



CATCH
ME

ft SINFULLY WICKED GAMES BILLIONAIRE SERIES

ALEXIA CHASE

Catch Me

A Sinfully Wicked Games Billionaire Series

Alexia Chase

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Editor Author Bunnies

Proofreaders Fiona & Jillian

Cover Design Susana Mohel

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Table of Contents

[Book Excerpt](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five](#)

[Chapter Forty-Six](#)

[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Her Filthy Professor](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Book Review](#)

Book Excerpt

London

He holds out his hand as we stand at the top of the steps leading to the main parking lot. “Keys.”

“What?”

“Hand me your keys. I don’t want you sneaking back here tonight and driving home. I’ll have someone bring your car around in the morning.”

“I told you. I’m fine,” I grumble as I dig through my clutch. I don’t have time for this. When I get home, I have a test to study for, and driving back and forth will cut into my already limited schedule.

I knew I should have stayed at home tonight. The next time Henley begs me to do something stupid like this, I’m ignoring her phone calls.

“And I don’t want to worry about it when I should be making deals.”

“Then stay.” I grip the keys tight enough that the notches bite into my palm. “The last thing I need is for you to have something else to hate me for. Your laundry list is already sky-high.”

“Watch your tone.” His jaw flexes as irritation radiates off him. “I’m driving you.” He snatches the keys out from between my fingers, sending a buzz of electricity up my arm, along my body, and straight down to my toes.

A valet driver pulls up, depositing Callan’s black Mercedes at the bottom of the steps, and he grips my upper arm. “This way, I know you get home where you belong, and no one takes advantage of you tonight.”

“Thanks.” I bite my lips together. ‘Dad’ is on the tip of my tongue, but I manage to stop before I add fuel to the already raging fire. He’s not a fan of my smart mouth, either.

Precisely, what is he a fan of? I giggle and stumble as my heel catches on the step.

“Are you okay?” His enormous hands grasp my waist, twist me around, and hold me against his chest. When he inhales, a strand of my hair floats toward him as if it’s the only part of me that gets free reign to do what it wants.

“Yes.” I blink. His lips are inches from mine. His chiseled jaw and high cheekbones would be the envy of any aspiring male model. The man is gorgeous. Muscular. Confident. Powerful. Lord, my head is spinning.

“Why do people want things they can’t have?” He draws his nose along my cheekbone toward my ear as a door opens and closes below. “Is it the act of doing something forbidden, or the keeping it a secret they crave? Or both?”

“Um....” I lick my lips and place my hands on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart under my fingertips. “I don’t know.”

“That’s the problem.” He rocks back onto his heels and drops his hands to his sides. “You’re too young to even understand complicated situations.”

“I’m not as innocent as I look.” Why does he have to act like I’m ten years old? I rotate on my heel and stomp down the stairs with my shoes clicking on the pavement.

Chapter One

London

“Let me get you a drink.” Jeff snatches a flute glass off the waitress’s tray. The pale-yellow liquid surges sideways in his haste, causing an array of bubbles to swirl inside.

A few minutes ago, Jefferson Rinehart introduced himself to me, nickname, Jeff, and now I can’t get rid of him.

“I’m underage.” I tilt my head and study the bottom of the drink. Did he drop some type of date rape drug into the glass?

A white tablet fizzes at the bottom of the champagne, and more bubbles spin up from it. He put something in my drink. What a slimeball. I shiver thinking of all the unsuspecting women who fall for his evil misdeeds.

“So?” He leers at me with red-rimmed eyes before lowering his gaze to my tits. The movement is quick but obvious.

Gross. I step backward, bumping into a man dressed in a black suit with a navy blue and white polka-dotted handkerchief in his pocket.

“Ma’am.” The man with the graying hair at his temples dodges to the side, giving me room. Now, that’s a gentleman.

Jeff wraps his hand around my hip, pulling me to him. “Be careful, sweetheart.” He exhales next to my ear. The man reeks of booze. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Thank you.” My teeth grind together as I glare at Henley from across the room.

‘What?’ She mouths and raises her eyebrows. Henley has been my best friend for years. *Has been.*

My eyes narrow into slits. I’m going to read her the riot act the second I get her alone. She knows what the problem is.

She wouldn't want this loser groping her. But she's too giddy that I'm at her father's celebratory event tonight to come and save me.

Callan, her father, stands a few feet away from her, chatting with another man. My best friend's father is sin incarnate, but he's the biggest dick I've ever met. I can't stand the man. Okay, I'd gladly take a ride with the devil as long as his mouth was duct-taped shut so I didn't have to listen to his insults.

The other man slaps his shoulder. Isn't that one of the professors from the college? Professor Taylor? Or at least he used to be a professor at the college. He stopped teaching a while back, and there was some scuttlebutt he was hooking up with one of his students. I arch my eyebrows. Not that I blame the woman. Mr. Taylor would make one filthy professor.

Jeff lifts my hand and wraps my fingers around the drink stem. "It's fine. This is non-alcoholic."

I cock my head sideways. Why's this guy still here? "Is it?"

What does he think I'm going to do? Guzzle a couple of these and sneak off with him to the bathroom. That's not going to happen.

"Sure." Jeff rocks back onto his heels and waits. When I don't move, his fingertips dig into my flesh. "I'm waiting."

"You're going to keep waiting." I drop my heel onto the top of his foot and shift back and forth, digging my stiletto into the black leather. "Oops, I'm sorry."

"Bitch." His eyes flash with heat.

"No one believes that line." This is why I don't go out. Partying isn't my thing. And pretending to enjoy conversations with jerks is at the bottom of my list of things to do with my limited free time.

My muscles ache from tension. It's crazy to feel alone in the middle of a couple hundred people. But here I am. And all

to please Henley.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think you know exactly what I mean.” I wiggle out of his grip to put some distance between myself and the leech. “This is alcoholic, and it’s been tampered with.”

“Tampered with?” His head snaps backward as if he’s offended by my accusation. “I’d never do that.” He glances around as if he’s worried someone will overhear our conversation, but I don’t care who’s listening.

“I’m telling Callan.” Henley’s father might not have any use for me, but he’d be appalled that one of his guests was trying to drug anyone, let alone an underage girl. Not that I’ll be underage for long. My 21st birthday is just around the corner.

“Who’s that?” He stumbles backward, staggering into a server.

“My best friend’s father.” Surely, he knows whose party he’s at. Or maybe not. He’s probably one of those guys who hangs around outside of event locations and sneaks in with the crowd.

“Whatever.” He puffs out his chest. “For one thing, I didn’t put anything in the drink, and for another, no one would believe you if you accused me of that.”

I saw the bubbles, right? And the pill at the bottom? Didn’t I?

Son of a bitch. This is how he does it. He gaslights, and I’m already questioning what I saw. And why is he here if he doesn’t know Callan?

“I’m not thirsty.” I snatch the drink from his hand and drop it onto the tray of the server passing by.

The woman frowns at the one full drink amid her overloaded stack of empties. If nothing else, the people at Callan’s party are sloshed. “Ma’am, is there something wrong with this one?”

“Yes, please dispose of it. The drink was too dry.” Is that possible? I don’t know the first thing about drinking. Between work and cheerleading, I don’t have time to go to keg or house parties, or whatever they’re called. I’m not a rich kid with a silver spoon in my mouth. I work hard to keep my scholarship.

“Oh...” Her eyes widen as she withdraws the black tray with the white linen cloth draped across it. “I’ll tell my boss.” She scurries away toward the kitchen with her heels clicking on the marble flooring.

“So, what’re you doing tonight if you aren’t drinking?” He crosses his arms over his chest. What’s up with this guy? I just accused him of trying to drug me, and he’s not left. His eyes dip to my chest again as he bites his bottom lip.

“We’re looking for my father.” Henley laces her arm through mine. Now, she rescues me. I could’ve avoided the entire groping situation and the likely laced drinking episode if she’d have gotten her ass in gear sooner.

What if I hadn’t noticed it was tainted and ended up waking up with this guy feeling me up. I shudder. Or worse.

He grips her chin and tips it up with his thumb. “I don’t know who your daddy is, but I wouldn’t mind taking that position tonight.”

“Please.” Henley rolls her eyes. “You wouldn’t be able to handle me.”

“Try me.”

My eyes catch Callan’s from across the room. His Italian suit and button-down white dress shirt fit him to perfection. He leans down and whispers something into the ear of a stunning woman wearing a black dress that barely conceals anything. The slit is up to her thigh, and the neckline plunges to a few inches above her navel. I instantly want to stab her eyes out.

Yes, I know it’s stupid. I can’t stand the man, and he hates my guts, but that doesn’t stop my body from wanting something to happen. *What a foolish child.* Sadly, those words

are said in the deep rumble of his voice as they rattle in my head.

The woman flings her arms around his shoulders and plasters her body against his, rubbing her lower half against his crotch. *Jesus. I'm going to be sick.*

I snatch a glass off the nearest tray and guzzle the champagne. It's not like he's a virgin. He's my best friend's father, for God's sake. He's probably had sex with half the women here.

"I was trying to be kind." Henley elbows Jeff in the gut. "But I guess I must be blunt. I'm not interested in you, and neither is my friend. You're not our type."

Even as my friend argues with this jerk, my eyes never leave Callan.

What's so special about this woman? She's not much older than me. Is it because she's rich and I'm poor? Is that the difference? Or is it because she looks like she could suck a softball out of a garden hose. The couple of guys I've made out with weren't that well-endowed, so there wasn't a need to learn that skill.

Stop. He doesn't deserve your obsession. Hell, he treats you like a second-class citizen as it is.

But for some reason, that doesn't dissuade me either. I'm sick.

"Honey." Jeff grabs Henley, yanking her hard against his body, and I drag my attention away from Callan and his date. This man is an idiot. When he finds out Henley is Callan's daughter, he'll shit his pants.

Right after, he realizes it's Callan's party, and he has more money than anyone else in the room.

"All women are my type." He grasps her chin. The longer we talk, the more people turn to stare at our conversation. "Girls like you enjoy pretending they're above

everyone, but they lay down with their legs in the air just like the slutty girls do. They just don't want anyone to know."

"Kiss my ass."

"Stop." I slap my glass on a passing tray as Henley's eyes widen. "Ms. *Tennison* is right." I emphasize her last name to get his attention. He doesn't blink. "Neither of us are interested in you. You're like a nasty pervert hanging outside the school watching the little kids play on the playground."

He shoves Henley away, causing her to stumble on her heels. "You're a cunt." He snatches the back of my neck and hauls me toward him until I land against his chest with a thump, causing the air to whoosh from my lungs. "I'm going to take re-e-eally good care of you."

From this vantage point, I notice his dilated pupils for the first time. He reeks of alcohol, and I don't think that's the only thing onboard.

"Yeah, that's not going to happen." Callan grabs Jeff's fingers and pries them off me. "You need to go before I beat your ass."

Jeff shakes his arm, trying to dislodge him. "Is this your woman? If she is, you should keep a better eye on her." He tips his head toward Henley. "Because these two girls will find themselves in a heap of trouble."

"From whom, you?" I fold my arms over my chest.

"Such a big talker now." He glares.

"I'm not doing anything. I'm here with my friend, and you're the one who hit on me. I tried politely telling you I wasn't interested, but you can't seem to take no for an answer."

"You're a dick tease!" Spit flies out of his mouth as he shouts. "Playing like you were going to take me up on my offer. Is that the game you two play? Pretend you're into someone so your daddy here will come rescue you."

My head snaps back. “I did no such thing. You were the one who dropped a date-rape drug into the drink you tried to get me to take. I wanted nothing to do with you.”

“He did what?” Callan’s jaw flexes as he twists Jeff’s arm, drawing it behind him.

“He put a white tablet into a glass he was trying to get me to drink. I saw it bubbling up from the bottom of the champagne. He also told me it was non-alcoholic, which I didn’t believe for a second.”

“Let go of me.” Jeff thrashes against him, but Callan is too powerful for him to get away as the security staff rushes toward us from all directions.

“You had no business bringing drugs into my party.”

“This is your party?”

“Callan Tennison at your service.” He sneers at the man as the first security guard retrieves Jeff from Callan and drags him backward.

Jeff howls as the guard yanks upward on his arm. The bald man with a barrel chest only stops when his detainee’s eyes bug out.

Callan brushes his hands together like he’s glad to be relieved of the trash. “This is my daughter, Henley.” He tips his head toward her. “And this is her best friend, London.” His eyes narrow into slits as he studies me. “My daughter’s underage friend who should be kicked out for drinking on my dime when she’s barely old enough to vote.”

“My birthday is in a few weeks.” *Asshole*. He might look good enough to eat, but his personality leaves a lot to be desired. “But thank you for coming to our rescue. I appreciate it.”

“I came to Hensley’s rescue.” His voice is sharp.

“Thank you, anyway.” Sarcasm drips from my tongue. I’m going to shove my stiletto into his eye.

“Dad.” Henley slaps her hands on her hips and taps the toe of her shoe on the floor. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“Am I?” He allows security to take Jeff away and returns his attention to his daughter. “When you’re around her, you tend to get into trouble.”

“That’s not true.”

“She draws unwanted attention toward you.” He waves his hand around the crowd of people, still listening to our every word. “And she has no business being here.”

I spin on my heel and march away. I’m not going to cry. I straighten my shoulders and hold my head high. No, I won’t.

“Wait up!” Henley calls out as I weave through couples dressed in their finest. They huddle in groups, whispering to each other. One older man glares down his bulbous nose as he watches my retreat.

Yes, I know I don’t belong here. Thank you.

How humiliating. I can’t remember the last time he said something nice to me. That’s probably because he never has.

“London, wait up.” Henley grabs my arm, spinning me around. “Don’t run off. We can still have fun. My dad is a wet blanket, but he’s harmless.”

“He’s harmless to you.” My jaw hurts from clenching my teeth together. “But he’s done nothing but belittle me. I won’t stand for it. If you want to stay, that’s fine. But I’m leaving. I don’t belong here. These are your people. I belong in jail with the other lowlifes. The ones that break into your house and steal the silverware.”

“He didn’t say that, and he never would. Not to mention, you’ve never committed a crime to end up in jail.”

“You’re right.” My shoulders sag. “He didn’t say that, but I’m so tired of him implying I get you into trouble. It’s not my fault that guy tried to drug me and caused a scene.”

“Well....” She waggles her eyebrows. “You have a body made for debauchery, and men are drawn to you like bees to honey. So, he has a point. When I go out alone, no one bothers me. When you show up, everyone’s attention shifts to you as they get in line, pounding on their chests to see which one will claim you.”

“Please.” I smack my palm against her forehead. “You must be sick.”

“And you need another drink.” Henley laughs, grabs two glasses of champagne, and shoves one into my hand. “Bottoms up.”

Why not? It’s not like he could have a lower opinion of me.

Chapter Two

Callan

The girl is trouble with a capital ‘T,’ and one day, it’ll bite her in the ass. The last thing I want is for her to say no and someone not to listen. It’s not going to happen on my watch. At least she had the good sense to leave. Now, I can focus on what I’m here to do. Conduct business.

As I move through the room, I discuss deals with partners and clients. If there’s one thing that’s always true, the business gets done when the alcohol goes down.

Jax Logan turns as I walk by and stops me. “Wonderful party. Thank you for inviting me and my friends.”

I clasp his shoulder. “I would be remiss if I didn’t invite five of the most powerful men in the country when they move into my neighborhood with pockets flush with money.”

“Good one.” Jax laughs and slaps my upper arm.

“In all seriousness, I’m happy to have you here. As a land developer always in the market for new business ventures, I’m interested in hearing what you have lined up.”

“First off, I’m getting married.” He clasps the hand of the stunning blonde next to him to get her attention from the group of people they were mingling with. “Kat, this is Callan Tennison, the man we’re here to celebrate. Callan, this is my fiancée, Katherine Graham.”

“Hello.” Kat’s face and eyes are soft and welcoming. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“You, also.” I grasp her dainty hand in mine. After a second, Jax’s eyes flash, and I drop her fingers as quickly as I embrace them.

“Jax.” She smacks his chest. “He touched me for two seconds.”

“One second too long.” He wraps his arm around her, and she sinks into him. Watching the love and adoration in their eyes as they look at each other is electric, causing jealousy to curl in my gut. God, I hate this feeling. It’s a sign of weakness, and I don’t do that emotion either. But that doesn’t dissuade my foolish wish to want someone in my life.

Unfortunately, there’s no chance of that happening. My business must come first to everything else. That became a sticking point between my daughter and me as soon as she could talk. And to this day, she still complains about my obsession with work. Not that I didn’t get to her activities. I did. Once a week for two hours. They were scheduled in my planner by my PA on January 1st for the entire year.

The women I’ve dated since my daughter was born have never lasted long. One complaint about my schedule, and they were gone. I don’t have time for drama. And Henley’s biological mother has never been in the picture.

“Actually.” Jax kisses Kat’s temple. “I was hoping to get the chance to speak with you. We’ve been considering selling a portion of our Vegas business and developing it here in the Kansas City area. We didn’t expect to fall in love with the area and permanently put down roots, but....” His eyes drift to Kat’s, and my chest constricts.

Shit. Maybe I’m missing something because this guy is notorious for being a shrewd businessman, and he appears to be doing fine in both areas of his life.

He shifts his attention back to me. “Not to mention, I’ve recently begun a new venture into a top-of-the-line sex toy company entitled *The Ultimate Boyfriend Company*, which is taking up most of my time.”

I arch an eyebrow. “A sex toy company?”

Jax laughs at my expression. “It’s more than dildos and vibrators.”

“That’s too simple for Jax.” Kat laughs as pink tinges on her cheeks.

“Princess, you weren’t complaining when—”

“Stop.” She shoves her hand over his lips. “No one needs to know the details.” But instead of being irritated by her antics, he grasps her fingers and kisses them one by one.

“Fine.” He winks and pulls her to his chest as if he can’t stop touching her. “This woman is a game changer. Not long ago, I was a three strikes and out kind of guy. And now, I’m engaged with an adorable future stepdaughter who has me wrapped around her little finger, and another baby on the way. I wouldn’t change anything for the world.”

“That’s nice.” Lord, the more he talks, the more I want to punch him in the face.

“Long story short....” He chuckles. “I’m not leaving here, so let’s set up an appointment to discuss the development of an entertainment district or the complete revamping of a current location if you’re familiar with owners who’re in the market for a sale. I’m itching to see this city reach its full potential.”

“Absolutely.” As adrenaline buzzes through my veins, I straighten my shoulders and pop my neck. This is why I can’t put anything before my business. Nothing else stimulates me the way a business deal does. “There are large pockets of the city in which a complete overhaul could result in a future windfall of money.”

“Now, you’re speaking my language.” He shakes my hand as we solidify our upcoming meeting.

After they meet with his business partners on the other side of the room, I exhale. These men have never touched something that didn’t turn to gold. This could be the biggest deal I’ve ever made. My head spins as the possibilities run through my mind. This could put me in the country’s top 1% of land developers and all on my own. Yes, I run a multi-billion-dollar business, but I inherited the company from my father, who inherited it from my grandfather.

London's laughter rings out from above the crowd. *Son of a bitch. She was supposed to have left.*

I snap my head around and instantly zone in on her talking to a man thirty years her senior. Christian Bailey. He's good-looking, from old money, and could charm the panties off a married woman.

As he leans down, he whispers something in her ear and hands her a glass of champagne. *Asshole.* He lays his arm over her shoulders and preens like a fucking peacock.

He's going to die. The fucker knows London is underage, and yet, he's plying her with booze, my booze, and whispering who knows what into her ear.

You know what he's saying. My hands ball into fists. Yes, I know what he's saying. Exactly what I'd say if I was an asshole with no morals. And why does he get to say it, and I can't? Christian nuzzles her neck as I stomp toward them with my stomach churning.

"Hey, bro." Andrew snatches my arm and spins me around. His eyes dance with humor. "What's up?"

"Nothing," I bite out with enough force a gray-haired woman with perfect white curls capping her head turns to gape at me.

When she realizes who startled her, she smiles and waggles her fingers. "Hello, Callan. Nice party. Your mom must be so proud of you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Holcomb."

My molars grind together as I jerk my arm toward me, but Andrew continues to hold on. He leans closer so everyone in the room can't overhear our conversation. "I saw you about to rush across the floor, and caveman carry London out of here. What would you do to her when you got her alone?"

"What're you implying? I wouldn't do anything with London."

“Ah...” He winks. “Still keeping up the pretense that you have no heart and an iron-clad resolve regarding your daughter’s best friend. How cute.”

“Let it go.” The muscles in my neck and shoulders scream in anger. I hate my brother, or anyone for that matter, sensing I have a weakness. Especially one I can’t have.

“Fine.” He raises his hands in the air. “I’ll let it go. But it looks like it doesn’t matter anyway.”

I snap my head around as Christian laces his fingers through hers.

“Son of a bitch. I’m going to kill him.”

“I told you that you’d wait too long.” He punches me in the shoulder, and it takes everything I’ve got not to put my fist through his face. The only thing that stops me is that if I take my eyes off Christian and London, I’ll miss where he takes her.

She glances in my direction. When her eyes meet mine, she snaps her head back around, dismissing me.

“Callan.” Jax steps between my brother and me and nods toward the man beside him. “This is Leo. He’s our brain trust.”

I greet him even though I don’t want to have a business conversation at this moment. My chest constricts. That thought did not just go through my head.

“Bro.” Andrew claps my back. “I’ll take care of that other matter for you.” He smirks. “You don’t have a thing to worry about.”

I’m going to castrate him. Andrew weaves through the crowd as I plot his murder—his violent death by cutting his Achilles heel and letting a hippopotamus loose after him.

Chapter Three

London

“I’m not interested.” I jerk my hand out of Christian’s grasp and brace myself. This is the second jerk tonight that won’t take no for an answer. And if this message doesn’t reach his ears, he’ll have my knee smashed into his balls.

Fine. I took it too far by pouting over Callan’s blow-off and agreeing to dance with this man when I knew his next invitation would be to his room for a night I won’t forget. And he’s not taken kindly to my refusal of his invitation.

“I told you. I don’t like girls who tease and then don’t follow through. I’m not some little boy you get all worked up and then sashay that tight ass away from.”

“I accepted one offer to dance.” I tilt my head and imagine catching this pudgy old man with no neck in a back alley and kicking his false teeth out of his mouth. “And that’s all you get.”

The man reeks of money, entitlement, and overcompensation. Unlike Jeff from earlier, Christian doesn’t concern me. On the street, money doesn’t matter—determination and speed do. And I’ve honed both those to perfection.

“You’ll regret this decision.” His face turns red as he eyes me up and down.

“I don’t think I will.” My voice is low to not draw any attention to our disagreement. I’ve had enough of being the center of attention to last the rest of the night, and I don’t want Callan to feel the need to rescue me again. Or to make another scene.

Seriously, this is not me. I don’t make scenes. I don’t even go out. And the one night I do.... This is what happens.

“Oh...” He steps forward and grasps my upper arm. “I think you will.”

“Hello, Sweet Pea.” Andrew, Callan’s brother, wraps his arm around my shoulders and glares daggers at Christian. *Thank God.* Where Callan has nothing nice to say about or to me, Andrew is the opposite. He’s always kind and supportive. “Is this man bothering you?”

“No.” I shake my head without breaking Christian’s gaze. “He’s not important enough to matter.”

“Fu—”

“Now, Christian, settle down.” He steps between us, shoving me partially behind him. “My brother doesn’t appreciate drama. And this is his daughter’s best friend.” Andrew arches his eyebrows. “I’d recommend you not fuck with her and get out of here before Callan can get away from some important businessmen. *If you know what’s good for you.*”

Damn it. Of course, Callan noticed. Fuck my life.

I glance over my shoulder as another man shakes Callan’s hand. To an outsider, it appears he has it together, but the set of his granite jawline leaves nothing to the imagination. He’s about to snap.

Why did I stick around?

Why? Because, for once, it was nice to dress up and pretend I was welcome at a party thrown for the elite. Where I wasn’t treated like a girl who grew up in low-income housing. Whose parents were druggies. And whose brother is a street thug.

Besides, I took the night off, and I deserve the break. Most nights, I only get four hours of sleep between working three jobs to keep my head above water, taking care of Gram, keeping my brother out of trouble, and cheering to retain my scholarship. Who wouldn’t want to let loose with that much on their plate?

Callan's eyes meet mine, and a zap of energy sparks between us with enough power that my toes curl in my heels. Or did I stay in hopes he'd corner me and for once, that tension would snap, and he'd finally notice me as a woman.

Jesus. I'm a fucking idiot.

Christian's eyes flash with anger. "She's a dick tease."

"No, I'm not." Rage races through me. One insult is shame on them. Two insults are a shame on me. And three?

My hands ball into fists. I'm done having people imply I'm some kind of slut because I'm at a party and wearing a dress. What century are we living in? I move to step around Andrew, but his arm snaps out, holding me in place.

"Go." His voice is a low growl.

"Shit." Christian's eyes bulge as he looks behind me, and the hairs on my neck stand. That can only mean one thing. God is approaching. Before I can glance over my shoulder, Christian scurries away. Scaredy cat.

"London, I thought I told you to leave." Callan grabs my upper arm and spins me around.

"You did, but I didn't feel like going." I tip my chin up with more bravado than is smart. He's like a raging bull, and I'm the matador with the red cape that can't keep her big mouth shut.

His eyes narrow into slits until I can't distinguish the tint of his irises. But I know what color they are. Ice blue like a crystal-clear lake and accentuated by lush black eyelashes. "And you've been drinking."

"Ding. Ding. Two for two. You're batting 1000."

Andrew laughs and squeezes me to his side. "Sweet Pea, you've got big balls for a little thing."

"Thank you." I turn my attention to the pleasant version of Callan and ignore the angry one who disapproves of everything I do. "I appreciate you coming to my rescue. I

could've gotten rid of him, but it would've been messy. And your brother already made it clear earlier tonight he doesn't like messes."

"It was Callan's idea to save you. If he hadn't been pulled away, he'd have intervened on your behalf." He kisses my temple and drops his arm to his side.

I groan under my breath. Why couldn't I be attracted to Andrew? They have the same color of eyes. Their jaws are cut the same. Hell, they even have the same basic build, but Andrew is sweet and supportive. Callan is not those things. Which means there's something wrong with me. It's probably some malfunctioning personality trait I inherited from my parents.

God, I swallow hard over the dryness in my mouth, my head hurts.

"Andrew, that's enough."

"Yes, Sir." Andrew chuckles, salutes Callan, and winks at me. "Be good tonight."

"I will." I'm going home. I've had enough of this party; my brain is throbbing, and my feet are killing me. If Henley wants to go to these gatherings, she's on her own. Leave me at home with my lemonade, cut-off shorts, and a TV remote.

"London," Callan growls and steps into my space. The scent of his woody cologne fills my head with longing. Lord, he takes the air out of the room. "You have no business drinking on my dime and causing another scene."

"I agree. I shouldn't have been drinking. But that's where I'll end my taking of the blame. More than one of your guests couldn't handle the word no, and that's not my fault." I tip my chin up and meet his gaze. "Don't you people know that when a woman says no, she means no?"

"Yes, I know what the word no means." He licks his lips and inhales. "But don't you know that little girls who dress provocatively and shake their ass in front of old men get attention they don't want?"

I should snap at him for victim shaming, but my addled brain is focused on his eyes, and my stupid mouth opens again. “What do old men do to little girls that tease them?”

He leans closer, filling my head with his cologne as his lips brush the shell of my ear. “They eat them for dinner.”

My gasp is involuntary, making me feel like a child. I want him to be talking about him, but I know he’s not. His nostrils flare, causing my heart to beat frantically in my chest. He’ll never lose control around me.

“You should run along before you get burned because, unlike my brother, I don’t find you cute and adorable, and you aren’t my Sweet Pea.”

“What am I?” My mouth is so dry I almost choke. What’s wrong with me? He’s not going to fall at my feet and beg me to be his. That’s a stupid little girl’s fantasy.

“You’re sin. Bad judgment. And trouble.” He rolls back onto his heels, putting distance between us to the point it feels like the moment never happened. “Nothing good.”

“Thank you.” I nod, relieved by the reminder that I’m nothing good. It’s like a slap in the face.

“Go home. Men like Christian don’t take no for an answer but all you’d be is a vessel for his pleasure. Not someone he’d keep as a prized pet. Once he was done with you, he’d sit on his throne with his lackeys at his feet feasting on the stories of his conquests.”

Prized pet? Gross. I shudder. How could he think for one second, I’d be turned on by the 60-year-old, pudgy, reeking of desperation man? It’s insulting.

Stupid. You were the one implying you were interested to yank his chain.

“Yes, Sir. You’re right. I shouldn’t have come here tonight. It was a mistake. Everything about tonight was a mistake.” I clutch my bag under my arm and spin on my heel. “Let Henley know I went home.”

Callan grasps my shoulder, twisting me back around again. “How did you get here?”

“I drove.”

“I’ll take you home. You have no business driving after you’ve been drinking.”

“I’ve only had three glasses of champagne, and the first two were a couple of hours ago. I’m fine.”

“I’m not risking it.” He latches his hand around my arm and walks me toward the door.

I teeter on my heels, trying to stay upright as his legs eat up the distance to the exit. He’s several inches taller than me, and I rarely wear heels, so speed walking is not something I’ve perfected. And falling would do nothing to convince him I’m sober enough to drive. Or even sober enough to call an Uber.

Sadly. It’s too much to ask that he’s worried about my physical well-being. He’s concerned I might crash, kill someone, blame him, and he’d get into trouble for supplying alcohol to a minor. It’s all about self-preservation. It always is.

But I go along with him because I’m tired of fighting and wiped out from wishing my life was different. It’s exhausting trying to hold everything together. And I haven’t had a good night’s sleep for weeks. My stomach grumbles. I should have stuffed some hors d’Oeuvres in my purse rather than drinking the champagne.

He holds out his hand as we stand at the top of the steps leading to the main parking lot. “Keys.”

“What?”

“Hand me your keys. I don’t want you sneaking back here tonight and driving home. I’ll have someone bring your car around in the morning.”

“I told you. I’m fine,” I grumble as I dig through my clutch. I don’t have time for this. When I get home, I have a test to study for, and driving back and forth will cut into my already limited schedule.

I knew I should have stayed at home tonight. The next time Henley begs me to do something stupid like this, I'm ignoring her phone calls.

"And I don't want to worry about it when I should be making deals."

"Then stay." I grip the keys tight enough that the notches bite into my palm. "The last thing I need is for you to have something else to hate me for. Your laundry list is already sky-high."

"Watch your tone." His jaw flexes as irritation radiates off him. "I'm driving you." He snatches the keys out from between my fingers, sending a buzz of electricity up my arm, along my body, and straight down to my toes.

A valet driver pulls up, depositing Callan's black Mercedes at the bottom of the steps, and he grips my upper arm. "This way, I know you get home where you belong, and no one takes advantage of you tonight."

"Thanks." I bite my lips together. 'Dad' is on the tip of my tongue, but I manage to stop before I add fuel to the already raging fire. He's not a fan of my smart mouth, either.

Precisely, what is he a fan of? I giggle and stumble as my heel catches on the step.

"Are you okay?" His enormous hands grasp my waist, twist me around, and hold me against his chest. When he inhales, a strand of my hair floats toward him as if it's the only part of me that gets free reign to do what it wants.

"Yes." I blink. His lips are inches from mine. His chiseled jaw and high cheekbones would be the envy of any aspiring male model. The man is gorgeous. Muscular. Confident. Powerful. Lord, my head is spinning.

"Why do people want things they can't have?" He draws his nose along my cheekbone toward my ear as a door opens and closes below. "Is it the act of doing something forbidden, or the keeping it a secret they crave? Or both?"

“Um....” I lick my lips and place my hands on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart under my fingertips. “I don’t know.”

“That’s the problem.” He rocks back onto his heels and drops his hands to his sides. “You’re too young to even understand complicated situations.”

“I’m not as innocent as I look.” Why does he have to act like I’m ten years old? I rotate on my heel and stomp down the stairs with my shoes clicking on the pavement.

Once I reach the passenger side door, I grasp the door handle.

“Ma’am.” The driver rushes around the front of the car and nudges me out of the way. “I’ll get that.”

“Thank you.” I blink to keep from crying. Damn it. I’m too strong to cry. He’s not worth it. He’s just another jerk like all the rest of them.

Even if he did offer to have sex with me, that’s all it would be. There wouldn’t be declarations of love and devotion. Callan is a notorious player who never has the same woman on his arm. I should know. I’ve seen the string of them on social media. A different hair color for every party—except blonde. He’s never seen with a blonde. And all of them are skin and bones.

I glance down and adjust the top of my dress before I have a wardrobe malfunction. I’m blonde with big boobs. Clearly, I’m out of the running. I’ve always wondered if I look like his ex, and that’s why he can’t stand me. In all the years I’ve been friends with Henley, I’ve never seen one photo of her. And the one time she mentioned something about her in front of her father, he snapped. He’s clearly not over her.

After slouching into the leather seat, I close my eyes. If nothing else, I can pretend to be asleep during the ten-mile ride.

As he climbs inside, the car rocks under his weight and his cologne surrounds me. He guns the gas pedal. “Who?”

“Who what?” I twist my head around and stare at him. Every inch of his body is tight as if he’s suppressing a fury that’s about to detonate.

“Who have you been with?”

“Jesus. Not another lecture about men.” I flop against the seat and reclose my eyes. This day can’t get over quick enough.

“Aren’t you going to tell me?”

“No. I’m not going to tell you.” I grasp the seatbelt without looking, snap it together, and shift my weight so I’m positioned toward the passenger side window. “You’re Henley’s father, not mine. My personal business has nothing to do with you.”

He growls under his breath, shoves the gear shifter into drive, and the car lurches forward.

I don’t bother opening my eyes as he maneuvers through traffic. I can’t take another attack on my character. All I’ve ever done is try to rise above my beginnings, and it’s never good enough. *I’m* never good enough.

And that pisses me off.

Chapter Four

Callan

My hands strangle the steering wheel as I rush through downtown Kansas City on my way to the neighborhood London lives, as visions of some faceless man touching her, defiling her, taking her innocence fills me with so much anger I'm halfway through a stoplight before realizing it's red.

After I slam on the brakes, the tires screech, making a skidding, jumping sound, followed by the scent of burning rubber. The only thing saving me from plowing into another vehicle is that traffic is light at this time of night. A man in the pickup truck across from me at the stoplight raises his hands in question and looks at me like I'm a dick.

Get in line, buddy. You aren't the first person I've pissed off tonight.

I want to shove the car into park and demand she answer me. My fingers work over the steering wheel as a red haze covers my vision. Was it someone like Christian? A pervert who stole what he wanted and left her filled with tears and shame. A boy who didn't know what he was doing? One that gave her more pain than pleasure.

The light changes to green, and I peel out. I growl under my breath and swerve around a slow two-door sedan. London's head rocks against the headrest, but she makes no move to change positions as she re-settles against the seat. Either she's asleep, or she's never going to speak to me again. Not that I blame her. I'm acting like an ass.

But fuck, I want—

Don't. Do not go there. What do I have to offer her? The loss of her best friend if Henley found out? And for what? A one-night stand? I haven't had anything to give since Henley was born, and that's not changing today. My only choice is to keep my hands to myself.

I relax my shoulders and exhale, holding that position for ten seconds before slowly inhaling. If deep breathing helps during childbirth, surely, I can survive accepting that London gave her virginity to some worthless piece of shit who didn't deserve it.

Fuck. My teeth grind together. That did not help.

As I turn onto London's street, I block everything out, except for business. Jax and Leo want to discuss a building project as soon as next week. That's more than I could've hoped for from tonight's party. It's a win for everyone, and if there's one thing I know, it's how to be a baller of a businessman.

The street is littered with porches covered in garbage cans, discarded furniture, and trash. I cringe. This place is dangerous. It's not the first time it's been on the tip of my tongue to tell her they need to move, but her grandmother has lived here since before London was born. And even if I could convince her to relocate, London's brother, Jared, would do something stupid that would ruin their path out of here.

Her brother is a liability, but London won't acknowledge he's a problem. She walks around wearing rose-colored glasses; positive he'll get his act together. Her hero worship for the loser makes me almost as angry as whoever had their filthy hands all over her.

The front porch light is lit as I slide into the pebble-filled driveway. The garage is tilted sideways with a broken-down door. It hangs from the top hinge. I rake my hand through my hair. The house to the left is dark. With the streetlight shining down on the side windows, you can see the steel bars intended to keep the burglars out.

This is no place for her to live.

"London?" I grab her shoulder, causing her plump pink lips to fall apart, and my gut clenches in regret. The need to be the guy who takes her out of this dump and worships her

almost drops me to my knees. But it's impossible. And that pisses me the fuck off.

“What?” Her blue eyes blink open, and the haze in them makes my heart skip a beat. This is how she'd look at me in the middle of the night when I wake her to—

“Oh!” She snaps upright, straightens her dress, and dives out the passenger side door.

Yeah. That's how she'd wake up. Desperate to get away. Thankfully, her revulsion saved me before I did something stupid like growing a heart.

I march along the sidewalk, several paces behind her. She twirls on her heel, shoves her purse under her arm, and slaps her hands on her hips. “What're you doing?”

“I'm coming in to talk to your grandma.”

“Why?” Her entire face squishes together as she wrinkles her nose. “To tattle on me? To browbeat me for not being good enough? I won't stand for it. My grandmother doesn't deserve your vile tongue insulting me because she did her best to raise me and Jared. You can say whatever you want to me because at this point, I'm used to it. But you need to leave my grandmother out of it.”

The door swings open, and Millicent stands with her hand on the door's edge. Her graying hair rolled into tight curls around her head. “London Aurora Kensington. How dare you speak to Mr. Tennison like that. It's rude and disrespectful.”

“You have no idea what I'd like to say to him.” She brushes past her grandmother and disappears inside the house.

“Hello, Mrs. Kensington, I'm sorry for the intrusion and London's harsh words. I'm afraid she's angry with me.”

“You don't say?” London stomps back into view. With the stark living room light shining down on her, she looks like an angel. A fiery, avenging angel.

“Yes, I am angry with you. You insulted me. Which is fine....” She waves her hands in the air. “When have you done anything else? But it ends when you’re in front of my grandmother. I won’t accept you implying she’s at fault for any of the deficiencies you see in me.”

“I wasn’t—”

“Don’t.” She places her hand on Millicent’s back. “My grandmother is a wonderful woman who’s done a fantastic job raising me. She saw to it I stayed out of trouble. She saved every dime she had for my education.” Her chest heaves with each breath.

Fuck. The woman is beautiful. Fucking stunning. And she’s right. I have no business talking to her the way I do. But if I spoke to her like I want, I’d lose everything. “I—”

“Stop.” She raises her free hand. “I’m not done speaking. My grandmother has sacrificed everything to raise me and Jared.”

“Which is—”

“I said to stop.” She shoves the door toward me. The only thing saving me from getting slapped in the face is Millicent’s widening eyes, taking us in like we’re on her favorite soap opera.

I step out of the way, surprised when she doesn’t push me out the door.

“I’m not a bad girl. I’m not irresponsible. I’m taking 25 college credits with a 3.8 GPA. Not to mention, I’m cheering to keep my scholarship.” That’s something else I hate—a bunch of testosterone-addled steroid-pumped-up cavemen ogling her ass all day. Not when I’m old enough to be her father and have no hope of keeping up with them.

“And I work three jobs. Now, I need to study.” She spins on her heel and disappears down the hallway.

“Well....” Millicent smirks. “I guess she let you have it.”

“Yes, you could say that.”

“I’d offer you a drink, but weren’t you having a party in your honor tonight?”

“Yes.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Yet here you are. Following my granddaughter around.”

“It’s not like that.” Heat climbs along my neck as I swing the door open. Yes, it’s exactly like that, but letting anyone else know I’m obsessed with her is a weakness I can’t afford to have discovered.

Her eyes narrow. “Then, what’s it like?”

“Um...” I cough and clear my throat. “Well, London was drinking, and I—”

“You’re a tattletale.” London stomps back into the room and slaps her hands on her hips. “I had two and a half glasses of champagne. And Callan here was afraid I’d kill someone, and he didn’t want it on his conscience.” She shakes her head. “Or he was worried I’d lay down in the middle of his fancy party and invite a bunch of pigheaded businessmen to have an orgy with me, and they wouldn’t be drooling all over him.”

She taps the toe of her shoe on the floor, and I laugh for the first time in I don’t know how long. “Ms. Kensington, your granddaughter is a spitfire.”

“Lions might eat a goat chained up waiting to be dinner, but they’d prefer a gazelle sprinting across the grassland as they lay in wait.” Millicent studies us both. “Goodnight, Mr. Tennison. Thank you for seeing London home when you had more important and pressing business to attend to.”

“I didn’t—”

“Exactly.”

London stomps across the room, opens the door the rest of the way, and waits for me to exit, snapping the door shut behind me.

I didn’t have anything better to do.

Jesus. I clutch my chest as pain shoots through it. Is this the big one? I'm going to die in the middle of the hood from a heart attack.

Chapter Five

London

“Let’s do it again.” I stand in front of nine third and fourth-grade girls at the youth center as they practice the cheer, I taught them earlier in the session. Their capacity to learn is only surpassed by how adorable they are, and I’m taken back to when I first met Henley in our ninth-grade year. As unlikely of a pairing as we were, we took to each other instantly.

However, she was from the right side of the tracks, and I was from the side with the broken-down cars and the duct-taped secondhand tennis shoes. Luckily for these girls, the program is well-funded, and they have new white tennis shoes. And not long ago, someone donated new uniforms to replace the secondhand ones they wore.

“How was that, Ms. Kensington?” Megan, the team captain, asks as they stand in unison with their hands balled into fists on their hips.

“Well done, girls.” I smile and relax my shoulders for the first time in hours. This weekend’s lecture from Callan haunted my dreams, and the test earlier today was intense. I need a break.

“Thank you, Ms. Kensington.” The girls chant in unison, then break into a fit of giggles followed by a few random shoves, and a couple of girls stumble to the ground, laughing harder until their eyes fill with tears. Their attention span is officially up.

“Okay, ladies. I’ll see you next session. Be ready to learn stunts—”

Before I can get the word out, they scream and jump up and down. Was I ever this excited to learn stunts? I can’t remember when it was this much fun. When anything was this much fun.

My cell phone rings when I grab my gym bag, and I dig it out. “Hey.”

“Hey, you. Where did you go Saturday night? I came back from the dance floor, and you ditched me. My uncle had to entertain me.”

“Your father drove me home.”

“What?”

“He decided I’d had enough of the party and took me home.” I sling my bag over my shoulder and wave to the girls. With only thirty minutes to get to the café, change my clothes, and start my four-hour dinner shift, I don’t have time to hang around and chat. I rotate my shoulders and ignore the exhaustion.

“The nerve of that man. What did he say?” Her voice is shrill in my ear, so I pull it slightly away from my face.

“What does he always say?” I sigh, not wanting to get into the specifics.

“I’m sorry, London. I truly am. I don’t know why he’s so rude to you.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t.” Her voice turns tight on a dime. “I realize you rub each other wrong, but he’s not an elitist. He has no problem helping less fortunate people. Just a couple of weeks ago, he donated to the youth center for the cheerleading shoes and uniforms.” So, he was the benevolent benefactor who got the girls their new costumes. Peachy. It must have been his moment to shine and pretend he was human.

“That was kind of him.” I smash my hand into the silver bar, letting the door swing open, and step into the warm fall sun. The weather is perfect. Blue skies, white puffy clouds, and children laughing and playing on the outdoor basketball court. “But his decency doesn’t extend to me.”

“I’m sorry.” The pain in her voice makes my stomach wobble. I don’t like fighting with her or making her feel bad

because her father can't stand me, but I've never done anything to give him a reason to dislike me.

Okay. Fine. When he says something to me, I can't help but respond. And maybe I come off like a smartass, but I hate it when someone thinks they're better than me.

"It's fine. It's not your fault." I trudge to my car and climb inside. The second the door shuts, I'm encased in a tomb of heat. I gasp for breath and jam the key into the ignition, rolling down the window. At the first hint of air, I suck down the cement and oil-infused concrete scent and wait for the air to kick on.

"Okay, let's not dwell on that. Are you coming over tonight?"

"No." My shoulders turn rigid at just the thought of running into Callan again.

"Why? If you aren't going to be friends with me because—"

"Stop. Hold the dramatics. I'm leaving the center and headed to the café for a four-hour shift. Then, I have a four-hour shift at the library, so I don't have time to stop by. Maybe later in the week."

"Fine. But I don't see why you have to work so much."

"Because I don't have a father who's paying for my schooling."

"Ouch," she chuckles instead of getting upset.

"Listen, Henley, I've got to go. You know I'm trying to save money to help Gram out, also. She's done so much for me, and I want to repay her."

"Yes, I know."

Moments later, I'm on the road listening to the radio when I notice a cufflink, two gold cufflinks in my cup holder. The diamond settings glisten in the streak of sunshine that hits them. How did I miss those yesterday and earlier today?

Lord, I'm so exhausted I overlooked random stuff left in my car. That's scary.

Whoever drove my car home is going to be missing them. I don't want to call Callan, but they need to be returned to their owner. The valets probably moved hundreds of cars that night, and whoever drove mine likely doesn't remember where they left them.

After I pull into the café parking lot, I inhale, count to ten, and dial.

"Hello?"

"It's me." I tap my fingertips on the steering wheel.

"I didn't expect you to call me." His voice is low and husky, sending a wave of desire to curl in my lower belly. "I thought I was public enemy number one."

"You are."

"Then...." The sound of a chair adjusting passes through the phone.

It doesn't take much for me to envision his thick thighs arching the chair backwards. Or his dark eyes traveling over my body. I shiver even though it's far from cold in my car.

"Why're you calling me? Are you in trouble?"

"Seriously?" I jerk open the door, causing the little old lady in the next vehicle to gawk in my direction. I lower my voice. "Why do you always think the worst in me?"

"Never mind. What do you need?"

"Someone left their cufflinks in my car. I wanted to ensure the rightful owner got them back, and I assumed you'd know who drove my car home. But I'll have Henley ask you because I don't want to listen to your voice."

"They're mine. I drove your car home."

"When?"

“When I got back to the party. I wanted to ensure you had it in case you need to take your grandmother somewhere.”

Son of a bitch. I slump into the seat. *Why is he being nice? It's not fair.* “I thought it was your party.”

“It was. But it had lost its appeal by then.”

“Oh....” I swallow over the dryness in my throat. *Is he flirting with me?* The side door to the café opens as one of the cooks walks outside. He waves and winks. I nod absentmindedly while nibbling on my bottom lip.

“What was the appeal?” My voice is breathy as heat floods over me in a tidal wave.

What're you doing? You can't flirt with him. You don't even know how to flirt.

Not to that level, anyway. I've kissed some toads and made out with a couple of frogs, but I've saved my virginity for Prince Charming. If he'll ever show up and whisk me off my feet and build me a castle.

“Business deals.”

Fuck my life. This is why I don't flirt. “I've got to get to work. Thanks for dropping off my car, and I'll give Henley the cufflinks to return.”

“London—”

I snap off the phone. *Get your head out of your ass and get to work.*

Chapter Six

A Few Days Later

London

The hairs on the back of my neck stand the second I step outside the library. Leaving after midnight to a desolate parking lot with dark shadows between the dimly lit streetlights is the downside of working at the library.

The upside? Hardly anyone shows up during my shift. Everyone is hanging out at parties or in the downtown district. Besides, it's easy money, and it smells like books. Okay, it's not as good as it sounds. I'm in the reference section, but it's paper with words on it.

