

The background of the cover is a romantic scene of a man and a woman embracing on a rocky beach. The man is wearing a white shirt and a dark vest, and the woman is wearing a white lace dress. They are both looking down at each other. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The water is dark and calm, with some rocks visible in the foreground.

Retrothea

BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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Betrothed



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To Larry.

CHAPTER 1



ZEKE

“**Y**ou’ve done this. You’ve made it this far. And we want to congratulate all of you for your strength and determination to... fight for yourselves.” I lifted my glass, extending it toward the room of women in front of me, my gaze making sure it connected with each of theirs as I listed the names of the newest graduates from the Blooms House. “Ten years ago, Addy and I opened this house for these moments. For you. To provide a safe place for you to take a chance on yourselves and a new, better life, just like my sister did.”

My twin sister, Addison, stuck out like a beacon in the corner of my eye, her blue hair gleaming under the light. But it was the swipe of her finger across her cheek that caught my attention; instantly, I knew she was pregnant again.

No, it wasn’t a twin thing. I’d never really bought into that psychic connection claim. I knew things about my twin sister—and our younger sister, Eve—because I paid attention. Because I loved them. Because to truly support someone, you had to be able to hear all the things they didn’t say out loud.

And unlike Eve, who would cry for a sad TV commercial, Addy never cried unless a funeral or pregnancy hormones were involved; in the ten years that we’d run the Blooms house together—a shelter for women recovering from abuse and addiction—nothing made my twin sister cry, not even the countless times she’d stood up and shared her own story of abuse by her ex-fiancé that almost ended with her death. If her now-husband, Ace Covington, and I hadn’t gotten there in time, she would’ve perished in the car fire; instead, we’d faked her death until Ace and his private security team had

finally brought the criminal and would-be murderer to justice.

I cleared my throat and returned my attention back to the table, searching for the first two women on my mental list.

“Daisy. Kendra.”

The two women smiled and stood up from the far end of the makeshift table that extended from the dining room into the living room. We hardly had enough room at the regular table for all eight new graduates, let alone for the rest of the Blooms family. There were women who continued into our one-year program. Women who volunteered part time at the house. Previous graduates who still lived in the area. Sometimes, even some of the residents of our newer safe houses in San Francisco made the trip down with Addy to celebrate their Carmel counterparts.

“Monica. Jasmine.” I paused briefly for a small burst of hoots. “Michelle.”

There was a shuffle and some laughter as the three of them worked to stand in a particularly crowded corner of the room. No matter how many times we did this, they all kept coming back to support each other. For that reason, we tried to hold this ceremony outside when we could. Just a few short blocks away, the beach stretched along the Pacific Ocean with better views and no capacity concerns. However, if it was raining—or thunderstorming like it was tonight, the beach was out of the question.

So, myself and roughly thirty other women were crammed into the two communal rooms of the old Victorian home that had once belonged to my and Addy’s grandparents.

“Christina. Holly. And Kenzie.” My voice cracked on the last, and I gritted my teeth hoping no one noticed.

Only the first two women filtered out from the crowd, giving my eyes an excuse to search for her. *Mackenzie Barrett*. Blonde hair that looked made of silken sunlight. Warm lavender eyes that changed with her mood. Lips that looked as soft as she was soft-spoken. I’d been stunned by her beauty from the moment we’d interviewed her a little over six months ago, and that never happened. I was all business all the time. Except in that brief moment where I wasn’t quick enough to stop myself from wanting her.

A woman looking for a safe place to heal after recovering from an opioid addiction and almost-overdose.

It was wholly unacceptable. So, I’d immediately recused myself and left the question of her acceptance into our program up to Addy. Of course, I

didn't tell my sister about my attraction; I didn't want that to affect her decision either.

The only thing more striking than Kenzie's beauty had been her determination. Addy had been floored by it, while I'd had to pretend I hadn't noticed. Fear, worry, hope—those were the emotions we commonly saw from women during their interviews; Kenzie had them, too, but there had been this unshakable determination that was impossible to miss. A look in her eyes—in her gaze that never broke from ours—that she was willing to do anything to get into our program.

I'll never forget the way Addy gaped at my hesitation before immediately accepting Kenzie's application. She was a recovering opioid addict with no immediate family and no place to go. *Of course, my sister accepted her application.*

"Kenz—"

"She's working," Holly chimed in. "She said she left a note on your desk."

Working.

If there was one person who rivaled my work ethic, it was Kenzie. She signed up for every volunteer position at the house, helped with others' daily tasks, and had been the first to knock on my door when three months rolled around with her job request form to clean some of the local businesses nearby.

Determined.

And too goddamn beautiful.

No one was supposed to be working tonight. It was the reason we held the ceremony on a Friday night, so everyone—but especially the graduates themselves—could be here.

Part of the Blooms program involved getting a job at one of the approved businesses in Carmel. We didn't handle the medical side of addiction recovery; all of our residents had completed some degree of rehab before coming here. The goal of Blooms was to provide continued rehabilitation and resources for those who lacked a safe place to live and a good support system. And part of that involved stepping back into society and contributing to the greater good.

"Right. Of course." I exhaled a chuckle. *Shit.* Kenzie shouldn't be working tonight—which was probably why she'd left the note on my desk, knowing I'd miss it. "Well, we all know the condition of my desk by Friday."

A ripple of laughter worked its way through the room.

By Friday evening, my desk looked worse than the blast zone of a nuclear bomb, and everyone knew it. They also knew that come six o'clock tomorrow morning, I'd be in my office in the back of the house, hunched over that blast zone to bring back a semblance of organization for the coming week. And somehow, by the following Friday, it would be a disaster again.

I used to be so organized, but over the years, with the growth of Blooms... *no, that was bullshit*. The organization had grown, but I was the one who'd let myself get swept up in the waves. I put everything I had—my time, my money, my legal expertise—into our program and let my purpose consume me. And it was a sacrifice I was happy to make.

A sacrifice I owed.

"Where was I..." I murmured, lifting my plastic cup a little higher. "Next steps can be frightening, but they're the only way forward, and wherever those steps lead, remember you have the whole of the Blooms family behind you." My lips pulled into a soft, tight smile. "Cheers."

"Cheers!" The group saluted and then broke into celebration.

I sipped on sparkling grape juice, as was the house's tradition. Every milestone. Every graduation. We celebrated with sparkling grape juice and trays of lasagna from Larry's Lookout, a local favorite restaurant just south of Carmel Cove, named for the man who inspired this whole town and made everyone feel like family.

For the next hour, I made my way through the crowd as it spilled into every room on the main floor of the house, making sure to talk to everyone for the one night every six months that I left my office and my work to socialize. Meanwhile, half the time, my brain tried to drag me back to all the prep work I needed to do for the new residents who'd be arriving the following week.

It was never ending—the influx of women who needed this place and our help. As soon as spots opened up, they were filled. And each time I came out of my administrative cave to celebrate, to watch as the residents who'd come here as broken as my sister finally be able to fearlessly embrace a new life and better future, I was reminded of every reason I did this. *For them*.

I congratulated the seven of the eight graduates again, hugging them and wishing them well. Out of the eight, Holly, Christina, Michelle, and Kendra were leaving Blooms for their next chapter; the other four—including Kenzie—were staying in the house.

Another six months of being in proximity to her.

I knew the rules. I wrote the damn rules. It was off-the-charts inappropriate to even fantasize about one of our residents, and if there were a way to put my thoughts in handcuffs, I'd do it. Unfortunately, there were no shackles strong enough to restrain my mind from wanting the damn woman.

So, since the day she'd moved in, I'd buried myself in work, continued to avoid most of the social gatherings, and kept all contact to a professional minimum—all of which was no different for me from my norm.

Yet, there was a difference. On the inside, the attraction I felt for her rooted like a seed, and every glance of her was like the fuel of sunshine, every conversation like welcome rain.

But desire could grow all it wanted, I'd sooner let it strangle me than act out of character—out of bounds with a woman who was under my protection.

“Nice job,” my sister's voice crawled over my shoulder, gripping me with a welcome distraction.

I'd made my rounds and shifted into the far corner of the room, finally eating a small plate of lasagna now that everyone had their fill.

I turned, scraping the last bite together on my fork. “The speeches were better when you gave them.” I shoved the bite into my mouth.

Addy had been the one to give that speech up until four years ago. Between the Blooms non-profit expanding into the city, her role on the board of the Butterfly Foundation, a charity supporting victims of trafficking and domestic violence, and her growing family... hell, she wasn't my sister; she was a superhero.

Addy rolled her eyes. “Bullshit. I'm always talking; your reserved words of encouragement carry a greater weight. Everyone knows you're the real guardian angel behind this house.”

I grunted, disagreeing but not in the mood for an argument that would make no difference.

“Does he know?” I changed subjects.

“Dammit.” She folded her arms and gave me a flat stare.

I shrugged. “You only cry when you're pregnant.”

She was stubbornly silent for another second before rambling, “Can you believe they call it a geriatric pregnancy? *Geriatric*, Zeke. I'm thirty-eight—we're thirty-eight. How would you feel if someone called you geriatric?”

I chuckled. “I've been called worse.”

She scoffed. “No, you haven't. You're a saint.”

I rolled my eyes. I had been called worse, and I hadn't always been a saint. College. Law school. The Zeke Williams who'd lived on the East Coast during those years had been anything but. He'd been blissfully ignorant and entitled, and he'd learned his lesson. There was nothing more sobering than watching your twin almost die—than knowing that if you'd just been around more, been more involved, more astute—you never would've let it get to this point.

I'd lived my life only for myself up until that moment when Ace and I pulled her beaten body out of that burning car. She hadn't been breathing. We thought we were too late. And like every other person who only resorted to prayer in times of utter desperation, I didn't just pray for God to save her, I bargained.

If you let her wake up, I swear I'll never be selfish again. I swear I'll give the rest of my life to saving others... if you just save her.

And then she'd coughed in Ace's arms, air filling her lungs just as surely as a weight started to fill mine. Yes, the bargain had been made, but to learn what her fiancé had done... to learn how many other women this happened to—how many who didn't survive it. *How many who had nowhere safe to turn.* Forget the bargain, the weight in my chest made it impossible to breathe.

I had to help them. Each woman who came to Blooms was an inhale of oxygen. Each woman who left strong, stable, and empowered, an exhale of relief. It was only by helping them that I was able to breathe. *To live.*

"And no, I haven't told him yet because I was just at the doctor's this afternoon and confirmed it," Addy said, dragging her fingers through her hair. "I'm going to tell him tomorrow once we're on the ship—assuming I don't cancel the cruise first thing in the morning."

"You have to go," I ordered.

"I know, but with the new house opening in the city last week, the new residents coming in two weeks, and now this..." Her hands went to her stomach.

"You deserve a vacation. Plus, the boys will revolt if you cancel."

That made her laugh. Unlucky for both her and Ace, their two boys, Axel and Aaron, had inherited both their parents' penchant for severe stubbornness.

"And what about you? When are you going to take a vacation since the last one you took was... never."

"I took one last year."

“Last year? You took a vacation to open up your office in town. It’s not a vacation when you’re taking a break from work only to do more work,” she accused. “Don’t make me force you.”

I tensed. After how many years working as both the COO and legal counsel for Blooms, I’d opened up a small office in town. *Zeke Williams, Esq.* I hadn’t done it for myself; I’d done it for Blooms. The house was quickly running out of space, and I had a feeling that within the year, my office here would be on the chopping block. Add to that, I’d been living in the apartment above the office space downtown when my landlord told me he was listing the building for sale, and it was a no brainer. I no longer had to worry about rent, and I had more room to work.

“I don’t need a vacation, Addy, you know that. This is my life, not just some job.”

It was a calling—a purpose.

“I know it’s your life. Everyone does. You’re here from dawn until dusk seven days a week. But what about the rest of your life, Zeke...”

“You’re starting to sound like Eve,” I teased.

Our younger sister had always been a hopeless romantic—a condition only exacerbated when she’d fallen in love with her husband, Miles, and found her own happy ending. I swore, not a week went by when she didn’t ask me to come visit her and the kids next door, only to introduce me to one of her new—*single*—yoga students.

The last thing I needed was to be set up by my baby sister.

“Have you used the gym membership I got you last Christmas?”

“I—”

“More than twice.”

Shit.

I exhaled. “Isn’t it enough that I take time to work out regularly in my apartment?”

“No,” she replied flatly. Only my twin was able to give me shit like this—and she did; if there was one thing anyone in this town would say about Addison Covington, it was that she didn’t hold back, especially when she was fighting for someone she cared about, which in my case was a double-edged sword.

“At least hire an assistant to help you with Blooms,” Addy begged, returning to her latest plea that I’d heard countless times over the last month after the newest Blooms location opened. Now, I was managing the operation

of three safe houses with the same resources I'd had when it was just one.

Every once in a while, one of the girls would help me for a few months while they lived at the house, but it was hard to unload a lot of things when I knew I'd have to take them back once they graduated.

"I can handle it."

"Maybe, but you shouldn't have to. And now with the work you're doing for private clients—don't argue with me." She wagged her finger when I started to protest. "I just talked to Callie the other day, and to no one's surprise, she told me how you just can't seem to say no to helping people."

I shook my head and sighed. I was going to have a word with my paralegal... which would make no difference except in principle because Callie Lockhard cared just as much about everyone as I did. She was kind and smart and dedicated, and her only downfall was that she was friends with Addy because Callie's husband, Reed, worked for Ace at Covington Security. If there was any concern about my well-being, Callie had zero qualms about roping my sister into it.

"She can't say no either," I replied, breaking from the conversation to throw my plate in the trash. When I returned, I was faced with Addy's scolding look. She'd only acquired that expression once she'd had kids, but somehow, it ended up leveled at me.

"Zeke..."

I took hold of her shoulders and met her firm stare. With her blue hair and smaller stature, it was really only our eyes that marked us as similar. And our stubbornness.

"I can take care of myself, Addy."

"I know you can, but will you?" she charged. "Because you seem to only be concerned about taking care of everyone else."

I exhaled slowly and promised, "I will."

It was probably a promise I shouldn't have made, but it was the only way to get her not to worry. "You should get going. It's almost nine, which is the universal geriatric bedtime."

She let out a choked cry and swatted my arm. "You're a geriatric jerk."

I chuckled. "Love you."

Her eyes squinted at me. "You're kicking me out so you can go back to work, aren't you?"

There was one stack of paperwork that needed to be completed for the women who were moving out next week and another stack for the next group

coming in. Not to mention, there were two grants I wanted the organization to apply for, and two letters of recommendation I needed to write for two women who'd graduated from the house last year and were going back to college.

I pressed a kiss to her forehead and ignored her question. "Enjoy your vacation and congratulations."

"If you don't have an assistant by the time we're back from our cruise, I'm going to hire one for you," she warned, and then her face softened when she added, "Love you, too."

I had to hope that by the time she came back from vacation, she'd be too busy catching up on her own life and the prospect of a new addition to their family that she'd forget to worry about mine.

CHAPTER 2



ZEKE

My office was a glorified closet—a small room near the end of the main hallway in the house that terminated in the kitchen. It had been a pantry in the original footprint of the home when we were growing up here with our grandparents. After Blooms' second year in operation, Addy and I remodeled the back of the house to add a commercial kitchen, and the pantry had become our shared office; that had only been for a few years until she moved in with Ace, and since then, I'd taken over the sole desk that was two sizes too big for the room and the singular bookcase filled with all my reference books and law reviews.

With a sigh, I picked up a fresh pile of folders from the middle of my desk, each belonging to one of the new residents, flipped through them and then set them on my chair to be dealt with later.

After saying goodbye to Addy, I'd helped the rest of the girls clean up from the celebration. With everyone chipping in, it hadn't taken more than thirty minutes to put everything back to rights. After that, they'd headed upstairs for the night, and I'd come here.

Just for a little bit, I told myself. If I could organize my desk tonight, I could spend tomorrow morning on the laundry list of things I was behind on instead.

My office in town was much neater than this, but only because I hardly ever worked out of it. Callie manned the desk there, handling the details for my private clients and any cases for the Blooms residents. Unless I was meeting with a client, my presence in town existed on the fringes of my time at Blooms.

I reached for another haphazard stack of papers sitting right in front of my

computer monitor. As soon as I tipped them upright, a Post-It fluttered free. I plucked it up before it reached the ground and read the note.

I'm so sorry. I have to work a late shift tonight at the center. —Kenzie

My body tightened. Even her handwriting was a combination between soft and strong, and the note itself? A testament to one more person who couldn't say no when someone needed her.

In all our years of doing this, I couldn't say I'd ever met someone who was so determined to get better—to succeed. She went to every counseling session we offered. Every adjunctive therapy program. Every guest seminar. All that on top of helping around the house and working her cleaning gigs.

If I didn't bury myself in all the behind-the-scenes work for the business, Kenzie would've been unavoidable. And there was a second—a single second—when she'd come into my office to get my approval for her cleaning job when it had been on the tip of my tongue to offer her a position as my assistant instead.

But it was only for a second.

A momentary lapse of conscience fueled by an all-nighter of work and Addy's nagging because instantly I'd imagined other ways she could assist me at my desk. Namely, her soft lips on my rock-hard cock. And at that point, I immediately scrawled my signature on the form for Kenzie to clean the local coffee shop in town—willing to approve anything to get her out of my sight.

From there, she'd added cleaning Fleurtations and the Carmel Bakery to her schedule and finally, the community center. I approved it all because I wanted to encourage her, but now, I had to wonder if I'd gone too far—if I'd let her overextend herself for my own selfish, self-preserving reasons; the more she worked, the less she was in the house and the less chance there was of seeing or speaking to the woman who made my blood heat.

If those were really my reasons, they gloriously backfired.

Business owners wanted their property cleaned either before or after working hours, and that meant Kenzie was leaving Blooms in the early mornings when I arrived or returning to the house later in the evening, right before curfew when I was leaving.

There were a handful of rules strictly enforced for any residents of the house, and a ten o'clock curfew was one of them.

Out of all the minutes in a day, fate always double-booked our comings and goings through the front door into the same sixty seconds. So, instead of

avoiding her, more often than not, Kenzie was the first face I saw when I started my day and the last one I glimpsed before I went home.

In any other world, those lavender eyes and warm smile would be the perfect way to bookend an entire day, but in this world—my world—they were nothing short of pure torture.

I crumbled the note and froze, hearing a soft crash from the kitchen. Not enough to make it to the upper levels of the house, but enough to reach my office.

What the...

I strode into the hall and made it to the kitchen in seconds. All the lights were off, only the open fridge illuminated the space.

And her.

“Zeke,” Kenzie squeaked from where she kneeled on the floor.

My gaze snapped to hers. Her eyes that were normally a shade of violet in the sun were now a foggy blue in the low fridge light. Her pale-blond hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun, and she had on a pair of black scrub pants and tee, both of which had been donated to the house, and a pair of sneakers.

After a long day, it was damned criminal just how beautiful she looked in the refrigerator light.

It only took a moment to see what had happened. There was a grocery bag on the counter and a dozen small yogurts scattered on the floor, one of them damaged in the fall, leaving a clump of spilled yogurt on the tile.

“Sorry for the noise,” Kenzie said, her voice carrying that husk it always did at the end of the day when her energy was flagging. *Something else I shouldn’t notice about her.* “I thought I could carry all of them—”

“Let me help.” I covered the space between us in two steps, taking the yogurt cups from her hands before she could protest.

Her shoulders were slumped. Her eyes hooded. And her grateful smile didn’t quite reach her eyes like it normally would. *How many businesses had she cleaned today? Three? Four?* I was going to have to say something to her about work. Residents were encouraged to have part-time jobs, but not at the expense of their health. I understood wanting to get back on her feet—wanting to start that new life, but this was too much.

Recovery was fragile even for the strongest of people. She needed to give herself some grace.

One after another, I loaded the small cups into my big palms, carrying

twice as many as she was able to the fridge. As I stacked them onto the top shelf, I noticed they were all plain Greek yogurt.

“You know, they have larger sizes of this yogurt you can get,” I said. “It’s cheaper to buy the big ones.”

Most of the women took part-time jobs after the third month in order to start building their savings. One of the first lessons we offered was on financial security and the importance of having a safety net. I wasn’t in the class, but I’d overheard Kenzie reviewing the information with some of the other women after the fact, adamant that it was important to be frugal until that safety net was built.

“It’s okay, I like the small ones,” Kenzie said as I took the remaining few from her hands and added them inside.

My brow creased. *Strange*. The Kenzie I’d overheard would’ve absolutely insisted on the large yogurt if it saved money, so why had she bought the more expensive ones?

The answer was none of my business.

She took a paper towel from the roll and crouched to wipe up the mess on the floor.

I should’ve let it go, but I couldn’t. “Are you worried about someone taking your food? *Has* someone been taking your food? Because we have firm policies, and if someone is disrespecting them—”

“No,” Kenzie claimed, frantically shaking her head and scrambling to stand just as I’d started to close the fridge door. “It’s just easier—” she broke off with a cry, her head whacking into the door with a sound that made my entire body cringe.

“Shit.” I reached for her, catching her as she reeled from the blow. Heat burst over my skin the instant my hands closed on her shoulders, the urge to pull her close as powerful and destructive as a wrecking ball through my restraint. “I’ve got you.” I steadied her. It was a mistake to hold her, but it was a danger to let her go. “Look at me. Are you okay?”

She nodded, but her eyes blinked rapidly so the tears wouldn’t fall. *Dammit*. I didn’t want her to hold back her tears, but I wasn’t in a position to comfort her. Not really. *Not at all*.

I lifted my fingers to her chin and tipped her head up. A lighter touch but still just as dangerous as her gaze met mine, something else swirling underneath the wash of tears that made her lips part.

I should pull away. She should pull away, too. But neither of us did—as

though we both just wanted this single moment to take for ourselves.

But that was impossible. There was nothing about Kenzie Barrett that could be mine.

“You sure?” My traitorous voice turned husky as I dropped my hand and drew back.

“Yeah.” Verbal confirmation this time, except when she went to nod, her body started to sway.

“Or not,” I declared low and reached for her again. “You need to sit.” But the nearest chair was at my desk. “I’m going to carry you to my office, okay?”

I heard her breath catch and part of me hoped she’d protest, but she didn’t.

“Yeah, sorry.”

I ignored her apology. It was unnecessary.

“Here we go.” In one smooth motion, I lifted her into my arms, the whole of her resting against my chest. Gritting my teeth, I buried the groan that formed deep in my chest and carried her down the hall.

Six months I’d managed to contain our distance... and in six minutes, some spilled yogurt managed to decimate it.

“Do you feel dizzy? Lightheaded? I can call Gwen,” I offered and carefully lowered her into my desk chair, remaining crouched in front of her.

Gwen was a local friend in town and a nurse at Carmel General Hospital. She donated her time to Blooms whenever the women needed anything, and she’d be here on a dime if I called.

“No, I’m fine.” Kenzie gingerly pressed her fingers to her head, wincing when she landed on the injured spot.

“Let me,” I said gruffly and brushed her hand aside. *My second mindless mistake for the night.* Her hair was so much softer than I’d imagined. Spun silk dyed the hue of morning sunshine. As soon as I reached the lump on her skull, she winced. My jaw locked. The way her hair was pulled back probably wasn’t helping. “May I?” I hooked my finger under her hair tie.

“O-Okay.” She kept her eyes averted, staring to the side—to the mess on my desk rather than straight at me.

It was for the best because if she looked hard enough, she’d be able to see that my dick was solid as steel in my jeans.

It was fucked up—being turned on right now while she had a golf ball swelling on her head. But fuck me, I’d just had to hold the woman I’d

fantasized about for six months. I could control a lot of things—like my firm decision to never act on my desire—but I couldn't control my fucking anatomy.

I carefully unwound the tie, careful not to get any of her hair knotted in the process.

“You're good at that,” she murmured once it was free, the rasp in her voice making my blood thrum.

“Addy and I were partially responsible for raising Eve, so I know my way around a hair tie,” I murmured, sliding the elastic onto my wrist and massaging her scalp for a selfish second, careful to avoid the lump. It was only for a few moments before the first moan slid from her lips, sweet and sticky like caramel the way it clung to my senses. *Fuck.*

Before she could make the sound again, I released her and moved back. Her head tipped up, her hooded eyes meeting mine before sinking lower. I felt them reach my chest. My abdomen. My waist.

“Sit here for a minute. I'm going to grab a bag of peas,” I ground out and fled to the kitchen, the heat of her stare lingering on my hard dick like it had been seared on there. “Shit,” I muttered.

I needed a breather. *No, I needed a cold fucking shower, but that was going to have to wait.* I had to make sure she was okay. I went first to the paper bag on the counter, unloading the rest of her groceries for her before pulling a bag of peas from the freezer.

When I got back to my office, she had one elbow propped on my desk, her forehead resting in her hands.

“Kenzie?”

She looked up briefly, a flush stealing into her cheeks.

“You sure you don't want me to call Gwen?” I asked, handing her the bag of peas.

“I'm fine, really. Thank you.” She gave me a smile and pressed the frozen pack to her head. “I'm sorry about this mess. It's just been a long day—”

Speaking of... “How many places did you clean today?”

She gulped. “Four.”

I knew it.

“And I'm sorry I couldn't make it to the celebration tonight. I was devastated when they told me yesterday they needed me to do the whole building. Holly and Michelle know how upset I was, and you know I'd really never missed any event at the house... ever...”

“Why did the center want you to stay late?” I didn’t really have a right to know since she wasn’t out past curfew, but I couldn’t stop the question from pushing through my lips.

“They have three events tomorrow, so they needed additional rooms cleaned—”

“Do you think you’re overdoing it?” I rasped, not needing to hear anymore.

Something flashed in her eyes, making them appear bright blue for a second. “No. I need to work,” she declared, her soft-spoken persona cracking to reveal something stronger. “I need to save money, so I can get my own place.”

“I understand, and we want that for you, but we don’t want you to jeopardize your recovery because of it.” I thought saying *we* would create some distance for the way I cared about her well-being. It didn’t. I finished feeling just as protective over her as when I’d lifted her in my arms.

“I’m not. I promise,” she insisted and stood, looking at me like she dared me to try and stop her. “I just need to do this.”

There was something there. After a decade of being in this business—of working with many women to file restraining orders against spouses or families—I recognized a secret when I saw it. The thing was, I respected the privacy of the women who lived here; they already had to share so much during the application process about their health and lives that whatever parts of their past were left private, I honored.

At least, I had up until right now when my baser, protective instincts kicked up a notch, wanting to know what drove her to the brink of exhaustion.

It was more than recovering from a prescription pill addiction. More than starting over and not losing her entire life to the habit. I wanted to know so I could help her, but I tamped down the urge. I had to. She was a resident. Treating her any differently—treating her as anything more—was completely unacceptable.

“Okay, I just want to make sure you’re not overworking yourself.”

“You mean like you do?” Her hand slapped over her mouth as soon as the words were out.

One of my brows lifted. I hadn’t expected that.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean—I’m just exhausted, and that’s none of my business,” she rambled as she approached me and shoved the bag of peas

against my chest. “Thank you for everything. My head is fine. Nothing some Tylenol won’t fix.”

I didn’t stop her from rushing around me and out of my office because I had no reason to. *No good reason to. Plenty of bad ones, though.*

I remained rooted in place, staring at my desk and all the work that needed to be done for long minutes before deciding to call it a night. There was no way I could be in this room right now and not think about her sitting there, the soft moans she made when I let down her hair, or the way she let herself look at me the way I had to stop myself from looking at her.

This was a hiccup. An awkward half hour that we’d both forget about come tomorrow morning when we both went back to the way our lives had been for the last six months. Like ships passing in the night, we weren’t meant to end up on the same shore.

CHAPTER 3



KENZIE

“Hello, Callie?” I called, slowly pushing through the door into Zeke’s law office in town.

I’d passed by his building countless times, but I’d never been inside. I had no reason to, and now that I did, it almost felt forbidden. Or maybe it was because Zeke lived in the apartment upstairs. It was one thing to imagine what the gorgeous man who worked like the wizard behind the curtain at Blooms did every night when he finally went home... it was another to be steps away from where my imaginings happened.

Imaginings that shouldn’t exist in any capacity. Not only was Zeke Williams every kind of off-limits, but I had a goal I needed to stay focused on—a purpose for why I was here and everything I did. And I wouldn’t let anything—especially an unexpected attraction—distract me.

No matter how good his hands had felt when they touched me last week nor how safe his arms had felt when he held me.

Nothing was about me anymore.

The small bell dinged again as the door shut.

The desk to my right and the chairs in the small waiting room to my left were both white and modern. The large plant in the corner was the only burst of color in the front space, but I couldn’t tell if it was real or fake.

The door in front of me opened, and Callie’s blonde head poked through, her blue eyes lighting up with when she saw me.

“Kenzie? Hi.” She stepped through, a big smile welcoming me and settling a few of the butterflies swirling in my stomach.

You have to do this, Kenzie. For Jake.

“I think Zeke should already be at the house by now—”

“Oh, I’m not here to see him,” I said quickly, tugging my bag higher on my shoulder, the strap starting to dig under the weight of my cleaning supplies. I should’ve dropped them off at Roasters first, since that was where I was headed next to clean, but I didn’t want to risk her leaving for the day. I’d been so tied up at the house all day with my duties there that I’d left a little later than I wanted.

“Here.” She motioned for me to follow her. “Let’s chat in my office.”

“Oh.” My eyes flicked to the desk out front and then back to her. “Okay.”

“Sometimes I still sit out there during business hours or if I know a client is coming in, but I have an actual office to work out of,” she explained, leading me down the short hall to the first door on the left. “Come in. What’s going on? Is this about the yoga event at the Beach Bash in August? I know you volunteered, but I can help if you need.”

I smiled. “Thank you so much. I’ll let you know if I need any help, but that’s not why I’m here.”

Callie and I both took the same yoga class with Eve at the Yoga Garden; Eve was Zeke and Addy’s younger sister. She’d opened the studio a few years ago and offered free classes to all the Blooms residents. And every summer, the town of Carmel held a community event along the main stretch of beach. There were food trucks and beach volleyball, games for kids, and this year, Eve secured an event spot to host a massive group yoga session; I’d volunteered to teach the class because Eve was pregnant, and her due date was too close to the event for comfort.

“Oh, okay.” Callie blinked. “What’s going on?”

Just breathe.

I knew I could trust Callie. I knew I could trust almost everyone I’d met since leaving the city and coming to Carmel, but for some reason, when it came to this moment, I struggled.

When it came to sharing just a tiny bit of the only important thing in my life, I struggled.

For seven months after I’d left the hospital, I’d done everything I was told. I’d completed the mandatory one-month outpatient recovery program for addiction. Then, I’d applied to Blooms to continue my path... *and to get away from my past*. At Blooms, I’d done everything that was recommended. Every meeting. Every counseling session. Every workshop. And all of it had built to this—the next step. But it was one I couldn’t take on my own, and that thought made my stomach turn, knowing the fate of my future—the fate

of the only thing I cared about in my life, rested on someone else.

I took a deep breath, feeling my hand sweat around the handle of my bag, and said, “I was wondering if you could direct me on where to find information on custody laws in California.”

Callie was an open book, so there was no mistaking the way her eyes widened.

No one in Carmel knew about Jake, and until I was ready to do this, no one could. It was too risky. If Stan found out... I swallowed over the lump in my throat. I couldn't think about that. About him.

After a moment, Callie collected herself and answered, “California is an equal rights state, so the custody is always evenly split unless there's a reason for it not to be.”

“She's a danger to herself and to him. I think that's been made abundantly clear.”

I squeezed my eyes shut for an instant, forcing myself not to cry as Stan's words ripped the scab off my open wound. “Yeah.” My head bobbed. “I'm... aware of that.”

“Here, let me check here...” She brushed past me out of the room, and I followed her to the end of the hall, through another door, and stopped short.

We were in a second office. *Zeke's office.*

The sparse, spacious room looked nothing like the cramped space he occupied at Blooms. The desk here was larger—space for a computer and for papers. There were bookcases lining two of the walls, their shelves mostly empty, and on the back wall, between the two windows that faced the small backyard, hung his framed diploma from law school.

This office was so much nicer than the one at the house—*so why wasn't he working here?*

I looked for Callie, finding her hovering over a box on the floor filled with law books that had yet to be unpacked.

“That's what I thought...” She shook her head and sighed. Straightening, she faced me again. “Most of Zeke's stuff is still in his office at Blooms because he refuses to take any time to get himself in order...” She trailed off, realizing she was getting off track. “I think all of his custody rulings are still on the shelves at the house.”

“Oh, okay.”

“I can look up some things online for you. Rules. Court cases. Procedures for custody filing and appeal...”

She wanted more of an explanation, but all I could manage was, “Thank you. I’d really appreciate that.” My fingers clutched the strap of my bag like my life depended on it.

“Of course.” Callie walked over and reached for my arm. “I’m happy to help, and this is the kind of thing I love to do.” She smiled. “I have to detour over to Blooms on my way home to drop some stuff off for Zeke anyway, so I can grab the books for you, then if you’ll be there...”

She trailed off, taking stock of the scrubs I had on and my massive cleaning bag.

I grimaced. “I’m actually on my way to clean Roasters and after that, I picked up another cleaning job at the Iron Works gym.”

“Oh, I’ve driven by that a few times!” she exclaimed. “Is it nice there? Reed seems to think it is.”

I nodded. “Really nice. It’s twenty-four-seven access, so the owner said business is booming. Anyway, he wants me to clean it in the evening when there’s less of a crowd.” *And I am going to have to bust my butt to make sure I am back to the house by curfew, but I couldn’t turn down the job.* I needed the money. I needed to build my life back up as quickly as possible. “Anyway, you’ll probably be gone by the time I get back...”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I’ll just stack them on his desk for you to grab.” She waved away my concern. “And then once I have my online research compiled, I’ll put it on a flash drive for you. It should only take me a few days—a week tops.”

“That would be perfect.” My exhale rushed out with a whoosh.

She didn’t respond right away, and that was how I knew there was another question coming—one I was going to struggle to answer.

“I’m sorry, I just have to ask, Kenz... is there a reason you aren’t going to Zeke about this?” she asked softly, her eyes searching mine.

Aside from what happened in his office a week ago? Or aside from the fact that I’d crushed on the man who worked tirelessly behind the scenes at Blooms like he was its own guardian angel?

It was wholly unexpected—the attraction I felt from the moment we met at my interview—and I immediately ignored it for a million and one reasons, not the least of which was that my life was a disaster, my future on the line, and all of it... in his hands.

I didn’t know him then. I didn’t know the way Zeke worked himself to the bone for Blooms and everyone in the house. I didn’t know he’d given up

everything—given up law school to help his sister. Didn't know that he'd finished his degree in the sparse hours of the night only when everyone else was taken care of. Didn't know that he provided all legal services to the women in the house at no charge. And I didn't know that my stomach would continue to flutter every time our eyes met or the rush of heat that would occur any time we happened to touch.

I didn't know any of it, and it was for the best. If I knew then what I knew now about Zeke Williams, I would've had a harder time resisting him.

Harder but not impossible. There were other, more important reasons to ignore the attraction I felt. Actually, only one reason. The most important reason. *Jake.* I couldn't have one misstep if I was ever going to see him again.

"You know he has a lot on his plate, Callie," I said with a sad smile. "He doesn't even have time to set up his real office..." I flicked my eyes around the room one more time and shook my head. "At some point, I will bring this to him, but I'm not there yet, and I'd rather have all my ducks in a row when I do."

"Okay." She bit her lip, her eyes scanning my expression. "You know you can trust him, right?"

That was the crux of it. I *did* trust him, just not completely. Not yet. And it had nothing to do with Zeke and everything to do with me—everything to do with Stan and the life I'd led for the last eight years.

"Of course." My chin dipped with the weight of my half-truth.

"Okay. I just can't file anything for you or give you legal advice. I can only give you the literature. Zeke would have to..."

"I know," I assured her calmly and repeated my promise, "And I'll talk to him about what's going on when I'm ready, but for right now, I just want to read all the right information for myself, so I understand what needs to be done."

At some point, I was going to have to bring this to him. My greatest vulnerability. But that point wasn't now. I would do whatever it took to get Jake back. *Anything.* And I wasn't ready to trust Zeke until I was sure he'd fight just as hard—as boundlessly—for my son as I would.

"Okay." She released my arm. "I'll have those books waiting for you when you get home."

"Thank you." Goose bumps prickled my skin, and I checked my watch. "I've got to run."

“Yeah. Go. And if you need anything for the Beach Bash, let me know.”

“I will,” I said over my shoulder and beelined for the door.

“Kenzie...”

I paused and looked back at her.

“I just want you to know that if you need anything or want to talk, I’m here.” Her kind smile made my chest squeeze. “I know you have a lot of resources at the house, but I just mean as a friend.” Her eyes dropped for a second. “I know how hard going through recovery can be. My sister went through it... and an abusive relationship. Not that it’s the same for everyone,” she rambled, her compassion shining like the sun through a thicket of clouds.

“Thank you,” I choked out, fleeing down the hall before she could see the tear that managed to escape.

As soon as I stepped outside, a raindrop splattered on my nose.

Crap.

Clouds darkened the sky, the low rumble in the distance an ominous threat. It was that time of the summer when storms came on hard and fast. I wasn’t all that worried; my work for the night was indoors, but if it was still raining by the time I left the gym, I’d have to grab a taxi, and I didn’t want to spend the money.

Reaching the edge of the sidewalk, I switched my bag of supplies to my other shoulder, checked for traffic, and then jogged across the street to the famed coffee shop, catching its red-haired owner on her way out.

“Hey, Laurel.”

“Kenzie! Hi,” Laurel greeted me with a hug like I was family rather than just the woman who cleaned her business. “How’s everything going?”

“Good.” I beamed and nodded, afraid that she might’ve seen me come out of Zeke’s office.

I cared about these people; I truly did. The way they welcomed a recovering drug addict without judgment or bias brought tears to my eyes on so many occasions. They never once looked at me like I was broken or something to be pitied. But none of them knew the extent of what I’d been through and the danger that still existed. None of them knew that dragging my body out of a narcotics addiction was the easy part of this battle.

“Oh, good. I left you a plate of lemon poppyseed muffins on the counter because I know they’re your favorite.”

“I think they’re everyone’s favorite,” I countered wryly. The lemon poppyseed muffins at Ocean Roasters were their most popular pastry and the

first thing to sell out every morning. *And she'd saved some for me.* Once again, my chest squeezed.

“Well, that might be true, but these are yours to share as you wish.” She winked.

I laughed. “Thank you.”

“Alright, I’ll get out of your hair before the rain claims us both.” She gave me another squeeze. “See you at yoga next week!”

I nodded and waved as she darted over to the SUV parked up the block with its four-ways on. Probably her husband, Eli, and their kids.

My throat immediately felt tighter. Their children were a few years younger than Jake, but seeing them still gutted me. So, I quickly let myself inside the building, sagging against the door just as the rain started to barrel down.

The people here... the friends I’d made... they were so good. They were the sun that shone even while it rained. But my life was the storm. It didn’t matter how brightly the good glimmered when the clouds rolled in. And as much as I wanted to open up and let everyone in—trust everyone to ease my burden—I wouldn’t put them at risk.

I reached up and swiped the wetness from my cheeks.

I hadn’t seen Jake in seven months. Seven whole months without his toothy smile and amazing bear hugs. Seven whole months that he’d been alone with my ex. But I couldn’t focus on that now or I’d break—crumble completely under the weight of guilt. I had to focus forward. One step at a time. Even if it hurt. Even if it meant trusting. Even if it meant asking for help from the man I couldn’t stop thinking about.

I’m coming for you, baby. I promise.

CHAPTER 4



ZEKE

“Kenzie?” I stopped on a dime just inside my office. My hand resting on the light switch that was already flipped up.

I’d made it halfway up the block—lost in thought—when I realized I’d left my gym bag next to my desk. A sad snapshot of my life considering I’d been on my way to the gym.

After the three check-up texts Addy had sent me while she and her family were on vacation, I figured I should at least use her gift card so she couldn’t give me anymore grief about not taking care of myself. Plus, it was getting harder and harder to focus late at night now that I kept imagining Kenzie in my chair, her eyes upturned, and her face level with my dick.

But this time, I wasn’t imagining her.

Not with her hair down, twisted in a thick rope and damp from a fresh shower. Her loose-fitting Covington Security tee (a donation from the business to all new residents) hung from her shoulders all the way down to her thighs. *Her bare thighs.*

This time, it was my face that was level with her waist; she’d pulled my desk chair over to the bookcase just inside the door and used it to search the upper shelves.

Fuck. I gulped.

The pre-workout I’d taken fifteen minutes ago screamed to life in my veins. Adrenaline set my attraction on fire, the combination combusting through me.

Was she wearing anything under the tee? Shorts? She had to be wearing shorts.

But what if she wasn’t?

Underwear. She had to be wearing underwear.

I groaned, my pulse galloping faster. *But what if she wasn't...*

Fucking fuck.

“Zeke!” Kenzie cried out in surprise, shoving away from the bookcase in a scramble to get down. But my desk chair wasn't a stable ladder, so when it rocked, it pitched her forward, and sent her tumbling right into my arms.

What in God's name had I done to deserve the torture of holding this woman twice in the span of one week?

