“What do you mean *was*?”

She laughs and covers her mouth with her hand. “Oh my gosh, you don’t know?”

Pulling out her phone, she opens an email from our dad. It says:

If you see your sister, tell her to call me back.

We fired Maxim.

The job is hers if she wants it.

I’d like to talk about your sponsorships, Rina.

-Dad

My jaw is slack, mind spinning. “What the hell happened?”

She smiles. “I have no idea, but it’s gotta be good if he got the heave-ho. I’ve been trying to search his social media, but I haven’t seen much. It’s been radio silence since after he posted some photos from Cortina, right after the Olympics.”

She looks at me and pushes my hair out of my face.

I loved whenever Law would do that—cuff a piece of hair behind my ear.

“Does that change how you feel?”

I sink back and lie flat on the counter. “I never considered going back. I gave away my shares in the divorce. And now—”

“You did what?”

“Don’t,” I say, holding up a hand. “I wanted out as fast as possible. And I was pissed, so I said yes to anything he asked for. I didn’t care. He got everything. The apartment in New York, the Montauk house. Whatever I left behind, which were a few very expensive pairs of shoes and bags that I’ll never be able to find again. But it was just stuff. And I wanted as little as possible to remind me what I had lost with him. I cashed in

my retirement savings and bought this place. I was broke until I got my first paycheck from Riggs.”

She jack-knifes up. “Tessa! I knew you gave him a chunk, which I was pissed about. I didn’t realize it was everything. I would have given you more money if you needed it.”

I shrug a shoulder. “I didn’t. I mean, it’s taken me a bit to start to furnish this place, but I didn’t want anyone else helping me.”

“I still want to talk about this.” She points to the bakeware on the floor. “But I want you to hear me when I tell you that you are not broken. You may think that’s why you don’t deserve love from someone, but everything that’s happened has made you stronger than you were before. This version of you, the one where you look happy, it’s the best version I’ve seen so far.”

I love how that sounds. That I seem happy, because when I really think about it, I am. I push away the hesitations and look at what I’ve built and who I am since I’ve been here, and I’m so happy.

“I wanted to show you something,” Rina says as she jumps down from the counter and pulls her phone from her bag. “When I saw this, it was insanely satisfying, and I feel like now is the perfect time for it.” She hands me her phone. “I believe in karma, but this screams more like karma had an assist.”

I stare at an Instagram selfie of Bijou, in a perfectly curated long-arm shot.

“Maxim’s fiancée looks like she’s celebrating her newfound freedom. The engagement is off. At least that’s how I’m reading it.”

I scroll up and look at a few pictures of them in New York together from a couple of weeks ago. “Maxim looks like shit.” And as much as that might sound petty, he really does. There’s a massive red rash all over his face and neck, and his hair looks like it’s thinned out significantly since I saw him in Italy.

“He was never my cup, but he was never a hot mess. Here.” She points and scrunches her nose, making a *yuck* face.

I can't help but laugh. “I hate that I love this, but yeah. Go, Bijou.”

Rina throws her fist in the air. “Go, Bijou,” she says. “I'm surprised she got an invite to this thing.”

“What?”

“Um. I would think you knew this. But I saw her yesterday on the snow cat adventure. I was kind of shocked, but she does have a very ridiculous number of followers and a travel blog, so it made sense. But she waved at me like we're friends. I ignored her, obviously, but she's very much in Strutt's Peak. Hella single now too, I guess.”

And while I don't hate the fact that my ex-husband's life is unraveling, it really doesn't have anything to do with mine anymore.

“Rina, what am I supposed to do here? Because, honestly, I'm one pep talk away from either getting on a flight or running next door and never letting him go.”

She smiles at me. I think we both know what I really want, but instead of hammering out the obvious, she says, “My vote is we eat a little something. Then we'll get dressed up for this very dirty little event your awesome company planned.”

“Curated. There's a difference.” I smile.

“Whatever.” She waves me off. “You breathe for a few hours and see how you feel later. No planes or declarations until after tonight. How about that?”

“I love you. You know that, right?”

“Oh, I know. I was thinking of staying, by the way. In Strutt's. It seems like the perfect place for an Olympic Alpine skier to retire,” she says as she hops down and bubble wrap pops beneath her feet. “But only if you are.”

I have a feeling I am.

Law

EVERLY

Law, Dad said you're in love. True or False?

HENRY

Are we taking bets first?

EVERLY

Law is apparently in love with Tessa

HENRY

Not how betting works, Ev.

LAW

What else did Dad say?

She better fucking say that he's railing the town's sheriff.

EVERLY

Nothing, just that he saw you with Tessa today and that you're happy.

MICHAEL

It's about time. You two are exhausting.

LAW

What does that mean?

MICHAEL

That my kids were asking when you two are going to get married. That's how obvious you are.

LAW

You should stop talking now. Seriously, you jussssssst told Grace that you wanted to throw it in like yesterday.

MICHAEL

I want my tools and bench back.

LAW

I'm almost done. I'm sorry, I'm sorry!

HENRY

What kind of DIY disaster did you build?

LAW

Bookshelves. For Tessa. And I finished the hot tub.

EVERLY

Yesssssss! Day. Made.

LAW

No celebrating yet. I probably already messed up.

HENRY

Should have taken bets.

LAW

Dick.

MICHAEL

What happened?

LAW

How soon is it to show the woman you're falling in love with a piece of land you bought and gauge if it's somewhere she'd like to be too?

EVERLY

Yikes.

LAW

I'm realizing this.

Pivoting from my disaster. You coming to this burlesque thing tonight?

They all said they were coming. Everly and the rest of the girls couldn't stop talking about the Toy Rodeo, so there was no way they weren't dragging my brothers and my brother-in-law to this tonight.

It's the last night of this massive marketing campaign. The whole thing was a very expensive gamble. One that Tessa had the initial idea for, but then supported my take on how to make it stick. The social media coverage has turned into mainstream coverage and all of it has turned this otherwise average winter week into a huge sales month. That's not including the bookings we've gotten for the summer and fall excursions. It's paid for itself three-fold. And that also means we'll be increasing the tourism in Strutt's Peak, which at the core of it, is good for everyone. The town council will be pleased, as well as all the businesses that line Main Street.

Strutt's Peak Mountain Resort is the largest property on the mountain. And during peak season, it's always sold out. But, for Riggs Outdoor, they figured it out. I may owe a few favors, but I'm hoping it's all worth it. There are more than seventy-five rooms, with nearly two-hundred guests here just for our weekend. And tonight, the spot is packed. Plenty of Riggs employees, as well as a few townies, who all scored their way onto the list, making it so the massive ballroom is bustling.