I glance in all directions, calculating the distance from the door to my car. A couple of football fields, max. There are only two other vehicles in the parking lot—one is on the opposite side, near the main street, and the remaining vehicle is a Dodge Challenger. It's only three spaces from mine. Both are dark with no signs of passengers.

This is the last time I'm leaving after everyone else. I jostle the contents of my purse. When my fingers curl around the stun gun, I activate it and grip it tightly. Just because I don't see anyone doesn't mean someone isn't watching.

As I speedwalk to the sidewalk, I shiver. Something feels different tonight. Like someone is hiding in the shadows. I jog across the street and through the parking lot. Just a few more feet, and I'm home free.

Two feet. One foot. The door of the Charger squeaks open, and I jump, biting back a scream. The only thing keeping me from shouting in fear is my pride and the fact I dodged wannabe gangbangers throughout school. I can fight if I must.

“Hey, sis.” My brother slides out of the driver's seat and rakes a hand through his sandy blond hair.

“Jesus.” I clutch my chest, letting the erratic beating of my heart slow down a beat. “You scared the life out of me.”

“Sorry.” He wrinkles his nose, shuts the door with a snap that echoes off the cement and leans against the door. “I would’ve called, but my cell is dead.” He’s wearing jeans, a black T-shirt, and matching combat boots.

“I see.”

He retrieves a packet of cigarettes from his front jeans pocket, thumps the end on his palm, and pulls out a smoke. “How’re things going?”

“Fine.” I cross my arms over my chest and study him. “Is that all you wanted? To come down to my job, wait in the parking lot in the dark, and ask me how I’m doing?”

“Nah.” He smirks and lights the cigarette. The clicking sound of the Zippo is followed by the mixture of lighter fluid, smoke, and tobacco. He doesn’t elaborate as he sucks down a long drag and blows it out. The smoke circles around his head.

Seriously? “Jared, I’ve got to get home. I’ve been up since 5 a.m., and I have class in the morning.”

“You do too much.”

“Someone’s got to do it.” *And you do too little.* I bite the words back. “I don’t want to spend my life living in the neighborhood we grew up in.”

When Jared was a kid, he had his life together. He was my rock when our parents disappeared. But the older he got, the more rebellious he became—smoking, drinking, all-night parties, skipping school, drugs, women, dropping out of school, and running the streets.

“Always with your head in the clouds.” Jared laughs. “Believing we can get out of this mess.”

“I’m going to move off Main Street and take Gram with me.”

He smokes while staring at the building behind me like he's never seen a library before.

My eyes narrow. Is he high? Drunk? Please, don't tell me he's driving under the influence.

He jerks his attention back to me. "Sister, we were born in the bad part of town; that's what we know, and that's where we'll stay. You're a fool if you think going to this college will make you into someone that asshole Tennison respects."

My stomach churns. Callan has never made any bones about thinking my brother is bad news; the feeling is mutual. I miss the kid he used to be.

He drops the cigarette to the ground and stomps on it with the tip of his boot, smashing it into the pavement. "I need a loan."

"A loan?" I squeak and hold my purse tighter to my side. "Why do you need a loan?" *Shit, why did I ask that? I don't want to know why he needs money.*

"I need to pay for.... Ah, shit." He shakes his head. "I'm not going to lie to you. I made a bad bet in a card game and lost my shirt. And if I don't pay it back...." He swallows hard as if there's a lump in his throat. "I don't think you want to know what'll happen."

"Why do you put yourself in these positions?" I shift my weight from one foot to the other as every inch of my body aches from tension and exhaustion.

"I don't know. Stupidity, I guess."

"You need to get a job." How much can I afford to give him? One hundred? Two? I can't afford anything, but I don't want to be responsible for his knees getting busted.

"I have a job. That's why I asked for a loan. I'm working at a club downtown."

"What club?"

"Club Desire."

I close my eyes in frustration. A strip club, and a crappy one at that. Of course, it's one Lorenzo Amato owns. The son of the head of the Kansas City mafia. The club is renowned for backdoor deals, drug distribution, underage sex trafficking, illegal gambling, and who knows what else.

“Don't be a prude.”

After I open my eyes, I glare at him. “What're you doing there?”

“I'm a bouncer.” Why do I doubt that? At best, that's a front for distribution—whether drugs or women, that's the bigger question. I hate not trusting him, but at this point, I'd be a fool to take his word as gospel.

“That's not the kind of job I was meaning.”

“Club Desire is a legit business. I get paid every week. I figured you'd be relieved I have a job, and I'm not begging off Gram anymore. I guess that's too much to ask for.”

I grind my teeth together. “Don't talk to me like I'm being irrational. I'm not some uptown girl. I know damn well and good what all goes on in that club. That's where half of your problems come from, so working there for a paycheck doesn't eliminate the issue of using, gambling, and hanging out with strippers.”

“Fine.” He waves his hand in the air as if he's dismissing me.

“Yeah, I get it. You don't want to hear what I say, but that's too bad. You're the one finding me and begging for money. Even if you don't have the balls to admit the truth.”

“Like I said, I lost a bet, got overextended, and need to pay it back.” He swivels his head around as he surveys the parking lot.

“How much?”

“\$1,000.” His eyes continue to dart around and not meet mine.

“\$1,000?” Seriously? A thousand bucks? That’ll take me several months to build back up.

“Yes, I need \$1,000.”

“Okay.” I shove my hands into my pockets. God, I hate this. But if I don’t give him the money, he’ll go to Gram, and she has no business getting involved in his bad dealings. “I don’t have the money today. It’s at the bank. When do you need it by?”

“A couple of days at the latest.”

“I’ll have it. Stop by the house and pick it up.”

He bites down on his bottom lip. “Can I meet you somewhere else?”

“Why?”

“I don’t want Gram to know I’ve returned to gambling.”

“Okay.” For once, he has his head on straight.

“I’ll call you, and we can figure out where to meet.” His gaze finally meets mine as he rakes a hand through his hair.

“Don’t make it too far away. I don’t have much free time.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. By the way, it’s good to see you.” He grins, and the light reaches his eyes. He’s handsome and smart, even though he’s not showing it by the stupid decisions he’s making. But with his rugged good looks and charm, he could sell underwear to a nudist. If he wasn’t so busy trying to fit into a crowd, no sane man would want to excel at.

“You’re the best.” He draws me to his chest, and for a second, I’m 13 again, and he’s my hero. I inhale his scent and sigh. Sandalwood and musk with a faint hint of cigarette smoke. It’s oddly comforting. Or maybe it’s remembering how he used to be. He kisses the top of my head.

“Jared?” I lean back and meet his gaze.

“Yes?”

“Promise me you’ll get the debt paid and stop the shady dealings. You have a job. While I’m not thrilled about it, it’s a paycheck. Save up some money, find a good girl, and move out to the suburbs.”

“I—” He clears his throat. “I’ll try.”

“I love you, and I hate seeing you stressed and worried about paying this guy off. It doesn’t have to be like this.”

“Yeah.” He snatches open the car door and slides inside, cranking down the window and smiling. “I love you, London. Take care of yourself and Gram.”

As he revs the engine, he rolls the window back up, and sadness descends on me. This isn’t it. He hasn’t hit rock bottom. I just hope there’s something left of him when he does.

Chapter Seven

A Few Days Later

Callan

From my office window, I watch Henley lift Avery, the three-year-old little girl she babysits, into the air. Her blonde curls blow in the breeze. Henley has watched Avery on Saturdays for the past year, and the monster terrorizes my home from 7:00 a.m. until 4 p.m.

She's cute but evil.

My phone rings as Henley deposits her on the sidewalk. The second she's on the ground, she's running. I don't have to watch to know she's headed to the garden to pluck flowers.

I spin on my heel and snatch up my phone. "Hello?"

"Cora said you had a potential project for me."

"Yes, I do." I settle into the black leather highbacked chair and inhale the scent of luxury. I wouldn't recommend Alexander Taylor and his office furnishings if I didn't use them myself.

"Spill it."

"You've heard of Jax Logan, haven't you?"

"Yes, of course. I'm familiar with him and his business partners. I had the opportunity to meet them at the party...." He trails off. "By the way, where did you go? Several guests were looking for you, and no one knew where you ran off to."

"I had some business to attend to." I clench the phone receiver between my shoulder and ear.

"Understandable."

Even after all these years, I still use my grandfather's landline phone in my office. It's one of the few items I took from his office when he passed. The phone. His oversized

Mahogany executive desk. And the grandfather clock in the corner of the room.

They're the pieces that remind me of him the most, sitting on the sofa across from him as I watched him run his business. The secondhand ticked as he went from phone call to phone call. My grandfather demanded respect and got it.

"Jax proposed a new business venture here in town. He's on the cusp of purchasing a large plot of land and developing it into an entertainment district, and if everything works out as anticipated, I'll be brokering the deal and constructing the buildings."

Alexander whistles. "That's a big opportunity."

"Yes, it is." I spin my desk chair around, catching a glimpse of Henley and Avery as they run past my window. Three. Two. One. The patio door swings open, and the girls traipse into the house.

In 60 seconds, they'll be raiding the kitchen for milk and cookies. "It's an enormous opportunity, and I'd like to propose a joint collaboration where your company is furnishing the building upon completion. Is that something you'd be interested in pursuing?"

He chuckles, making my eardrum vibrate. "That's a stupid question. Of course, I want to go in on something like that. And for once, I don't have to go through my father for permission."

"Well.... Well.... Someone put on their big boy pants."

"Yes, I did, and I won't pretend to be insulted. I used to resemble the opposite of that remark. But through the love of a good woman, I found my balls and put them in her purse."

"Nice one." I laugh along with him. Working with Alexander is enlightening, to say the least. I enjoy spending time with people who aren't stuffed shirts compared with most of the business associates I've dealt with in the past.

I snatch an ink pen off my desk and tap the end on the wooden surface. “Happy to hear you and your father worked things out.”

“Thank you.”

After solidifying a future meeting, I hang up and open the office mail. I’d have spent Saturday and Sunday at my headquarters in the past, but now I rarely leave my home on the weekend. The benefits of high-speed internet.

Bang. The door swings open, and the pixie demon bursts into my quiet space with a sippy cup of milk in one hand and a half-eaten cookie in the other. Her eyes glitter with mischief.

We stare at each other for a few seconds as if we’re in the Old West preparing for a duel. Then, she grins and races across the floor with her sandals, clicking on the marble flooring.

“Hello, Avery.” I glare at her as I snatch her off the ground and spin away from my desk. Here we go. All semblance of peace has flown out the window.

“Cal!” She launches into my arms, flinging a piece of cookie behind me and smacking the back of my head with the cup.

“Hello, Demon Princess.” I briefly squeeze her and then tickle the side of her neck, earning me giggles that echo off the walls. “Are you being good for Ms. Henley?”

“Course.” Those dimples pop, and my heart pangs. I loved this age. Henley was adorable and had my whole heart. I would’ve loved to give her a sibling, but it wasn’t in the cards. The situation with Henley’s biological mother soured me on women, and I wasn’t about to put myself or my finances in the hands of someone I couldn’t trust again.

But those days are long gone. Now, I’m waiting for grandchildren. Someday. Not today. I grind my teeth together. Or next year.

“What’re you doing today?”

“Cookie.” She kisses my cheek and pulls back, biting into the cookie. Another piece of the cookie drops to the floor as she devours the rest of it. Her fingers are covered in melted chocolate. And dirt.

“I’m sorry, Dad.” Henley rushes into the room and scurries across the floor. Her denim shorts are too tight, and the top she’s wearing inches upward with each swing of her arms.

“What’re you wearing?” I wrinkle my nose and ignore the elephant in the room—the little girl snuggled up on my lap with her head lying on my chest. I’d pout like a baby if Henley didn’t bring her by. Not that I’d tell anyone that.

“Da-a-ad.” She exaggerates the word and rolls her eyes. “I’m working. I’m not going anywhere.”

“That’s good.”

“You’re being ridiculous. You realize I’m 21 and capable of picking my own clothes out.” Avery drops her sippy cup on my desk, pushing it over and watching it pop back up.

“Avery!” Henley rushes forward.

“Again!” She tips it back in the other direction.

“Dad,” Henley groans. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. As usual, it’s easier to let her do her thing than try to stop it.”

“Thank you.” Her shoulders sag as she flops onto the chair across from me. “I know you hate when anyone barges in here and disrupts your work.”

“Yeah.” I wrap my arm around Avery’s middle, so she doesn’t fall onto the floor and bounce her on my knee.

Henley’s eyes narrow. *Shit*. I usually try harder in front of my daughter to act like her charge is annoying.

I’m off my game. Hell, I’ve been off my game since taking London home the other night. Distracted and on edge.

“You don’t care, do you? Not when it’s Avery.”

“Fine.” I chuckle and shake my head. “No. I don’t. Avery is a doll. It’s kind of nice to have a child around the house. It’s been years.”

She stares at me like I have an alien crawling out of my body and doesn’t know whether to run away screaming or stick around and uncover all my other lies.

“Why did you invite London to the party?” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“Because she’s my friend. Because she deserves to enjoy herself for once. And...” She licks her lips. “I’d like to see her dating a guy who’s worthy of her. Someone with money who could treat her like a queen rather than someone who’d take advantage of her or push her down.”

“And Christian Bailey and Jeffrey Rinehart are at the top of your list?” Avery jumps at the harsh tone of my voice. I relax and kiss the top of her head, inhaling the scent of baby shampoo and powder. “I’m sorry, Avery, I shouldn’t have yelled at Henley.”

She cups my face. “Okay.”

The trust in her big green eyes makes my gut twist. She’s going to be a heartbreaker. The toddler slips off my lap and walks to the floor-to-ceiling window behind me, pressing her face and hands to the glass.

“No.” Henley’s hazel eyes flash when I return my attention to her. “Christian Bailey and Jeffrey Rinehart are not on the top of my list.” One corner of her mouth turns upward in a smirk. “But they did notice her.”

“They’re both perverts.” I brace my hands on the chair’s arms and shove upward, springing to my feet. “They’re too old for her. Christian is rumored to be involved in underage sex trafficking, and Jeffrey is known for drugging unsuspecting women. Do you want London pulled into something like that?”

“Of course not.” She joins me in the middle of the room, grabbing me by my upper arms. “London is not going to get involved with someone like that, so stop freaking out.”

I inhale and tip my head from one side to the other, popping my neck to loosen my tense muscles. What’s wrong with me? The last thing I need is for Henley to suspect London moves me in any way. Because she doesn’t. She can’t.

“She had no business being there.” I spin on my heel, causing Henley’s arms to drop from me. Not when I couldn’t protect her.

When Christian put the moves on her, I was across the room. What would’ve happened if he kidnapped her and tied her up for his pleasure? Or she disappeared into the world of underground sex trafficking. I have a shit-ton of money, but I’m not a retired CIA agent.

My hands ball into fists as it takes everything in my power not to hurl the vase of fresh flowers against the window, but my housekeeper, Edna, would throw a fit.

“You’re such an ass.”

I turn around and pin her with a glare. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You’re a jerk. You’re always looking down on London. It’s not her fault she wasn’t born with a silver spoon in her mouth and that she must work her fingers to the bone to keep her head above water.”

She jerks Avery off the floor, hooking her legs around her waist. “As much as you love to put work before everything else, you’d think you’d have some respect for a person with a stronger work ethic than you. But you’re too pigheaded to see beyond the end of your nose.”

I’m not about to tell her it has more to do with my dick that can’t come near her than my nose. But it’s safer if she thinks my disapproval is why I don’t want her around.

Chapter Eight

London

After giving Jared the money, I go to Henley's house for lunch. I'd rather meet her anywhere but at her house, but she's watching Avery today and can't break away for hours. And honestly, after giving Jared the money, I'd have to skip eating out anyway. It'll be Ramen Noodles and sneaking extra food off the line at the café before it makes it to the trash.

I pull into the driveway and survey the grounds—an eight-car garage, paved circular driveway, a six-acre yard, and a two-story white house with pillars on the front porch and plate glass windows on either side of the front door. This place is about as different from where I was raised than you can get.

From my vantage point in the drive, the outline of the chandelier beckons me forward. I yank open the car door and slide to my feet. The grounds are empty except for the gardener near the side of the house, and he's too far away to hear anything. I rotate my shoulders, slam my car door shut, and sling my bag over my arm.

As I jog up the stairs, the door swings open, and I expect to see Arnold, the butler, on the other side. Only, this time, it's Callan with his chiseled jaw and disapproving eyes traveling over me.

My heart skips a beat as I jump backward. "Hi." My voice comes out in a squeak. Why do I act like a five-year-old around the man? I straighten my shoulders. "Hello." This time, I managed to sound smoother. "I was expecting Arnold."

"He has the week off for vacation." Arnold is more than a butler. He and Edna, the housekeeper, run the house without batting an eye.

"I see. Is Henley around?"

"Yes." He nods and steps out of the way. "She's in the kitchen with Avery."

I lick my lips. “May I come in?”

“I assume that’s why you’re here and you didn’t drive thirty minutes out of the way to stand on the front porch.”

God, he’s an ass.

“Yes, thank you.” I brush past him and realize too late that there isn’t enough room to get by without touching him. I stop inches from his chest, close enough to see the flecks of gold in his eyes. His gaze drops to my lips and settles there. Every inch of my body comes to life as if he’s hitting me with an electrical current, and heat curls low in my belly.

The man exudes power and grace—even in jeans and a T-shirt. Jeans and a T-shirt that stick to him like a second skin and show off every flexing muscle. The shirt is slightly bunched at his trim waist, but it does nothing to mar the perfection of the man.

“Don’t you have something for me?” His voice is low and husky, as if he’s enveloping me in a cocoon and blasting everything else away.

“What?” Something for him? My knees buckle. He can’t mean *that*, can he? I blink and meet his eyes. They swirl with awareness.

Please, please, mean that. My arms itch to loop around his neck so the rest of me can cling to him. I’d give him everything I’ve been saving. I don’t care if it’s a silly schoolgirl crush. Or that I can’t stand him. I want to be possessed and ravished by this man. To know what it feels like to be his obsession.

“My cufflinks.” He steps back and straightens his shoulders. “You were supposed to return the cufflinks I forgot in your car. Henley said you never gave them to her.”

“Right.” *You’re the biggest idiot in history. Whatever you thought you saw in his eyes only reflects what you were feeling.*

I dig into my purse, shifting things around until I find the pill container I stored them in.

“Here.” I drop it into his palm, turn on my heel, and speedwalk toward the kitchen. “Keep the container. Toss it. Whatever you want to do with it. I don’t need it.” If I kept it, I’d sit it on my nightstand and wish I could use his leftover DNA to conjure a version of him that thought I was awesome and wanted to be with me. But I’m not fourteen years old.

When I reach the kitchen, Henley waves while bouncing Avery on her hip. “Hey, London.”

“Lon.” Avery smiles and waves, but her eyes are so heavy she can barely keep them open.

“I was getting Avery a cup of milk when the security system alerted you were here. I’m sorry I didn’t reach the door in time.”

“That’s fine. Your dad let me in.”

Avery lays her head on Henley’s shoulder. “Was he polite?”

“Yeah, sure.” I shrug, not wanting to replay my silly response to seeing him. My crush on Callan is the only secret I’ve kept from her, and I plan to take this one to the grave.

“Good. How was work?” Henley asks as Avery yawns and closes her eyes.

“Which place?” I walk to the counter and snatch up a cluster of white grapes. Their plump skins are swollen from juice. Another of the perks of being rich is getting your groceries handpicked from the farmer and delivered straight to your door.

Henley chuckles. “Any or all of them.”

“Everything’s great. I love the library. It’s perfect. If it’s quiet, I can get my homework and studying done on the job. You know I love the girls at the center.” I shrug. “The café is good, but I missed my shift today.”

I bite into a grape and groan. These are delicious. Avery's eyes blink open, and she reaches her arms toward me. I snatch her out of Henley's grasp and hold her close. The little girl lights up the room. "Hey there, my lady."

"Why did you miss work?" Henley asks, but I ignore her. I don't want to explain the entire ordeal with Jared.

Avery smiles and cups my cheeks. "Pretty."

"Thank you." I kiss the tip of her nose as she giggles. "But no one is as pretty as you." One day, I'd love to have a daughter. And unlike my mother, I'll never desert her over a man and drugs.

When I glance up, Henley stares while tapping her toes on the tile flooring. "Why did you miss work?"

"It was nothing."

"Fine. Pretend nothing is going on, but I'll get it out of you before lunch is over." She collects our plates and stacks them with sandwiches and fruit. My stomach growls. Since I missed my shift at the café, I haven't had anything to eat since yesterday.

She drops the plates on the counter, spins around, and slaps her hands onto her hips. "Have you eaten today?"

"No." I bounce Avery on my hip. "It's fine." Please don't let Callan be in earshot. I don't need his pity.

"No, it's not." She grabs a dishtowel and wipes her hands. "Do you need money?" She takes a step toward the door. "I'll ask my dad."

"Stop!" I raise my hand as my heart beats erratically in my chest. "Do not ask your dad for anything. Please." I shake my head in resignation as the weight of everything presses down on me. "I'm trying so hard to keep everything together, and your dad's snide remarks would be more than I can take today."

Avery lays her head on my chest as if she senses I'm about to break. I pat her back and blink to keep from crying.

Do. Not. Cry. I'm not a crier. I can handle anything. I close my eyes and inhale. "Everything's fine, Henley, I promise."

"Bullshit." My eyes snap open as she marches across the floor and grasps my shoulders. "I don't care what my father says. If you need money, he'll give it to you. I'll make him."

"Right." I choke out a laugh and pull away from her. "That's not going to happen. He would rather watch me burn to death than help me." I stomp to the counter, snatch a piece of cheese, and pop it into my mouth.

"Why're you short on money, and why did you miss your shift?" She crosses her arms over her chest.

"Jared asked for a loan, and I met him to give him the money before coming here."

"Why in the hell would you give him money? How much did you give him?" Callan's bark from the doorway is the last straw. I'm so over his shit. And I'm tired. And fucking starving.

I stomp toward him with my shoes slapping on the floor. "It's none of your business how much or why. And it's impolite to listen to another person's conversation."

His eyes blaze with anger. "It isn't if it's in my own house. Or when we're talking about my money."

"I don't want your money." I poke him in the chest with my index finger, but it does nothing more than collapse at the knuckle from hitting his solid form. "I don't need your money." I'd die before asking him for money.

"Despite my daughter's assurances. I wasn't offering my money to you. You'd only give it to that loser of a brother of yours to snort or spend on a hooker."

"Stop." Henley snatches Avery from my arms. "Why can't the two of you get along? It's not like you fight with anyone else like this. It's ridiculous."

"That's not true." I ignore her comment and focus on his insults toward my brother. "He's using the money to get out of

a bad spot. Jared has a job and will be paying me ba—”

“Bullshit.”

“I think I’m going to put Avery down for a nap before she uses all of this colorful language to impress her parents with how mature my father and best friend are.” She glares at the two of us. “I’ll be back when the two of you can speak to each other like reasonable adults.”

“Like that’s going to happen. London would have to start making adul—”

“Bite me.”

My phone rings with my grandmother’s ringtone, and my heart sputters. She never calls me. “Hello?”

“You need to get here.” Her voice sounds rattled, making the cheese cube in my stomach churn.

“Why?”

“The kitchen caught on fire.”

My knees buckle, and Callan grabs my arm to keep me from collapsing to the floor. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine. Everything’s fine. You just need to come here.”

“I’m on my way.” I twirl on my heel and rush across the living room, snatching up my bag and tossing my phone inside.

“What’s going on?” Callan grips my hand and twists me around.

“I can’t.” My bottom lip trembles.

“If it has something to do with your brother, I’m going to kick his fucking ass.” The pulse point at his temple jumps, and the world spins around me.

“I can’t do this with you right now. Gram’s kitchen caught on fire, and—”

Everything turns dark as the room fades around me.

Chapter Nine

Callan

“It’s going to be okay. Your grandmother is fine. You just heard her voice.” I speak low and soft as I hold her against my chest.

A few moments ago, her eyes floated upward, and I thought she would pass out. Her small frame shakes against me, belying the magnitude of her fear. The woman never shows any emotion but anger toward me, so I’m not prepared for how much of a gut punch fear is.

I inhale her scent, letting it fill my lungs. Having her vulnerable and in my arms tilts my world on its axis.

“I know, but what if she’d been sleeping?” Her hands fist my shirt as she sucks down a gulp of air. And those enormous ice-blue eyes stare up at me.

“I’m sure the smoke alarm would’ve woken her.” I rub her back and wish I knew the right words because seeing her like this is killing me.

As if she senses my unease, she licks her lips and jerks backward while wiping her hands on her jeans and clearing her throat. “I’m sorry about that.” Her eyelids hood her expression as she tips her head toward the floor. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“You were upset about your grandmother.” I cup her shoulder. “It’s a normal human reaction to fear.”

“Yeah.” She gnaws on her bottom lip. “I still shouldn’t have reacted that way. My grandmother needs me to keep my head on straight and take care of things. Not cower in the corner and cry.” And just like that, her vulnerability disappears and is replaced by the most fearless, stubborn woman I’ve ever met. She takes a step toward the door. “I’ve got to go.”

“I’ll drive you.”

“No.” She glares at me over her shoulder.

“Fine.” I raise my hands in defeat. “By all means, take care of yourself. I’m sure you can call about the insurance and make arrangements while driving.”

Her eyes narrow into slits. “If you’re going to be such a pain about it, you can drive.” The door swings open, and she stomps down the steps on the way to her car.

I press my lips together. Score one for me. I never get the upper hand.

Before I can reach her car, she has the door open and is strapping the passenger’s side seatbelt across her waist. Chivalry might be dead, but at least I’m not pacing the floor worrying that she’s wrapped herself around a light pole because she’s distracted.

After I pull onto the street, she raises the phone to her ear and presses several keys while listening to the prompts.

“Yes, hello.” She explains to the representative who she is and why she’s calling. The longer she listens, the paler her face becomes. I clench the steering wheel as worry has my nerves on high alert.

“I don’t understand,” she mumbles, shifting her gaze to the side window.

As we travel out of my neighborhood and across town, the distance between houses shrinks by the mile. Soon, we’re on her street, and all sense of expansiveness is gone. The street is narrow and filled with potholes. It seems like they’ve grown since the night I brought her home. Or maybe it’s because it’s daylight today, making the giant craters stick out more.

The windows of several of the houses are boarded up. If they’re vacant, someone’s likely squatting in them. London’s house has a large firetruck and a line of pickup trucks and cars parked in front of it. The crowd on the sidewalk surpasses the number of occupants that could’ve shown up in the vehicles—some areas of the yard and sidewalk are packed three and four

deep. Clearly, the fire was the highlight of the day for the neighborhood.

“Thank you.” She hangs up and slumps into the seat.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Everything’s fine.” Her hand clutches the door handle as if she’s going to jump before I’ve shifted into park.

“London.”

She snaps her head around. “What?”

“There’s obviously something wrong, so tell me what it is. Is the insurance not going to cover something?” I slip into an open spot.

How’s that even possible? Unless the fire was intentionally set. Anger surges through me. If her brother did something that caused the fire or if someone started it intentionally to make a point, I’m going to bury him in a shallow grave.

“I don’t know what’s going on. I need to talk to my grandma. Just give me a second to find out the details, and I’ll tell you.”

“Will you?”

She groans. “I don’t know. It’s not any of your business.”

“Did Jared start the fire for insurance money?”

“No.” Her head snaps backward and bounces off the seat rest as she looks at me like I’m the biggest jerk in the world. “Of course not. That’s ridiculous. How could you think he’d do something like that? That he could’ve killed our grandmother.”

“Arson isn’t covered by insurance. I’m sure that wouldn’t have been his intent. But that’s one of the only reasons insurance companies don’t step up to pay, and from the sounds of it, that’s what’s at stake.” I shrug as the idea

takes root in my head. “So, he either set the fire himself or someone else set it to make a point. He wouldn’t have asked you for money if he didn’t owe someone, and it’s not hard to imagine that person twisting the screws into your brother to get the money.”

A man in a fireman’s suit moves closer to London’s car and peers inside at us.

Her teeth grind together as she snaps the door open. “I told you. He’s gone legit. He has a job, and I gave him the money to make everything right. The fire wasn’t set intentionally, so stop talking about things you know nothing about.”

After she gets out, she rests her forehead on the passenger side doorframe, looking down at me. “Thank you for the ride.” She shoves her hand toward me. “Hand me the keys and go.”

I twist off the engine but make no move to give her what she’s asking for. I know her brother is at the root of it. Even if her blinders are too thick for her to see that her brother isn’t a superhero.

“Now, or I’m calling the police and telling them you stole my car.”

“Fine. Have it your way.” I toss the keys onto the open seat and climb out. “Don’t worry. I won’t offer to help you again.”

“Please don’t. I can’t afford the price of paying you back.” Her body is tight, as if the world’s weight is on her shoulders.

I slam the door shut and call for my driver to come pick me up. I’m done trying to save this woman from herself. She’s too stupid to figure out she’s in over her head. “Pick me up. I’m sending you the location.”

Chapter Ten

London

I'm so sick and tired of his crap. If I didn't love Henley like a sister, I'd never speak to her again. Yes, there's something wrong with the insurance, but it has nothing to do with my brother. Gram probably changed insurance companies and forgot to tell me. It's not like it's my business anyway. She owns the property.

As I weave through the crowd of bystanders, I ignore the desire to see what he's doing. Is he still standing by the car? Is he talking to someone? Is he watching me? Stop. I groan and quicken my pace. God, I'm a fucked up mess. He's like a disease, or I have daddy issues.

I roll my eyes and sigh. That ain't no lie. I had a deadbeat dad who never showed up for anything, leaving his mom to take care of my brother and me. I need therapy to get over my daddy issues, and then I won't be obsessed with him anymore.

A police officer tugs one of those non-descript brown blankets higher on my grandma's shoulders. She smiles up at the salt-and-pepper hair-colored man. "Thank you, son."

She smiles at him until he blushes a cute shade of pink. Leave it to Gram to charm someone in the middle of a catastrophe.

"Hello, dear." Her gaze meets mine as she pats the officer's hand and steps away. "There's my granddaughter."

"What happened?" I run the last few steps and throw my arms around her frail body, holding her close, inhaling the scent of smoke as tears spring to my eyes.

"I was taking a nap when the kitchen caught on fire."

"How?" I shudder forcefully. She was asleep. What if she hadn't woken up? "Did the fire alarm go off?"

“Of course, dear.” She squeezes my waist and pulls back. “That’s how I realized there was a fire.”

“Thank God.” I can’t imagine my life without my grandmother in it. She’s one of the few consistent people in my life. And although her life was hard, she ensured I was washed and had clean clothes to wear to school.

And even when she worked two jobs and got home dead-ass tired from standing on her feet all day, she’d brush the tangles that my brother didn’t get out of my hair and then read me a chapter from one of the books the library was tossing out. And when pages were missing, she’d make up the story along the way.

“I’m fine, sweetheart. Please don’t be upset.” The corners of her eyes are dented with wrinkles, and moisture pools in the crevices.

“No, Gram, I’m fine.” I inhale and straighten my shoulders.

“Everything’s out here!” One of the firefighters calls out to a group of turnout-clad men standing outside the doorway.

As they roll the hose up, I turn back to my grandma. “What caught on fire, and what do they think caused it?”

“Faulty wiring.” She cringes and shuffles her feet. “I was told ten years ago that the kitchen needed rewired, but I never saved up enough to pay for the repairs.”

“You should have told me. I could’ve given you some money.”

“It’s fine, dear. I promise.” Her eyes are haunted as she watches the firefighters load their gear.

For some reason, I don’t believe a word of what she’s saying. Our lives have never been fine. A cool breeze blows at my top, sending a chill along my spine. I wrap my arms around my chest to keep as much body heat in as possible.

I swallow hard over the dryness in my throat. “I called the insurance company. The one we had for years.”

“Did you?”

“Yes.” I wait for her to explain. For her to say, we have a different agency. But she stays silent. “What’s going on? They said you weren’t covered. Did you change companies?” My heart thuds in my chest.

Her shoulders sag, and the sinking feeling in my gut doubles down. “No. I didn’t change companies. I didn’t have the money to pay the premium, so I didn’t pay it. I’ve not had insurance on the house for close to a year.”

“What?” I didn’t hear her right. I couldn’t have. How’s that even possible? I drop my hands to my sides. “I don’t understand what you’re saying. You’ve always had enough money for insurance, and I’ve been taking on more of my responsibilities, so there’s no reason you should be too short to pay for insurance.”

I rake my hands through my hair as guilt seeps through me. I should’ve noticed she was struggling, getting absentminded, or whatever was going on. How do we fix this? The roof has a jagged hole in it from the fire, and while I haven’t seen the interior, there’s no doubt it’s covered in suppression foam, soot, and smoke.

“It was... You wouldn’t understand.” She turns away as if she’s refusing to meet my gaze.

“Try me.” I step in front of her and grab her upper arms, waiting until her pale blue eyes meet mine.

She licks her lips and sighs, “Jared got into some trouble and needed some money. I didn’t want to worry you about it, so I didn’t say anything.”

Son of a bitch. I drop my hands to my sides as if she’s the fire.

“How much?” The words are sour in my mouth. I hate that Callan was right. Or sort of right. It’s Jared’s fault she didn’t make the upgrades and has no insurance to cover the repairs. And Callan being right, chaps my ass about as much

as my brother taking advantage of our grandma and putting her in this predicament.

“Altogether, probably \$20 grand.”

Twenty grand? “Fuck me.” I jerk backward, stumbling over my heel before righting myself.

“Be careful, lady.” One of the firefighters who’s carrying a long black ax grasps my upper arm and waits until I’m steady on my feet.

“I’m fine. Thank you.” My head is spinning in circles as I mumble words of appreciation to him.

His brown eyes rake over me. “That you are.”

Please. I fight the urge to roll my eyes. My life is a dumpster fire, and this dude wants to hit on me. The man is a fool. I’m no one’s catch. Tonight, I get to sleep in a burnt-out house. He scurries away as if he senses I’m about to snap, and whoever is close by is going to get the brunt of my anger.

“Don’t give him any more money. You can’t risk your safety over his irresponsibility.”

“I know. I won’t. When he asked this week, I told him no. I hated to do it, but he assured me he had something else he could work out.”

And I became his patsy. Now, it all makes sense. My hands ball into fists. He’s not got his shit together. It’s just another day in the life of Jared. I can wish in one hand that he’d get straight and shit in the other, but we all know which one will get full fastest.

“When can we go in?”

My grandma licks her paper-thin lips. “We can’t.”

“What do you mean we can’t?” My stomach drops to my feet. My only saving grace is that Callan is climbing into the passenger side of his Mercedes Benz and not hearing how jacked up everything is.

“We can only go in for a quick tour and grab necessities out of the house.” Gram places her hand on my forearm. “I’m going to stay with Phyllis. She stopped by as soon as she found out about the fire. Her landlord gave her an exception on the two-week stay, but she can only have one guest for six weeks and then I’ll have to move on. I would sneak you in, but I can’t risk her losing her housing.”

“No. No, you can’t. I’m glad you have somewhere to go.”

“Can you stay with Henley? I’m sure she’d love to have you. She’s such a good girl and her dad, he’s a sweetheart.”

To you. There’s not a snowball’s chance in hell I’m asking to move in with Henley. Even if it’s only temporarily. I’m not breathing a word of this to either of them. “I’m sure they’ll let me stay. Don’t worry about me for a second.”

How’re we going to get the place fixed? With no insurance. I straighten my shoulders. I’ll figure it out. Even if I must fix everything myself. “I’ll call them as soon as we get a tour of the inside.”

Chapter Eleven

One Week Later

Callan

I lean across the desk and grasp Jax's hand in mine. "Thank you for meeting me today."

"It's my pleasure. I'm thrilled to move forward with some new projects." He releases my hand and nods to the man beside him. "I introduced you to Leo the other night. He's the brains behind the magic."

"Without me, there'd be no magic." He nods with a grin playing on his lips. "I like that, and my fiancée will enjoy that comment as well."

After greeting each other, we settle into our seats. Jax leans back into his chair, kicking out his feet as Leo studies me. The only sound in the room is the ticking of the clock on the wall and the hum of my electronics. He's trying to intimidate me, but I don't break easily.

Finally, he arches an eyebrow. "So, are you as good as they say? Can you put together a project of this size? In Kansas City?"

I adjust in my chair and rest my forearms on the flat surface. "I'm good, and I won't flinch at saying it. However, I'm not going to lie and say it'll be easy. It's harder here because of the state line in the middle of the city, but it's possible to find enough land in an area that's underdeveloped or ready for revitalization—without having to deal with multiple governments. If you have the proper amount of money, of course."

Leo chuckles, causing the laughter lines around his eyes to crinkle. "I like you. You tell it like it is." His eyes narrow as the humor drops from his expression. "But I don't overpay for anything."

“Understood.”

“Leo....” Jax growls at his friend. “It’s fine to take a hard stance in Vegas, but here in the Midwest, we may need to bend slightly.”

The other man crosses his arms over his chest and glares at Jax from the corner of his eye. “That’s not going to happen.”

“You know if you play hardball, and we aren’t able to expand here in Kansas City, we’re going to be stuck flying back and forth to somewhere, right?”

“I’m aware of that, but I don’t back down. We’ll do something else.” He lowers his arms and brushes the lint from his knee. Not that there was any. “We didn’t get wealthy by making irresponsible deals.”

“Gentlemen.” I raise my hands with my open palms toward them. “There’s no need to argue. The city is rife for expansion in all directions. In addition, there are underserved portions of the downtown area that could be leveled, and new buildings built instead. Let me know how much land you want, what area you’d prefer, and your top dollar amount. With that information, I can figure out who we want to court. I guarantee once we find the location, the rest will be a breeze. This is my business. I buy and develop land.” I tip my head sideways and clasp my hands together on my desk. “And I’m damned good at it.”

Two hours later, we’ve hashed out their visions, and I’m off to find the top three locations to start the negotiation process for purchase.

It won’t be easy, but nothing good ever is. I slide my cell phone from the pocket of my buttoned black Italian suit jacket and swipe the screen open. That’s when the overwhelming urge to call London comes over me. Until I shove it back.

Unfortunately, each time is harder than the last. Henley says she’s fine, but each day that passes makes it harder to believe that. Of course, insurance has likely put them up in a

hotel, and they're knee-deep in repairs. But she's not been to the house since the day of the fire. I shudder as visions of her charred body take front and center stage in my brain. What would've happened if she'd been there, and the fire alarm didn't go off? She'd be dead.

I jump out of my chair and speedwalk to the window overlooking the city landscape. A bus swerves in front of a small two-door car and parks by the sidewalk. As the other driver passes by, they lay on the horn. The sound barely travels to my tenth-floor corner office.

My shoulders tense until my neck and shoulders ache. Something's not right. I spin on my heel and return to my desk. The way London spoke on the phone to the insurance agent gave off the distinct impression that her grandmother didn't have insurance on the place. So, how's it getting repaired, and where're they staying?

Stop freaking out. She doesn't lie to Henley. Lying to me? That comes as easily as breathing. But Henley? They've always been honest with each other.

After settling at my desk, I make several calls, setting up some leads on land to develop and report the findings to Leo and Jax. As I expected, the issue will be selecting the location and not finding people willing to sell. They have the right amount of cash to properly motivate people. And that's with lowballing. People in the Midwest aren't used to billionaires swooping in and wanting to take their albatrosses off their backs.

The sun is setting in the west, casting a glow of warmth over the corner of my office where my desk sits. My cell phone rings, making me think of London yet again. Dude, it's not her. She's only called you once.

I rake a hand through my hair. Maybe I'm out of sorts due to a lack of sex and constant dreams of rescuing her from a burning building, with her repeatedly thanking me in the most thorough ways imaginable.

Specifically, I wake up every morning with my dick ready to burst and only my hand to solve the issue. It's driving me insane.

That's it. Stop thinking about her. There are 20 girls that look like her that you could hook-up with tonight at Club N9ne. I've gone to the elite sex club for years, but lately, it's lost its appeal.

Why am I denying myself the relief? What's it proving? That I'm worthy of sweeping London off her feet and convincing her to give up her future. I've seen the guys at the club with their young eye candy. Blonde hair, cheek implants, lip injections, fake tits. They all look like Barbie dolls with vacant eyes hanging on 60-year-old men with beer guts and ruddy red cheeks.

The way people look at them. The way they talk about them behind their backs. She'd laugh in my face if I even suggested it.

My phone rings again. *Henley*. "Hello?"

"Hey, Dad. I wanted to let you know I'll be in late tonight. I'm studying at the library."

"Who're you studying with?" If it's London, maybe I can ferret some information from her without her realizing I'm pumping her for details.

"It's no one you know."

My teeth grind together. Is she seeing her, but London doesn't want me to know? "Who?"

"Taylor Barrett." She doesn't hesitate with her answer. So, either she's telling the truth or plotted out her story before calling me. "He's in my biology class and aced the last test. He said he'd help me pick out the topics that are most likely to be on the exam. He's good at figuring that stuff out."

"I see."

"Why?"

“It’s... No reason.” I clear my throat. “When do you plan to be home?”

“Probably after 11. Is that okay?”

“Yes. That’s fine. I’ll leave the security alarm where you can deactivate it when you get in. Do you want me to leave a dinner plate in the fridge?”

“No.” She pauses for a second. “Sure. If you don’t mind, that would be fantastic.”

“No problem.”

“Thanks, Dad. You’re the best. Did you have a successful day?” By now, her voice is chipper, as usual. We don’t see a lot of each other because of my hours at the office and her school schedule, but we try to keep in touch daily. And we get along unless we’re discussing London.

“I had a productive day, but one that’s going to lead to long hours for an extended period of time.” I rotate my neck and shoulders to ease the sharp pain in my upper back.

“You push yourself too hard. You need a vacation and a girlfriend.”

“What?” The chair squeaks when I rock backward.

“You heard me. You need to take a break from all that work. It keeps you from finding someone and truly enjoying life. I hate seeing you so tense and serious all the time. Every morning for the last week, you’ve been... I take that back. Every day for the last couple of years, you’ve been angry and biting everyone’s heads off. Even when you come back...” She coughs. “From wherever you go, you’re still cranky. I think you’re looking in the wrong places for a significant other.”

I grind my teeth together as irritation colors my vision. “That’s enough.”

The fact she recognizes my weakness for London, even though she doesn’t know what it is, is a sign that I need to do

something different. It's time to go to the club and play out a scene. It doesn't matter if it won't satisfy me.

Sadly, when I go now, I spend time discussing business rather than picking a woman for entertainment.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'm just worried about you and want to see you happy."

"I'm happy." *Damn it. I'm happy.* I toss my cell phone on my desk.

Chapter Twelve

The Next Day

London

“Thank you.” I snatch the plate of food from Henley’s hands and yank open the silverware drawer. “I’m starving.”

My head hurts from the combination of different smells. I’ve spent the last week cleaning, scrubbing, and fixing what I can. And every inch of my body aches. I can’t even sit to pee without my thighs screaming in protest.

“This is crazy.” Henley spins in a circle, taking in the damage from the fire and the suppression powder. “I can’t believe you’re doing this on your own.”

“Who else is going to do it?” I shrug and slide the fork into the lukewarm mashed potatoes and inhale it.

With the home repairs added to my plate, I’ve not taken my shift at the café, which has reduced my eating opportunities. My stomach cramps as the mashed potatoes land like an anvil in the center of my stomach.

Shit. I cringe and relax my muscles. *Take it slower. And smaller bites.*

“You need to come and stay with me.” She crosses her arms over her chest and taps the toe of her shoe on the cracked linoleum.

“I can’t.” I rest my ass against the counter and slice off a smaller portion of food when my gaze travels over my hands. My fingernails are worn to the quick. I groan inwardly as thoughts of cleaning them before the next game makes me sick. It’s going to hurt so bad. “I’m not asking your father for a handout.”

Her eyes narrow into slits. “Where do you think that food came from?”

“Damn it, Henley.” I slap the plate down on the counter, swipe my hands over my jeans, and climb the ladder.

“You’re so fucking stubborn. More stubborn than my father, which is saying something.”

“That’s bullshit.” I glare down at her. “I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” She grabs the two sides of the ladder and stares up at me. “You won’t eat his food. You won’t stay at his house. You won’t ask him for money. You won’t let me do any of those things for you. What’ll you do when you have nowhere to stay or anything to eat?” She raises her arm, making a big deal about looking at her watch.

“Everything’s fine. I’m staying with Gram and her friend. I have a warm place to stay and food to eat. I’m just hungry right now because I’ve been working here the last few hours.”

“Except you’re supposed to be at work, and instead, you’re here working on the renovations and losing money because you’re here fixing another of your brother’s mistakes.”

“Fine, you’re right.” Anger rolls over me in waves, building like it’s behind a dam. I have no outlet for my fury. My brother has disappeared off the grid, and just when I’d love to smack him upside the face. “But I don’t want to hear your father saying he was right.”

“But he was right.”

“I know.” All the tension eases from my body, leaving me limp like a ragdoll. “But what do I do? Tell your father that everything he said about Jared is true? That I need money? That I’m irresponsible? That my brother took all my grandmother’s money, leaving her with nothing. That he took the money I’d been saving for the last six months, and that he’s not working like he said, and isn’t answering my calls? Yeah, that’s going to win me brownie points. It’ll only reinforce his belief that I’m a bad influence on you and that the only reason I hang out with you is for free handouts.”

How could anyone respect someone like me? Especially someone like Callan. Everything he touches turns to gold, and when I touch something, it turns to ash.

“That’s it.” Her eyes flash with anger. “I’m calling him and giving him a piece of my mind. I told him last night I was disappointed in his workload and his unwillingness to do anything more than fuck some nameless sub at a sex club. It’s ridiculous. He deserves something better than that.”

“Don’t.” Heat fills my body from my core to the tips of my ears. “Don’t call him. I’ve got this handled.” I don’t want to hear about him going to a sex club.

Two years ago, Henley and I overheard a conversation between him and his brother where he talked about a primal play scene he’d recently played out. That was the day my innocent childhood crush turned into a raging obsession. I can’t remember how often I’ve imagined him chasing me in the woods, catching me and pounding me to orgasm with a knife sliding along my neck.

Jesus. I inhale, step off the ladder, and turn away from my best friend. She’d never speak to me again if she knew how hard I come, fingering myself to that fantasy.

My breathing is ragged as I squeeze my thighs together. With one or two swipes over my clit, I wouldn’t be able to hold back the scream. And God, I need some relief. What’s wrong with me? Why am I talking to my best friend and thinking about sex with her father?

The scent of the meatloaf wafts through the room, and my mouth waters. *Fuck it. I’m starving.* I snatch the plate off the counter and shove another bite of potatoes into my mouth. The only thing that would make it better was if I had a clit stimulator and two minutes alone. I’d probably pass out and drop to the floor.

“Where *are* you staying? Don’t tell me you’re sleeping here?” She spins in a circle. It wasn’t until last night that I told

her Gram didn't have insurance, and I'm taking care of the renovations.

"I'm not sleeping here." I cringe and inhale more of the food. Now that I've gotten past the point of self-respect, I'm eating like someone will snatch it from my hand and devour it in front of me.

"Where. Are. You. Staying?"

"With Gram at her friend's house." *Liar*. Heat tinges on my cheeks. I don't want to lie to Henley, but what choice do I have?

I can barely look him in the eyes. It's hard enough to run into Callan every couple of weeks. But live with him? Under the same roof? Knowing he was naked in a shower? Sleeping in the buff in a king-sized bed? I wouldn't be able to keep from throwing myself at him and losing my best friend in the process.

