

Burn

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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GLINES

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Scorched Teaser...

Prologue

One

Acknowledgements

To all the “best friends” who were always something more.

I

“Denial ain’t just a river in Egypt.”

—Mark Twain (possibly. No one is completely sure.)

The Past ...



GENESIS—SEVEN YEARS OLD

JUNE 1

Crossing my arms over my chest, I stood on the back porch of our new house, watching the neighbors put out balloons around their yard. The inflatable water slide had been delivered an hour ago, and it was in the center of everything. I chewed on my thumbnail and considered leaving the house to go over there and introduce myself. My mom had gone to get groceries, and my dad was back in Georgia, handling the sale of our old house. I knew I wasn't supposed to go anywhere when I was home alone, but it was just next door.

I hadn't noticed any kids over there since we'd moved in last week, and trust me, I had been looking for a house on this street with kids in the yard. Two boys came running out of the back door of the house. One was shouting while the other was laughing, as if he had all the secrets to life. They were wearing swim trunks and headed for the slide. I wanted on that slide.

A woman followed them, carrying a large watermelon, and put it on the table in the yard. I heard her call out for them to be careful. Her long blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and when she turned to go back inside, I saw her face. She reminded me of the Barbie dolls that my cousin Annie loved to play with. I didn't like dolls of any kind. I would rather climb a tree or build a fort.

The boy who seemed to outshine the other one came down the slide, shouting, "Motherfucker."

My eyes widened in shock. I studied him as he stood up and pounded on his chest. He had hair even blonder than the woman did. It was long for a boy too. Almost to his shoulders. He shook his now-wet hair and was grinning up at the other boy, who hadn't come down yet. I was almost positive he called the other boy a pussy.

Did that woman inside not hear him cursing? I'd get a paddle to my butt if I talked like that.

He turned as if he were about to jump down when he saw me. Pausing, he studied me then lifted a hand and waved at me. "Are you my new neighbor?" he called out.

I nodded my head.

"Cool!" He grinned. "Want to come to my birthday party?"

Yes. Yes, I did!

"What time is it at?"

"In an hour, but you can come slide now if you want."

The other boy came down the slide and knocked him off his feet. He yelled another curse word at him, and then they both stood up. The other boy had

dark hair, and it looked like it was in a buzz cut. The blond shoved him, and buzz-cut boy fell off into the grass.

Then, the blond looked back at me. “Come on over!”

Mom wouldn't mind, I told myself even though that wasn't exactly true.

“Okay!” I called back.

Inside, I had to dig through two boxes in my room before I found a swimsuit. I hurried and changed before heading next door. I'd keep my eye on the house and come tell Mom where I was when she got home.

When I made it to the backyard of the neighbor's house, the blond boy was cutting open the watermelon with a knife.

How old was he? My parents wouldn't allow me to touch a knife. He said bad words and used a knife.

Looking up, he saw me and smiled. “Hey, I'm Kye. What's your name?”

“Genesis,” I told him.

“That's a fucking cool name,” he said with an appreciative nod. “You like watermelon?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“I got some sodas!” the other boy called out as he came out of the house. He saw me. “The new neighbor girl,” he said. “I heard Mom say that a family moved into the Mills' house. You got something on your face.”

“Oh, that's, uh ...” I paused. I did not want to call it a beauty mark, like grown-ups did when they pointed it out.

“Is it, like, a mole or a freckle?” he asked.

“Jesus, you're an idiot,” Kye said to him, rolling his eyes. “It's, like, one of those birthmark things.”

It wasn't a birthmark either. It was a mole, and it hadn't shown up until a year ago. I hated it, but Mom said I wouldn't one day. She'd had it checked out, and the doctor had said it was fine. I, however, wished it would go away.

The guy shrugged, then looked at me. "What's your name?"

"It's Genesis," Kye told him. "That's Bowie," he said to me. "You want a soda?"

"Uh, no, that's okay." I wanted a soda, but my mom hated for me to drink anything but water.

Kye looked at Bowie. "Go get her a soda."

Bowie rolled his eyes. "It's your house, Kye. You go get it."

Kye glared at him, and Bowie threw up his hands in frustration, then turned to go back inside the house.

Kye sliced a large chunk of watermelon and slid it across the table to me. "Here you go."

I walked over to it. "Thanks," I said to him. "How old are you turning today?"

He gave me a crooked grin. "Eight. I already had a party too. It was at my dad's though. Best thing about divorced parents: two parties." He winked, then stuck a piece of watermelon into his mouth.

Bowie came back outside with a soda and handed it to me. "Here."

"Thanks," I told him.

He reached for some watermelon. "How old are you?" he asked me.

"Seven," I replied. I left out the fact that I had just turned seven last month.

He nodded. "Too bad you're not a boy."

“Don’t be fucking rude, Bowie!” Kye yelled at him.

Bowie shrugged. “Didn’t mean to. It’s just if she was a boy, then I’d have someone to play with when you’re at your dad’s.”

“I only go every other weekend,” he replied.

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at Bowie. “You have a problem playing with girls?” I asked, annoyed.

“Seeing as I don’t like dolls and stuff like that, then yeah.”

I cocked my head to one side. “Neither do I. I don’t even own a baby doll.” Then, wanting to prove myself, I glanced over at the big tree in the corner, where my yard connected with Kye’s. “Bet I can get to the top of that tree before you can.”

Bowie raised his eyebrows, then grinned, showing two missing teeth. “No way.”

Kye laughed. “Dude, if she beats you, I’m telling the whole school.”

Bowie set his drink down and narrowed his gaze as he looked at me. “Say when.”

I was good at climbing trees. It was why I’d made the bet. But I hadn’t climbed that one yet, and it was tall. Much taller than I normally climbed. I looked at the tree and the amused expression on Kye’s face, then turned back to Bowie.

“Go!”

We both took off running, and it was a good thing I was a fast runner because Bowie’s legs were longer than mine. I kept up and only got to the tree a second after he did. I heard Kye cheering me on, and I knew he was doing it to get to Bowie, but it helped me. I did good under pressure. Using

my feet, I pushed against the trunk and grabbed the first limb, then pulled myself up. I could see Bowie on the other side of the trunk, and he was struggling to get his longer legs over the limb and stand up to reach the next one. That gave me the advantage. I was up to the third limb when I glanced down to see he'd just gotten on the first one fully. Smiling, I started going up further. Just a few more to go.

“She’s kicking your ass!” Kye called out, laughing.

I was grinning as I made my way up to the next limb when I heard Bowie grunt. I glanced down to see he hadn’t even gotten up to the second limb yet. I was going to prove my point even better than I had hoped.

The sound of my mother shouting my name came just before the limb I was pulling on started to break. I tried to grab something else, but it snapped before I could get my arms around the trunk. There was a moment when I wondered if this was going to kill me as the branches scratched my body while I fell past them, failing to grab hold of any of them. The sharp pain that shot up my arm was the last thing I remembered when I hit the ground.



GENESIS—TEN YEARS OLD

JUNE 1

The music could be heard from Kye’s backyard the moment I stepped outside. Smiling, I pulled my ponytail through my Atlanta Braves baseball cap that Dad had brought me home last week and ran across the freshly mowed grass of our lawn.

Today, Kye turned eleven years old.

I’d waved at him and shouted, “Happy birthday,” from my bedroom

window this morning.

He had opened his bedroom window and told me that I'd better have him a good present when I showed up this afternoon for the party. Mom had tried to get me to wear a dress over my bathing suit and braid my hair. I had rolled my eyes at her and asked if she wanted the boys to make fun of me for months. If Kye and Bowie saw me in a dress, they'd laugh so hard that their sides would hurt.

The blue gift bag that I held grasped tightly in my hand swung back and forth, hitting my leg as I made my way into the backyard that I spent more time in than my own. The trampoline that Kye had gotten for Christmas two years ago had a sprinkler under it, and the bonfire was already going with long sticks beside it and a table that held s'mores supplies. There was a water-balloon station set up over where his swing set used to be, an area with a water gun obstacle course, and then the table with food and snacks.

Kye was shouting at Gary, a guy in his grade at school with bright red hair and freckles, to grab a water gun while he took off into the course with one in his hand. Just before he turned the corner, his blue eyes met mine, and he stopped. The big grin that had recently started making me feel funny in my stomach broke out over his tanned face.

"Wait up!" he called out to Bowie, who had already gone into the course. Then, he turned and headed toward me.

I set his gift down on the table with the other few gifts from the kids who had already arrived.

"You're late!" he accused me as his eyes twinkled.

"Am not," I argued. "The party starts at seven. It's seven," I replied.

He raised his eyebrows and cocked his head to one side. "Since when do

you wait until the party starts?”

Since I'd had to argue with my mom about how I dressed. She'd said I looked like a boy. That was a common argument these days. She kept wanting me to dress feminine. Her words, not mine.

“Sorry,” I replied with a shrug. “Mom was making me do stuff,” I lied.

There was no way I was telling him about the dress and braids. He'd laugh at the mere thought of it.

He reached for the bag, his body dripping water all over the table.

“It's not time to open presents yet!” I scolded him.

Kye didn't care. He always did what he wanted, when he wanted.

“I'm not waiting to see what you got me,” he said with a crooked grin before reaching into the bag and pulling out the Florida Gators football jersey Dad had helped me order online.

He beamed at me, holding it up. “This is awesome!”

“HEY! I didn't get one of those for my birthday!” Bowie accused me, frowning, when he reached us.

I laughed and took the bag from Kye. “There is something at the bottom, but you shouldn't get it wet.”

Kye looked at me, then motioned at the bag. “Then, you show me.”

Feeling like the hero, I reached inside and pulled out the envelope that Dad had given me earlier this week. Kye studied it, his eyes going from the envelope to my face.

“A card?” Bowie asked, then rolled his eyes.

I opened the envelope, feeling like a rock star, then took the tickets from inside and held them up. “First Gators home game of the season. Dad's

taking us.”

Kye’s eyes went wide, and then he punched a fist into the air and shouted, “HOT DAMN!”

“WAIT! You got him tickets to see the Gators play?” Bowie looked devastated.

I fanned out the three tickets and looked at him pointedly. “I got all three of us tickets.”

The massive smile that broke across his face was priceless.

“Hey, Kye,” Maegan Washington said in a syrupy voice.

She was wearing a short blue jean miniskirt with a hot-pink bikini top as she leaned closer to Kye, batting her long lashes. Every guy at school thought Maegan was pretty.

Kye turned to look at her, and I could tell by the expression on his face that he liked her. Bowie nudged his arm and then gave the girl his own appreciative ogle.

She twirled a long lock of her blonde hair. “Happy birthday,” she said, looking at him as if he were a treat she wanted to eat.

My chest tightened as Kye turned his back completely to me and gave her his undivided attention. This had been happening more and more lately. I was no longer the only girl in Kye’s and Bowie’s lives. They had started noticing girls and talking about them. At first, I’d made fun of them, but it was starting to make me feel left out.

I tucked the tickets back in the bag and placed it on the table.

“Thanks for getting me a ticket too,” Bowie said, reminding me he was still there.

I managed a smile and nodded. Usually, I'd have a comeback or a snarky remark to make him laugh, but right now, I had nothing. Kye took the skirt that Maegan had slipped off, and his eyes slowly scanned her body. I didn't wear bikinis. My blue one-piece swimsuit wouldn't draw anyone's attention.

"Come on! Grab a water gun, and let's go," Bowie said as he slapped my back, then headed toward the course behind Kye and Maegan.

Tonight, it would just be the three of us. I could share them until then.



KYE—THIRTEEN YEARS OLD

"I can't believe you invited Briar Decker," Bowie said, shaking his head at me while I laced up my tennis shoes.

"Why? She's fucking hot," I said, glancing up at him. "Not to mention, she has the biggest tits in junior high."

Bowie gave me an annoyed look. "You were making out with her best friend just last week. That's why."

I shrugged, standing up. "We weren't dating or anything. Just messing around."

Bowie could be a judgmental fuck. Just because he got all serious about the girls he liked didn't mean we all had to be that way. My dad sure as fuck wasn't that way.

"HEY!" Genesis shouted.

I looked over at my window to see her leaning out of her bedroom window, almost directly across from mine. Genesis's long brown hair hung over one shoulder. I noticed the lighter highlights in it. That was new. Had she gone to a salon? Surely not. The idea was comical. Must be the way the sun was

hitting it, making it look like chocolate with caramel streaks.

“Open the window,” I told Bowie.

He leaned over and pushed it up. “What’s up, Baby Doll?” he called out just to piss her off.

Only I got away with that nickname. We both knew I was her favorite.

“Bowie, I will break your nose,” she shouted, making me smirk.

I liked that she didn’t want anyone else calling her that name.

I had started calling her Baby Doll when she was seven years old after falling out of the tree in my backyard and breaking her arm in two places. She’d acted all badass, then—*bam!*—ruined my birthday party. Truth was, it scared the fuck out of me. I thought she was dead. Lying there, all crumpled up. She had been determined to prove to us that she climbed trees and not played with baby dolls. She’d climbed the damn thing all right.

Grinning, I walked over to stop them before they started fighting. They had been doing that a lot lately. It was weird.

“You ready?” I asked her.

She stood back and held up her arms in question. “Yeah, is this okay?”

Why was she asking me if what she was wearing was okay? We didn’t talk about her clothes, and she didn’t care about shit like that. Genesis would rather be comfortable. She wore jeans with rips and her favorite Chucks most of the time. Today, she was wearing a short sundress though. That was strange. She looked like a girl. If she wasn’t my best friend, then I’d go as far as saying she looked hot. But this was Genesis. She wasn’t a hot girl. She was ... well, she was Baby Doll—the girl next door, the center of our trio.

“Yeah, sure. Come on over. We are heading downstairs now.”

“Okay. Be there in a few!” she said, then closed her window, and I did the same.

I started to walk off and realized Bowie was still looking over at Genesis’s house. I glanced back, and she was brushing her hair. I shifted my gaze back to him, and he was still watching her. What the fuck? Why was he watching her brush her hair? It was creepy, and he needed to stop.

“Dude?” I asked.

He turned his head toward me. “Yeah?”

I looked at him questioningly. “Why are you looking at Genesis like that?”

He rolled his eyes and sighed. “You don’t see it, do you?”

I looked back at Genesis, and, yeah, I saw it. Her hair was different. Even without the sun on it. There were highlights. Then, the dress showed off the shape of her body. That bothered me. Why was she showing people that?

“No. Not really. I mean, she’s got on a dress, and, yeah, that’s fucking strange,” I lied. No way I was admitting shit to him or anyone. That would make things awkward.

Bowie laughed. “I guess I should be happy about that.”

Why? I studied him as he looked at her again. He needed to stop that shit right now. Genesis was our friend. She wasn’t a regular girl.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Bowie pointed at the window. “Genesis is, like ... she’s pretty. Real pretty.”

I scowled. His words felt like a slap in my face. I didn’t like hearing him verbalizing something I had already noticed. I was just ignoring it. I had to shut this down now, before he fucked up everything. We were friends. The

three of us. It was how it was supposed to be.

“What? Baby Doll? We are talking about the same person, right?” I asked him.

He had an amused smirk. “Yeah. She’s changed this year.”

I shook my head, as if he were insane. I wished she’d stop changing. Go back to being the girl who dressed like a boy.

“No. She’s the same girl we’ve been friends with since we were eight. Except she’s taller and she doesn’t climb trees anymore,” I told him.

Bowie had a confused expression. “Whatever,” he said. “Let’s go downstairs and get shit ready for the party?”

“Yeah.”

And to stop talking about Genesis like she was ... a regular girl.

She wasn’t. She was our glue. Without her, we wouldn’t have the perfect trio. Bowie seeing her as a girl meant that would end. If I could ignore how she looked, then he could too. He had to see her like me, just Baby Doll. Our best friend.



GENESIS—SIXTEEN YEARS OLD

JUNE 1

Bowie was scowling. I knew he was pissed about my bikini, but he could get over it. I crossed my arms under my boobs and walked over to stand in front of him. His gaze went to my chest, then finally met mine.

“Are we really going to fight at Kye’s birthday party?” I asked him, irritated.

His nostrils flared. “I don’t like that fucking bikini, Gen, and you know it.”

“It covers more than what most everyone else has on,” I told him, then stepped closer to him and put my arms around his neck. “You didn’t used to get so upset about my bikinis.”

His gaze dropped back to my chest again, and he sighed. “Yeah, well, until this year, your tits weren’t C cups either.”

I laughed and went up on my tiptoes to place a kiss on his lips. “You weren’t complaining about that in the back of your truck last night,” I whispered.

His hands cupped my butt, and he jerked me against him. “I love your tits. I just don’t like others looking.”

He pressed a kiss to the mole that was located above the corner of my upper lip. Turned out, my mom had been right. I liked my beauty mark a lot.

“It’s my birthday,” Kye announced, slapping us both on the back. “Stop eye-fucking each other long enough to make this about me.”

Bowie rolled his eyes, then looked at him. “When is shit not about you?” he asked him.

Kye raised his eyebrows. “Right fucking now. You’re all worked up because Baby Doll put on a bikini and the jealousy monster has taken over.” Kye looked at me. “You are stealing the show.”

If any other guy called me the nickname Baby Doll, Bowie would have his fist in their face. But Kye had labeled me Baby Doll when we were kids. He thought it was funny.

“It’s more conservative than Ricki’s bikini,” I pointed out.

Ricki was Kye’s flavor of the week.

Kye bit his bottom lip and groaned. “Fucking hell, it barely covers her double Ds.”

“Jesus, Kye,” Bowie replied with a laugh.

Kye flicked his tongue ring. His dad had taken him to get it pierced for his birthday, and he was always clicking it against his teeth. I had to admit, it was sexy, just like everything else about Kye. Every female in school thought so. He was my best friend though. I could admit he was sexy and not feel anything.

I loved Bowie. I mean, I loved Kye too. That would never change. But it was Bowie who had made the difference. Kye would always see me as one of the guys. Since the summer I’d turned twelve, Bowie had made it clear that he saw me as more. That more had turned into an us.

“I’m gonna fuck those tits as soon as I get her back to my truck, but later, y’all are still coming over, right?”

I glanced at Bowie. It was tradition. We stayed the night in Kye’s den in the basement of his house. Our night was normally filled with horror movies, video games, and junk food. It had changed over the years some. We no longer all slept on the same sofa bed together. That would be awkward. The sodas had been exchanged for beer, and we didn’t eat as much candy anymore.

“Yeah, we’ll be there,” Bowie told him.

Kye grinned. “Good. Be sure to get the making-out shit done before you get there. I don’t want to watch that once our night begins.”

Bowie shook his head and laughed. Kye always said exactly what he was thinking. There was no filter there at all. It was part of what made him Kye.

Smiling, I laid my head on Bowie’s chest and sighed. It was funny to think

that I'd once had the crush on Kye. Back when the boys still thought of me as one of the guys. I used to daydream about the day Kye would notice me as a girl in the same way he noticed other girls. But that had never happened. I was thankful for that. Kye wasn't meant for one girl, and he'd have broken my heart. I'd have lost this. What we have now.

Sure, when Bowie had bought me flowers and asked me to the junior high dance, things had changed for us—but in a way that worked. The day that Bowie asked me to be his girlfriend, I knew in my heart it had never been Kye for me. I'd gotten that confused because of Kye's dominating presence. He was hard to look past. Kye was my best friend and also a ridiculously sexy, funny, and very charming man-whore, who everyone wanted to be around.



GENESIS—SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD

JUNE 1

The basement was too quiet as I walked down the stairs. Coming here was the last thing I'd wanted to do, but I had to. For Kye. And maybe for me too.

When I reached the bottom step, I saw Kye sitting in the faded brown leather recliner with a bottle of Corona dangling from one tattooed hand and a cigarette in the other. His eyes locked on me, but he didn't smile. There was no gleam of mischief in his eyes. It was as void as my chest felt because I was here without Bowie.

“You came,” he said, then put the cigarette between his lips.

“Did you honestly think I wouldn't?” I asked him, walking farther into the den. Memories of Bowie flooding me. My chest ached as I thought of the last time we'd all three been in this basement together. It was something I had

known would destroy us.

“No,” Kye said through his teeth that still held the cigarette. Then, he reached up and took it out of his mouth. “I knew you’d show, Baby Doll,” he replied, then sighed heavily. “Fuck, it’s hard to sit down here.”

I sank down onto the sofa and crossed my legs, leaning back. “Yeah, it is,” I agreed.

Kye took a drink of his beer, then held it out to me.

I reached forward and took it. Placing it to my lips, I took a long pull from it before handing it back to him. “We probably need tequila,” I said.

He nodded.

Kye didn’t live here anymore. He had moved out to live with his dad shortly after the breakup. I knew it was his way of coping. He ran from it rather than facing it. Not having Kye there, in the window across from my own, had been painful, but then it had probably been for the best.

“Has he spoken to you at all?” Kye asked.

A lump formed in my throat. “No,” I whispered.

Kye turned his head to look at me. “Are you doing okay?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t sure anymore. “I miss him ... us.”

Kye put his cigarette out in an ashtray and got up from the chair to move over beside me. He put his arm behind me. “I’ve not been the greatest best friend either. I’m sorry about that.”

At first, I had hated Kye for kissing me. For drinking too much and then telling me things that, deep down, I wanted to hear. I blamed it all on him. But as the days wore on and I faced life, walking past Bowie at school and seeing him with other girls, I had realized it was equally my fault. I had

wanted that kiss.

Unspoken words hung in the air, which I doubted we would ever acknowledge. Regret was one thing that we both felt so deeply that it ruled out all the rest- the years of friendship we had destroyed in a few moments of weakness. The girl in me who had once held that crush somehow took over my brain that night. She hadn't cared about anything but that Kye was finally kissing her.

Kye was a wild, unattainable life force. He didn't see past his own light most of the time. That night, with too much to drink, he'd forgotten about Bowie. Neither of us had thought about anything but the way we felt even if it had been fleeting.

"I'm sorry I fucked it all up," he said, then put the bottle to his lips again.

"I blamed you for a long time, but the truth is, I was equally at fault. I participated."

He let out a long sigh, but said nothing. The silence was deafening, and I needed it to go away. I wanted to fill it.

"My curiosity had gotten the best of me."

Kye turned and looked at me. "Is that what it was? Curiosity?"

No. But that was all I would ever admit to because admitting more meant I would lose him too. I couldn't lose them both. In a sense, I had already lost Kye, but he still texted me sometimes. He didn't act as if I were invisible, the way Bowie did.

I reached for the beer in his hand and took a drink, then handed it back to him. "You're the only best friend I have left. I don't want to ever ruin that. I can't lose you, Kye." And it was true.

Maybe that would change once I was gone. I was leaving for college next summer. I had to get away from here. From all I had lost. That we had lost.

Kye squeezed my arm. “Starting now, I’m going to change. I’m going to be the best friend you deserve. I’ll make up for all I did. I swear it.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. I wasn’t sure he could do that, but I knew Kye meant well. He wanted to be the good guy. He’d just always let Bowie hold that title. Kye excelled at being free, unpredictable, and unreliable. Yet I loved that about him.

“I just have senior year left, and then I’m going to college in Savannah, Georgia,” I told him.

The last time we had spoken over the phone, I’d mentioned moving away for college. I knew Kye wouldn’t be leaving. His future wasn’t college. Kye had been born into something much darker. His father and his grandfather were both in the Mafia. The one south of the Mason-Dixon line. Kye was already in that world. He’d grown up in it when he visited his dad. It was all he’d planned on in life since he had been a kid.

“Damn, Baby Doll, I was hoping you wouldn’t go farther than Gainesville,” he said, turning his head to look at me.

That was an option I’d thought about, but it was too close. I was sure that Bowie would be going to Gainesville.

“If I want to pursue fashion design, then I need to go to a college that can help me.” That was also a reason.

He nodded and pulled me against his side, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “Yeah, I get it,” he said softly. “I’m just gonna fucking miss you. I swear I’ll be around more this year. I won’t let you down.”



KYE—TWENTY YEARS OLD

JUNE 1

Using my key to unlock the door, I walked inside my mom's old house, which Genesis was renting during her summer break. My mom had remarried and moved to Key West three years ago, but she'd kept my childhood home for visits here. Genesis using it made me fucking happy.

The vanilla-cinnamon scent hit me, and I smiled. I tossed my keys on the counter as I passed the kitchen and headed to the living room.

"Honey, I'm home!" I called out teasingly.

"You're earlier than I expected. I just got out of the shower." Genesis's voice carried down the hallway. "Give me a few minutes."

My gaze swung over to the coffee table, covered in snacks. The usual was there—chocolate chip cookies, brownies, Rice Krispies Treats, which she didn't bake, but bought from a bakery in town because Baby Doll didn't bake or cook. There was a bowl of regular M&M's—my favorite—a bowl of popcorn, and the mandatory bowl of fruit that neither of us ate but was there in case we might want something healthy.

The cupcakes in the center of it all were new though. I could tell from here they were my favorite chocolate cake with vanilla icing. Again, those had come from a bakery—no way Genesis had made them. They looked fucking delicious, and when my girl tried to bake, it was rarely edible. The one in the center had an unlit candle. Grinning, I grabbed a cookie and flopped down on the sofa to wait on her.

"I thought I'd have time to finish my shower before you got here. I figured

the party with the Lords of the Underworld would keep you out later,” Genesis told me as she walked around the sofa and took a seat beside me.

She’d been calling the family the Lords of the Underworld since I’d told her about them when I was sixteen.

My dad had gotten me my first tattoo, and I’d been so fucking pumped. Genesis was shocked that my dad would let me get one at my age. Then, Bowie said something about a tattoo being the least of the things my dad would let me do. Genesis had always known how to make me talk. She wouldn’t let that go. Finally, I caved and explained the family to her.

When I was done, she had stared at me and said, “So, you are telling me that instead of college, you’re going to just join the Lords of the Underworld in organized crime?”

Bowie had spit his drink and doubled over, laughing. I’d been annoyed though. In her eyes, I was already the one who didn’t measure up. Bowie was the golden boy. He did all the right things, said all the right things, treated her like a fucking princess. I was the hell-raiser.

I still was, but Bowie had been out of the picture for years.

“So, tell me about the party. How many strippers did you bang? Did y’all slice open the veins of your enemies and drink their blood?” She popped an M&M in her mouth, grinning at me.

Genesis was a complete smart-ass. An adorable smart-ass.

I leaned back and wiggled my eyebrows at her. “You want to know my head count?” I asked.

She sucked on the M&M in her mouth, which was the way she ate the damn things and one of the reasons I loved them so much. “It’s your birthday, Kye. I’m your best friend. You have to share all the details.”

I held up two fingers.

She placed her hand over her heart and gasped. “Just two? You’re slacking in your old age,” she taunted me.

I smirked. “Baby Doll, I can assure you that nothing about me is slacking.”

That got a laugh out of her as she stood back up, slinging her damp locks of hair behind her shoulder.

Genesis might be my best friend, but she was a female, and I wasn’t fucking blind. I’d never been with her. I was just smart. Protected our friendship by ignoring her appearance. Bowie had been the one to fuck it up. He’d been the one to make her something more.

My gaze traveled over her narrow waist and the small flash of flat, tanned stomach as her pink plaid pajama pants hung on her hips. Briefly allowing my eyes to move up, I only let myself quickly appreciate the outline of her perky, round tits in the pink tank top she was wearing as she walked over to grab a lighter from the mantel.

Holding it up, she smiled at me. “Since your birthday was in the lair of the Lords of the Underworld and I missed your birthday cake, I thought we’d have some cupcakes here. Don’t worry. I didn’t make them. I bought them from the cute little bakery downtown.”

That made me chuckle. As if I would ever think that the perfectly iced cupcakes had been made by her. Not in this lifetime.

Genesis leaned forward, giving me a view right down the neckline of her tank top, and I jerked my gaze off her tits before I saw nipples. Getting hard over your best friend’s tits wasn’t cool. Although I’d always wondered about her nipples. What they looked like. I couldn’t help it. I had a thing for tits, and Genesis had some great ones.

I heard the lighter flick, and I waited until I could see her standing back up out of the corner of my eye before turning my gaze back to her.

She was holding the cupcake, the candle in the center of it lit, out to me. “Make a wish,” she said to me.

I blew the candle out, then took the cupcake from her. “Thanks, Baby Doll.”

“You’re welcome. Now, you need to pick the movie you want to start with, and I’ll go get the drinks. Corona, or are you ready for your birthday present?”

“I can’t have a drink and my birthday present?” I asked her, trying to figure out the reason she looked almost giddy.

Her aquamarine eyes sparkled when she was excited about something. I was intrigued. What had she done?

“You can, but they could be one and the same,” she said in a singsong voice.

“You got me whiskey for my birthday,” I guessed.

She winked at me, then left me in the living room to go get whatever it was she was so fucking happy about. It felt like my birthday finally. All day had been just a regular day, except for the strippers and drinks I’d had at Huck’s shop with the guys.

As nice as all that had been, it didn’t feel like my birthday until I was with Genesis. She’d been with me on my birthday every year since the summer I’d turned eight. Without her, it just didn’t feel right. There had been a time when I would have wanted Bowie here too. That ship had sailed. He was no longer a regret. I was fucking thrilled he’d left our friendship. I got Genesis all to myself.

She came walking back into the room with two whiskey glasses in one hand and a gift bag in the other. It was times like this that I could see past those killer eyes of hers, that fucking beauty mark that sat just over the left corner of her heart-shaped mouth, and her perfect slightly upturned nose to the tomboy with dirty knees and stringy hair. The girl who had been down to any crazy-ass idea I came up with and did her best to do it better than Bowie and me.

She held out the bag to me.

“You look real damn pleased with yourself,” I told her.

“Oh, I am,” she replied.

I opened the bag and pulled out a bottle of Pappy Van Winkle’s Family Reserve—15 Year. This shit ran close to three grand. I jerked my gaze back up to look at her in shock. I knew exactly how much she made a week. She was working at the boutique in town that my mother owned.

“You got me Pappy’s?” I asked.

She held up the two glasses. “I might have designed a boho wedding dress for a girl at school, whose brother-in-law is a higher-up at the Buffalo Trace Distillery in Frankfort, Kentucky. I clearly didn’t pay what you’re thinking. Not that I don’t love you that much, but because I have to pay rent and all.”

She placed the two glasses on the coffee table in front of me. “Let’s drink to twenty.”

Then, she sank down onto the sofa beside me, curling her legs underneath her. “Now, pour us some Pappy’s.”

I opened the bottle and gave Genesis her two-finger pour while I was more generous with myself. Turning back to her, I handed her the glass and then

picked up mine. We tapped the glasses together, the clink filling the room, because that made my girl smile.

Genesis said, “To twenty. May it be the best year yet.”

I watched her take a sip from the glass and wondered what it would take to convince her not to go back to Savannah in the fall. It was selfish of me, and I knew I’d never let her give up her dream, but, fuck, I missed her like crazy. This past year with her away at college had sucked. I hated it.

Putting the glass to my lips, I tried to push aside thoughts of the future and enjoy tonight.

“Which movie first, birthday boy?” she asked. “*The Conjuring*, *Poltergeist*, or *Scream*?”

I rested my head on the back of the sofa and turned to look at her. “Those are my options?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’ve seen those enough that they no longer scare me. And I live alone, so nothing new that can cause me to lose sleep. Going next door to my parents’ isn’t happening either.”

I reached over and grabbed her chin. “But you have me. A Lord of the Underworld to keep you safe.”

She tilted her head and gave me an amused smirk. “Yes, but you are only staying tonight. What happens tomorrow night when I need to pee and I’m too scared to go to the bathroom? Call Mom and ask her to come over and watch me?”

I laughed because she wasn’t exaggerating. I knew this to be fact. “No, you call me, and I’ll come running.”

“And if you’re in the process of getting busy at the time? I might pee my

pants before you can get here.”

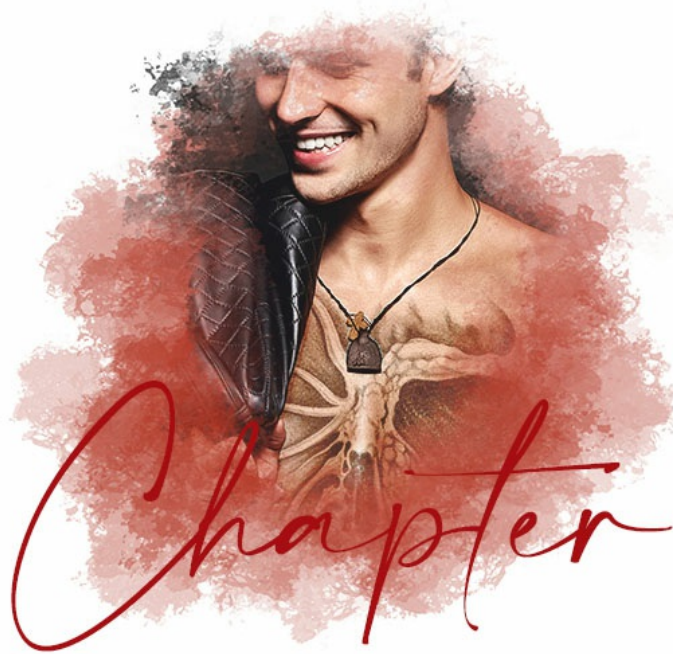
I let go of her chin and rolled my eyes. “You know the moment you call, I’ll drop what I’m doing.”

Genesis took a sip from her glass and studied me for a minute. “Okay, fine. What movie do you want to watch? I’ll be brave.”

I leaned forward and took the bowl of popcorn and a brownie, then sat back, handing the brownie to her. “*The Conjuring*,” I replied with a wink.

Taking her brownie, she shook her head, smiling at me as she settled in close to my side, pointing the remote at the television. “You just like getting me worked up,” she said.

“Always have, Baby Doll. You’re fucking adorable when you get all stressed.”



ONE

KYE—TWENTY-ONE YEARS OLD

JUNE 1

I bent down to pick up my keys, placing a hand on the door to steady myself. Swaying, I caught myself before I fell over. Fucking hell, the keys were moving. I squinted hard and tried to focus. Slowly, I reached down and grabbed the keys. Success. Standing back up, I managed to find the right key and jam it into the lock on the door.

When the door swung open, the sweet smell of Genesis hit me, and, damn, I loved it when she made my childhood home smell like her in the summers. Stepping inside, I grinned, then stumbled and had to grab on to the side table by the door to keep from pitching forward. I should have stopped after the fifth shot of tequila. But those tits with that little shot glass between them had been too fucking tempting.

“Honey, I’m home,” I called out, dropping the keys and hearing them

clatter to the floor.

Silence.

I made my way to the living room. It was dark. Where the hell was Genesis? It was my birthday. Leaning against the wall, I groaned as things began to spin. Slapping my hand around until I found the light switch, I slowly opened my eyes against the sudden brightness. Maybe I should have left the lights off.

My gaze locked on the coffee table, covered in all our favorite snacks. The cupcakes in the middle brought a goofy grin to my face. She'd stuck a candle in the center one again this year. I liked that new addition to our tradition.

"Baby Doll! Where are you? I'm ready for movie night," I yelled and managed to make it to the sofa without tripping over the other furniture.

Sinking down on the worn leather, I sighed in contentment. This was what I had been missing tonight. Sure, the drinking, strip club, and fucking had been great, but I did that pretty regularly. My birthday movie night with Genesis was special.

I laid my head back on the sofa and closed my eyes. She'd be in here soon. I just had to wait. She was probably getting a shower. I loved the way her hair smelled after she used that vanilla shampoo. I needed to bury my nose in it, listen to her laughter, feel her snuggled up against me as we watched one of the horror movies we already knew word for word.

Happy birthday to me.



The pounding in my head made opening my eyes a bad idea, but my fucking mouth was so dry that I couldn't swallow. I needed water. Groaning, I rolled

over and realized I wasn't in a bed. Where was I, and how much had I had to drink? Jesus Christ, I felt like I'd been hit by a truck.

"Here," my favorite voice in the world said. "Drink."

My eyes opened, and Genesis sat on the edge of the coffee table, holding a glass of water. A smile curled across my lips. The sight of her was a relief.

"Baby Doll." My voice sounded gravelly and hoarse.

She gave me a tight smile that concerned me. What was wrong? I sat up and took the glass of water from her and drank it all down while studying her. Something was off, and if I wasn't so fucking hungover, I'd know what it was.

Had I done something or said something last night? Why was I here anyway?

"You okay?" I asked her, trying to remember why I was on the sofa.

She laughed softly and shook her head, then stood up. "I'll get you some toast and an aspirin."

I reached out and grabbed her wrist, stopping her. She was acting weird. It wasn't like I hadn't shown up here drunk before. That shouldn't have been an issue. Unless ... fuck, had I come on to her? I winced, thinking about it.

"What's wrong, Baby Doll?" I asked her, trying like hell to remember last night.

The last thing that I could clearly recall was drinking shots out of Chyna's cleavage. Levi had held her big, fake tits together while I drank from the shot glass between them. Then ... oh, wait. I also remembered Levi spanking her ass with his belt, then me kissing the welts before fucking her from behind. She'd sucked Levi off, and then he'd left. I thought we'd fucked again after.

Things got blurry.

Genesis sighed, and the tight smile she'd been giving me just looked sad now. My chest tightened. What had I done?

Think, Kye! Fucking think!

She was upset. I'd messed up somehow.

"I'm fine. Let me get you something to help with that, and then we can talk."

I shook my head. "No. I want to talk now. You're upset, and if I did something, then I need to fucking know so I can fix it." Standing up, I winced as the pain in my head sliced through me.

She narrowed her eyes as she looked at me. "Do you remember last night?" she asked me.

I stalled. I wasn't going to give her details on what I did remember. We joked around about my sex life, but that was it. She knew little about what I did with women. I had never even told her about my four cock piercings. That was just shit you didn't tell your girl best friend.

"Not all of it," I admitted.

She simply nodded and looked away from me. This was not good. I was going to have to spend the summer making this up to her, whatever it was. The summer ... holy fucking hell! My gaze swung back to the coffee table, where the snacks had been last night. I remembered them. The table had been full. The cupcakes, the candle. Motherfucker!

I shoved my hand in my hair, furious with myself. The pain in my chest was now worse than the pounding headache. "Baby Doll, I am so sorry. I drank too much. Fuck." I closed my eyes, trying to find the right words.

“It was your twenty-first birthday. You went out with friends and got drunk. That’s what people do. It’s fine. I shouldn’t have expected you to come back here. That was silly.”

No, please stop talking. She was killing me.

“Don’t do that. Do not let me off the hook like that. I can’t handle it.”

I opened my eyes to look at her perfect face. Her heart-shaped mouth with the beauty mark right above the corner of her lip, the slightly upturned nose, and those aquamarine-colored eyes. It was painful sometimes to see just how beautiful she was.

“I’m not letting you off the hook. It’s just the facts. No reason to get worked up over it.”

“You are upset. It’s all over your face. I fucking hate myself,” I said, reaching out and pulling her to me in a hug.

She smelled so good. This was what I’d needed last night. Why had I drunk so much?

“We can celebrate tonight. Have our tradition with me sober and right here with you all damn day.”

That was what we needed. What I needed. I wasn’t going to feel right without it.

“I can’t,” she said against my chest.

I pulled back and looked down at her. “Why not? You’ve already got all the stuff. We don’t need to waste it. Besides, I want my cupcake, and I need to blow out my candle and make a wish.”

She let out a soft laugh. “We can do that this morning. And I packaged up all the snacks and put them in a bag for you to take.”

“No!” I said, shaking my head.

I wasn't fucking taking anything. We were eating them right here on this damn sofa. She was going to curl up next to me as we watched movies.

“We're having our movie night.”

Genesis sighed and stepped back from me. “I'm leaving, Kye. I'm going to take the summer semester at school.”

My world felt like it had just stopped spinning. Panic sank its claws into me.

“What? You're leaving me because I messed up last night? I'm sorry! I swear to God, I will make it up to you all summer. I'm yours. We will have movie nights every night. I won't get drunk or go to the strip club. Just you and me.”

Genesis put her hand on my chest, and I reached up and covered it with both of mine. She had to stay. All I got of her anymore was the summers. I could convince her.

“It's not about last night. I registered for it back in April. I was going to tell you, but you've been busy, and we haven't seen much of each other since I got here three weeks ago. You're immersed in your life here, and I get that. This was something I'd been considering since last summer. I left most of my things at my apartment back in Savannah. I thought I'd get a chance to talk to you about it, but you canceled on me last week, and I'm not complaining. Just pointing it out. You had to handle an issue with the underworld and all. Anyway, I planned on discussing it with you last night. But ...” She gave me that sad smile again. “I start my job tonight. I have to leave in an hour if I'm going to get there in time.”

She was leaving me. The only light I had in my world was really walking

out that door. And it was my fault. She'd been here for three weeks, and we had barely had time together. I'd been busy, but even when I could have made time for her, I hadn't. As much as I hated it, she had a life in Savannah. One with friends and a job. Here, I was the only thing she had, and the deeper I got into the workings of the family, the less time I had to be with her. I wanted her happy more than I wanted my next breath. Even if it meant letting her leave me.

"I'm gonna miss you so fucking much," I told her. The thick emotion in my voice was impossible to mask.

She turned her hand over and clasped mine in hers. "I'll miss you too. But life is changing for both of us. You'll always be my best friend. That won't ever change. Even if we aren't in the same city."

I pulled her back to me and wrapped my arms around her.

Genesis Stoll had been the best thing in my life since the day she'd walked into my backyard and ruined my eighth birthday party. Every good memory I had, she was in it. When life got dark, she was the thing I reached for to keep me sane. I was selfish with her. I always had been. This time, I wasn't going to be. I loved her too much to hold her back.



TWO

GENESIS—TWENTY YEARS OLD

JUNE 17

The music was pumping through the speakers so loud that it was hard to hear Quinn, my roommate and backup best friend—or at least, that was what she called herself. I leaned closer to her, moving the tray in my hand over so I didn't spill the shrimp cocktails I was serving.

“What?” I asked her.

She had a tray filled with crystal champagne flutes.

“I said, I am going to finish giving these out, then go take my break.”

I nodded instead of trying to talk over the music. The live band was also on a break, and I was looking forward to their return. They weren't this loud. I much preferred working weddings and classy rich-people parties. I wasn't a fan of this type of event. The catering company I worked for paid well

though, and the tips I received made it even more worth it. Except for tonight. Nothing made working at some frat house event, hosted by older men who had once been in the fraternity, worth it. I didn't understand college Greek life, but this event seemed like a way for wealthy, old men to relive their youth.

Turning, I made my way through the crowd, smiling and pausing as guests took the appetizers from my tray. A college-aged guy winked at me while his date was clinging to his side. That was typical at this kind of thing. Even the older men with wedding rings would give me leers and make suggestive comments. I always stuck my tray in their face and asked if they'd like whatever I was serving to keep them far enough away so they didn't touch me. It did the trick most of the time.

Stopping at the next group of people, I sighed when the music ended and the band returned. The lead singer was speaking over the microphone when I held out the tray with my practiced smile.

"Would you like a—" The words halted as I stared into a familiar face.

Those brown eyes I hadn't seen since graduation widened only slightly before turning away from me and looking at the girl at his side.

"Would you like one?" Bowie asked the brunette.

She shook her head. "I don't eat seafood."

He lifted his eyes to the guy standing across from him and began to carry on a conversation. I regained my composure and turned my attention to the others to make sure no one wanted anything before I left them.

"I don't do shrimp, but I'd like your number," the guy to the left of me said, leaning toward me with a cocky grin.

His brown hair was long and tucked behind his ears. He was used to getting

what he wanted. That was clear from the way he was looking at me. I was sure he had a trust fund to go with his attractive face. If Bowie hadn't been standing there, acting as if I were some stranger, then I would have ignored the guy.

But I was annoyed that Bowie was still treating me as if I were invisible after all this time, so I returned the flirty smile and gave him Quinn's number.