My jaw wrenched tight as I steadied her from the chair rolling back. Her feet clamored for the floor, and she apologized profusely into my chest. Meanwhile, it took everything I had to keep my desire from tearing through my skin. Last week was different. Yeah, I'd carried her, but she hadn't been flushed to me. *Not like this.*

Like this, it didn't matter how loose or tight her damn shirt was because I could feel every soft curve. The swells of her breasts to my chest. The dip of her waist under my hands.

Her head tipped up, and smoky violet eyes met mine. The pink in her cheeks bloomed brighter, and her lips parted slowly, the catch of her breath a blatant admission that I wasn't the only one affected right now.

A lifetime ago I would've read everything about her expression—from her glossy eyes to the swipe of her tongue over her lips—as an invitation to kiss her. Now? *Never.*

“Are you alright?” I asked and pushed her away from me, making sure she was steady on her feet before I completely let her go.

“Yes, I'm so sorry.” She cupped her hand over her mouth, her voice laden with dismay.

“Don't apologize,” I ordered and shifted around her to grab my desk chair.

Using it as a shield to hide my hard dick, I rolled it over to where it usually sat and remained standing behind it, my hands resting on the back.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, scrutinizing her.

I never kept my office locked. There were locking file cabinets where I kept some current case files, as well as all of the resident files, but that was the extent of the information I protected. I'd never had a reason to worry about anything else. No one came to my office unless they were looking for me. *Until now.*

“I'm sorry. I was just looking for some books,” she stammered, brushing

her hair over her shoulder.

I tensed. The wet strands had gotten locked between us, dampening the front of her shirt to the point where I could now clearly see the outline of one nipple pebbled against the fabric. I sucked in a sharp breath, my dick punching against the front of my jeans. *Dammit*. I wished I could just say good night and walk away—or let her walk away—but I’d found her poking around my office while I wasn’t here, and that was the kind of thing I couldn’t just let go without explanation.

“Law books?” My brow arched. There were bookcases in the living room that had all sorts of novels, but the only kinds of books in my office were anthologies of case reviews.

“Yeah.” She was nervous, the way she shifted her weight and kept pulling her lip between her teeth. *Was she lying?* “Callie said she was going to leave a few out for me to grab tonight when I was done cleaning, but I didn’t see them. I thought maybe she marked them on the shelves or something...”

I sucked in a breath and exhaled a curse. “Shit.” I straightened and released the chair, striding around my desk toward the bookcase. “That’s my fault.”

Instantly, I realized exactly why she was here.

I’d gone over to pick up dinner from the Carmel Pub earlier, and when I’d come back, there’d been a stack of documents sitting on my desk Callie said she’d drop off for me to review, but there’d also been a stack of books on the very corner. I assumed Callie must’ve pulled them looking for something. I’d been a little surprised because it wasn’t like her to leave things out, but I figured maybe she’d been in a rush.

Or maybe she’d left them out for someone else to read.

“I saw the stack of books and thought she forgot to put them away, so I stuck them back on the shelves.” I scanned the shelves, trying to recall which four they were. I managed the first two before the heat of her standing next to me made me question myself. “Were these the ones?”

Her shoulders slumped. “I don’t know. She didn’t say, she just said she’d leave out the relevant ones.”

“Relevant to what?”

Her head snapped up, her expression like a deer in headlights.

“It’s not a big deal. I’ll just ask her next week to grab the right ones—”

“Kenzie,” I rasped, now even more curious because she was trying to brush me off.

The molecules of air seemed to buzz with the electricity of our attraction. I gripped the stack of books tighter, my fingers bruising their hard covers.

I dragged my eyes from her, looking at the spines in my hand one more time. My mind flipped through the contents of the law reviews, searching for the thread that connected them all.

And then it hit me.

My gaze whipped back to her, watching the slow bob of her throat as she swallowed hard.

“These all have custody precedent in them,” I said, my voice splintering with a deeper husk.

Was this about a child?

Her child?

It couldn't be, I wanted to protest. We'd had plenty of mothers transition through the house over the years; I wasn't sure there was anything stronger than a mother's will to get better for her child. Some I'd only known about. Some I'd helped in their fight. For safety. For custody. But none had tried to keep it a secret.

Or maybe they had. I guess I wouldn't know.

I watched her eyes drift to the books, in them, a glimmer of desperation like all she wanted was to reach out and snatch them from my hold. But she held back. Why...

Because reaching for them would confirm my assumption. Air whooshed from my lungs when I realized she didn't trust me enough to tell me the truth.

She had a kid.

Suddenly, her selflessness and dedication to helping others shone in a different light.

“Kenz...”

She looked back at me, her cheeks now bright red.

I swore she was going to deny it. I saw the subtle way her spine straightened, and her eyes flicked to the door to flee. This was so important—so personal to her that she was willing to sacrifice what she'd come here for in order to keep it a secret from me.

“Here.” I handed the books to her before she could run.

If she had a child, it wasn't any of my business. These books were here for me—for reference—but they were available to the residents, too. And if this was something she wanted to research privately or with Callie or, hell, even another lawyer, I wasn't here to pry. No one was forced to use me as

their council, and plenty had used others in the past.

This would be no different because she was no different. Something wrenched painfully in my chest at the thought, my heart seeming to hammer out the word *bullshit*. But I ignored it.

“Sorry,” I said gruffly, stepping back and grabbing my gym duffel from the floor. “I just came back for this. I’ll get out of your hair.” I slung it onto my shoulder. “If you have any questions... or anything...” I trailed off, losing myself in her bottomless gaze for a second. “Well, I’m here,” I said, wrapping my hand around the back of my neck. “Good night.”

I would respect that. I didn’t want to, but I would.

I headed for the door when her voice stopped me.

“Zeke.”

I turned. Kenzie looked at me with a mix of wonder and gratitude on her face, and my muscles pulled tight. I’d seen that expression plenty of times before—the one that confessed no one had respected her or her wishes in the past. But though I’d seen it plenty of times, it never quite filled me with rage like it did now.

This woman pushed herself to be there for everyone around her, and tonight was case in point. It was only at ten-goddamn-thirty that she was in here looking for something for herself. *Just like I was.*

“Thank you.”

I couldn’t stop the shudder that ripped through me. I’d been thanked for a helluva lot in my lifetime—a helluva lot that I’d done to help. But this was the first time I could recall being thanked for *not* doing something.

For not overstepping and demanding answers. For not prying. For not taking my position of power in this house and over her to get information I had no right to.

I gritted my teeth and swallowed. I should feel good about it, but I didn’t. All I felt was unworthy. I didn’t want her gratitude. I wanted to know who’d hurt her—who’d broken her trust so damn bad she hesitated to confide in me. *Me.* A man she’d known for six months. A man she’d interacted with and seen help other women who were struggling. A man who did his damndest—who gave his all—to help everyone around him.

I’d never claim to be a saint, but goddamn, I knew I was a good man. *Just not good enough for her to trust.*

My fist balled at my side, wanting nothing more than to reach for her. To promise she could trust me. To promise I’d respect anything she had to tell

me. To promise that I would fix it. But I did none of those things.

“I’m always here to help,” I murmured low, reaching for the door, and then added, “Always.”

And then I spun and strode down the hall and out of the house before the emotions gnawing at my gut made me say something I’d regret.



“TWICE IN ONE DAY. What’s the occasion?”

I looked in the direction of the voice. Benny stood in the corner of the Iron Works gym wiping off the leg press machine.

I chuckled and headed in his direction. “Full moon maybe?”

I hadn’t noticed him—hadn’t noticed any of the other three guys in the room when I’d entered. My body was on autopilot, heading for the barbells, while my mind was stuck on a spin cycle, replaying not only my conversation with Kenzie over and over again, but the truth she wouldn’t admit.

She had a child.

I shouldn’t have walked here wondering how old her kid was. If she had a boy or a girl. *Wondering what the hell kind of man let a woman like Kenzie go...*

The reason she wanted those books was obvious: she wanted custody—at least part of it. With a history of abuse, a judge would’ve given someone else, presumably the child’s father, legal custody over the kid.

“I didn’t know you were a member here,” Benny said, clapping me on the back in greeting.

“I wasn’t,” I admitted. “Addy got me a membership as a gift for Christmas, but I just haven’t been able to make it until now.” I folded my arms. “What are you doing here? Did your brothers kick you out of Covington?”

Benny’s two older brothers were Dex and Ace Covington—Ace as in my sister’s husband, Ace. Their private security firm had a state-of-the-art gym inside it.

“No, but this is closer to home, and with the newborn right now, I get about forty-five minutes before I’m back on duty so Cammie can sleep.”

Benny’s wife, Cambria, did a lot of work with Blooms, including offering one-on-one self-defense training using Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. However, she’d

been out of commission for the last six months because she was pregnant with her and Benny's second boy.

What if Kenzie had a son? What would he look like? Would he have her eyes?

There'd been nothing in her file or application that mentioned a kid—not that we explicitly asked. We needed to know certain personal information to accept applicants into the Blooms program, whether or not the applicant had a child wasn't one of them. We asked for medical histories and records pertaining to their history of abuse or assault. In Kenzie's case, she provided hospital records showing she was admitted for fentanyl addiction and overdose several times over the last five years.

"Sounds like fun," I murmured, fighting to stay focused on the conversation when all I wanted to think about was how I'd missed it.

And why she hid it.

"Exhausting." He laughed. "But worth it. Just wait until you have kids."

I tensed but managed to swing a smile. "I don't know that kids are in my cards, but we'll see."

I was asked about settling down with a wife and kids often enough that the comments more or less rolled off my shoulders, and the twist of regret in my stomach was small enough to ignore.

"You know you can ask for help, right?"

My head cocked. "Help with what?"

"Everything." Benny sighed. "You don't have to be the silent superhero behind the scenes forever. There are plenty of people who'd happily and whole-heartedly step into an organization like Blooms and take some responsibilities off your shoulders."

But would they do it as well as I did? Would they care as much as I did?

Every time I interviewed an applicant, it was like I was walking up to that burning car again, my sister trapped inside. Of course, there was no fire, but the way I felt was still as though it were life or death. Every day I worked the way I did because these women's lives depended on it. And every day, it still felt like it wasn't enough. There were still more women who needed help—more survivors who needed safety and shelter.

And how was it fair for me to try and find someone—to try and find love like my sister—when my life was dedicated to other women?

"Just look at my brothers. Some of the most controlling men I know," Benny added, dragging me from my thoughts. I let out a low chuckle,

recalling the day Ace had tossed my sister over his shoulder and carted her from the Blooms house for her own protection. “Ace didn’t grow the team because he needed a bigger business. He didn’t even grow it because it was the only way for him to have more time with Addy. He grew the team because the guys he brought on needed it.”

My eyebrows lifted. I’d never thought of it like that. I’d always assumed that with Covington’s reputation, Ace had needed more men to meet the demands of a growing client list and his reduced availability because of his family with my sister.

“Think about it. Roman needed something after his sister died. Reed needed a change of pace from being a cop. Rorik was becoming just as dead inside as the people who ended up on his autopsy table. And after Kane barely survived his undercover op with the DEA, he was a dead man walking until Ace brought him on.”

I reached up and rubbed the back of my neck. Maybe Benny was right. But ten-thirty at night when I needed to exercise out the painful level of lust building in my system wasn’t the time to consider his claim.

“Something to think about.” I grunted.

“I’m sure even women within the program would be interested,” he went on. “I know how important it’s been for Cammie to be involved and give support. I’m sure there are other women in the house who feel the same way.”

Cammie had been a victim of sexual assault. It was the reason she’d taken self-defense classes and met Benny in the process, and now, it was the reason she was dedicated to teaching those classes herself.

“I mean, just look at Kenzie. She’s around town all afternoon cleaning places. Roasters. The bakery. And then comes here to clean. She clearly is determined to work, and from what I hear, really dedicated to Blooms.”

Everything he’d said after the part about how Kenzie was here droned out.

“Kenzie was here?”

“Yeah, she was finishing up when I got here.” Benny paused and added, “Actually, she was already done, but those guys over there were talking to her, so they kept her here for a few extra minutes.”

My eyes traveled through the room, now needing to be aware of every single person in it. *Especially the ones who’d talked to her.*

All part-time jobs had to be approved by either Addy or me, and since

this addition to Kenzie's cleaning schedule was news to me, it had to be my sister who'd signed off.

My teeth clenched. I didn't like the idea of her cleaning the gym just like I didn't like the idea of her cleaning the pub. Thankfully, the pub was open past the house's curfew, so that eliminated it as an option.

"You okay?"

I cleared my throat and dipped my chin. "Yeah. Just thinking about what you said. How maybe she'd be a good candidate to work at the house."

But then I'd have to get used to seeing her all the time—working with her. And when she left, I'd have to get used to not seeing her all the time. *And both those things sounded terrible.*

"Something else to think about," he said and clapped me on the shoulder again. "Alright, I've got to get home. Have a good night."

"You too. Tell Cammie I said hi."

His smile spread wide. "Will do."

Once he was gone, I headed for the weight rack, but my focus was solely on the two guys left in the gym. I didn't recognize them, but that wasn't saying much. I didn't really get out or meet many people outside of the Blooms circle or the Covington Security crew. I picked up the weights and started going through the motions, using the mirror along the wall to watch them.

I didn't know why I was fired up. I had no idea what they'd said to her, but they weren't talking about her now, so the whole damn thing could've been innocuous—so innocuous that Benny easily mentioned it. If he were concerned, he would've said something, I rationalized, but it didn't make a damn bit of difference.

I increased the weights in my hands and repeated the same reps and exercises over and over again as I watched them, waiting for them to give me one reason to confront them. To warn them away.

But it never came.

Because I was thinking like a goddamn crazy person.

"Shit." I dropped the dumbbells back onto the rack as soon as they walked out of the gym, my arms hanging like dead, burning weights at my sides. I hadn't lifted this hard in months, and it was all because I was too preoccupied with Kenzie to process anything else.

Preoccupied with the knowledge that she had a kid. With the fact that she hadn't wanted my help. With the worry that some gym rat was going to

harass her if she was here at night. Preoccupied with the notion that I had a solution to keep her safe and keep her close.

No.

Absolutely not.

I couldn't hire her at Blooms. Not because she wouldn't be phenomenal at the job, because she would; she was phenomenal at everything she did for the house. I couldn't hire her because I honestly had no idea if I'd be doing it to help her or to help myself.

Shaking my head, I grabbed my things and left, finally heading home for a few hours.

I needed to get over myself. I didn't need to be everyone's savior. I knew that. The problem was I wanted to be hers.

CHAPTER 5



KENZIE

Don't. Look.

The warning was as stern as I could muster from inside my own head, but as soon as I straightened from wiping the last corner of the last mirror I had to clean in the gym, my gaze hunted for Zeke's reflection in the now-pristine surface.

He stood in front of the rack of weights, legs spread, slowly curling one arm and then another with a massive dumbbell in each fist. His tee bunched over his swollen biceps, veins trickling like branches of a living river down his forearms to his fists, but it was his gray sweatpants that really did a number on me. It only took one time of being pressed to the front of him to send my desperately contained fantasies running rampant—fantasies that would've been easier to corral if I hadn't been treated to the sight of him at Iron Works every night since the book incident in his office last week.

I couldn't hide my surprise when he'd shown up on my second day on the job. *Was he following me after our conversation about custody cases? Was he trying to get answers another way?* The thought tied a knot in my stomach.

No, he wouldn't. If he'd wanted answers, he would've asked for them—found some way to demand them of me, and I would've had no choice to comply; my living circumstances and any hope I had for my future rested on Blooms. And if I believed that, then the only explanation was that Zeke had always used this gym during the late-night hours, and I was now only realizing it because I worked here.

The latter made more sense. I'd had plenty of time over the last six and a half months to appreciate the stoic man's physique. A broad chest. Thick

arms. Legs that filled out and stretched his jeans each time he left his office to repair one thing or another in the house. But here... to see those muscles in action, flexing and bulging in taut coordination... parts of my body came to life that I hadn't felt in a long time.

Parts that ached and craved. Wanted and hungered. Parts that fear and drugs and anger had buried for a long, long time.

I sucked in a breath when Zeke's gaze caught mine. The connection was as swift and as electric as a lightning strike before I whipped my arm up and scrubbed an already clean spot right over his face as though I'd seen a speck of dirt there.

Get a hold of yourself, Kenzie.

It was a good thing he only showed up for the last ten to fifteen minutes of my cleaning shift. Otherwise I would struggle to finish on time.

The first time I saw him here, I worried he was going to renege on Addy's approval. Cleaning the gym every night pushed me dangerously close to missing the curfew at the house, but I was determined to make it work—and I was determined to fight to keep the position. But I hadn't had to.

Zeke left my fears again unfounded when he hadn't offered anything except a curt smile and nod of acknowledgment from a distance before he went about his business and let me take care of mine.

After the conversation in his office, I sensed my silence had hurt him. But I couldn't explain—*wouldn't explain*—why I didn't trust men who seemed the most trustworthy. If I did, I might never see my son again.

With that sobering thought, I blew a stray strand of hair out of my face, grabbed my spray bottle and towels, and went to my bag. I always finished with the mirrors, so that meant I was done for the night.

Avoiding another glance at Zeke, I bundled up my things, hoisted my supply bag over my shoulder, and when I turned to head for the exit, I ran right into a solid presence behind me.

After being held in Zeke's strong arms twice in the last two weeks, it took no time to realize the hands that grabbed me weren't his, and even less for this touch to make me squeamish.

I tensed. "Sorry," I murmured to the beefy guy who'd introduced himself to me on my first day. I couldn't remember his name. *Mike? Mark?* All I remembered was wondering what this guy must be taking to look the way that he did, his muscles so round and bulging it looked like he had tennis balls stuffed under his shirt.

“Don’t apologize for putting yourself in my arms, gorgeous.” His voice grated on me.

I stepped back, and he released me. Over his shoulder, I caught Zeke’s gaze again in the mirror. He was frozen. The dumbbells in his hands poised mid-rep as he watched our interaction. I could see the beat of his jaw muscle flex even from here. This time, I didn’t look away. I held his stare for comfort, knowing he was watching over me.

“Okay.” I didn’t want to make a scene, and I definitely didn’t want Zeke to feel like he had to step in. I could take care of myself. I *would* take care of myself. “Well, thanks.” I managed a tight smile and sidestepped the man to head toward the door.

“Here, allow me.” His arm reached and opened it for me. I almost thought I was overreacting, that he was being nice—a little forward but nice—but then I saw he had his things with him. *He was leaving now, too.*

Crap.

It was fine. I breathed deep. The parking lot was well lit and led right out onto Ocean Avenue which would still have some people wandering about, heading back from late dinners or after-dinner drinks. *It was fine.*

“Thank you,” I murmured and darted through, careful to avoid any contact with him. As much as I wanted to look back—to see if Zeke was still watching me—I didn’t. I didn’t want to instigate any further conversation with this guy. “Have a good night.”

The next thing I knew, a big hand clamped around my wrist and held me back.

“Now, hold up a minute, gorgeous.”

“Let me go,” I said. It was going to be my first and only request.

“I just want a chance to talk to you is all,” he chuckled as he spoke, as though it was a laughing matter that he’d ignored my wish.

“You don’t need to touch me to talk to me,” I said sharply, balled my hand below his grasp, and then dragged my elbow forward toward his forearm like we’d learned in our self-defense class. Within a second, the leverage on his hand was too much, and he was forced to release me.

“Oh, you’re a feisty one, aren’t you, sweet cheeks?” He started to reach for me again as though the concept of *no* was non-existent.

I stepped back so quickly I stumbled just as the door to the gym slammed open, a rough shout echoing the vibration of metal and glass.

“*Hey!*” Zeke’s voice rippled through the parking lot like a crack of

thunder straight from Zeus himself.

Even though I was free, the wave of relief I felt only came when I heard Zeke—when I knew he was here.

The muscled jerk turned and lifted his hands like he'd been completely innocent this whole time. "Can I help you?" he snapped at Zeke.

"Yeah. You can make sure you have all of your things and never come back here again."

The other man jerked and snarled. "Seriously? You don't own this place. Who the fuck do you think you are?"

Zeke continued to approach him, and I covered my mouth to stop myself from crying out to stop. While they were about the same height, this guy had at least thirty pounds of muscle on Zeke. And if that muscle was accompanied with roid rage, I didn't want to think about what he could do.

"You don't want to know, Mark," Zeke said, his voice low and ominous.

He knew the man's name.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" The meathead lifted his arm and pointed at Zeke. "Get the fuck out of here and mind your own business before I beat the fucking shit out of you."

In a flash, Zeke grabbed Mark's wrist with one hand, his other hand shot up and wrapped around his throat, tightening until Mark gasped.

"What I mean is that I will fucking destroy you. And I don't mean like this." Zeke closed his grip, cutting off more air until Mark began to wheeze. "When I destroy you, it won't be by beating your face to a pulp. It will be by pressing charges and then suing you for every goddamn thing in your miserable life."

I sucked in a breath, my heart thudding wildly against my chest.

"I'll start with the aggravated assault charges. I can tell you right now, as soon as you have that 'attempted rape' allegation attached to your name, the investors for that new gym you're planning on opening will disappear faster than your dick did after taking so many steroids." Mark jostled angrily against Zeke's hold. "Speaking of steroids. Once Kenzie calls the police, and they get here and search your bag and your truck, we both know what they're going to find. Possession of anabolic steroids is illegal. They'll confirm it once they book you and make you piss in a cup. So that's going to add another year on top of the three for aggravated assault."

I couldn't tear my eyes away from Zeke. The way his voice was so calm. Yes, he had his hand around another man's throat, but it was his words that

were controlling Mark. As much as he struggled like he wanted to fight, I could see fear poking holes in his anger, realizing he hadn't just picked some fight outside of a gym that would be handled with fists; he'd picked a fight with a man who was going to level him to the ground without lifting a finger.

"Four years, Mark. Minimum. And assuming you even make it out of jail, you'll never have a career in fitness again. Not with the assault charge and the steroid use staining your reputation."

Mark sputtered angrily, though it now appeared like he was trying to simply escape Zeke's hold and his threats rather than wanting to fight back.

"So, here's what's going to happen," Zeke said in a low voice. "I'm going to let go so some oxygen can go to your pea-sized brain, and then you're going to decide if you are going to walk away from this place with your reputation intact and pretend like this never happened, or you're going to come at me like the dumbass I'm tempted to think you are, we'll get the police involved, and you'll spend the rest of your life knowing I destroyed you and it was within your power to stop it."

Zeke kept his hold steady for another second and then released Mark with a shove, sending him stumbling backward several feet away from the two of us.

Rage glittered in his eyes and his nostrils flared as Mark fought to catch his breath. His hunched over body and venomous expression reminded me of a bull stamping at the ground, ready to charge at the red flag.

My breath caught, and for a moment, I worried that none of what Zeke said mattered—that this guy was really that stupid.

But then he straightened, rubbed his neck, and shook his head. "You're fucking insane," he charged, yanking his bag from the ground.

"Keycard," Zeke demanded flatly. "I'll let Roy know you're canceling your membership to the gym."

Mark ripped his keycard off his bag and whipped it onto the ground.

"Bitch isn't worth this," he snarled and then stalked toward his lifted pickup truck.

Neither Zeke nor I moved as we watched the truck come to life and rip out of the parking lot like he had one last thing to prove. Only once he was out of sight did I let myself look over at Zeke, my throat feeling like there was a beach ball lodged in it.

He'd defended me.

I'd never been defended before. *Certainly not by Stan, though he would*

argue differently. Stan only defended me when it was at no risk to himself; he defended me only when it made himself look better. But Zeke...

He'd risked himself to make sure Mark never bothered me again. I wasn't a lawyer, but I knew that there were claims—charges—that could probably be made against Zeke that could damage his career. Maybe even risk his license.

But he'd risked all of that to protect me.

"Are you alright?" Zeke said with a low rumble.

He didn't come closer. He didn't reach out. He didn't overstep a single boundary with me, and my chest ached wishing that he would.

"Yeah." I tried to swallow. "He only grabbed my arm and not that hard."

Zeke's jaw flexed angrily, then mention of it still making him edgy even after Mark was gone. "Let me grab my stuff, and I'll walk you back to the house."

I glanced at my watch when he went inside. It was after curfew which meant that my security code for the door wouldn't work, so Zeke would have to let me in. Not even thirty seconds later, he returned, his bag slung over his shoulder. He opened his mouth to say something, and a crack of thunder ripped through the sky.

Zeke's gaze flicked up, and his expression hardened. "We should get moving."

I followed his lead through the parking lot and onto Ocean Drive. When we reached the sidewalk there, the rain started to fall in heavy drops.

"Thank you," I blurted out, afraid if I didn't say it now, I wouldn't get the chance.

"I knew he was going to try something the way he was watching you," Zeke muttered, and I noticed how he didn't accept my thanks. *As though there was something more he should've done.*

"I didn't realize..." Probably because I'd been so distracted by the way Zeke was watching me, I'd been oblivious that it was only for my protection. "Could he come after you?"

"He won't."

I swallowed. His confidence was so strong, I wanted to just lean on it, but I was afraid. "And if he does?"

"Then I'll deal with him, Kenzie," he said and sighed. "The only thing that matters is that he's no longer coming after you."

My heart lurched. He had a life, a career, and a business. Protecting me

shouldn't be the only thing that mattered, but there was no question that it was.

We walked another few paces in silence, his body so close to mine, I could feel the heat radiating off him with each stride. The urge to tell him swelled in my throat. He should know. He would have to eventually.

Last week, I'd held back because I'd been afraid to trust him—afraid the way I was attracted to him could be clouding my judgment. Now, I realized it wasn't him I was afraid to trust; it was me. I'd been fooled by a trustworthy man before, and the consequences almost killed me. This time, if I was wrong, it was my son who was on the line.

But I wasn't wrong to trust the man who'd just risked everything in his life to protect me.

My lips parted, the words about to break free, when a bolt of lightning split through the sky. A second later, the quake of thunder sent rain spilling from the clouds like an overflowed dam.

"Come on." Zeke took my hand, and we started to run.

We hugged as close to the building and awnings as we could, but the rain was merciless. Summer thunderstorms came on quick and forceful, not unlike the heat that radiated from his fingers locked around mine.

By the time we climbed the steps to the house and stopped on the large front porch, we were both panting and drenched. The relentless rain fell like a sheet over the front gutters, closing us in a cocoon of water.

"Zeke," I murmured and faced him, and his fingers instantly slid from mine, taking their heat with them.

"Are you alright?" His big hand reached for the side of my face to brush away the wet hair matted to my cheek.

I shivered at the contact, a new wave of warmth working its way through my body. I wasn't alright. Not in the slightest. My entire body was on fire, wanting this man—wanting to let him in. No man had ever made me feel like this before. Cared for. Wanting to be cared for. Stan had... bastardized the entire concept. But Zeke... no matter how hard I tried or rationalized, I couldn't stop my body from aching to throw caution to the wind and give into wanting.

My head tipped up. Rain dripped from the ends of his hair and ran down the hard planes of his face. My inhale clung to the inside of my lungs, not wanting to let go as I savored the soft press of his fingers to my skin. But those eyes... their depths glittered as though studded with gold. *Or maybe it*

was his heart of gold showing through.

I could trust him. I knew it in the marrow of my bones. And if I was ever going to be fully okay again, I couldn't keep doubting every good man that came along, afraid they'd all turn out to be a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Swallowing hard, my breath released and collided with his. We stood with no more than a foot between us, but I needed it to be less. I needed to be closer, so I took a small step forward, feeling Zeke's sharp inhale and the way his arms brushed against my chest.

"Kenzie..."

Was it a warning? Was it a plea? A question? I couldn't tell. All I knew was that he wasn't pushing me away. The sound of the rain drowned out the rest of the world. It was only us. And for the first time in seven months, I felt safe enough to speak the truth. After what he'd risked for me tonight, I could risk this for him.

"His name is Jake," I said so softly, the words might not have been audible over the storm. *It's okay. You can trust him.* I urged myself, willing myself to be strong even as I blinked back tears. "My son. He's eight. His name is Jake."

Zeke's gaze widened, the gold in them shimmering so warm and comforting like he could just absorb all my worries if I let him. *And I wanted to let him.* Zeke could do so much to help me, but I was afraid. Paralyzed. Conditioned to fear those the world saw as saviors.

"Jake." The tension in my chest unknotted when Zeke said his name, and I fought back a cry of relief. "Thank you for sharing with me," he added with a low rasp.

My lips parted. *He was thanking me.* Not asking for more. Not demanding explanations. Just... thankful.

For a single forbidden second, I wished my son could've had a father like him. One who knew the meaning of tenderness and compassion and loyalty and love. One who was selfless in the way he respected and cared for others. One who wasn't twisted and deceitful and manipulative.

I rolled my bottom lip through my teeth. I wanted to say more, but I couldn't. My son was one truth, but the way I felt about Zeke was another. I couldn't tear my eyes from his face. His mouth. One forbidden second spilled into another, wondering what it would be like—feel like—to kiss him.

And I swore he wondered the same thing. His gaze locked on my mouth, his head slowly approaching mine as though drawn by a magnetism he

couldn't stop.

"Zeke..." I murmured, my eyes closing when I felt the warmth of his exhale on my cheek.

I held my breath. *Just one kiss.* One moment to want something in my life that I didn't have to fight for or fear. One moment where I could know what it felt like to be kissed by a good man.

My lips tingled, feeling his hover right over them like an electric cloud. And that was the moment the storm let out another roar, shaking us and the whole house with its force.

"*Shit.*" Zeke dropped his hand and stepped back, his low curse almost swallowed up by the echoing thunder.

My arms came up, winding protectively over me and shielding the way my heart raced inside my chest.

"You should get inside and change before you catch a cold." He reached for the door, punched in his code to the house and pushed it open for me. The whole time, he kept his eyes averted as though I were standing naked in front of him rather than looking like a wet dog.

"Are you..." I trailed off, my tongue suddenly feeling too big for my mouth.

Did he know what I was thinking? What I wanted? Was the tick in his jaw proof that he fought wanting it, too?

"I'm going home."

His rough voice poked a hole in my fantasy. *Of course he was going home,* I chided myself. Zeke didn't live here. This was his business—I was his business. A resident at the house. A woman in his care. He'd never cross that line with me—not in a million years.

And I shouldn't want him to. I shouldn't want anything that could risk me getting my son back.

"Good night, Zeke. Thank you." I reached for the door, about to step through it when his low voice stopped me.

"Kenzie."

My breath hitched, and I turned, holding the door as though there was still time for him to change his mind and pull me back through it and into his arms—still time to suspend reality for a few moments longer.

"I want you to work for me—as my assistant for Blooms."

My eyes bulged. "What? Why?"

Of all the things I hadn't expected was the night to end with a job offer.

Did he want to spend more time with me? Or was he trying to learn more about me? I couldn't stop the worried thoughts from crashing through me.

"I need someone. I need help." Zeke huffed and dragged his hand through his hair, squeezing fresh drops of rain through his knuckles to run down the hills and valleys of the veins on his forearms. "You'd be perfect. And you'd make more than you're making now with cleaning."

I blinked rapidly, my brow creasing. Now, I understood where this was going. "You don't want me to clean anymore," I murmured.

His jaw ticked. "No, I don't," he admitted honestly. "But that doesn't change the fact that you'd be perfect for the job. You already do so much for the house. For your housemates. And everyone knows I'm... overworked." He grimaced when he said the word, his adorable expression bringing a small smile to my face.

There were reasons I should refuse. Big ones, too. The fact that only moments ago I was hoping he'd kiss me was close to the top.

I slid my tongue out and over my lips to wet them while I considered how to answer. His eyes lowered to my mouth, following the path of my tongue before it snapped back up.

"Please." His rough grunt was just loud enough for me to hear as he shifted his weight.

Zeke stood there looking like a golden, glistening Zeus, drenched from the fury of his own storms, and begged me to work for him. I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth, rolling the soft flesh through them. *Maybe it was a good idea.* I was going to need his help at some point, and if I worked for him, I wouldn't feel so bad about asking for it.

But then there was the tangle of heat that came to life when I thought about all the time we'd spend together. Suddenly, I couldn't tell if accepting his offer would be selfless or selfish; I wanted to help him, and I wanted his help, but mostly I wanted to learn more about the one man I knew I could trust.

"Okay." I heard myself agree. "I'll work for you."

It was a mistake in the making, but I couldn't resist the thought of a few more stolen moments with the only man who'd ever made me ache this way.

CHAPTER 6



ZEKE

“Knock knock.”

“Yeah. Come in,” I called, not taking my attention away from the box of plaques I was searching through.

“Wow, what a difference,” Callie remarked warmly, entering the room. “Amazing what a few days actually spent in your office can do.”

My gaze snapped up and met her teasing one for a second before it scanned the room. My office in town had been nothing more than a glorified storage closet with a desk. Hell, it had hardly stored anything because I hadn’t bothered to bring much over from Blooms.

All that started to change two weeks ago.

Now, my computer was finally set up on my desk, two chairs positioned in front of it like I could actually take a client meeting in here rather than in the small conference room down the hall. The boxes of books littering the floor had been emptied onto the bookshelves. There was even some massive, leafy plant in the corner by one of the windows that Gwen had dropped off as a thank you for the donation I’d made to the hospital two months ago; it was a miracle—or Callie’s daily watering—that kept it alive this long.

The only thing I had left to unpack was the box in front of me filled with more diplomas and awards. I hung my law degree, but I had no plans to hang the rest. There was only one thing in this box I wanted.

A grunt burst from my chest when I found the small frame and tugged it free. I wiped the dust from the faded photograph of Addy and me standing alongside Larry Ocean the day we’d opened Blooms.

Larry was the unofficial grandfather of Carmel Cove. He was the man who treated everyone like family even when he hardly knew you. The man

who left his front door unlocked and his invitation to Sunday night spaghetti and meatballs open to anyone who needed a place to go and someone to lean on. He was the man who'd helped so many people find a way forward, myself included, even though, in the end, he hadn't been able to find one for himself.

I set it on the corner of my desk. Ironically, even though the image was taken the day we'd opened Blooms, it never reminded me of the events of that day—only the events of two years prior.

After Ace and I had saved my sister, I'd brought Addy back to Carmel—to the house our grandparents had given us to heal... and to hide. For weeks, her body had gotten better but her mind had stayed stuck. Fixated on the one man who'd betrayed and almost killed her—fixated on all the evil he was still committing.

Larry had found me sitting on the front porch of the house, afraid to go inside one more day with no idea how to make anything better—how to stop my twin sister from heading down a path that would destroy her.

He'd handed me a cup of Roasters coffee. Every time he left the coffee shop for a walk, it was with two coffees, one for himself and one for the person he knew he'd find along the way who'd need it. That day, that person had been me.

"I don't know what to do," I'd told him.

"Because you're thinking too big. It's small deeds that change people, Zeke. It's small deeds that change the world." And then he'd pushed that spare cup of coffee into my hand. "Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can."

"I don't have anything." I'd dropped out of my final year of law school when I realized Addy needed me, so I had no degree. No job. And no idea how to help her.

"Bullshit." He'd pointed over his shoulder. "You have this house. That's more than a lot of people."

I'd hung my head, his words sending a wash of guilt over me. He was right. Having a safe place to live was more than most people had—and it was the reason Addy was so fixated on retribution. Her ex had preyed on women who needed a safe place to stay and then exploited them. It kept her up at night worrying over his next victim.

And that was the moment the idea had hit me. We had a safe place to stay. For us. For them.

I'd turned slowly to look at Larry, and I remembered wondering if he knew what he'd done—if he knew what he'd given me.

“How do you know the right thing to say?”

“I don't.” He rose carefully from the steps and brushed off his pants. “I just do what I can to remind people that good things don't come fully grown. You've got to plant the seed, do the hard work, water the world with kindness, because that's how every good thing blooms.”

I'd planted the seed that day. Found something greater than justice for Addy to focus on. And six months later, we were a registered non-profit, accepting applications for residents and donations to our cause. The very first check that came to us was from Larry. I never asked, but I imagined when he made it out to *Blooms*, he knew it was our conversation that had given me the idea, not just for the organization, but for its name.

“Seriously, it was a great idea for you to hire Kenzie to help over at Blooms. So great, I'm surprised I didn't think of it,” she teased, a twinkle in her blue eyes.

I grunted. “Me too.”

I wasn't sure my rash decision on the front porch almost two weeks ago was a great idea... more like the product of a thunderstorm and temporary insanity. Maybe it was a great idea for Blooms because the house was certainly benefiting from the way Kenzie had thrown herself into the role; I actually managed to check things off my to-do list. Before Kenzie, I didn't even have time to make a to-do list.

But there was also a good chance that this great idea could turn into a giant mistake if I couldn't continue to keep my distance from her.

I did my damndest to keep things professional. I met with Kenzie for an hour each morning, and we talked solely about the house. About the things that needed to be done. Tasks I needed to complete, and ones that she could take over for me. We worked in a kind of sync that was so perfect, it would've been frightening if there wasn't something bigger to fear in the room: the attraction that crackled and popped every time our eyes met.

She didn't mention her son again. *Jake*. But that hadn't stopped me from thinking about him. Some quick mental math on the porch that night revealed Kenzie had only been eighteen when she'd had him. But that was the extent of the information I could glean, and it had been like giving a crumb to a starving man.

I wanted to know more. I wanted her to trust me with more. And, God

help me, I wanted to touch her again. To hold her face and explore her mouth. To pull her close and feel every inch of her soft curves on purpose rather than by accident. So that was why I kept our meetings focused, productive, and brief—because if there was any hope of remaining professional around her, I needed to spend the rest of my time avoiding her.

Hence how my office in town had finally been unpacked and organized.

“What do you need?” I asked, mindlessly straightening the folders on my desk and catching sight of the clock. “I thought you were heading out soon?”

“I am.” She nodded. “I was just wondering if you were heading back over to Blooms later? I accidentally put this address on the return for Kenzie’s request, and the reply from Stan’s lawyer came today. I know she’ll want to read it right away, and I’d take it over there myself if I didn’t have to scoot out of here so Reed and I can make it into the city on time—”

“What request?”

Callie’s jaw went slack, her eyes widening as she realized I had no fucking clue what she was talking about.

“Zeke...” She approached me, her brow creasing deeper with every step.

“Tell me.” My palms flattened on my desk, fighting to keep myself from reeling back.

“Last week, Kenzie asked if I could help her draft and send a visitation request to her ex’s lawyer for a supervised meeting with her son.” Callie gulped and clutched the envelope to her chest. “She told me you knew about Jake—I asked if she’d told you about her son, and she said yes.”

“I did know about him,” I said, my voice rough. “She didn’t tell me about wanting to request a visitation or that she’d asked you to do it.”

I shouldn’t be angry. I had no right to be angry. I mean, she had asked my paralegal to send this request without my knowledge, but Callie was also her friend.

Was this because of what happened on the porch? Because I almost kissed her that she didn’t trust me? Fuck.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and exhaled slowly. I swore she’d wanted the same. The way she’d leaned into me. The way her eyes had darkened and then hooded. I swore it wasn’t just the thunderstorm shooting electricity into the atmosphere.

“I’m sorry.” Callie winced. “I shouldn’t have asked—I didn’t realize—”

“Why doesn’t she trust me?”

She grimaced. “I don’t think it has to do with you.”

I wished I could believe her.

“I’ll take it.” I nodded to the envelope.

I was going to make this right. If I’d overstepped... if I’d said or done something that made her feel like she couldn’t ask for my help, I was going to find out and fix it. I could live with the torture of seeing her every day, of having to hide how much I wanted her, but I couldn’t live with the idea that I’d done something to hurt her.

“Zeke...”

I extended my hand. “Please, Callie.”

I’d tried not to push—not to pry for weeks now. Even after Kenzie borrowed my law books. Even after she’d told me her son’s name. But this... using my PA to request visitation rights without my knowledge... if that didn’t give me a right to know what was going on, I didn’t know what did.



THE LAST FRIDAY of the month was movie night at Blooms—something that had slipped my mind until I got there and heard the TV blaring from behind the closed living room doors.

My fingers drummed on the letter, itching to call Kenzie from the room to talk to her. *Don’t be an idiot.*

I stalked down the hallway before I ignored my own warning, closed myself in my office, and turned on the light.

I stopped short for a second, absorbing the space. It wasn’t like I hadn’t been here earlier today for my meeting with Kenzie, but when I was here with her, my focus was only on her. What she was saying. What I was saying. *What I wasn’t saying. What I shouldn’t be thinking.* But without the distraction of her presence, I saw all the changes that I’d missed.

Within two weeks, it was clear someone else was spending more time at this desk than me. Everything was organized. Post-its tagged papers and ideas in an array of colors. And there was a vase of freshly picked flowers on the corner of the desk. I still thought of it as my office, but it had Kenzie’s touch written all over it.

Just like so many other aspects of my life.

I sank into the chair and stared at the envelope, wishing I could see inside to its contents.

Her ex. Stan.

I'd wondered who had her son while she was here. Of course, the father was my first assumption, but Kenzie wasn't married, so then I'd wondered if the father was even in the picture, and if he wasn't, what were the other options? Grandparents. Siblings. Foster care. I shuddered. On the one hand, I should've been glad Jake was with his dad. Instead, the baser emotions of jealousy and protectiveness overwhelmed my brain.

Why were they not together? Had he done something to her? Harmed her? There'd been nothing about abuse in her file. Had he left her because of the drugs? Or had she gotten hooked on the drugs because of him?