"Oh." She nods. "That makes sense. I'm glad you have somewhere to stay. I thought by the way you were eating; you were staying in your car or something."

"No." I roll my eyes like that thought's crazy.

I'm not sleeping in my car. Well, sometimes I am, when I'm not hiding out in the library, sleeping on one of the old ratty loveseats they have stored in the study rooms until two a.m.

Then I must wake up and move to the floor behind the sofa, so the security guard doesn't see me. At five o'clock, I sneak into the women's bathroom outside of the study room after the janitor switches to cleaning the men's room.

It sucks hiding for 15 to 20 minutes in the toilet, trying not to step in front of the sensors and make an unintended toilet flush. But it's better than the alternative. Once he heads to the next floor, I slip down to the main floor and wash up before sliding out the side door and off to class.

I set down my plate. “Can you help me with something?”

“What?” She places her hands on her hips.

I smile widely as I prepare to get her to help. “How would you like to hold this section of sheet rock up while I screw it in?”

“About as much as I’d like to take a bottle of colon blow and go out for a night on the town wearing white pants.” She smirks as if she’s proud of her sense of humor.

“Well....” I waggle my eyebrows. “You’re in luck. You’re just in time for some colon blow.”

Chapter Thirteen

Callan

“Who’re you seeing, dear?” My mother stares at me from across the formal dining room table. The plate ware is Bone China. The goblets are made from crystal. And the butter dish is a 100-year-old family heirloom.

“I’m not seeing anyone.” The blessed event of Sunday dinners with my mom, wearing formalwear and enduring a police-style interrogation. The only thing we’re missing is the spotlight.

“Why not?” Her eyes narrow into tiny slits as Henley pats her grandmother’s forearm.

“Grandma, don’t get all worked up. You know Dad is never going to date anyone.” She gives me an innocent look.

“That’s a bunch of baloney. He’s run out of excuses.” My mom lays down the fork, which is a blessing because she’s just as likely to point it at me as she is to fling it across the table like a javelin. “At first, he wouldn’t date because women were after his money. Then it was because you were too little. Then, because he was too busy. The next excuse was that he wouldn’t date while you were in school. I’m tired of the made-up reasons he uses to keep people at arm’s length.” She picks up her fork and points it toward me. “No more excuses.”

Henley tips her head sideways and stares at me with a tiny smile playing at the corner of her lips. Damn them. They’ve ganged up against me.

“Don’t you start.”

“What?” She raises her hands in question as if she doesn’t realize she’s instigating.

“Why aren’t you helping?” I elbow my brother in the ribs.

“I’m just relieved it’s you and not me she’s focusing on.” Andrew bites into a sweet roll that smells like heaven.

“That’s not the help I was looking for.” I contemplate knocking him out of his chair and punching him in the ribs until he begs me to stop. The joys of being an older brother. I lean back into my seat as I fantasize about him screaming uncle.

“That’s all I’ve got.” Andrew shrugs as Cole, his three-year-old son, comes running at full speed from the living room. His eyes dance with glee as he bounds into the room.

“You should find a suitable mother for Cole.” Our mother raises her water glass off the table.

“Cole, young man, you’re my favorite nephew.” He’s my only nephew, but we’ve officially moved to the part of the program where our mother nags Andrew. And I couldn’t be happier.

“Great.” Andrew sends flying daggers in my direction. Thankfully, our eyes aren’t weapons, or we’d both be bruised and bloody.

“She just wants you both to be happy.” Henley wipes her hands on the white linen napkin. “We both do. It’s not like either of you are old. You could both stand to find a woman who treats you right and makes you happy.”

Our mother places her hand on Henley’s shoulder. “Henley’s right.”

“Stop,” I growl, causing Cole to jump as he stands between my brother and me. “I’m sorry, bud. I’m not mad.” I rub his back.

“Unc Cal.” He lifts his chubby arms to me and doesn’t relent until he’s settled on my lap. His bottom lip quivers. “I sorry. You forgive?”

“I wasn’t mad at you. Sorry, I made you jump.” I kiss the top of his head.

“Good.” He turns and surveys the table like a boss.

“This kid is rotten.” Henley laughs and stabs a piece of broccoli with her fork. “If he ever needs a career, he’s got one in Hollywood.”

“So, are *you* seeing someone?” The woman is like a dog with a bone.

“Mom, let it go. I’m not seeing anyone, either.” My brother’s jaw flexes.

Andrew is not remotely over Felicity’s betrayal. Not that I blame him. She stole money from him and took off with his best friend. Apparently, they’d been sneaking around behind his back from the beginning and plotted together to fund their life together. She’s now doing time in the state penitentiary.

“I wish you wouldn’t idolize your brother. Just because he doesn’t want a wife and wanted to raise Henley on his own, doesn’t mean you should make the same stupid decision.”

“Thank you, Mom.” I roll my eyes and stab my own piece of broccoli.

“You’re welcome, dear.”

“I wasn’t being sincere.”

“Neither was I.”

Henley laughs as she lays her forearms on the table. “I love Sunday dinners. They’re so much fun.” From my side of the table, she couldn’t be more wrong.

It might not be his proudest moment, but what can I say? I was his role model, and Henley’s biological mother switched out my condoms with ones she’d poked stick pins into. I didn’t love her, but I married her to do the right thing.

I didn’t find out the truth until after the wedding when she bragged to the wrong person. She’s gone, and I raised Henley on my own. Since that time, I haven’t trusted women. They’re only after one thing. Money.

“Andrew, pass me the roll basket.” The second she has one of the mouthwatering rolls in her hand, she licks her lips.

“So, there’s no one at the club that you find intriguing?”

When I stop breathing, Cole tilts his head and studies like I’m a slide under a microscope. “What rong, Unc Cal?”

“Nothing, son.” I ruffle his dark curls and hand him back to Andrew, who’s busy pretending to take a phone call.

“I haven’t been to the club in a while. And that’s not exactly a place to find a soulmate.” The fact my entire family knows I frequent Club N9ne is not something I’m excited about.

“Grandma, he’s right. All the girls there are into submission, and despite what he thinks, a woman like that would bring him to tears.”

Andrew coughs until his eyes bug out, and he excuses himself from the table with Cole settled at his hip. Traitor.

“I’m done.” This is the last Sunday dinner I’m ever attending. I lay my napkin down and push my seat back.

“You know what I mean, right Grandma?” She doesn’t wait for her to respond before continuing. “He thinks he wants a sweet girl who does whatever he says, but he prefers the chase. The thrill of stalking his victim. Right, Dad?”

Andrew’s face is bright red as he glances at me from over his shoulder. I don’t say a word. Please don’t say anything. Not that Andrew wants anyone to know about that night any more than I do.

Unfortunately, Henley knows me too well. She might not know about that night, but she knows what interests me. Women at the club bore me. But it has nothing to do with submission or dominance. It’s because they don’t intrigue me. They aren’t—

Is she right? Is that why, in the middle of a BDSM scene, I’d rather be at the bar wheeling and dealing than focusing on the woman. And why not? I’ve more than doubled my money at that place. I thought it was old age, but maybe it’s more than that. The scene from a little over two years ago

between Andrew and I and a young girl in the woods flashes before my eyes.

It was my present to Andrew. A welcome back to the world after his ex's betrayal. The woman consented; neither of us knew her name, and we never saw her again. But the chase was exhilarating. Until she talked, and I wanted to be done.

It had nothing to do with shattering the illusion that it was London we were chasing and about to share. Okay, maybe that was what ruined the moment.

Not that I would share London permanently. Maybe for an hour. So, I could re-claim her over and over again.

Please. She would jack you in the dick if she knew you'd even considered having sex with her and sharing her with your brother.

My mom sits straight in her seat. "You should let Henley set you up with someone. She must know a lot of young women."

"Mom." I spin on my heel as my mouth drops open. "Henley's friends are barely legal."

"But they're of consenting age. I'm sure some of them would be interested in men of your age. You both still look young and fit."

Henley's eyes twinkle with humor. "I have some women in class who are older, nontraditional students." She arches her eyebrows. "They might be better choices. Most of them don't have gray hair yet, or if they do, they cover over it. They probably even—"

"I'm going to ground you when we get home." At this point, it's clear she's trying to rile me up, and it's working.

My mom loops her index finger into the gravy boat's handle. "You should get the number of one of those older women and have Henley pave the way."

"Pave the way?"

“To finding you a new woman. One you can have a family with.” She bites her bottom lip. “Maybe we should go a little younger than those older ladies. You want one that’s still fertile because you’re not too old to have another baby.”

I groan. I need a bottle of Jack to deal with this conversation.

Chapter Fourteen

London

While holding open the heavy door to the library's top floor, I flip the locking device and step back onto the main floor rather than taking the stairs to the exit. I wait against the wall, listening for any sounds on the other floors. I'm always the last one to leave for the night, which fits perfectly for being a stowaway.

I flip off the side lights, leaving the edges of the library in darkness while the bookshelves stay bright.

Once I'm confident I'm alone, I walk along the edge of the room and sneak into the smallest study room equipped with a sofa. I don't need a big room. It's just me, a desk, my bag of clothes and other necessities, and my bookbag. During the day, I keep my gear under the counter by the lost and found, so if anyone asks, someone forgot their stuff, and they're picking it up tomorrow. No one ever asks.

After I settle at the small desk, I pull out my cell phone. Still nothing from my brother. Damn him. He caused this mess, and of course, he won't pull his weight. The least he could do was help with the heavy labor.

Where did things go wrong? He was a good kid. He was a responsible older brother—brushing my hair, making sure I got dressed and onto the bus on time, and helping me with my homework. And then, he hit 14 and turned into a different person. One who didn't care about anything but impressing his friends. His worthless, jerk-wad friends.

Me: You need to call me back. I'm tired of the dodged phone calls. And pretending nothing's wrong. Call me.

There's no point in waiting for a response. I drag out one of my books to study for tomorrow's test.

Within seconds, my eyelids fluttered shut, and I'm shifting in my seat. I'm never going to stay awake. I blink and rotate my shoulders, cringing when the muscles bunch from the renovation work at Gram's house. That coupled with cheer practice and no sleep, I'm about pushed over the edge.

I lean back into the chair, causing it to creak under my weight. What I wouldn't give for a soak in a big jacuzzi tub or even a scalding hot shower.

My cell phone rings, giving me the wake-up boost that I needed. Of course, it's Henley and not Jared. "Hey."

"Did you make it to your grandma's friend's house?"

"Yes." I glance at the clock and freeze. *I wouldn't be there yet. Shit. I'd still have 10 minutes to go.*

"Did you get off work early?"

"No." *Shit.* "Yes, I got off a little early, and no, I haven't made it there yet but I'm close. I'll be there in the next five minutes or so."

"Oh, okay. I wanted to see if you were off tomorrow night and wanted to come over for dinner. You could stay the night and be closer to school the next day."

That sounds like heaven. Can I deal with Callan's insults? Why would I even see him? It's not like he hangs out with Henley at night. He's always busy on a call. Or at a meeting. "Sure. I can do that. It sounds nice and would save me a lot of time."

"Perfect." She lets out a loud whooshing sound. "I was hoping you'd say that. My car broke down earlier today, and my dad has offered to drive me to school tomorrow. There's nothing more embarrassing than being a 21-year-old adult who's dependent on her father for transportation."

Try hiding in a library after hours to see which is more humiliating. "I'm sure he could let you drive one of his many vehicles."

“He wants to drive me,” her sigh is loud as she flops down onto something.

“I can take you home after class tomorrow. It’s the one night I’m not working this week.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” There’s a rustling sound on the other end. “You aren’t going to your grandmother’s house after school, are you?” She groans dramatically. “Not that I mind helping you or doing something nice for your grandma, but the last time I helped you, I had sheetrock dust in my hair and broke two fingernails.”

“It’s fine.” I chuckle at her dramatics. Not that she’s wrong. My fingernails are cut down to the quick, and my hair is stiff as a board. “No, I’m not going there tomorrow night.” I’ve got to wait to get paid to purchase any more supplies. Or catch my jerk of a brother and get some money out of him.

“Thank God.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“Yes, it was. Okay. I’ve got to go. See you at school tomorrow.”

“Later.”

After I hang up, I stand, stretching my muscles. A shower and a bed. God, that sounds delicious. Before I can return to my studies, my phone beeps.

Jared: Hey, Sis. Sorry, it’s so late. I would’ve called, but I was busy—

I don’t even read the rest before I poke at his photo and wait. I’m not stupid. He waited until he thought I’d be in bed before contacting me.

One ring. Two rings. Three rings. I tap the toe of my shoe on the low-pile carpet. He’d better not dodge me. Click.

“Hello?”

“It’s about time you answered.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve been unavailable.”

My jaw tenses. “And I’m sorry I called your bluff and returned your call. I assume you thought I was in bed, which was the only reason you graced me with a ‘sort of’ answer.”

“Hey, don’t be rude.”

“And ignoring my calls for over a week, isn’t?”

“Yeah, about that—”

“Don’t.” I straighten my shoulders. “Don’t pretend you give a shit. All you care about is yourself. You don’t care that Gram’s house caught on fire or that she didn’t have insurance because of you, and you don’t care that she’s having to stay with some random friend of hers. Or that I’m spending every waking second when I’m not at work or in school fixing the place so she can move back in.” My head pounds with each beat of my heart.

Breathe. Calm down. He doesn’t deserve to control you. He’s the one with the issue.

“Don’t blame all this on me.”

“Who else am I going to blame it on?”

“I have a job, and I’m straightening everything out.”

“It’s a little late.” I stomp to the door. The lights are on at the edges of the main library.

Oh, fuck. Sweat pools in my armpits. The janitorial crew is already on the floor. Typically, they start on the bottom floor and move up. It looks like the timeframe is sped up today.

“Don’t get short with me.”

“Fine.” My voice is low as I stuff my books in my bag and latch it over my arm. “Whatever you say.” They always start in the bathrooms, so I should be able to slip out and get away before anyone notices.

“I’ll bring you money tomorrow night.”

I pause in the middle of the study room and lick my lips. “That would help a lot, actually.”

The quicker I get back home, the better. “How much can you afford? Can you gather some funds and help with the manual labor? I’d love to get back into Gram’s house next weekend. I’m not sure the inspectors could finalize everything that quickly, but—”

“Sure. I’ll get in touch with you tomorrow. I’ll give you a call around 4:00 p.m.? Is that okay?”

“Yes, that would be perfect.”

After I hang up, I lay my forehead against the wall. Finally, something is going right. With Jared and some of his friends’ help, I can cut weeks off this project and get things back to normal.

I’ve got to tell Gram the good news. I jerk upright and scroll to her phone number. *Dummy*. I groan. *What’re you doing? It’s 12:30 at night. She’s not up.* She’s snug in a bed. It might not be her bed, but she’s on a mattress, at least.

The sound of a toilet flushing and the water rushing through the pipes jolts me back to reality. I’ve got to get out of here before I’m caught and get fired for squatting. I shudder forcefully. Or get charged for trespassing. Or some trumped up stealing indictment for using electricity and water after hours. That’s not something I want on my record.

Chapter Fifteen

Callan

After dropping Henley off at class, I travel around the campus's large external driveway, making the full circle and turning at the exit lane. The faint haze of the sun peaking over the horizon leaves everything in darkness.

With Henley's car in the shop and my office across town, I had to leave an hour early to drop her off. But I wasn't about to let her drive any of my vehicles to campus and park all day. The paint would've been covered in door dings and key scratches.

As I near the stop sign, I glimpse London's car out of the corner of my eye. It's parked on the back row of the library lot, but she got off work at midnight... and had to drive over thirty minutes to where she's staying with her grandma.

I tap my fingertips on the steering wheel. That meant she had less than four hours of sleep. What in the fuck? She's going to kill someone driving on that little rest. I speed down the road, skid to a stop at the light, and circle back around into the parking lot.

As I approach her car, I frown. No one's inside. Anger surges through me as I grip the steering wheel tighter. She's with someone. That's the only explanation. After work last night, she took off with some guy and shacked up with him. I slide into the open spot next to hers and slam on the brakes, causing my car to lunge forward and rock backward, settling into place.

I don't want Henley hanging around with a loose woman who uses people for a place to stay. I'm waiting, and the second she shows up, I'm giving her a piece of my mind. She's not using me. I mean, she's not using Henley.

Something moves in the adjacent vehicle. *Son of a fucking bitch. She's in there. Right now. Fucking some*

dumbass jock. Some young, dumbass jock. In broad daylight. I jump out of my car, slamming the door. The sound sends a shockwave through the parking lot. Luckily, no one else is present to witness my rage.

I stomp over to the driver's side and yank the door open. "What in the fuck do you think you're doing?"

The bright light illuminates the black cloth interior, highlighting the faded and cracked dashboard. London blinks as she shifts in her seat. She shoves her hair out of her face while smacking the back of her head on the headrest. "What?"

"What's going on?"

"What're you doing here?" She adjusts her top and stares in shock as the haze in her eyes disappears. She's alone. Her backpack and a large black trash bag are in the passenger seat. The backseat is covered in bags with what I presume to be the rest of her clothes.

"Why're you in the library parking lot at 6 o'clock in the morning?"

Her jaw tightens as she shoves out her chin. "I'm waiting for my next class."

I step back, giving her some space, and cross my arms over my chest to avoid dragging her out of the car and paddling her ass. "You've been sleeping in your car? Don't you realize how dangerous that is? Anyone could've broken in and assaulted you. For fuck's sake, the door wasn't even locked. How long have you been here?"

"It's none of your business."

"I beg to differ. For some reason, my daughter cares about you, which makes you, my business."

"No, it doesn't." She slides out of the car and stands next to me, rising to her full height, which brings her to my shoulder. It takes everything inside of me not to drag her against me and kiss the stubborn expression off her face.

“I should beat your ass for putting yourself in danger like that. Clearly, your grandmother and brother don’t care what happens to you.” With each word, anger grows inside of me. “You could’ve been robbed, assaulted, or raped. Or killed, and you’re too stupid to care or to do anything to protect yourself.”

“That’s enough.” She pokes her index finger into my chest. “Don’t talk about my family and say things you know nothing about.”

I raise my hands and spread them open in front of me. “You’re here. Sleeping in your car. What else am I supposed to think? You’re putting your safety at risk, and you’re too stupid to think about the consequences. You could’ve told Henley you didn’t have somewhere to stay.”

She snaps her arms in front of her chest and glares. “And you would’ve opened your arms and let me into your home? No, thank you. All I would’ve heard were insults about my intelligence and how I need to stand up to my brother. I didn’t want to hear it. Besides, I’d never beg you for anything.”

I grab her chin and hold her in place. “You’re a pain in the ass. I’d love to take you over my knee and spank the bratty snark right out of you.”

“You and what army.” She fists my tie and yanks me off balance. “I dare you to try. I don’t think you have the balls.”

I slam my mouth against her and suck down her scream of shock. Her lips are cold and unyielding as she resists me, and it only makes my blood boil harder. She yanks me closer, yet our bodies stay inches apart. Heat radiates off her. Or maybe it’s me. I can’t tell.

My head feels like it’s drowning. Every inch of my body hums as my dick shouts to claim her. The ache to destroy her is overpowering, almost dropping me to my knees. I’ve never responded to anyone like this. I drag my hands through her hair and tilt my head, easing my kiss and eagerly sucking down the whimper I didn’t know I was so desperate for.

When she lifts her arms and wraps them around my neck, her nails dig into my flesh. I dive my tongue between her lips as hers swipes against mine. *Jesus*. I've waited for this moment for so long, and it surpassed everything I expected. I haul her closer until her chest heaves against mine, sending shockwaves throughout my body.

What are you doing?

I pull back and gasp for air. Her eyes are filled with lust and unspoken desire. But then she hides them from me, and it makes me question what I saw. *Shit*. My heart races in my chest, pounding against my ribs. What have I done? This is London. My daughter's best friend. My daughter's 20-year-old best friend. I'm as bad as all the perverts who follow around teenage girls with their hand in their pocket, jerking off.

After I lurch backward, I rake my hands through my hair. "What would you have done if someone would've done that to you and it wasn't me? You've got to be careful. Just because you have a prickly exterior doesn't mean you can't get hurt."

She swallows hard and looks down at the ground. "You're right. Tell Henley I'll stay somewhere else tonight." She backs up, knocking her backside into the side of her car.

"Where?!" I bark louder than I intended, causing her to jump.

"I'll stay at the library."

I frown. "What're you talking about. The library isn't open all night."

"No, it's not." Her shoulders sag as she lowers into the driver's seat. "But it's the best I can do. Gram is staying with a friend, and her lease won't let her have more than one guest. And I gave my—"

"And you gave all your extra money to Jared."

"Yes."

“You’ll pick Henley up after class this afternoon and stay at the house. Do you understand?” I brace my hand on the top of the open doorway and wait.

“Yes, Sir.” She nods as if she’s too tired to care anymore. My stomach clenches at her dejected stance. I love her feistiness, her will to live, and her determination to thrive at all costs. This? This makes me sick to my stomach.

I squat down beside her. “London?”

“Yes?” She glances out of the corner of her eye.

“It’s going to be okay. You’ll stay with us until the house is repaired. How are the renovations going?”

“They’re fine.” Her gaze darts away from mine. “It should be livable within a week. Or two at the most.”

“Who’s been doing the repairs?” I groan inwardly. She’s been doing it all on her own. How’s she surviving?

“I have.”

“London, you’re going to kill yourself doing so much. Why isn’t the insurance taking care of everything?” Just like I instinctively knew who was doing the renovations, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to realize her grandmother didn’t have insurance. That damn brother of hers. Her grandma spent all her money bailing him out of another jam.

She bites her lower lip. “She gave the money to Jared and didn’t have insurance. He’s supposed to bring me some money so I can buy some more supplies, and we’re going to figure out a time when some of his friends can help finish everything up.”

“Perfect.” My voice drips with sarcasm. The fact she still believes in him is beyond comprehension. The man has done nothing but cause her heartache.

“Don’t.” She shakes her head as she stares out the windshield.

“Tonight.” I grab her chin and twist her face toward mine. “You’ll eat, shower, and get some sleep without worrying about anyone taking advantage of you. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Tears fill her eyes as her bottom lip trembles. “Thank you.”

I swallow over the lump in my throat. London and tears combined with a thank you? I’m about to drop to my knees and thank God for something. I don’t know what because I’ve never begged God for anything. But I want to.

Chapter Sixteen

London

The second I step out of the classroom; Henley grabs my arm and drags me to the wall away from the rest of the students flooding the hallway.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you were homeless.” She says the last word in a whispered hiss. “We’ve been best friends for years, and you don’t tell me something this important?”

“I know.” I lean my hip against the wall and shake my head. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t cut it.” Her eyes narrow into tiny slits. “It’s one thing to fail to mention that you don’t have anywhere to stay, but it’s quite another to lie and say you were staying with your grandma and her friend. When instead....” Her eyes are wide. “You’ve been living in your car.”

And the lies will keep coming. I might tell her where I’ve been staying, but I’m not about to share what happened this morning. I can still feel Callan’s lips pressed against mine, and the intensity of his eyes scorched me from the inside. But he was proving a point and nothing more. I put myself at risk by sleeping in my car, out in the middle of an empty parking lot, without locking my doors. And my only excuse is exhaustion.

But what a point he made. It doesn’t matter how many times I fantasized about being devoured by him. None of them came close to reality. They were the equivalent of a kindergartner’s drawing of two stick figures kissing with no body parts touching versus a NSFW artist’s rendering of two adults fucking each other’s brains out. I shiver and blink, trying to refocus on our conversation.

“Not exactly.” I glance in both directions as the traffic thins. The session letting out is the last one before the evening

classes, which don't start for a couple of hours. "I've been staying in the library."

"What?" Her head would've whacked off the cement if she'd been standing by the wall.

I step forward and dip my head toward her in case anyone passes by. "After the library closes, I turn down the side aisle lights and lock up. Then I sneak down along the wall to the first study room. That's where I stay until the middle of the night when the janitors come to clean the floor." I bite my bottom lip and sigh. "Once they were in the bathroom and out of hearing distance, I'd sneak down to the bottom floor to get ready for class. Last night, one of the staff came to my floor right after closing, and I had to sneak down early." I shudder as visions of jumping back into the stairwell to avoid detection flash before my eyes. I was seconds away from getting kicked out of school. "Only there was a worker sweeping that floor."

She stares at me like I have a unicorn horn growing out of my forehead. "So, you ended up sleeping in your car?"

"Yes, and your dad came by after he dropped you off and confronted me."

"As he should have." Her eyes are filled with worry as some of her anger dissipates. If she knew how I almost dragged her father into my car and recreated a NSFW drawing, she wouldn't have that same level of care. "It's dangerous for you to stay alone on campus where anyone could come upon you and harass you."

"I realize that now," I sigh as my shoulders drop. "I'm so used to taking care of everything alone, and you know how your father feels about me."

She cocks her eyebrows. "Do you?"

"Yes. Of course, I do. He's told me enough times. I don't need it bashed over the top of my head."

"He doesn't approve of your brother." She grabs my shoulder. "That's different. He sounded concerned about your safety on the phone. He sounded frantic even. And he's not

wrong about your brother. Isn't he the reason you're in this position because he conned money from both you and your grandmother?"

"Fine." I raise my hands in the air defensively. "It's partially his fault or mostly his fault. Whatever. But..." I give her a weak smile. "He called last night and said he would bring me the money for the rest of the renovation materials and get some of his friends to help with the heavy lifting. Which will keep you from having to help me and will get us back into the house within a couple of weeks."

"I hope you're right." She drops her arm over my shoulder as we walk toward the exit. "It's time he confronts his demons and man's up. He's not the only kid who lost a parent."

She's right. I lost my parents the same way he did, and Henley's mom has never been in the picture.

Several Hours Later

When I sit down for dinner, I'm relieved there are no signs of Callan. He wasn't here when we arrived, and I didn't run into him in the hallway as I brought in my gear, which Edna promptly retrieved and took to wash. Not that I blame her. I'm used to how I smell at this point, but the faint hint of smoke might remain on my clothing.

Edna deposits a platter of fried chicken in front of us, and my mouth drowns in moisture. I don't remember the last time I had a sit-down home-cooked meal. My grandma rarely cooks anymore because of her arthritis.

"This smells and looks delicious." The chicken is browned to perfection and looks like it will crunch when bitten into.

"Thank you, dear." Her eyes beam with pleasure, but that's the only way you can tell she's pleased. All of Callan's staff are the ultimate professionals.

“I can’t wait to eat.”

“You should’ve come here in the first place, and you’d have eaten like this every day.” Henley dollops a scoop of mashed potatoes onto her plate and hands it to me.

“You’re right. I should have.”

Henley clutches her chest and goes limp in her seat. “Did you just tell me I was right?”

“Stop.” I glare at her dramatics.

“Fine.” She laughs, straightens, and snatches a roll off a glass platter.

“But hearing you say I was right almost caused a heart attack. You do realize you’re the most stubborn person I’ve ever met?” She rolls her eyes. “Well, besides my father, that is.”

“Hello, dear.” Callan’s deep voice causes me to jump in my seat. “London.”

I twist my head around. He’s wearing jeans and a skintight gray T-shirt. I cough. Lord, I about swallowed my tongue. The man is beautiful.

“Hello, Daddy.” Henley slips out of her chair and steps into his embrace.

“Did you have a good day?” He kisses the top of her head, and I return my attention to my meal. Watching his ease with her hurts. It’s stupid. She’s, his daughter. Of course, they’re close. But that doesn’t stop the envy. I’d love to have someone fawn over me and treat me like a princess. But that isn’t happening. I dig into my food and chew in silence as she rattles on about her day.

He rubs her back. I chew louder, blocking out thoughts of his mouth on mine. His hard body pressing against my chest. The way my skin hummed and vibrated with pleasure. I shiver. The thoughts won’t go away. They’re permanently seared into my brain.

When he laughs at something she says, the walls of my sex clench until I rotate my hips and grind my clit into the chair. The whimper that emits from my lips makes me feel weak and stupid. It was hard enough being around him when I didn't know how I responded to his touch. Now, staying here is impossible. At least without losing my sanity.

Would it be ungrateful to grab my food and ask permission to eat alone? I sigh. Yes, it would. Just forget he kissed you. It didn't mean anything to him. Pretend it didn't happen and return to normal.

Chapter Seventeen

Callan

I join Henley and London at the table, sitting next to Henley rather than at the opposite end. But when I glance up and meet London's gaze, I realize my mistake. I curl my hands into fists to keep from reaching across the table and dragging her across it. I'd much rather feast on her than Edna's expertly prepared meal.

"Dad." Henley rests her hand on top of mine. "Thank you for allowing London to stay. I appreciate it so much. This way, I don't have to worry about her sleeping in her car or squatting in the library." She rolls her eyes. "I can't believe the amount of cat and mouse she played to keep from being detected there."

Visions of chasing her as she attempts to evade me makes my heart skip a beat. Now that I've tasted her lips, I want more. I want everything.

"Yes." The corners of London's mouth rise slightly upward. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

When she gnaws on her bottom lip, my dick jumps. *Dude, you aren't 24 years old anymore. You have more control than that.* I growl under my breath. Yeah, that's the problem. If I was a 24-year-old, I'd claim her and punch the shit out of any man that looked at her.

"It won't be long though." She lays her fork on the napkin and grabs her water glass. "I'm supposed to get money from Jared tomorrow."

My jaw clenches, and all thoughts of sex fly out the window. The idol worship she bestows on her brother pisses me the fuck off. At the mere mention of his name, I want to throat-punch the bastard.

He lies to her. But she knows he does. He never follows through. But she expects it. He insists on running around with

drug dealers and street thugs. And she doesn't care. No matter what he does, she accepts him with open arms and thinks rainbows and gold will shoot out his ass.

Son of a bitch. Heat floods over my skin as blood drums in my ears. I'm jealous of her brother. I can't breathe as the realization hits. I want her to look at me with half as much devotion as she does him, and I'd be a happy man.

What's wrong with me? Nothing can come from my obsession with her. I've known that for two years. That's why I've kept her at arm's length. Why I've accused her of being bad for my daughter.

That's not it at all. She works harder than my daughter could ever dream of. She's smart, does good in school, and is loyal to a fault. She's a talented and strong athlete. Let's not even delve into her stunning body and gorgeous face. No, the problem is—she's not good for me. She makes me want things I can't have—her. And this morning was a mistake.

I harden my heart from opportunity, hope, and dreams. All of it. "That's good. I hope he gets everything arranged, and you and your grandma can return to your place."

"Thanks." London's head jerks downward as she swirls her fork in her mashed potatoes.

"Dad!" Henley barks sharply.

"What?"

"You're making London feel unwanted, and that's uncalled for." Her eyes darken in anger, and love punches me in the gut. She looks like me. Dark hair. Clear blue eyes. And a prickly attitude.

"I apologize." I nod in London's direction.

"Thank you for the meal." She wipes her hands, pushes back her chair, and avoids my gaze.

That's better. She hates me, and I can pretend watching her leave makes me happy rather than destroyed.

After London departs, Henley and I eat in silence as the grandfather clock ticks in the corner. Henley chats on about her classes and different things going on at school as I fall into a trance. It's like sleepwalking on a dimension between heaven and hell.

"I'm headed to meet some friends to study." She jumps out of her chair. "You two have a good night."

Alone. I'll be alone with London. In my house. Where there are beds and countless walls. And a forest of trees outside at the end of my yard.

God, I'm going to die.

Chapter Eighteen

London

Two hours later, I'm soaking in the tub with bubbles popping across my skin. I rarely indulge in the finer things, but today seems like the day. The lights are off except for the one above the glassed-in shower across the room. The water is warm. And I've never felt this relaxed in my life. Henley left for a study group, and I'm doing everything in my power to avoid Callan.

Every move I made, I felt like I was under surveillance. It's ridiculous. I've never stolen so much as a fork from him or anyone else. I'm the good girl who works and studies every waking second of the day.

I close my eyes and drift in and out of sleep. When the shower water snaps on, I jump and slap my hand over my mouth to keep from screaming out. That's when I see him. Every inch of Callan's impressive body as he steps into the shower and shuts the door.

For several moments, he stands motionless to the side of the shower, staring at the tiles as he waits for the water to heat. The walls of my sex clench as I devour him. Broad shoulders. Sculpted muscles. Trim waist. Tight gorgeous ass. Muscular thighs. Everything about him is perfection.

He steps under the water, and I groan in frustration. I ache to join him in the shower. To have his hands all over me. To feel his calloused palms caressing my skin. His mouth trailing over my neck and down to my chest. Heat floods over me from head to toe as I fight to catch my breath. His movements are quick and efficient as he washes and lets the soap and water trail down his body and drift down the drain. What I wouldn't give to follow those same movements with my hands. To touch him so intimately would be—

Too much.

I rub my thighs together to ease the tension building deep inside me. Lust curls in my lower belly as slickness coats my slit, and the scent of soap makes me dizzy.

Slowly, I cup my breasts, tugging on my nipples. *Oh, my God.* My eyes roll back into my head as I moan low in my throat. This is so wrong. I should have shouted and jumped out when I saw him, but now, it's too late. I can't leave. He'll know I'm in here.

I slide my hands along my belly and glide between my legs.

No. Don't. It's wrong. You shouldn't be watching him. Close your eyes and pretend he's not here.

Instead, I bite my bottom lip and swipe along my outer lips. They're so swollen and slick. I should look away, but I can't. The muscles in his back ripple as he rotates his head and neck.

When he turns sideways, that's when I get the full view of the man as his hand glides up and down his massive length. *Holy fuck.* I whimper and freeze. *Please, don't let him have heard that.*

I'm motionless as I watch and wait. He doesn't give any indication that he realizes he's not alone. He closes his eyes as his movements intensify. Unable to control myself, I spread my thighs wide and rub my clit, dropping down lower to gather the desire that coats my slit and smearing it on the throbbing bundle of nerves.

I moan and fight back a cry as I press hard and stroke faster. The muscles in his neck bulge as his thumb swirls over the head of his cock and back down the shaft. I've made out a few times with a few toads, but I'm still a virgin, and this is the most erotic thing I've ever witnessed.

"Fuck," he groans loudly, and his speed works to a frantic jerky pace.

I dive my finger between my outer lips as quivers cause my thighs and belly to stiffen. "Oh!"

Shit. I swallow hard but can't stop my movements. I rub three fingers from my sex around my clit and back down, pressing hard as I convulse in orgasm. I swallow my gasp, holding my breath, and scissor my thighs together as the water splashes over my breasts.

"Jesus," Callan grunts as spasms of cum shoot out of his cock. "Fuck." He shoves the water handle down with enough force that I'm shocked it doesn't snap off.

Please don't let him have heard me. I lay there motionless as fear ripples through me. My terror is as intense as the orgasm that just leveled me moments ago. He'll toss me out on my ass if he knows I watched him.

He steps out of the shower, slings a towel around his waist, and marches from the room as water trails down his back.

My heart races. How am I going to get out of here? It's one thing if he maybe didn't see me. But how do I get to Henley's room without him seeing me? I must go past his room to get to hers.

The house is quiet until a creak sounds from down the hallway. And a door slams shut.

Go. I jump out of the tub, grab my clothes, and put them on wet before running to Henley's bedroom. *My phone. I've got to go back and get it. Shit.*

After I toss my hair up into a bun, I open the door and confidently march down the hallway like I own the place and re-open the bathroom door.

"Taking a shower?"

"Fuck!" I jump and spin around.

Callan leans against the doorjamb. "Or a bath?"

"Oh, hi. I didn't see you there." I lick my lips and swallow hard. "I'm going to take a bath."

"Enjoy the bubbles. I hope it doesn't get cold in there."

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.” My heart beats so hard and fast I’m surprised it doesn’t flop out onto the floor as warmth floods over my cheeks.

“I used plenty of hot water.” He tilts his head sideways and frowns. “Why’s your hair already wet?”

“Oh.” I jerk open the door. “I used Henley’s sink to wash it.”

He bites his bottom lip and stares. “Interesting.”

“Yes.” *Jesus. Get out of here now.*

I slip into the bathroom, shutting the door behind me, and fall against it. He didn’t see me, did he? Surely not. He wouldn’t have finished if he heard me. It’s all in my head. But now, I’m stuck taking another bath. Or at least pretending to take another bath.

Chapter Nineteen

Callan

What in the fuck is wrong with you?

I march across the floor of my office and slump into my chair. It's bad enough to realize she was in the bathtub seconds before coming while envisioning her kneeling at my feet, but then I had to basically shout that I knew she was there?

What did you expect to happen? She'd admit to enjoying the show. And that she'd come while watching you rub one out?

Right. She was too repulsed to even speak. And what would've happened if she said she enjoyed it? A whole shitload of bullshit would be coming my way. Because she's not going to want the things I want.

I turn on my computer and work on Jax's project for several hours in a desperate attempt to pretend it never occurred. When I straighten, my back screams in frustration. I sat way too long in one place, but it was successful. I've located the perfect place for the project.

The site I'd originally considered was smaller and farther out of the city. Another option is not in the best neighborhood, and there'd need to be a larger revitalization project to make the location work.

But this one is perfect. Taking on a project of this size will be the biggest one I've undertaken, and it's going to be my crowning achievement. Adrenaline buzzes in my veins. What time is it? I glance up at the clock. 10 o'clock. Henley should be home by now. I glance at my cell phone to find a message from her.

Henley: I'll be back later than I expected. Probably after midnight.

Panic swells in my chest. Another two hours alone with London. I straighten my shoulders and inhale. What am I worried about? By now, she's probably asleep.

I ring Leo.

"Hey."

"I know it's late, but I think I've found a goldmine."

"Tell me more. Jax said you'd have the pulse of the city at your fingertips. Let's see if the old man knows what he's talking about or if you'll fall flat on your face. What're we looking at?"

After I give him the addresses of the three locations, he spouts off specifics about the locations, including the owners and surrounding landmarks. He's a walking encyclopedia of knowledge.

"I'm not going to ask you how you know all that, but since you do, why do you need me?"

"I need you because you know what's not on the internet. You know the players. Their relationships. Their friends with other businesses in the area. The city commissioner. You know all the contacts and most importantly, my fiancée has more important things for me to do and I've been forbidden from working all day and night. And I'd rather hold her than negotiate with a joker who would attempt to put the screws in me because I'm not a local." He laughs. "And last but not least, I've searched everything about you, and you're the best in the business."

"Thank you." I chuckle and lean back into my chair. "I appreciate it. And you're right. I do know all the players."

"Which one?"

London walks by the door on her way to the refrigerator. Why did I leave the door open? Did I hope she'd come down for a midnight snack? She's wearing the tiniest shorts I've ever seen and a white tank top that leaves little to the imagination.

She's breathtaking. Every inch of her is smooth, tight, and luscious.

My dick twitches in appreciation. *Down boy. You've already had your fun tonight. No more.*

After opening the door, she bends down, and my brain short circuits. Her tits hang low, proving she's not wearing a bra, and her ass screams for me to take it right then and there. So much for jerking off and relieving my tension. It didn't work.

"Hello?"

Shit. I blink, cough, and refocus my attention on Leo. "Sorry, man. I missed what you said?"

"Which one?"

"The one I found tonight."

"Why?"

As I explain to him the importance of the location, London walks to the cabinet, arches on her tiptoes, drawing the edge of her shorts up her ass, and grabs a glass. I'm going to hell for the thoughts I have about this girl.

"Jax was right. You are good at your job. Make the arrangements, and let's get this thing going." He tosses out a number that makes my chest hurt.

"You're ready to make an offer?"

"Yes, we're ready. We've made the decision that Kansas City is where we're raising our families, so this is our new hub."

"Perfect." *Holy shit.*

After hanging up, I walk over to the credenza and pour a large tumbler of whiskey. This deserves a toast. I raise the glass to my lips and drink as I look around the room. Well, that's a little hollow and anticlimactic. For the first time, I regret not being in a relationship. Okay. It's not the first time, but it's one of the most poignant.

I'm poised to secure the most lucrative business deal I've ever orchestrated, and there's no one to celebrate with. The alcohol burns my throat as I finish my drink. But by the second shot, the edge of tension begins to dull.

I lift my phone to my ear and wait for Henley to answer. It goes directly to voicemail. I growl and pour another shot. What did I expect? She's not my little girl anymore. She's a grown woman with most likely a secret boyfriend that she's messing around with.

I'm not ready for that. I'm not ready for her to grow up and leave me alone. I survey the study. It's neat and tidy. The furniture is black leather, and the shelves are lined with classic and thriller novels. It's homey and comfortable. But eerily quiet.

I drain the third shot as London glances around the corner. "Oh." Her eyes widen. "I'm sorry. I assumed you were already in bed. I heard a noise and was hoping it was Henley."

"No." I shrug and set the glass down with a clunk. "Sorry to disappoint you, but it's just me."

Her eyes narrow. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Everything's great. I just got off the phone with a client that's going to make me more money than I've ever made."

"Congratulations." She walks gingerly into the room as if she senses I'm on edge. "You don't seem happy or overly thrilled about it."

"I am." I frown, spin away from her, and pour another drink. The amber liquid sloshes over the side when I don't stop pouring in time. That's a waste of fine whiskey. I lift the glass and salute her. "I'm celebrating."

"I see that." She rubs her hands together. "Well, I'll go and leave you to it."

"No."

“Excuse me?” Her chin jerks upward, causing me to growl under my breath.

Fuck. At this moment, I realize I want her to refuse me so I can make her stay. My head swims with the sickness of the thought. “I’m sorry. I should have asked. Would you like a drink to help me celebrate?”

She studies me for several seconds, then licks her lips. “Sure.”

Chapter Twenty

London

This is a bad idea. His fingers brush over mine as he hands me the glass, sending a shiver along my spine. And there's no use pretending my nipples aren't begging for his hands and mouth. I should go. I take a sip of the whiskey and relish the warmth as it burns down my throat. I needed that.

"Let's have a seat." He tips his head toward the sofa.

When I don't move, desire flashes in his eyes, and every inch of my skin flares with heat. My knees wobble as the effort to remain upright takes every ounce of willpower I own. The image of defying him and having him force me to relent burrows its way into my brain and won't relent. I crave the passion with which he claimed my mouth this morning. The fierceness. The possessiveness. Before he pushed me away.

"Sure." I walk over to the sofa and sit at the opposite end.

He lowers onto the cushions and turns to face me with his arm along the back of the sofa and his knee and leg angled on the cushion, facing me.

My heart thunders in my chest. "Have you heard from Henley?"

"Yes, she won't be here until after midnight."

"Oh, I see." *Shit. Shit. Triple shit. This is bad.* I twist the half-empty glass in my fingers. What do we talk about? It's not like he wants to hear about my boring life. He's making million-dollar business deals, and I'm teaching cheer. We're not in the same league.

"What's the deal you're working on?" My face heats. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked that."

"It's fine." His hand lands on my upper arm. "I trust you not to tell anyone."

He trusts me? How's that possible? He's never trusted me to get a drink out of the refrigerator. Let alone divulge trade secrets. Moments later, his warmth is gone, and I ache to rub the spot to mimic the feeling of his touch.

"It's a project with a group of billionaires that recently moved from Las Vegas. They've fallen in love with the area and plan to move their business operations here."

"Wow." My breasts bounce when I move, and his eyes follow their trajectory. "That's amazing. You should be proud of yourself." I barely breathe as his presence muddles my head.

Maybe it's because you've seen him naked. Stop. Breathe. I gulp the rest of the whiskey down.

"I am." His gaze meets mine again, and it's impossible to ignore the lust brewing in them.

Fine. He wants me. We're alone, I'm not wearing a bra, and he's been drinking. But then what? I don't want a one-night stand with Callan. I want a future.

My heart stops beating, and I suck down a ragged breath. Where in the fuck did that come from? Sweat pops on my chest and back. I can't have a relationship with Callan. What about Henley?

Please, that's a worry I don't ever have to entertain. Callan may want to fuck me, but that's where it ends. He screws women at a sex club, but he doesn't bring them home and make a life with them. I'd just be a wet hole to relieve himself in.

"As you should be."

"But I was feeling sorry for myself." One corner of his mouth rises upward, but it's an expression of self-deprecation versus cocky ego. "I'm alone. Which is usually fine, but Henley is grown up, and soon she'll be out on her own."

"And you'll be here."

“Alone.” His eyes drop to my lips, and a whimper escapes before I snap them shut. He’s across the sofa in one powerful step and grips my chin. “Why did you hide in the bathroom? Did you like what you saw?”

“No.” His eyes flash as his nostrils flare, and it feels like I’m a canary with an enormous cat ready to pounce on her. “I mean...” I lick my lips. “Yes. I liked what I saw.”

“Fuck,” he growls, grasps the back of my head, and slams his mouth against mine. All rational thought flies out the window. His kiss is masterful, possessive, demanding, and thorough. He explores my mouth until there’s nothing left for him to know about me. I fist the front of his shirt and hold on.

“Fucking sweet,” he mouths against my lips, turning his head and thrusting his tongue deeper, fucking my mouth like I’m sure he takes a woman—slow, deep, thorough.

His hand slides along my thigh, caressing my skin. When he wedges it between my legs, he presses his fingers against my clit. “Oh!” I squeak and involuntarily thrust against him.

Every touch elicits a moan or whimper. It feels so good. His lips trail along my jaw, hot and wet, until he reaches my ear. “Those little whimpers make my dick so hard. Harder than it was when I was picturing you on your knees sucking me off. Were you touching your throbbing pussy as you watched?”

“No.” I freeze at the lie. My sexual experience is damned near zero.

“Liar.” He laughs, causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand. “I think you’re a little dick tease.”

I press my hand against his chest and shove him backward. “No, I’m not.”

“Really?” He continues to chuckle while cuffing my chin like I’m a child. “I think you’re a liar. I think you rubbed that tight clit until you came. Which is when I noticed you. When you were convulsing in the water and wishing you were riding my dick.”

“Fine.” I grind my teeth together and tip my chin up. “Yes, I did. I watched everything you did. And with each stroke of your cock, I rubbed my clit.” I bite my bottom lip. “And when I couldn’t take it anymore, I came.” I arch my eyebrows. “And then you shot your cum all over the shower.”

“Fuck, you’re a dirty little girl.” He presses my back against the cushions and lays down on top of me. The weight of his solid frame against me sends my senses into overdrive. I dive my fingers into his hair and yank his mouth down to mine.

As I wrap my legs around his waist, I grind my clit into his hard shaft. He growls into my mouth, and all control snaps. I’ve never wanted anyone like this. Never touched anyone like this. His hands caress me everywhere, from cupping and pinching my tits to sliding along my abdomen.

When his hand slides under the edge of my shorts, I whimper. That’s when his phone rings. It’s Henley’s ringtone. He rolls off me, landing on his ass on the floor. His eyes are wild as he searches for the ringing sound.

After he stands, he stumbles and retrieves his phone from the coffee table. *Shit. This was a mistake.* I run my hands through my hair, straightening the tresses and scrambling upright.

Not that I don’t want him. I do. But I want it to mean something. Not a way to relieve an itch when he’s drunk. He caught me watching him, and now, he’s horny. Big deal. It happens in porn all the time. It means nothing.

“Right.” He nods. His jaw tightens as he listens to whatever Henley says. “No, it’s fine. She’s not waiting for you to come home. She’s already gone to bed.”

I cross my arms over my chest and tap my toes on the floor.

“Actually, I’m going out.” He pauses as he listens to whatever she says.

Son of a bitch. He's going to leave me to fuck some nameless hole that means nothing to him. My hands ball into fists. How dare he pretend like he cares. I blink as rage flows through me.

Dumb ass. He didn't pretend to care. He pretended you had a hole he'd like to fill. That's it. Then he got caught, and now, he's running.