I look around the room for one person in particular. I haven't seen her since earlier today when I managed to scare the hell out of her. I knew she was spooked the minute we got back to my dad's ranch. She was quiet. And I realized I pushed too hard, too soon. But even figuring she's probably one foot out of town, I still can't help but look for her. I need to see her.

There are couples whispering in quiet conversations, groups of friends gawking at the dancers, and even a few singles who are sipping on cocktails as they type away on their phones.

The cabaret-style set-up has glasses clinking while the low lights set the mood. There's uplighting placed around square platforms throughout the room to keep everyone's attention on the dancers, who are grinding with just enough sex appeal and too few clothes. I approved the sets for tonight, or at least gave the green light with how raunchy I would allow June to go as the host of the evening. While most burlesque has campy themes similar to our Toy Rodeo, tonight the performers will highlight all of the mountain sports that we love here.

"Lenny, I didn't think this would be your type of thing," I say as I stop one of my favorite people. I doubt Grace knows her mom was planning to be here tonight either.

"We wouldn't miss it," she says, nodding to her partner. "Juney is our girl. We're here to cheer her on." She points to the stage at the center of the room. "Oh, it's starting. Hot hand of Hell, her tits look so good in sequins." My eyebrows are still raised when they move along to their table.

But then I catch a glimpse of a red dress. *The* red dress. One that I remember very well. This time, there's no blonde

wig or black lace mask, instead there are red painted lips and dark brown hair that I love playing with.

Fucking hell, she's beautiful.

Every time I see her, I think it. Even when she pisses me off, I can't stop looking at her. It's a knock-the-wind-out-of-you kind of beauty. The kind that's put blinders on me. The kind that if you're lucky, there's a slice of personality too. With Tessa, there's way more than slices. She's smart. Harsh yet kind. Loyal yet fiercely independent. She's been like a hurricane in my life, but I've never felt so calm and grounded lately. And fuck, the mouth on her. *I don't want to mess this up and lose this shot.* It's all I keep thinking.

The flicker of the room lights alerts everyone to find their seats or a space to lean against at the bar. But all eyes need to be front and center. I watch my dad in his velvet black suit jacket and satin ascot make his way to the stage. I'm going to need to talk with him on Monday, once all of this is wrapped up. He may already see it coming, but my priorities are changing. I'm liking the job I currently have. All of this kicked me where I needed it.

"Good evening, everyone," he says over the crowd of cheers and whistles. "I'd like to thank all of you for being here. For taking time out of your busy, and quite frankly, very cool lives to come and see our magnificent town." He pauses and looks around the room.

A few hoots and hollers break out from the corners. It's obvious where the Riggs employees are stationed. I can't help but curl my tongue over my fingers and whistle nice and loud.

"Strutt's Peak is the kind of place you can get lost in, if that's what you need. You can find yourself here. You can have a helluva great time. And you can even decide to stay and call it home. That's what I did, a long time ago. Fell into big love with it here, raised a family, and started Riggs Outdoor." He clears his throat. "I'm proud of what we've built. I'm excited to see where it's going with our newest leader at the helm and our team. So let's hear it for Contessa Costa, and my

son, Lawrence Riggs, the masterminds behind the week's events."

I look out across the room, and Tessa glides up the stage with her chin held high. *Damn knockout*. I follow and hustle up behind her. We give a wave to the crowd, but I know they're ready for the fun to begin. My father is the showman tonight.

"Thank you again for being here. For letting the world know about what kind of place this is and who we are as a brand. We hope to see you all again." My dad turns, and June takes that as her cue to get the show started.

"Thank you, Asher Riggs," she shouts and throws her arm up high. "That's a silver fox if I've ever seen one, amiright?" Catcalls and whistles echo her sentiment. The music sounds off and the room lights dim lower.

I keep moving my pace alongside Tessa. My arm brushes hers, but before I can say anything, she smiles up at me and says, "I'm sorry."

I close my eyes, because I wasn't ready for her to do this here. For her to tell me she's done or not ready or leaving.

"Please don't."

"Let me say this," she says, but before she can finish, she's interrupted.

"Law," my dad says, claspng my shoulder. "I need to do a marketing meeting with your team before Monday's board briefing. I also had a few thoughts about how we can organize things as we move into the next quarter."

"Dad, it's going to have to wait. There's something I need to talk through with you first. But I can't get into it now."

When I turn back to hear what she was going to say, Tessa's in a huddled conversation with her sister. When I look up and register what they were looking at, I'm in the direct line of sight to a very blonde mistake.

Tessa

THERE ARE THREE WOMEN AND TWO MEN ON STAGE DRESSED like snow bunnies. Faux white fur hats, gloves, and thigh-highs, with icy-blue G-strings and cropped snow jackets, make up their ensembles. It's insanely sexy, a bit campy, and the crowd is loving it.

Lenny walks up to the bar next to me and says, "The leggy blonde is back. Heads up."

It takes me a minute to understand what she's saying. But once I do, I turn to look for him. And she is the same woman who waltzed into his office, thinking she would swoop in and entice him. She's on the same mission, if I had to guess, just in a different outfit. She's in full burlesque, grinding on Law's leg, getting ready to pull him up on stage.

I don't fucking think so, honey.

"Rina," I say to my sister, who's standing next to me without taking my eyes off the scene. Off of him. He looks around the room and then finally finds me. Those pale blue eyes that I'm such a fangirl of it's annoying, lock right on mine. The way he looks at me, it's like he's relieved to see that I'm watching him.

"Rina?"

"I'm seeing it."

"I'm in love with him."

Rina laughs as she brings her attention back to me. "Oh, I know." She tilts her head on my shoulder. "You just need to tell him that now."

She lifts her head and looks off to the other side of the room, eyes narrowing. "Is that?"

I turn to look at what she's focused on.

Bijou, having what seems like a heated discussion with, "Maxim?"

We watch as the fight that they're clearly having is moving closer to where we're standing. I can hear his cutting tone and nasty words as they approach.

"This is over. The fact that you're even here... You're disgusting," Bijou carries on, following behind him. His path coming right for where we're standing.

"Shut your fucking mouth, Bijou," he barks at her.

She sucks in an audible gasp and pulls out her phone.

A moment later, he stops right in front of me. Rina shifts her body so she's half in front of mine. The way he moved toward me was intimidating, and I hate how uneasy he still makes me. He looks unhinged. I hold my breath. He's angry. The last time he was this angry, he shoved me. Hard enough that I hit my head on a glass door and saw stars for a minute. It was right after I pushed back on a host of marketing concepts he was dead set on making happen.

"You think you know better than me? Who holds the title here, Tessi?" I back up a step. I don't like how he's in my face about this. "You're going to support my fucking decision."

