

EDGE
FIKRE
PROTECTORS
SERIES
#4

Disgruntled

PROTECTOR

JADE DOLLSTON

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**Book 4 in The
Fierce Protectors Series**

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**WARNING: THIS BOOK CONTAINS GRAPHIC SEXUAL CONTENT AND PROFANITY.
READERS 18+ ONLY.**

TW: Death of a loved one, Character who is an amputee, Flashback of an explosion

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DEDICATION

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED to my book bestie, AK Landow. The first time I read one of your books, I immediately felt connected to your humor and wit. When I wrote to inform you that you were now my best friend, you rolled with it, and here we are.

Thank you for being you and for helping me to be me. Your unwavering support astounds me every single day, and I'm so effing proud to call you my friend.

Signed,

AK Landow's Head Bitch in Charge (a.k.a. Jade)

*Everything has its beauty,
but not everyone sees it.
-Confucius*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

TAZANNA BIRDSONG IS A complicated character, one I hope you'll fall in love with as much as I have.

She is a twenty-seven-year-old Army veteran who lost part of her leg in service to her country. She's also a bit of a smartass with a wickedly dark sense of humor. Yes, she pokes fun at herself at times. She makes wildly inappropriate jokes about having a prosthetic leg.

Taz uses these jokes as a coping mechanism. Imagine losing part of yourself and having the strength to come out the other side with a smile on your face. It's not easy, but she's doing the best that she can.

I have a friend who is an amputee, and he's constantly cracking jokes, which makes some people uncomfortable, but you get used to it after a while. He's always been a bit of a nut—even before his accident—and I derived a lot of Taz's personality from him.

Deep down, beneath the jokes and teasing, Taz has a very warm and sensitive heart. She's been through a lot in her young life—like, really. A lot.

So I hope you'll cut her some slack. She really does have a beautiful soul, and she just wants to feel as beautiful on the outside as she does on the inside.

Mario "Woody" Diaz gives her that. It's a long and winding road to get to that point, so be patient. It will be worth it in the end.

Happy reading!

Love,

Jade

CHAPTER 1



“I NEVER THOUGHT I’D see the day,” I mumbled to Bode as we watched the couple cut the enormous white wedding cake.

“Shark getting married? Yeah, me neither.” He took a swig of his longneck IPA and then grinned, his dark-blond hair swinging around his ears when he turned his head toward me. “He’s a lot less grumpy now that he’s found Charli.”

We clapped politely when the newlyweds fed each other a piece of cake, and then Shark leaned down and whispered something in his bride’s ear that made her blush prettily. Charli was a beautiful woman, tiny, blonde, and adorable, and we were still trying to figure out how she had snagged the biggest player in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. No one ever thought Beau “Shark” Atwood would settle down, much less with someone so... sweet.

Thirty minutes later, the first dances were all done, and the deejay started cranking out dance tunes. I grabbed a shot of Patrón from the bar and let my

eyes scan the area around the large, wood tile dance floor. Charli certainly had some hot friends.

I did an ocular and mental assessment as my eyes passed over each woman. *Cute. Married. Hot. Pretty. Taken. Wow. Meh.*

My eyes snapped back to Miss Wow. *Holy shit. Who is she?* She was standing near the dance floor with her back to me, her long, dark hair flowing all the way to her butt. A very nice butt that was bumping up and down in time to the music. Like she was itching to dance. She was wearing a long, bright purple dress that showed off tanned, smooth arms.

Is she Hispanic like me? She looked like it. Not that it mattered a bit to me. I was an equal opportunity lover.

Miss Wow's hips swayed side to side—and my eyes tracked the motion like they would follow a hypnotist's watch—before resuming their little bounce action, which caused her hair to ripple down her back. The man behind my zipper approved. In fact, he wanted to wrap those gorgeous tresses around himself until he exploded. Which was a bizarre thought because I'd never had the urge to jizz in a woman's hair before.

But that silky, raven hair was doing things to me. Making me have all kinds of kinky thoughts, most of them revolving around fisting and pulling those long locks while she was on her knees with—

Fuck.

I watched as my buddy Cam approached Miss Wow and grabbed her by the hand, pulling her toward the dance floor. Women loved Camden Fitz with his dark hair and mischievous blue eyes. Well, you know what? Women loved me too, and as soon as Cam was done dancing with the mystery woman, I was going to break in. My fucking flirt game was top-notch, and I was going

to put it all on this chick with her bouncy ass and beautiful hair. She was *mine* tonight.

Cam spun the woman around, giving me my first view of her face, and I jerked my mouth open so quickly that I was pretty sure my teeth fell out of my mouth and directly onto the charcoal concrete floor. No. It couldn't be.

Taz?

Miss Wow is Taz?

No. Fucking. Way.

I tossed back the tequila and didn't even flinch at the burn, keeping my eyes trained on Taz and Cam even as I flicked through the files of my mind. Huh. Fucking crazy. I had apparently never seen Taz with her hair down. She always kept it braided and wrapped around her head. Who knew she was hiding this mass of luxury underneath those prim, functional updos?

Cam spun her out and then back in, and Taz laughed raucously, the sound reaching my ears over the beat of the music, and I smiled. Then I quickly wiped the smile away. *What the fuck am I smiling about?* I couldn't stand Tazanna Birdsong. The woman worked on my last damn nerve.

Fuck it. I'm getting more tequila. I turned and headed to the bar, and the pretty woman wiping down the area with a cloth looked up. "Another Patrón?" I held up two fingers to double my order, and she nodded without so much as a lifted brow, pouring the shots and sliding them across the wooden surface. I swiveled my body to face the dance floor once again, leaning my elbows back on the bar.

Taz was dancing with my friend Bode now. They were doing the salsa and weren't half bad. Not as good as me, but... I reached for one of the tequila shots and slammed it back, squeezing my eyes shut as the smoothness slid

down my throat. When I opened my eyes again, I saw Bristol Hopkins headed my way, her violet eyes trained on my brown ones.

“You. Me. Salsa,” she chirped, her pretty lips curling up at the edges. Bristol was my friend Waylon “Tank” Hanford’s girlfriend, but they’d been going through a rough patch lately. Me and the other guys affectionately called her Queenie because she was just so goddamn gorgeous that she looked like she should be wearing a crown, even when she was eating pizza in sweatpants. But tonight, she was far from sweatpants in her stunning peach bridesmaid dress. Tank was a lucky man.

I slugged back the other shot and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “All right, Queenie. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

We hit the dance floor, and I took her right hand in my left one and let the other rest on her upper back. “Okay, the last time I salsa-ed was with Charli in high school, and I had to be the guy,” Bris admitted.

“I got you, Queenie. Just start with your right foot.” We started dancing the basic steps, and she picked it up quickly, her hips finding the rhythm easily. Pretty soon, we were spinning and doing more complicated steps as I led her around the dance floor. Bode and Taz danced by, and my gaze dropped to Taz’s hips. The word *tantalizing* sprang to mind.

“She’s good,” Bristol said. “You’d never know she only has one good leg.” I pulled my eyes back to Bristol to find her looking at me appraisingly. “Taz looks beautiful tonight, doesn’t she?”

I managed to swing us in a circle while simultaneously shrugging casually. “I guess.”

Hearing a husky, feminine laugh from my left, I did my best not to look. I failed. Bode was whispering something to his partner, and it aggravated the

shit out of me, but I couldn't place exactly why. And that annoyed me even further.

The song ended, and Bristol gave me a swift kiss on the cheek. "Thanks, Wood. I'm gonna see if Bode wants to dance. Why don't we switch partners?" she said, giving me a coy smile.

"Oh, um..." *Fuck.*

She dragged me over toward the other couple and grabbed Bode's hand as a country waltz sifted melodically through the speakers. He tossed a flirty wink at Taz, who grinned and then shifted her eyes toward me before dropping them to the floor, that beautiful smile fading instantly. I didn't like that one bit.

"Hey, you, uh.. ." Jesus, I felt like I was back in sixth grade trying to ask Lola Herrera to dance at the end-of-year social. I cleared my throat. "We can dance, if you want to."

Her warm, brown eyes lifted, and she blinked twice. Her look could only be described as hopeful. How had I never noticed how long her eyelashes were or how tiny caramel and jade flecks brightened the chocolate-color of her irises.

"You don't have to. I know you don't—"

I cut her off, taking her hand and feeling something exhilarating stir the air between us. "I want to," I said, surprising myself with how honest that declaration was.

"Okay." Her grin slowly returned, and it made my chest swell with something I couldn't define. Her smile was perfect. Bright white teeth and pink lips set against her dark skin.

I pulled her into my arms, leaving room for the Holy Ghost, as Sister Francis always insisted at our school dances. Taz's hand rested on my

shoulder, and I held the other one as we started to waltz. *One, two, three. One, two, three.* I could feel the corners of my lips tilting up. “You’re pretty good,” I said.

“For a one-legged girl?” she asked, giving me a mischievous look.

Trying not to frown, I shook my head. “Don’t talk like that, Taz.” She rolled her eyes at me.

Taz was an Army veteran who had joined our firm, DFW Security Force, about six months ago. The rest of us—me, Shark, Cam, Bode, Tank, and Hawk—were all former Navy SEALs, and Shark, the owner, had decided to bring in a female agent to work with us.

The only problem was that Tazanna Birdsong had annoyed me since the first day I’d met her. She’d had the lower part of her right leg amputated, the result of a service injury while she was still in the military, and she insisted on cracking jokes about it. It aggravated the shit out of me because she was just so flippant about something that was fucking serious.

We’d gotten off on the wrong foot from day one, and if she knew I thought that, she would make a funny comment about “the wrong foot.” And that would probably piss me off too.

“Why does it bother you so much when I talk about my injury?” she asked, seeming genuinely interested in my answer.

My mind whirled, trying to think of exactly why it irked me. “It’s not your injury. I just don’t like you making fun of yourself.”

Her head tilted to the side, and her hair whispered against my forearm, causing a thrill to sizzle up my arm. “That’s actually kind of sweet, Woody.” The corners of her eyes lifted with her smile, and I felt myself softening toward her. “I guess I think of it like the elephant in the room, and I feel like I

need to address it. It's just my way to make light of it instead of moping and crying."

My head bobbed slowly up and down as I thought about it. "I can see that."

Taz's eyes fell to a spot on my chest, and I felt something shift between us. "I'm tired of crying about it," she said so quietly that I wouldn't have heard it if her face hadn't been mere inches from mine.

Well, now I feel like a prick. I pulled her closer, edging out the Holy Ghost as our bodies made contact for the first time. Her breasts were soft against my hard chest, and the curve of her back made my fingers itch to slide lower. Down to that round, firm ass I had been admiring earlier.

I was relieved when the song ended because my arousal was becoming painfully obvious, and that seemed inappropriate given what we'd just been discussing. "You want to go get a drink?" I asked, pulling my hips back a couple of inches to avoid rubbing my hard dick on her.

Her mood brightened. "Yeah, that sounds good."

After three tequila shots each, we were back on the dance floor, shaking our asses to a bumping ACRAZE song. Taz turned her back on me and swirled her hips. *Fuck yeah.* I grabbed her slim waist and pulled her back against me, the alcohol removing any inhibitions I may have previously had about my erection coming in contact with her body. In fact, I was grinding that motherfucker against her sweet ass like I was being paid to do it.

"You drive here tonight?" I asked in her ear, inhaling the scent of coconut in her hair.

She shook her head. "No, I rode with Tank." Our eyes drifted to where he and Bristol were making out hard in the corner. "Huh. It looks like he's got his hands full. I should probably find another ride."

"I've got a ride for you," I growled, sliding my cock against the softness of

her butt.

She turned and wrapped her arms around my neck. “I’m ready when you are,” she said without hesitation. There was fire blazing in her eyes, and that only fueled my desire.

I nodded. “No one will even miss us. I’ll head out the side door first, and you wait about five minutes before following me.”

I waited for her in the parking lot beside my red truck, and my dick twitched as soon as I saw her headed my way. Helping her into the passenger seat, I jogged around to my side, adjusting the hardness behind my zipper before climbing in.

Her hands and lips were all over me as I headed down the side street toward my house. I almost ran a stop sign and had to slam on my brakes to avoid T-boning another vehicle. *Fuck*. I was way too buzzed to be driving. Add to that the fact that Taz was unzipping my pants, and I knew I needed to get the fuck off the road ASAP.

I wheeled into a parking lot, only vaguely realizing that we were at the church where the wedding had been held earlier tonight. I drove carefully around to the back before slamming the truck into park.

My dick was in Taz’s hand now, and I groaned as she stroked me hard and fast. “Get over here.” I yanked her across the console until she was straddling my lap. We both jumped when her ass hit the steering wheel, and a loud honk resounded through the dark night. We both giggled like drunken idiots.

“Let’s get in the backseat,” she whispered conspiratorially. “I want to suck your cock.”

She didn’t have to ask me twice. The next thing I knew, I was sitting in the back, and she was kneeling on the seat beside me with her face between my legs. “God, Taz. That feels fucking amazing.” Her soft tongue lapped the

length of my penis. Long, firm slides of that rough, pink muscle, each one ending with a swirl around my engorged head.

“You’re so thick,” she moaned a second before wrapping her lips around the tip of me and sucking. “And you taste yummy. I think I could suck on this cock all night.”

“I wouldn’t complain about that,” I said with a chuckle, which turned into a groan when she took me deeper. I gathered her hair in my fist, letting my other hand drift down her back and to her tempting little behind. “Ohhh, that’s it, *mi amor*. Get down on that dick until it chokes you.”

“Mmmmm,” she hummed around me before taking me to the hilt, and the sound of her gagging and the vision of her mouth stretching around me in the dim moonlight filtering through back windows almost undid me.

My hand was a tight fist in her hair, and I held her down on me before tugging up so that she could breathe. “You’re so fucking sexy when my cock is in your throat, baby. Take it again,” I demanded. She did. Over and over. My moans filled the cab of the truck, and my fingers twisted around long dark strands as I thrusting up into her mouth.

With my free hand, I scrunched her dress up around her hips and found simple cotton panties in a purple that matched her dress. I yanked them down and stroked her beautiful brown ass. “Does sucking me off make you wet, Taz?”

“Mmhmm,” she groaned around the thick column that was plunging in and out of her mouth.

I slid a hand down to test the veracity of her noises and found her thighs slick with her arousal. “I like that. Getting that cunt wet and ready to take me.” My fingers found her center and quickly located the little bundle of nerves that had her panting around my erection when I caressed it. Her mouth

slowed, and I spanked her ass, my eyes hungrily following the tight bounce of her firm backside. “Don’t. Fucking. Stop,” I growled.

Holding her head in place, I fucked up into her mouth as I slipped my middle finger into her pussy. She was tight. Like, *really* tight. “Fuck, that’s a hot little pussy, Taz. I bet it wants to eat up my fat cock, doesn’t it?” Another soft moan of assent while she took my punishing drives into her mouth. It took me a good minute to work another finger inside her, and her hips began to rock back onto me. “I’m going to break this cunt tonight. Is that what you want?”

She nodded her head, and I slipped my pinky down to her clit, giving it the attention it deserved while my first two fingers continued to plunge in and out of her. Her inner walls began to squeeze around me, and I yanked her head up until we were nose to nose. Her eyelids were heavy as she panted against my mouth.

“Let me see how pretty your mouth looks when you come with my name on your lips.”

“Woo-Woody,” she stammered, balancing herself with her hands on my shoulders, her entire body shivering as my fingers worked her down below.

“Fuck my goddamn fingers like you’re going to do my cock, Taz. Fuck ’em until you come.” Her hips churned, her head angled back, and then she came hard and fast, damn near snapping my fingers in half.

“Fuck. D-don’t stop. Oh god, Woody, yes.” Her eyes slammed shut as her dark-pink lips parted, and the sodden sound of my fingers inside her filled the space around us.

“So fucking sexy, baby,” I murmured before crushing my lips to hers, swallowing the remainder of her cries. The saltiness of my precum mingled with the tang of tequila and lime, and I sucked on her tongue to savor the

taste. By the time our lips separated, my cock was throbbing, begging for attention, but I put him on hold for a minute, pulling my fingers from her and wiping her juices on my tongue. My tastebuds came alive, and I wanted fucking more of her flavor.

“Lick it off,” I ordered, and her dainty pink tongue lapped at my own as she groaned. “I’m going to lick you up later, Taz, and I want you to taste what I’m gonna taste.”

“You’re so fucking dirty, Woody.”

“Baby, you have no idea.”

After sliding her panties off, I hauled her into my lap as we ate at each other’s mouths, wild frantic clashes of tongues and teeth.

“Please tell me you have a condom,” she whispered as my lips sucked their way down her neck, and she rocked her sex up and down my shaft, fucking soaking me.

“Yeah,” I groaned. I had never been this turned on in my life. Reaching into my wallet and then sheathing myself, I held my cock up and guided her over it.

“Woody?”

“Uh-huh?” Her pussy was soaking my tip, but she was resisting my efforts to slide her down onto me. *Please don’t change your mind.*

“Can we, um, go slow? It’s been a while.”

Our eyes met, hers soft and vulnerable, and I laid a hand against her cheek. “How long, baby?”

She blinked and ducked her head. “Almost five years.”

Christ. “Since before.. .”

“Since before my accident.” She nodded shyly.

“Wow. No fucking pressure, Taz,” I teased.

That made her smile, and her dancing eyes returned to mine. *God she's really pretty.* “Don’t worry. If you fuck it up, I probably won’t even know the difference at this point.”

I pulled her into a slow, sensuous kiss before edging back and looking into her eyes. “I won’t fuck it up, *cariño*. Now you... I’m definitely gonna fuck you up.”

Her tongue peeked out to moisten her lips, swollen from the fucking I gave them earlier, and I resisted the urge to stuff my dick back inside her hot little mouth. “Show me,” she whispered, spreading her knees and sliding a couple of inches down onto my aching cock.

“Holy fuck, Taz.” I wasn’t sure if it was the tequila or the fact that I hadn’t been laid in over a month, but I was positive I was inside the most perfect pussy ever created. The need for more of her bubbled up inside me, and I pulled the top of her dress down, hearing something rip as I exposed her braless tits. They were fucking gorgeous. Full. Pink-tipped. Nipples so hard they looked like she had rubbed ice cubes across them. Who the hell knew she was hiding this under her work clothes? It was a travesty really.

“You. Are. Perfect,” I told her, leaning forward to softly kiss each nipple, and even in the faded light, I could see her cheeks darken. *She likes being praised.* I turned my full attention to her nipples, a rosy brown around the outside and lightening to a dusky pink at the peak. I slid my tongue along the gradient from dark to light and raised my eyes to hers as I took it into my mouth, sucking oh, so slowly while our gazes fused together.

“Woody. God that’s amazing.” I sucked harder, and her cunt took another inch of me as her wet desire flowed down my shaft.

Scooping some up on one finger, I rimmed her other nipple with her own juices and admired the glistening peak before taking that one into my mouth.

“Fuck,” I garbled around it. Pulling back with a pop, I pressed my lips to hers. “You taste like fucking heaven, sweetheart. I can’t wait to bury my entire face in your cunt until your throat hurts from screaming my name.”

With her arms around my neck, she leaned her forehead against mine and grinned at me. “That’s awfully cocky talk.”

I returned her smile with a smug one of my own. “You’re right. Less talking and more fucking.” Slipping a hand between us, I pressed my thumb firmly against her clit, holding it tight against my cock and giving her the friction she needed as I pumped slowly into her. Resting my lips against her ear, I whispered, “Let’s see how much wetness I can fuck out of you, *amor*.” I continued my shallow thrusts until I felt the telltale gush from her inner walls, and then I took her fully in one swift thrust.

“Woody,” she whimpered as I filled her completely, her pussy quivering around me and pushing the limits of my control.

“Fuck me, Taz. Take my cock in that tiny pussy of yours and fuck me.” Her long, gritty pants were warming the side of my cheek as she started to move. “Ay! That’s it, baby. Work those sexy hips for me.”

As her lower body rolled sensually over mine, allowing my rigid cock to rub all along her snug channel, Taz moaned in my ear. “You like being inside me, Woody? Filling me up with your big cock?”

“Fuck yeah,” I grunted. She squeezed around me, and I bucked up into her with smooth, hard strokes. “You’re so tight for me, baby. I don’t know how long I can last in a pussy this hot and wet. You’re driving me fucking crazy.”

She tipped her head back, her neck exposed for my lips to nip and suck on the supple flesh there as my fingers dug into her firm ass. Guiding her. Moving her how I wanted her. “Oh god. I’m coming,” she squeaked, and I

felt her contracting so tightly around my dick that I could barely move inside her.

Slamming her down on me while I lifted my hips from the seat, our bodies made a cacophony of erotic noise that had my balls drawing up against my body. My thumb thrummed her clit as our sounds filled the cab of my truck. Her wetness sucking me in. Our loud moans twisting together. Our lower bodies slapping forcefully against each other.

“Fuck yeah,” I roared as my climax shot from my balls, straight up my erection, and into her heated center.

Taz was wild and out of control on top of me as her orgasm continued to shudder through her body, my name dripping from her lips like melted butter.

“Jesus, you fuck good,” I mumbled into her hair as she collapsed against me. Our breaths were heaving violently from our chests as our heartbeats sped together in a coordinated rhythm. “So good, *cariño*.”

I had fucked a lot of women in a lot of places... in beds, on the counter, against walls, in the shower, and once—only once—an ill-conceived bang in a janitor’s closet that resulted in a spilled bottle of ammonia that had us both gasping for breath. And not in a good way. But I had never come as hard as I had with Taz. My fucking legs were numb, and my hands shook when I stroked them soothingly up and down her back, relishing the feel of her silky hair draping over my arms.

“Well, I think it’s safe to say that you didn’t fuck it up,” she muttered against my shoulder, and my body shook with laughter even as my thoughts turned to fucking her again. And again.

“Come home with me. I need more of you,” I said, kissing her soft cheek just in front of her ear as our breathing finally returned to normal.

Taz sat up, looked me in the eye, and said, “No.”

What.

The.

Fuck?

CHAPTER 2



“WH-WHAT DO YOU MEAN no?” Woody spluttered. “I thought...”

I stifled my smile at his outraged expression, thinking that maybe I should fuck with him a little. “I mean, you were... fine.”

His eyebrows squeezed together until they formed a single, dark slash above his inviting brown eyes. “Fine?” he croaked.

Honestly, Woody had been way more than fine. He had been perfect, taking it slow at first and then fucking me with a fervor the likes of which I had never experienced. And he was so... girthy. I had felt every one of his engorged veins, thanks to my extremely tight and unused pussy. He had awakened nerve endings I’d forgotten I had.

A smile crept across my face, and his eyebrows slowly separated as he realized. “You’re messing with me, right?”

My teeth sunk into my bottom lip. “Maybe a little.”

His warm laugh and strong arms wrapped around me, cocooning me. “So you’ll come home with me?”

“No,” I repeated, earning me another glimpse of his tightening eyebrows. “But we can go to my place.” At his confused look, I explained, “You live with Tank, Hawk, and Bode. No way I’m doing the walk of shame in front of my co-workers.”

“Ah. Gotcha. Okay, where do you live because we probably need to sit a while before I can drive?”

“My house is just a couple of blocks away. We can walk, if you want.”

“You have rubbers?”

I shook my head. I’d just told him I hadn’t been with anyone for years. Why would I have condoms? “There’s an all-night pharmacy on the way.”

He pulled my face to his and kissed me. Deeply. “Good. We’ll buy a mega-pack and use every damn one of them,” he said against my lips.

Oh sweet Jesus!

“Tonight?” I squeaked.

He pulled back and graced me with a slow, sexy smile. *Goddamn, he’s hot.* “If you think you can handle it, baby.”

My competitive side reared her crazy head and pushed unintended words from my mouth. “Oh, I can handle it, but I’m not sure you can.”

He leaned his head forward and took one of my nipples in his mouth, his dark, hooded eyes never leaving mine as he gave me a hard suck that I could feel between my legs. I clenched around him and felt his dick twitch inside me. Releasing me with a pop, his grin turned cocky.

“We’ll see.” Wrapping his hands around my waist, he lifted me. “Just let me take care of this,” he said, pulling off the condom and knotting it as my eyes glued themselves between his legs. I had never seen a penis that big, and

I found myself unable to look away. I could feel his eyes on my face and ratcheted my guilty gaze upward to meet his. “It’s been so long that you’ve forgotten what a cock looks like?”

I giggled. “Yeah. Pretty much. I do think yours is really cute though.”

“Cute? I’ll fucking show you cute,” he growled, twisting me until I was flat on my back on the seat with his hips between my thighs. Pushing into me, he groaned. “Does that feel cute, *amor*?”

My mind worked to remember these Spanish words he was saying to me so that I could look them up later. Woody rolled his hips, touching all the places inside me that had yearned to be touched for years. Places that Joe had ignored after my accident.

He’s not wearing a condom. Think with your brain and not your vagina, Taz.

“Actually, Woody, it feels raw. Like you’re not wearing protection,” I said pointedly, though something deep inside me—probably my reinvigorated pussy—was telling me to shut up and just go with it.

“Fuck,” he said, stilling immediately but not pulling out. “Sorry, Taz.” His lips found mine, and when his tongue fucked into my mouth, I almost forgot all about prophylactics. I wanted his hips to mimic what his mouth was doing to mine, especially as he began to thicken inside me. “So fucking hot, baby.” His tone was reluctant as he pulled out of me and kissed his way down my neck and back up.

My legs spread farther apart and my hips lifted. Asking him for more. For what I shouldn’t be asking for.

Woody’s teeth nipped at my ear. “Let’s go before I do something royally stupid,” he muttered, pushing up and off me. Realizing that the bodice of my dress was ripped, I attempted to hold the frayed edges together as Woody

frowned. “Sorry, babe.” He grabbed his discarded tuxedo jacket and held it up for me to shrug into, buttoning the too-big garment around me.

I got out of the truck and froze. “Oh. My. God. We’re so going to hell,” I said, pointing out that Woody had parked in the *Clergy Only* parking place behind the church.

He laughed and kissed my cheek as he buckled his belt. “At least we’re going together.”

A warm feeling rose up into my chest at his words as he moved his truck to an undesignated parking place. I’d been crushing on Mario “Woody” Diaz since the first time I’d laid eyes on him six months ago, but he’d always seemed to disregard me. In fact, it seemed like he disliked me most of the time. But with that statement... *At least we’re going together...*

It was probably nothing, but it still made me smile.

Ten minutes later, we were walking into the pharmacy to find a bored-looking middle-aged woman with a name tag that read, “Marge,” who was chowing down on a massive piece of purple bubblegum. She took one look at us and said in a bored voice, “Condoms are on aisle three,” before looking back down at her phone.

“Where do you keep the really tiny ones?” I asked, trying to stifle my grin. “You know, the ones that would fit a small rabbit?”