Not knowing made me agitated. Needing to know drove me insane.

I had no idea how long I'd stared at the envelope, lost in thought, but the next thing I knew, the door opened and Kenzie stopped, startled. "Zeke." She blinked. "What are you doing here?"

Dammit. She was wearing only a tank top and pajama shorts. *Short* pajama shorts.

My dick swelled against my jeans, throbbing painfully against the fabric until I was forced to either stand or make an obvious move to adjust my raging hard-on. I gritted my teeth and chose to stand, holding the envelope out in front of me.

"Waiting to give you this."

She furrowed her eyebrows and stepped forward to take the letter, the door closing behind her. The soft thud echoed like one more of my boundaries blowing up; after hiring Kenzie, I decided I wouldn't be at Blooms after dinner hours. Anything that put me close to her—with an excuse to be close to her—late at night was a risk I wouldn't take.

So, while I tried to spend most of my time in town, if I was at the house for any reason, dinner was my hard limit. My stroke of midnight so to speak. And I'd held to that invisible barrier until tonight.

Her fingers were careful not to brush mine as she took the letter. I watched her face, able to pinpoint the exact moment she realized what it was... and realized I knew what it was, too.

Her head snapped up. "How did you..."

"Callie gave it to me because she thought I already knew."

"Zeke..." I watched her throat move as she swallowed, guilt creating a soft shadow over her expression.

"Why don't you trust me?" I asked, my tone sharper than I wanted but it

was damn hard not to feel hurt by the thought. “Have I done something—said something—”

“I do trust you!” she protested quickly, covering her mouth with her hand for a quick second before offering, “I just don’t want to take advantage of you—of everything you’ve already done to help me.”

A deep growl pushed through my lips as my feet carried me over to her, crossing all the invisible distance barriers I’d erected in my mind.

“You could never take advantage of me, Kenzie,” I swore roughly. “Ever.”

Her lips peeled apart, her eyes raking over my face like she wanted to memorize every inch of the expression on it. Maybe I’d said too much—revealed too much about how I felt about her in the way I spoke, but I couldn’t take it back now.

“No?” Her lip quivered. “Because since the moment I told you about Jake... the moment you offered me this job... it feels like you’re avoiding me.”

“We meet every morning—”

“For an hour before you practically run out of here and disappear for the rest of the day. Even the other girls have commented how strange it is that you’re not in your office from dawn until dusk,” she protested. “If you didn’t want me cleaning the gym, you should’ve just said. I could’ve found somewhere else, and I would’ve preferred that than feeling like you regret having to hire me and can’t stand being around me.”

I stared at her, shocked at what she thought, though I couldn’t fault her perception; it was the truth. I was avoiding her. Not because she was a burden but because she was the most exquisite temptation... but I couldn’t tell her that.

“I don’t regret hiring you,” I began slowly, scrambling for a better—but equally true—reason to give for avoiding her than the fact that she made my dick painfully hard and my thoughts impossible to control. “I have a hard time asking for help... and a hard time knowing what to do once it’s given.”

Not a lie.

“I guess that makes two of us,” she said softly and then added, “I’m sorry for not telling you about this.”

I shifted my weight. “Don’t be sorry. Just let me help you with this... with your son.”

She hesitated, and the pink tip of her tongue slid out, wetting her lips like

it had the night on the porch. And just like then, my cock went from rock-hard to solid stone.

“JAKE HAS BEEN with my ex this whole time. Stan. The judge gave him full custody after I was admitted to the hospital.” She paused and something flashed across her expression. It took a second to recognize what it was because I’d hardly ever seen the emotion cross her face. *Anger*. In all the months she’d lived here, I couldn’t recall a single instance when I’d seen Kenzie angry.

Was she angry at herself because her drug habit had cost her her son? Was she angry at her ex for a reason she wasn’t sharing?

I remained silent, watching her finger travel the length of the envelope.

“I just want to see him.” Her voice cracked, and I could tell she was fighting off tears. “I want more than to see him, but this is where I have to start. With supervised visitation.” She made no move to open the envelope, instead staring at it like it was the barrel of a loaded gun.

“Are you afraid he’s going to say no?” I reached for the letter opener on my desk and extended my hand. “Here, let me.”

She handed me the envelope and answered. “No. Yes.” She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

I pulled out the letter and handed it back to her to read. “Whatever happens, we’re going to figure it out,” I promised softly.

“Thank you.” Her fingers fluttered along the paper, trembling as she unfolded it.

Now it was my turn to feel my heart pound against my chest. This wasn’t even my kid, but all I could think about was what I’d do—all the things I’d throw at this bastard if he tried to keep Kenzie from her son.

Her eyes whipped over the paper. “He agreed.”

Two words, and I could breathe again.

She looked up at me and back at the paper. “He agreed, right?” She shoved it at me, her hand shaking. “Tell me I’m not imagining it.”

I scanned the letter from her ex’s attorney. *Robert Crawford on behalf of Stan Klinger*. My mind translated the legalese into simple fact.

There were a handful of stipulations in the letter—a recent urine test proving she was clean. Confirmation that she’d completed a certified rehabilitation program. But nothing out of the ordinary before the final

sentence conceded to Kenzie's request.

I met her glistening violet gaze. "He's agreed to a supervised visitation on Sunday afternoon at a park in the city."

"He agreed." Kenzie let out a strangled cry, and before I could realize what she was doing—or stop her—she launched herself at me. Into my arms. Holding me tight as she shook with relief and cried into my neck.

"I'm going to see him. I'm going to see Jake." The whole of her weight caved against me.

I couldn't imagine the relief she felt—the happiness she felt—knowing she was going to see her son after all these months. But goddamn if I wasn't suffering my own kind of euphoria having her back in my arms.

I should've pushed her away, but I was a weak man. An addict craving another hit of this attraction. I was too weak to not close my eyes and savor the feel of her barely clad curves pressed against me. Too weak to not breathe in deeply her lemon sugar scent that lingered everywhere she went. Too weak to stop my restraint from crumbling like a sand castle against the sea.

I wasn't sure exactly when it happened—when the rush of her excitement ebbed, and she realized the position we were in. But we'd definitely crossed into the territory of heavy breaths and electric heat. I felt the tips of her hard nipples, and there was no way she could mistake the solid ridge of my erection jammed against her stomach.

"Zeke..." she murmured and slowly tipped back.

I should've released her then—the second I realized we were in forbidden territory—but she didn't unwind her arms from my neck, so I didn't unwind mine from her waist. Instead, I lost myself in the lavender sea of her eyes.

"Yeah." My voice was rough—edged with desire. I'd finally convinced her to trust me, and now I was going to fuck it up because there was no hiding how bad I wanted her.

Her eyes lowered to my mouth. "Why didn't you?"

"Why didn't I what?"

I tensed when her tongue slid out and wet her bottom lip. God, if it were up to me, I'd give that tongue a whole fucking cock to wet, root to tip.

"Why didn't you kiss me the other night?"

Her question freed a broken groan from my chest. *Fuck. I hadn't been imagining it.* She'd wanted me to kiss her as much as I'd wanted to do it.

And now, my muscles vibrated with the strength it took to stop me from remedying my restraint.

“I couldn’t,” I ground out. There was no point in trying to lie. Not like this. Not with my dick standing taller than the Empire State Building between us.

Her breath caught, and she angled her head up, her lips hardly an inch from mine. “You should have.”

Fuck.

My head dropped lower. I wanted to kiss her so damn bad I swore my heart threatened to stop if I didn’t. But I couldn’t... *I couldn’t.*

Our breaths crashed into one another like hot, heavy waves, sinking us deeper in their fury. I clenched my jaw so tight it felt on the brink of fracture. I couldn’t move, every muscle in my body taut with desire.

I felt like I was standing in a pool of gasoline balancing a hundred lit matches on my shoulders; one wrong move, and I’d send all of this—all my duty, all my professionalism, all my restraint—up in flames.

And I wouldn’t do that. It didn’t matter what I wanted—what we wanted. There were rules in place that would only end up hurting her if we broke them.

“You’re a resident and my employee,” I insisted, my voice low and strained. “The only thing I can do—should do—is help you.”

It felt like it would’ve taken less strength to simply break my arms than to willingly let her go, but somehow, I managed to pull them back.

“I should probably go unless you have other questions about the letter.”

Heat flamed in her cheeks as I reached around her and opened the door, the rush of fresh air doing nothing to ground the electricity that still sparked in the small room.

“Who supervises the visit?” she stopped and asked.

I scanned the letter again and handed it to her. “It doesn’t specify, so I’m assuming his lawyer. If you want someone else, you’ll have to petition a judge—”

“No.” Kenzie shook her head, understanding that it would delay her visit with Jake if she chose to dissent. “That’s fine. As long as I get to see him.”

My chin dipped, and I stepped around her. “Good night.”

“Zeke...”

I stopped, a shudder tearing through me. The crimes I would commit to hear my name husky on her lips every day were as countless as they were wrong.

“Yeah?” I croaked and looked back.

She had her bottom lip pinned between her teeth, and her eyes flicked between me and the letter. It was her hesitation that got me—that made my spine straighten and tingle in anticipation.

Whatever it was—whatever she was going to ask, I wouldn't be able to refuse. I'd used up all my strength letting her go.

"If Stan's lawyer is going to be there, does that mean my lawyer can be there, too?" She let the letter fall to her side.

Shit.

"Kenzie..." There was no mistaking where she was going with this.

"Will you go with me on Sunday?"

With her. To see her son.

Something wrenched inside my chest. Anything. I'd promised to do anything I could to help her, and *this* was the first thing she asked of me.

I wanted to go, that wasn't the question; it was the problem. I wanted to be there for her. I wanted to meet her son. I didn't know what the situation was with her ex, but I wanted her to know she had someone there. *And I wanted him to know she had me.*

"Please." Her soft plea was my undoing.

I kept crossing lines, almost breaking rules because of how I felt about her. Christ, I'd wrapped my hand around a man's throat like a psycho and threatened him with things that would have me disbarred faster than the drop of the gavel. The last thing I needed was to inflate the feelings I had for her, but I couldn't stop myself.

Because she needed me.

"Of course," I murmured, my voice low. Our gazes tangled for another moment before I left.

The reality was I would do whatever it took to help her... even if resisting her temptation killed me in the process.

CHAPTER 7



KENZIE

“So, what’s he like?” Zeke’s voice pulled my attention from the window.

I turned as his gaze flicked over the console of his Jeep Cherokee and caught mine. We’d ridden in silence since he picked me up from the house twenty minutes ago. *No wonder he was trying to make conversation.* Meanwhile, my mind was racing. I’d hardly slept last night, and my stomach was in knots.

“Who?” I shifted in the passenger seat.

“Jake. What’s he like?”

My exhale whooshed out. For a second, I thought he’d been talking about Stan. Maybe because that was where my thoughts had been. I hated that I was on my way to see my son for the first time in seven months, and worries about my ex polluted my thoughts. Like storm clouds in front of the sun or a thicket of thorny branches shielding a rose bush.

I’d done all the right things. Played by all the rules. He couldn’t keep Jake from me. Not anymore.

“He loves superheroes. All of them, but he really loves to make up his own. He makes up whole stories. Draws the pictures and everything,” I said, feeling myself lighten instantly as I talked about him. “And swimming. I’ll take him to the pool at the beginning of the season, and the water is cold enough to make him shiver, but he won’t get out. By the time we leave, his lips are practically blue, and he’s shaking from the cold, but he’s crying because he doesn’t want to go.”

“I know where he gets that from,” Zeke murmured wryly.

“His love of swimming?”

“His willfulness,” he returned, his eyes glittering with that golden warmth

that made my stomach flutter and my toes curl.

I tried to hold back a smile, but I couldn't. Everyone always commented how much Jake looked like Stan, but to hear Zeke say he sounded like me even though he hadn't met him yet... It was silly, but I blinked back tears. Jake was my son, too. *Mine*. And I was going to fight like hell to get him back.

One step at a time, I cautioned. I was the one coming from behind. Drug addict. History of addiction and overdose. I had to earn back my right to my son, but when I did, I was going to make sure Stan never took him from me again.

"And he's so smart," I went on. "I know parents always say that about their own kids, but I promise, he's really smart."

"I believe you," Zeke assured me with a tipped grin.

My teeth pulled on my bottom lip. *God, he looked so good today*. He looked good every day, but this... dark jeans, a button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled to his elbows, the collar unbuttoned. Maybe it wasn't the outfit. Maybe it wasn't the delicious way his jeans hugged his firm ass or the way his shirt bunched at his forearms, the fabric stopping short of the layers of muscles and veins that tapered to his wrists. Maybe it was that he was here for me.

It had been a long time since someone was here for me the way Zeke was.

I pressed my hands to the fabric of my sundress and ran them down my thighs. I didn't have anything nice—I'd come to Blooms with nothing, too afraid that if I went back to the house for anything, Stan would find a way to get me to stay—*that he'd find a way to leverage Jake over me*. When I told Callie that our request was approved, she'd offered to let me borrow a dress—a crisp, white sundress that hit mid-calf, had bows on the shoulders, and made my boobs look good. I'd never say it was revealing, but the way Zeke looked at me when he'd picked me up... it was like I'd walked out of the house in lingerie rather than a borrowed summer dress.

"What else?"

I let my gaze wander over him once more. One hand on the steering wheel. The other resting on the shifter. My mouth dried, and I blurted out, "He drops everything."

"What?" Zeke tipped his head and laughed.

I didn't know why I'd said that. There were a million other things to say about Jake, but I wanted Zeke to really know my son... not some perfect picture I could paint of him.

“He’ll be holding something one minute and then next, it’s on the floor,” I continued. “Nothing is wrong with him. Stan insisted we take him to the doctor about it a few years ago, and they couldn’t find anything.”

“Your ex had him checked out because the kid drops stuff?” Zeke sounded incredulous. He sounded like I’d felt when Stan insisted, but what could I do? I couldn’t stop him. *I could never stop him.*

“He was worried.”

And angry. The time Jake had dropped a full glass of milk at the table... I’d never seen Stan so angry. But there was no arguing with him once he’d made up his mind, especially about something medical.

“I think Jake’s mind just goes somewhere else, daydreaming.”

Zeke hummed low. “Eve was like that. I’ll never forget the time I came home from soccer practice and heard the hose running in the back. Addy had asked her to water the plants, but her mind was somewhere else. She was just standing there with the hose on, the poor plants drowning as her imagination ran wild.”

Everyone at Blooms knew how the Williams siblings had grown up. Raised by their grandparents until they passed away at which point, Zeke and Addy had been fully responsible for their younger sister, Eve. I had a feeling Zeke felt responsible for both his sisters long before that.

“You played soccer?”

“Not very well and not for very long,” he admitted with a laugh. “And not my point.”

“I know.” I smiled. “Your sister is lucky she had someone to encourage her creativity.” For an impossible second, I imagined Jake having Zeke as a father. His patience and dedication. His kindness. *Insane and impossible, Kenzie.* I gave my head a little shake and added, “If Jake grows up half as creative and half as kind as Eve, I’ll be happy.”

And if, years from now, once Jake and I were safe, I found someone who was half as chivalrous and half as handsome as Zeke Williams, I’d be happy, too.



BEFORE I REALIZED IT, we were pulling into the entrance to the park. Zeke found a spot close to the playground and parked. It wasn’t too busy—maybe

fifteen kids or so running around and climbing on the swing set, but it could've been a crowd of one hundred, and I still would've found him instantly in their midst.

Jake.

I sucked in a deep breath. How was it possible that he'd grown so much in seven months? Had he been this tall seven months ago? Had his hair been this long?

He was on the swing set—*he'd always loved the swings*. He was wearing athletic shorts and a jersey from some sports team that Stan was probably a fan of. He swung high and then low, his hands gripping the ropes of the swing as he squinted up and down the length of the park. *He was looking for me*.

My hands curled into the fabric of my dress, my chest threatening to explode. My baby boy.

“Kenzie.” Warm fingers pressed to my shoulder.

My head turned. I hadn't even realized that Zeke opened the door and was waiting for me to get out.

“You okay?”

My head bobbed. I didn't trust myself to speak. I scrambled for my bag, completely forgetting that I still had my seat belt on until I went to move and couldn't.

“Here. Let me,” he said low, reaching across me to unclip the seat belt.

I took that second to breathe him in. His warm musk. His heady scent of safety. I breathed him in and held him deep, needing every ounce of his strength.

“Thank you,” I murmured just as his face passed by mine.

He paused. Our eyes connected, his dropping to my parted lips for a split second before he straightened and took a step back behind the door so I could get out. I smoothed my dress as he locked the car.

“Ready?” Zeke prompted, subtly shielding me from the park in case I needed another minute.

“Yeah.” My pulse raced. “Jake's over there. On the swings.” Zeke stepped to the side, and my gaze instantly found Jake's toothy smile again as the swing went high. My heart swelled.

And then the swing went back. And that was when I saw Stan looming behind him like a proud protector. *Of course, he wore his uniform*.

Dread ripped through me like an arctic wind.

Seven months I'd built up strength in solitude. Seven months I'd prepared to play his game, but now that I was here—back on the board and staring at the man who'd destroyed my life, old instincts came back with a vengeance. To cower. To obey. To please. But I wouldn't let them win. I'd come this far to get my son back. I wasn't going to crumble now.

I forced my breaths to stay steady as we walked over in silence. I was grateful Zeke kept pace beside me rather than falling a step or two behind. I was grateful he was here because I knew the lengths he'd go to protect me.

“Mom!”

No matter the place, no matter the pain, I'd never not smile when my son screamed my name.

Jake jumped off the swing and sprinted for me. My knees hit the ground just as he launched himself into my arms, almost taking us both to the ground.

“Oh, baby. I missed you so much.” My eyes shut, and I absorbed my precious boy with everything I had. The scent of his hair. The warmth of his gangly limbs wrapped around me.

I blocked out the rest of the world so nothing could mar this moment and squeezed him so hard because it was the only thing holding me together.

“I missed you, too, Mom,” Jake mumbled, and I felt him shifting, but I didn't want to let go. “Are you feeling better? Dad said you were really sick.”

Pain blossomed in my chest, and I forced myself to release him a little. Tipping back, I slid my hands to his cheeks, letting my eyes absorb every inch of him—inspect every inch. *God, how was it possible for him to look so different in only seven months?* His big hazel eyes, flecks of lavender in them that I'd never seen before. His hair looked lighter than ever—lots of time out in the sun. And his smile... he'd lost two more teeth since the last time I saw him.

“I'm feeling better now that I can see you,” I said, running my fingers through his hair even though it was combed perfectly. *Of course, it was.* Stan wouldn't settle for less than a perfect son.

A million apologies piled up in my throat, crashing into worries and fears and regrets, but I couldn't say anything of them—I couldn't say anything because this wasn't my game. *But that didn't mean I wasn't going to win.*

“Who are you?” Jake looked up at Zeke.

“Zeke. I'm a friend of your mom's.” The man's smile felt as warm as the sun as he took off his sunglasses. “You must be Jake. I've heard a lot about

you.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Jake straightened and extended his hand like a tiny soldier, and as adorable as it was, my heart pained a little because it wasn’t my son; *it was how Stan wanted Jake to be*. More than polite; he wanted him to be perfect.

The perfect replica of himself.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Zeke replied, but before he could shake Jake’s hand, a voice boomed and sent a chill through my veins.

“Jake.”

Jake turned, his arm falling to his side as his dad approached.

My heart beat into my throat. Seven months since I’d seen the man who destroyed my life. In uniform, with his blonde hair perfectly slicked back, his dark sunglasses, and a wide smile, I was instantly reminded how easy it was to fall for him. He was a paramedic Ken doll come to life.

“Hello, Mackenzie.” He slid his glasses back, staring down at me with bright blue eyes, clear and confident like I would always be powerless next to him.

I scrambled to stand, wincing when I saw the dirt stains on Callie’s dress. It was just dirt. It would wash off. I stood too quickly. Nerves and no breakfast colliding to make the blood rush from my head, and my body sway.

And then Zeke’s warm hand was gently on my arm, steadying me.

I swallowed, refusing to look away from my ex—refusing to give him that power. “Stan,” I greeted coldly.

Instantly, his head snapped to Zeke. “And you are...”

“Zeke Williams,” Zeke introduced himself smoothly, taking his hand from my arm and extending it to Stan. “I’m Kenzie’s lawyer.”

Stan gave him a once over, the briefest flicker in his eyes when Zeke called me Kenzie, and then shook his hand with a laugh. “Don’t tell Bobby that lawyers outside the city don’t wear suits, or he might drop me as a client,” he said, using his head to motion to where his lawyer stood a few paces behind like an obedient guard dog.

The barb was subtle. Small. Made even smaller by Stan’s genial smile and the way he followed it with, “It’s nice to meet you, Zeke. Stan Klinger.” The words... the tone... it was an exact replica of how Jake had introduced himself, and it made me nauseous. “I really appreciate you bringing Mackenzie here today. I’d love to be more flexible, but the job means I’m pretty much always on duty.”

Bile seeped into my mouth as he motioned to his EMT uniform. There was a special brand of conceit that could make someone hate a paramedic, but Stan possessed it.

“I’m happy to be there whenever Kenzie needs me,” Zeke replied smoothly, and I could’ve kissed him for the subtle but not-so-subtle thread of possessive dedication in his tone.

Stan caught it, too, and I saw his lip twitch. “Glad to hear it,” he said. “We all just want Mackenzie to get better and come home.”

Now it was my turn to tense. I was never going back with him, but the fact that he thought I would...

“Jake, do you want to go back over to the swings? I can push—”

“Hey, bud. I have a better idea.” *Another barb.* Stan gripped Jake’s shoulder. “Why don’t you show your mom some of your soccer moves?” He pointed to the soccer ball left by the swing set.

“Soccer?” I choked out.

Jake nodded obediently. “I’m in soccer camp.” His eyes glazed over with tears.

“What about swimming?” I demanded, snapping my head to my ex, knowing I was practically accusing rather than asking.

“We talked about it and decided to try soccer this summer instead, right bud?”

“Yeah,” Jake mumbled, but his eyes remained downcast.

It took everything I had to hold back my small cry. Jake loved swim camp. It was all he talked about all winter and the only thing he cared about during the summer.

And Stan hated it because swimming wasn’t... manly enough or something... for him. “You think I want my son growing up and doing a sport that’s going to put him in a fucking speedo? Do you want him to be a loser? Picked on? You want people to think he’s gay? I shuddered. I’d love and support my son no matter who or how he loved, but Stan didn’t feel the same.

Stan had this image. This complex. And either we fit into it... or he made us fit into it.

“Why don’t you show me what you learned, baby? I’m excited to see.” I swallowed down the bitterest disappointment I had for my son and pretended like my life depended on it. I’d already put him in this position—left him alone with his father. The last thing I wanted was to make it worse.

So, for one afternoon, I'd pretend soccer was exciting so Jake wouldn't feel so horrible about it.

I reached out, and Jake took my hand; I could breathe again when I was holding him. I hardly took a step when Jake asked, "Does Zeke want to come?"

I looked over my shoulder, and my heart tripped.

"Love to." Zeke smiled and then dragged his hand through his hair with an exaggerated grimace. "But I just have to warn you, I'm pretty bad at soccer so don't expect much."

Jake laughed, and I could've cried.

"I'll be right over here if you need anything, bud," Stan called as we walked away, his confidence oozing from every syllable like oil leaking from an engine. He wasn't shaken or concerned; he knew he had every power in this situation, and he was relishing it.

But one day, he wouldn't have that power, I reminded myself. One day, I'd never have to worry about him again.

"I'm not good at soccer either," Jake confessed, looking at Zeke as we approached his forgotten ball.

"I bet you're better than me," Zeke promised. "The last time I played, I got hit in the head and got a concussion."

Jake's eyes went wide.

"Yup." Zeke nodded. "My own fault, too. Ran right toward this big guy who was kicking the ball, and one minute, the ball was flying straight for my head, the next, I was waking up with everyone on my team looking over me."

"What happened?" Jake wondered, completely enthralled by Zeke's story.

"Well I guess I was mumbling something about flying hot dogs, so they figured I should go to the hospital."

Jake cackled, and even I couldn't contain my laughter. "Flying hot dogs?"

Zeke shook his head. "I think someone said something about when pigs could fly which made me think of pigs in a blanket and then..."

"Flying hot dogs."

He grinned. "Yeah."

Jake stopped in front of the soccer ball, looking at it and then back at Zeke. "But you didn't have to play again after that?"

Zeke shook his head. "No. My grandmother let me quit."

Jake wrinkled his nose. "Maybe I could try to get a concussion, and then

my dad would let me quit.”

“Jake...” My breath caught.

“You don’t want that,” Zeke chimed in easily, and then used his foot to roll the ball over between his feet.

“But I’m not good at it.” Jake rocked back on his heels.

“Well, good things don’t come fully grown,” Zeke replied and kicked the ball to Jake. “You have to practice. Give your skills time to grow. Did you know Michael Phelps played soccer when he was a kid?”

“What?” I swore I heard Jake’s jaw hitting the ground. “*Really?*”

I had no idea how Zeke knew this, but I watched him nod his head. Jake passed him back the ball with a soft kick.

“He played soccer and lacrosse before he went completely into swimming,” Zeke went on, stepping back and returning the ball a little harder. “So, who knows? Maybe he learned a thing or two from those sports that help him grow into one of the best swimmers.”

“One of the best?” Jake squealed. “He is the best!” He launched the ball back to Zeke, and this time, his enthusiasm was notably different.

‘*Thank you*’ I mouthed to Zeke when he spared me a glance, and the wink he sent back in return made me shiver.

“Alright, why don’t you show me what you’ve learned?” I asked, pointing between the two of them. “I feel left out of the passing game.”

Minutes blurred into memories as Jake gave me a full rundown of every kick and trick he’d learned at camp before we started to pass the ball around in a circle. The whole time, he asked all kinds of questions about how I was doing—what I was doing. Where I lived. If it was near a pool. If I’d gone swimming. *When I was coming home.*

I hated that Stan planted the seed that I was coming back there, either knowing I’d have to be the one to break it to Jake that I wasn’t... or, more likely, delusionally believing that I’d actually come home to him.

“Alright, I have a game we can play,” Zeke suggested, moving between Jake and me. “It’s called keep away.”

“Oh! I know how to play that one,” Jake exclaimed, looking for me. “Mom, we have to keep the ball away from Zeke, okay?”

“Got it,” I said with a smile, feeling my lips tug a little wider as the game began.

Maybe a dress wasn’t the best choice for an afternoon of playing soccer in the park, but I would’ve worn a potato sack if it meant spending the time

with my smiling son.

I'd been so afraid—so worried about the light that Stan painted me in while I was gone. Afraid he would've told Jake I didn't love him or didn't care about him. But of course, I was wrong. After eight years under his thumb, I should've known that the only image Stan wanted to paint of me was a weak one. Sick. Needy. Vulnerable.

Maybe it was better than the alternative, but it still made my stomach turn.

One day, my son would know I wasn't weak for leaving him. *One day.*

I didn't know how much time had passed, how long we'd been playing, or how many times Jake and I were brought to tears laughing because Zeke kept tripping over the ball, but it certainly wasn't enough time together when I heard Stan's voice interrupt us.

"Time to get going, bud."

Jake spun, the soccer ball falling from his hold. Zeke immediately picked it up, palming it with a single hand. Gripping it easily, he turned his wrist and checked his watch.

"We still have another forty-five minutes," Zeke said much more calmly than I would've.

"Yeah, I know but unfortunately, I just got called in." Stan shrugged, his sympathetic expression nothing more than a veneer. But it was a good veneer on the handsome face of a man in uniform, and I knew all too well how easy it was for those things to fool people.

"They don't have anyone else?" Zeke asked.

Maybe I wasn't the only person not fooled by Stan's persona.

"Trust me, Zeke," Stan said, reaching out and taking the soccer ball from his hand with a tipped smile. "I wish my job could include billable hours to hang at a park on a Sunday, but duty calls. Isn't that right, bud?" He wrapped an arm around Jake's shoulders.

I felt the ripple from Zeke going tense, and I wanted to vomit.

Jake looked at his dad and then back to me. "Are you coming with us, Mom?"

I didn't know how I managed to speak over the lump in my throat, but I heard myself say, "No, baby. I can't come with you. I have to go back to my new house, but I'll see you again soon, okay?" *Stronger.*

"Maybe we can add this time to a meeting next weekend to make up for the lost time. The arrangement agreed on was for a full four hours," Zeke said

firmly.

Stan smiled and nodded. “For sure. If I’m not working next weekend, I’ll definitely consider it.”

My stomach dropped like a stone. *Bastard*. This was what he wanted. To let me see Jake—to give me a taste of everything I’d lost when I’d left them—and then take it away. He’d use Jake like our son was nothing more than a yo-yo, letting him loose and then reeling him back in, all to string me along until I did whatever it was he wanted.

“Can Mom and Zeke come to my game next weekend?” Jake turned to his dad and asked.

He might be able to hide it from everyone else, but I could see the way Stan tensed slightly; he hadn’t expected Jake to chime in. *Or to want Zeke there*.

“Sounds like you won’t be working for that,” Zeke drawled tightly, daring Stan to disagree with him.

“I’ll have Bobby be in touch,” Stan brushed him off and focused on Jake. “Go give Mom a hug.”

My arms opened instantly, pulling my boy’s sullen frame close. “Don’t be sad, baby. I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Promise?” he murmured, the single word feeling like a knife through my heart.

“I promise.” I promise I’ll get you, baby. I promise you’ll be with me soon. That you won’t have to worry about soccer and being perfect. That we’ll spend weeks doing nothing but laughing and swimming and being silly.

I promise.

He sighed. “Mom?”

“Yeah, baby?” My tongue felt thick in my mouth.

“I’m glad Dad saved you.”

I stifled a small cry. My eyes squeezed shut, but a tear managed to still work its way through as I spoke, my next words feeling like they came through my throat wrapped in barbed wire. “Me too, baby. Me too.”

I let him go this time because I had to, but not for much longer.

“It was good seeing you, Mackenzie. Glad you’re doing better. You had us both so worried,” Stan said, his smile appearing tender to the rest of the world, but I saw it for what it really was: treacherous. And I wanted to scream. “Nice meeting you, Zeke. Enjoy the rest of your weekend.” He winked as though it was some sort of inside joke that he was more important

than a lawyer because he got called into work on a weekend.

“See you next weekend,” Zeke countered, somehow making it sound both like a promise and a threat.

My feet stayed rooted to the grass as Stan pulled Jake to his side and led him from the park. The farther they got, the more my chest ached. I’d escaped my ex with my life but not with my heart. He still had that wrapped in his clutches.

“Kenzie.”

I shuddered at Zeke’s voice, suddenly feeling the exhaustion that adrenaline had kept at bay. My stomach rumbled. I hadn’t eaten or drank anything all day, and now I was paying for it.

“Kenz...”

Zeke’s hand on my shoulder was all it took for me to crumble. My shoulders caved, and my head slumped. I reached for him, but I didn’t have to—*he was already there*. He was always there.

He pulled me to his chest, and I clung to him, his body like a warm, stone shield as silent sobs racked my body. His arms wrapped around me like the roots of an oak tree, the beat of his heart a steady drum in my ear.

“Whatever it takes, I won’t let him keep you from Jake,” Zeke murmured low against my hair. “I promise.”

I could break a million times, and somehow Zeke always knew the right words to say to put me back together.

Seven months, I’d dotted every i and crossed every t in order to get to this moment. I’d prepared to see Jake again. I’d prepared to deal with Stan again. But I wasn’t prepared to watch Jake walk away—for the moment I had to let him go again until I could keep him safe.

And I definitely wasn’t prepared for the man who held me as I fell apart... or the way I hoped he’d never let go. Zeke Williams wasn’t part of my plan at all.

CHAPTER 8



ZEKE

She was still thinking about earlier. I didn't blame her. I was, too.

Time felt like it hadn't existed for the minutes I held her in the park, her whole body shaking with massive sobs. I wanted to say something—to say a million things. But what the hell could I have said that would've been enough?

That her ex was a fucking ass. That her kid was amazing. That no matter what she'd been through, she was a whole person. Not broken. Not less. Not unworthy. She deserved to be in Jake's life and not have to worry about whatever fucked up power game Stan was playing.

The guy was so full of himself, I was surprised he had any head space left to think about someone else, let alone save their life.

Was he on duty? Was he really called into work? Who the hell knew... I certainly hadn't seen him take a call while he casually chatted with his lawyer in the shade. But why would he lie? And why the hell did he treat her the way he did? Was it because she left him? But there was no bitterness, only a muggy superiority... *Mackenzie*... like she was a child to be disciplined, too.

I had so many goddamn questions about him... about them... but no right to ask. No right to even wonder.

"Thank you for coming... for everything today," her quiet voice trickled over my kitchen counter, and I looked up to see her wipe the corners of her mouth with a napkin.

After we left the park, the first place I took us to was a pizza shop in the city for some food. The day would've been emotionally draining for anyone, let alone someone who hadn't eaten anything.

We hadn't said much over dinner. Even less on the drive back to Carmel.

My frustration grew with the dwindling miles back to Blooms. We'd be getting back to the house right after the dinner rush; any other day, it was a great time to unwind with the other residents and catch up on everyone's day. But when you were still processing the magnitude of seeing your son after seven months... I knew having to pull out her gracious smile and generous conversation was the last thing Kenzie needed.

Taking her straight to Blooms might've been a mistake, but bringing her here—to my apartment—definitely was.

It went against every rule. Professional rules. Personal rules. But what other option did I have? Roasters was closed. The pub would be packed. There was my office downstairs, but even put-together and organized, I wouldn't go as far as to say it was comfortable.

Like my marginally comfortable counter stools were much better.

"Don't thank me," I grunted, staring far too long at her mouth before I dragged my attention away and grabbed two water bottles from the fridge. "I told you I'd do anything to help. Even if that means embarrassing myself with a soccer ball."

Setting one bottle on the counter, I cracked the other open and went to hand it to Kenzie, but she reached forward and took the unopened one instead.

The quick movement startled me, but then I remembered the yogurt conversation. And how she'd refused to take a sip from my water at the park. Must be a germ thing I thought and popped the cap on the bottle in my hand and took a sip.

"Was it true what you said about Michael Phelps?"

My eyebrows rose, and I wiped the back of my hand across my mouth. "Of course. I wouldn't lie to him. Or you."

Kenzie looked at me like the concept was almost foreign to her—and having met Stan, I could see why. The man lied as easily as he breathed. *Called into work, my ass.*

"I went to law school with a kid from Maryland who went to elementary school with Phelps. He loved to share how bad Michael was at everything but swimming," I explained, adding, "Though I'm pretty sure I could give him a run for his money on poor soccer skills."

"You weren't that bad," she said with a small smile.

I hadn't been good at soccer when I was six, and the next thirty years hadn't improved my skills. I was sure everyone else at the park thought it was

an exaggeration when I tripped over the ball no less than five times—two of those times sending me crashing to the ground to the amusement of both Jake and Kenzie—but it wasn't an exaggeration; I was that bad.

"It should be illegal for me to be within ten yards of a soccer ball, and you know it." That brought a smile to her face, and it felt like I'd won the goddamn World Cup.

"You have other skills," she said, and as soon as our eyes connected, her smile stifled into a small gasp, realizing how her words sounded.

I cleared my throat. Time to change the subject before it got too tempting to show her just what those other skills were. "You have a great kid."

"Thank you." Her chin dipped, a lock of blonde hair falling forward. Her eyelids fluttered, and when she looked back up, there was a glaze over her eyes. "I have a less-than-great ex."

I tensed. The urge to punch the shithead's smug face when he cut Kenzie's time short just to prove he could still blast anger through me.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," I said, unwilling to hear more until I was certain she knew she didn't owe me this. She didn't owe me anything. "I came today to be there for you, and I will continue to be there for you and Jake without expecting anything in return."

"I know." Her tongue wet her lips, and she swallowed. "But I want to. I didn't before because I have a hard time trusting people. A hard time trusting... trustworthy people. And Jake... he's everything. Literally everything I have, and the only thing I care about. And I just..."

"Wanted to keep him private." *Protected*. "I understand."

She nodded and took another sip of water. "Stan and I met when I was eighteen. He'd was training to become an EMT, and I... my parents were divorced; my dad was never really in the picture. My mom... wasn't that great. The kind of single mom who wished she was just single."

I hummed low.

"I guess I was looking for a hero to save me from my own life then, and I met Stan, and that was what he was; a knight in shining armor at every turn. He became a paramedic right around the time I learned I was pregnant." She took another drink of water.

"Was he always..." *An asshole*.

"No," she said, understanding exactly what I meant. "But over time..."

"His narcissism bloomed?"

She inhaled sharply, and for a second, I thought I'd gone too far; he was

the father of her son, after all. But then she nodded.

“I don’t know what happened. Maybe I was young and naïve and wanted to escape my own home life so I missed it. Maybe I became pregnant so early on that I didn’t want to see it because he was the father of my child.” Her shoulder sagged. “Or maybe it was the job... constantly being called to people in dire moments—the life and death decisions he had to make... maybe that brought out something that was always there.” She paused. “He became controlling. Obsessed with being in control and being the hero saving people.”

“Just because he did good work doesn’t mean he gets a pass to treat you like shit.”

Her eyes snapped up. “Oh, I know,” she said, her voice much firmer than I’d anticipated.

“Did he hit you?” I had no idea why I asked. Blooms housed women who needed shelter from domestic abuse, and I’d filed plenty of restraining orders against violent husbands or exes; Kenzie would know she could’ve shared if this had happened to her.

“No,” she insisted, and then looked like she was about to say something else before she stopped herself and rolled her bottom lip through her teeth.

She could be lying, but I doubted it. Kenzie might hide some of her truths, but she never lied about them.

“He was deprecating and condescending. Insulting. Controlling. But he never hit me or Jake... that wasn’t how he liked to control me. Ironically, I think he believes physical abuse to be a weak man’s weapon.” She let out a bitter laugh. “No, he controlled me by taking care of everything. Providing everything. Letting me be a stay-at-home mom. Which, on the surface, makes him sound like such a great guy... but that was the whole point; he did all these things, so how could I go against anything he asked of me? Anything he wanted?”

“He trapped you,” I said, clamping my teeth tight as her gaze lowered.

“It’s hard to argue you’re living in a prison when it comes with a white picket fence and your guard is a handsome, hardworking hero.”

“Why didn’t you leave?” The pressure around my chest increased, slowing each breath. “Do you still love him?”

“No,” she blurted out, almost frantic in her attempt to deny it. “No, I don’t love him. I haven’t loved him for a long time, if I ever really did at all.” She began to absentmindedly peel the label off the water bottle. “I didn’t

leave because I couldn't."

"Jake..."

She nodded. "Stan was a good dad—is a good dad, I guess."

"So good he kept his son from his favorite summer camp?" I asked and then regretted my harsh words. *Who the hell was I to say shit like that?* I never made rash comments or personal judgments, especially about someone else's life. I was a lawyer, not a judge or jury. But damn if I hadn't passed my own sentence on Stan Klinger the second we'd met. "Sorry," I mumbled and reached up to rub the back of my neck.

"No." Kenzie shifted on the stool, her fingers balling the label of the bottle. "You're right. He's..."

"Horrible?" That was the nicest word I could come up with.

"Worse," she replied, the word laden with so many things she could say but didn't, and that made me even angrier. A strand of hair fell forward, and my fingers itched to brush it back from her face. "But if I admit he's horrible, then I'm admitting that I left my son with a horrible man."

"Kenz..." God, she was so damn good. Too good to be feeling this kind of guilt.

"I was going to leave," Kenzie said carefully, her fingers crinkling the paper even more vigorously now. "I told Stan I wanted to leave—to separate. He said if I left him, I'd never see Jake again."

Fucking prick.

"California is an equal rights state, you would've both had custody..." Something wasn't adding up.

Her eyes glazed over with tears, and instantly, the pieces connected.

"He knew about the drugs," I muttered. I didn't want nor need her to rehash her medical history. I knew she'd become addicted to opioids after she'd sprained her ankle five years ago. That she'd been hospitalized five times in three years for drug-related problems, including the last time when she'd overdosed in an attempt to end her life.

"Yeah." She blinked quickly, a tear landing on my countertop. A second later, her thumb swiped it away. "That was two days before I ended up in the hospital."

I'd never rationalize someone using drugs. I would, however, be critical of the piece of shit who knew the mother of his kid had a problem—who was a goddamn EMT, for crying out loud—and had used her addiction against her instead of getting her help.

“Kenzie...” I forced myself to swallow, debating whether or not to ask, but we were already here—the conversation barreling like a snowball down the side of a mountain. “Why did Jake say that Stan saved you?”

Red bloomed in her cheeks, and something flickered in her eyes that I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

“Stan was... on duty the night I overdosed,” she confessed softly. “He was the one who administered the Narcan and saved my life.”

I sucked in a breath, conflicting emotions twisting in my gut. *He’d saved her life.* There was nothing I liked about the guy, not a single goddamn sliver, but this... this was the only reason that prevented me from hating him.

In the corner of my eye, I caught her hand move over the counter. More tears.

“What is it?” I asked, my voice growing coarse. I moved around the barrier I’d placed between us—*another mistake to add to my list*—and notched my fingers under her chin. “What’s wrong?”

There were more tears shining in her eyes. Too many to blink back, so they started to stream down her cheeks.