"Max," I interrupt, with my hands up in surrender. "You're talking about blowing a year's budget for one athlete. There's no way you're going to get the return on it. This isn't —"

Less than three seconds later, my stomach sinks and my head pounds as I get up from being shoved into the glass door of the conference room.

"Go home and figure out how to make it work. That's your job," he says as he steps closer to me. I don't let him touch me. I get up and leave. I grab my bag and make it two blocks before I decide to head back. I'm not going to let him get away with that.

I remember how I went back to talk to my father, but his office was empty, and that's when I heard them. In the same conference room.

"...the fuck outta my way, Rina," Maxim snides. He points in my face. "Tessi, I know..." Gritting his teeth, he continues,

“I know you had something to do with this.” Shaking his head, he huffs out a breath. “You’re a lazy, conniving bitch, and I’m going to sue you for everything you’re fucking worth.”

I swallow the nerves that have my body trembling and tilt my chin up. Rina is shouting back at him, but I refuse to cower behind her. I’m not scared of someone who has no power over me. Not anymore. He tries to grip my arm. The same way he did on the red carpet in Italy.

But that’s all he gets. One threatening statement and a fast grab, because seconds later, he’s getting shoved at least a foot back away from me.

“Get your *fucking* hands off my girl,” Law growls.

I don’t know how Maxim managed to stay on his feet, but he does and comes back in Law’s face, spitting and snarling more words that I can barely hear over the music and audience in the room. I step away enough to not get caught in the middle of these men.

“You don’t touch her. You don’t speak to her. Ever. You hear me, you low-life piece of—”

And the rest happens so fast that I wish I could rewind and see it again in slow motion.

Just as Maxim cocks his hand back for Law’s face, Henry comes from behind the both of us, launching his body right into Maxim’s like the kick-off fight to WWE WrestleMania. Jack is right behind Henry, throwing the first official punch.

I don’t realize I’m gripping onto Law’s arms so tight until he says, “It’s okay. You’re okay.” He moves us backward, away from what’s happening, and I look around quickly as most of the room is still so focused on the performance in the middle of the space. Only a few tables near us are paying attention to what’s been unraveling. Maxim starts yelling up a storm from the ground, and that causes more attention to focus on what’s happening over here.

Michael is standing off to the side of them, and it’s not until Jack and Henry get up from the floor, that I realize Michael’s been jamming the heel of his boot into Maxim’s

knuckles. I think he managed to throw a kick in there too, because it looks like a tooth might be missing.

Law leans over my shoulder to Everly, who's also appeared out of nowhere, and says, "Get Callen over here. Now."

I knew that Cal, or at least one of his patrol guys, was here tonight. And if they're not inside, then they're not far. Likely out in their patrol car. With so many high-profiles here, there's bound to be some kind of chaos after enough alcohol.

Henry and Michael pull Maxim up off the floor and work quickly to get him out of the room. We follow them into the lobby, and Cal is there with two other officers intercepting Maxim. "Get your hands off of me," he shouts, blood rushing from his mouth and clothes disheveled.

"Officer, I want to press charges. These three men attacked me. I want them arrested, and I need to seek medical attention."

Cal looks at Maxim, assessing the situation, and then looks over at Michael and Henry, who are standing with their arms crossed over their chests. Cal brings his attention to me next. I'm sure there's a roster of emotions cataloging on my face right now. My hands are still gripped tight to Law's, and it's not until I look at him that I feel like I can exhale. "Tessa, baby, you okay?"

Maxim spits, "Baby?" Then he mumbles "Jesus Christ" under his breath. "*That* woman has been harassing me. I'd like to charge her with inadvertent assault."

Cal's mouth kicks up on the side. "Inadvertent assault isn't a charge. And you can't charge people with anything. You need to be a part of law enforcement to do that."

Cal grips my shoulder, looking around me and making sure I don't have any marks on me. He nods at his officers. One moves to pull out his cuffs while the other has his hand on his gun holster.

I smile and wrap my arms around my friend. He holds me tight and says, "I got it from here. You sure you're okay?" I

nod furiously into his arm.

And I see Maxim's eyes widen and realize he's fucked.

Cal looks at Law and asks, "You got her?" The way these men have pulled me into their lives like I've always been here, like I belong here, has me swallowing a lump of emotions in my throat.

"Always," Law says, giving Cal a nod. The easy response makes me feel so safe. How could I ever want anything other than this feeling? When Cal turns, he gives his deputy the green light, cuffing Maxim. "Sir, you have the right to remain silent..."

When the officers haul him off, I catch the most horrid smell.

I cuff my hand over my mouth. "Oh god, what's that smell?"

Law answers, "Cat piss. Or dog. I wasn't particular about the animal."

I blink at him. Once. Twice.

"Don't look at me like that, Bunny." He smirks. "You know how I get when I render you speechless."

"I don't...how?"

Lifting our intertwined hands, he brushes his lips over the top of mine.

He asks his brothers if they're okay. Michael claps his shoulder and leans in to tell him something I can't hear, but it leaves Law with a wide smile.

Henry nods. "Tessa, we got you." He winks at me just as Giselle goes running at him and jumps on him like a spider monkey, saying something that makes him laugh loudly.

Jack gives Law a fist that Law bumps with his.

Law laughs. "First punch. Didn't think you had it in you, Jack."

“Just looking out for family.” He smiles. When he starts walking toward Everly, he turns back and points at me. “That’s you too now, Tessa.”

I look over to Law and smile. “Can we get out of here?”

He links his fingers with mine once more. “Home?”

I nod yes, but hearing that word and really thinking about what that means to me has me feeling so lucky to have found it. To have found him.

After we grab our coats from the coat-check and hit the cold, I’m ready to hear what all of that was about. “Now might be a good time to tell me what you’ve been up to.”

Law clears his throat and rubs his lips along my knuckles. “You might get mad.”

“Not a good start.”

He smiles, opening the door to his truck. Once we’re both inside and the heat is finally warming the space, he searches my face. Worry’s painted all over his, and suddenly, I’m anxious to hear what he’s going to say. “Tell me you’re okay.”

I search his face for a sign of the lighthearted goofball, the one who always manages to pull brightness into the room, but that’s not who’s driving right now. This version of Law Riggs is a rare one—serious, concerned and caring, maybe even a bit angry still.

“I’m okay.” I lean across the seat and console to drag my fingers along his neck and into his hair. He holds my hand there, relaxing into the touch.

“When I saw him near you, Bunny…” The tightness in his voice has my emotions flaring up again. That made him nervous.

I blink back my tears. “I’m okay, I promise. And that’s over now.”