I yelped when Woody pinched my ass and leaned down to whisper, “You’re about to fuck around and find out what happens to smartasses.” Yes, *please!* Looking back up at Marge, he said, “Actually we need some that will withstand a lot of pressure. Preferably some that won’t melt with long-term, vigorous use.”

“Aisle.” *Chew. Chew.* “Three.” *Chew. Chew.* Marge didn’t seem to be amused by our antics. At all.

Grabbing my hand, Woody pulled me to aisle fucking three and stopped in front of the vast array of condoms. I picked up a box of hot-pink, glow-in-the-dark ones as a joke. “I like these,” I said, wagging the box in front of his face.

Woody’s eyes cut to me as if he were contemplating the challenge, and then he snatched them out of my hand and started walking toward Marge’s register. “Okay, I’m man enough to wear hot pink rubbers. My dick looks good in anything.” His gorgeous lips tipped up on one side. “Plus, they glow in the dark, so you can see what’s coming for you.”

Holy fucking hotness.

Minutes later, we were entering my house, Woody pushing me backward and kicking the door closed as his lips devoured mine. He was a fucking ferocious kisser, his tongue taking what it wanted without apology. I had never been kissed like this in my life, with so much... lust.

Turning our bodies, he pushed my back against the door and lifted me by the butt with his thick, muscular arms as my legs wrapped around him. “Have I told you what a nice ass you have?”

“Hmm. No, I don’t think so,” I said, grinning as he nibbled that vulnerable spot just below my ear.

Woody lifted his head and looked at me. “Are you sure? Because that seems like the kind of thing I would mention.”

I mock-scowled at him. “I’m pretty sure I would remember a discussion about my ass.”

His full lips curled up in a sexy little smile. “Maybe I told you while you were getting off on my dick earlier, and you didn’t hear me because of all the screaming.”

His tone was playful, and I laughed. “Are you always this cocky?”

“Yes. And speaking of wanting my cock...” He ground his erection between my legs.

“That is not what I said.” I kissed his dark-pink lips. “But now that you mention it, bedroom is down the hall on the left.”

He carried me to the room and set me on my feet, holding my waist until he was sure I was steady. My heart swelled with affection for this man. He had basically ignored me for months, but tonight he was being really sweet. Dirty as hell, but there was a mischievous sweetness beneath the surface. *He likes me.*

Woody slid his jacket from my arms and tugged my dress off over my head before kneeling behind me and pulling my underwear up into my butt crack. *Why the hell didn't I wear sexy underwear tonight? Oh. Yeah. Because no one has seen my panties in years.* I usually went for comfort over style.

“Ay, Dios mío. This is a gorgeous ass, baby,” he said, sliding his tongue over one firm cheek. I did have a good ass. I worked hard for this ass.

A shiver vibrated down my spine when he sunk his teeth into my behind and then sucked. Hard. Releasing my flesh, he soothed the spot with his tongue before moving to the other side and repeating the process. “Are you giving me ass hickies?” I demanded, my voice shaking slightly as his tongue flickered softly to my hip.

“Mmhmm. This booty is my new best friend. I want her to remember me.” *Absolutely no risk of that not happening.* His full lips closed around a spot on my hip, and he marked me again. And again. He devoured my backside as his hands worshipped my body, sliding slowly up and down my torso and thighs.

Please don't go any lower, I compelled him silently. I didn't want him to be reminded that I only had one good leg. I just wanted to feel like a whole woman for the first time since my injury. And Woody's hands and mouth

were doing that for me. I felt feminine and... wanted. Something Joe had taken from me with a few mere words.

I'm so sorry, Taz. It just feels different. Crap, I'm really sorry.

One of Woody's hands slid up my back, grasping the hair at the base of my neck and bending me forward until I was forced to place my hands on the end of the bed. Then, next thing I knew, my panties were being ripped from my body, and Woody's tongue was... there. *Back* there.

Oh fuck. I started to protest, but then he groaned into me. "God. Damn. Please tell me this is turning you on as much as it is me."

I looked between my legs to find that he had his pants open and was stroking his fully erect cock. *Sweet Jesus, that thing is big.* He released my hair and trailed his fingers down my spine, around my waist, and directly between my legs. "Fuck yes. I found my answer, *cariño*. You're fucking dripping for me. You like me eating your ass, baby?" His tongue did some kind of amazing little swirl as his fingers found my center and dragged my juices to my clit.

I had never had anyone's mouth at my back entrance before, but it was surprisingly arousing. Maybe because I considered it taboo. *More likely it's because of who is currently tonguing your little rose.*

"Y-yes. I've never... but I like it," I stuttered through my panting because the things this man was doing to me were about to push me straight into an orgasm. "Woody. Ohhhhh." His fingers were plucking, pinching, and caressing my clit, playing me like a finely tuned violin.

"That's it, baby. I want you to come with my tongue in your sweet ass."

And that did it. I exploded with a scream when the tip of his tongue breached my back entrance. He moaned but never stopped the delicious movements of his hand at the apex of my thighs. Finally slowing as I came

down, his teeth nipped my left butt cheek before sucking what I was sure was another hickey onto my skin.

“Holy crap, Woody,” I panted, looking back over my shoulder at him. His eyes were glazed, and his thick fingers were still wrapped around his dick.

After a gentle kiss and a light slap on my hip, he straightened and crawled onto the bed. “Come fuck my face, *amor*.”

“Fuck... what?”

“Sit. On. My. Fucking. Face.” He beckoned me with the simple curl of one finger and blazing lust in his eyes, and, like a robot, I went to him, kicking off my shoes as I stood beside the bed. “I want you to ride my tongue with that beautiful cunt of yours like a cowgirl, until you’re coming all over my face.”

Ho-ly shit!

Sensing my hesitation, he smiled gently and took my hands, pulling them to his shirt. “Undress me, baby.” My fingers fumbled at first, but as more of his tan chest was revealed, they steadied and bared him to my eyes. And my eyes liked what they saw. Broad chest that looked like it had been carved from polished mahogany. Abs that you could grate cheese on. The perfect amount of body hair—not full-on grizzly bear, but just enough to be manly.

Woody pushed my hair behind my shoulders before lightly grazing my cheek with his fingers. “You don’t have to be shy with me, my beautiful girl.” My heart fluttered in my chest. *My beautiful girl*.

I damn near swooned to the floor like a Victorian-era heroine in a historical romance novel. *Oh mercy, Mr. Diaz. I feel as though I’m getting the vapors.*

I giggled at my wacky thoughts, and Woody pulled me down to lie on top of him before kissing the tip of my nose. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. Just nervous, I guess,” I demurred.

His hands slid to my hips and inched me up his body. “You won’t be nervous when I’m tongue-fucking your pussy.” Wetness seeped from me at his filthy words. Who knew I liked dirty talk so much? “You’re going to want to hold onto the headboard, Taz,” he said, settling me over his face. “With both hands.”

Oh. Damn. That’s so fucking hot.

At the first swipe of his tongue, my legs clenched around his face, and he smoothed his hands up and down my thighs until I relaxed. When he buried his tongue inside me, all of my reticence left the freaking building, and I began moving my hips, slowly at first, and then picking up speed as Woody guided my hips.

“Oh god. That feels so fucking good,” I moaned, my hands gripping the wooden rail with white-knuckled force.

“That’s it, baby. Get what you need,” he said around a mouthful of... me. “Come on,” he urged, flattening his tongue and grinding my pussy down onto it.

My lower body was churning now. Riding his face without shame as an orgasm brewed deep in my belly. Woody’s hands tightened, as if he could sense that I was close, and he drove me to a brutal pace. Rough fingers slid up my ribcage and to my breast, cupping it before rolling and pulling at my nipple. The shocking sensation went straight to my core.

“Shit! That’s...” His tongue was coarse and wet against my clit, and my vision went dark as I started to come. My head jerked back, and I wailed his name to the ceiling. Woody was snarling like a feral animal as his teeth came out to play, nipping and biting my swollen pussy lips as my hips jerked erratically against his mouth.

As his movements gentled, I slumped forward, resting my sweaty forehead

against the light blue wall behind the bed.

His mouth was making noises between my legs that I never thought would be a turn-on, but as he drank me down, the guttural groans made me want more. *Greedy bitch.*

“Fuck, you’re delicious,” he growled, and before I knew what was happening, I was on my back with Woody’s dark head between my legs. His tongue was slow and soothing, and his lips sucked softly at my center. Against my oversensitive pussy, it felt perfect. *He* felt perfect.

When he lifted his head, his eyes were dark and piercing, and his lips were shiny with my arousal. It was the hottest thing I had ever seen. My fingers reached down and sifted through the soft curls on the top of his head. “Woody,” I murmured.

Kissing the inside of my thigh, he smiled up at me. “You want more, baby? Because I’ll snack on this little pussy until my jaw hurts.”

I gave his hair a little tug. “I want you inside me.”

His smile widened. “Hell yes. I’ve been dying to wear a pink condom since we left the pharmacy.”

Our laughter mingled together as he shucked his pants and reached for the box. Once he was suited up, he reached for the lamp and flicked it off. “Let’s see how this sucker looks.”

Glancing down at the glowing penis in front of me, I started giggling. “That’s a mighty big glow worm you have there, mister.”

“You like that, baby?” I could hear the smile in his voice and felt the bed shake as he made it wiggle in the darkness.

“It’s awesome. Oh! Do the helicopter thingy!”

“I’m not a goddamn pet monkey,” he grumped, but he did the helicopter move anyway, and I clapped. Dropping down on top of me, Woody nuzzled

his nose against my nipple. “Enough fucking play time,” he said a second before his lips closed around my hard peak.

“Ah!” I cried, my back arching off the bed as he sucked hard. Increasing his suction, he swirled his tongue around and around my nip until I was begging him to fuck me. He shifted, and I felt him at my entrance.

“This what you need, *mi amor*?” He pushed into me, stretching my pussy to its limit.

“Fuck. Yes,” I panted. “More.”

He started to move then, our bodies already slickening with sweat and our skin gliding smoothly against each other. “I’ll give you more. Spread for me, baby.” I widened my thighs and lifted my hips, earning me a loud grunt as he tunneled deeper inside me. “Fuck yeah. That’s what I want. Wrap your legs around me.”

I hesitated as memories of a similar scenario pummeled unwanted into my brain. Pinching my lips together, I turned my head to the side, trying to stem the stupid tears that tried to spill over my eyelids. *Why now? I thought I was over this.*

Woody couldn’t see me in the darkness, but he seemed to sense the change. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?” I couldn’t help the tear that escaped and trickled down my cheek. Woody’s lips found it and kissed it away. “Taz? Is this what you’re worried about?” he asked, sliding one hand down my right thigh across my knee and down to my prosthesis.

I cringed and nodded. “Yes.” My voice was barely a whisper. “What if it feels weird to have it wrapped around you, and you can’t get into it.”

Woody growled, pulling his hips back and slamming his incredibly hard cock into me. “Does that feel like I’m not into it? I’m fucking into it, Taz. You’re perfect.”

“I’m not. I’m... broken.” I wanted to take those words back as soon as I’d said them. This is what I’d worked so hard to get over—this feeling of inadequacy—but apparently, I’d just repressed it.

He was moving now. In and out, the friction slow and lush between my legs. “We’re all broken in our own ways, Taz. But that doesn’t mean you’re not sexy and gorgeous. And it doesn’t have to take away from what we’re doing in this bed. Because there is nowhere in this world I would rather be right now.”

Oh. Wow.

My heart was beating ninety miles an hour when his lips touched mine and moved over them with soft sucks. I parted my lips in welcome, and his tongue took advantage of my courtesy, stroking against mine in a sweet dance as he fucked me slowly. “You’re so beautiful, baby,” he murmured against my lips, increasing my heart flutters to the point of possibly needing a cardiology consult.

No matter how grumpy Woody Diaz had been in the past, tonight changed everything. He was sensitive and sexy, and the man did know how to use his hips. I felt myself falling for him in that moment.

“I want your legs around me, *cariño*, so I can get deeper inside you. I need to feel all of you.” I wrapped my good left leg around his hips, still hesitant about the other. “This one, too,” he said gently, his fingers tracing up and down my right thigh, letting me choose when I was ready.

Slowly, I looped that leg around him, and he groaned. “Good girl. Now I’m gonna infiltrate that uterus with my dick.”

He certainly knew how to break the ice, and all my tension faded away as I laughed. “I don’t think that’s physically possible.”

Woody buried his face in my neck. “I’m damn sure gonna try.”

His hand slid down to my butt, holding me against him at the perfect angle to hit my G-spot with every deep thrust.

“Fuck. That’s good,” I moaned, feeling an orgasm—*another one?*—budding at the base of my spine.

Woody’s soft grunts against my neck did absolutely nothing for my control as his hips picked up speed and force. “Goddamn, your pussy is tight.” Tilting his lower body just slightly, he used the base of his dick to abrade my clit as his strokes became more powerful, our bodies slapping rhythmically together. “Please tell me you’re fucking close, Taz, because I don’t know how long— Oh, fucking Jesus,” he growled as my inner walls did an excellent impression of a vice around his penis.

“I’m... com... ing,” I panted, heaving out a breath between each syllable. I was vaguely aware that my nails were digging into Woody’s strong back, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to care. My body felt like it had been taken over as my back strained to arch against him.

“Fuuuuck,” he roared, his body slamming into mine. “You’re squeezing my cock so fucking hard, baby.”

He finally stilled on a long groan as the walls of my pussy rippled with hurricane-force waves of pleasure. I could feel him filling the condom, the warmth apparent even through the thin shield.

My hands flattened on his back, gliding up and down the thin sheen of sweat covering his warm skin and finally coming to rest on his ass. And what an ass it was. Tight. Round. Squeezable. “I’ve never... come like that, Woody.” I was having trouble catching my breath, and he lifted some of his weight off, though he still kept full-body contact with me.

He wiped his sweaty forehead on his muscular bicep before leaning down to press his firm lips to mine. “Neither have I. You’re a hot little fuck, Taz.”

My eyes were adjusted to the darkness now, and I could just make out a slight frown crossing his forehead. “I didn’t mean it like that. You’re obviously more than a fuck.”

I pressed my fingers into his butt cheeks, and he flexed inside me. “I know what you meant. You’re a really hot fuck too, Woody.”

“Glad you think so, because we’re doing that again in a little while.” His grin was adorable, and I couldn’t help the upward curve of my own lips.

“Jeez, give a girl a break, man,” I complained.

“I’ll give you a break, and then I’m turning you over and slapping your ass while I fuck you from behind.”

My fingers trailed up his spine and plunged into his dark hair, loving the way it was both thick and soft against my fingertips. “And why exactly am I getting a spanking? I thought I was a pretty good girl tonight,” I said, my voice teasing and light.

Woody pulled slowly out of me and slid to the side, taking care of the condom before pulling me against him. “You were a very good girl. The best.” My heartrate had finally slowed, but it picked up a couple notches when he said that. *The best?* “You’re getting your pretty ass spanked because you’ve been hiding this from me all this time.” One of his hands slid up into my hair, gently sifting my long strands through his fingertips. “It’s fucking gorgeous, and I’m going to be having a lot of very dirty fantasies about it.”

“Thank you,” I whispered against his chest.

His lips pressed against my forehead. “Will you wear it down for me on Monday? I’ll probably be walking around the office with a hard-on all day though,” he said with a chuckle.

I tilted my face up, and he looked down at me with a soft smile. “Of course. I’d do anything for you, Woody.”

CHAPTER 3



I WOKE IN THE dark room with Taz wrapped in my arms. I usually got too hot when women wanted me to spoon them and ended up scooting away as soon as they were asleep, but Taz's beautiful body felt perfectly warm against mine. Damn, even our temperatures were compatible. My nose was buried in her hair, the coconut scent infiltrating my every cell, which caused the man downstairs to come to life.

She wiggled her ass against my rapidly growing erection and murmured something in her sleep, and I smiled into her hair. Time for round three.

My hand trailed over her flat stomach and down to her leg, caressing the soft skin of her thigh, eliciting more cute little noises from Taz. I was careful not to brush against the scars that ended just above her knee, knowing that they were probably still sensitive to touch. I saw them for the first time tonight when she had flipped on the light to remove her prosthetic. Her

worried eyes had flicked toward me, but I'd given her a comforting smile, and my chest swelled when the apprehension faded from her face.

I wanted her to be comfortable with me. To trust me. Because there was something going on here between us. And it went far beyond spending a night together. Taz was... special. I hadn't felt more than a sexual affection for a woman in a long time, but I had tonight. Sure, she fucked like a wildcat—the sex in the backseat of my truck had been nothing less than phenomenal—but it was more than that.

Taz was beautiful and funny and so fucking strong, though I had seen her vulnerability for the first time tonight when I was on top of her. She had let me in just a tiny bit, and I wanted more. I had witnessed her devil-may-care attitude for months, but I'd realized earlier that she used that façade to cover up her scars. And I wasn't talking about the scars on her skin. Her scars ran deeper than that, and I wanted to help smooth them out.

My hand traced upward until I was cupping one perfect ass cheek, and I squeezed, allowing my cock to slip between her legs.

“Mmmm, Woody?” Her voice was soft and gritty from sleep.

“Well I damn sure hope it's Woody,” I growled in her ear as her pussy drenched my shaft.

She tilted her face around toward me and kissed my chin as her hand slipped up into my hair. “You want me on my hands and knees this time?”

The corners of my lips turned up in a stupidly happy smile. It was like she'd read my mind. “More than any fucking thing.” She pulled away from me and moved her body into position as I reached for the lamp. I wanted to see every bit of this. In fact, I wished I had a damn spotlight to highlight that fine ass of hers while I was fucking her. “Turning the lamp on, baby,” I warned.

I flicked the switch and reached for a condom, tossing it on the bed as I knelt in front of her. “I want you to take my cock in your mouth and get it nice and wet.” Cupping her pretty face, I let my thumb brush across her plump bottom lip. “Then I’m going to fuck you with it until you see stars.”

Taz moaned, rocking her bare body forward and brushing her lips across my tip. Precum dripped out and coated her mouth with a shiny gloss, and my dick twitched when her tongue slipped out to lick my arousal from her lips.

“I love how your dick tastes,” she said a second before she began lapping at my crown. Digging the tip of her tongue into my slit, she hummed as her gaze rose to mine. *Holy fuck!* Her thick, dark eyelashes were so long that they almost brushed her eyebrows, and she hummed around my head before letting her lashes drift down to her high cheekbones, savoring me.

Then she sucked my cock like a fucking boss, her head bobbing up and down my shaft as her mouth worked me. “That’s it, *amor*. You’re so sexy.” My fingers threaded into her hair, and I pulled her mouth all the way down onto me until I was slamming the back of her throat. “Fuck, yeah. I love your beautiful hair, baby. It turns me on and makes me have some really fucked up thoughts.”

Feeling my balls swelling with need, I tugged her off me and bent to kiss her swollen lips, my hands finding her cheeks. “You are amazing, Taz.” I felt the warmth rise up her face and seep into my fingertips, and I reveled in the fact that my praise put that flush there.

I simultaneously crawled around behind her and sheathed my throbbing dick, lining myself up with her sweet heat. With one hand on her slim waist, I used my other to rub my erection through her slit. She was dripping. *For me.*

Easing myself inside, I gripped her hips and pulled her back onto me. “God. Woody. Fill me up, baby,” she groaned. My cock was so fucking ecstatic,

taking her slowly and feeling every silky inch of her pussy. The happy bastard was still thinking about being raw inside her in my truck earlier, and I wished I could take her like that now. But we needed to discuss that first and not in the heat of the moment.

I squeezed my ass tight, pushing forward to the hilt. My thumbs separated her butt cheeks as my eyes locked on where we were joined. The lips of her cunt were spread and stretched as she accepted me, the color bordering on red from our previous activities. *Fucking beautiful.*

“You feel so goddamn good,” I grunted, pulling my hips back and entering her slowly once again. “Your pussy is exquisite, *cariño*. So fucking perfect for taking my cock.”

As if to reiterate my point, she rocked her hips forward until only my tip was in her, and then she slammed back and ate up all of me. “Fuck me hard, Woody.” Her voice was shaking with need, and I tightened my grip on her hips as I gave her what she wanted.

Our movements were rough and fast, our hips finding a flawless rhythm as we fucked each other. I loved that she wasn’t one of those women who just waited to be pleased. No, Tazanna Birdsong was a willing participant who gave as good as she got. The woman was frying my fucking balls.

The room was filled with our sensual sounds. Moans mixing with the sounds of the light-oak headboard banging against the wall. The echoing sound of my balls slapping her clit mingling with the squeak of the bedsprings. And all that sexiness infiltrated my ears until I had to bite my lip to keep from coming too soon.

Add to that the visual pleasure of seeing my marks all over her hips and ass, and I lost fucking control. Wrapping her long, dark hair around my wrist, I wedged my fingers against the scalp at the back of her head, shoving her head

down to the mattress as I took control and really let her have it. A gush of wetness slickened my movements inside her, and I bit out a curse as she started to come, her screams muffled against her butter-yellow sheets. I slapped her ass, and her pussy became impossibly tighter around me, so I did it again and again, spanking her as she quivered around me.

“That’s a good girl. Keep coming on my cock, baby.” My words set off another orgasm, and she turned her head to the side, letting me hear her hoarse, unintelligible cries as I pounded into her like a jackhammer. My dick was legit about to explode, but I finished her off until she was a trembling mass of muscles and bones beneath me.

Then she surprised me. Still panting, Taz rocked her hips forward, letting my erection slip from her before turning around to face me on her knees. Her eyes were full of fire and wickedness when she reached for me and tugged off the pink condom.

When she leaned forward, I thought for a second that she was going to finish me off with her mouth, but then she wrapped her luscious hair around and around my burgeoning cock and surrounded it with her fingers. As she jerked me with her satiny strands, I watched as my crown peeked out and hid once again, over and over until I couldn’t hold back anymore.

With a long growled, “Fuuuuck yessss,” I saw ribbons of my release spurting into her hair. So. Much. Cum. Seeing the white streaking her dark hair urged a couple more threads to drip out until I was so drained that I could barely hold myself upright. “Hottest fucking thing ever,” I breathed, leaning over her and holding myself up with one fist on the mattress as my chest heaved.

“Thought you could give me a protein treatment for my hair,” she said with an impish grin. I couldn’t hold back the laugh that spewed from my mouth,

and she giggled. “I have to say, that’s a first for me.”

“Me too,” I admitted, unwinding her hair from my dick and gently pushing her until she laid back on the bed. Resting beside her, I rolled her toward me and gathered her close as I took her lips in a slow kiss. Her mouth opened to accept me inside, and at the first touch of our tongues, something fluttered in my stomach. This woman was giving me butterflies, something I hadn’t experienced in years, and I was fucking here for it. “Would you think I was a total freak if I asked you to leave my cum in your hair?”

She smiled against my lips. “Yes, but I guess I’m a freak too, because I don’t mind.”

Spreading myself through her hair with my fingers, I bent to drop a feather-light kiss on her breast. “I’ll wash your hair myself in the morning,” I promised as my tongue slipped out to lap at her dusky nipple.

“Mmm, feels good,” she said sleepily.

I continued gently worshipping her nipple until a soft snore rumbled through her chest, and then I worshipped it some more, holding her soft body against mine as I suckled her gently. She had amazing tits, and I found myself obsessed with her pretty nipples. And her lips. And her eyelashes. *And I think we’re all aware of how I feel about her hair.*

My eyes traced every inch of her face, memorizing each detail that I had overlooked for the past six months. How had I missed the dark hollow beneath her high Native American cheekbones? And her adorable nose, slightly flat at the bridge and dropping into a cute button that rested over her cupid’s bow mouth. Taz had the facial structure of a model.

“I really like you,” I whispered, and she made a soft cooing noise that had my lips curving upward. After staring at her for what seemed like a creepy amount of time, I extricated myself from the bed and went into the connected

bathroom. I was washing my hands when I heard a noise at the front of the house.

“Honey, I’m home,” a voice called out. A male voice.

What the fuck?

“Tazzy? You up yet?” the voice asked. I glanced at the bathroom window to see tangerine light just peeking over the horizon. “I caught an earlier flight, and I brought your favorite breakfast. I smell like death, so I’m gonna hop in the shower, babe.”

Again, what the fuck? That seemed to be the only thing that I could think. Until my eyes landed on the counter beside the sink. On one side was girly hair stuff and makeup, but on the other? Shaving stuff and cologne. *Men’s cologne.*

Oh. No. In a panic, I darted into the closet, which had a few women’s clothing items hung on the right side and men’s clothing on the left. Including... *fuck me...* several police uniforms. That meant the dude—whoever the fuck he was—probably had a firearm nearby.

I had slept with this guy’s woman. Fucked her like there was no tomorrow *three times*. I had to get the fuck out of here before I got myself killed. *Ay, Dios mio!* He said he was about to take a shower. In the bathroom. On the other side of this door. Hopefully he wouldn’t come into the closet first.

The sound of a shower had my brows lifting. It didn’t sound like it was coming from the next room, so I peeked around the door to find the bathroom empty. He must be showering down the hall. I had no idea why, but I was fucking grateful and took the opportunity to dash my naked ass out into the bedroom, where I gathered my clothes and hastily dressed.

My gaze went to the woman curled up on the bed. The woman who had shared her body with me all night long. *The woman who belonged to another*

man.

Fuck.

“Damn you, Taz,” I whispered. “You made me do something I swore I would never do.”

Sure, I may play around and have fun with a lot of different women, but never one that was attached. I’d seen what that could do to families, and I wanted no part of it. Besides, there were plenty of women out there. *Single* women.

I didn’t need this one. This strong, beautiful woman who had made me smile and feel... things. And who had made me come harder *with her fucking hair* than any other woman had made me come with her mouth or pussy. Ever.

You’re not helping your case here, buddy.

As I stuffed my bowtie into my pants pocket and tossed my tux jacket over my shoulder, I glanced back at the bed one more time, and my brow creased. I thought Taz had said she hadn’t been with a man in years.

Well, it was obvious that Tazanna Birdsong wasn’t a woman who was well acquainted with the truth, and my anger began to rise, heating my face with fury and embarrassment. She’d fucking played me.

Walking swiftly down the hallway, I heard whistling rising over the sound of the shower behind a closed door. The man sounded happy as fuck. *If he only knew...*

I breathed a sigh of relief as soon as I exited the house and began my walk of shame back to my truck. My feet faltered when I approached the pharmacy, and my lips formed a smile, remembering Marge and the neon condoms and Taz teasing about a tiny rabbit dick. The way she’d laughed and

clapped when I'd performed my excellent dick helicopter move in the darkened bedroom.

My smile faded. *The bedroom she shared with another man.*

Tightening my jaw, I muttered, "Bitch," as my feet carried me forward.

CHAPTER 4



I STRETCHED AND FELT a delicious soreness... everywhere. The bed was empty when I rolled over, but I pulled a pillow close to me and hugged it, burying my nose in the pillowcase and sniffing. Woody's scent permeated my nose, a warm, musky scent with a hint of spice, and I smiled into the fluffiness.