I launch off the sofa and twist on my heel. Before I can step away, he grasps my arm, spinning me around. His face is like stone, and his eyes glint like steel. "I had too much to drink and made a mistake—"

"No. I made the mistake." I meet his gaze dead in the eye. "I don't fuck drunks. Or loser old men who like to feel up little girls rather than have big boy relationships." I lash out to avoid the pain.

"That's enough." His eyes blaze with fire as he grips my chin, holding tight so I can't move. That's fine. I've got more to say.

"Go fuck one of your easy lays." I smirk. "Some girl with daddy issues who's pathetic enough to—"

His mouth slams over mine as I thrash against him. If I don't, I'll be right back in the same place I was—begging for a morsel of his attention like a silly child. It's time I respond to him like a woman. A woman with a spine.

He shoves me backward. "That's for the warmup. Don't wait up."

Chapter Twenty-One

Callan

I slump into the backseat of my limo with my head resting against the cushions. I've done some stupid things in my life, but that one takes the cake. Not only did I force myself on London, but I treated her like it was her fault when the only person to blame was myself. But—

But— Shit. All of it is excuses. It doesn't matter that she makes me angry. Or that I'm jealous that some other guy has touched her. Or a bunch of other guys. I smash my fist into the tinted window, causing pain to shoot up my arm. It also doesn't matter that she thinks I'm pathetic. All of those are my issues and not hers.

If she breathes a word of this to Henley, I'll lose both. I close my eyes and inhale the scent of leather. I'll lose Henley. I don't have London.

What's wrong with me? I straighten in my seat and scroll through my phone, answering messages. I might as well do something I'm good at because this relationship shit, I screw up.

That's why I go to the club. The women there know the score and accept the terms of service. It's an exchange of sexual pleasure, and that's it. Granted, I've seen several relationships develop between previously unconnected partners, but I avoid women who're looking for more and only focus on those who're there for the same thing. Exploration, release, and walking away.

It's always served me well. At least until the last couple of years. I don't have time for complications. I run a billion-dollar business, I have a daughter, and—

And nothing. Henley is twenty-one. It's not like she needs me to hold her hand as she walks across the street. If

tonight is any indication, someone else will do that soon enough.

Thomas, my driver, pulls into the driveway of Club Nine. Do I want to spend the rest of my life alone? Henley will get married, move away, and have her own children. Unless....

I press my lips together. Unless I can convince her and her future husband to live with me and start popping out grandchildren for me to play with. Then, I'd still see London. I rake a hand through my hair. It always comes back to her.

As Thomas puts the limo into park, I frown. Where does he go when he gets off work? He's worked for me for years, and I don't know the answer. I press the button to lower the partition between the back and the driver's seat. Yes, I'm finding some random conversation to avoid going inside.

"Are you married?"

"Yes, Sir." He glances at me via the rearview mirror as he places the car into park. "Me and the missus have been married for 30 years. We have two daughters and three grandchildren."

"I see." I frown. No, I don't see. How could I not know this? "You should bring your wife to the house sometime."

"She doesn't have much free time." He shifts sideways to study me. "She watches the kids while the girls work and runs a catering business during the evenings and on weekends."

"I apologize for not knowing those things about you. I guess I've been preoccupied." For over ten years?

"It's fine, Sir." He shuts off the engine. "You're a busy man, and we've not sat down and held a personal conversation."

My shoulders slump as I slump into the leather cushions. "I'm assuming Henley knows these things?"

"Yes. She's met my wife and the girls."

Of course, she has. “Why do you work for me?” *Lord, I’ve had too much to drink.*

“You’re a fine man, Mr. Tennison. I respect you. You’re a sound businessman and treat your employees with dignity.” One corner of his mouth rises upward. “And you pay a lot, which allows my wife to afford her side business.”

Well, at least I pay well.

“And there weren’t women running in and out of the house. Just Henley and London. They’re both amazing girls.” His smile widens. “Young women.”

The door to the club opens, and one of the club owners walks out with his wife at his side. I’ve known the man for years. He wasn’t that different than me. Mostly one and done. No emotional involvement. Business first, last, and always. I should know. I’ve worked on many deals with him. But everything changed when he met his wife. Now, he sees nothing but her. And his business continues to thrive.

“Do you think I should have gotten remarried?” The words are out of my mouth before I can take them back. But now that they’re out in the open, I don’t want to take them back. Damn it. Lots of men don’t even start their families until now. And some of them have wives much younger than them.

Sweat breaks out on my forehead. Would it be a betrayal of Henley to get into a relationship now and have another child? My head spins. Where’s all this coming from? That’s easy—too much whiskey.

In the past, Sienna was interested in more than a sexual relationship. Would she be so bad? She’s attractive and age appropriate.

I growl under my breath. For one thing, she bores me to tears. Okay. If I’m being honest. All sex bores me to tears. So much so that I’m sitting in the parking lot talking to my chauffeur rather than going inside.

“No, Sir. I don’t think it was wrong for you to not get remarried. You’ve focused on your career and your daughter.

Those are admirable things. But situations have changed. You aren't as shackled to your desk as you were. You have people working for you who can handle most of your business operations, giving you more time for a relationship. And Henley and London won't always be there to keep the house hopping."

My chest hurts. When Henley moves out, I won't ever see London again. The man and his wife drive by. The satisfied expression on their faces makes the intensity of these feelings churning inside of me stronger. What if I do want more than emotionless sex and an empty house?

Thomas raises the partition, climbs out, and opens the door. "Have a good evening, Sir."

As I trudge to the door, Thomas's words rattle in my head. Would Henley have a problem with me dating? She's hinted around about wishing she had a stepmom and a sister. But it was generally a ploy to get London to stay overnight.

The interior of the club is pure luxury. The lighting is dark with only the soft glow of the overhead chandeliers illuminating the main walkways. Everything else is cloaked in shadows as dressed to the nines members drink champagne.

Club N9ne is an invitation-only club. Exclusive and seeped in secrecy. The scent of Cuban cigars swirls around the room. The bar is dark mahogany and takes up a large portion of the socializing area. There might be nicer places on the East and West Coasts, but for the Midwest, this club reeks of opulence and decadence.

A woman wearing a long black dress with a slit to her crotch kneels in front of a man wearing an Italian suit. The way she looks up at him makes my gut tighten. It's more than adoration or random sex. He smirks and cups her cheek. "That's a good girl, kitten."

"Thank you, Sir." He swipes his thumb over her bottom lip, prying it open. Without asking, she sucks it deep into her mouth. "Show me how you'd suck my dick. Show everyone

here how you suck my dick.” He presses deeper until she gags, and her eyes roll up into her head. “That’s it, baby. I’m going to fuck you so hard, you’re going to pass out for pleasure and pain.”

That’s when I see Sienna. She sways her hips as she weaves through the room on her way to me. She’s a stunning woman. Long black hair. Red painted lips. She’s in her mid-thirties, but she can easily pass for late twenties. She’s fit and stacked. Her bright green eyes meet mine and she smiles. “Hello, handsome.” She lays her hand on my forearm. “I’ve missed you.”

“Thanks.” I swallow over the sawdust in my throat as the realization hits. As attractive as she is. As attractive as all of these women are. I haven’t missed any of them. I don’t feel a pull to her. A desire to command her. To tie her up and tease her. To bring her pain. To bring her pleasure.

The opposite is true. I feel nothing.

Why? We’re compatible. Our age difference is minimal. She’s wealthy. She likes to experiment sexually. She’s intelligent and well-respected within the community. She’s a perfect match for me.

She licks her lips. “Would you like to join me in the Emerald Room?”

It’s simple. Walk with her to a room and forget. But I don’t want that. It doesn’t matter that it’s been nearly two years since I’ve had sex with a woman or that she was the last person I finished a scene with. I’m not drawn to a repeat performance.

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m going to pass.”

Her bottom lip pokes out. “Are you meeting someone else?”

“No.” I inhale and motion the tuxedo-wearing waiter for a drink.

“Then what’s the problem?” Her eyes widen. “Oh, are you having performance issues? I’ve heard it’s common for older men.”

“I’m not having performance issues. Thank you.” That’s not entirely true. I was hard as a rock not an hour ago, but the last few times I’ve come to the club, I didn’t complete the physical act of sex.

I went through the motions of the scenes, but in the end, I went home and jerked off in the shower. A shiver goes down my spine. The shower. London watching my every move. Touching herself. Getting off.

My face heats as every inch of my skin tightens. When she came, she was coming for me. And I can’t get that out of my head.

“Then, what’s your problem? You came to the club. I’m here. I’m ready to submit.” She drops her gaze down to the floor, assuming a submissive position.

The waiter offers a tray of drinks in front of me, and I opt for another whiskey. Because mixing alcohol at this point would not be a good idea.

What’s the problem? The problem is that the thought of tying her up and having sex with her holds no appeal. The problem is that the only woman who intrigues me is young enough to be my daughter and despises me.

Is that what I’m missing? Do I need the thrill of the chase? Giving her a head start and stalking her? The adrenaline rush of wanting something I can’t have? I glance at Sienna. No, that’s not it. Not even the prospect of hunting her holds any appeal.

It’s London. She’s completely under my skin, and it’s time I admit the truth.

I drain my drink. “The problem is me. I think it’s best if I went home.”

Her jaw flexes as her head snaps backward. The heat in her eyes is hot enough to singe me, and if I told her to run, she'd comply. But nothing happens. My dick is flaccid, and no adrenaline rushes throughout my veins.

It's not dominance. Or submission. Or chasing what I crave. It's London. No matter how I can get her. Tied up. Running. Dropping to her knees in submission. Slapping my face. Smiling at me as she begs me to take her.

Jesus. I'm fucked. I'm beyond fucked. It's not time to start thinking about starting a relationship because the one I want—I can't have.

Chapter Twenty-Two

London

After two hours of cheerleading practice coupled with classes and one hour of strength and conditioning to start the day, I'm beat and ready to call it an evening. But I can't. I took off from the café and the library today to meet Jared at Gram's house to get some money, and I'm crossing my fingers that some of his friends will show up with him.

I hop into my car while waving goodbye to the girls and turn the key. My old car roars to life, reminding me that the need for a new exhaust isn't far away in the future. Someday. For now, I'll have to live with the noise. I toss my bag into the backseat and scan for messages.

Henley: I'm sorry I was out late last night and missed you. Did everything with Dad go okay?

My teeth grind together. If you call it okay getting caught mooning over him, making out because he was drunk and I was a fool for thinking I could be something more than a blowup doll, and then not being able to study or sleep because I was imagining him eagerly having sex with someone who isn't me. Yes, it went great.

Me: It was fine. We stayed out of each other's way.

Seconds pass as I wait for the air conditioner to do something more than blow heat out through the vents.

Henley: Perfect. But I was hoping to allow you the opportunity to get to know each other and.... I don't know. Get along or something.

I open my fingers wide in front of the vent, trying to get some relief.

Me: I'm sorry. That's not going to happen. Are you going to be there tonight?

I swallow over the bitterness in my mouth. If she's not going to be there, I'm staying somewhere else.

Henley: Yes, I'll be there. I'm headed home now.

Me: Good. I'll see you later. I'm supposed to meet Jared at Gram's to get some money to grab the supplies. I'm hoping some of his friends can show up. Do you want to come help?

Henley: I'd prefer no. But if you need me, I'll be there.

After the other night at Gram's, I'm surprised she agreed to that level. That's a sure sign she loves me. Ugh.... She wouldn't if she knew what I did with her father. What if he says something to her?

Ple-e-e-ase. He'd never tell her. For one thing, he was probably too drunk to remember. And for another, he got laid last night. Nothing that happened before that amounts to anything. It didn't happen.

I scan through the rest of my messages to find none from Jared. *Damn it.*

Two hours ago, I asked him what time he was meeting me. And now, nothing. If he falls through, I'm going to snap. I fasten my seatbelt as the vehicle next to me eases backward into the lot. Two girls from the cheer squad smile and wave as they disappear from my view.

Me: What's up? I thought you were meeting me tonight.

One minute. Two. Three. Maybe he's already there and planning to surprise me by having the project complete. As I travel through the city to my grandmother's place, I flip from station to station, avoiding any melancholy *I've lost my man* songs that the stations seem intent on destroying me with.

Gram's house is locked up tight, with no signs of anything being disturbed. Damn it. I didn't want to be wrong.

After grabbing the mail, I speed down the street, refusing to look back or acknowledge the elephant in the room.

One mile from Henley's house, my cell phone beeps. *Jared.* I shouldn't have doubted him. He might have his faults, but he's never disappointed me this bad before. It was his fault Gram doesn't have insurance, so he'll come through.

I flip on the blinker, check for traffic, and pull over next to the curb. I don't want to go to Henley's house and leave 30 seconds later.

Jared: Hey, sis. Where're you?

Me: I'm close to Henley's house.

Jared: Good. I'm about a mile out. Wait outside for me, and we'll talk.

Me: Just meet me at Gram's.

A motorcycle rumbles to a stop at the street sign closest to Henley's house.

Jared: I'll see you at Henley's. Stay outside.

What in the hell? What's he up to? My stomach churns. I'm not sure I want to know. Two minutes later, I park in the circle drive in front of Henley's house. Once again, the beauty of her house hits me in the chest. What would it be like to own something like this?

I place the car into park as Jared eases up the driveway and stops beside my car. Without shutting off the engine, he rolls down the window. "Hey." He nods. I narrow my eyes. The crinkles at the corners of his eyes are deep enough to drive a truck through. He's too young to look this bad.

"You look like crap. When was the last time you ate and slept?"

One corner of his mouth twitches. "It's been a while."

"I can tell."

“Listen.” The color of his face turns a sickly white. “I can’t come by tonight and help at Gram’s. Something came up.”

“Damn it, Jared.” I’m more frustrated than I should be, but Callan was right. I can’t depend on my brother. “I was expecting you to follow through this time.”

“I know.” He shrugs. “Things aren’t going as I’d like, and extra money for Gram’s house is not on the table.”

“Fine.” My back aches from the stress. I’m going to need to take everything out of my savings. “I’ll pay for everything, but I’ll need you to gather your friends and meet me tonight. With everyone pitching in, we can get this wrapped up in a couple of hours.”

Movement behind the front door window catches my eye. Callan’s arms are folded in front of his chest, and I don’t need binoculars to read the anger radiating off him.

“I can’t. I’ve got shit going on.” His jaw flexes, and a surge of anger shoots through me.

“This is bullshit. I was depending on you to help me out.”

“I don’t need your guilt trip.” His eyes flash with a matching anger mixed with a heavy dose of jitteriness that makes my stomach roll. “Or your judgment.” He glances at the front door and taps his fingertips on the steering wheel. “Of course, he’s here. I expected him to be gone at this time of day, or I wouldn’t have stopped here.”

“What would you have done? Ignore me?”

“Don’t,” he growls. “You don’t know—” His phone rings as he’s about to toss another barb in my direction.

When he looks at the screen, all the anger dissipates and is replaced with fear. I thought the anxiety was concerning, but fear? My brother is too cocky to entertain fear. But at this point, I’m too tired to care what he has going on. I’m not wasting another second saving him.

“I’ve got to go.” He licks his lips, and all I feel is relief. I don’t want to spend another second with him.

“Take care.” I hop out of my car, slam the door shut while locking it, and hike to the house.

“London!”

“Later.” I don’t turn to look at him as I twist the knob and open the door. Gravel slaps the underside of my brother’s car as he lets his anger out on his car and the road.

Now, to get past Callan and hide in Henley’s room for the rest of my life. I skirt around to the back of the house, sneak in the patio door, and jog to Henley’s room. Safe and sound.

I leaf through Gram’s mail as I toss my backpack onto the bed. A letter from the courthouse. What’s this? I tear open the flap, and my heart drops to my feet.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Callan

I'm in my study when the glass condiments in the kitchen door clink together. *London*. She dodged me earlier, but I'm not letting her escape again. That brother of hers has no business on my property, and I've spent the last hour stewing in my office, waiting for her to resurface. This time, she's going to listen.

I stomp to the kitchen and lurch forward as if my feet glue themselves to the floor. She's bent over, pulling out the bottom drawer of my refrigerator, wearing her cheerleader uniform. The uniform that wakes me up from a dead sleep with soaked sheets and cum plastered on my stomach.

Her hips shift from one side to the other as she hits her hip on the door, jarring it back open, but my eyes never leave her ass or her long tan legs. The girl is a menace to society. Hell, she's a menace to any male between the ages of 15 and 85's sanity.

"Gram, I can't believe you didn't tell me. You should have said something." She rests the phone between her shoulder and her ear while standing.

She spins around, and when she sees me, her eyes widen, and her mouth drops open. "Oh!" Beautiful, pink-tinted lips that are meant for feasting on. I'd give everything I have to drown in those lips. "I didn't hear you."

"What did he do?" When she doesn't respond, I ask again, "What did he do?"

"Are you okay?" A faint voice comes from her phone, and she lifts the phone back to her ear.

"Yes, I'm fine. Everything's okay. I'm at Henley's house, and her father came in. I wasn't expecting anyone to be behind me." She listens for a second. "I'll talk to you tonight. We'll discuss it then."

She picks up a plate of fruit and lunchmeat off the center island, juggles a bottle of water in one hand, and tucks her phone under her arm.

My hands ball into fists at my side. She's not going to answer me. She's going to ignore me and walk out the door. "What did that no-good brother of yours do?"

"He didn't do anything?" Her face contorts as if she's realized she's lied. Or at least that I've caught her in the lie.

"London," I growl and march into her space, grabbing her chin and tilting her head upward until her eyes meet mine. "Your brother is bad news. He's dragging you down."

"He's my brother." Her eyes flash with anger as she jerks her head backward, dislodging my grip.

"Who's going to get you into trouble?"

She juggles the plate to keep the food from toppling onto the floor. "You don't understand anything he's been through and never will. And I don't like it when you talk bad about him."

"He's a weak man." I brace my feet apart and square my shoulders. "And I do know what he's been through. I witnessed Henley go through the same things. She wanted a mother, but I wasn't about to let her be a part of Henley's life. The woman was a liar and a cheat. I agree that's not entirely the same thing—"

"Exactly." Her jaw flexes as she shifts her weight from one hip to the other, causing her ponytail to sway.

"But it was damn close."

"No, it wasn't. You were there. She had you. She had your parents. Our parents left us when I was born and disappeared. It's not the same thing. Henley had you to tuck her in at night. We had our grandmother, and she was too tired to do anything but collapse in her chair after working two jobs."

“Your brother should appreciate the sacrifice she’s made for the two of you and should be working two jobs to take some of the pressure off her. Like you have. You’re working three jobs, going to school, and you’ve worked hard to get and keep your scholarships. You’ve never given her a minute of worry. If he was half as hardworking as you are, this situation wouldn’t be happening.”

“Thank you.”

I’m unprepared for her quick shift from hostility to those wistful eyes that make my heart ache. I should be, but I’m not. It’s there like an arrow slicing through my skin and piercing my beating heart.

“You’re welcome.” I shove my hands into the pockets of my sweatpants to keep from yanking the tie from her hair and plundering her until neither of us can survive.

Bang. Bang. Bang. The windowpane rattles as the door shakes from the force of the knocking. I jerk my gaze from her as the knob spins, and my brother pops his head inside. “Hey, bro.” He nods at London. “Hey, Sweet Pea.” He winks at her.

When she smiles at him, her cheeks turn pink. “Hey, how’re you?”

“Better now that I’ve seen you.”

“Whatever.” She giggles and rolls her eyes. If she gives him a sideways look, I’m going to take her over my knee and paddle her ass and punch him in the face. “Henley came in a minute ago. I’ve got to catch up with her.” She gives him a half-finger wave.

“This conversation isn’t done,” I growl, which makes me sound like a deranged jerk.

“He didn’t do anything.” She brushes past me, jogging up the stairs with her shoes slapping on the tread on her way to Henley’s bedroom.

Andrew leers as he shuts the kitchen door. “Does London have a boyfriend?”

“No.” My teeth grind together while my heart hammers in my chest. Does she have a boyfriend?

Sweat coats my armpits, causing me to lift my arms from my sides. The last thing I need is my brother to see me sweating like a pig. He already suspects my obsession with London. I can't have it confirmed.

“Good.”

My head snaps around so fast my neck pops. “What's that supposed to mean? You're too old for her, and if you make one move toward her—”

“You'll what?” His eyes dance with laughter. “Beat me up? Toss her over your shoulder and lock her up so no one can sully her reputation? The woman is stunning. Old man, I think you have more to worry about than me.”

“She's a girl. You need to leave her alone.”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “She's almost 21. Most girls by the age of 21 are no longer virgins. I'd be surprised if she hasn't had a string of lovers by now.”

“She's a virgin.” Bile rises in my throat as rage boils in my gut. The thought of London with anyone else makes my inner beast explode.

“How do you know?” He grabs a bottle of water from the refrigerator.

“I know.” Heat floods from my chest, up my ears, over my chest, and to my ears. “Fine. I don't know. It's an assumption.” I'm not about to tell him I overheard a conversation between London and Henley several weeks ago about this subject, and pray the answer remains the same.

Yes, I stopped outside her room and listened until I was certain she'd never been with a man. Or boy. I was silently relieved but equally sick that, at some point, it was going to happen. Someone will touch all that golden skin. Worship her body. Bury themselves inside her tight, quivering body.

But it sure the fuck won't be my brother. My seven-year younger brother who wouldn't turn heads if they walked into a restaurant together. Is she interested in Andrew? She blushed when he teased her. *Son of a bitch*. My hands ball into fists.

He cocks his head. "How long are you going to pretend you aren't eaten up over her?"

"I'm not." My mouth barely moves as every muscle tightens, and my breath catches in my lungs. If he sees it, who else notices? My daughter? Our neighbors? The fucking mailman?

"Ple-e-ease." He snorts as he raises the bottle of water to his lips and guzzles it. "You want that woman more than your next breath. And I'm along for the ride, waiting for the explosion to occur."

"Nothing's going to happen." Shit. That's not the denial I was looking for. I march to the refrigerator, slinging the door open and retrieving a beer. Before the door is shut, I've drained half the contents.

"So, what's the deal? If she isn't messing around with some punk that's going to pop her cherry and break her heart, what has your panties in a bunch?"

My fingers press into the metal bottle until it's misshapen, and I finish the beer, tossing it into the can with a loud rattle. I'll destroy anyone who breaks her heart. Thankfully, the words stay locked in my throat.

I turn to face my brother. "I'm not sure what's going on. It sounded like her grandmother was in some kind of trouble—again. Although she denies it, I'm positive her worthless brother is somehow at fault. But of course, she's rushing to the loser's defense."

"Damn." He shakes his head. "That's not good. What're you going to do?"

"How in the hell do I know?" I shrug my shoulders. "She won't tell me anything."

“Maybe you should try getting the information out of her with whips and chains.” He winks. “Or a well-placed knife at her throat.”

“Shut up.”

“You’re so easy to fuck with.” He has the nerve to chuckle at my irritation. “I’m not saying you can’t get kinky in the bedroom or out in the woods with her, but when you’re talking to the woman—”

“Girl. For fuck’s sake, stop calling her a woman.”

“When you talk to the w-o-m-a-n....” He stretches the word until it sounds like he’s talking to a kindergartener. “You should treat her like an equal, not a three-year-old who needs put in time out.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

London

As I jog up the stairs, my heart thuds in my chest, and it's not from exertion. I've been a competitive cheerleader for years. No. What my heart is racing from is Callan. The man who's been the center of my teenage fantasies and the jerk who thinks I'm too stupid to chew gum and walk at the same time.

The door to Henley's room swings open. "What took you so long?"

Her hair is piled high on top of her head, 2-carat diamond studs in her ears, and a robe that matches the flooring. The white carpet accentuates the red hue of her toenails.

"I got the 20 questions from your father again."

"Ugh...." She steps out of the way as I set the plate of food and my phone on the desk and shove my backpack onto the floor while flopping onto her bed.

For some reason, I'm no longer hungry. The canopy blocks her head from my view as I stare up at the white gauzy fabric.

"What did he want?"

"I was grabbing a water from the refrigerator while talking to Gram when he overheard part of the conversation." I roll onto my side and peek out at her. "It's bad."

"What's bad?" She drops cross-legged on the oversized sofa across from the bed, letting her robe fall open, exposing her pink tank top and matching shorts.

"Gram is in trouble."

"What's going on?" Her eyes are round as she leans forward.

“She hasn’t paid the mortgage in six months either.” I flop against the mattress and stare at the draped fabric. “And she didn’t tell me anything about that also.” I rub my eyes as the heavy weight of exhaustion overwhelms me.

I’m already going to school, trying to maintain as close to a 4.0 GPA as possible to keep my scholarships, cheering, and working 30 hours a week to pay for groceries and gas. I’ve got nothing left to give to her to get her out of this mess.

“Court is next week, and she didn’t say a word,” I groan in frustration. “If I wouldn’t have seen the letter in the mail when I stopped by there today, I still wouldn’t have known.”

“You’ve got to ask my dad for money.”

“No.” I shove off the bed, walk over to the sofa, and drop down beside her. “Do not say anything to your dad. He already thinks I’m only friends with you so I can get to his money.”

“No, he doesn’t.” She rolls her eyes. “He thinks your brother will use you to get to his money.”

“See. Exactly.” I lift my hands palms up to emphasize my point. “He doesn’t trust me, and he thinks I’m weak.”

“He doesn’t trust Jared and thinks that you don’t see any of his faults. But you do. You know he’s up to no good. So how is he related to this situation?”

“I’m sure Gram gave him that money as well.” I grind my teeth together. Despite what I implied when I spoke with Callan, my brother must be involved—somehow. Even if my grandmother won’t throw him under the bus.

I snatch my cell off the desk. A message blinks on the screen. It’s Jared. What’s he up to? I click on the message and listen.

“London,” Jared’s gravelly voice sounds scratchy and pathetic. Sweat pops on my forehead as dread rolls in my gut. Callan’s right. He’s done something. Something bad. “I need money. Now.”

“Shit.” My stomach drops to my feet.

“What?” Henley jumps off the sofa and snatches the phone from my hand. As she listens to the message, she shakes her head. “Dad’s right. You need to drop him before he drags you into something bad.”

“You’re right.” But the pull to save my brother is strong. We were all each other had after our parents left.

As if on cue, the phone rings, and Jared’s frantic voice fills my ear, “Thank God. I’ve been freaking out thinking you wouldn’t answer.”

“What happened?” It comes out snappier than I intended, but his mooching of us has reached its limit. I’m done being his crutch.

“I got in bad with a loan shark....” His voice trails off. “I was on a heater and.... Well, you know. It dried up.”

“Where’s the money Gram gave to you that was supposed to pay the mortgage? And the money that was supposed to go to cover the insurance? And the money I gave you?”

“Get off my ass. You’re always so high and mighty. Like you’ve never done anything wrong.”

“Go on.” My jaw is tight. I need to hear all of it so I can move on once and for all.

“I was keeping up, but after a while, I couldn’t, so I started helping the guy out.”

“Dealing?” Bile rises in my throat as I stand and pace the room. Sweat breaks out in my armpits, and my stomach cramps. Don’t tell me he stole drugs or drug money from a loan shark. Jesus. “How bad is it?”

“Bad,” he groans. “I owe Lorenzo Armato.”

“You owe who?” My voice squeaks as Henley stalks toward the door. “No. I didn’t hear you right. You don’t owe Lorenzo Armato. That would be a suicidal move.”

When her hand grasps the doorknob, I snatch her wrist. “He can’t know. It’ll prove everything he’s said is right.”

“Prove everything who said is right?” My brother asks as if he’s irritated. I’m not focusing on his issues. “Are you still at Callan’s house? What’re you doing there anyway?”

“What I’m doing and where I’m doing it are none of your business?” I cover the phone and glare at Henley. “Please let me deal with it. I’ll figure this out, and that’ll be the end.” I straighten my shoulders. “I promise.”

Despite all appearances, my brother is not stupid. If I can get him sober and get him a job, everything’ll be fine. After I find a way to keep him from being killed and get Gram’s house taken care of.

“Fine.” She waves her hands in exasperation.

“I need you to come down to Club Desire.”

“Not on your life. Meet me somewhere else, and we’ll figure out how to get you out of this mess. The man can’t be completely unreasonable.” Good girls don’t step foot in that place. I have street smarts, but that place is dangerous.

“London,” he whines. “It’s important. I owe 75k and need collateral that I’ll pay the money.”

“You owe what?”

“You heard me. Don’t make me repeat it. I need you to come down here. He’ll bury me in the quarry if you don’t make a downpayment on my debt.”

What in the fuck. I don’t want my brother dead, but this isn’t good. 75k? A downpayment? “How am I supposed to do that?”

The room spins as the edges of my consciousness go dark. How in the fuck did he get into this mess? It’s ridiculous.

“Rich men pay for young girls. There’s a premium for virgins.”

“No.”

“London, you have to. If you don’t have sex with this guy that Lorenzo sold you to, I’ll get killed. Do you want me to get killed?”

“He’s not going to do that.” *Jesus*. This can’t be happening. But it is. He’s already tried to work off his debt, and he fucked that up. There’s nothing left but to give the man what he wants, or my brother gets murdered.

“You know he will.” His voice is full of pleading. “I promise this will be the last time. I’ll go to rehab and get right. I promise. I’m going to straighten up. I’ll get a job and stop using anything. I promise. London, I need you.”

The room spins faster. *Fuck*. “What about Gram?”

“I won’t tell her.”

“No, dumbass. The money for the house.”

Henley grabs the door handle again. “Don’t!”

She throws her hands into the air and paces the floor.

“Hello, Lo-o-ondon.” The word is drawn out in a sickening, disgusting voice, making my skin crawl. “I happen to have a solution for Gram’s problem. I have some men who like to watch. They’ll cover what Jared owes you for being a naughty little minx. They like girls who appear underage, and I think you’ll fit that bill.”

“I want it in writing.”

Laughter rings through the phone, making the hairs in my ear tickle. “I won’t write down a thing.”

“How can I trust you?”

“You can’t. But you know my reputation.”

“Fine.” I jerk my backpack off the ground and sling it over my shoulder. “He owes our grandmother 7k and \$1000 to me. I want an extra 5k for being a virgin. And I don’t want him killed, so figure something out to get him out of debt.”

“Yes-s-s-s,” he hisses as if he’s already jerking off at the prospect. “You’re on, little girl.”

What’s the big deal anyway. It’s just fucking. Two pumps and the old fucker will come, and it’ll be over with. I might be a virgin, but I’ve sucked guys off. The more pathetic they are, the quicker they fall.

I’ve got to grab a condom. I’m on the pill, but I’m not about to risk getting pregnant with some loser’s baby.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Callan

London runs down the stairs with her tennis shoes slapping on the steps and her backpack bouncing off her back.

“You can’t do this.” Henley grabs the banister with a death grip. Her eyes flash with anger as London spins to face her.

“What choice do I have? It’s not like there’s another option.”

“Yes, there is. There’s always another option.” Henley takes the first step. “My dad—”

“Absolutely not.” She sprints through the living room.

“What’s going on?” I march from the kitchen as Andrew slips out the side door. I think he finally understands that I’ll never pursue a relationship with London.

London smacks into my chest. “Umph....” She sputters, blinks, and jumps backward. The mixture of fear and resignation in her eyes sends a cold chill along my spine.

I grab her shoulders to keep her in one spot as Henley races down the stairs with her robe flying behind her. “I said, what’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Her head snaps back as her jaw flexes. “It’s nothing for you to worry about.” She steps away, but I dig my fingertips into her flesh, holding her in place. I should care that I’ll leave bruises, but I don’t. I’ve never seen this level of desperation in either of the girls. Something is going on, and it isn’t good.

“Let. Go. Of. Me.” She jams the heel of her tennis shoe into the top of my foot with the pressure point, sending a shockwave of pain to my toes.

“Shit.”

She jerks from my grasp and strides out the front door. Before I can do anything but blink, she's gone, and Henley pounds her fist into my chest. "You're such an asshole."

"What in the fuck are you talking about? I didn't do anything to her. I was trying to keep her calm. She's the one that damn near broke my toes."

Surely, she didn't say anything about the kitchen. What's there to say? Nothing. Yes, I thought of a thousand different ways I could fuck her blind, but I remained a gentleman and did none of them.

"You're always running your mouth about London's brother and making her feel inferior. Unwanted. Like she's a piece of trash." She swings her hands in the air. Her eyes are wild with unshed tears. "She's my best friend, and I'll never forgive you for this. Never." A tear slips past her lashes and slides down her cheek. "I hope you spend the rest of your life being miserable."

"For the love of God." I grab her shoulders and shake her. "What in the fuck are you talking about?"

"London is going to have sex with some guy to make sure Jared doesn't get killed or maimed by some drug dealer he owes money to."

"The motherfucker." Red-hot rage shoots throughout my body. I'll kill the son of a bitch. I've told her repeatedly that her brother was a piece of shit. He's selfish and irresponsible. And now, she didn't listen to me and... Bile fills my throat. It's not happening. I don't care what happens to her brother, but I won't let one inch of her body be violated to save the piece of shit.

"Ouch!" Henley jerks backward and wraps her arms around her body while rubbing the area I held.

"Where's she going?"

"What does it matter to you? You're the reason she's doing this." She spins on her heel and stomps up the stairs.

“It’s my fault? Fuck that. I didn’t get in debt with some low-life piece of trash.” Her back is to me as she ascends the staircase. “This conversation isn’t over. And how in the hell did this become my fault?” I ball my hands into fists as I march behind her.

She stops mid-step and glares daggers at me. “You always think she’s trying to steal money from us or that she’s only friends with me for what she can get. Or that her brother will convince her to find our safe and break into it to get the money.” Her bottom lip quivers. “She’s never done anything but be an amazing friend to me. And now, she’s rushing off to do something stupid because she wouldn’t dare ask you for money. For even one dollar because you hate her.” Her shoulders shake as she swipes the back of her hand over her cheek. “If she gets raped or killed because of you, I’ll hate you for the rest of my life.”

Pain shoots through my forehead like a scepter jammed into my temple, slicing my brain in half. “Henley....” I shake my head. “I don’t hate London.”

I don’t elaborate and tell her that there isn’t one part of me that hates her. Lust after her? Yes. Jealous of other men who have touched her? Yes. Crave to worship her? With every ounce of my being. Drown in misery every single day because I can never have her? True.

My fingers itch to pour a decanter of whiskey, sit it down, and drain the rest of the bottle like I do every night before falling into bed. Miserable and alone. But I can’t. Once I get Henley calmed down enough to speak rationally, I’ve got to find London at any cost.

She grasps the door handle. “You’ve done a piss-poor job of showing it.” Her shoulders slump as the wave of adrenaline crests, leaving her exhausted. She glances up from under her lashes. “She needed us. Me. You. Someone. She needed someone to be in her corner for once. And we weren’t there.”

I swipe my hands on my pants. “Where’s she going? And who does Jared owe money to?”

She licks her lips and crosses her arms over her chest. “Club Desire. Lorenzo Armato.”

“Shit.” When he goes big, he swings for the fences. “When?”

“She didn’t say. All she said is that the guy will let Jared live if she has sex with someone who likes paying for young girls.”

Her cheeks tinge with red. “She bargained for money to pay for her grandmother’s debts. The insurance, repairs, and six months’ worth of mortgage. And the money he owes her. She just found out today that her grandmother’s place is in foreclosure.”

“Jesus.” I close my eyes and fight back the swell of admiration that fills my chest. Leave it to London to find a silver lining in a shitshow of a situation. But once I get her, I’m going to beat her brother’s ass for being a selfish asshole, and when I get done with him, he might wish he’d taken his chances with Lorenzo.

“See?” Her door snaps open.

“See what?” I pop open my eyes as Henley yanks her door open. Before she can slam the door shut, I brace my palm on it, sending a wave of pain shooting up my arm to my shoulder.

“You think the worst of her.”

I swallow. Don’t say the wrong thing. Don’t say too much. I don’t need her to go from thinking I hate London to realizing I’m as pathetic as the dude who’s paying for her.

“No, I don’t. I think she’s brilliant and resourceful. I think she’s better than the life her brother could drag her into. That her brother is dragging her into. And I made a point to ensure she was never in a place where she had to choose

between her brother or you because I know she loves you both and would do anything for either of you.”

And yes, it pisses me the fuck off that I’m not on her priority list. That she wouldn’t tell her brother no if he wanted her to get something from me. That she would choose him over me.

“Really?”

“Yes.” One corner of my mouth raises upward. “You’re lucky to have London for a friend. Now, I’ve got to go to get her out of this mess.”

“You promise?” Her eyes fill with hope as she meets my gaze.

“There’s nothing I’ve ever said to you that I mean more than this. I’ll take care of this situation at any cost. I’ll protect her and keep her safe if it’s the last thing I do.” Heat floods from my chest to my ears. “For you.”

“Daddy!” She squeals and slams her small body against me. “Thank you. I love you so much.” She grabs my face. “I knew you cared about her. I told her repeatedly that you didn’t hate her.”

I close my eyes to keep her from seeing the truth. To keep from feeling the truth.

Chapter Twenty-Six

London

With each step toward Club Desire, or in my case, Club Dread, my legs shake. Each time I set a foot down, I about drop to my knees. I hate to admit that Callan was right, but he was. My brother is no longer a sweet kid. Drugs, gambling, and bad decisions have taken over his life. If he cared about me as much as his next poker hand, I wouldn't be waiting for the security guard to let me inside.

The bouncer's beer gut is as large as his biceps. He tips his chin up and opens the door. "Go on. Jimmy will lead you to Mr. Armato."

I don't bother thanking him. Why? There's nothing to be thankful about in this situation. No. I straighten my shoulders. That isn't true. Gram's problems will be resolved.

"There you are." A tall, thin man with a row of gold teeth on the top and neck tattoos grabs my arm and yanks me forward. "Mr. Armato is waiting for you." He tips his head down, and the scent of sweat and cigarette smoke fills my nose. "You're late."

"I got lost."

That's not exactly true. I pulled into the parking lot twice and left before finally getting the balls to put the car in park.

"I bet you did." He chuckles, grabs my waist with one hand, and my wrist with the other. "I don't want you getting cold feet and getting away."

My stomach cramps. This is the biggest mistake of my life. Not losing my virginity. That's a waste, anyway. The only person I want to take it expects nothing but the worst from me, so why save it for him? My eyes dart around the interior of the club.

A man in a suit grabs the back of a collar attached to a woman's neck, pulls her head back, and spits in her mouth. My heart races as adrenaline surges through my body. Any other time, I'd be thrilled to explore a sex club. When I was 14, I came across a BDSM romance book and was hooked. I've read everything I could get my hands on, from books to instructional websites. And then, I overheard Callan's conversation, and I was a goner.

Good girls don't lust after being tied up and degraded. They run the other way, screaming at the tops of their lungs. I might be a virgin, but I'm not a good girl.

I tip my head down. My tennis shoes look out of place on the white tile floor. Not that the club is fancy. I've seen websites of clubs that would put this one to shame. It's a few steps up from a biker bar but nowhere close to a 5-star resort.

"Here we are." The man opens the door.

"Ah.... There she is." A dark-haired man with a jagged scar on his cheek smiles as his eyes sweep over me, taking in my cheerleading outfit. I didn't want to chance chickening out, so I didn't stop on my way to the club.

"London." My brother nods from his vantage point on the black leather sofa. His boot-covered feet are propped up on the glass-topped coffee table as cigar smoke swirls around his head.

Is he for real? I cross my arms over my chest. "You look scared and intimidated."

"What?" He wrinkles his brows, drops his feet to the ground, and rises from the sofa. Panic fills his eyes as he stabs out the cigar. "I need your help."

Lorenzo pushes back his chair and stands. He's wearing black leather pants and a white button-down dress shirt. "He's right."

As he swerves around the edge of the desk, my stomach clenches. The man smells like cigars and tequila. I'm never going to smell either again and not want to vomit. "I prefer to

keep my prisoners happy, but make no mistake, Ms. Kensington. Your brother is in way over his head.” He stops in front of me, sticks a finger under my chin, and shoves my head back.

“You’d better live up to your end of the deal,” I say with more bravado than I feel.

His laughter is a barking sound that sends goosebumps scattering along my arms. “Damn, you’re a feisty one. Christian is going to love breaking you. And I’m going to love watching it.” His tongue slides along my jawline until he reaches my ear.

Christian? Christian Bailey. Disgusting. I was hoping it was someone I’d never heard of. Not one of the two jerks who insulted me at Callan’s party.

“There’s nothing I love more than breaking a woman.” His hand slides down, and he grips my throat until I can’t breathe. “Except money. And more money.” His teeth shine under the lights. “When I told everyone I was watching a virgin get destroyed, the players crawled out of the woodwork. And once they see this tight ass....” He grabs the back of my skirt, shoves it out of the way, and digs his fingertips into my flesh. “I’m going to make a killing.”

Perfect. I get an audience for my humiliating experience. This day keeps getting better and better. I grit my teeth to keep from punching him in the face. “Just hold up your end of the deal. Give me the money you promised.” I don’t care what happens to my brother at this point.

“And you keep up your end.” He bites his bottom lip. “I sure hope you have a degradation kink buried deep inside you. If not, tonight is going to be painful. In every way imaginable.” Without taking his eyes off me, he nods to the other man. “Get the restraint ready. Christian will be here any minute.”

“Christian, who?”

“Christian Bailey. When I told him who was up for grabs, he was almost drooling with anticipation.” Wonderful.

My brother shifts from foot to foot. “You never mentioned anything about a bunch of people watching. Or hurting her.”

Lorenzo whips his head around. His beady eyes look like a snake’s. “And you’re one of them. You’ll watch every second. This is part of your punishment for defying me. No one steals from me and gets away with it. And I consider not paying me what’s owed to be stealing.” He pauses and smiles, giving off a Jeffery Dahmer vibe and smacks my ass.

I jolt at the pain but don’t make a sound.

“Jesus.” His attention shifts from Jared to me. “Now I wish I was taking you myself. This bitch can take a beating and holds up like a champ.”

“No.” Jared’s mouth drops open as he raises his hands, palms outward. “I’m not watching. I can’t.”

“Yes, you will. And if you don’t, I’ll let everyone line up and take a turn at her. Don’t cross me again, or you’ll be fucking your sister every night while I watch and maybe even take on this Gram I keep hearing about. That’s if you both make it out of here alive.”

Oh, my God. What have we gotten ourselves into? I shudder from head to toe. I have no doubt that if we don’t cooperate, we’ll both be leaving here with bullets in our heads.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Callan

Lorenzo leans back into his high-backed red upholstered chair and surveys me from head to toe. The man reeks of cheap gangster vibes. “This club isn’t your usual haunt. Why’re you involving yourself in this situation?”

He’s wearing leather pants with matching wrist and neck cuffs. His dress shirt is open, showing a tuft of chest hair. This club is nothing compared to Club N9ne and the other clubs I’ve been around. For one thing, consent is of utmost importance in a reputable club. This is back-alley shit.

“You have something I want.” I brace my shoulders and turn my back to Jared. The punk is getting an ass beating the second we get out of here. If he wasn’t weak, she wouldn’t be trying to rescue him from another one of his boneheaded situations.

“Is that right?” Lorenzo smiles, letting his eyeteeth show. Does he have veneers on his teeth? The light flashes off the pointed fangs. *Jesus*. Someone watched vampire movies too many times and thinks he’s running the underworld as a vampire.

“Yes. That’s right. My daughter is best friends with this jackass’s sister. My daughter told me she’s come here to pay off his debt. How much?” The black framed lanterns flicker with flames. From here, it’s too hard to tell if the flames are real or fake lightbulbs made to look real. I must give the guy credit. He’s gone all out in the dark, angsty atmosphere.

“75k.”

What a joker. It’s for London. Remember, it’s for London. “I’ll pay off his debt.” Sweat drips down my back. “And I’ll take care of Jared when we leave. Just give me the girl.”

“You’re not touching me.” Jared shoves upright on the sofa, barely visible in the room’s lighting.

The bodyguard marches over to him and grabs his shoulders, causing him to flinch. “You don’t have a voice right now.” The other two bodyguards take a menacing step closer to me, blocking my retreat to the exit.

“Our deal has changed.” Lorenzo tilts his head sideways. “There’s more money on the line. But you’re in luck.” His leer makes him look more like an off-balanced, unhinged Joker.

If this doesn’t work, I don’t have a Plan B. Yes, I can go to the police or a private security company, but this is happening now. Not next week. There’s no time to plan for a way to get her out of the building and to safety. It’s either pay her way out or let these assholes violate her. And that’s not an option.

“If you pay in, you can have her, but you’re covering the buyer, paying him for what he’s missing, covering what this douche bag owes me and what I promised the girl in there.” He throws out a number that would give me pause in other instances, but not now.

“Fine. You have a deal.” I nod, and the muscles in my shoulders relax. I’ll pay anything to get her out of this mess and not indebted to Lorenzo. Because let’s get real. The first transaction she does with him is only the beginning. Unless I get her out of it.

“Perfect.” He laughs and tips his head toward the bodyguard closest to me. “Take the money.”

“Yes, Sir.” The burly redhead marches toward me with enough force that the floor shakes over his movements.

When he’s inches from me, he bends his head down and growls, “No funny business. Hand me the money. And step back. If I think for one second you’re going to double-cross my boss, I’ll blow a hole through your brain.”

I grind my teeth together. “I’m not tricking you.”

My stomach rolls. The need to beat the shit out of Jared intensifies with every second. How dare he let his sister get involved in this. He’s the most pathetic waste of a man that’s

ever lived. Rage surges through me. This is what I've always been afraid of. She'd be blind to his faults and run into danger to protect the punk. I hand the briefcase of money to his bodyguard.

After he lays it on the desk, he counts the funds and nods. "It's all there. Plus, an extra 100k." I'm not quibbling over change. What I brought was what I was willing to part with.

"Wonderful." Lorenzo's eyes twinkle as he claps his hands together and sits behind his desk. "It's a pleasure doing business with a man of quality. A man who understands the importance of sound business deals." He glares at Jared who is rubbing his palms over the knees of his jeans. "Unlike people who steal from me."

"Sir—"

"Shut up." Lorenzo lurches forward in his chair, yanks a handgun out of his desk drawer and raises it toward Jared who's cowering in the cushions. "That's what I thought. Pussy." He laughs until tears form in the corners of his eyes.

"Go on. Go look at what you've bought. Jimmy will lead the way." He waggles his eyebrows. "I think you'll approve."

Panic swells in my chest. "Where is she?"

Jesus fucking Christ, please tell me I'm not too late. Every nerve in my body is humming with fear. If something has happened to her, I won't stop until I've brought this asshole down. I'll spend every dime of my fortune to make this right.

"Right this way." Jimmy waves his hand in front of me and points to a door down the hallway. With each step forward, it feels like the world is spinning.

When I pass by the sofa Jared's seated on, I grab the collar of his shirt with both hands, raise him off the cushions, and shake him. "You'd better be ready for the ass beating of your life. You're a worthless piece of shit."

His eyes are watery and bloodshot, and he reeks of booze. “I didn’t mean to cause her—”

“Fuck you.” I punch him in the left cheekbone, knocking his head backward. “I wish I could leave you to Lorenzo, but you were smart and involved London in this. But if she’s hurt...” The words are clipped as spit flies from my mouth, splattering on his face. “You won’t live.”

I drop him and follow Lorenzo’s man.

The second the black door with the ornate silver skull knob is open, he shoves me inside, and the lock snaps into place.

This is not going according to plan. The room is dark, and the door is locked. I wanted to snatch her up and get her out of here. As my eyes adjust to the lack of lighting, a spotlight shines on London. She’s still wearing her cheerleading outfit and seated on a couch like the one in Lorenzo’s office.