He glances at me. “This isn’t,” he says like a statement, but I know he’s asking. He reaches toward me and holds my hand again.

I bring it to my lips and kiss his knuckles. “This isn’t.”

A big dimple popping, eye crinkling smile, that makes those pale blues sparkle and pushes that worry far away shines my way. It’s impossible not to smile back.

“Maxim had been embezzling money from Costa Athletics for about six years. That’s what got him fired.”

What? My eyes widen and mouth opens, because I don’t know what to say. I knew he was fired, but I didn’t know the details.

“I started digging after our run-in at the Olympic Games. Shared those details anonymously with your father. I doubt he cares where that information came from, but knowing it soon turned into Maxim being fired, I won’t take credit for that. The idiot did that to himself.”

We turn down our street and up the driveway. Before he throws his truck into park, he adds, “But I will take credit for the rest of it.”

“What did you do?” To say he’s piqued my interest is an understatement.

He gives me that smirk—and I know that no matter how much I brace for what he’s going to tell me, I will still be shook. He lifts me out of the truck, but instead of helping me down, he hoists me higher, gripping me right under my ass. “I can walk, you know.”

“You can let me take care of you tonight,” he says with a little boost to grip me tighter. “...in all the ways that I want...” He nudges the door closed and walks up to the entryway that leads directly to our fun room, flipping the light switch as soon as we’re through the threshold. “You’re going to let me.”

“Am I?” I push back, giving him the best attitude I can muster. The reality is that I really do just want him to take whatever he wants from me right now. Care, pleasure, smiles, moans. I’ll gladly give any of it. All of it.

In less than five strides, he brings me to the plush gray lounge that he set up in front of the newly assembled built-in

bookcase. When he lowers himself to his knees and me to the lounge, he pulls my chin toward his lips and kisses me lightly.

“You’re going to do a lot of things in a minute, but first, I need to finally tell you some of the—” he looks around the room, maybe searching for the right words “—details.”

I can tell he wants to smile, but I think a part of him is nervous. His hand rubs along his chest—his only tell that he’s not totally confident.

Leaning back, I sink into the cushions. This really was a nice addition to the space. “Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

“I paid Maxim’s cleaning company an expanded salary to make some adjustments to how they service his apartment.”

“What kind of adjustments?” I narrow my eyes.

He clears his throat for what I’m sure is going to be a roster of things too good to forget. “Bed bugs are what I’m assuming caused that rash that doesn’t seem to ever calm down. Adding in hair remover to his shampoo every time a new bottle showed up in his shower. Then the cleaners got an extra bump in pay for spraying some kind of animal urine on the collars of all his shirts.”

I know the look I’m giving him is one that might seem shocked, but I’m on the precipice of uncontrollable laughter.

But he’s not finished. He stands and moves toward the wall of shelves. Then he flips the switch on the wall that turns on the fireplace. “Weekly, there’s a hefty handful of glitter tossed onto his suit jackets. Have you ever been assaulted by glitter?”

I bark out a laugh. “Have you?”

He nods. “Sammy and Miles’s graduation party last year. I still find pieces of it every now and then.” He walks to the far side of the room, where the bar cart is set, and pulls out two rocks glasses, pouring two fingers of a light amber liquid in each from the crystal carafe that I hadn’t realized was added. “He’ll find glitter for at least the next decade in almost everything he owns. Even if he moves.”

He walks back over and passes me a glass. When he clinks mine, he takes a sip, and I watch as his Adam's apple moves the drink along. The man is so fucking fine, and I'm about ready to pounce on him after hearing all of this.

“His trainer is actually one of my buddies, come to find out, so that one didn't cost anything. He's been on a bulked-up diet for about a month now.”

When I take a sip, the warmth of it reminds me of a time when I drank to Maxim's name because I was angry and felt so lost. Never mind betrayed. But this sip, the burn, feels like retribution. Payback that I didn't even realize was occurring on my behalf. I taste the notes of oak and vanilla. I savor the sip.

“I didn't like the way he touched you, either. That arm grab really pissed me off, and it'll never be okay with me. So, I personally hacked his social media accounts and DMed every woman he was connected with. I alerted all of them of his new sexually transmitted infection status and that they should probably avoid swapping bodily fluids with him moving forward.”

He drains his glass. And I'm biting back my smile, because while each and every one of those things is horrible and borderline certifiable, I love that he did all of that for me. I love that he refused to ignore it. *I love him.*

“I don't think you're mad,” Law says hesitantly as he stands squared off in front of me. “But today has been...a lot.” He blows out a breath. “I can be a lot. Obviously.”

I take back the last mouthful of my drink. Sitting up on my knees, I move closer to where he stands. “You put my favorite bourbon on your bar cart.”

His eyes follow my movements, and his mouth pulls into my favorite smile right before he says, “I did. You have a hot water spout that was just installed next to your mugs on that middle shelf.” He nods his head to the farthest set of shelves on the built-in. “And a batch of teas from your favorite shop in London should have arrived, but they got stuck in customs.”

I look around the shelves he built out, taking everything in. They look amazing. And all the thought he put into this...

“I made a few enhancements to this thing,” he says, but before he can show me any more, I launch myself into his arms, forcing him to stagger back, laughing. He lifts me up and my legs wrap around his waist as I push my mouth against his, my lips finding exactly where they’re meant to be. I lick the seam of his mouth and our tongues collide as he moves us into the warm enclosure.

“If I knew *this* was the reaction I’d get, I would have led with this on our ride this morning,” he mumbles over my lips.

“This. All of this. What you did...” I rest my forehead against his and take a minute to let it settle. To be in this moment with him.

“I was wrong,” he says with an exhale, making my heart race. Then his pale blue eyes meet mine. “When I told you there wasn’t a before... there was.” He searches my eyes. “Everything before you was just me waiting. And everything after has been the best time of my life.”

The smile that takes over my face is just a pinch of the happiness that I feel.

So, this is what love feels like.

Wiping the tear that’s started running down my cheek, he pulls my lips to his again. He kisses me hard. With so much need and emotion that it doesn’t feel like enough. I pull my arms closer, holding him tighter.

When he pulls back, he rests his forehead on mine and says, “I am so madly, stupidly in love with you, Bunny. And I know this is a sweet moment that we should savor, but I also want you so fucking badly.” He grips onto my dress, gripping it tightly. With a clenched jaw and a deep audible breath, he growls out, “I *need* you.”

“Good.” I nip at his lip and tell him a truth. One that’s been mine for a while now. If I really think about it, probably since London. “Because you have me.”

Law

I SHOVE MY HANDS INTO HER HAIR AND PULL HER MOUTH TO mine. The way her teeth nip at my lips and how our tongues play together makes me want to show her what else I've done to make this room more...fun.