It smelled fantastic, but the real thing was even better. Where was he anyway? Probably in the bathroom. Reluctantly releasing the pillow, I turned over and sat up on the edge of the bed, reaching for my liner and rolling it carefully on. My hands palpated the end of my limb, and I decided one sock would be good for today. The number of specially made socks that I had to wear to cover my liner varied from day to day, depending on my ever-changing "limb volume." Some days I had more swelling than others, and a single sock was all I needed to make my prosthetic fit snugly and comfortably.

Once I had my leg on and had rolled the sleeve up my thigh, I stood, giving myself a second to adjust before I walked to the closed door of the bathroom. “Woody?” I called softly, but there was no answer. I went in and used the toilet before washing my hands, dressing, and heading to the front of the house. Hearing movement in the kitchen, I was about to call his name again when a blond head popped out, a grin encompassing his face.

“Jake!” I cried, walking into his outstretched arms. “I thought you weren’t coming back until tonight,” I murmured against his chest.

His head tilted to the right to meet his shrugging shoulder. “I caught an earlier flight. I have a shift tomorrow and wanted to get home and get some rest today. Law enforcement conferences can be brutal. There are only so many classes on cybersecurity that I can sit through before wanting to eat my revolver.”

I laughed and pulled back, grinning up at him. “Were any of your classes any good?”

Jacob’s hands slid down my arms, and he pulled me into the kitchen with one hand. “There was a really interesting one on digital forensics. Now come on. I brought you food from Miguel’s.”

My eyes widened in delight. “You brought me breakfast tacos? This is why you’re my favorite roommate.”

His chuckle reverberated around the tidy but outdated kitchen. “I’m your only roommate, dork.”

My brain remembered that I had been looking for Woody when I was surprised by Jacob. My eyes darted around the room as if he would be hiding behind the toaster or something. *Where the hell is he?* “So, uh, what time did you get home, Jake?”

“About an hour ago,” he replied, taking a pan with the breakfast tacos

wrapped in foil from the oven. “I put these on warm until you woke up.” He placed two tacos on my plate and three on his own before digging into the paper bag on the brown Formica counter and pulling out small cups of red and green salsa.

I helped him carry the food to the dining room and placed it on the glossy, white square table. We settled onto the burgundy padded chairs and dug into the delicious food.

Woody must have left, I decided. I knew he usually ran with Bode early in the morning. It certainly worked for him because his body was firm and fit. I tried to put him—and our amazing night together—out of my mind and focus on Jake and my breakfast.

“Fuck a duck. These tacos are life changing,” I moaned around my first bite. “I would give my right leg to have these every morning.” I glanced down and then widened my eyes comically. “Oops!”

Jake’s loud laugh boomed around the room. “Shut up and eat, crazy. How was the wedding last night?”

“God, it was just beautiful. My boss is totally obsessed with his new bride.” I added more green salsa to my taco. “Charli is a sweetheart. She even invited me to the bachelorette party, but all the guys were having Shark’s bachelor party the same night, so I volunteered to take the on-call shift for the office.”

He nodded. “That was nice of you.”

“You know. Low woman on the totem pole and all that,” I replied with a shrug. The truth was, I hadn’t really wanted to go to the bachelorette party. I’d always felt more comfortable hanging out with men, probably having to do with the fact that I grew up with four brothers.

Jacob squinted at me and leaned forward over the table, his index finger pointing at my head. “You’ve got something in your hair.”

I reached my hand up and felt the crustiness there, trying my best not to blush or laugh. *Fucking Woody*. “Probably some cake frosting,” I demurred. “I haven’t had a chance to shower.”

“Must have been a wild reception,” Jake noted, and I fake laughed and changed the subject.

“I talked to Chayton yesterday. He said for you to call him when you have time.” Chayton was my oldest brother and Jake’s best friend since grade school.

Jake leaned back in his chair and grinned. “What’s that fucker up to?”

My eyes rolled up dramatically. “Trying to boss me around all the way from Colorado. He actually told me to be home by ten last night. I’m freaking twenty-seven years old.”

“He just worries about you,” Jacob said. “He probably wouldn’t have even let you move here if you didn’t live with me.”

“Let me?” I shrieked, pointing at my face with my index fingers. “Grown-ass woman, remember?” Jacob just laughed, and I narrowed my eyes to tiny slits. “You better be glad you brought breakfast, Chucky,” I sniped, earning me a glare at the Chuck Norris reference. Jake was a police officer, but his life’s goal was to become a Texas Ranger.

“Keep it up, and you’ll be grounded.”

“Try it, and I’ll kick your ass with my good leg.”

His lips curled up into a playful smile as he chewed up his last bite of food and rose. Dropping a kiss on my cheek, he carried his plate to the kitchen, tossing back over his shoulder, “Bring it, little sister I never wanted.”

“Shut up. You know you love me more than fried chicken.” I could hear his chuckle as he put his plate in the sink, and I finished off my second taco and

followed him. “Thank you for letting me stay in your room this week while you were gone.”

“No prob. Didn’t want you gagging on paint fumes.” *If he only knew what I actually gagged on last night...* “Your room looks good. Are you happy with the color?”

Pulling my dirty thoughts away from Woody and his big cock, I answered. “I love it. The yellow is very soft, not too bright. Matches my sheets perfectly.” Hip checking him to reach the sink, I rinsed our plates and put them in the dishwasher. “Speaking of that, I’ll go strip my stuff off your bed now. I washed your bedding for you.”

“Thanks, Razzmatazz, but you didn’t have to do that. Charlotte’s coming over later, so we’ll just get them dirty again.”

“Eww. TMI.”

He laughed at my scrunched-up nose. Heading down the hall to his room, I started stripping the bed. Jake walked in and around to the other side of the bed to help me, and that’s when I noticed the neon pink condom lying *right there* near my pillow. The condom I pulled off Woody so I could jack him off with my hair.

Fuck!

I quickly folded the sheet over it and wrapped everything into a big bundle. My roommate grabbed the pillows and then froze, dipping his nose to the one in his left hand. His brow furrowed. “Smells like men’s cologne,” he said, his sharp green eyes focusing on my face.

Dammit all to hell. I didn’t want him running back to my brother and tattling on me. Chayton would be on the next plane to Texas, demanding to know who I’d slept with and insisting on “meeting” him. Which was code for

an FBI-level interrogation. And possibly water-boarding and ramming bamboo shoots underneath Woody's fingernails.

My mind scrambled through possible explanations while my face attempted to remain placid and unconcerned. "Probably," I replied nonchalantly. "I danced with Shark last night."

Jacob visibly relaxed. "The groom?"

"Yeah. Charli was dancing with one of her brothers, and so I danced with Shark."

"Hmmm. I guess that's okay." I refrained from rolling my eyes. "What about that Woody guy? Is he being nice to you now?"

Do multiple orgasms count as "being nice?"

"Uh-huh, yeah," I said, trying to keep any enthusiasm out of my voice as we headed to my room down the hall. "We're all settling in, and everyone is getting along great. You know me... just one of the guys; I can fit in with anyone." There was a false chirpiness to my voice that I hoped he didn't pick up on.

"All right. Just let me know if he gives you a hard time."

Oh, he gave me a hard time last night. Very hard.

"He won't. We're just very competitive with each other since we're the best shooters on the team." *And then he shot his load in my hair.* I dipped my head to keep from giggling aloud. "Nothing I can't handle."

Dropping the pillows on the floor, Jacob said, "Why don't you get your clothes and stuff out of my room, and I'll move the bed back against the wall. You still want it here?" he asked, pointing to a spot bordered by two large, arched windows.

"Yep, that's good. And thank you for doing my room. You really should have done the kitchen next." Jake's house was large but outdated, and he was

having it redone, room by room. He'd had new flooring installed and the walls painted in my room while he was at his conference in Ohio.

"We'll get to it," he said easily, pulling the protective plastic off the bed.

An hour later, my sheets were in the washer, and I'd moved everything back into my bedroom, hiding the condoms in the one place I knew Jake would never look—my tampon box. Not that he snooped in my room or anything, but he would occasionally grab my book from my nightstand if I was in the living room with my leg off.

I settled in the lavender armchair near a window and closed my eyes, letting my thoughts drift as Woody's words floated through my brain like wispy clouds.

At least we're going together.

There is nowhere in this world I would rather be right now.

You're obviously more than a fuck.

You were a very good girl. The best.

My hand pressed against my mouth to stifle my squeal of happiness. Maybe things were finally going to happen for me and Woody now. I'd been infatuated with him for months, and last night, he seemed just as enamored by me.

I looked up some of the Spanish words he'd said to me last night. *Cariño* was analogous to "sweetheart," and *mi amor* was "my love." I realized that was more a term of endearment rather than an actual declaration of love, but it still made me giddy.

The desire to see him again rose up inside me, so I messaged him.

Taz: Hey! Wondered if you wanted to hang out tonight. I can order a pizza since I don't cook.

I wasn't into the whole sneaking around thing, so I would just have to tell Jacob I was seeing someone, and he would have to fucking deal with it. And hopefully not rat me out to my brother.

Snuggling back into my chair, I waited for a response from Woody.

One never came.

CHAPTER 5



Eleven Months Later

A DOOR OPENED ON the right side of the gray-carpeted hallway at DFW Security Force as I made my way to the large office at the end of the corridor, and I prayed it wouldn't be him.

It was.

Woody Fucking Diaz.

I reached him just as he turned to head into the boss's office, and I ended up walking right beside him.

"Got you a present," he muttered, pulling a hand from his pocket and presenting me with his raised middle finger.

"Oh, I'm honored. Let me put on my lipstick so I'll look nice for my acceptance speech." I pretended to pop the top off my own middle finger and

used it to 'apply' my lipstick. His lips almost twitched, but he pressed them together to hide it.

My only one-night stand had turned out to be the worst mistake of my life. I hadn't thought so at the time. I'd thought it was hot. Magical. Special. When he was touching me and talking me through my mini breakdown, he'd made me feel like the only woman in the world.

Though he hadn't called me the next day, I still stupidly thought we were good... that we had a connection. And then I saw him Monday morning at work.

I found Woody in the breakroom as soon as I arrived. After scanning the room to make sure he was alone, I stood in the doorway for a full minute, admiring him from behind as he fixed his coffee.

Six feet tall. Broad shoulders. Perfectly firm butt. Dark hair that I knew from experience would be soft and thick against my skin. And that wasn't the only thing that was thick, I thought, suppressing a giddy laugh.

My fingers tucked my hair behind one ear, sliding down the long strands and pushing it behind my shoulder. I had worn it down, just as he'd asked. Creeping up behind him, I wrapped my arms around his waist and whispered, "Guess who?"

Woody jerked away, sloshing hot coffee all over his hand and biting out a curse as he whirled toward me.

"Oh gosh. I'm so sorry," I said, horrified as his hand began to turn red. "Let me get you some ice."

"It's fine," he snapped, averting his eyes from me and rinsing his hand off in the sink.

I went to the freezer anyway, grabbing a couple chunks of ice and wrapping them in a towel. Returning to him, I reached for his hand. "Here. Just let me

—”

I stumbled backward in surprise when he yanked his hand away from me, and that was my first real indication that something was wrong. The Woody from Saturday night wouldn't have reacted like that.

But this Woody... his eyes were cold and hard, his mouth set in a tight line.

Pushing the errant strands of my long hair out of my face, I took a step toward him, my hand outstretched. “I'm so sorry I startled you,” I said, a little surprised that he was acting like such an ass over something that was clearly an accident.

“Don't. Touch. Me.” His voice was low and angry, and my hand dropped limply to my side.

“Woody, I apologized about the coffee and offered to help. I don't know what else you want me to do.”

His jaw clenched so hard that I was afraid he was going to crack a tooth. “It's not about the coffee. It's... just leave me alone, okay? You stay out of my way, and I'll stay out of yours.”

Resting a hand on the wooden table for balance, I questioned him with my eyes as a hollow feeling settled in my stomach. Finally, I asked, “What is it about then? Saturday night?”

Pulling his eyes from mine, he stared at a spot over my shoulder. “Yeah. Saturday night,” he mumbled.

“Di-did I do something wrong?” I racked my brain trying to come up with something that had been... bad about that night. I couldn't think of anything. Judging by his moans when he came—three fucking times—he seemed to enjoy himself immensely.

He dragged his gaze back to my face, and the hatred burning in his dark chocolate eyes almost had me stumbling backward again. “I don't know. Did

you?” His muscular arms crossed over that broad chest.

My eyes traced a triangle over his face. Left eye. Right eye. Tightly clenched jaw. And again. Searching for answers that his clamped lips weren't giving me.

“You didn't like it,” I stated.

“No. I didn't.” His voice was soft, but those three words sounded like a bullhorn going off directly in my ear.

He didn't like the sex. He didn't like me.

Then it hit me. The only blight on the evening. “It's because I cried, isn't it?”

Woody's jaw dropped open, and his eyes blinked rapidly for a few seconds before he hung his head and sighed heavily. “It's not about that. It was just a huge fucking mistake, and I hate that it happened.”

He “hates” that it happened? Wow. Just slap me right in the face then.

Anger began coursing through my veins like hot lava. “The first time?”

He lifted his head, confusion clouding his handsome features. “The first time what?”

Lifting my chin, I asked, “You hated the first time we had sex? When I rode your cock in the back of your truck?”

His lips rolled in for a second before he answered. “Yes.”

“So you didn't like the second or third time either?” He released an annoyed little grunt but didn't answer. I took a half step toward him, lowering my voice. “When I let you do things to me no man has ever done?” I thought of him licking my back entrance. Coming in my hair.

He managed to look angry and embarrassed at the same time, a dark flush slithering up his neck. “No,” he muttered, struggling to maintain eye contact with me.

I raised two very skeptical eyebrows. “So after the first time, you decided to come home with me and give it another whirl? Like maybe my inferior fucking skills would suddenly improve?”

Two deep grooves made an appearance between his eyebrows, and he opened his mouth. “That’s not... fuck!” Bowing his head, he scrubbed a hand through his hair before lifting his hardened face. “Look, Saturday night was the result of too much tequila, and it never should have happened.”

Ouch. Harsh.

I tilted my chin up valiantly and swallowed the large ball of hurt and embarrassment that was lodged in my throat. “You’re right. Big fucking mistake. One I won’t ever make again.” My voice sounded much stronger than I felt, and I strode toward the door before I embarrassed myself.

He stopped me with a hand on my arm as I passed him. My nipples tightened as they remembered his touch. Stupid nipples.

“You didn’t tell... anyone... did you?”

I stared straight ahead, not even deigning to look at him. “No.”

He released my arm and exhaled what sounded like a relieved sigh. He was ashamed of being with me and didn’t want anyone to know. Nice. “Good. Don’t.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. I don’t want anyone knowing either.”

I continued toward the door, pausing only slightly as his parting shot was directed at my back. “I’m sure you don’t.”

Since that day almost a year ago, things had gone downhill. Like a snowball rolling down a mountain during an avalanche. We fucking hated each other.

I could have honestly let it go. The fact that he’d used me for sex and acted like a jerk afterward. But then he’d started with the looks. The sneers and eyerolls every time he was around me, which was pretty much every day

since we worked together. But when he'd flipped me off during firearms training one day, I'd snapped back with my own middle finger. It was either that or turn my gun on him, and I wasn't a fan of going to jail.

So now we were engaged in a daily, mostly non-verbal battle filled with a mutual animosity that no one understood but us. Shark, our boss, had questioned us both, but neither of us admitted to anything except that we didn't care for each other's company. After that, we'd kept our sniping quiet enough that no one else could hear. But they could feel the tension that permeated the space whenever Woody and I were in the same room. I was sure of that.

My nemesis quickened his footsteps and outpaced me to Shark's office door, stepping through and letting the door drop closed in my face. "Prick," I mumbled as I opened the door and entered.

"Morning, Taz," Shark said from near the conference table where he was placing folders at each seat.

"Hey, Shark. How is L.J. doing?"

"Better. Thanks for asking." Shark and Charli's ten-month-old son had a cold last week, and you would've thought he'd contracted the black plague with the way his father had reacted. "He stood up by himself this weekend," he said proudly.

"I'm assuming you have video evidence?" I asked with a grin, which he returned.

"Yeah, from the nanny cam," he said, pulling out his phone and scrolling to the video. He had installed little cameras all over their house so they wouldn't miss anything in L.J.'s life.

"Awww, look at the little guy. He'll be walking in no time," I said as I watched. Shark was lying on his stomach on the floor, and L.J. stood,

wobbled a little, and then fell spectacularly onto his dad's head, giggling like a little maniac.

Shark pocketed his phone and continued his task as I sat in the chair directly across from Woody. As much as I hated looking at him, making him uncomfortable by sitting in his line of sight was well worth it.

"Brown noser," he mouthed, and I flipped him off again. Our boss turned around just then, and I brought my hand to my face and pretended to scratch my chin. His eyes darted suspiciously between me and Woody, and I grinned winningly. *Nothing to see here, boss.*

Bode, Hawk, and Tank entered then, and Tank took the seat right beside me, nudging me with his elbow. "What's up, Tazzy?"

"Not much, Tanky," I retorted. "How's married life treating you?"

The big man sighed happily, a dreamy look clouding his bright blue eyes. "Fucking fantastic." He and Bristol had married two months ago, and the dude had been floating around the office since returning from their honeymoon in Playa del Carmen.

Cam busted through the door, panting his apologies. "Sorry I'm late. Waffle emergency." His wife was six months pregnant, and Cam regaled us with stories of every detail of Shiloh's pregnancy at each meeting.

"Do I even want to know what that means?" Shark growled as Cam fell into the chair to our boss's right, his dark hair flopping over his forehead. He looked slightly unkempt this morning.

"You might. There was syrup involved." Cam wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, and I couldn't hold back my laugh. "I had to take another shower to try and get all the sticky off my—"

"Okay, we get it, you deviant," Shark said, holding up a hand. "Don't need fucking details. Now that everyone is here..." he cut his eyes toward Cam

who didn't look the least bit concerned about his one-minute tardiness, "...let's get today's briefing started."

He went through the week's assignments and congratulated us on wrapping up two difficult cases last week. "All right, a few housekeeping issues. We're all aware that our office manager is retiring, so Charli thought it would be nice to have a little party honoring Sandra at our house on Friday night. You're all expected to attend. Sandra said no gifts but bring one anyway," he ordered.

"So who's taking Sandra's place?" Bode asked.

"Journey will be the new office manager. She knows everything about this business, so she was the obvious choice. I've hired her girlfriend, Lynn, to replace Journey as administrative assistant."

Everyone nodded their approval.

"Okay, back to our next assignment," Shark said, and my heart rate picked up. It was always exciting to get a new job, and I hoped I would be on the team handling it. "You all remember Ella Ervin, right?"

Seriously, who could forget Ella? She was one of the best pop singers in the business, and we had protected her when she was in Dallas about a year and a half ago.

Shark continued. "As you probably know, after the attempt on her life here in Dallas, she's pretty much become a recluse. There haven't been any other incidents, until she recently decided to get back in the public eye." There was an audible shuffling of bodies as everyone leaned forward to hear what was said next. "It appears her stalker is back. She received a disturbing note and some photos of her after going to a video shoot for her new album."

Curses floated through the room. Everyone in our company liked Ella. She was kind and down to earth, and she'd even insisted on going to the hospital

when Bode was injured while saving her life. That put her at the very top of the respect charts in our eyes.

Running a hand down his face, Shark sighed. “We have reason to believe that it’s someone close to her. We think the guy we took down at the hotel here in Dallas was merely a hired gun, sent to scare her.” His eyes fell briefly on each of us, his expression serious. “She trusts us and wants us to be in charge of finding the real stalker.”

We all nodded, eager for the chance to do what we do best: protect.

“I want in,” Woody said. “I wouldn’t mind going to L.A. for a while.” His eyes flicked in my direction so quickly that I almost missed it.

“I’m glad you said that,” Shark said with an approving nod. “I’m sending two of you in undercover. Only Ella, her PA, and her head of security will know your real identities. Everyone else will think you’re new employees. A married couple who has recently moved to L.A.”

Woody’s gaze went around the table, as if to try and figure out who he was supposed to be married to. My face was the last one he looked at, and I’m sure it registered as much shock and dismay as his own.

“Oh fuck,” I heard Cam mutter beside me.

Oh fuck indeed.

CHAPTER 6



NO.

No.

No fucking way.

I was unable to feel my lips and wondered if maybe I was having a stroke or something. My hand reached out to accept the dossier Shark was handing to me. I rubbed my fingers over the smooth navy-blue folder, the DFW Security Force logo embossed in silver on the front adding some texture against the roughness of my finger pads.

My mind was vaguely aware that my boss was handing the matching folder to that woman. I could barely stand to look at her, much less pretend to be her husband.

“How long is the assignment?” a female voice asked. *Her voice.* She didn’t sound any happier about this than I was.

“At least a month to get you two established in the household and gain trust from the other employees there. Could be longer, depending on how long it takes you to find the leak.”

Fuck me. That was some serious motivation to wrap this shit up quickly.

“Maybe it would be better if Bode went,” I hedged. “I’ve really got a lot going on right now.”

Shark tipped his chin down slightly, his green eyes piercing my skull. Dude seriously knew how to throw a *don’t fuck with me* look. “No. Bode and Hawk are right in the middle of the Franklin case. I can’t spare them. Shiloh is entering her third trimester, so it wouldn’t be right to send Cam.”

“Tank?” I suggested. Christ. Anyone but me.

Waylon “Tank” Hanford cleared his throat and stood. The man was practically a giant, six foot eight and aptly nicknamed. “Actually, I have some news.” His large mouth stretched into a grin. “Bris is pregnant too.”

There were cheers from around the room. From everyone except me and... My eyes found Taz’s face, which looked resigned and distinctly unhappy. And pretty. *Fuck. Why does she have to be so goddamn pretty?*

Tank sat down, receiving a placid smile and congratulations from the woman beside him. She knew as well as I did that Bristol’s pregnancy had just sealed our fate. Shark wouldn’t send a man with a pregnant wife if there was another option. And that option was me.

Tank and Bris just got married two fucking months ago! Hasn’t this asshole ever heard of birth control? Doesn’t he know he’s ruining my life?

Shark smiled happily at Tank and nodded. He’d obviously already been privy to this little tidbit of *fabulous* news since Charli and Bris were best friends. “Congrats, bud. All right, back to business. Taz, Woody, everything you need to know is in your dossiers. Starting with your new names. Woody,

you're going by your real name. Mario Diaz is pretty common, so there's really no need to change it." He turned to Taz. "We've shortened your name from Tazanna to Anna, and of course, your last name will also be Diaz."

Kill me now.

She nodded grimly. "Kay, boss."

Shark stood, his hands planted firmly on the mahogany conference table. "Dismissed," he barked, and everyone began gathering their things. "Except for Mario and Anna." I paused with my ass halfway out of my chair and plopped back down, massaging my forehead with my fingertips.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and looked up to see Bode giving me a sympathetic look. His hand gave me a squeeze as he offered a reassuring wink. *You got this, brother.* I returned his gesture with a half-smile and a curt nod. *I can do this.*

Bode was my best friend and knew how I felt about Taz. Though I was pretty sure he suspected that something had happened between us, I'd never told him outright. I was too ashamed, and it pissed me off that she had put me in that position.

When the room was clear, Shark leaned forward, his hands pressing into the table and his sharp gaze moving slowly back and forth between me and Taz. "Are we going to have a problem here?"

I inhaled a deep breath. "I just don't see why—"

"Because it's your fucking job," he growled, and I nodded, duly chastised. "I know there's some... animosity between you two." I barely stifled a snort as he continued. "I can't even begin to comprehend what that's about, and I don't want to know." He sat in his chair and leaned back, his arms crossing over his chest. "Are either of you willing to let Miss Ervin lose her life

because you can't act like goddamn grown-ups? Or like the professionals you're supposed to be?"

From the corner of my eye, I saw Taz's head pop up. She shook it slowly. "No, Shark. You're right." I wanted to call her a kiss-ass, but fuck, I agreed with her. And our boss. Ella Ervin deserved our full and complete attention. This was our job, and we would keep her safe and sniff out the mole in her camp, consequences be damned.

After all, I'd survived in worse conditions during my time as a Navy SEAL. And Taz sure as hell had overcome a lot with the loss of part of her leg. I risked a look over at her, and she gave me a timid smile. I didn't return it, but I didn't scowl at her either, so I guess that was progress on my part.

"We can do it," I told Shark. "We'll be fine." I respected this man more than anyone I've ever known, and I didn't want to disappoint him.

My friend let out a barely audible sigh of relief. "Okay, good. I know this isn't ideal, and if I had another choice, I would take it. Now, you leave for Los Angeles on Saturday, so familiarize yourselves with everything I've given you."

I picked up the blue folder and tapped it on the wood surface. "Histories are in here?"

"Yep. Everything you need. Family info. Work history. How and where you two met, as well as details about how you fell in love." I tried not to cringe at that. "And for the rest of the week, you need to practice using each other's aliases while you're in the office. We can't afford any fuck ups or blown covers, so you need to get in the habit of acting like a couple. You can start by going to lunch together. Dismissed."

Jesus. This is really happening.

I stood and waited for Taz to do the same, holding out my arm for her. "Are

you ready, Anna honey?”

She paused as she rounded the table, and a sly smile flicked across her full lips. “Of course, Mario darling.” I hated that I loved her smile.

Taking my arm, Anna walked to the door beside me as Shark muttered, “For fuck’s sake,” behind us.

CHAPTER 7



AS SOON AS WE were out of Shark's office, Taz dropped any pretense of playing nice and pulled her hand from my arm like I was burning her, the smile fading from her face. It pissed me off that I wanted her warm hand to stay there. I shouldn't want it there, for god's sake.

"Let's get this over with," she said shortly, walking toward the front of our office. "Where do you want to eat?"

I jogged to catch up to her. "Pietro's?"

We walked out into the parking lot, and the sun caught in her hair, the shiny strands gleaming under the light, and I remembered what it looked like wrapped around my fist. Thankfully, she hasn't worn it down since that day we blew up at each other in the breakroom. I wasn't sure I could tolerate seeing those gorgeous locks free and loose down her back.

Fuck. I was getting a chubby just thinking about it. And yeah, maybe I'd jerked off to thoughts of that hair falling over my stomach and hips as her hot

mouth swallowed me down. I'd tried not to think of her that way, but every time my dick was in my hand, it was her I saw. I fucking hated her, but I wanted her.

Realizing she had stopped and was staring at me, I tried to remember what she'd just said. "Sorry. What?"

She puffed out an annoyed sigh. "I said Pietro's is fine. Do you want to take my car or your truck?"

"Mine is closer," I said, angling toward my red truck and opening the passenger door.