I wasn't about to give him mine, and I knew Quinn wouldn't be mad about it. He was her favorite type.

He pulled out his phone and plugged in the number. I flashed one more smile, making it a point not to look at Bowie before I went through the crowd and continued to do my job. Once the tray was empty, I hurried to the back in search of Quinn. I also needed a moment to think this through.

Why was Bowie here, in Hilton Head? I had assumed he'd gone to Gainesville for college. Although seeing as he'd completely shut me out of his life, I didn't know for sure. Was he here with a friend? Maybe it was the girl he was with. I set the tray down and walked over to get a glass of water. I needed to take my break.

"You look rattled. Did some douche canoe touch you?" Quinn asked as she walked up to me.

I shook my head and downed the rest of the water in my glass.

"Then, what happened?" she pushed.

I put the glass back down and looked at her. "Remember the guy I told you about that Kye and I were friends with, growing up?"

She nodded. "The one you dated, then kissed Kye, and he dropped both of you."

“Yes, that one. His name is Bowie ... and he’s here.”

Her mouth fell open. “No fucking way!”

I nodded. “Yep. I just offered him a shrimp cocktail. He recognized me, obviously, but he acted like he didn’t know me. Which, after the thing with Kye, when he treated me as if I were invisible in school, I should have expected this, but I don’t know. It’s been a few years. We’ve grown up. I just kinda thought he’d be over it. That he’d say, *Oh, hey, Genesis. How’s life?*—or something like that.”

Had I really wanted him to do that? Maybe. I wasn’t even sure. Seeing him had definitely messed with my head.

“You must have broken him hard, girl. If he’s still pissed about that kiss, what, three years later ... damn.”

I shook my head at her. “It’s ridiculous. Kye was drunk. He kissed me. We have never, not once, touched each other in any sexual way since. You would think Bowie could let it go and at least ... I don’t know.” I shrugged.

There was no reason to think about this. I was wasting my time. Seeing Bowie had just reminded me of Kye and the fact that I had loved him most of my life and wasted years hoping he saw me as something more than his best friend. But no more! I had stood my ground. Moved back to Savannah. Put distance between us so I didn’t spend my summer moping around, waiting for him to give me attention.

“Ladies,” Chuck, our boss, said as he held out two trays full of appetizers to us. “Break is over. Get out there.”

We each took a tray.

“Point him out if you can,” Quinn told me. “I want to see if he’s as hot as Kye.”

I rolled my eyes and followed her out of the kitchen.

The rest of the evening, I intentionally stayed clear of any area that Bowie was in. It became a game in a way. I made sure to locate him once I was on the floor, then went everywhere but there. Quinn kept giving me looks, wanting me to show her who he was, but I wasn't about to be caught, pointing at him. She served his group more than once, and it made me grin. It was killing her that she didn't know.

By the time the party was over, I hadn't seen Bowie in the crowd in over an hour. Quinn made guesses on who it was as we cleaned up the kitchen. When we were headed out to Quinn's car, she was still giving me descriptions of guys while I read the last text from Kye.

Call me. I miss your voice.

I sighed. I knew he didn't realize how painful it was for me when he said things like that. Kye loved me. I knew that. But the problem would always be that I was in love with Kye. He couldn't know that. It was my cross to bear. Being in love with your best friend sucked.

“Brown hair—kinda has a sexy, messy look—brown eyes that have dark lashes long enough to make a girl jealous, wide shoulders, lean but muscular build, wearing a blue button-down and jeans.”

Quinn's description started sinking in, and my head shot up from the text.

“Yes, actually. That's really accurate,” I said, surprised that she remembered so many details about him.

She nodded, then raised her eyebrows. “Yeah, well, probably because he's walking this way.”

Wait. “What?” I asked, my gaze swinging over the parking lot until it

landed on Bowie. “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh. Guess you aren’t invisible anymore after all,” Quinn said in a singsong voice beside me.

“Shut up,” I whispered as he got closer.

“Fine, I’ll just go wait in the car.”

I grabbed her arm before she could move. “Stay. Do not leave me.”

She laughed quietly. “Okay, fine. I’ll be your bodyguard. All five feet of me.”

I shot her an annoyed look, then turned back just as Bowie reached us. Was I supposed to say something? I stared at him and couldn’t think of one thing to say.

“Hey,” he said, breaking the silence.

“Uh, um, hey,” I stammered, confused by this.

He hadn’t spoken to me in four years.

He licked his bottom lip and glanced over at Quinn. Was he here to meet her? Maybe? How awkward would that be?

“Oh, uh, Quinn, this is Bowie. A childhood friend,” I said to her, then looked back at him.

His eyes were locked on me.

“Bowie, this is Quinn, my roommate and best friend.”

“Backup best friend,” Quinn corrected me with a smug smile. Then, she looked at Bowie. “It’s nice to meet you. She refused to point you out tonight, so I was left guessing.”

I elbowed her before she said anything else.

A grin tugged on the corner of Bowie's lips. "So, you told her I was there."

I was going to kill Quinn. She'd better sleep with one eye open.

I felt my face grow warm, and I let out a nervous laugh. "Yeah, I might have mentioned it," I admitted.

"But she said that she was invisible where you were concerned. I guess she was wrong. You are clearly seeing her now," Quinn added.

I glared at her. "Why don't you go wait in the car?" I suggested.

"So, you don't need me—"

"Now," I cut her off, which only made her smile bigger.

She wiggled her fingers at Bowie. "See you around."

When she finally walked toward the car, I turned back to him. He wasn't watching her go. Instead, he was looking at me.

"She's, uh ... ignore her," I told him.

He smirked and tilted his head slightly to the side. "You told her about me."

I nodded. No point in lying.

"But you introduced me as a childhood friend."

I glanced at the ground and shrugged before looking back at him. "I wasn't sure what to call you exactly."

His eyes seemed to be reading my thoughts, and that made me nervous.

"The guy you gave your number to tonight is a bastard."

A laugh bubbled out of me. "I'll be sure to let Quinn know when he calls her."

Bowie raised his eyebrows with an amused expression. "I see."

“Yeah. It’s a thing I do. She’s used to it.”

He shook his head and glanced away, smiling. “You’ve not changed much.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that so I stayed silent.

When he looked back at me, he seemed nervous. “Any chance you’d give me your number? I don’t need Quinn’s.”

Whoa. I had not been expecting that.

I blinked several times, making sure I had just heard him correctly. Finally, I managed to nod my head. “It’s the—” I almost told him it was the same one I’d had four years ago, but my guess was, he’d deleted it from his phone. “Yeah,” I replied instead. “I can just text you it ... unless your number changed.”

“It’s the same,” he replied. “You still have it in your phone?”

I lifted a shoulder in a small half shrug. “Never thought about deleting it,” I admitted.

“Do you still see Kye when you’re home?” he asked me.

I knew it was best to be blunt. If he had an issue with it, then he didn’t need to text or call me.

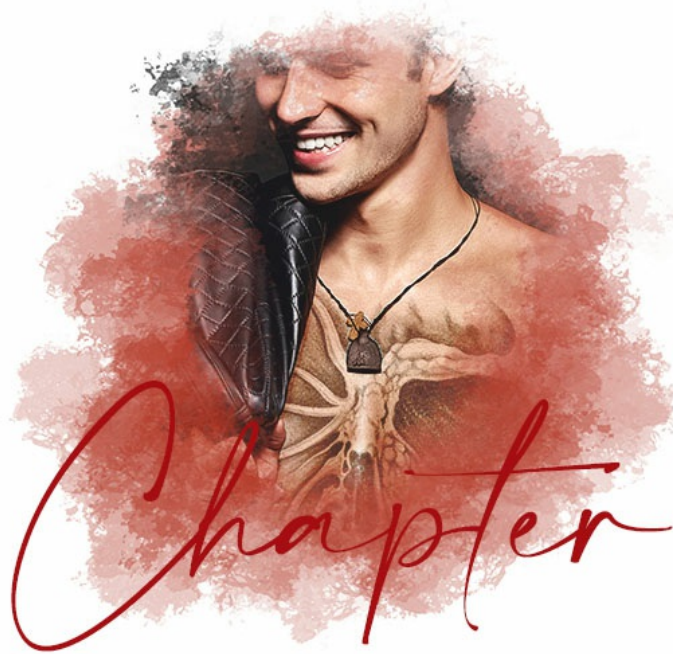
“He’s my best friend, Bowie. Still.”

His lips pressed together, and he nodded. “Okay. It’s, uh, good you could remain friends after the kiss.”

I laughed. “Yeah, well, he was drunk, and I think, looking back, I was just curious. Maybe he was too. Regardless, it cleared up any question we might have had in our heads about us feeling something more than friendship.”

Bowie chuckled softly, a crooked grin on his lips. “Yeah, well, guess I

should have stuck around longer to see that play out.” He dropped his gaze to the ground for a moment, then raised his eyes to lock on mine. A serious expression was now on his face. “I miss you. I’ve missed you for four fucking years.”



THREE

KYE

JULY 14

Dropping the last box of Gage's stuff in the back of the truck, I pulled my phone out of my pocket to see if Genesis had texted me back yet. Nothing. Fucking nothing. She'd texted me that she was on a date and couldn't talk, then hadn't texted me the rest of the night. Now, it was three in the afternoon, and I'd sent her five texts, and she wasn't responding.

I slipped a cigarette between my lips and lit it. I was trying to cut back, but fuck that. I needed a smoke—or three.

The truck that Gage was driving pulled around the house. He'd had a new road put in that led back to the house he'd had built for him and his girlfriend, Shiloh. It wasn't completely finished, but they had enough done that they could live in it while it was being finished. He was determined to get her all to himself because I'd mentioned once that she was loud when they fucked.

Crazy ass almost killed me. Huck and Levi had held him back. I wasn't upset they were moving out. Gage was insane.

"That all of it?" Levi called out as he climbed out of the passenger side.

"Yeah," I replied, shoving my phone back in my pocket with more force than necessary.

Levi frowned. "What's up your ass?"

I started to say *nothing*, but I needed someone else's opinion. I should probably go to Huck for an opinion since he had a fiancée and Levi fucked around with women as much as I did, but he wasn't here. I took a pull from the cigarette, letting it blacken my lungs while giving me some relief.

"Genesis went on a date."

I hated that saying it pissed me off. She was allowed to date. She'd dated before. But she always texted me back on dates. She had even called me on dates.

"And?" Levi asked.

"She isn't texting me. She told me she was on a date and couldn't text me."

Levi looked at me like I was talking in riddles. "So?"

I ran my hand through my hair and growled, frustrated. "She always texts me back. Even on dates. If I call her and she's on a date, she answers. It's been nineteen hours, and she's still not responding to my texts."

Levi shrugged. "Must have been a good fucking date."

That was not what I wanted to hear. Genesis didn't get serious with guys. She dated. That was it.

"She's not like that."

Levi chuckled. "Like what? She doesn't go on dates with guys and have

sex? Dude, if you think that, you're fucking delusional. I don't know her, but I do know that any female who can be your best friend isn't sweet and innocent."

I began pacing because standing still suddenly felt impossible. I was restless. "Something could have happened to her. Maybe I should drive up there and check on her."

"Where are you going?" Gage asked as he walked over to us.

"He's going to check on Genesis. She went on a date," Levi replied in an amused tone.

Gage smirked. "You need to make sure he fucked her properly?"

I glared at him, and my stomach knotted up at the image in my head. Genesis didn't fuck around. She would have to be serious with someone to sleep with them. Her text sound went off in my pocket, and I jerked it out so fast that I almost dropped it.

Fucking finally.

Sorry! I was out late, and then we went to breakfast this morning, then decided to have a beach day. Just getting back to the apartment. Haven't had time to respond.

I reread that three times, trying to make sense of it. Who was *we*? A guy? Quinn? And why couldn't she have taken a minute to let me know she was alive?

"What's it say? She's exhausted from a night of wild fucking?" Gage asked.

I ignored him and walked away from them. I pressed Call while inhaling deeply. Texting wasn't going to do it for me. Not now.

“Hey.” Genesis’s voice came over the line, and the war going on in my chest eased from the sound of it.

“Hey, you scared the shit out of me. Since when can you not text me when you’re on a date or out with Quinn?” I was throwing that in there because I needed her to confirm the “we” had included Quinn.

She was silent a moment too long, and my chest was back to feeling like it might explode from the shit it was doing. Getting all tight and painful.

“Uh, well, it wasn’t any date. I’ve been seeing this guy for a while now, and we’re *dating*.”

Those words caused me to need to sit down. I walked over to the stairs leading up to the front of the house and sank down.

“How long? You’ve not mentioned anyone.” I tried to sound casual.

“We went out for the first time on June 18. But we made it exclusive about a week ago.”

Exclusive.

Serious.

Fuck.

She didn’t do serious. She had left me to go back to Savannah, and now, she was serious with some guy a little over a month later.

“That was fast. You must really like him,” I managed to get out without choking on the words.

She laughed softly, and I winced. God, I missed her.

“I do. It’s ... I think it’s fate. You know, just meant to be.”

I dropped my head into my hand and closed my eyes while the cigarette stayed clamped between my teeth. This was not happening to me. Genesis

was mine. I'd not had to share her with anyone since fucking Bowie.

"That's, uh, good," I lied. What else was I supposed to say?

"Yeah, it is. I'm sorry I made you worry though. I won't do that again. I'll get back to you when you text. Promise."

"You'd better. Next time, I'm not waiting; I'm coming to Savannah." And to see what this fucker looked like.

"That would be drastic," she said in a teasing tone. "Okay, I hate to cut this short, but, well, he's here, and I am supposed to be getting in the shower. I hate to leave him alone with Quinn too long because she talks too much."

He was there. He had been the "we" today. They had gone to the beach.

I felt sick.

"Yeah, okay. Well, text me later." I sounded pathetic.

"I will," she replied. "Bye."

"Bye, Baby Doll," I said just as the line went dead.

I stared down at the phone in my hand and wondered how the hell this had happened. She was supposed to be here with me this summer. We should have been at the beach together. I'd had my chance to keep her here and fucked it up. My life wasn't something she fit into. She was my best friend, but it wasn't like it used to be. We'd gotten older. There had been lines drawn that kept parts of our lives—mostly mine—separate.

"I take it, she's alive?" Levi said, and I looked up at him before standing.

"Yeah."

"You don't look happy about it."

"I need to see tits, drink, and fuck. In that order," I told him.

He nodded. “Devil’s it is. Kitty said Chyna quit last week, but that new girl—Echo, I think is her name—she’s got some triple D’s on her.”

Triple D’s sounded perfect.

“That’ll work.”

“I’ll drive, and you can start drinking,” he said, slapping me on the chest with a flask.

I took it, opened it, and drank one long, hard swig.

Deep down, I had known that this was eventually going to happen. Hell, Genesis was gorgeous, sexy, smart, and funny. Fuck. I took another drink. Why had Baby Doll had to grow up to be blazing hot? It made life complicated.



FOUR

GENESIS

AUGUST 30

Looking up from my phone, where I'd been texting Kye back, my eyes met Bowie's. I knew without him saying a word what he was thinking. I also knew he was right, but I didn't want to talk about it. Not tonight. My texting with Kye had become sparse, as had our calls. I didn't even know when I would see him next, and I was not telling him about Bowie over the phone.

I turned my phone on silent and put it on the dresser before walking over to the bed, where Bowie was propped up, watching me.

"Don't look at me like that," I told him as I climbed onto the mattress, then moved over him to straddle his legs.

He put his hands on my thighs. "How?" he asked.

I waved my hand in front of his face. "Like that."

He grinned then. “What look is that, Gen?”

I sighed dramatically. “That look that says, *You need to tell Kye about us. It’s been over two months since we started dating.* And I agree, but I need to do it in person.”

Bowie raised an eyebrow. “You are aware that it was me who got fucked over. Not Kye. He did the fucking over. This shouldn’t be a touchy subject for him.”

If it were any other guy, I knew they would struggle to believe that Kye and I were just friends. However, Bowie knew him as well as I did. He knew that Kye was never going to look at me as anything but a friend. He didn’t do relationships. Our friendship was the longest relationship he’d ever had.

I cupped Bowie’s face with my hands. “Trust me, I get that. It’s just that we all have a past. A complex one. So, yes, it will be a big deal that we are back together. And as much as I wish you and Kye could be friends again, I know that you don’t think you can do that. I told you in the beginning that I would never expect you to.”

Bowie ran his hands up my legs, then turned his head to press a kiss on my palm. “Fine. Whatever you want to do,” he said. “I love you, Gen. I’ve fucking loved you since I was a kid. I’m not letting Kye mess with my head again. Whatever hoops you want me to jump through, I’ll jump.”

Smiling, I touched my lips to his. This was comfort. It was security. Knowing that I was loved and I wasn’t going to be alone. Once, I had thought that I needed the butterflies, excitement, thrill, and rush that Kye’s wild, larger-than-life personality offered. But I had been a kid and not understood how the Bowies of the world were the smart choices.

“I love you,” I told him, and I did.

I loved all that he offered me. There was no heartache always there, threatening to tear me apart. I was never forgotten or put on hold. To Bowie, I was number one. He didn't need strip clubs and numerous women. I was enough.

When he picked me up and laid me on the bed beside him, I stared up at him as he took off his shirt. The bare, tattoo-free chest and defined muscles in his lean build were so different from Kye's that it was easy not to let myself start fantasizing it was my best friend over me. I could be in the present with Bowie.

He took off his shorts, then began undressing me. There was never a rush to things with him. Bowie was the only guy I'd ever had sex with, so I had nothing to compare it to. The idea of him taking me hard and wanting me so bad that he lost control was for movies and books. I knew it wasn't reality.

When he slipped inside of me, I held on to him. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the warmth of his body and the connection. I already knew when he found his release, I wouldn't do the same. I was pretty sure I was broken when it came to that. Sure, I could get myself off with my imagination and a vibrator on my clit, but I didn't even get the stirrings of one while having sex.

Bowie never asked about that, and I figured it was normal for girls not to get off. Maybe most didn't. Whatever the case, it didn't matter. Sex was something that gave men pleasure. They needed it. Although I liked having sex. It gave me a sense of having someone I belonged to.



SEPTEMBER 15

“Have you not told your mom about us?” Bowie asked.

I spun around, surprised that he was here. I hadn't heard him come in, but then I'd been on the phone with my mom. How long had he been standing there, listening?

"Not yet," I admitted, annoyed that he'd stood there without letting me know he was in my room.

"Why, Gen?" he asked, his eyes narrowing.

I wasn't sure exactly.

"I need to tell Kye first." Which was true.

"Then, tell him. Hell, I'll drive us to Ocala this weekend. You can tell him in person. Then, we can go to your parents' house together. Tell them. Visit my mom while we're there."

The idea of telling Kye made my stomach clench up. I couldn't do it yet. I didn't know why, and that was definitely something I needed to work through.

"Not yet. Just ... we can wait until Thanksgiving."

Bowie stared at me. "Thanksgiving?" he asked incredulously. "Are you fucking serious? Gen, my mom knows. She lives on the same street as your parents. I had to make her promise not to say anything to anyone. You want me to tell her to wait until Thanksgiving?"

Yes. Ugh. I hated this.

"I didn't think about that," I admitted.

Bowie threw up his hands in frustration. "No, you didn't! Because you're too worried about Kye's feelings! When the hell has he worried about anyone's feelings? Sure as shit not mine. Not yours. The world revolves around Kye. He thinks of no one but himself. Yet you are all worried about

upsetting him, which makes no sense. He didn't get hurt four years ago. I DID!"

Bowie had never shouted before. At least not at me.

"Kye doesn't think the world revolves around him. He thinks of others. You don't know—"

"NO!" Bowie shouted, pointing a finger at me. "YOU don't know. You never have. You choose to turn a blind eye to all his faults. Why is that, Gen? Why? He doesn't deserve your loyalty. Is it because you want him? Is that it? He kissed you, and when that sent me away, he never once stepped in and made you his. He didn't want you then. He doesn't want you now. You will never have his love, and I am fucking over it. This is just the same as it was before, except this time, I SEE it. I'm not an idiot."

"Bowie, no," I argued, starting to panic.

He was misunderstanding all of this.

He held up his hand to stop me from getting any closer to him. "Don't. Not again. Just don't," he said in a calmer tone before turning and stalking off.

I stood there, staring. His words replaying in my head. He was right. About all of it.

The door to the apartment slammed closed, and I winced.

I had done this to myself, and I had no explanation or excuse.

I picked my phone back up and started to hit Kye's number, then stopped myself. What would I tell him? Why was he the one I always went to? I had Quinn. She'd listen. She would eat Oreo ice cream with me and let me cry. But it was Kye's arms I needed. Not ice cream.

Giving in because I was weak and I needed to hear his voice, I pressed his

number. It rang twice.

“Baby Doll?”

The sound of his voice set me off, and I let out a small sob.

“Hey,” I managed to say.

“What’s wrong? Where are you?” he demanded.

“It’s okay. I just needed to hear your voice.”

“You’re crying. It sure as fuck isn’t okay. No one makes you cry.”

The fierce edge in his voice only made me cry harder.

“Where are you?” he asked again.

“Savannah.”

“Did that bastard you’re dating make you cry?”

I sniffled and closed my eyes tightly. “It was my fault. Not his.”

“Fuck that,” Kye growled over the phone. “Where’s Quinn?”

I wiped at my face while more tears ran down my cheeks. “In class.”

“You got Oreo ice cream?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Okay, this is what you’re going to do. Go get the ice cream. Get you a spoon. Take it to the sofa and curl up under that ridiculous, fluffy pink throw. Turn on *Schitt’s Creek* and watch it until I get there. Should take me a little under three hours.”

I sniffled and wiped at my face. “No, you don’t need to come. I’m okay. Really. I just wanted to talk to you for a minute. I’ll be fine.”

“I’m already in the car, Baby Doll. Have been since you let out that first sob.”

I covered my face with my hand. “Kye, go back. I am okay.”

“No.”

“Kye!”

“Baby Doll,” he replied, mimicking my tone.

I sighed and stared at the wall. Deep down, hadn't I known that he would come? He always came.

That's why you called him, Genesis. You can lie to yourself all you want, but when life blows up, you want Kye.

“You can't get here in three hours. That's reckless.”

“I was north of Gainesville.”

At the strip club. I hated that I felt joy in the fact that I had the power to pull him away from a strip club so easily. I should never have called him.

“Drive carefully.”

“Always,” he assured me.

I turned and headed for the kitchen with the phone pressed to my ear. “I'm getting the ice cream now.”

“That's my girl,” he said into the phone. “I'll be there soon.”

“Okay.”

“Wear something sexy,” he teased.

I couldn't laugh, but I did smile a little. “My flannel pajama pants and your football T-shirt are gonna have to do.”

“My high school one?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Take off the flannel, and that'll be better than porn.”

This time, I did laugh.

“That’s what I like to hear. I got my laugh. I’ll be there soon.”

“Kye,” I said before he could hang up.

“Yeah?”

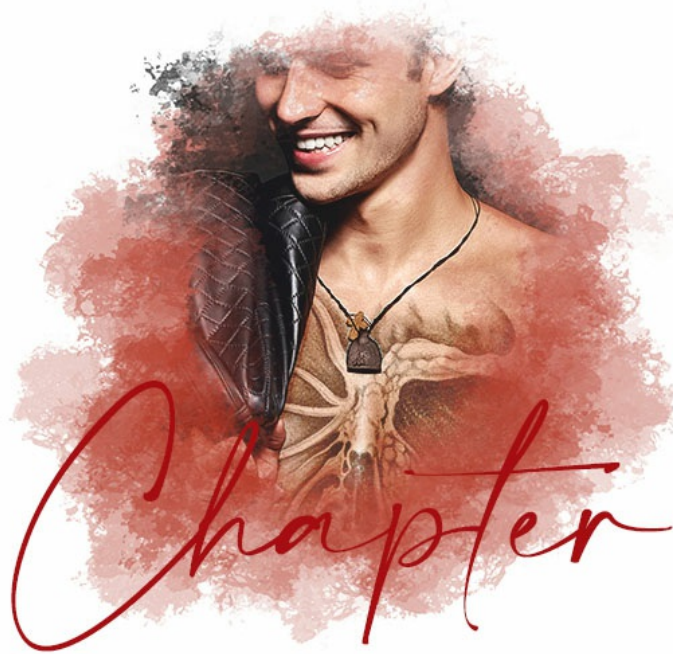
“Thank you.”

“You need me, I’ll be there. Always.”

We ended the call, and I took my ice cream and spoon to the sofa. I needed counseling. Something was off in my head when it came to Kye. My moods should not be affected by one person. Kye shouldn’t have that kind of power over me. Bowie had said some hurtful things, but they were true. Kye wasn’t ever going to want me that way. The more I let him in like this, the more pain I was causing myself.

Bowie had hurt me, but it had been my fault. I’d asked for it. I just didn’t know how to fix it. Having Kye come here wasn’t the right way to do it. Or maybe it was. While he was here, I could tell him about Bowie. Then have Bowie come over. Apologize. Tell him I was sorry.

I thought about it some more, then shook my head. That wasn’t going to work either. No matter that this was my fault, it was very possible that Kye would kill Bowie for making me cry. I had to think of another way.



FIVE

KYE

SEPTEMBER 20

“That’s it, sugar,” I groaned as Echo sucked my dick.

Normally, I didn’t like for brunettes to suck me off. When I was in the heat of the moment, my imagination would take over and turn them into Genesis. Echo’s purple streaks in her hair kept that from happening. They were near the ends though, so I kept her hair fisted in my hand so that I could see the difference. She also didn’t have those caramel highlights in her hair, like Genesis.

This was the second time I’d gotten sucked by Echo without Levi taking his leather belt to her ass at the same time. He’d gone and gotten a taste of Aspen, the younger sister of a stripper we used to enjoy, who had been killed this summer in a gang fight. Levi saved Aspen, brought her back to the house, and instead of making sure she was safe and then getting her moved

into a new place, he kept her. To protect her. In his bed. After that, the impossible happened. He'd stopped fucking around. Just Aspen now, and, damn, I was horny as fuck, having to listen to it just down the hall every day.

I slammed my dick further down Echo's throat. Didn't bother her. She made these hungry sounds, like she couldn't get enough of it. The woman was by far the best at sucking cock. Her pointy nails bit into my things, and I liked the little bit of pain, along with her vacuum cleaner-like mouth. I held her still while I began to spurt my cum down her throat.

"Fuck, that was good," I praised her.

Next, I'd bend her over and fuck her hard, the way she liked it. The girl would beg pretty for it too. I enjoyed letting her beg for my pierced dick before giving it to her.

Once I was done, she ran her tongue over my magic cross piercing. That was always the one that women were most interested in seeing. Most of them had only seen a Prince Albert on the cockhead. Seeing two rods that crossed each other instead excited them. Even with the condom on, they got some pleasure from it.

Genesis's ringtone went off, and my head snapped up from watching Echo lick my metal to find where I had set my phone down. It was on the chair closest to me. I pushed her head away, then let go of her hair quickly and went to grab my phone before it rang a third time.

"Hey!"

Leaving her back in Savannah had been hard. She was so fucking upset about the dickhead she was dating. He didn't return her calls or text messages. I'd only been able to stay for two days before Blaise called and ordered me back.

“Kye.” She was crying.

Motherfucker. I was gonna kill this bastard. I’d make Quinn tell me his name. Genesis wanted to protect him from me, but I was over it.

“What’s wrong, Baby Doll?” I asked gently, walking over to grab my boxers and get them on while she talked. Looked like I was driving north tonight.

She let out another sob. “It’s my dad,” she choked out.

Holy fuck. No. My heart started racing as I hurried and got dressed.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, afraid for her to say more.

I couldn’t get to her fast enough if something had happened to her dad. She’d need me right fucking now.

“He had a stroke.” She let out another sob. “Mom called me. They’re at the hospital.”

He wasn’t dead. He could live after a stroke.

“Okay, listen. I’m coming. Do not try to drive like this.” I was already at the door, about to leave.

“You’re leaving? Seriously?” Echo asked from behind me.

I turned and glared at her. Making it clear that she needed to shut the fuck up. Genesis did not need to hear her. Then, I swung open the door and left.

“Quinn is driving me. We are already on the road. Just meet me there. Please. Go check on Mom. She’s alone.”

“I am getting on my bike now. I’ll be there with her. Tell Quinn to drive carefully. I’ve got this,” I assured her.

She sniffled this time, and I seemed to calm down. I wished I had driven a car so I could keep talking to her. The bike would make that impossible.

“Thank you. I’m sorry if you were busy.”

I winced. She’d heard Echo. Dammit! Not that she didn’t know I fucked around. She knew me better than anyone. It was just that it felt wrong—her hearing the woman I was with when she was so upset and needed me.

“I’m never too busy for you. You know that, Baby Doll. Never.”

Her breathing was stuttered, as if she was trying not to cry some more. “Tell Mom I love her, and I love you too.”

I threw my leg over the Harley. I’d finally paid Huck the last payment on it and could call it mine. “Love you, Baby Doll.”

When I ended the call, I slipped my phone into my pocket, then took off to the hospital in Ocala. This was not the way I wanted to get Genesis home or how I wanted to see her, but, damn, knowing she’d be here soon did feel good. Nothing could happen to her dad though. It would destroy her.

That stupid piece of shit who had broken up with her was left back there while I was here to make sure my girl would be okay.



I stood, looking out over the lit parking lot from the window of the waiting room. Alice, Genesis’s mom, had finally been allowed to see her dad, Theo.

Alice had been so relieved when she saw me that she threw her arms around my neck and wept. It had been heartbreaking. Growing up, I had known my parents didn’t care much for each other, but I’d gotten to watch Alice and Theo. It had always made me happy to know that Genesis had them. That she got to experience having two parents who loved each other. They were good people.

“Kye!” Genesis’s voice called, and I spun around as she came rushing into

the waiting room. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying as she made her way to me. “Where is Mom? Is Dad okay? What have they said?” She shot off her questions frantically.

I cupped her face in my hands, hating to see how much crying she’d done. “Your mom got to go see him, but just for a moment. He has to go into surgery now that they have the bleeding under control. The doctor called it a hemorrhagic stroke. He had an aneurysm burst. They are going to have to go in and repair the broken blood vessel. But that’s the good news. That they can repair it and get to it.”

She pressed her face to my chest and sucked in a deep breath. I wrapped my arms around her just as Quinn entered the room.

“What happened?” she asked in a whisper. Her eyes went from the back of Genesis’s head to meet my eyes.

“He’s going to be okay. He’s got to have surgery to repair the blood vessel that ruptured. Alice is with him now, but the doctor said she’d only get to see him a few minutes.”

Quinn’s shoulders sagged in relief, and the worry in her gaze as she looked back at Genesis was clear. She called herself the backup best friend, and she fucking was. She wasn’t taking my place. But I was thankful Genesis had her.

I looked back down at Genesis and held her tighter. “What can I get you? Have you eaten anything?” I asked her.

She sniffled and shook her head, then turned her head to lay her cheek against my chest. “No. I can’t eat.”

“Thirsty?” I asked.

She didn’t respond at first, then finally nodded. “Yeah. Water would be

good.”

Quinn held up a hand. “I’ll get it. That’s the calmest she’s been since she got the call. Keep doing whatever it is you’re doing. I’ll go get us all water.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

She turned and left the room. I ran my hand over her back, trying to soothe her any way I could.

“Your mom was there. She recognized the symptoms and called 911 immediately. The doctor said her fast thinking was going to mean a big difference in his recovery.”

Genesis leaned back enough to look up at me. “He could have died,” she whispered. “That’s all I keep thinking.”

“He didn’t though. That’s what you need to keep thinking. He is going to live.”

She gave me a sad smile. “Why does hearing you say it make it easier to believe? You’re not a doctor.”

I leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose. “Because you know I’d bring down death, God, and anything else that tried to take someone you loved away from you.”

A soft laugh escaped her, and she shook her head. “As crazy as that sounds, for some reason, I believe it.”

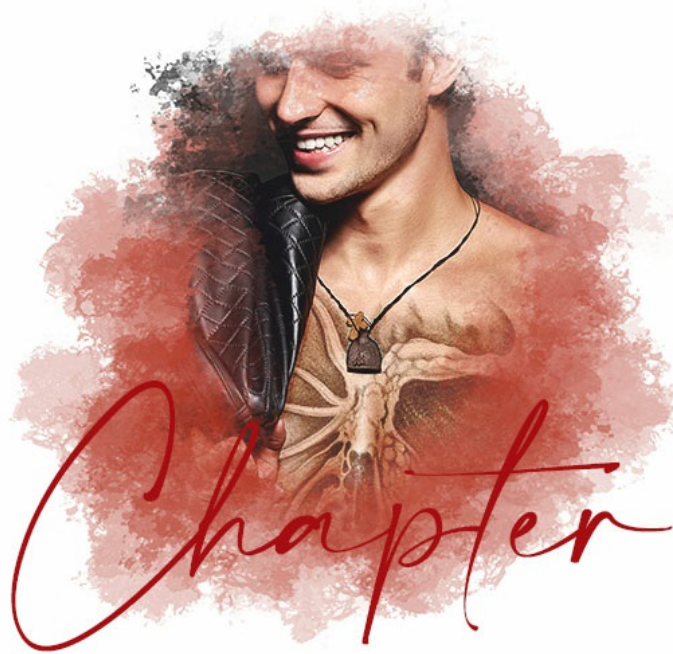
I fucking hoped it was true. Right now, I would say just about anything to ease her fear.

“I got waters!” Quinn announced.

Genesis let go of me and turned to her other friend as Quinn walked over to her with a bottle in her hand.

“You look better,” Quinn told her. “Seems Kye has magical abilities.”

Genesis let out a small laugh and took the water. “He does.”



SIX

KYE

SEPTEMBER 30

Part of me felt guilty for smiling like a damn fool, but, fuck, I was happy. Genesis was curled up on the sofa beside me, watching a movie in my mom's old house. Her things were all officially moved back to Ocala. Her sewing machine was on the kitchen table, where it belonged. The fact that she'd dropped this semester when it had just begun and wasn't registering to go back next semester bothered me because I knew she wanted her fashion and design degree. But convincing her not to stay here and help her mom with her dad was pointless.

Theo was going to be in the hospital for weeks, maybe months. He had to go through physical therapy and speech therapy. Once he met some goals, he could come home, but even then, he was going to need help and physical therapy appointments. Genesis wasn't leaving her mom to handle all of this

alone.

Convincing her to stay in my mom's old house had been a little difficult. In the end, Alice had helped with that. Saying she'd need Genesis's bedroom to sleep in for herself once they got the master bedroom set up for Theo. I hadn't wanted to explain that my mom's house had bulletproof windows and a security system that went well beyond what most homes had. My dad had had it installed when he bought this house for Mom to raise me in when she refused to live with him. Genesis assumed the security system was a typical one. She did use it when she was there alone, and when I needed to check on her, all I had to do was look at the app on my phone. It gave me peace of mind when she was in town. The deeper I got into the family dealings, the more I worried about her safety.

The past few days had been hell. I'd never had to be involved in killing a woman, and, damn, it was hard to witness. Even if the bitch had deserved it. Blaise did most of it, but I had to watch. I kept hearing my mom in my head, telling me this was why she didn't want this life for me. When I had to hold a fucking gun to another girl's back while Levi threatened her to stay the fuck away from Saxon, it made me physically ill. She was trembling. Levi knew as well as I did that the girl wasn't bad, like her brother. She wasn't dangerous. She was just the sister of a gang member who had kidnapped Aspen. Levi had been fucked in the head over that even though Aspen was back home and back in his bed.

The darkness of this week had only been bearable because I had Genesis here. She didn't ask when I came to her with the twisted shit in my eyes. I knew she saw it, but she never said a word. Instead, she just eased me. Made me smile. Reminded me that I had someone so fucking pure in my life.

"I'm hungry," she said, looking up at me.

“Tell me what you want, and I’ll order it.”

She scrunched up her nose, and I realized I wanted to kiss it. I kept kissing her. Not her lips, but anywhere I could get away with platonically laying my lips on her. The nose was a popular spot. I should stop it, but, damn, it had been a hard few months. She’d gotten so busy with the stupid nameless fucker that she rarely called or texted me. Then, when I was going into a dark place from her absence, she’d called me, upset over the bastard.

“Mexican,” she finally said.

“Enchilada with queso on top,” I confirmed, already knowing her order.

She just smiled as I pulled out my cell to call her favorite Mexican restaurant.

My text message ding went off, and I opened it to see Winter—one of the newest strippers at Devil’s who I’d fucked a couple of nights ago—had sent me a text.

Miss you. When are you going to let me suck that big, pierced cock again? I’ve been a bad girl and need spanked.

“Big and pierced, huh?” Genesis said, and I closed the text, not liking how it felt that she’d read that.

I cut my eyes to her. “You reading over my shoulder, Baby Doll?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t mean to, but the *big, pierced cock* got my attention, then the spanking thing.”

I kept my sex life and Genesis separate. It felt wrong for her to know that side of me. Sure, she knew I wasn’t a good guy, but to her, I was the guy she depended on. The guy that Winter knew was a different man.

She shoved my arm. “Are you being pissy because I read your text? I’ll let

you read all of mine if you want. But I can promise you that none of them talk about cocks or spankings.” Her eyes twinkled with amusement.

“I’ll pass. You keep your dirty little secrets,” I told her, then found the phone number for the Mexican restaurant.

While I placed our order, she laid her head back on me and turned her attention back to the movie. I swore to God, if I got called away from her tonight, I was going to be pissed. She’d had an emotional week, and while she’d been in the hospital with her mom and dad, I’d been dealing with family shit. Every chance I got to get away, I went to her. Except, of course, when I needed to burn off some pent-up energy with a fuck. That was what girls like Winter were for. I handled my needs, then got my ass to the hospital. Winter had taken a good bit of my tension across her ass the other night. I should have figured she’d want more with all the begging for it she had done.

Genesis’s phone began to ring, and I glanced down to see the word *Him* on her screen. Fuck. I didn’t have to ask who that was. Not only was he now calling, but she was even hiding his name from me on her phone. Did he know what the hell she’d been through since he’d shut her out?

I felt her entire body tense before she jumped up and answered the call while walking away from me. I sat there as she went back to my old bedroom, which was the one she used when staying here.

When she closed the door behind her, I got up and started to follow her. It took all my willpower to stop. She wanted privacy. I had to give it to her. Even though it was killing me to know he was on the other line. If he was upsetting her, I was going to figure out who he was and hunt him down. But then, if he was trying to get her back, I was also going to figure out who he

was and hunt him down.

I turned and went to the kitchen instead to pour myself some whiskey.

I wanted her happy. I did. But I wanted to be the one making her happy. We completed each other. We understood each other. She made my day brighter. There was nothing that son of a bitch on the phone with her could do for her better than I could. Except sex. He could fulfill her sexually. I couldn't do that. It wasn't that I didn't want to because truth was, I wanted to real fucking bad.

However, Genesis wasn't the kind of girl who could have sex without emotion. It would mean more to her. She'd end up getting hurt by me, and I'd lose her. That wasn't a fucking option. I needed her in my life. She was all the good things. When I didn't have her, everything was wrong. It was off.

The past two months—when she was barely available to talk to me, never visited, and didn't want me coming to see her—had been torture. It was so bad that I started getting pissed that she wasn't calling me, needing me for something. I'd have given my left nut for her to interrupt a blow job, and that was insanity, but true. The less she called, the not being needed, it had rocked me. Opened my eyes to just how badly I had to have her in my life. I wasn't sure when the switch had flipped in me. There had been a time that I was too busy for her. She had been there, and I'd taken her for granted. Until she wasn't there. That was probably when the switch flipped and why. June 2, when she went back to Savannah, had been a wake-up call. Genesis was my number one, and I had let her down. Never again.

The door opened to the bedroom, and I stayed leaning against the kitchen counter, drinking the whiskey in my hand. My jaw was clenched tightly, and I felt like someone had their hand around my throat, choking me. If she

walked in here and told me she was going to give him a second chance, I wasn't sure I could control myself. Images of putting my fist through the wall came to mind.

Genesis stepped into the kitchen, and her eyes met mine. I felt like a fucking brick had settled in my stomach. She wasn't crying, so he hadn't been mean. He hadn't said something to upset her.

Had she even told him about her dad? Not that he deserved to know.

"He, uh, wants to talk in person. And he ... he said that he doesn't want to lose me but that I had to make a decision."

I waited. What fucking decision? This asshole was giving her stipulations? Was he that stupid? Her dad was in the hospital, recovering from a stroke. He didn't deserve her. No one did. I doubted they ever would. He should be groveling at her feet. I should make him grovel at her feet. No. Wait. I wanted him gone.

She took a deep breath. "He's coming here. I'm ... I mean, he wants to see you too. You're my best friend, and he knows that and understands it more than most. He just needs you to know ... him. That he's the guy I am with."

The way she stumbled over her words told me she was leaving shit out, but I wasn't going to push her. I had to be careful, handle her gently. She had dealt with too much this week. I just needed her to not need him or want him. I could be enough. I didn't hurt her, and I took care of her. He wanted her back. Of course he fucking did. Who wouldn't?

This time though, I wasn't going to be blindsided. I was going to win. I knew her better than anyone. I could be exactly what she needed. Maybe even ... handle her pleasure, just not sex. Other things. Fuck, I was getting this twisted. That wouldn't work.

“When is he coming?” I asked, taking a drink.

“In the morning,” she replied.

That was too fucking soon. He needed to stay his ass in Georgia for at least another week. She didn’t have time for relationship shit. She had her dad to think about. Didn’t he care about that? No. He apparently just cared about himself.

“Does he know why you are here?” I asked.

She nodded. “I explained. It’s why he called. He had gone to the apartment, and Quinn told him I moved back to Ocala but that he’d have to call me for any more information. Then, she slammed the door in his face, but not before taking the roses and chocolates out of his hand and keeping them.”

I smirked. Not just because Quinn was a badass, but also because of the fact that he’d brought her roses and chocolate.

“Does he not know the way to your heart isn’t chocolate, but macarons? And you hate roses.”

Stupid fucker hadn’t even taken the time to get to know what she liked.

“In his defense, we haven’t discussed those things.”

I didn’t want to listen to her defend him. They’d been together for two damn months. He should know this stuff. If he cared about her, if he was even close to being worthy of her presence, then he should fucking know what she liked.

“Is he staying or just coming for the day?”

He wasn’t staying the night in this house. The idea of him fucking her in my bed made me livid. That bed was hers. Only hers.

“He’s staying, but not here. We aren’t ready for that.”

Good. I'd fix this before they got to that point. This guy had no chance. I would make sure of it.

I nodded. "Okay. I want to meet him too."

She bit her bottom lip, and I could see that she wanted to tell me something. It was all over her face. I waited, giving her a minute, but she didn't say anything. That was gonna drive me crazy, but I had to let her do this on her time frame. No pressure or stress. Dickwad was doing enough of that. I was going to let him sink himself.

Pushing off from the counter, I walked over to her, took her chin between my finger and thumb, then tilted her head back to look at me. "Food is almost here. Let's go eat, watch our movie, and enjoy the night. Stop worrying. It's me. I won't let anything hurt you, and I'll be so damn nice to this guy that he might decide he prefers me to you."

She let out a short, surprised laugh, then dropped her gaze from me. "I'm one hundred percent positive that will not happen. No matter how charming you are."

I took a drink from my glass, then slid my arm around her shoulders. "Come on, Baby Doll. I have a powerful smile, and have you seen my abs?"

Another bubble of laughter.

"Relax. It's all going to be okay, I swear," I assured her.

She let out a deep breath, then nodded.

The doorbell rang, and I slapped her ass playfully before going to get our food. I was going to be the best platonic boyfriend a girl could have. Genesis wouldn't need anyone else. And if I needed to get her off without fucking her, I would do that. I could give her the best orgasms of her life without my dick. I just had to keep from losing my cool and slamming my dick inside

her. Jerking off several times first would be vitally important.