“Do you remember what you called this room when you first saw it?”

Her lips move to my neck as she drags her teeth along the front of my throat and then licks my Adam's apple. She pays attention to the little parts of me, and it makes me so fucking hard.

“Something about a man-child.” She slams her eyes shut and bites her lower lip to keep from laughing at my expense. Goddamn, this woman owns me in every possible way.

When I move from her grasp, her eyes fly open, and she watches me as I step over to the last row of shelves. When I pull out the last book—The Count and His Maiden—the dummy shelf shifts forward, revealing some of the goodies I ordered from the Toy Rodeo.

A slow, Cheshire cat-style smile takes shape on her face. “Law?” Without looking away from the surprise, she asks, “Did you just change the meaning of fun in this room?”

“I think I just created another version that you might... appreciate.”

“Can we play?” She bites her lip, gaze swinging back to mine.

I pull out a wide piece of black lace.

“You bet that sweet pussy of yours, we're going to play.”

“Is that for me?” As her eyes light up, I just about melt at her feet.

“It's for whatever you want.” She drags it from my fingers and takes a minute to look at it as she holds it up between us.

“Good. Lose the shirt.”

I hurry to unbutton my cuffs first and then pull the shirt hem out of my suit pants. Unbuttoning the bottom, I work my way up.

“You better hurry.” She smiles mischievously. “I can rip things too.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time, Bunny.”

She kneels on the lounge in front of me, watching me intently. Her eyes travel slowly across my chest and down the rest of me. I can practically feel the want billowing off of her.

“Are you getting undressed, or is this going to be my Magic Mike moment?”

She makes a face like she’s weighing the idea, but then says, “Sounds fun, but another time.”

“Lose the dress.”

She smirks and lifts the red dress over her head, tossing it across the room. I stop dead in my tracks.

“You had nothing on under that?”

She smiles coyly. “Bunny, those fucking tits look like they need to be sucked on,” I grit out as I stalk toward her.

“Pants off first,” she says, holding her hand up to me. She moves her hands so that the lace drags across her chest.

I watch like an obedient dog for her next request. “You’re bossy today.”

“I’m your boss, so it seems appropriate.”

I bark out a laugh. “You sure are.”

Kicking off my pants, I shed my undershirt. “We should talk about that. What you want and what I want. How we’re going to make it all work. I had an idea...”

“Later. The only idea I want from you is what you want me to do with this.” She holds the long piece of lace out to the side.

I shove my boxers down and off.

“Later,” I agree. I hold out my hand so she gives it back to me. Moving around her, along the edge of the long, plush lounge, I take in every angle of her naked body. “You’re so fucking beautiful, Tessa. I could come just by looking at you. Every curve. The way your skin raises in goosebumps when I touch you like this.” I lean in closer and drag the tips of my fingers up her hip and then higher toward her waist. I drag the piece of lace across her stomach, and then hug her from behind so I can grab the other end of it.

As I pull both ends toward me, I jerk her closer to my body. She lets out a small sound as her ass presses into my hard-on, and then melts into me. She tilts her neck to the side, making space for my mouth.

“Can you feel how hard you’ve already made me?” I whisper into her skin, dragging my tongue along the side of her neck before I close my lips around hers as she looks up at me.

She grinds her ass back, and I can’t help but nudge my cock right in between her cheeks. “I’m going to fuck every part of you, my queen.”

She answers me with a breathy moan, followed by “Ti Voglio (*I want you*)...” And as much as I want to test out some of those new toys, I need to sink into her juicy cunt, right fucking now.

I turn us slightly. “I always want you, baby. Now open your legs for me.”

She’s so needy for me that she immediately does as I ask—no snarky response or witty comeback, just complete submission. I drag my fingers through her pussy and the arousal that’s coated her.

“Say please,” I demand as I fist my cock and tease her.

I can hear the smile that I know is plastered across her lips as she says, “Silly boy, I’m not asking nicely...”

I pinch her clit. “You sure about that?”

“Fuck. Yes, I’d rather beg for it.” And then the tone of her voice changes slightly as she grinds back into me again. “I

need it. I'm so wet and ready for that big, hard cock to fill me up."

New kink unlocked with those words in that tone. I clench my jaw and grit out, "Fucking. Hell." I'm only human. I stop messing around and nudge the head right up against her entrance. "What's it going to be, boss? You going to say please?"

I release her clit, and then rub out small, slow circles instead. It's what finally does it.

"Yes." She lets out a loud exhale and moans the word "please."

I thrust into her deep and roll my hips forward. I want to feel every fucking inch of her.

"Fuck, Tessa." I suck in air and then roll my hips again. "You feel so good. Your pussy does fucking *work* on me."

She only answers my praise with moans. I don't give her time to catch her breath as I pull out of her slowly, remembering the piece of lace that should be right where I left it in front of her. I know exactly how to use it. I release my hold on her only for a second, grabbing each end of the lace, and then pulling back toward me so it's taut against her pussy. I use it as leverage to bring her hips back. The back of her thighs meeting the front of mine.

When I push forward, I pull the lace back, and it fucks her right into me.

"Oh, fuck. That's so good," she moans out.

She leans forward, grabbing onto the cushion in front of her, her ass up, and I repeat the same movements. I pull out of her slowly, watching as my cock drips, then with a jerk, I thrust forward. *Fuck, I'm so deep.* But there's no pause. I have no desire to ease up or let her mewl for more of me. I fuck her hard. I fuck her deep. And she fucks me right back. Her cunt clenches with every pull as her moans dance across my skin, urging me for more.

"I'm going to fuck every last drop of cum into this beautiful pussy."

“I want it,” she grits back. “All of it. Right fucking...” But before she can finish the demand, she starts to shake. First her thighs. I release the lace and pull her body flush against mine, her back to my front as I find her clit. I feel her gripping me. Her pussy pulses so fucking good that it smashes any hold I had left. My orgasm barrels right through my body, and we come completely undone together. Heavy breaths and sweat-coated skin are the aftermath to what this woman does to me.

“Law?”

With my body draped heavily over hers, it takes a minute for the ringing to stop in my ears and to realize I haven’t made a sound or move to respond to her.

“Hmm?” is all I can conjure at the moment.

“This thing we have...”

I lift the upper half of my body up so she can turn over. Her eyes are glassy, mouth puffy from the way we attacked each other. Her cheeks and chest flushed pink, hair stuck to her face. I love how good and fucked she looks right now. I move away the pieces of hair that are sticking to her neck, one by one. She doesn’t finish her thought, and I think it’s because she’s trying to hold it together. There’s a lot of emotion swirling between us right now.

“This thing we have...” I say with a dazed, sex-drunk smile and nod.