Taz's face formed a confused scowl at my gesture, and she muttered, "Thanks," as she climbed inside.

Going around to my side, I got in the truck and closed the door as her scent immediately filled the space. Coconut and something else sweet. It was intoxicating, and I attempted to breathe through my mouth as I cranked the vehicle. That didn't help. I could taste her now, and my black pants began to grow tighter in the crotch. I spread my legs a little further to make room for the growth. Goddammit. Why did she affect me this way?

Because it was the best sex of your life, and the last time you were in this truck with her, she was riding you like she owned you.

I sighed internally. Yes, but it wasn't just that. Tazanna had been sexy, for sure, but she'd also been sweet and vulnerable, a side of her I'd never seen from the strong, funny woman. A side I had really liked.

As I took off, Taz pulled down the mirror in front of her and frowned. Swiping her finger at a spot of mascara under her eye, she let out a small, frustrated noise and reached for the storage area on the console. "You have any napkins in here?"

I slammed my arm down on the console and snapped, "No." *Ay, Dios mio!*

She absolutely could *not* look in there. “Check the glove box,” I said, my tone a bit softer.

“Snippy ass,” she muttered under her breath, and I stifled my smile. She was a fiery one, for sure, and I liked that, despite every single cell in my brain telling me not to.

The rest of the drive was in comfortable silence, and when we arrived, I held the door to the restaurant open and let Taz go before me. I had given myself an internal pep talk on the way. Yes, I was still pissed that she had used me to cheat on her boyfriend, but I needed to try and reel in my anger. I took my job seriously, and Shark was right. Ella Ervin was a client, and she deserved one hundred percent effort from us.

We were seated at a table near the plate-glass window with a view of the park. Taz was across the linen-covered table from me, and she eyed me warily. “Woody,” she started just as I said, “Taz, we need—”

Chuckles from both of us filled the air. It was the first time we’d laughed together since *that night*. “You go first,” she said, fiddling with the napkin in her lap.

Inhaling a deep breath, I steeled my spine. “I know we’ve had our problems...” A delicate snort erupted from the woman across from me, and I leveled her with a sardonic glare. “Like I was saying, I know we haven’t been getting along, but our jobs and a person’s life are on the line here. I think we need to call a truce.”

Her smooth face wrinkled into an adorable pout. “That’s what I was going to say.”

I tried a smile and found that it wasn’t as difficult as I’d thought it would be. “See? Look. We’re already agreeing.”

Taz chewed the corner of her lip, and I found myself wanting to bite it for

her. *Stop it! You do not like her.*

“So how are we going to go about this?”

Leaning back in my chair, I shrugged. “I have no fucking clue.”

She mirrored my arrogant position. “Me neither. Maybe we could start with you not flipping me off every time you see me.” A bit of hurt tinged her words, despite her supercilious demeanor, and I felt the tiniest bit of shame.

I nodded. “You’re right. And maybe you could refrain from calling me a dick-nosed prick-tickler.”

She grinned, and a stupid little flutter took off from my stomach and landed in my chest at the sight of those beautiful lips curving up around her pearly teeth. Making me remember... *things*. “Now we’re getting somewhere. You have to admit that was a good one though, right?”

I could feel the corners of my lips twitching, but I did my best to maintain a look of impassivity. “Entirely inaccurate, but I suppose you get a B for effort.”

“B?” she asked, looking affronted. “That was a solid A-plus, dude.”

Closing my eyes, I shook my head before lifting my lids and looking at Taz. “No. As much as it pains me to admit it, syphilitic anal lesion was your best one yet.”

She dipped her head in acknowledgment. “Thank you, kind sir.” Her head tilted to the side, and a tiny strand of loose hair brushed the shoulder of her shirt. “I’m much more creative than you, ya know. You can’t even think of any good insults.”

Rolling my eyes, I stroked my bottom lip with my index finger. Taz’s eyes followed the movement, and her pupils dilated slightly in interest. *Nope. Not going there.*

“I can be creative when I want to be,” I argued. To be honest, I found it

difficult to sling slurs at a woman. I wasn't raised that way, and my mother would pop me upside the head if she heard me call a female by a derogatory name. In fact, I even tensed every time I flipped Taz the bird, wondering if my mom was going to pop out from behind a potted plant and wallop me. Mrs. Diaz didn't fuck around.

Propping her elbow on the table and resting her jaw in her hand, Taz said, "Uh-huh. Let's hear a creative insult."

My brain was whirling ninety to nothing, trying to think of a good insult. "You're a flat-chested cum gobbler."

It was then that I noticed the waiter standing beside the table, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. "Uh, I, uh, I c-can come back," he stammered, whirling on his heel and scurrying away.

Taz was overcome with a fit of giggles, her hand over her mouth and her eyes scrunched closed. I couldn't help myself, and a low laugh escaped my lips. "Dammit, now he's probably going to spit in my food for being rude to you," I grunted.

Uncovering her mouth, she grinned at me. "Good. You deserve it." She pursed her lips and asked, "You really think I'm flat-chested?"

I cleared my throat, but my voice still sounded uncharacteristically husky when I answered. "I think we both know that's not the case."

Don't look down. Do. Not. Look. Down.

I fucking looked down. Though her office-issue polo shirt did a fairly good job of camouflaging them, the full outline of her tits was visible through the fabric. I knew firsthand that Taz had a more-than-generous handful, and *motherfucker!* Now I was thinking about her tits. The brownish rose of her nipples. The way they pebbled roughly against my tongue. Her soft moans when I...

Jesus Christ. I needed to say something to get my mind off her breasts. “And the other part?” came out of my dumbass mouth as I discreetly adjusted myself underneath the table. For fuck’s sake, did I really just ask her if she was a cum gobbler?

“No, I’ve never—” Her eyes widened in horror, and her full lips clamped so tightly shut that they turned white. Fumbling around on the table, her hands grabbed the menu and lifted it, obscuring her face. But not before I saw a pretty blush staining her tanned cheeks into the most glorious shade of dusty pink. “What are you getting to eat?” she asked, her words running together.

So she’s never had a man blow in her mouth? I would be the first.

No! Stop this train of thought, you stupid fuck! Not. Going. To. Happen.

“I like their lobster ravioli,” I said. There. Finally, I said something safe. Something that didn’t make me think of her under this table, sucking me off. I took a sip of my water and watched the top of Taz’s head until she finally lowered the menu.

“That sounds good. I’ll get that too.” Her brown eyes darted around the room until she made contact with our server. She flashed him a smile, and he rushed over like his pants were on fire.

“Yes, ma’am. Can I help you with something?” The fucker was practically drooling all over her, and it pissed me off. “My name is Aiden, by the way.”

“Ahem, *Aiden*. My *wife* and I will both have the lobster ravioli,” I broke in pointedly. “And can we please have a basket of garlic bread as a starter?”

“Certainly, sir.” His voice was polite but tight, and he spared me only a cursory glance before turning back to Taz. “Would you like a glass of wine, ma’am? I could recommend something that would go nicely with the ravioli.”

“Just water is fine with me, but thank you.”

“I’ll just have water as well,” I said, even though he didn’t ask me. *Prick.*

After giving Taz one last gag-inducing smile, motherfucking Aiden headed toward the kitchen, leaving me alone with her. Her smile faded when she looked at me and raised one dark, perfect eyebrow.

“Wife?”

CHAPTER 8



WOODY LEANED FORWARD WITH his forearms on the table, hands clasped together. Though I kept my gaze trained on his, I could still see the thickness of his muscles and the dark hair scattered across his caramel skin in the bottom periphery of my vision. I was a sucker for hair on a man, and though I couldn't stand Woody, I had to admit that I was still attracted to him.

Big time.

I think that's why I hated being around him so much. We constantly threw ugly looks at one another, but I still wanted more than anything to run my hands through that coarse arm hair, up his strong biceps, over his wide shoulders, and directly to that disarmingly handsome face. He had grown out his beard a few months ago, and I longed to touch it. Feel the soft scratch of it against my fingertips. *And...*

“Yes, *wife*,” he reiterated. “Mario. Anna. Husband. Wife.” He waved a finger back and forth between us. I clenched my thighs together at the memory of what he could do with that finger. *Goddammit*. I hated this. Being attracted to a man I couldn’t stand.

“You realize Shark isn’t here right now, don’t you?” I asked, narrowing my eyes. “You don’t have to say that.”

“I know, but he sent us on this lunch to work things out, and I think I have a solution.”

“I’m all ears,” I said, with a note of sarcasm, angling my body forward and copying his pose.

“Well, I know that Taz and Woody don’t like each other, so what if we leave them behind and let Anna and Mario take over? I’m sure they can...” He paused for a moment, looking down and rolling his full lips together before lifting his chocolate gaze back to mine. “I think Mario and Anna can get along.”

A long sigh leaked from my mouth. I was not normally a person prone to conflict, but I was also not a fucking pushover. Woody raised my hackles, but maybe I could give Mario a chance to actually be decent. He seemed sincere enough, and I sure as hell didn’t want to pretend to be married to someone I was actively fighting on a daily basis. It was bad enough having to see him at the office every day.

Perhaps I could pretend he was someone else. *Mario*. But I was going to be on my guard at all times. If *Woody* made an appearance and started that bullshit with me again, I was going to push back with everything in me.

“I think they can too,” I said, sticking my hand across the table for a friendly shake, but instead, Mario took my hand in both of his. I

simultaneously wanted to wrench it away and curl my fingers around his. I did neither.

“Here’s your bread,” Aiden announced from beside our table, setting down a basket and two bowls of red sauce for dipping.

“Thank you,” Mario said without looking away from me as he lifted my hand and kissed my knuckles. Something moved inside my stomach, and it wasn’t due to the delectable aroma of garlic bread. It was because of the gentlest brush of lips against my fingers. I wouldn’t say I had butterflies. I was still way too miffed with the man to have butterflies. But there may have been a few gnats buzzing around in there.

Damn him and his soft lips.

Mario rubbed his thumb across the spot he had kissed, and the roughness of his skin against my tingling knuckles made those damn gnats grow just a tad larger. Then his lips curled up into a sly smile, and he winked. *Fucking winked.*

Oh. He’d been putting on a show for our audience—Aiden. He’d been snippy with the waiter earlier, and now the fucker was marking “his” territory like a damn dog.

I pulled my hand away and clapped my mouth shut. That’s probably where the gnats had come from. They flew into my stupid mouth, which was gaping open from one little hand kiss. Well, I wasn’t falling for his shit again. I would do my job and pretend to be a couple in public, but that’s it. Woody Diaz was still behind the Mario mask, and I would do well to remember that.



“You almost ready, Jake?” I called from my room as I tugged the hem of my sundress down. Because I felt self-conscious about my leg, I hardly ever wore a dress, and if I did, it was a long one. But I had fallen in love with this sunshine-yellow number that hit just above my knees, so I bought it on a whim.

Now... staring in the mirror... I wasn't so sure.

Jake appeared in the doorway to my bedroom and let out a low whistle. “Lookin’ good, Razzmatazz.”

I turned to face him, my fingers pulling the yellow fabric down to try and make it magically longer. “Are you sure? Because—”

Two seconds later, Jacob’s hands were covering mine, halting my dress-lengthening efforts. “It’s no secret that you have a prosthetic leg, Taz. There’s no need to hide it,” he said gently. “You look fantastic.”

I gave him a quick hug. “Thanks, bro. You don’t look too horrible yourself.” Looking him over, I straightened the collar of his red polo shirt.

“Gee, don’t stroke my ego too hard, Razzy. I might get the big head.”

I patted his cheek consolingly. “I’m not stroking shit. That’s what you have Charlotte for.”

After chuckling, he turned to my full-length mirror. “You sure I’m dressed okay? I’ve never met most of your work friends before. Should I have worn a tie or something?” Jake had paired his red polo with navy-blue golf shorts. Since Jacob’s now-fianceé was out of town, he’d agreed to go to the party with me.

“Oh heck no. I told you it’s a casual barbecue at Shark and Charli’s house. They’re the least pretentious people ever. You could probably even get away with wearing jorts.”

His reflection grinned at mine in the mirror. “I could still go change.”

I groaned, “Can we please go before I change my mind about this dress?”



Twenty minutes later, Shark answered the door with a smile. “Anna, good to see you.” He shook my hand and then reached for Jake’s. “Jacob, glad you could make it.” Shark had met my roommate one day when he’d come to pick me up from work.

“Just Jake is fine,” he replied, grasping my boss’s hand.

“Gotcha, Jake,” he said, stepping back and allowing us through the door. “Everyone’s having drinks on the patio. What will you two have?”

Not tequila... that’s for damn sure. I hadn’t drunk that particular spirit since *that night*. “Rum and Coke sounds good,” I said, and Jake asked for a beer.

After placing Sandra’s gift on the table in the foyer, we walked out onto the flagstone patio, and I began introducing Jake to everyone. Hawk and Bode were standing beside the meat smoker, and I was a little relieved that Woody—er, Mario—wasn’t here yet.

Charli and Bristol both gave me a warm hug, and I congratulated Bris on her pregnancy. “Thanks. We’re both really excited, but Waylon is like a big kid himself.”

Waylon, a.k.a. “Tank,” grinned without shame and wrapped an arm around his wife, cradling her non-existent baby bump with one giant hand. “I can’t help it. Bris just looks so beautiful pregnant.” The couple shared a look that was borderline indecent.

Camden Fitz and his very pregnant wife, Shiloh, joined the group. “It took you long enough, big guy. You’ve been married... what? Two months now?”

Shiloh elbowed him. “Not everyone is rude enough to knock up their woman before the wedding.”

“I’ll show you rude later, angel,” Cam growled, swatting his wife lightly on the butt.

Jesus, was every couple here hot as hell? And when will I find someone who looks at me like my friends look at their wives? I pasted on a fake smile to cover my thoughts.

Shiloh turned her attention to me. “Taz, is this your boyfriend?”

Jake and I looked at each other with scrunched-up faces and simultaneously said, “Ewww.” Everyone laughed, and I introduced him to Cam and Shiloh. “No, this is my roommate, Jake Stewart. He’s my brother’s friend and my warden.”

“Oh whatever,” Jacob said. “You love that I look out for you.” He tugged at my hair, which was in a long braid down my back.

Shark came outside and handed us our drinks as he squeezed in beside Charli and curled an arm around her waist. “Why don’t we all sit down?” he asked, nodding his head at the dark-brown rattan furniture on the far side of the patio. As everyone was finding seats, we heard a loud guffaw from Hawk.

“What’s so funny?” Tank called out, but Bode shook his head.

“I’ll tell you later.”

“Bode and Woody picked up these two chicks at a bar one night, and—”

The mention of Woody with another woman gave me a completely irrational sense of jealousy, and I balled my fists at my side. *Don’t be stupid, Taz. Of course he’s seeing other women. Did you actually think he wouldn’t?*

Bode cut off his friend with a slap to the stomach. “I’m sure *the ladies* don’t need to hear this story,” he said, widening his eyes at Hawk in warning.

Hawk glanced around at the mixed group and nodded, a huge grin still on

his furry face. “Yeah, sorry.”

Bristol scoffed. “You think we can’t hear about your dirty little sex life because we’re girls?”

Bode’s face flushed beneath his long, dark-blond hair. “Naw, that’s not it, Queenie. It’s just... well, it’s kind of an embarrassing story.” Hawk snorted and started laughing again as he fell into one of the padded chairs.

“Couldn’t get it up?” Bristol asked, a smirk playing over her lips.

Bode walked over and mussed her hair. “Just because your husband has that problem, it doesn’t mean all men do.” Tank leveled him with a glare as everyone else snickered.

As Tank and Bode sniped at each other, Jake and I took the only seats left, adjacent spots on the small couch, and I started tugging at my dress. *Why didn’t I just wear pants?*

My roommate took my hand and said my name quietly. “Taz. Stop fidgeting. You look wonderful, okay?”

I let out a long sigh. “Okay, thanks. Sorry, I’m just self-conscious,” I said, smiling up at Jake and squeezing his hand. Movement near the back door drew my eyes from him and straight into the burning brown gaze of Mario Diaz. His eyes flicked down to our joined hands and then back up to my face.

And he did *not* look happy.

CHAPTER 9



“HEY, SANDRA. LET ME get the door for you,” I said, jogging up the steps to give Sandra a kiss on the cheek before pushing open the front door to Shark and Charli’s house.

“Oh, thank you, sweet boy.” We were all her ‘boys,’ though each of us were well over thirty years old. “I brought my famous potato salad,” she said, holding the giant metal bowl with both hands.

“Hmm, I don’t know if they want it in the kitchen or out on the patio.” Hearing noise from the backyard, I led Sandra in that direction. “Let’s go ask.” I opened the glass-paned door and allowed Sandra to walk in front of me. And then I stilled. Frozen in my tracks.

Taz was sitting on a little couch with a man, and they were holding hands and smiling at one another. *Holy shit!* She had the fucking nerve to bring her boyfriend to this party, knowing I would be here? Did she even stop to think how awkward that would be for me?

She started to smile at me, but her lips morphed into a confused grimace as she obviously noticed the fury on my face. As the rest of the crew greeted Sandra, I stood with my feet cemented to the ground and my eyes cemented to Taz's.

Time stood still because I wasn't simply pissed that she had brought her boyfriend. If I was being honest with myself, jealousy stung every cell in my body because she was holding hands with another man. *Dude, you're being crazy. She doesn't belong to you.*

I ripped my gaze from Taz's, and it collided with Bristol's. She lifted one eyebrow, and I forced a smile onto my face. She didn't seem to be fooled, but luckily, our uncomfortable staredown was interrupted.

"Come on, ladies. Let's go inside and let the dudes handle the meat," Charli was saying.

"Well, we are experts on all forms of meat-handling," Bode quipped, and everyone laughed.

Except for me. Because my eyes were back on Tazanna Birdsong and her *boyfriend*. She spoke in a low voice to him, and I seethed internally. He patted her arm before she rose to follow the other women into the house, and she tossed me a questioning look as she passed. I ignored her, unable to even bring myself to meet her eyes.

This is so fucking awkward.

"Woody, what's up, bro?" Hawk asked, handing me a beer from the cooler. "You got here just in time. Bode was about to regale us with his latest fuck story."

I sat beside Hawk, which put me directly across from *The Boyfriend*, who I immediately didn't like.

Bode leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, his beer hanging from

two fingers between his legs. “Okay, so Woody and I picked up these chicks at a bar last weekend. Melissa took me back to her house, and Woody went... wherever with his girl.”

I made an excuse and dropped her off at her place before going home and eating leftover pizza. Alone.

“So, Melissa and I are getting pretty hot on her couch, and then she leads me back to her room.” Everyone nodded and smiled indulgently until he continued. “She pulls out this little bottle of spicy cayenne pepper massage oil, and says she wants us to use it. Said her friend told her it was the hottest sex of her life with this shit. So I’m all, okay, what-the-fuck-ever. Just get your panties off and get that ass up in the air for me.”

Tank chuckled. “Why do I have the feeling this isn’t going to end well?”

Hawk held up a hand, his grin apparent even beneath his full beard. “Just wait, dude.”

“Anyway,” Bode said, taking back over the story. “I use an excessive amount of the oil. Inside her, and I even slathered it all over my balls because... why the hell not, ya know? Then I start fucking her. And holy shit! Did it feel good? It was warm and tingly at first, and the faster I went, the warmer it got.”

“Uh-oh, I think I see where this is going,” Boyfriend said with a grin, and I had to clamp my teeth together to keep from telling him to shut the fuck up and then blurting out the entire sordid truth about me and Taz.

“Yeah, it went from warm to hot as fuck, pretty damn quick. We both noticed about the same time that it was getting uncomfortable, so I pulled out and looked down. My fucking balls were the size of beach balls. For some reason, my dumb ass decided to pull the condom off, and it smeared the oil all over my dick. Within twenty seconds, it was as red as a tomato.”

“Jesus Christ,” Shark said, covering his eyes with his hand to try and block out *that* mental image.

“That’s exactly what I said!” Bode told him. “We ran to the shower to try and rinse it off, but it didn’t help at all, so we decided to go to the emergency room.”

We were all laughing pretty hard, but Cam collapsed over onto the couch, holding his stomach. “Swear to god. This would only happen to fucking Bode.”

“It seriously felt like someone was holding a blow torch to my crotch. I couldn’t even get my underwear on, so I borrowed a pair of loose shorts from Melissa.”

“Wait. Tell them what color the shorts were,” Hawk broke in.

“Barbie-fucking-pink,” Bode muttered. I shook my head and took a swig of my beer. “But even those hurt when they touched my area, so I had to pull them down in the front and wrap a cold towel around my junk.”

Beer spewed from my mouth, and I choked for a few seconds. “You drove to the hospital wearing pink shorts and with your dick hanging out?” I asked.

“I had a towel around it,” Bode said with an eye roll. “Unfortunately, the ER was packed, but I flirted with one of the hot nurses, and she got us back pretty quickly.”

“So you flirted with one of the nurses while you and your hookup were in the hospital for a sex-related injury?” Boyfriend asked. “Epic, dude.”

Shut. Up. Asshole.

Bode shrugged. “Yeah, Melissa didn’t care. She just wanted relief from the inferno boiling down there.”

“What did the doctor say?” Shark asked.

“We showed him the little bottle, and he pointed out that the instructions

said it was for external use and was not to be used near the genitals, mouth, or eyes without diluting it first. Melissa's friend apparently forgot to mention that part."

"Holy fuck," Cam gasped, sitting up and wiping tears from his face. "You always have to dilute massage oils when you're using them in the genital area, bro. I thought that was common knowledge." Everyone stared at him, and he shrugged with his customary nonchalance. "What? I may have the face of an angel, but I'm not one. I thought that was also common knowledge."

A smirk played across his 'angel' face. With his dark hair, bright blue eyes, and easy smile, women flocked to Camden Fitz—that is, they did before he got together with Shiloh. Now he only had eyes for his wife.

"Anyway, they managed to get all the oil off and out of us. Put some kind of ointment on that soothed, and by the next day, it was better."

"From now on, anytime I meet a girl named Melissa, all I'll be able to think about is Fire Crotch Melissa," Hawk snorted.

Bode leveled him with a look. "It wasn't her crotch... it was... *you know*. Farther back?"

It took us all a second to realize, and then we collectively cringed a little. "Ohhh, fuck," someone groaned.

"So, are you going out with Fire Ass Melissa again?" I asked, and Bode shook his head with a laugh.

"She said she was afraid it would bring back too many sore memories, so we decided to go our separate ways." Then he smiled the cheekiest fucking grin ever. "But I'm going out with the hot nurse next weekend."

We all howled with laughter. *Fucking Bode.*

"Shit, I need to hang out more often with you guys," Boyfriend said before

draining his beer and rubbing a hand through his neatly trimmed blond goatee. “My friends are boring.”

Hell. No. Not happening, prick.

Shark clapped me on the shoulder. “Mario, I don’t think you’ve met Taz’s roommate, Jake Stewart. Jake, this is Mario Diaz. We usually call him Woody.”

The man stood and held out his hand, a friendly smile on his face. Since the last thing I wanted to do was make a scene, I rose and shook his hand. But my mind instantly thought, *You’re shaking the hand that I used to hold your girlfriend’s ass while she rode me like a bucking bronco.*

I’d never felt more awkward in my entire life as I faked a smile and mumbled some semblance of a greeting before falling back into my seat. *Damn you for putting me in this situation, Taz.*

Bode piped up with, “You’re welcome to come hang with us, Jake. Any time.”

Shut. Up. Bode. Fuck!

But my best friend continued. “Where do you like to go to pick up some sexy ladies, Jake?”

He shook his head and chuckled. “No picking up ladies for me. I’m engaged.” *Engaged? Holy hell! This is worse than I thought! Should I tell him? I would want to know before I got married to a cheater.* I opened my mouth to ask him if we could talk privately, but the man shocked the hell out of me with his next words. “Her name is Charlotte, and she’s a med student.”

“That’s cool. My sister is a doctor,” Shark added. The rest of the conversation faded into the background as I tried to process what the actual fuck was going on here. He was engaged to someone named Charlotte, so why was he here with Taz? Maybe this was a different guy than the one I

heard enter the apartment almost a year ago. No, I recognized his voice; it was definitely the same guy. I was so confused.

Tuning back into the conversation, I heard Jake say he was a cop. That fit with the uniforms I'd seen in the closet. My mind whirled, and then words burst unwittingly from my lips.

"Why do you share a room with Taz if you have a fiancée?" All eyes turned toward me, including Jake's green ones.

"Who said we share a room?" His voice was sharp and his lips tight.

Way to go, Woody. How are you going to explain how you know this tidbit of information?

"You said 'roommate,' so I just assumed," I said weakly.

"Dude, I call you my roommate, but I don't sleep in the same room with your snoring ass," Bode announced, adding a little much-needed levity because honestly, everyone was looking at me like I'd lost my mind.

"Taz is my best friend's little sister," Jake explained. "She needed a place to live when she moved here from Colorado, so I promised Chayton I would let her stay with me and look after her. Charlotte has another two years of medical school and needs a lot of quiet study time, so she doesn't want to move in with me until after she graduates." He shrugged and grinned. "Apparently I'm too distracting. And Taz definitely has her own room." He added that last part with a pointed look at me.

"That's a common trope in romance novels," Bode said, and everyone's eyes turned toward him. "You know, the dude gets with his best friend's little sister? Forbidden romance and all that?" His gray eyes darted around the group. "Come on, don't tell me you've never read some spicy shit? That's how I learned the art of dirty talk. Women love it."

As the others discussed the pros and cons of reading romance books, my

mind spun like an out-of-control Tilt-A-Whirl. For the first time, I began to consider that maybe I'd jumped to some inaccurate conclusions.

But if Jake was engaged to some woman named Charlotte, then what was Taz doing sleeping in his bed? I know what I saw... his and her clothes were both hanging in the closet, and there were men's and women's items in the bathroom.

When I heard Shark say Jake's name, I dialed back in to the conversation around me.

"Jake, Taz told me you've been doing some renovations at your house. We're thinking about updating some things here. Any good contractors that you know of?"

The blond man nodded. "Yeah, depends on what you're looking for. The guy I used for drywall was good, though the job was pretty simple. I wouldn't recommend my plumber. He's slow as hell and missed his deadline by a week."

"What about painters? Charli wants to repaint L.J.'s room and the downstairs bathroom."

Jake reached into his back pocket and drew out his wallet. "I've got just the guy. He does a great job, and he's fast. In fact, about a year ago, he even worked on a weekend to finish Taz's bedroom and bathroom. I was away at a conference, so she stayed in my room so the paint fumes weren't too much for her. It worked out perfectly."

I was vaguely aware that he was handing Shark a business card because my vision went blurry around the edges as realization hit me.

Oh. Holy. Shit. I'd made a horrible, terrible mistake.

One I wasn't sure I could fix.