SEVEN

GENESIS

OCTOBER 1

Once I got the text from Bowie that he was fifteen minutes away, I sighed in relief that Kye wasn't back. He'd been called away early this morning by the Lords of the Underworld to maim, kill, destroy, or whatever it was they did. Typically, I hated knowing that he was doing dangerous business, but right now, I worried that Bowie's life might be in more danger if Kye were here.

Last night, Kye had been even more charming than normal. It had messed with my head.

When I had woken up in bed, after falling asleep on the sofa while watching a movie with Kye, I'd found a note on my pillow.

Baby Doll,

Blaise called. I have some things to handle with the family. I'll be

back as soon as we are done. Let me know when you go to see your dad at the hospital. If you're there once I'm free, I'll head over.

Kye

I'd admit, I'd lain in bed for a long time, wondering if he'd brought me in here last night or if we'd slept on the sofa together most of the night. Not that it mattered. We'd slept together many nights. To Kye, it was like sleeping with his sister. To me, well, let's just say, I'd watched him sleep more times than I could count. It was the only time I could appreciate how beautiful he was without him catching me. Pathetic, I know.

Bowie had always been the one to defuse my attraction to Kye—or at least distract me from it. His being back in my life this summer had kept me from missing Kye. Wishing I'd stayed back here to be with him whenever he made time for me. Which was just sad and why I had left to begin with.

The doorbell rang, and I took a deep breath before going to open it. Seeing Bowie standing there with a dozen pink roses calmed me immediately. This would be okay. It had to be. I needed Bowie in my life. Especially now that I was with Kye all the time.

“Hey,” I said, smiling at him.

It was good to see him returning my smile instead of the angry scowl he'd given me before storming out of my apartment.

“God, I missed you,” he said as he stood there, staring at me.

I stepped back and waved a hand for him to come inside. “I'm glad you called and came here,” I told him.

He walked inside and then turned back to look at me as I closed the door behind him. “I just needed time to cool down, face old demons, understand where you were coming from.”

I nodded. He had every right to feel that way. I knew I'd handled it wrong. I'd had time to think, and he was right. I had been unfair to him. My life couldn't always revolve around Kye.

"I'm sorry."

He took a step closer to me. "I'm sorry too."

He handed me the roses, then leaned down to press a kiss to my lips. It was sweet, comfortable—exactly like our relationship had always been.

When he straightened, he glanced around the room. "Hasn't changed that much in here."

I liked that about it. Being here made me feel at home. Chloe, Kye's mom, had told me I could redecorate if I wanted to, but I never did.

"Yeah," I agreed.

His gaze came back to me. "Where is Kye?"

I sighed. "Possibly torturing someone. I don't know what it is they do."

Bowie smirked. "Ah, family stuff."

"Yep," I replied. "He said he'd come as soon as he was done. Not sure how long that will be. We can talk about things while it's just us."

Bowie reached for my hand and threaded his fingers through mine. "That sounds good. There's a lot I want to say. I just had to figure out exactly what it was and how to say it. I'm sorry I shut you out, but it was the only way I could work through what I wanted." He paused and gave me a sad smile. "I'm not that kid who was jealous and heartbroken anymore. I no longer stand in Kye's shadow."

I shook my head. "You never did."

He chuckled. "Yeah, Gen, I did. And until you, I hadn't cared. Then, things

changed. Kye still saw you as one of the guys. I remember when I realized he hadn't noticed how you had changed, grown up, become breathtaking. I felt like the luckiest guy in the world. For once, I didn't have to stand back and watch Kye get what I wanted. There was no competition."

He shook his head. "Wait. I'm making this all about us. Me. First, how is your dad?"

I had called Mom when I finally got out of bed this morning. She sounded happy. Dad had said several words today, and she had been helping to feed him.

"He is good, considering. He has a long road of recovery, but with Mom and me helping him, he will be fine."

Bowie nodded, looking concerned. "You're staying here for a while then?"

"I can't leave them."

"And school?"

I didn't want to get angry because he was bringing up school when my dad had just had a stroke, but it was my first reaction.

I forced my voice to remain calm before answering him. "School can wait."

He knew me well enough to know he'd asked the wrong thing. I wasn't that good at masking my emotions anyway. And like Kye, I'd grown up with Bowie. He might not know I didn't care for roses and that I loved macarons, but he did know how to read my face.

"Of course it can. I'm sorry I asked that. It was insensitive."

"It's okay," I replied. "Come on. Let's sit down."

I led him to the sofa. It was strange to be in the living room of this house

with Bowie. We had always hung out in the basement over here.

He didn't let go of my hand as he looked directly into my eyes. "I've loved you most of my life. Even when we weren't together, I measured every girl I dated against you, and they always failed. I hated that I did it. I won't lie. Drove me crazy." He let out a small laugh, then shook his head. "Then, you were there in front of me, like my subconscious had summoned you. It felt like someone had knocked the air from my lungs. I wouldn't even let myself look at you. I even worried everyone around me could hear my heart slamming against my chest. No one else makes me feel like that, Gen. You're it for me. And if I have to face Kye, accept your friendship with him to have you, I will. I do. It took me some calming down to realize that if there was something between the two of you, then it would have happened by now."

I thought he'd already come to that conclusion. The words he'd hurled at me when he left my apartment said as much.

His eyes softened, and he looked guilty. "I said some hurtful things because I was scared. I was terrified of losing you to him. When I said them, it was what I had been hoping. I realized later, although I'd said them in a nasty way, it was the truth. The two of you are just friends, and I don't think you want more with him. That was my jealousy talking."

He had every right to be jealous. I'd not handled any of this the right way. I opened my mouth to respond when the door opened and Kye walked into the house. All words left me as I stared at him over Bowie's shoulder. Kye's gaze swung from me to Bowie, and he paused only briefly, then quickly covered the moment of shock on his face before he closed the door behind him.

Bowie let my hand go and stood up to face Kye. I hurried to do the same.

This was not how I'd wanted to tell Kye about Bowie. I had hoped to explain this first. I had wanted to do it last night and then chickened out.

Kye rubbed his jaw as he stared at Bowie before looking back at me. "Damn, Baby Doll, you could have prepared me."

Guilt, worry, fear, frustration swirled inside of me. All the things I had practiced in my head to say to Kye went poof. I couldn't remember any of them. I felt like I had betrayed him, which was ridiculous. But I had lied to him in a way. By not telling him.

"She was putting it off. Worried about how you'd feel about us. That's what our disagreement was about. Why I shut her out," Bowie said when it was clear I wasn't going to respond.

Kye tore his gaze off me to give Bowie a hard glare. "Is that what it was? You ignoring her. Refusing to answer her calls and texts. Making her cry. That was a disagreement?"

I had to speak before Bowie said the wrong thing. Forcing my feet to move, I stepped around Bowie. "Kye, he was right. He wanted me to tell you. He begged me to. I was ... I don't know. I was just unsure how you'd take it. With all our history, I was nervous, and I kept putting it off. I should have told you. I was going to so many times, and then I couldn't say it. I got scared."

Kye tilted his head, and the cold expression he'd given Bowie was gone. He looked wounded, which made my chest hurt. "When have I ever done anything to make you scared of me? I want you happy, Baby Doll. That's it. I'm not sure he's the one to do it though."

Before Bowie could respond, I took another step toward Kye. "I wasn't scared of you. I was scared of upsetting you. For this reason. I know you still

hold it against Bowie about how he handled things years ago. But we were the ones who had messed up. Bowie was a kid. We all were. That's the past, and we are all different now. Time changed things. You see that, don't you? Just like you and I have changed, Bowie did too. We grew up."

Kye glanced back at Bowie before meeting my gaze. "I don't want you hurt. I don't like it when you cry. He made you cry already."

"I've apologized for that, and I intend to make it up to her. I had to work through some old shit in my head. Shit that you'd caused," Bowie said.

Kye's body tensed, and I reached out and grabbed his arm.

"He's right. We never got closure on what happened. He needed time to accept that we are and will always be just friends. That the kiss he had seen was a drunken mistake. Not something you meant to do."

"If you wanted her as more than a friend, that would have happened by now," Bowie added. "It just took me stepping back and calming down to get that clear in my head."

Kye didn't look back at him. His eyes stayed fixed on me. There was something there that I didn't understand. He seemed lost. "Does he make you happy?"

I nodded. "Yes, he does."

There was a flash of pain in his eyes, and I battled with the urge to throw my arms around him and assure him he'd always be my best friend. That was a position no one else could have. But for Bowie's sake, I remained where I was. I had to draw the line, not blur it.

Kye lifted his eyes to look back at Bowie. "Don't hurt her again. That's your only warning."

Bowie was silent for a moment, and I was mentally pleading with him not to say something to set Kye off. When he came back from doing Mafia things, he was always on edge.

“I don’t plan on it,” he finally said tightly.

Kye raised his eyebrows, and I saw his jaw clench. “I need more than your fucking plan. I need your word.”

“Kye,” I said, squeezing his arm in an attempt to get his attention.

“It’s okay, Gen. He’s been the one taking care of you for the past few years. I get it. I respect it,” Bowie said behind me.

I didn’t take my eyes off Kye.

“I didn’t do it for you,” Kye said through his teeth.

“I didn’t say you did. We both love her. For her sake, let’s call a truce. I’m not here to come between your friendship. In fact, I might be the only man who gets it. Most guys would hate that her best friend is a guy. Especially someone like you. You’re intimidating to those who didn’t grow up with you.”

Bowie was right. I watched as Kye let his words sink in and hopefully calm him. When he looked back down at me, he searched my face, his eyes scanning me for any sign that could give him a reason to argue this.

Finally, he nodded. “Okay. If he’s what you want.”

Relief flooded me. “He is.”

Kye stepped back from me, and I let my hand fall away from my hold on him.

“I have some things to do. I’ll leave the two of you to it.”

Then, he turned and walked back to the door without another word. When

it closed behind him, I let out a sigh. Although it had gone better than I'd expected, the ache in my chest wasn't completely gone.



KYE—SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD

Closing my eyes tightly, I laid my head back on the sofa and wished the six-pack of beers I'd drunk could take the image of Genesis, naked, with Bowie fucking her, out of my head. Truth was, I had been fantasizing about how she'd look while being fucked for years. It was one of my favorites to get myself off. But in my fantasies, it was me filling her with my cock. It was me making her moan. My name she cried out.

Bowie had now taken that away from me too. He'd tainted it. Made it his.

My free hand balled into a fist, and I threw the empty bottle of beer in my other hand against the wall.

“FUCK!” I roared.

Why did it have to be like this? There were a million other girls out there for me to want. Why did it have to be Genesis? And why the fucking hell had Bowie gone and made her his? It wasn't fair. It was me she looked at with those big, worshipful eyes. Me, who she let call her Baby Doll. Me, who she hung out of her window and talked to at night. Not Bowie. If one of us got to have her, it should have been me.

The door opened at the top of the stairs, and I threw my arm over my face, covering it. I wasn't in the mood to explain the broken bottle of beer to my mom. She was already pissed about my newest tattoo. Lately, she'd been angry with me about all kinds of shit. Dad had been pushing for me to move in with him. He'd said she'd never truly understand me.

“Kye?” The sweet voice that ranked above all other voices said my name, and I dropped my arm from my face and sat up.

Genesis stood at the bottom of the stairs, frowning at me, and then her gaze swung to the broken bottle near her feet.

I jumped up. “Don’t move. You could get cut,” I told her.

She watched me as I walked over to her, then let out a squeal as I put my hands on her waist and picked her up, moving her over the broken glass to a safer area. My hands didn’t let go of her waist right away though. The warmth of her skin under my palms felt too good, and I wanted it to seep in some more. I suddenly felt an urgent need to take the little I could have of her before Bowie somehow stole that too.

Genesis lifted her eyes to look up at me. Those eyes of hers had always made me weak. I had blue eyes, but they weren’t like her kind of blue. Mom had said Genesis had aquamarine eyes. I didn’t know anyone else with their perfect shade of ocean and sky.

“I was looking for ...” She paused and glanced around, and the frown between her brows appeared again. “What happened?” she asked.

“Bottle broke,” I told her, making myself drop my hands instead of leaning down and smelling her like a maniac.

She was Bowie’s girl. No smelling her. No burying my face in her neck. No licking that place at the base of her throat where her pulse gave away her reaction to things when her expression didn’t.

“How?” she asked, then shook her head. “Never mind. Is Bowie here?”

Fucking Bowie. My fist balled up again.

“You lose him?” I asked.

She shook her head and grinned, as if I were making a joke. My eyes dropped to her neck, then down to her cleavage. When were her tits gonna stop growing? Fuck, it had been easier when she was flat-chested. The urge to tug her neckline down and clamp my mouth around one of her nipples was strong.

I moved back to stand in front of her. Smell her vanilla-cinnamon scent. Feel the warmth from her body. Imagine how she looked as she was orgasming. My eyes moved to that spot on her throat. The pulse was there, making it clear I affected her. I placed two fingers over the small, pumping vein gently and caressed it.

“Kye,” she whispered in a shaky breath.

“Yeah, Baby Doll?” I replied, lifting my eyes to meet hers.

The way her eyes shone back at me with uncertainty but clear interest took the next move out of my hands. I couldn't have stopped myself if I wanted to. Bowie could have walked in the damn room, and I'd still need this. She was a fucking siren, and I was weak.

I brushed my lips over hers twice, and the soft gasp that came from hers sent me over the edge. My mouth locked down over hers, and I teased her lips with my tongue until she opened for me, leaning in and pressing her body against mine. I cupped her face with one hand and ran the other one up her arm, then circled her neck with my fingers. The moment her tongue moved over mine, I was lost. She tasted better than anything my dreams could have conjured up.

“What the fuck?!” Bowie's shout was like a bucket of ice water being dumped over our heads.

I knew then that nothing would ever go back to the way it had been.



EIGHT

GENESIS

OCTOBER 15

Bowie had gone to pick up our dinner while I opened a bottle of his favorite red wine and prepared the living room for our movie date. He had been back in South Carolina the past week, and he had shown up to surprise me today. We were doing good with the back and forth.

Chloe owned a clothing boutique in town. She had several of them in Florida now. Even one in Key West, where she now lived. She'd hired me to do the ordering for all the stores, do the window display at the Ocala store, then send the picture to the other stores so they could do something similar. The best part was, she'd offered for me to sell my own designs in all the stores. I was so thankful for her allowing me to do this. I wasn't sure when I'd finish my degree, but this was hands-on experience. I had a chance to sell my clothing to the public.

I was currently wearing one of the items from my first store order. Chloe had asked if I could start a lingerie section. She'd had several requests from her stores managers. The lavender satin nightgown I had slipped on had matching thong panties and barely covered my butt. Bowie liked visual things, and I was glad I'd bought this one today when the shipment arrived.

I heard the keys in the door rattle and began pouring the wine into the glasses. I waited for him to come into the kitchen and say something about what I was wearing. Smiling, I stood there, acting like I was busy with my back to him. Bowie didn't ever get real creative with sex, but I was determined to eventually get him to lose his cool during sex. Maybe some sweaty, out-of-control, dirty-talking sex in the kitchen would finally happen for us.

His footsteps stopped, and when he remained silent, I turned to see what was wrong.

Kye stood there, staring at me. Not Bowie. The look in his eyes was something I had never seen before. Kye was a man-whore. A strong wind could make the man horny. But still, my traitorous body tingled when I got a look of him drinking me in.

I crossed my hands over my chest and glared at him. "What are you doing here? And stop looking at me like that!"

Kye licked his bottom lip, flashing his tongue ring in the process. "Damn, Baby Doll, what the fuck are you wearing?" he drawled, and then he pointed at my crotch. "Better uncross your arms. I am getting a view of something that you don't want me to see."

I let my arms fall immediately. "Kye! Stop looking!" I scolded him.

He laughed and covered his eyes with his hand. "Jesus, I didn't mean to

look. It was just right there. Why are you dressed like a fucking wet dream?”

My body flushed, and I wanted to slap myself. This was not the way to react to Kye. Although I was pretty sure I had started to get fluttery around him when I turned eleven. Didn't matter. He was my best friend, and he was a slut.

“Bowie is here. He surprised me today. He's gone to pick up our dinner.”

“And you think he is gonna be able to eat and drink red wine when you look like that?” Kye asked.

I was smiling, and I couldn't help it. Sure, he was a slut, but when he complimented me, it made me slightly breathless, like I was still that eleven-year-old girl, wanting him to notice me as more than one of the guys.

“What did you come by for?” I asked him.

He had to leave before Bowie got back. The last thing I needed was to give Bowie any reason to doubt my friendship with Kye. So far, we'd been doing good. The three of us. We weren't hanging out together or anything, but still, we were okay.

“I was going to see if you wanted to go get ribs and play some pool,” he explained. “Clearly, I should have called first.”

“Probably would have been a good idea, but I need you to go before Bowie gets here and knows you've seen me in this. He'll freak out.”

Kye nodded, keeping his eyes covered. “Yeah. I'd hate to hurt him when he took a swing at me.”

Sighing, I walked over and grabbed Kye's arm, trying not to think about how big and hard his biceps were. Not at all slim and toned, like Bowie's.

“Come on. Let's get you out of here,” I said, leading him back to the door.

“Do you dress like that often for him?” Kye asked me.

“That is not your business,” I replied.

“What? I see my best friend’s smooth, round asscheeks peeking out from under a satin nightie, and I can’t ask questions?”

He needed to shut up. Unfortunately, Kye and his blond hair, blue eyes, and muscular, tattooed, and pierced body affected females, even the ones who didn’t want it to affect them. Like me. I did not want my panties getting damp over my best friend.

I opened the door and shoved him out of it. Kye dropped his hand and turned to look back at me. I scowled at him before slamming it shut. I let out a sigh and rested my forehead on smooth wood. God, why did he have to see me in this? I was never going to hear the end of it.



“I come in peace.”

Kye’s voice startled me, and I spun around in the storeroom of his mom’s Ocala boutique to see him standing behind me, holding up two paper bags in his hands. Other than a few texts from him, saying he hoped I hadn’t caused Bowie to suffer a heart attack with my nightie and the usual *good morning, Baby Doll* text, we hadn’t spoken since last night.

Putting the hanger down, I looked from the bags in his hands and back to him. “Is that so? Let me see what’s in the bags,” I replied, crossing my arms over my chest.

Kye gave me a cocky grin. “Gotta go to the park with me to find out. Picnic or nothing,” he replied.

I glanced down at my phone and realized it was after one. I’d forgotten

about lunch. I looked back up at him. “Do carnivores eat what’s in those bags?” I asked.

Kye raised one eyebrow. “Baby Doll, what kind of question is that? Do you think I’m gonna bring you a meal without some fucking meat in it?”

I sighed in relief. Bowie’s vegan lifestyle was a struggle. I should feel guilty for even being annoyed by it. Bowie had had to leave this morning. He had classes and work. Spending some time with Kye would help brighten my spirits before I headed to the hospital.

“Deal. Let me tell Vera I’m stepping out for lunch,” I told him.

Vera was the store manager, and at first, she’d not been happy about me handling so much. I’d managed to sway her though. She liked my window displays and the things I ordered. Sales had picked up.

“She knows,” he replied. “Let’s go.”

Of course she knew. I was sure he’d walked in and charmed her before coming back here to see me. She might be in her fifties, but Kye was eye candy for all ages.

I followed him out the back door and realized his bike was parked outside. He went over and secured the food, then picked up the helmet and turned to me. His eyes scanned over my outfit. It was one of my designs that I’d made a few sizes of and put out in the storefront. It was hot pink and lime green. The bottoms were shorts, and the middle made a crisscross over my stomach, leaving my sides bare and showing a small portion around my belly button before wrapping around my neck in a halter style.

“That’s a fucking awesome outfit, Baby Doll,” he said when his eyes came back to mine.

That was the reaction I’d been hoping to get from Bowie this morning, but

he'd said nothing about it. He wasn't much into fashion, so I didn't get my feelings hurt when he didn't mention my designs.

"Thank you," I replied. "It's a Genesis original."

The proud look in Kye's gaze made my chest get tight.

"That explains it then," he said as I took the helmet from him and put it on my head.

Kye went to buckle it, and I let him. He had a thing about making sure it was done right. When he was satisfied, he threw his leg over and got on the back, then looked back at me as I climbed on behind him.

Kye squeezed my leg, then cranked up the bike. As he pulled out onto the main street, I wrapped my arms around his stomach. I loved this feeling. It reminded me of a simpler time. When we had been younger and life hadn't gotten complicated. On the back of Kye's bike felt like summertime in my youth even though it was now fall. Thoughts of Dad and the future seemed to ease. My chest didn't feel so heavy.

He drove up to the parking lot of the park and held my hand as I climbed off before following me. There was a breeze, thankfully, and plenty of shade. We walked over to an area with plush green grass and a view of the pond. Kye tossed down the blanket he'd taken out of his saddlebag, and I spread it out.

I sat down first and watched as he took the spot beside me, which I'd left for him because I knew he preferred to lean up against the tree. Opening the bags, I squealed at the sight of the familiar paper wrapped around the burgers.

Looking up at him, I beamed. "You are forgiven."

He chuckled. "For what exactly? Seeing your ass or pussy lips or jerking off to the image of both in the shower?"

Heat flooded my body as my eyes widened.

Kye leaned over and grabbed the second bag from me, still grinning. He was teasing me. The man had no filter. He hadn't been born with one. Besides, he didn't jerk off. He was too sexually active to pleasure himself. Pulling out a box that I knew was cheese-smothered fries, he handed it to me.

I took it and prepared my lunch in my lap.

“You gonna ignore that question? Or were the cheese fries enough to get me forgiven for all three?”

I lifted my eyes and looked at him, trying not to react to this. “All three,” I replied before picking up my burger to take a bite.

“What if I jerked off more than once?”

Do not blush. Do not let him get the better of you. He is trying to. This is what Kye does, I mentally coached myself while chewing the burger.

When I finally swallowed, I licked the mustard from my lips, then returned his gaze. “You have too much sex to jerk off. I'm not naive. You are just trying to get to me.”

Kye smirked and took his burger from its wrapper. “Is that what you think?”

I ignored that. Instead, I picked up a fry from heaven and put it in my mouth

“When does Bowie leave?” he asked me.

“He left this morning,” I replied with a heavy sigh. I wished he could have stayed longer.

“Short visit. You sound upset about that.”

I lifted one shoulder and let it fall. “We just don't get much time together.

It's only a five-hour drive to Charleston. I just wish he managed to carve out more time to see me." I sounded whiny. But I needed to get it out, and Kye was the one person I could be real with. Just say what I was thinking and not be judged or lectured. "Mom was hoping he'd come to family dinner tomorrow night. We haven't had one since Dad had a stroke. It seems silly to have one with just the two of us. Not to mention, it would be depressing. But Mom loves to cook. It's therapy for her. I think she misses having someone to cook for."

"I'll go to dinner. It's been a while, and I miss Mom and Pops."

I stared at him. He was serious. I could tell by the look in his eyes.

"Really? Don't you have better things to do?" *Like go to Devil's and screw a stripper.*

He leaned forward and took one of my fries. "Nope. You know I'd rather be with you than anyone else. Plus, I'd do anything to give Alice a reason to smile. If she wants to cook, then I'll gladly be her person to feed."

A smile tugged at my lips. My parents loved Kye. They didn't approve of his wild living, but they did love him.

"Mom would like that," I replied honestly.

Kye always made them laugh, and Mom enjoyed feeding him because he ate so much and praised her cooking. With him, she wouldn't have to stress over making vegan food. That would have been a struggle for her.

"It's a date," he said, leaning back with his burger.

I took a few more bites and enjoyed the peacefulness.

"So, how many seconds did you get to keep that man-slayer thing on last night once he got home? I'm guessing you didn't make it out of the kitchen.

You sure as fuck had better not have done anything in my bed. You promised not to fuck him in my bed.”

My face felt warm. Not because Kye was bringing up sex. He did that often. It was just part of his vocabulary. However, the fact that even Kye thought the nightie would end in kitchen sex made me feel like I was doing something wrong. It had not ended in the way I’d hoped. Sure, Bowie had said I was beautiful in it. We’d had our wine, and he’d made love to me. Nice and slow on Chloe’s former bed.

I glanced at him before getting another fry. “We didn’t do anything in your bed. The other is not your business.”

He didn’t seem upset about me not giving him details. “Fair enough. Not sure I want to know anyway. My imagination has already taunted me plenty.

“Tell me about the designs you’re putting in Mom’s shops. She’s real excited about them. Couldn’t get her to shut up about them when she called yesterday.”

It was a relief to know Chloe liked my designs. Talking about clothing was easy, and no longer being in school with other fashion majors, I didn’t get to discuss it much. I started going into detail about what I had made and my ideas. Kye even gave me feedback. He was listening to me, which gave me a release I hadn’t known I needed.

Once we finished, Kye took our trash to the garbage can while I folded up the blanket. I handed it to Kye when he returned. He took it and held out his elbow for me to take his arm. Laughing, I slipped my hand through the opening, and we walked back to his bike. He had always been able to do this—make a bad situation better. When I was sad, he found a way to make me happy.

Even from the first day I'd met him. I'd fallen out of a tree and broken my arm in two places. I also had a concussion. The next day, while I sat in my bed, watching the television and hurting, he showed up at my house. My mom let him in, and he came in my bedroom with a bag full of candy, movies, a board game, and a pack of markers.

He decorated my cast with colorful doodles, telling me outrageous stories that went along with his drawings to make me laugh. Then, Bowie arrived, and both of them watched movies with me. We played Monopoly until I fell asleep from the pain meds my mom had brought me. That had been the real beginning of a friendship that became the center of my world. Even when I had fallen in love with Bowie, it was Kye who would keep me from falling apart when things got hard.

I wrapped my arms tighter around him as he revved the engine on his bike. He turned his head to the side to look back at me.

"Thank you. For listening," I said.

"Always, Baby Doll."

I laid my cheek against his back, thankful for the day I'd moved next door to the blond boy with a wild streak and a vocabulary full of curse words.



NINE

GENESIS

OCTOBER 30

Bowie had been nervous all through dinner. It felt as if he needed to tell me something, but wasn't sure how to. When he didn't, my head immediately went to him breaking up with me or needing space or maybe he'd met someone else. Once we reached his car, he stopped and asked me if I was in the mood to go to the springs. Not to swim, just to sit and talk. I hadn't been to the springs since I had been in high school.

I said yes, wondering if it was there that he was going to tell me whatever it was that had him acting odd. Mentally, I tried to prepare myself for Bowie not being able to do long-distance. Although I did feel like we had been doing good at talking on the phone and texting. I thought things with us were good. He'd told me he loved me just last night before we ended the call and went to bed.

When I'd opened the door this afternoon to him, he'd said he missed me and how he had needed to see my face. I hadn't been expecting him, and it was a great surprise. One I needed. Kye had been busy with his underworld life this week, and I'd thrown myself into working when I wasn't at the hospital. My only friends growing up here had been Bowie and Kye. It had taken me moving to Savannah for college to meet my first female friend. Quinn had claimed me the first day we met. Thinking of her made me smile.

Being a Monday night, the springs weren't packed. There wasn't another car here. Relieved that we would have privacy, I stepped out of the truck as Bowie walked around the front to meet me. His grin didn't look like one of a guy about to break things off. That was some relief. Maybe I was just being paranoid.

"We got lucky. No one else is here," he said to me, taking my hand.

"It is a school night," I reminded him.

We made our way over to the spot we knew well and sat down. The moon was bright tonight, and the way it danced over the water was peaceful.

"I think this is the first time I've ever been here without the place being packed," I said.

"Yeah, me too," he agreed. "We've got a lot of memories here."

I laughed, thinking about the times we'd been here over the years. "Yes, we do."

I left out that all those memories had Kye in them too. Bowie already knew that. I'd come here the first time with Kye and Bowie. Chloe had brought us the summer Kye turned nine.

"I've made mistakes with you. Ones I can't go back and fix. If I had only known then what I know now," he said to me, his hand tightening over mine,

“I would have done it differently. I’d have listened to you about the kiss. I wouldn’t have shut you out. There wouldn’t be this weirdness between Kye and me.” He chuckled, then shook his head. “No. That’s a lie. I wouldn’t have ever been able to think of Kye as my best friend after that day. But I’d have stayed around for you.”

I really hoped we weren’t out here to rehash the past. I wanted to leave it there. Not go back and think about it.

“You and Kye were always opposites. That would have probably made the two of you grow apart over time anyway. Here you are, a software programmer, and Kye is a ...” I trailed off.

“Lord of the Underworld,” Bowie finished for me with amusement in his tone.

I smirked. “Yeah, that. He also works on motorcycles,” I added.

Why I felt like I had to defend him when Kye chose to be a part of the Mafia life, I didn’t know. But it just always happened.

“Sure, I know,” Bowie said, and then he lifted our joined hands and placed a kiss on mine. “You’re right. We aren’t anything alike. Growing up, we were boys, and that didn’t matter as much. But as men, we don’t enjoy the same things. For example, there is no way in hell I’d go to a strip club. I don’t like guns, so I sure as heck wouldn’t walk around with one always on my body, and a motorcycle is a death trap.”

A smile touched my face as I thought of what Kye would say to all that. I was thankful that Bowie didn’t feel the need to go watch women dance naked and that he didn’t like guns. I hated them. The motorcycle thing I might not agree with. Somehow, when I was on the back of Kye’s, I felt safe. But I understood Bowie’s feelings about it. I’d never want him driving one. That

would be dangerous.

“Kye lives a life neither of us will ever understand,” I replied, wanting to get the topic off him.

It felt wrong to talk about Kye with Bowie. I didn’t want to say or hear anything that made Kye sound bad.

“Yeah. And I should have seen that at seventeen,” he said. “I love you, Gen. I’m going to love you forever. There isn’t a woman out there who will ever be able to make me feel the way you do.”

I turned to look at him. Bowie only talked sweet like this when we were making up. We weren’t fighting tonight.

“I love you too,” I replied.

He studied me for a moment, then let go of my hand and stood up. Confused by why my saying I loved him would make him move away from me, I started to ask him where he was going when he moved in front of me and started going down on one knee while pulling something out of his pocket. The moment this happened was not something a girl could be prepared for. Had I imagined it in my head? Yes. But it had been years. Back when I had been a young teenager with dreams that were never going to come true.

This, however, was real. It was right there in front of me.

Bowie looked up at me, and on the tip of his finger was a diamond ring. My eyes went from the ring to his face. I was sure my mouth was hanging open.

“Genesis Stoll, I’ve loved you for as long as I can remember. It didn’t matter when we were apart. I loved you then too. I hated that I loved you, but I loved you just the same. I was born to love you. Forever, for me, is and will

always be you. Will you marry me?"

This was happening. Oh my God. Not in a million years had I expected this from him. At least not now. I was living back in Ocala while his life was in Charleston. It had only been two hours from me in Savannah, but it was five hours from Ocala. I stared into his eyes and saw the fear. This was why he'd been nervous all night.

"I want to say yes," I told him. "But I have so many questions. I can't promise you I will be able to return to Savannah anytime soon. I don't know when my dad will be better."

He smiled. "I intend to finish this semester, and then the rest will be online. I've been offered a job out of Atlanta, but I don't have to live there. It's a great opportunity. One I hadn't expected to get so soon. I'm going to buy us a house here in Ocala. You don't have to leave your parents."

Oh, wow. A house. He was going to buy a house. Here.

"You want to do that? Live in Ocala?"

I had always thought he couldn't wait to get out. He'd always talked about the day we'd move off to a big city up north.

"I want you, Genesis. Just you."

He loved me. Wasn't that what every girl wanted? Yes. This was the man who loved me enough. I was what he needed. Nothing more. That was what my parents had. I wanted it too.

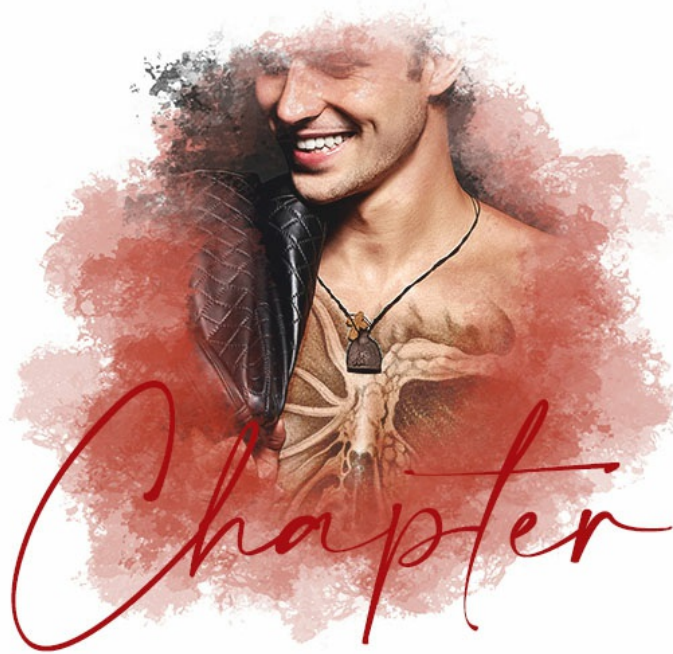
"Yes," I said, surprising myself.

Bowie's grin could have lit up the night sky without the moon. He took my finger and slipped the ring onto it. I barely paid attention to the solitaire. My head was spinning. I was engaged. I'd said yes. It was the right thing to do.

With Bowie, I'd grow old beside him. He would be faithful and cherish me.

If only my heart wasn't breaking a little for the young girl who had always had another groom in mind. A man who would never get on one knee for anyone.

It was time I grew up and let that dream go.



TEN

KYE

NOVEMBER 2

I stared at the ceiling fan as it went around and around. The half-empty bottle of Jack in my hand hung off the side of my bed. I wasn't sure what day it was, and I didn't fucking care. What I did care about was that I'd need more whiskey soon.

The only thing that was keeping me sane was my good friend Jack. I was afraid to part with him. If I did, then I'd care. My chest would hurt like a motherfucker again. I wasn't ready for that. Nope. I was not ready. Numbing this was the only way to make it.

I'd taunted Sax for sulking after we had Haisley Slate shut him out. It wasn't like I wanted to do it. But I was just following orders, making sure she stayed away from Sax. He didn't know it though. He was still struggling with it. We could all tell. But it seemed he had been better lately, but then he'd

only known the girl two fucking weeks.

Genesis had been in my life for thirteen years. We had real history together. What I had with her was deeper than the love shit that Sax thought he had felt.

Eventually, it wouldn't hurt so bad, right? I mean, I had to get used to the fact that my Baby Doll was engaged.

My hand gripped the bottle tighter as I thought about the diamond ring on her finger. Fucking Bowie taking her away from me again. Asking to marry her. Making her his when she was mine. She'd always been mine. Except now, it didn't feel like it. She had another man's claim shining on her pretty, slim finger. She had let him put it there. She had said YES to him. Didn't she understand that saying yes to him was saying goodbye to me?

I sat up and took another long swig from the bottle. Four other empty bottles sat on the dresser across from me. Levi had said this was the last one he was getting for me when he brought it this morning. He'd said I needed to snap out of it and deal with shit. Well, he didn't know what this felt like. He could kiss my ass. I'd call someone else to get me more.

How could she do this to me? To us? This would mess everything up. Change us. Fuck, I hated Bowie. If it was some dickhead I didn't know, making him disappear would be tempting. But, no, she'd had to go and get back with our childhood best friend. Then get all engaged and shit. Why was he hell-bent on ruining my life? He knew I needed her. He'd left her! Broken up with her! I was the one who had stayed by her side. Not him!

Genesis's text message sound went off on my phone, and I grabbed it, desperate for any connection to her. I missed her. She was with him in South Carolina right now. Her mom had forced her to go, saying she needed a

break.

Coming home Saturday. I miss you! If you can carve out time for me, I want to see you.

I laughed. It was hard and loud. *If I can carve time out for her. Shit.* It was more like if I could get my ass sober enough. I knew I would though. Letting her down was something I couldn't allow myself to ever do again. There was always the chance that they would break up. She might realize she didn't want to be married to him.

I'll be at the house, waiting on you.

I pressed Send. She needed to see that I was clearly the more dedicated man. Bowie wasn't there for her all the time. What would happen when she married him and needed me? I'd fucking go to her, was what would happen.

Okay! I'll order out, or we can go out. Your call.

I wanted her to myself. The idea of sharing her with even strangers annoyed me. I needed her cuddled up against me, watching a movie while I smelled her hair. If I could just go back in time and not go to Devil's, get hammered, and miss my birthday night with her. If I had been with her and not messed it all up, she wouldn't have left me. Wouldn't have been at that damn event where she'd seen Bowie. This would not be happening to me.

I stood up and headed for my bathroom. I stunk. I needed a shower and a gallon of water. I wasn't sure what today was or how much time I had before Saturday. What I did know was, I didn't want to let her down. I was going to remind her how much she needed me in her life. That stupid ring didn't mean shit. Baby Doll was mine, dammit.

After I showered and changed into clean clothes, I headed down to the kitchen. Huck was leaning against the counter, looking down at his phone

when I walked in.

He lifted his eyes to me. “You decided to face the world again.”

“What day is it?” I grunted, opening the fridge.

“Thursday,” he replied.

I took a bottle of water from the fridge and opened it and began chugging it down.

“You going to sober up and fly to Arcadia for the Breeders’ Cup?” he asked.

I scowled. “That’s this weekend?”

He nodded.

“I can’t. You?”

He shook his head. “No. Gage, Sax, and Trev are going with Blaise and Garrett. I’m holding down things here with Levi. We were letting you have another day or two before we forced you out of your funk.”

I opened the fridge back up and got another bottle of water out. “Genesis is coming home Saturday.”

He cleared his throat. “As in she’s coming back to your mom’s old house?”

I glared at him. “That’s fucking home.”

“Maybe for you. Doubt it is for her.”

I slammed the door to the fridge. I wasn’t in the mood for this shit.

“Don’t break the damn door,” he growled.

“Don’t piss me the fuck off,” I snapped back at him.

He crossed his arms over his chest, leveling me with his gaze. “Did you really expect her to always stay single?”

“She has me,” I replied, slapping my chest.

“Friendship isn’t the same. She needs intimacy. She’s a woman, for Christ’s sake. She wants romance and shit.”

I groaned and ran a hand through my damp hair. “Why? That leads to pain. Heartbreak. It destroys people. What we have is ironclad. It’s stronger than romance shit.”

Huck chuckled. “You’re so fucking clueless.”

“Look, just because you fell in love and got married doesn’t mean we all want that. What I have with Genesis is just as fucking strong as what you have with Trinity. It’s just different.”

Huck dropped his hands and straightened. “You keep telling yourself that. But you’re wrong. When I’m buried deep inside my wife and she’s screaming my name, that’s a bond you will never have with a best friend. It binds you in ways that you don’t understand.”

I tossed the empty bottle into the recycling bin. “It’s just fucking. I fuck all the time, and not once have I had some bond that is stronger than what I have with Genesis. It means nothing. I like the girls I fuck. It’s a mutual thing. But that isn’t deep. It’s not something I can’t walk away from.”

None of the girls I fucked would ever compare to what I felt with Genesis. That would never change. I knew that for a fact.

“What you do is slam your dick into a cunt to get off. For the pleasure of it. That is a different kind of fucking. The kind I’m talking about ain’t the same thing. It’s sinking my dick into someone that is mine. She belongs to no one else. When you are inside the woman who owns you, there is nothing more powerful. It’s soul-binding that can’t be achieved any other way.” He gave me a pointed look, then walked out of the kitchen.

I glared at the doorway long after he was gone. Why the fuck did that bother me? Was it really something different? Did Genesis have that with Bowie? It felt like a knife was twisting in my stomach. I didn't want to think that when Bowie fucked her, they had some deep connection. The idea that he had a piece of her that I never would, that he could call her his, made my chest burn. I didn't like that shit at all. He didn't own her. She would never completely be his. She couldn't do that. Could she?

“Dammit, Huck!” I shouted. “I was trying to get sober!”

“You need to get sober!” he shouted back. “Then get your head out of your ass!”

My head wasn't in my ass. But fucking would get the edge off. Maybe a little distraction for a moment. I needed to go to Devil's.



ELEVEN

GENESIS

NOVEMBER 23

I glanced down at my phone while I creamed the bowl of potatoes. It was only ten in the morning, and we weren't eating Thanksgiving lunch until twelve. Bowie had plenty of time to get here. I needed to stop worrying.

Today's plan was to eat lunch at my parents' and then dinner at his aunt's house in Gainesville. I had suggested that we invite his mom over for lunch here and do a family meal together, but he'd shot that idea down. Dad had been released to come home last week, and I didn't want to leave them on Thanksgiving. I wanted to stay here and bask in the fact that he was home. We didn't have to face Thanksgiving with him in the hospital.

"Keep an eye on the dressing," Mom called out from the dining room, where she was setting the table.

She was elaborate with her holiday centerpieces, and with the mess she had on the table right now, this one was going to take a while.

“Okay,” I called back to her just as the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade came back on the television that sat in the corner of the kitchen.

I had moved from the potatoes to working on the green bean casserole when the front door chimed as it opened.

“Please tell me there are pumpkin pancakes left!” Kye called out.

“I saved you a plate! It’s in the microwave,” Mom told him. “Genesis, warm up his pancakes and add some butter before you put the maple syrup on them.”

I looked up from the casserole dish I was working on when he entered the kitchen. “You can warm your own pancakes,” I informed him with a smirk. “Mom might think you need waited on, but I know better.”

Kye walked over to me and put his arm around my back, then kissed my cheek. “Happy Thanksgiving to you too, Baby Doll.”

I rolled my eyes at him, but I was smiling. I was glad he’d come. I hadn’t been sure. He’d been acting weird since the engagement. Less texting, more awkwardness when he was around us, and it caused me to panic at times. I had said yes to Bowie, not thinking about how it would affect me and Kye. I couldn’t lose Kye. The truth was, if I had to choose between the two, I wasn’t so sure I wouldn’t choose Kye, and was that a way to start a marriage? Knowing that there was someone else who was more important than your spouse?

“Did my second favorite Stoll lady make my caramel pie?” he asked me as he walked over to the microwave.

“What do you think?”

Mom had been making Kye caramel pie for Thanksgiving since he had been eight.

He looked back at me with his cocky grin. “I think if your dad ever frees her up, I’m proposing.”

“Sure you are,” I replied while reading the recipe Mom had left on the counter for me.

I wasn’t a cook, but on Thanksgiving and Christmas, Mom always gave me specific things to make. The simple things I couldn’t mess up. I should know how to make green bean casserole by heart at this point in life, but since I only made it for two meals out of the year, I always forgot how to do it.

Kye walked over and pulled out a stool to sit down with his breakfast across from where I was working.

I reached over and got the bowl of candied pecans, then pushed them over to him. “You forgot to sprinkle these on top,” I told him.

He grabbed a handful as I went to the fridge to get the whipped cream out. When I went back over to his plate and added the final touch, he opened his mouth for me to shoot some inside it too. Laughing, I gave him a large squirt before putting it back up.

“See, I did need your help with fixing my pancakes,” he said to me as I went back to working on the casserole.

“Mmhmm,” I replied. “Why do I think you left those things off because you knew I’d do it for you?”

He winked and put a forkful into his mouth. Looking past him, I watched as the new Snoopy float they’d kept talking about made its way down the street. This was a tradition and had been for years. One that Bowie had never

been a part of. He'd always gone to his aunt's house with his family on Thanksgiving.

Kye had started coming over for pumpkin pancakes since I'd told him about them the first year we moved in next door. We would watch the parade together, and he'd stay and visit while Mom cooked dinner. Once he had left home, Chloe had started to travel during Thanksgiving week with friends, so Kye had begun staying here for lunch. A few times over the years, he and his mom had come over for Thanksgiving meals too.