She nods like she’s agreeing to something unsaid. “It’s the big kind, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, Bunny, I think so.” I smile at her. The emotion that pours from her words, that’s written all over her face, it’s an understanding between us.

Tears fall down the sides of each eye when she says, “I want this. Us. You.”

I prop my forearms on either side of her and swipe my thumbs along her face, trying to intercept the rest of the tears that try to follow the same path.

“Me too,” I admit as I brush my lips against hers.

“Now what?”

“You tell me you love me.” I smile.

And she smiles back.

But because I can't help myself, I say, “Then you marry me. We build that ranch on the land I showed you. Maybe have kids or dogs or horses. All three. I don't know. Don't rush me. Don't scare me off.” I try to joke, but really, I'd do it all tomorrow.

And she doesn't tense up or push me away. She laughs at the sarcasm and gets practical instead. “Last time I checked, you wanted my job.”

I swipe my thumb along her lips and kiss her again. “... about that.”

On Monday morning, we walk into our briefing with the executive team and the board of directors with a plan. Two, to be exact. The first shows off the phenomenal results that came from our influencer marketing campaign. The second is what comes next.

“I'm going to be staying in my current role. I'd like to support Tessa as her Chief Marketing Officer when she eventually takes over the CEO role full time.”

She addressed the room first, and then looked at my dad and said, “I'd like to be here for the long haul. Asher, my goal is to help you sustain what's been built and eventually help to grow your legacy.” My dad searched my face for hesitation and that streak of immaturity he's used to finding, but all he got from me was contentment. We made these plans together. As a team.

I wanted that job for a long time, but wanting something doesn't mean I was meant for it. She was. My role in marketing is where I am best suited. I like it there, my team, the broad creative strokes all the way to the details that take a good idea and make it great.

“Riggs, I’m going to need us to have a working lunch today. My office.” She turned her head to the side and looked over her shoulder with a smirk. “Oh, and make sure you lock the door this time.”

It was a fist-in-the-air, winning-at-life type of moment, but I held it back. I’m way more professional now. I simply answered, “You got it, boss.” And then I proceeded to text her exactly what I wanted to eat and what I’d like her to sample, possibly gag on, too.

Law

IT'S BEEN EXACTLY ONE YEAR SINCE I WALKED INTO THIS pristinely manicured, sprawling estate, just outside of London. I'm wearing the same black tux, and I'm looking for the same woman now as I was that night. Only this time, she knows I'm coming. A lot can happen in a year, because what she doesn't know is that there's a platinum ring with an ornate salt and pepper diamond sitting on the first knuckle of my ring finger, waiting to take its intended place on her hand.

Tessa wanted to play out the night that we never finished. And while I'm practically drooling at the prospect of what kind of playing we can do here together, I need to ask my best friend if she'll keep me. For however long she wants. Forever, preferably.

After the invasive pat down again, I walk through the familiar open basilica. The long rectangular bar at the center of the room, with its shiny black top reflecting the chandelier lighting, gives off a vintage-movie glare to everything in the room. I'm packing a semi again, but that's only in anticipation of the woman I'm eager to see. I look around. It's a bit more crowded, women donning masks as elaborate as something you might find at an art gallery, to as basic as the same black sheer over the face of every female server.

I didn't tell her where I'd be. And she didn't want to decide what hall or room we should venture into. We just agreed we'd find each other and play. And that she'd be wearing the same black lace over her eyes.

She arrived in London last night after a weekend with my sister and hers in Paris. My flight landed this afternoon, and I know she's as eager to see me as I am her. I've gotten an impressive number of dirty texts, but she won't tell me what she's wearing. She simply said, "You'll know it's me."

Getting married wasn't something we planned, but it's not like we've *never* discussed it. I'm not springing a commitment on her without being very clear that it's something she wants.

I've been making jokes for months about marrying me. They were nudges that she laughed at, but if at any time she said yes, it would have been the proposal. But at Christmas, she finally said to me, "I don't hate the idea, you know."

"Of what? Finally trying the snowboard I bought you?"

She stopped rolling out the cookie dough and said, "I *do* hate that idea. But no, I meant the part where you said you wanted to start looking into contractors." She looked back up at me, her big, beautiful eyes sparkling when she added, "For our ranch." It was the longest amount of time she had rendered me speechless.

"You said 'our.'"

She smiled. "I did. And I kinda love you, so..." She shrugged her shoulders, and then the timer for her potato chip cookies buzzed. And that was that.

I started looking at rings two days later. I have no chill; everyone knows that. I couldn't find one that was just right, so I decided to design my own. I've been trying to figure out the right way and right time to ask. And this felt right. Just like her.

"Sir," a tall, slender gentleman, who I recognize, begins to escort me to where I'd like.

"Q." I smile. "It's so good to see you."

"You as well, sir." He nods toward my Old Fashioned. "Will you need another before we take our rounds?"

"This is fine." Just as I say it, I see a flash of two skinny black ears that stand above the crowd of gentlemen who are starting to make their way down the farthest corridor. I try to smother my smile. I have a feeling I may have found her.

"Q, no need to take a round this time. I'd like to go down that way."

"Ah, yes." He bows slightly forward, encouraging me to walk, and he'll follow.

"This would be in the direction of?"

“This is our Dom, sub hall. Would you prefer we try somewhere else?”

I smile. “Not at all. Something caught my eye.”

I never made my way down here the last time. My exploration stopped when I followed Tessa out of the room. This corridor is lined with quite a few rooms, and the first few that we walk by are larger spaces.

“These are demonstration rooms. Typically, for those who are new to this type of kink. But there are quite a few Dom and sub partners who still frequent this space to share knowledge, explore, or test out new partners.”

I hear everything he’s saying, but what Q doesn’t know is that’s not what I’m looking for. I’ve found my partner. And we play. We play often and change roles. It’s the most satisfying sexual relationship I’ve ever had. She’s curious, and I’m not one to deny her anything.

“Sir, might I suggest this room?” I look inside, and it’s basic. A chair in the center. Nothing else. Windows surround the space, so I’d imagine if someone wanted to watch, then this would be the room for it.

And that’s when I see her. Black thigh-high stockings, with garters that just peek beneath the shiny black skirt that’s wrapped tight around her ass. A black tank-style top that’s cut so short that the under-curve of her magnificent tits peek out.

My mouth waters. “Fucking hell,” I breathe out.

When my gaze moves higher, I knew I saw her in the crowd. It was ears. She traded that black lace for a black kinky bunny mask. The oversized eye cutouts give me a view of her beautiful blue eyes. The protruding bunny ears are tall and proud, held high above her head.