She tried to turn away, and maybe I should’ve let her, but goddamn it, just because she could withstand the storm didn’t mean I didn’t want to shelter her from the rain.

“Tell me,” I murmured, brushing a tear away with my thumb. “Please.”

We were too close. I was too close to this. All the lines were blurring.

“I just... I feel so guilty for leaving him,” she said, a choked cry punctuating her confession.

“Kenz...” I groaned, lifting my other hand so I could cup both her cheeks and hold her face higher. “You left to get help—to get better.”

“I know.” Her bottom lip quivered. “But I still left him there with Stan all this time...”

“And if you hadn’t left, how much longer would you have survived there?”

Her eyes dropped, and I felt her swallow. “I don’t know,” she said, but what I heard was *‘not much longer.’*

“Jake will be okay,” I promised her, catching a tear that landed on her lip without even thinking. “Jake’s a smart kid. A strong kid. A swimmer. He knows how to keep his head above water for a little until things calm down and get better. That’s all this is. One summer without swim camp. One summer playing soccer. A couple months treading water, so you could get

better.”

She took in a slow breath, letting it out like the world rested on her shoulders.

“I’ve never seen a kid more worried about making sure you’re happy and okay.”

The corners of her mouth quivered in the faintest smile. “He has the biggest heart.”

“So do you.” The words were out before I could stop them, landing like a match in a bottle of propane.

Her gaze collided with mine, and suddenly everything was on fire. The air ignited with our proximity. Our breaths combusted in the small space between our mouths.

I wanted her, and there was no denying it. No fighting it, really.

“Kenzie...” I begged, my voice low. She needed to step back. To tell me to take her back to Blooms and thank me for my help.

She shouldn’t want any more from me like I couldn’t want any more from her.

No matter what my sister or Callie or any of the women at Blooms argued, I wasn’t a saint. I was a gentleman and a workaholic and overwhelmingly protective and respectful after everything I’d watched my sister go through... but I wasn’t a goddamn saint.

And there were only so many times I could be so close to Kenzie’s mouth before I couldn’t stop myself from taking a taste.

“Kiss me,” she said with a husky whisper. “I’ve dreamed of it for so long.”

Christ.

I groaned, her soft plea twisted the knife of desire into my chest. “I can’t,” I protested even as my head drifted lower.

She was an adult. A sober, consenting adult. And after today, no doubt the most level-headed and strongest woman I’d ever met. If this were a court case—if we were standing in front of the judge—there were a million ways to defend what was about to happen. A million ways to prove I was innocent of abusing my power—abusing my position over Kenzie. Innocent of everything except the way I wanted her. To that, the whole of me pleaded guilty.

“You said I could never take advantage of you.” Her eyes found mine, and I lost myself in their lavender haze.

“I did,” I choked out, losing this battle.

“Do you promise?” she whispered, her eyes lowering to my mouth.

I knew why she was asking, and I knew what was going to happen if I said yes. I knew it all, but it changed nothing. I’d meant every goddamn word I’d said, and if she wanted this as much as I did...

“I promise.”

Then fuck the rules.

Her lips pressed to mine, and I came undone.



A DEEP GROAN split from the seams of my chest as I slid my fingers back into her hair, tipping her head and claiming control of the kiss.

I wanted to erase every memory she had of every other mouth. Every other kiss. Every other man.

I wanted to wipe the memory of that piece of shit’s two-faced look, his fake placations and false kindness covering up the way he’d looked down on her. Treated her like she had no power because she’d made mistakes.

We all fucking made mistakes. Life was about learning from our mistakes.

Like I’d hopefully learn from this one in the morning.

She let out a soft moan and opened her mouth beautifully under mine. Her kiss mirrored everything else about her. Warm and sweet. Inviting, but not passive. She kissed me back with equal fervor, her tongue stroking along mine, drawing it into the depths of her mouth.

My cock pulsed angrily. Too many nights spent where I should’ve taken a cold shower—should’ve worked one or two out before going to bed. Instead, I buried myself—and my needs—in my work, thinking that if I buried them deep enough, I could ignore them.

But there was no ignoring a fucking land mine. And that was exactly how my body reacted to her kiss. It blew all my protests and restraints to high hell.

“Fuck, Kenzie.” I growled into her mouth.

“Don’t stop.” She curled her hands into my shirt and held me tight.

I turned, pinning her between me and the counter and then lifted her onto it. *Not unlike that night in the kitchen at Blooms.*

As soon as I stepped between her thighs, her legs wrapped around my

waist, and I was a goner.

“One night,” I warned in a low voice. “Understand?”

I wanted consent, and I wanted to be clear. This was so fucking wrong on so many levels, but if I couldn’t stop it, I could make sure it didn’t happen again.

Yeah, we were living in the same orbit now, but that wasn’t permanent. In a few months, she’d leave Blooms and go back to the city—back to be with her son. And I’d still be here, working my days away to try and save the world.

I might not be a pretentious, narcissistic ass like Stan and flaunt my work in everyone’s face, but that didn’t mean I didn’t know how important it was. The women who came to Blooms needed all my attention. All my commitment. I’d never forgive myself if by focusing a little more on my own life, I put one of theirs at risk.

But for one night...

“One night.” She exhaled shakily. “Please.”

My lips slammed back down onto hers, kissing her wildly.

For one night, I’d break all the rules to treat this woman the way she deserved to be treated—to *be worshipped*. Because if today was any indication, the only worshipping Kenzie had ever experienced was at the feet of her egotistical ex.

With one hand, I held the back of her head, imprisoning her mouth with mine as my other hand snaked around her waist. Instinctively, she clutched me as I picked her up and carried her to my bedroom.

I hadn’t brought a woman here since I’d moved into the place. I tried not to think about that—not to make anything more of it—but I couldn’t help it.

At the foot of the bed, I turned and sank onto it, keeping Kenzie in my lap. Just like when we’d worked together, there was this kind of innate synchronicity that shouldn’t seem as special as it did. My hands went to the hem of the dress, lifting it as her arms rose.

Then went my shirt.

Her bra.

My shoes.

I flipped us, her back to the bed, and my hips resting between her thighs. My hungry gaze roamed over her lush body. Her blonde hair fanned out on the bed like spilled sunshine. Her pale skin shimmered like a slice of moonlight, her full breasts topped with bright red nipples that furled tightly.

All the swells and valleys I'd fantasized about over the last weeks came to life beneath me, more beautifully than I could've imagined.

"You have perfect tits," I growled, palming one breast while my mouth lowered to her other begging nipple.

"Zeke." She gasped and bowed as I sucked on the taut peak, clutching my head to her chest like it was the air her lungs needed.

"I couldn't help staring at them all day. Any day," I admitted. "At the house. At the gym. At the park."

I laved and sucked until she writhed on my bed like my own wanton nymph. The way she responded to my touch drove me wild. It was like her body had never known pleasure—or had known it too long ago to remember. I'd bet her shithead ex never cared about her pleasure. Never cared about anything except getting one off. *Fuck him.*

"Please..."

"Please what?" I growled. I wanted her words. I wanted to hear her tell me everything she wanted so that later—tomorrow—when I hated myself for being so damn weak, I'd at least have the memory of her voice reminding me why I couldn't resist her—*why I'd done this.*

"Touch me."

"Where?"

She rocked her hips, pressing her hot core along my erection.

"Say it." I pressed my teeth around her nipple until the pressure made her squirm.

"Between my legs." She panted. "Touch my pussy. My clit. Everywhere."

I slid my hand between her legs, cupping over the whole of her sex and grinding my palm against the sensitive flesh.

"Fuck, you're soaked for me." Her underwear was drenched, and it only took me another second to remove them. I groaned loud when my fingers returned to her core, sliding through the slick folds and sinking two fingers into her while my thumb massaged her clit.

"Zeke, please," Kenzie begged, trembling underneath my touch.

"That's it, baby. You're doing so good. God, what I wouldn't give to feel you soak my cock like this." Her body clenched around my fingers, her response to my dirty words driving me wild.

I breathed heavily over her skin, my mind scrambling with how hot and tight she felt, and wanting nothing more than to bury my dick inside her.

My fingers worked her into a frenzy. Between her clit and her G-spot, it

wasn't long before she moaned my name over and over again, and it was like hearing a fucking angel pray. But instead of to a god, it was to me, and goddamn if it didn't humble me and drive me wild all at the same time.

She was incredible, and if that piece of shit treated her even a tenth of the way he did today while they were together... well, there was no doubt in my mind that Kenzie hadn't heard how incredible she was nearly enough.

"You're so fucking beautiful. And determined. And strong," I praised her as my mouth mapped the inches of her skin. "The way you were today... you took my breath away."

I only had one chance to chart as much of her body as I could and mark it for memory. The rosy tips of her tits. The freckles that cascaded over her collarbone. The birthmark above her belly button and the scar from her C-section.

"Zeke," she cried out, her hips bucking under me. Her hand found my hair, dragging my head so her eyes met mine. "I want you," she murmured, her eyes hooded with the wave of desire about to overtake her.

My strokes slowed. I wanted to make her come. To feel the way she squeezed my fingers and gushed against my palm, but I wanted what she wanted more. "Use that beautiful mouth, angel, and tell me, and I'll give it to you."

Her eyes flickered. "I want you inside me," she said, her voice husky. "I want your cock inside me. Fucking me. Please, Zeke. I want you."

Christ. Desire exploded in my veins, sending a firework of dark spots bursting into my vision. Was it because I never let anyone need me like this? Was it because this incredible woman—who fought not to need anyone—now wanted me? Needed me? Or was it because I was simply fucking insane with wanting her?

"Fuck, Kenz," I panted, my dick straining painfully against my jeans as I brought my face back to hers, finding her eyes and locking them to mine. "Last chance."

I couldn't even finish the goddamn sentence because I was afraid of the words. If she didn't want this, now was her time to leave. Now was her time to say. And I'd let her walk away.

Of course, I would. Even if it killed me to do it.

"Please, Zeke." Her hand curled around the nape of my neck and pulled my mouth back to hers, kissing me like I was her only source of oxygen. *Or maybe she was mine.*

She tasted like honey and heaven. Impossibly sweet and addictively forbidden. All my reservations melted under that kiss, and I gave into the desire gnawing away at my insides.

If I was to have one night for myself—if I was going to let myself take something I wanted for the first time in years—by god, I was going to fucking take it. *Her*. Take her. I was going to possess her like it was all I was made to do. Like it was for more than one night. Like it could be anything but what it was.

When I pushed off the bed, I couldn't help but stare at her. Her blonde hair spread over the covers. Her body full and flushed and dewy with desire. And she stared back, her eyes lowering over my body until they reached my waist.

“You want my cock, angel?” I rasped. “Take it out.”

Kenzie sat up, her hands greedily reaching for my belt, undoing it and then my zipper. I groaned low as she peeled my clothes down my waist, and I almost completely lost it when I saw her breath catch as she freed my dick.

I'd never brag about my size, but my cock on the other hand... it stretched and swelled even thicker under her gaze. Like her lust watered the damn thing to grow even bigger. Like all it wanted to do was show her how fucking big I could get.

“Can I...”

I hissed and caught her wrist in my hand before she could touch me. “Not if you want me inside you.”

If she touched me now, I'd be a goner. Hell, if those lips of hers breathed too close, my dick was more than willing to paint her face and chest with my cum.

I released her wrist and cupped her cheek. “Lie back.”

She did as I instructed, and I went to my nightstand, digging out a condom from the top drawer. It had been long enough that I checked the expiration date to make sure the damn thing was still good as I returned to the foot of the bed.

Thank God, it was.

Ripping the wrapper open with my teeth, I pulled out the rubber and rolled it slowly down the length of my cock. It was fucking painful. I'd never been so hard in my life.

“Spread your legs. Show me how bad you want my cock,” I ordered.

Her thighs drifted apart, her pussy swollen and slick. I dragged in a deep

breath, fighting every urge in order to move slowly.

“Please, Zeke,” she murmured, her thighs drifting wider as I lowered between them.

“I’ll give it to you, angel,” I swore, a feral sound escaping my lips as I tipped over her. The tip of my cock found her entrance like a moth to a fucking flame. “I’ll give you everything you want.” And then I thrust deep inside, burying myself in her flame.

Her mouth opened, letting out the most beautiful cry as I filled her.

My eyes screwed shut, my heart threatening to explode in my chest as pleasure ravaged me. “Fuck, you’re so tight,” I growled, the hot clamp of her cunt squeezing the life out of my cock.

I groaned from low in my chest as I bottomed out inside her, bumping against her womb. A rush of possessiveness blazed through my mind. It wasn’t just her tits or fucking her that I’d imagined. Seeing her with Jake earlier made me imagine other things... things I had even less justification for. *Kenzie pregnant with my baby. Jake as an older brother, teaching his sibling to swim.*

“This what you wanted, angel? My cock buried all the way inside you?”

“Yes,” she whimpered.

With a groan, I drew back and then thrust deep again, her strangled gasp sending goose bumps out over my skin. I was going to lose my mind like this—right after I took her like a goddamn beast. And that was the last thing I wanted.

I wanted her. I wanted to watch her come apart with pleasure and know I was the reason.

I slid my arm under her back, and with one swift motion, flipped our positions so she was on top of me. My hands clamped her waist and pushed her up, and I let out a low hiss when her position allowed my cock to sink even deeper into her hot cunt.

I bit into my cheek, tasting blood as my pulse beat wildly. I was a giver. There was no question. I gave until there was nothing left of myself. But for Kenzie, I wanted her to take just as much as I wanted to give.

“Ride me,” I ordered, finding her gaze above mine. “Fuck me, angel, and make yourself come.”

Her eyes flickered with something powerful. Slowly, her hands slid along my forearms, her fingers biting into my muscles as she used me to brace herself. And then she began to move. Up and down, she slid onto my cock. I

gripped her hips harder, not to control her, but to control myself. She felt so fucking good. So hot and tight, and if it hadn't been for the condom, I probably would've come already.

"That's it, Kenz," I roughly praised. "Take that cock deep right where you want it."

She whimpered beautifully and bit into her bottom lip.

As much as I wanted to focus on my own pleasure, it was hers that consumed me. The way she worked herself on my cock. Her hips rolled forward, making sure she hit her clit and her G-spot each time she sank all the way down.

This had to be heaven because I was being fucked by an angel.

Her movements became more frantic, our hips slapping together and filling the room with erotic sounds. I gritted my teeth, barely holding my orgasm at bay as she wound her pleasure higher and higher.

"Zeke..." She panted, and her head tipped back.

"Don't stop, angel," I ground out. "Don't fucking stop until you get what you need." *It would kill us both if she did.*

"Give me what I need," she murmured between breaths, taking one of my wrists and dragging my hand between us, pressing my fingers to her clit.

"Fuck." My cock pulsed, leaking cum, as I felt the swollen bud move against my fingers with each thrust.

My heart threatened to explode inside my chest, but I ignored the danger. I ignored everything except her moans of pleasure as I plucked and rubbed her clit between my fingers, feeling the way her body stretched each time she sank down my cock.

"That's it, angel," I ground out, feeling the pressure build at the base of my spine. "Come for me."

She panted in a way that almost sounded like a sob, her hips grinding down harder on me, her fingers digging into my wrist as she held it to her pussy.

"Come for me." I pressed hard on her clit at the same time as she slammed down on my cock like she'll never get the chance to again, and then she exploded.

Kenzie screamed and gasped as her body convulsed around my cock, squeezing so tight it choked the air from my lungs. With a feral shout, I anchored her hips, and drove up into her like a wild man, thrusting into her clenching cunt twice more before my cock erupted.

There were orgasms, and then there was this. A taste of pure heaven. Something I'd never felt before, and something I damn well wasn't lucky enough to have again.

She collapsed on top of me as though her bones turned to Jell-O. I held her to my pounding chest, wondering if she realized just what she did to me... and pretending like I didn't have to let her go.

"Fuck," I hissed, and pulled out of her just as a drop of cum leaked from the edge of the condom. *Well that had never happened before.* "Don't move."

I gently laid her to the side and went to the bathroom to peel off the mess. Was it too much cum or had I just stretched the rubber too full? I gritted my teeth and quickly wiped myself down before returning to the bed with a warm cloth for Kenzie.

"Zeke..."

"Shh." I carefully wiped between her legs, my damn dick stirring again at the sight of her used pussy. "Let me take care of you."

"I think you already did that," she murmured.

My eyes flicked to hers and then returned to my task, gently wiping the sensitive skin between her legs.

"I need to get you back to the house," I said softly after several minutes, my hand still carefully dragging the cloth between her legs, unsure if I'm still cleaning or if the slight tremors in her breath meant I've started something else in the process.

"It's already past curfew, Zeke," she murmured, and my eyes lifted to hers. "And you promised one night."

My cock jerked against my thigh, hardening at the idea of a whole night with her. My jaw clenched, and I made the mistake of setting the cloth on the floor and baring her pussy to my gaze.

"You know what I'd do to this pussy for one whole night?" I slowly slid one finger down her puffy seam. "Ruin her for every other night and every other cock."

I couldn't help myself—couldn't help the possessiveness that eked out into my tone and words.

And then she placed her hand on my head, her fingers gently tangling in my hair. I looked at her, watching her tongue slide along her lips. "Do it." And then she gently pushed my head toward her sex. "Please."

I hardly needed her plea, let alone the nudge of encouragement to send my mouth to her cunt like a starved man to a feast. My groan muffled, and I

began to devour her honeyed flesh like this was the only chance I had.

Because it was.

One night to get this out of our system, and tomorrow, I'd go back to being her boss and her lawyer, and she'd go back to being the woman fighting to get her life back on track and her son back in her arms.

CHAPTER 9



KENZIE

“Hi.”

“Hey.”

I’d never had a more loaded greeting in my life. Zeke’s voice might sound normal, his relaxed posture and furrowed brow from behind his desk might look normal, but nothing was normal anymore after the other night. Now, every hello, every glance, every time our hands brushed passing papers back and forth, was loaded—like a smoking gun ready to fire another shot.

“How are the new residents settling in?” he asked, running a hand along his jaw as I took a seat in front of his desk.

It was the same motions as I’d done the week before, except everything had changed. Everything right down to the physical act of sitting, my body willingly reminding me that it was still recovering from the hours of pleasure and four orgasms at the hands of this man.

“Good.” My head bobbed. Earlier this week, the first four residents had been moved in and oriented to the house. Next week, the remaining four will arrive. “Really good. Everyone has picked up with their household duties pretty easily. I think Addy will be happy to hear that Josie and Karen both have green thumbs, and they’re getting the tomato garden back on track.” I rambled in the hopes it would distract from the way I kept staring at his mouth. *Those lips.*

I didn’t know what I was thinking, kissing him the way I had.

Or maybe I did.

Almost eight months ago, I’d made the hardest decision of my life—the decision to free myself from Stan. No matter how much it hurt, no matter how hard it was, I made the choice to start fighting for myself. For my life.

For my health. For my son.

And Sunday night, at Zeke's apartment, I'd wanted to fight for him, too, even if it was only for one night. *That* was why I'd kissed him. *Because I'd wanted just one taste of him for myself.*

"And how are you doing?" he asked, and I told myself it was my imagination the way his voice lowered just a hair.

"Good." I opened my notepad. "How are you?"

"Good."

We were both lying. Both struggling to move past the line we'd crossed—and the incredible sex we'd fallen into. I couldn't speak for Zeke, and I was sure he'd had more intimate partners compared to my one, but I'd never had sex like that before. His kisses... touches. Pleasure. Orgasms. *Nothing came close.*

There was no comparison to that night, and if the air between us wasn't still charged with the same energy, I almost would've believed that something that incomparable had to be imagined.

I didn't have any delusions. I knew any kind of relationship was out of the question, for him because of the boundaries that already existed between us, and for me, because of Jake. Until I had equal custody over my son, I couldn't think about having another man in my life... especially since the last one had almost destroyed it.

But one night... was one night. One toe-curling, incredible, magical night. And now it was over. *Like Christmas.* No one expected Santa to stick around for a few weeks and continue to hand out presents... or orgasms.

We were adults. This wasn't the 'pretend it never happened' kind of thing, it was the 'it happened four times... and now, we were done with it' kind of thing.

"So, the next group arrives on Thursday—"

"And I have their welcome packets together." I placed my hand on the stack of folders on one corner of his desk. "Once you have everything you need from them, I'll go through the tour, introduce them to everyone, and get them settled."

When I looked up, I caught Zeke staring at me before his head tipped, and he nodded. "Great," he said and cleared his throat. "I know it's still over a month away, but Benny was asking me about the Beach Bash, do we have a list of—"

"All the activities and businesses that need volunteers, and which of the

girls have signed up for which.” I passed him the papers over his desk.

Every year, all the profits from the Beach Bash were donated to the hospital. In addition to the food and fun events, there was also a large tent of donations from local businesses to be sold for charity.

“On the list are still the vegetable baskets from the garden to auction off like we did last year, but some of the girls and I know how to knit and crochet, so we’re going to do some handmade softies and donate them straight to the NICU.”

“Softies?”

“Little toys. Bunnies. Octopus,” I explained, leaning forward to point lower on the sheet as though he wouldn’t be able to find it.

Instead of his eyes going to the spot by my finger, his attention turned to me. To the straight line of sight down my shirt I’d just given him.

My breath snagged, and a warm coat of goose bumps lifted on my skin. My nipples furled, remembering the heat of that stare on my bare skin, hot enough to feel like an actual touch.

The intensity of the way he’d wanted me was enough to make my knees weak.

“Gwen said they like to give the preemies something to hold onto so they don’t try to grab at any of the tubes,” I said, pulling our conversation back to safe shores as I quickly sat back down.

A familiar ache heated between my thighs, so I crossed my legs to stop it. Of course, my pebbled nipples still showed through my shirt, but at least he pretended to be focused on the documents in his hands, perusing them slowly to let the tension leak from the moment.

“This is... incredible,” he said and looked at me. “You’re incredible.”

So much for letting the tension leak.

My jaw went slack, heat flooding my cheeks. “Zeke...”

“I’m not going to hold back from giving praise when it’s due, Kenzie,” he said, his tone stern. “Regardless of what’s happened between us.”

I couldn’t stop my small smile. I’d tried to do so much for Stan when we first started dating and then after we had Jake. He wanted me to be a stay-at-home mom, and I wanted to do what I could to help him—to make his job less stressful since he was providing for all of us. I cleaned the house, prepped and made every meal. Took care of everything for Jake. Hosted parties for him and his friends and coworkers. Ran volunteer events. But no matter how much I did, there was never a compliment from Stan, let alone

gratitude. It was all... expected.

And sex... well, what I wanted wasn't the priority in those moments. Sometimes, he'd give me an orgasm and then spend days reminding me how generous he was, but it wasn't common, and never with his mouth.

God, I'd never felt a tongue on my clit but even if I had—even if I did again—I knew it wouldn't be like Zeke's. The man's mouth had spoken its own language to my body, and my body had replied with a kind of pleasure I'd never known before.

"Thank you," I murmured.

Really, there was only one thing I wanted to talk to him about today, and it was one of the reasons why I'd worked into the midnight hours the past few nights trying to get everything else organized and done. *The other reason was because if I went to bed any earlier, I'd be tossing and turning, fitful with the memory of our night together.*

"I think you pretty much blew through everything we needed to meet about today—"

"I wanted to talk to you about custody," I blurted out, locking my hands in my lap.

"Of Jake."

I nodded.

I watched regret darken his gaze. "The judge is going to need to proof that you're clean and went through rehab treatment—"

"Of course. That won't be a problem," I interrupted him even though it wasn't necessary; he was simply telling me the requirements I needed to meet. But the instinct to protest was just that... instinct.

I'd long ago buried the rage I harbored toward Stan. I'd never get better or see Jake again if I held onto it. Still, the fervor sometimes flared, especially when Stan looked at me with that smug smile like I was still under his control.

In some ways, I was. Forever scarred by what he'd done to me. But because those scars were invisible—twisted like an invisible noose around my neck, I had to play the game by his rules. *Bastard.* But I'd do it. I'd play any game at any deficit if it meant getting my son back.

Slow and steady.

One day, I'd win the race. One day, I'd be free of the cloud he dangled over me. But until then, I had to keep playing. Keep fighting.

"They'll also want to see steady income and stable housing."

“I know,” I said, my throat thickening. “I have some savings. I should be able to get an apartment in the next two months. I just need to know what you think my chances are then...”

“Kenzie...”

“I want your honesty, Zeke,” I insisted, folding my arms and telling him flatly, “You don’t need to sugarcoat the truth just because we slept together.”

His mouth snapped shut, and his jaw flexed. “Honestly, it depends on the judge,” he said with a frown. “If you had a longer track record of those things... something concrete to show that Jake’s life would be safe and stable, then I could say it would be an easy case. But since it’s been less than a year since you’ve been out of the hospital, only a few months since you’ve been working, and you’re saying you want to apply as soon as you get your own place...”

“It’s unlikely they’ll give it to me.” Pain bloomed in my chest.

“You have about a fifty-fifty chance,” he said. “Most of the judges around here and in the city know of Blooms, so our reputation will help, but it’s not a guarantee. If Stan was on board with it though, that could—”

“He won’t be.” *Not a chance.*

“He agreed to the supervised visitation.”

“Only to prove he could still control me,” I said without thinking, anger bubbling to the surface. “You heard Jake... Stan thinks I’m still going to come back after this. He’s that delusional.”

Zeke frowned. “Kenzie, look at me.” I shivered at his tone; the husky demand made my knees weak. “He doesn’t control you. Not anymore.”

My chest tightened. Both because of how fervently this man fought for me but also because he had no idea of the truth—no idea what I’d gone through with Stan. What I’d barely survived.

And that was equal reason for why I couldn’t have more than one night with Zeke. The lengths he’d go to protect me were the ones that could undo everything I’d fought so hard for.

“I know,” I said thickly and nodded, fighting back tears. “If you think it’s a better bet to wait, then I’ll wait.”

“It doesn’t hurt to try, Kenz,” Zeke said. “I just want to make sure you’re prepared for both outcomes.”

“I know.” My chin dipped. “Thank you. I appreciate you being honest with me.”

“Always,” he said hoarsely, the tenderness in his gaze making me

shiver. As soon as he saw the effect he had on me, Zeke stood and began gathering up the files on his desk, stuffing them in his briefcase. “Well, I’ll get out of your way and let you take over.”

It should’ve been my cue to leave, but there was one more thing I needed to ask.

“Actually, I have one more question.” I stood, rolling my bottom lip through my teeth until he looked at me. His eyes narrowed like he knew what I was about to say.

“I can reach out and ask about the extended visitation—”

“I don’t want to ask,” I broke in. “I mean, we can, but regardless of what Stan decides, I want to go to Jake’s game this weekend.”

“Kenz...” he trailed off, exhaling slowly. “That’s not a good idea.”

“It’s a public park—a public game. I don’t need to be supervised in a public place. I just want to be there for Jake—cheer him on.” The ball in my throat inflated as I added in the last part, “Will you take me?”

His jaw pulsed.

“Please, Zeke.” My lip quivered. “You saw him. You know he’s going to be miserable at the game, and Stan’s only going to make him feel more like a failure...”

He exhaled with an audible whoosh as though my plea were a nail straight to the balloon of his denial. His hand tightened into a fist and then released.

“Okay,” he agreed, taking his bag and walking around the desk until we stood only a few inches apart. “But Kenz, if they don’t agree to a visit, you can’t try to see him, do you understand? That will definitely kill any chance of you getting custody as soon as you want it.”

“I understand.” I nodded wildly. “Thank you.” I placed my hand on the side of his arm, only gratitude on my mind until we touched and heat ricocheted through me. “Sorry.” I pulled back with a jerk.

“Don’t apologize,” he said lowly. “I think this is a lot harder than both of us thought it would be.”

I gave him a half smile. “Well, maybe you shouldn’t have made the sex so spectacular then.”

He made a sound that was somewhere between a chuckle and a groan, and my stomach fluttered. Zeke didn’t laugh much. He cared. He worked. He overworked. And then he cared some more. But laugh? It was rare. And I shouldn’t have liked it so much when the rare occurrence happened for me.

“I don’t think I’m the one solely to blame for that,” he muttered.

“I guess we’re both a bunch of orgasm overachievers.” That got another small smile.

“Not something I ever thought I’d wish to be worse at.”

I laughed. “Me neither.”

The banter worked until it didn’t. Until there was only silence and the hunger coursing between us, eating up the oxygen and the space and the *one-night* boundary we’d agree to.

“I should go,” he said hoarsely and stepped back. “Have a good day.”

He stepped into the hall as I called, “You, too,” after him.

For the foreseeable future, all we could have were good days. Good nights were out of the question.

CHAPTER 10



ZEKE

“Go, Jake! Go!” Kenzie cupped her hands around her mouth and screamed as Jake chased the ball down the field, his legs pumping fast to try and catch it.

“Go! Go! Go!” she yelled again, this time forcefully enough that she tripped over her own feet and stumbled forward.

I caught her by the waist as she swayed. “Whoa there, tiger.”

“Sorry,” she murmured sheepishly, steadying herself. “As much as he doesn’t like soccer, I have to say that this whole cheerleading part is a lot of fun.” She tipped her head up to me and smiled.

“Maybe too much fun,” I teased without thinking that I was still holding her or that her face was upturned to mine like she was waiting for a kiss. A blush crept across her cheeks, and for a second, we were caught up in the moment until the whistle blew.

“Halftime,” I murmured. I should’ve let her go, but my hands stayed put on the dip of her waist for a second longer, feeling her shiver as a breeze blew over the field. The day had started out sunny, but had quickly become cloud-covered, the threat of rain looming in the distance. “Here. Wear this.” I shrugged out of my jacket and held it up for her.

Her gaze tangled with mine for a long second before she turned and slid her arms into the sleeves.

“He’s doing well,” I murmured, redirecting the conversation to anything other than the fact that lawyers didn’t loan their jackets to their beautiful clients.

“He is,” she agreed, but the shine in her eyes dimmed when she looked across the field. “I wish I could tell him.”

If the thrum of desire in my blood wasn't enough to keep me heated, the jolt of anger I felt every time I looked at the team's bench and saw Stan lording over it, *coaching the game*, was.

I sent over the visitation request to Stan's lawyer with zero expectation he was going to easily accept it this time. For Kenzie's sake, I'd hoped I was wrong, but I wasn't. Stan had refused. His reason? Because he was helping coach—something he'd conveniently forgotten to mention last weekend; he claimed it wasn't fair to split his or Jake's focus from the game to let him see Kenzie.

I called bullshit. My fist balled with a will of its own, ready to split Stan's head from his body if he continued to do this to Kenzie.

Meanwhile, the damn saint of a woman took the news with more grace than he deserved. Or maybe that was just because I'd agreed to take her to the game regardless of what Stan said.

But for Kenzie's sake, we had to stay on this side of the field. Let Stan handle telling their son why he couldn't come over and see his mom; it was his choice.

"He knows you're here for him. That's what matters," I promised her, unable to stop myself from reaching for her hand.

Instantly, her fingers twined with mine, like we were both starving for any crumbs to feed the attraction between us.

Back at Blooms, the lines were clear. We kept things professional. Didn't talk outside of work hours. But here... outside of Carmel... the lines blurred.

"Do you think he can hear me?"

"Kenz." I chuckled. "I'm pretty sure Canada can hear you."

A wide smile beamed over her face, and she started to laugh before her whole expression crumbled.

"What are you doing here, Mackenzie?"

I turned, releasing Kenzie just as Stan reached us. He narrowed his eyes on me, and I wondered if he saw that I'd been holding her hand. It didn't matter, I told myself. There was nothing he could do about that—*nothing he could do about me though I sure as hell would like to see him try.*

"I came to watch Jake's game," she said firmly, and I caught the slight lift in her chin like she was prepared for battle.

"And I told you no," he said, his tone flat but with a slight edge. "So, you can either leave now or—"

"Or nothing," I broke in. "We're just here to watch the game from the

opposite sideline of a public park. We're not here to visit Jake, and we aren't breaking any rules to do so."

Stan's nostrils flared, and he folded his arms, his eyes wild for a second as he looked me up and down. "You think you're smart, don't you?" he demanded and turned his attention to Kenzie. "You know I don't have to let you see him, right, Mackenzie? It's my decision, and I can change it like *that*"—he snapped his fingers—"if I want. You're a drug addict. You should be thanking me for letting you visit my son."

Kenzie let out a gasp of pain. The way he emphasized 'my' didn't go unnoticed—nor did the way he spoke loudly to make sure the few people standing around heard him call her a drug addict.

Fucker.

Red blurred my vision. I stepped forward until he could only see me and dropped my voice low. "Speak to her like that again, and you'll be begging me not to sue you—not to drown you in so much legal paperwork not even your smug ass will be able to worm your way out of it."

"Zeke." Her hand rested softly on my arm, and it was the only reason I held back.

"You'll have to let Kenzie see Jake if a judge orders you to," I said, holding my tone flat as I smiled that fake-ass smile back at him. "And I'm sure that judge would be interested to hear how you're threatening and verbally harassing her in public with no provocation."

His lip curled, and I thought he was going to say something—do something stupid, but then he didn't. Instead, it was almost like every emotion wiped from his face, replaced with an easy grin that made me question everything.

"I'm disappointed in you, Mackenzie. Very disappointed." Stan shook his head, his eyes flicking to Jake before looking back at her. "Enjoy the rest of the game."

He turned and walked back around the field, making sure to stop and talk to several parents along the way, some with their kids who played on the opposing team, but still, everyone greeting him with warm smiles while they sent pitiful stares in Kenzie's direction.

As soon as she noticed them, she tensed.

Fucker.

"Who are those people?"

"Neighbors. Stan's friends." She exhaled slowly. "Some of the many

who've taken his side.”

What?

“What side? There are no sides.”

Her head fell a little. “I was the one with a drug problem, and he was the hero who'd saved me—who'd found and put a deposit in for a different rehab program in the city.”

“Instead you came to Blooms...”

“If I did what he wanted, I would've ended up back there with him... back in that destructive cycle,” she said. “But they didn't see it that way—or Stan didn't give them a chance to.” She gulped. “He made sure all they saw was a pill-popping, stay-at-home mom who left him and our son.”

“To get help. To get better.”

“If you knew Stan, you'd know he managed to find some spin to turn him into the hero; he always does...” she trailed off and swallowed. “That if I really cared about getting better, why didn't I go to the program he'd chosen? That he'd prepaid for? That I don't care about anyone but myself, which is why I'm here when he asked me not to be.”

“That's bullshit,” I spat.

Rage churned in my veins. Stan practically painted a damn scarlet letter on her chest, and for what reason? Was he that upset she'd left him? If he wanted her so damn bad, then why hadn't he married her—*why hadn't he just been decent to her?*

He didn't want her. He wanted power. It was obvious.

“Kenzie.” I reached for her but she lifted her hand to stop me.

“I'm okay,” she insisted and faced the field.

Her spine was straight. Her hair was tied back, but I watched a gust of wind come through and take a few strands across her face. She didn't touch them—didn't let them bother her. Her focus was only forward. Those dusky-lavender eyes only looking for one thing: her son.

Fuck, she was beautiful.

Her strength. Her composure. The way she could continue to stand while everything around her seemed to crumble. I'd always noticed that about her, and so had my sister. It was why she'd been entrusted with so many responsibilities at Blooms. No matter what the storm brought, she'd continued to stand. To survive.

Rules and boundaries be damned. I couldn't just stand here and pretend I didn't feel anything for the woman beside me even though I should.

I reached out and placed my hand on her shoulder. The kids were jogging back onto the field as I stepped forward, partially obstructing Kenzie's view; Jake was still on the bench, so I didn't feel guilty stealing her focus for myself.

"You were right. We shouldn't have come," she said, letting her guard down just for me to see.

It can't mean anything, I reminded myself.

"No." I caught her chin and lifted her face. "We're exactly where we're supposed to be, you hear me?" Maybe I should've said her not we, but hell, this felt like exactly where I needed to be, too.

"What if he decides I can't see Jake?" Her voice was impossibly small.

"I won't let that happen." I stared down at the woman who'd been saving herself for so damn long, and I just wanted her to let me take the burden for a little while. "He has no grounds to do that. We've done everything by the book."

"He'll find a way to hurt me; he..." She paused, and I wished like hell I knew what she'd been about to say. "You don't know him."

Anger rolled through me, and I couldn't understand how she was so damn calm. I had a pretty damn good idea the kind of man her ex was—the kind that everyone loved and admired. The EMT. Devoted single father. Charming friend. And toxic to those closest to him.

Kenzie had a serious drug problem—one that almost killed her—and instead of supporting her, he'd turned her into a fucking villain. Instead of doing whatever it took to help her get better in whichever recovery path she chose, he dragged her reputation through the mud because she didn't want to do it his way. *Because she didn't want to come back to him.*

Stan was a selfish piece of shit.

"Repeat after me. *Fuck him.*"

Her eyes widened in horror. "W-what?"

"Say it."

She hesitated.

"Kenzie..." I growled.

"Fuck him," she murmured.

"Say it like I know you mean it."

Her breath caught, and then she repeated more forcefully, "Fuck him." Her shoulders slumped immediately after, as though some of the angry pressure building inside her had released.

“Better?”

She nodded.

Good. Stan deserved more than a muttered *fuck you*, but this saint of a woman hesitated to even give him that.

My thumb stole over her cheek and then dipped toward her mouth. Instantly, anger turned to lust, and all I could think about was the feel of her mouth against mine. My head started to dip forward, thankfully, I caught myself and straightened quickly, returning to stand beside her, our shoulders touching.

I moved just as the teams switched out players, and Jake ran onto the field.

“Yeah, Jake!” Kenzie called and clapped, and when I looked at her, all trace of the trauma was gone and only the bravest smile was left for her son to see.

The game started again, but it was hard to focus. All I could see was him—Stan—as he stalked up and down the sideline. A quick glance wouldn’t have shown much change, but the longer I watched him, the more I saw a snarl start to creep onto his face anytime his gaze passed by Kenzie and me.

There was just something so off about this guy. I tried to believe it was just that he was an egotistical ass, but something in my gut told me it was more. *And if it was... I was going to find it.*

In the corner of my eye, I saw one kid kick the ball to Jake. Instantly, a bigger kid on the other team defending against Jake approached to try and claim the ball. Except he didn’t. He moved toward Jake and head butted him in the face.

Jake fell onto the field with a wail of pain. An audible gasp rocked the crowd. Whistles were blown. Flags dropped.

But that was nothing compared to Kenzie.

“*Jake!*” she screamed like a banshee. It was nothing short of a miracle that I hooked my arm around her waist in time to stop her from rushing onto the field. Even from this distance, it was easy to see the blood running down his face and onto his hands. “*Jake!*”

“You can’t, Kenz—” I held her tight.

“No, let me go.” She struggled wildly against me. “He’s hurt. My Jake, he’s hurt.” She started to sob, and my whole fucking heart broke because I knew as soon as I let her go to Jake, Stan would file a protective order against her; he would get every power over her ability to see him again. “*Jake!*”

I thought I'd imagined the way Jake looked toward us or the sobbed 'Mom!', but I hadn't. Kenzie lunged forward, almost breaking through my arm because she saw and heard it, too.

"Jesus—" I manhandled her, spinning her to my chest and clutching her there, whispering in her ear. "It's just his nose; he's going to be okay," I tried to tell her—to comfort her. But my words felt like they were doing shit. "He's sitting up. Talking. They're controlling the bleeding."

"Let me go, Zeke. Please," she sobbed, her fists balled against my chest.

"I can't, angel," I ground out. "You can look back, but I can't let you go because if you go over there, Stan will have exactly what he wants."

Even from the edge of the field, we heard slivers of what was happening. Jake's nose was broken. No need for an ambulance because Stan was taking him to the hospital. *Of course, he was here to save the day.*

I didn't know what was worse: seeing her son hurt or seeing his dad be the hero in the public's eyes... opening up the medical kit, ordering the other adults... when in private he was just a plain ass.

Minutes later, a large truck pulled into the middle of the field followed by a police car; Stan carried Jake to the passenger door and then took the keys from the driver—it was the same man he'd stopped and spoken to earlier: the neighbor. *The neighbor whose son just head butted Jake.*

Even though the windows were tinted, I swore as that truck pulled off the field that Stan was looking directly at us. Like he wanted to rub this moment in her face—to use their son's injury to hurt her.

God, I wanted to hurt him. There weren't many people I wanted to hurt in my life, but holy hell had Stan Klinger shot straight to the top of the list.

"Come on, angel," I murmured, bundling Kenzie into my arms and leading her from the field. "Let's go."

"I need to go to the hospital. Did you hear—can you see where they're taking him?"

"We can't go to the hospital. We have to go home," I told her hollowly as we reached my Jeep.

Her head shook frantically. "No, I can't. I need to see him, Zeke. I can't leave." A fresh rush of tears streamed down her face, and it had never been so damn hard to breathe before.

"Listen to me." I gripped her shoulders. "You can because you're strong, okay? You can because we're going to get in the car, and then I'm going to find out everything that's going on. You're his mother, you have a legal right

to know what's going on."

She just didn't have a right to see him because that stupid fucker wouldn't let her.

"I have to be there. He called for me. You heard him call for me." She cupped her hand over her mouth, trying to hold in her strangled cry.

I gritted my teeth and swallowed though it felt like pure acid down my throat. "If you go, he'll refuse to let you see him," I said, my voice cracking. "You know he will. And as soon as you try, he'll file a restraining order."