"Where's Bowie?" he asked, and the sarcastic way he said his name wasn't lost on me.

"He's on his way. He didn't leave until early this morning," I explained.

"Doesn't he have to go to his aunt's house?"

I nodded. "We are both going for dinner. He's eating lunch here."

Kye looked annoyed by that answer as he took another bite.

"We set a wedding date," I said, needing to get that out of the way. I didn't want Bowie bringing it up and Kye getting all weird on me.

Kye set his fork down. "Oh. When?"

I slid the casserole into the oven and checked on Mom's dressing. "March 30."

He coughed as I turned back to him. The scowl on his face made it clear that he didn't like that answer. "Of next year? As in four fucking months?"

I had felt like it was soon too. When I'd mentioned waiting a year, Bowie had been hurt, so I had given in and agreed to sooner.

"Yeah."

Kye narrowed his eyes as he studied me. "You're twenty. Why the rush?"

he said, his voice raised lightly. “You don’t seem real happy about it either.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Either?” I asked.

“Yeah, either. I’m not fucking happy about it.”

“Language!” my mom called out from the dining room. “And it is too soon. They need to wait a few years. Twenty is too young to be married.”

Kye pointed at the dining room. “See! Listen to your mother.”

I leaned my hip against the counter and crossed my arms over my chest as I looked at him. “Bowie doesn’t want to even wait a year. I mentioned it, and he acted like I’d hurt his feelings.”

Kye’s eyebrows were pinched together. “Because he’s a pussy,” he said angrily, although his voice dropped to a whisper on the last word so Mom wouldn’t hear him. “Don’t let him pressure you to get married so soon. It’s bad enough you’re engaged at twenty.”

I shrugged. “Does it really matter? I mean, we’re gonna get married, so why argue over when?”

Kye ran his hand over his head and stared at me with those blue eyes of his, full of so many emotions that I didn’t know which one he was actually feeling. “I can’t believe you’re gonna marry him, Baby Doll.”

“Why?”

“Because ... because you have me. Why do you need him?”

I laughed then. Kye really believed that too. He didn’t seem to think I needed anything more from a man than what his friendship provided. Explaining relationships to him was pointless. We’d had that conversation over tequila before, and he hadn’t gotten the point. To Kye, sex was a fun time, nothing more. He didn’t see intimacy as something required to fulfill a

relationship.

His exact words had been, “Sex and love don’t mix. It just complicates shit.”

I reached over and took his hand in mine. “Kye, you are and will always be my best friend. I know you don’t think I need more than what we have, but I need the other stuff too.”

He flipped his hand over and threaded his fingers through mine. “He’s gonna take you away from me.”

“No, he’s not.”

He stared down at our hands. “Do you swear?”

“I swear.”

The doorbell rang, and his head snapped up, looking angry again. “Is that him?”

I laughed and gave his hand one more squeeze before letting go. “Yes.”

“He’s early. You didn’t save him pancakes too, did you?”

“Is someone gonna get that?” Mom called from the living room. “Theo is asleep. I don’t want it to ring again. He needs his rest.”

“Yeah! I am,” I replied and glanced back at Kye. “Be nice. Please. For me.”

He sighed and gave me a nod before I went to let Bowie in.

This would be a first for us. Sharing a holiday. I was excited and nervous about it. Fitting Bowie into my life with Kye hadn’t been easy so far. Neither of them seemed to want to rekindle the friendship they’d once had. Deep down, I had hoped that they would find that again. But the more we were all together, the more they seemed like strangers. Almost ignoring the other’s

presence.

Opening the door to Bowie smiling with a bouquet of yellow and orange roses, I put aside my worries about Kye and took the flowers before leaning in to kiss him as he stepped inside.

“I missed you,” I told him.

“I missed you too,” he replied, then nodded his head toward the outside. “Kye’s motorcycle?”

“Yep. He’s in the kitchen. Come on,” I replied, refusing to let him make this awkward.

He had known that Kye was going to be here. I wasn’t sure if he had stated it as if he shouldn’t be here or just pointing it out. Either way, it seemed odd.

I took the roses into the kitchen, and Kye looked at them, then me before raising his eyebrows.

“Roses?” he asked with a touch of amusement in his voice.

“Yes,” I replied tightly, hoping he wasn’t going to say what he was thinking.

Kye swung his gaze to Bowie. “Since you’re marrying her, you should probably know her favorite flowers.”

“Kye,” I warned.

I could feel Bowie’s eyes on me, and I was very close to strangling Kye.

“What?” he said, shrugging. “I was just gonna help a guy out. He needs to know you don’t like roses and find them basic and overrated.”

My face felt hot as I glared at Kye. “That isn’t true.”

Bowie had bought me so many roses since we’d started dating. I didn’t want him to know that I didn’t like them.

Kye let out a bark of laughter. “Yeah, it fucking is true. You’ve said that for years.”

Shut up, Kye. Shut up, I mentally yelled at him.

He didn’t care. Instead, he looked back at Bowie. “Her favorite flower is a Persian buttercup. The brighter pink, the better. If you can’t find those, then dahlias are her second favorite. She really likes those in orange. You should have gone with orange dahlias if you were trying for a fall bouquet.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. This was not how I’d wanted to start off our first holiday meal together. Kye reminding Bowie how well he knew me wouldn’t warm him up to this.

When I opened my eyes, I forced a smile and turned to Bowie. “I’ve changed my mind about that,” I told him. “Orange roses are now my favorite. They’re beautiful. Thank you.”

Bowie didn’t look convinced. “You’re welcome,” he replied.

“Oh, would you look at those roses! They will look beautiful in my centerpiece,” Mom exclaimed as she walked into the kitchen. Then, she smiled brightly at Kye and Bowie. “It sure is good to have you two boys in this house together again. Now, Kye, please get me the cornucopia out of the attic. And, Bowie, would you go to the basement and get the two extra chairs for the dining room table?”

I wanted to hug my mom’s neck. She’d come in and defused the tension like a pro.

Kye stood up from the stool. “I’m on it,” he told her.

“Yes, ma’am,” Bowie replied.

I turned to look at her while they both headed to do what she’d asked.

Thank you, I said silently.

She nodded. “There is too much going unsaid that you need to clear up before you walk down the aisle,” she said in a low voice, then followed Kye to the attic.

I stood there alone, wondering what she meant by that and afraid I already knew.



TWELVE

GENESIS

DECEMBER 10

While I finished putting the lights around the tree, Kye had gone up to the attic to find the ornaments his mom had told me were up there. I wanted to have everything decorated before Bowie got here tomorrow night. He was only going to be able to stay for two days, but it was something. We needed to make some decisions on the wedding. Like where, what colors, how many people, flowers, cake—since he was vegan, that was going to be more difficult. He'd promised he could stay the entire week from Christmas to New Year. I was hoping we'd get a lot done during that time.

“Found them! You and I made most of these. I forgot about them. Mom hasn't used them since she moved,” Kye said as he put the boxes down on the coffee table.

I walked over and picked up one of the colorful balls that had a small

handprint in white paint on it, where the fingers had been made into snowmen. Chloe had always done a craft day before decorating the tree when we were younger. The year we had turned thirteen, Kye had put his foot down and refused to do it anymore. I smiled when I saw my name written with a Sharpie on the back of the red ball.

“I love these. We had such little hands once,” I said.

“What do you mean, had? Baby Doll, you still have little hands,” Kye teased.

I rolled my eyes and put the ball back in the box while I continued to study the ornaments we’d made as kids. “If your mom isn’t going to use them, I wonder if she’d let me have them?” I asked.

Kye shrugged. “I don’t see why not. What are you gonna do, hang these on your Christmas tree every year?”

I nodded. “Yes, I am.”

A smirk curled his lips. “I’m sure Bowie will fucking love that.”

I glared up at him. “He won’t mind.” At least, I didn’t think so. “Bowie probably has a few in here too. Didn’t he do ornaments with us one year?”

Kye plopped down on the sofa and propped his feet up on the coffee table, crossing his ankles. “I don’t remember. I fucking hope not.”

“Kye!” I scolded him. “When are you going to ease up on Bowie?”

Thanksgiving was the last time I’d tried to get the two of them together. Not only had Kye told Bowie what my favorite flower was and how I felt about roses, but he had also corrected him on my favorite Christmas song and the way I liked my coffee, and the worst was when he’d brought up the fact that I loved vintage-style jewelry. He had gone on to be specific and said that

I preferred yellow diamonds, unlike the princess cut white diamond that Bowie had chosen for my engagement ring. That the only rings I liked with white diamonds were if the diamonds were around an oval-cut sapphire. I'd been torn between being angry with him and impressed that he remembered something like that. I couldn't even remember when I had said anything about engagement rings to him. We never talked about marriage.

"I'll ease up on him when you give him that ring back. Besides, that ring isn't you."

I looked down at the engagement ring on my finger. "It's a beautiful ring," I told him.

Kye let out a short laugh. "It's typical. Just like the fucking roses. He doesn't take the time to make things special. If he's gonna buy you flowers, then he should have found out what your favorite one was. And if a man is dumb enough to get engaged, then he should fucking make sure he knows the type of ring his woman wants. You don't just go buy the first thing you see."

I put my hand on my hip and stared at him. "How did you know about what kind of ring I wanted anyway? When did we ever discuss that?"

He flicked his tongue ring against his top teeth and grinned at me. "We didn't. I just pay attention."

I raised my eyebrows. "No, you don't. You can't even remember the girl's name you were with last night!"

He'd already called her two different names, telling me about how Mattia had gotten oddly possessive over her. He often shared women with his friends, along with other kinky things.

"I didn't say I paid attention to everyone. Just you."

I wished that when he said things like that, I didn't feel warm and tingly

inside. I had hoped being engaged to Bowie would kill that. It hadn't. Nothing ever would, I was afraid.

“All right then, when did I mention an engagement ring?” I asked him because he had been so accurate on Thanksgiving that I was speechless. Then, I had recovered and run interference with Bowie's feelings again.

“I saw you zooming in with your phone on some actress's hand once. You were looking at her engagement ring. I asked what you were doing, and you looked up from the screen to see me staring down at it. You laughed and said I was being nosy, then said, ‘What if I was looking at something private?’ I asked if someone was sending you dick pics, and you shoved me with your elbow, then laughed before going back to study the ring. I swear you kept looking at it for about ten minutes. When you finally stopped, you sighed as you set your phone down and said if you ever got engaged, you hoped you got an antique ring. I asked you what the difference was, and you said that they were more romantic and that a yellow diamond stood out in a way a white one didn't.”

He remembered every detail of that conversation. I tried not to look as impressed as I was because he might think I was reading into it.

“Okay, but you mentioned two different kinds of vintage rings on Thanksgiving. The ring you're talking about wasn't the sapphire Edwardian setting with a cluster of diamonds around it.”

Kye dropped his feet to the floor and stood up. He took two steps until he was standing in front of me. “You made me watch William and Kate's wedding even though we aren't fucking British. I was nine, and it was torture, but I watched it with you because you were sick. Anyway, Kate's engagement ring. You went on and on about it being Princess Diana's and

how beautiful it was.”

I let out a shocked laugh and stared up at him. I didn't have any words. How in the world did he remember that? I barely remembered that.

He put his finger under my chin and tilted it back some, locking his eyes on mine. “And Bowie was there, too, but his ass didn't remember. I did.” When he dropped his hand, he gave me his trademark smile. “Let's decorate this tree.”

I stood there as he picked up an ornament and watched as he put it on the tree.

“I think ...” I said, then paused, wanting to make sure I said this correctly. “That it's unfair to measure Bowie against you. He's not going to measure up in the friend department of our relationship. Most men don't; that's why women have best friends who know them better than anyone else.”

Kye picked up another ornament. “If a man is gonna shackle himself to one woman, then he'd better know everything about her. He should fucking worship her. Because only getting to fuck one cunt for the rest of your life is a real big commitment. No pussy is that good. So, he'd better know her inside and out because once he gets tired of fucking her, he needs to love the rest of her.”

And that was the reminder I'd needed. *Thank you, Kye, for the hard shake of reality.*

The warm, tingly feeling I had gotten earlier was now gone. No woman would ever be enough to make Kye settle down. He loved women. A pretty face could turn his head so fast, and after a few times of sleeping with her, he would move on and forget her name, if he'd ever known it to begin with.

I took an ornament and hung it on the tree. “You know, not all men are like

you. They don't think like you."

He chuckled. "Yeah, they fucking do. They just won't admit it. No secrets with me, Baby Doll. You've always said I have no filter. But that also means I never leave you guessing. I say exactly what I think."

That was true. Yet he still broke hearts left and right. Girls had always thought that they'd be the one to change him. They got their hopes up, and then he left them crying in the dust once he got bored or they got too clingy. The man should come with a warning label.

My phone rang, and I looked down to see Quinn's name lighting it up. I picked it up.

"Hey, you," I said in greeting.

"UGH! I miss you. My new roommate doesn't even like Christmas."

"I miss you too. She her how to enjoy it. Make your famous apple cider and play Christmas music while shoving icebox fruitcake down her throat."

Icebox fruitcake was something Quinn's grandmother had made that she loved and forced everyone to try.

"I don't shove it down people's throats. I just suggest they try it."

I laughed. "Well, next Christmas, you need to plan to come here. Stay with Bowie and me. He will eat your fruitcake."

"Do not remind me that you are marrying him," she grumbled.

I laughed. "You sound like Kye. I am just getting married. Not moving to Switzerland."

"That might be the only thing Kye and I agree on."

I grinned and looked over at him. "I guess I should be glad my best friend and my backup are seeing eye to eye for once."

“I take back all the things I’ve said about Quinn in the past,” Kye said loud enough for her to hear him.

“He’s there! Of course he is.” She sounded annoyed. “He’s getting in all the Genesis time he can before you’re hitched. It’s not fair. I am missing it all.”

“I will be there in a few weeks to visit. You can help me with my wedding planning.”

Kye scowled as he hung another ornament on the tree.

“Just make sure I look hot as your maid of honor. No tacky-ass dress.”

I laughed. “You can pick out your own dress. How’s that?”

She squealed. “Thank you!”

“You’re welcome.”

“So, what are you doing with the number one best friend tonight?”

“Decorating my Christmas tree.”

“Our Christmas tree,” Kye corrected me.

“Okay, fine, our Christmas tree.”

“Oh, that’s not cozy at all. You sure you’re marrying the right childhood best friend?”

I cut my eyes to Kye to make sure he hadn’t heard her. When he didn’t look at me, I relaxed. “Positive. But I need to go. I’ve got to go check on the cookies in the oven.”

“Cookies? You can’t bake! You’ll burn the house down.”

“Kye’s here to make sure that doesn’t happen and to put out any fires,” I assured her. “And it’s the cookie dough you buy at the store. It’s not like I

whipped some up from scratch.”

“I’m not wanting to die from Christmas cookies,” Kye added.

I punched his arm. “I’m not that bad!”

“Yeah, Baby Doll. You fucking suck at cooking or baking unless supervised.”

“Go on and get the cookies out of the oven, Baby Doll,” Quinn drawled teasingly. “But call me tomorrow. I’m missing you!”

“I will,” I assured her, and then we said our goodbyes and hung up.

Kye was headed to the kitchen. “I’ll get the cookies out,” he told me.

“I need to add the peanut butter cups to the middle while they’re still hot and soft,” I called after him.

“Then, get your cute ass in here and do it!”

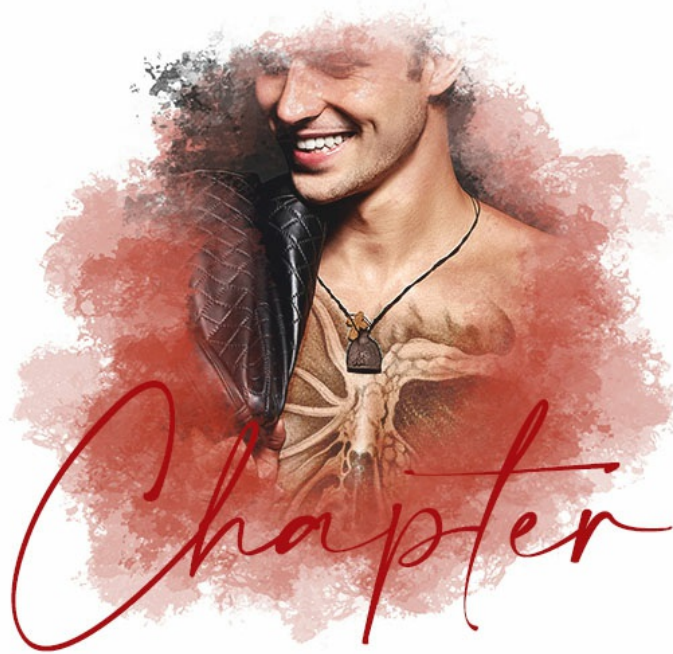
Smiling, I put down the Santa ornament in my hand and followed after him.

II

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

—Joan Crawford

The Present ...



THIRTEEN

KYE

JANUARY 2

All I wanted to do was go sit on the sofa with Genesis and chill. After the fucking shit that had gone down Saturday—getting Saxon’s baby momma back from the gang that had abducted her, thanks to her now-dead brother—I needed Genesis. She got the bad shit out of my head and eased me. But fucking Bowie had been with her until last night.

Now, Blaise had called me to meet him at Liam Walsh, his father-in-law’s, office above Devil’s—the strip club Liam owned and I frequented often. Liam was also the president of The Judgment MC, which led me to believe this was business and I wasn’t the only one who had been called to come to the meeting. If I was going to have to leave fucking town before getting time with Genesis, I was going to be pissed.

Asking Blaise why I had to meet him there wasn’t something I could do

and still live. He was the boss now. His father had gone into semi-retirement after getting married on Christmas Day.

Parking my bike behind Devil's, I noticed the only other vehicle here was Blaise's. Where was everyone else? I wasn't the one he called when he needed something personal handled. Since this was at his father-in-law's office, then it was personal. Huck, Levi, or Gage did that kind of thing for Blaise. They were his best friends as well as part of the family. They'd grown up together.

Heading up the back stairs to the office door, I hoped this meant it wasn't serious. I'd get to leave here and head to Genesis soon. Granted, I'd probably be back here later tonight after I left her. But I'd fucked last night. Several times.

I knocked on the door and waited. It was opened almost immediately. Tex, one of Liam's men, stepped back so I could come inside. He was glaring at me like I'd done something wrong. That didn't bode well. What the fuck had I done? Or maybe his mood wasn't because of me.

He walked over and opened the door leading into Liam's office. "Go on," he said to me.

I glanced at him again, confused by his scowl, before going inside.

Blaise stood with his arms crossed, looking at me with a solemn expression. At least he didn't look as pissed as Tex had. Liam was sitting in his office chair. My gaze shifted between the two, then went back to Blaise.

"Boss," I said when neither of them said anything.

He sighed deeply, then shook his head. That was not good. He wasn't happy. I just hoped whatever the fuck I'd done wasn't gonna get my ass killed. Although I couldn't think of anything I'd done that was out of line. I

mean, sure, I'd hit Sax a few days ago, but the fucker had punched me first. Busted my damn nose. Granted, he'd been angry about my holding a gun to his baby momma's back while Levi threatened her to break things off with Sax, but that was all cleared up now. They were living together at Saxon's, being all domestic and shit.

Besides, I hadn't wanted to hold a gun to her back. It had been Blaise's orders we acted on.

The door opened again, and I turned to see Carmichael—the family's private doctor who made house calls when needed, which was regular for us—walk inside. He was carrying a container of some kind.

“Carmichael needs to swab your cheek,” Blaise said. “We need a DNA test done to see if that is in fact your kid.”

He nodded his head to the other side of the room, and I froze.

A very tiny baby was wrapped up in some kind of carrier thing. It was covered in a blanket, but, damn, it was little. Like, brand-new little.

I shook my head. “I don't have a baby,” I said.

Blaise ignored me and nodded at Carmichael.

He walked up to me. “Open your mouth. I just need a cheek swab, and I'll get this expedited. Should know in a few hours.”

“What?” I asked, horrified.

Why the fuck did they think that small creature was mine? I used condoms. Always.

“I don't fuck raw,” I said before opening my mouth so he could swab it.

There was no way that kid was mine. If he needed to get proof, then he could get it. I was more than positive I hadn't created any small human.

He took it, then put it in a vial.

“I’ve already got Jagger’s. I’ll call as soon as I have the results.” He was looking at Blaise when he said it, and then he looked back at me.

Who the fuck was Jagger? The other option for the sperm donor? Because it was his. I could save everyone the time right now.

“That isn’t mine,” I said, pointing at it.

Blaise picked up a piece of paper from the end of Liam’s desk, then held it out to me. “Read it. See if your memory is jogged,” he said, still looking grim.

I took it but shook my head. “Boss, I swear, this is not my baby. I don’t know who is trying to pass it off as mine. Where the hell is its momma? Why isn’t she here with it?”

“Read the fucking letter,” Blaise demanded.

I looked down at the handwritten note.

Kye,

I thought having a baby would be fun. I’d have a family. I thought I wanted that. Turns out, I don’t. So, he’s yours. Do what you want with him. Maybe find him a good home, I don’t know. Just don’t go looking for me. I won’t take him back. He cries at night, and I am so tired. He’s also fucking expensive! The number of diapers he goes through—Jesus Christ, they should warn you about that.

I left Devil’s when I found out I was pregnant and thought I wanted to keep him. I figured it was best to start our new life somewhere else. I was wrong. I want to start a new life, but not with a baby. Men don’t want to date women with a baby. You know me! I

like to party.

I figure I carried it for nine months—well, eight. He came three weeks early. But I did all the work. Shoved him out of my cunt and stretched the damn thing. I need it fixed, and I can't afford that if I got to buy all the baby shit.

It's your turn to do something. Give him to some folks who want a kid. His birth certificate doesn't have your name on it since you weren't there. It has no father on it, as you can see. But I googled it, and all you have to do is get a paternity test to prove you're the father, then get your name on the birth certificate. Then, you'll have legal rights since I gave him to you and split.

I don't want any rights. Parenting is not for me. I should have aborted, but whatever. What's done is done.

And if you're thinking that ain't your kid, then let me remind you since you were drunk the night it happened. One of those damn piercings of yours punctured the condom. It split. You cursed like a damn sailor, but then we fucked again on your birthday, so I figured you'd gotten over it. Found out two days after your birthday that I was knocked up. I hadn't realized my period was late.

Go get the damn paternity test and do something with your mistake.

Leslie—aka Chyna

I stood there, holding the paper in my hand, staring at it. She was real convinced I was the dad. What about the Jagger dude? Had he gotten a similar letter? Where was he? This couldn't be happening. I didn't remember my condom breaking. She could have made that up.

Finally, I looked up at Blaise. “Where is the Jagger guy? He’s gotta be the dad. Not me.”

Blaise frowned. “Jagger is the baby’s name. Jagger Henley Ward,” he said, picking up an envelope and handing it to me. “Birth certificate is in there. Along with a letter from Leslie, saying she gives up all rights to you.”

My stomach turned. I needed to sit down. I couldn’t be given a baby. What the hell had she been thinking? What kind of mother talked about their kid like that? That was completely fucked up.

I glanced over at the tiny human. He was asleep. Chyna was positive he was mine. I wasn’t the only guy she’d fucked. But if she was telling the truth and the condom had broken, then ...

I dropped my head into my hands. This could not be happening to me.

“Holy shit,” I muttered.

“She dropped him off sometime before I got here. No one saw her, but I did have the security cameras pulled up. Can’t say I’ve ever seen such a coldhearted bitch before. She didn’t even kiss him goodbye. It was fucking awful to watch,” Liam said. “He was sitting outside the back door in the car seat for over an hour. She left a bag of supplies and the envelope with him.”

I lifted my head and looked at him. “She just left a baby outside, alone?” I asked, horrified.

He nodded. “Yeah. Fucking cunt.”

“If he’s yours, then you’re taking him. Figuring out what to do with him. Carmichael said he’d check him over, but you need to get a pediatrician. I can get you in with Cree’s. She’s excellent,” Blaise said.

I stared up at him. “You’re saying I have to keep him?” I asked.

Blaise raised one eyebrow. “If he is yours, then yes. It will take a little time to get the birth certificate changed and get things set up if you plan on giving him up for adoption. But good fucking luck with that once Trinity and Aspen get their hands on him. You take a baby into that house, and those two are going to claim him real damn fast.” He shrugged. “Maybe Levi and Aspen will want to adopt him.”

What? Fuck. My head was spinning. This was too much to think about. I didn’t want the kid being adopted by someone I knew. If he was mine, then I wanted to hand him off to a family and not have to see him again. That would be weird, having him there in the same house as me. But Blaise was right; Aspen and Trinity would get attached. I couldn’t take him to the house, but then I couldn’t take care of a baby. What the hell did you do with one? I had only ever held Cree, and he had been eight months old then. I’d never held a new one or changed a diaper. What did they eat? Milk?

“How long do you think I have to keep him?” I asked.

Blaise shrugged. “I don’t know. Never had this come up before,” he said sarcastically.

“I can’t take care of a baby,” I said, looking from Blaise to Liam. “Would Maddie do it?”

Blaise’s expression hardened. “You aren’t bringing my wife into this. Get her all attached to a baby, then take it away. Fuck no. This is your responsibility.”

I looked at Liam, thinking maybe one of the girls here could keep him, but before I opened my mouth, Blaise glared at me.

“Your responsibility,” he repeated.

My gaze swung back to the tiny human. *Fucking hell, little dude. You’d*

better hope I'm not your dad. I'm not a horrible bitch, like your mom turned out to be, but I don't know shit about babies. Damn, you're one unlucky kid.

He moved then, and my eyes went wide. What was he doing? Was he going to cry? His hand went to his mouth, and he moved his head back and forth over his fist. Was he looking for his thumb? Was that like a baby thing they all came out doing? Should someone help him?

“He’s gonna wake up hungry,” Blaise said. “That’s a sign he is looking for food.”

I turned my eyes to Blaise. He knew things about babies. He had a kid. “What does he eat?”

Blaise winced and shook his head at me. “Fucking hell,” he muttered. “He will need a bottle with formula in it. Chyna left some in the bag.”

I stared at him again, now sucking his hand like his life depended on it. “He’s not mine yet. I mean, no one has proven it.”

I wasn’t about to try and pick him up. Hell, I might do it wrong and break him.

“I’ll get one of the girls up here to handle the feeding,” Liam said.

“Thanks,” Blaise replied, then turned back to me. “That friend of yours. The female one.”

I swallowed nervously. *Fuck, don't go there, Blaise. Please don't do this to me.*

“Yeah,” I said.

“Take the baby there if you don’t want the girls getting attached. She can help you.”

Genesis would help. That wasn’t a question, but she’d expect more out of

me. She'd want me to do things for it. I wouldn't want to let her down. But, fuck, when she found out I had made a human, she was going to be disappointed in me. Then, my mom was gonna find out. Her mom. What if they wanted me to keep it? No, they knew I wasn't dad material. Genesis would want me to find a good home for him.

My gaze went back to the baby as his eyes opened, and he continued to suck hard on his hand. I didn't know who I felt sorrier for—him or me.



FOURTEEN

GENESIS

It was almost seven when I heard the keys in the door rattle. Kye hadn't called or texted since this morning. I had started to think he'd forgotten about me and our plans. There was always the strip club that could easily distract him. If he'd gotten a naughty text, it was likely he'd taken off for Devil's.

Twice, I'd been tempted to text him, but I had talked myself out of it. It wasn't like I didn't have plenty to do around here. I'd taken the time to put away the Christmas decorations, done some house cleaning, and started sketching a design that had been playing out in my head.

When the door opened, I glanced up from my sketchbook to say something, but then my eyes dropped to the infant car seat Kye was holding in his left hand. My eyes shot back up to his, and the expression on his face made my heart rate speed up. I moved my sketchbook and pencil to the coffee table and stood up from the sofa, then walked over to him, staring at

the item I had never imagined seeing in Kye's hand.

My hand flew to my mouth the moment I saw the tiny baby covered with a blanket. Its little eyes were closed as it slept. I reached for the blanket and pulled it back to find the rest of its sweet body. The blue pajamas were stained.

"Kye, did you steal someone's baby? Please tell me you didn't kill its parents." I said it to be funny, but the lost, frightened expression on Kye's face worried me.

Had this baby had parents who had pissed off the underworld?

"Neither," he said in a hoarse voice. "He's ... he's mine."

My hand fell away from my mouth, and I straightened to stare at him. In horror.

What did he mean, this baby was his? Oh my God. OH MY GOD!

"And his momma?" I choked out.

"Dropped him off like an unwanted animal outside Devil's." His words were hard now. Angry.

My chest hurt as I sank down to my knees in front of the carrier as he set it on the floor. "You're sure he's yours? I mean, don't you always use condoms?"

That was a conversation we'd had more than once. I'd warned him he was going to get a disease, sticking his penis into so many vaginas.

"He's mine. Paternity test confirmed it. And I always wear a condom. It seems one of my piercings punctured a condom. Never happened before. I didn't remember it. I was drunk," he said, then dropped a letter beside me. "It's all in there. You'll see his mom is a real fucking winner."

I reached for the letter and unfolded it, then read it. Every word made me feel sick. This woman was a terrible person. I blinked and realized my eyes were watering. My heart was breaking for this little life. How could someone do this?

I put the letter down and began to unbuckle the seat. Someone needed to hold him. He hadn't been held and loved. How old was he? Oh God, I couldn't handle this.

"What's his name?" I asked, taking him from the seat and cuddling him against me.

"Jagger Henley Ward," he replied.

"How old is he? He's so little."

"Birth certificate says he was born December 23."

"He's not even two weeks old," I whispered.

Kye sighed. "I don't know what I'm gonna do, Baby Doll."

I looked from the sweet little face to Kye's pained one. There was no need to lecture him on how this was what happened when you slept around all the time. He was learning that lesson already. This was done. A life had been created.

"Well, first, I'm going to change his diaper. Do you have diapers in that bag?" I asked, looking at the blue bag he'd brought in with him.

He held it out to me. "Yeah. But I think he will need more, and there's only a little of that milk powder stuff left that he drinks in his bottle."

"Formula," I replied. "Let me get him changed and see what he has in here. Then, I'll go to the store. Unless it's time for him to eat. When did he eat last?"

Kye looked panicked for a moment. “Uh, fuck, I think it was four hours ago. Maybe three.”

“He needs to eat again. Changing his diaper will wake him up, and he’s gonna be hungry,” I said as I put the bag on the table and found the formula. There was enough for one more feeding. “I can feed him, too, and then we need to go buy things. A lot of things. Is this all you have?”

He nodded slowly.

“Okay, first, diaper change and feeding. See if there’re any other pieces of clothing in there. He’s got spit-up on this one.”

Kye walked over, his eyes going to Jagger briefly, as if he was nervous, before looking through the bag. “Uh, yeah. Just this though,” he said, holding up a gown with monkeys on it. “Why does he have a dress?”

I smiled. “It’s a gown.”

He frowned. “A gown, a dress—same thing. He’s a boy.”

I took the gown from him. “Infants sleep in gowns. It’s easier for diaper changes at night.”

He didn’t look convinced. I took Jagger over to the sofa and laid him down.

This was going to sink in later when I had time to think about it. I knew, right now, I was doing what had to be done for Jagger. My chest was still aching when I thought about him being ignored and unwanted. If I let myself think about that too much, I was going to fall apart. *This was Kye’s baby!* The idea of any baby being unwanted and neglected hurt my heart, but this was different. This was breathtakingly painful because this was Kye’s baby.

“Thank you, Baby Doll. I don’t know ... I’m still processing. I think I’m in

shock. I just ... I can't do this. I'm scared to hold him. I might break him. Just ... thank you. For this."

I looked up at him. He was staring at Jagger's face. He wasn't someone who could raise a kid, and he wasn't going to ever get married. I knew he was already preparing to give this baby up for adoption, and honestly, it was for the best. But could I handle that? Knowing Kye had a baby out there and I didn't know him? That he didn't know who his parents were? This was too much right now. Jagger's immediate needs came first.

"I'll teach you how to hold him," I said. Because he was going to hold this baby.

Jagger needed one of his parents to hold him so he felt that love in his life. I knew Kye better than anyone else, and although he was currently shaken up, this was his kid. He would love it. Even if he didn't mean to, he would.

"Maybe it's best I don't. I'm gonna give him to a good family." He said what I'd already assumed he was thinking.

"That might be the case, but in his life, he's going to have the experience of being held by his father. He needs to feel that connection even if he doesn't remember it years from now. He deserves it. Especially after having lived his first ten days on this earth with that woman."

I didn't look up to see what he was thinking as I changed Jagger's diaper. He opened his eyes, and his little face got red right before he began crying.

"Is he okay?" Kye asked, sounding anxious.

"Yes. He is mad about the diaper change and getting his clothes changed. He's also awake and hungry. It's all normal."

"You're sure? I shouldn't call Carmichael?"

I frowned, picking Jagger up in his clean gown and holding him close to my chest. “Who is Carmichael?” I asked.

“The family’s doctor.”

I laughed. “The Lords of the Underworld have their own doctor? Of course they do. And, no, do not call a doctor because he’s crying. Now, sit down.”

Kye sat where I had been, and I bent down with Jagger.

“You have to be very careful with his head. Always support it. He can’t control it yet.”

“You’re giving him to me now?! While he’s crying?”

“Do you know how to fix a bottle?” I asked him pointedly.

“No,” he replied.

“Didn’t think so. Now, hold your son.”

Kye held out his hands awkwardly, and I chuckled.

“Take his head in your palm, then bring him in close to your chest,” I instructed.

Kye looked terrified, but he did what I’d told him to do.

When he had Jagger against him, the crying stopped, and Jagger stared up at Kye. I blinked back my tears and stood up. I could not get emotional about this. I had to stay strong and focused. I might not be able to keep Jagger myself, but I would make sure we found him the best parents in the world.

“Hey,” Kye said to him, and Jagger’s little eyes widened. “I think I startled him,” Kye said, glancing up at me, concerned.

“He’s listening. Talk to him. He needs kind words. We don’t know what all he’s heard from the woman who gave birth to him.”

Kye looked back down at him. “Yeah, she was a real bitch.”

“Kye, language. Don’t curse. Sweet words.”

“What are sweet words?” he asked me.

“Just no cursing and no talking about the underworld.”

He grinned as he stared at Jagger. “She’s vetoing the good stuff,” he told him.

I went to make the last bottle while I listened to Kye talk to him. This was not at all something I’d thought we would ever experience together, but I realized it might be the only time I got to see Kye be a dad. It was sad to me that he didn’t want this in his future. A wife, a family. Well, a real family. Not the underworld.

I found the distilled water that had been packed in the bag and wondered if the mom had left this or if Kye had gotten it somewhere else. I was just about done when my phone rang. I pulled it out of my pocket and saw Bowie’s name. I couldn’t talk to him right now. I sent it to voice mail, then headed back to the living room.

Kye looked up at me when I handed him the bottle.

“You look comfortable. Time for lesson two,” I said.

He reached out and took it from me. “You sure this is a good idea?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yep.”

Kye held the bottle and stared down at Jagger. “What do I do?”

“Put the nipple in his mouth,” I replied.

“Not words I’m used to hearing you say, Baby Doll,” he replied with a smirk.

“Don’t make it dirty, Kye. You’re feeding your son.”

“You’re the one who said nipple,” he replied.

Jagger let out a wail, and Kye put the bottle into his mouth. It only took him a second to realize it was there, and his lips clamped down on it and sucked.

“Too bad you don’t get to suck on the real thing, little man,” Kye said to him.

“Maybe we should add *not talking about sexual things* to the list of stuff that’s inappropriate,” I suggested.

Kye lifted his gaze to me. “What? It’s true. The one time in a male’s life he gets to suck on big, full tits all the damn time, and he’s missing it. Just seems like he is being robbed.”

I sat down beside him, watching the two of them. “He won’t remember,” I told him.

Kye ran his hand gently over the white-blond hair covering Jagger’s head. “He’s got the same hair I did when I was a baby.”

I’d seen the pictures. I should have noticed it immediately, but in my head, it just didn’t click that Kye could be a father. That was not where my thoughts had been going. But the more I looked at Jagger, especially when his eyes were open, I could see Kye. So much Kye.

My phone began to ring again, and I pulled it out to see Bowie’s name. I had to talk to him, or he’d get worried. I stood back up and walked toward the kitchen before I answered.

“Hey.”

“Hey. Why did you send me to voice mail?” he asked.

“I couldn’t answer right then.” I left out why.

“What were you doing?”

I should have known he was going to ask. I didn’t know if Kye wanted me to talk about this. I walked back to the living room, and from the doorway, I pointed at the baby, then at the phone. Kye shook his head. I had guessed that. He didn’t want me telling anyone.

“I was trying to make a reservation with a bakery to taste vegan cake options,” I lied. It was on my to-do list though, and I planned on doing that tomorrow.

Kye’s eyes widened, as if he were impressed by my convincing lie. I turned and walked back to the kitchen.

“We don’t have to do a vegan one, but I have several friends who are also vegan. It’s becoming more popular. Maybe do a small one, and then the big one can be a regular cake.”

That sounded like it would work.

“Okay,” I told him. “If you’re sure.”

“Yeah. Besides, I’ve not convinced you that life is better as a vegan yet. Until I do, I figure you want the regular cake.”

This man was delusional if he thought I was giving up ribs. Or steak. Or bacon. Not happening.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” I replied.

He laughed. “We’ll see. But anyway, I just wanted to hear your voice before I went to bed. I’ve got an early morning tomorrow, and I have some work to get done first.”

“Okay,” I replied. “Good night. Love you.”

“Sleep tight. Love you,” he replied, then ended the call.

I headed back for the living room, and Kye was holding an empty bottle. I tossed the burp cloth over my shoulder and took Jagger from him.

“After he eats, you have to burp him,” I explained, and he watched me until a loud little belch came out, making Kye laugh.

“All right, good job, both of you,” I said, amused. “Ready to go shopping?”

Kye stood up. “Yeah. Let’s go do this.”

I moved Jagger back to the crook of my arm, and he was watching me. “We are going to go get you all the things you need,” I told him. “When we get back, we can get you a nice, warm bath.”

Because I wasn’t sure the last time he’d had one. The woman who had written the letter Kye had shown me didn’t seem like one to bother with bathing her child.

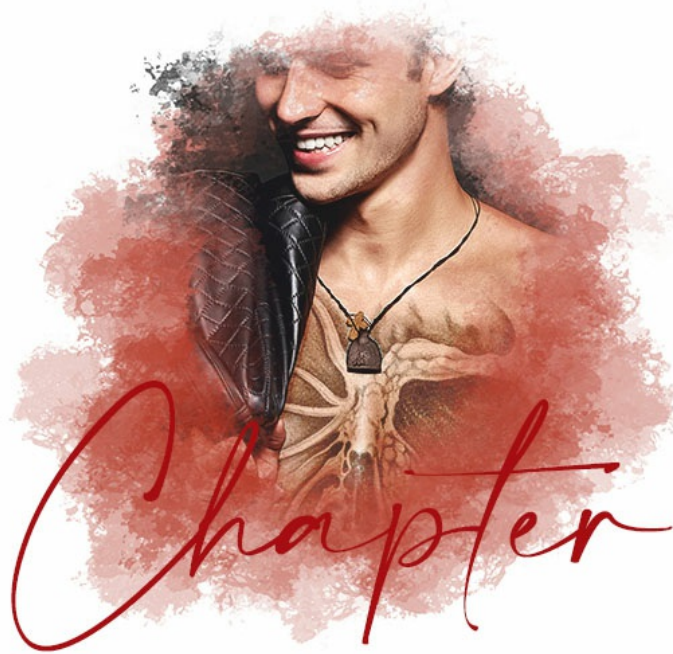
“How do we bathe him?” Kye asked me.

“We will get an infant tub,” I told him. “And baby washcloths and baby shampoo and a baby towel.”

Kye nodded once. “Got it. In other words, I am about to go broke.”

Smiling, I walked over to the infant seat. “I think that’s the general consensus among all parents.”

I buckled Jagger in and covered him back up with the blanket. Kye picked it up by the handle. Why did he have to look so sexy, carrying a baby seat?



FIFTEEN

KYE

The amount of stuff that babies needed was way beyond what I had expected, and it was clear that Genesis had been trying to just get the basics. The must-haves. There was all kinds of shit she didn't go near. Still, it had been a fucking lot.

Blaise had texted while we were out shopping, asking if I had things under control. I told him Genesis was helping me and we were currently buying baby things. He'd left me alone after that. I wondered if he'd told Maddie about Jagger and she'd made him check to make sure the baby he'd allowed me to take was okay. I couldn't imagine Maddie would have been pleased to hear that.

Genesis was really good with baby stuff for someone who didn't have her own kid, nor did she have younger siblings. Were women just born with the gift? No, that couldn't be true because Chyna had clearly sucked at it.

I took the baby clothes we'd bought out of the dryer and carried them into my old bedroom, where we had set up the portable crib thing. Genesis put her finger over her lips the moment I entered the room. She was standing over Jagger, who she'd wrapped up like a burrito in one of his new blankets.

I put the clothes on the bed, and she started for the door, motioning for me to follow her.

Once we were out of the room, she started to close the door and froze. She looked up at me. "I forgot to get a monitor," she whispered, leaving the door open before heading back toward the living room.

"What's that?" I asked when we got to the living room. "Is it vital? I can go get it now. Walmart is open all night."

She shook her head. "A baby monitor. It's not vital, but I can't hear him if the door is closed. It won't be an issue at night. I or you ..." She paused. "One of us will be in there with him."

Sleep. Yes. We hadn't talked about things. It had been go mode since I had gotten here with him and announced I had a kid. The thought of leaving them here without me didn't sit well. I just hadn't thought that far ahead.

"I was planning on staying. He's my responsibility. I just knew I needed help. I was lost, and you're the only person I wanted help from."

She walked over and sat down, curling her legs up underneath her. "I didn't question why you brought him here. I would have expected you to. But what are the next steps?"

I sat down beside her and laid my head back, staring at the ceiling. "I get my name on his birth certificate. Then, the state determines I have full custody after they acknowledge Chyna deserted him and gave up all rights. After all that, then I go through the process of putting him up for adoption." I

turned my head to look at her then.

She sighed heavily. "That's a lot," she said softly.

"Yeah," I agreed.

Then, she slid over and laid her head on my shoulder. I curled my arm around her shoulders, and we sat there in silence. My head was all over the place. Tonight ... hadn't been bad. I'd actually enjoyed myself. Which was strange. Genesis had taken the fear away, and I had been able to relax enough to be in the moment with him ... and her.

"That's not all going to be done overnight," she said.

I'd already known that, but how did I ask her to help me until then?

"No, it's not."

She tilted her head back and looked up at me. "I'll try not to get too attached to him. That is, assuming you want my help with him, or do you want to call your mom?"

Calling my mom was out of the question. Thankfully, she was in Greece right now. Once she got a look at my mini me, she was going to want to keep him. I wasn't going to let my mom raise my kid. She'd done her job with me. She needed to be free to travel with her new husband and live her life.

"Mom is in Greece, remember?" I said.

"Yes, but she'd come home for this."

"I don't think it's a good idea for her to see him," I replied.

She nodded. "I get that."

"But if you don't want to do this or you think it'll be too much, I can figure out something else." Saying those words was fucking hard. I wanted to beg her to help me. Help us.

“Kye,” she began, “do you honestly think I could just turn my back on the two of you? And it’s not because I don’t think you can’t learn how to take care of him by then. It’s because you’re my best friend and you are about to handle some tough stuff. Emotional stuff. I can’t leave you to do it alone.”

God, I wanted that, but she was forgetting something real damn vital.

“Bowie. The two of you are getting married soon.” Way too fucking soon. *Never* would be better in my opinion.

She didn’t say anything at first, and I almost wished I’d not said anything.