The biggest problem? Her foot is shackled with a silver cuff attached to the leg of the sofa. And it isn’t any cuff. It’s a cuff with barbed thorns like a biblical crown. I’ve seen these before but never used one.

However, if someone tries to remove it without a key, there are barbs that’ll pierce her skin. It’s similar in theory to a bear claw trap, only the barbs are slender and will tear her up.

When she sees me, she gasps, and her shoulders stiffen. “I knew I shouldn’t have told her anything.”

“Seriously?” I stomp across the room only to stop a few feet from her. “You’d rather be raped by some asshole than have me rescue you?”

“It’s not rape.” She sticks out her chin. “I consented.”

“Under duress.”

“Whatever.” She leaps off the sofa but can’t get any closer to me because of the chain and crosses her arms. “I’d

rather take my chances with Christian Bailey. You're the last person I'd ever want to lose my virginity to."

"Fuck that asshole." So that's who bought her. He's not going to be happy I intervened a second time. But that's the least of my worries. She'd rather be with him than me? Those words are a knife wedged into my gut.

"He's got nothing on me." I grab her chin and lower my face to hers until her gasps for air puff against my lips. Her eyes widen, but it's not fear I see when she glances up from under her eyelashes. It's lust. Pure, unadulterated lust.

After I slam my mouth against hers, I feed on her whimpers like a starving man while yanking the hair tie out of her hair and threading my fingers through the strands. My response to her is instinctual, with no amount of forethought or intelligence involved. She insulted me. And I take and devour.

I lash my tongue between the seam of her lips and take more while skating my hands along her back. I forget how to breathe. How to think. All I do is take.

Her arms wrap around my neck as she meets me with the same level of desperation. God, I've wanted this forever. Needed this. Her fingers dig into my skin as she grinds her stomach into my dick. My balls ache for release, and precum soaks my jeans.

It's sick. I shouldn't want her like this. Tied up. Paid for. But I do. While my darkest fantasy is chasing her and catching her. This is a close second. Bound for me. Loving it. Wanting it. Screaming out for me. Begging me to give her pleasure. Only me.

She drops her hands to her sides and yanks my dress shirt out of my jeans, raking her fingernails from my back to my abdomen.

"Shit." I pull back and gasp for air.

The flecks in her irises glow with heat as she licks her swollen lips. "I lied."

“About what?”

She rubs her hand over my erection, stroking and cradling my dick until my head is spinning. “I want you to be the one to take my virginity.”

“London...” I don’t want her like this. Because I paid for her. I want her to belong to me.

She rips open my jeans enclosure and drops to her knees. “Please.”

The expression on her face makes any other answer, but yes, impossible. Her hair halos around her face. Those piercing blue eyes looking up at me. The ones that haunt my dreams. And those lips. Jesus. I fucking want her more than my next breath. She’s gorgeous.

I grab her hair and fist it, yanking her head back.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

London

The man lording above me is the hottest thing I've ever seen. Gorgeous. Ripped. And fucking sexy. He bites his bottom lip and says, "Beg for it."

Holy hell. My heart thunders in my chest. I lied when I told Henley I didn't want him to rescue me. Since the second they bound me to this stupid sofa and left me alone, there's been nothing but him riding in on a white steed and rescuing me on an endless loop in my brain.

It didn't matter that I've never seen him on a horse. Hell, I don't even know if he can ride one. That doesn't matter. What matters is that he's here. He's here and agreed to take my virginity and will save my brother's life. Even if he doesn't deserve it.

Because let's get real. No man with any worth would let someone he cares about get put into this situation with no way out. Callan didn't. He came here to save me at any cost. I swallow hard over the dryness in my throat. Except he's doing this for Henley. Not me.

"I said. Beg for it."

"Please let me suck your cock." I grind my thighs together as desire coats my spanks. If it was anyone else, I'd be sick, but this is a fantasy come true.

Ever since Henley told me that her dad frequents high-end sex clubs, I've been obsessed. I've dreamed about it. I've fantasized about it. I've read about it. I've masturbated to it. All in a little girl's ridiculous hopes that someday he'd see me there and fall for me—the adult woman who is willing to fulfill all his darkest desires.

His eyes glow with desire as he strokes his thick swollen cock, but he doesn't relent. The veins pulse under his movements. The two boys I've sucked off before were nothing

like Callan. They came within seconds of my tongue touching them.

“Please.” My skin is burning as my clit twitches in anticipation. “I want it deep in my throat.” I grasp my nipples through my shell and tug in desperation to relieve some of the aching inside me.

“Fuck,” he groans. “Open that sweet mouth of yours. Suck me off like that tight pussy will when I fill you up.”

Before I can get my mouth open, he lunges his hips forward and pierces my lips, prying them apart and gagging me with his length. Tears fill my eyes, but I don't stop. I won't ever stop. Not until he's as weak as I am.

“That's it, baby. Fucking suck my dick. Watching you pinch your nipples has me rock hard.”

I try to speak, but nothing comes out except my greedy devouring of his shaft. His nails dig deeper as he fists my hair, tugging until my temples stretch. I open wider and angle down, allowing his thrusts to smack against the back of my throat, taking my air.

“This is what I imagined when I jerked off in the shower. You, on your knees. Begging to suck my cock. My own filthy little slut. So eager to please.”

The strength of his erection pounds into me as I run my tongue along the underside of his shaft. It's amazing. It's powerful. His furious movements leave a trail of spit dripping down my chin.

He rips his cock from my mouth, grabs my chin, and yanks my head up until I'm looking into his eyes. “You're too good at that.” Anger blazes in his eyes, and a shiver of fear skates down my back. He spits in my mouth. “Swallow it.”

I follow his command, unable to speak as the muscles in his jaw flex. “This is my mouth. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir.” I finally croak out, but it sounds foreign to my ears.

“Who were you with?”

“No one important. They don’t matter.” I was just practicing so I could be prepared to please you, is on the tip of my tongue, but I bite it back. That would give him too much ammunition against me.

“Have you let another man fuck you?” His fingertips bite into my skin. “You said you were a virgin, but you suck dick like a pro.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I was saving myself.”

“Good.” He lays me down on the sofa. “Take off your clothes.”

My breath catches in my throat. I wasn’t expecting him to want everyone to see everything. But this is a club, and we’re putting on a show. I just wasn’t expecting him to buy into it so much.

I blink as heat floods over me. The thought of being on display turns me on, but not here with these people. *Pretend no one else exists. It’s just you and Callan.*

“Yes, Sir.” I pull my top over my head and unfasten my bra as he watches my every move while absently stroking his cock. The cool temperature leaves a trail of goosebumps on my arms, and my nipples pucker, ready for his mouth.

The cuff. I unzip the skirt and shift the material upward until I slip it over my head and let it fall at my feet. *How in the hell am I going to get my spanks off?*

As if he senses my confusion, he pulls a switchblade out of his pocket, pops it open with the light flashing over the steel blade, and cuts one side of my cheer shorts off with the blade sliding along my skin. And then the other side. My heart pounds in my chest. This is hot AF, but now I need to purchase another pair of bloomers.

“Spread those legs and show me how wet you are.” He closes the blade, shoves it back into his pocket and runs his thumb in a circular motion over the head of his dick, swirling

in the pre-cum. As I spread my thighs wider, he says, “That’s it.” His movements become jerky as his chest heaves. “So pretty. So pink. And dripping. Open those lips and show me what a greedy little slut you are for me.”

Oh, my God. No matter what I’ve read or seen, nothing prepared me for reality. As I brush my clit, my pelvis jerks off the sofa. “Jesus.” I scissor my thighs together to tame the tension building deep inside of me.

“Open,” he growls and grasps my knees, dropping them to the sofa. The chain clanks as it smacks against the wood, sending a wave of adrenaline through me. I want more. I want to be tied up. I want to be restrained. I want him to punish me and pleasure me until I pass out.

At this point, I no longer care if I’m on full display and someone or several people have paid to watch us have sex. It makes it dirtier. Hotter. Sexier. I rotate my hips on the leather and whimper as the longing to come overpowers me.

Before I can blink, he has his hands on my ass, boosting me upward and feasting on my drenched sex. His tongue skates in my slickness as he swirls his tongue around my clit and dives into my tight hole. I clench my fingertips on the leather but to no avail. They slip until my hands are in fists. “So, fucking sweet. And tight.”

My eyes roll back into my head as wave after wave of pleasure rakes my body. It’s surreal. “That’s it.” He looks up from between my thighs as my desire glistens on his lips and chin. The lust in his eyes makes my entire body convulse. “You’re all ready for me.”

He stands but doesn’t move.

“Yes, I’m ready.” My clit throbs with each beat of my pulse, and the walls of my sex clench at nothing as they seek any source of relief. I groan in frustration.

“How ready?” He stares with hunger but stays motionless.

“So ready, please.” I rotate my hips and clench the muscles of my sex together.

“I’m not sure you’re ready enough.”

“Please,” I whimper. “I’m so ready.”

“Show me.” His jaw flexes.

Screw it. With both hands, I slide my fingers through my wetness, stroking, rubbing, bucking, and mewling. And all the while, he watches. “Pinch your clit.”

I squeeze the tight bundle of nerves between my fingertips, and tears fill my eyes. “Please, make me come. I want to come so bad.”

“Suck your fingers.” After I follow his command, he says, “That’s it. Now do it again.” Each command I follow as a fever settles over me. If he stops me now, I’ll die.

“That’s it, baby.” He smirks and climbs onto the sofa between my thighs, pressing his cock to my entrance. “Play with your clit. Stroke it. Pinch it. Tug on it.” He pushes at the opening and withdraws, swirling and brushing through my slick heat.

I spread my thighs wider and increase my attention to my rock-hard clit. Each time, the tip spreads me wider, and then he retreats. For fuck’s sake, tears slip out of the corners of my eyes as I launch upward, forcing him back to my opening. “Please, quit teasing me and fuck me!”

He pinches my clit and repeatedly rubs the side until fireworks flash behind my eyes, and I scream out in orgasm, “God, yes!”

My eyes roll back into my head. As he pierces my sex, my eyes fly open, and I gasp. His jaw flexes and the muscles in his forearms cord as if he’s having muscle spasms. “Do it,” he growls. “Keep rubbing your clit, it’ll take your focus off the pain.” He spits on my clit, letting the saliva slide between my lips and moistening my already-drenched sex.

When I slide my finger over my clit, my hips jerk off the leather and force him deeper. “You’re so fucking tight. I’m already fighting not to come.”

He moves in and out of me. The pressure and fullness of his cock surpasses anything I’ve experienced. I’ve dipped my fingers inside, but nothing more. I was determined to remain pure for the man I love.

His eyes burn into mine and sweat drips down his forehead. This is it. This is the moment I’ve waited for. The moment I’ve saved myself for. Even if this is the only time he touches me, it’s worth it. It’s worth every second.

“That’s it, baby. Relax. Enjoy it. Keep taking this dick like a good girl.” He grips my hips tighter as his fingertips dig into my flesh. My mouth hangs open as I rotate my hips in a circle, forcing his shaft to press against the tight muscles at the top of my pussy. He spits again, giving me more moisture to swirl around my clit.

As he hooks his arm around my thigh, he presses his free hand at the base of my abdomen, pushing my G spot down onto his dick. “Rub your clit while I fuck you. I want it to feel as good to you as that tight cunt feels sucking me off.”

The head of his cock brushes my core over and over as my muscles tighten and quiver uncontrollably until I have no choice but to meet him thrust for thrust, riding the intensity, relishing the sounds of our moaning rocketing off the walls.

“Please.” This is too much. The tender nerves sing under my fingertips. With each thrust of his pelvis, his zipper bites into my ass. The pain feels amazing. Making everything tingle.

“Look at how good you take my dick.” He bites his bottom lip and grunts as he pounds into me. “Watch me filling you up. You’re taking my dick so good. Squeezing it. Sucking it. Your body is a fucking wet dream.” He presses harder. “Put your fingers on either side of your clit. Milk it. Harder. Faster.

And don't stop." He spits, letting it drip onto my clit. "Keep milking it. Make that clit hum."

More. I need more. Please something. Sweat drenches my hair, and I hold my breath. Begging for something to happen to make it stop. To make it keep going. I pinch hard on my clit and tug until it's stretched away from my body. At the same time, he slams into my sex.

"Oh, God." Dizziness overcomes me as this orgasm overwhelms me. I grasp my tits and give them the same attention I gave my clit. "Yes! Oh, fuck, yes!" I scream, causing my body to shake from head to toe.

"So, tight." He hauls me upright, slams his mouth over mine, and grunts as his body quakes and he gasps for air.

Holy fuck. My entire body goes limp. "That was insane." Our chests brush against each other as his gaze never leaves mine. I don't want this to be a one and done. There's so much more I want to explore. "Are all scenes like that?"

"What?" His face pinches as if he's confused.

"You know." I shrug as I rotate my hips, continuing to keep his hardness inside of me. "In the voyeur rooms or when you restrain someone, is it always this good?"

He swallows hard over his Adam's apple. "Voyeur rooms?"

Panic rolls over me. How could he not know? Bile rises in my throat as his now limp cock slips out of me. "Lorenzo found a bunch of men who'd pay to watch me lose my virginity." Tears sting my eyes as I scurry up the sofa, covering my breasts with my arms.

Oh, God, I'm going to vomit.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Callan

Son of a bitch. My heartbeat thuds throughout my body until the whooshing blood sound is all I hear, and the stabbing pain is all I feel. I lurch backward off the sofa and shove my dick into my pants with shaking hands.

“How much?” I rake my hands through my hair.

“How much what?” She yanks her cheer skirt over her head and down to her waist, but not before the smear of blood on her inner thigh confirms my future trip to hell.

“How much are you getting for letting people watch?”

“Nothing. That all goes to Lorenzo. I did secure a deal to get the money to cover Gram’s insurance, renovations, and her back mortgage. And it’s supposed to hold Jared over until he can figure out how to get out of this mess.” She ties back her hair. “I wasn’t going to do it for nothing, but you know more about this stuff than I do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Under my shoulder blade, a ball of muscles tightens until my arm arches upward. *Jesus.* I stretch out my arm and hand, trying to ease the pain.

“You go to sex clubs. So, you know what people charge for participation and observation.”

“And where did you hear that I go to sex clubs?”

“Henley.” She shrugs and puts her top back on. “She told me a long time ago you go to Club N9ne and other places like that.”

Great. I groan in frustration. It’s bad enough that Henley knew. Or suspected. But I didn’t want London to know what I do when I’m not at home, being a responsible businessman and father who puts his kid first. Or what I used to do.

“I don’t come here. This is not the type of place to come to. Club N9ne is high-end. This is back-alley type stuff. And no one pays to participate in scenes at high-end clubs. The owners go to great lengths to ensure everything remains consensual.”

A shudder starts between my shoulder blades and radiates outward to my arms. Now London knows what I like, and so do the other men who watched the show. Not that I haven’t had sex in a voyeur room before, but never with anyone I had a previous relationship with. Or after. And she didn’t get paid.

London got paid to fuck me. Which makes the entire thing just perfect. It doesn’t matter if she’s giving the money to her grandmother or not. It was a paid transaction, not because she wanted to be with me.

What did you think would happen? You were going to walk out of here as a couple? That’s—

God, I’m going to be sick. The ramifications of what happened slams into me like a ton of bricks. When I saw her, I took. I took because I wanted her. I took because she could’ve gotten hurt. I took because she offered. I took because she pissed me off. I took because I could.

And she let me take to get money for her grandmother and brother.

“Get your money and go. Don’t ever come back here. Forget your brother. If he’s going to let you pay for his mistakes, you need to drop him before you get hurt.”

“Right.” She sits down on the edge of the sofa, causing the chain attached to her leg to clank.

“London.” I shove my hands into my pockets. “I’m serious. You need to drop him. He’s no good for you. He doesn’t care if you get used or hurt.”

“Like you?” She lurches off the sofa and stomps toward me. When the cuff bites into her ankle, she winces and stops. She pushes her chin out and glares. “I hear you loud and clear,

and I have no intention of putting myself into a bad situation again. With my brother....” She licks her lips as she eyes me up and down. “Or with anyone else.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I didn’t hurt you. As a matter of fact, you enjoyed yourself quite a lot. And I was the one who was unaware that you were getting paid to get fucked while people watched, so I think I’m the victim in this situation.”

Her mouth drops open as the blood drains from her face. “I thought you knew.” She rakes a hand through her hair. “How did you not know?”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re right. It’s not like I haven’t had sex in front of people before. It’s part of the club experience. And it doesn’t mean anything.” I cough as I choke on the words. It’s never meant anything before, but this situation is different. I’ve wanted London for two years. Dreamed about her. Fantasized about her. And the reality far surpassed the fantasy. But it wasn’t real. It was a scene.

I march to the door and open it. The guard stands outside the door. “Uncuff her, pay her, and let her go.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Lorenzo’s lackey rushes in and uncuffs her ankle. The second she’s free, she speedwalks across the floor, causing the soles of her cheer shoes to clap on the black-stained cement.

“Where’s Lorenzo?”

“He’s coming out of the voyeur room as we speak.”

Fuck. That entire show was on full display for all of them. The argument afterward is worse than them watching the sex. At least for me. Now the fuckface knows I’m butt hurt that she didn’t have sex with me because she wanted to.

No. She did it because she was getting money to get screwed by whoever paid the price. Rage surges through me.

She braces her shoulders and meets the gaze of each man that files out of the room. When her brother steps out of

the room, my soul turns black with a feeling I've never experienced before. He watched. The disgusting fucker watched. He averts his eyes to the ground as he tries to dodge the both of us.

Yeah, it's not going to happen. In two steps, I'm in his face with his shirt wrapped around my fist and his nose touching mine. "You disgusting pig. Did you get off watching your sister get fucked?"

"No." He shakes his head as tears fill his eyes. "Not at all. I didn't want to watch, but Lorenzo made me as part of my punishment."

Lorenzo leans against the doorjamb with his arms over his chest. "He's not lying. He needed to see what happens to people who cross me, and he'd better be relieved that I see reason in the face of money. Otherwise, he wouldn't just be puking on my floor.

I jerk him closer and plow my fist into his gut. He gasps and bends over. "Jesus."

The other guys continue to file out, not caring about the show. They saw the one they wanted to see.

"You're still a fucking asshole. You disgust me." I pull back and punch him in the jaw, sending his head back to fling sideways as spit and blood fling onto the ground. "Only a weak pussy would steal from their grandma, cheat their boss, use their sister to pay their debts, and jerk off while watching it."

"Fuck you." He shoves me backward. "I didn't get off watching."

I push him until he tumbles backward and falls to the ground.

"Stop." London grabs my arm and holds me in one spot. "He's had enough."

"Always ready to save him." I scoff as derision swells in my gut. Here I am defending her, and yet again, she chooses

him over me. Well, the joke is on them. I'm done. I don't need to be kicked in the balls to get the message.

"No, I'm not." Her eyes flash in anger as she drops her hand from my arm and steps backward as if to dismiss me. "I'm done with both of you."

She snaps her head around and points her finger at her brother, who's scrambling to get off the floor. "You will never contact me or Gram again for money, or to get you out of a situation. I've done my best for you, and now, I'm done. From now on, I'll take care of Gram's finances so you can't get to her for money. And I'll never pay another debt of yours. You're not the little boy who brushed my hair and put in bows so no one could tell we didn't have running water. That boy is gone." Tears stream down her cheeks. "If you ever find him again, let me know."

She shifts her attention to me, but the pain on her face is too much to bear. I step toward her and lift my hand.

"Stop!" She glares. "Don't ever touch me again. I'm tired of you treating me like a piece of trash. And I sure the fuck won't let you treat me like a disposable toy to fuck and forget." She stomps to Lorenzo. "Give me my money. I need to get out of here and shower the filth off me."

Chapter Thirty

London

The Next Day

“I don’t care if you want to stay somewhere else.”

Henley stomps up the stairs toward her room, stops on the first landing, slaps her hands on her hips, and glares. “My house is open to you, and you’re staying.”

“Henley,” I groan in frustration. “I think it’s best if I stay somewhere else. I’ve paid for the renovation work, and Gram’s house should be finished in a week. I can scrounge up enough money to stay at a hotel.”

“I don’t care if you can or not. You’re staying here. You’re my best friend, and whatever happened at that club has messed with your head. I can tell. So, you’re staying here with me so I can make sure you’re okay.” She taps her toes on the white carpet. Her red toenails flash up and down with each angry bounce of her foot. “Unless you want to spill your guts and tell me what really happened?”

“I told you. Nothing happened. Your dad got there in time before anything happened, paid off Lorenzo, and we got out of there. End of story.” What am I supposed to say? I had sex with your dad. It was phenomenal. Then he got pissed, beat up my brother, and stormed out, thinking I’m a hoe who would fuck anyone for money.

Tears sting my eyes. Which I would’ve. That’s the sad and pathetic thing. I was angry with him and wanted to lash out—proving he made a mistake by going to the club and choosing another woman when he could’ve been with me. I was punishing myself for still wishing it was him.

And then it was. Like all my fantasies had come true.

When it appeared he had no idea he needed to consummate the deal for my brother to get out of his jam, my heart soared. He had sex with me because he was drawn to me.

Because all those times I'd caught him staring at me meant he felt the same connection. The same pull that could no longer be denied.

But that wasn't the case. Between his anger toward me and my brother, I figured it out. He was turned on by the scene and nothing more. He gets off on sex clubs and helpless females. Well, that's not me. When I'm presented with a problem, I fix it. To hell with the consequences.

Now I know exactly how the women at the club feel when it's over, and they were no more than a warm place for a man to ejaculate inside. I could've been a knot in a tree for all he cared. The only good thing is that he didn't come home last night and wasn't here when I pulled up tonight.

"And you're a liar." She twists on her heel and marches up the remaining stairs. When she reaches the landing, she swivels her head around. "You and my father are both liars. And I'm not giving up until I know what happened."

"Noth—"

The door to her room slams shut, shaking the windows in her fury. Like it's going to get better if one of us tells her the truth. I sag onto the sofa and close my eyes. At least Gram is happy.

When I stopped to tell her I had a team of people working on her renovation project, she'd hugged me so hard my ribs hurt and chastised me for working so hard. She complained I looked like a ghost and dragged me inside. Not that I complained. The food was delicious, and there were no undercurrents of tension at her friend's house.

Stop throwing a fit. You have homework. It doesn't matter if it's after midnight and you must get up at 5 o'clock for cheer practice. There's a test to study for. I open my bookbag and drag out my notes. Thankfully, I had time at the library to finish my paper.

An hour later, I yawn and stretch, dropping the notebook back onto the coffee table.

When I glance up, I jump. Callan stands across the room with his hip braced against the liquor cabinet and a glass of whiskey in his hand. His eyes burn into mine. “Isn’t it a little late to still be up?”

“Yes.” I hastily gather everything, tossing it into my bag. “I should be in bed, but I have a test tomorrow.” I shrug. “I didn’t have time at work to go over my notes.”

“What’s the test in?” He pushes off the cabinet and stalks across the room, making my mouth water. His white dress shirt is unbuttoned halfway down his chest, exposing a sprinkling of hairs, and the sleeves are rolled up to his forearms, showing off his bulging muscles and those veins that weave under his skin.

Looking at him is like looking into the sun. It’s painful and exciting at the same time. I ache to see more of him. To touch him. To beg him to take me again. But it’s a fool’s errand. Callan doesn’t make commitments.

“It’s a course on difficult clients.”

“I see.” He sits on the other end of the sofa, faces me with his knee propped on the cushion, and throws his arm over the back of the seat. “I’m sorry I pummeled your brother. I should’ve handled the situation in a different manner.” His jaw flexes. “That’s bullshit. That’s the only way I could handle the situation. His lack of respect for you is as annoying as your lack of respect for yourself.”

If I told him I only went because I was angry at him for leaving me to go to Club N9ne, he’d know how pathetic I am. I rotate my shoulders and tip my head back. “My brother made his own bed.”

His eyebrows arch upward. “So, you’re not mad that I beat him up?”

“No.” I lick my lips and inhale. “He was supposed to give me money to finish Gram’s house and bring his friends to do the heavy lifting, and he didn’t follow through. That’s what

he was here for the other night. To tell me he couldn't give me any money."

He stands and paces the floor. His movements are aggressive as he balls his hands into fists at his sides, but as angry as he is, I don't fear him hurting me. Well, at least physically. He spins on his heel. "Why do you continue to defend him?"

I rise from the cushions as sitting while he's standing makes me feel too vulnerable. "I don't. Or at least, I don't anymore. He screwed up. I was already done with him when he fell through for the last time." I shake my head. "Then he called after managing to get himself into more debt and used me to get out of it with his heart still beating."

He stomps across the floor and grabs my shoulders. "Tell me you aren't going to fall for his sob stories again."

"I'm not." My chest heaves as I try and catch my breath. I want to fist his shirt and drag him to me. But I stay motionless instead.

His gaze drops to my lips. The tightness of his stance gives off that he's not immune to me. But neither were the guys on the other side of the window who wanted a show. Or the guy who originally bought me. I'm not stupid. A warm body feels better than a calloused hand. What man wouldn't choose one over the other? But I want more than that. I want it all.

He groans and drops his hands to his sides. "You should go to bed so you can get some sleep."

"Yeah." I snatch my bag off the coffee table and speedwalk to the stairs before I do something stupid and beg him for a morsel of attention.

Chapter Thirty-One

Callan

A Few Hours Later

The windows are dark, leaving the house cloaked in shadows as I walk down the stairs. My gaze drops to the sofa where London sat last night. Or earlier this morning, in this case. I made it a point of coming home after midnight both nights to avoid her, but it was no use. Even if I don't see her, she's all I think about.

Like a stalker, I watched her for ten minutes as she studied before making enough noise to get her attention. And I regret it. I could've looked at her all night. But my need to hear her voice and have her acknowledge me overwhelmed everything else.

I step on the main floor, listening for sounds of life. The house is quiet. No noise comes from the kitchen or upstairs. London has likely already left for practice, and Henley won't be up for another two or three hours.

She's gone, and it's for the best. Because if I saw her, I'd likely drag her upstairs and destroy her. I've managed to control my emotions for years, stuffing them down. And now, they're threatening to explode all over the place.

When I closed my eyes, she was in my head. While I slept, she was in my dreams. Not that they were good dreams. I pop my neck from one side to the other and will the irritation rushing through my veins to dissipate.

After grabbing a mug of coffee, I collect my briefcase and get into my Lexus, sinking into the leather and groaning. Another night of fitful sleep. Knowing that London was only two rooms from me required a constant battle of wills.

I want her and having her did nothing to alleviate the desire. I crave her lips under mine. I ache for her pussy

wrapped around my dick, squeezing, and dragging an orgasm from me.

It was hard enough to go through life, having never touched her. Now, the reality of claiming her and not getting to keep her is smacking me in the gut. It's like giving a kid a piece of candy, snatching it back, and eating in front of him.

By four o'clock, when I woke up in a full sweat, having watched her getting fucked by a line of other men, as she repeatedly came, screaming those other men's names, I was ready to throat punch the next person I saw. I'm still ready to throat-punch the next person I see.

After closing the garage, I travel in front of the house. London stands beside her non-running car, staring at her watch and slipping her backpack higher on her shoulder.

I roll to a stop and slide the window down. "Is everything okay?"

She smiles weakly. "I'm fine. My car won't start, but I called a friend to come and get me."

"Male?"

"Yes."

I snap my teeth together. A male friend has no business picking her up. Ever. And certainly not when she's dressed in her cheer uniform with every inch of those glorious, sinful legs peeking out from under that skirt that barely covers her ass.

The spanks I cut off her. If she doesn't have anything covering her backside, I'll come unglued. "What are you wearing under your skirt?"

Her face heats as if she's remembering me cutting the fabric off her in my desperation to see all of her. "I have more than one pair."

"Good." I wring my hands around the steering wheel. "Call this dude back. Tell him to forget it. I'll take you to school."

She waves her hand dismissively. “It’s fine.”

“London!”

Her eyes widen as she meets my gaze. “Yes?”

“Get in the car before I get out and spank you for disobeying.”

Her nostrils flare as her gorgeous tits rise and lower under the thin, skintight shell. *Jesus*. I jerk my door open, dragging my suit jacket off as I get out.

“Do not go out in this outfit. It’s bad enough you shake your ass in front of a crowd of drunk guys who go home and jerk off thinking about you. At least there, you’re protected by the other cheerleaders and the crowd. Out here....” Visions of this guy pulling up and seeing her in this short skirt has my mind splintering into a million pieces.

As I drop the coat over her shoulders, encircling her inside the oversized jacket, her mouth drops open and then snaps it back shut.

“That’s better.” I smile and step back. “Give me your phone.”

Her head snaps back as anger flashes in her eyes. “I’m capable of making my own decisions. I called Andrew several minutes ago. He should be here—”

“He should have been here by now if he was coming.” I snatch the phone from her fingers. Andrew. Seriously? He knows she’s off-limit.

She fists my shirt and yanks me toward her, taking me off balance. “I can call him myself. I’m not a baby.”

“I didn’t say that you were.” There’s no question she’s all woman. Every inch of her is delectable. And I don’t want anyone else seeing her or touching her. Ever. She’s mine. So, what do I do about it? How do I convince her she belongs to me?

“Then stop treating me like one.”

“Fine. Then prove to me you can listen to directions and call Andrew. When he answers, tell him you have a ride.”

“He’ll be here any minute. I don’t want to put you out.” She bites her plump bottom lip, and I force back a groan. If I didn’t know better, I’d think she enjoys being a brat as much as I love the thought of disciplining her.

“Too late.” I snatch the phone out of her hand, swipe until I find the last number she called.

“She doesn’t need a ride.”

“Oh, hey, big brother. I’m looking forward to giving Lon—” I hang up in mid-sentence.

“You can’t do that.” The fire in her eyes almost drops me to my knees. If she knew how badly she has me wrapped around her little finger, I’d be screwed.

“I just did.” I open her palm and deposit it inside, curling her fingers around it. “Get in the car.”

When she doesn’t move, my dick throbs. If she wasn’t already late, I’d slam her against my car and fuck her right here.

I yank open her door. “Get inside.” Her feistiness is an aphrodisiac. Hell, she’s an aphrodisiac.

Chapter Thirty-Two

London

My heart races in my chest. The way he looks at me makes the butterflies in my belly flutter. I inhale the scent of his cologne and snuggle deeper into his jacket. What does this mean? Everything? Nothing? With Callan, it's hard to tell.

I settle into the leather seat and watch as the landscape changes from the neighborhood where he lives to the more populated city area. His hands curl around the steering wheel, giving no question to how strong he is.

Why am I not mad that he called Andrew without my permission? I should be angry. But I'm not. I want him to care enough about me to not want another man driving me around. Because I sure in the hell don't want to ever hear he went to the club again and had sex with another woman.

Or even worse. Starts dating someone seriously. Watching him and this other woman grow close. My muscles tighten until they ache. He's only 39. What if this woman gets pregnant and they have a child?

"What do you want to do?"

"What?" I gawk at him as if he's been reading my mind. Surely, he isn't able to do that.

"What do you want to do when you graduate from college?"

"Oh..." Heat covers my cheeks. Yeah, he's not thinking what I'm thinking. "I'm majoring in social work. I want to work with children and families that're struggling."

His eyes dart to mine, and my heart skips a beat. When I don't see the judgment I expected, my stupid heart swells with happiness.

"That's admirable."

The corners of my mouth arch upward. “I think so. I wish there’d been other programs in place to help when we were growing up. Gram was great, but she couldn’t keep up with our energy. If we’d had better after-school programming, maybe Jared wouldn’t be making these selfish decisions.”

“Are you seeing those types of programs at the center?”

“Yes, I am.” The fact he’s interested in what I’m doing gives me hope. “Alexa and her husband, Jason, have expanded the programming at the center, giving more opportunities to the children. It’s fantastic. They’re doing everything from art to sports to poetry writing. It’s like a magnet school for free.”

“Tell me more.” His fingertips move one after another in a pattern on the steering wheel as he weaves through traffic. With each program I discuss, he asks a ton of questions, and before I realize it, we’re at school, and it’s time for practice.

“Thank you for driving me. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” He squeezes my knee, and I bite back a whimper.

As if he heard my unintended begging, the air in the cabin zips with energy. The pulse point at the base of his throat thumps. I want to run my tongue over it, feeling the movement of the blood under his skin. The warmth of his flesh under my mouth.

“I’m sorry about the other day.”

I lick my lips and jerk my gaze back to his. “About?”

“About everything. It shouldn’t have happened. I—”

“Right.” I jerk the door open and climb out, dragging my bag behind me. I can’t keep following him around like a lovesick dog begging for a scrap of food. It’s time to grow up and be a big girl.

“I’ll get a ride tonight.” I slam the door, not giving him the opportunity to contradict me. I take two steps while adjusting my gear. *Shit. I have on his jacket.* I spin on my heel and run smack into his chest.

He grasps my chin. “I brought you here, and I’ll bring you home. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

His jaw is tight, as if he’s struggling not to do something. Kiss me? I gnaw on my bottom lip. Please, kiss me. “Now, be a good girl, and keep my jacket on until you get to practice. There’s a guy over there who’s staring at you.”

“Who?”

His eyes narrow. “I don’t care what his name is. His eyes need to be on something else.”

“Why?”

He shakes his head as if he’s disappointed. Disappointed in himself. “Because I know what guys like him want.” His eyes dart behind me and he drops his hand, stepping backward. “I’ll have my driver pick you up.”

“London!”

Maria calls from several yards away. I jerk my head around to see her and three other girls huddled together gossiping and gawking at where I stand.

“Is that your dad? Why didn’t you tell us he was in town?”

The door slams shut, and the engine roars to life.

“He’s gorgeous.” Loren whistles and fluffs her hair. “Is he single, or is there a mom London?”

“He’s single, and he’s not my father.” And won’t ever be anything else.

“Oh, my God.” Maria grabs my arm and yanks me toward the field. “He’s so hot and possessive. I was weirded out when I thought he was your dad, but now, it makes more sense. He was throwing off one of those, *I’m going to slam you against the car and fuck you blind* vibes.” She laughs. “Now, it doesn’t feel so creepy.”

“Thanks. But he’s not interested.” And even if he was, it would never see the light of day. Because he’s either repulsed by the thought of being with me or by the prospect of someone finding out.

“Oh, he’s interested. You need to do the classic drop and bend. And he’ll be all up inside of you in two seconds.”

“Please.” I roll my eyes.

Loren laughs and throws her arm over my shoulders. “Sweetheart, he wants you, or he wouldn’t have his jacket on you to keep you from showing your ass. Which is stupid considering everyone at the stadium has seen your spansks.”

“Do you think so?” She has a valid point. He doesn’t freak out this much when Henley wearing a bikini to a pool party, and she’s showing more skin than this.

“Yes, I know so.” Loren’s eyes are serious, with no signs of the joking around they were doing a few moments ago.

“He’s my best friend’s father.”

“Oh.” Maria clutches her chest. “That’s so hot.” Her eyes dance with laughter. “Not my best friend’s dad. He’s 50 and overweight. But that guy....” She tips her head toward the street. “That’s a dad I’d like to fuck.”

“Not. Funny.” I glare at her.

No, I’m done. It’s time to be strong and move on. He’s never going to see me as an equal or want anyone to know we had sex. It’s not like he didn’t have the opportunity, and when he did, he said it shouldn’t have happened. He’s repeatedly said it shouldn’t have happened. What more do I need, him to beat me over the head with it?

Chapter Thirty-Three

One Week Later

London

As I pull into Henley's driveway, dread fills my entire soul. I've come up with every excuse in the book to avoid seeing her, but there are only so many tests, papers, and reading assignments a girl can come up with to keep from going to her house. Callan's house.

Since the day he drove me to cheer practice, I've stayed at Gram's friend's house. It was better than the alternative—having him tell me we shouldn't have had sex. Again.

And last night, we returned home. It was a bittersweet moment. I'm glad that I was able to get her home, but it doesn't feel the same anymore. It feels like my childhood home. Not an adult woman's home.

After I put my car into park, I close my eyes and force back all thoughts of him. His hands. His mouth. His body. All of it. I can't believe I was naive enough to think things could be real between us.

I snap the door open, hold my head high and march to the side door as if I don't have a care in the world.

Henley swings open the door. Her eyes are hard as she glares at me. "It's about time you showed up. You've got a lot of explaining to do."

"I—" *Fuck*. I stop in mid-step. Did he tell her what happened? He couldn't have. There's no way he wanted her to know.

"Hello, London." Callan nods as he comes around the corner of the garage with a T-shirt in his hand.

"Hi—" *Did I squeak?* Heat floods my face. *Lord. I squeaked.* He hooks the shirt over his head and slowly covers his chest, and I can't tear my eyes away from him. It's like a

trainwreck I can't stop watching. Only he's so hot it makes it hard for me to breathe.

Henley braces her hands on her hips and clears her throat. "Are you going to stand there all day, or are you going to come inside?"

"Come inside." I jog through the door, slip past her into the cool temperatures of the mudroom. "I'm sorry I've been busy. Things at school and work were crazy."

"I bet."

"Yeah." I slow my step and walk into the kitchen with Henley trailing behind me.

"Spill it."

"Spill what?"

She grabs my shoulder and twirls me around. "Tell me why you're avoiding me. Tell me why my dad bites my head off anytime I speak. And please explain what happened at the club because it's clearly not as cut and dried as you both claim. Or you wouldn't have gone to stay with your grandma when I said you could stay here."

"Nothing happened." Callan barges into the room, making my heart thunder against my chest. "I already told you. I got there and paid Lorenzo the money and got London out before—"

"Anything bad happened." I rake a hand through my hair. "Callan paid the guy off that bought me, and all was well." The skill of lying is to keep things as close to the truth as possible. While acting like you don't have anything at stake. "Do you have a bottle of water? I'm thirsty."

"Stop."

"Okay." I lower my arm to my side and turn to face Henley.

Her eyes dart between the two of us. "So, nothing happened? You paid and up and left?"

“Yes, that’s right.” Callan nods as if he’s bored with the conversation. “I’ve told you this ten times already.”

I slap a fake smile on my face. “And I thanked your father for coming to my rescue. If he wouldn’t have, I’d have given my virginity to Christian Bailey.”

“Thank God.” Henley clutches her chest. “I had no idea it was him.”

“I’m so glad it wasn’t him.” I shudder forcefully, no longer acting. “If it would’ve been Christian instead of your father....” I swallow hard over the lump in my throat.

“It wasn’t.” Callan’s eyes meet mine, which starts a fire deep inside of me. Being away from him for a week did nothing to stop my obsession. It probably didn’t help that I slept in his jacket until I could barely smell his scent.

He licks his bottom lip, and my belly flops. Actually, it made it worse. I want him more now than I did. I want him to shout to the world that he loves me and won’t ever let another man touch me. Lord, I groan. I’m no more mature than I was a week ago. No wonder he thinks I’m a child. My head is always filled with schoolgirl fantasies.

I glide to the refrigerator, snatch out a bottle of water, and twist off the lid. “Everything worked out.”

“How’s Gram’s renovations going? Did everything get done? The insurance? The mortgage?”

“Yes, everything was taken care of. Your father made sure of it, and we were able to move home last night.”

“Dad, I knew you’d come through. Thank you so much for helping.” Henley smiles and pats his shoulder. “See London, I told you he didn’t hate you.”

“I don’t hate London.” He frowns and shakes his head. His deep voice slides along my skin.

How am I supposed to act like nothing happened? I fight back tears by drinking the remaining water and sitting it on the counter while shoving a strand of hair behind my ear. “I

haven't properly thanked you for helping Gram keep her house. It's important to me that she's safe and in her home."

"I think that's pretty clear."

The intensity of his gaze makes my knees buckle. I'm going to die. How do I keep being friends with Henley when that means I must see Callan. It was hard enough before when I hadn't had sex with him.

"Thank you again. It meant a lot to me." It meant everything to me. It was the most memorable moment of my life. And I'd give anything to do it again. But it's not going to happen.

"You're welcome."

"Dad, you should pay for a new roof and floor for Gram. The damage from the fire was bad, but she needed things updated already. And didn't the house catch on fire due to electrical issues?"

"Henley!" My heart skips a beat and thunders erratically. "Your father doesn't need to do anything else. He's already done enough, and I'm already indebted to him."

"Fine." She waves her hands in the air. "But Gram deserves to live in a nicer place. One that's not falling apart around her."

"I know." I frown. The last thing I want is for him to think that I wasted the money. I took care of everything, including her car. "When I graduate, I'm taking care of it."

Henley's phone rings. "I've got to take this."

The second we're alone, the tension ramps up tenfold. He crosses his arms over his chest and cocks his head sideways. "What did you do with the money?"

"The kitchen renovation materials and labor, the mortgage, her insurance, the bills, and I paid off her car. The rest, I put back into my account to pay for what I gave Jared. When I offered to put on a new roof, she insisted I put the money in the bank instead."

“What did you tell her?”

I glance away from him. “I told her that you gave me the money as a loan, and I have to pay you back.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Do you have enough money to quit one of your jobs?”

“Not hardly.” More than once, I wished I’d negotiated for more money so I could take a break. “I’m not high maintenance, so I don’t need a lot of money, but there still isn’t enough. Maybe I could quit one of my jobs, but I’m not willing to risk it.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to risk losing it all and being broke ever again. I know I said I’d leave Jared in the dust....” His eyes narrow into slits. “I have.” I raise my hands in defense. “I haven’t spoken one word to him since I left the club, and Gram hasn’t either. But if he ever agrees to go to rehab, I want enough money to pay for an inpatient one.”

“London,” he growls and grasps my shoulders. The nearness of his body sends a heatwave through me as I inhale his scent. Basking in it. I catch myself before I start sniffing him. “Don’t spend your money on him. You deserve what you have left. Use it to make your life safer so you never put yourself into a horrible situation again.”

“Was it horrible?” I suck down a gulp of air and forget how to exhale.

He shakes his head and cups my cheek. “It was like the devil climbed out of hell and sucked out my soul.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked that. It was—”

“It was your first time, and it shouldn’t have happened.” He shakes his head and drops his hand to his side, putting an enormous space between us, like touching me burnt him. “I’ll regret that for the rest of my life. Thank you for not destroying Henley’s faith in me. I appreciate it. You didn’t have to. That means a lot to me.”

“I won’t say anything.” I won’t say a word because I don’t want her pity.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Four Hours Later

Callan

Having London under my roof and not touching her is slowly killing me. I pour another shot of whiskey and down it in one gulp. I rarely get drunk, but I'm not about to count my sober days since the night at the club. If I do, I'll have to reevaluate my statement of not being a drunk. The amber liquid drains down my throat, warming my body until my fingers and toes tingle.

When my phone rings, I lean against the black leather chair in my study and lift it to my ear. "Yes?"

"Everything's ready, Sir." Arnold's voice is calm and collected as he completes a rundown of what I threw on his plate not an hour after he'd completed a full workweek. "I've contacted the construction company, and they're good to go for Monday morning."

"Thank you. I appreciate the speed at which you've gotten everything together." He'll be well compensated, but that doesn't negate the need to thank him for dropping everything on a Friday night and getting a top-notch crew together to make repairs at Millicent's house.

"You're welcome, Sir. Is there anything else you need me to do?"

"No, I've got it handled." I hang up and pace the floor between my desk and the window overlooking the garden. The moonbeams soften the edges of the patio furniture and kitchen appliances, leaving everything a muted gray.

On the other side of the patio is a hot tub and a fire pit, and to the back of the yard is a waterfall that cascades into an underground swimming pool. While I love everything about this house, I'm most proud of the landscaping. Maybe it's because it keeps me out of the house and away when London

is visiting Henley. Of course, it doesn't help anything when she's outside lounging by the pool, glistening in the sun with a body ripe enough to pluck.

Stop. I spin around from the window and call Millicent.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Millicent. It's Callan, Henley's father."

"Of course, I know who you are. It's nice of you to call. Is everything okay with London? She's been acting distant the last few days."

"As far as I know, she's fine." I pause for a second and ask the question I know will only lead to trouble. "How has she been acting?"

"Oh, I don't know," she sighs loudly. "You know how young women are. They're happy one second and moody the next. I'm used to that, but she's been especially melancholy. Staring into space. Not eating. Not sleeping. Staying up too late. And I've heard her crying a few times."

Shit. Sweat drenches my armpits. I don't want her to be devastated and hurt by what happened. I rake a hand through my hair. But how do I fix it?

"Would you mind asking her what's wrong? She said she was going to visit Henley tonight."

"I—"

"Please, she's such a sweet, happy girl, and she's always had a soft spot for you. She'll listen to you."

Soft spot? What in the hell? That's almost laughable.

"What do you mean by that?" I cringe. I sound like a 13-year-old boy pumping one of his friends for information about a girl in class. Only I'm pumping a 65-year-old woman for information about her granddaughter.

"Sweetheart, you're adorable. My granddaughter has had a crush on you for years. Probably since she was 16. She couldn't shut up about you until a couple of years ago, and

now she won't mention your name. Did something happen between the two of you?"

"I..." I slump into the chair because if I don't, I'm going to land on my ass. The possibility that she feels something for me, something more than disdain, has thrown me for a loop. And her grandmother not being upset about it is messing with my brain.

"Oh..." Her voice rises. "Did something happen?"

"Well..." *Shit. How do I answer that?* I fan the neck of my T-shirt. *Lord, it's hot in here.*

"You're single. You've been single for a long time. London is over the age of 18. She'll be 21 next week, and you're a good man. You're both attractive, young, and healthy. She could do a lot worse than you."

"Thank you. I appreciate your kind words." It's safer not to address the specific words.

"Don't placate me, young man. There's nothing wrong with my granddaughter. She's a smart, determined, hardworking young woman. You could do a lot worse."

"I... Listen. This is not an easy conversation." My head spins. It's clear I've had too much to drink, and it's possible I'm dreaming this discussion. Maybe I slipped and hit my head. "Your granddaughter is a beautiful woman inside and out. She's a great friend to Henley and always has been. And her determination to take care of herself is something I admire. A lot."

"But?"

"But she's too young. She's my daughter's age. What would Henley say about it? She could lose both her father and her best friend. I can't risk that."

"What if she loses both of you anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

“London has been avoiding Henley for the last week. If that continues, that’ll drive a wedge between them that can’t be healed. And you? Have you been avoiding your daughter for the same amount of time? Guilt eats at the soul. So why feel guilty about it? Life’s too short. Be happy and celebrate it instead.”

I stare at the bottle of whiskey in search of answers. “I wasn’t expecting this conversation when I called you.”

She chuckles. “I’m too old to pretend things aren’t real and in your face.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“So, why did you call?”

“I called to tell you there’ll be a team of construction workers at your place Monday morning. Henley said there were issues with your roof, floor, and the electrical wiring, and I don’t want London feeling like she needs to take care of it herself. I’ll do it.”

“That’s sweet of you. I know she’ll appreciate it.”

I smile as the first hint of hope fills me with possibilities of a different future than I envisioned. Why not? If she’ll consider it, that is. “Thank you, but it’s self-serving. I don’t know what she’d do to get the money.”

“Good man. My granddaughter is nothing if she’s not resourceful.”

“That she is.” I straighten my back. “Do you know how to get ahold of Jared?”

“You going to punch him again? His face was pretty messed up when he came by whining to me.” My shoulders tense. I’m going to knock him on his ass again. “Calm down. I hear your teeth grinding together. He deserved it after what he put London and you through. You should remember that I live in this neighborhood and always have. Word travels on the street.”

Sneaky old woman. I shake my head. She knew all along. “I can’t make any promises. If he tries to con either of you out of money again, I’ll wring his neck. And if he ever puts London in a compromising situation again, I’ll not stop beating him until he passes out.”