She flinched as though the fact had physically struck her. Her eyes lowered to my chest, and she stared hollowly—silently—for so long, I started to worry when her small voice finally spoke.

"Okay." The resignation in her voice killed me.

I opened the door and helped her into the car. We weren't even out of the parking lot before I called Callie's husband, Reed; he was former San Francisco PD and still had friends on the force. Within minutes, he'd called back and told me they'd taken Jake to Saint Francis Memorial Hospital.

"I'll call." Kenzie extended her hand for my phone.

"No." I shook my head.

"What—"

"I don't trust them to not give you the runaround," I explained and dialed a different number—and called in a different favor. "Dex? It's Zeke." Dex Covington was Ace's brother, and his former CIA intelligence training was about to come in handy. "Can you get me the medical records and updates for a patient, Jake Klinger, from Saint Francis Memorial Hospital in San Francisco?"

"You mean... hack into a hospital?" he asked on the other end of the line.

One look at Kenzie and the answer came flying from my lips. "Yes, I mean hack into the hospital and send me the records," I confirmed. "Thank you."

Her jaw went slack and her pink cheeks darkened to red as I ended the call.

"Zeke..."

I handed her my phone, so she'd be the first to see what Dex sent over.

"He won't get caught." Dex was too good. However, that didn't change the fact that I'd asked him to do something illegal. *For her.*

We'd just pulled onto the highway when my phone began to vibrate with updates, and Kenzie hunched over it reading and re-reading every word and

screenshot and image that came through.

“His nose is broken,” she informed me. “They reset it.” Another couple of minutes went by. “They checked him for a concussion. CT scan came back normal.”

“Good.” Even though this was all what I expected based on what I saw on the field, I was relieved to hear it, and I knew she was, too.

“They’re discharging him,” she said another few minutes later.

That was fast. I had a feeling Stan had something to do with it.

“What happened to the kid who hit him?” Kenzie asked in a daze.

My brow creased, and I tried to remember what happened to the other kid but it was all a blur. The whistles and shouts. The people rushing onto the field. Kenzie.

“I’m not sure,” I confessed. “But I think the kid’s dad was the same guy who brought Stan’s truck onto the field.”

Kenzie’s head swayed back and forth, her breaths growing unsteady again. “Why would he do that? Why would he hurt Jake?”

“I don’t know.” I sighed. “Maybe he’s a bully. Maybe he thought Jake was an easy target...” *Who the hell knew.* “Jake’s going to be fine. That’s all that matters.”

Kenzie continued to stare out the window silently, still unsettled.

I wanted to reach for her—to hold her again, but all I could offer was, “I’m sorry.”

Her eyes fluttered. “It’s not your fault. None of this is your fault. All you’ve done is help me.”

I tried to keep my breathing even, but her strength was breaking me. “I wish there was more I could do.”

She didn’t respond.

We drove for most of the remaining time in silence. Periodically, she checked my phone for any updates, but when none came through, it was safe to assume Jake had been discharged from the hospital and was home recovering.

“I’ll call his lawyer in the morning and ask for an official update. Maybe see if I can get them to agree to a video call.”

“Thank you.” She paused, and her head finally tipped in my direction. “Zeke?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I stay at your place tonight?”

I inhaled sharply. “Kenz...”

“I just...” Her lip quivered, and at that point, it didn’t even matter what else she said because I was going to let her. “I don’t want to be around everyone right now.”

I wanted to say it was because I understood; this afternoon had been traumatic to say the least, and her pained exhaustion was written all over her face. To go back to Blooms looking the way she did was inviting questions—questions I couldn’t blame her for not wanting to answer right now.

“Okay.” I might understand how she felt, but I’d be lying to say I agreed solely out of empathy.

I agreed because I wanted to take care of her. Because I wanted her back in my apartment. Back in my arms. In my bed. *No*. That wasn’t going to happen again. But I could let her stay... *one more night wouldn’t kill me*.



BY THE TIME we made it up to my apartment, I’d firmly decided that Kenzie could stay here, but I was going to sleep downstairs. The small loveseat in my office was too small to be comfortable, but it was a whole floor away from Kenzie in my bed, and that was what mattered.

I closed my apartment door, preparing to break my decision to her, but when I turned, she stood in my kitchen, her hands planted on the countertop and an expression on her face I hadn’t seen for hours.

Determination.

“I want to file for custody,” she looked at me and declared. “No, I need to get custody, Zeke.”

My teeth locked tight. I hadn’t been expecting her to say *that*, but I couldn’t say I was surprised. She’d just had to watch her kid get injured and stay on the sidelines while her asshole ex took care of everything.

“Kenz, we talked about this.” And of all days, I didn’t want to remind her that it was extremely unlikely for her to get custody right now.

“I know, but I’m clean. Sober. I’ve done everything. Followed every rule —”

“The judge is looking for more criteria than just your sobriety,” I tried to remind her calmly as I dragged my hand through my hair, but it wasn’t working.

Fat teardrops pooled in the corners of her eyes and dripped onto the counter. I walked over but left some semblance of space between us. *If I reached for her now...*

“I don’t care,” she insisted, wiping her cheek with the sleeve of my jacket. “I need custody of him, Zeke. I need it. You don’t understand. I need custody. I can’t not see him—not know if he’s okay—”

Fuck.

“I know.” My voice cracked, and I dragged a hand through my hair. Her pain was ripping me apart. “I know today was hard, but it’ll only be for a little longer—”

“I can’t wait longer. There has to be something I can do, Zeke. Anything,” she said, her voice fragile and desperate. “I’ll beg Benny to let me rent the apartment above the Pub—”

So she’d be close by for all the drunk guys at closing time? Hell no.

“Maybe I can clean the building as part of the deal. Or bar tend. I could learn how to do that—” She was spiraling, but so was I.

“No,” I bit out harshly. It was no longer waves of possessiveness but a goddamn riptide tearing through me and ripping my reservations and rationality to shreds.

Her head shook and she swiped another tear from her cheek. “Please,” she begged—not for mercy, not for charity, not even for someone to take care of her, but for someone to help her fight. “I’ll do anything, Zeke. Anything to give the judge what they want to see. Tell me what I need to do.”

Anything. The word unlocked my mind to think outside the box—to think of anything to make her pain go away because goddammit, I wanted to be the man who fought with her—for her.

Her lip quivered. “Just tell me what I should do. *Please.*”

I stared at her, standing in my kitchen with my jacket over her shoulders, her face streaked with tears, and those eyes trusting me—begging me to have an answer. And I did. God help me, I had an answer... because I’d do anything for her. *For all the right and wrong reasons.*

“Marry me,” I rasped.

The words detonated the conversation into a stunned silence.

“W-what?” Her jaw dropped.

I met her shocked stare. “Marry me, Kenzie,” I repeated, hardly recognizing my own voice. “If you marry me, you’ll have stable housing, stable income, and...”

“You,” she breathed out.

I nodded. “Me.”

Someone who the judge would look at as a positive guardian—someone whose reputation could be trusted when I said she deserved to have custody.

“Zeke...” Her throat bobbed, her eyes red and glistening as she looked up at me.

“You could never take advantage of me,” I reminded her before she spoke too soon.

I couldn’t even claim she hesitated after that because if she did, it was for barely a second before she agreed.

“Okay,” she said, her voice husky and low.

For an instant, something passed between us that had nothing to do with her son or her ex and had everything to do with the way we clearly still wanted each other.

And now, we were going to be married.

All the rules we’d broken before would now protect the way we ached for each other. *Because she’d be my wife.*

Suddenly, it felt like to fix one problem, I’d created another. A bigger one. One that could destroy me.

But if it helped her... if it got Kenzie back her son... it was a risk I was going to take.

CHAPTER 11



KENZIE

“You didn’t have to do this.” I stared at the ring on my finger, the weight of it the only thing tethering me to my new reality.

Married.

At first, I’d wondered if Zeke would recant his offer in the morning. Between what happened at the game and then his proposal, I was spent. He’d given me one of his tees to wear, and after changing and sliding into his bed, I’d crashed, emotional exhaustion completely overtaking me.

I wouldn’t have known if he’d slept in bed with me or not, and the only reason I knew he hadn’t was because the covers on his side were still made when I woke up.

But instead of him backing out of the proposal or offering up another legal loophole or solution, the only thing he asked was if I’d changed my mind.

I hadn’t.

If marrying Zeke got me custody of Jake, then that was what I’d do. And if marrying Zeke meant that maybe the boundaries that existed before no longer did, then that wasn’t a bad thing either.

Wanting my husband was less complicated than wanting him when he was my boss or my lawyer, right?

“We’re married, Kenzie. You needed a ring,” he replied, cleaning up our plates from dinner. We’d ordered Chinese take-out, and I was happy to eat out of the cartons, but Zeke insisted on plates.

“I might’ve married you at the courthouse, but we’re not having our wedding dinner out of cardboard.”

The memory made me smile.

I'd spent eight years with Stan, and he always shut down any conversation about a ring. At least he did early on in our relationship when I'd wanted one—when I'd wanted a future with him as a family with our son.

“I do everything for this family, Mackenzie. I work—provide for us by saving lives. By working all hours and all shifts so that you can stay home with Jake. Isn't that enough? What difference does a ring make?”

I'd wanted the fairy tale so badly, I'd believed it for a long time. But eventually, the shimmer wore off, and it became clear that his unwillingness to get married had nothing to do with any fear of commitment and everything to do with how much he liked me being reliant on him—trapped by him, ring or not.

When I left the hospital eight months ago headed to Blooms and not whatever program Stan had wanted, I sent up a silent prayer for the blessing in disguise; had we been married, I knew without a doubt I never would've been able to escape his hold.

But Zeke... he'd offered to marry me without a second thought. All so I'd have a sure shot of getting joint custody of Jake. The idea had never even crossed my mind. I'd been willing to go to any lengths—to lie, to fake where I lived, to sell my soul for the appearance of a stable life, but this... marriage to the most selfless man I'd ever known... that wasn't a sacrifice; it was a temptation.

The ring was simple. A narrow band with a single, solitaire diamond in the center. *His grandmother's*. He'd told me so nonchalantly earlier when he'd pulled it from his pocket at the courthouse. I guessed it was supposed to be an explanation for why he had a diamond ring lying around, but all I heard was a man who took helping me so seriously, he was not only marrying me, but giving me his family heirloom to make it seem real.

Of course, I knew it wasn't real—that it wasn't going to last. *One day, I'd take this ring off and give this man back*. But I had time to figure out how to deal with that.

“I always thought it would feel different,” I murmured, resting my elbow on the kitchen counter and watching him wash the dishes.

He'd worn a suit earlier—one I was sure that had been to the courthouse numerous times but never for a reason like this. Meanwhile, I wore the same white dress Callie had loaned me the other week. I'd set it back on her desk last weekend, but she and Reed were away on their honeymoon, so I figured she wouldn't mind if I wore it again.

It wasn't fancy, but it was white.

I still had the dress on and Zeke was still in his suit pants, his jacket discarded, and his sleeves rolled to his elbows. I bit my lip, recalling the way those veins on his forearms had pulsed underneath my fingertips as I held onto him that night, his body over mine, driving me to the most incredible peak of pleasure I'd ever felt.

I coughed, covering up the small whimper that almost escaped and took a sip from my water bottle.

"Did you want to marry him?" Zeke asked, his question perceptive enough

I blinked. "No. I mean, yes. When we first met and then had Jake... I thought that was where our relationship was going," I said, continuing carefully. "Once I realized the kind of person he was, then no. So, it was a good thing he had no intention of asking."

Zeke hummed low, his eyes flicking to the ring on my finger.

"What about you?" I rolled my bottom lip through my teeth. "Why haven't you married?"

I knew Zeke was older than me; I didn't realize until we were at the courthouse filling out paperwork that he was a full ten years older. *How had a man like him stayed single all this time?*

"Too busy," he grunted.

"To date?" I asked incredulously.

His eyes flicked to mine and he exhaled. "After what happened to Addy, I needed to be there for her. And then Blooms opened, and I got wrapped up in... everything."

"What does that mean?" I wondered honestly, and when he gave me a stern look

"It means that Blooms needs me. It's not fair to have someone else in my life that I can't give one hundred percent to."

I swallowed over the lump in my throat, recognizing something familiar about his reason. "I stayed with Stan for so long because I thought it wasn't fair to Jake for me to leave."

Zeke shifted his weight, my analogy clearly unsettling him. "It's not the same."

"Isn't it?" I refused to let go of his gaze. It had taken me so long to get over the hurdle.

"If I take my eye off the business, someone could get hurt," he rasped.

“Someone could not get the help they need. Someone...”

My throat swelled tight. “What is it?”

“Ace and I were the ones who found her—found Addy. Beaten and unconscious in the back of a burning car,” he rasped, the expression on his face indicating that the memory felt like it was yesterday. “I was distracted with school—with parties. If I’d been more present in her life—more aware of the person she was with, maybe it never would’ve gotten to that point. Maybe her life wouldn’t have been in danger...”

“Zeke, you can’t blame yourself.”

“I don’t blame myself for what happened to her, but I would blame myself if something happened to any of the residents because they’re my responsibility,” he said staunchly.

“And what if you don’t take care of yourself? Whose responsibility is that?” I tipped my head. “Who takes care of you?”

The last came out a little breathless because I was no longer a resident or just his friend or assistant; I was his wife. And even though this was a sham, I still ached to take care of this man who put taking care of everyone else first.

Zeke sighed. “Now you’re starting to sound like Addy. I’ll be fine—I’ll manage.”

I’ll be fine.

“That’s what I thought, too, about staying with Stan,” I said quietly, my gaze dipping to my lap. “And then I ended up in the hospital from an overdose.”

I told myself it didn’t matter that Zeke didn’t know the whole story—the whole truth. What mattered was that I’d stayed—I’d sacrificed myself to be there for my son until it almost killed me, and that was when I realized the only way to take care of Jake was to take care of myself.

“Kenzie...” The way he drawled my name, staring at me like he saw something more in my confession made my breath catch.

There wasn’t more. At least, not for him to know. Not now. It was too dangerous. I trusted Zeke—I trusted him so much. But not with this. I would do anything to protect my son—including marrying a man I hardly knew. But giving Zeke the whole truth about my past... that wasn’t protecting anyone.

Blood rushed to my head, and I placed my hand on the counter to steady myself, scrambling to shift the conversation.

“Did you tell Addy...” After everything the two of them had been through, to not tell her he was getting married.

Between his proposal, moving what things I had from Blooms over to his apartment yesterday, and then going to the courthouse today, I knew he hadn't seen either of his sisters; maybe he'd called them, but I didn't think so. Jake was my only family, but Zeke... he had so many people in his life—so many people that loved him and would want to be at his wedding. And for me, he'd forgone all of them.

He shook his head. "No. I'll tell my sisters soon," he said. "It won't stay a secret for long."

Almost everyone at the courthouse knew Zeke. The guards. Other lawyers. Receptionists. The judge who'd married us. No one except the judge knew the truth for certain, but we'd also walked in there in a suit and white dress. At some point, the rumors were going to spread, and in a small town, Zeke's sisters would be among the first to find out if he didn't tell them soon.

"Don't be sorry," he warned and then went to the freezer, leaving me wondering if my expression was that transparent.

"Okay," I agreed.

He pulled out a carton of ice cream, set it on the counter, and offered me a spoon. I froze. Past and present collided, and my first instinct was to refuse because instinct was the only thing that had kept me safe for so long.

But I could trust Zeke. I knew I could trust him. Maybe not with the whole truth, but to share some mint chocolate chip, I could.

"Thanks," I murmured, taking the spoon but letting him dig in first. "Do you think your sisters will be upset?"

"Addy, yes. Eve, yes and no," he answered honestly. "Don't worry about my sisters, Kenzie. Nothing would've changed my mind about marrying you."

My breath caught. He didn't mean it like that—like he *wanted* to marry me. But for some reason, I couldn't stop myself from hearing it that way.

"Zeke..." My heart squeezed, but before I said something I'd regret, I scooped a massive spoonful of ice cream and shoved it in my mouth, wincing as the cold immediately gave me a brain freeze. "Crap."

"Who taught you how to eat ice cream?" Zeke rumbled, and then he was in front of me. "Open."

My jaw dropped without a second thought, and the next thing I knew, the flat of his thumb was pressed to the roof of my mouth. I didn't know if it was the pressure or the heat of his finger, but almost instantly the pain began to subside.

And almost equally as instantly the entire energy in the room changed.

My head felt better and we both knew it, but neither of us moved. I looked up, my gaze snapping to his, the depths turning dark with the promise of a storm. And then my lips tightened around his thumb, holding it with the flat of my tongue and wishing it was another part of him. *And he wished for it, too.*

I felt the shudder that racked his big frame, his restraint quaking, and I couldn't stop myself from licking along the side of his finger.

“Kenzie,” he growled low, lust bringing sparks to his gaze.

One night to get it out of our system wasn't enough. The moral and ethical boundaries we'd retreated behind had worked for a while—or at least, we pretended like they did—but now, those were gone, too. We were married.

Husband.

Wife.

And it was our wedding night.

His jaw muscle flexed as he pulled his finger free even as I applied some suction to it. It popped from my lips, and he took a half step back. The heat of his intense stare raked over me, making my already pebbled nipples strain and sending another rush of wetness between my thighs.

“What happens now, Zeke?”

His chest moved in uneven breaths, and he reached up and ran a rough hand through his hair. “I draft the custody request, and we forward it to Stan's lawyer and the judge when it's time—”

“I mean with us,” I said, my voice husky. I knew what the plan was for Jake. I'd asked a million and one questions over the last two days to know every step of the legal process of getting back custody of my son.

His eyes flashed. “We play husband and wife for a few weeks so that it seems legitimate.”

I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to do more than kiss him, but instead, I settled for standing and placing my hand on his chest, the diamond ring glinting in the kitchen light.

“We are husband and wife, Zeke,” I murmured, my eyelids fluttering, a haze of warmth seeping over my skin. *And that meant what we'd been trying to fight for weeks on end was no longer forbidden.*

“Kenzie...” Something sparked in his eyes—the kind of thing that made parts of my body start to heat. His palm covered mine, his fingers tightening

like he had everything he wanted... and then he let it go. "It's not a good idea."

"You're not taking advantage of me," I promised him, my voice husky with want.

I knew what it was like to be pressured to be with someone. To feel forced and obligated to be in an emotional and physical relationship that was destroying me. I *knew* what it was like to be controlled by a man... and indulging in wild, incredible sex with Zeke—my temporary husband—was *not* that.

"We both wanted this long before now..."

Electricity crackled between us. If I thought the tension was bad after we'd slept together, it was nothing compared to the ache that opened up when he pressed a chaste kiss to my lips earlier after we'd exchanged our vows.

"It'll be easier if we don't blur the lines," he rumbled low even as his mouth drifted closer.

"We're married... there is no line anymore," I said softly, my breath rushing out and colliding with his deep groan a second before his mouth covered mine.

He tasted sweet, like chivalry and ice cream, but also like something more decadent and erotic. *My husband*. Our wedding ceremony was as transactional as it could get, but even the chaste kiss he'd placed on my lips at the end of it couldn't hide the wildfire of lust he tried to contain. And now, that blaze roamed free.

The counter dug into my back, but I didn't care. I held onto his face like his mouth was my only source of oxygen. Our tongues lashed together. Searching. Seeking. *My husband*. In some ways, this kiss was more essential and more intimate than anything else I'd ever experienced.

I pushed myself closer to him. Needing more. *Needing him*. The ridge of his erection dug into my stomach, and I whimpered, aching to have him inside me again.

He filled his hands with the fabric of my dress, the hem rising higher and higher on my legs. I gasped when his knee wedged between my thighs, putting pressure right where I wanted it.

"Zeke," I moaned, my hips grinding my pussy on his thigh.

"Tell me, angel," he cooed, gripping my hips and moving them faster.

I moaned, the friction of the fabric on my aching clit was insane. My body clenched for more—for him, but I couldn't stop moving. "I need you," I

begged.

“You’ll get my cock once you’ve soaked through my pants,” he ground out, biting along my jaw until he reached my ear. “I want you fucking dripping for me, angel.”

My head tipped back and my jaw went slack. The man was a dirty-mouthed saint, and it was moments like this that made it easy to forget that he and I wouldn’t exist in the future.

I rode his thigh, desperately chasing my orgasm—and him. And then a phone alarm started to go off.

“Oh no,” I gasped, almost choking on the exclamation.

“Fuck,” Zeke swore and pulled his leg back, letting my dress flutter down. He cleared his throat and nodded to the clock in the kitchen. “It’s almost eight.”

I swallowed. I didn’t need to look at the clock; I’d set that alarm because I’d been paranoid about missing my video call with Jake.

After the soccer game, Zeke had badgered Stan’s lawyer to let me see Jake. Multiple calls. Multiple emails. Relentlessly fighting for my right to see and talk to my son and know he was okay. Of course, Stan used the injury as a barrier, but finally agreed to a video call when Zeke threatened to go to the judge.

“Zeke...”

“We can talk later, Kenz,” he muttered, grabbing his computer from the couch in the living room and bringing it to the counter.

I watched as he plugged everything in and got the computer all set up for the call, amazed—but not surprised—how he could focus entirely on his task helping me while his body was still so hard.

His erection stretched the front of his suit pants—pants that were made to fit him well in court, but in this scenario, the tight fabric revealed every ridge of his cock.

“There. All set.” He turned the computer in my direction and added, “I’ll be downstairs.”

I sucked in a breath. “Are you coming back?”

He’d slept in his office the past two nights while I’d taken his bed. But tonight... *it was our wedding night.*

“I’m going to sleep on the couch,” he said firmly, the set of his mouth indicating that it wasn’t up for debate.

I swallowed and nodded. “Okay.”

What else could I say? That we were in this situation together, we might as well enjoy it? That I knew it was just sex? That I knew he had responsibilities to go back to just like I did?

No, I wouldn't beg. Not because I didn't want to, but because Zeke had already done so much for me. If he didn't want our relationship becoming physical again, I would respect that.

"I'm going to... tell Jake about us in person." This wasn't the kind of thing I wanted to tell my son over a call. I'd gone from being in his life every day to being absent from it for almost eight months, and now I had to break it to him that I'd married a man he'd only met once.

He was eight. His dad was his hero. I didn't expect him to take the news that well, but one day... god, I hoped that one day he'd understand. When he was old enough to know the truth... I prayed he'd understand.

"Whatever you want to do, Kenz." Zeke grabbed his phone and headed for the door. "Good night, Kenzie."

"Good night." *Husband.*

He left the apartment, and even as I listened to his heavy footsteps down the stairs, part of me stared at the door like he'd change his mind and walk back through it.

That he'd wait for me to finish my call with Jake and then pick up where we left off.

I tried not to feel disappointed. I shouldn't be. I was about to talk to Jake, and he was all that mattered. My son. Seeing that he was okay. Hearing his voice. Knowing that soon, Stan wouldn't be able to stop me from being with him.

But there was the tiniest part of me—the veritable needle in a haystack—that ached for whatever I had with Zeke. I ached for it in a ravenous, selfish way.

The computer started to ring with the incoming call, and all my thoughts returned to Jake.

"Mom!"

My breath whooshed out when I saw him, half afraid that the call would open to Stan's face. But it was Jake, and he was smiling, not scared. *Thank god.*

"Hey, baby," I greeted him with the biggest smile on my face, trying not to wince when I saw his splinted nose and bruised face.

"Look at my nose!"

“I see it,” I assured him, fighting back tears. “You’re so tough, baby.”

“You should see what it looks like without the splint.” He reached for the tape, and my hand hit the screen like I could reach out and stop him.

“Oh, no, honey. Just leave it for now. You can show me when I see you.”

He stopped. “When will I see you?”

“Soon,” I promised. “Next weekend if Daddy’s okay with it.”

His little face scrunched for a second before he declared, “I’ll beg him.” My throat tightened. “Where are you?”

I blinked, startled by the question. “My... new apartment.”

“It looks nice,” he said and pulled his legs up underneath him. “Can I come see it?”

I nodded. “It’s not quite ready yet, but when it is, you’ll be the first guest.”

“Has Zeke seen it?”

I tensed and answered carefully, “I said you’d be the first guest, baby.”

“Zeke could come see it too.” His grin widened.

“I’ll let him know.”

“Did he see my nose?” Jake tipped forward on the counter, his energy getting the best of him as he fidgeted in his seat.

“He did.”

“Was it as bad as his concussion?”

I chuckled. “I don’t know. You can ask him next time you see him.”

“Okay.” His head bobbed, and then his expression fell. “I miss you, Mom.”

“I miss you, too, baby.” My fingers pressed to the screen as Jake dived into the tale of what happened at the game as though I hadn’t seen it.

The twenty-minute call felt like it flew by in two before Stan appeared in the view and declared it was time for bed. Jake started to whimper, and before I could say anything to calm him, Stan resorted to threats.

“You only get to see Mommy if you’re good, and good boys don’t whine.”

The call ended with a sour goodbye, and I sat at the counter for several long minutes in silence, reminding myself that it wasn’t for much longer. A few weeks to make the marriage appear real, and then the bid for custody.

A few weeks living with the man I desperately wanted but couldn’t have. *My husband.*

CHAPTER 12



ZEKE

I wasn't sure I believed in miracles until this week.

Not only had I managed to keep my hands off my tempting wife for the last four days since our shotgun wedding, but somehow the Carmel rumor mill hadn't yet informed my sisters of my hasty nuptials.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Kenzie looked over the console at me.

Her blonde hair was in a loose braid over her shoulder, and she had on a T-shirt dress that rode up just high enough on her thighs while she was in the car to put my dick squarely in a state of painful arousal.

No matter how I tried to keep our days busy or how many doors and floors I put between us at night, it couldn't stop the way I wanted her. *My wife.*

"Yeah." I nodded and got out of the car, rounding to open the passenger door for her.

I'd delayed telling my sisters about the marriage for several reasons; one, I wanted to make sure the paperwork was processed just in case Addy tried to threaten me to undo it, and two, she'd just come back from vacation yesterday, and like Kenzie, I felt this news was better delivered in person.

I was sure Kenzie thought I was holding off because I regretted my decision—that I hadn't told anyone because I was afraid that would make it real and make it unable to be secretly undone—but that couldn't be farther from the truth.

It already felt real—*too damn real*. The way she'd become integrated into my personal life was just as effortlessly quick as she'd fit into my professional one. To be fair, I didn't have much in the way of a personal life,

so there wasn't much to fit into.

"It'll be okay," I said, noticing her hesitation.

I reached down and took her hand in mine, the touch sending a ripple of electricity through my system. That had gotten worse over the last four days, too. Simple touches became as dangerous as a single spark in the most dangerous wildfire conditions.

"I don't want them to hate me," she said softly, her bottom lip quivering before she slid her tongue over it.

Damn.

"They're not going to hate you," I promised.

"We got married and didn't invite them."

"And they'll understand," I promised again.

Her only response was to continue to stare at me uncertainly.

"ZEKE!" Eve waddled down the hallway, a flower crown encircling her head. "You're here—and Kenzie! Oh, hi!" She pulled Kenz in for a hug first. "So glad you came."

"Please don't tell me you brought work to Eve's birthday party," Addy drawled, approaching behind our younger sister, her blue hair in a high pony and her younger son, Axel, in her arms.

I gave her a tight smile and hugged her and my nephew before I replied, "I didn't."

Addy tipped her head and looked at Kenzie. "What's going on?" Her eyes narrowed on Kenzie. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Kenzie nodded nervously and without thinking, reached up and adjusted the strap of her purse on her shoulder. *With her left hand.*

I saw the second my twin recognized the ring on her finger.

"Zeke..." Addy whipped her head to me, asking the question without saying another word.

I met her hard stare, watching disbelief turn into dismay.

"Addy..." Eve looked between the two of us. "What's going on?" She rubbed her stomach. "Why do I feel like I'm missing something?"

I reached for my wife's elbow and carefully maneuvered her arm until our hands were locked. "Kenzie and I are married."

Eve blinked several times, her expression agape. "You're joking," Eve declared with a startled laugh. "Tell me now if you're joking because I'm

eight and a half months pregnant, so unless you want to add labor and delivery to your list of skills, big brother, tell me—”

“I’m not joking,” I interrupted and squeezed Kenzie’s hand. “We got married on Tuesday at the courthouse.”

Eve gasped. And then frowned. And finally—ultimately—smiled. “Congratulations! I didn’t know... didn’t realize...”

“It all happened kind of suddenly,” I said, beginning an explanation I’d run through a million times in my head, but for some reason, my two sisters were more intimidating than any jury or judge I’d ever faced, and right now, I felt no less like I was on trial trying to convince them of the truth than if I’d been standing in the middle of a courtroom.

“Well, yeah, that’s obvious,” Eve balked and then laughed. “How long...”

“There was always something ever since Kenzie moved into Blooms, but I never... we never...”

“Oh, I love a good forbidden love story.” She clapped her hands together.

I picked up later in the story, still feeling Addy’s steely gaze on me like a hot poker, waiting to see how long I could hold out before I flinched. “But once we started working together...”

“So, you decided to get married before even telling us you were in a relationship?” Addy’s firm voice entered the conversation. *Betrayed*.

“Oh my god, are you pregnant?” Eve screeched. “Because I can show you some really good stretches and poses—”

“No!” Kenzie beat me to the answer, her face turning beet red.

“It’s okay if you are,” Eve was quick to assure her. “Miles got me pregnant the first time we were together, though marriage was definitely not the first thing on his mind.”

I groaned. Not what I wanted to hear about my little sister. “She’s not pregnant, Eve.”

“Then why wouldn’t you tell us?” Addy demanded, never one to beat around the bush.

Her hard stare and straight spine would never give away how hurt my twin was, and I couldn’t blame her. This wasn’t how I envisioned getting married back when I still figured at some point I’d settle down. But things changed. Life happened. Dreams adapted. And for me, marriage was nothing more than Kenzie’s means to an end.

“Did you not want us there?” Eve asked, sadness clouding her soft face.

“Evie, no,” I rumbled.

“I get it. Eloping is so romantic,” she said, but her smile was weak and her eyes watery. “But we were right here...” She brushed a tear from her cheek. “It’s okay. I’m happy for you. You deserve to be happy.”

Shit. I could feel Kenzie drawing back—retreating because she felt like this was her fault. It wasn’t. I’d offered—insisted. She wasn’t to blame.

“I’m sorry, Eve,” I rasped. “I didn’t do this to hurt you.”

“I know.” Eve nodded slowly, always ready to forgive. The world would be such a better place if everyone practiced the kind of grace that Eve possessed.

“Why, Zeke?” My twin, on the other hand, remained undaunted.

In some ways, Addy’s flat tone was worse than Eve’s tears. Her hardness existed to protect the softest parts of her that had been betrayed before. I was one of the few who knew the depths of those parts, and now I was one of the few that had hurt her.

“It was my decision,” I said, meeting Addy’s similar gaze. “For how long have you tried to get me to break off just a sliver of my life for myself? Everything I do is for you—for both of you. For Blooms. For the women. You... our business... it’s my whole life; it’s in every piece of my life. And I don’t want to change that. But when Kenzie and I...” I swallowed and looked over my shoulder at my wife—a mistake because then all I could see was her. The warm color in her eyes. The flush of her cheeks. The way she held her breath, wondering what I was about to say. I wondered, too, because this wasn’t part of my plan.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen. She was in the program and then started working with me, and it shouldn’t have happened...”

“We would’ve supported you,” Addy said lowly, the hard edge in her voice softening.

“Dammit, Addy, it wasn’t about you—either of you. It was about me. For once, it was about me. I wanted something for myself,” I rasped, letting out a rough breath as I looked back at my sister. “Why do you think I let you make the decision on her application? Because the things I felt... the things I wanted... Kenzie came into my life, and for once, I wanted to be selfish. I felt something that was only mine. I felt the love that you found with Ace and Eve with Miles, and I wanted that to be all mine... just for a little.”

I felt Kenzie’s shocked stare, and I couldn’t blame her; I’d not only admitted to wanting her from the moment we met, but I’d used the word love.

Sure, it was part of the plan, but goddamn it hadn't felt like a lie. I wanted Kenzie selfishly. *My wife*. I wanted to keep her all to myself and pretend like I could have her forever.

Addy was silent for several long seconds, her strength only matched by her stubbornness, and her gaze like a litmus test to my claim. And when she stepped forward and pulled me in for a hug, I didn't know whether to be relieved or worried that she believed me.

Because either I was miraculously good at lying to the one person who knew me better than anyone... *or I wasn't lying at all.*

"I'm not happy about it, but I'm happy for you," she said softly, and I pulled her tight with one arm, my other hand refusing to let go of Kenzie. "I love you."

"I love you, too," I murmured as she drew back and turned her attention to my wife.

There, her expression relaxed even farther—enough to allow tears to glisten in her eyes. Kenzie stood frozen, afraid to have hurt one of the women she admired most.

"I'm glad it was you," Addy said to her, and Kenzie's jaw dropped a little.

"You don't have to say that," Kenzie assured her. "I'm sorry—"

"Don't," Addy warned and took Kenzie by the shoulder. "I said it because I mean it. And I won't say that this isn't going to hurt for a little bit, but never apologize for being the person who makes someone else happy, especially when that person is my brother." Her eyes flicked to me. "He deserves every ounce of happiness, and so do you."

She hugged Kenzie, and it was only then did I release my wife's hand so she was free to embrace her old friend and new sister-in-law.

"What's going on down here?" Miles's voice boomed down the hall. He strode toward us with his daughter, my niece, Arielle, in his arms, his focus solely on his wife and their unborn baby. Behind him, his twin brother, Mick, and his wife, Jules, followed.

Addy and Eve stepped to the side, both of them looking to me to share the news.

I smiled and pulled my wife close to my side. "Kenzie and I are married."
Miles stopped short. "Seriously?"

"Isn't it wonderful?" Eve clapped her hands even as she burst into tears again. "We have to celebrate!"

“No.” I shook my head and pointed my finger at her. “It’s your birthday —”

“And look at me, Zeke. I’ve reached the beached whale stage of pregnancy. Please take the attention away from me... for my birthday,” Eve begged. “Please.”

Miles looked at me and grunted, “She won’t take no for an answer.”

I exhaled slowly, meeting my little sister’s pleading stare... but there was no denying her. And she knew the moment I broke.

“I’m just so happy for the two of you,” Eve squealed. “Can I see the ring, Kenzie? I haven’t seen it in so long. I forgot Grammy even gave it to Zeke.”

A glimpse at the ring turned into a full press tour through the house and guests who thought they were there to celebrate Eve.

“There’s no stopping her,” Miles muttered, coming to stand next to me while we watched Gwen and Jules gush over Kenzie’s ring while Eve explained its significance.

“No stopping either of them when they want something,” I muttered.

Both my sisters were forces to be reckoned with in their own way.

Miles looked at me, a crooked grin claiming his cheek. “I guess some of that finally rubbed off on you.”

I tensed and then chuckled. “A little,” I lied.

I wanted Kenzie, and that was the exact reason I wouldn’t let myself have her again. Because this wasn’t about me—it was about her and her son.

“The way you’re looking at her, I’d say it was a helluva lot more than a little.” My brother-in-law clapped me on the shoulder and then walked over to Eve with a water bottle and piece of birthday cake in hand to make sure she was staying hydrated and happy.

Meanwhile, I stood there steeping in the irony of his assessment, afraid that my family and friends weren’t the only ones I’d convinced about how I felt about Kenzie.



“THANKS FOR STOPPING.” Kenzie looked over her shoulder at me, the breeze blowing a strand of hair across her face.

After one too many rounds of karaoke at Eve’s party, which she successfully turned into mostly a celebration for us, Kenzie and I said our

goodbyes and left. We drove in a strange kind of silence through town. I didn't know about her, but it was hard to feel like anything that happened this afternoon was fake. Telling my sisters. Celebrating with friends and family. The toast that ended with my lips on hers.

It all felt so fucking real.

I glanced at Kenzie as we sat at a red light in town, waiting to turn. Her gaze was locked out my window on the ocean.

“Want to go for a walk?” I asked without thinking.

She nodded immediately.

Maybe I wasn't the only one afraid to carry this afternoon back into the apartment with us. Like dumping boiling water into cold glass, how we felt threatened to crack right through the frigid façade of our arrangement.

“You're lucky to have a family like you do,” she said, sliding off her shoes and stepping barefoot into the sand.

I gritted my teeth. I'd spent the last four hours watching her fall right in with my family as though she'd been a missing piece. A piece I'd have to take out again once she had custody of her son.

“I am,” I agreed, following her trail of footsteps in the sand as she walked closer to the water, stopping just short of where the waves reached.

The sun danced like a bright yellow marionette along the horizon, orange and red streaming from her sides with each dip.

“I'd never been to the beach before moving here,” she murmured, her focus straight ahead. “But I think the sunsets are my favorite part. Can you imagine having this view every day?” Her head tipped to the side, and she sighed. “It would be heaven.”

No, heaven would be a sunset with her by my side.

My tongue pushed forward, eager to tell her about a place no one knew about—a place that had this view every day and that belonged to me.

But that place... just like this woman... belonged to a future I couldn't have.

The best response I could offer was a grunt as I turned and kept walking along the sand, hoping she'd follow.

“Did you mean what you said?”

Her voice stopped me, and when I turned, she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. Instantly, a current of lust pushed through me. How long would it take until one look no longer set my body on fire?

“Back at the house, when you told your sisters about us, did you mean...”

My heart rocketed into the front wall of my chest. She couldn't mean about me loving her, could she? *No.* That was out of the question.

"Kenz..."

"About letting Addy decide on my application because you..." She took measured steps forward as she spoke, stopping when she stood right in front of me.

Relief coursed through me, expelling in a quick exhale. "Because I was attracted to you?" I finished, arching a brow. "Yeah." I dragged my hand through my hair and offered a sheepish smile. "Everything about you... undid me. And if I'd made the call, it would've been for selfish reasons that I couldn't afford to encourage."

She slid her tongue out and licked her lips. "Except now we're married, so why aren't we..."

The breeze wrapped around me with every evidence of her lust. The slight husk of her voice, the sweetness of her scent, the hint of her nipples pressed to the fabric of her dress.

My cock thickened in my jeans. There was no reason I couldn't have her... *and every reason I shouldn't.*

Against my better judgment, I cupped her face and brought my forehead down to hers, resting it there for long moments with nothing but the tide echoing between us.

"Because it will make this harder to end..." I rasped low, struggling to hide my own vulnerability.

Because it had to end.

Her head tipped upward, her gaze hooded and lingering on my lips, and I felt it happening again. The way the rest of the world faded like sand through my fingertips, leaving only her. The way I wanted Kenzie—wanted everything with her—consumed me in the most dangerous kind of way.

And the most selfish.

Her son was important. Blooms was important. *And if I gave into the way I felt...* I swallowed a bitter groan. I was strong enough to admit I wasn't sure how the hell I'd be able to let go of a real relationship with her when the time came.

And the last thing I ever wanted was to put her in a position she felt like she couldn't escape from again.

I straightened my neck and pressed my lips to her forehead, every inch of my body protesting before I pulled away.

“Let’s grab some hot dogs and head back.” I released her and stepped back, checking my watch though the damn thing could’ve read midnight for all I actually looked at it. “I don’t want to cut it close to your call with Jake.”

Her eyes flickered, but she wouldn’t argue when it came to putting Jake first.

“Okay.”

I looked past her to the Dog House, the hot dog stand on the boardwalk, and saw several familiar faces watching the two of us.

Of all the times to have to keep up appearances...

I tugged a smile to my lips and reached for Kenzie’s hand. Her inhale of surprise was obvious, and I quickly brought her knuckles to my mouth, murmuring over them, “Kane and Jackson, who work with Ace, and their wives are at the hotdog stand. We should go say hello.”

Understanding dawned on her. “Of course.” She smiled wide and tightened her fingers on mine, allowing me to lead the way off the beach and toward another group of friends who would no doubt respond with the same excitement when we told them we were married.

It was the most exquisite kind of torture to pretend to have something that would never fully be mine.

Just like her favorite sunset. No matter how bright and beautiful it could be, at the end of the day, its responsibility was tethered to the horizon, its passionate colors giving way to the necessity of night.

CHAPTER 13



KENZIE

I t would be a mistake. Mistake. Mis. Take.

Miss. Him.

Zeke. I missed him.

I took another drink from my water and capped the bottle, staring at the now-sleeping laptop screen. My call with Jake had ended almost twenty minutes ago, and I still couldn't bring myself to leave the seat.

I didn't know what Stan was about. He wouldn't let me see Jake at the game—wouldn't let me visit him at the hospital, but now, he was letting Jake call me regularly. Not just regularly. Every night. Sure, it meant I had to talk to my ex for a couple of minutes. Answer his probing questions about my life here. Listen to him compare everything to how my life had been with him. But then I got to talk to Jake. No runaround. No excuses. No cutoff.

I'd spoken to Jake every night since that first time, and Stan agreed to another afternoon in the park on Sunday. It was... wonderful. A good thing.

And wholly out of character for Stan.

I learned long ago never to look a gift horse in the mouth. Zeke insisted Stan finally realized he didn't have much room to argue unless he wanted a real legal battle. I wanted to believe it; but I couldn't.