“We will push the wedding to the summer. I’ll need to explain it to him though. I can’t keep this a secret from him.”

Push the wedding off. Fuck yes.

“This is a lot, Baby Doll. You’re sure you want to rearrange your life to do this?”

Please say yes. Please choose me.

“That little boy is yours. He’s a part of you. That makes him a part of my life. The wedding can wait. He is more important. *You* are more important than all the other stuff.”

I pulled her tight against me and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. Fuck, I loved her. “Thank you,” I said, emotion clogging my damn throat, like I was a pussy.

“Always. Right?” she replied, putting her arm around me to hug me.

“Right,” I agreed, then inhaled her scent.

“Stop smelling me,” she said against my chest.

“But you smell so fucking good all the time.”

She laughed and shook her head. “You’ve not smelled me after I work

out.”

The thought of her sweaty started to make my dick stiffen. I had to think about other shit real quick before that became obvious. It wasn't like she hadn't noticed me hard before when we were together, but right now was not the time to remind her that my body was attracted to her in ways it shouldn't be.

I heard her yawn and squeezed her arm gently. “Go to bed.”

She sat up, and I already missed the way she felt against me. “Do you want me to sleep in the room with Jagger, or do you want to?”

I sat there, staring at her. I knew I should do it, but I was afraid to be alone with him. What if he stopped breathing and I was asleep and didn't know? The thought of being alone with him at night was daunting.

“Uh, the bed is a queen size. Can't we both sleep in there?”

She nodded. “Yeah, until you're comfortable in there with him alone. But that's something we don't ever need to share with Bowie.”

I wanted to grin at the thought that this would piss him off, but I didn't. She was sacrificing a lot for me.

“It will go with me to my grave,” I promised.

She laughed softly and stood up.

“Please tell me you sleep in those little silk things I saw you in,” I teased, knowing there was no way she'd wear that for me—and it was a good thing because I'd be so fucking hard all night that I'd never get to sleep.

She shook her head. “Not for you.”

“Okay, fine. You can sleep naked. I'm good with that,” I replied.

“Kye, keep it up, and I'll make you sleep in there alone,” she warned.

I smirked, knowing she was full of crap. “Does that mean I can’t suggest you sleep in one of my T-shirts?”

She picked up a pillow and tossed it at me before walking down the hallway. Grinning, I followed her, amazed at how my day had gone from a nightmare to something I was going to survive.



SIXTEEN

GENESIS

The loud wail woke me up, and for a moment, I was confused. Then, it all came back to me, and I sat up and turned on the lamp by the bed so I could see.

Jagger's little face was red as he let out another angry cry. He had kicked the blanket loose, and he tried to suck on his hand, then wailed again.

"Someone is hungry," I said, picking him up. "It's okay."

"Here," Kye's deep, gravelly voice said beside me. "I'll take him while you get the bottle."

I turned to him, and seeing Kye's messy hair and bare, tattooed chest distracted me briefly. He'd been wearing a shirt when we went to bed. Where was that shirt now? I did not need to be reminded how droolworthy his chest was.

“It got hot, Baby Doll. I’m sorry. I usually sleep naked,” he said, and I realized I was still looking at his six-pack.

My eyes snapped up, and I gathered myself, then handed Jagger to him. He took him the way I’d taught him, and when he pulled him to his chest, Jagger turned his little head, as if he was going to latch on to a boob.

“What’s he doing?” Kye asked.

“Trying to nurse,” I replied with a grin.

He chuckled. The deep sound to his sleepy voice was making me feel things between my legs that I did not need to be feeling for Kye.

“Sorry, little dude. I don’t have what you’re looking for.”

I stood up and headed for the door.

“Baby Doll is going to get you a bottle. Hang in there,” he reassured him.

I hurried to the kitchen and went about getting it mixed up. Thankfully, he wasn’t crying too bad. He would start up and then stop. Kye must be talking to him. He was very interested in his father, which was so freaking precious that it hurt. I could not let my head go there. Kye couldn’t raise a kid.

When I walked back into the room, I sat on the bed beside Kye. “I’ll feed him. You go back to sleep. Then, you can do it next time. We will take shifts.”

Kye handed him to me, but he didn’t lie back down right away. He watched as Jagger took the nipple and began sucking hungrily. It was cute. I didn’t blame him for wanting to look.

“He’s an aggressive little man when hungry,” Kye said, observing him. “Good thing he can’t get to your tits. He’d latch on real damn fast.”

I cut my eyes at Kye. “Go to sleep.”

He gave me a cheeky grin, then lay back down. Still shirtless. And very close to me. He needed to scoot over some. Give me some space.

“This bed smells like you,” he said before turning his head to the pillow and inhaling.

I acted like I didn’t enjoy him smelling me, but that was a lie. I didn’t say anything though. I let it go.

By the time Jagger was fed and burped, Kye was asleep again. I took Jagger to the other bedroom to change his diaper, then wrapped him up snugly, then swayed back and forth with him until he fell back asleep. Once I placed him in the crib and he didn’t wake back up, I climbed in beside Kye and managed to not think about his naked chest and hard muscles, which were entirely too close to me.

The next time Jagger woke up, I changed his diaper first, then gave Kye the bottle before going to sleep. I had a feeling I would only get a brief nap before I had to help Kye get him to sleep, but when the next wail woke me, the sun was already rising, and Jagger was in his bed while Kye was spooning me.

Kye stretched and yawned, but didn’t move away from me right away. I started to sit up, and he grabbed my waist, pulling me back to him.

“This feels good. Jag, buddy, don’t make her leave me just yet,” he said in that raspy voice again.

I felt my nipples harden, and I glanced down, thankful he couldn’t see the front of my shirt. I agreed that this felt very good. Too good.

I wiggled. “I need to get his bottle,” I said, hoping my voice sounded sleepy and not breathless.

“My boner needs to go down before I pick him up,” Kye said.

I felt my entire body flush as I hurried from the room. Kye's laughter echoed down the hallway. Good Lord, I needed to stick my head in the freezer. It was as if every nerve ending in my body were buzzing with electricity. Whew.

I made the bottle while mentally scolding myself. We were not playing house. Kye was my best friend. That was his baby, not mine. I was engaged to Bowie. Reacting like that to Kye had to stop. Jagger needed me. Kye needed my help. He did not need me getting all worked up over his teasing.

When I walked back into the room, Kye had Jagger in his arms and was sitting with his back against the headboard. The man was mommy porn. Literally, if there was a thing such as mommy porn, then Kye was their star.

"See, there she is," Kye said to him. "I told you she was coming back with the goods."

I sat down and reached for him. "My turn."

He took the bottle from me. "It's good. I'm awake. Get some more sleep. I'll wake you for a diaper lesson if I can't figure it out myself."

Jagger was already drinking away comfortably in Kye's arms. I pulled back the covers and lay back down, putting my back to them. I didn't need to get any more visuals of Kye being a sexy, shirtless daddy. Exhaustion pulled me back under pretty fast.

When I opened my eyes again, I was surprised to see a sleeping Jagger in his bed, the sun was completely up, and Kye was spooning me again. His breathing was slow, so he was asleep too. I closed my eyes again and tried very hard not to focus on the hard length pressing against my butt. Or the fact that his arm was right under my boobs. They might as well be resting on them. I knew he was tired from last night, and I hated to wake him, but I had

to get up. My body was not understanding that Kye wasn't supposed to arouse it.

I moved slowly, and just as I thought I was almost free to slip out of the bed, his arm tightened, and he pulled me back.

"Not yet," he mumbled.

Thankfully, he moved his arm lower, away from my boobs, but his erection was now tucked even closer.

"Kye," I hissed.

He nuzzled his face in my hair. "Shh," he whispered.

I took a deep breath and tried to move, but my wiggling did nothing but shift him from my butt cheek to being in the crack. My eyes went wide. He felt thick and long. At least compared to Bowie. I was afraid to try and inch away now. Would it push him more?

"Mmm ... that's real damn tempting, Baby Doll," he groaned close to my ear, and then he rocked his hips just enough to rub it against me.

My clit throbbed so hard that I wasn't sure if I could handle any more without crying out. I had to get away now. I pulled away hard this time and scrambled to get out of the bed before he could do anything more.

A deep, low chuckle came from the bed, and I glared at him. I shouldn't have though. The covers were down to his waist, and he had his arms crossed behind his head. The muscles popping in his biceps, hair sticking up like he'd just had wild sex, and his hooded eyes that looked like he'd just opened them after a deep sleep—it was an image that made my knees weak.

"Sorry, Baby Doll. I woke up horny. I'll behave," he said, then winked. "I'm gonna go rub this out in the shower. You want to give me a quick flash

of those tits to help a guy out?”

I rolled my eyes and spun around to get away from him. My attraction to him was deep. Yes, he was sexy. Ridiculously so. But all the other emotions went with that. I loved him. He was my best friend. It added up to be this powerful reaction.

Kye, however, got hard over any boobs. Didn't matter that they were mine or that it had been my butt he was pressed up against. He'd have gotten hard had it been any other female. His sexual activities and desires weren't connected to any other emotion.

Calming my body down, I went to use the bathroom and do my morning necessities before Jagger woke up again. I heard the shower come on in the master bathroom, and for a second, I was tempted to go listen at the door and see if he was jerking off, like he'd said he was going to do. That was creepy, and I clearly needed slapped.

By the time he walked into the kitchen, I had made coffee and put some frozen waffles in the toaster. I looked up from my phone, where I had been sending Bowie a text. Kye's hair was damp, and the shirt he was wearing hugged his chest.

He grinned at me. “Stop pouting, Baby Doll,” he said, walking over to stand in front of me. “You didn't do anything wrong. We're friends. Your juicy little ass was there, and I enjoyed it for a minute. I'm sorry if I made you mad.”

I scowled up at him. “What does juicy mean? Are you saying my butt is fat?”

He ran his hand through my hair and let it fall from between his fingers as he gazed down at me. “I'm saying it has just the perfect amount of bounce to

it. If we weren't best friends, I'd show you exactly what I like to do to juicy little asses like yours." Then, he winked and walked over to get a cup out of the cabinet.

I stood there for a moment, trying not to let my thoughts go to what it was he would show me. I'd heard the comments before about leather belts. My nipples got tight again, and I turned away before he could see them.

"You told Bowie about your change of plans yet?" he asked.

My waffles popped up from the toaster, and I went to get a plate to put them on. "No. I figured I'd talk to him on the phone later and explain."

I took the waffles out and started to turn around when Kye came up behind me.

"You got waffles?" he asked, so close that his chest brushed against my back.

I held up my plate. "Take them. I'll make more."

He reached for the plate. "You're my favorite girl," he said.

"I know; I know," I replied as I got more waffles out of the freezer.

I took the maple syrup out of the cabinet and slid it across the counter to him.

"Only thing that would make this better is chocolate chips," he said, catching the syrup.

I pushed the lever on the toaster down, then went over to the pantry and took out the bag of chocolate chips. When I put it in front of him, he grabbed them, grinning like a little boy.

"Ah! Thank you."

I was waiting on my waffles to finish when I heard Jagger cry out.

Kye started to stand up, but I stopped him.

“You finish eating. Then, we will switch.”

He nodded and sat back down. “Good plan.”

I went into the room. Jagger wasn't exactly angry. He was just trying to get attention. When he saw me, he stopped fussing and stared up at me with those Kye-like eyes of his.

“Hey, buddy,” I said as I scooped him up. “Good morning.”

His little hand wrapped around my finger as I pulled the blanket around him. I kissed the top of his head, then turned to take him to the kitchen. He made little grunting noises, and I smiled at him.

“I see you. Are you trying to tell me something?”

He kicked and seemed excited as he listened to me. The attachment I already felt to this little guy was going to break me when he was gone. Even if I knew he would have a family to love him, it would be brutal. I could already feel the future heartbreak.

“He doesn't sound hungry,” Kye said when I walked back into the kitchen with Jagger.

“No, he's just awake and curious,” I replied, wiggling my finger as he held on tightly, watching me.

“He's full from all the eating he did last night,” Kye said, standing up after putting the last bite of waffle into his mouth. He walked over to me and reached out for him. “I got him. You eat,” he said.

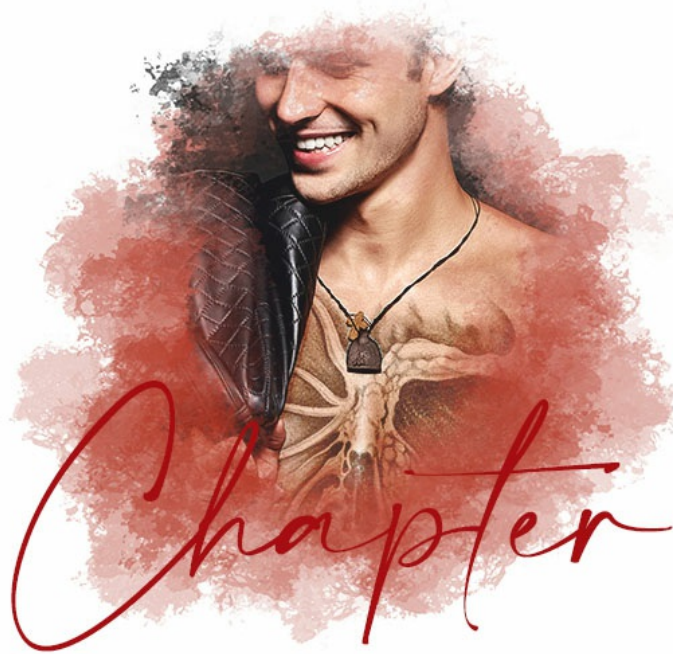
Kye was already looking like a pro at holding a baby. He wasn't nervous, like he'd been when he walked into the house yesterday evening. We'd been through a lot already with Jagger. It was a crash course for both of us.

“You, little man, are lucky you got my charm. We get to stay here with Baby Doll. She doesn’t want us to leave,” Kye said to him, then lifted his eyes to me, grinning.

I grabbed my plate of waffles and went to sit where Kye had been. “I hate to break it to you, but he is more irresistible than you,” I told Kye.

Kye nodded. “Yeah, I guess he is. I’m not complaining. It worked on you.”

I took a bite and grinned at the sight they made. Any woman would have offered to help them. Most would have begged to help. There were those who would have probably paid him to let them help. Truth was, I might actually be the lucky one. Until the day Jagger left. Then, I’d be the devastated one.



SEVENTEEN

KYE

Five days later, and Genesis still hadn't told Bowie about their change of plans. Granted, we had been busy. When Jagger was sleeping, we took turns getting a nap, too, did laundry because the little dude messed up more outfits in one day than I'd thought possible, took out dirty diapers, washed and sterilized bottles, and of course fed him. For a tiny human, it took a lot of work.

Oddly enough, I wasn't hating it. Blaise was letting me handle my personal life, and Genesis was with me all the time. Jagger was a cute little fucker too. He liked when I talked to him, and the way he watched me when I came into a room felt really good. Made me want to hold him and talk to him some more.

I was currently burping him while Genesis had taken the phone call to the back bedroom. I knew it was Bowie, and I was trying to give her privacy, but,

damn, it was hard. If I hadn't been feeding Jagger, I'd have cracked by now and gone to eavesdrop. There was a small part of me that worried he might convince her to have me call my mom for help. But it was so unlikely that she would do that. I didn't dwell on it.

Jagger had hooked her pretty hard. Listening to her talk to him was my favorite. Her voice would get all soft and cute. I didn't even think she realized she was doing it. I wasn't going to point it out to her either. Why take that away from the little dude? And, well, me too. I didn't want her to stop.

The belch that came from this tiny body made me chuckle. I wiped the spit-up from his chin and stood up. Genesis was still back there, and if I could keep Jagger quiet, we could go listen a little. Just to make sure she was okay. If Bowie had upset her, she could be crying. I'd fucking kill him if he made her cry.

When we got to the closed door, I could hear her.

"Yes. I know that, and he is doing a great job of it. He's blown me away with what a good dad he is. I'm not having them stay here because he isn't doing anything. You aren't listening to me."

She stopped talking again, and I knew it was because he was talking over her. I hated when he did that.

"A baby is a lot of work. It takes more than one person. I—" She was cut off again.

I clenched my teeth. Stupid fucker. I wanted to barge in there, snatch the phone out of her hand, and shut him up. But Jagger was saving my ass from only getting her more upset. Having to hold him was keeping me from snapping.

“I don’t want to fight about it either. But I’m doing this. Until he finds parents worthy of Jagger, I will be right by his side.”

I looked down at Jagger. “Told you she wouldn’t kick us out,” I whispered.

“There is no reason to rush the wedding anyway. It can wait until summer. Right now, Kye needs me. He’s my best friend, and I’m not letting him deal with all this alone.” A brief pause. “Because I am here. He doesn’t want his mom here all the time. No, I am not putting my life on hold for him. You aren’t listening to me. I want to help.”

I winked at Jagger as he stared up at me, wide-eyed.

“I still help my parents too. I go over to the house every day—”

Again, cut off. Damn him. I made sure she was available to her mom and dad at all times.

“Bowie, I love you. I want to marry you. This does not have to come between us. But it will if you let it.”

Other than having to listen to her tell him she loved him and wanted to marry him, I fucking enjoyed hearing her tell him that Jagger and I were more important than he was. Even if she didn’t realize that was what she’d just said.

“No. I didn’t say that. But you are trying to make me choose, and I told you when we started dating again that if you ever tried to make me choose you or him, it would end things.”

I smirked. Damn, I liked knowing that.

Hell yeah, Bowie. She’s always been my Baby Doll.

“Well, it’s not healthy to tell your partner they have to choose between you or their best friend either ... BUT you knew. You knew about my

relationship with Kye. It's not like you didn't already know the history. You are part of it ... please don't throw that in my face. We were in high school, and you know he was drunk. He never ever made another move on me."

Why was this annoying me? It was true. She was just telling him the truth. But I didn't like hearing it. Jagger started to scrunch up his nose, and I moved quickly back down the hall in case he was about to wail. I didn't need to be caught listening in.

I was just getting settled on the sofa with Jagger in my lap when the door opened, and I watched the doorway to see her expression when she walked into the room. I needed to make sure she was okay before she masked it.

When she emerged, her eyes met mine, and she sighed heavily. Her shoulders rising and falling with exaggeration was adorable.

"That went ... okay," she said. "Maybe worse than I'd anticipated, but we are still engaged. He didn't break up with me. So, there is that."

I held up Jagger to face her. "But this face makes it all better."

She smiled at him, her face softening instantly. "Yes, it does," she replied in that cute voice I loved.

Feeling a hell of a lot better now that that shit was over, I stood up. "Why don't we go for a walk in the park? Maybe get ice cream. We need to get out of the house."

Genesis's eyes lit up. "That sounds great. I could use some ice cream."

"I'll change Jag's diaper, and you go put on a bra so I don't have to punch some fucker for looking at your tits."

She glanced down at her boobs, then back up at me. "Okay ..." She trailed off like I was crazy. Hell, maybe I was.

She didn't wear bras a lot, and I didn't complain. I enjoyed it. But the idea of other guys enjoying the view was bothering me.

I managed to get Jagger's diaper changed without getting peed on and made it back to the living room by the time she was ready. I did a check to find her tits were contained and less bouncy. That was better.

"Ready?" I asked.

She held up the tiny socks and shoes she'd had me buy Jagger. "First, he needs these."

I grinned. "Didn't know he was going to walk around the park too. I assumed I'd be carrying him."

She cocked her head to the side. "It's kinda chilly. His feet will get cold."

Ah. Good point. I hadn't thought of that. I walked him over and held him so she could put them on his tiny feet. He kicked and fussed at her some, but then seemed fascinated by the new items on his body.

"When you're a little bigger, I'll get you some better shoes," I told him.

I saw Genesis pause and felt her eyes locked on me. It took me a second to realize what I'd said. I'd spoken as if I'd be around him when he was older, but I wouldn't be. Damn. My arms tightened around him automatically, as if someone was going to come by and snatch him away from me.

"I need to grab that little sweater we got him too," Genesis said and spun around to go back to my old bedroom.

I cradled Jagger in my arms, and his eyes went from the shoes on his feet to my face. Fuck. I'd gotten attached. But he deserved a real family. Parents. A house with a dog and shit. My heart began to hammer in my chest. I wanted that for him. I did. I wanted him to have it all. So, why did it now sound so

damn hard?



EIGHTEEN

GENESIS

Just as I finished changing Jagger's diaper, the doorbell rang.

I smiled down at him. "Bowie is here. You get to charm him, so he'll stop being grumpy about me being here," I whispered, then kissed his head as I picked him up.

Kye had left to go do underworld business for the first time since he'd brought Jagger home. It had been two weeks, and I'd assured him that I could take care of Jagger while he worked. As for my job, I was managing to get a lot done when he slept, and the winter window display was good for two more weeks. Then, I'd have to go do a Valentine's Day-themed one. Hopefully, by then, Chloe would have been told about Jagger.

Moving him to my right arm, I opened the door. Bowie's gaze went from my face straight to Jagger. He gave me a tight smile as I stepped back for him to come inside.

“You made good time,” I said, a little too cheery.

“I was missing you,” he replied. “Can you, uh, put him down so I can kiss you?”

That wasn’t how I’d hoped he would react to Jagger, but he just needed to adjust.

“Yes, of course.”

I tried not to feel the rejection for Jagger. I walked over and laid him on the blanket we kept on the floor for him. He enjoyed the ceiling fan overhead.

Standing, I turned back to Bowie, and he was staring at Jagger with a hard expression that bothered me. This was about me putting the wedding off. Not Jagger. I had to remember he wasn’t angry with Jagger. He was angry because I had chosen to help with Jagger until he had a new home. Which I hated to think about so much that I hadn’t even asked Kye about where he was with the custody thing.

I walked over to stand in front of him and grabbed the collar of his jacket. “I missed you,” I assured him.

His eyes softened as he looked down at me. “Promise?”

Going up on my tiptoes, I pressed my mouth to his. He grabbed my waist and returned the kiss. The reassurance that this was going to be okay eased my mind. Bowie’s hand slid down to my butt, and he squeezed it hard, pulling me closer to him at the exact same time Jagger belted out a loud cry.

I broke the kiss and turned to look back at him. Spit-up covered his little face as he wailed.

“Oh no,” I gasped and hurried over to pick him up.

“It’s okay,” I cooed. “I’ll get you all cleaned up. That stuff tastes nasty,

doesn't it?"

I grabbed the burp cloth and started to clean off his face, but he'd calmed down now that I was holding him. He was going to need a change of clothes though. I glanced up at Bowie, who was frowning as he watched me. He hadn't moved from where I'd left him.

"Where's Kye?" he asked, his tone clearly annoyed.

"Work stuff," I explained, carrying Jagger over to the clean, folded clothes Kye had left out for me before he had to go. I picked up a pair of pajamas, then turned back to Bowie.

"Does he leave you to take care of his kid a lot?"

I took a deep breath. I wouldn't get upset. Bowie had no idea how much Kye did for Jagger. He'd see that soon enough.

"No. He is here with him most of the time, but just like I have to work, so does he."

Bowie rolled his eyes, then walked over to the sofa. "Mafia orders isn't work. It's crime."

I realized Jagger didn't understand what Bowie was saying, but I didn't want him to hear bad things about his dad.

"Let's not discuss our opinions on Kye," I said, smiling down at Jagger so he wouldn't feel any hostility in the air.

"Are you hungry?" I asked Bowie as I changed Jagger's clothing.

"Yeah. I thought we'd go get something to eat, but I assumed Kye would be here for him," he replied, nodding his head toward Jagger.

I was not going to get mad. I was not going to get mad. Bowie just needed to get used to Jagger. He would then stop acting like this sweet baby had

somehow wronged him.

“I can make us something,” I offered.

He raised his eyebrows at that suggestion. “You don’t cook,” he replied.

Proud of myself, I tilted my head and smiled at him. “I’ll have you know, I’ve been watching the Cooking Channel. I can make a few things now.”

Bowie looked shocked. “You didn’t tell me that,” he said.

“I wanted to surprise you,” I told him.

I’d surprised Kye with fettucine Alfredo two nights ago. He’d raved about it as if he’d never had anything that good in his life. I knew he was full of crap, but I’d enjoyed it nonetheless.

“I wanted to start making dinner for Mom and Dad a few times a week. She’s got her hands full during the day, and I know she needs a break.”

Bowie grinned finally. “Okay, then, yes, I’d love to have my future wife show me what she’s learned. I’m assuming you have the stuff to make something vegan.”

Hearing him call me his wife was startling. Yes, we were engaged, but being a wife was different. It felt different.

“Yes. I got tofu just for you in my grocery order yesterday. No pressure or anything,” I teased, then stood back up with Jagger.

The front door swung open, and Kye came walking in with his leather jacket on, looking like some rock god. He ignored Bowie sitting on the sofa, although he had seen the truck outside and knew he was here. Instead, he looked at Jagger, then me.

“Everything good? Do I need to get anything?” he asked, walking over to me.

“I was just about to make vegan-style chicken Parmesan, but with tofu. I have chicken though and can make you some the regular way,” I told him.

He reached for Jagger. “I’ll take Jag. That sounds fucking delicious.” Turning with Jagger in his arms, he finally looked at Bowie. “Wait until you taste her cooking. She’s killing it in the kitchen.”

Bowie didn’t look amused or even remotely interested. He stood up. “Actually, since you’re back, I thought I’d take her out for a meal. Get her out of the house, where she’s not taking care of a baby constantly.”

I tensed. “Bowie,” I said, not liking the tone he’d taken. “I get out of the house, and please don’t say things like that, especially when Jagger can hear you.”

Bowie’s gaze swung to mine. “He’s an infant. He doesn’t know what the hell I’m saying.”

“Use your sweet words,” Kye corrected him.

Normally, this would make me laugh. Right now though, the tension was so thick that it was hard to take a deep breath.

“My what?” he asked, scowling at Kye.

I moved to stand between them. “I don’t allow cussing in front of the baby,” I explained. “Why don’t you come with me to the kitchen? I can cook, and we can all eat. If you want to go out and do something, we can do that after.”

Bowie frowned as he looked down at me. I reached out and touched his arm, hoping to calm him. This wasn’t how I’d wanted things to go. I’d been so sure that with one look at Jagger, he’d soften. Silly me had even thought he’d change his feelings about Kye.

“If that’s what you want to do,” he said.

I squeezed his arm. “It is. Come on. You can tell me about the new project you’re working on.”

He’d been explaining it with so much excitement on the phone last night that I figured it would be a good distraction.

When Bowie followed me into the kitchen, I glanced at Kye, who was watching us with interest.

Please be good, Kye, I begged silently, hoping he could read my thoughts.

Once we were in the kitchen together, I relaxed a little.

“Have a seat.” I motioned toward the bar. “Would you like a drink? Beer? Whiskey? I don’t have any red wine.”

Neither Kye nor I drank wine.

“Water?” he asked.

I opened the fridge and pulled out a bottle of water, then took it to him. “We can go out to eat tomorrow,” I told him.

He glanced over at the kitchen table. “Your machine is on the table, and it’s covered in fabric. Where are we going to eat?”

I hadn’t been able to finish my latest design I wanted to get into Chloe’s shops. Or at least the Ocala location. Things had been busy around here.

“Oh, I’ll clean it up. The machine only takes up the one spot. I can clear off the other three spots,” I assured him.

He opened the bottle of water, then took a long drink. I began to get out the ingredients I needed for the recipe.

“I want to hear about the project. It’s a new app?”

Bowie thankfully began talking about that. I listened the best I could, but I was also listening to Kye and Jagger in the living room. It was hard not to when Kye was talking to him about the football game he was watching on the television.

I was almost done with everything and ready to put both dishes in the oven when Kye walked into the kitchen, carrying Jagger.

He gave me a crooked grin. "Someone was missing you. Thought I'd bring him in here to see what you're doing."

Unable to resist, I washed my hands and reached for Jagger. "Put those in the oven as soon as it beeps," I told Kye.

"On it," he replied.

Looking down at Jagger, I smiled. "Did you learn all about football in there?" I asked him.

He made little noises as he reached up, grabbing at my hair. More than once, he'd gotten ahold of it lately and tried to put a handful in his mouth. I stopped him by taking his hand.

"No, no, you," I said, laughing.

"He's got a thing for her hair. It's because it smells good," Kye said to Bowie.

Bowie was watching me. "Yeah, it does," he agreed.

"It doesn't taste very good," I said to Jagger as he reached for it again.

The oven beeped, and Kye moved to go put the two different Parmesans in it. "What do I set the timer on?" he asked me.

"Forty-five minutes," I told him.

Once he was done, I took Jagger to him. "I've got to get the appetizer

ready.”

Kye took Jagger. “Is it the Mexican dip again?” he asked, sounding excited.

I glanced at Bowie and smiled. “Well, uh, that has beef in it. I was going to make a vegan-friendly appetizer, but you’ll like it.”

Kye didn’t seem bothered by that. “I have no doubt.” Then, he kissed Jagger’s head. “Come on, little man. Let’s go back to the game.”

When they were gone from the kitchen, Bowie stood up. “He seems attached to the kid already. You sure he’s going to give him up? I mean, I hope he does. That kid needs real parents.”

I glanced at the doorway they’d gone through. Every day, I wondered the same thing. Sometimes, it was easy to forget and pretend like this was permanent.

“I think he wants what is best for Jagger.”

Bowie didn’t look convinced. “I just hope his parents rename him. That’s a terrible name.”

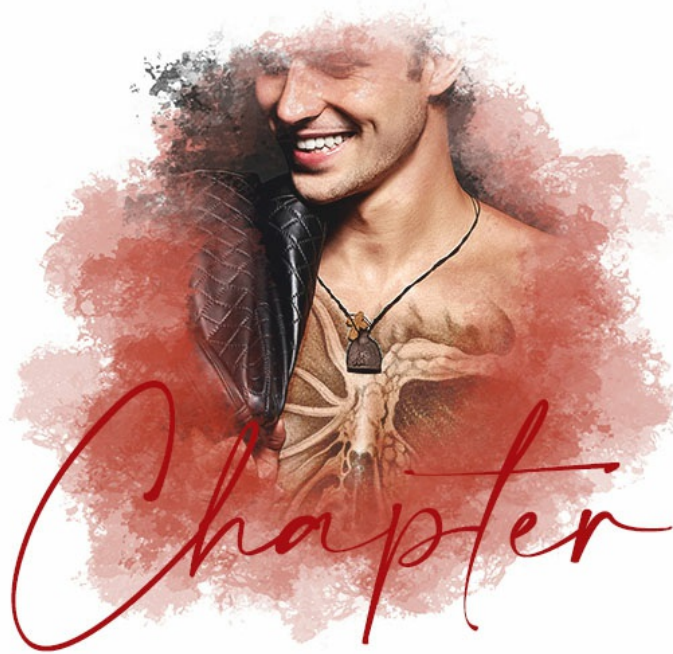
I tensed. I hadn’t thought of some strangers giving him a new name. Jagger was his name. My stomach suddenly felt sick, and my chest tightened.

“I ... I like that name. It fits him.”

Bowie scrunched his nose with a look of distaste. “That name doesn’t fit anyone.”

I would not get upset. I would not get upset.

I was upset.



NINETEEN

KYE

The chicken Parmesan had been fucking delicious. Genesis was getting really good at this cooking thing. Bowie hadn't said much about his vegan meal she'd made, and it pissed me off. If he didn't like it, then he needed to lie about it or eat real meat. There was only so much she could do to make tofu edible. I'd made sure to rave about my own meal.

When Genesis had told me Bowie was coming, I'd assured her I could stay in my room, alone with Jagger. She and Bowie could take my mom's old room. Not that I liked that idea at fucking all, but I'd wanted him here. To see us together. The three of us.

Maybe it was unfair, and part of it was selfish of me, but Genesis had no business marrying at twenty. Not to Bowie. Not to anyone. If I could make him call off the wedding, she'd be hurt, yes. But I'd be here for her. I would make sure she got over it quickly. I was the better man for her anyway.

Honestly, the past few nights, I'd come real damn close to stepping over a line and showing her how I could meet those other needs of hers too. If I wasn't terrified of losing her, I would. It had been weeks since I'd fucked, and that was a record. And it wasn't because I hadn't had the chance.

It was because since I'd been sleeping in bed with Genesis—smelling her and feeling her warm, soft body against mine—I hadn't been able to be with someone else. It had been frustrating at first, but I was starting to embrace it.

Her sleeping down the hall in bed with Bowie though was about more than I could fucking handle. Apparently, she wasn't having the same issues I was.

If I heard them having sex, I might lose my shit. Closing my eyes, I tried like hell to go to sleep. It wasn't happening. Glancing at Jagger, all wrapped up and peaceful, I eased out of bed and headed for the kitchen. I tried to ignore the closed bedroom door taunting me just a few feet away.

The light from the kitchen spilled from the doorway, and at first, I thought I'd forgotten to turn it off when I went to bed since I had been the last one up. However, when I walked into the room, I found Genesis drinking a glass of milk, leaning up against the bar, staring straight ahead.

Her eyes swung to mine, and she straightened. "Is everything okay?" she asked, looking worried.

This was her first night not sleeping in the room with Jagger. I hadn't thought about how that would affect her. Damn if I didn't like that she missed us ... him.

"Jag is all good. I couldn't sleep. Missed my bed buddy," I said quietly in case dickhead was still awake.

She rolled her eyes, but there was a grin tugging at her lips. I wanted to kiss that fucking beauty mark so damn bad. My eyes dropped to stare at it.

Why that spot got to me so bad, I didn't know, but it did.

"I'm sure you will survive without me," she replied.

My eyes shot back up to hers. "I'm not so sure."

For a moment, we stood there in silence, staring at each other. I was waiting on her to break the eye contact. Get all awkward and rush off to the bedroom. She didn't though. Her eyes dropped to my lips, and my cock was instantly hard.

"Baby Doll," I warned, taking a step toward her.

She swallowed hard, and her eyes lifted to meet mine. She wanted me. It was all there in her gaze. The pulse in her neck that gave her away was drawing me closer. Bowie was down the hallway. She was engaged to him. But, dammit, she belonged to me.

Just before I reached her, she set the glass down and rushed past me. I closed my eyes and sighed as her footsteps faded down the hallway. Gripping the edge of the sink, I hung my head. I wanted my best friend. I wanted her naked and underneath me. Fuck, I wanted to bend her over this sink or put her on the bar and spread her legs. Wincing as my cock throbbed in my sweatpants, I wasn't sure what the fuck I was gonna do. She had wanted me. I could see it all over her face, but she'd run. She was a good girl. She wasn't about to cheat on her fiancé.

I reached for the milk she'd left behind and drank it down, then rinsed the glass and loaded it into the dishwasher.

Heading back down the hall, I felt a heaviness in my chest. I hated that door up ahead. I hated that she was in there with him. She belonged with me, but it had taken me too long to accept the truth. What if I was too late to change her mind? What if she wanted to marry Bowie because she did love

him in a way she didn't love me?

I stepped back into my bedroom and stared down at my son, made sure he was breathing, took off my sweatpants, then climbed back into my empty bed.

When the first hungry cry woke me, I was surprised I'd fallen asleep. Sitting up, I glanced at my phone to see the time. It was after two. Right on schedule. I started to get up when Genesis opened the door.

"I'll get the bottle," she told me, then turned and headed down the hallway.

Reaching into the bed, I picked up Jagger. "Hey, little man," I said, then yawned. "Baby Doll is getting the bottle. It's okay."

When he continued to wail, I stood up with him and did that swaying thing that I'd seen Genesis do with him. That seemed to work. He stopped crying, and his eyes went wide. Maybe I was swaying too hard. I slowed it down, and then he started crying again. Okay, hard it is.

"Here I am," Genesis said as she walked back into the room. I reached for the bottle, and she frowned. "It's my feeding time."

I nodded toward the door. "You have company. I'll handle it."

I tried to take the bottle, and she snatched it back.

"I'll do it. Bowie is asleep. Go back to bed."

I wanted to argue with her, but the more time she spent out of that bed with Bowie, the better. She held her arms out for Jagger. I moved to ease him into her hold when a shadow appeared at the door. I looked over Genesis's head to see Bowie standing there. He wasn't happy. I didn't give a shit. He could go home.

Genesis raised her eyes to me when I didn't hand over Jagger.

“Bowie,” I said simply, then tilted my head in the direction of the door.

She turned to see him standing there, looking pissed off. “Hey, it’s my feeding time. I’ll be back to the room soon.”

Bowie didn’t say anything. Genesis reached for Jagger again, and I figured, what the hell? She wanted him, and if she was going to choose him over Bowie, I couldn’t stop her. This wasn’t my fault.

“Hey, buddy,” she cooed. “I’m gonna feed you.”

I watched her as she put the nipple in his mouth, then glanced back at Bowie, who hadn’t moved. His eyes locked on her feeding my son.

“Let’s go to the living room,” she told him then.

Bowie stepped back and let her walk out of the room, and I expected him to follow her. He didn’t. Instead, he watched her walk away, then finally looked back at me.

“He’s your kid,” Bowie said accusingly.

“Yeah, he is. Glad you figured that one out,” I replied sarcastically.

I watched as he clenched his teeth.

“Do you always dress like that in front of her at night?” he asked.

I was in my boxers. Only my boxers. I wanted to say, *I sleep with her, dressed like this at night*, but I wasn’t about to hurt her that way.

“Do you have a problem with it?” I asked him. “She’s never complained.”

He stayed there, glaring at me for a moment longer, then spun around and stormed back to the master bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

I smirked as I stared at it. He felt threatened. Good. Maybe he’d go back to where he had come from and leave us alone.



TWENTY

GENESIS

“It’s been over two weeks since he brought home the kid, Gen. I want to see you, but I don’t want to stay in the house with a baby. I want time alone with you. Can’t Kye stay here alone with his kid and you stay with me at a hotel?”

The edge in Bowie’s voice made me wince. Last night had been rough. Jagger woke up more than usual, and I knew Bowie hadn’t gotten much sleep either. My getting up and down had hindered his sleep. But I didn’t want to talk about this in front of Jagger.

Kye had gone to the store to get more formula, diapers, and some items I needed for a couple of other recipes I wanted to try. The moment he’d stepped out of the door, Bowie had started in on me about last night. He hadn’t liked my getting up to help with Jagger, which I didn’t understand at all. I looked at Jagger, watching me from the bouncy seat that had been dropped off this morning early by one of Kye’s friends. Maddie Hughes had

sent it over for us to use, along with a baby monitor, a swing, and a bottle sterilizer.

Bowie was waiting for me to respond, but what did I say? How was I supposed to just leave them here? Jagger was still waking up three times a night to eat most of the time. Last night, he'd woken up five times. Bowie had witnessed it last night, and he had to have seen how hard that would be on one person. Kye was great with Jagger, but the idea of him having to do it all seemed impossible.

"I don't know," I finally replied. "That is asking a lot." More than I was willing to agree to.

"Why don't you know? You're aware this is his kid. Not yours. Is he even looking for parents for the kid? Every time we've talked lately, you two seem to be fully involved in playing house. And now that I am here to see it, that is exactly what it looks like. I feel like the odd guy out. It's like you have a family that I'm not a part of. And you're my fiancée. Mine."

I'd explained to Bowie more than once how this was going to be a process. The birth certificate situation was currently being handled. Kye's name was being put on it as the father, and Jagger's last name was being changed to Levine. But he hadn't talked about the next step. Lately, the way I'd caught him looking at Jagger made me wonder if he was changing his mind. The idea of not having to give Jagger away made my heart soar until I remembered that Kye was not in a situation to be a parent. This little bubble we were living in wasn't forever. We weren't a family. I'd admit, I felt like one at times. Or at least, I wanted it. I felt guilty every time I thought of Bowie. I shouldn't be wanting this with someone else.

"We aren't playing house. And, yes, Kye is working on the custody thing

right now so that he can legally find parents for Jagger.”

I wasn't going to say that Jagger wasn't mine. Not when his little eyes were locked on me. Maybe he wouldn't understand what I was saying, but it didn't matter. I would know what I was saying. I didn't want him to hear negative things. It wasn't good for his brain and emotional development.

Bowie sighed heavily. “This is harder than I thought it would be, and that's saying a lot because I thought it would be hard. I just ...” He paused, then walked over to stand near the window. He ran a hand through his hair, clearly frustrated.

I wished I could fix it for him. Make this easier for him to understand, but I didn't seem to be doing that the right way.

“I need to be first. You think that's me asking you to choose, but it's not. If we are going to get married, then I need to know you love me and put me first. That you want to put me first. That it's not even something you have to think about. And right now ... I don't know if that's the case.”

My eyes burned, and I turned so that Jagger wouldn't see me upset. “This isn't about my putting you first,” I said in a calm voice. “It's me helping my best friend.”

“Putting him first,” Bowie shouted.

“Bowie, please,” I begged, not wanting Jagger to hear us fighting. “I told you this was going to take time. It's just been two weeks.”

“Seventeen days,” he corrected me.

“Stay here a few days. Stop glaring at Jagger like he did something wrong.”

“No. I'm not doing that. I've already accepted that you are sleeping in the

same fucking house as Kye. You pushed our wedding off to help Kye. He has plenty of women in his life who can help him. Why not one of his regular fuck buddies? There are women all over the damn county who would happily do what you're doing."

The thought of some woman I didn't know taking care of Jagger made me cringe. I couldn't stand the thought of handing him over and just walking away. I didn't know those women that Kye spent time with, and I didn't trust them. Jagger's mother had been one of them, and look what she'd done to him.

"Because I am his best friend. He doesn't trust the others, and neither do I."
And I love Jagger.

Bowie was silent. I glanced back at Jagger, who was now watching the ceiling fan while kicking his legs excitedly.

"I can't," Bowie said. "This is asking too much of me. I deserve better than this. I love you, Genesis, but I can't love for the both of us. Until you figure out what is more important to you, then I think we need to call off the wedding. Put a halt on us. Unless you can tell me that you will walk away and let Kye find someone else to help him. Like his mother. He trusts her. I don't get why she isn't here, doing this. Chloe has always catered to Kye. This seems like something she'd want to be involved in. I bet she could keep Jagger by herself. Kye could go back to his Mafia life."

I wiped at the tear that rolled down my face. "He's not going to do that to her. She'll get attached to Jagger. He doesn't want her to get hurt," I said softly. "You want to call off the wedding?" My voice cracked, repeating his words.

"Yes, I do. When I say *I do*, I want to know the woman I am saying it to

puts me first in her life.”

Why was he doing this?

“I love you,” I replied as another tear escaped.

And I did love him. I knew he’d be a good husband. He’d give me the comfort of a home, children, security. He was exactly what a woman should want in a man. But Jagger ... and Kye were first. I didn’t love Bowie enough to walk away from them.

“Not enough, Genesis. I’ve thought of little else since you decided on changing our wedding date so you could help Kye with his mistake. I’ve talked to my mom. I’ve lost sleep over it. I hoped that, today, you would agree to come stay at a hotel with me. That you’d give a little. Just enough to give me hope. But you didn’t.”

He’d tested me, and I’d failed.

I sniffled and fought off crying. I hadn’t wanted to hurt Bowie. But I’d realized, being here with Kye, that I might have been using Bowie as a distraction from what I couldn’t have. Kye would never be the marrying kind. He’d never be a Bowie, yet my heart didn’t seem to care. It was no longer just Kye holding me tightly; it was Jagger. They both had my heart. Maybe there wasn’t any room left.

“That’s it? You aren’t going to change your mind, are you? Even with me calling off the wedding?” he said with a defeated tone.

“You are asking for something I can’t do,” I whispered.

He looked at me, and the pain was there on his face. He didn’t try and mask it. My chest hurt as I thought about how he was feeling, but as much as it ached, I knew leaving Jagger would be worse.

Bowie walked over to me, and I thought for a moment that he was going to kiss me. Tell me he was sorry. That we'd work it out. However, when he reached me, he looked down at my left hand, then up at me.