CHAPTER 10



ALL THE WOMEN WERE gathered in the kitchen trying to help Charli finish the rest of the meal preparations. Normally, I'd much rather be outside with the guys, but assface Mario "Woody" Diaz was out there, so I was happily making the best of it inside with the girls.

Bristol was beside me as we chopped vegetables for the salad. "Waylon said you and Woody are going undercover for a while in California. He wouldn't give me details, but I'm assuming it's for Ella Ervin? I saw on the news that she's had some kind of threat recently, and DFW Security Force has worked for her before."

I cut my eyes toward her. "I'm not supposed to talk about it."

Her face was the picture of exasperation. "That's what he said too. You know I was Ella's stylist for about six months, right? I could help you pick out what to wear. If, in fact, you're going to be working for her."

A sly grin pressed the corners of my lips upward. “While I can neither confirm nor deny that Ella Ervin is our client, I could use some wardrobe assistance. Shark gave me a stipend to pick up some business attire, but I have no freaking idea what to get. I was going to go shopping tomorrow and hope for the best.”

“I’m in. This is totally my jam. What time do you want to go? I vote we have lunch while we’re out because the pregnant lady likes to eat.” She pointed at her flat belly.

I laughed at that. I was a bit of a tomboy and had no clue what to buy for my assignment, so I was really grateful that Bristol had offered to help. “I’m not pregnant, and I still vote for lunch.”

“Good. It’s settled.” We exchanged phone numbers, and she said she would pick me up at ten in the morning. “Hey, do you mind if I bring Waylon’s grandma with us? She lives at an assisted living complex, so I try to get her out of the house whenever possible. Though she doesn’t drive anymore, she loves to go, go, go.”

“That sounds really fun. I’ve met Gram a couple of times, and she’s a character.”

“Girl, you ain’t even lying. She’ll probably shop circles around us both, and she’s always prime entertainment.”

The men infiltrated the kitchen then, picking up the side dishes and carrying them out back. They had set up a few tables and chairs beneath a white canopy tent in the yard, so we were eating out there. Lifting the large wooden salad bowl with both hands, I turned and almost dropped the damn thing when I ran smack into Woody.

“Whoa! Careful there,” he said, gripping my waist to steady me. The warmth of his fingers infiltrated the thin fabric of my dress and heated my

skin. “Let me carry that for you.” He released me and took the bowl from my hands as I tensed.

After the evil eye he shot me earlier, I was primed and ready for an altercation, and my back stiffened. But he smiled at me. Actually *smiled*.

“I, uh, I just wanted to let you know that you look really pretty tonight, Anna.” I stared at him, waiting for the punchline, but it didn’t come. Instead, he shifted the bowl to one arm and dragged the backs of his knuckles down my bare arm. “I really like this dress on you. It makes your legs...” His eyes widened in horror. “I mean, your leg... shit!”

“Leg and a half?” I suggested, and his face relaxed into a smile.

“Sorry. I was trying to be nice, and I fucked it up. I just wanted to tell you that you look amazing.”

“Oh, um. Thanks.” I searched his face but didn’t find an ounce of deceit or mockery there.

He tilted his head in the direction of the back yard. “Come on. I saved you a seat beside me at the table.”

Following numbly, I tried to work through what the *actual hell* was going on here.



Sifting through the racks of clothing in the *Business Attire* section of the large department store, I frowned. “These are all skirts,” I mumbled.

“Do you feel more comfortable in pants?” Bristol asked, and I nodded.

“Yes, because of my leg,” I admitted.

“You wore a dress last night.”

“I know, and I felt self-conscious the entire time. I’m surprised I didn’t tear the fabric from pulling on it so much.”

Bris nodded. “Whatever makes you most comfortable, but I thought you looked really good. Maybe get at least one skirt so you have options?”

I relaxed a little. “I could do that.”

A sales lady with a cute blonde bob haircut approached us. “Can I help you find anything?”

Bristol took over from there. “My friend needs some business suits for a new job, and she prefers pants. We’ll need at least five complete outfits.”

The saleswoman looked like she’d hit the lottery as she gushed, “Of course! Follow me.” She led us across the floor to a wide selection of pantsuits and waved her hand toward the racks. “Here we go. Size six?”

I nodded and started flicking through the clothes. “I don’t know what I’m looking for,” I hissed to Bristol. “Should I stick to dark colors, or what?”

“It would help if I knew what kind of position you would be working in for El— whoever you’ll be working for.” She tossed a smirk my way.

“I’ll be a personal assistant.”

“Ah, that’s right. Claudia is about to pop out her first kiddo, so *the person whose name we’re not mentioning* will need a new PA.”

“I like this,” Gram said, approaching from our right, holding up a skimpy little red satin tank top. I started to protest, but Bristol snatched it up and inspected it.

“Me too, Gram. Taz would look sexy as hell in this.”

“I thought we were looking for work clothes, not sexy clothes.”

“All work and no play make Taz a very horny girl,” Bris shot back, making Gram giggle. “This would be good for a casual evening out, paired with some black palazzo pants.”

“Or leather booty shorts,” Gram suggested, pulling a pair from behind her back, and I gasped.

“I am *not* wearing booty shorts. Much less leather ones.”

“You got a nice tushy,” Gram said, poking me in the butt with one stubby finger. “If I had a tushy like that, I’d be flashing it all over town.”

Bristol was barely restraining her laughter, and I squeezed my own lips together for a moment before answering. “Well thank you, Gram. I’ll try them on just for you.” The woman beamed, her wrinkled face creasing beneath her cotton-candy-pink old lady hairdo. “I really like your hair color, by the way. It’s super fun.”

She patted the short curls. “Isn’t it? Bristol does it for me. I started out with just a colored streak, and when the old biddies at the retirement village got jealous, I decided to go whole hog and turn it all pink.” Gram turned toward the clothes rack. “Is this what we’re looking for?”

“Yes. How about this one?” I asked, picking up a high-necked green pantsuit, but Gram took it from my hand and returned it to the rack.

“No, ma’am. You trying to look like Hillary Clinton? Here, try this one.” She handed me a buttery yellow suit that was actually very pretty. And it was my favorite color.

Bristol nodded her approval and pulled out a red suit with black buttons as well. “This one is a three piece. It comes with a jacket, pants, and a skirt, so you can choose what to wear on the bottom. Plus, the jacket is short sleeved. It’s not as hot in Cali, as it is here, but it still gets warm during the summer.”

We were on a roll now, pulling out clothing and discussing it before keeping or discarding. By the time we were done in that store, I had five very attractive suits and one fancy pantsuit that would be appropriate for evening wear if I didn’t want to wear the dress.

I also bought the slinky tank top and black palazzo pants, but I didn't get the leather shorts even though both of the other women raved on and on about how great I looked in them. And I actually felt good in that outfit. Sexy. But it was still a hard no from me on actually purchasing the booty shorts.

"Let's go get some grub," Gram announced, heading down the wide corridor of the mall. She was certainly spry for her age. "Bristol, what do you feel like eating, honey? I know pregnancy can affect your appetite."

"This baby craves Mexican food all the time. Is that okay?"

We both nodded, and Gram clapped her hands beneath her chin crowed, "My first great grandchild is going to be a spicy one."

"Just like you," I said, elbowing her gently, and she flashed me a sassy wink.

We found the Mexican restaurant near the food court, and as soon as we were seated, Gram grabbed the drinks menu. "I'm getting a swirly margarita. Bristol, what was that one I liked so much last time?"

"I think it was the pomegranate swirl with sugar on the rim."

Gram bobbed her pink head up and down. "That's right. I didn't care for the mango one all that much. It tasted like feet."

This was obviously their routine—going out together for swirly margs—and I loved that. "So what does Tank, I mean Waylon, think about you two party animals hanging out together?"

Me and the guys used our nicknames around the office. Besides Waylon/Tank, Beau Atwood's nickname was Shark, Camden Fitz was Cam, Mario was Woody, Bode was just Bode, and Tate Gentry was Hawk. I'd been a little wary of the intimidating Hawk when I first moved here, but he was

actually a really nice guy beneath the beard, ginormous body, and growly exterior.

“Oh, my big overprotective boy!” Gram exclaimed. “He’s happy I get along with his bride.” The women shared a warm look. “He knows I can cut loose and have fun with Bristol because she will get me home safely.”

“I think I’ll join you in having a margarita, if Bristol doesn’t mind?” I questioned, turning my eyes toward my beautiful new friend.

“Of course not,” she said, waving her hand. “I’ll be the designated driver for the remainder of my pregnancy, but after that, it’s game on. We’re taking turns once I pop out the kiddo.”

My chest swelled over her including me in her little group. I didn’t have a lot of female friends, but perhaps that was because I hadn’t found my people yet. Maybe now I had. Bristol and I seemed like opposites on the surface. She was girly where I was a tomboy, but beneath all that, she had an inner strength that I admired, not to mention her wicked sense of humor.

As soon as we ordered our food and drinks, Bristol leaned forward with her forearms on the table, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “So, you and Woody, huh?”

My eyes almost bugged out of my head, but before I could refute her statement, Gram said, “Ohhh, are you dating Woody? He’s a cutie pie. I’ve been wanting to get me a Latino man. Wait, is it Latino or Hispanic? I don’t want to insult anyone by being politically incorrect, but it’s hard to keep up with everything at my age.”

Bristol patted the older woman’s hand indulgently. “Latino is fine, Gram.”

“Okay, good. Anyway, like I was saying, I heard Latino men are good in the sack. All the hip action, if you know what I mean?”

She waggled her eyebrows, and I noticed that they were also dyed pink. I

was speechless. Absolutely no words came to mind as Gram continued. “There are three Latino men in my complex, but one of them is gay. He’s a real sweetheart and quite handsome, but I’ve had to mark him off my list.”

“There’s a list?” Bristol asked, amusement plying her lips into a pretty smile.

“Of course, gotta stay organized. I’ve got one of those, whatchacallits... a spreadsheet. Waylon showed me how to make one.” Tank was excellent with anything computer-related, but I wasn’t sure he would have taught his grandma about spreadsheets if he’d known her intended purpose. “Anyhoo, that leaves Jorge and Ned.”

Finally finding my voice, I asked, “You have a Latino friend named Ned?”

She nodded. “Uh-huh. Ned Hernandez. I think he’s my best bet. Jorge has a combover, and I don’t feel very frisky around him with that hairdo. I just want to tell him to let it go already. Either shave it off or go with the Friar Tuck look, but all that mess on top of his head makes him look ridiculous. No way I could do the chitty chitty bang bang with a combover man.”

“Um, here are your drinks,” the young server said from beside our table. He’d obviously heard that last bit, and the poor guy looked afraid. *Very afraid.*

My hand reached up to cover my grin, and Bristol’s shoulders were shaking with silent laughter. I saw exactly what she was talking about when she said Gram was “prime entertainment.” This was the most fun I’d had in months. Probably years.

The waiter disappeared like someone had slingshotted him across the room, and Gram turned her face toward me. “Sorry, I got sidetracked there for a minute. You and Woody are dating now? Nobody told me.” She shot a look across the table at her granddaughter-in-law, who held up both hands.

“I didn’t know, but he was certainly eyeballing Taz last night. He looked like he wanted to rip Jake’s hands off when he saw y’all holding hands.”

“What? No!” I shook my head vehemently. “No way. Woody and I don’t get along at all.”

Bris ignored that, addressing Gram. “And then, he insisted that Taz sit beside him at dinner.”

“Ahhh, jealousy and possessiveness are the first signs. He’s definitely interested.”

“Totally.”

“And who is Jake?”

“Taz’s roommate. He’s her brother’s friend, and he’s engaged.” The two of them were cheerfully conversing about this like I wasn’t even there.

“If I may, I’d like to be part of this conversation about *my* love life,” I said sarcastically, ignoring the fact that I didn’t actually have a love life to speak of, unless you counted my vibrator. “There’s absolutely nothing going on between me and Woody.”

“Nothing going on *now*, or *ever*?” Bristol asked shrewdly, and I faltered, my mouth gaping open.

“Huh?” I was totally stalling for time, trying to think of an answer that wasn’t a complete lie.

The women linked eyes and shared a grin. “So you have slept with him,” Bris stated, and I covered both eyes with my hands.

“Yes,” I whispered, peeking through my fingers and fixing her with a glare. “But you can’t tell anyone. Not even Tank. It was almost a year ago, and it was only once.” I paused. “Okay, that’s not entirely true. There was more than one... incident, but it was only one *night*.”

“Oooh, a multiple,” Gram crowed. “I haven’t had one of those in at least

five years.” Mine and Bristol’s heads turned slowly toward the older woman, who had to be well into her seventies. What the hell were they feeding the men at her retirement community? “Don’t look at me like that. I went through a cougar phase a while back.”

Holy hell! This senior citizen has a better sex life than me.

Bristol’s eyes floated back to mine, and she looked as disturbed as I felt. “Anyway, Taz, how was it? And why was it only one night?” she asked.

I licked some salt from the rim of my margarita and took a long swig before spilling the whole story. Of course, I skimmed over the sex details, much to their dismay.

“That freaking snake!” Bristol exclaimed when I was done. “So he just banged you and then acted like nothing even happened?”

“I’m going to give that boy a piece of my mind next time I see him,” Gram fumed.

Waving my hands in front of my body, I practically shouted, “No!” I lowered my voice when people started to stare. “No, please don’t do that. You’re not supposed to know, remember?”

“Oh yeah. Right. Well, maybe I’ll accidentally step on his toe or something. He can’t treat you like that.”

“It’s okay. I’m over it now.” *Pretty much.*

“You need to date someone else when you get to California. Flaunt that shit right in his face,” Bris suggested.

“I really can’t do that because...” I chose my words carefully, so as to not give away any details of our secret assignment. “Because I can’t blow our cover.”

Bristol’s eyes narrowed and then widened as she put the pieces together. “Ohhhh, you’re supposed to pretend to be a couple, right?” I could see the

wheels turning in her head. “So will you have to share a room with him?”

My own eyes almost popped out of my head. “Shit. I’ve been so worried about packing and finding business clothes to wear, I hadn’t even thought of that. Our instructions just said that we would be provided with accommodations.” I drained the rest of my margarita and signaled the waiter for another.

All the *you can do this* pep talks I’d been giving myself flew right out the window. Woody and I were supposed to be a married couple, so we would probably be expected to live like a married couple. In the same room. In the same... *gulp*... bed.

Shit.

CHAPTER 11



I REMOVED THE PURPLE panties—Taz’s panties—from the console compartment of my truck, tucking them into the pocket of my jeans before heading into the house.

“Hey, you got everything packed?” Bode asked from his lounging position on the couch.

“Yep. Just getting my last bag, and I’ll be ready to go.”

“You need any help?”

“No thanks. I think I can handle it.”

“Awww, my precious Mario is growing into such a responsible little man,” he cooed, and I chuckled as I flipped him off and headed up the stairs.

In my room, I slipped the panties from my pocket and held them to my nose, inhaling the faint scent of her before folding them and placing them carefully into the drawer beside my bed.

After removing her underwear from her body that night eleven months ago, I'd stuffed them into my pants pocket, and when I arrived home the next day, I found them.

For some unfathomable reason, I kept them. I never took them out or... *ahem*... used them. Until one night three weeks ago. We'd just returned from a mission in The Maldives, where Taz and I had fought like cats and dogs the entire trip, constantly sniping at each other. And God help me, her smartass mouth had turned me on like nothing ever had.

Not even bothering to unpack when I got home, I went straight up to my room and locked the door before taking the scrap of fabric from the drawer and holding it to my nose. I was harder than I'd ever been in my life and jerked off twice with her scent against my face.

It wasn't until Bode knocked on my bedroom door the next morning that I realized I had slept all night with Taz's panties clutched in my hand. I was disgusted with myself, but I still didn't throw them away. No, I stuck them in the console of my truck to remove the "temptation" from my bedroom.

And I admit it... she *was* still a temptation. I think that's why I'd been so angry with her the past year. I'd had a taste, and then that taste had been ripped away. I hated her—and myself—because the craving for more didn't stop, even as my brain knew that it was wrong to want her.

Or so I'd thought.

After what I found out last night, everything was different now. Taz wasn't taken, she hadn't cheated on her boyfriend, and she hadn't made me do something I absolutely abhor. *So what now?*

First of all, I needed to stop standing around daydreaming and go pick her up. I barely slept at all last night as the guilt practically ate me alive. I'd been the biggest dickhead to Taz for eleven months, and now that I knew my

attitude was completely unwarranted, all I wanted to do was make it up to her.

It wasn't going to be easy. She was still pissed—rightfully so—and seemingly confused by my complete one-eighty. Last night, I replaced my usual insolence and rudeness toward her with compliments and kindness, and she'd eyed me warily all through dinner. The woman had every right to be suspicious. I'd been an asshole for almost a year, and now I was acting like Mister Mario Fucking Sunshine.

Picking up my suitcase, I jogged down the steps and set it beside the couch. Bode rose, and we bro-hugged. “Gonna miss you, dude,” he said, giving me a sad little half-smile.

“You too, but just think. You'll have the whole place to yourself now.”

When we first moved to Dallas, Cam and Shark were roommates, and I lived with Hawk, Bode, and Tank in a larger house in the same neighborhood. After Shark and Charli got married, Hawk had moved in with Cam. Then Tank and Bristol moved in together, as did Cam and Shiloh, so that just left me and Bode in our rambling two-story house and Hawk alone in his.

“Yeah, it's going to be awfully quiet without you here. Guess I'll hang out with Hawk.”

“God help the women of Dallas if you two are on the prowl together. Just stay away from the Den of Sin,” I said with a laugh, referring to our nickname for Hawk's bedroom. None of us were saints, but goddamn. Hawk was next level. He had things in his room I didn't even want to know the name of.

“You know he doesn't mind sharing,” Bode said, wiggling his eyebrows up and down. “And I got a tetanus shot recently.”

Shaking my head, I picked up my suitcase. “Take it easy, dude. Don’t run off and get married or something while I’m gone. And avoid any kind of spicy massage oil.”

“I’ll try and control myself.” My friend stood on the porch as I drove away, looking like he was my mom watching me drive away to college for the first time. I really was going to miss him.

Taz—*Anna*—only lived about ten minutes from us, and I pulled up in front of the white brick home with hunter-green shutters. I didn’t really get a good look at it last time because we were all over each other on the way in, and I was running like my pants were ablaze on the way out. It was nice. A tidy yard with pretty flowers and plants around the border.

Leaving the truck running, I jogged up the sidewalk and knocked on the door. It was answered by a petite blonde with a welcoming smile. “Hi, I’m Charlotte. You must be Mario?”

“Yes, nice to meet you,” I said, shaking her proffered hand before following her inside.

“Taz, Mario is here,” she called down the hallway. “Jake is on duty, so I decided to come see her off,” she explained.

Anna exited a door on the right—the opposite side from the room we slept in together—and pulled two suitcases down the hall.

“I got ’em,” I told her, hurrying toward her and taking them.

“Thanks,” she mumbled and headed back to her room while I settled her bags in the truck. When I turned back to the house, Anna and Charlotte were embracing on the porch, another two smaller suitcases beside them. I climbed the steps and reached for them.

“I can carry them,” Anna protested, but I shook my head.

“It’s okay. You wrap up here and meet me in the truck. Bye, Charlotte.”

She waved. “Bye, Mario. You take good care of our girl, okay?”

Anna let out a little snort before turning to give her friend another hug. I was waiting to open her door when she made her way to my truck, and she scowled at me. *Someone is in a mood today.*

As I drove toward DFW Airport, I attempted to start a couple conversations, but I was met with only one-word answers, so I finally turned on the radio to camouflage the awkward silence. Once I pulled into one of the parking lots, I decreased the volume.

“Is everything okay, Anna?” I asked as I searched for an open spot.

“I just... I don’t want to be here any more than you do.”

Whipping into a vacant parking place, I put the truck in gear and pivoted my body toward hers. “I thought we were going to try and get along. Maybe we can even have some fun. It’s Malibu!” I attempted to put some enthusiasm in my voice.

She stared at me blankly before rolling her eyes and getting out of the truck. When I met her at the back, she already had the tailgate open and was furiously whipping her suitcases out and setting them roughly on the concrete.

“Whoa, I hope you don’t have anything breakable in there, Rocky.”

She glared so hard, I was surprised my skull didn’t shatter. “I’m not in the mood for your shit, Woody.”

“Mario,” I corrected. “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on? Did I do something to piss you off?”

“Besides existing?” she shot back, and I crossed my arms over my chest and locked my eyes on her face. She seemed to deflate a little. “Sorry, I have a bit of a hangover. I went shopping with Bristol and Gram yesterday.”

“Let me guess... margaritas?”

Blowing out a breath, she nodded and then rubbed her forehead with her fingertips. “Yeah, swirly ones. And I think we’re both aware that I don’t act right under the wicked influence of tequila.”

I wanted to tell her that I rather liked the way she acted the last time we’d had tequila together, but I was afraid she’d pull a junk punch on me. Didn’t really want to fly all the way to California with bruised nuts.

“I’ll get us a luggage cart,” I said instead. I returned a few minutes later, and we settled the bags on the pushcart before heading into the terminal. “Bode is going to come pick up my truck later so we’re not paying for parking for God knows how long.”

Checking in took a little longer than normal because Anna and I both had to declare our weapons, which were stowed in our checked baggage. “What guns did you bring?” I asked quietly as we entered the line for airport security.

“My Sig M18 and the M82,” she whispered, referring to her pistol and preferred rifle.

“You like the eighteen better than the seventeen?” This was something we could do with ease... discuss firearms. Anna knew her shit as well as I did.

“I like both, but the eighteen has a shorter length, so it’s easier to conceal. But I brought my Sig as a backup.”

“Good girl,” I murmured, and she inhaled a quick, short breath. *Hmmm, I like that response.* “Here we go,” I said, pressing my hand against her lower back and guiding her to the available TSA agent at the border to the screening area.

“Identification and tickets, please,” she said politely, and I showed her our tickets on my phone before giving her my driver’s license. I noticed that Anna handed over her license as well as a small blue card. The agent studied

everything and directed me to a line to the left. “Ma’am, if you’ll please step over there,” she said, pointing to the right.

“Why can’t she go with me?” I asked suspiciously.

“Sir, please get in line for screening. There’s a long line behind you,” she said before calling the next passenger.

Stepping through the gap in the barrier, I watched Anna pull her backpack off as she walked toward her designated line. What the hell was going on here?

“Anna?”

She glanced over her shoulder, frowned, and shook her head sharply. “It’s fine.” Then she turned around and kept walking.

I suspected what was going on, but... *no fucking way*. If it was what I thought it was, heads were about to roll. People pushed around me as I stood there staring at Anna’s back.

“This way, sir,” a male agent directed. “Shoes off and everything in the bin.” I complied but kept craning my neck to see where my fake wife was.

“What’s that over there? They sent my wife to that line.”

The agent glanced over. “Special screening.”

“Why would she need special screening?” I practically barked.

“I don’t know, sir. Please step into the metal detector, legs spread and arms up.”

Stepping inside the device, I felt my anger bloom. When I was done, I grabbed my backpack and shoved my feet into my Nikes before heading toward the “special screening” area. Anna was seated on a chair with the leg of her jeans pulled up, and a female agent was doing something to her prosthetic.

A dark-haired male agent stopped my progress and pointed toward the exit.

“That way to the departure gates.”

“I’m not going to the departure gate. I’m trying to get to my wife. She’s being violated,” I gritted out, pointing in that direction, and his gaze followed. “She is a veteran of the United States Army, and would you like to know how she lost that leg? She lost it serving this country because she’s a goddamn war hero.” My voice was rising, and I could feel blood darkening my ears and face.

The agent’s eyes narrowed, his jaw tightening, and I was pretty sure I was about to go to jail.

Shark is going to be so pissed.

CHAPTER 12



“ALMOST DONE, MISS,” THE kind agent said as she swiped my prosthetic with a round, white swab. “Thank you for being so patient.”

“It’s fine, Agent Henson,” I told her with a smile. “You have a hard job to do, dealing with all these people.”

She shook her head. “Every day we have someone kicking up a fuss. Case in point,” she said as she stood, bobbing her head at something behind me. I turned, and—*holy shit*—Mario was standing in front of a huge male agent, gesticulating wildly in my direction. He was obviously angry.

Damn fool is about to get us kicked off this flight.

“Why are you singling her out? This is not okay,” he said, his voice way too loud.

“Shit! That’s my,” I glanced down at the simple gold wedding ring I was wearing before continuing with, “husband. We’ve never flown together, and I

didn't think to warn him about the extra screening. Could you please bring him over here so he can see that I'm okay?"

Agent Henson hesitated, and I smiled sweetly. "I am allowed a family member or companion with me while I undergo screening, as long as they've already cleared security, right?" I was aware of my travel rights and knew I was a hundred percent correct, as did Agent Henson, and she nodded.

"Harry, send him over here," she called to the giant man in front of Mario. "This is his wife."

The man reluctantly stepped aside, he and my fake husband glaring at each other until Mario cleared the mountain that was Harry. Then all his attention was on me as he hurried over and squatted beside me. "What's going on, Anna?"

"I'm fine," I assured him. "They're just making sure I'm not trying to take over the plane with my fake leg."

Agent Henson snorted at my joke. "This is a swab that detects trace amounts of explosive residue. Absolutely nothing invasive was done to your wife," she explained as she stood.

Mario scowled at her. "Explosives? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard." *Oh, my god. Shut. Up.* "You should be—"

I didn't let him finish that sentence, effectively shutting him up by grabbing the back of his hair and pressing my lips to his. He literally melted into the kiss, his mouth soft as he parted his lips and hummed a little sound of approval. My fingers tightened in his hair as I inhaled his minty breath.

Damn, he still tastes good. Also, what the fuck am I doing?

I'm trying to shut him the hell up before we both lose our jobs.

Mario pulled back with a soft suck and then went in for round two, his hand cupping the side of my neck and his tongue darting out for the briefest of

tastes.

When he ended the kiss with a soft brush against the corner of my mouth, he smiled against my lips. “That’s one way to shut me up.”

“I was just trying to save you from receiving an anal probe,” I said more breathlessly than I would have wished, and he chuckled. *Play it cool, Taz.* Clearing my throat, I turned to look at Agent Henson who was grinning down at us. “You *can* do an anal probe on my husband, right? If he doesn’t shut his trap?”

“It can be arranged,” she said with a smirk, “though I’d have to get a male agent to perform that particular screening. I think Harry’s available.” Mario’s eyes widened. “It’s his favorite part of the job,” she whispered conspiratorially.

“I’ll be good,” he agreed with a hearty bob of his head as he made an X over his heart.

Henson stepped behind a machine and inserted the white swab, nodding when she got the results. “Okay, you’re all good to board.” Her smile widened as she looked between us, and I realized my pretend husband’s hand was stroking softly up and down my leg. “Newlyweds, huh?” she inquired.

Okay, Taz. This is the first real test of your acting abilities.