“Thank you for taking care of her and not letting anything bad happen to her. Let me get you his new number.”

I can’t fuck this up. I’ve only got one chance to do things right.

Chapter Thirty-Five

London

“If you’re lying to me, I’m going to be so pissed.” The bedsprings squeak, followed by the rustling of covers.

“I’m not lying to you. I’ve not been avoiding you. I’ve been busy.” I click the mouse and flip to a different screen. If I look at her, it’ll all come spilling out. And I promised Callan I wouldn’t say a word. But not having someone to talk to is eating me up from the inside.

She wanted to go for a swim. I said no. She wanted to get a snack. I said that I was fine, so she went on her own. She wanted to go downstairs and watch television on the big screen. And I said I have too much studying to do. Now, she’s given up on me leaving the room and gone to bed.

“London?”

I spin to face her. “Yes?”

“You’ve got to tell me if something’s wrong. We’ve been best friends for years, and you’ve been avoiding me. Or my father. Did he say something insulting to you when he picked you up from the club?”

“It’s fine. Yes, we had words.” I shrug. There’s no point in hiding that. “When do we not have words?”

“Damn it, London, you should have told me.” She sits up and slides to the edge of the bed.

“Don’t worry about it.” I smile despite how I’m feeling inside. “You saw us earlier. We’re good. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“When I think about what could’ve happened?” She shudders as she sits cross-legged in the middle of her white comforter. “It about destroys me.” She tucks her hair behind her ear, causing it to fall along her back. “You should have

listened to me when I told you to ask my dad for the money. Then none of this would've happened."

"I'll admit the ramifications of what almost happened have been bothering me. But I'll be fine."

"You promise?" Her eyes fill with tears. "I would hate myself if something happened to you because I didn't tell my father sooner. Or if what almost happened keeps you from feeling safe."

"I'm fine. He got there in time. Gram's fire damage is repaired, all her payments are up to date, and your father helped fix everything. I'm not letting Jared pull me into his shit again. It was a good lesson to learn. I can't save him."

"Okay." She rubs her fingertips on the edge of the blanket. "If you ever need anything, I'm always here for you."

"Yes, I do. I love you, Henley. Thank you for being an amazing best friend."

"You, too." She pulls the covers up to her chest. "I love you, too. I'm going to get some sleep. It's been a long week."

"Good night." I swivel back around and start studying as she falls asleep.

I am fine. I must be. I can't let this tear us apart. Henley is my best friend. I close my eyes and shove all my feelings for Callan into a box, wrap the box inside another one, and tie it up with string. From this moment forward, my childhood crush is gone and forgotten.

Twenty minutes later, I receive a text message from my brother.

Jared: I fucked up. I fucked up a lot. I'm so sorry for putting you in that position. I was selfish and irresponsible. I don't know how I even got to that point. I know you'll never forgive me, and I completely understand that. But I wanted to let you know I'm headed to rehab. I hope when I get out, we can talk so I can apologize in person.

One minute passes. Two minutes pass. My hand shakes so hard I drop the phone onto the desk. Henley murmurs something in her sleep and rolls over.

Do I message him back? Do I believe him? What if it's a ploy to get something out of me? Responding and ignoring him war inside of me until my head throbs in pain.

Jared: Thank you.

Thank you for what? Thank you for saving me? Something else? My teeth gnash together. I hate cryptic.

Me: Thank you for what?

Jared: For everything. I love you, London. I promise I'll be a better man. A man you and Gram can respect. I'm going to leave all this behind. I promise.

A tear slips down my cheek. He's never wanted to go to rehab before. Maybe that'll be the difference. My heart skips a beat.

Me: How're you paying for it?

Jared: I'll let that person tell you.

I sit in silence as the lamplight bathes the room. Please don't tell me he took money from Gram again. Or Lorenzo. He doesn't need deeper in debt.

Me: Who?

Nothing. The screen stays the same, with my message at the bottom and no dancing typing dots in the corner. *Great.* I groan and shove my chair back.

Ding. My cell phone alerts me to another message. I pull down the top of the screen. It's Callan. My mouth dries as I try to catch my breath.

Don't look.

Just look.

Fine.

Callan: Come downstairs. We need to talk. Meet me on the patio.

Every muscle in my body tightens in fear. Jared contacted Callan and asked for money. This is bad. So bad. He's going to tell me to leave and never come back. Not that I blame him. I gather my schoolwork, my clothes, and my laptop while thrusting on my slippers.

When I walk past Henley's bed, I hold back the tears. I don't want to lose her as a friend, but I did that the second I had sex with Callan.

As I pad down the hallway in my slippers, I regret not changing from my sleep shorts and tank top, but I don't want to waste time. If he wants me gone, it's better to leave now rather than dragging out the inevitable. I've already been doing that since the night at the club.

The lights are off downstairs as I walk through the living room, past the kitchen, and stop at the patio door. The twinkling lights are flashing along the patio wall, highlighting the inground pool and waterfall.

It's beautiful like a tropical paradise without leaving home. I'll miss this place. I'll miss Henley. And I don't know how I'll survive never seeing Callan again.

I step outside and shiver at the change in temperature. Not that it's cold. It's the opposite. Outside, it's balmy and smells like coconut.

"Put your stuff down." Callan dims the lights and ambles toward me in a pair of swim shorts and nothing else. He's silhouetted by the dark sky that's dotted with stars.

"What's this?" I set my backpack and computer on the table and sweep my hands over my silk shorts. I've never been more nervous in my life.

When he steps out of the darkness, he cups my face. Staring into my eyes with a mixture of heat and longing. "This is what should have happened for your first time."

His mouth covers mine, eliciting a whimper from my lips. A whimper that he greedily devours with his tongue and lips. The more pressure he exerts, the weaker my knees become.

He pulls back and runs his thumb over my bottom lip. “This is how you should always look when you look at me.”

I lick my lips as my heart thunders in my chest. I expected him to send me away, not seduce me. “How?”

He smiles. “Scared. Anxious. Turned on. And in awe of me.”

“Please....” I roll my eyes.

“That’s better.” He chuckles and wraps his arms around my waist, hauling me closer until our bodies are pressed together. Our chests touch when we breathe. “I love your bratty side.”

“I had the distinct impression that’s the side you didn’t like about me.” His hands caress and stroke under my pajama shirt, sending shockwaves throughout my body.

“You were wrong. That’s what made me want you, but I hated my weakness. I didn’t want you to be disgusted by my obsession with you or to ruin my relationship with Henley. But I’m done pretending I don’t ache for you every second of the day.”

“I don’t know what to think or what to say.” I stare into his eyes, searching for signs that he’s lying. His muscles are tense, yet there’s still a level of softness about him. That makes me believe that the impossible could be possible. I brace my hands on his chest, feeling the beat of his heart under my fingertips.

“I understand.” He slips his hands out from under my shirt and clasps my forearms. “I’m sorry. This is my fault. I’ve wanted you like a drowning man wants air, and I hated it. I was angry and resentful. I thought if I pushed you away, it would stop. But it only grew stronger, and then, when we were together at the club, I had the world ripped out from under my

feet. I thought you'd come to me willingly, but it was all part of your deal with Lorenzo. It was a slap in the face."

"It was willingly. I didn't want it to be anyone else but you." I bite my bottom lip as the butterflies in my belly flop. The words he's saying are more than I could've ever hoped for. "But you gave no indication that's what you wanted. I thought you were angry with me because I didn't explain the voyeur part. I thought you knew and were repulsed that we'd had sex in the first place because you were angry and walked out."

He groans and drags his hands through my hair. "I was angry. I'd taken your virginity in front of a bunch of perverts because that's the kind of clientele Lorenzo has, and you were getting paid to have sex with me. I was convinced you'd never be attracted to a man twice your age."

"You're wrong about that." I shift closer until our lower bodies are connected and rock against his erection. "I've not wanted anyone but you since I fully understood what happens between a man and a woman." Heat covers my skin as the realization of what I said weighs heavily in the air. I desperately need this to be something more than an intimate second chance at taking my virginity, and then—nothing.

"Good." He lowers his head and slowly devours my mouth, taking me higher and higher until I can't think. Or breathe. The only sound is the quiet spilling of water into the pool from the waterfall. He tugs my hair, pulling my head back. "You belong to me, and you need to be ready for what that means."

"I..." I snap my mouth back shut. Wow. I was expecting sex. But belonging to him. That's a big deal. "I didn't expect you to want something serious."

His forehead creases as his eyebrows skyrocket upward. "And that's not what you want?"

"No!" I speak so fast and loudly that the sound echoes off the oversized rock slabs that line the backyard patio.

“That’s not what I meant. I’d love to have a relationship with you, but I didn’t think you’d want anything more than a casual fling. Even if you wanted sex. Or something. I mean, I expected sex when you kissed me, but I expected it to be that and nothing else. Until you got me out of your system. Lord, I’m rambling.”

“Make no mistake.” He trails his lips along my jaw to my ear and down my neck, causing my nipples to tighten, and goosebumps to scatter on my arms. “When I claim you this time, there’s no walking away.”

He straightens and meets my gaze. “Monday morning, Gram’s house is being updated. My team is already gathering their equipment to move jobs. And Jared is headed to a top-of-the-line rehab facility as we speak. I’ve also contacted my security team to tighten the screws on Lorenzo’s operation. I’ll do whatever it takes to ensure he never sells another girl to the highest bidder again. And anything else you want is yours. You don’t even have to ask.”

“This is surreal but thank you.” I sling my arms around his neck and pull his face to mine. My typical response would be to tell him no but fuck that. What’s wrong with getting spoiled a little?

Nothing.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Callan

“I’m glad you see things my way.” I grip her ass, kneading it as I devour her gorgeous, pouty mouth. She’s everything I’ve ever wanted, and this time, there’s no question she’s coming to me willingly. Or that I’m only having sex with her to fulfill a contract.

At least not that kind of contract. I don’t intend to let her get away from me, so a ring and a marriage license won’t be long in the making. If I could swing it, I’d marry her tomorrow to ensure no one else can touch her.

“Take your clothes off.”

“Yes, Sir.” She shivers as she crosses her arms over her chest and pulls her top off by grasping the hem. The second her gorgeous tits are on full display, my mouth waters.

“You don’t know how many times I’ve watched you out here at the pool, stripping down to your bikini. Swimming. Laying in the sun.” My hands ball into fists to keep from dragging her to the ground and claiming her right here.

But she isn’t ready for that level of raw domination. She’s a sweet, innocent woman that I’ll have to slowly prepare for the darker side of sex, but I have little doubt that she’ll be turned on by being commanded, edged, denied orgasms, and overwhelmed by pleasure.

“Shorts.” Every muscle in my body is tight in anticipation.

She glances up from under her lashes. “Yes, Sir.”

As she wiggles free from the material, my eyes are glued to her gorgeous curves. The woman is perfection. She steps out of her shorts and clasps her hands together in front of her, making her chest press toward me.

“Such a beautiful body, and it’s all mine.” I stalk forward and clasp my mouth over one nipple, drawing it into my mouth and eliciting a deep moan of appreciation from her lips. The tight pebble begs for my touch, and I don’t deny it. I tug on the tip, drawing it deeper and letting it go with a loud popping sound.

“Please.” Her eyes glow with desire.

“Please, what?” I lick my lips, eager to hear what she wants.

“Don’t stop.”

I smile and clasp her chin, tilting it upward. “That’s a good girl. I want you to tell me what you like.”

“I want you to suck harder.” She grinds her thighs together. “Each time you tugged on my nipple; the walls of my sex convulsed.”

“Jesus,” I groan and yank her face toward mine. I’ve never been with anyone like her. Most women tell you to do whatever you enjoy, even though they’re frustrated that you don’t do what they want. Not London. Even though she’s innocent, she’s confident in her own skin. “Do you have any idea what that does to me?”

“I hope it turns you on as much as it turns me on.” My dick twitches and aches as her eyes travel over me. “I’ve spent the last two years eagerly waiting for this moment. I’ve watched and read everything I could get my hands on so I could please you.”

I close my eyes and step backward, putting some much-needed space between us before I come in my pants.

When I open my eyes, she’s bent down, picking up her clothes. “Drop them.”

“Okay.” She instantly drops the items and straightens.

“No.” I shake my head. “‘Yes, Sir.’ Your answer is, ‘Yes, Sir.’ Or you keep your mouth shut, do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir.”

I cradle her face. “I had to step back before I took you too roughly or made a fool out of myself by coming in my pants.” When she smiles, my heart sings. “How did everything you learned make you feel? Why did you want to do it?”

“At first, I only researched it because Henley said you went to sex clubs, and I was intrigued.” She bites her bottom lip. “When I went to Club Desire, I was angry with you for leaving me and going to Club N9ne. I was hurt and wanted to get back at you. Even though the only person who would get hurt was me. At the same time, I was praying you’d show up and rescue me.”

“Baby....” I shake my head as her words heal things inside of me I wasn’t even aware were broken. “I was fighting a losing battle, but there’s nothing to worry about. When I went to the club, I wasn’t with anyone. I couldn’t be. Not when I wanted you as badly as I did.” I cup the back of her head. “I haven’t had sex with anyone but you in two years. However, the club has been a lucrative part of my business for years. I’ve made a lot of deals at that place.”

“What did you say?”

“I’ve made a lot of business deals—”

“Stop.” She rolls her eyes and smacks my chest.

One corner of my mouth arches upward as she stares in wonder. It’s time to be painfully honest if I want her to forgive me for how I’ve treated her. “I went a couple of times and tried to perform but was unable to. If I wasn’t constantly hard when you were around, I would’ve thought I needed a little blue pill. But rest assured, there are no issues in that department.”

“You haven’t been with anyone in two years?” She swallows hard. “How is that even possible?”

“You ruined me for everyone else. Now, tell me what you liked about what you learned.”

“I’m in shock, so let me think for a second.” She inhales and slowly exhales.

My heart hurts as I realize how much time we lost. No. This was how things were supposed to happen. She was too young when my feelings for her first developed. Even if she felt the same, she needed time to grow as a woman and figure out what she wanted in her future.

“The more I learned, the more I was turned on. And not because of the sex. It was about giving up control yet staying in control.” She shrugs. “It’s hard for me to explain. Like I enjoy that the man or the dominant person tells the other what to do, leading the person where he wants. But in relationship dynamics, the submissive is the more important person.”

“How so?” My heart races in my chest. If what she says is real, the woman is about to surpass all my fantasies and dreams.

“Because the dominant needs someone to control, so if the sub doesn’t allow the dominant to be in control, the dominant person, has nothing. That’s true power. And at any point, they can recant their submission.”

“You’re a smart woman.” I trace her cheekbones with my thumbs. “And this is something you want to explore with me?”

“Yes, Sir.” Her eyes light up with excitement. “I’ve been dying to explore it. If you want vanilla sex after the night at the club, I’m afraid I’ll be disappointed. That was the ultimate adrenaline rush.”

“That’s my good girl.” Her eyes roll back into her head as she shivers from head to toe. “Get on the counter.”

Her eyes blink open. “Which counter?”

“The island between the stove and refrigerator.” She scrambles to the island and climbs onto the counter. Her long legs swing in front of her as the twinkling lights highlight her hair. She’s stunning. With each step, my balls ache because they’re so swollen with need.

But as much as I want her lips around my dick, I need to pleasure her. She's giving me a gift. A gift I didn't expect to receive, and in return, I'm going to make her lose her fucking mind. "Feet on the counter, legs spread wide, and ass on the edge. I want to see every inch of my pink pussy."

Her eyes glow with lust as she follows my command with her arms wrapped around her legs, holding them open.

"So perfect. So sweet." I swipe my finger between her lips and slide them through her desire. "And so wet. Does being all laid out in front of me turn you on?"

"Yes, Sir."

"How much?"

"It makes me so wet. My lips are so swollen." She bites her bottom lip as her legs shake. "My clit is throbbing for your touch. I want to come so bad."

"That's too bad." I stand inches from her but don't get any closer. I study her like I have all day. Which is bullshit. As she said, she's the one in control, and I'm not going to last long. Seconds pass. Then, a minute. She rotates her ass, grinding her sex on the counter as she tries to find relief.

"I didn't tell you that you could pleasure yourself." I smack her thigh, causing her to gasp, and her eyes flash with shock and a layer of anger.

"Ouch!"

"Do you want me to touch you?"

"No. Not now." She scrambles sideways. Like I'm going to let her go.

This is what I want. Excitement floods over me. I don't want any submissive. I want a bratty submissive. "Not so fast." I grip her leg and hold her in place.

"Asshole. I wanted your fingers on my clit, not your palm on my leg."

I tilt my head sideways. "Show me."

“What?”

“Prove to me that you don’t want me anymore. Let me see that pussy.” I open her legs and survey the drenched countertop. “I think you get off on denying me and pretending you don’t want my touch.”

“I don’t.” Her chest heaves with each ragged breath that she sucks down. Yeah, my baby loves to fight as much as I do.

“Yes, you do.” I twirl my index finger around her clit, along her swollen lips, between her outer lips, and around the quivering hole. “I think you like this more than you want to admit, don’t you? You want my fingers deep inside your pussy and my mouth eating you until your hips are bucking off this counter.”

“Fuck,” she whimpers and stares with a mixture of frustration, anger, and lust. “Yes.”

“Yes, what?” I lighten my touch.

“Yes, please, fuck my pussy.”

“Ah, too bad. I think I’d rather you watch.” I yank down my shorts, dropping them to my feet, and kick them out of the way. “You see what you do to me?” I wrap my hand around my dick, leisurely stroking over and around my pulsating hardness and cupping my balls before returning to the head.

“Yes.”

“Do you think about my hard cock pounding into that tight hole? Sending you flying?”

“Yes. Yes, please.” Tears form at the corners of her eyes. That’s my girl. Beg. Beg when it’s the last thing you want to do. I love it.

I swipe my thumb over the oozing tip and shove my thumb into her mouth. “Suck on it like a good girl. Show me how good you’ll be at pleasing me.”

Her mouth wraps around me, and my dick screams in disappointment. Sadly, my game is denying both of us what

we want. I'm not going to be able to keep this up much longer. This woman is all mine. To do with as I please, and I'm going to please the fuck out of her.

I rip my thumb from her mouth, grab her ass, yank it off the counter, and lean down. As I inhale her scent, my eyes roll back into my head.

"Let me see what a greedy cunt you have." I tongue fuck her center while reveling in her lusty growls of approval. Her sweetness floods my face as her sex bites down at my tongue. I love every ravenous thing about this woman.

My heart thunders in my chest. I love her. *Lord, this is crazy.* I pull back and twirl my tongue around her clit, tugging it between my lips and sucking. Her mouth hangs open as she strains against me, seeking the release she desperately wants. And right then and there, I know. This is right. It doesn't matter what anyone says. We belong together.

"Oh, my God. Please, don't stop." She uses her heels to press into the countertop and thrusts her pussy into my face. *Not so fast, beautiful.* I continue tugging on her clit, taking it as far as it'll go. And then, I attack the same place on the side of her tight bundle of nerves.

"Oh! Jesus! Yes!" she screams until it echoes off the cement around us and slams her center into my face. "Don't fucking stop!"

That's it. Fuck me. Demand more from me.

Moments later, she relaxes, and I straighten, drop her ass to the counter, and pierce her to the hilt. "Yes-s-s," I hiss as my eyes roll back into my head and my thighs shake.

She gasps as her body tightens around me, and I force my eyes open. I don't want to miss a thing.

"You feel like heaven." I don't give her time to speak or adjust, as I take everything I've denied myself. I pound into her, driving us both higher. Each gasp and whimper falling from her lips sends me farther out of control. Her tits bounce

and jiggle with each lunge. “Baby, I can’t stop. I can’t slow down for you. I’ve got to fuck you.”

“Please,” she gasps. “Don’t stop.” She shakes her head, causing her hair to cascade around her as it falls down to the counter. “Don’t ever stop. Fuck me. Claim me. Destroy me.”

“Jesus.” I remove a hand from her hip and haul her upward, fisting my hand into her hair until she squeals. “You’re mine. If I ever sense that another man has touched you, I’ll rip his dick off and force him to eat it. Then, I’ll drop you to all fours and fuck you raw. Do you understand?” Sweat drips down my face. “I’ll ruin you for anyone else if you ever leave me.”

“I won’t.” She shakes her head. “You have nothing to worry about. I’m yours from yesterday to eternity.”

“Good girl.” I clasp my lips over the slender column of her neck and bit down as her pussy sucks my dick. “I’m going to come so hard and so much, I’m going to coat the inside of this cunt.”

“Yes, please. Please, fuck me. Please, Callan. Don’t fucking stop.” Her entire body shakes as she comes again.

“Fucking greedy girl,” I growl as tremors rack my thighs and balls, and spasms of cum shoot out in jerking streams as I fill her sex. Even then, I don’t stop. I keep stroking deep inside her, shoving the semen that slides to her edge back inside of her.

My thighs shake as I pull back, having never fucked someone with such intensity. She gasps for air, and my heart lurches in my chest. She’s mine. I’m never letting her go. “Are you on birth control?”

“I was, but I missed several because of all my moving.” Fear crosses her face as if she’s afraid I’ll be mad.

“Good.” I slowly pull out of her sex.

When my cum drips out, I use my index and middle fingers to shove it back inside of her. I want her knocked up

and round with my baby. I've waited long enough to claim what's mine. I push her back onto the counter with my fingers still inside of her.

"What're you doing?" She tries to shift upright, but I shake my head.

"Babe, if you move, I'll spank you."

Her mouth hangs open as I finger fuck her harder. With each thrust, I stare into her eyes and stroke over her G spot. Her eyes widen. "What're you doing?"

"I'm going to make my little girl come again with my seed inside of you. When those sweet walls of yours convulse, it'll keep my baby inside of you."

"Oh!" Realization appears and disappears as desire takes over.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

London

“London?” The sound is muffled through the floorboard.

What was that? The second I wake up, I jolt upright and glance around the room. Two enormous dressers with matching end tables. A mirror that covers half of the wall. Callan laid back against the pillow with his arms propped behind his head and a cocky grin on his face.

“London?” The sound grows louder, as if she’s climbing back up the stairs.

Henley is looking for me. My heart skips a beat as I search the room for an exit strategy but don’t come up with one. All I see is our reflection in the mirror. Pink tinges up my cheeks as flashes of our bodies entwined on the patio, in the pool, and in the middle of the night in his bed pass through my head.

Lord, the man has stamina, and I look like shit. *Jesus.* I smash my hair down to my head and cringe. This is not a good look. I shift my leg to the edge of the bed. “I need to figure out how to get past Henley and take a shower. I look like death.”

“No, you don’t.” His voice is a low grumble as he grabs my arm and pulls me down until I’m draped over him, and his palms are caressing my skin. When his cock tightens against my belly, I moan and rock into him. He laughs. “That’s my greedy angel.”

“Shut up.” I roll my eyes and swat at his chest.

“Good morning, love. Did you get enough sleep?” His eyes dance with merriment as heat settles in my core.

“For what?” I waggle my eyebrows and nuzzle his jaw. I should be ashamed that I want him again, but I’m not. I’m dying to experience all the things my body can do. All the things he can make my body do.

“My little angel is a naughty little devil, isn’t she? Always hungry for more.” His fingers slide between my ass cheeks and dive between my lips. “Always so wet and ready.”

“Please,” I whimper and rotate my hips in a circle, drawing him deeper.

“Dad!” The doorknob jiggles as Henley’s voice comes from the other side of the door.

“Shit!” I lurch my hips upward, only to be met with his steel grip digging into my skin.

“Don’t move.” His hot eyes meet mine, and I convulse from head to toe. “That’s it, angel.” He smiles and dives a second finger into my sex, and I spread my thighs wider. “That’s a good girl. Give me that tight cunt.”

“Dad! Are you asleep?” The doorknob and the entire door move as Henley tries to open the door.

“No, I’m not asleep.” He fists my hair, pulling me down until his mouth is smashed against mine. His tongue twirls around mine, all while increasing his intensity.

“Have you seen London? Did you tell her to leave? I swear, if you did something to hurt her feelings or make her cry, I’m going to be so mad. You know London is my best friend, and she’s never done anything but—”

“Oh!” My eyes roll back into my head as I thrash against him like a wanton hussy who should care that she came with her friend listening on the other side of the door while getting finger fucked by her dad, but I don’t care. At least not for this second.

“Did you say something?” Henley’s voice is quieter as she appears to stop and listen.

He slides his fingers out of my sex and sucks them one by one into his mouth. “She’s coming.” He winks, and I crawl off him, slamming my eyes shut. The man is not only insatiable, but he’s also incorrigible.

“What?”

“London and I are having a long talk about her future. Give her fifteen minutes. No....” He smiles as he climbs off the bed, dragging me with him. “Make that thirty minutes, and we’ll be done.”

“Okay.” She pauses and then gasps. “Oh, my God. Okay. Okay. Oh, my God.” She sounds like she’s hyperventilating. “Okay, Um.... Shit. Okay.” She knocks on the door. “London, if you’re not okay, tell me. Right now. And I’ll break down the door because I have no qualms about knocking him in the junk so you can get away.”

I lace my fingers through his. “I win. She loves me more.”

“Sassy little brat.” He clutches the back of my neck. “I always win.” He turns his head toward the door. “What if she’s hurting me?”

“Too fucking bad. London, are you okay? Is this okay with you? I’m serious. I need to know that squeal was a good one and not you getting hurt.” Her voice sounds a little panicked at the end.

I giggle as he shakes his head and growls. “I told you I won.” I wink at him. “Henley, I’m fine.” I cup his cheek, loving the feel of his five o’clock shadow against my palm. “Everything’s good, I promise.”

“Okay. Twenty-nine minutes. Or I’m busting the door in.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” He kisses my swollen lips.

“You’re probably right. I’m not sure my innocent brain is ready to see my dad and best friend humping like bunnies in the middle of the room.”

As soon as the sounds of her feet disappearing fade, he hauls me to his chest and threads his hand through my hair. “She was going to find out anyway when we went downstairs, and I told her.”

“I know.” My voice is muffled against his chest. “I mean, I guess I knew.”

He pulls back and holds my shoulders. “If this isn’t what you want, tell me now. I realize I can be a little high-handed.”

I arch my eyebrows as I lace my arms around his neck. “A little?”

He groans, “I’m serious, London. Tell me. If you don’t want this, I need to know.” He swallows hard as worry covers his features. “I realize it’s a lot to ask of you to change your relationship with Henley. And I understand if you’re worried about what people will say about us. If you aren’t in this forever. Tell me now. I can’t promise that I’ll survive or that I won’t do everything in my power to make you change your mind, but once we step outside this door, I plan to tell everyone that we’re together.”

I stroke his neck. “On one condition.”

“Anything you want, angel. All you have to do is ask, and I’ll hand you the world.”

“Why?”

His face scrunched together. “Why, what?”

“Why do you want to be with me? Is it because I’m young and I’ll make a good trophy girlfriend to show off to your friends?” I spread my legs and grind my clit on his solid thigh. “Do you want everyone to think you aren’t getting older?”

He smacks my ass. “You’re one sassy wench, but that’s not why I want to be with you. Actually, I can’t say I’m excited to have people thinking you’re my daughter. I don’t want to have to explain that repeatedly only to make myself feel older and pathetic.”

When he sighs, my stomach clenches. What if my teasing makes him change his mind? My breathing goes shallow as fears fill me with dread.

“But it doesn’t matter. I can’t walk away. I’m not with you because I’m afraid of growing old. I’m with you because I’m afraid of growing old without you. You’re constantly in my dreams and in my thoughts. I love your strength. Your determination. Your loyalty and friendship. Your willingness to stand up to me and flip me off with a fuck you on your lips.”

He kisses me gently. “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted in a woman yet couldn’t have. And it made me angry and bitter. I was filled with self-loathing and took it out on you. I’m sorry. It wasn’t your fault. I made you feel like it was. All you were doing was being you. The woman I love with every breath I take. And I promise to treat you like the queen that you are. No matter how anyone else sees us. I can’t promise it’ll be easy. People will say rude things to you—”

I press my finger to his lips. “I don’t care what anyone says to me. I stand up for the people I love and would do anything for them.”

“I know.” One corner of my mouth rises. “That’s what I love about you.”

“Even when you hated it?” Happiness swirls throughout my body. I never thought this would happen, and for it to happen out of the blue is rocking me to my core.

He laughs. “Yes, even when I hated it.”

“I love you, Callan. And yes, I want to be with you. You’ll never know how much I want that.”

“You just have to show me.” He kisses my nose. “But first, we need to talk to Henley and make sure she’s okay with us being together.”

“And my grandmother.” My shoulders are tense. That conversation might not go over well.

“Don’t worry about Millicent. She’s already on board. She’s the one who told me to get my shit together.”

“Wow. I didn’t see that coming.”

“But you’ll see yourself coming in about two minutes.”
He snaps on the bathroom light. “By the way, Gram said you were crying yourself to sleep over me.”

“Really?” I tilt my head and stay rooted in the doorway.
“Do I look like the kind of girl who cries over a man who needed to get his head out of his ass?”

“Nope.” He tugs my fingers, dragging me into the room.
“You look like the kind of girl who cries when she gets a good banging for being a bad girl.”

I’d smack his chest and tell him that he’s dreaming, but why? I’d prefer that he’d make promises he was going to cash in on.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Callan

As I jog down the stairs, Henley steps out of the kitchen and stands on the threshold, waiting. I want her to be happy for us, but I'll settle for non-hostile. At least toward London. I'm her dad. I've met hateful, sullen, and rude before.

"Well...." She slaps her hands on her hips and stares at me in question. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

I chuckle, march over to her, wrap my arms around her stiff shoulders, and kiss her forehead. "It's funny getting a lecture from you."

"It's not funny." She shifts backward and away from my grasp. "This is my best friend." She waves her hand in the air. "The one you insulted daily and didn't want me to hang out with." Her eyes flash with anger. "And now, you're messing with her head for no reason. What's this for?" She crosses her arms over her chest. "Is this some kind of sick revenge for her talking back to you?"

"Henley, that's ridiculous."

"Stop," she growls, turns on her heel, and stomps to the kitchen. "I don't like that you're intentionally doing something to hurt someone I care about." She shakes her head and snatches a glass out of the cabinet. "She has feelings, you know."

"Henley." I grip her shoulders and spin her around. "I'm not doing this to hurt London. That's the last thing I want to do. I realize I've given you both mixed signals, and I apologize for that. I've had feelings for London for a while now, and I hated it. I thought it was wrong and pushed her away. And I'm not going to lie, I loathed how she let her brother put her in dangerous situations, with this last time being the most irresponsible."

My jaw flexes as memories of that day flash through my mind. “I’ll never forgive him for selling her virginity to get his ass out of trouble.” I swallow hard over the lump in my throat and close my eyes. “I’ll never forget walking into that club and praying I wasn’t too late and that nothing bad had happened to her. I would’ve never forgiven myself.”

“Callan, don’t.”

My eyes fly open when I hear her voice. It’s like the balm to my pain. As she strolls across the kitchen with a T-shirt that barely covers her tits, my heart skips a beat. Her hair is piled on top of her head, giving her that bedhead look that makes me want to take her back to bed and fuck her again. And those shorts. They show off too much.

“It was meant to be you. And this was how it was supposed to happen.”

I arch an eyebrow. “I was supposed to want to wring your neck for almost having sex with Christian Bailey?”

“But I didn’t.” She glares and crosses her arms over her chest. “And if you say you’re going to bring it up every day, I’m not sure I want to be in a relationship with you.”

“A relationship?” Henley squeaks as my stomach churns.

I’ve got to get my head on straight. We weren’t together, so I can’t—

Fuck that.

In two steps, I’m at her side and tip her chin up with my index finger. “I don’t share, and the thought of it makes me want to punch something.” I press my fingertips into her chin and jaw. “And you don’t have an option. You’ve got me. All jealous, possessive, 6’3” of me. So, what’re you going to do about it?”

Her eyes fill with lust as she bites her bottom lip. “Get used to it.”

“That’s better.” I lean down and growl in her ear, “And if I ever see you in shorts these small or in a T-shirt that shows your nipples in public, I’m going to punish you.”

“Duly noted.” She shivers as her body vibrates next to me. When I rock back on my heels, I find her eyes dancing with laughter. Lord, what have I gotten myself into?

“Seriously, guys, answer me,” Henley says with a pout. “What’s going on? Is this some kind of crazy hookup, or is this serious? And what exactly went down at that club?”

I hook my arm around London’s shoulders and pull her to my chest. “I’ve never been more serious about anything in my life.” I kiss the top of her head as I inhale the scent of my shampoo on her. That’s better. I don’t even care if it makes me seem like a dog pissing on its property line. I like knowing she’s wearing my scent. I meet Henley’s eyes. “Besides being a parent, which I hope happens again in the future.”

“Whoa.” She yanks a chair out from under the table and falls onto it. “This is blowing my mind.” Her eyes are wide as she looks from me to London. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes. It’s what I want. I’m sorry that it came out of the blue. I mean, it’s kind of coming from out of the blue for me as well. I’ve had feelings for your father for a long time, but I thought he hated me. Finding out his actions toward me were based on his not wanting to have feelings for me and failing miserably is still a shock. So, there’s no way I could prepare you for the news.”

“Yeah.” She shakes her head. “I’m not sure what to say. I mean...” She shrugs. “You both look happy together, and I want you both to be happy, so that’s good. But I’m not sure how this works. I mean, are you still my best friend when you become my stepmom?” Her face fills with heat. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have taken things that far. I don’t want my saying you’re getting married to ruin things.”

“You aren’t going to ruin anything.” I rub my thumb over London’s upper arm. Even through the thin fabric, I feel

her heat. “I’m not going anywhere. I love London, and I want a long-term future with her.” I plan to marry her soon, but I don’t want to push her away by going too fast.

I glanced at London out of the corner of my eye. “We’ve not discussed everything in detail, but we’re together, and I don’t intend to keep that a secret from anyone. I also expect her to sleep in my bed where she belongs from now on. But it won’t change your relationship with each other.”

“This is crazy.” Henley rubs her face. “I woke up this morning, saw that London’s stuff was gone, and thought you’d sent her away. But what I wake up to is my dad getting busy with my best friend and her moving into your room.” She shakes her head as if she’s trying to reboot. “But I’ll get used to it. I’m not going to fight it or cause any problems because if this is what you both want, I’m all in as well.”

We spend a few moments filling her in on what happened at the club, and to say she’s shocked is an understatement. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me the truth.”

“I couldn’t tell you the truth.” London grips her shoulder. “I didn’t want to lose you as my best friend.”

“You wouldn’t have.” They wrap their arms around each other in a hug, holding on for several seconds as they walk through what could’ve happened.

Henley squeezes London and turns to me. “Thank you for listening to me and going to rescue London. I don’t know what I would’ve done if anything would’ve happened to her.”

I pop my neck and push all negative thoughts out of my head. This day is too important to me to focus on things that didn’t happen. Taking care of her and loving her is the only thing I can do. And I intend to do it every day for the rest of my life.

“I paid for Jared to go to rehab, and a crew will start on Millicent’s renovation work on Monday.”

“Dad,” Henley sighs. “Thank you so much. I didn’t think you were listening to a word I said. That is so sweet and

thoughtful of you.”

“Thank you.” I thank Henley for her compliment but never take my eyes off London.

When I place my lips against hers, she closes her eyes and sinks into me. I relish the softness of her mouth, loving that I can touch her whenever I want. Which is going to be a constant need. This was easier than I expected. And two of the most important people know we’re together and aren’t complaining. That’s more than I could’ve hoped for.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Callan

I'm not into birds singing, the sun shining, and green grass growing bullshit, but I'm not going to lie; being in a relationship with London feels like the best spring day on steroids.

In my wildest dreams, I never thought it would happen or that Henley would be okay with us being together. The only problem is—she's too busy for her own health and doesn't have a moment of free time for me. And I'm a greedy man. I want all of her attention on me. I've waited years to enter another relationship and pined for London for over two years. I deserve to have my cake and eat it whenever I want.

Sadly. I'm at work, and she's in class.

“Knock. Knock.”

I glance up from the report I'm reviewing and nod at my brother. “Hey, come on in.”

He shuts the door behind him and strolls over to the chair opposite mine. “What's up? I haven't seen you in the office for two days. It's not like you to skip out on work.”

“I was busy.” I lean back in my chair and tap my ink pen on the desk.

He eases into his seat and rests his ankle on the opposite knee. “With?”

I shrug, enjoying the thought of stringing him along. “This and that.”

He glares. “You're never evasive. What's going on? Are you sick? Did you go to the doctor and find out you have some grave illness? I would hate that to happen as my son likes you.”

“Asshole.” I jerk upright, causing my chair to squeak. “Everything’s fine. I have a clear bill of health.”

His eyes widen as worry crosses his face. “Is something wrong with Henley? Did some guy mess with her? Tell me who, and I’ll take care of it.”

“Stop.” I raise my hands. “You’re turning into a drama king. I’m fine. Henley is fine.” When he starts to speak, I interrupt him before the first syllable is out. “The deal with Jax is in full swing. You’re turning into a girl. Maybe you should get laid.”

“Bite me.” His eyes slowly widen as the realization hits. “Who’re you seeing? I heard you were at the club the other night.” He shakes his head. “Please don’t tell me you’re with Sienna. She’s not your type. Despite what you think, you won’t be satisfied with a submissive type. You need the thrill of the chase. A woman who stands up to you. Not the ‘Yes, Sir, whatever you say, Sir,’ type of woman that you think you’re into. I know you.”

I smile as what he describes is London to a T. She fights me at every turn, and I crave it. I adore her strength and her sass. The only thing better would be if....

Don’t. She’s not ready for that and likely never would be.

“It’s a long story, but I’m with London.”

“No, shit.” He drops his foot to the ground with a loud smack. “I can’t believe it. I didn’t think you’d ever have the balls to pursue her.” He smiles. “Congratulations, old man. You’ve still got it.”

“Shut up.” I roll my eyes. There’s nothing like your sibling giving you shit to make your day perfect. But I don’t care. The day is perfect. I woke up to London in my arms and had a fifteen-minute quicky in the shower before she had to leave for practice.

But that’s the problem. I don’t want only fifteen minutes.

As I explain what happened over the last few weeks to London, he's as appalled as I was with her brother's actions. "And at least, this time, London is onboard. If Jared doesn't get his act together, she's restricted her involvement with him, and so has her grandmother. They've realized that enabling him isn't helping the situation." I tent my hands together on my desk. "Not that either one of them will ignore him if he shows up changed. I expect both to move heaven and earth to support him if he gets clean and leaves the street life behind."

He shakes his head. "Are you okay with that? He put her in an unforgivable situation."

"Yes, he did. But he's her brother, and I have a feeling he's been put into some unforgivable situations himself. I don't think he would've risked London's life if his wasn't in danger. But time will tell. If he takes this opportunity to turn it around, I'll let him breathe and speak to her. Eventually. But not without a PI watching his every move for the foreseeable future. I'm not letting either her or her grandmother be placed in a dangerous situation again."

"Dude." He shakes his head. "I've never seen you give a shit about anyone but Henley. It's kind of nice to see. It gives me hope." His eyes grow dark as he evades my gaze. "Never mind. I'm not looking for a relationship, but I'm happy for you."

"Thanks. She's amazing. I love her strength and her determination. I love how stubborn she is, and I've never met anyone who's a harder worker." I bite my bottom lip. "But she works too hard."

He leans back in his chair. "So, how do you feel about all the guys in the football stadium seeing her ass every week at the game?"

"Murderous." I launch out of the chair. "That's it. She works too hard because she can't pay for her schooling. I'm calling the university right now and paying for everything. That way, she doesn't have to worry about her scholarship."

She can quit cheer and the café and spend more time with me. That way, she can graduate sooner, and we can start a family.”

“Good idea.” Andrew chuckles. “You aren’t getting any younger.” He stands and brushes the creases out of his pants.

I frown and cross my arms over my chest. “Do you think I’m too old to have another kid?”

“Nah, man.”

Anxiety washes over me. “No, I’m serious. Do you think it’s foolish to want to have more children? London is only twenty, but I’m 39. What if she decides raising a child with me is a bad idea?”

He arches his eyebrows and smirks. “And that’s going to matter to you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He laughs as he walks toward the door. After he opens it, he turns to face me. “You’ve decided to pay for her schooling, drop her from cheer, and quit her job in the span of 30 seconds. If you decide you want to knock her up, you aren’t going to ask her what she wants, will you?”

I shove my hands into my pockets as they ball into fists. I’d rather punch him in the mouth, except we’re not teens anymore, and we run a business together. But I’d love to smack that smug smirk off his face.

“Yes, I’ll ask her. That’s different. She’s exhausted from working so many hours and told me she doesn’t enjoy cheering anymore. So, she’s not going to care if I make it easier for her. Why would she? This way, she can focus on school, the center, and me.” I shrug.

“Keep telling yourself that.” He winks, spins on his heel, and shuts the door with a snap.

He’s clueless. He’s not seen how drained she is when she wakes up or how stressed she’s been about money. And making it easier on her is a gift I can give her without any real effort.

I snatch up the phone and make the first call.

Chapter Forty

London

Henley throws her arm around my shoulders the second I step out of class and into the hallway. “How was class?”

“Good.” I wrap my arm around her waist as we walk side by side, dodging the crowd on our way toward the exit.

“I think I aced my class. I was worried since I didn’t have time to study this morning because....” Heat floods my cheeks. Stop. She doesn’t want to hear about the shower. I cough and clear my throat. “Never mind.”

“Please.” Henley laughs and squeezes me tighter. “I’m glad you and my dad are together, and I’m not going freak out because you had sex this morning rather than studying. All I can say is, good job.”

“I’m not sure I’m ever going to be comfortable enough to flat-out say we were having sex when you ask. Let alone volunteer the information.” I shove open the door, and we step into the sunshine. The blue sky is pristine, without one cloud to mar the view.

She stops and drops her arms as the door smacks shut behind us. “You’ll get comfortable. You’re my best friend, and we tell each other everything. So, if you get chased and banged out in the woods one day, I expect you to tell me. If you need to leave out who did the banging, that’s fine. Even if it is my dad and uncle who’s doing you.” A guy wearing a backward baseball cap and cargo shorts stops in the middle of the sidewalk with his mouth open and stares.

Henley glares at him. “Move on. This doesn’t concern you.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” His face flushes a bright red as he skirts around us and disappears into the building.

“I’m serious.” She grabs my upper arm. “This is not going to change us. You have to promise me that.”

“I promise. You’re right. I don’t want to have secrets between us.” I smile and bite my bottom lip. “I was thoroughly serviced this morning before being dropped off at cheer practice.” I leave out the, by your father, section, but I’ll get there.

“That’s better.” She beams.

“Can you drop me off at work?”

“Of course.” We turn and walk down the sidewalk toward the parking lot. “Do you need a ride after work?”

“No. Your dad will take care of me after work.” My cheeks hurt from smiling.

“Epic.” Tears fill her eyes as she laughs. “See, I told you we’d be fine. And I’m glad you have a ride later because I’m studying late with a guy from class again.”

“Studying?”

“Yes.” She waggles her eyebrows. “We’re meeting at the library and having sex in one of the study rooms. I figure if you could hide out in one, I could get busy in one. It’s freaking hot.”

“I see the appeal.” I stop in mid-step. Callan’s limo is parked at the edge of the sidewalk.

He climbs out of the back, and my panties flood. The man is walking sin. Tall, dark hair with a sprinkling of silver at his temples, muscular, commanding, and eyes hard enough to make me want to beg for forgiveness. Even when I haven’t done anything wrong. But I sure want to. I bite my lips together. “What’re you doing here?”

“I’m picking you up.” His jaw flexes as he shifts his attention to Henley. “Hello, baby.”

“Daddy.” She steps up to him and kisses his cheek.

“Did you have a good day?”

“Yes, I did. I was telling London I’d be late tonight. I’m studying at the library.”

“Have a good night. I’ll take care of London.”

“I’m sure you will.” She giggles. “You two have a good night.” She waves as she spins around and heads towards her car.

“Why’re you here?”

“Why were you letting that guy eye you up and down?” He snatches my arm and deposits me in the back. “And in that outfit.” His teeth grind together. “Do you want me to snap?”

He leans over me and slams the door shut.

“It’s a skirt and a T-shirt. I’m more covered in this than in my cheer uniform.” I toss my bookbag on the floor, cross my arms over my chest, and slump against the cushions. The least he could’ve done was kissed me and said he was happy to see me, but no—he had to start with the lectures.

“I don’t like it.”

“Too bad.” I cross my legs and ignore him by watching out the window as we drive away from the building.

He grabs my chin and twists my head toward him. “Did you know that guy? Is he someone you dated?”

“No.” I clamp my mouth shut and refuse to meet his eyes.

“London,” he growls. “You’ll wear clothes that cover more than your ass when you’re with me.”

I snap my eyes to his as anger flares through me. “Then maybe I won’t be with you. How would you like that?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” His nostrils flare as his eyes drag over me, taking in my entire body before returning to my eyes. “Is he someone you’d rather be with?”

“No. He’s not. I don’t even know him, but instead of greeting me by telling me you love me and kissing me until

my toes curl, you treated me like a little kid. And you know I'm going to bite back.”

His lips twitch as the corners of his eyes wrinkle. “I'm sorry, baby.” He fists my hair and lifts my head to face his. “I missed you. All I did was think about you all day. So much so that I couldn't wait another second, so I dropped work and picked you up. Only to see some young punk practically leg-humping you, and I saw red. I don't want to lose you.”

“That's better.” I wrap my arms around his neck and accept his lips against mine. His tongue sweeps into my depths until our tongues desperately dive and thrust against each other.

I wrap my leg around his and press my clit into his thigh, but it's not enough. It'll be hours before I get off work and can spend time with him. And then, it'll only be a few minutes before I must go to bed.

Not for the first time, I wish I was only going to classes and the center. I don't want to leave the kids I've been mentoring. But the rest? The rest I'd love to drop so I could spend all night letting him tease, taste, and love me until I passed out from pleasure and not exhaustion.

“I love you, London.”

“I love you, too.”

He runs his thumb over my cheekbone. “So, tell me, why was that guy so interested in you and Henley's conversation?”

Heat covers me from head to toe, and I can't meet his gaze.

“London,” he growls.

“Henley said she wanted me to tell her everything as always.” I bite my bottom lip. “Including if you chased me in the woods and banged me. The guy was already interested, and then she said, even if her uncle also got in on the action.”

“Shit.” He stiffens against me and eases back into the cushions. “I didn’t know Henley knew about that.”

“Umm....” I clear my throat. “We both did. We heard you and Andrew talking about it years ago and....” I lick my lips. “I started researching everything I could about primal chase scenes. I didn’t like thinking about you with another woman, but the thought of you chasing and catching me has provided more orgasms than you can imagine. I’ve read about it. I’ve watched it. I’ve imagined it....” I shiver as I smell the scent of the woods and his cologne.

“You’re serious?” His pupils are dark like they’re two pieces of coal as his heartbeat pulses the skin at the base of his neck.

“Yes, I would love to try something like that someday.”

“You’re killing me.” His hand slides up my leg and inches closer to my sex.

“I’ve got to go to work.”

“Forget about it.” He rips my panties off in one motion, spins me to face the front of the vehicle, and spreads my legs wide while settling me onto his lap. His breath is hot against my ear. “I want to feel how hot and wet that makes you.”

“So wet.” I rub my ass against his cock. His fingers slice between my outer lips and through the wetness. “Such a dirty girl, thinking naughty thoughts.” He smacks my clit with his fingers.