I knew the kind of games Stan played, and his favorite had always been luring me into a false sense of security. His control was always an invisible fence around my life, goading me into believing I had all the freedom in the world... right up until I ran up against the boundary of his power.

The last shock I almost hadn't recovered from.

I wouldn't make that mistake again. So, my happiness, along with my hope, remained cautious.

Just like my relationship with Zeke.

Normally, I'd change, climb into the big empty bed, and then proceed to toss and turn while thinking about the man sitting at the desk in the room directly beneath me. *My husband*. But tonight... I couldn't bring myself to leave the stool at the counter, and I couldn't tear my eyes from the door leading downstairs.

Something had changed today. It shouldn't have, but it did. We were legally married as of four days ago, but hearing him tell his siblings about the marriage... confess to the way he wanted me... I couldn't let him keep this distance any longer.

Whatever happened... whatever needed to happen... it wasn't going to change the way we wanted each other because nothing had been able to change that. Not his position. Not my recovery. Not his boundaries. Not my secrets. Not his chivalry. Not our fake marriage.

We wanted each other, regardless of circumstance or consequence. And we were already fighting for so much, I needed him to stop fighting against this—fighting against himself.

My bare feet hit the floor, and my steps carried me to the doorway. Downstairs. Through the hall. Even my knock didn't hold me back from cracking the door to Zeke's office and stepping inside.

His head jerked up from the papers he'd been looking at. His desk lamp was the only source of light, casting harsh shadows over his drawn expression. His hair was disheveled. His shirtsleeves rolled up and the collar unbuttoned. And the way he half leaned back in his chair but kept one elbow on the desk... he looked like a modern Cincinnatus, the Roman emperor who stayed in power long enough to bring Rome through crisis and then resigned and went back to his farm.

That was Zeke. The man who stepped up when everyone around him needed him... but never got the chance to return to *his* life.

"Is everything okay?" He set the papers down, the intensity of his focus honed on me. "Jake?"

Tingles ran wild over my skin.

"Fine." I shook my head and took a few steps forward. "He's fine—good. Excited for tomorrow."

"Good." His shoulders relaxed, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Are you okay? Do you need something?"

My mouth opened and closed, working a few times before my throat

produced sound.

“You.”

The movement was slight. The smallest of ripples through his frame to turn every muscle to stone. But I saw it. The chink in his armor.

“Kenzie...”

I grew bolder, approaching the edge of the desk and placing my fingertips on it. “What you said earlier...”

“Was the truth, but that doesn’t mean it should change anything,” he said, his voice brittle.

“I don’t believe you.” He didn’t believe himself either. Zeke was a lot of things—almost all of them good, but what he wasn’t was a good liar.

His jaw flexed, and then he looked back at the papers on his desk. “You should go back upstairs, Kenzie.”

“Wanting me isn’t against the rules anymore, Zeke.”

“I don’t—”

“Want me?” I paused. “I’ll go if you say you don’t want me.”

He glared at me. “What I want doesn’t matter.”

“It does, Zeke. Just like what I want matters.”

“You deserve—”

“I deserve what I say I deserve,” I finished for him, moving closer. “And after what I’ve endured—what I’ve overcome—I deserve to be with a man who is good for me. Who protects me. Who respects me. Even if he’s far too chivalrous for his own good.” My legs bumped his, and his hands curled into fists. “We both deserve to put a small piece of ourselves first.”

“Kenz...”

“Tell me you don’t want me, and I’ll leave,” I said low, taking my hand and placing it on top of his; his skin was on fire underneath mine, and my ring glinted in the stark lighting. “Tell me we both don’t deserve to have this to ourselves for a little while. Tell me...”

“I can’t,” he said through locked teeth. “You know I can’t.”

“Because you want me.”

His jaw muscle flexed hard. “Yes,” he croaked, the word spilled from his lips like the cup of desire inside him tipped over, and heat burst like fireworks over my skin.

“Then have me.” I took his hand and dragged it from the desk, placing it between my legs.

“Fuck.” The rough word heightened the caress of his fingers along my

inner thighs until I pressed them to my core.

I shivered, watching the expression on his face change when he realized I had nothing on beneath his shirt.

“Damn, angel,” he groaned, unable to stop his fingers from sinking through my slick folds and covering them with my want. He groaned so low, the ache he felt had to be more pain than pleasure.

I gripped his wrist, hanging on as his thumb started to roll over my clit, and he pushed two fingers inside me.

“Zeke,” I panted, my knees shaking.

“Take off your shirt,” he ordered, his gaze locked on where I clutched his hand to my pussy.

Peeling my fingers free, I grabbed the fabric and tore it over my head, sending it to the floor.

His heated gaze raked possessively over me, and I felt myself take my first full breath in four days. But instead of reaching for me again, he sat back in his chair and ordered, “Sit on the desk and spread your legs. I want to see how wet you are.”

I bit hard into my cheek, feeling another rush of heat between my thighs. I turned to the desk. There were papers everywhere, but the second I reached out to carefully move them, Zeke’s arm swung out and wiped the desk clean.

“Zeke!” I exclaimed. “Your work...”

“Sit.” His order was unwavering. “I’m about to write a new contract with your sweet cunt binding it to my mouth.”

Oh god. I couldn’t scramble fast enough onto the edge of the desk, resting back on my palms as I let my legs drift wide.

“Beautiful,” he praised, taking one ankle and then the other to prop my feet on the armrests of his chair. My breath caught as he rolled forward, bending my legs and bringing his head closer to my sex. “I dreamed of this last night.”

“Of what?” I prompted, hungry to hear all the dirty words from his mouth.

“Devouring you on my desk. On this chair. The couch.” He grunted. His eyes snapped up, meeting mine over my quivering stomach and peaked nipples.

My eyes rolled back in my head as his mouth clamped over my sex.

“Fuck you taste so good,” he said, his lips and tongue devouring me like a starved man, working me inside and out until I swore the stars on his ceiling

were real.

“Mmm, that feels so good, Zeke,” I panted, my arms trembling with the waves of pleasure he sent through me.

“Tell me, angel,” he growled, swirling his tongue over my clit again.

“Ohh, right there,” I begged, and he dove back in like a starved man. Cries tumbled from my lips, and one hand worked its way to his head, holding him to my sex like his mouth was my new addiction.

“Tell me,” he ordered again.

Mindless words escaped from my lips, telling him what his lips and tongue were doing to me. It drove him wild. Ravenous. The way he pleased me felt like it broke every law of desire, the way my heart hammered and my breaths struggled to stay in sync.

This couldn't be wrong. However, until this came to an end, enjoying all the parts in the middle—even if just in stolen moments at night—couldn't be wrong. Not when it felt like this.

My feet pushed against his chair until finally, with a rough growl, he rose from the seat, keeping his mouth latched to me and let me push the chair away as he gorged on my pussy.

My legs found a new support, winding around his broad shoulders and holding tight as his tongue worked my clit into a frenzy, my vision blurring before my first orgasm claimed me.

He groaned low, lapping up my release as it spilled into his mouth.

“You're too wet, angel,” he growled as I trembled back down to earth. “I can't leave you like this, all soaked and begging for my cock.”

I loved this side of him. The raw and dirty side that hid behind his gentlemanly exterior. I loved it because it made me so hot... and because it was just for me.

I hadn't had anything that was only for me for so long.

“Yes, Zeke. Please.”

He carefully took my legs and lowered them down, bringing his hands to the waist of his pants and then undoing them.

“You like to see what you do to me?” he rumbled, peeling his slacks and boxer briefs over his hips, his cock bobbing free. “How hard you make me?” He fisted himself, dragging his hand firmly all the way to the tip where a bead of cum appeared.

“Yes,” I panted, a rush of power coursing through me.

I'd never had a man wild for me—weak for me. With Stan... he was

always in control. Like everything else about our life, I was only there for him. For his pleasure. For his son. For his image. For his twisted ego.

Zeke yanked open his desk drawer and pulled out a condom.

“You have condoms down here?” I asked breathlessly.

He tore the packet open. “Brought them down here the day you moved in so they’d be out of the bedroom... out of reach.”

A small smile curled over my lip as he rolled the condom over his massive cock. “I think your plan backfired.”

“All my plans involving you have backfired,” he said, reaching for me and carefully pulling me upright. His hands went to my breasts, weighing and kneading them as his mouth searched out my ear. “Now bend forward, angel, and take my cock like a good girl.”

I moaned before he even touched me. Goose bumps broke out over my skin as I spun and lowered myself forward.

The desk felt cool underneath my hot skin, my nipples pressing flat to the surface as I exposed myself completely to him. Cool air greeted my slick, sensitive flesh a second before the fat tip of his cock pressed to my entrance and then inched inside.

“Is this what you came down here for?” He rumbled low, sliding inside me with torturous slowness. “To be bent over my desk and fucked?”

“Yes.” I tried to move my hips back, to take more of him faster, but his hand on my lower back was too strong. “Fuck me. I’m yours, Zeke. Yours.”

The words just came out—a desperate plea for more of what we both wanted. But the effect they had on him was instant and immeasurable.

Zeke let out a ragged shout and then drove deep.

I grappled for the edge of the desk, holding on for dear life as he slammed into me. Over and over, my body stretched to welcome him—to draw him deeper. The sound of flesh smacking on flesh ricocheted off the walls in the room. But the fullness... the friction... it started to consume me from the inside out.

“That feel good, angel?” he said lowly, thrusting hard and fast until the desk started to shake. “Your perfect pussy stuffed full with me.”

“Yes,” I whimpered, my hands starting to sweat.

“Is it different knowing it’s your husband’s cock?” Zeke rasped, shifting his pace to something that was slower and deeper, the friction making my core clench desperately for more. “Knowing that I’d do anything to protect you except keep my hands off you?”

I moaned, too drunk on pleasure to find even the word yes.

“Because I can’t. Every second I’m not touching you feels like I’m holding my goddamn breath.”

Once more, I felt the rush of wild abandon—the pull of selfish, hungry desire gnawing at my veins. How was it fair that it was like this with him? This impossibly good man? The one who’d married me to help me? *The one I’d eventually have to walk away from?*

“That’s it, angel, take this cock,” he growled, slamming harder into me. “Take it and come all over it if that’s what you want.”

Pleasure twisted through my insides, knotting them tighter and tighter until it felt like I couldn’t breathe until the pressure released. And he felt it.

His strangled groan dissolved as he drove through my clenching muscles, chasing his own release as he worked me into mine.

“Zeke,” I panted his name over and over again, climbing toward a peak that had only gotten higher the more we’d tried to fight this. Every breath, every cell, every beat of my heart clamored to let go, and it was only then I realized I might be letting go of more than I thought.

It was more than the pleasure he gave me or the pleasure that he took. It was support and comfort and security. It was strength and respect. It was hope.

“Let go, angel,” he begged. “I’m right here. I’ve got you.”

I cried out, my climax sweeping through me with the force of a hurricane. My hips buckled. My core spasmed. Zeke thrust through the tension in my body, finding his own release moments later with a rough shout.

After a few minutes of heavy breaths, Zeke pulled out of me and I heard him discard the condom in the trash. Next I knew, he peeled me from the top of his desk

“My fingers might’ve left imprints,” I warned.

He chuckled. “Good.” He chuckled. “And if they didn’t, we can always try again tomorrow night.”

My breath caught. “So you’re not going to walk away from this?” *From us.*

“The only one who’s not going to be walking anywhere after this is you, angel,” he drawled next to my ear. “Because I’ve got four nights to make up for not fucking my wife.”

I didn’t get a chance to reply before he lifted me in his arms. I squealed and locked my hands around his neck. “What are you doing?”

“Carrying you upstairs... over the threshold and into my bed like I should’ve done days ago,” he declared, striding through his office like I wasn’t naked in his arms and his dick wasn’t hanging free from the flap of his pants.

I shivered as a fresh course of want awoke in my body.

“WE CAN HAVE this part of the arrangement for ourselves...”

“Yeah.” I nodded and pulled his head down to mine.

“For a little while.”

I should’ve been happy. The line we’d been holding behind for ridiculous reasons was gone. Instead, those four words planted a new ache in my chest. A longing for something that would never be mine.

CHAPTER 14



ZEKE

“**Y**ou okay?” I reached over the console and took her hand in mine. Instantly, warmth trickled through my veins.

In the two weeks since the night in my office, I couldn’t get enough of my wife. Her mouth. Her taste. The sounds she made when I sucked on her clit and the way she clawed at my skin every time I entered her. Fucking her was turning into an addiction that I was powerless to stop.

Before Kenzie, I’d easily survive a dry spell that lasted months. I thought it was because I’d gotten good at prioritizing my needs—and my need to help others always superseded my need for sex.

Maybe I had... but they both paled in comparison to my bone-drenched need for her. Not for sex. Not for release. For Kenzie.

The vanilla scent she left on my pillow. The sigh she let loose each time I kissed the sensitive spot in the corner of her neck. And her small smile—the one that wrote like a secret on her lips—when I took her into my arms at the end of each day. No matter what the day brought, it brought us together at the end.

We’d become the sunset.

“Yeah.” Kenzie nodded, but I could see her nerves were getting to her. The slight crease between her brows. The constant tug of her lip through her teeth. The tap of her finger on her thigh.

I tried to pretend like it wasn’t anything special—tried to tell myself that being able to read the slightest of her expressions came from growing up with two sisters and then running a safe house for women for almost a decade.

But that was about as big of a lie as telling myself it was going to be fine—*I was going to be fine*—when we eventually parted ways.

I wasn't going to be fine. I was going to be screwed. *How the hell did one rip the sunset from the sky?* Because that was the equivalent of what I'd have to do.

In two weeks, our lives had completely meshed together. All of her things—of which there weren't many—were moved into my apartment, and she'd filed the paperwork to change her name. It wasn't necessary, but that was the point of this—to do anything and everything so the judge would have no reason to deny her partial custody of Jake.

I swore at that moment, my offer of marriage had been selfless. *Anything to help her.* Two weeks later, and I had to admit the offer was selfish.

Two weeks of stopping for coffee and lemon poppyseed muffins at Roasters in the morning. Of working side by side. Of going out to dinner. Of not faking one ounce of my enjoyment in her company while seeding the image of happy newlyweds to the rest of the town.

And of spending every night fucking my name from her lips.

Fuck, I thought I was civilized. Upstanding. Kind. Generous. Thoughtful. All of that went out the window when the day dwindled to Kenzie and I in the apartment. Then, I was reduced to some brand of dominant, lust-driven beast, hungry for the feel of her cunt wrapped around my cock.

My name. My life. My reputation. I'd let her trade on it all as long as I could stay on this borrowed time with her.

"You don't have to tell him yet if you don't want. It's okay to wait," I said quietly, catching the way Kenzie's eyes had dropped down to her ring.

It was the plan—to tell Jake today that we were married. While we built the foundation of our relationship back in Carmel, we'd kept it under wraps from Jake... and Stan. Kenzie said she'd wanted to give Jake a few more times around me before telling him the truth.

I had a feeling she was worried what Stan would have to say—and *what he'd say to Jake when she wasn't around.*

"No, I do," she said, balling her fingers tight. "It's time, and I don't want to risk him finding out any other way."

She meant from her ex. Carmel was still pretty far outside the suburbs of San Francisco, but that wouldn't stop news from traveling, especially to a man who liked to keep tabs on the mother of his child.

Maybe Kenzie didn't notice—or if she did, she didn't care because all she cared about was seeing Jake—but I sure as hell noticed how fucking nosy her ex was. I never stayed in the apartment for the video calls, but a few times,

I'd overheard him asking Kenzie a barrage of questions about her life here. Even the last two weekends when we'd met them at this park, all he'd done was bring up memories of their life together. Telling her about the garden she'd started at their house—how he'd kept everything alive. Talking about their favorite restaurants. Family movie nights.

The guy was becoming a broken record of memories from her life before Blooms—*before me*—and it was really starting to piss me off. She didn't want his narcissistic ass, she wanted me. *Her husband*. At least for a little while.

We entered the parking lot, and I picked a close spot in the shade and parked.

“Don't worry about Stan.” *I'd handle him.*

Her attention darted to me, nervous.

I hated that he made her feel this way. Small. Unworthy. Uncertain. She'd been with the prick for eight years; all it took was eight minutes in his presence to get a damn good idea of the emotional damage his narcissism could do to a person over time, but my gut always felt like there was something more. *But what else could it be?*

“You're not in this alone,” I swore.

She pulled the corner of her lip between her teeth, her eyes growing hooded for a second before she was over the console and pressing her mouth to mine in a swift, hard kiss.

“Neither are you,” she reminded me softly before pulling back.

I gritted my teeth. It felt... strange at first for someone to know why I was the way I was. One time, I'd overheard one of the therapists giving a lecture at Blooms claim that our trauma response was the opposite of our love language. My love language was acts of service—*doing* for others. The opposite of that? Solitude.

I wasn't too proud to admit how true that rang. I was always there for everyone, yet for myself, I was alone. Until Kenzie.

Now, neither of us were alone.

And it was an arrangement that was both simple yet complicated at the same time. Simple because there were real feelings that existed. Desire. Admiration. Compassion. Friendship. But complicated for those exact same reasons.

“Let's go, angel.”

We weren't even ten feet onto the grassy green before a small figure

started barreling toward us. Today, the tape that had been on his nose for the last two weeks was gone, a giant smile on his face.

Within seconds, Kenzie had him in her arms, holding him close before she started examining his face as though she hadn't seen him every night on their video calls.

"Mom, I'm better," Jake protested as she tipped and turned his face, carefully tracing her fingers along his nose like it was the first time she was seeing it.

"Just let me check, baby," she pleaded, and he settled to let her. "Look at you." She sighed. "So brave."

Jake nodded, proud. "I even went back to practice on Monday."

"Did you?" I caught her slight wince.

She thought it was too soon for him to be playing again... and she knew it was Stan who'd put Jake back out on the field as soon as he could.

"Yeah." Jake nodded again. "Dad said I had to get back out there. That I had to be tough and show no weakness."

Christ.

As Kenzie responded, I looked up, finding her ex and his lawyer chatting in the shade, a smug smile on Stan's face.

"Zeke!" Jake grabbed my arm and brought my attention back. "Look at my nose! You can't even tell it was broken."

"Good as new." I crouched and grinned.

"Did you have to go to the hospital when you got your concussion?"

I smiled. "Yeah." I nodded. "But I don't remember any of it. I didn't take my hit so well. I got knocked out, and the first thing I remember afterward was being in the hospital."

"Wow." His eyes went wide.

"But look at you, back out on the field already." I ruffled his hair. In the corner of my eye, I saw Stan approaching. "Why don't you take your mom over to the swings?" I suggested, pointing to the swing set.

"Are you coming?"

"Yeah." I smiled. "I just want to talk to your dad for a minute."

I met Kenzie's gaze, her lips parting slightly. I didn't really want to talk to Stan, but I wanted to give her a chance to talk to Jake alone. She was worried enough that he'd be upset—that he'd been programmed to think she was coming home to be with him and Stan again. I didn't want her to have to bear that worry while Stan was watching.

“Okay.” He grinned. “Come on, Mom.”

She stood, following Jake as he took her hand and pulled her away, but the look she shot me over her shoulder made my chest tighten. One look from this woman was all it took to make me weak.

“Zeke,” Stan greeted with a smile and extended his hand like we were best buds.

I shook it because I wasn’t a dick... but I wasn’t happy about it.

There was something about Kenzie’s ex that grated more than his ego, and I realized in that moment what it was: it was the way he disguised his narcissism as altruism... and got the whole world to fall for it.

“Jake said he went back to practice this week,” I said, my insinuation obvious.

“His nose is fine. He needs to learn to toughen up,” Stan said, crossing his arms and widening his stance. He nodded in Kenzie and Jake’s direction. “She looks good.”

I tensed. It was a generic comment that could’ve been meant in a million different ways... still, I didn’t like that he was talking about my wife.

“She is good.” She’d be better if you didn’t make her jump through informational hoops to see her son each week.

“I think it’s time for her to come home.”

My back snapped straight, and my head whipped in his direction. “Excuse me?”

He didn’t actually think Kenzie was going back to him, did he? Was he that delusional? I had to shift my weight to try and disguise how fucking shocked I was at his presumption.

“Look.” Stan sighed, shaking his head slightly. “I know you’re helping Mackenzie. Probably some sort of charity or something, which is all great, man. Really, it’s great.” Whatever compassion his words conveyed was metered by his patronizing tone. “But look at her... at the two of them... what she really needs now is to come home. To Jake. To me.”

I’d never felt this kind of rage before, hearing him talk about Kenzie like she was some weak, misguided child. *Hearing him insinuate that he knew what she wanted and what was best for her.*

“And she wants to. All she’s ever wanted was a family, and I know my job took a toll on her. I didn’t give her the attention she needed, and it was how I missed all the drugs.”

Jesus Christ, was this asshole nominating himself for sainthood?

“But after what happened with Jake at the soccer game, the way she’s desperate to talk to him each night, I think she sees now that it’s a mistake for her to stay away.”

My eyebrows lifted, and I fought back an incredulous laugh at how wrong he was. I kept my focus on Kenzie and Jake, not wanting Stan to see my expressions, but then, when I saw Kenzie take Jake’s shoulders and kneel in front of him, I knew she was breaking the news.

My heart started to hammer.

I didn’t give a shit what the man standing next to me thought, but I did care about her son. It was obvious that Stan was Jake’s hero. Hell, I didn’t blame the kid; his dad literally saved lives—saved Kenzie’s life. For that alone, he deserved his son’s admiration.

I didn’t want to replace his dad, but goddamn, I wanted him to like me.

“I think if you told her it was okay to come home, she’d admit it’s what she wants,” Stan went on, oblivious that I was ignoring him because he couldn’t be more wrong.

He couldn’t be fucking serious.

“I’m not going to tell her that because it’s not what Kenzie wants,” I said flatly.

Stan’s brow creased, and then he laughed it off. “Look, Zeke, I’m trying to be a nice guy about this, but I know Mackenzie. She’s the mother of my child, and she’s not well.” Stan turned, facing me even though I remained forward. My heart rocketed up into my throat as Jake looked over to me and then back to his mom. “She’s a recovering addict. The best place for her to be is with the support system she has. Her son. Me. The man who saved her damn life.”

“Just because you saved her life doesn’t mean she wants to continue living it with you,” I growled, feeling a surge of protectiveness ignite inside me.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” He scoffed, so sure of himself. “Of course, she does. Do you think she only wants to see Jake on video calls and once a week for a few hours?”

I turned, unable to believe this asshole. He really believed this. He really believed that Kenzie wanted to come back to him... and he really believed that he had the power to keep her from seeing Jake if he wanted. Suddenly, that swell of protectiveness consumed me like water on a grease fire, incinerating whatever reserve I had left.

“She wants to come home. She needs to be taken care of. She needs me —”

“Then why is she *my* wife?” I growled.

Fuck this and fuck him.

The bomb dropped before I could meter the explosion. It wasn't my place to tell him, but I couldn't stop the words from coming out. The way he was talking about her... like she was some helpless, pathetic creature, and he was her savior... *No one talked about my wife like that.*

“What did you just say?” he demanded low, his face taking on an expression I'd seen flicker only a handful of times when he couldn't contain it. *Pure malice.*

I straightened, the words rushing through me like a straight shot of adrenaline. “I said she doesn't want to come home to you because she's my wife.”

His lip twitched, and I felt his body shift toward me like this was about to get physical, but then a shout drew both our attention.

“Dad!” Jake came running over, and only then did I feel a blast of fear.

I wasn't afraid of getting in a fist fight with Stan. I sure as hell was afraid Jake was going to hate me for marrying his mother.

“Jake...”

“Mom and Zeke are married,” he exclaimed, and when he smiled, I breathed a little easier.

Stan was silent for a moment before saying with a voice that was barely steady, “I just heard.”

“Mom said she's happy,” he said, his little face scrunching. “I'm happy if Mom's happy...”

“I'm sure you are,” Stan said through tight teeth, lifting his gaze as Kenzie approached. She didn't hesitate even though I could practically see her pulse racing from here. “Go back to the car.”

What the hell? They'd only just got here.

“But—”

“Go,” Stan snapped, instantly revealing how short his patience ran and how harsh he could be.

Tears welled in Jake's eyes, but it wasn't until Kenzie nodded and mouthed the word ‘go’ that Jake hung his head and walked with heavy steps toward the lot.

“Stan—”

“This is a mistake, Mackenzie. You made a mistake,” he declared, pointing his finger at the ground in her direction as though she were a child or a dog to be scolded.

“No, Stan. I got married.” She reached for my hand, and instantly I slid my fingers through hers, giving them a squeeze to let her know I was here if she needed me.

“You need me,” he spat. “You have nothing without me. Not your son. Not a life—”

“No, that’s exactly what I have without you,” she charged. “A life of my own.”

There was a beat of tense silence, and something unspoken passed between them. Something that felt like ice in my veins.

“We’ll see,” he said cryptically and then looked at me and sneered, “Good luck, Zeke. All she wants is a man to take care of her, and the more you do it, the more she needs because she’s sick. She’ll take and take and take until one day, you’re the one trying to resuscitate her from another overdose that your son had to call in.”

Kenzie swayed toward me, the venom in his words having its intended effect.

“Enough,” I growled. “We’re done here.”

“We’re nowhere near done.” He smiled wide, never taking his eyes from Kenzie. “You’re going to regret this. I gave you everything. I took care of you—of everything you needed, and now, you choose him over our son? Latched onto the nearest man to take care of you and leeches off him like a whore—”

Before I knew it, my hand fisted in his shirt, and I hauled him to me.

“You might know how to save a life, but if you utter another word of disrespect against my wife, I’ll show you how I’ll get away with murder,” I warned in a low voice and then threw him away from me.

Stan stumbled for a second and then collected himself, straightened his shirt, and then let out a tight laugh.

“No idea what you’ve done, Mackenzie,” he said. “No fucking idea.”

And then he stalked off toward his car. Jake had stopped halfway to their car, lingering in one spot like he was hoping Stan would change his mind. Even his face was hopeful until Stan reached him, gripped his shoulder, and forced him away. Jake’s cry of protest echoed all the way to us.

“Kenzie.”

She resisted when I reached for her.

“I don’t need you,” she said quietly, a protest to every accusation he’d lashed at her. “I swear, I don’t—”

“It’s okay, angel,” I swore and hauled her to my chest. “This was a blow to his ego. I know none of it was true.”

It was another of the ties of his control severing. I saw the look on his face—pure shock that debilitates a person who thinks he’s always in control. And he thought he’d always have control over her.

“As soon as I have Jake, we’ll get divorced. I just need... my son.”

I nodded, my chin rubbing against the top of her head, but I couldn’t bring myself to speak. That was the plan, and I wasn’t going to argue it. *No matter how much I wanted her to need me... just a little bit.*

“It’s okay if you need me, angel,” I rasped, unwilling to let Stan twist her definition of need any further. “It’s not needing someone when they give you no choice; it’s a prison. You didn’t need him because you were helpless; you needed him because he gave you no alternative.”

I slid my hand to cup her cheek, tipping her face to mine. The next words out of my mouth weren’t for me, they were for her. I’d watched her face as Stan spewed his accusations—watched self-doubt shadow her face and fracture her breaths. And now, I was determined to wipe it all away.

“I want you to need me, Kenzie,” I promised. “I’m your husband until I’m not, do you understand?”

And even then... I’d never not be here for this woman when she needed me.

Her eyes fluttered, and she said softly, “Yeah.”

“You did this all by yourself,” I rasped, my thumb stroking small circles on her skin. “You survived an overdose, got out of an emotionally abusive relationship, tackled recovery with your own support, and you were prepared to sacrifice everything to get custody of Jake.” I let out a rough breath. “I only had to meet Stan once to know your relationship was never about you needing him, but him needing to control you.”

Her body softened in my arms, and so help me, all I wanted was for her to need me. Because she wanted to, not because she had to.

“Zeke...” Her eyes lingered over my face, something about her expression seeming like she had something to tell me.

“What is it?” I murmured.

My jaw tightened. There was something...

She held her breath, swallowed, and then released her exhale as her gaze fell. “Can he do anything... to stop me from seeing Jake?”

My shoulders slumped. *That was it.* She was worried he’d make good on his thinly veiled threats.

“I won’t let him do anything, I promise.”

Was he going to try and stop Kenzie from seeing Jake now? Stop their calls? Their visits? It wouldn’t matter when she got custody, but until then... it would kill her, especially with the vitriol he’d spewed before leaving. I swore if he talked about her like that to Jake, I’d make sure those were the last words he spoke. Whatever he tried to do, he wasn’t going to get away with it; I wouldn’t let him.

“Let’s go home.”

Her chin bobbed slowly.

I kept my arm around her and walked us back to the car.

“What did Jake say?” I asked once we were back on the road.

He’d been smiling when he came over, so I hoped that was a good sign; I hoped that at least she didn’t have to worry about that.

“He was confused at first,” she said. “I guess Stan has been telling him more and more that I was going to come home soon—that we’d be a family again.”

Fucker.

“What did you tell him?”

“The truth.” She swallowed. “Not all of it, but the parts of it that an eight-year-old can handle. I told him we would always be a family, but that I wasn’t coming back home—back to Stan’s house. That I wasn’t happy with his dad.”

She swiped her hand over her cheek and then let out a soft laugh. “And he knew. He’s so... smart.” Her eyes glistened. “Smart with feelings, I mean. Jake said I look happy now. That my smile was never this big when I was home.”

My heart thumped harder in my chest. “He’s pretty perceptive.”

“Yeah.” Her breath faltered. “He asked if he would get to come stay with us, and I said I hoped so. And then he said that maybe he could teach you how to swim since you’re bad at soccer, too.”

I laughed. “Perfect.”

Her head tilted to me. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me.” I shook my head. “I was the one who told him. Not

that it wasn't going to come out, but it probably made it worse that it came from me—”

“No,” she said, a thread of resignation in her tone. “It didn't matter who it came from, he would've responded the same.” Her gaze drifted blankly to the window, worry fogging her features.

“I won't let him do anything to hurt you—to keep you from Jake,” I said and reached for her hand. “I promise.”

I shouldn't make that kind of promise, but I had to. I had to just as surely as I had to breathe. I'd do whatever it took to protect Kenzie, and it had nothing to do with my pathological need to help people and everything to do with my selfish desire to be a part of her life for as long as I could.



WE STOPPED for Chinese food on the way back, our sparse conversation drifting through various superficial topics. The whole time, all I wanted was to pull her to me—to hold her like I could erase everything that was said earlier this afternoon.

God, I wished I could.

Stan's words looked like they'd cracked her open. Split her right down her most vulnerable seams and exposed her to me—the one man she'd trusted to help her.

I never took the honor lightly, but after meeting her ex, holy hell, did I appreciate what it must've taken for her to ask me for help. To willingly tie her future to someone else's control.

But she had. For me.

And before I knew what I was doing, my blinker was on, and I made an early turn off of Coastal Highway onto an unmarked road.

“I want to show you something,” I said.

“Down a road with no road sign?” she asked, sliding a glance in my direction.

I chuckled. “There is a road sign back there... it's just buried in the brush. A truck hit it a few years back and knocked it over. I guess the township has more important things to spend their money on than fixing it.”

I didn't say it, but it was better that the road was unmarked. Then it went mostly missed by everyone who drove by it, so I didn't have to deal with

trespassers.

“Where are we going?” she asked another minute later as the road turned from pavement to dirt and gravel.

“Almost there.” For a moment, I second-guessed myself for bringing her here.

There was nothing here—nothing but a possibility. And it was one I wanted to share with her.

I put the car in park when we reached the end of the gravel drive on top of the hill, trees encasing the clearing like spruce statues. The daylight was almost completely gone, so most of the property she couldn’t see, but behind us...

I got out of the car and walked to the back, stopped short by the sight of the ocean stretched like onyx silk in front of us, trapping on its surface both the last flickers of the sunset and the first glitters of stars.

“Wow.” Kenzie came to stand beside me, her eyes greedily consuming the lavenders, royal blues, and deep navy of the sunset’s dying breath. Higher, stars twinkled in the clear night sky. “Zeke, this is...” She stopped and looked at me. “What is this place?”

I swallowed, feeling my chest tighten, and then confessed, “Mine.”

Her gaze widened. “What?”

“The property is mine,” I said, a distinct husk to my voice. Aside from the man I’d bought it from, Kenzie was the first and only other person to know about it. “I bought it a few years ago when Addy and Ace finally got together.”

Seeing my sister reclaim another piece of her life had given me hope for myself. But it was a hope that hadn’t lasted when the waves of my work and responsibility pulled me back into their clutches.

“The view is incredible. The sunset from here...” She stared at the glimmering ocean, her eyes shining with a similarly wet surface. “Breathtaking.”

I hummed low. As beautiful as it might be, I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her. Kenzie was the most breathtaking thing about this moment.

She glanced over and caught me staring. I cleared my throat and replied, “You should see it in the daylight; it’s like you’re in a whole different world.”

The sea appeared an impossibly bright blue. The green trees and foliage wrapped around the clearing, and even though we were just minutes from the

highway and the beach, being up here felt like you were the only person on the coast.

“Well, if it’s even half as good as this, I’m sure it feels like heaven,” she murmured. “Are you going to build your house here?”

My jaw flexed. “That was the plan.”

I’d bought my office in town, and I’d purchased this property off of Judge McCormick with big plans for both that had fallen by the wayside.

“What happened?”

“I don’t... I don’t know,” I said, still searching for the answer to that question. “Eve was with Miles. Addy moved in with Ace. And I thought I’d build a house and finally start to build my life. But Blooms kept growing, and it just felt selfish to take time away. It wasn’t like I had someone in my life to move in with or start a family with... I guess I figured once that happened, I’d start building. But it never happened.”

Because I never gave it the chance to.

“Zeke...”

“Do you think Jake would like it up here?” I blurted out as my neck craned around. *What the hell was I doing?* Everything I told myself I shouldn’t... “There’s plenty of room to put in a pool—”

“What? No.” She shook her head wildly. “You’re not building a house for me—for us—”

“Who else am I going to build it for?” I countered and then added, “Plus, how well do you think we’re going to live in the apartment? I know there’s a guest bedroom for Jake, but the space is small, the walls are thin, and it’s in town. There’s nowhere for him to run and play—”

“The park is up the road one direction and the beach in the other—”

“Kenzie...” I groaned.

“Did you not hear him?” she demanded, the real cause of her distress bubbling to the surface. Her lip quivered violently, and she wrapped her arms around herself like she was trying to hold herself together. “I overdosed while Jake was home. He was the one... forced to call 911. To tell his father that his mother wasn’t breathing.”

She snapped her head to the side, trying to hide the tears that streamed down her face.

No. I wasn’t going to let her do this to herself.

“Kenzie.” I cupped her face and tipped it up; I wouldn’t let her hide from me. “All I heard was a narcissistic prick who plans to hold your every

mistake over you—to try and keep you in his control—for the rest of your life. We’ve all made mistakes. All of us.”

“Zeke...”

“I brought you up here to show you that I need you, too,” I said quietly. Wanting her was the only thing strong enough to make me a little selfish—to make me want to carve out a life of my own. Even if her role in it was temporary. “Because if it’s up to me, I’ll never invest in my own life. I’ll let this land sit vacant until I give it along with the rest of my... everything away.”

She stared up at me. “If you’re trying to convince me that you want to build a house for me and Jake for purely selfish reasons, you’re doing a poor job.”

I let out a tight laugh. “Fine. How’s this? The walls of the apartment are so damn thin, it’ll be impossible for me to fuck you the way I want once Jake is there,” I growled.

Her eyes popped wide, my words having exactly their intended effect.

“So, you want to build the house so we can have loud sex?”

I dropped my face closer to hers. “I want to build the house because I refuse to give up making you scream my name as I’m fucking you. Inside. Outside. And I want the damn pool so I can have you float naked in it with your legs wrapped around my head while I eat your delicious cunt,” I said with a deep voice. “Is that selfish enough for you?”

Kenzie gulped. “Almost.”

“Almost?” I gaped.

Her arms twined around my neck and pulled me closer. “I think I just need to be reminded how loud I scream.”

I groaned and covered her mouth with mine.

It was a long day, and I should keep my hands to myself, but goddammit, she was my wife. *Mine*.

I’d gone into the kiss with the goal of being tender. Of being gentle with her after what happened today. But within moments, I devolved. My tongue dominated her mouth in deep strokes, mimicking the movement my dick would soon be making inside her.

It was getting dark—too dark for this to take long. And goddamn, if my cock wasn’t some insane kind of hard, spurred by my possessiveness of Kenzie—*of my wife*—that had unleashed earlier.

My hands went to the waist of her jeans. I growled, fighting with the

fabric for a second before it released.

“Dresses,” I growled. “I’m building this house, and I’m buying you dresses.”

“Zeke—”

“Purely for fuck’s sake.” I shoved her jeans and thong down, and she got one leg free from the pants before her hands grabbed for my belt.

I cupped one hand around the back of her neck, the other delved for her clit, finding it swollen between her slick folds.

“Mmm,” she moaned, her head tipping back as I stroked her.

“Fuck. Condom.” The thought snapped in my mind as soon as my fly loosened.

“I’m on the pill,” she said.

It wasn’t new information. We’d been living together for weeks now, and I watched her take a multivitamin and birth control every morning. But if there was any protest left, it was gone when her warm grip took hold around my cock, stroking me all the way up to the tip.

“Fuck,” I breathed, pleasure searing through my skin.

I latched my arm around her waist, lifting her as I backpedaled toward the car.

“I’m going to make you see stars, angel,” I promised, kissing her hard before I spun her so that her back was to my front.

I kicked her legs apart and then hauled her onto my lap, her ass instantly cradling my dick.

My mouth opened, but she didn’t need any instruction. She reached between us, gripping my length and feeding the tip to her entrance.

My head dropped back into the car, a groan erupting from the depths of my chest as she sank down on my cock. I let out an inhuman groan, feeling her slick heat clutch my bare cock.

“Fuck, angel. You feel so good, so fucking—ahh.” I grabbed her hips and buried myself all the way to the root. Dragging my mouth to her ear, I muttered, “I’m going to fuck you until you forget all about this afternoon. About all the insults and the pain. Until there’s nothing but me.”

I was being insane, but I didn’t care. She was my wife, and my dick had caveman brain.

“Do you feel how much I need you?” My voice broke as I gripped her hips and thrust hard into her warm clutch, her pussy pulling me deeper into its wet heat.

Feral sounds erupted from my chest. I'd never fucked a woman bare before. Ever. And now that I'd had her like this, I didn't think I could ever go back.

"I'm so fucking hard right now, angel, my cock feels like it's going to explode," I growled, knowing my fingers were probably bruising her skin with their force, but I couldn't figure out how to lighten my hold. "I've never fucked without a condom before. Never felt how fucking soft your pussy is around me. How warm and creamy it feels when I push inside you."

Every word brought a fresh rush of heat around my cock.

Her head tipped back onto my shoulder, her moans clawing from her lips. "God, yes, Zeke..." she begged for more.

"I need you, angel. I need you quaking and screaming my name—your husband's name."

"Yes," she murmured, her moan fracturing into a cry as my hand snaked lower, my fingers finding where we were joined.

"Fuck," I hissed.

Her slick honey coated my fingers as I traced where her body stretched wide to accommodate mine and finally settled on her swollen clit.

She bucked as soon as I rubbed over the sensitive bud. "More," she whimpered. "Give me more."

I thrust harder into her as my finger teased and rolled her clit. "I need you, angel. I need you so fucking bad, it makes me sane and insane."

Broken breaths burst from her chest, her body breaking apart in pieces under the pleasure.

"That's it, wife," I cooed, feeling her pussy spasm with pleasure around my cock, trying to catch her orgasm that was just out of reach. "Milk your husband's bare cock."

I shouldn't let it turn me on—the idea that I was fucking *my wife* bare. But holy fuck, it did. Even if it was only for a little while, for that little while, she was mine. Mine to worship. Mine to protect. Mine to claim. Mine to pleasure. *Mine*.

"Yes, please," she begged as her back bowed. "Please, Zeke, please..."

My arm tightened over her middle, holding her prisoner to my thrusts. I felt her inner muscles start to convulse, tighter and tighter as I drove deep. And then the rest of her began to tremble in my arms.

Fuck.. I groaned deep, my own release balling into the tightest knot in my spine as I jammed my cock harder and faster into her hot pussy. She held

onto my arms, trusting me to hold all of her—to pleasure and take care of all of her. And goddamn, that was the most precious thing I'd ever been given.

My teeth sank into the curve of her neck feeling her body spiral toward her orgasm, taking mine with it.

“Come all over me, angel,” my gravelly voice instructed roughly as I rolled her clit under my thumb, shooting her into the release she was chasing.

“Zeke!” She hurled my name into the heavens as she came.

Her body wrung mine, convulsing along my length and pulled my own release free. I was coming inside her. Not on her. Not into a condom. *Against her womb.*

A rough shout barreled from my chest, the thought shooting me over the edge. I wasn't sure if my eyes were open or shut—the stars that stretched in my vision remained the same as my dick pulsed inside her. Filling her up with my cum.

My wife.

I held her to me for long minutes after, letting our bodies return to earth in the cool night air.

It wasn't going to be the same after this. The tether between us had always been more than physical... but now... now I was afraid it could quickly become everything.

CHAPTER 15



KENZIE

“Hi.” I slipped through the door into Zeke’s office.