“We are,” I gushed. My hand was still in his hair, and I ruffled it affectionately. “One month of wedded bliss. Right, honey?” Though my mind was still a little foggy from the kiss—and it had been relatively PG-rated—I managed to remember the backstory Shark had provided in our dossiers.

Woody’s dark-brown eyes locked with mine, and something bubbled deep in my core. The look he was giving me was molten hot, but that was nothing compared to his next words.

“You haven’t even begun to experience bliss, *mi amor*. Wait till I get you to

our room tonight.”

Fucking hell! I knew he was just going along with the narrative, but the man should win an Academy Award for the performance he was putting on. Anyone watching would think I was going to get fucked to within an inch of my life later tonight, though nothing could be farther from the truth. There would be none of *that* going on. Mario and I were merely tolerating each other for the assignment.

“I can’t wait,” I said. *Why does my voice sound so squeaky?*

“You ready to go, babe?” he asked, offering me his hand as I stood. Normally, I would snipe that I could stand up by my damn self, but going along with this charade was good practice for when we were around people we actually needed to fool.

So I allowed him to tug gently, releasing his hand immediately when I was fully upright. Before I could retrieve my backpack, Mario had both of our bags thrown over his wide shoulders. “I can carry my backpack, hon,” I said, trying not to sound too bitchy.

“Settle down, my little rosebud.” *Rosebud? What the fuck?* Turning to Agent Henson, he said, “My wife is just so darned independent.” Then he actually pinched my cheek, and I resisted the urge to bite him. “And sweet,” he added with a grin. I bared my teeth at him, hoping it somewhat resembled a smile.

“That’s me. Sweet to the core for my handsome cuddle muffin.” Mario’s lips pursed and then twitched into a sly grin.

“You two are adorable together. Congratulations on your marriage,” the woman said.

“Thank you. We couldn’t be happier.” I was glad Woody spoke up because I was about one step away from calling him a syphilitic anal lesion again.

“You’re lucky to have someone who obviously loves you so much,” she said, giving me a light nudge with her elbow. “And who is so protective over you.”

“Luckiest girl in the world,” I chirped with entirely too much enthusiasm, but she seemed to buy it as she bade us safe travels.

We only made it about two minutes before Mario opened his stupid mouth. “Tell me again how lucky you are to be married to me?”

“Shut up before I stab you with the knife I have concealed in my prosthetic,” I grumped as we approached our gate. I really wasn’t in the mood to pretend to like him today. My head was still aching from my hangover.

Not to mention the fact that I woke up late today and had to rush to get ready to leave, so I hadn’t even had time to check what Bristol had packed in my suitcase. I’d already had most of my packing done, but the bossy-ass woman had kicked me out of my bedroom while she filled my final bag with my new purchases. She informed me that she was a master packer, and it would be best if I just stayed out of her way. Gram and I had done tequila shots in the living room while she went about her business.

I had a sneaking suspicion though. I remembered them dragging me to Victoria’s Secret after lunch, and I have a vague recollection of prancing around the dressing room in sexy underwear and bras—much to their delight. There may have also been a corset involved.

What is wrong with me? I don’t prance. Damn tequila.

Don’t get me wrong; I wasn’t so tomboyish that I didn’t appreciate pretty underwear, but since absolutely *no one* was going to be seeing them, I was feeling the sharp sting of buyers’ remorse. Especially since I couldn’t remember what I’d even bought.

Mario laughed at my knife joke as he put his hand on my lower back to

guide me. “Here’s our gate.” His sharp eyes scanned the area until he found two seats beside each other, and we took them. “I’m sorry I made a fuss back there, but it pissed me off that they were treating you differently.”

I met his eyes, looking for any hint of insincerity and finding none. “I’m used to it by now. Everyone with a prosthetic, cast, or brace has to have the extra screening. It’s no big deal.”

“Still, I don’t like it. It seems like they could show you more respect.” His brow creased as his jaw tightened. He was really bothered by this, which was kinda sweet, I guess. I dug through my backpack and found a bottle of Advil—thank god because this headache wasn’t getting any better. But when I shook it, there was no telltale rattle. *Damn. Empty.*

I turned to Mario, rubbing a spot over my left eye. “The agents have never been less than respectful with me. They’re just doing their job. I’m no one special.”

His brown eyes softened before he turned his head and mumbled something that sounded like “you are to me” under his breath. *Wait. What did he just say?* Standing swiftly and placing his backpack in his seat, he said aloud, “Be right back. Will you watch my bag?”

I nodded dumbly, and he hurried off. Probably because he knew I heard what he’d said, and he was afraid I might take it the wrong way. I was sure he didn’t mean that I actually *meant anything* to him. He was most likely trying to say it hit home because I was someone he knew and worked with.

My thoughts were interrupted by a sharp ring, and I pulled my phone out and smiled when I saw Gram’s name pop up. “Hello, Gram,” I answered.

“Hey there, Taz. How are you feeling today?”

“Not great,” I said with a little laugh. “Got a bit of a headache. How about you?”

“Right as rain!” she said a little too merrily, which would have pissed me off if I didn’t adore her so much. “How is Woody acting today?”

“Pretty nice, actually.” It burned me up that I had to admit that.

“If he’s not, you let me know, and I’ll give him a talking to. I’ve got an excellent stern voice. Heck, Waylon was bigger than me by the time he was ten, so I had to get my bluff in early. He never gave me a minute’s trouble after he moved in with me and his grandpa.”

“I’ll be sure to call you if I need assistance,” I said, amusement tingeing my voice at the thought of big ole Tank being bossed around by a woman half his size.

“And send me a picture when you wear those booty shorts. What’s it called? A selfie?”

“Yes, selfie is correct, but I didn’t buy the leather shorts, remember? I bought the black palazzo pants.”

“Yep, when we were in the store the *first time*. Then we went back after we visited Vicky’s Secret, and you said you were getting them because they made you feel like a hot mama. Remember? You even used your personal card like you did with the lingerie because you said you couldn’t put leather Daisy Dukes on the company card.”

How many freaking margaritas did I have at that restaurant? Indistinct images began to form in my mind, and *dammit! I did buy those shorts.*

“You’re right,” I said with a weak laugh. “I’m not sure I’ll have an opportunity to wear them while I’m here, Gram. They were kind of an impulse buy, to be honest.” *A tequila-fueled impulse buy.*

“Well, make sure to take time and have a little fun while you’re there. You’re a beautiful young lady, Tazanna, so don’t forget to take advantage of the good times before you get old like me.”

This woman warmed my heart, and I nodded, even though she couldn't see me. "I will, Gram, and thank you." I spotted Mario coming my way and said, "Look, I need to run, but I'm so glad you called."

"All right, honey. Don't forget what we talked about. You're a fierce lioness! Rawwwr."

A giggle escaped my lips. "I'm but a mere lion cub compared to you, Gram. You're the true queen of the jungle."

Her laugh was loud and raucous. "You'll learn, Taz. I've had almost eighty years to perfect my roar. You just have to practice."

"I'll do my best, Gram."

We said goodbye and disconnected as Mario took his seat beside me. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, that was Gram calling to see how I was feeling today. She didn't seem to have even a hint of a hangover."

A grin crept across his face as he handed me an ice-cold bottle of water. "That woman is a bona fide party animal."

"She's pretty great," I said, opening the water and gratefully taking a long swig.

"Here take these," he said, pulling a small bottle of Advil from a bag. Uncapping it, he poured two into my hand, and I swallowed them. "I got you some fries too. They always help when I've overindulged the night before."

I wanted to ask what else he overindulged in besides alcohol. Women? Of course he did. Mario Diaz oozed sexuality. No way he wasn't getting some on the regular.

Stop it, Tazanna Birdsong. It's. None. Of. Your. Business,

I took the orange and white Whataburger sack from him and opened it, the aroma of fried potatoes causing my mouth to water. "Thank you, Mario. That

was really thoughtful.”

“I think the phrase you’re looking for is ‘perfect husband.’” He buffed his nails on his shirt and blew on them, making me laugh.

“I have to admit, you’ve been a pretty good fake husband so far,” I told him, sticking a french fry in my mouth.

His expression turned solemn. “I’m really trying, okay?”

Pausing my chewing, I held his gaze for a moment and then looked away. “Okay.”



“Anna, wake up.”

“It’s not time yet, Dad,” I mumbled, rubbing my nose against my pillow. *Why is my pillow so hard? And why does it smell so good. Like—*

My heavy eyelids lifted to find that I wasn’t in my comfy bed in my parents’ house. And I wasn’t seventeen. Brown eyes sparkled down at me as I raised my head from Mario’s chest. *Crap.*

His full lips curved up into a wicked smile. “I don’t mind if you call me Daddy, sweetheart, but maybe you should wait till we’re alone,” he said in a low voice that made me tingle in places that had no right to be tingling.

“Shit,” I hissed, realizing his arm was around my shoulders as I leaned all into his personal space, and my hand was... *dammit to hell...* on his thigh. I jerked it back like he was made of poison and straightened in my seat, scrubbing my hands over my face. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay. I think I dozed a little too.” His index finger traced a lazy pattern over my bare shoulder. “Not even a full day on the job, and we’re already

sleeping together.”

I turned to him with my most impressive glare, but he was grinning like an idiot. “Shut up or I’m going to find the Air Marshal and tell him you’re making terroristic threats on an airplane.”

His joyful look faded. “Now that’s just mean, Anna. And after I let you drool on me for the past two hours.”

My hand went immediately to my mouth in panic, but it was completely dry, so I narrowed my eyes. “I did not drool.”

“No, but you snored like Tank’s chainsaw.”

My eyes widened. “Did I really?”

“Maybe a little, but it was cute.”

“I take back what I said earlier. You’re a horrible fake husband.” Removing his arm from its perch around my shoulders, I crossed my arms over my chest.

“At least I’m a good kisser.”

He was, but I wasn’t giving him the satisfaction of knowing that. “You’re adequate,” I retorted.

“That’s not what it felt like earlier when you kissed me. By the way you were pulling my hair, I was more than adequate.”

“I didn’t... I mean... that was...” His stupid smile pissed me off as I spluttered. “I just did that to keep both of us from getting banned from the airline.”

“If that’s what you want to tell yourself. I think you liked it.”

“Just stop talking, okay?” He was shooting a little too close to the target, and it irked the crap out of me. Swallowing hard, I attempted to rid my throat of the dryness that had settled in.

Mario raised his hand and signaled the pretty, blonde flight attendant, who

approached immediately, her eyes tracing over his admittedly handsome face and down to the wide expanse of his chest beneath his tight black T-shirt.

“Yes, sir,” she said a little too breathlessly. “How may I help you?”

“Hi, Cara. Can we please have two glasses of juice?”

“Of course! We have apple, orange, pomegranate, and a lovely fruit blend garnished with fresh blackberries.”

He smiled, his perfect teeth looking even whiter against the darkness of his full beard. “Fruit blend for me. What about you, Anna?”

“Same,” I said curtly.

“Be back in a jiffy.”

Cara—her name came out as a sneer inside my head—did indeed return in a jiffy, setting down crystal flutes containing a deep red liquid in front of each of us. “Here you go, handsome.” She leaned over a little too far, putting her round boobs on display right in front of Mario’s face and turning me into an irrationally jealous woman.

“Cara,” I said with faux sweetness before I could consider what I was doing, and she looked at me for the first time. “If you’re going to do your little Hooters girl impression in front of my husband, could you at least wait until I’m in the restroom?”

Our marriage may not be real, but Wonder-Boob Cara didn’t know that and flirted with him anyway.

Linking my fingers with Mario’s, I thought, *Back off, bitch. This is MY fake husband.*

CHAPTER 13



I CHOKED ON THE air in my lungs as Anna threaded her fingers through mine, and the overly friendly flight attendant's face reddened. She had definitely been flirting with me, but Anna shut that shit down right quick, and I couldn't say I didn't like it. Quite a lot, in fact.

As I regained control of my breathing, the other woman stuttered out an apology and quickly retreated to the front of the plane.

"Well," I said, and Anna cut her eyes sharply at me in warning. I took a sip of my juice and let the moment hang in the air as a pink blush coated her cheeks. She tried to pull her hand away, but I lifted it to my lips and kissed her knuckles before settling our joined hands on my thigh.

"I like that my wife is so possessive."

Anna took a drink, swirled it around in her mouth, and swallowed before speaking. "Haven't you ever heard that silence is golden?"

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from grinning at her snark. I liked a woman with some fire in her belly, and Anna had that in spades.

Something had happened to me the past few days. It was like a veil had been hanging between us for almost a year, and after the revelations of Friday night, that veil had lifted, taking away the barrier between what I *wanted* to feel for Anna and what I *really* felt.

And what I really felt was attraction. Deep and undeniable, but I'd pushed it behind the veil of hate and denied acknowledgment of my true feelings for so long. It was more than physical too. I actually liked Tazanna Birdsong. I liked when she gave my shit right back to me. I liked that she was quick and witty.

What I didn't like was the way we'd treated each other the past year. Yes, I'm aware that was one hundred percent my fault for jumping to conclusions and not talking to her about what I thought I knew. My plan was to break that cycle of hatred and replace it with something else. Something playful, with trust and mutual respect mixed into the equation.

I wanted her to open up. To show me that vulnerability again, like she'd done that night we spent together. I really, really liked that Tazanna Birdsong, and I wanted her back.

How was I going to do that? I had no fucking clue, but I knew it wouldn't happen overnight. She was going to be a hard nut to crack. Patience was going to be the key. My change in attitude was accomplished practically overnight, but I knew hers wouldn't be. She needed time to come to grips with the new me. *Mario*.

She thought I was playing a part. That Woody and Mario were two different people, and honestly, that's what I had planned as well. I was going to pretend to be Mario Diaz, husband extraordinaire, and play nice for the

sake of the mission while secretly hating her. But with a few simple words that had cleared up my misconceptions, Mario and Woody had morphed into the same person. And they both liked Taz. Anna. Whatever.

Speaking of that... “We need to change out our IDs as soon as we get there,” I whispered, and she nodded. We’d used our own identification to get through airport security, but we had an entirely different set of papers with our new identities. Though my name remained the same, my stats and background were different.

Catching Anna from the corner of my eye, I watched as she chewed violently on a juicy blackberry. She was obviously still annoyed at the flight attendant for flirting with me. Or maybe she was annoyed at her own reaction to the flight attendant flirting with me. *Yeah, I think that’s it. She got jealous, and now she’s pissed that she was feeling jealous.*

I took that as a good sign. If she was jealous, that meant she felt *something* besides hate for me. It was buried so deep, I would probably need a backhoe to get to it, but I was pretty sure it was there.

“It was nice of Shark to upgrade us to first class,” I said quietly as she drained the rest of her glass.

“He probably felt sorry for you for being stuck with me for God knows how long.”

Guilt flooded my gut for making her feel that way. “Anna, look at me.” She defiantly kept her gaze forward, and I softened my voice. “Please.” After a few seconds, reluctant brown eyes turned to me, her lips rolled in between her teeth.

Taking a deep breath, I began, “I know I’ve been a total ass to you for a long time, and I just wanted to apologize for that.” Her eyebrows arched high

on her smooth forehead. “I was... working through some stuff, and none of that was your fault. I’m sorry, and I’ll do better, okay?”

Her eyebrows lowered and pinched together before she finally nodded. “Okay.”

I squeezed her hand, and she returned the gesture before we shared a hesitant smile. But Anna’s smile fell away when the pilot announced that we were approaching the airport. In fact, her entire demeanor changed, her eyes squinching closed and her other hand gripping the armrest so tightly her knuckles whitened.

When she pressed her head against the back of the seat and took several shallow, panting breaths, I knew. “You’re afraid of flying,” I stated, and she shook her head.

“No, I’m afraid of landing,” she admitted through gritted teeth.

“You know that’s a vital part of flying, right?” I asked teasingly, and she cracked her eyes open long enough to throw me an evil glare.

“I don’t mind as long as the plane is nose up or level. But for some reason, nose down makes me...” She sucked in a deep breath and then blew it out, shaking her head back and forth before turning to look out of the small window beside her.

Distract her.

“What kind of margaritas did you have yesterday?”

“What?” she snapped in annoyance.

“I know Gram and Bris like that Mexican restaurant inside the mall. Is that where y’all went?”

Her head slowly pivoted to face me. “Yeah. I had... uhhh...” She tried to look back toward the window, but I gently held her chin, keeping her face pointed at me. “I had a pomegranate one and then, ummm, sangria.”

“I like the sangria ones. The fruitier ones are too sweet for me.”

She nodded, and her forehead smoothed out slightly as a flight attendant—not Cara this time—gathered our glasses. “That one was good. I actually had two of them.”

“Wow. Three margaritas? They really did initiate you into their little club, didn’t they?”

A hint of a smile played against her lips. “They’re a lot of fun. I think I could hang with Gram every day.”

“That woman is a hoot. Did she say anything funny?” My distraction technique was working. Anna’s posture had loosened, and the tightness in her face had eased a bit.

“She’s looking for a Latino man in her retirement complex. She has a spreadsheet.”

I couldn’t help the snort of laughter that escaped my lips. “Oh god. I hope Tank doesn’t find out.”

Anna let out a little giggle. “He’s the one who taught her to use spreadsheets.”

That made me laugh even harder. “Is there a frontrunner?”

She nodded vigorously but then stiffened when the distinct sound of the landing gear lowering rumbled beneath us. When she attempted to look out the window, I held her chin and lowered my voice an octave. “Eyes. On. Me. Understood?”

Her scared brown eyes locked onto mine. “Understood.”

“You were telling me if Gram had a frontrunner among her stable of Latino men.”

“Yes, uh. There’s only three of them, and one is gay. Jorge is also out because he has a combover, so Ned has taken the lead.”

“Ned?”

She nodded, and her lips curved up just slightly. “She’s going to keep us updated on her progress with Latino Ned.” Anna swallowed hard as the air pressure tightened around us with the plane’s descent. “I’m sorry. I promise I’m not always a big baby. I’ve literally jumped out of planes with a parachute, so I don’t know why this bothers me so much.”

“I don’t think you’re a baby. You’re the strongest woman I know.” My forehead tilted forward against hers, and I closed my eyes. She smelled so fucking good. “Fears aren’t always rational.”

“Are you afraid of anything?” she whispered, and I nodded. “Will you tell me?”

I didn’t want to, but how could I not, so I muttered the answer under my breath. There was a long silence as she pulled her head back a couple inches, and I slowly opened my eyelids to find her almond-shaped eyes staring back at me.

“Did you say...” She repeated my only real fear, and I nodded in affirmation. She grinned, and I was so happy to see the distress fade from her face that I didn’t even mind sacrificing my own dignity. Much.

“Don’t laugh,” I warned, but her body was already shaking.

“How can you be afraid of... ladybugs?” She was having a full-on gigglefest now, and the corners of my lips made a mirthful journey upward. “They’re, like, the cutest bugs ever.”

“I don’t know. They just creep me the fuck out. I don’t mind them when they’re sitting still, but when they spread those weird ass wings, and you can see their bodies underneath...” I shuddered.

Anna schooled her features, though I could still see the amusement on her face. “Sorry, I laughed, but that was just so unexpected. Ladybugs?” she

asked one more time, and I rolled my eyes.

“I have to tell you one more thing.”

“Let me guess. You’re afraid of butterflies?”

Trying my best not to laugh at her smartass comment, I shook my head.

“No. We’ve landed.”

Her head whipped around to the window to see that we were indeed on the ground, and I could feel the relief dripping from her body. “We landed,” she said in amazement as she turned back to me.

“Yep. You did it.”

Her teeth sunk into that full bottom lip, and she shook her head. “No, *we* did it.” She leaned forward and pressed a sweet kiss against my cheek, and everything inside me warmed. “Thank you, Mario,” she said softly. “You’re a damn good fake husband.”

Anna started to pull away, but I slid my hand up her arm and over her shoulder to cup the back of her neck and keep her close. “You’re welcome, *cariño*,” I rumbled in her ear. “But you forgot to mention handsome.”

She laughed at my cockiness and rubbed her face against mine. “I do like the beard.”

“I’m never shaving again,” I informed her. We remained like that, cheek to cheek, until the plane came to a full stop.

Anna pulled back first, looking a little embarrassed over the moment we’d shared together. Or maybe because she’d enjoyed it as much as I had. Bodies rustled around us as everyone gathered their belongings. I stood, ducking my head so I didn’t bump it, and stroked a finger across her reddened cheek.

“What?” she asked, her fingers tracing the same path.

“Just a little beard burn.” I pulled our backpacks from beneath our seats and hitched them onto my shoulders as I stepped into the aisle to let her go before

me. “For the record, beard burn can be quite pleasant on certain areas of a woman’s body. Or so I’ve heard.” Fucking Hawk talked about it all the time.

Her eyes narrowed as she stood. “You’re pushing your luck, Diaz. And *for the record*,” she said, snatching her bag and hooking it over her back, “I can carry my own backpack. I’m not an invalid.”

Much to my amusement, she stomped down the narrow aisle in front of me, but it didn’t escape my notice that she reached back to hold my hand when we passed the flirty flight attendant.

A wide grin split my face in half. My grumpy, snarky “wife” was back, and I liked her just as much as the sweet, vulnerable one.

CHAPTER 14



DID MARIO JUST TALK about going down on other women in front of me? I mean, I know we're not really married, but I couldn't help but be pissed off as we walked down the concourse.

My eyes fell on a restroom sign, and my bladder decided visiting there was an excellent idea. "I need to..." I said, gesturing toward the opening, and we shifted between the busy travelers to head that direction.

Unable to hold back anymore, I stopped outside the restroom and turned to face Mario. "Look, I know this is a difficult situation for both of us because of... our history, but if this is going to work, we both need to be completely honest about things that bother us. That way nothing is festering beneath the surface and affecting the job we need to do."

He nodded. "I completely agree. Just tell me what I did wrong."

I hesitated, my eyes darting around before resting on his. "What you said on the plane about giving women beard burn... I know this is all fake, but I'd

rather you not say things like that. I don't really give a damn what you do, but we have to think about the mission. What if we were in front of someone in Ella's household? You talking about eating out other women doesn't really scream devoted husband." I patted him on the chest. "Just think about that." Then I turned on my heel and entered the restroom, leaving him standing there with his mouth gaping open.

Inhaling a deep breath through my nose, I exhaled through my mouth as I entered an open stall. When I was done, I washed my hands, inspecting my reflection in the mirror. *Not too bad*. I'd only had time to braid my hair today, and other than a few flyaways, it still looked pretty decent.

When I exited, Mario was standing right beside the door, his eyes a flaming brown. His hand wrapped around my bicep, and he pulled me toward another departure gate. "What are you doing?"

"I'm about to set some shit straight," he growled, leading me to two seats with no one else around. I sat, crossing my arms over my chest. If he was about to argue over what I'd said, bring it on. It was completely rude to brag about his sexual conquests in front of me, and I'd tell him exactly that.

Mario took the seat beside me and twisted his body toward me. "That wasn't what I meant. You completely misunderstood me."

I parroted his words back to him. "For the record, beard burn can be quite pleasant on certain areas of a woman's body. Or so I've heard."

"So I've heard *from Hawk*," he clarified, his eyes narrowed on mine.

Oh. "So you weren't talking about—"

"Personal experience? No. It would be a dick move to say something like that to you." I lifted an eyebrow at him, and he almost smiled. "Okay, I'll admit I've been a dick a lot recently. I own that, but in this particular

instance, I wasn't. I was making an obviously weak attempt at flirting with you."

"But why would you flirt with me?" I blurted, and Mario looked down at his hands before shrugging one massive shoulder and lifting his eyes back to my face.

"A man can't flirt with his wife?"

Oh, again. He was playing his role. My hand reached out and covered one of his clenched fists. "I'm sorry, Mario. I got pissed and jumped to conclusions."

He turned his hand over and linked our fingers together, giving me a sardonic smile. "Trust me, you're not the only one who does that. I just wanted you to know."

His fingers between mine... his palm warming mine... that slight rubbing of his thumb... it all felt a little too good, and I tried to pull away. He didn't let me.

"Anna, I know this may get weird at times, but you're going to have to at least pretend to be comfortable with us being affectionate in front of other people. We're supposed to be newlyweds." He was right, so I squeezed his hand in response. "Good girl," he breathed, and I pressed my thighs together, remembering another time he'd called me a *good girl*. While he was inside my body. Then again later. *You were a very good girl. The best.*

"I-I can do it. I can act professionally. I mean, *unprofessionally* in the name of being a professional. Totally acting of course." Complete babble was spewing from my mouth because his other hand was on my face, his thumb tracing the little divot beneath my lower lip.

"Of course. It won't require too much acting on my part. My father was very loving toward my mom, and I think I'd be the same kind of husband.

Touching my wife whenever I want. Kissing her when the mood strikes me. Are you good with that?”

His eyes, his hand, the deep timbre of his voice... it all combined to put me in some kind of Mario-induced trance, and I nodded. A tiny part of my brain that still held a bit of intelligence said, “In public, that’s fine.”

Full lips turned up at one corner. “I knew you’d be okay with the kissing part after that one you laid on me back at security.”

The trance was broken by a laugh from me, and I swatted his hand away from my face. “I didn’t lay one on you. It was barely a peck.”

“Mmm, much longer than a peck from what I remember.”

Pursing my lips, I lifted my shoulders in the best nonchalant shrug I could muster. “I gave you a simple kiss to preserve the sanctity of your ass. I can’t help it if you liked it so much you came back in for more.”

He didn’t deny it and sunk his teeth into that bottom lip before smirking with his customary cockiness. “Also for the record, no other pussy has crossed my lips since yours.”

What the... There was a long silence where I was like an infant trying to come up with words to convey what I wanted to say, but I was unable to think of anything except, “Liar.”

He stood and looked down at me, his face the picture of impassivity. “Think what you want, Anna, but it doesn’t make it less true.” He held out his hand and pulled me to my feet, holding on until I was completely steady, which took a few seconds longer than usual, thanks to that little bomb he’d just dropped on me.

He cracked a small smile and asked, “So I can do what I want to you in public?”

“Within reason,” I replied.

“What I call reasonable and what you call reasonable may be two totally different things, so maybe we should set some ground rules.”

“Can we talk about it in the car or when we get there? We really need to get our baggage.” *And also, I need to come up with some firm ground rules that I can live with.*

As we continued on toward the baggage area, my mind flicked through scenarios, trying to come up with affectionate husband/wife behavior that was relatively tame. Let’s see...

Okay, number one. Holding hands. I could totally do that. In fact, I liked the way Mario’s hand felt in mine right now as we walked.

Number two. Kissing. But only on the cheek or the head. Pretty sure I could deal with that.

Number three. Touching. Hands above the waist only. That was reasonable, right?

Number four.

Before I could come up with anything else, Mario broke through my thoughts. “I have a ground rule of my own.”

“Oh, um, okay.”