"If this is truly how you feel, then it's not just the wedding I'm calling off. It's the engagement too."

I swallowed painfully over the lump in my throat. Lifting my hand, I slid the ring off my finger and looked at it one last time.

The truth was, I should have never said yes to him. He'd asked me at a very emotional time. My father was in the hospital, and my mother's complete devotion to him reminded me that their love was what I wanted in life. Bowie seemed like the man who could give me that. But I hadn't factored in that my mother adored my father with every breath she took. She had told me once that he still gave her butterflies when he walked into a room. Bowie didn't give me butterflies. He never had.

"I'm sorry," I said as I placed the ring in his open hand. "I'm sorry for everything. All I've done that has hurt you. You're right; you deserve more than I can give."

His hand closed tightly over the diamond that I should have never accepted.

"He will never love you the way you want him to," Bowie said with conviction. "He will destroy you. Crush your soul. This pretend world you're living in right now is temporary. Once the kid is gone, Kye will be right back to the way he was. It's just how Kye is."

I pressed my lips together to keep from letting out a sob. I nodded. I knew he was right, but hearing him say it out loud was like a knife slicing through me.

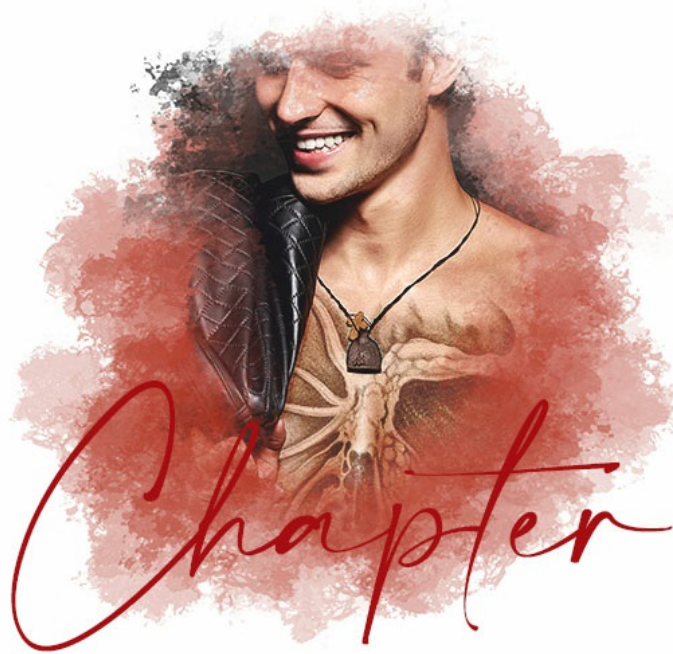
“I know,” I managed to say through the emotion clogging my throat.

He shook his head. “Then, you’re a damn fool.”

I blinked away the tears and sniffled. Bowie turned and walked over to the door, picked up his backpack and overnight bag, then walked out without one backward glance. I stood there, looking straight ahead until I heard his truck start up and drive away.

One day, he’d find a girl who adored him. He would fall in love and be thankful that this had happened. I would be one of those relationships he was glad hadn’t lasted because he’d found the one that was meant for him.

As for me, I wasn’t sure what my future held. I couldn’t look that far ahead and hope. There was too much in my present that I never wanted to let go of even though I knew the day would be here soon when I had to.



TWENTY-ONE

KYE

Bowie's truck being gone surprised me when I arrived back at the house. I hadn't expected him to give up time with Genesis.

He'd been fucking annoyed last night, and I felt guilty for enjoying it. I didn't want Genesis hurt. That was the only reason I wasn't grinning like a fool from the scowling Bowie did last night and this morning over breakfast. He was quiet and withdrawn. I knew Genesis saw it, too, and she seemed nervous. It was one of the reasons I'd offered to run to the store. I'd wanted them to have some alone time.

When I walked inside the house, the living room was quiet. I took the bags to the kitchen and put the cold things away before going to find where she and Jagger had gone. Stopping at the door to my bedroom, I saw Jagger sleeping in his bed with the baby monitor thing beside him on the table. Genesis had been so excited about the things Maddie had sent over with Six

this morning.

I closed the door to the room, then made my way back to the master bedroom. The sound of the shower made me stop. If Genesis was in there, then I didn't need to go any further. While the idea of seeing her naked body standing under the spray of water sounded like a level of heaven that I'd give my soul to experience, she'd be furious with me. I started to turn around and leave when I noticed there were no signs of Bowie.

The duffel bag he'd brought with him was missing. It had been at the foot of the bed this morning when I glanced down the hallway to see the door open. The laptop that had been on the side table was gone. I studied the room for anything of his and found nothing. Turning my attention back to the open bathroom door, I heard the water shut off.

Had he left already? Wasn't he supposed to stay for another two nights?

I'd had to buy more fake meat for the bastard, and the brand of almond butter he'd requested was fucking hard to find. I'd had to ask for help at the store.

Genesis emerged from the bathroom with her hair twisted up in a towel and another towel wrapped around her body. There was the video screen that came with the baby monitor in her hand, and she was looking down at it, checking on Jagger. A soft smile touched her lips before her eyes lifted and locked on me. She jumped, startled, then scrambled with her one free hand to keep her towel from falling off.

"KYE!" she cried, then let out a breath. "You scared me."

Her red-rimmed eyes looked swollen from crying. The fucker had upset her, then left. My hands fisted at my sides as I looked at her. She might not let me kill him, but I was going to hurt him.

“What did he do?” I asked through clenched teeth. Fury pumped through my veins. He might be engaged to her, but I’d be damned if he thought he could make her cry. “Talk, Baby Doll, or I’ll hurt him worse than I’m currently planning on.”

She took a step toward me while setting the monitor on the dresser. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “He’s hurt enough. He doesn’t need you to physically assault him too.”

I didn’t agree. “You’ve been crying. His shit is gone. He’s gone. Why?”

Her shoulders drooped, and I tore my eyes off the drop of water running from her neck to her cleavage. Getting a damn hard-on wasn’t what I needed to be doing. I had a man to go hunt down.

“He asked me to choose. You and Jagger or him,” she said, then lifted her bare, damp shoulders. “And when I chose the two of you, he called off the wedding and took the ring.”

That was not what I’d been expecting to hear. My gaze swung to her left hand ... her bare left hand. Fuck, that felt good. The heavy weight that had been making it hard to take deep breaths was instantly gone. Looking back up at her face and seeing the clear pain there, however, reminded me that this had hurt her. She had wanted to marry him.

“What exactly did he say?” I asked, trying to wrap my head around the fact that he’d just released his hold on her and she wasn’t getting married anymore.

“He wanted me to go stay at a hotel at first. While he was here. Spend time with just him. It was a test, apparently, and I failed it. Then, he wanted you to get one of your strippers to come stay here instead of me, which I adamantly refused. His last demand was that you call your mom to come and take care

of Jagger.” She paused and pressed her lips together. “I couldn’t do it. I don’t want someone else to take care of him.”

I didn’t either. Goddamn him. He’d been cruel.

“Come here,” I said to her, holding out my arm.

She sniffled and hurried to me. I wrapped my arms around her and held her against me. She wasn’t sobbing, but I could hear the sniffles. When she cried, it killed me. I hated it. Even though I was ready to thank whatever gods there were that she wasn’t marrying Bowie.

“He didn’t deserve you,” I said as she clung to me.

I didn’t deserve her either. I wasn’t sure anyone did. Except maybe Jagger.

“He deserves someone who can put him first. Who adores him the way my mom adores my dad. In my head, that’s what I thought we were, but I realized”—she sniffled—“that it was me being selfish. I knew Bowie would treat me the way Dad treats Mom. But he didn’t give me butterflies. He never did.”

Relief wasn’t a good way to describe what I was feeling. The surge of joy that rushed through me was something I didn’t have a word for.

“Butterflies?” I asked, wanting that clarified. I wanted to make sure I was understanding her correctly.

She nodded against my chest. The towel in her hair was in my way. I couldn’t smell her this way. I reached up and pulled it off, then tossed it aside.

“Butterflies,” she repeated. “Mom said that she still gets butterflies when Dad walks in a room. I never got those with Bowie. He was just comfortable. Safe.”

She didn't finish, but I knew what she was thinking. He was things that I wasn't. Did she measure the guys she dated up to me? Was I the guy she made sure they were nothing like? Fuck, that hit me in the gut.

"Don't ever settle without the butterflies," I told her. "You are worthy of a man who makes you feel all the things."

She let out a short, humorless laugh. "Yeah, well, I don't think that's going to happen."

I ran my hand over her damp hair. She had no fucking clue how perfect she was. No idea how the man who gave her butterflies would be the luckiest bastard on the face of the planet.

"It'll happen," I assured her. "You're only twenty. I'm not ready to give you up for a very long time. And even then, I'm going to end up in therapy when I do." I was serious too.

The brutal truth was, I wanted her. She gave me fucking butterflies. When she walked into a room, I got so damn happy that my entire world lit up. I was pretty sure Jagger felt the same way. Like father, like son.

"Maybe," she whispered, then pulled back, her hands going to her towel to keep it together. "Jagger has been asleep awhile. I need to get dressed before he wakes up."

I wrapped one of her wet locks around my finger. "I'll take care of little man. You take your time."

She smiled. "Honestly, I need to hold him. He'll make me feel much better."

Watching her with him was my favorite thing to do.

His new birth certificate was in a drawer in my bedroom, tucked away, and

had been there for a few days. Levi had gotten it expedited through his connections. I hadn't wanted to expedite it, and I wasn't ready to tell Genesis I had it. The thought of giving my son away was more difficult than I'd ever imagined it would be. I tried to tell myself that it was just because I knew it was going to be hard on Genesis. I couldn't stand the idea of her being upset over letting him go. But I had to face the facts. It was me who didn't want to let him go. I wanted to keep him. Just like I wanted to keep her.



TWENTY-TWO

GENESIS

Jagger had slept five-hour stretches the past two nights. It was as if the night when Bowie had been here exhausted him so much that he was making up for the lost sleep. When my eyes opened at six and he was still sleeping, I watched to make sure he was breathing. Kye's arms tightened around me, and he snuggled in closer to my back.

This, too, had gotten more intense since Bowie had left. I no longer just woke up like this, but we went to sleep like this too. Kye had asked if he could hold me the first night, and I'd been weak. I'd said yes. Somehow, it'd happened again last night. To be honest, I enjoyed it. I slept better. The only issue I had with it was that my panties were wet every morning and the tingle between my legs had become an ache.

Kye buried his head in my hair and made a sleepy groan. It was like he knew I was awake and would be getting up soon. If he knew I wanted to stay

here even more than he wanted me to stay and why, he would be the one flying out of the bed first.

At least, I thought he would. I kept telling myself he would to keep me from doing something stupid that I couldn't take back. Kye was always touchy-feely. I also wasn't sure how much sex he was getting these days. When he wasn't off doing underworld stuff, he was with us. There were days he didn't leave us at all. I couldn't let his lack of sex and typical horny behavior make me think he was asking for something that I knew he didn't truly want from me.

He shifted, and his erection was tucked inside of my butt cheeks. I closed my eyes and tried not to make a sound. I wasn't sure if he was awake enough to know what he was doing. I had blamed his morning wood on just that. But now that he was spooning me at night, I could feel it then too.

Last night, I'd scooted away from it, and his deep chuckle in my ear had made me shiver. It was bad enough that the view of his muscular, tattooed arm thrown over me was arousing. I didn't need to feel that too. Not if I was going to stay sane.

I tried to move away just enough to get his hard length away from my bottom.

"No," he said in a low growl, pulling me tighter. "That feels good."

I closed my eyes tightly. "Kye," I whispered, not wanting to wake Jagger.

"Yeah," he replied in his raspy, deep voice.

"That, uh ..." How did I say this? *Excuse me, but your dick pressing between my butt cheeks is making me really wet, and you are going to feel it soon through these pajama pants.* I didn't think that was the right way to handle it.

He gently thrust his hips against me, and I had to bite my tongue to keep from moaning.

“Mmm, that feels so fucking good.” His hoarse whisper caused me to tremble. Maybe he wasn’t fully awake.

“Kye, wake up,” I hissed, feeling panicky.

He did it again.

“I’m awake,” he said. “Trust me.”

My hands fisted in the sheet, and I forced oxygen into my lungs in an attempt to control myself. “What are you doing?” I asked.

He moved his arm that was around me and brushed my hair off my neck, then locked it around me again. This time much closer to my breasts. His forearm was tucked under them. I felt his warm breath on my neck before his lips touched my overheated skin.

“Kye,” I whispered.

He moved his hips against me again, causing his thick arousal to rub against me. “Baby Doll,” he replied as he trailed kisses up my neck.

“What are you doing?” I repeated.

His arm turned, and his hand slid up to cup my left breast. He groaned so close to my ear that I almost had an orgasm. I did make a sound, but I couldn’t help it. When he squeezed the plump flesh, I felt the sparks of pleasure all over my body. I rubbed my thighs together, needing some kind of relief.

“Fuck, you feel incredible.” His voice sounded thick as he licked the skin beneath my ear. “I bet you taste like candy.”

Oh God. I was unable to keep a clear head with all this. Kye had never

touched me this way or talked to me like this. I wasn't going to be able to stop it. He had to do that. Surely, he was going to before I did something embarrassing, like orgasm loudly. "Kye." His name came out more like a moan, but he was moving his hand under my T-shirt.

His callous palm slid over my stomach, and I stopped breathing.

"Fuuuck." The pleasure I could hear in his voice in that one word when his hand closed over my bare breast this time made me cry out.

Kye flipped me onto my back so fast that I gasped. He jerked my shirt up until my breasts were uncovered. I watched in amazement at the wild look in his eyes before he lowered his head and began to suck hard on one of my nipples. His hands grabbed my waist, and his fingers dug into my sides.

The sight of Kye's mouth on me was too much. His tongue flicked over my nipple as he sucked more of my breast into his mouth. Hungry noises vibrated in his chest. I spread my legs, and the moment his sank down, settling between them, the pressure from his hard cock against my clit was all it took.

I threw my head back, and a sound tore from my chest as my body exploded in the most powerful orgasm I'd ever had. I shook as the tremors hit me. Kye shoved his rigid length harder into me, and I continued to shake with the pleasure that continued to pump through me.

The loud wail from Jagger jerked me from the moment, and my eyes snapped open. Kye wasn't sucking on my breast anymore. He was staring down at me. The dark look in his eyes wasn't one I was familiar with, and I didn't get a chance to figure it out before Jagger let out another loud cry.

I had woken him up with my inability to control myself. My eyes widened as I thought about what I'd just done.

Kye lowered his face until his mouth was just over my ear. “Don’t go there in your head, Baby Doll.”

I pushed at him to get off me as Jagger continued his hungry wail.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to,” I said, shaking my head as Kye moved off me.

I started to turn and get Jagger when Kye’s hand wrapped around my wrist. I didn’t look back at him. I couldn’t.

“I don’t want an apology. I meant to do that, and I’m not apologizing.”

I took a deep breath and tugged at my arm. “I need to feed Jagger.”

“Go fix the bottle. I’ll get him up and change his diaper,” Kye replied.

I didn’t look back at him as I rushed out of the room. Once I was in the kitchen, I took a moment to calm myself.

What had we just done? What had I just done? And, oh God, why had it felt so earth-shattering? It was unfair. So very unfair.

I heard Kye talking to Jagger, and I hurried to get his bottle ready. My face was beyond warm; it was hot. I knew I was flushed, but I wasn’t sure if it was from embarrassment or the insane orgasm I’d just experienced. Maybe both.

When Kye and Jagger walked into the kitchen, I kept my back to them as I finished warming the bottle. The soft pad of his bare feet moved closer to me, and I tensed, waiting for him to say something. Kye stopped at my back—Jagger kept him from getting any closer.

“Is it ready?” he asked, leaning close to my ear.

I cleared my throat and nodded, reaching for it. “Yeah,” I replied.

“I’ll feed him,” he told me. “But you come sit with us.”

I turned and handed Kye the milk before lifting my gaze to meet his. He

was watching me closely. Those blue eyes of his sparkled, as if he found my reaction to what we had just done amusing.

“Are we going to talk about ... that?” I asked him.

He gave me a wicked grin. “We can. Or we can talk about something else. What do you want to talk about, Baby Doll?”

Jagger latched on to the nipple and began to suck.

Kye leaned over and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “Come on. Let’s go sit down.”

When he turned, I followed him. Maybe I was still asleep, and that hadn’t happened. The spooning could have very likely caused a dirty dream. I pinched myself and winced. Nope. I was awake. I had just lost my mind, it seemed. But then so had Kye.

I sat down a little farther away from Kye than I normally did.

He gave me a knowing grin. “Baby Doll, move your ass over here.”

“Why?” I asked nervously.

“Because I want you close to me.”

“You’re feeding Jagger,” I pointed out.

He smirked this time. “And I’ll lay him down and move you myself if I have to.”

Giving in, I slid over until I was where I normally sat beside him on the sofa. Unable to look at him, I stared straight ahead. “Kye, what did we do?”

He chuckled softly. “One of the many things I’ve fantasized about since you hit puberty.”

I snapped my head around and looked at him to see if he was joking. “That’s not funny.”

“No, it’s just the truth. Trust me, Baby Doll, the fantasies I have about you, that was a very tame one. If that has you all worried, then you don’t need to hear what else I want.”

What else he wanted? With me? I knew I shouldn’t ask. That line that we had just crossed wasn’t completely broken yet. It could be salvaged.

But I opened my mouth and asked anyway, “You have fantasies about me?”

He shifted Jagger to rest in the crook of his left arm, freeing his right arm. His hand slid over the top of my thigh, entirely too close to my damp crotch. “Very detailed fantasies,” he said as his hand slid between my legs.

I heard his sharp intake of breath as his fingers met the telling sign of just how excited he’d gotten me. His nostrils flared, and I watched as the muscle in his neck flexed.

“I’m gonna need those panties.”

“What?” I asked as he gently rubbed his pinkie finger over the damp flannel of my pajama pants.

“The soaked panties you have on under these fucking pants. I want them.”

I tried to shift away from him, and his hand grabbed my thigh. With one hard tug, he pressed me closer to his side while opening my legs at the same time.

“I can smell you,” he growled. His expression went dark again. “I want the panties, Baby Doll.”

I was trembling at this point. I knew he could tell. “Why do you want my panties?”

His hand covered the wet area, and he squeezed hard. “I want to smell

them. I want to suck on them. I want to rub your sweet juices all over my cock.”

“Oh,” I whispered, unable to breathe suddenly.

Jagger let the bottle pop free of his mouth, and Kye turned his attention back to his son. I moved away from him then, needing distance.

“Toss me the burp cloth,” he said as I stood up.

I picked it up and went back over to place it on his shoulder. When I moved away as quickly as I could, he grinned at me, then brought Jagger up to his chest to burp him.

“I need to go to the house today,” he told me.

I knew the house was where he lived with the other Lords of the Underworld.

“Okay.”

I didn’t want to think that he was going to have sex with some girl there. I wasn’t sure I could handle it. No, I knew I couldn’t handle it. I would never be able to just do things like that and remain friends. My heart was already too invested in him as it was.

“Can you be ready to go in an hour? I’ll dress Jag.”

I stared at him, confused. “Go where?” I asked.

“To the house.”

I pointed at my chest. “You want me and Jagger to go to the house of the Lords of the Underworld?”

The idea terrified me and intrigued me at the same time. It was also a relief. If he was taking us, then he wasn’t going to have sex at one of their sex parties or whatever they did there.

“Yeah, it’s time you got to know them. And time they met you. And Jag. Trinity will have breakfast on the table in the next hour, but I’ll text her and let her know we are coming. She’ll make them wait on us.”

Trinity? He’d mentioned her before. She was married to one of them. I couldn’t remember who. We didn’t talk much about that part of his life.

“Will they be okay with you bringing us?” I asked.

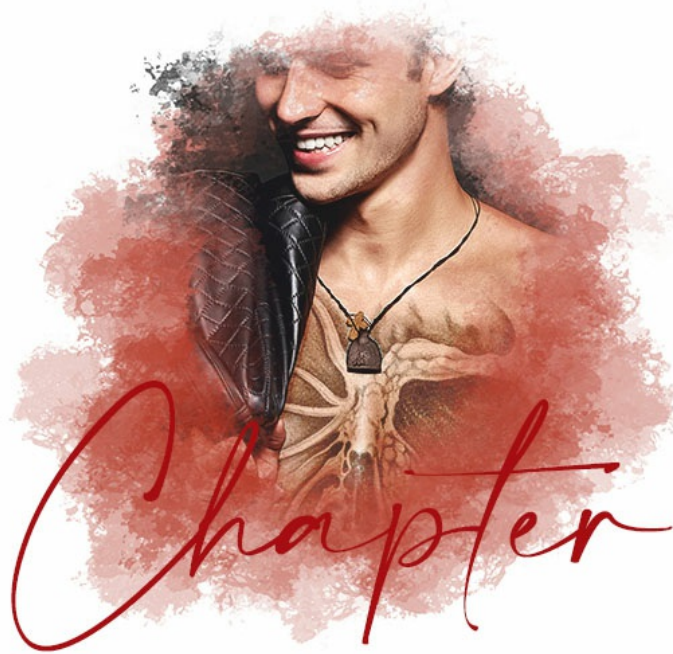
He laughed. “They’re gonna be thrilled.”

Oh. Well, okay. I started to ask if it was safe to take Jagger, but then I looked over at the bouncy seat, swing, and stroller that had been given to us by Blaise Hughes’s wife. She had a son, and he’d mentioned another one who had a pregnant girlfriend. Clearly, they were good with children.

“What do I wear?” I asked.

“Anything you want. Just wear a bra. Please.” His eyes dropped to my breasts, and his eyes flared. “Maybe go do that now.”

I hurried from the room, wondering if this was Kye drawing the line in the sand again. Making sure we kept things on the friend side. He’d been sure to keep me from acting different, and I appreciated it. The problem was, just because he could keep his emotions and sexual things separate, I couldn’t.



TWENTY-THREE

KYE

“Should we take in the car seat or carry him?” Genesis asked.

I looked over at her as I parked the truck inside the garage. She was wearing a flowy, lacy cream-colored top that was cut too low for my comfort and a short blue jean skirt with turquoise featherlike fringe along the bottom. I knew she’d designed both the top and skirt. I’d seen her drawing the sketches back in December. Mom was going to want this in her stores. I hoped she’d sent her pictures.

“He’s awake,” I replied. “And the girls are going to want to hold him. No reason to take in the seat. He’s going to get a lot of attention.”

Genesis frowned. “Girls?”

I could tell by the look in her eyes that she thought I was referring to the females we had all been known to bring around and fuck once. That no

longer happened in this house though. Not since every male here but me was now owned by a woman.

“When I say girls, I mean, Huck’s wife, Trinity; Levi’s wife, Aspen; and Gage’s fiancée, Shiloh. I didn’t see Trev’s or Saxon’s vehicles, so Gypsi and Haisley won’t be here.”

The relief on her face made me want to laugh. Had she honestly thought I’d bring her somewhere around women I’d fucked? Apparently, she had. I needed to make sure she didn’t think shit like that anymore.

“Oh, well, okay,” she replied, smiling now.

I got out of the truck and went to get Jagger from his seat. He was checking things out with interest. I grinned and pressed a kiss to his forehead. Damn, he was cute. His white-blond hair seemed to be getting thicker. I’d noticed that Genesis was brushing it every day now with a soft, little baby brush.

Genesis walked around and closed the door behind me. The diaper bag that she’d bought at the store last week was hung over her shoulder. Her eyes met mine, and I could tell she was nervous. She had no reason to be. Once we walked in there, she was going to be instantly welcomed.

“This way,” I told her and headed for the door leading into the house.

I pressed the security code, then opened the door and waved for her to go inside. The light was on in the first room, and I saw her eyes go big as she took in the walls of ammunition.

I closed the door behind us and put my free hand on her hip to turn her in the direction of the next door.

“That’s,” she said in a whisper, “a lot.”

I smirked. “Baby Doll, what did you expect? It’s the underworld.”

A small laugh escaped her lips, and I wanted to taste them so damn bad. She'd gotten me so worked up, then gone off like a firecracker this morning that I didn't get a chance to kiss her before Jagger woke up. I grinned, thinking about the noises she'd made. Fuck, it had been the hottest damn thing I'd ever seen or heard.

She went through the next door into the living room. Gage was on the sofa, and his gaze swung over to us from the television he'd been watching. The slow grin that spread across his face made me realize I hadn't warned Genesis about the shit that would come out of his mouth.

"We can eat!" he shouted toward the kitchen and stood up. His focus was on Jagger, and he just smirked and shook his head like he couldn't believe what he was seeing before he looked at Genesis. "So, this is the girl whose text can get you to take your dick out of a—"

"GAGE!" Shiloh's voice interrupted him, and he flashed her a wicked grin.

"What, sweet baby?"

Shiloh put her hand on her hip and shook her head at him. "You know what," she said, then turned her attention to Genesis. "You'll learn to ignore the things he says. I'm Shiloh, and we are so happy that Kye brought you and Jagger to the house."

"It's nice to meet you," Genesis replied.

Shiloh's gaze went to Jagger then. "Can I please?" she asked hopefully.

I stepped forward and handed Jagger to her. Shiloh's gaze lit up, and she started cooing at him.

"Thanks, man," Gage drawled. "You're gonna give them all baby fever."

I shrugged. "It's not a bad thing."

Gage narrowed his eyes as he studied me. I placed my hand on Genesis's lower back, and we followed Shiloh into the kitchen. When we stepped inside, Huck was at the end of the table with his coffee and some papers in front of him. Levi was to his right, looking over whatever it was Huck had with him. Aspen and Trinity were in the kitchen, getting the food set up on the island, like a breakfast bar.

"Look who I have," Shiloh said in a singsong voice.

Both women stopped what they were doing and hurried around the bar to see Jagger up close.

"Oh my God, Kye! He looks just like you," Trinity gushed. "Hey, little guy," she said, taking one of his socked feet and tickling it as he kicked.

Aspen smiled sweetly at him, then turned her attention to Genesis. "I'm Aspen," she said to her. "It's really nice to meet you. We've heard a lot about you. I'm so happy Kye brought you for breakfast. I hope that becomes a regular thing."

Genesis seemed to visibly relax. "Thank you for having me at the last minute," she replied. "It's nice to finally see this part of Kye's life. I think I envisioned it a little differently."

Trinity looked up from Jagger and grinned knowingly at Genesis. "I'm Trinity, and you are always welcome, even without advanced warning. This is Kye's home, and that makes you family."

"That's very kind of you," Genesis told her.

I could tell by the tone of her voice that she was surprised by everyone. This wasn't what she'd expected at all. I couldn't help but grin.

Leaning down, I whispered in her ear, "Not very underworld-like, is it?"

I saw her blush, and she shook her head. I had needed her to see my place here, where I lived, and that the people in my life weren't unsafe for Jagger to be around.

I slid my hand around to rest on her hip, then pointed to Huck, who was watching everything with his typical serious expression.

"That's Huck," I told her. Then shifted my finger to Levi. "That's Levi."

I knew she'd heard stories of both, and seeing their women must be shocking. Especially some of the things I'd told her about Levi. Aspen was much younger than him and had that innocent freshness about her. I couldn't wait to hear Genesis's take on all this later at the house. My plan had been to bring her here already, but Bowie showing up had put this on pause.

"Glad he finally got around to bringing you to the house," Levi said to her.

She smiled at him, and I tightened my hold on her, surprising myself yet again. What was wrong with me? That was Levi. He was so fucking in love with Aspen that he couldn't function without her. Genesis could smile at him. Jesus, she'd had one orgasm underneath me, and I'd lost my damn mind. I had to snap out of that.

"I need to hold this sweet boy," Trinity said, taking Jagger from Shiloh. "You are so precious!"

Genesis watched with a pleased smile as they fawned over Jagger. There was a look of pride in her gaze that twisted me up inside. Right now was not the time to dissect that.

"He's cute as fuck, but what did we expect from pretty boy here?" Gage said, moving past us. "I'm starving. Let's eat."

"Agreed. Can we eat now?" Levi asked Trinity.

She nodded as she held Jagger in her arms. “Go for it.”

“We do it buffet-style here. Trinity makes a lot of food for breakfast,” I explained to Genesis.

I liked the way she stayed close to my side as I led her over to get a plate. I didn’t miss Huck’s knowing smirk as he glanced at the way I was holding her to me. This was going to be used to taunt me for a while. I didn’t give a fuck. Let them find it amusing. At least they wouldn’t find out about the dry-humping we’d done in bed this morning.

“I don’t see a ring. Thought you were engaged,” Levi said across the island from us. His eyes locked on Genesis.

“Not your business,” I warned him.

I should have handled that before Genesis got here. This morning had messed with my head. I’d only been able to think about how much I wanted to do that again but naked.

He raised his eyebrows as he turned to me. “It was just a question.”

“We broke up,” she said. Thankfully, her voice didn’t waver, and I detected no emotion in her tone.

Levi’s gaze swung back to her. “Really? I hadn’t heard.”

Aspen walked up to him and wrapped her arms around him. That drew his attention away. He dropped his gaze to hers.

She smiled up at him. “Let’s leave her alone. Let her enjoy breakfast. Maybe she will come back.”

Levi grinned down at Aspen, then lowered his head to kiss her lips. “Okay, baby.”

Thank you, Aspen.

I relaxed then and helped Genesis fill her plate, showing her my favorites. She turned to look for Jagger and found him back in Shiloh's arms.

"Do you want to eat? I can take him," Genesis told her.

Shiloh shook her head. "Oh, no. You eat. I want to hold this pretty boy."

Genesis's pleased look made me feel all warm and shit inside. I lifted my gaze from her to see Huck watching me with an amused gleam in his eyes. The corner of his mouth tugged upward, just barely, before he turned back to look at Trinity with that same look.



TWENTY-FOUR

GENESIS

Mom placed a cup of peppermint tea in front of me before she sat down at the other end of the small kitchen table in her breakfast nook. I swirled the bag around by the string.

“How was speech therapy today?” I asked her.

Dad took it three times a week still.

She sighed and shrugged. “I see it helping some, but it frustrates him. You know how your dad loves to talk. Tell his stories. It’s hard on him to struggle to speak and be understood. But we are thankful every day that he’s here.”

I nodded. So was I. I missed hearing Dad tell stories, even the ones he’d told so many times that I knew them by heart. I wished I could hear those stories again in his deep voice and jolly laughter.

“He’ll get there. He’s determined,” I said, hoping I was right.

She picked up her cup and took a sip, then put it back on the table. Her eyes never leaving my face. I knew that look. She wanted to talk about something. I mentally prepared myself for whatever it was.

“Kye sure is over at the house all the time. Morning and night. Bowie only stayed one night, and then he was gone.” She paused, and her brows knitted together. “I’m not being nosy. Truly, I’m not. You’re an adult; you pay your own bills. I have no right to question you about anything. But I am your mother. And I love you and want the very best for you.” She took a deep breath. “Gen, honey, why were there baby items dropped off by a scary biker-looking man earlier this week? Are you doing some kind of charity thing and taking donations?”

I had known, at some point, Mom was going to notice something like that. For the most part, it had been easy to hide Jagger from her. I parked in the garage, and we took him out from the house through the garage door. When we went to the park or out with him to a store, we always went to Gainesville to get some distance from any locals. This had been bound to happen eventually.

I took a drink and tried to decide how to go about explaining this. I was very protective of Jagger. My mom could be opinionated. She’d worry about me first. Not think about the abandoned baby who needed someone to care for him.

She needed to see him first. That was best. She’d see Jagger, and when I started explaining it all, she’d accept him. Not lecture me on what a terrible idea this was.

I took my phone and called Kye.

“Baby Doll? Your dad okay?” he asked, sounding worried.

“Yes. He’s resting. Could you and Jagger come over here, please?” I asked him.

He was silent for a moment.

“She knows?” he finally asked.

“Yeah. She saw the baby stuff being dropped off.”

He sighed. “On our way,” he replied, then ended the call.

Mom put her cup to her lips as she stared at me over the rim. “It’s Kye’s then? That’s why he’s there. You’re helping him. I’d ask about the mother, but I’m guessing she’s one of those wild women he always messes around with. She didn’t want the baby.”

How my mom could pull all of that together with the short conversation I’d had with Kye, I didn’t know. Maybe it was just that the older you got, the more you saw and understood.

I stood up. “I’m going to go let them in. But yes. Everything you said is correct.”

Mom shook her head, looking worried. “Poor baby. Didn’t ask to be brought into this world, and then his momma just left him.”

I nodded. “Yes, she did. She’s a horrible, selfish person.”

I turned and went to the door just before Kye and Jagger appeared on the steps. He looked up at me. I could see he wasn’t sure what to expect, but hadn’t questioned me about bringing Jagger over.

“I want her to see him. She’ll understand my decisions better,” I whispered as he reached the door.

“Do you want me to stay?” he asked.

“Yes. Of course.”

The pleased expression on his face wasn't what I'd expected. I had assumed he would want to escape my mom and the questions. I left Jagger in his arms and led them into the kitchen.

"Mom, this is Jagger Henley Levine, at least as soon as his last name is officially changed," I said to her, then stepped aside.

Kye took Jagger over to stand in front of Mom.

Her eyes softened, and I saw them well with emotion as she looked at him. She held out her hands and took him from Kye.

"Oh, he looks like you," she said to him with awe in her voice.

Jagger stared up at her and lifted his little hand to reach for her hair.

"Be careful. He likes to pull long hair in his attempt to eat it," I warned her.

Mom laughed and placed her finger in his hand instead. "You are a handsome little man. Yes, you are," she cooed at him.

Jagger kicked happily and studied her face, waiting for her to say more.

"Tell me about custody and his future," Mom said, not glancing up to look at either of us.

Kye's gaze swung to meet mine. Was he wanting me to tell her? I wasn't sure anymore. Kye hadn't even mentioned the birth certificate, custody, or finding him parents.

"I have full custody," he said, still looking at me. "The birth certificate now has my name as the father, and his last name is officially Levine."

I hadn't known that. When had he gotten that done? Why hadn't he mentioned it? I felt panic grip me as I waited for his next words. Was he already in the process of finding parents for Jagger?

I couldn't breathe, I realized. I gripped the edge of the table and tried to

draw air into my lungs.

“So, you are going to raise him?” my mother asked.

There was a whooshing noise in my head as I fought to inhale. I wasn't ready for this. He was going to give Jagger away. How could I let him do that? Jagger was mine. Ours.

“I know he needs a mom and dad. A stable home. I want him to have it all. To be loved and cherished. I want him to know he is loved and wanted,” Kye said.

My eyes lifted to look at him as they began to burn.

Don't do this to me. Please, I can't take it.

I had known this day was coming, but I wasn't going to be able to handle it. Suddenly, I bolted from the room and ran to the back door and rushed outside into the night air. Bending over, I grabbed my thighs, digging my nails into them as I sucked in oxygen. Tears rolled down my face, and through the blur, I saw them splash onto the wooden flooring of the porch.

“Baby Doll!” Kye's voice sounded as frantic as I felt.

I couldn't look at him. I wasn't ready to face him. Hear him tell me what he had planned for Jagger. I didn't care how wonderful the family was or how much they were going to love him. Yes, I was being selfish, but he was mine. I'd fallen in love with him so completely. That sweet little face staring up at me as I fed him and rocked him. How would I just let that go? Never experience it again?

“I want him!” I blurted out, standing up and finally looking at Kye. “Don't give him to someone else. I want him, Kye.”

“Baby Doll,” he started, and I shook my head.

“No!” I shouted. “Do not tell me why I can’t have him. Don’t!”

He reached for me, and I took a step back, holding up both my hands.

“Baby Doll, I’m not giving him away,” he said slowly.

I stilled, staring at him, unsure if I heard him correctly. “You’re not?” I asked, almost afraid that I’d hallucinated that.

“I’m not.”

I pointed at the house. “But what you said in there to Mom.”

“What I said in there was that I wanted him to be loved and cherished. To know he was wanted. I might not live the ideal life to raise a kid, but neither did my dad, and I wouldn’t have wanted any other parents. I never felt unwanted or unloved. Sure, I lived most of the time with my mom, but the family was a huge part of my life too. I can be Jag’s dad. He’ll know I love him and that I want him.”

I wiped at the tears on my face as I listened to Kye. He was serious. He wanted Jagger. He was going to rearrange his life for his son.

“I’ve been giving it a lot of thought, and I wasn’t going to ask you to keep helping us like you have been. I spoke with Trinity, and she wants to help me. Keep him when I’m working. She’s excited about it. I just didn’t know how and when to tell you. Then, Bowie did what he did, and I wanted to be with you. Make sure you were okay.”

His words felt as if he’d reached into my chest and pulled my heart out. I knew he hadn’t meant to, but he was slowly killing me with every word he spoke. I turned away from him and reached for the railing to steady myself. He wasn’t giving Jagger away, but he was taking him away from me. I was still losing him.

I hung my head and tried to process the sheer agony gripping me. This was never supposed to hurt this bad. I had known from the beginning that I wouldn't get to keep Jagger. But I'd grown attached. So very attached.

When Kye's hand touched my back, I jerked. I didn't want him touching me. Which was a feeling I'd never experienced. Normally, where Kye was concerned, I wanted to be near him.

"Talk to me," he said gently.

I sucked in a deep breath. "I can't right now. It hurts too much."

He wrapped his arms around me and held me against his chest. I didn't have the energy to fight it.

"What hurts?"

Did he really need me to spell that out for him?

I closed my eyes tightly. "I'm still losing him."

Kye grabbed my waist and turned me around to face him. "No, you are not losing him. What makes you think that?"

My bottom lip pouted, and I couldn't even stop myself. I was doing all I could not to cry some more. "You're taking him away from me."

Kye moved his hands and cupped my face. His eyes held mine. "Baby Doll, I'm taking him there so you can have your life back. As much as I love seeing you take care of Jag, I can't expect you to keep doing it. He's not your responsibility. You want to design clothing. You'll eventually go finish your degree. But we won't be out of your life just because we aren't in the same house. You can't get rid of me. You're stuck with me for life. And Jag too. We're a package." He smirked when he said the last part.

He still didn't get it.

“I want him too,” I said in a hoarse whisper. “I can have my dreams and Jagger too.”

He shook his head in disbelief as he smiled. “Damn, Baby Doll. I’m trying to do the right thing by you, and you go and say shit to make it hard. Real fucking hard.”

I wrapped my hands around his wrists as he still held my face. “If you’re taking him back to the other house because of me, please don’t. It will kill me, Kye. I will miss so much. I don’t want to miss his firsts and not be there when he wakes up in the morning. Don’t take him away.”

Kye’s eyes dropped to my mouth for a moment, and I felt my heart rate speed up.

“If we stay with you, I can’t promise that what happened this morning won’t escalate.”

My breathing hitched as he lifted his eyes back to meet mine.

“Okay,” I replied breathlessly.

He tilted his head as he looked at me. “You sure that’s okay?” he asked, his voice a low whisper. “Because when I say escalate, I mean, I’m gonna end up spreading your legs and feasting on your pussy until you are begging me to stop. I’ll fuck you.” He closed his eyes and inhaled sharply, then opened them again. The pale blue color had turned a piercing shade. “Hard and deep and raw. My control with you is slipping. Every day I am with you in that house, it cracks a little more. I can’t stay there with you and not be able to fuck you on the nearest piece of furniture—or hell, against the damn wall. Rip your top off so I can suck on your bouncing tits you tease me with.”

My knees buckled, and Kye shoved his knee between my legs, holding me up.

“You want that? You think we can do that and not lose what we have? Because as bad as I want to have you, I can’t lose you.”

I wanted to shout, *YES, I want that. All of it.* I had always wanted all of that.

But what would happen when he was done with me sexually? Would I be destroyed? Would I be able to ever love another man?

He lowered his head, and his mouth covered mine. The hard metal from his tongue piercing flicked over my lips, and I opened to him. Taking in the taste of mint and spice. The world around me faded away. I felt like I was floating as he groaned deep in his chest while he kissed me like a man who was starving and I was his last meal.

Jagger’s wail from inside caused us both to stop, and I opened my eyes as he pulled back away from me. His eyes went from my mouth to meet my gaze.

“It’s time for his bottle. I’ll go take him back to the house. You can think about it. Make sure this is what you want. I need you to be absolutely sure. I can’t lose you to sate my need for you.”

I nodded and stood there as he turned and walked away. I wasn’t sure I could move yet, and I wasn’t at all ready to face my mom. She’d have questions after the way I ran out of there and how long we’d been outside.

When she stepped through the door, I should have guessed she wasn’t going to wait to confront me. Not after the scene I’d made. I watched her as she made her way over to me.

“I don’t think I can explain it right now, Mom,” I said weakly.

“Oh, you don’t need to explain anything. I’m your mother. I saw and heard enough. I’m here to talk to you, and I hope you listen.” She reached out and

tucked some of my hair behind my ear. “You, my beautiful girl, have a big decision to make. This day was coming for you the moment you laid eyes on Kye Levine. I saw it in your eyes then, and as you grew older, it never went away. Even when you dated Bowie, the way you looked at Kye was something much deeper and powerful.” She let out a long sigh. “I always feared the day would come that he would hurt you. Don’t get me wrong. That boy would rather cut off his arm than to see you in pain. He adores you. It’s the reason I can overlook the fact that he is in organized crime.”

My eyes flew open wide. “You know?” I asked, shocked.

She gave me a small shake of her head and laughed. “Honey, there is little that I do not know when it comes to you. Yes, I know who and what Kye is. And if he hadn’t grown up right under my nose, I’d be terrified of you having anything to do with the Mafia. Seeing as how Kye would give his life for yours, I think you might be one of the safest females in the southeast.

“Anyway, back to what I was saying. I’ve known since you were kids that you were soulmates. It was clear as day. The problem was that Kye was a wild one, and I didn’t know if the day would come that he was ready to settle down. That is, until I saw him on Thanksgiving with you and Bowie. He was territorial. You were his, and he wanted Bowie to know that the ring on your finger wasn’t going to keep you away from him.”

She looked up to the sky and seemed pleased about something. “Fate often takes over when we can’t seem to get things right. It’s why we call it fate. Nothing we do can truly change it. You weren’t meant for Bowie. You never were,” she said, her eyes moving back to mine. “That sweet baby boy has your heart wrapped around that tiny little finger of his. The fierceness I witnessed when you told Kye you wanted that baby made my heart proud. It also scared me at the same time.”

She stepped up to me and grabbed my hand and held it in both of hers. “You have a choice to make, and I won’t lie to you; it’s a gamble. One that I wish I could shield you from, but I know I can’t. You have to make it. What I know is that Kye loves you. The big kind of love. The kind that never fades or goes away. You love him that way too. It’s intense, and it can burn the world around you to the ground if it’s not handled correctly.”

I let out a hard laugh and wiped at my face with my free hand. “I think you might be wrong about that, Mom.”

Kye didn’t love me that big. If he did, then he would only want me.

She gave me a knowing smile. “I’m not. I’m seeing it from the outside. I can see all of it. Unlike the two of you, who are circling this flame that’s just getting hotter, the more you pretend it isn’t there.”

She patted my hand. “Here’s the thing, honey. That boy doesn’t think he can be with one woman for the rest of his life. Oh, he knows he loves you. That isn’t something he can ignore. He loves you so much that he is terrified that he will hurt you with his inability to be with just you. That’s the only reason Bowie ever stood a chance. Had Kye trusted himself to be faithful to only you, Bowie would have never been an issue.”

I shrugged. “What do I do with that, Mom? It’s not like I can change him.”

She leaned closer to me. “That’s where you are wrong. You are the only one who can change him.”

“How?” I asked, not thinking she had this answer but desperate for some hope.