“Shit.” My pelvis shoots sideways to escape the sharp sting, but it does no good as his steel arm holds me tight against his body as he inserts two fingers into my sex. “Such a dirty little cunt, trying to get away from me. But you’re going to stay right here and get punished.” His arm goes around my neck and holding me tight against his body. “How bad do you want it?”

“So bad.”

He clamps tighter and finger fucks me while licking and biting my neck. “You’re such a dirty little cunt, aren’t you? Thinking about me while touching yourself.” He slows his movements and lightens his grip. I gasp for air as my head spins. “Yes. God, yes. I’ve been so bad.”

He removes his fingers from my sex. “Such a dirty little slut watching porn and playing with your pussy.” He runs his hand up my body until he reaches my mouth. “Suck them and taste how naughty you are.”

I suck down on his digits as new moisture floods between my legs and soaks his pants.

“It tastes so good, doesn’t it?”

I hum as he fucks my mouth with the same intensity that he plundered my sex. “Have you been waiting all this time for me to claim you? To make you cum?”

“Yes, please.”

“I’m going to give it to you so rough that you won’t be able to look at another man.” He releases me, jerks his belt off, releases his cock, and positions me over his erection. “It’s time to punish bad girls who listen to conversations they shouldn’t.”

I gasp as he slams me into him, and his forearm presses into my throat. “Jesus.” My voice is raspy as I try to talk over the pressure. The man is dangerous and oh so hot. This is better than anything I could’ve ever dreamed up. “Spread those pussy lips as I fuck you.”

Unable to do anything but obey him, I do what he commands. His cock splits me in two.

As I open my outer lips, I watch as he fills me, and my sex coats his length, making my mouth water. I want to suck his cock as he fucks me but it’s impossible. Minutes pass as he plows into me, taking my air, giving me air, rubbing, and pinching my clit until I’m screaming. My body feels like it’s being destroyed. But it’s amazing.

“Whose pussy is this?” He smacks my clit.

“Yours. Always yours.”

“That’s right. It’s mine to do with what I want.” His arm closes off my airway as his thighs stiffen, and his movements become erratic and drive me over the edge. Stars flash behind my eyes as he lets go.

I gasp as the walls of my sex convulse. “Fuck. Yes. Yes, oh fuck. Yes, Jesus. Fuck.”

“Fu-u-u-uck,” he grunts as his body spasms under me. The world explodes around me. I’m not sure I’m prepared for this level of pleasure. He cups my cheek and turns my face to face him. “I love you, princess.”

“I love you.” I lick my lips and look down at the mess I made of my clothes. “I’ve got to change.” I glance at my watch and scramble off his lap, straightening my shirt as I go. “I need to get to work. I’m already going to be late.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He stuffs his cock back into his pants and straightens his belt.

I glance out the window. We’re outside of his house. “I have to worry about it. I’m going to get fired. Why did you bring me here?”

“You don’t have a job. I called the café and told them you quit. I also called the school and paid for your tuition and took you off the cheer team. You can keep the job at the library if you want.” He tucks in the white tail of his button-down shirt. “And the center, of course. But this way, you aren’t so tired, and we can be together more.”

“You did what?” My mouth hangs open as I stare at him in horror.

“You don’t have to worry about money. I took care of everything.”

My heart thunders in my chest as my hands curl into fists. “By not talking to me?”

“I figured you’d appreciate it.” He shrugs as if it never occurred to him to consider I might want to have a say in the matter.

“Appreciate it?” I bite out. “You thought I’d appreciate you running my entire life without giving me an option?” I open the door and step outside. “Well, that’s not the case.” I grab my cell phone and call an Uber as I slam the door shut.

“You aren’t going anywhere.” He stomps in front of the limo and grabs my arm.

“Yes, I am.” I bite out between clenched teeth.

“No—”

“Get your hands off me.”

He drops his hand to his side.

“I’ll decide later if we ever see each other again, but right now, if you touch me, I’m calling the police and getting a restraining order.” I march several feet away from him and cross my arms over my chest.

“London.” He reaches out his hand.

“Get back.” If he touches me, I’m going to wring his fucking neck.

“Yes, Ma’am.” He nods and bites his bottom lip. “I’ll—”

“Say another word, and I’ll throat punch you.”

Chapter Forty-One

Thirty Minutes Later

London

“Come on in, dear. Phyllis is still at work.” Gram meets me at the front door of her friend’s apartment, ushering me inside. The living room is small and tidy with secondhand or older furnishings. The back of the sofas and chairs are covered by crocheted doilies that keep the fabric clean. The house smells like lemon cleaner and cookies.

“Are you sure it’s, okay?” I stand inside the door, rubbing my hands together. “I don’t want Phyllis to get into trouble.” Gram moved back in while Callan had the new flooring installed.

“It’s fine. There are no stipulations for short visits.”

Yeah, but what am I going to do about long-term arrangements? It’s not like I can stay with Henley and not see Callan. And being with Callan feels like a sellout of my independence. I kick off my shoes and drop my backpack at my feet.

Where am I going to stay? Gram’s house won’t be done for several weeks. Go back to the library? That’s pathetic. I’m 20 years old. I should have enough money to get my own place.

“Have a seat.” She waves to the brown plaid sofa and settles on one of the blue recliners. She pours tea from the pitcher into one of the cups on the coffee table. “Here you go.” She smiles reassuringly. “You sounded upset on the phone. What’s going on?”

I take a sip of the tea and sigh. The drink is the perfect blend of bitter and sweet. “Everything was going good with Callan, and then, the next second, it all ended.”

She frowns and taps her fingertips on the arms of the chair. “I don’t understand. When I spoke with you last, you said Callan was great, and I’ve always known you’ve been smitten with him. So how did it go wrong in such a short amount of time?”

Callan: You need to listen to me.

I hit mute on my phone and set it down with a slight clink as the clock on the wall clicks the seconds away. That’s the tenth message I’ve received from him since leaving. But I’m not ready to talk to him. At least not yet.

“We were...” My face heats as the vision of him playing my body to perfection takes centerstage until.... “What we were doing isn’t important.” I cross my arms over my chest. “He called the university and paid for my classes, and then he removed me from the cheer squad and told the café I wasn’t returning.”

“I see.” She licks her paper-thin lips. The lines around her eyes are more pronounced than a few weeks ago. Renewed anger fills me. My brother’s selfishness has caused her to age. I straighten my shoulders. And now I’m here adding to her burden. That’s unforgivable.

I run my hands over my skirt. I’ll figure something out. “Never mind.” I brace my hands on the cushions and stand.

“London ...” Her eyes flash with indignation. “Sit back down so we can finish this conversation.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Heat covers my cheeks as I settle back into the cushions.

“So, this man you care about tried to make your life easier by paying for some things and providing you with more time for your studies and for the two of you to be together.”

“Yes.” I grit my teeth together. “But he did it without asking and treated me like a child. I won’t be treated like I’m not his equal.”

“Did you want to keep doing those activities?”

“No.” I realize this makes me sound stupid, but it’s the principle that matters—not the specifics. “I didn’t want to work at the café or cheer anymore. The only reason I was doing either was because I needed to pay for school. I’m tired, and I’d love to spend more time with Callan. I don’t even want to work at the library. I’d prefer to only go to school and help at the center. But he didn’t ask.”

“Would you have happened to have mentioned this to him?”

“Not in so many words.” I frown. Did I tell him how exhausted I was? No. That would’ve been admitting I was weak. But I made it clear I regretted not being able to spend more time with him. Would I have asked him to pay for everything so we could be together more? Also no, that would’ve seemed like I was using him.

Ugh. I slump into the seat. “Fine. I would’ve kept on slogging away.”

“How much time would you have had to devote to him?”

“None.” I shrug. My shoulders ache from the tension. At this point, I’m living on four hours of sleep. Is it any wonder I can’t think straight? “Maybe an hour a day at most, and I would’ve felt guilty that I wasn’t studying.”

“How would that have affected your relationship in the long run?”

“It would’ve strained it over time.”

“So....” She raises her drink from the end table and takes a sip. Letting the pause settle in the room. Perfect. Grandma silence. There’s nothing like it.

“Fine. Maybe I shouldn’t have walked out and left him without having a conversation.”

Great. I growl under my breath. I’m trying to show I’m a mature adult, and I did the opposite. Stomping my foot,

pouting, and leaving, which only proved I was acting like a child.

“Yes, dear. You’re right. I’m not going to say he handled the situation correctly because while his heart was likely in the right place, he should have asked you if you were okay with his plans. And then proceeded from there. But you likely would’ve stubbornly refused to allow him to help.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do?” I throw my hands into the air. “We’ve barely started our relationship. It’s kind of a big leap to move from, I’m staying as a guest in his house to him paying for everything. I don’t want him to think I’m taking advantage of him.”

She shakes her head and sets her cup on the end table. “Dear, it’s clear that he wants all your attention on him and doesn’t want to share you.”

I freeze and bite my lips together. I’m not sure that’s entirely true, but I’m not about to tell Gram that. “Well, maybe he should have expressed that with words first.” I yawn and rub my face. I need to sleep.

“Are you going to tell him that? Because the most important things in a relationship are setting boundaries and communication.” She rises from the recliner and straightens her shirt. “I’m going to grab a plate of cookies from the kitchen while you consider your options.”

I stand and pace the small room. There’s little space to move. The man is stubborn. More stubborn than I am.

Will he listen to what I have to say? I can’t be in a relationship where I’m not treated like an equal. I’ve been taking care of myself for too long to switch to a little girl who needs daddy’s help mindset.

Is that what he wants? I gnaw on my bottom lip. I want to be with him, but I can’t live like that. I’m not a submissive. Is there such a thing as a bratty submissive? That’s more like me. Yes, I’m intrigued by kink and would like to explore more

things, but I don't want him taking care of me, and if that's a dealbreaker for him....

"Well, dear." Gram walks into the living room with a plate of cookies in her hand. "What did you decide?"

"He needs to realize I'm serious, and I'm not going to get weak in the knees because he said to come back and listen to him."

"That's smart, dear." She offers the plate to me, and I snatch up a cookie.

As I bite into it, I moan. This is so good. I must be strong and prove I can stand on my own two feet. But—

My eyes widen. My schooling is paid for. So, there's no reason I can't spend the night in a nice hotel and rest. Then, when I'm not so tired, we can discuss the situation like two rational adults.

Chapter Forty-Two

Callan

As I stomp across the foyer, my dress shoes click on the marble flooring. The sun is setting, leaving shadows along the front porch from the pillars holding the roof. It's been hours since she left.

Nothing. Not one word from her. And I've called and left messages. I've texted. I've called her job. The one I quit for her. I've gone to the college, stopping by the library only to find out she called in sick. I've called her grandma, who was not a fountain of information and likely knows more than she said, but she's locked down tighter than a bank vault.

As a last resort, I messaged Henley, who's yet to respond. It's not like I wanted to call my daughter and explain that I angered her best friend. But I need her help to get London back. That makes me a loser. I'm supposed to be her rock and source of advice, not the other way around.

It's like she dropped off the planet.

I glance at my phone, swiping and clicking on screens until I've checked everything. There's no sign of social media activity.

"Damn her," I mutter and toss the phone onto the table by the door. The woman is beyond stubborn. I rake my hands through my hair. Is it worth it? Do I keep smacking my head against a brick wall? It's not like we were together for years, and we're dividing a household. We had sex a few times, and then she left.

It's not like I had to chase women in the past. This isn't me. Women come to me, and I shove them away.

And for once, I wanted to keep one, and I drove her away.

I close my eyes and allow my jaw muscles to unclench. As mad as I am, I'm also hurt. I want her in my arms—right now. I want to hold her. I want to feel at peace because, for the first time in my life, I felt complete and then she yanked the rug out from under me.

I'm not a sentimental guy, but I want to tell her I love her and beg her to spend the rest of her life with me. I want us to be a family. Unconventional—yes. But a family, nonetheless.

I want to watch her belly grow big with my child. I want to worship and cherish her. I need something to go right because I'm tired of being alone and wanting something I can't have—her and love. I never believed either would happen.

And to offer me one taste and then have it gone. My heart aches. Only it's worse now. I know how good it feels. And how bad it hurts to watch it willingly walk away. And even though it tore me in two, I let her go.

I spin on my heel and take two steps from the front door when it opens.

I whip around as Cole runs full speed toward me and launches his body into my legs. “Hey, Squirt.” I hoist him off the ground and into a circle as he giggles uncontrollably. My brother's son is the cutest kid alive. The only child I've seen with bigger eyes was my daughter.

“Unc.” He clasps my face and kisses my lips. “What's up?”

My brother shuts the door with a snap. “The girls here?”

“No.” I rest Cole on my hip and kiss his temple. And not all of it is to wipe the spit from my lips. I love the little guy and would've liked to have had another child, but that's gone out the window. “Henley is at the library or somewhere studying.”

He arches an eyebrow and crosses his arms over his chest. “And London?”

“Fine,” I growl at him and regret not locking the door. Not that it matters. He has a set of keys for emergencies. “You were right. She didn’t appreciate my interference.”

“No, shit?” His eyes twinkle, and it takes everything I’ve got to not knock the smug expression off his face.

“Yes. No, shit.”

“No, sit,” Cole says in a singsong voice.

“Sorry, Buddy.” Andrew ruffles Cole’s hair. “We shouldn’t have said bad words.” He returns his attention to me. “I don’t know why you thought she would appreciate your overbearing decisions without asking her opinion.”

“She wouldn’t have agreed if I suggested it. She’s too stubborn. Too opinionated. Too sassy. And who doesn’t want their man to surprise them with nice gifts?”

“Sassy.” Cole’s eyes glow as he kicks his feet, wanting down.

“Yes, she’s sassy.” I leave a loud smacking kiss on his cheek. “Just like you.” I drop his feet to the ground, and in a flash, he’s digging through the toy box.

“And you love it.”

“No, I don’t.” I shove my hands into my pockets.

“Yes, you do.” Andrew uncrosses his arms and brushes past me to watch Cole in the adjacent room.

“No, I don’t.” I stomp after him like a petulant child. “It’s ridiculous. She should appreciate the effort I went through to pay for her schooling to ease her burden. I didn’t resolve a single problem that she hadn’t already expressed was a concern for her. It’s not like I called the school and dropped her out. I know how important her education is and that she wants to become a social worker.”

Cole pulls out a medium-sized blue and purple striped plastic ball out of the box and rolls it several feet in front of him.

“Ball!” he yells and runs behind it until it stops. As he bends down, he topples over it and lands on the floor, collecting the ball and holding it in his arms.

“Yes, of course, she does. She might not have grown up in the system, but that’s only because of her grandma. But she’s had a tough life, and she’ll relate well to the kids in protective services and be a role model for success. I’m sure it took a lot of determination for her to be successful with the odds stacked against her.”

Cole steps toward me and rolls the ball to Andrew. As Andrew picks it up, he says, “I mean, there are so many kids in her position that don’t work and think the world owes them for living.”

“I didn’t say she was a kid. She’s all woman,” I growl as my hands ball into fists. The asshole knows running his mouth is safe. I won’t punch him in the face with his son here. I’m smashing my fist in his mouth the second we’re alone.

“Calm down, Callan. You’re acting like a lovesick 16-year-old.” He laughs and throws the ball again. This time, it’s a soft toss, and Cole catches it in his chubby arms.

“What’re you doing here anyway besides insulting me and talking s...” *Damn, little ears.* “Trash.”

“I wanted to see how this situation went and how you were coping with her leaving.”

“How did you know she’d leave?”

“Because she’s a strong, independent woman, and you decided what she would do without consulting her. That implied she wasn’t smart enough to handle her affairs.”

My shoulders slump. He’s right, and I hate it when he’s right. “Fine. It was a stupid decision. I should have discussed it with her and given her time to think about it.”

“I get it. You wanted to spend more time with her and to support her. But you’re going to need to give her time to adjust. You’ve just started seeing each other.”

“And now it’s ended.” I walk over to the whiskey bottle, open the bottle, and pour a liberal amount into the glass.

“Ended?” Andrew grabs my shoulder and spins me around. “She’s not going to end it.” His eyes narrow. “Is she?”

“I don’t know. But if she doesn’t, maybe I should.” I down the drink in one guzzle and hiss from the bite of the alcohol. “I don’t want a woman who—”

“Don’t say it.” His eyes glitter with anger. “You don’t want a submissive woman. You want a woman who’ll fight you to the death. You don’t respect women who don’t question you. Women who lay down and offer it up without a fight bore you to tears. I know you. London is the perfect match for you. I’ve watched your response to different women, and she’s the only one that’s held your attention for more than a couple of hours.”

“You’re right,” I sigh. “I’m hurt and angry that she left.” I rub a hand over my face. “I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

“You don’t have to worry about it.” He squeezes my shoulder. “The two of you have been dancing around each other for years. You’re meant to be together. Just give her time and grovel.”

“I will.” I pour another drink. “She knows about the chase.”

“I’m surprised you told her.”

“I didn’t tell her. She and Henley overheard a conversation we had at the time.” My heart skips a beat as visions of capturing London and claiming her fill my head with intense need. I don’t even remember the name of the woman we used. She was a girl from the club who agreed to the primal scene with no strings attached, but she was a poor substitute for what I wanted.

But London was 18 at the time. Too young and too innocent. Now? Now, she’s not. She’s intrigued by the idea. Adrenaline rushes through my veins.

Andrew sends Cole to the toybox to grab another toy and pours his own drink, drowning it in one gulp. “And?”

“She’s intrigued and about squeezed my dick off coming as we talked about it.”

“I see.” He drops the glass onto the counter and brushes the back of his hand across his mouth.

“I need to make things right with her. And it’s not about the sex. I won’t say the sex isn’t phenomenal because it is. But...” I shove my hands into my pockets. “I want more than that. I want a future between us, and somehow, I’ve got to convince her she wants the same thing.”

“Dude.” He grabs my shoulders. “All you need to do is tell her how you feel and what you want. That’s it. You won’t have to convince her of anything.”

“I hope you’re right. Because I haven’t heard a word from her in over six hours.” My stomach cramps as worry swirls around me.

I want to know she’s safe, but I need to trust her. She’s capable of taking care of herself. She’s smart. She’s resourceful. Hell, she lived in the library and offered herself up to protect her brother. She’s stronger than I ever could be.

And when she’s ready to talk, I’ll explain to her how much I respect her and go from there. That’s all I’ve got because with this one, money isn’t going to cut it.

Chapter Forty-Three

London

After sleeping for 12 hours, I feel like a new person. And then there was the all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet. I didn't realize how thin I was spread until I ignored everything and indulged in self-care. And with no morning cheer practice, I've got two hours to work things out with Callan before my first class.

The Uber stops in front of his house, and before the door is shut behind me, he's standing on the front porch with his arms crossed over his broad chest.

The man is powerful and imposing, but I'm not letting him push me around. I might come from nothing, but that made me stronger.

I straighten my shoulders, adjust my backpack, and stride to the steps that end where he's glowering at me.

"Where were you last night?" The muscles in his jaw flex as he bites out the words.

"Well..." I stop in front of him, drop my bag to the ground, and mimic his stance. Two can play this game. "It may be none of your business, but for now, I'll humor you. I stayed at a hotel."

"It may be none of my business? What's that supposed to mean?"

I widen my eyes and tilt my head sideways. "It means that depending on how this conversation goes determines whether anything I do has anything to do with you."

His arms drop to his sides as he marches toward me. "That's bullshit."

I raise my hands to deflect his advance. "Stop, or I'll turn around and leave. Again."

“Fine.” His eyes flash with anger as the energy around us zaps. It doesn’t matter how wrong it is. I want to rip his clothes off and fuck him blind.

I swallow to tamp down the lust coursing through my veins because as badly as fighting with him turns me on, there must be some ground rules.

“Enlighten me.” His eyes sweep over me and only stop when he reaches my eyes again. The desire in his eyes is as clear as the flexing and unflexing of his hands, as if he’s struggling not to yank me over his lap and spank me. Desire drenches my panties. Focus. Stick with the plan.

“I first went to where Gram is staying to talk to her. I needed some advice on how to handle someone like you.”

“Define someone like me.”

“Someone demanding and controlling. Someone who bulldozes over me without considering my feelings.”

“I only did what was right. You said you didn’t enjoy cheer anymore and would rather continue with your coaching. You also said you were exhausted and only working three jobs because you couldn’t pay for school. So, I paid for your education and made it to where you don’t have to work so hard.” He shakes his head as hurt replaces the lust. “I wanted to do something nice for you. How’s that so bad?”

I lick my lips and straighten my back. “I appreciate that you did those things.”

“Then why did you leave, and why weren’t you in my bed last night?”

“Because....” My palms break out into a sweat. “You can’t treat me like a child. I realize by reacting the way I did, I acted like one, but with our age difference, it’s important that I know you respect me. I’ve spent my entire life taking care of myself. I can do things on my own.” I shrug. “I enjoy proving that I have what it takes to succeed in the harshest of circumstances.”

“I do respect you.” He lifts his hand as if he’s going to caress my cheek but then drops it down to his side. My heart aches as I yearn for his touch.

“Why?”

“Why, what?”

“Why do you respect me?”

One corner of his mouth arches upward. “I respect you because you’re stubborn. Because you’re opinionated and because you don’t put up with my bullshit. I love that you’re determined and busted your ass working three jobs while going to school. But...”

This time, his palm cradles my face, and I instinctively lean into it. “You don’t need to anymore. And I’m a jealous dick. I want you to myself. I don’t want other men staring at you and thinking about all the dirty things they’d like to do to you. I want you at home and in my bed at night.”

“And it’s not because you think I’m a child who can’t make her own decisions?”

He throws his head back and laughs. “I know you can make your own decisions.” He pulls me to his body and weaves his free hand through my hair. “And I love it when you make your own decisions. Especially when it contradicts what I want. It makes me prouder of you.”

His eyes dance with humor, desire, and love. “And it makes me want to fuck you right here on my front porch. I don’t want a woman who bows down to my command. I want one who tells me to fuck off because she knows how rock hard it makes me.” His thumb strokes over my cheekbone. “But you’ve got to be here so I can discipline your challenging me.”

My heart thunders in my chest. “Isn’t that the definition of a toxic relationship?”

“No.” He pushes me against the porch rail and grinds his cock into my sex. “I want you to fight me. I need you to defy me. I ache for you to challenge my submission. I don’t want

someone who says, ‘Yes, Sir,’ and does everything I say without question.” His lips trail along my jawline and stops when he gets to my ear. “I want you to be a bad girl. It’s the definition of a brat/discipline fetish, and I think you want the same thing, am I right?”

I gnaw on my bottom lip as a lump forms in my throat. I can’t speak because everything he’s saying is exactly what I want. Ever since the first time I read about the primal scene he and his brother took part in, I’ve been obsessed with fighting back and getting claimed. About escaping and being captured. About fighting submission. But I assumed his thrill was the submission. Not the chase. “I was afraid you wanted a submissive and that I wouldn’t do what you wanted.”

“There are many different types of submissive relationships. I don’t want a woman who drops to her knees when I tell her to. I want one who says, ‘No,’ and only relents when I force her to. Of course, that means we need to establish a safe word and discuss other boundaries, but are you at all intrigued by this idea?”

“I want to be your bad girl. The thought of telling you no when you tell me to drop to my knees and service you has my panties drenched.”

“Such a bad, disobedient girl.” He fists my hair and yanks my head back. “You only defy me during sex.”

A huge smile breaks out across my face. “Not on your life.”

“Fuck,” he groans and slams his mouth against mine. I struggle against him until he boosts me off my feet, drops my ass on the railing, and demands I follow his lead. I adore his strength and control.

He pulls back only after my lips are swollen, and the bitter taste of blood fills my mouth. “Are you mine?”

“Yes, I’m yours.” I wrap my arms around his waist and cradle his cock against my sex.

There's a time for playing and games, and there's a time for honesty. I don't want there to be any question about how I feel about him as long as he treats me like his equal. His body is warm and hard against mine.

"London, I love you, and I want you to live here with me."

My head snaps back as my mouth drops open. Is this for real? This is fast, right? "I..."

"London," he growls. "This is not something we're going to argue about. I understand you want your say in things, and I don't want you to be weak and acquiesce, but this is important to me. I don't want to spend another minute away from you. We've fought this long enough."

I snap my mouth back shut and glare at him.

He chuckles while rubbing my back in a lazy circle. "Okay, I fought this long enough. I belong to you, and everything I have is yours. Please, London, say that you'll move in with me so that we can get to know each other intimately and thoroughly in a physical, sensual, and spiritual way." His eyes twinkle as he lays it on thicker and thicker.

"Fine. I agree. This one time." I laugh as I throw my arms around his neck and hop off the railing until we're glued together from chest to thigh. He feels like home, and for the first time in my life, I truly feel like I belong somewhere. Gram did her best, but she was forced to raise us. Callan wants me because he wants me. "I love you, and I'd love to live with you."

"Good. That makes it easier for us to plan our future."

"And what does our future entail?" I arch my eyebrows and stare into his eyes. The sad thing is, I'd do just about anything for this man, which makes my independent streak look a tad suspect.

"An engagement, marriage, and a baby." He presses his lips together and rubs my back as if he's trying to distract me

from something I might not agree with. Like that's going to happen. "Or more than one if you want more."

"Am I supposed to fight you on this or just agree? Because that sounds like heaven."

He lifts me into his arms and cradles me against his chest while traveling from the front porch to the foyer. "Let's skip fighting about the important stuff and only argue about the stupid shit."

"Like I need to go to school and don't have time for sex right now?"

"Yes." He shuts the door behind him, drops me to my feet, and locks the door behind him.

"But I can't miss class." I grab the doorknob and twist the lock open as heat floods my core. I don't give a fuck about class today. I haven't missed one session all semester, but I'm not about to tell him that.

Chapter Forty-Four

One Week Later

Callan

As we walk up the steps to my parents' house, the tension radiating off London is high enough to light a small town. "Babe..." I squeeze her waist with the arm that's wrapped around her, holding her tightly to me. I'm not sure she won't bolt if I let her go. "It's going to be fine. You know my family."

"Yes, I know your family as Henley's best friend. This is entirely different. Are you sure they're not going to spit on me and tell me to leave?"

"They won't. I promise you. Not if they ever want to see me again. Once they find out, they'll be over the moon."

She stops, causing me to tip her sideways. "Once they find out?" Her eyes flash in anger as her eyelids lower. "Do not tell me you haven't told them."

I remain silent as she steps sideways, away from me, and taps the toe of her black knee-high boot on the cement. "Well?"

"You told me not to tell them." One corner of her mouth inches upward. "But I will say, you're super sexy when you're mad. It makes me want to take you over my knee and spank that sweet ass of yours until it's pink with my handprint. And then—"

"Damn it," she growls as a butterfly flutters around the oversized potted flowers that line the veranda. "You can't intentionally do things to piss me off just to get turned on. It's not fair."

I laugh and wrap my arms around her, pulling her back to me. When I'm not touching her, it feels like I'm missing a piece of myself. The amount of time we've been able to spend

with each other this past week has been amazing. But it'll never be enough. I want to crawl inside of her and know everything about her.

She purses her lips together but stays stiff inside my arms even though I can feel the need radiating off her. "You're trying to distract me."

"Is it working?"

"Yes," she whimpers and laces her arms around my neck. "It's working, and you know it."

The scent of her perfume mixed with her pouty mouth makes me want to turn her around and go back home. Her eyes search mine as worry overrides her irritation and lust. "Why didn't you tell them? Were you afraid they'd be upset and advise you not to see me? I don't want to cause issues between you and your parents. They're sweet, kind people."

"I'm not worried about that." I rest my forehead against hers. "I wanted to surprise them."

"Surprise them with dating your daughter's best friend?" She arches an eyebrow. "Are you sure that's a good idea? How are they physically? I don't want to be the cause of a heart attack."

"Stop." I roll my eyes and thread my fingers through hers. "They adore you and always have. And they've been hassling me about a relationship for years. They're not going to get upset that I'm seeing someone or that it's you."

The door swings open, and Henley raises her hands in question. "Are you two going to stand out there all day or come inside? The food is getting cold, and you know how I feel about not getting to eat."

"Hello, Sweetheart." I kiss Henley's temple and join her in the foyer.

The crystal chandelier shines brightly, showcasing the family portraits that line the walls. There were never any photos of Henley with her mother. But that won't be the same

when London and I have a child. There will be maternity shots, couples' photos, and newborn images, and if the thought of birthing photographs irritates her, there will be some of those as well.

Okay, maybe she'll draw the line on recording the birthing process, and I might relent because I'm already going to be going without sex for several months. I don't want to risk her getting angry.

"Grandma and Grandpa are getting restless. You know they need to take their pills." She grabs London's free hand and tugs her toward the dining room. "Stop being a chicken and get in here."

"I'm not sure I want to." London's voice still holds a high level of apprehension.

The dining room table is laden with platter after platter of homecooked food. My mouth waters at the spread of BBQ ribs, corn on the cob, baked beans, and cornbread. It's like they butchered the fattened calf.

"Hey, son." My pop shuffles in front of the kitchen carrying a basket of rolls.

"What's with all the food? It's like you're planning to feed an army."

"It isn't every day that your son brings home a girl." My mom breezes into the room with a bowl of potato salad. When she sees London, she smiles. "Hello, beautiful. We're so glad you could join us today." She sighs as her eyes go soft. "Honey, isn't she gorgeous?"

"Yes, dear." He sets down the basket of cornbread and pulls out my mother's chair. "She is. And such a sweet girl, also."

London tips her head sideways as she gives me a look. "I thought you said you didn't tell them."

"He didn't." Henley's eyes gleam. "But I did. I told them the night you told me. It's not like they didn't already suspect

you had feelings for each other. You've never been good at hiding it. Now, let's eat." She drags London to a chair on the other side of her so that the two of us can be seated together.

Before the girls can seat themselves, I grab both of their chairs and pull them out. "I thought I did a valiant job of keeping my feelings to myself." Once they're seated, I take my chair and rest my hand on London's thigh.

"Well, he fooled me." London drops her hands onto her lap. "I thought he couldn't stand me."

"Oh, dear." My mom places a scoop of baked beans topped with brown sugar onto my father's plate. "That's only because he was afraid of getting rejected. The rest of us knew it was only a matter of time before one of you broke."

"And we knew it would be Callan." Andrew marches into the dining room with wet-haired Cole on his hip. If I had to guess, he's already been into the ribs and gotten coated with his lunch. "The thought of London with another man was bound to send him over the edge."

"And it did," I growl and squeeze her leg. The night at Club Desire still wakes me from a dead sleep. If she had let another man touch her, I would've tied her to a chair and forced her to watch as I pulled each one of his teeth out of his head.

One by one. Slowly. And with excruciating pain.

"Don't." She places her dainty hand on mine, easing a part of my rage. I almost waited too long to claim her, and that realization wrecks me.

Her eyes meet mine. "I'm sorry." Her shoulders are curved inward, and her eyes are filled with sorrow.

"Babe..." I shake my head as the rest of my family ignores us and digs into their food. I almost lost her due to fear. Fear that she'd reject me. When all along, she craved my touch.

I lean closer and cup her cheek until she's face to face with me. "Don't ever feel guilty. I was the one who was too proud to admit I was vulnerable and that you held my future in your hands. I'm the one who needs to apologize to you. From the beginning, I should have told you I wanted the chance to be with you rather than pushing you away. And I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you, hoping that one day you can forgive me."

"Lord," Andrew groans. "If I wanted to watch a *Hallmark* movie, I would've stayed home and ate a TV dinner."

"Andrew," my mom barks at him. "That's unacceptable. Your brother is pouring his heart out to the woman he loves, and you're giving him a hard time over it. You should be ashamed of yourself." She drops the platter of ribs in front of him rather than serving his food to him. "But I'll let it pass and not send you to your room. I realize its jealousy speaking. You want someone of your own, and you don't have that person yet."

"Bite me." He hands Cole to our mom and forks two servings of caramel-coated ribs onto his plate.

"Uncle Andrew," Henley says in a singsong voice. "You appear to be depression-eating."

"Shut up." He glares at her as we all laugh at his frustration.

However, my mom isn't wrong. My brother was always more open to a relationship than I was and got burned along the way. Now, it'll take a special woman to convince him to reopen his heart, but I hope it happens soon. I hate seeing him miserable. And it would be great if Cole had a sibling. Our parents always wanted a huge house full of grandkids for the holidays. Maybe it's not too late.

"Dear, what do you want to do when you graduate from college?" My father asks London as he pushes back his plate and rests against the chair.

“I’m studying social work, which is why I adore working at the center. When our parents ditched us, we were young and didn’t have a say in where we went. Luckily, children’s services put us in a kinship placement with our grandmother, but it might not have turned out that way. At first, they said she was too old. Then there were concerns with her home, so she had to jump through a lot of hoops to keep us. It was wonderful living with Gram. She was kind, affectionate, and loved us unconditionally. But she was older and not able to keep up with us. She also worked a lot to keep a roof over our heads.”

I grab her hand and lace my fingers through hers. “I see where the stubbornness comes from.”

“Cute.” She rolls her eyes at my attempt to soothe a topic that I know is difficult for her to discuss.

“You are stubborn.” Henley and Andrew say in tandem and laugh over their shared insult.

“Enough.” I narrow my eyes and glare at them.

“Sorry.” Henley raises her hands in defense and laughs harder.

“You’re so not sorry.” I shake my head. I’m used to their insults, but London hasn’t been on this side of the table.

“No, she’s not.” Andrew winks.

“Boys.” My mother gives us the stink eye, and we shut up. There was a time when we would’ve kept going, but we’re too mature to disrespect our mother like that now.

“Sorry, Mom.” We both say in unison.

“Go on, dear. And ignore the Neanderthals. They’re not domesticated. It’s like they still live in the woods.”

London shudders under my fingertips, and I bite my bottom lip as need buzzes inside me. I shouldn’t think about sex at my parent’s dinner table, but being this close to the woods and having no prying eyes has me ready to indulge.

“Thank you, Mrs. Tennison.” She clears her throat and stares straight ahead, not looking at me or my brother, but I feel her body vibrating as she continues with her plans for after graduation. “It’s important to me that we do better for kids. I’m not going to pretend to know the answers, but there’s got to be a way to help before it’s too late.”

And just like that, her eyes turn dark, and her back tightens, telling me without her saying a word that she’s concerned about Jared and wishing she would’ve recognized the signs sooner before he was determined to hide everything from her.

“Honey.” My mom rests her hand on my dad’s hand. The veins on the back of her hand are pronounced due to her thinning skin. “We should donate to the center and to the local children’s division. It would be the perfect charity to share our wealth with.”

London clutches her chest. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Yes, we do.” My mother’s jaw flexes. “Because I want to.”

“In that case.” She smiles. “By all means, Alexa and Jason would gladly take your money.”

“Perfect.” My dad turns his hand over and squeezes my mother’s hand. “Let’s have some cake.”

“Not so fast.” My mom pins Andrew with a look. “Andrew needs to update us on his love life.”

“I don’t have a love life.” His teeth grind as he bounces Cole on his leg. “I don’t have time. Even if I wanted to, which I don’t, I don’t have time for anything. I’m busy with work and taking care of this hellion is a full-time job.” He shakes his head. “And who’s going to take on a readymade family?”

“If I had to wager a guess, I’d bet Uncle Andrew hasn’t had relations since a certain moonlit night.” Henley’s eyes dance.

“Henley.” I snap at her. I don’t need our parents asking a bunch of questions about something they don’t need to hear. London stops breathing as if she’s thinking the same thing.

“You should hop on the bike and take another spin.”

“Henley,” London snaps at her best friend.

Seriously? I glare at her as Andrew’s face turns so red it’s almost purple, and he shakes his head.

“Come on. You don’t want to have forgotten how to please a woman when the right one comes along.” She shoves back her chair. “I’m sure that a certain someone would be willing to be a sacrifice for the team.”

London coughs as she grabs a glass of water from the table, gulping down half the contents in one fluid motion.

“Grandpa, I’m going to get you some cake.”

“Good idea. You can shove it into your mouth and shut up.”

“You love me, and you know it.” Henley winks at Andrew as she gathers our parents and heads into the kitchen.

I wrap my arm around London’s shoulders as her gaze meets mine. *Shit. I shouldn’t be thinking about this. Not here. Probably not anywhere.*

Would she? Fuck, it’s hot in here.

“Baby,” I whisper in her ear. “Ignore Henley.”

“I know your daughter. She’s incorrigible.”

“I guess you do.”

My brother’s entire body is stiff as he sits across from us, avoiding my gaze. *Don’t go there. Don’t even think about it.* Until he rakes a hand through his hair, inhales, and looks in my direction. My heart skips a beat.

As if he reads my mind, he stands with Cole on his hip. “I need to go.”

“Andrew?”

He jerks his attention back to me. “Yes?”

“Call me.”

“Yeah.” His jaw flexes as his eyes rake over London so fast no one else but us would notice the flinch. He swallows hard over his Adam’s apple and marches through the house.

I lean down and kiss London’s cheek and whisper, “I’m sorry Henley brought this up here. Today.”

“It’s fine.” She shudders while fiddling with the seam of her shorts.

I twist my hand in her hair and turn her to face me. “It will be. Don’t ever question if it’s my life’s mission to please you. Whatever that includes.”

Her nostrils flare as desire flames across her features. “And I, you.”

“Anything?”

“Yes.” She licks her plump lips. This is not where I intended to have this conversation. Not a place where we can’t say everything that needs to be explained. “You’re mine. I don’t share. Say it.”

Her eyes squint as she studies me. The confusion in her eyes makes me happy. *That’s right, lover. I’m always going to keep you on your toes.* “Yes, I’m yours.”

“As long as you understand that. We’re perfect.”

“Yes, Sir.” She nods. “I understand.”

“Good.” I haul her to me and claim her mouth. She whimpers against my lips and rests her hand on my thigh. She’s mine and mine alone.

Chapter Forty-Five

One Week Later

London

Henley leans over her leg, staring at her toenails as she paints them a bubblegum pink tint. “How did you do on your exam?”

“I did great. It’s been so much less stressful to only have school and the center to deal with.” I climb out of the chair and walk to the ½ bath that’s attached to Henley’s bedroom. “I’m relieved I don’t have to work so hard, and I can get some sleep.” Okay, I’m exaggerating about the sleeping part. I’m not getting that much sleep.

It’s starting to sink in that I live here, and I’m not a guest. When I moved all my things into Callan’s room earlier in the week, he made me toss half of it out and took me shopping. I’m learning not to be the kind of girl who complains about new clothes or that none of them are revealing. Well, except for the ones I’m allowed to wear at the house.

Okay, I’m not learning. I fight him, and he pretends he’s running something. It’s honestly a win-win situation. I run a brush through my long hair, letting it tumble down my back. And I can’t wait to break out the ones I hid from him. Those are going to be fun to wear at the most inappropriate times to get a rise out of him.

I can’t stop the smile that curves up to my cheeks. It shouldn’t be a turn-on to defy him, but I’ve given up control of that also. It is. And lucky for me, he gets off on setting me straight. I shudder from head to toe.

“I’m so glad.” Her voice is louder as we’re no longer in the same room.

I spin in the doorway and wink. “Don’t tell your dad about how happy I am. I don’t want him to get a big head.”

She twists the cap of the nail polish and shakes her head. “It’s too late. The man is walking on cloud nine and is as cocky as they come. He already thought he was a big shit because of his business dealings. Now, he’s got a hot, younger girlfriend and is wheeling and dealing with billionaires. It’s nearly impossible for him to walk through a doorway.”

I snort with laughter as my face heats.

“Don’t,” she groans and climbs off the mattress. “I don’t want to know how this is improving his bedroom performance.”

“I won’t say a word.” I zip my mouth shut and turn back to the mirror. But her fears are legit. The man is a beast in bed, and anywhere else he can get me. I’m the luckiest woman in the world on too many levels to count.

“Damn it.” She stomps across the floor.

“Be careful with your toenails.”

“They’re fast drying.” She meets my gaze through the mirror and crosses her arms over her chest. “I lied. Tell me everything is going good in that department. I know you had no experience before my father. Are you sure you’re enjoying it the way you’re supposed to?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” In other circumstances, I might worry, but Callan’s determination that I orgasm at the drop of the hat is living proof that he knows what he’s doing. Except....

Argh. Not thinking about it.

“What’s wrong?” Henley grabs my shoulders and pivots me to face her. “You seem upset. Are you sure things are okay? I don’t want you going through the rest of your life with a lousy lover. I’ll talk to Uncle Andrew.” She drops her hands to her sides as if she’s about to hunt him down. “He’ll talk to him about upping his game.”

“Henley, don’t. Everything’s fine. Your father knows how to please me.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Well....” My face flushes with heat as I scurry back into Henley’s bedroom and tidy up my books. “When I think about his sexual past, I get insecure. There’s a reason he’s phenomenal at sex. He has way more experience than I do and....” I gnaw on my bottom lip. “Those experiences are way more adventurous than anything he’s tried with me. It’s only been a few weeks. What if he gets bored and goes back to the club or even meets a woman in a business meeting and decides she’s more exciting? More experienced.” I wrap my arms around my chest. “More mature.”

“London.” She grips my shoulders and glares. “He’s not once wanted a girlfriend in my lifetime. That’s 21 years. He’s not going to wake up tomorrow and decide he wants a different one. He cares about you. Hell, he’s obsessed with you, but your connection is deeper than sex. He respects your drive and determination. He wants to carve a future with you, get married, and have another child. That’s bigger than some random woman that he met and shared nothing with but an exchange of sexual ministrations.”

“Ministrations?”

“Shut up.” Her eyes twinkle as she drops her hands to her sides and studies me. Then, her eyes widen. “It’s not the women. It’s the scene. I was joking the other day at my grandparents’ house trying to get a rise out of my dad and uncle, but you were interested, weren’t you? And that’s what’s bothering you?”

“Yes.” I shrug and slip my backpack over my shoulder. “That’s it more than anything else. He shared an intense experience with another woman. One that symbolizes what he wants in a relationship. One that has lived in my fantasies since the second I heard about it, but he hasn’t mentioned it again since the day we fought about him making decisions for me.”

I’m not looking to be shared by Callan and Andrew. He’s already made it clear that won’t be something we explore. Even for a night. But for him to not once mention him

stalking me in the woods, it's starting to bug me. I know it was something that he enjoyed, and I have no doubt I'd be just as excited by the experience.

“Maybe that's it. Maybe he doesn't want to push you, and he's waiting for you to bring it up again.”

“I don't know.” I shake my head as worry settles in my belly. “I don't want him to wish he was with someone else because he doesn't think I'd enjoy what he wants. Or even worse, that he wouldn't enjoy it with me. I know it's stupid—”

“No, it's not. You have the right to worry about anything you want to in a relationship. The only thing is that you need to discuss the issue rather than let it fester and cause problems between you two. You've got to communicate openly with each other for this to be a solid, long-term relationship, so stop stressing about it and say what you need to say.”

“Yes, Ma'am.” I laugh as she ends her lecture with a bang. She's right. I don't want this to be a problem that eventually makes me feel inferior or makes me question his love for me.

Once I dry off from my shower, I glance at my phone.

Callan: Wear a nice dress to dinner. I'll see you at 8. Henley is out for the night, so we have the place to ourselves.

My blood hums in my veins. I'm still not used to the intensity of our relationship. I crave him in ways that are unhealthy. Case in point. I don't remember the last time I slept more than six hours in a night. And now, it has nothing to do with working three jobs, studying, and trying to sneak a nap in during my 20-minute break at the café. It's all Callan and his insatiable appetite for me.

Once my panties are on, I study my reflection. Big blue eyes. Flush skin. And happiness.

I sigh and put on a light coating of make-up. Life can't get any better than this. I live with the man I love and my best friend. My grandma is getting the equivalent of a new home. Jared is in rehab. He called last week and sounded good. My fingers are crossed it's not a story and that he's putting forth an effort to get clean. And when Cole and Avery are here, the house is full of laughter, making me yearn for a child of my own. But school first.

It was stupid of me to get upset earlier when talking with Henley. I don't need anything more from Callan. It's not like he doesn't give me endless orgasms.

Okay, fine. There are a few moments when I fantasize about being stalked in the woods by two men. I giggle as lust floods through my center. I don't want an emotional connection with anyone but Callan. But an extra mouth or hands, who would bitch about that?

I selected a red dress that clings to my chest with a plunging neckline, so I don't need a bra, and it flares at my waist. The hem floats around my knees. I gnaw my bottom lip. We're alone. It's going to end in sex. So why wear panties? And the dining room table? Maybe a well-placed strawberry. Or some chocolate syrup. I'm not opposed to fulfilling that fantasy tonight.

After carefully removing my panties, I straighten the dress. Perfect. As I descend the stairs, my black heels click on the wooden treads.

"Hello, love." Callan steps out of the study, and my mouth dries. He's wearing black slacks and a white button-down dress shirt that's open to his chest yet still tucked into his waistline, emphasizing his trim build. God, he's hot. His eyes glow as if he's eating me alive while traveling over my outfit. "You look stunning."

"Thank you." I lick my lips and descend to the main floor. He strides over as if he's stalking me and slips his arms around me. His lips descend over mine, and I moan and close

my eyes. It seems like years since I was wrapped up in him, but it was only this morning.

He sucks my bottom lip into his mouth and rakes his hands along my back until he's gripping my ass. His fingers tighten into my flesh, sending a wave of heat through my core. I'll never get enough of him.

When he pulls back, he glares. "Why aren't you wearing panties? Did you go to school like that today?"

"No." The corners of my mouth inch upward, which is the wrong thing to do. I mean, the right thing to do. My body buzzes with adrenaline.

"You'd better not. This body belongs to me." His tone is harsh as he swats my ass. I gasp with a mixture of shock and desire. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir." I nod. "I was teasing you. I was properly clothed all day."

As much as I love to tease him. I don't want him to think I would do that. "I wouldn't go out like this and disrespect you. Not unless you were with me. I might tease you, but I wouldn't betray you." I run my finger over the line of the buttons that remain intact. "I wouldn't try to get the attention of another man."

"You don't have to try." His jaw flexes. *Smack.*

"Shit!" I wasn't expecting that one. The stinging of my flesh causes my nipples to tighten.

"All you have to do is exist, and men around the world are at home tonight wishing they were buried deep inside you. I know." His nostrils flare. "I was one of them."

I rest my hands on his chest, feeling his steady heartbeat under my palm. "But you don't have to worry. You know I've never been with anyone else, nor do I wish I was."

"Is that so?" He drops his arms to his sides and steps back. "For some reason, I don't believe that." He stalks to the liquor cabinet and pours a heaping glass of whiskey. His

movements and words cause anxiety to ramp up in my belly. He's not been this out of sorts since the night in the den when he kissed me and ran off to the club.

Does he miss it? Is he thinking about all the fun he used to have? Before me. What if he wishes he was with someone else? My hand shakes. Please don't let this be the end. I swallow over the lump in my throat. I've got to know.

I inhale and straighten my shoulders. "Do you want to go to the club?"

He spins on his heel so fast to face me that the alcohol sloshes out of the crystal glass and splatters onto the floor. "Why? Do you want to go? Do you want to find another man already?"

"No." I roll my eyes and groan, shaking my head. "You're a pain in the ass. You're the one acting weird, so I thought maybe you were growing tired of me and changed your mind about us or our dynamic. If you want to go to the club and mess around with other women, I'll try to understand."

"I'm sorry." He chuckles and relaxes his shoulder. "I'm on edge tonight. No, I don't want to go to the club unless it is to explore something with you. But that's not what's on my mind tonight." He deposits the glass on the counter and ambles toward me. "And no, I'm not done with you. I'll never be done with you."

When he reaches my side, he retrieves a box from his pant pocket, opens it, and drops down to one knee. "London Aurora Kensington..." His eyes dance at my gaped mouth. "Will you do me the honor of being my wife?" He clutches my hand and holds it in his as I snap my mouth shut.