He lifted his head, his eyes darkening when he regarded me.

I ran my palms along the side of my thighs, feeling the heat course like electricity through my skin. Part of me thought this would fade—the aching. The want. The way he made me feel.

I’d hoped to build a tolerance to Zeke Williams, but in our first almost four weeks of marriage, I’d only grown to want my temporary husband more. Especially after that night in the field.

It didn’t matter how many times I took his body in mine, what I’d agreed to that night was more than just a safe place for loud sex. It was more of a future. More permanence.

I’d agreed to a risk I shouldn’t be taking—one that involved a home as much as it did my heart.

But it was hard to argue his reasoning. Coming back to the apartment that night made me think about the future differently. For so long, my focus had only been on custody. On getting Jake away from Stan. In my mind, anything was better than him being left alone with my ex.

But when I got past that part—I had to admit that the apartment above Zeke’s law office wasn’t exactly ideal for a young boy. Sure, he’d have his own room, and there was space enough to be comfortable, and if it was the only option, I’d take it in a heartbeat. But the notion of a house... land... *a pool*. How could I not want that for my son?

And how could I not want my husband for myself?

I’d known Zeke for almost nine months now. Nine of the lowest, hardest, and most painful months of my life. He knew some of my most difficult

truths before I'd even walked through the door to Blooms, but that night, somehow, everything between us became more real and vulnerable. Two incomplete pieces that came together into something whole.

It was a strange feeling—to feel whole without my son. For so long, Jake had defined my life. I loved him. I would die for him... and I almost had. But that night reminded me that I was my own person, too. That I was a whole being outside of being a mother. And the whole of me was having a very hard time not falling for my temporary husband.

If I was honest, the last almost two weeks since that night had made me wonder if we were both fooling ourselves into thinking that we could eventually walk away from this—from each other. But that wasn't a discussion for now. Nothing for myself was a discussion until I had custody of Jake.

"Hey." Zeke set the papers he'd been reading down, giving all of his focus to me. "Everything okay?"

"He agreed," I said, unsure if everything was okay or not.

Zeke lifted an eyebrow. "To come to the beach bash?"

I nodded slowly.

I'd expected a lot of things from Stan over the last week and a half. Refusing to let me call Jake. Trying to prevent me from seeing my son. Anything to get back at me for marrying Zeke. I waited for the other shoe to drop, especially today when I'd asked him to bring Jake to the beach bash in Carmel this weekend so I could see him.

But nothing changed. It was almost as though his outbursts at the park didn't exist. *Except they had.*

I knew the kind of man Stan was. He wasn't just going to let this slide; he'd find a way to punish me, he always did.

"That's good," Zeke said and motioned to me with his fingers. "Come here."

I hesitated. "You're not messing up my hard work again."

It had taken many weeks of effort, but Callie and I had finally organized everything in Zeke's office. It finally looked like a lawyer worked here. All the boxes on the floor were gone. His law journals and books were organized on the shelves. I'd ordered him two filing cabinets, one for his case files and the other for his business documents, both tucked into the corner of the room.

And his desk.

My masterpiece.

The clutter was gone. Everything was color-coded and stacked based on priority or tasks for the day based on Callie's information. I had everything prepped for him before he sat down each morning and before I headed over to Blooms to take up my tasks there.

"I thought you accepted my several-orgasm apology?" he teased with a wink.

Heat bloomed in my stomach. "I did."

Those winks... his teasing smiles... his hungry stares... they'd all been more frequent. Less guarded. The walls we'd had in place had come down as easily as if they were no more than sheets strung up on a laundry line.

"Come here, wife."

I shivered. If Stan had talked to me like this, I would've hated it. He would've turned 'wife' into a weapon—another means of controlling me. But Zeke... he used wife as a call to worship. A promise to give me anything and everything I needed.

Biting my lip, I walked around his desk, knowing it was a dangerous game to put myself in arm's reach. For the last two weeks, we hadn't been able to keep our hands off one another.

He took my hand and brought my palm to his lips. "What is it? What's worrying you?"

I swallowed hard. I wanted to trust him—I *did* trust him. But this... it went bigger than trust. I knew the lengths Zeke would go to defend me, and if he knew what worried me, I worried he'd forget every law he'd sworn to uphold in order to make Stan pay.

"What's going to happen when I file for custody," I said weakly.

"There's nothing he can do, angel. It's up to the judge."

I wished that each time he said it made it truer.

He must've seen my doubts written on my face because he asked, "What do you think he's going to do?"

"I don't... know," I offered carefully. "He's good at twisting things. Twisting truth into lie and lie into truth. Good at hiding his narcissism with selflessness. Wanting to care for me. Wanting me to have to worry for nothing. Wanting to protect me. Wanting to make sure I'm healthy—" I broke off before I said too much. "I'm afraid a judge won't see through that."

Zeke moved his hands to my waist, drawing me into his lap. "I'll make sure he does."

I tensed. "Is Callie..."

Callie and I got along well, and she'd welcomed the idea of me as Zeke's wife so easily. Maybe because she had the most proof that at least certain parts of our relationship were real... it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out how Zeke's desk had gone from pristine to a mess in the course of one night, or how one of the legs on the small loveseat mysteriously broke one day, or the reason for the sudden dent in the hallway drywall that appeared over the span of her lunch break.

Maybe it was because Callie and her husband had ended up married under questionable circumstances, too, but regardless, I was grateful for her kindness. Grateful for everyone's kindness. But at the same time, the way they welcomed me with open arms hurt because the reason for it wasn't real... and when they learned about Jake and my custody battle... I was afraid of losing everyone who'd come to mean so much to me.

"She left for the day." Zeke cupped my cheeks and claimed my mouth in a deep kiss.

My tongue instantly tangled with his, and I sighed into the embrace. I couldn't get enough of the way he kissed me. Not to distract me or make me forget my worries, but to let me know I wasn't alone.

"You don't have to worry about him," he broke the kiss and said. "We're going to file for custody, you'll both go before the judge, and a decision will be made. There will be rules. Lines. And you won't have to worry about him again."

I hoped he was right.

"Yeah." I let my forehead drop to his, fighting back the nagging thought that he still had no idea what Stan was capable of... and I couldn't tell him.

"Here." He turned me in his lap and handed me the papers he'd been reviewing. "Read this."

I could feel his erection pressed to my ass, and that was where my focus wanted to stay until a handful of the words registered.

"The custody forms?" I sucked in a breath.

"They're done," he confirmed.

After that night in the field, Zeke had been working on getting all the documentation in order, and yesterday, he'd opened a custody case with the court. As soon as we filed this paperwork, we'd get a hearing date, and the only thing left to do was serve Stan with the papers.

My eyes roamed over the paper, so eager to read everything all at once that I had to stop and take a deep breath and start over before my brain began

to process everything.

Most of the information we'd already talked about. Why I wanted legal and physical custody. I argued that I'd been the primary caregiver for all of Jake's life. That Stan's job required him to be on long shifts or go on emergency calls at the drop of the hat. I argued that in spite of my past issues, I was the best guardian for our son. That spilled into my terms for Stan's rights and visitation. And finally, there were the hard facts of my recovery, sobriety, and current living situation.

"Wait, what's this?" I pointed to an astronomical amount listed as "our" assets.

That number had to be a typo. Either that or the zero button was pressed for a few too many seconds.

"What I have in savings and investments. Stocks. Crypto. Things like that," he answered gruffly.

I assumed Zeke made good money—a stereotypical assumption about a lawyer. Maybe not as much as the big names in the city or in-house attorneys for giant corporations, but still a good income. When he'd mentioned building the house... adding the pool... part of me rationalized it was okay to say yes because our arrangement might end long before he was financially ready to do that.

But this... what he listed in assets... it was in the millions. Several times over.

"I didn't... realize," I said lamely. Not that it mattered. I mean, it did matter because it was a solid benefit to my claim, but the money itself didn't matter to me.

We'd signed a prenup that Zeke had drawn up mere hours before going to the courthouse. It was simple but effective, and I would've signed anything to have a better shot at getting custody of Jake.

"It'll all go to Blooms eventually, and to my nieces and nephews," he murmured. "If you want to take another day to review it, I can file tomorrow ___"

"No." I shook my head. "I trust you. If it's ready, then I'm ready."

I didn't miss his redirect of the conversation. Nor the passed-over truth that he was still prepared to give away everything he'd earned from all the time and effort he'd dedicated to others. This man... my husband... took nothing for himself. *Except me.* And that thought made me feel things I definitely shouldn't.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded and stood from his lap, folding my arms. “I’m sure.”

“Okay. I’ll file it online tonight, and then have Stan served with the paperwork tomorrow.”

Maybe then I could breathe a little deeper. Easier.

Zeke’s gaze raked over me. “Kenz...”

“If you keep looking at me like that, we won’t make it to dinner,” I murmured breathlessly, toying with the idea of climbing back on top of him and spending another night pleased over his desk.

But we couldn’t. We had dinner plans with a bunch of friends from town.

The last few weeks had been sprinkled with social gatherings with Zeke’s family and our friends. Dinners. Beach days. Hikes. Between our work-filled days, we had to make the marriage appear real, even if the most real thing was our desire to stay locked up in the apartment and spend those moments in bed.

“And if I’m hungry for something other than food?”

My nipples pebbled, my inhale trembling. “Then you’ll have to save that appetite for dessert.”

His jaw twitched. “I’m going to file this, and then I’ll be right up,” he said and added in warning, “Make sure you’re dressed by then, or I can’t make any promises that we make it to dinner.”



THE LOOKOUT WAS Carmel Cove’s best-kept secret. A restaurant on the outskirts of town, it sat along the cliffs of Big Sur like a sanctuary for locals. It was a haven with good food, friendly faces, and an atmosphere of community that seemed to be a lost art in the world these days.

The owner, Ash Tyler and his wife, Taylor, lovingly ran the restaurant that was dedicated to Laurel Ocean’s grandfather, Larry. It was a testament to the compassion and support he’d given to everyone he crossed paths with, but especially those struggling, like Ash had been when he’d come to Carmel.

Ash had moved here as a recovering alcoholic, and Larry had made sure he’d stayed on the path to sobriety. There was no alcohol served at the Lookout, and Ash hired most of his employees either from Blooms or from the local AA chapter.

The restaurant had massive windows that looked over the jaw-dropping cliffs, but tonight, we sat at a large table on the back patio that was draped in twinkle lights.

Tonight, we were celebrating Larry.

I'd never met him, but it was hard to not feel like I had with the way everyone spoke about the man. He wasn't just Laurel's grandfather... he felt like the grandfather for the entire town. And every year, on the anniversary of his passing, Ash held a special spaghetti night for everyone who wanted to remember him... and there were a lot.

The restaurant was packed, but the patio was reserved for us; for Laurel and those closest to her grandfather.

At our table were Laurel and Eli, Eve and Miles, Cammie and Bennett, Gwen and Chevy, Addy and Ace, and open seats for Ash and his wife who were still chatting with patrons inside. In the last hour, even more of their friends had come and gone—Ace's brother, Dex, and his wife, and the rest of the guys from Covington Security, though I struggled to remember all of their names—they all stopped by to share a story and grab a bite before family duties called.

"I can't believe it's been seven years," Eve murmured, rubbing her hand over her stomach. She was due any day now, but she refused to miss this.

Laurel took a sip of her water and then stared out toward the ocean. Even the dim lighting caught on the glimmer of unshed tears collecting in her eyes. Without missing a beat, Eli wrapped his arm around his wife and pulled her close.

What it would be like to have that... The thought made me shiver, and a second later, Zeke mimicked the motion and hugged me to him as though answering my thought that I did have that—that I did have him.

My chest tightened. *It wasn't real. It wasn't real. It wasn't real.*

But what if it was?

"He'd be happy to see this," Laurel said softly. "Happy to know he's still remembered."

"I doubt he'll ever be forgotten," Zeke murmured, and it brought a small smile to her face.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Ash chimed in, joining us at the table with his wife and daughter in tow.

There was something about this group of people... something that was as warm and comforting as a crackling fire on a chilly winter's day. The way

they'd welcomed me as Zeke's wife. There wasn't a moment that passed where I felt like I didn't belong, and that tormented me the most—feeling like I did belong. Like I was exactly where I was meant to be.

Ash lifted his glass of water, and we all followed suit.

“Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.” He paused, his gaze meeting everyone at the table. “And above all, be loved.”

A weighted repeat of “*be loved*” rippled around the table.

Once more, the group erupted in conversation. Memories and musings. Tall tales and stories so funny my sides cramped from laughing so hard. Another hour passed in a blink talking about the man everyone missed and loved. The resounding theme being to not take for granted the people in your life.

The entire time, I felt Addy's gaze drift over to me. I hadn't seen her much after Eve's birthday party, and the times I had it had been at Blooms while I was working. *And without Zeke*. Now, she watched the two of us as though she had an internal litmus test to know if what was between us was real or fake. I tried not to think about it, and it was easy with Zeke's warm presence next to me. Steady and unwavering. Sometimes he spoke, sometimes he listened. Sometimes his fingers lightly traced my shoulder, other times his hand searched out mine. Always something to let me know he was there.

I didn't take him or the time I had with him for granted, but I'd be a fool not to think about what would happen when this all came to an end...

Before long, couples began to rise from the table and say their goodbyes. Cammie and Bennett were the first to leave. Then Chevy and Gwen—but not before Gwen promised to drop off a swimsuit for me to wear on Sunday. When Eve and Miles made their goodbye round, Zeke rose, too.

“I'm just going to walk with Eve to their car—”

“Oh, for crying out loud, Zeke,” Eve huffed. “I'm not going to give birth in the fifty feet between here and the passenger door to my car. Plus, Gwen is inside—”

Zeke wouldn't hear any of it, and I smiled, watching him walk with his pregnant younger sister and her husband out to their car.

I was alone at the table for hardly a minute before Ash took the seat next to me.

“I'm glad you're here, Kenzie,” he said. The owner of the Lookout had a generous smile and kind eyes—the ones that had weathered a lot of trial

before settling into triumph. The sobriety chip around his neck added to the testament of his former struggles.

“Me too.” I smiled, my eyes flitting around the few people remaining outside and catching on Addy’s stare once more.

“I mean, I’m glad you’re here with Zeke,” Ash said, capturing my attention again.

Heat rose in my cheeks. “Oh.”

“For as long as I’ve been here... as long as I’ve known him... I’ve never seen him let himself be loved.”

My breath hitched. *Love*. Who said anything about love? This wasn’t love. It was friendship and mutual understanding and phenomenal sex and a temporary marriage. But not love. No. It couldn’t be.

“I know what it does to a person when you give everything you have to others and you don’t...” he trailed off, emotion clogging his throat. “And you don’t take anything for yourself.” He paused, and I felt my brow start to crease when he added low, “That was what Larry did. He gave everything—was everything—to everyone until he had nothing left.”

My throat tightened. It was no secret in Carmel that Larry had committed suicide. Maybe for most that was the kind of thing kept quiet or hushed up. A tragic circumstance to never be mentioned. But not here. Like everything else about Larry Ocean, even in death, he’d left a lesson to be learned.

To let yourself be loved.

“I’m sorry,” I said and gently placed my hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t be sorry.” He smiled. “I’m just glad Zeke finally found something... someone... a reason to be loved.”

My lips parted, but before I could say anything else, Ash’s daughter moseyed around the table and put her arms around her dad’s neck.

“Grace, can you say hi to Kenzie?”

The little girl buried her face in Ash’s shoulder, and he chuckled. “Sorry, she’s tired.”

“Don’t be sorry. My son would get the same way,” I said without thinking.

Ash cocked his head. “You have a son?”

“Jake. He’s eight.” I nodded. There was no turning back now. “He lives with my ex.”

I didn’t need to explain more to someone recovering from an addiction. Ash read between the lines that I didn’t have custody of my child.

Grace whimpered in his arms, and he sent me another apologetic look. “I’ve got to get her to bed. It was good talking to you Kenzie,” he said as he stood. “Hopefully we’ll get to meet Jake soon.”

My chest squeezed. “Hopefully.”

I watched him walk away for as long as I could, but eventually I had to turn my head and meet Addy’s stare over the table. She was the only other person out here; Ace must’ve accompanied Laurel and Eli back inside the restaurant.

It only took a second to realize she’d overheard my conversation with Ash; *she knew*.

I stood, my chair grinding on the patio. I had to explain. She had to know this wasn’t my idea. I never would’ve asked this of Zeke—never would’ve begged for this sacrifice after everything he’d already done.

“Addy...” I tried to figure out what to say, but all my words blended together on the tip of my tongue.

She walked up to the table, holding my stare as she demanded, her voice cracking, “Was it for your son?”

“Please,” I begged softly, looking at the woman who’d saved me—whose organization had saved my life and had given me a second chance. And I’d never felt like more of a fraud.

No matter what Zeke said—what he wanted—it didn’t change why we’d gotten married.

“Just tell me the truth.” She swallowed. “Did my brother marry you so you could get custody of your son?”

My jaw went slack. The truth was there. A simple yes about to tumble from my lips when a different voice echoed over the patio.

“Addy?” Zeke stood in the doorway, his gaze swinging between us. “What’s going on?” He walked over to my side, but I didn’t feel comfort like I had before.

Addy lifted her chin. “Did you marry Kenzie just to help her get custody?”

Zeke tensed, thrown off guard by the sudden interrogation. “Don’t,” he warned.

“Just tell me the truth, Zeke,” she pleaded.

“My marriage is none of your business,” he said, but anything other than a flat-out denial was firm confirmation.

“How could you?” she asked softly, looking at me with tears in her eyes.

“How could you do this to him?”

I shrank back, her words cutting deeper than if they’d been filled with rage and resentment. Maybe I hadn’t been the one to suggest it, but I’d agreed to it. I’d willingly taken years of his life for myself—for my own ends.

“Enough,” Zeke snapped and stepped in front of me, taking my hand in his. “It was my decision, Addy. My offer. My choice.”

Her head shook, a tear spilling onto her cheek.

“You don’t have to understand my decision,” Zeke declared, pulling me tighter to his side. “But you do have to respect it. And my wife.”

Without waiting for her response, he led me through the restaurant and back to his car. Only then did I start to gulp in air to compensate for the way I’d been holding my breath.

“Zeke...” I looked at my husband.

Husband.

Stared at him and searched for the answer to her question. *How could I have done this to him?* My mouth dried, and my throat tightened. I knew what I was getting out of this marriage, but what about him?

What if she was right? The accusation in her eyes that claimed I’d taken advantage of the most selfless man that ever lived.

Why had he done this? Why had he married me?

“Don’t, Kenzie.” His gravelly voice was pained, and he took my hand again to bring it to his mouth, meeting my eyes as he kissed my fingers. “We’re only talking about this once I have you in my arms.”

A pang shot through my chest. I wanted Zeke Williams in spite of all the guilt coursing through my veins.... But maybe Addy was right. Maybe this marriage was a mistake.

CHAPTER 16



ZEKE

“Zeke, what are we doing here?” she asked, trying to hide the quiver in her voice but failing.

She hadn’t said a word as I’d driven straight through town—straight past the apartment—and brought us back to my property. She hadn’t said a word because she’d been silently crying—trying to hide her pain from me.

There weren’t many times in the course of our lives when I’d wanted to throttle my twin sister, but tonight was one for the books. I understood Addy’s shock—her hurt. I understood how it must look to her and the sacrifice she thought I’d selflessly made.

But she couldn’t be more wrong.

I swung the Jeep around so that we faced the ocean, the surface dark with the reflection of the night sky, and then shut off the engine, my thumb drumming on top of the steering wheel as I tried to find the right words to say.

Of course, my sister would connect the dots as soon as she learned about Jake. We’d worked with too many women in similar situations for her to not recognize the lengths a woman would go to get her child back—or the lengths I’d go to help her.

But this was more than that... and that was why we were here. Weeks ago, I’d brought her to my property because I wanted—needed her to focus on a different future. One that didn’t involve worrying about Jake’s future or worrying about what Stan would do to compromise it. Tonight, we were here because she deserved the truth. My truth.

“I’m sorry for what Addy said, Kenz,” I began.

She didn’t move in the seat. The only reason I knew she even blinked was

because it triggered a tear to trickle down her cheek.

“You shouldn’t have married me.” She finally turned to me, her eyes puffy and her cheeks red. She’d been crying the whole way here.

Fuck. “No.” I reached over, swiping the tears from her cheeks like I could just as easily erase her hurt. “No, Kenz. You’re wrong.”

“I never should’ve asked it of you—”

“You didn’t ask, I did,” I growled.

She let out a soft whimper. “I never should’ve put you in that position because of course you would ask, Zeke. Of course, you would do anything to help me because that’s what you do. And I... I agreed because I was only thinking of Jake. I never thought about what I was costing you.”

“Dammit, Kenzie. Enough.” I framed her face. The ache in my chest felt as powerful as the goddamn ocean, swelling and rising up with the truth.

“You deserve so much more than this, Zeke. You deserve a real marriage. A real wife and family. Real—” she broke off, catching herself before she said the word that burned on the tip of my tongue.

Love.

“And if I want this to be real?” I rasped.

Her brow creased, and then she slowly shook her head. “No, I know you don’t,” she declared. “You said you couldn’t because of Blooms—because of the other women and your responsibilities—”

“I lied, Kenzie,” I confessed quietly. “I said that because it’s easier than admitting I was too afraid to fuck up a relationship.”

“How could you...”

“Because my sister almost died.” The words came out rough. Edgy. Untrained because of how few times I’d said them. “A woman I love almost died because I wasn’t there to protect her.”

“That wasn’t your fault, and you saved her.”

The sunset was long past, but the moonlight now glittered across the open ocean and reflected on the tear-soaked surface of her eyes.

“Ace saved her... and if I had paid more attention, maybe he wouldn’t have had to.” I gritted my teeth and reached over the console for her hand, taking it tightly in mine until I felt her ring bite into my palm.

Larry had told me to do what I could... but he wasn’t around to tell me what to do when all I could do didn’t feel like enough.

“Then why did you marry me, Zeke?” she asked softly.

I dragged my gaze to hers, feeling my throat tighten. *This was why I’d*

brought her here—to tell her the truth I’d been trying to ignore for so long now.

“I married you because I wanted you—because I wanted you in all the ways I shouldn’t from the moment I saw you, and suddenly, I saw a way for me to have you,” I rasped low. “I want a future with you, Kenzie. I want this marriage. I want Jake. I want the house. The pool. The family. I want it all with you. Wholeheartedly. Selfishly. Desperately. I. Want. It. All.”

It was the hope in her eyes that was my undoing. It was boundless. Endless. Unfailing. No matter what came against her, it never dulled that hope.

“I married you because I’m in love with you, angel. From the moment I met you, no matter what I’ve done, I haven’t been able to stop myself from falling in love with you.” Every word split my chest open wider, pieces of my guarded heart tumbling free. “And I know it’s not right. I know you have your son to think about—his future to think about. I know I have Blooms to think about... but goddammit, I love you, and I want us. Whatever happens, I want us.”

“Zeke...”

I bit down on my tongue, tasting blood, as I left the final piece of my heart bared before her.

“But if that’s not how you feel—not what you want, I’ll respect that, and as soon as you get Jake back, we can—”

“Stop.” She wouldn’t let me finish, leaning over the console to frame my face with her hands. I stared at her, our breaths colliding in the small space. “From the moment you let me walk out of your office with those books and without demanding an explanation, I loved you. And when I said I’d marry you, I wasn’t just thinking about Jake. I thought about how it didn’t make sense for you—that I had nothing to offer you in return—but I said yes anyway because I selfishly wanted a chance to love you. Even if it wouldn’t last.”

I groaned, my heart wanting to explode. “Kenzie...”

“I’ll happily take everything with you, Zeke, but all I ever wanted was you,” she murmured, her lip quivering. “I love you.”

Kenzie loved me.

My wife loved me.

My growl hardly took form before my mouth covered hers, my tongue sweeping past the boundary of her lips and tasting the sweetness of victory. I

needed her, and I needed her to know I needed her

I broke the kiss for only a second to unbuckle her seat belt and haul her over the console onto my lap. *Thank God, she had a dress on tonight.* The fabric bunched as her knees spread on either side of my thighs, and I moved the seat back as far as I could.

Our mouths connected again like two magnets snapping to their opposing pole, the kiss voracious and consuming.

Our hands bumped into each other, both frantic to move the layers of clothes between us. Hers were easy. With one hand, I dragged her dress up to her waist, my other hand delving straight for her core.

“Fuck, you’re soaked, angel.” Her underwear was drenched as I tugged them to the side.

There was no way clothes were being removed in this position.

My fingers found her clit, her moans landing like honey on my tongue as she undid my belt and the zipper of my jeans. I bit down on her bottom lip, sucking hard as she pulled my cock free, stroking my length hungrily.

“Put me inside you, angel,” I begged.

She made a soft sound, tangling her tongue with mine as she raised up and notched my tip through her slick folds.

She was so warm and wet. I groaned into the kiss. “Fuck, you feel so good, Kenz.” My wife was my very own slice of heaven.

I savored the catch of her breath as she impaled herself on me, hanging onto her every sound, her every tremor, because they were the only things that kept me from losing my mind at the pleasure.

When I was sunk to the hilt, pressed to her womb, and stretching her sweet cunt to its fullest, she dipped her head next to mine, panting. I inhaled her bare vanilla scent, filling myself with her just like she’d filled herself with me.

“Time to show me how good you can ride your husband’s cock,” I rasped, my hand gripping her hips and giving them a little upward pressure.

That was all it took for her to move.

Up and down she worked along my bare cock, rolling her hips each time I was rooted deep and rubbing her clit over the coarse nest of hair at my groin. Meanwhile, her mouth held over mine, our tongues meeting in frantic swipes between heavy breaths.

The way we moved was too rough to keep kissing. The slap of our hips as we came together too hard and too hungry. My heart felt like it was going to

explode from my chest. The way she took my cock it was as though she was made for me. Molded to every ridge and vein in order to draw out maximum pleasure.

“Fuck, I love you,” I ground out. I’d never wanted anything—anyone the way I did her.

Kenzie lifted up slightly, her movements pausing as her hands braced on my chest, digging the fabric of my shirt into my skin. “I love you, too.”

Her eyes glittered the way they held mine, a promise of forever.

“Move,” I ordered, roughly.

This time, she pushed back, allowing me to sink even deeper inside her pussy and hit her G-spot—a sweet whimper bursting from her lips as I did.

Emotion clawed at my chest. It had never been like this before. Each time a new layer—a new barrier peeled back between us, the way we came together changed. But this time... this time, there were no more barriers. It was only the two of us. Two selfless hearts who’d done everything to try and make this marriage about anything but what it was—*love*.

She clutched my shirt like it was her reins, tugging on the fabric as she ground her hips to mine, burying my cock to the hilt with each drive. Her movements grew frantic, my hands having to guide her hips as her head tipped back, her body clawing for the orgasm that was almost in reach.

“I love you,” I ground out and slid my hand to where we were joined, finding her clit and squeezing it tighter as she lowered herself once more, giving her the most pressure when my cock rubbed her G-spot.

“*Zeke!*” She shattered over the edge of her orgasm with a sweet cry that filled the car.

Her body convulsed around mine as I thrust into her clenching heat once last time, a ragged curse tearing from my mouth as I came hard. The cabin of the Jeep filled with our moans and heavy breaths for long minutes until Kenzie collapsed on my chest, and I held her to me.

After several minutes, I found her left hand and held it up, my fingers entwining with hers and the rings we both wore.

I’d fallen in love with her. There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it. And I was going to take every day to prove to her that our temporary solution was something I didn’t want to live without.

Like the Eiffel Tower in the middle of Paris. It was supposed to come down when the World’s Fair was done, never meant to be more than a fleeting entertainment. Until it wasn’t. Until it was the most iconic piece of

the Parisian skyline.

I cupped her cheek and kissed her gently. She was my Eiffel Tower. The most iconic piece of my life. And no matter what happened, I wasn't going to let her go.



THE FIRST THING I did the next morning was text Addy that we needed to talk. It was time my sister understood—time I let her understand.

“Thanks for coming,” I said gruffly, joining my sister at the table in the front corner of Roasters coffee shop.

Addy looked like she hadn't slept a wink last night, and I wasn't surprised. Neither of us carried the weight of guilt well.

“Don't thank me,” Addy replied, standing and hugging me tight. “I was a giant bitch.”

My shoulders slumped. “You were worried.”

She drew back. “I still am.” If there was one thing my sister would never do to me, it was lie. “But I shouldn't have said what I said—”

“Addy—”

“Please,” she begged. “I shouldn't have said what I did, and I'm sorry.”

I placed my hand over my sister's clasped ones and squeezed. “Addy, it's my fault.”

“What?” she scoffed. “No. This isn't your fault, Zeke. You're an adult. You made your own choices—”

“It's my fault for not telling you the whole truth, but that's what I'm here to do now,” I cut in and exhaled slowly. “I never lied to you. We did get married to help Kenzie get custody of her son, but I didn't tell you because...”

“It's real now,” she said quietly.

“No.” I shook my head. “I didn't tell you because it always was.”

That made her eyebrows lift in surprise.

“It was always real, Addy. What I said to you and Eve at her house that day, it wasn't a lie. Everything I said... everything I felt... it was all true. The lie would've been to let you think this was solely about Jake or anything else. I fell in love with Kenzie when I had every reason not to, I just hadn't... accepted it yet.”

She stared at me for a long second. “I know how that happens.” Her small smile was comforting as she alluded to the time when she’d moved in with Ace ‘for her own protection’... and then never moved out.

“If I told you about Jake, I knew you’d put the pieces together, and then I’d have to admit I didn’t marry Kenzie just to help her.”

“Zeke...” Like a light switch, her eyes turned on the tears.

“I would’ve had to admit I was selfish.”

“Love is selfish,” she countered. “It’s unpredictable and unstoppable. No matter how long or how hard you try to ignore it, it perseveres.”

My shoulders slumped, and I stared at my twin. Somehow, we always knew the right things to say. “It does.”

We sat in silent agreement for some time. We’d both fought the idea of love for so long, finding different ways to try and escape its hold, but in the end, there was no escaping the thing your heart most wanted. It would be easier to lose your own shadow.

“I’m happy for you. For both of you,” she finally spoke. “And if there’s anything I can do...”

“Thank you,” I said just as my phone buzzed. Murmuring an apology, I checked the notification and immediately went on alert. “I have to go.”

“Everything okay?”

I nodded. “Kenzie’s ex just got served custody papers. I want to get back in case...”

I’d gotten confirmation that Stan had signed for the custody arrangement papers, so he knew now that Kenzie was filing for sole custody of Jake. After how he’d responded to news of our marriage at the park, I anticipated a backlash, too.

“Is she in danger?” Addy rose with me.

“No,” I said firmly. “He’s just a cruel, selfish ass, and she doesn’t deserve to have to deal with him alone.”

I made it to the door before I felt her hand on my arm.

“Zeke.” Addy looked up at me. Our eyes mirrored in one another. “I’m glad it was her, and I’d like the opportunity to tell Kenzie that again.”

“I think she’d like that, too.” I pulled my sister in for a brief hug. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

CHAPTER 17



ZEKE

I crumpled my empty water bottle and threw it in the recycling can, grabbing a fresh one from the cooler just as Kenzie jogged over to me.

“Is he...”

“Not yet.” I pulled her close and pressed my lips to her forehead.

I scanned the surrounding crowd that was only growing by the minute. Carmel Cove’s Beach Bash was in full swing with games and events and local bands getting a spot on the stage set up in the sand. Kenzie had led the yoga class early this morning when the beach had been relatively clear, but now, hundreds of locals and visitors stretched along the length of the shore.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized this was the best possible place to deal with Stan. It was public. It was crowded. And for a man who cared a helluva lot about his image, it was the ideal way to keep him contained.

I notched my fingers under her chin and lifted it. “I promise, I’m not leaving this spot until Jake gets here.”

It was almost two which was when Stan’s lawyer said they’d be here.

Since he’d been served papers, we hadn’t heard directly from Stan or from Jake. I tried to remind myself it was only a few days, but Kenzie’s level of worry... worried me. Her appetite started to dwindle. Her sleep was restless. And the look in her eyes when I tried to tell her it was going to be okay—when I reminded her that our court hearing was at the end of this coming week—it was haunted. As though she’d been chased to the edge of a cliff by a ghost I couldn’t see.

But today, she’d see Jake. She’d spend all afternoon with him, and I’d handle Stan’s wrath. And hopefully that would be enough.

“Sorry, I know.” She sighed and wrapped her arms around my waist. “I’m just worried he isn’t going to show.”

“That would be a really big mistake on his part,” I said.

She was guaranteed visitation as long as she showed she’d been through treatment and rehab for her addiction and was staying sober. If he tried to cancel today... he wouldn’t. I knew enough about the man to know he’d show up here and try to control the situation just like he always did because that was who he was.

I captured her face between my hands and lowered my mouth to hers, claiming it with a slow kiss.

“Zeke...” she murmured, reminding me that we were in the middle of a crowded beach.

I drew back and put a few inches between us before my dick made a scene.

“Who gave you this bathing suit again?” I muttered, my eyes greedily eating up the sight of her in the hot pink bikini.

I’d kept a close eye on every inch of skin that peeked out from its seams with clenched teeth, prepared to tackle her to the ground if any piece of her wardrobe malfunctioned.

“Gwen.” Kenzie’s eyes twinkled.

I grunted. I’d always find her in a crowd, but the hot pink made her impossible to miss, especially the way she bent and stretched in the beach yoga class earlier today. There were definitely some positions I was going to put her back in later once we were alone.

“Here, drink some water.” I handed her my bottle.

“No, I’m okay. That’s yours.” She winced and then smiled. “I’ll get a new bottle for myself.”

“Considering I just had my tongue down your throat, I think it’s okay if you share my water,” I rumbled low, watching the color in her cheeks deepen.

For a second, I wondered if she knew I was just teasing her, but then she quickly took my bottle and replied, “You’re right. Sorry. Old habits.” She cracked the cap and took a long drink, and it almost masked the way her voice wavered.

What did she mean, old habits? Did Stan not share anything with her? That fit with his personality, but why would it make her refuse something I offered? *What the hell had he done?* My brow creased. It felt like I was

missing something, but I had no time to ask.

“Zeke...” Her wide-eyed expression looking over my shoulder was all the explanation I needed.

I spun, instantly picking out Jake... and Stan coming down the steps from the boardwalk onto the beach.

“Mom!” Jake sprinted to Kenzie like he couldn’t get away from Stan fast enough. *Like every other time.* And I didn’t blame him.

The look on Stan’s face was sour as all hell, even with that fake smile on his face. I’d never seen a person so capable of emanating the ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’ persona.

As soon as Jake reached Kenzie’s waiting arms, his water bottle crashed into the sand, and I smiled small as I picked it up; the kid was really a pro at dropping things.

“Mackenzie,” Stan practically spat in greeting, but the rage in his eyes really fired up when he looked at me. He didn’t even bother to say anything to me before addressing her again. “Did you really think I wouldn’t realize what you’ve done?”

I tensed. “Stan,” I warned, my eyes flicking to Jake who’d looked up at his dad.

“Your mom got married just to take you away from me—from your home,” Stan said, firing the words out like they’d been stuck in the chamber for days.

“Stan, please—”

Jake’s lip started to quiver. “Dad...”

Fucker.

“I saved her life, and now she married a complete stranger just to destroy our family,” Stan drove on, his scathing tone blistering with hatred. “Your mom’s been lying to you this whole time, behaving just as selfishly as she did before, thinking only of herself—selling herself to the highest bidder—”

“Enough,” I growled murderously and put myself between him and them.

It was a miracle I didn’t hit him. He deserved far worse, but Jake didn’t. Jake didn’t deserve any of this, especially the manipulative father he was stuck with.

“Jake, this guy doesn’t care about you or your mom,” Stan continued, redirecting his barbs to me, taunting me right to my face. “He’s pretending to care—being paid for it.”

The way he said paid made his accusation clear.

“One more word about my wife, and I’ll leave you without a tongue.”

It was easy to see Stan waiting to let his hatred loose. He’d bottled it up and saved it for today when he could accuse us right in front of his eight-year-old son. The judge could let Jake weigh in on where he wanted to live—*who* he wanted to live with, and that was what Stan wanted; he wanted to give Jake every reason to pick him over Kenzie.

“Is that a threat?”

“A promise,” I swore.

“Zeke...”

I turned immediately at the small voice, finding Jake staring up at me, his tiny brows furrowing together and tears in his eyes. Kenzie held him to her, his back pressed to her legs and her arms draped over his front.

I bent so he could only see me, not his asshole father.

“Jake, I married your mom because I’m in love with her. Because she’s incredible and kind and caring—”

“And beautiful,” he added exuberantly, causing Kenzie’s cheeks to heat.

“And beautiful,” I agreed with a smile. “And I don’t want to take you from anything, I just want to be a part of your family.”

“Bullshit—”

“Kenz, why don’t you take Jake down to the water?” I suggested and stood, meeting her stare before I turned and faced Stan.

The rest of my conversation with Jake would have to wait until Stan wasn’t around. Until then, I’d go toe-to-toe with the asshole all damn day if it spared Kenzie and gave her the afternoon with Jake.

“You want to go see the ocean?” she asked Jake softly.

He must’ve nodded because I heard their footsteps shuffle away through the sand a moment later.

“She’s not going to take away my son.” He was so damn smug, smiling right through his declaration.

“That’s up to the judge to decide.” I metered my words.

The way his smile grew gave me chills. Once again, that knot in my gut tightened and made me feel like I was missing something.

Stan stepped closer to me like he was untouchable. “Considering how all she does is harm herself and those around her, I think it will be a pretty easy decision for him to make.”

With that, he strode over to the drink tent, easily striking up a conversation with the next people in line and having them laughing in

minutes. Fucker was charismatic, I'd give him that.

Taking a deep breath, I turned my attention to the shore, needing only a second to find the two people I cared about. Kenzie and Jake stood at the edge of the water, letting the waves lap at their feet. As I got closer, I saw they were both smiling, Jake laughing loudly each time the cold water got his toes, and my relief was indescribable.

Stan came here because he had no choice, but he thought to ruin it with his cruel accusations; I was glad to see he hadn't succeeded.

Fucker.

I uncapped the water bottle in my hand and took several healthy gulps, the bottle crinkling as I chugged over half of it. There was something about what he said that bothered me. The confidence he had in his claim. He sounded like he had something on Kenzie that would prevent the judge from agreeing to our request.

I forced an exhale and shoved the bottle into my back pocket as I approached Kenzie and Jake. I couldn't think about that now. Stan didn't deserve any more of my focus than he'd already claimed.

As I got closer, I heard Jake squeal when a particularly large wave crashed onto the beach, the flow rising up his calves. He wasn't afraid though. He looked up at Kenzie like he wanted to get closer.

She'd mentioned they'd never brought him to a beach before, and even though the water was cold, I knew Jake wouldn't care. He loved water.

"Looks like someone wants to go in the ocean," I said when I reached them.

Kenzie spun, her lips peeling apart when she saw me. The love I felt in her gaze was enough to bring me to his knees.

"You'll take me?" Jake smiled and looked at me—hope in his eyes.

Something tightened in my chest, but it was different than before. Unsettling. I cleared my throat, pushing through what must be the swell of emotion and answering him, "If it's okay with your mom."

Kenzie nodded. "Of course." But it was the way she reached for my arm when I went to walk by her—the way she leaned close and whispered, "I love you" that calmed the storm inside me.

"I love you, too," I said, sinking my hand around the back of her neck and claiming a quick kiss.

Jake's grin split his face, waiting for me before wading farther into the waves.

“Alright, let me show you how to ride a wave,” I said. The water was damn near freezing, but it didn’t matter—nothing mattered when Jake’s small hand fit into mine.

I led him toward the cresting waves. They weren’t too tall or I wouldn’t have offered to go in with him.

“Alright, let’s wait for this one to break, and as soon as it does, we’re going to rush out before the next one reaches that point,” I explained, pointing to the area where the waves toppled over.

Jake’s hand tightened on mine as the wave approached, and just when it crashed, we both pushed forward into the onslaught of water.

The cold hit my chest, but it felt like it went right through me. I didn’t know how long I was going to last out here, but I was going to do my best.

We made it past the break point of the waves, and Jake happily tread water, laughing as each roll of water carried him high and then dipped him low.

“This is so fun!”

I wanted to feel his excitement, but all I felt was the weight around my chest. Each breath feeling like I was lifting a boulder from the bottom of the ocean rather than oxygen from the depths of my lungs.

I wasn’t sure how long we were out there; it couldn’t have been long though before I realized something wasn’t right.

I swayed with the incoming wave, my balance caving in a way that wasn’t normal. I tried to straighten, but I couldn’t. My heart felt like the crack of a mallet each time it beat.

Something was really wrong.

“Jake, we have to get out,” I said, my voice groggy, as the shore started to tip in my view. “We go in with the next wave.”

I had to get him to shore. *If something happened to me out here and he was alone...* I had to get him to safety.

It was my only thought as I moved us toward the beach. Thank God, he didn’t protest because I knew I didn’t have the strength to fight. The next wave hit me, and I lost my footing, sinking until the water submerged me for a second.

“Zeke!” Jake cried out as soon as I was above water again.

His panic drove my adrenaline. “I’m good, bud,” I promised though I was anything but.

What the fuck was happening to me...