“Let yourself be honest with him. Give him all the love you have for him. Let it free. Let him see it. Let him feel it. Show him. Take all he gives you and let that flame explode into something that he can’t live without. Once

he's had that, he'll never want another."

I stared at my mother, wishing every word she had just said was possible. "I don't know, Mom. What if I do that and I lose him in the end? That would break me in a way I don't think I could recover from."

She kissed my head. "That's why I said it was a gamble."



TWENTY-FIVE

GENESIS

Kye was sitting on the sofa with a glass of whiskey resting on his knee in silence. His eyes lifted to watch me as I walked inside the house. I went over to sit beside him. “Did you put Jagger to bed?” I asked.

“I bathed him, gave him his bottle, and rocked him to sleep,” he replied with a crooked grin. He was proud of himself.

He put his arm around me and pulled me close, then pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “I’ll do whatever you want me to with Jag, Baby Doll. I should have talked to you about moving. I’m sorry. If you want us to stay here, then we’ll stay. I handled things wrong,” he told me. “And this morning, I crossed a line. I won’t do that anymore. I’ll be good, I swear.”

There he went, putting up a line again. Trying to keep us from that flame Mom had warned me about. She was right about one thing; I did control the cards here. It was just the outcome of it I couldn’t be promised. The gamble.

I tilted my head back and looked up at him. For the rest of my life, I was going to love this man. No one else would even hold a close second. If we did this until Kye needed other women, then we would end it. I wouldn't be able to lose him then either. I'd forgive him. I would be completely shattered, but I would still have his friendship, and I'd still get to be in Jagger's life. Kye would never shut me out. It was me who would pull away due to being hurt, and I knew I could never do it. I'd need him in whatever capacity I could have him.

Why not know what it felt like? Know Kye in every way. Then, while I pined for what I no longer had, at least I wouldn't be pining for something I'd never experienced.

"I want all of it," I said finally.

He tensed, and he moved the glass on his knee to the table beside him without looking away from me. "I'm gonna need you to elaborate on that sentence, Baby Doll."

Here it goes ...

"I want you to fuck me on every piece of furniture in this house. The wall. Maybe even the shower—"

Kye moved then and grabbed my arm, his eyes narrowing as he studied my face. "You can't say *fuck*, Baby Doll," he said tightly.

"Why? You brought it up. And I want it."

He swallowed hard. "What's the catch?" His words were tense.

"There is no catch. You fuck me until you're bored with me, and then we can go back to being platonic. I only ask that while we are fucking, you keep it exclusive. Just me."

Kye rubbed the back of his neck. “You think we can do that? You can do that? Stay friends once the sex has run its course?”

I nodded. “Yes. And Jagger is your insurance policy,” I told him. “Even if I was angry or hurt, I’d never shut you out. Because of him.”

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly. “So, Jag has taken my place as your number one.”

I shrugged. “He’s cuter than you.”

A wicked grin spread across Kye’s face. “Is that so?”

I nodded.

He ran his hand down my neck and over my cleavage before covering my left breast and squeezing it. “You want us to stay here with you, and you’re gonna let me have you whenever I want you?”

“Yes,” I breathed, afraid that I’d just jumped off a cliff.

“You gotta swear I won’t mess us up. I want you. I’ve wanted you for a long time. But it is also hard to accept something I’ve told myself I couldn’t have for years.”

“I know what I’m asking, Kye. I’ve thought hard about this.”

“What if I want it rough? I’ve got some kinks,” he asked, moving to the buttons on the front of my shirt and slowly undoing them.

“I’ve never had rough. I want to know how it feels.”

His eyes flared with desire. Want. Need. “Baby Doll,” he said, “get this motherfucking shirt off before I rip it. I don’t want to destroy something you made, but I want you naked and in my lap.”

I took over the unbuttoning, then shrugged the shirt off before reaching around and unhooking my bra. Kye’s eyes stayed glued on my breasts, and

the moment the bra fell away, he made a deep sound in his chest. His hands were on them, and he squeezed them so hard that it was painful. I let out a yelp, and his eyes flew to my face. I expected him to apologize because that was how he was. But he didn't. Instead, it seemed to excite him that he'd caused me pain.

"Stand up and get the rest off," he demanded, and my body instantly reacted to it.

I stood and shimmied out of my skirt as his eyes seemed to eat me up inch by inch.

After I slid my panties off, he held out his hand. "Give them to me."

I held them out to him, and he snatched them from me while his eyes roamed over my body. Kye wadded my panties into his hand and held them to his nose as he inhaled deeply.

"Fuck, that's good," he said, then rubbed his face in them.

Reaching for the sweatpants he was wearing, he shoved them down and discarded them. He wasn't wearing underwear, but that wasn't what was shocking.

There was a lot of metal in his penis. I stood there, staring, unable to move.

"I told you I was pierced," he told me.

"How ... how many times?" I stammered.

"Four." Then, he held out his hand to me. "Come here."

I slipped my hand into his, and he pulled me forward.

"Straddle me," he instructed.

He sank his hands into my hair as he held my head and gazed into my eyes. "Baby Doll, there are a lot of things I want to do to you. But I need to be

inside of you before I fucking lose it. You're still on birth control, right?"

I nodded, never feeling this mix of emotions in my life. Excitement, need, desire, fear. All of it combined made me feel lightheaded. Or maybe that was all the piercings that he was about to stick inside of me.

"I was checked after I found out about Jag. I'm clean. I can't stand the idea of not being inside you raw. Feeling your hot, slick walls squeezing me. When I come, I want to be deep inside you."

Oh good Lord, I was going to orgasm just like this if he didn't stop talking.

"Fuck me, Kye," I begged.

My words made his nostrils flare and the veins in his neck stand out. His hands grabbed my waist, and he pushed me down on him as he lifted his hips to plunge into me. I whimpered as he sank all the way in so deep that I could feel the two piercings at the head of his cock that crossed each other hitting something inside of me.

I grabbed his shoulders, and my nails dug into his skin.

"FUUUCK! Baby Doll, that's a tight cunt."

I rocked against him, then lifted my hips to sink down over him again. The piercing at his pubic bone was rubbing my clit in a way that was glorious. Needing more of that, I began riding him harder.

Kye grabbed my face and covered my mouth with his. The out-of-control way he sucked at my bottom lip, then my tongue felt like he couldn't get enough of me. As if he were trying to take all of me. This was how I'd always wanted to feel with a man. To know I could drive him to lose control.

Kye's hips lifted to thrust into me. When he tore his mouth off mine, he went directly to my left breast and pulled it into his mouth to suck while his

hand twisted the nipple on my other one. I moaned with pleasure as he clamped down hard on the nipple in his mouth.

He stopped and kept his eyes on my boobs, watching them bounce as he began to pump upward, harder and faster. “Prettiest tits I’ve ever seen,” he growled. “I’m gonna need to come on them soon. Rub my semen all over them.”

When his piercing hit my clit this time, the crossed piercing at the head touched a spot inside me I knew had never been touched, and pure euphoria took me under, like a wave crashing over me. I had no control anymore as my body shook and trembled. I cried out Kye’s name over and over as it seemed to keep me there in a state of bliss.

“Fuck, Baby Doll! Holy shit!” Kye shouted as a warmth began to fill me deep inside. His arms wrapped around me as he panted and jerked beneath me. “GAH!” he moaned as I felt more of his release.

I shuddered in his embrace and clung to him. Slowly, my body was easing, coming down from its high.

Kye buried his face in the crook of my neck and held me so tightly that it was as if he thought I was going to run away. Did he not realize I probably couldn’t even walk right now? My entire body was spent.

“Damn.” His voice was hoarse as he pressed his lips to my neck. “I didn’t know I could come that much.”

A giggle escaped me.

“Baby Doll, are you laughing at me?” he asked, moving his head back to look at my face.

“No.”

He reached up and pushed the hair back out of my face. “Then, tell me what that giggle was about. Here I am, thinking I just rocked your world, and you giggle.”

I bit my bottom lip and felt him still inside me. “You rocked my world. That was a happy-slash-amazed giggle.”

He grinned then. Cocky man. “Amazed, huh?”

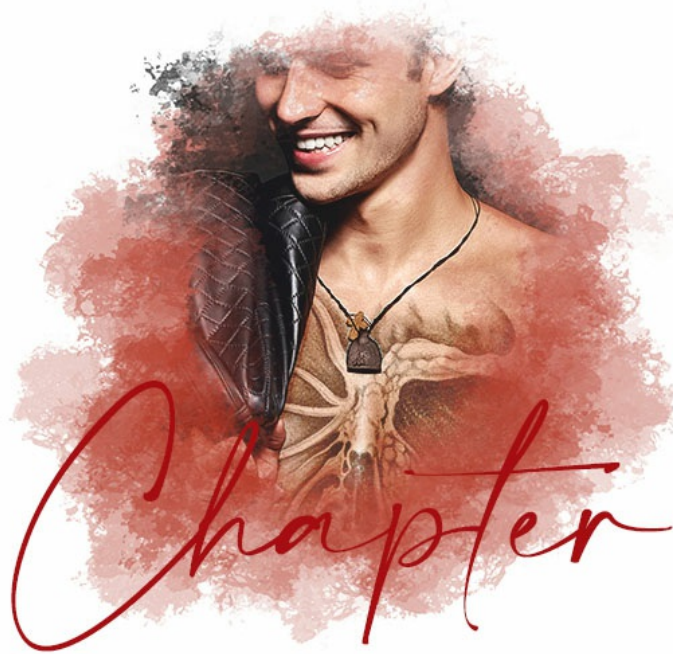
“Yes. Amazed.”

I shifted on his lap, and the piercings rubbed in new places. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the feeling.

“You keep that up, and I’m gonna fuck you again,” he warned.

I opened my eyes and stared at him through my lashes. “Promise?”

Kye groaned, then slammed his mouth down over mine.



TWENTY-SIX

KYE

Genesis looked over at me as Jagger took his bottle. “Go to sleep,” she told me.

I shook my head. “You’ve not been to sleep either. That’s not fair.” Besides, I liked watching her with him. I wasn’t ready to close my eyes.

“One of us needs to be asleep when he falls asleep or ...” She trailed off, blushing.

We’d come to bed after I made her bend over the coffee table so I could watch her ass bounce while I fucked her the second time. Problem was, the moment I started spooning her, we were unable to stop moving—or maybe I couldn’t stop moving. I took her leg, threw it over mine, and slid into her from behind. We’d been nice and quiet until I slipped my hand around and started playing with her clit. Then, she’d begun getting more frantic, which made her pussy squeeze me even harder.

The sound of her crying out my name seemed to send me into some insane, animalistic heat, where I ejaculated so hard that my entire body spasmed. It was incredible. I wasn't sure it was normal though. Not that I gave a fuck.

I ran my hand up her bare thigh.

"Kye," she scolded me. "I'm feeding the baby."

"But you don't have on panties, and my cum is leaking out of you," I said. "I just want to feel it."

Her entire body flushed. Damn, that was cute. So cute that I wanted to fuck her again.

"Don't say that. He can hear you," she whispered.

I watched as she tried to stay focused on feeding Jagger and ignoring me. Part of me wanted to tease her and make it impossible. I had to get away from her if I was going to keep my hands off her while she fed him.

"Come to the master bedroom when he's back asleep. I have the monitor with me," I told her, moving to get off the bed.

"Are we not going to bed?" she asked as I stood up.

"We will. After."

She didn't ask after what. She just nodded her head and dropped her gaze back to Jagger. I left the room, thinking about my cum making her thighs wet as it slowly trickled out of her. I went back to the living room and picked up her discarded panties, then pressed them to my nose as I made my way back down the hall. When I got to the master bedroom, I pulled the covers back and lay down, then began to rub the soft silk over my dick slowly.

My eyes went to the monitor as she began to stand up and wrap Jagger back tightly in his blanket. He was good about going back to sleep now.

When she walked away and I heard the faint click, I moved my gaze to the door, waiting for her to walk through.

The sight of her in my old football T-shirt and nothing else was the hottest damn thing I'd ever seen. She paused and looked at her panties that I was rubbing over my cock. Her breath hitched as she stared. I continued to do it, enjoying the way she watched me.

“Come here, Baby Doll,” I told her.

She walked over to the bed, and I dropped her panties beside me.

“Take off the shirt.”

There was no porn that compared to seeing Genesis pull my high school football T-shirt off to reveal her completely naked body. Her tits had my bite marks and hickeys all over them. I'd sucked so much that her nipples had to be sore.

I held my hand out to her, and she slipped her smaller one in mine.

“Come ride me one more time before we go to bed. I want to be as deep inside you as I can get while those tits I'm obsessed with bounce.”

Genesis blushed as she climbed on the bed and straddled me. My gaze went to the opening between her legs, and I could see the inside of her thighs damp from my cum. Fuck, that was hot. I'd owned that pussy tonight. She would be tender tomorrow. I would keep my face down there and be sure to make it feel all better. But tonight, I needed her over me, taking her pleasure while I watched. I was hungry for it.

Before she could sink down on me, I reached between her thighs and ran my fingers over our mixed juices, then rubbed it around while she moaned. I was torn between watching her face and the way my cum looked on her pussy.

“Kye.” She panted my name.

Fuck, nothing had ever sounded that good.

“Yeah, Baby Doll?” My eyes were locked on her face now.

“Please,” she begged.

“What do you need?” I asked her because I loved hearing her say it.

“Fuck me.”

Those two words coming from her pretty heart-shaped mouth were going to be my undoing. She had no idea how much power she had over me. I grabbed her hips and pulled her down as I lifted mine and thrust inside of her. When I was fully seated as deep as I could go, I let out a deep growl. God, she was so tight. Did Bowie not ever fuck her? Jesus Christ, had I ever been in a pussy this good? No, I fucking hadn't. I would remember something that had felt this phenomenal.

Genesis leaned back and placed her hands on my upper thighs for balance, then began bouncing on my cock. Holy fuck, that was hot. For a moment, I was unable to do anything but stare. Take it all in. Memorize every moment. Her sounds became louder moans as her internal walls began milking my cock. That crazed animal she seemed to awaken in me roared to life. Grabbing her waist, I flipped her onto her back, taking her wrists and pinning her arms over her head while those almond-shaped aquamarine eyes stared up at me with fascination and excitement. The fact that she wanted me to lose it and take her only made the animal inside me pacing back and forth ready to attack her more insane.

I slammed my cock into her hard, and she arched her back, crying out my name.

“You like to be fucked hard, Baby Doll?” I asked.

“Yes! Your piercings,” she panted, then made another sexy sound in her throat.

“You like the metal,” I taunted as I slid out slow, then sank back in hard and fast. “That makes my girl’s pussy feel good.”

She nodded frantically. “Yes, yes! Harder, Kye!”

Damn. Any control I’d had was gone. My free hand went to her throat as I squeezed gently. Her eyes widened, and I knew she’d never had this done before. I held her gaze as I bared my teeth, unable to stop the animal she’d unleashed that couldn’t get deep enough inside her.

“My pussy,” I growled. Words I’d never said in my life. I didn’t claim pussies, but right now, I knew I’d kill any man that touched this one.

“AHHH! Oh God!” she screamed bucking her hips as her cunt began to spasm, sucking my dick deeper inside.

I watched her body begin to tremble and shake as the orgasm took her.

The magic voodoo she was doing to my cock sent me spiraling over the edge with her. I released her neck and wrists to dig my fingers into the soft flesh on her hips as the first shot of my release filled her.

“FUCK!” I roared, holding her hips against me as I stayed buried deep while my cream continued to pulse inside her.

She was watching me with a look of awe and pleasure on her beautiful face. My cock jerked again.

She was perfect. She’d always been perfect, but, damn, I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to stop this. I didn’t want to. What did it mean for the future? She was my best friend. The only female I’d drop everything for. She centered and calmed me when nothing else could. Just looking at her made

me feel like all was right with the world.

Now ... I was pretty damn sure she owned my cock.



TWENTY-SEVEN

GENESIS

It was hard to stay focused on the outfit I was making while Kye walked around the kitchen, shirtless, with a pair of shorts hanging off his hips. He had come in to make a sandwich while Jagger napped. I'd promised Chloe that I'd make the two new sketches of mine she'd seen while she was visiting. However, I was going to end up ruining this fabric if I didn't stop glancing up at Kye.

His text alert went off twice, and he glanced at his phone lying on the bar, but didn't pick it up or seem concerned with answering whoever it was. The third time it went off, I stopped sewing and looked up again.

"You're popular this afternoon," I said to him.

He leaned against the counter as he took a bite of his sandwich and grinned at me. When he began to chew, I lined my fabric back up and started working on the dress I was making again. Another ding from his phone, followed by

another.

I glanced up again. “That sounds important.”

He shook his head while eating and still watching me. Completely ignoring his phone.

“Could you go eat that in the living room?” I asked, my eyes unable not to drift down his chest and the V clearly defined below his waist.

“Why can’t I look at you while I eat?”

I sighed and lifted my eyes back to his. “Because you are distracting.”

He smirked and took another bite, making it clear he wasn’t leaving.

“Fine,” I said, stopping my work and standing up. “I’ll eat too.”

When I started to walk past him, he reached out and grabbed my arm, tugging me to him. His phone went off again. Glancing down, I saw the name Winter on it. My eyes snapped back up to him.

“Who’s Winter?” I asked, trying not to sound jealous.

I was still waiting for him to change his mind about us having sex and being exclusive. I didn’t know how not to bore him. I wanted to be more adventurous. Keep him satisfied.

His hand circled around my waist, then lowered to grab my butt. “Someone I’m ignoring.”

I raised my eyebrows, staring up at him. “She’s a stripper, isn’t she?” Yes, I was jealous. Terribly so.

He nodded, then leaned down to press a kiss to my mouth.

“What is she saying?” I asked him.

“I don’t know or care.” He squeezed my butt and nuzzled the crook of my

neck.

“You’re trying to distract me,” I accused.

“No, Baby Doll. I’m trying to fuck you.”

Laughing, I put my hands on his chest and pushed him back before he got his wish.

“What if I wasn’t with you and she was texting you like that?” I knew I sounded petty, but this was all new with Kye, and I was struggling with it. The *trusting that I’m enough* part of it.

Kye reached for his phone. “I’d ignore it,” he said, then handed me the phone. “You answer her.”

I took the phone and opened the text thread.

Please tell me ur coming 2night.

When I say coming, I mean, down my throat.

I miss u.

U luv the way I suck it and take it deep.

I cleared my throat and lifted my eyes to meet Kye’s as he was chewing. “Uh, I don’t think I want to answer that.”

Kye narrowed his eyes at me as he finished the bite in his mouth. “Why?”

When we had just been best friends, I would have made a joke about this. Teased him to cover up the jealousy. Accepting the possessiveness suddenly clawing at me was new. Although we were temporarily exclusive, it didn’t help my fear that I’d lose this thing we had too soon.

“I shouldn’t have read it,” I replied, unable to keep the annoyance out of my voice.

Kye set down the half-eaten sandwich on the counter, then slid his hand under my chin. “Scroll up. I can’t remember the last time I texted her. It’s been that long. Any texting was her to me. Same for any other female who’s texted me. I said we’d be exclusive, Baby Doll. You trust me, don’t you?”

I wanted to pout, but I also wanted to go shove her in the chest and demand she stay away from what was mine. This, too, was a new side of myself I hadn’t known was lurking in the shadows. I hated that he’d liked the way she gave him a blow job. He’d apparently praised her for it. I hadn’t done that yet, but he never really gave me a chance to get around to it.

He was here with me. She wasn’t. For now.

I grabbed the waistband of his athletic shorts and pulled them down. Kye’s eyes widened, and he started to reach for my shorts, but I shook my head and held his hand back while I sank to my knees.

“Fuck, Baby Doll.”

I smiled up at him sweetly, then took his cock in my hands.

Dropping my gaze from his to closely study the different piercings that he had, I ran my thumb over the two bars that went through the head, making a cross.

“What’s this called?” I asked him before licking each side.

“Magic cross,” he groaned, then muttered a curse word.

I gently ran my finger over the one down further, right past the middle. “And this one?” I asked, then gave it attention, flicking it with my tongue.

“Deep shaft,” he said in a hoarse whisper as his body trembled.

Smiling, I kissed my way down to the bottom and ran my tongue over the last one several times, enjoying the sounds coming from him. “And this

one?”

“Pubic,” he panted.

I glanced up at him, and he was gripping the counter behind him while his eyes stared down at me with a look bordering on devotion in them. I watched him as I ran my tongue all the way up the side. His mouth fell open slightly, and he moaned.

Loving the feeling of power I had over him, I held his base in one hand while laying my palm flat against his thigh before slipping his head into my mouth.

“Jesus Christ,” Kye hissed as his hand grabbed my hair.

That was all the encouragement I needed. I took him in as far as I could go without gagging, then began to work my mouth over him, sucking as I went. I’d only done this a few times with Bowie, and I knew I didn’t know exactly how to do it, but from the sounds Kye was making, he was enjoying it.

“God, Baby Doll.” His voice was raspy as he tightened his fist in my hair and held my head, then pumped into my mouth. “Even your mouth is superior.”

That only made me want to be even better. I didn’t want him to even remember another woman sucking him off. Opening my throat, I gave him full control. When he went so deep that I gagged, he let out a growl that made my clit throb.

“Fuck! Fuck! That’s my good girl. Taking me deep. Gagging on my cock.”

If he was going to talk dirty, I might orgasm too. I locked my lips around him as he got more aggressive.

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve beaten off, imagining this?”

You taking my dick. Such. A Fucking. Good. Girl.” He thrust into me hard with a grunt as he said each word.

“I need to come, Baby Doll. Are you gonna swallow it?”

My eyes were watering as I stared up at him. His mouth was open, and his eyes looked completely lost in the moment. The pleasure in his gaze took my breath away.

“I’m coming!” he shouted, and he shot his release down my throat.

I struggled to swallow, but I was determined to get it all. I wanted every blow job he’d had before this one to pale in comparison.

His knees buckled as he held my head against his pulsing cock. When his hand let go of my head, I held him in my hand as I licked the head, getting the last of his cum. He shook as my tongue went over the slit at the top.

“Baby Doll,” he hissed.

I licked my lips as I slowly stood back up. He was breathing hard as he stared at me. A slow smile spread across his face.

“Anytime you want to read my texts, please help yourself. In fact, I’m sure I can find some more if you want to read them. If that is the response I’m going to get, then read them all.”

I threw back my head and laughed as Kye wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against his chest.

“Will you slap me if I tell you I love you after I just shot my load down your throat?” he asked as he pressed his face into my neck.

“Possibly,” I replied, grinning.

“Thought so.” He inhaled deeply, then growled as he tightened his hold on me.



TWENTY-EIGHT

GENESIS

“Knock, knock,” Chloe’s voice called as the front door opened.

I had been walking back into the living room with Jagger’s bottle, and I froze at the sight of Kye’s mom.

She saw me and beamed her bright smile, which Kye had inherited from her, at me. I watched as her gaze dropped to the bottle in my hand, and her smile faltered as she now looked confused. At that moment, Jagger decided he was going to let out another hungry wail.

Chloe’s gaze swung to the infant swing I’d left him buckled in while I went to get the bottle. She slowly closed the door behind her, then walked over to him. Her eyes taking him in as she got closer.

Why, oh why, had she decided to come for a surprise visit when Kye wasn’t home? What was I supposed to do?

Jagger stopped crying to stare up at his grandmother before deciding food was more important and let out another angry cry. I made my way over to them, but didn't move to take him. Chloe was still processing what she was seeing.

Finally, she turned back to me. Although her eyes were slightly glazed over, I saw concern etched on her face.

"Genesis," she said softly, "whose baby is that?"

I shifted my gaze to Jagger and stepped up to unbuckle him. "Chloe, meet Jagger Henley Levine. Your grandson," I said.

It wasn't like I could lie to her until Kye got here. He was going to tell her once she returned from her trip anyway.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "I knew it. He looks just like Kye. I just don't understand."

I picked Jagger up and quickly got the bottle in his mouth before he got any more worked up, then lifted my gaze to Chloe's face. She was watching him drink. The clear awe on her face didn't take away from the fact that she was clearly worried.

"Come on and sit down with us. I'll explain, but know that Kye was going to tell you once you got home. This was a surprise, and at first, well, he wasn't sure of his plans for Jagger yet. He didn't want anyone to get attached to him."

Chloe let out a short, startled laugh. "Attached? I'm currently trying to resist snatching him and running away before my son does something to break my heart."

I smiled and glanced down at Jagger, who was watching me closely as I fed him. "You won't need to do that. It seems he charmed his way into his

daddy's heart, and he isn't going anywhere."

"Oh, thank God," Chloe said with a loud sigh, her hand placed over her heart. "Now that I know my son's little replica isn't being handed off to strangers, I need details. I also want to hold him very badly."

I leaned toward her and held Jagger out so she could take him. The adoration glowing in her eyes as they began to fill with tears squeezed at my heart.

"You sweet baby boy," she cooed. "You look exactly like your daddy at this age. It's like holding my baby all over again."

Jagger's eyes locked on her face as he studied her. She sniffled and laughed as she wiped at her tears.

"Whew," she said and glanced up at me. "Sorry I'm a bit emotional. I didn't think Kye would ever give me a grandchild. It was clear he wasn't going to love any woman but you, and, well, the relationship you two are determined to keep makes a grandbaby very unlikely."

She dropped her attention back to Jagger. "Okay, now, tell me how this all happened. I would ask why you are the one here with him, but that would be a silly question. If he didn't call me for help, then you're the only other female he'd go to." She paused, and a frown wrinkled her brow.

"How is Bowie doing with all this? I mean, from the looks of this living room and all the baby stuff lying around, I am assuming Kye and Jagger are living here too."

I nodded. "Yes. Kye brought him to me the day he got him. As for Bowie, it didn't go over well. We aren't engaged anymore. He called it off."

Chloe gasped and reached over to touch my arm. "Oh, honey, I am so sorry. That's unfair to you."

I shook my head. “No. It’s okay, really. It is for the best. I should have never said yes. It wasn’t right.”

Chloe didn’t look convinced. “Are you sure? Don’t you love him?”

I let out a small, amused laugh. “Yeah. I’ve loved both Kye and Bowie since I was a kid. But with Bowie, the love I had for him, I tried to make it into something more. The kind of love that would never be his.”

Chloe nodded as her eyes seemed to read right through me. “I see,” she said, then turned her gaze back to Jagger.

“Jagger was left at the back door of, um ...” I hated to tell Kye’s mother all the details. I knew she was well aware of Kye’s activities, but it still felt wrong of me. “Well, a business. The woman who gave birth to him had worked there and left a note for Kye, knowing they’d be able to reach Kye, which they did. Kye had a paternity test done to prove Jagger was his, which he is. The birth certificate has been changed. Kye is the father on it, and Jagger is a Levine. Kye has also been given full custody.”

The corners of Chloe’s mouth turned down. “It was the strip club, wasn’t it? He got a stripper pregnant, and she just left my grandchild there without even making sure Kye got him.”

I nodded.

She shook her head. “I want to be angry with him for this, but then”—she looked back down at Jagger—“we wouldn’t have this sweet little baby now, would we?”

I couldn’t agree more.

I heard the knob turn before the door swung open. Kye had already seen whatever vehicle his mother had driven here in and knew she was inside. His gaze went from me, then swung to his mother and Jagger.

“Mom,” he said.

She turned and glanced over her shoulder at him. “Hello, son,” she replied happily. “I’m just bonding with my grandson here while finding out the details from Genesis that you didn’t think to call and tell me.”

His eyes shifted back to me, and I shrugged. What had he expected me to do? It wasn’t like I could hide Jagger from her.

“Uh, yeah, I was going to tell you as soon as you got back from Greece.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Were you now?” she replied.

“Yes. We’ve just had a lot going on,” he explained, walking around the sofa to sit on the coffee table across from her.

Jagger heard him, and he let go of the nipple to look at his dad. The way his little face seemed to light up with excitement was all it took for Chloe to tear up again.

“Hey, little man,” Kye said, reaching over to take his hand.

“I want to be mad at you and hug you and burst into tears, all at the same time,” Chloe admitted and sniffled.

He grinned at his mom. “You can do all three if you need to, Mom.”

I stood up to get her a tissue.

“Genesis assured me you’re not giving my grandson away,” she said in a tone that clearly meant she would not allow it.

“Definitely not,” Kye replied.

I handed her the tissue, and she thanked me, then dabbed at her eyes and nose.

“Good. Now, tell me how you plan to raise a baby in the life you live. I can move back here. Whatever you need. Just tell me what to do,” she said,

looking at Kye.

He shook his head. “No need to move back here, Mom. We’ve got it under control.”

Chloe glanced at me. “We, as in you and Genesis?”

“Yes. We, as in me and Genesis,” he confirmed.

I watched her shoulders rise and fall with a heavy sigh.

“I’m aware the two of you are grown, but I can’t just sit here quietly while Genesis changes her life for you and Jagger. Her engagement is already off because of all she has done for you.” She turned to me. “I know you love Kye, but, sweetheart, you can’t always be the one to save him. You have to live your life. Finish college. Fall in love. Have your own family.”

“She wants to be here with us, Mom,” Kye interrupted her.

Chloe shifted her gaze to Kye. “Sure she does. This is your son, and she would do anything for you. I have no doubt she loves this baby as much as I do. He’s yours. But that can’t keep her from having her own life. Staying here to help raise her best friend’s child isn’t having a life. She needs more than that. A woman needs to be fulfilled—”

“Mom,” Kye cut her off. “She’s good.”

“But—” she began again.

“Mom, Genesis has all her needs taken care of. She wants to be with me. With us. I wouldn’t let her do this if I didn’t know without a doubt that this was what she wanted. When have I ever not put her happiness first?”

Chloe reached out and grabbed her son’s forearm and squeezed. “Listen to me. You are scared. This is all new, and Genesis is giving you comfort. She has always made you sane and kept you centered. It’s one of the most special

things about your friendship. But she is a woman, and she has needs that go beyond friendship.”

“I know about a woman’s needs, Mom,” Kye bit out as his eyes swung over to lock with mine.

I was staying silent. I didn’t know how to explain this without telling Chloe the truth. Every explanation I’d gone over in my head seemed unrealistic. She’d see right through it.

“Are you ...” Chloe asked slowly, and I felt my face warm as she looked from me to Kye. Her eyes narrowed as Kye shifted uncomfortably. “You are,” she said as a smile stretched across her face.

Jagger finished the bottle, and she lifted him to her shoulder to burp him as she continued to smile at Kye.

He groaned and rubbed his hand over his face. “Mom, let this go, please.”

“Let what go, son?” The amusement in her voice was obvious.

He dropped his hand to his lap and gave her a stern look. “You know what.”

She shrugged. “Not sure I do.”

Kye looked over at me, and I dropped my gaze to my lap. I wasn’t saying a word.

“There have been so many times I’ve wondered if it would happen. And to think, all it took was a sweet little gift from God to get you two locked away with each other to shake some sense into you.”

I bit my bottom lip and chanced a glance at Chloe, who was now holding Jagger in front of her, smiling at him.

“It’s not what you think,” I finally said when it was clear Kye was

uncomfortable with where his mom's thoughts were going.

He frowned at me as I met his gaze. What had I said wrong? I was trying to help.

"How's that, Baby Doll?" he asked me.

"You know what she's thinking, Kye," I replied, trying to figure out what he had misunderstood here.

He nodded. "Yeah, I am pretty clear on what she is thinking, just like I'm positive she's not got the wrong idea."

I shifted my gaze to Chloe, who was watching us with interest.

"What do you think is going on?" I asked her, just to prove my point.

She smirked. "I think my son finally got his head out of his ass and realized the only woman he would ever love was right in front of him. He got a taste, and now, he's hooked and not letting her go."

Kye sighed. "Why does everyone keep saying my head was in my ass?"

"Because it was," Chloe replied.

I waited for him to tell her he wasn't in love with me and that, eventually, this would go right back to friendship. But Kye just sat there, holding my gaze, saying nothing.

"Are you going to correct her?" I asked him, starting to get annoyed. Why was he doing this?

He shook his head with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

"Kye!"

"Yes, Baby Doll?"

I sighed and threw up my hands in frustration. "She needs to know what

our situation is.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Sounded like she knows to me.”

I sat there and just stared at him. In my head, I tried to go back through all Chloe had said.

What was I missing? Had I misunderstood something?

“Why don’t you go outside and take a walk with your gran?” Chloe said to Jagger as she stood up. “Sounds like your daddy and his *Baby Doll* need to talk.”

Kye continued to hold my gaze. He didn’t acknowledge his mother leaving with Jagger and said nothing until the door closed behind them. I started to open my mouth and demand he stop confusing me when he moved to the sofa to sit beside me.

He reached for my face, cupping it in one hand. “Stop scowling at me,” he said softly.

I sighed. “You are being difficult.”

He brushed his thumb over my bottom lip, then my beauty mark. “I was thinking the same thing about you.”

“Me?” I asked as I felt my stomach flutter and skin tingle. It didn’t take much for Kye to turn on all my senses, then toss them into overload.

He leaned down and brushed his lips over mine. “Mmhmm,” was the response I got.

“What are you doing?” I asked breathlessly.

“Do you remember all that shit I said about a guy needing to worship a woman if he got himself shackled to her and that there was no pussy that good?”

I nodded, holding my breath.

“It seems,” he whispered as he trailed kisses across my jawline and toward my ear, “that a pussy can in fact be that fucking good, and every time I’m buried inside yours, I want to worship at your altar.”

I sucked in air as his teeth bit down on my earlobe and tugged.

“The idea of fucking anyone else no longer appeals to me. All I want to do is sink so deep in your tight cunt and stay there.”

“Kye,” I finally managed as his tongue flicked over the pulse in my neck.

“Yeah, Baby Doll?”

“Are you sure? We just started this. You have time to get bored with me —”

He shoved one of his hands between my legs and wrapped the other around my neck, stopping the rest of the words that I’d been about to say.

“Don’t,” he said fiercely. “There were a lot of women I lied to and said shit I didn’t mean to get what I wanted. But they weren’t you. I didn’t love them. They didn’t own my soul. That’s been yours for fucking years. I should have known once I got my cock inside you that you’d own that too.”

His mouth came down hard on mine then, and I let out a moan, then buried my hands into his hair. The way he kissed me with pure, raw desire was always my undoing. I wanted to believe I got to keep this. That it was never going to go away, but how did I erase a belief that had been carved into my brain for so long?

“Oh, well, it seems we have things all cleared up between you two.” Chloe’s voice startled me, and I tried to pull back, but Kye held me against him as he lifted his gaze to look up at his mother.

“Yeah, I think we did,” he replied with a pleased grin on his face.

“And here I thought, I was just coming for a little visit. Not knowing all my prayers were gonna be answered,” Chloe replied.

Kye chuckled as he dropped his gaze back to mine. The glow in his eyes was different. He’d never looked at me like that before.

Was it stupid to hope that maybe he was right? That I would be enough for him?



TWENTY-NINE

GENESIS

Standing back on the sidewalk, I studied the Valentine's Day display I'd worked on all day at Chloe's Ocala store. I should have done it weeks ago, but life had taken a crazy turn, and I hadn't found time. Thankfully, Chloe understood and didn't mind.

It had taken me several tries to get it just right. Along with the lingerie I'd ordered, I had also designed a cocktail dress that was perfect for a Valentine's date night. Satisfied with my final display, I took my phone from my pocket to take a few pictures so I could send them to the other stores for inspiration.

I had missed a text from Kye. I swiped my finger to open it.

Jag and I are running some errands. Should be back before you.

Kye had gotten so good with Jagger. He was comfortable keeping him

alone while I ran to the store to work two days a week. They had been going out and doing things while I worked. One day last week, Kye had brought a picnic, and we had lunch with Jagger in the park. I was proud of the dad he had turned out to be. Watching the two of them together was my favorite thing in the world. I was ready to get back home and spend the evening with them.

I focused on taking the pictures from several different angles. The sooner I got this done, the sooner I could get home. I emailed the images to the different store location managers, said my goodbyes to Vera and Natalie—one of the young girls who worked afternoons at the shop—then grabbed my pink shopping bag, smiling at the thought of Kye's face tonight when he saw me in what was inside.

Stopping at the grocery store, I picked up the items I needed for dinner. I was taking dinner over to my parents tonight. Mom had grown accustomed to me supplying their meals on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday nights. Although Dad had gotten better, was speaking clear enough that he could be understood, and feeding himself, he still required help in most everything he did. Cooking had become one of the ways I could help Mom, which was comical, considering I couldn't be trusted to boil water alone six months ago.

Jagger also brightened both Mom and Dad's day. They loved when he came to visit them. Mom had started referring to herself as Honey and calling Dad Pops when she talked to Jagger. I felt like Jagger had given Dad a reason to fight to get back his independence. I told Jagger often how special he was even if he was too little to truly understand how his life had brought joy to so many people.

By the time I pulled into the driveway, it was almost four. Kye's truck was still gone, but there was a metallic-yellow Camaro sitting in the driveway. I

didn't open the garage and pull inside. Instead, I parked beside the strange car and left my groceries in the back when I stepped out.

There was a woman on the front porch, I realized. She had long platinum hair almost to her waist, a pair of tight pink shorts that weren't much more than boy-short panties, and a matching halter top. When she turned around, her boobs were barely covered and pouring out of the top.

I stopped at the bottom of the stairs. "Can I help you?" I asked, already guessing this was one of Kye's former flings.

She gave me a once-over and was clearly unimpressed before flashing me a syrupy-sweet smile on her red-painted lips. "You must be Genesis," she said.

"Yes," I replied, waiting for her to explain what she was doing here.

She glanced back at the door. "I rang the doorbell, but no one came. I assume Kye isn't here."

"He isn't."

She lifted her bare, tanned shoulders with a shrug, then walked down the stairs toward me with a white paper bag in her hand. "Could you give this to him? He forgot them the other day, and I know how much Jag loves that stuffie."

I reached out and took the bag from her, glancing down to see one of Kye's shirts folded inside, along with the stuffed alligator that had gone missing a few days ago. I'd asked Kye if he'd seen it, and he'd said no.

Why did this woman have it? And why was Kye's shirt in here?

A sick knot formed in my stomach. I didn't want to go there in my head, but right now, I wasn't coming up with any other explanations. All things pointed to something that I didn't want to believe.

“Who ... are you?” I asked her.

The gleam of satisfaction in her eyes didn't go unnoticed. She'd wanted me to know. That was why she'd brought the items here. She had known I'd be here.

“Winter,” she replied. “I'm one of Kye's ... friends. Anyway, I work tonight and need to get to the club. It was nice to finally put a face with the name.”

I couldn't get a word out past the invisible clamp that was currently around my throat. The text messages. I said nothing as she placed sunglasses on and sauntered down the walkway and climbed into her yellow sports car. I managed to turn away from her and go up the steps, unlock the door, turn off the security system, and finally inhale some oxygen in a loud gasp.

My gaze fell to the bag in my hand. I reached inside and pulled out the black T-shirt I remembered Kye wearing when I'd worked earlier this week. It now smelled like that woman's perfume. The alligator was something Chloe had brought him two weeks ago when she came to visit. Its bright colors drew his attention, and she was right. He loved it.

I felt numb as I carried the items to the sofa and dropped them. Gripping the edge of the sofa, I stared straight ahead, trying to think of a scenario that made sense. Any reason that woman would have Kye's shirt. Jagger's alligator. I was getting nothing. Instead, the graphic text messages she'd sent to Kye that I'd read were all I could see. They taunted me. Every single word of them replaying in my mind.

I wasn't sure how long I stood there when I heard Kye's voice behind me.

“Why is the door unlocked and open?” he asked. “That's not safe, Baby Doll.”

I couldn't look at him. My head would not turn to make eye contact. I feared that if I did, I would end up falling apart.

Why had I allowed myself to believe him when he said I was all he wanted? I knew Kye better than that. How stupid could I have been? At the rate we'd been having sex, of course, he was tired of me already. He hadn't been able to tell me that he needed variety again because he didn't want to hurt me.

I placed a hand on my stomach. It hurt so much worse than I'd thought was humanly possible. This was excruciating. My mom had been wrong. I couldn't survive this.

"Baby Doll?" Kye's voice was right behind me now. He touched my waist, and I jerked. "You're scaring the shit out of me. What's wrong?" he asked, grabbing my shoulders and turning me to face him.

I kept my eyes down. I couldn't look into his eyes.

Jagger was asleep in his car seat. Kye had set him down beside us. I wanted to sob. Wail at how unfair this was. He had let Jagger be held by that ... woman. Another woman had not only been with Kye, but she'd also held Jagger. She'd had her hands on what was mine. Both of them.

But they weren't mine. Not really. I'd been kidding myself.

Kye took my face in both his hands and forced my head back. "Look at me." His tone sounded desperate. "What happened?"

When I finally allowed myself to see him, it was as if I had been punched in the gut with a sledgehammer. I sucked in air, and my eyes watered. I wasn't going to be able to say words. It hurt too bad to simply breathe.

"Baby Doll, I need you to talk to me," Kye said. I felt his body tremble as he searched my face. "I've never been this fucking scared in my life. Please

say something. You're killing me here."

I was killing him? Did he have any idea how he had destroyed me? Death would be easier than this. How did I find a way to heal from this kind of pain? There was no way I would ever be the same.

"Jesus Christ," Kye swore as he stared down at me. "I am going to kill whoever did this to you. Just give me a name. Nothing more."

I let out a long, jagged breath and locked my eyes on him. "You," I whispered.

He frowned, his eyes studying me as if he had heard me wrong. Then, he shook his head. "I don't understand. What did I do?"

I swallowed hard, then winced. The tightness in my throat wasn't easing. "Winter was here when I got home. She ... she brought back your shirt and"—I closed my eyes and inhaled through my nose—"Jagger's alligator that I couldn't find."

"No, Baby Doll. Look at me," he pleaded. "You misunderstood that. She made sure you took that the wrong way."

I opened my eyes and stared into his. The desperation there was going to shatter me all over again. If that were even possible.

"The shirt smells like her perfume. You wore it the last time I worked at the shop."

Kye leaned his face closer to mine. "Liam called me to his office that day. They had information on Chyna—or Leslie. She was arrested in New Orleans for breaking and entering. He wanted me to be aware of her whereabouts in case she was released and tried to come back here and cause trouble." He stopped and wiped the tears that had rolled down my face with the pad of his thumbs. His gaze seemed to be battling with pain, fear, and anger, all at the

same time. “I had to feed Jag while I was there. He woke up, raising hell. I never left Liam’s office. But Jag did blow out a diaper, and shit got all over my shirt. It was funny at the time. I took off my shirt, and Liam gave me one of his, then sent mine to be washed. As for the alligator, I forgot that I’d put that in the car seat with Jag that day. It must have fallen out at some point. After getting cleaned up, I just wanted to get out of there and back here to you.”

There was nothing on this earth I wanted more than to believe him. The sincerity in his voice and the way he was looking at me soothed the torturous emotions that had flooded me.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I didn’t want you worried about Chyna. I have her being monitored, and if she gets out of jail and comes anywhere near Ocala, I will know.” Kye ran his hands down my arms until they reached mine, and he threaded our fingers together. “Baby Doll, I swear to you that I don’t see other women. I don’t want them. It’s only you.”

Drawing in a deep breath that no longer hurt, I nodded. “I’m sorry. I tried to think of an explanation for it, but I couldn’t. And when she said her name, I knew she’d texted you those things. My thoughts went dark, and I couldn’t pull them out.”

Kye bent his head and brushed his lips over mine. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” I replied before his tongue slipped into my mouth.

My world began to slowly right itself as Kye held me against him, tasting me, making all else fade away. I clung to him, wanting to be lost in the moment. Knowing he was mine.

When he pulled back, he ran a hand through my hair. “I’ve got to go handle

something.”