“I don’t want you to get all pissy every time I try to help you. Like carrying your bag for you.” I bristled, and he tilted his head toward me. “See? Like that. I don’t offer because I think you’re not capable of carrying your own bag. Did you know that a below-the-knee amputee uses thirty percent more energy walking with their prosthetic than the average person walking on both legs?”

I tugged on his hand, and we came to a halt in the middle of the corridor as other harried passengers weaved around us. “Yes, I did know that. I learned it

on day one of Amputee 101 class.” He cracked a grin, and I shook my head in a bit of shock. “How did *you* know that?”

“I’ve been researching. Since we’ll be living together, I thought I should find out everything I could about your situation.” His cheeks pinkened slightly, and I kind of adored him right that second. “I don’t want to do anything dumb, so just let me know if there’s something I’m not doing right or if there’s something I could do to make things easier for you. That’s all I was trying to do when I carried your backpack for you earlier.”

I took a deep breath and then blew a raspberry as we entered the baggage area. “Okay, I apologize for being bitchy about it. It’s hard for me to ask for help, which a lot of amputees struggle with.”

“Did they cover that in Amputee 102?” he asked as we spotted our carousel, which was already revolving around, laden with suitcases and various other luggage.

“Yep. I failed the ‘ask for help when you need it’ portion of the exam and had to retake it,” I teased. “Is this where the head of security is meeting us?”

“Uh, near that door, I think,” he said, tipping his head to the right side of the room. “His name is James Williams, right?”

I bobbed my head up and down. “Claire said he would have a sign.”

Mario stepped to the edge of the carousel. “There are a couple of our bags. I’m going to grab yours too, so don’t yell at me.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, giving him a snappy salute. “I’ll get a cart while you use those muscles.”

“Glad you noticed them, my little pop tart,” he threw over his shoulder as he hefted one of the cases like it was a sack of feathers.

I shook my head and giggled. *Pop tart? Guess it’s better than rosebud.*

Once we were loaded, Mario pushed the cart as we searched the line of

people holding signs. “There,” he said, and I followed his gaze to the man holding an iPad that read DIAZ in block letters.

I lifted my eyes to the suited man’s face and froze. I recognized that face. Very well, in fact.

Dropping the sign to his side, the man grinned and mouthed, “Taz.”

My feet took a tentative step forward as I tried to recover from the surprise, my mouth releasing his name in the form of a question.

“Joe?”

CHAPTER 15



JOE? WHO THE FUCK is Joe? And why is he jogging toward my pretend wife, grinning like the happiest asshole in the world?

Anna was hesitant at first, almost as if she'd seen a ghost, but now she was laughing as "Joe" picked her up and twirled her in a circle. I didn't like this. Not. At. All.

He finally set her down but didn't let go of her. I was liking him less and less with every passing second.

"Wh-what are you doing here, Joe? I thought someone named James was picking us up."

The man was still smiling and looking down at Anna with an expression that irritated the hell out of me. "James Joseph Williams, remember? I go by Joe because that was Aunt Jodi's husband that died—"

"Right before you were born," Anna finished. "That's right. I can't believe you're here."

That makes two of us, babe. I didn't know this prick, but Anna certainly seemed to. I'd had about enough of this happy little reunion and stepped forward. "I'm Mario Diaz," I said, extending my arm, even though I didn't really want to shake his hand. I just wanted that hand *off* Anna's waist.

Joe turned, looping his left arm around Anna's shoulders as he vigorously shook my hand with his right. "Mario! Nice to meet you, dude. So you're on assignment with my girl, huh?"

She subtly cringed, and I had a vision of snapping that arm right in two. *Your girl? I don't think so, Joe.*

I gently pulled Anna from his grasp and toward me while removing my wallet from my back pocket. "Honey, why don't you get Joe a tip for helping us with the bags," I said, handing her my billfold and relegating the man to mere baggage handler.

His cheery-ass smile faded a bit, and a sense of victory rushed through my veins. "No, no tip necessary. Ella compensates us quite well." He turned back to my wife. Pretend wife. Whatever. "You just relax, dollface. The men will get the luggage handled."

Miss Independent didn't like that at all, and I stepped in, taking my wallet back and handing her my backpack. "Anna is perfectly capable of doing anything she wants," I commented, and she smiled gratefully up at me. "Just stick these in the backseat, and we'll put the others in the trunk. Unless you want to help us."

Joe was watching our exchange with eyes so narrow, you could barely see the blue of his irises. I kissed her forehead and let my hand slide down her arm to give her hand a reassuring squeeze, which she returned, letting me know I'd gotten it right.

A black stretch limo was idling at the curb—because of course Ella Ervin

would send a limousine—and Joe and I quickly loaded the suitcases in silence as Anna climbed in the back with our packs. When we approached the back door, he opened it and tipped his head toward the front.

“Mario, why don’t you sit up front with Arnold? Taz and I have a lot of catching up to do.”

Not just no, but *fuck no*.

“It’s *Anna*, and no thanks. I prefer to sit back here with my wife.”

“Oh, that’s right. It’s going to take some getting used to because I’ve known her as Taz for *so many years*. And she’s your *fake* wife, right? Just for the assignment?”

This guy is pushing his fucking luck, I thought as I slid into the seat beside Anna, pressing my body tightly to hers and leaving not even an inch for *Joe* to weasel in between.

“Actually, Mario and I are dating,” Anna blurted out, her eyes holding a slice of panic when they darted toward mine as Joe took the seat across from us.

“That’s right,” I said smoothly, taking her hand and twining my fingers with hers. “How long has it been, sweetheart?” I was letting her take the lead on this little story she was fabricating since I had no idea what was going on. It was obvious she and Joe had some kind of dynamic going on that I was unaware of.

Joe seemed displeased but fuck him with a rusty pipe.

“Almost a year now,” she said, and her left eye twitched with the fib, but he didn’t seem to notice. He was too busy gnawing the inside of his cheek in annoyance.

Good. Let’s see if I can push his buttons a little more.

“Maybe Joe can recommend a nice place for us to celebrate our anniversary

next month,” I said, shifting my eyes from Anna to the other man. “Somewhere nice and romantic.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw, and he shook his head. “I don’t really know of anywhere like that.”

“Ah, not the romantic type, huh? Too bad.” I had more smartass shit to say, but stopped when Anna nudged my leg in warning.

“Ta— uh, Anna,” Joe started, “how are your brothers doing? Roca must be done with high school by now, right?”

“Just graduated,” she said proudly. “He’s going to the University of Colorado for undergrad, and then he wants to go to law school.”

Shit. I didn’t even know she had a younger brother. As I listened to Joe and Anna talk about her family, I learned that she actually had two older and two younger brothers, and I felt more and more like an interloper.

You should have made more of an effort to get to know her, you jerk. Then maybe you wouldn’t feel like a damn third wheel here.

Well I would rectify that as soon as possible because, honestly, I was feeling a little jealous of the connection Joe had with Anna. I wanted that. I wanted to know everything about her.

Twenty-five minutes later, we pulled up to a set of white iron gates in front of what could only be described as a compound. As we drove down the palm tree-lined drive, I saw a huge white beach mansion as the centerpiece with two slightly smaller houses on either side. Several small bungalows dotted the wooded area to the right.

“Wow,” Anna said, her sharp eyes taking in everything at once.

“Pretty fancy, huh?” Joe asked. “The mansion is Ella’s, of course. The big pink three-story to the right is her sister’s home, and the white one to the left is her dad’s.”

“The pink kinda throws the whole visual out of whack,” Anna noted. “Everything else is white.”

“Yeah, well. What Emily wants, Emily gets. And Ella’s sister wanted a pink house, so there ya go.”

“Emily and Ella are close?”

Joe nodded his dark-blond head. “Uh-huh. Emily is a backup singer for Ella, so she’s on the road with her when she travels. Not that she’s been traveling much since what happened in Dallas. Anyway, Ella takes really good care of her sister. Her dad too.”

The limo pulled up to the main house. “Her dad used to be her manager, right?” I asked, remembering that from the background information I had memorized.

“Until two years ago when her career really started to blow up,” Anna supplied. “She had to get someone with more experience in the industry. The mom passed away ten years ago, so Enoch raised his daughters pretty much by himself.”

“Wow, you two really did your homework,” Joe said, reaching for the door handle. “Ella wanted to personally welcome you both, and then I’ll take you to your bungalow.”

We climbed the wide, white stone steps, and the door whipped open to reveal Ella Ervin in all her glory. The woman radiated energy from every cell, which was one of the reasons she was so freaking popular. The other, of course, was the fact that she had a voice sent down straight from heaven.

“Mario! Anna!” Even squealing our names sounded like a song from her mouth. She pulled us into a group hug before ushering us into her palatial home. Everything was beautiful but completely comfortable. No stuffy furnishings or extravagant chandeliers. The luxurious architecture spoke for

itself, but Ella obviously chose to surround herself with coziness, as evidenced by the overstuffed couch and two mismatched chairs in the living room off to the right. The light fixtures were lovely but subtle, and the hardwood floors gave off a warm, inviting vibe.

The only over-the-top indulgence was visible through the floor-to-ceiling windows at the back of the house. Ella's pool area would have been right at home at a luxury resort on the Riviera.

"Wow, I'm definitely giving this place five stars on Yelp!" Anna commented, making us all laugh.

"I was just in the pool," Ella said, waving us toward the biggest French doors I'd ever seen. She was wearing a thigh-length teal cover-up made of lace that gave a peek of her matching bikini beneath. "I had Kyle whip up some welcome cocktails."

She preceded us through the doors onto a coral stone patio with a bar setup to the left and gestured for us to sit at the white wrought iron table topped with a sunny yellow umbrella.

"Hey, Kyle. This is Mario and Anna Diaz. Anna will be my PA while Claudia is on maternity leave, and Mario will work with the security team. Guys, this is Kyle, bartender extraordinaire."

The man laughed, looking like a life-sized version of a surfer Ken doll with his perfect teeth and longish blond hair. Reminded me a little of Bode. "Nice to meet you both," he said, giving us a friendly wave from behind the gray stone bar.

We greeted him, and then our host spoke up again. "Just leave the pitcher, Kyle, and you can get home to your daughter."

"Thank you, Ella," he said with a grateful nod that conveyed his respect for his boss. Ella was a mega-superstar and could have rightfully insisted that her

staff call her Miss Ervin, but I like that she went simply by Ella in her home.

Kyle walked over with a tray laden with short crystal glasses filled with a barely-there-pink liquid and garnished with a lemon twist and a cherry. I wasn't much for frou frou drinks, but I took a sip to be polite. At the first taste, I almost groaned as the bubbles tingled against my tongue, the taste light and refreshing.

The bartender wiped down his area, and after a goodbye, he disappeared into the house. Ella leaned forward, resting her arms on the tabletop. "I don't want to talk business today since you just arrived, but I wanted you both to know how happy I am that you're here." Her eyes flitted to my fake wife, and she winked. "Even though Anna crash-tackled me last time I saw her."

Anna had indeed shoved Ella to the ground and covered her with her own body during the attempt on the singer's life a year and a half ago. Thankfully she was not seriously injured, sustaining only a couple scrapes and bruises.

"Yeah, sorry about that," Anna said, cringing before taking a drink. "I was pursuing a side career as a linebacker."

Ella snickered before her face turned solemn. "I'm really scared." She traced a drop of condensation that was trailing down the outside of her glass, her eyes following the movement. "I just want to live my life and pursue my career, and I didn't know what else to do, so I called Beau Atwood to see if DFW Security Force would be willing to take my case." Her big blue eyes raised to mine, and I could see the fear pulsing there.

"We're happy to help, Ella. I think I can speak for Anna and myself when I say that we respect you, and all we want is for you to be safe and happy." Anna nodded her agreement.

"Thank you," she said, smiling gratefully at both of us. "I feel like I'm living in a mystery novel with two undercover agents staying on my property."

Joe knows who you are, of course, as does my PA, Claudia, because she met you both in Dallas. Everyone else thinks you're both new employees."

"Including your family?" Anna clarified, and the singer nodded her head.

"I completely trust my family. I know they would never hurt me, but I did exactly as Mister Atwood instructed and didn't tell anyone else."

"Good, we will do our absolute best to get to the bottom of this."

"Thank you. I truly appreciate you both taking time out of your busy lives to come here. I know it's probably a pain in the ass. Now Anna, you'll start working with me in the morning. Claudia has a week to train you before she starts on her maternity leave."

"Sounds good."

She turned to me with a smile. "And Mario, you'll be working with Joe since he's our head of security." *Yay. And I mean that with as much sarcasm as humanly possible.* "He'll put you on the schedule."

Joe's lips curled upward, and I didn't like the way he was looking at me at all. Like he was up to something. *Is it possible he's the mole?*

"Don't worry about a thing, Mario. I've got you handled," he said, smugness oozing from his every pore.

"I can't wait to get to work with you," I returned with a feral smile. *So I can keep my fucking eyes on you,* I told him with my stare, which he returned.

Oblivious to the ocular battle we had going on, Ella stood. "Alrighty, I'll just show Anna the office so she'll know where to go tomorrow. Joe, if you could show Mario the security office, that would be great."

Ella and Anna headed to the first floor office as Joe directed me to the fourth floor by way of the stairs. "There's also an elevator if you can't handle climbing that many stairs," he said mildly, though I caught his underlying jab.

He was baiting me, but I kept my cool and hummed noncommittally. “Nice setup,” I said when we entered a large room filled with monitors showing almost every square inch of the Ervin compound.

“We have to share the space with maintenance,” he informed me, pointing to a long panel covered with labeled buttons and knobs. “No one lives on this floor except for me and Manish, the head maintenance guy. We each have our own apartments up here. The rest of the fourth floor is reserved for storage.”

Stuffing my hands in my pockets, I rocked back on my heels. “I’m assuming all security personnel are armed?”

He nodded. “Yes, do I need to issue you a weapon?”

“No, I’m all good. I brought plenty.”

“That’s something else I wanted to talk to you about. I’ll need you to pass a weapons test before I can allow you to work as part of my security team. To make sure you’re proficient with a rifle and a pistol.”

Is he fucking serious? Is he not aware that I was a sharpshooter? Shoulda done your homework on me, Joe.

“Of course,” I said, effectively smothering my smirk.

“Meet me out front at nine in the morning, and we’ll go to the shooting range. If you’re acceptable, you can start your first shift tomorrow.”

Oh I can promise I’ll be more than acceptable, son.

“I look forward to it. What time will my shift be?”

His smug little smile was back. “You’ll be on the night shift. Eight in the evening till four in the morning.” *Ah, so this is his game. Make me work nights while Anna works days.* He confirmed it with his next words. “If you’re worried about Anna being alone, I’ll make sure to stop by and check on her while you’re working.”

If my glare had been made of fire, he would have been completely incinerated within seconds. Just a pile of embers and ashes on the pristine tiled floor. *Stay calm, Woody. Don't take the bait.*

“Anna is certainly capable of taking care of herself. She’s survived more than either of us can probably imagine.”

That wiped the smug-ass look right from Joe’s face. “Yeah, she has,” he said, looking properly chastened as he turned and walked toward a black metal door. “Roof access is through here. That’s probably where Preston is.”

As if on cue, the door swung open, and a young guy with dark-brown hair walked in, stuffing a pack of cigarettes into the breast pocket of his white button down. “Hey! You must be the new guy.” He held out his hand, and I shook it. “I’m Preston Brownlee.”

“Mario Diaz. Nice to meet you.”

Joe’s phone buzzed, and he cut our meet and greet short. “Ella is done showing Anna the office. Let’s head back down.”

As Arnold drove us down a narrow road to the first bungalow, a white one-story with timber posts and slate gray trim, Joe reached over and patted Anna on the knee.

“I spoke with Ella about you, and she had handicap accessible bars installed in the shower.”

My teeth grinded together until I was concerned I would only be left with nubs by the time the short drive was over.

Anna gave him a tight smile. “That was thoughtful. Thank you.”

“Unless you want me to come and help you shower like I used to,” he added. His tone was casual, but his gaze flickered to me to see my reaction. He didn’t even notice how uncomfortable he made Anna as she squirmed in her seat, her face pinched.

Motherfucker wants a reaction? He's about to get one.

“Joe, have you ever considered what your life would be like if you could only drink through a straw for the rest of eternity?” My voice was low... dark... dangerous, and the other man’s eyes widened in surprise. And fear, I was happy to see.

He should be afraid. Even without my extra two inches in height and probably thirty pounds of muscle, at this moment, I could take him down like a tiger pouncing on a lame deer. With ease.

Anna elbowed me and lifted her chin. “I’m perfectly able to shower by myself, Joe. I’ve been doing it for five years now.”

The timeline started clicking into place in my mind like a jigsaw puzzle. Anna and Joe had been together around the time she was injured, if I wasn’t mistaken. Was he the one who’d made her feel insecure about her leg? Because someone damn sure had. She’d cried about it that night we were together, and my dislike for him burned into a thick fury that threatened to choke me.

The tension was still simmering in the vehicle when Arnold pulled right up to the short walkway leading to the front door.

“It seems we’re here,” Anna said quietly, releasing the pressure pot that was threatening to explode.

Joe hopped out of the car first and walked swiftly to the front door to unlock it as Anna and I exited the limousine. He turned around at Anna’s sharp squeal when I swept her legs from beneath her and caught her in my arms.

“What are you doing?” she laughed, the previous tightness around her eyes completely gone now.

“Carrying my bride over the threshold,” I informed her, strolling easily with

her against my chest. “For Arnold’s benefit,” I whispered in her ear as I bounded up the steps. “To protect our cover and the mission.”

“Ah, yes. The mission,” she whispered back, her lifted eyebrows telling me she knew exactly what I was doing.

Angling our bodies, I entered the living room of the pretty house but didn’t set her down. Instead, I tilted my head down and spoke against her lips. “Welcome home, baby.” Then I kissed her, and it was far from chaste. As my tongue invaded her warm mouth, her arms wrapped tightly around my neck, and she responded—*oh boy, did she ever respond*—her tongue sweeping playfully against my own.

She tasted like fruit and bubbles, and I lost myself in the pure decadence of her sweetness, slanting my head to take and taste her more deeply.

Yes, this kiss had started out as me marking my territory. If I were a dog, I would have peed on her leg before humping it. But it rapidly turned into much more, and I put everything into each sweep of my tongue. Apologies. Regret. Affection. Need.

So much fucking need. My cock was at full mast, saluting the one he’d been missing for almost a year.

I’m not sure how long the kiss lasted—*not fucking long enough*—but we broke apart a few seconds after I heard a grumbled, “Nine o’clock sharp, Diaz,” and then the sharp slam of the front door.

I finally lowered Anna to the floor, holding her waist until she was steady, which, much to my delight, took several seconds. *She was as affected as I was.*

“Was that really necessary?” she asked, taking a step back from me.

“Of course,” I confirmed. “It was for—”

“Let me guess. The mission?”

I nodded vigorously, a smile creeping across my kiss-swollen lips as I lied my ass off.

“Yep. It’s all for the mission, *cariño*.”

CHAPTER 16



SWEET BABY JESUS!

I was having trouble finding my land legs, and it had nothing to do with balancing on one good leg and one prosthetic. No. It all had to do with that kiss.

That delicious, sumptuous, hot, sweet, dirty, fantastic, sexy kiss that had a fine sheen of sweat coating my forehead. And my chest. And beneath my boobs, though, to be honest, that might be from the heat outside the house. Or the heat literally radiating from the man who had just kissed the stuffing out of me.

Words came from my mouth, and I was proud that they actually made sense because my mind went kinda goofy when I stared at Mario's pink lips peeking out from behind that dark beard. Thoughts of that soft roughness against my lady bits had them dripping in my panties, and I knew for sure not a single droplet of that wetness was sweat.

“Yep. It’s all for the mission, *cariño*.” That voice. Agghhh! Why was it so deep, and did he really have to have a hint of a Spanish accent that curled sexily around each word? Seriously. Not fucking fair.

My backward step to put space between us did nothing to lessen his appeal. It only gave me a better view of all of him. Shoulders like Atlas, arms that threatened the integrity of the fabric attempting to contain them, and a chest so wide I had to tick my eyes back and forth to take it all in. Unfortunately—or maybe *fortunately*, depending on your perspective—that view also included a large, hard bulge behind the zipper of his jeans.

He liked the kiss too. And I liked that he liked it, damn me all to hell.

Boundaries, Tazanna Birdsong. Boun-da-ries, I thought, spreading the syllables out in my head, as if that would make the word more effective.

“Well, that can’t happen again. I know you were trying to prove a point to Joe, but that’s one of my ground rules. No tongue.” My voice sounded strong. Confident. Which was a miracle because my coochy was in full pout mode, and she may be staging a revolution at any moment.

“No tongue?” he clarified, and I nodded with what I hoped looked like conviction.

“If we’re in front of other people, you can give me a kiss on the head or the cheek.”

Mario’s mouth edged up on one side, making him even more sexy. “That’s not how I would kiss my wife, Anna.”

Lucky bitch, I almost said but stopped myself.

Crap, play it cool, sister. Cooooool as a cucumber.

“We’re both having to do a lot of acting here, so just *pretend* like that’s how you would kiss your wife.”

“We’re also not in the fifth grade,” he pointed out. “I’ll concede the tongue

thing, but is there some reason I can't give you a little kiss on the lips? It just seems more realistic for newlyweds, don't you think?" His gaze dipped to my lips, and his grin widened a little, his self-assuredness making my nipples want to freaking detonate. "Unless you're scared you'll like it too much."

Attempting to get my potentially exploding nipples under control, I scoffed as convincingly as possible. "Pssh, that's not it at all. I was just... thinking of you. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable or whatever."

"Don't worry about me. I'm good with pretty much anything."

If my vagina had a hand, she would be waving it in the air, screaming, "Me too!" I pinched my legs together to choke the bitch out.

"Okay then, I'm okay with lips. Perfectly okay." *Why am I saying okay so much? I sound like an illiterate lunatic.*

"You sure? Because I won't do anything you don't want. I just think it would be easier if I could act the way I would normally act in a certain situation."

"Yep, it's okay." *Okay, again? Say some different words before he thinks you're having a stroke and calls an ambulance.* "That's settled then. Tongueless lip kisses for the win!" I said it with gusto, and *could I be any more awkward? At least I didn't say that word again.*

Amusement settled across his face, and he tugged my braid playfully and thankfully changed the subject. "Why don't we bring our bags in?" As we hauled the suitcases in from the front porch where Arnold and Joe had apparently left them, Mario casually asked, "So you know Joe, huh?" Maybe a little *too* casually.

Deciding to put it all out there, I dragged my small suitcase into the living room and closed the door before settling my butt against the arm of the couch. "Yes, we used to date."

Mario nodded, fidgeting with the handle of his black suitcase, sliding it up and down. Up and down. He raised his eyes to mine, and something fierce and angry flashed there, but something else was there too. Something sweet and protective.

“Did he break up with you because of your accident?”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I pushed out a long breath. “No. It factored into our breakup, but I’m the one who ended it.” I shook my head dismissively. “It’s a complicated story.”

He sat on the soft ceil-blue couch and patted the space beside him. “I think I can keep up.”

I slid off the arm of the couch and snuggled my rear end into the comfort of the cushion, my eyes finding a ring-shaped mark on the coffee table to stare at.

“We’d been together for almost a year when I had my accident. Joe flew over to be with me while Mom applied for an emergency passport since she didn’t have one. He never left my side until she got there. Then they switched out staying nights with me so I would never be alone.”

My fingers picked at the frayed fabric surrounding the hole in my jeans. “I didn’t want to be alone at all just then. Right after the surgery, it was...” I rolled my eyes upward and blinked rapidly. *Keep your shit together, Birdsong.* Clearing my throat, I continued. “It was difficult, to say the least. I was like a big baby, couldn’t do anything for myself. I felt fucking useless.” The bitterness in my voice—and in my heart—rang through every word.

Something tightened against my left hand, and I realized Mario’s warm fingers were wrapped around my palm though I didn’t even remember him taking it. “You were injured, Taz,” he said softly, reverting back to my real

name, which was somehow comforting. “You had a major injury, and you were recovering. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“*Logically* I knew that, but I didn’t want to be logical just then. I wanted to be... whole.” My eyes darted to Mario’s handsome face, but there was no judgment there. No look that told me my feelings were invalid, and I appreciated that. “Anyway, when I got back to the States, Joe insisted I move in with him. He’d inherited his aunt’s house when she died, and it was handicapped accessible. Had a wheelchair ramp and everything. My brother Chayton argued at first because he thought he should be the one to take care of me, but he finally realized it was the best solution.”

“How long were you in a wheelchair?”

“A few months. It takes a while to heal before you can be fitted with a prosthetic,” I explained. “When I got home, I was surrounded by people all the time. My parents. My brothers. Joe’s family. Members of my tribe. Someone was always there, bringing a meal or stopping by for a visit. I was so grateful, I really was, but I also felt stifled, you know?”

Mario’s rough thumb rubbed back and forth across my knuckles. “I can imagine.”

“In the next few months, Joe and I grew apart. I know that sounds weird to say since we were together all the time and he did everything for me, but we’d lost our relationship somewhere along the way. We were now caretaker and patient instead of boyfriend and girlfriend.”

The memories of that were painful. The *no touching* except in a clinical way. We didn’t even sleep in the same bed because Joe was afraid he would accidentally bump up against my limb.

“I tried to get back what we’d had, to be a real couple again, but... well... Joe kind of had a mental block. That’s what the therapist at the VA said

anyway. He said it really had nothing to do with me physically; Joe just had trouble thinking about me in that way. I understood, but it still didn't make me feel any better about myself."

Mario released my hand and slid his arm around my shoulders, tugging gently until I leaned into his space, my cheek against his chest. He felt warm and solid, and the silent gesture was so sweet, tears welled in my eyes. Clamping them shut, I concentrated on breathing, and the subtle, spicy scent of Mario's cologne calmed my nerves in an instant.

"Long story short, I ended things after about a year. I didn't think it was fair to Joe to keep taking care of me when it became obvious that we couldn't find our connection again. He argued, but it was the right thing to do. I didn't want him to take the fall and be known as the mean guy who dumped his amputee girlfriend, so I broke up with him and moved out."

Two thick fingers lifted my chin until my eyes met Mario's. "I appreciate that Joe took care of you like he did. That must have been hard for him, and maybe now I don't hate him quite as much as I thought I did, dammit." We shared a smile, and then Mario's expression turned serious as his brown eyes flashed. "But you deserved more, Anna. You are vibrant and funny and so goddamned beautiful, and you deserved more. You feel me?"

Holy shit. My insides are officially mush.

Held spellbound by the raw emotion in Mario's eyes, I nodded. "I feel you." There was something going on here, and I wasn't sure I was ready to deal with that, so I broke the intense connection and sat up, averting my eyes to the skin of my knee exposed by the hole there. "Can we talk about something else for a little bit?"

"Of course," he said easily, kicking off his shoes and stretching his long legs out beneath the coffee table. "My sisters are complete bullies."