Everything was hazy and tipping as though the whole world rested on the top of a wave. I tried to think—to process—but my body didn't feel like my own. Infinitely heavier—exacerbated by the weight of the water. Something was wrong... every inhale felt like my chest strained against a thousand-pound weight.

Whatever this was needed to wait until I knew he was safe.

The next wave came behind us, and I thanked God as it pushed us forward, my feet stumbling in the sand as we made it out of the water.

“Jake?” I heard Kenzie's voice, her figure approaching as a blob of blonde and pink. “Jake, are you—*Zeke!*”

I saw Jake reach her arms before I went down. My knees hit the sand first, and I felt myself start to sink down. In slow motion, the rest of my body tumbled forward, and my vision fizzled to darkness.

The sounds stayed, distant as though through a tunnel. Kenzie's voice stayed. The way she said my name. It stood out above the rest. But even that started to fade.

“Zeke, stay with me.” Her hands felt so warm on my chest. “Please, Zeke. I love you.”

“Paramedic coming through!” The last thing I heard was the very last thing I wanted to hear. “Call 9-1-1. Tell them I'm administering Narcan.”

Stan.

CHAPTER 18



KENZIE

Every direction I looked, it was as though I stared at a different funhouse mirror that distorted what the afternoon should've been into something twisted and sinister.

First, it was Jake and Zeke coming in from the water not long after they'd gone out. Jake looked scared, and I thought something had happened to him. Water up his nose. A jellyfish sting. But then I saw Zeke. The man who was always strong and steady, wavered like a ribbon in the wind. His skin pale. His eyes dilated.

And then he hit the ground, toppling like a sack of potatoes.

I pushed Jake back behind me and rushed to Zeke. I flipped him over and screamed for help, shaking him wildly. A crowd swarmed around us, and that was when I faced the next funhouse mirror.

Stan. He maneuvered through the crowd with his well-honed bravado, an emergency medical kit in his hand.

My world tipped on its axis. I wanted to stop him, but I couldn't. Zeke's life was in jeopardy and the only thing I could trust was Stan's ego.

He wanted to be the savior so bad, he'd do anything—*anything*—to put himself in that position. And now, he wanted to be the one to save Zeke; the ultimate pump to his narcissism—being the one to aid my husband.

How could I trust the man who almost killed me to save the life of the man I loved?

Because I had to.

But if I thought that was the worst distortion of the situation, I was wrong. The worst came when Stan pulled out the Narcan and administered it to Zeke.

I reached for his arm to stop him—to protest that it would do nothing, but I wasn't fast enough. Stan gave the shot, and I held my breath.

Seconds later, Zeke gasped back to life.

No.

I started to shake my head, past crashing headfirst into the present. *God, no.*

“Kenzie.” Addy gripped my shoulders. “What happened?”

“He overdosed,” Stan answered for me, and I swore there was a ghost of a smile on his lips.

Sirens blared closer, the ambulance pulling onto the beach.

“No. Not possible,” Addy denied. “What did he eat today? Drink?”

Drink.

I looked down at the water bottle in my hand, the liquid clear... like a wolf in sheep's clothing.

“This.” I handed her the bottle. It was the last thing he'd had before going into the water.

“I'm going to take this to Ace. I'll be right back, okay? Stay right here and then we're going to follow the ambulance to the hospital,” she ordered, and I nodded.

I didn't understand. Zeke didn't do drugs, I knew that. He'd never... but there was no arguing with Narcan.

The EMTs in the ambulance joined Stan, and I listened to my ex update them with everything he'd done as they moved Zeke onto the gurney.

“Mom!” Suddenly, Jake's arms were around me, and he was crying into my stomach. “What's going on? What happened to Zeke?”

He cried so hard, he started to hiccup, his little lungs unable to work fast enough.

“I don't know, baby,” I told him, trying to find words to calm him even as my own heart rioted in my chest as they put him in the ambulance. “The doctors are going to find out.”

I moved toward the ambulance, Jake at my side.

“Kenzie.” A chill rippled down my spine.

I stopped and turned, finding Stan's hard gaze and his mouth drawn tight.

“Go get your towel, baby. We're going to see if Zeke is okay,” I told Jake.

He reluctantly released me, glancing several times over his shoulder as he walked toward my beach bag and the pile of towels a few feet away.

“You’re coming home with Jake and me,” Stan declared.

I recoiled. “No. I’m going to the hospital to be with my husband—”

“Only if you want to lose your son.”

I froze. “What are you talking about?”

Stan stepped closer, and I fought the rush of icy adrenaline. “Your... *husband*... almost just overdosed on fentanyl. If you think I won’t bring this up when we go in front of the judge, you’re wrong. And then not only will Jake remain fully in my custody, but I will make sure that you and your drug-addicted husband *never* see Jake again.”

“No.” My head shook wildly. “You can’t—”

“I did,” he snarled. “I already did.”

His eyes glittered, and right then, the truth hit me. I didn’t know how he’d done it or when, but Stan had orchestrated all of this; *he* was the reason Zeke overdosed, and he was also the reason Zeke was alive.

Once more, the truth was snarled in the barbed altruism of his lies, but I wouldn’t stand for it any longer.

I ran once to save myself—to give myself a chance at saving my son. I was tired of running. The world needed to know that my ex wasn’t the hero in this story, he was the villain.

“I’m going to the police,” I declared. “This is over, Stan.”

“And say what? Your ex tried to kill your husband... only to save his life?” He scoffed and then bit out bitterly, “Who the hell do you think is going to buy that, Mackenzie? No one. Because you’re the one with a drug problem, and now, it looks like you took your new husband down with you.”

“No,” I protested. I wasn’t going to let him get away with this.

“This isn’t just going to get me Jake, Mackenzie. It’s going to ruin Zeke,” he seethed with a smile. “He’ll be disbarred. Everything he’s worked on... all the weak little women he’s so desperate to help... *gone*.”

Now there was no mirror—no distortion of the truth. If I didn’t leave with Stan, not only would I never see my son again, but he’d ruin Zeke’s life’s work—everything he’d fought for, everything that defined him. Gone. Because of me.

I squeezed my eyes shut, every cell in my body wanting to fight—knowing Zeke would want me to fight. Remembering how he’d already risked his career to save me. Wanting to believe that his love was worth any cost.

I opened my eyes, but whatever I had left to stand on, died in the next

instant as Stan bent forward and murmured the final nail into the coffin burying my freedom.

“If you won’t obey to save him, then do it to save your son. What you’ve done already caused his broken nose, and this latest marriage and custody stunt, well... the water Zeke drank today was supposed to be for Jake.”

I let out a small cry, my worst fears crystallizing into reality. *It was because of him. It was all because of him.* This whole time, I’d feared Stan’s perverted assault would extend to our son... but the truth was it already had.

I stared at Stan, searching for any part of the man I’d once cared for—any part of the man who at least loved his own son enough to not harm him. But I found nothing.

The man in front of me had planned on poisoning our son with fentanyl just to punish me and force me back into his life. I couldn’t leave Jake alone with him again; he would kill him.

“Okay.” The word choked out of the black pit in my stomach. “I’ll go with you.”

Stan smiled triumphantly, reaching for Jake when he returned and bombastically declaring that *Mommy* was finally coming home.

I would fight for love. For the love of my son. For the love of a good man. But I would also sacrifice for it—sacrifice anything including myself in order to keep them safe.

So, I put on a brave smile for my son, and let Stan lead us through the crowd and off the beach, acting every inch the handsome hero he wanted people to see.

Maybe someday Zeke would realize why I made the choice I did. Unfortunately, by then it would be too late. The day the truth came out would be the day that Stan finally managed to kill me.

CHAPTER 19



ZEKE

“Where’s Kenzie?” I grabbed the cup of water again, trying to erase the scratchiness from my throat.

I wanted to rip all the IVs and monitors off my body and find my wife. I had to tell her this was a mistake—there was no way I’d knowingly take any drugs, let alone overdose on them.

Rationally, I knew there was no other explanation for why the Narcan had revived me, but I hadn’t done this. The drugs must’ve gotten into my system some other way. Still, all I could see was Kenzie’s face blankly staring as they loaded me into the ambulance.

Those first few minutes after I’d been revived were a strange mix of adrenaline-fueled clarity and drug-induced haze. Stan’s face—and his smug fucking smile—were perfectly clear when I came to. But after that... the commotion... the other paramedics... it blurred until I was jostled into the back of the ambulance. Then it was only Kenzie’s face I saw. Her confusion. Her pained disbelief.

She didn’t want to believe I had taken drugs and neither did I. But somehow, I had.

“She’s not here?” Addy came to my side, checking over me like a mother. “I found her on the beach. I told her to wait for me while I gave Ace the water bottle and that I’d bring her to the hospital—”

“What water bottle?” I demanded, needing to process one fact at a time.

“Your water bottle,” she said. “I asked Kenzie what happened—told her there’s no way you’d do any kind of drugs. And then I asked what you’d had to eat or drink, and she gave me your water bottle. Ace is testing it now...”

My brow creased, her voice distancing as my mind tried to string together

facts. I'd chugged the water on my way to Kenzie and Jake, and then handed it to her when we went into the ocean. But the water I'd grabbed from the beverage tent—*No*. My heart dropped into my stomach. I hadn't grabbed that water bottle from the tent; *that water bottle was the one Jake had dropped*.

"Fuck no."

"Zeke?"

"Where's Stan?" I demanded, grabbing the IVs and ripping them from my arms

"Jesus Christ, Zeke. What—"

"Where's the guy who gave me the Narcan?" I ripped off the hospital gown, grateful that they'd let me keep my bathing suit on. "The paramedic."

Addy blinked. "I-I don't know. I left the beach when I couldn't find Kenzie—"

I whipped around. "What do you mean, couldn't find her?"

"I just told you! I told Kenzie to wait so we could come here together. When I got back, she was gone, so I assumed she couldn't wait and came here on her own—"

"She's not here."

"Well, no shit, Sherlock. I see that now." Addy flapped her arms. "Want to tell me what the hell is going on?"

"Yes, but while we're on the road." I grabbed my sister's arm and hauled her from the room.



"ACE? I'M WITH ZEKE," Addy said when her husband answered our call.

"I'm on my way to the hospital—"

"We're not at the hospital," I interrupted my brother-in-law. "We're heading toward San Francisco."

"What? What the fuck?"

"Did you run the water in the bottle?" I demanded.

"Yeah. It was laced with fentanyl. Care to tell me why you're taking my wife to the city?"

"Because I'm trying to save my wife's life," I ground out, flooring Addy's Range Rover as I pulled onto the highway. "I need Dex to get me Kenzie's previous address and then look into her hospital records. Pull them

all and pull who was the first paramedic on scene for each drug-related incident.”

“I can do that if you tell me what the fuck is going on—”

“What’s going on is that water bottle was Jake’s.” I sped up the left lane, knowing I didn’t have much time. “He dropped it in the sand when he ran for Kenzie, and I picked it up, forgot it was his, and drank some of it.”

“So, someone tried to poison a kid...”

“Not someone. Kenzie’s ex. Jake’s father.”

There were bombs that detonated with less destruction than the words I’d just uttered. I didn’t want to say them. Hell, I could hardly believe I was saying them, but deep in the pit of my gut, I knew they were the truth.

“Zeke...”

“If you just have Dex look up the records, it will confirm I’m right.”

“How will records on Kenzie prove Stan was harming the kid?”

“Because he was doing this to her first.” My heart felt like it was beating outside my body, refusing to come back home until I had her back in my arms and knew the two of them were safe.

“How could he drug her if he was working?” Addy asked.

“Because he laced it into her food. Her drinks. Christ...” It was all clicking into place. Why she bought the damn individual yogurts. Why she never shared any food or drink or never took anything offered to her unless she saw exactly where it came from and that it wasn’t tampered with.

“So... he drugged her just so he could save her?” Ace drawled slowly. “It doesn’t—”

“Munchausen by proxy,” Addy blurted out, horrified. “Oh my god, Kenzie...”

“Why wouldn’t she say? Why wouldn’t she tell me...” I gripped the wheel harder. Didn’t she know she could trust me?

“Who would believe her over him? Question him, the man who saved his partner’s life? Why would anyone believe that the man who kept saving her was also the one responsible for her almost death?” my sister murmured, her mind working to keep up with mine.

This was why she’d been afraid of him—because he’d hurt her in ways she couldn’t prove. In ways that weren’t classically physical.

My stomach rolled. I’d never been so disgusted by the idea that someone could use altruism to obscure abuse.

“I would’ve believed her,” I rasped. *I was her husband.*

“But would you have been able to keep Jake safe?”

I opened my mouth to answer yes, but I couldn't because it wasn't the truth. Even if Kenzie had brought this to me before, and we'd gone to the police... even if we did all the right things... it still would've taken time to get Jake out of Stan's clutches. To the world, he was the upstanding citizen, and she was the one with a drug habit. And if this afternoon proved anything, it was that all Stan needed was a few minutes and a drugged water bottle to inflict damage.

Minutes.

“She was afraid he'd do this, Zeke... afraid he'd target her son if she told anyone the truth about him.”

And that was why she'd kept it from me.

It could've been the effects of the almost drug overdose or the Narcan or everything about the whole fucked up afternoon... but in my gut, I knew the burn in my blood and the vibration of my limbs had nothing to do with drugs and everything to do with savage rage ignited inside me.

“He probably thought if Jake almost overdosed, it would be blamed on Kenzie—or he could blame it on Kenzie. On her past habits. Use it as proof that she wasn't fit.”

“He had to have taken her from the beach. Threatened her to go back with him when his plan didn't go according to plan,” Addy said.

Ace swore. “Give me two minutes. Dex will get you the address and then get on the evidence.”

I ended the call, a strained silence falling over the car.

“He doesn't just want her back, does he?” Addy asked quietly.

“No.” My jaw threatened to break as I shook my head. “She's proved she's not willing to go down without a fight, and that's too much of a risk.”

Stan was going to take her back and kill her; every other option left him vulnerable. Weak. And that was the last thing that piece of shit could stomach.

My sister reached for my arm. “We'll get there in time.”

CHAPTER 20



KENZIE

“Jake, go play outside.”

My son tensed in my arms.

We’d gotten back to the house, the colonial standing like a bright white tombstone behind a picket fence. It presented the perfect image for Stan. The perfect house. The perfect family. *The perfect crime.*

My heart clamored in my throat as my eyes flicked around the place I’d lived for almost eight years.

It was messier. Unkempt. Dishes in the sink. A trash bag of Jake’s toys sitting by the front door. My chest constricted. Stan always threatened to bag up any toys that Jake didn’t pick up, but he was just a kid, so I always gathered them all before Stan got home. But without me here, it looked like Stan had made good on that threat.

“Dad, is Zeke okay?” he asked, making no move to leave.

“He’ll be fine. He just drank something that made him sick,” Stan snapped.

Jake’s brows pinched together. “He drank my water that you brought.”

Stan tensed. “No, he didn’t.”

“Yeah, he did. I remember because you wrote my name on the label so I wouldn’t lose it, and I saw Zeke drink it before we went—”

“Goddammit, Jake!” Stan roared, striding toward him like he had no qualms about striking a little boy.

Jake’s eyes went wide, and he let out a cry. But before there was fear in his eyes, I’d seen realization. He might only be eight, but he was smart enough to understand that Zeke got sick from drinking the water that was meant for him.

“Jake!” I reached for his arm and pulled him to me, sheltering him to my chest.

I held my breath, feeling like there was a bomb strapped to Stan’s chest, and I’d just cut one of the wires, hoping to diffuse him before he blew. I listened to his loud breaths. He always did this when he got frustrated—fumed and enjoyed the power that just his heavy breathing could wield.

“Go outside right now so I can deal with your mother,” Stan ordered a few moments later.

Jake frowned, and I saw his tears well before his whimper escaped. I buried his head into my shoulder, hoping Stan hadn’t heard the noise.

“It’s okay. It’s okay, baby. Go outside for your dad, okay? And when you get there, baby, run for me.” I swallowed over the lump in my throat, feeling my own tears leak down my cheeks. “Run until you get to the pool and then call Zeke.”

Jake would know how to get to the community pool. We would walk there every day during the summer. And he knew Zeke’s number because he’d called it every night to FaceTime me. I just prayed that Zeke... or someone who had his phone would answer.

“Mom...” His lip shook.

“Be brave.” I pushed him away from me and toward the front door, hoping Stan was too focused on me to care which exit from the house Jake took.

I stared at my ex—stared at the face that always wore a charming, heroic mask. No one knew there was nothing behind it but evil. A man who needed to be the hero so badly—to get his way so badly—he was willing to drug his own son.

We stood unmoving until the door closed.

“You can’t get away with this anymore, Stan,” I told him, somehow keeping my voice steady when it felt like all my insides were trembling. “Zeke will come looking for me. He’s my husband.”

Stan’s lip twitched at the last—as though Zeke had taken something that belonged to him even though he’d never been interested in making me his wife until someone else did.

“You were mine, Mackenzie. I loved you.” Stan shook his head and casually walked to the kitchen, grabbing a water from the fridge.

“Loved me?” I scoffed and shook my head. “No. You don’t even know what that means.”

“I saved you—”

“*You tried to kill me! You tried to kill our son!*” The words flew unbidden from my lips. Not once in all the years we’d been together had I ever accused him like this.

“No, I saved you, you ungrateful cunt.”

I jerked. “Zeke will find me,” I warned—*hoped*. Except he was in the hospital. Probably still wondering how he’d overdosed on fentanyl.

Maybe if I’d just told him what Stan had done... maybe he wouldn’t have been hurt. Maybe none of this would’ve happened. Or maybe Stan would’ve hurt Jake sooner to punish me.

“I’m sure he will now that you’re his needy little whore.”

I shivered, but his words fell flat compared to the fear I felt when he pulled a small packet from his pocket and started to dump the powder into the water bottle. *No*.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, my voice cracking.

“You made a mistake, Mackenzie, and now you have to be punished.”

I shook my head. “You can’t make me drink that.”

“Of course, I can.” He smiled, having gotten away with this for too long to think he was in danger now. His ego was too inflated to see how close he was to giving himself away, and he was too insane and enraged to heed my warning.

He started to approach me. My heart pounded.

I had to escape. I had to find some way to escape.

“I thought you wanted us to be a family,” I stammered, grasping at anything to hold him off.

“I did, but you wanted to whore yourself out to your lawyer to try and steal my son, and that’s unacceptable.”

I backed up until my back hit the console that sat against the wall.

“You won’t get away with this,” I warned again. “You don’t think they’ll make the connection? A water bottle with fentanyl that caused Zeke’s overdose and now mine?”

His calm mask faltered.

“You don’t think they’ll make the connection to you?”

“To me? I’m not the one with a history of drug overdoses. I’m the one who’s saved you all those times. What reason would they have to think it was me?”

“Because Zeke knows,” I blurted out, my chest heaving as Stan stopped

in front of me.

“What?” His eyes sharpened.

“He knows what you’ve done to me,” I lied through my teeth, but I didn’t know what else to do. “I told him the truth. That you were the reason for all my overdoses. That you drugged my yogurt and my water and my smoothies... all so that you could play the hero.”

“No.” He started to shake his head.

“Zeke knows the truth—he knows you’re responsible for all of this, and he’s going to make sure—”

“No!” Stan roared and lunged for me, his hand wrapping around my throat with a murderous grip.

My body’s natural reaction was to open my mouth. To try and gasp in air, but when I did that, instead of air, Stan forced the bottle to my mouth.

I struggled, pushing against him as water filled my mouth. But the more I struggled, the tighter his hand got, and the moment it loosened, it was only liquid that leaked down my throat. I tried to swat the bottle away, but Stan barricaded his arms on either side.

My eyes squeezed shut. I had to do something. I had no idea if Jake listened to me—if he was running to the pool to call for help. Even if he did, it would take too long for anyone to get here in time. I had to fight for myself.

I let my arms fall, knowing Stan would take the moment to loosen his grip and force me to swallow.

“It doesn’t matter if he knows the truth, Mackenzie. He’ll get here too late to save you—and too late to stop me from taking Jake somewhere safe. There’s nothing you can do—nothing you ever could’ve done. You’ve always been too weak.”

I let out a small cry. I was never going to let that happen.

I opened my eyes and let the water gurgle down my throat, watching Stan’s triumphant smile appear. And then I brought my knee up hard between his legs, nailing him right in the groin.

Stan’s mistake was underestimating me.

He thought he’d brought back the same woman whose life he’d almost taken a year ago. But I wasn’t that woman. I was stronger. Determined. And I was going to fight like hell.

The bottle crashed to the ground, sending the drugged water flying everywhere. Stan’s hold on my neck released, too, as he doubled over in pain.

I didn’t hesitate, I pushed past him and headed for the front door, Stan’s

enraged roar nipping at my heels.

“Jake!” I called as soon as I was outside, scanning the front yard for my son.

When he wasn’t anywhere to be seen, I took off down the road. I had to get to the pool—to Jake. I had to get us to safety.

“Mackenzie!”

I looked over my shoulder.

Stan sprinted from the front of the house, a murderous glare on his face. Gone was the mask—the veneer of heroic perfection. All that was left was the deranged man who wanted to make me pay for ruining everything about his perfect life.

My legs pumped harder, my chest heaving with each breath. And that was when I felt it—the weight starting to settle in my limbs.

I had no idea how much fentanyl he’d dumped into the water, but it was enough that the few gulps I’d taken to distract him were having an effect.

No.

I focused ahead of me, letting Stan’s yell fade. I focused on getting to Jake—to safety. I focused on one foot in front of the other. Slamming each step down harder to try and jostle more adrenaline free.

My periphery began to blur.

Almost there.

There was one street to cross before I reached the grounds of the community center. One more street.

Closer.

I felt my pace slow no matter how hard I tried to push.

Almost...

The periphery of my vision began to blur.

I wasn’t near a crosswalk but I couldn’t risk the detour.

My feet carried me into the road with nothing more than a prayer that there were no cars coming. Another step, and the sound of a horn blasted through my consciousness.

I turned, watching a large black SUV barrel toward me in slow motion. I tried to keep moving, but my feet seemed out of my control. Sluggish. Immovable. I didn’t know if I had taken another step or if I just started to go down. My knees hit the pavement as tires screeched.

It didn’t seem like the SUV was that close, but what could I tell? Everything was off. *And Stan was coming.*

I tried to crawl, but my arms gave out as the squealing noise stopped. My body felt numb. I thought the car had stopped in time, but I couldn't be certain I hadn't been hit. I couldn't feel anything.

So close.

I was so close.

A tear leaked down my cheek. At least Jake was safe. If Stan had to deal with me out here, it gave Zeke time to get to Jake.

Maybe whoever was in the car would wait for the ambulance. Maybe they wouldn't automatically trust Stan. *Maybe...*

Everything went dark.

"*Kenzie!*" The rough growl filtered into my brain, and light jostled through the darkness.

I forced my eyes open, convinced I had to be imagining things. It couldn't be real. Couldn't be...

"Zeke."

CHAPTER 21



ZEKE

“I swear to god, if you don’t tell me he’s in jail, I’m calling Harm,” I said to Ace, rising to meet my brother-in-law’s towering form.

Harmon Keyes ran a motorcycle club that specialized in vigilante justice, and if that was what it took to finally put an end to the terror Stan wanted to inflict on my wife, then I’d sanction it.

Ace stopped in front of me and reached for my shoulder. “Stan’s in custody, and I don’t think he’ll see the outside of a cell for the rest of his life.”

“Good.”

I took my second full breath since we’d returned to the hospital. The first one was when Kenzie woke up. I knew she’d be okay; the ambulance had arrived minutes after Addy and I, and had revived her while Addy kept Stan at bay until the police arrived. The fucker claimed he’d been trying to help her.

By the time we’d made it to Stan’s street, Ace called back confirming the presence of fentanyl in the water bottle. Dex pulled not only the hospital records that established Stan was the one to rescue Kenzie for each of her overdoses, but he also scrubbed through security footage from the Carmel Pub’s exterior cameras—footage that showed Stan adding something to the water bottle before giving it to Jake just moments before they reached the beach.

Fucker.

Like a house of cards, Stan’s twisted story began to unravel. He’d protested his arrest to Addy. To the police. But it was when Addy found Jake at the community center that he unraveled. With red swollen eyes and a

quivering lip, Jake told the police that his dad put stuff in the water bottle that hurt me. He told them how his dad would always put “vitamins” in his mom’s food and drink, and no matter how many times he told his dad it made Kenzie sick, Stan didn’t listen.

And that was when Stan’s rage broke through—shattering his heroic veneer. I heard his shouts and struggle, but my whole focus was on Kenzie. Getting her into the ambulance. Holding her hand the whole way to the hospital. Addy took Jake in her car and followed right behind.

We hardly had a moment alone in the hospital before Jake burst through the door and jumped onto his mom’s bed. There were a million things left unsaid, but they would have to wait; Jake was most important. I left the two of them in the room together so I could speak with Ace.

“How is she?” Ace looked over my shoulder into the hospital room. Jake was still curled up against Kenzie’s side as she lightly stroked his arm.

“She’ll be okay,” I said thickly, my heart swelling in my chest.

“And you?” He arched a brow, looking at me like he knew exactly why I was struggling right now.

I kept reliving that moment over and over again—when she’d stumbled out into the road in front of me. Thank God, I’d already been slowing down to make the turn, but Christ... when I realized it was Kenzie, her dazed eyes almost blank as they stared at me before she crumbled to the ground... that moment would haunt me forever.

“I don’t know.”

What if I hadn’t realized what was really going on?

What if I hadn’t gotten there in time?

What if Stan had given her too much to come back from?

What if. What if. What if.

My heart stopped beating in my chest then, the same as when Ace and I had pulled up to the burning car with Addy trapped inside all those years ago.

“Life isn’t about what if. It’s about what is,” Ace said like the guy could read my thoughts. In this case, he probably could. “And what is, is your wife and your boy in there, Zeke, and both going to be perfectly fine.”

I gritted my teeth and nodded.

Addy reappeared then. She’d gone to the cafeteria to get some ice cream for her sons, Axel and Aaron, who’d come with Ace, and for Jake. “Are you ready?”

“For what?”

“To be the hero.”

My head cocked to the side. “Pretty sure we’re past that part, Addy. Kenzie is safe.”

“I’m not talking about for her. I’m talking about for you,” she said firmly, leveling me with a stare that made me feel like she was a decade older than me instead of mere minutes. “Time to be your own hero and get your girl.”

I let out a long exhale and looked over my shoulder again at Kenzie.

Her hair was a mess. Her eyes red and swollen from crying. Her arms scratched up with IVs streaming out of them. And she’d never looked more beautiful.

But after all of this, would she still want to be mine?

“Yeah,” I croaked.

It was time to get my wife. *My family.* And neither blood nor time defined the two.



I KNOCKED ON THE DOOR, seeing Kenzie and Jake look my way before I opened it cautiously.

“Hey.” I stepped inside, and Addy followed right behind me, leaving Ace and the boys in the hall.

“Jake, I found the good stuff,” my sister said with a wink and nodded to the hallway. “Let’s eat out here so we don’t drip on your mom’s blankets. Plus, my boys are here, and they want to meet you.”

Jake squeezed Kenzie, and she planted a kiss on his head before he climbed down from the bed and followed my sister out into the hall, a smile working its way to his face. I caught Jake’s introduction to Addy’s sons, who were just a little younger than him, but I couldn’t bear to keep my attention away from Kenzie any longer.

As soon as the door closed, she spoke, “I’m sorry.” Tears dripped down her cheeks.

“Dammit, angel.” I went to her side, brushing the drops away with the pad of my thumb. “Don’t apologize.” I cautiously sat on the edge of the bed.

“I should’ve told you about Stan—about what he did.” Her head shook, dismayed.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and asked, “Did you think I wouldn’t

believe you?”

“No.” She gasped and shook her head. “Part of me was afraid of what Stan would do if I ever accused him. He was... so good... at making people see what they wanted to see; I was afraid he’d start to hurt Jake.”

Her eyes met mine, and we shared a silent acknowledgment that she was probably right; Stan tried to poison Jake at the beach today all so that he’d have a sure rebuttal against her custody claim. Had Kenzie threatened to expose him for what he’d really done... there were clearly no lines he wasn’t willing to cross in the effort of self-preservation.

I reached out and took her hand in mine. Her breath caught and then instantly her fingers squeezed, sending a rush of warmth through my veins.

“Will you tell me what he did to you?” I rasped.

There would be a point where the police would want to question her. A point where they’d asked for dates and details to line everything up with medical reports and hospital visits. They’d dissect everything about her story to confirm his guilt. And I didn’t want that to be the first time I heard what he did.

Her throat bobbed, and her head started to fall.

I lifted my hand and cupped her cheek, lifting her so I could find her eyes.

“It’s your voice that matters now, angel. Only yours. And I will do whatever it takes to make sure it’s heard.”

She placed her hand over mine and turned her face into my palm for a moment as though it were the safest place in the world for her to be.

“After Jake was born, Stan started to become more controlling. It was little things at first, and I told you how they became bigger things. But the drugs...” She took a deep breath. “When Jake was four, I was chasing him in the yard, and I tripped over a rock and sprained my ankle. Stan rushed out, picked me up, and sped us to the hospital. I remember the way he carried me into the emergency room, refusing a wheelchair. Everyone in the ED was enamored with him—the hero husband. And looking back, I think that was the first time he realized he didn’t have to wait for a call while on shift... he could be the hero anytime by creating his own emergencies.”

I stroked her cheek, refusing to move any other muscle because I wanted to hear every word of the story she’d been too afraid to tell.

“In the next year and a half, I’d gone to the hospital four more times. Two more sprains, a cut on my foot that required stitches, and a broken wrist,” she went on. “I’ll never forget how Stan’s work friends teased that it was such

good luck I was in a relationship with a paramedic.”

“Did you know...”

“Not then.” She shook her head. “At the time, they were all plausible accidents—even to me. And why would I think the man who professed to love me would... hurt me?” She lowered my hand from her face and balled it with hers in her lap. “But when I broke my wrist, Stan insisted they give me something for pain. At first, I took it because I was in pain, but then Stan started insisting I take it regularly even when I said I didn’t need it; I told him it made me groggy, and the pain was manageable, but he didn’t care.

“Even after I refused to take the pills—thought I had stopped taking them—I noticed my head was still feeling funny. Like I was perpetually out of it. After a few days, it would get better. Then it would get worse again. Stan brushed it off, telling me it was allergies or hormones or my imagination. We went on a family skiing trip almost two months later, and the second day, even though I wasn’t feeling myself, I went out with them, but I ended up hitting a patch of ice and falling and dislocating my shoulder.”

“Jesus, Kenz...”

“Once again, Stan played the hero.” She swallowed. “Only this time, while I was at the hospital, they ran my blood and said I had high levels of opioids in my system.”

“That was when you knew.”

She nodded. “I wanted to say something then. I remember staring at the doctor in complete shock. The last Vicodin I’d willingly taken had been almost six weeks prior, and yet, here they were telling me that I had high levels in my system, and it was what caused my fall.”

“What did Stan say?”

Her breath caught, a pained crease formed between her brows. “He threw it back on me. If I thought learning I had drugs in my system was bad, it was nothing compared to hearing my partner fall right into a story—a lie about how I’d broken my wrist a few weeks ago and had been given pain meds and that he knew my pain was bad but he didn’t realize that I’d still been taking them.”

Part of me wished Stan wasn’t in police custody. The punishment the legal system would give him seemed too good for what he’d done—what he’d put her through.

“I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t... believe what was happening. And when we were finally alone again, he acted as though I *had* been taking

the drugs on my own, promising he would help me and that we would get through this.” Her eyelids fluttered. “The first and only time I confronted him about it, he screamed in my face—screamed that he’d saved me. That I was nothing without him—had nothing without him. He said if I ever accused him like that again, he’d show me what it would be like if he actually hurt me.”

“God, I want to murder him,” I admitted roughly.

“After that, I started to be afraid of what I was eating or drinking. It had to be where he was putting the drugs, so I refused to drink anything but water, thinking I could see if it was cloudy or taste if something was off. I started buying individually packaged foods—”

“Like yogurt.”

She nodded slowly. “I don’t know if it was that using the pills was too unpredictable or if it was because I changed my habits or if it was because he got a call not long after that involving a drug overdose and had to use Narcan, but the next time I ended up in the hospital, it was from fentanyl.”

He could’ve killed her. So many times, it was so fucking dangerous. And he did it all to satisfy his own twisted high.

“Zeke...”

When she said my name, I realized how tense I’d become.

“I would’ve believed you,” I swore to her. “If you had told me, I would’ve believed you.”

“I know.” Her tongue dragged over her lips. “But you believing me wouldn’t have been enough to make Jake safe... and I had to make sure my son was safe.”

I brought her hand to my lips and kissed the backs of her knuckles. “He will never hurt either of you again. I promise.”

I watched color lift into her cheeks, and her eyes well with tears as she nodded. After a few seconds, her focus zeroed in on the ring that was still on her finger.

“About our marriage,” she started, but her voice broke at the end.

I tried to swallow, but my throat was too tight. “I love you, Kenzie. Nothing you could ever do could change that,” I confessed. “I want you. And Jake. I want a life with the both of you.”

Her lip quivered. “I have issues, Zeke. Eight years is a lot of trauma-induced habits to break...”

“Then give me the honor of breaking them with you,” I said hoarsely. “Marriage isn’t about finding the perfect person to be with, it’s about finding

the right person to grow with. You're my right person, Kenzie."

"I love you," she murmured thickly. "And not just because you always know the right things to say."

I chuckled and tipped toward her.

"I love you, too, Kenzie Barrett," I said and framed her face with my hands. "Will you stay my wife?"

Her breath caught, and then she started to sob and nod at the same time. "Yes," she blubbered as I pressed my mouth to hers. "Yes, I will."



FOUR WEEKS LATER...

"WHERE ARE WE GOING?" Jake asked for the fifth time in the last four minutes.

"Home," I replied with a smile and flicked a glance at Kenzie as I drove slowly up the dirt drive to the clearing at the top of my property.

"Home?" His nose crinkled as I slowed the car to a stop. "This looks like a field."

I didn't say anything as we got out of the car, watching Jake as he eagerly took in his surroundings. In the last month, I'd realized how damn observant he was—even more than I'd initially thought. Observant enough to be able to tell the police all the times he saw his dad putting 'vitamins' in his mom's smoothies and how his dad was always specific about who ate from what plate or drank from which bottle.

"This is a field," Jake wandered back and repeated.

"But it will be a home," I said and crouched down. "Our home." I took his small shoulders and smiled. "We're going to build a house here for you and your mom and me to live. What do you think?"

He rocked his head side to side. "Do I get my own room?"

Kenzie let out a little groan.

"Yes," I answered. "And there will be a pool."

"A pool?"

His eyeballs got so comically big, I had to laugh. I thought for sure he was going to scream with excitement, but with more willpower than any child

I'd ever met, he instead turned to Kenzie first and said, "Only if it's what my mom wants."

My chest swelled. I hated the life and the shitty role model he'd had that made him that way, but damn, there was nothing that made me prouder of the kid than the way he protected his mom and her happiness.

I tipped my head up to my wife and asked, "What do you think, Kenzie? Do you want to build a home here with me?"

The brightest smile burst over her face, pure joy glittering in her lavender gaze. "I do."

Only then did Jake let out a loud squeal of excitement, taking off across the property determined to find the perfect spot for a pool. Meanwhile, I stood and pulled Kenzie into my arms, claiming her mouth in a kiss.

"You're going to spoil him."

"And you I hope."

"Oh, me?"

"Mmhmm," I murmured into her neck and then whispered, "It was in our vows. To love, honor, cherish, obey, and spoil."

She threw her head back and let out a warm laugh. "I must've missed that one."

"It's okay." I pressed kisses along her jawline. "I'm more than happy to remind you."

EPILOGUE



KENZIE

One year later...

“WHAT TIME DID you say everyone was coming over?” Zeke asked as we approached our new driveway.

They’d only paved it last week, and it felt like the final piece was put into place at our new home.

Zeke had spared no expense when it came to having the house and the pool built as quickly as possible.

“In about an hour or so,” I checked my watch and replied, biting my lip to hide my small smile.

Today, we were having a housewarming party, and all of our friends and family from town were coming. *Except it was more than a housewarming party.* We were also going to be renewing our vows... and Zeke had no idea.

In the last year, so many things have changed. I was safe. Free. Stan had been found guilty on all charges and was going to be spending the rest of his life in prison. I’d lived a life—experienced a love I never knew was possible for me and for my son, and it was all because of the man beside me. The one thing that hadn’t changed though was the way I felt about him or the commitment I’d made that day in the courthouse.

But as we’d grown together, I realized I wanted to give him this—the chance for his sisters and friends to be a part of what was the start of our future. So, as soon as Zeke suggested a housewarming party, I’d discreetly planned a surprise vow renewal along with it.

I was even wearing the dress I'd borrowed from Callie a year ago. I worried Zeke might suspect something when he saw me wearing it this morning, but I told him between the move from the apartment and doing all the laundry, this was all I had.

"Alright. Plenty of time to blow up the floats, isn't that right?" Zeke glanced in the rearview, and Jake let out a holler.

Jake was in on it, too, and I swore I'd never seen him more excited—mostly because he and Addy were officiating.

I clasped my hands tight as we pulled up the drive. There was no way to hide the cars, nor the chairs and flower arch that Eve and Izzy had spent the whole morning setting up while the three of us had been at Jake's swim meet; Zeke would realize as soon as we reached the top.

I tried to keep my focus ahead, but as we crested around the final corner, I couldn't stop my gaze from drifting to Zeke.

He looked at me and smiled. "What is it?"

I smiled back. "I love you."

"I love you, too," he replied, a furrow forming between his brows. I could tell he was about to ask what was up, but then we pulled into the clearing, and the rows of cars parked on our lawn stole his attention.

The car came to a stop, his gaze scanning the vehicles and then widening when he saw the white folding chairs set out in arcs in front of a rose and ivy-wrapped trellis, and all of our friends standing and waiting for us.

"Kenzie..." He turned to me, his jaw clenching.

Jake knew it was his cue to leave, so he scrambled from the car and bolted to the front of the aisle where his aunt Addy was waiting for him with his tuxedo t-shirt.

Now that it was just Zeke and me in the car. "Zeke Williams, the first time, it was my choice to marry you. This time, it's yours," I murmured huskily. "Will you choose me again? Will you marry me again in front of our friends and family?"

He let out a deep groan, the kind I knew came from an excess of emotion.

"I'll choose you every time, angel. Forever. Because in the end..."

Love wins."

Looking for more in Carmel Cove?
Ace and the team at Covington Security have their own series, starting with [Betrayed](#).
Harm and the guys of the Sherwood Garage bring a fresh take on justice in
The Vigilantes MC series, starting with [The Vendetta](#).

Looking for more small town goodness?
Start my addictive, small-town family series, The Kinkades, with [The Woodsman](#)!

AFTERWORD

Dear Reader,

Good things don't come fully grown.

Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can. And be loved.

Carmel Cove begins and ends with Larry, a character inspired by my grandfather who took his own life in 2011.

We live on in what we leave behind. So I leave you with Larry's inspiration, his integrity, and his fearless spirit. Whether it's a smile, a cup of coffee, a listening ear or words of comfort, you have the ability to do so much—to change so much for the people around you. So do it.

Leave kindness. Leave compassion. Leave mercy. Leave love.
For Larry.

OTHER WORKS BY DR. REBECCA SHARP

COVINGTON SECURITY

Betrayed

Bribed

Beguiled

Burned

Branded

Broken

Believed

Bargained

Braved

THE VIGILANTES

The Vendetta

The Verdict

The Villain

The Vigilant

The Vow

REYNOLDS PROTECTIVE

Archer

Hunter

Gunner

Ranger

CARMEL COVE

Beholden

Bespoken

Besotted

Befallen

Beloved

Betrothed

THE KINKADES

The Woodsman

The Lightkeeper

The Candlemaker

The Innkeeper

THE ODYSSEY DUET

The Fall of Troy

The Judgment of Paris

THE SACRED DUET

The Gargoyle and the Gypsy

The Heartbreak of Notre Dame (TBA)

COUNTRY LOVE COLLECTION

Tequila

Ready to Run

Fastest Girl in Town

Last Name

I'll Be Your Santa Tonight

Michigan for the Winter

Remember Arizona

Ex To See

A Cowboy for Christmas

Meant to Be

Accidentally on Purpose

THE WINTER GAMES

Up in the Air

On the Edge

Enjoy the Ride

In Too Deep

Over the Top

THE GENTLEMEN'S GUILD

The Artist's Touch

The Sculptor's Seduction

The Painter's Passion

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Sharp is a contemporary romance author of over thirty published novels and dentist living in PA with her amazing husband, affectionately referred to as Mr. GQ.

She writes a wide variety of contemporary romance. From new adult to extreme sports romance, forbidden romance to romantic comedies, her books will always give you strong heroines, hot alphas, unique love stories, and always a happily ever after. When she's not writing or seeing patients, she loves to travel with her husband, snowboard, and cook.

She loves to hear from readers. You can find her on Facebook, Instagram, and Goodreads. And, of course, you can email her directly at author@drrebeccasharp.com.

If you want to be emailed with exclusive cover reveals, upcoming book news, etc. you can sign up for her mailing list on her website: www.drrebeccasharp.com

Happy reading!

xx

Rebecca