I try to speak, but nothing comes out. I think I've swallowed my tongue.

When I don't respond, he says, "You've shown me it's never too late to find your soulmate and that it doesn't matter what anyone says. When you find the person you love, the

person who ignites a fire inside of you and gives you a reason to get up in the morning, you go for it, grabbing onto it with both hands.”

I lick my lips as my hand shakes. The ring is a 2-carat teardrop halo diamond and glistens under the chandelier’s light. “Someone is going to cut my finger off to get to that ring. But...” I tilt my head. “It’s gorgeous.”

“Well?” He frowns as the sun disappears and darkness cloaks the windows.

“I’m sorry.” Laughter spills from my lips. “This is amazing. I don’t know what to say.”

He rises to his feet and draws the ring from the black ring case, lifting it between his fingers. “That’s a first. You usually have plenty to say.” He smiles. “You say, ‘Yes, Sir,’ I would love to marry you, so that I don’t get a complex from you not responding.”

“Yes, Sir.” Happiness swells throughout my entire body from my toes to my fingertips. “I would love to marry you.” I wiggle my fingers in front of him. I’ve never been this happy before in my life. “I can’t believe this is happening. A few months ago, I thought you hated me, and I wasn’t expecting you to want to make it official this soon. So, I’m in shock.”

He slips the ring on my finger and holds it to his heart. “Hate?” He shakes his head. “Never. Hate my weakness because I thought I’d never be good enough to win you? Definitely. But now that I have you, I’m not going to let you get away. Even if that means having to act like a possessive asshole to make sure you don’t see someone else, you want more.”

“That won’t ever happen.” I cup his face, staring into his eyes and loving the feeling of his 5 o’clock shadow against my skin, and the lights shine off the diamond. “I love you and only you.”

“Good because I don’t share.” His mouth covers mine as he tastes and sucks on my tongue, devouring me and leaving

my entire body vibrating until my toes curl and my desire coats my thighs.

His lips trail along my jaw until he reaches my ear. “The door is unlocked. You need to run.” He fists my hair, yanking my head back and staring into my eyes. “Now!”

Chapter Forty-Six

The Woods

London

Oh, my God. This is crazy. My heart thunders in my chest as the tree limbs brush past me. I dart between two large maple trees, barely missing scrapping my arm. The sun has completely disappeared, leaving behind the full moon and a smattering of stars to light my path.

The breeze in the woods is chilly against my skin, but it does nothing to tame the fire burning inside me. Each beat of my heart feels like it's thumping against my ribcage. This entire night was not what I was expecting. I anticipated tossing the dishes off the dining room table and getting eaten rather than eating.

But this? An engagement ring and getting chased in the woods? Talk about an epic engagement. I giggle as thoughts of explaining the night we got engaged to anyone who asks. A limb smacks my arm, causing my skin to sting, but I don't pause to survey the damage. Yes, half the fun is getting caught, but the anticipation of when is the adrenaline rush. I'm not going to tell anyone this story.

Well, maybe Henley.

With each step, the underbrush makes a loud crunching sound. If I get coated in poison ivy, I'm going to be pissed. I shiver and turn to the right, sinking deeper into the forest. But it'll be so worth it. The feral look in Callan's eyes as he stepped back, giving me a head start to the door, was the hottest thing I've ever experienced.

My thighs shake as I sprint toward an oversized oak that'll block his view of me. It doesn't matter how many times I fantasized about a primal scene. I wasn't prepared for the reality.

Two steps later, I stumble, reaching out to catch myself before I fall.

“Shit.” I lurch sideways and steady my legs before changing directions. One step later, a squirrel chirps from a tree as I disturb its sleep. At least, I hope it’s a squirrel. A shudder quakes through me.

If a bear bites my ass, it won’t be as much fun as Callan doing it. I giggle again and glance behind me. He’s standing near the edge of the wood, his back silhouetted by the yard lights, making him appear larger than life. *Keep going. Don’t stop.* His fantasy is not a weak woman who gives up. And where’s the fun in that anyway?

I dart behind the tree and slam my back against the bark. It bites at my skin as blood thumps in my ears. An owl hoots from an upper branch, causing me to scream and jump.

“Well, well. Look what we have here.” A deep voice sends a chill down my spine, and enormous arms haul me away from the tree and against a solid frame. At my neck is the faint glint of silver. A knife.

Holy fuck. I yank sideways, trying to get away. “London, don’t struggle. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“What?” Andrew. The voice registers as I lurch around. Well, at least my head lurches. The rest of my body is plastered to him.

Oh. My. God. This is not happening. My legs wobble.
Oh. My. God. This is happening.

“My brother would be upset if I hurt you.” His breath is hot against my neck.

“Then, let me go.” I yank again, knowing the punishment for fighting back will blow my mind. The knife presses into my skin. Thankfully, it’s on the non-cutting side, or I’d be dripping in blood, and we’d have a lot of explaining to do at the ER.

“Not so fast, sweetheart.” His hand caresses along my body, up my torso, and cups my breast. “My brother is lucky to have such a beautiful woman to play with. Such a naughty girl that flaunts her tits and ass for all the men to lust over.”

“I don’t.” I barely hear my response over the rush of desire flaring throughout my body.

He yanks the fabric from my chest, and the cold air pebbles my nipple even tighter. “Do you get off knowing what you do everyone?” He pinches the hard tip, causing a low groan from my lips. The rough callouses scrape over my skin.

“You’re a filthy little slut, aren’t you?” Callan stalks toward us. “Fantasizing and finger fucking that tight little pussy while imagining being taken by two men. Little girls with dirty minds need to be punished.”

Callan retrieves a switchblade from his pocket, pushing the button and making the blade snap out. The full moon shines on the blade. “I’m going to hate destroying this dress, but it must be done.” He cuts the fabric from my breasts to my knees.

When I grab the shredded remains, Andrew clasps my hands together. “I’ll do the honors.” I moan deep in my throat when Andrew reaches around me, grabs handfuls of the dress, and yanks it down until it falls in a puddle at my feet.

“Grind that dick into her ass as I feel how sopping wet she is.”

I whimper and quake as Andrew’s cock digs into my back, as he’s too tall to fit between my ass cheeks. And lord, if I don’t hate being short for that one second. “Spread her wide for me.”

“I’d love to,” Andrew growls against my ear as he kicks my feet apart. My weight shifts backward, throwing me harder into him as the smooth end of his knife slides down my neck.

After depositing his knife back into his pants, Callan slips his fingers between my outer lips, sliding through the desire gathered there, and jams two digits deep into my sex.

“Oh, God, yes,” I whimper as the sound of my pussy sucking his fingers in the woods makes me feel wanton and powerful.

“Such a little slut.” He jerks his fingers from my opening and presses them against my lips. “Open up. You need to clean my fingers. Get rid of all the evidence that you want to fuck my brother. I told you. I don’t share.”

“Yes, Sir.” I open my mouth and gag as he shoves them to the back of my throat. With his other hand, he grabs my chin. “I don’t share this pussy. It’s mine. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” *Son of a bitch.* Tears spring to my eyes. I want to be fucked so bad my skin feels like it’s on fire. And if he thinks for one second, he’s going to drag me out of here and not—

He laughs. “Such animated eyes. Do you think I’ll tease you and then turn you away?”

“No.” I tilt my head sideways. “I don’t.” I raise my knee and brush it along the underside of his balls. “Because if you do, I’ll cut your dick off.”

“God, I love you.” He kisses my lips sucking and biting down on my bottom lip before diving his tongue deep inside as Andrew squeezes my tit and caresses my belly, drawing closer to my sex with each swipe of his palm while being careful not to cut me with the sharp blade.

Callan pulls back. “I don’t share what’s mine. Unless I want it shared. And lucky for you, I want to see you being destroyed by two dicks.” His fingertips cut into my skin. “But don’t for one second think that you’ll do this on your own. Ever. Because if you even think about it, I’ll destroy any man that looks at you. Piece by piece in front of you.”

“Yes, Sir.” I grab his shirt, ripping the buttons as I yank it from his body. “Now, get busy.”

“Such a greedy little minx.” He cups my face, running his thumb over my cheekbone.

To think that a few weeks ago, I was an innocent virgin, and now I'm getting ready to be railed by my fiancé and his brother in the middle of the woods. It's surreal.

"That's it, baby. Let him know how much you want this." He retrieves Andrew's knife from him. "How you dreamed about this moment for years." He runs the knife tip along my nipple, and the walls of my sex clench in frustration.

"Please." The word is a whimper of lust dripping off my tongue.

"Such an exquisite creature." Andrew drags me back against his hard, hot frame as his hands caress up and down my body until he returns to my chest, cupping my heavy breasts.

"Pinch her nipples. Tug them nice and hard." Callan trails the back of the blade along my stomach. I don't dare breathe to keep from being nicked. Until Andrew follows his command. And then it takes everything I have not to buck my hips to relieve the pressure building between my thighs.

My skin is soaked with desire, and my lips are so swollen they feel bruised. I rotate my hips and squeeze the walls of my sex together. "Oh, fuck."

A ripple quakes through me. I'm going to come with no stimulation. Is that even possible? No. I grit my teeth together. It might be possible, but I don't want that. I want to be fucked.

"So responsive." Andrew slides his lips along my neck, and I reach between my legs. I don't want to come without enjoying it.

"Not so fast." Callan grabs my wrists and holds them in one hand with the knife in the other. "I want you dripping with desire. Begging for me."

"Please. I want to come so bad it hurts."

He growls, "That's it. Be a good girl and beg for it. Beg for my fingers. For my mouth. For my cock. Show Andrew what a greedy little slut I have."

As Andrew licks my throat and massages my breasts, any blood left in my body drops to my throbbing clit. I press my lips together to keep from screaming. Something has to give, and soon. My pussy is so swollen, I don't have to move to feel my lips pressed together.

I can't hold back any longer. "Please, Callan. Fuck me. Fuck me so hard I scream. I want your fingers. And your cock deep inside of me. Please, don't make me wait."

"See if she's wet for me."

"I'd love to." Andrew rocks into my back, and I fall back into him, eager for his strong body to hold me up.

As his fingers near my heat, I spread my legs farther apart. I don't want anything in the way of my goal. If I don't have an orgasm in the next minute, I'm running away from them again and finger fucking myself. To hell with what they want. A giggle of laughter erupts from my lips, and Andrew grips my thigh with one hand and plunges two fingers into my soaked pussy.

"Jesus, yes!" I lower my hips to suck him to his palm. When he doesn't move, I pick up the pace, riding over his fingers and gasping for air.

"Such a greedy little cunt." Callan drops the knife to the ground, kicking it away, and smacks my clit, sending a momentary flash of pain throughout my core, but it's instantly followed by the clutching of my sex onto Andrew's fingers. "Watching you fucking my brother's fingers makes me rock hard."

"No more." Andrew grips my hip, refusing to let me move, and slips his fingers from my screaming cunt. "You'll wait."

"No," I growl in frustration.

"Don't worry, baby. We're going to keep playing with you until you can't stand it another second." He drops to his knees. "Move her leg out of the way and hold her while I eat my sweet pussy."

“I’d love to.” Andrew’s hand slips from my hip to my thigh, gripping and lifting it until I’m fully exposed.

“Make her suck your fingers clean.”

“I’d love to.” Andrew grips my chin, twisting my head around to face him. “Use that pretty pouty mouth of yours to clean me. You’ve gotten me dirty.”

I suck his fingers into my mouth and stroke the bottom side of them with my tongue as my head spins. This surpasses anything I ever dreamed of. Anything I’ve ever wanted. He shoves them deep into my throat, causing me to gag.

Callan chooses that moment to swipe his tongue along my seam, and reality disappears, leaving me with only sensations and colors shooting in my brain. Who has this happen to them? It’s not real. It can’t be. The way his tongue and mouth work over me is intense, and I couldn’t stop my legs from shaking if a gun was held to my head.

“That’s it, baby. Suck him nice and deep. Let me hear you gag, swallowing your own spit.” He shoves two fingers into my pussy, and I almost lose consciousness. Breathe. Don’t miss a second of this. My head spins.

“Hold her throat. Cut off her air as I make her come.” I can’t speak over Andrew’s fingers, but I want to shout to the heavens to make it happen.

He clasps his fingers tighter. “Like this?”

“Yes, just like that.” Callan rises to his full height and stares into my eyes. “I love seeing you like this. Do you like being destroyed by two men? Having two men who want to worship you?”

I nod but can’t do much else.

“That’s it. Let her get a breath.” I gasp for air, drawing it in until my lungs hurt. He glances over my shoulder at Andrew as he continues to stroke my sex, filling me, rotating in circles as he seems to touch everything at once. But with

each clutch of my walls, he changes the rhythm, depth, or speed, denying me the release I crave.

“Do it again. Only this time, fuck her pussy with your fingers. I want to feel how tight she is when we’re both inside of her.”

“Oh, my God.” My eyes roll back into my head and only pop back open when they’re both working inside of me. Andrew from behind me and Callan from in front of me. My love’s eyes never leave mine as he bites his bottom lip. His nostrils flare with each rotation of my hips as I ride them harder and faster.

Stretching me. Annihilating me. And sending me over the edge. “Fuck,” I choke out over Andrew’s fingers as wave after wave of orgasm sends my body shattering into a million pieces.

“That’s it.” Callan smiles with a glint in his eyes that makes me swallow hard over the dryness in my throat.

Only then does Andrew reduce his grip, yet they continue to plunder my core. I try to jerk away to lessen the intensity, but Callan grabs my hip and holds me in place. “None of that. There’s no point in turning into a dick tease now. We both already know what a little slut you are.”

“She’s your perfect little slut. This pussy is fire.”

“Now, you’re all loosened up and ready for us. Go on, brother.”

I gasp and try to shake my head. It’s too much. I can’t. His fingers leave my sex as my walls suck down, wanting more as if my body doesn’t agree with my brain and demands additional stimulation.

“I’d love to.” The sound of Andrew’s zipper opening sends a tidal wave of heat over me. I want this. *Yes, please. I want this. More. Don’t ever stop.* “Her body is perfect. I can’t wait to feel her heat wrapped around my dick.”

Before he spreads my ass cheeks, he slips on a condom. “I’d love to go in bare, but we can’t have any accidents.” He slides his cock along my seam and plunges to the hilt. I gasp and grip Callan’s upper arms to remain upright. “Oh, my God.”

“That’s it, baby. Let him fuck you nice and good. Let him feel how sweet that pussy is. My pussy.” He smashes his mouth against mine, and our tongues war at the same pace as Andrew’s lunges. His dick is similar in size to Callan’s, but his pace is leisurely, like he’s taking a long drive, and as much as I don’t want it to end, I want to come again. I rotate my hips and pound back into him, begging him with my ass to fuck me harder. But instead of complying, he grasps my hips and holds them in place.

“Not so fast. There’s no need to get into a hurry. I can fuck you all night long.” Each sentence is punctuated with a slow thrust and retreat. *Son of a bitch*. I want each word to come with his balls slapping my ass and his dick hitting my cervix.

Callan’s hands travel along my body, stroking everything as he explores and watches his brother fuck me. His eyes are dark as he pinches my clit and slaps his palm over the screaming bundle of nerves.

“Jesus.”

Andrew laughs. “That’s a good girl. Make my brother jealous that he’s not fucking you, and I am.” He bites down on my neck, sucking the skin between his teeth. I’m going to die. He groans, “She’s one tight piece of ass.”

“Brother, you need to remember whose pussy this belongs to.” He unzips his pants and unleashes his swollen cock, stroking up and down his shaft. “And she’s not filled enough. You’ve got me aching for you.” He licks his lips with a feral look in his eyes. “I’m fucking dripping over here. My precum is making me slick and ready to join my brother in the fun.”

I whimper as his words cause my entire body to convulse.

“Do you want us both to fuck you?” Andrew’s breath is ragged as he asks the question as if he’s struggling to keep from exploding.

“Yes, please.” I’m not ever going to pretend I don’t want this. The sound of my pussy sucking his cock fills the space around us as an owl hoots, flaps its wings, and flies from the tree we’re under as if he’s giving up on us leaving.

Callan strokes the tip of his dick, smearing his precum on the head. “Hold her still.”

Andrew lunges to the hilt as his pelvis smacks my ass and waits. *Oh, my God. At the same time? Oh, my God.* The head of Callan’s cock pierces my sex, and my eyes widen. I’ve never felt this full before. It’s— “Oh....”

“That’s it, baby. Open up wide for me. Lift her up.”

Andrew boosts my ass until I can wrap my legs around Callan’s waist. “Jesus, she’s tight,” he grunts as he waits for Callan to become fully seated.

“That’s a good girl. Taking my dick.” I grip his shoulders and hang on. “While taking my brother’s dick. Such a good little slut. Hold on tight. You’re going to get the fucking of your life.”

“Yes, please.” I wrap my arms around him and hold on as they pummel me.

When one goes to the edge, the other lunges upward. It feels like being attacked by a battering ram. And it’s amazing. My whimpers and moans grow louder as their guttural grunts are intermixed with rambling words that no longer make sense.

It feels like I’m on an alternate universe at this point. Deliciously stretched. Ass slapped by Andrew’s upward thrusts. My G spot is ravaged by the crown of Callan’s dick. Too shafts sliding in and out of my pulsating core. It’s pure

bliss. Ripples convulse along my walls, and everything erupts at once.

“That’s it, baby. Squeeze our dicks with that filthy cunt. Suck us off. Milk the cum from our balls.”

“Jesus! Fuck! Fuck! Yes! Don’t fucking stop!” I chant the words at the top of my lungs as my orgasm takes me to heaven. With Callan’s next upward movement, something shoots from my sex. *What the fuck?* The squirting continues, making a sloppy wet sound as they continue to fuck me.

“God, yes. Drench me in your cum.” Callan grips the back of my head and claims my mouth with an intensity that takes my breath. What little breath I had remaining was keeping me from passing out.

I’m no longer the same girl I was when I ran out the back door. I’m worshipped. Cherished. And ravaged. The grunts grow as the plundering intensifies. Every inch of my walls is stroked by their hot cocks. I dig my nails deep into Callan’s shoulders as another orgasm builds inside of me.

“Fuck. Tight fucking pussy,” Andrew says as he growls in my ear. “Sucking my dick.”

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” I scream out at the top of my lungs around Callan’s tongue. My throat is raw from screaming as something runs out of the bushes, scurrying in the other direction. The movement causes me to jump, but Andrew holds on, keeping me in the same spot.

“Jesus,” His entire body quakes against my back as his dick jerks inside of me.

“Yes. Fuck. Yes,” Callan says at the same time, filling my core with his cum.

Andrew slips out of me while yanking off the condom, and I sag against Callan with my full weight. I’m so sated that I can’t do anything but suck down air and try to catch my breath.

When I've finally caught my bearings, I flop my head sideways on his shoulder and look up at him. "That was phenomenal."

He elevates my hips and pulls out from my dripping heat. "Yes, baby, it was." He kisses my temple and lays his lips against my ear. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, but don't think you're doing it again. Unless it's my decision. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir." I shudder from head to toe. "I understand."

Minutes pass, and I sense we're alone as Andrew slipped away from us and headed back to the house. I wiggle until my feet are on the ground, and he cradles my face. "I love you, princess. And I'd do anything in my power to make you happy. Anything. But I won't share you with another man. Unless it's with Andrew. I trust him with my life, and I know he won't try to steal you from me. He cares about you, but he's not in love with you like I am."

"I understand."

"Is this something you want to do again?"

I swallow hard and shake my head. "No. Not really. I mean..." I smile and wrap my arms around his neck. "It's not something I want to do all the time. I love you and want our relationship to be our complete focus. But I wouldn't mind doing more primal scenes between the two of us. I loved the chase and being caught. That was so hot. But I want Andrew to fall in love and have his own happily ever after. I wouldn't want this to interfere in any way with that."

"So, you're good with this only being a once-in-a-blue-moon kind of thing? A scene we play out on special occasions?"

I waggle my eyebrows. "How often is a blue moon?"

"Hussy." He lifts me off the ground and boosts me up until my legs are wrapped around his waist again. "Blue moons are about once every two and a half years, in my experience."

“Damn. That’s a long time.” I laugh as I grab his face and kiss his lips. “This, as far as I’m concerned, is a once-in-a-lifetime event. It’s like seeing a solar eclipse. You can’t wait to experience it. You get your special glasses on. And you wait for the sky to darken. And it’s amazing. It’s surreal. But then it’s over, and your life goes back to normal. And my normal is pretty fucking amazing.”

“I love you, London. Happy 21st birthday tomorrow.” I have the love of my life. My best friend. And a future that’s going to be filled with love and laughter.

But a second once-in-a-blue-moon might not be the end of the world.

His hand slaps my ass, dropping my feet to the ground, twists me around to face the tree, and says, “You’d better hold on because you need to remember who this pussy belongs to.”

Chapter Forty-Seven

Six Months Later

Callan

It doesn't matter that we've been together for six months. When she walks into my study, my heart still sputters in my chest. Her hair is piled high on her head, and a pair of dark-rimmed glasses are perched on her nose. She's wearing a faded T-shirt and cutoff denim shorts. At least she's changed out of the little black skirt with fishnet stockings and stiletto heels.

And she's all mine.

But first. We need to discuss what she changed out of. "Is this better?" She braces her hands on her hips. "I liked the other outfit better."

"I'm sure you did. And so did every other man at the party." I shove my chair back and adjust the waistline of my pants. "There wasn't a man there who wasn't imagining taking you home tonight, shoving those panties aside, and filling you until you screamed."

She arches her eyebrows. "What panties?"

I growl as I close my eyes, envisioning my business partner, my brother, and the other patrons closest to our table. I don't remember any of them dropping anything and picking it up. Which is a good thing because I don't want to have to beat the fuck out of one of them. Especially since it was a celebration of the groundbreaking for the new entertainment district.

When I open my eyes, she's standing two feet from me with a sassy smile on her red-painted lips. "What's wrong? Are you jealous?"

"Babe." I stand and clutch her chin. "You have no idea how jealous I am of every man who's within 100 miles of you."

I hate knowing anyone else breathes the same air you've exhaled." I stare into those blue eyes and drown.

She may think I'm joking, but I mean every word I'm saying. I thread my fingers into her hair, pulling at the band and pins, holding her hair in place. They drop to the floor as her hair falls free of its entanglement.

"You have no reason to be jealous," she purrs and inches closer until our bodies are connected from head to toe.

"Until every man's eyes in the world are gouged out, and you stop dressing to provoke me, I'll respond in the same way." I fist her hair, yanking until her neck is exposed. Her eyes flare with heat as she gnaws on her bottom lip. And to think, at one time, I was worried she wouldn't enjoy being dominated. I couldn't have been more wrong. I'm the luckiest man alive.

"I wore the skirt for you." She places her hands on my chest. "I don't care what anyone else thought about it. Just you."

"Not good enough." I slide my index finger along the slender column of her neck. "You'll be punished for testing my patience. For every look of lust in other men's eyes." I step back as blood rushes to my dick.

"Yes, Sir."

I need this woman as desperately as I need air. "Put your face on the desk with your ass pointed toward me."

"Yes, Sir." When the corners of her mouth twitch, I press my lips together. That's going to earn her another swat.

She lays with her face smashed into the wood with her round ass ready for the belt and making my mouth water. I want her bare, but I don't have enough control to stop from taking her and skipping the punishment. And she needs that as much as I do.

As I slip the belt from the loops of my pants, she moans and wiggles her ass. "You've been a slutty little brat. I've told

you before not to wear clothes that make other men have devious thoughts.”

“I’m sorry, Sir.” I fold the black leather strap in half and lay it across her backside with a whack. She squeals and inches away from me.

“You aren’t getting away until you’re properly disciplined for your misbehavior.” I grab her hips and smack her again over the denim of her shorts. The edges of the hem ride up her leg until the swell of her ass cheeks is visible. “Anyone could’ve seen this sweet ass.”

I raise the belt against her upper thigh and send a jolt through her as it lands. “Does it make you wet knowing that there’s a man at home jerking off in the shower while thinking about you with his wife not 10 feet away sleeping in bed?”

She doesn’t respond, and a smile curves up my cheeks. *God, I love this woman.* I smack her again. “Answer the question.”

“Yes, Sir. It does turn me on, but I’d never do anything about it.”

“Such a dirty little dick tease.” I unfasten my tie, the one that matches my handkerchief, and slowly loosen it as she watches me out of the corner of her eye.

“Stand,” I bark as the humor evaporates. The time for playing is over. It’s time to possess my woman and remind her who she belongs to. Once she’s standing, I spin her around, tie her wrists together, and force her to her knees. “Suck me off good and hard. See what you do to me.”

“Yes, Sir.” Her eyes glow with lust as she watches me undo my pants and stroke my swollen dick. It’s red and aching from sitting next to her all night. The dinner was excruciating. All the talking with her hand stroking me under the table. I almost shoved everything off the table and fucked her right there. I thrust my cock in her face. “Suck me nice and deep.”

“Yes—” Her mouth is full, and her eyes are wide as I plunge to the hilt.

The sweet sound of her gagging makes my balls crawl upward. I won't last long. And I don't care. She's too gorgeous on her knees, tied up with her lips wrapped around me and tears streaming down her cheeks.

Now this—this is what I'd rather do than celebrate a business accomplishment. I fist both sides of her hair and lose control. Deeper and faster until I spasm and shoot my load onto her tongue.

I pull back and shove my fingers into her mouth, playing in my cum. “Now that's a good girl. Suck all my cum down your throat. Drink it up.” As I shove it deeper, she swallows around my fingers.

My chest heaves as I regain my bearings. I smirk and stand back. “Well, I guess it's time to go to bed.”

Her eyes narrow into slits as she tips her head back. “You're going to leave me like this?”

“No.” I shake my head and grab her wrists. “I'll untie you.”

“That's not what I meant. You're going to leave me horny and dying to come and go to bed. Just like that?”

“It would be the appropriate punishment for being a dick tease.”

“Asshole.” She glares with her arms stretched to one side but still tied up.

“What do you propose I do instead?” I bring her to her feet and spread her legs, grinding my thigh against her clit. “Take care of you?”

“Yes,” she moans and rides me harder. “Yes, please.”

“But you've been a bad girl. Maybe I should leave you all tied up and aching for release with no way to achieve it.”

“Don't,” she whimpers. “I need you.”

I love seeing her like this. Desperate and greedy. For me. It's immature and shows my weakness for her, but I don't care.

I'm lost in her. If she ever walks, I'll never survive it. "Then you'll have me."

I rip her shorts down her smooth legs, drop to my knees, and feast on her sex until my face is drenched and she's uncontrollably shaking. "Please, don't stop. I'm so close." She gasps as I drive two fingers to the hilt. "Right there. Please, you make me feel so good."

I rest on my haunches and stop my assault while watching her face turn from bliss to anger. She yanks at my tie but can't break free. I keep my fingers still and lick my lips clean. "What do you need?"

"I fucking need you." She shakes her head as anger contorts her features.

"Then you have me." I wink and finger fuck her G spot until tears fill her eyes, but she never breaks my gaze. It's the hottest thing I've ever seen. Okay, everything with her is the hottest thing I've ever seen.

"Yes, please. Oh, God, yes. Fuck me. Oh God, fuck me." She shoves her pelvis forward and grinds hard in a circle. "Fuck I'm coming so fucking hard." Her voice cracks as she cries out.

"I love this fucking cunt so much." I slap her twitching clit.

"Shit." Her entire body convulses as she gasps for air.

After I stand, I stuff my fingers in her mouth and back her up until she hits the wall. Without breaking contact, I elevate her up until her legs are wrapped around my waist. "I've got to have this tight cunt wrapped around my dick." I fill her sex with one thrust, and within seconds, we're both crashing again. I can't get enough of her.

"Jesus." I gasp against her mouth, sucking down her air as the room spins around us.

She laughs and twists her arms around until I can remove the restraint. Once she's free, she flings her arms

around my neck. “Soon, you won’t be able to do that.”

“Only a momentary setback.” I rest my palm over the swell of her belly, loving the feeling of my baby growing inside of her. She’s given me more blessings than I’ll ever give her. I cradle her face. “I love you, London. You’re my heart and soul. Thank you for loving me.”

“Always.” She offers up her mouth to me. Like I’ll ever deny her.

Epilogue

Eighteen Months Later

London

After receiving my diploma, I walk to the edge of the stadium and take everything in, soaking in the blessings of the day. The warm sun beams down as the announcer names the next graduate as I flip the tassel and step into the future.

In the second row, standing tall and clapping for me, is Gram, my best friend, my husband who is holding our gorgeous daughter, and on the other side of him is my brother. To see them in the same place without Callan's hands around Jared's neck is a gift all on its own.

Twenty minutes later, the ceremony concludes, and my brother wraps his arm around my shoulder and kisses the top of my head. "Thanks for letting me come. It means a lot to me."

"You're welcome. I'm just glad you're in a good spot and able to come. Three years ago, this wouldn't be happening." I wrap my arm around his waist and lay my head on his shoulder.

"I know," he sighs. "I screwed things up. When I should have been thankful for what I had, I was resentful and angry about what I didn't have. Hell, I had it good. I had you and Gram in my corner, and I screwed you over." His eyes grow dark as if he's reliving his past. "I'll never forgive—"

"I'm not saying I've forgotten, but if you continue the path you've been on since that night, I forgive you. And so does Gram. You made mistakes but you've made up for them."

"How about Callan?" He tips his head toward my husband, whose eyes never leave us while speaking to Gram and passing around Meadow. My hands itch to snatch her up and kiss her cheeks. God, she's the most precious thing in the world.

“Oh, he hates you, but it’s fine.” I turn my attention back to Jared. “He loves me, so you’re safe.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“He’s a little rough around the edges and doesn’t like other men looking at me.” And I absolutely love it.

Callan’s jaw flexes as he eats up the distance between us. My heart thuds in my chest. As much as I want to shower Meadow with kisses, I need Callan to follow through with the look in his eyes. Lord, the man is possessive. And controlling. And downright dirty.

“Besides, if you hadn’t pulled the stunt you did, Callan might have never had the balls to touch me, and we wouldn’t have that gorgeous baby over there. He should thank you.” I wink at him as Jared stiffens next to me.

“Angel.” He glares. “You’re writing checks I’m not sure you can cash.”

“I can definitely cash them in.” I waggle my eyebrows as Meadow wiggles and squirms against him in her haste to get to me. Yes, she was conceived in a clearing after a hunt. A solo hunt. Since the full moon in the woods, we’ve kept our relationship fully focused on ourselves.

“Baby.” He grasps the back of my head as Meadow settles against my chest, and he hauls me forward until his lips are a fraction of an inch away from mine. The heat in his eyes makes my toes curl, and my ovaries pop.

“Yes, Sir?” I stand on my tiptoes and press my mouth against his. They’re soft yet firm against mine.

He pulls back, digging his fingertips deeper, and leans next to my ear. “I love you, my sweet brat. Congratulations. And I am thankful every day your brother sold your virginity to the highest bidder, and I won. But I’m never going to tell him that.”

Meadow slaps my face with her chubby hands and puckers her lips. I give her a loud kiss. “Thank you, baby girl.”

I proceed to smother her in kisses. My heart is so full I have to fight back tears. I'm thankful every day for the blessings in my life.

"Congratulations, London." Henley and I embrace. "I'm so proud of you."

"I can't believe we're both finally done with school."

"No more homework." Henley laughs while rocking back onto her heels. "No more binge study nights. No more tests."

"I can't believe we're both joining the full-time workforce."

"I know." Henley graduated last semester. When I had Meadow, I took a year off to enjoy and spend time with her, and it was worth every second.

"Any job leads?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I'm working full-time with the Children's Division. They called me yesterday and offered me the position. I'm excited to get started."

"That's awesome." She drags me back into her embrace and squeezes me.

It was hard to navigate our friendship, my relationship with her father, and how to balance it all out, but we're strong now. After a few awkward weeks, she moved out and only visited a couple of times a month. Until we all sat down and discussed what our priorities were.

Now, Henley and I go out every week for dinner or she comes over and we have a girl's night. The only caveat is that Callan can't be there. Then a couple of Sundays a month, we have brunch, and all hang out together. It made it easier when she started dating her husband, and we had Meadow. That added more people to the mix.

Gram walks toward me. "Congratulations, honey, I'm so proud of you." She cradles my face in her wrinkled hands as a

tear rolls down her cheek. “Your parents should have been here, but I’m so lucky it’s me here instead of them.”

“Me, too, Gram.” I hug her with Meadow patting her shoulder. She loves her as much as I did while growing up. “I’m so glad you’re the one who raised us. We were lucky.”

“Thank you, dear.” She swipes the tear off her cheek. “This is such a beautiful day. Both you and Jared together. Your beautiful baby and husband,” she sighs and shakes her head. “I prayed for this day every night since you were born. You’re such an amazing young woman.”

“Gram.” Callan lays his arm around her shoulders as the crowd around us thins into a few stragglers. “Stop giving her a big head. She’s already conceited enough.”

“Quit.” She giggles and swats playfully at his chest as Meadow lays her head on my shoulder and relaxes against me. Her soft heartbeat and the scent of baby shampoo relaxes me in ways that nothing else ever has. But don’t tell Callan that. He’d get his feelings hurt.

“Please.” The way this man has my grandmother wrapped around her finger is ridiculous. “I don’t have a big head and stop trying to get on my grandmother’s good side. You’re already there.”

“I know.” He winks, making my stomach flip. “I’m just banking extra points for when I need them. You never know when I’ll forget to fill your car with gas or run your bathwater and have you go running to her, telling her how neglectful I am of your needs.”

His eyes never leave mine, and anyone in their right mind would know what needs he’s referring to. He does fill my gas tank and runs my bathwater, and there’s always an extra treat hidden somewhere when I’ve had a bad day.

And he gets up with Meadow in the middle of the night. And fixes my grandmother’s roof. And pays for my brother’s rehab. Yeah, he’s amazing, thoughtful, and attentive. And we

haven't even gotten to the sex part yet. Suddenly, I wish we were anywhere but here.

"There's my girl." Andrew wraps his arm around my waist. "When're you going to dump this old man and run away with me?"

"Never." I laugh. There were a few awkward moments after the night in the woods, but we quickly went back to our teasing, which riles Callan up. "Although, you are quite the catch."

"Thank you, love." He kisses my forehead as Callan gives him a death glare. "Congratulations."

"Thank you." Even though he looks like my husband, there's no simmering spark between us. He's a great guy but nothing more than a friend.

"Go." Callan shoves at Andrew's chest. "Leave my woman alone."

"Yes, Sir." Andrew winks and saunters off.

"If he wasn't my brother, I'd punch him in the throat for touching you."

"Stop." I pat his back as Meadow reaches out a chubby hand and clutches Callan's dress shirt, and his eyes soften. She loves her daddy as much as he loves her. It's beautiful to watch them together. They both bring me to my knees.

"Let me take her." Gram snatches Meadow from me. "I've got my car seat. I'll see you two later this evening. Just call when you're ready for me to bring this little angel home."

Once they leave, I turn my attention to Callan. "So, what're we going to do with ourselves this afternoon?"

"For one thing, I'm going to paddle your ass for flirting with my brother." He grips my chin, shoving my head back until I meet his gaze.

"What if I said I enjoyed flirting with your brother?" Adrenaline buzzes in my chest. There's nothing that turns

either of us on more than me being a brat and him punishing me.

“Oh...” His eyes narrow as his jaw flexes. “I know just the thing. I have a gift for you in my pocket.”

“I see.” I glance around to see if anyone is paying any attention, but we’re alone in front of a quiet stadium of folded chairs.

He pulls out a box and flips it open. It’s a diamond choker with a hook on the end. “The rest of it is at the house. I didn’t figure you wanted me to break out the straps here.”

“That was thoughtful of you.”

“Yes, it was. Because I’m going to tie you down and pound that ass of yours for letting Andrew touch you and the guy who graduated after you couldn’t take his eyes off your ass.” He wraps his hand around my throat. “And if I’m not mistaken, you wiggled it for him.”

Heat curls in my belly as my clit and the walls of my sex clench in anticipation. “Let’s go home.”

Diamonds are nice, but being strapped down as my husband worships my body? Yes, please. Sign me up. It could be duct tape for all I care.

“You read my mind.” He fastens it around my neck. “The chains will connect to your rings.”

I moan as if he’s already tugging on the chains clamped to my clit and nipples. He loops his finger into the hook between my breasts and tugs. “Are you ready to be my good girl and get on your knees?”

“No.” I smirk while backing away from him. “I don’t think I am. You’ll have to catch me and force me to drop to my knees. This is my day, not yours.”

“Brat.” He swats my ass, causing me to jump.

Didn't get enough of London and Callan? Grab a copy of Callan's side of the Epilogue [here](#).

Enjoyed the vibe of this story? Grab *Her Filthy Professor* [here](#) for another forbidden relationship.

Want more billionaires? Check out *Taming the Beast* where a sweet and innocent Ember meets the sexy and gruff billionaire tattoo artist Maverick. [Taming the Beast](#).

Her Filthy Professor

Daisy

“That dress looks a little snug on you.” My mom pinches the mauve fabric at my waist, drawing it toward her an inch. “When we had the fitting, the gap was bigger. This makes your boobs look too big.”

“I’m sorry.” I rotate my shoulders inward to take the focus off my chest. Since I turned fourteen, my size has been an issue. If I gain a pound, my mom can tell. It’s in my chest. And everywhere else.

“I knew you should have skipped the rehearsal dinner.” She lets go of the stretched material. It’s forgiving, but she isn’t. “You’re going to take all the attention away from your sister.”

“Mom....” I inwardly roll my eyes because if I don’t keep my face devoid of emotion—that will be the next lecture in my future. And I’d rather have another plate of Bourbon Blueberry Cobbler from last night’s dinner. “No one will notice me. Everyone’s eyes will be on Julia. She’s the bride, and it’s her day.”

Every day is my sister’s day. At least according to my parents. I love my sister, but it’s a love/hate relationship. A girl can only be compared so often to someone else before she gets a complex.

“Did you say something?” Julia brushes her hand over the row of beads at her waist. Her slender, less than three percent body fat, waist. The material shines under the lights of the church’s changing room. Her hair, makeup, nails, and everything else are perfect.

My sister is four years older and has just passed the bar exam. I can’t make it past a cupcake bar without failing my diet.

If only Zoe was here, she could save me from the constant onslaught of insults. Or, at least, we could get sloshed

at the reception. But no, she went on a family trip to St. Lucia for the last two weeks before college resumes. I would have been invited, except for this blessed wedding.

“I said you look beautiful.” And she does. She’s gorgeous, and I’m—me. The only thing I have going for me is big tits. That has brought a few guys around who were into tits and ass versus skin and bones. But I’ve not gone all the way.

I’m looking for the whole package. A guy who can walk the walk and talk the talk. A guy like all the book boyfriends I fantasize about.

She tilts her head sideways and sighs, “Thank you.”

The room is covered in discarded clothing, makeup, and hair supplies, and it smells like a department store fragrance counter where someone sprayed each bottle at least once.

“I told Daisy she should have laid off the brisket and seafood.” My mom marches over to my sister and arranges the veil along her back.

Julia’s two best friends, Bridgette and Stacy, and our cousin, Heather, turn and gape at me. They’re the spitting image of my sister—thin, wispy, blonde, blue-eyed, and ex-cheerleaders. Maybe my dad spread his seed behind my mom’s back, and I was switched at birth. It would explain a lot of things. One is that I’m the only brunette with green eyes in the family.

Unfortunately, my cousin Karissa isn’t here either. She’s off to Lake Tahoe with her fiancée scoping out wedding venues. She’s the cousin I like but her father is my dad’s half-brother, and they don’t get along that well.

“Mom, I would prefer we didn’t discuss my weight in front of everyone.”

“What goes in your mouth goes to your hips,” Heather says, giving me a shitty look. God, I hate her. I don’t care if she is my cousin. She’s the epitome of an evil witch. My mom might lecture me about my weight, but Heather has no qualms about shoving it in my face. “And those hips don’t lie about all the carbs you’ve been wolfing down.”

And there it is.

“Heather....” My mom glares at her. “That’s enough.”

“I’m sorry, Aunt April.” She purses her lips together. “I won’t insult Daisy again. I promise.”

“Thank you, dear.” My mom beams at Heather like she’s just won a gold medal, but she pats her arm rather than lifting it high.

“I was only cautioning her because if she keeps it up, she will always be alone.”

I snap my mouth shut. God, I want to throat punch her.

Someone knocks on the door, and we all turn. “Is everyone decent?” The man’s deep voice leaves a trail of goosebumps along my skin. He sounds like a sexy narrator. Now all I need is for him to say, ‘Good girl,’ and my day will be complete.

“Yes.” The trio of blondes, excluding my sister, giggle and waggle their eyebrows.

“We’re decent. Today.” Bridgette winks at Julia. Her hair is piled high on her head, with little tendrils kissing her neck. She looks like a porcelain doll.

“Stop.” My sister glares and elbows her hard in the ribs.

“Ouch. Why did you do that?”

“Never mind.” Julia shakes her head and brushes past our mom, opening the door. “We’re ready.”

Interesting. Did Little Ms. Perfect go overboard at her bachelorette party? I wouldn’t know because I wasn’t invited, but from the looks they’re giving each other, I’m guessing there was at least a stripper involved.

“Excellent.” The man who knocked on the door nods and stands to the side. “Go ahead and proceed to the atrium.”

“You weren’t here last night.” Heather eyes him up and down. Not that I blame her for checking him out. He’s tall, dark, and handsome with soulful brown eyes and a five o’clock shadow.

His gaze meets mine, and I forget how to breathe. It feels like he's looking into my soul. The room spins, and I blink, sucking a gulp of air.

"Are you okay?" Bridgette shakes my shoulder. "For fucks sake, don't pass out. That's all we need." Of my sister's friends, she's the most dramatic.

"No. I'm fine." Heat floods my face, and one corner of his mouth arches upward. Wonderful. He knows I'm a loser with drenched panties over him. That's all I need. Another perfect person to make fun of me.

He clears his throat. "I flew in last night. My flight was delayed, so I didn't make it to the rehearsal activities."

"That's too bad." Heather bites her bottom lip and steps closer to the man.

"Yes, it is. I would have loved to have more time to spend with my cousin. It's been a while." He shifts backward, evading her advancement.

"Oh..." My sister's eyes light up. "You must be Alexander, Wyatt's first cousin."

"Yes, that's me. His father and my mother are siblings. We spent a lot of time together in the summers at our grandparents' lake house up in Michigan." He holds the door open, causing the edges of his suit jacket to stretch apart. The man is stacked.

Yeah, too bad he wasn't here last night. I could have spent the hours I listened to the bedsprings squeaking in the hotel's adjoining room, thinking about him braced above me rather than knowing Julia and Wyatt were going at it all night.

Heather advances forward again and runs her finger down his lapel. "Are you a doctor like Wyatt?"

"No, I'm afraid not." He grabs her hand, pats it, and steps sideways. It's like watching a chess match.

She wrinkles her nose. "Too bad." She spins around as if she's dismissing him even though he was dodging her advances. That's one way to keep her at arm's length.

He thrusts his hands into his pockets. “They’re waiting for us.”

As everyone files out, I hang back. Not that they notice. I could skip the entire wedding, and the only reason they would complain would be because the attendant numbers would be lopsided.

I step through the threshold and watch them file down the hallway with their perfect backsides swaying. Their thighs probably don’t even touch.

“Not a fan of weddings?”

“Shit!” I jump and stumble on my heel. The flipping sexy-as-sin guy drags his hand out of his pocket to grab me but misses my arm. Double shit. My arms flail around as I try to catch my balance. Oh, my God, please don’t fall on your face. The seams of the dress stretch as my legs wobble.

He grabs my upper arms and pulls me toward him. “I’ve got you.”

When my chest lands against his, my heart slams against my ribs. He smells woody, like cedar, with a sweet, earthy undertone. God, he smells good. I straighten, causing my boobs to rub along his suit jacket.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Thank you.” I glance up and swallow.

Concern etches his features as his jaw twitches. Is he gritting his teeth? He’s gritting his teeth. Heat floods over my face. How embarrassing. He’s repulsed by me touching him, and I’m about to dry hump his leg. Thankfully, everyone else had disappeared and didn’t witness my stumble.

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” His hands slide down my arms, and a whimper escapes from my lips. He licks his lips, and heat flares in his eyes as they linger on my chest.

“Yes, I’m fine. Thank you.” Does he.... Stop. Your tits are in his face. Men don’t have to be attracted to a girl to get

turned on if you're shoving your tits in their face. I could be anyone.

I step backward and rub my hands along my skirt. "I'm sorry about that. Thank you for catching me. This dress is not made for aerobics. Not that I was doing aerobics." I roll my eyes. "Or that I even do aerobics. Just ask my mom. That's why the dress is too small. I should have skipped that last Red Velvet cupcake at the rehearsal dinner."

What am I doing? I'm babbling. I never babble, but he's the best-looking guy I've ever seen.

And you just told him that your dress is too tight. And that you don't exercise. And you eat too much.

Fuck my life.

His eyes skate over me. "You look fabulous in the dress. You're the only one that fills it out how the dress was designed."

"Please," I groan and roll my eyes again. "The designer intended for someone like my sister and her friends to wear it. My boobs are about to jump out of the top, and my thighs are squished together. Designers are looking for 104 pounds models when they're designing their dresses. Not...." Do. Not. Tell. Him. How. Much. You. Weigh. I bite my lips together.

He grabs my chin. "Babe, you're gorgeous. Don't let anyone else tell you any different." He tips his head in the direction of the atrium. "They're waiting for us."

I lick my lips, and his eyes never leave my mouth. "Right." I nod and spin on my heel, causing him to drop his arm.

I teeter again, but this time, I remain upright. Thank God. I don't need a repeat performance.

As I near the foyer, the rest of the wedding party is waiting expectantly for us as Alexander trails behind me.

"Daisy, hurry up." My mom shakes her head. "The more we rush you, the slower you go."

Alexander bristles behind me. "Who is that?"

“My mom. I’ve got to go.” I march across the vestibule with my heels clicking on the tile flooring.

This day just keeps getting better.

Want to keep reading? Grab Her Filthy Professor [here](#).

About the Author

Alexia Chase is a steamy contemporary romance author who specializes in visual stories set in an interconnected world.

If you love stepping into a place that feels like home where familiar people, places, and things welcome you with open arms, then you're in the right place.

Ms. Chase pens everything from short stories to novels with heroes from bartenders to billionaires.

What can you find between the pages? Heavy doses of snark, sinful fun, smut, and happily ever afters.

Come inside. They're waiting for you.

Where can you find Ms. Chase when she's not writing? Ms. Chase lives in a small community outside of Kansas City, Missouri. She spends her free time with her husband, three children, and two dogs and loves to spin stories in her head. She's an avid learner and never far from her computer. Just ask her children. They have plenty to say about her excessive computer usage.

**** I love short stories, and I love Alexia Chase. ****

**** Oh, my I love these short hot and sexy books by Alexia.

**** Funny, sweet, and steamy. Alexia Chase did an awesome job with this novel. ****

**** Ms. Chase has written an engaging, steamy, funny, angst driven, and entertaining. ****

**** Sexy, funny, sweet and all the feels. ****

Quick. Dirty. Sweet.

Alexia Chase

alexiachaseromance@gmail.com

<https://www.amazon.com/author/alexiachase>

<https://www.facebook.com/Alexia-Chase-Romance-312300706120371/>

<https://www.bookbub.com/profile/alexia-chase>

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Book Review

If you liked this book, I'd be honored if you would write a review. I'd be forever grateful.