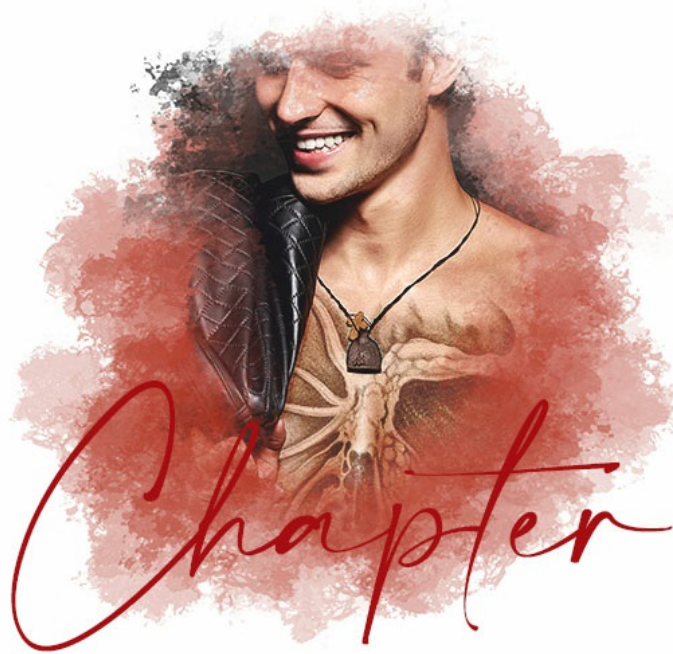
I didn't want him to leave. He'd just gotten here. I shook my head.

He smiled and pressed one more kiss to my lips. “Baby Doll, if I don't go put that bitch in her place and make sure she leaves what's mine alone, my anger is going to simmer until I explode. The image of your eyes looking up at me with pure agony in them is going to haunt me. No one hurts you and gets away with it.” He buried his face in my hair, pulling me against his chest. “My fucking chest felt as if someone had sliced me open when I saw you like that.”

I ran my hands up his back and held him. “I'm okay now. Stay with me. Don't worry about her.”

“If I don't go to the source, my fury is going to manifest with my fist through a wall. The only thing keeping my rage at bay right now is you. Why don't you take Jag to visit your parents? Let me do what has to be done.”

I wanted to beg him to stay and argue that there was no point. Kye's body was strung so tight, and even though he was gentle and loving with me, the violent gleam in his eyes told me he was serious about needing to go do this.



THIRTY

KYE

I finished cleaning up the kitchen after dinner while Genesis put Jagger to bed. He'd started sleeping all night—or at least eight-hour stretches, which felt like all night. The fajita soup that Genesis had made tonight was fucking delicious, and the way she'd blushed when I raved about it made me want to praise her for more shit.

Genesis had always been my center. But now, it seemed that she and Jagger were the sun and I orbited around them. They were the bright moments of my day. When I wasn't with them, I was thinking about them.

One day, I would make sure Jagger understood that he'd saved me from myself. Not only would I have not gotten to be the dad of the best little boy in the world, but I'd have lost Genesis too. She'd have married Bowie before I could realize all those things I felt for her. All that power she had over me was because I worshipped her. She was my one. My only one. I had just been

in a denial so damn deep that I was blind.

“He’s asleep,” she said as she walked into the kitchen.

My cock sprang to life in record time as my eyes soaked her in.

“Fuck, Baby Doll,” I whispered hoarsely.

She smiled sweetly, then spun around, letting the see-through pink nightie with black lace float out around her. The matching thong looked tied on each side, where little satin bows appeared. My leather belt, clasped in her right hand, made my cock throb so hard that I could feel the pre-cum leak from the tip.

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” she said with a musical laugh.

“It’s not for another week, but I’m not complaining,” I replied, dropping the hand towel I’d been drying dishes with on the counter and stalking over to her. I grabbed her wrist tightly and took the belt from her hand while my eyes locked on her face. “You don’t taunt me with a belt, Baby Doll.”

She bit her bottom lip, and I felt my blood roaring in my ears as it pumped harder through my body.

“It’s not a taunt,” she said, running her hand up my chest. “It’s a request.”

Fucking hell. My hand squeezed the leather as I stared at her. “Not sure that’s a good idea,” I warned her, then took a step closer and ran my hand over her bare bottom. “That’s a pretty little ass. Soft, smooth skin.” Even as I said the words, I fought the need to bend her over the table and take the strap to her. “I hit hard, Baby Doll. I like to see welts. I’ll want to make your sweet bottom sore before I get on my knees and kiss it better.”

She trembled and pressed her butt against my palm. “If you promise to kiss it, then you can spank me as hard as you want to.” Her breathy voice made

me groan.

God, I'd never spanked an ass I wanted so bad in my life.

I brushed a strand of hair away from her face. "But you're not a bad girl."

Her nails ran down my chest. "If that's a prerequisite, I can be."

Yeah, I was about to cream in my damn pants. My fingers wrapped around her upper arm, and I pulled her over to the table.

"Bend over and put your hands on the table," I ordered her.

She glanced back at me over her shoulder as she did exactly as I'd told her to.

I took the bows at her hips and pulled them loose. The flimsy fabric slid to the floor, leaving her completely bare.

"Open your legs a little," I said, unable to take my eyes off the wet pussy lips I could see from back here.

Waiting another second seemed impossible. I swung the belt and watched in fascination as it slapped against her ass, causing it to jiggle.

"AH!" she cried out.

The red mark that was already forming was so damn pretty.

With another flick of my wrist, I brought the leather down on the other side. Fuck, I loved watching that. The pained noise she made only made my cock throb harder. The inside of her thighs were glistening; she was so wet.

"Your pussy is soaked, Baby Doll. I can even smell it. You're supposed to be my good girl, but only bad girls want to be spanked."

She turned her head to look back at me over her shoulder. "I've been very bad. I need it harder."

“You’ve got my cock so fucking swollen; it’s about to bust out of these damn jeans,” I growled as I unzipped my pants and shoved them down, freeing my raging hard-on.

I swatted her ass again with the belt and slowly stroked my dick while she squirmed, shaking her plump red bottom at me. She was pushing my control. I felt it slipping with each crack of the leather against her flesh. The more she begged for it, the less control I had.

“OH GOD!” she wailed as her knees buckled after the eighth hit she’d taken, and I could see the squirt of juices running down her thighs.

The belt fell from my hand, and I sank to my knees, then buried my face between her legs, lapping up the wetness.

“Kye,” she moaned loudly, and more of her sweetness gushed against my tongue.

The scent and taste were driving me insane. I couldn’t get enough. Grabbing her thighs, I shoved them open and ate her like a crazed man. The sounds of pleasure she was making drove me harder.

I licked up all of it. Cleaning it off her thighs, then running my tongue back until I went between her asscheeks. The red welts I’d left on her perfect skin made me want to pound my chest. I lapped at them like a damn animal while my cock pulsed to the point that I knew I was about to fucking explode.

I jumped to my feet and placed a hand on her back to keep her bent over while I pumped my dick, slick from all the pre-cum, as I stared down at the marks I’d made on her.

“My Baby Doll,” I grunted. “My sweet ass. All red and swollen because she begged to be spanked like a bad girl.” My mouth fell open as the first shot of white cream hit the crack of her ass. Then, the next landed on one of

the red stripes on her skin. A low groan tore from my chest as I unloaded, coating her turned-up bottom with my cum until I was empty.

I ran my fingers over the mess I'd made, wanting to rub it all over—between her legs, shove it inside her pussy, between her lips. “So fucking sexy, Baby Doll.”

She pushed up slowly and almost lost her balance. I wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her back against me.

“Are you sore?” I asked before biting her earlobe.

“Yes,” she replied with a smile in her voice. “You spanked me hard.”

“Mmm,” I replied as my dick twitched against her lower back. “If you talk about it, I’ll end up fucking you before I can get you in a warm bath and take care of that tender bottom.”

She laid her head back on my chest and smiled up at me. “The harder you spanked, the harder it made me come.”

I ran my hands up her stomach and squeezed her tits. “You want fucked, don’t you?”

“Please,” she purred.

“It’s not enough to have my cum all over your ass. You want it in your pussy too.”

She turned around in my arms and wrapped her arms around my neck. “If you fill my pussy, then I’ll let you shoot it down my throat next.”

I inhaled sharply as my cock sprang back to life. “That’s the best deal I’ve ever been given, Baby Doll.”

She giggled as I carried her into the living room for round two.



Everyone was already in Blaise's office when I arrived.

"Taking your time these days," Gage drawled.

"I had to go get Jag some gas drops before I left," I explained.

Gage just smirked and shook his head before taking a drink from the whiskey glass in his hand.

"You haven't slept at the house in over two months," Levi pointed out. "I thought Trinity mentioned you were moving back in, bringing Jag with you, a few weeks back over breakfast. But that never happened."

I walked over and sat on the sofa beside Sax. "Change of plans," I replied.

Why were they all up in my fucking business? Didn't they have their own lives to run?

"He started fucking his best friend," Gage said, then chuckled into his glass.

"No shit!" Trev said, grinning at me. "How did I miss this?"

"Can I have your room at the house?" Mattia asked.

"NO!" Huck and Levi said in unison.

Mattia frowned. "What the hell did I do to the two of you?"

Huck took the cigar out of his mouth. "The parties. Can't have that shit in the house anymore."

"I can have parties at the shop," Mattia said, sounding hopeful.

Huck shook his head again. "No."

Mattia sighed. "Man, I am over Six and Bart fighting all the damn time. I need out of there."

"Those two fuckers still fighting over Rose?" Gage asked.

Mattia nodded. "It's wearing me out. Rose is a bitch."

Blaise cleared his throat. "Unless y'all have more personal drama to discuss, I'd like to handle the current situation so I can get back to my wife."

Everyone went silent and turned their attention to Blaise, except Trev.

He was perched on the corner of Blaise's desk, grinning, looking down at his glass as he swirled the amber liquid around in it. "And Mattia thought he had problems now."

The glint in Trev's eye as he looked up and glanced from Mattia to me didn't sit well. What the fuck was he talking about?

"Get in a fucking seat," Blaise growled at him.

Trev seemed amused as he stood and walked over to sit in the only empty chair left in the room.

"I met with Liam today," Blaise said, looking grim. "Two of his girls and a member of The Risers were found dead last night. They'd gotten their hands on a lethal mix. Still not positive where the drugs originated from, but Liam, Tex, and Levi have gone over the security footage in the club. We know who was in contact with them before they went back to the motel, where they were found this morning." Blaise leaned back in his chair, then looked at me. "From what I've been told, you are Winter's favorite."

Fuck. I did not need this right now.

"She's got a lot of favorites," I replied.

Blaise shook his head. "No, apparently, just you, according to the girls closest to her and her phone records," he told me. "Winter was caught on a security camera getting into Liano Morts's vehicle three nights ago. Liano is the head of the Vagos. The fact that a Riser is one of the dead, we believe that

this was a direct attack on them. The girls were just caught in the cross fire. That,” Blaise said, then shifted his gaze to Mattia, “or they were both girls the two of you have shared, and Winter was happy to get rid of them.”

“Damn,” Mattia muttered. His eyes met mine. “I told you she was psycho.”

“I’ve not been with her in months,” I told Blaise.

He shrugged. “Maybe so, but she is still texting you. You’re not responding, but she’s not stopped.”

“Which of the girls were found dead?” Mattia asked.

Blaise glanced over at Levi.

“Starla and Tatiana,” Levi replied.

“Fuck,” Mattia swore.

We had shared both more than once, but I’d been with Starla a few times alone. I felt sick to my stomach. If Blaise was right and Winter had had something to do with their deaths, then she was as insane as Mattia had claimed.

“How secure is the house you are in with Genesis and Jagger?” Blaise asked, causing my blood to run cold.

I shot up off the sofa. “Why?” I asked, wanting to bolt from the room and get back to the house.

“Easy,” Blaise said, holding up his hand. “Six and Bart are both stationed outside the house until you return. I wouldn’t have called you here without making sure your family was protected.”

Although it eased my fear, I still wanted to leave. I needed to be there with them.

“Six and Bart can handle a crazy-ass bitch—and Vagos for that matter,”

Gage stated. "They're fine."

I pulled my phone out of my pocket to check the security footage inside the house. When the screen appeared, showing Genesis on the floor in the living room, tickling Jagger's feet and laughing as he smiled up at her, my chest eased some.

"I take it, all is well?" Blaise said. "Are the windows bulletproof?"

I nodded. "Yeah, all the ones in the front and the windows in each bedroom. Dad had them installed when Mom moved me in there as a baby."

"When was the system on the house updated?"

"Two years ago," I replied. "I had it handled before Genesis began renting it for the summers."

Blaise seemed appeased by that information.

"They could just move into Kye's room at the house," Huck said. "At least until this is handled."

As much as I wanted Genesis all to myself, I also wanted her and Jagger safe.

"I don't want to scare Genesis," I explained. "But I'll figure out a way to convince her to without letting her know the situation."

Gage let out a bark of laughter. "Fuck, that's a terrible idea. Have you not paid attention to any of our mistakes?"

Blaise shot Gage a warning glare, then turned back to me. "This is what we are going to do ..."



THIRTY-ONE

GENESIS

When I got home from taking Dad to his doctor's appointment, the sight of another strange car in the driveway concerned me. Kye would have texted me if we had company, so I was curious to see who was here with him and Jagger. The doorknob turned without me needing a key, and that was unlike Kye—at least when he had Jagger here with him.

“RUN, GENESIS!” Kye shouted from inside, and I shoved the door open in a panic to see Kye standing on the other side of the living room with a gun pointed at a man I didn't recognize while the man pointed a gun at Kye.

I didn't notice anyone else until Winter stepped from the other corner of the room, dressed as trashy as she had been the last time she was here.

“Get out of here!” Kye yelled at me.

I took in the situation and made a quick scan of the room to make sure

Jagger wasn't in here.

“Oh, look, just who I wanted to see,” Winter said, placing a hand on her hip and glaring at me. “What he sees in you, I have no idea.”

She swung her gaze to Kye, who had his eyes locked on the man with a gun pointed at him. My heart was pounding so hard that I could hear it in my ears.

Winter slowly walked toward me with a smirk.

“Get away from her, Winter,” Kye warned her.

She paused and glanced back at him, then laughed. “You should have learned your lesson about threatening me,” she told him. “I don't take it well.” Then, she turned back to me.

I forced myself to breathe evenly and focus on her movements. I could do this. I wasn't scared of her.

“Please, Baby Doll. Please, run out of that door. I swear I've got this,” Kye pleaded with me.

“I can't leave you,” I told him, not taking my eyes off Winter.

“Aww, how sweet. Stupid but sweet,” Winter said.

When she was close enough, she reached out and tugged on my hair. “Is this real?” she asked, then jerked harder.

I slapped her face as hard as I could, and she stumbled back. The taunting gleam that had been in her eyes morphed into something much more sinister.

“Bitch!” she said through her teeth as she reached for something at her side.

The glint of shiny metal caught my eye just as she grabbed my arm and spun me so my back was to her chest. I only had a second to think before she

moved the knife in her hand toward me. Shutting out everything else, I recalled every lesson I had learned and took her arm, then jerked my body forward as hard as I could. Winter flipped over me and landed on her back with a loud thud. Still holding her arm, I twisted it while she cried out, and then I straddled her body before slamming my fist into her face five times in the angle I'd been taught until she went limp beneath me.

Before I could look up to check on Kye, there was a crash as others came into the house behind me. Snatching the knife that now lay on the floor beside Winter's unconscious body, I jumped up and spun around to see Gage staring at me with his eyes wide and a guy who I hadn't officially met, but recognized from seeing his face in the media. The younger Hughes son, Trev.

Trev was grinning.

Still holding the knife, ready to cut someone, I turned to see the man who had been holding a gun on Kye splayed out on the floor as blood pooled around him. My eyes snapped up to Kye just as he reached me. His gaze was searching my face.

"Fucking hell, Baby Doll," he gasped, taking the knife from my hand before pulling me against him.

"Did she just kick the bitch's ass?" Gage asked from behind me.

"I think she did," Trev said with awe in his voice.

Kye pulled back and grabbed my face in both his hands. "You weren't supposed to be back yet."

I wanted to laugh at that. My heart was still racing, and there was a man bleeding out on our rug.

"Jagger!" I said, suddenly panicked.

Kye shook his head. "He's not here. Trinity has him."

Although I was flooded with relief, I was confused. "What? Why?"

"Because we set these two bastards up," Gage supplied.

Kye pressed a kiss to my lips and let out a weary sigh. "I think I just died three damn times in less than five minutes. You were not supposed to be here. Fuck, if anything had happened to you ..."

"But it didn't because she's fucking Harley Quinn," Trev said with a surprised-sounding laugh.

"I was thinking she was more like Natasha Romanoff," Gage drawled.

Kye shot them an annoyed glare, then turned his eyes back to me. "What the hell was that?" he asked.

"Might want to tie the bitch up and gag her while she's unconscious," Gage suggested. "It'll just be easier and less dramatic."

"Trev, can you handle it?" Kye asked, moving me away from Winter's body. "How did you know how to do that?" he asked me again.

"Self-defense classes. A year ago, girls were getting raped late at night near campus. I figured I'd make sure I could protect myself," I explained.

Kye narrowed his eyes. "Why the fuck did I not know about the rapes? You never told me."

"Because you would have worried about me, and there was nothing you could do. Besides, if I'd been attacked, I would have been ready."

Kye pulled me against his chest. "I would have come to Savannah, found the fucker, and killed him. The rapes would have ended."

I wrapped my arms around him. The sight of that man holding a gun to his head was going to haunt me for a while. I closed my eyes tightly, thankful he

was safe. That Jagger wasn't here. Sure, there was a dead man in our living room, but I was okay with that. Other than we would need a new rug.

"We should teach her to shoot. Take her to jobs with us. No one would see her coming. It would be deadly as fuck," Gage drawled.

Kye's arms tightened around me. "Shut the fuck up, Gage," he snarled.

Gage laughed loudly. "Damn, this is fun. I can't fucking wait to watch the security feed so I can see her kick the bitch's ass."

Just as he said it, a phone started to ring.

Gage reached into his pocket and pulled it out. "Boss," he said in greeting. He flashed me an amused grin. "Yeah. Okay." Then, he ended the call and nodded to the dead man. "Six and Mattia are headed to clean up the mess. Red's coming to haul him out. We need to get back to the house. Blaise is meeting us there," Gage informed them.

Trev stood back up just as Winter began to make a groaning sound. "Just in time," he said, grinning like he found this all amusing.

"Boss said to bring badass here back to the house too," Gage said with a wink.

Kye let out a heavy sigh. "Can I have a minute? I'm still fucking running on adrenaline and terror. Just let me hold her, and you two stop talking."

Gage shrugged, then turned to Trev. "She's awake. Get her on her feet. We have to go pick up Huck and make the delivery before we get to go eat."

Winter staggered, then began to struggle against Trev's hold on her.

"Easy there, or I'll let our very own Black Widow knock you out again," he warned her.

Kye held me as the other three left the house out the back door. I stared

over his shoulder at the dead man.

“What was all this?” I asked him now that we were finally alone.

Kye ran his hands over my hair and kissed my forehead. “A setup. We needed proof that Winter had been involved in some lethal, laced drugs getting into the club. We also needed to know who she was connected with that was supplying them. Blaise decided since Winter was hung up on me, I would be the bait. You were supposed to be gone for another hour. I was going to track you on your phone, but then things went sour—and fast.” He shook his head. “They weren’t supposed to show up here. I told her to meet me at the motel we ... well, hooked up at in the past. Problem was, I had gone to threaten her after she came here the first time, so she didn’t believe I wanted a booty call. They showed up here instead. I knew Levi had my security cameras on the screen, watching them in case anything went wrong, and they saw them show up here. You just arrived a few minutes too soon.”

He held me tighter. “Dammit, Baby Doll, you could have been shot. That bitch could have had a gun on her.”

I reached up and wrapped my hands around his wrists. “But she didn’t, and I wasn’t.”

“I wanted us to stay here. I know you wanted it. But it’s not safe enough. I need you and Jagger safe.”

“Where is safe?” I asked, already thinking that if this was what could happen, I didn’t want to bring danger this close to my parents’ door either.

“For now, the main house. Where I live—or did before we started this,” he said.

“Where we had breakfast?”

He nodded.

Right now, I didn't want to argue or think about the details. I just wanted away from the dead man in the living room, and I wanted to hold Jagger. For several hours.



THIRTY-TWO

GENESIS

My mother smiled as she watched Kye push Jagger in the baby swing he'd hung from the tree that had broken my arm and ruined his eighth birthday party. Dad was sitting out in his hammock chair on the other side of the tree, looking content with life.

"I can't believe he's already three months old," she said wistfully, then turned her gaze to me. "He's moved you into the Mafia house," she said teasingly. "I guess that gamble paid off."

There was so much I could never tell her. She'd worry herself to death if she knew the things I'd seen. But what I could tell her was how the wild boy next door had become the man I used to dream he'd be.

"Yes. The gamble was the best thing I ever did. I've never been this happy, Mom. He makes me feel cherished, loved, wanted."

She leaned forward and held my gaze. “Does he make your chest flutter when he walks in a room?”

I laughed and nodded my head.

“Good. That’s what you hold out for. Well, that, and does he satisfy you in the bedroom?”

My eyes widened in shock. “MOM!” I gasped.

She lifted a thin shoulder. “What? It’s a legitimate question. Although, with all the womanizing he did, I am assuming he knows all the tricks.”

I covered my face with both hands. “Mom, stop talking right now,” I begged.

She laughed as I dropped my hands back to my lap.

“Sex isn’t the key that holds a relationship together. That is trust and respect. But it’s the glue that keeps things from going dark when times get hard. Not just because of the pleasure either, although that is a perk. It’s the connection deep in your soul.”

I just smiled and shook my head. I could not believe Mom was talking to me about the importance of sex in a relationship.

“Just please don’t give me any details,” I pleaded.

Mom winked at me, and I burst out laughing.

Kye looked our way, and when his eyes met mine, the flutters were in full force. He puckered his lips in a kiss, then smirked. Jagger slapped the tray on the front of his swing and giggled. I dropped my gaze to him to see he was looking at me too. His toothless grin melted my heart.

“Nothing else like it in the world,” Mom said beside me.

“What?” I asked, not looking away from my two boys.

“Seeing the smiling faces of the man who owns your soul and the child who claimed your heart.”

It was true. The joy that those two brought me was unlike anything I’d ever known.



Quinn’s name lit up the screen on my phone. I had muted it for the movie I was watching with Trinity and Aspen. The guys had gone to handle something today and still weren’t home. I held it up so that they could see why I was leaving the room. Jagger was asleep in the bouncy seat, and I knew they’d both keep an eye on him.

I headed for the patio door and answered the phone as I stepped outside.

“Hey, you,” I said, happy that she was finally calling me.

I’d been trying to get her on the phone for weeks. All she had been able to do was text me. Work and school had been keeping her busy.

“Hey,” she replied. “How’s life?”

“Wonderful,” I admitted, although today had been a little stressful. The image of a gun being pointed at Kye’s head was still too fresh.

“Jagger looked so big in the picture you sent of Kye pushing him on the swing.”

“I know. I feel like I’m going to blink, and it’ll be his first birthday,” I told her.

She chuckled. “Ah, my bestie has gone and gotten all domestic. Mommy life, cooking, hot man in the bed at night. You know, I was wondering since Kye is now your man and not your best friend, does this mean I get to take over the best-friend role instead of backup?”

“Yes,” I replied, laughing. “I guess you do.”

She let out a dramatic sigh. “Good. Because I need to tell you something, and I want you to remember I am your best friend now.”

The way her voice had changed from lighthearted to serious concerned me.

“Okay,” I replied. I couldn’t come up with one thing that she could tell me that she needed to pull the best-friend card on.

“Ugh, I am trying to figure out how to start. I’m tired of avoiding you. I miss you. I want to talk to you. I just know I have to tell you this before it eats me alive,” she said.

She had been avoiding me? What in the world was this about?

“Quinn, there is nothing you could tell me that would upset me.”

A short, unamused laugh came over the line. “I am hoping that’s true.”

“Spill it. Get it over with. Then, we can talk about life. I want to know all that’s going on with you,” I told her.

“Well, that’s kinda what this is about. All that is going on with me. My life.”

She was silent for a moment, and I let her think. Clearly, this was bothering her. Whatever it was, she had worked herself up over it.

“Genesis,” she said firmly.

“Yes?” I asked, unable not to smile at the seriousness in her tone.

“I’m dating ... Bowie,” she blurted out, then sucked in a breath.

That, I had not been expecting. Not even a tiny little guess. Holy crap.

A bubble of laughter burst out of me as a grin spread across my face.

“You’re laughing. Is that an angry-psycho laugh or a *this is great news*

laugh?”

“It’s a *I was so not expecting that, but I think it’s great* laugh,” I replied.

“You do?”

“Yes! Bowie is a great guy. He was just never the right guy for me.”

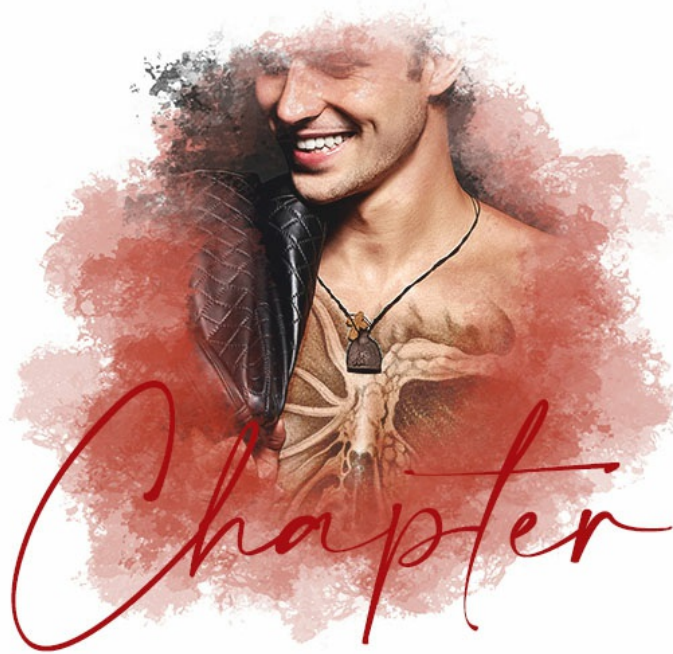
“Oh, thank you, baby Jesus. I have lost sleep over this. I was so afraid you were going to be hurt that I’d started dating him and not even asked for your permission.”

“Permission? Why would you think you had to do that?”

“Girl code. You were engaged to him, and three weeks after y’all broke it off, I went on a date with him. I broke all the girl codes ever written.”

I walked over and sat down on a lounge chair, then leaned back. “Tell me all about it. I want to know how it happened,” I told her, unable to get the smile off my face.

“Well, he came over one night, asking if he had left a book in your old room. He thought it was in the closet. I knew there was nothing of yours left here, but I let him in ...”



THIRTY-THREE

KYE

Where are you?

I glanced down at the text from Genesis. While she'd been in the shower, I'd snuck out of the room to take Jagger to Trinity and get things set up for my surprise.

Last room on the left.

Down the hall?

Yes. Come here.

I sent the text, grinning, then watched the door, waiting on her.

When the knob turned and the door opened, I was standing in the middle of the room. It had taken me two weeks to get it set up for her. She paused and took in the room. I could see confusion and excitement flicker in her eyes.

“What do you think?” I asked her, hoping I'd gotten it all.

Quinn had been a big help. I owed her one.

Genesis walked over to the organized shelves, filled with everything I'd been told she'd want, need, and get giddy over.

She swung her gaze back to me. "Kye, what is this?"

I grinned. "Baby Doll, if you don't know what this stuff is, then you might want to rethink your future."

She shook her head and laughed. "I know what this stuff is, but whose is it? It's"—she waved her hands out wide—"like a designer's wonderland. It has everything. That sewing machine is what dreams are made of. I've been saving for one for over two years. And the rolls of fabric—where did they even come from? That's expensive stuff. You don't go get fabric like that from just any store. It's special-ordered." Then, she pointed at the shelves. "And that. The buttons alone are insane. I've not even looked through all the other containers. I can't imagine what is all in there."

Thank you, Quinn. She'd been right about the sewing machine and the fabric.

I closed the distance between us. "This is your new sewing room, Baby Doll. You can sketch on those pads there or use that computer there to draw them digitally. The programs you need are already loaded. You can make those amazing designs you come up with right across the hall from Jagger's nursery."

Her eyes went wide, and her pretty heart-shaped mouth fell open. "Mine? This? That sewing machine? The fabric? This?" She pointed at the floor, gaping at me. "This is all mine?"

I nodded. "All yours."

She shook her head. "What nursery?" she asked me then.

Jagger had been sleeping in a crib in our bedroom.

I pointed across the hallway. “Levi and Aspen are moving to the top floor for now. Until he’s ready to build a house. Their room will be empty by the end of the week. You get to decorate Jagger’s nursery however you want.”

She covered her mouth with both hands as she slowly took in the room. “I can’t believe you did this,” she whispered. “It had to have cost a fortune.”

“My Baby Doll deserves the best,” I told her.

She looked at me, then burst into tears, throwing her arms around my neck. “I love you, Kye Levine,” she gushed.

I held her against me. “I love you more, Genesis Stoll.”

She shook her head, laughing through her tears. “I swear you do not. I’ve loved you the longest.”

“I don’t know that I can agree with that.”

She pulled back just enough to look up at me. The joy on her face made my heart full. “I promise you that I have.”

“We can dissect the different types of love and what they mean all damn day. But the fact is, I’ve loved you since we were kids. That love changed; it grew, and it became a fucking force so big that it owned me. But I’ve always loved you.”

She blinked, and more tears rolled down her face. “That was so perfect that I’m not going to say anything to spoil it.”

I bent down and pressed a kiss to her lips. “Good girl. Now, go sit in your new sewing chair and see how it feels.”

She walked over and pulled out the plush, brightly colored quilted chair on wheels that would support her back a hell of a lot better than that kitchen

chair she'd been using. I realized I was holding my breath as she sat down in it and turned to the sewing table in front of her. I knew the moment she saw it because her entire body stilled.

I closed in behind her and waited in silence as she reached out and took the antique revival ring with a three-carat yellow diamond, surrounded by a halo of yellow diamonds and flanked by a half-moon of white diamonds, lying right in front of a vase I'd filled with various shades of pink Persian buttercups.

"Kye?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

I went down on one knee just as she turned in her chair to look at me. The diamond in that ring didn't hold a candle to the way her aquamarine eyes sparkled as she stared at me. Every emotion she was feeling was laid bare within their depths.

"I love you, Genesis Stoll. You've been my other half since we were kids. I've loved you in every capacity one person can love another. I can't imagine my life without you in it, and, fuck, I don't want to. We can wait as long as you want. I just need to know that you are and will always be mine. Baby Doll, marry me. Please take my name like you took my soul."

A small cry escaped her, and then she laughed. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

I slipped the ring onto her finger, and then she threw herself into my arms.

"Thank you," I said, burying my face into her neck.

I could say I'd never imagined I'd want one woman for the rest of my life. Hell, I'd said that more times than I could count. But the truth was, I thought I'd only wanted one girl since I had been eight years old. I'd been Baby Doll's long before I understood what being in love even meant.

Scorched Teaser...



GARRETT

Deciding to meet with The Judgment MC's president was more of a family matter than business. Since the president, Liam Walsh, was my daughter-in-law's father and there had been bad blood between us in the past, I felt it was time to remedy that. This would be my belated wedding gift to Blaise, my oldest son, and his wife, Madeline. It also didn't hurt to have The Judgment as backup when needed. The more men I had in my pocket, the more power I held.

The family had never associated with MCs before, but then times were changing, and I had to learn to accept that. Our world couldn't just exist among the elite. We had to broaden our attachments. This was a good start. I imagined my father was rolling over in his grave. But then perhaps not. Madeline's grandfather had been his best friend. If there was an afterlife, then I would hope he'd see this as the right thing to do. For Madeline and the family.

Liam Walsh fit the biker persona with his combat boots, leather vest, tattooed arms, and ripped jeans. It had taken a lot for me to come here. To face the man who had been the cause of Madeline's mother, Etta's, disappearance that led to her death. His side of the story was still one I questioned, but for Madeline, I was willing to fucking try. She'd given me my first grandson. The heir to the Hughes place as boss among the Southern Mafia. For Cree, I could accept this.

"I'm sorry, Garrett," Liam said as he handed me a glass of whiskey.

It wasn't what I typically drank, but I doubted Liam could afford my preference in scotch.

"Micah was called to meet with us before we went to church. The others will have all gathered. I'll get Micah on our way down."

Not smirking at the way he called a meeting among his men "church" was difficult. I had always found biker clubs to be cliché. It was a dirtier, uncivilized gang of criminals. The family at least had a standard, unlike the men here. Again, I was judging them. I had to control that if this was going to work.

"This way," Liam said to me as he headed for the door of his office.

I downed the amber liquid in the glass, then set it on the bar as I followed him into the hallway. There were doors that I knew were rooms for the higher-up members in the club. Liam walked down the hall and stopped at the third door on his right.

"FUCK, that's it! Suck it like a good little slut," a voice shouted inside the room.

Liam sighed and shook his head, then banged loudly on the door.

"MICAHA! CHURCH NOW!" Liam yelled.

“Fuuuck!” Micah called out from inside the room. “Yeah, okay.”

Liam scowled. “Get your dick out of her goddamn mouth! We have business.”

“Fuck, baby, suck that dick ... take it deep ... TAKE IT! I’M COMING!”

Liam looked disgusted as he glanced back at me. “I sometimes wonder why I put up with his shit.”

“Why do you?” I asked.

If one of my men disobeyed me this way, I’d have them killed.

“I raised him,” Liam replied. “He’s like a son.”

Now, that, I could somewhat understand. He wasn’t his flesh and blood, but that wasn’t what made family. Loyalty made family.

The door swung open, and Micah was grinning while zipping up his jeans.

“Sorry, Liam. It’s hard to walk away from a blow like that.”

His gaze swung to me then, and I saw him stiffen. We’d never met officially, but like I knew who he was, I knew that he was well aware of who I was.

“Mr. Hughes,” he said, closing the door behind him. “I didn’t realize you were here.”

“If you could keep your dick out of her mouth, then you’d have seen my text. And stay out of Tex’s goddamn room,” Liam said, sounding disgusted. “Now, let’s get to church.”

I followed Liam as he led me down the stairs I’d come up when I arrived. The black walls seemed all very forced. As if they were trying to be dangerous by color choices alone. The paint on a wall did not make you threatening. The willingness to end a life did. I doubted these men had much

of that in them. Especially the pretty boy who would rather get his cock sucked than listen to the chain of command. But then my youngest son wasn't much different. He, too, struggled to obey when it came to his pleasures.

"This way," Liam said as he opened a large wooden door and stepped inside.

Leather jackets, which they all called cuts, with their emblem on the back and their title patched on the front; tattoos; scarred faces; beards; cigarettes hanging out of most mouths—it all fit the description of a biker club. It also stank of stale beer and nicotine. A good cigar I could respect. A Marlboro I could not. It was just a waste of a good set of lungs.

"Men, I'd like you to meet Garrett Hughes," Liam began.

For the next fifteen minutes, he discussed the decision to work with the family and the benefits it would mean for them. I listened and didn't speak. These weren't my men, and I respected that. Liam was their leader. I took in their expressions. I was an expert at reading people. Men at least. Women I wasn't always the best at, but what man was?

For the most part, his men seemed happy about the connection. I could see doubt in the eyes of a few older ones, but nothing to be concerned with. This wasn't something I offered to just anyone, especially a biker club. They all seemed to realize that.

When Liam was finished speaking, the men all stood, and I spoke to a few who approached me. Even in their need to appear as if my presence didn't intimidate them, I could see it in their mannerisms. The way they struggled to meet my gaze. Yes, every one of them knew if I wanted them dead, they would be within minutes.

“My girl is waiting on me,” Micah said with that cocky smirk on his face.

“Oh, yeah? Which one?” the man who had been introduced as Tex called out, and the others laughed.

Micah scowled then, and I was surprised to see he had it in him.

“Shut the fuck up, Tex,” he warned.

“Stay out of my goddamn room with your club whores,” Tex replied, then stuck a cigarette in his mouth and stalked past him.

“Men!” Liam raised his voice, slamming his hand down on the table, and the room went silent.

I liked that. He had control. Good. I was beginning to wonder.

“That’s enough.”

Micah turned and opened the door. I started to turn back to tell Liam I was leaving when my eyes locked on a face that took my fucking breath away. Exquisite perfection. Eyes the color of spun gold, full pink lips, long, pale blonde hair, framing the face of an angel. Who the fuck was she? It was then Micah walked to her and pulled her into his arms, lowering his head and taking her mouth. Jesus Christ, that was whose mouth he’d been fucking earlier? Lucky bastard. I couldn’t blame him.

Disappointment sank in as I realized that angelic, heart-shaped face belonged to a club whore. What a waste. She probably wasn’t that perfect up close, and she was used goods. I didn’t want a virginal innocent in my bed. An innocent couldn’t give me the shit I demanded, but I sure as hell wasn’t interested in a slut. Especially a biker slut.



ONE

FAWN

It must have been the pale blue of his eyes that had made me stupid. Crossing my legs, I tilted my head to the side and studied the male who had turned me into a cougar for a short time. He grinned at me with that sexy smirk that drew women in, not knowing I'd just overheard him letting Dylan—one of The Judgment's porn stars—suck him off in Tex's room only ten minutes ago.

Living in their little biker den of iniquity hadn't been my best mom moment. I loved an adventure, and this time, I'd let it go too far. My daughter, Gypsi, deserved better from me. I had failed her with this decision. Thank God for the slap in the face I'd just had to get my head on straight.

"Damn," Micah drawled, walking toward his bed that I was perched on the edge of, wearing nothing but his T-shirt from last night. "Looking at you never gets old. It's unfair for a woman to be so fucking beautiful."

I gave him my own smirk. Silly boy. I wasn't one of his female worshippers. Poor Dylan seemed to always be waiting for him to toss her some attention. It seemed he still obliged her even though he had moved me into his room and promised me that I was all he wanted. He wasn't the first player I'd ever dated, and I doubted he'd be the last. I had a type, and unfortunately, he checked the boxes. All the boxes.

"Get a good look," I told him, then uncrossed my legs slowly for his benefit before standing up.

The way his gaze heated with instant arousal made me want to roll my eyes. The man was a machine. His erection was always on the go, it seemed. I chuckled softly and stepped around him before he could reach me.

"I'm going to get my things together."

"What?" he asked.

I didn't look back at him as I pulled his shirt off and dropped it on the floor, knowing he was currently taking in my naked body. It was the last time he would ever see it. I picked up the sundress I'd had on last night and slipped it over my head before glancing back at him.

His eyes were on my legs, but they snapped up to meet mine. A confused expression was on his ridiculously handsome face. Those thick black lashes outlined his crystal-clear ocean-blue eyes, and I couldn't truly beat myself up over this. The man was gorgeous. I'd had a weak moment. It was over now though.

"You heard me," I told him, then just smiled and shook my head. "I'm not one of your girls, Micah. Did you think that I would become one of the many females to worship at your feet?"

"What are you talking about, Fawn? You're the only one in my bed. I

moved you into the club. Into my room. I don't move women into my room." His brows were lowered as he studied me.

I shrugged. "Yes, well, I'm not the only one on your cock, now am I?"

He stilled. I could see the realization dawn in his expression. He knew he'd been caught.

"It's for the best really. I'm not mad. It was time for Gypsi and me to move along anyway. We've stayed here longer than I intended."

Micah moved then and took the five long strides to reach me. His fingers wrapped around my upper arm as he stared down at me. The pleading look in his eyes wasn't going to change my mind, but I did feel a little sadness that I wouldn't see him again. He had made me laugh, taken me on an adventure in his little world. I'd had a good time, but all good things must come to an end.

"Wait, Fawn. That was nothing. I didn't touch her. She—"

"Just sucked you off while you called her a hot little cumslut. Yes, I know. I heard it clearly. You were rather loud while you got off in her mouth."

He had the decency to wince.

I reached up and patted his cheek. "It's okay. I'm not destroyed. This wasn't love. It was fun, and it's over."

He inhaled sharply and shook his head. "Fawn, I'm sorry. Fuck, please don't leave me. I shouldn't have let her. I messed up. Just give me one more chance. I swear to God it won't happen again."

I laughed and took his hand off my arm. "You're right; it won't. At least not with me. I don't give second chances. If I'm not enough for a man, I don't stay."

"FUCK!" Micah ran his hand through his blond hair. "You are enough.

You are more than enough. Jesus, Fawn, it was one mistake. I don't feel shit for Dylan. I'm ... I think I'm falling in love with you."

I wanted to cackle with laughter, but I didn't. This boy was entirely too young for me. He had no clue what he was saying. I was only thirty-six, but when you'd had a daughter at the age of seventeen and you were alone in the world, you grew up fast. Dating a twenty-six-year-old was dumb. I should have known better.

"Micah, you are not falling in love with me. I can promise you that. We had fun. We laughed a lot. Sex was great. It will be a fond memory for both of us. Let's end this as friends."

He let out a short, hard laugh. "That's really how you feel, isn't it?" He shook his head, as if he was in disbelief. "You don't know your power, Fawn Parker. I've never met a woman like you. You're fuckin' perfect. Not only are you the sexiest female I've ever seen, but you're also not afraid of new things, you love life, and your laugh is the most addictive sound I've ever heard. There is no jealousy or clinginess, and I thought I'd hit the jackpot, but dammit. The one time I want a female to be clingy to me, she isn't. If you walk out of that door, I'm pretty damn sure you're taking the only chance of me loving a woman with you."

I doubted Micah could love only one woman. Maybe one day, when he had lived more of this wild life, slept with enough Dylans, and felt like he'd gotten it out of his system, he would meet a female who would be enough for him. He'd love her. I hoped so. He had a good heart. He was just a whore. A sweet, sexy manslut.

"One day, she'll come along. I'm not her," I assured him.

"You're leaving before we had a chance at love," he argued.

“There was never going to be love. That was never going to happen. You have a lot more living to do, and I’m not the kind of woman who falls in love. I think I’m broken when it comes to that. When we started this, I told you this was just a good time. I didn’t want anything more from you.”

Micah sighed in defeat as he stared at me. “Yeah, well, that wasn’t the first time I’d heard that from a female.”

“But I’m not like the others.” I winked at him, then turned to get my duffel bag.

I needed to go find Gypsi. It was time to go home to our camper. Then decide on where we were headed next. I was thinking we could go up the East Coast.

“There is nothing I can say to make you stay, is there?” he asked me.

I shook my head. “No.”

“Fuck, I’m gonna miss you.”

I smiled, but I didn’t reply. I couldn’t say the same to him. Not honestly. Sure, I’d think about him and remember the good times, but my heart wasn’t even a little cracked. I wasn’t attached. I never got attached.

I hadn’t been lying when I said I was broken. The horror in my past hadn’t destroyed me. How could it when I’d been given Gypsi in the end? She was where I found my happiness. The darkness had severed whatever emotion it was that made a woman love a man. My heart was guarded from everyone but my daughter. There was an impenetrable wall that kept me safe. No man would ever be able to get through. And that was a good thing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Those who are making my insane publishing schedule this year happen (while I finish edits on a plane headed to Disney World... again.)

Britt is always the first I mention because he makes it possible for me to close myself away and write for endless hours a day. Without him, I wouldn't get any sleep, and I doubt I could finish a book.

Emerson, for dealing with the fact that I must write some days and she can't have my full attention. I'll admit, there were several times she did not understand, and I might have told my six-year-old, "You're not making it in my acknowledgments this time!" to which she did not care. Although she does believe she is famous after attending some signings with me. But that is not my fault. I blame the readers ;) She gets her own table for the first time at a signing in November and she's pumped. Thanks to Marlana Grela for making that happen.

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