I smile at my real-life fantasy standing in front of me, arms crossed, with every bit of confidence she usually has, surrounded by an aura of pure sexual energy.

“Bunny,” I greet with a nod.

Her red-stained lips curl up into the sexiest smile. But she doesn't say anything yet. Instead, she tilts her head to the side, waiting for my next move. For me to take what's mine.

I look back over my shoulder. "Thank you, Q. That'll be all."

With a tight-lipped smile, he says, "Yes, sir. Enjoy." Before he closes the door behind him, "Miss, if you need anything."

"We'll be fine. Thank you, Q."

I can't help but smirk as I let my eyes wander and linger around her body. *Fuck*, my girl looks good.

I rub my thumb back and forth over my lip, and then sling my hands into my suit pockets.

Circling her, I check her out at every angle. As soon as I come around to the back of her, I lean forward, right against her ear, and say, "I can't decide if I want to lick these pretty tits or ruin that red lipstick with my cock instead."

She hums. Like either of those are perfectly fine with her.

I've circled her like my next meal, and while I want to devour every inch of her like this, I'm also on edge as I play with the ring on my finger. When I walk around to the front of her, she has a smirk on her face.

"Is it the dominance or submission that has your pants getting tighter?" she asks in a breathy tone. A question I remember. Her voice and words clung to me until I saw her again. I was a goner the moment she spoke.

She pushes me back, and I sit in the chair. Then she's leaning in front of me, one hand on my shoulder and the other, familiarly, gliding up my chest and toward my neck, making me shiver.

She looks at me with a desire so palpable, it has me beyond fucking ready for her, and I almost forget what I need to do first. She's waiting for an answer. And I have it.

"It's the woman I want to marry. The one who's ready to push me, play with me, meet me half-way, or go toe-to-toe. Depending on the day. You're the reason my pants are always

tight, Bunny. My heart is beating really hard thinking about how much I want you...

...for as long as we both shall live.”

The smirk she wore is gone. Instead, her stained lips part. Her eyes are glassy as they search mine, wordlessly asking me if I mean it.

I reach out and lift the mask from her eyes. “Law...”

“Tessa, I want more than ten minutes. When it comes to you, I want all of them. Every minute you choose me, I feel lucky. You are the love of my life.”

Grasping the ring, I hold it in front of her. “Marry me, Bunny.”

Tears streak down her face as she tries to bat them away. I stand up and step closer to help and thumb them from reaching her perfect red lips.

She shakes her head quickly when she says, “You really are the most ridiculously perfect person I’ve ever known.”

I frame her face with my hands and pull her closer. “I’m going to quote you on that the next time you call me an idiot,” I whisper.

She smiles against my lips.

“You have so many smiles. But this one...”

Kiss.

“...where you smile as I kiss you...”

Kiss.

“This one is my favorite.”

I pull back and slide the ring onto her finger. She stares at it for a minute. And I worry just for a second that she might love me but not want to get married.

She flicks her eyes back to mine and says, “Silly boy.”

My stomach bottoms out.

Then she digs her fingers into the strap of her top and pulls out a thick gold band. When she holds it out and grasps my fingers, I almost start crying like a giant man-child.

She smiles as she slides it onto my ring finger. “I was worried I scared you off from the idea. Thought you might not ask.” She shrugs and says, “So I figured I would.”

“Fucking hell, Bunny.” I grab her by the back of her thighs and wrap her legs around me as I growl into her neck. “You better be ready for the best time of your life. You’re about to be a Riggs, baby.”

She laughs against my lips. “I’m ready.”

EPILOGUE

Tessa

“WHY DO YOU HAVE A COOKIE PAN COATED IN FLOUR?”

Law puts the pan down on the coffee table in front of me. I push my screen glasses to the top of my head and watch as my husband, who’s wearing nothing more than mesh shorts, a backwards baseball hat, and Timberland work boots walks from the fireplace to the Christmas tree, counting his steps.

“This needs to look legit, Bunny.” He says it so seriously that I can’t help but bite my lip so I don’t laugh. “Last year, they didn’t trust the bite marks in the carrots. So I’m not about to place any more doubt in their minds if these are not properly matched strides.”

“Don’t forget to take the elves when you go to the basement. They’re supposed to hitch a ride back to the North Pole with Santa tonight.”

“Already did it, Bunny. C’mon, what do you think this is, amateur hour?”

I smile as I return to my spreadsheets. I need to approve the final spend for the post-holiday budget. We’re just about to close up an acquisition, and I want everything to be accounted for. Costa Athletics was on the verge of bankruptcy from some very poor decision-making prior to Maxim being fired. We’re in the final stages of acquisition, and while my father put up a fight the whole time, this will ensure he can retire when he’s ready.

He leans over me as he takes his final strides in the family room, before crossing into the kitchen. “Santa wants to unwrap your present with his tongue in a few minutes.” He kisses my neck. “You almost done?”

I tilt my head back and meet his warm lips, smiling into the kiss as he starts to hum, “*I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus.*”

We were married the winter after our matching proposal in front of all our friends and family. Most of the town too. It was

beautiful. I think I always knew, from the moment I skidded into that snowbank, that Strutt's Peak was meant to be my home. We built the house, too. It's still not totally done, but it's ours.

“What time did my dad say for dinner tomorrow?”

“Any time we want. He's not serving dinner until later. He knows I've been swamped and that the kids will want to play with their new stuff for a while.”

He smiles as he unties his boots. “Yeah, until he gives them his gifts.”

I give him a glare. “What did he get them?”

Shrugging, he smirks.

“What aren't you telling me?”

Asher decided that semi-retirement was a good place to be until we finish rounding out our family. Now he spends a lot of time being a grandpa.

“I know nothing. I swear. But I mean, last year they got ponies. So...”

The oven timer dings, and I hustle to shut it off so it doesn't wake the kids.

The anisette cookies are frosted and drying, but those are for us to enjoy over the Christmas break. Giselle and Henry bring theirs on Christmas Day.

This batch of chocolate chip cookies were the last ones to make. And they're my favorite. Law and I make them together every Christmas Eve. Our own little tradition. A promise we made to each other even before we realized it was one we could keep. We've tweaked the recipes here and there over the years. But this one makes my mouth water—brown the butter first before any other ingredients, and then finish them off with a sprinkle of flakey sea salt as soon as they're pulled from the oven.

Law's arms loop around my waist as he kisses the back of my neck. “You need to keep this batch for the monsters. I

already put the last one in our top cabinet. They'll never find those."

When we wanted to try for a family, it wasn't easy. But on our last round of IVF, after we agreed if it wasn't going to happen for us that we'd be happy just as a family of two, we ended up with a beautiful set of twins—Luca and Enzo. I carried them almost full-term, with all of the stretch marks to prove it. And they made us a family of four.

The kicker was that ten months later, just after we found a rhythm, and I felt like my boobs were my own again, I started violently vomiting after I smelled a batch of freshly baked vanilla cupcakes at Brews & Books. And just like that, around thirty-six weeks later, we were a party of five. Ryker Riggs rounded us out, and I was surrounded.

I didn't want to stop working when we talked about childcare options. Riggs Outdoor was doing well, and I liked having something else, in addition to motherhood. And it's worked out. Law chose to be a stay-at-home dad for a while. His only plea was that he could name the last kid.

"Ryker Riggs," he shouted, his hands raised over his head. "Bunny, that kid will be the most badass of all of them with a name like that." I caved eventually. It is a cool name.

And my husband is a total natural at the whole dad thing. The first time I saw him wearing one kid on his chest and the other on his back, I nearly jumped him. It was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen, next to the way he takes care of all of us now.

"You're my favorite. You know that, right?" I smile as he leans into my neck and kisses me just where I like it.

"You're my favorite too, Bunny."

"Can I give you my present a little early?"

He wiggles his eyebrows and says, "Are you wearing it? Does it vibrate? Oh fuck, is it both?"

I start walking us backwards, slowly toward the stairway to our bedroom. "If I tell you, then it'll ruin the surprise."

He hooks his finger in the waistband of my pants. “You have a five-minute head start. And then I’m coming up,” he says as he lifts my shirt up just enough to kiss my side.

“Daaadddd?”

Law’s eyes widen, and I swear I’ve never seen him move that fast. He bolts to the top of the stairs in record time before little eyes catch a glimpse of what Santa has set up for them.

“Box him out, Bunny. Front of the stairs!” he whisper-shouts, flaring his arms out at his sides. He hustles into Ryker’s room, and I can hear them talking about a bad dream.

I hover to the left of the doorway. “What if reindeer are secretly evil and they poop all over our presents?” To be fair, he’s four.

“Then I’m guessing they were fired from their job a long time ago and Santa uses an electric sleigh.”

“Like Grandpa’s Tesla?”

“Exactly. Now go to bed or Santa is going to think we don’t sleep here. I don’t want him to skip our house.”

“Definitely not, Dad,” he says in his raspy little voice. “Are you going to bed too?”

Law catches me watching and says, “Yeah, I have to tuck your mom in.”

“Can you snuggle with me?”

He peeks his head out of the room. “I’ll be there in ten minutes, Bunny,” he whispers. “You better be ready for me.”

I just give him a knowing smile. “Silly boy, I’m always ready for you.”

I hear him let out a groan when he moves back into the room. “I love you, but you’re playing some heavy chicken defense right now.”

“What’s chicken defense?”

“Tell you when you’re older. Go to sleep.”

THE END

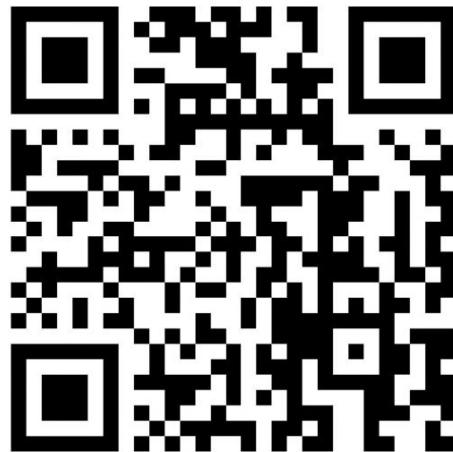
*Thank you for reading A Peak Performance. Keep going.
There's a little more...*

AN EXTRA HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Thank you for reading **A Peak Performance**.

If you've read all of the Riggs Romances then I'd absolutely recommend you check out the extended epilogue because everyone (especially Asher) deserves a little *extra* happily ever after.

Grab it [here](#).



Scan the code and read it right on your phone.

COMING THIS DECEMBER...

DECEMBER
MIDNIGHTS

VICTORIA WILDER

Welcome to Wild Tide, Maine.

A SIP FROM STRUTT'S PEAK

Asher's S'mores Martini

You can sip on this as a martini, or if you prefer, it can be made as an iced espresso.

For the martini version

Ingredients

- 2oz vodka (marshmallow/ cake flavors work too)
- 1 shot of espresso
- 1 tbsp fluff or 1 large marshmallow
- 2 tbsp of chocolate chips
- 2 oz Irish cream
- Chocolate syrup
- Crushed graham cracker square

Better served in a rocks glass, but if you're feeling coordinated go for a martini glass

Directions

1. Coat the inside of the glass with the chocolate syrup, rim the glass as well and dip in crushed graham crackers
2. Brew espresso over marshmallow and chocolate chips. Stir until dissolved
3. In a shaker over ice mix, vodka, espresso, and Irish cream Strain, pour, sip and enjoy!

If you'd like to drink it as an espresso drink without the alcohol then brew 1-2 shots of espresso over 2 tbsp of marshmallow fluff and 2 tbsp of dark chocolate chips. Stir until dissolved and drink hot or shake up over ice. Top it with your creamer or milk of choice.

Law's Perfected Old Fashioned

Ingredients

- 3-4 oz of bourbon - *Law prefers Foxx Bourbon, but since that's not a real distillery, any mid-range bourbon will do.*
- One large ice cube or ice sphere
- 1 brown sugar cube or 1 tsp brown granulated sugar
- 3 dashes of orange bitters
- A splash of Aperol
- 1 orange peel

Directions

1. In the glass, muddle the sugar, bitters and aperol together
2. Once those are combined, drop in your ice
3. twist your orange peel to pull the oil from it and rub it along the rim of your glass, then drop her in
4. Pour over 3-4oz of bourbon

If you'd like to warm yourself up even more with these drinks feel free to head back to Chapter 24.

ALSO BY VICTORIA WILDER



Everly & Jack



Henry & Giselle



Michael & Grace

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you! Yes, YOU, for reading this book. Whether you've been reading my stories since Peaks of Color or I'm a new-to-you author, you are the reason this book exists. Thank you for taking a chance on a new indie author and my small-town series.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Forever a hopeful romantic, author Victoria Wilder writes contemporary romance with deliciously witty and wild characters. Her stories range from small-town swoon-worthy men to fiercely powerful families and lead characters whom aren't afraid to ask for what they want.

She's an east coast girl, always chasing the next season and living it up with her husband, two kiddos, and dog, Linus. When she's not reading or writing, you'll find her training at a kickboxing class or finding an excuse to sink her feet in the sand at the beach.

She believes in the power of a great story. And that words have the ability to change the trajectory of your life.