A snort escaped my throat at his off-the-wall statement, and I turned to him. “How many siblings do you have?”

“Two older sisters and a younger brother. He’s awesome, but the girls are mean as hell. Very bossy.”

“Poor little Mario,” I cooed, rubbing my hand mockingly up and down his arm. His extremely hard, chiseled arm.

“Don’t make fun of me, Anna. You have no idea the things they did to me. They made me wear,” he paused dramatically before continuing in a whispered hiss, “makeup.”

I hooted out a laugh. “Recently?”

His eyes rolled in my direction. “No, not recently, goofball. I was, like, four, I think. But there are pictures. I’m constantly traumatized when I think about it.”

“I’m going to need your sisters’ phone numbers immediately,” I informed him. “I have to see this.”

He exhaled on a long sigh and pulled out his phone, scrolling through what looked like a group text until he came to a picture. Clicking on it, he handed the phone over to me. “There you go. Are you happy now?”

“Extremely,” I said, giggling as I studied the photo of a chubby-faced little boy wearing a shit-ton of makeup. “That hooker-red lipstick clashes spectacularly with your hot-pink scarf.”

“I know, right?” he said indignantly. “The least they could have done was make sure I matched. Oh, and take note of the eyebrows. The little witches shaved mine off and drew that shit over my eyes. Had me looking like a goddamn *chola*.”

I wasn’t sure what a *chola* was, but the word seemed to fit what I was seeing. Thin, high-arched eyebrows had been drawn on above the same eyes

I'd stared into a few minutes ago. Except the eyes in the photo had mile-long fake lashes.

"This particular shade of blush is interesting," I said, tilting my head to the side.

"Yeah, I think the orange really brings out my eyes. Plus, it matches the feathers in the hat."

"Oh! I just noticed the hat with everything else you had going on," I said, circling my pointer finger over the hilarious pic. "It's quite fetching."

He shot me a faux glare. "Are you done yet?"

"Not really. I haven't even commented on your earrings. Did your mom take you to Claire's to get your ears pierced?"

"No, smartass. They were clip-ons."

A dull ache throbbled through my leg, and I reached down to rub at it after setting his phone on the couch. "Would it bother you if I take this off for a little while?"

"Jesus, Anna. Of course not. This is our home for the foreseeable future, so do whatever makes you comfortable."

"It always feels good to take it off for a while. Kinda like stripping off my bra as soon as I get home." I winced when I realized what I'd said. "Sorry. TMI."

His eyes rolled upward as I unhooked my prosthetic. "Doesn't bother me. I have sisters, remember? As soon as they'd get home from school, bras were flying all over the house."

A loud laugh escaped my lips. "I thought you only had two sisters. How many bras could they possibly wear at one time?"

"Approximately a thousand. That's what it seemed like to my tender little eyes anyway."

When I attempted to prop my legs on the coffee table, my right one came up a few inches short, and Mario instantly slid the wooden table toward the couch so I could reach. “Better?” he asked as I slumped back and nodded.

“Much,” I said quietly, touched that he had noticed and fixed the problem without me even asking. “Thank you.”

“No problemo. You want anything to eat or drink?”

My stomach took that opportunity to growl, and I grinned and pointed at it. “Survey says, yes. Ella said she had the chef leave some sandwiches in the fridge.”

“Chef, huh? Aren’t we the fancy couple?” he asked in a posh voice before rising from the couch and heading to the kitchen. There was a cutout between that room and living room so I could see him as he opened the refrigerator and rustled around before pulling out a tray of food that would feed a platoon. I snatched up his phone and sent the photo of him to myself via text before tossing it back on the couch just as he walked back into the living room.

“Lord, Ella’s chef completely overestimated my gastric capacity,” I commented when he set the platter down on the white wooden surface in front of me.

“I’m sure we can at least put a dent in it,” he said, turning back to the kitchen. “Let me get us some drinks.”

“Sorry, I should have waited to de-leg so I could help you.”

His low guffaw was warm and sexy. “De-leg? Seriously?” He returned a moment later with two glass bottles of sparkling water and a sheaf of papers with two pens hooked at the edge.

“What’s that?” I asked, gesturing to the light-pink papers.

His finger tapped the sticky note on top. “It’s apparently a food preference survey. Someone named Guillermo wants us to fill it out.”

“Hmmm, let’s eat first.”

We each grabbed a sandwich and a packet of what appeared to be homemade kettle chips and dug in. “Oh my god,” Mario said around a mouthful of bread and meat. “This is amazing.”

“Mine too,” I said nodding as I chewed. “What is yours? Mine seems to be ham with some kind of sweet and spicy jam on it.”

Mario peered at my sandwich. “That does look good. Can I taste?”

Holding it up, I watched his full lips as his teeth sank through the layers, and he moaned. Hell, I almost moaned in response to that deep, sultry sound.

“I think that’s even better than mine.”

“Let me taste yours, and I might be willing to switch.”

Mario held his sandwich to my lips, and I took a bite, tasting smoked turkey and a sharp cheese. “Mmhmm, switcheroo,” I said with a nod after swallowing.

We exchanged, and the sharing of food felt somehow intimate, though I didn’t find it at all unpleasant. When we were done, I picked up the papers and flipped through them before handing him a copy. “Holy shit. This is... comprehensive.”

He grinned cheekily. “How about we have some fun with this?”

I agreed with a laugh and printed my name across the top of the form, my heart stuttering a little at seeing *Anna Diaz* in my neat script.

Good grief! Get yourself together, woman. This isn’t junior high where you’re writing your crush’s last name on the front of your social studies notebook.

We giggled together as we tried to come up with more and more outlandish foods, including grilled lobster tails and Beluga caviar. The only questions

we answered truthfully were the ones regarding food allergies, which neither of us had.

“You don’t think they’re really going to take this seriously, right? We’ll probably just eat whatever the chef prepares for the main house.”

“Nah. No way. In fact, we can just cook here like an old married couple most of the time.” He flipped to the last page. “Wine preferences? You know anything about wine?”

“Nope. I’m *stumped*,” I said, doing a *ta da!* hand toward my leg.

“Ah. Stumped. I get it,” he said with an appreciative bob of his head. “You and your amputee jokes.”

“That started when I moved in with Chayton. That’s where I went after I moved out of Joe’s house. I wasn’t quite ready to live by myself because I wasn’t progressing in my physical therapy like the doctors wanted. To be honest, it was probably because I wasn’t very motivated. After an injury like that, you go through stages, and I was in my pity party era. You know, the *why-didn’t-God-just-take-all-of-me* phase.”

At the sound of Mario’s sharp intake of breath, I turned to look at him, seeing the shock registered on his face.

“I wasn’t suicidal or anything,” I assured him, “but I guarantee, almost every amputee has had a similar thought at some point.”

“I understand, but I still don’t like hearing you talk like that.” He rubbed a spot over his chest, his face scrunched up in a grimace.

“Yeah, my brother didn’t either. My parents wanted me to live with them, but I chose Chayton because he’d always babied me, and I thought that’s what I needed.” A smirk crawled across my lips. “Boy, was I sorely mistaken. My brother was a fucking ballbreaker when it came to my therapy.

He knew me better than anyone, and he knew exactly what I needed to get better.”

“You needed to be pushed.”

My head bobbed up and down. “Exactly. He was always forcing me out of the house, out into society. I needed that too because I was becoming too complacent hiding at home.” I took a long swig of my water before continuing. “Anyway, one night, Chay was insisting that we go to a concert. Journey was coming to Denver, and we both liked all their songs, so he said he was searching for tickets. I asked him if he was looking on StubHub because that was the premiere site to buy tickets for amputees.”

Mario mouthed the word *stub*, paused, and then covered his face with one large hand when it hit him. I could see his smile peeking out as he shook his head. “Good lord, Anna. You’re something else.”

I chuckled at the memory. “I didn’t mean to say it. It just kinda popped out. We both stared at each other for a long minute, and then we busted out laughing. Like, almost peeing our pants laughter. I think that was the first time I realized that my injury didn’t have to define who I was. The old, smartass Taz was still inside here, and I just had to set her free.” I tapped the spot over my chest with two fingertips.

“Well she’s arrived in full force now,” he said, showing me a flash of white teeth in his smile. I stifled a yawn, and Mario patted my shoulder. “It’s been a long day. Why don’t we get ready for bed?”

“Shit. We haven’t even unpacked.”

“Let’s just get out what we need for tonight and tomorrow. We can worry about the rest later.”

Yes, but first I need to get through tonight.

CHAPTER 17



AFTER I'D STRAPPED MY leg back on and we'd dragged the suitcases to the bedroom, we stood side by side, staring at the bed. It was king-sized and covered with a gorgeous red comforter and sheets. It was the sexiest bed I'd ever seen and *holy freaking snotballs!*

What the hell had I been thinking? There was no way I could sleep in *that* bed with *this* man.

Yes, you can. You can do it. You can do it. You can do it.

“You realize you’re saying that out loud, don’t you?” Mario asked, amusement coating his words.

My eyeballs slipped up toward him, and I flashed the most awkward smile in the history of lips. “No I’m not. You must be tired and imagining things.”

His gaze was fully on me, but mine was back on that sumptuous bed. “Anna, I can sleep on the couch if this makes you uncomfortable.”

My eyes flitted to him. To the bed. To him. And back to the bed.

Stop being a baby, Tazanna. You're a grown-ass woman who can control herself. Just because you're in a bed with a big, sexy hunk, that doesn't mean you're going to automatically do the horizontal hokey-pokey with him.

I jerked my head toward the big, sexy hunk, and it felt like my eyes were bulging out of their sockets. "I didn't say that last part out loud, did I?"

"Didn't hear a thing," he assured me, his full lips curved up at the corners.

"Okay, good. Because it's rude to listen to another person's private thoughts." *Good grief, I need professional psychiatric care.*

"I agree," he said, stroking a gentle hand from my shoulder to my elbow. "I'll see if there are some blankets and pillows in the closet."

Before he could pivot away, my head was shaking back and forth. Mario had had just as long a day as me, and it wasn't fair to make him sleep on a couch that was barely big enough to hold him.

Making my voice as calm as I could, I gave him another smile, this one much more genuine than that thing I'd done a few seconds ago. "No, it'll be fine. We're both adults here. Not that I'm thinking about adult things," I rushed to add. "Not at all."

Mario's cheek hollowed as his teeth gnawed on the inside of it, and I was pretty sure he was trying not to laugh at me. I appreciated the effort.

"All right. I'll just hop in the shower, if that's okay."

I opened my mouth to ask him if it was absolutely necessary for him to be naked while he showered, but I quickly clamped my lips shut and nodded instead. I didn't trust my stupid thoughts to stay firmly ensconced inside my head.

The room was incredibly spacious, with a sitting area tucked into a nook to the left. Mario lifted a large suitcase onto a curved lounge chair and opened it, heading to the bathroom after getting what he needed.

Once he was inside, I dug through my bags to find my shower prosthetic, toiletries, and sleep clothes. “What the actual hell?” I said aloud, pulling out a mint green babydoll nightgown that probably wouldn’t even cover my uterus.

I think that’s kinda the point of that getup, my brain informed me, and I tossed the lacy little thing back in the suitcase. Finally finding something halfway decent—silky shorts and a matching button-down shirt in a soft pink animal print pattern—I went on the hunt for some underwear.

Damn you, Bristol! There wasn’t a single pair of granny panties in any of my bags, so I dragged out the most comfortable looking ones I could locate, a pair of beige boy shorts made of soft lace. I vaguely remembered wearing these in the dressing room while Gram and Bristol clapped. There may have been some twerking involved.

Tequila is a shady bitch.

After setting my stuff on the bed, I pulled open a white door to find a closet the size of my entire bedroom. I wondered if it would be too weird to have a spare bed put in here. I could sleep in a closet. It’s bigger than the one Harry Potter slept in under the stairs, and if that scrawny kid could do it, so could I.

There were hanging racks and high shelves surrounding three walls, a wooden shoe rack, and lo and behold! Pillows! Lots and lots of pillows stuffed on top of a shelf. Choosing three huge, fluffy ones and a flatter one, I carried them back to the bedroom.

The sheets were approximately a million thread count I decided when I pulled back the comforter and ran a hand against them. I strategically placed the three larger pillows down the center of the bed, effectively dividing it in half.

As I straightened and admired my handiwork, I became aware of someone else in the room. Whirling around, I found Mario leaning one broad, bare

—*gulp*—shoulder against the doorframe of the bathroom. Steam was billowing out from around him like that scene in *Grey’s Anatomy* where McSteamy walked into the bedroom.

And let me tell ya. McSteamy had nothing on Mario Diaz. The man was wearing nothing but a towel and a smile.

And abs. Lots of hard, delicious abs.

Look away! Avert thine eyes from the sinfulness before thee!

“What are you doing, Anna?” His deep voice was loaded to the brim with unabashed amusement and snapped me out of my mental biblical-style ranting.

“Oh. Hey. I was just, you know, making a pillow barrier.” I waved one hand toward my pillow wall with a flourish. “That way everyone knows where everyone is supposed to be.”

“Everyone? How many people are sleeping in this bed tonight?”

Holding up two fingers—I guess because I thought maybe this grown man had lost the ability to count—I said, “That would be two. Hence, the two distinct sides of the bed I’ve created.” *Did I just use the word hence in casual conversation? Jesus H. Christ on a popsicle stick.* “Pretty smart, huh?”

“Brilliant,” he said, “but you forgot one. Wouldn’t want the barrier to be incomplete.”

I glanced at the flatter pillow he nodded at. “That one is for me. I need something between my legs in bed.” *Well that didn’t sound perverted at all.* “I mean, not that I need anything between my legs like *that*. Just... fuck. I’m sorry I’m being awkward.”

“Your surgery site is still sensitive, and you need to sleep with a pillow between your legs?”

I pointed at him like he’d just solved a global health crisis. “Yes! That.

Wait, how did you know that?”

He shrugged one of those boulders he called shoulders. *Mister Boulder Shoulder in the house.*

“My sister Catalina had knee surgery, and afterward, she couldn’t stand for her knees to touch while she was sleeping. Said it was like a poking sensation.”

“Yeah, it’s strange. It doesn’t exactly hurt; it’s just uncomfortable.”

Mario pushed off from the door and walked toward me, and my eyes traced a naughty trail down his body.

A droplet of water slid between the fine black hair on his upper chest and hung up on his dark-brown nipple. *Lucky droplet.* My eyes drifted further down. I’d already done a mighty detailed inspection of his abs earlier, but it wouldn’t hurt to take another look, right? In the interest of thoroughness.

The muscles rippled as he walked, and it was everything I could do not to drool. This man was hard as a damn rock. *Everywhere?* my brain questioned, but I didn’t have time to ogle the south forty because he was *right there.* Standing a few inches away from me, *wearing only a towel, might I remind you.* And smelling like God’s gift to female noses.

Mario reached a hand forward, and I thought he was going to touch me, at which point I probably would have needed to be placed in the cardiac wing of the closest hospital. Instead, he reached around me and picked up the white device laying there.

“What’s this?”

“My shower leg. It’s not great for my metal prosthetic to get wet every day, so I use this to balance me while I shower.”

“Huh,” he said, turning it over in his hand as he nodded approvingly. “That’s pretty fucking cool.”

“I know, right? It’s a relatively new invention.”

He handed it to me with a soft smile. “I’m just gonna finish up in the bathroom, and then you can take your shower.” When he turned to walk toward his open suitcase, I was blessed with the back view of Mario Diaz. The wide expanse of his back. The narrowing of his waistline. And...

Holy guacamole! When he bent to retrieve something, my eyes were bonded to his ass like someone had used the entire world’s supply of Super Glue to hold them there. The outline of two hard globes that didn’t even jiggle when he rooted around in his case held my attention better than a double dose of Ritalin.

When he turned around, I jerked my eyes upward to find a chagrined smile on his furry face. “Forgot these earlier,” he said, waving a pair of black boxer briefs before going back into the bathroom and closing the door.

Sinking onto the bed, I buried my face in my hands, thinking of white towels, black undies, and tiny water droplets on nipples. I needed to calm the fuck down and pull myself together. *This is no big deal, Tazanna. You’ve erected your pillow barrier to prevent any accidental sleepyttime touching. You’re fine.*

Lifting my head as the door opened, I watched as Mario walked out, adjusting the waistband of his briefs. *Of course he wouldn’t be a pajama wearing kind of guy.* When his eyes lifted to mine, a tiny furrow appeared between his eyebrows, and he sat beside me on the bed.

“You okay, Anna?”

I scrubbed a frustrated hand over my face and nodded. “I’m good. Just tired.” Which wasn’t a lie; I was suddenly exhausted.

“I really don’t mind sleeping on the couch if sharing a bed bothers you,” he said softly before glancing behind me. “Though, with the Great Wall of

China there, I'm pretty sure we would have trouble even finding each other."

A giggle erupted from my throat. "You're right. I'm overthinking it." Standing and gathering my things, I said, "I'll just grab a quick shower and then we can hit the sack."

He rose, and I felt like a dwarf in the shadow of his huge frame. "Which side of this monstrosity is mine?" he asked, jerking a thumb at my fabulous pillow wall.

"First of all, it's not a monstrosity. It's a marvel of modern pillow engineering," I informed him with an upward tilt of my chin. "And second, either side is fine with me."

"Alrighty. I'll let you have the side closest to the bathroom because there's a lamp on that side. Don't worry about turning it on if you need to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. I'm a pretty heavy sleeper."

"M'kay, thanks," I said, scurrying off to the bathroom before I said something weird about being dirty or getting clean or any combination of the two.

As I closed the door behind me, I puffed out a sigh of relief and leaned back against it. Two more deep, calming breaths, and I was ready to roll, placing my stuff on the wide charcoal marble counter and stripping out of my clothes.

My bladder made its needs known, and I sat down on the toilet. Three seconds later, I tried unsuccessfully to cut off the flow.

Is my pee always this loud? Sounds like someone's trying to pressure wash the toilet bowl. What if Mario hears it?

So what if he does? Everyone pees, Taz.

Yeah, but not everyone sounds like they have an enormous waterfall between their legs.

It is a little loud. You almost done?

I cut off the warring voices inside my head and *finally* finished my business, chalking this up as one of the unintended consequences of living with a man.



Exiting the bathroom as quietly as possible, I crept across the semi-dark room, twisting a finger around a lock of my freshly washed and dried hair. And praying that Mario would already be asleep.

No such luck. He leaned up on an elbow from his side of the pillow fortress, his eyes tracing down my body. “Your pajamas are really pretty.”

“Oh. Thanks. I like your underwear too.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I wanted to cut my tongue out with a chainsaw. Flopping my ass down on the bed, I unhooked my prosthetic and muttered, “I swear, tomorrow I’m going to be a normal human being. I’m not going to say anything insane. If I do, you’re welcome to medicate me.”

Stretching out beneath the covers, I mirrored his position on my side and propped up on one elbow. The asshole was snickering, and I leveled my best glare at him.

“It’s okay. There’s bound to be an adjustment period. Neither of us are used to sharing a room with someone else.”

“True.”

“And after tonight, we probably won’t have to worry about it anymore. Your boyfriend has scheduled me to work nights.”

Guilt flooded through my system. “About that. I’m sorry I blurted out that we were dating. It was weird seeing my ex for the first time, and I guess I

didn't want to look like a big loser since I don't really date."

The little line reappeared between his eyes before he reached over the Great Wall and shifted my hair behind my shoulder. My breath caught in my lungs at the gesture, and I tried to cover it with a fake cough.

A little smile pulled one corner of Mario's beautiful mouth upward. "I understand. It reminds me of a book I read recently. A woman is going to her ten-year high school reunion, but she's been so focused on her career, she really didn't have time to date."

"Oooh, I think I've read that one. Her ex-boyfriend is going to be there, so she hires a male escort to pretend to be her date. They end up falling in love."

He chuckled. "Yeah, but he wasn't really an escort. He thought he was signing up for a dating app."

"Right! It was so funny when she was trying to justify falling in love with a male prostitute." I grinned. "So I guess you're my own personal manwhore."

Mario's face registered shock, and then he burst into hysterical laughter as I groaned.

"Fuck a duck. Forget I said that. I'm just going to turn off this light. If you hear weird noises, don't remove the pillow from my face. In fact, press down harder."

That only made him laugh louder, so I clicked off the lamp and curled up facing away from him. His laughter finally died away as a thought struck me.

Lifting my head, I quietly called his name.

"Yeah?" he answered in the darkness.

"Why were you reading a rom-com novel?"

I heard a long sigh. "Fucking Bode gave it to me. He reads spicy romance books to learn more about the female perspective or whatever. He thought I would like the story."

“And did you?”

“I’m reluctant to admit this, but yes. It was really funny, and I liked the characters a lot.”

“I did too.” I paused for a long moment before saying his name again.

“Uh-huh?”

Keeping my voice level, I asked, “Did you wear that scarf and hat while you were reading?”

A snort laugh preceded his next words. “Shut up, Anna.”

I fell asleep with a huge smile on my face.

CHAPTER 18



“RED ALERT! THE BARRIER has been breached. Repeat... the pillow wall is down, and there’s an intruder on the west side of the boundary line.”

I smiled into the back of Anna's head, inhaling the intoxicating coconut scent of her shampoo. “What are you talking about, crazy?”

“You’re on my side of the bed, sir.”

I dragged one eyelid open and looked around in the dim light seeping through the blinds. There was a wide gap between Anna and her edge of the bed. “Actually, I think you’re on my side.”

“What? No, I’m...” I felt her hand sliding around the empty expanse of bed in front of her. “Oh my god, I am. I’m so sorry.”

“Mmhmm. I’ll let it slide this time, you little intruder.” Hitching her closer to me, I snuggled against her back. It felt good to have her warm, tight body against me. “Now hush. We have at least an hour before we have to get up.”

As soon as my body was almost in Lala Land, she spoke again. “You’re poking me in the back with your, ummm...”

“My dick?”

“Yeah, that.”

I assessed the situation and discovered that my morning wood was indeed in full effect. “Don’t worry about him. He’s curious in the morning.”

“Well, can you make his *curiosity* go away?”

“No, but you can. You want to be on top or bottom?”

“Mario!” she scolded, but there was a giggle behind it.

“You asked.”

Anna was silent for a long while before speaking again. “There’s not going to be any sex going on. I just want to make that clear.” She turned and looked at me over her shoulder, her gorgeous brown eyes serious. “None whatsoever.”

“Why not?” I had no explanation as to why those words popped so quickly from my lips, except that maybe there was zero blood flow to my brain. It had rerouted to my cock, and that dude had no filter.

Obviously, it was the wrong thing to say because Anna elbowed me in the gut before pushing herself up to sitting. “Seriously, Mario? You really have to ask me that?”

I sat up too, pulling the covers over my lap. “Because I hurt you before.”

Her chin lifted in defiance before she turned her back on me. “I wasn’t hurt; I was pissed.” The lie was evident in the way her shoulders rose and fell with her heaving breaths.

Reaching forward, I stroked my hand over the soft silk of her pajamas covering her back, surprised that she didn’t pull away. “It’s all right to admit you were hurt, Anna. I was a complete prick to you, and none of that was

your fault, okay? I don't want you to feel like you were anything less than perfect that night we spent together."

She twisted her entire body around to look at me, and even in the dim light, I could see the pain in her eyes. It broke me.

"Okay, maybe I was a tiny bit hurt," she spat. "You were different that night. I thought..." She shook her head as if to brush away what she was going to say, and her long hair twisted and swirled around her. I wanted to grab two hands full of it and yank her lips against mine. To show her how I really felt about her.

"I thought everything was going to be okay with us, and then two days later, you treated me like some whore you were too embarrassed to even look at." Her voice hitched at the end, and she pivoted away from me again, draping her legs over the side of the bed and dipping her chin to her chest.

She was too embarrassed or ashamed to let me think she was anything less than the strong woman I knew her to be. She was hiding her vulnerable side, closing it off, and I couldn't fucking stand it. Pushing back the covers, I slid up behind her, my thighs cradling her hips and my arms wound tightly around her middle.

"No, *cariño*. No. It was my problem, and I took it out on you. There's absolutely nothing wrong with you. Our night together was the best of my fucking life." She deflated, her body melting back against me, and I kissed her temple. "I know I didn't act like it afterward, and that's a million percent on me."

"I'm just confused. I don't know how everything went south so quickly."

"Will you let me explain it to you? I know nothing will make up for my asshole behavior, but I'd like to tell you where my brain was at."

"Or your lack of a brain," she muttered, and I couldn't help but smile at her

sass.

“Yes, exactly.”

Anna inhaled a breath and blew it out with a long *pewwww* sound. “Can we talk about it another time? We’re both starting new jobs today, and I’m not sure I’m in the right headspace for any more heavy conversation this morning.”

“Okay, we can save the heavy stuff until some time after the sun has actually risen. And I’m gonna need some coffee since *someone* interrupted my beauty sleep at this ungodly hour.”

“Because you staged an invasion onto my side of the bed.”

I tickled her ribs, and she laughed and squirmed in my arms. “I think we’ve already established that *you* were the interloper onto *my* side. I was just minding my own business until you decided you needed some cuddles.”

“Oh whatever. You probably tossed the pillows and dragged me over to your side to make me think it was all me.”

“Hmm, that sounds like something I might do, but since we were both unconscious at the time, we’ll never know.”

“Uh-huh, a mystery for the ages,” she said with a heavy dose of sarcasm as she reached for her prosthesis. I watched closely as she rolled on the tan liner and then a white sock-like thing before placing the end of her limb into the socket of the fake leg. Then she rolled an outer sleeve all the way up her thigh with her palms before standing.

“Does it still hurt?”

She turned and looked at me. “My leg? No, not really. Sometimes it gets... uncomfortable.” The way she said it made me wonder if maybe she was downplaying it a tad. “I can go in for a socket adjustment if I’m having problems.”

“At the VA Hospital?” I asked, and she nodded. “If you ever need to go there, I can find one around here and drive you.”

Her smile was tentative but sweet. “Thanks, but I’m pretty used to going on my own.”

“You don’t have to. It wouldn’t hurt to have a friend go with you.”

Her lips twisted to the side. “Yeah, I guess.”

A thought occurred to me. “Who do you usually hang out with?”

“Jake. When he’s not with Charlotte.”

“Don’t you have any girls you hang out with?”

She eyed me speculatively. “Not really. I’ve always been more comfortable hanging out with guys. Most women just don’t get me, you know? I did have fun with Bristol and Gram the other day though.”

My mind was spinning like a top. “You used to go out for drinks sometimes with me and the other guys from work. Why don’t you do that anymore?” She raised an eyebrow at me, and I knew. “Because of me, right?”

Her pretty eyes drifted away from me, and she nodded. “Yeah, they’re really your friends, and I didn’t want to make anyone uncomfortable.”

So me and my stupidity had really fucked up her life. It wasn’t just us fighting at work; I’d taken away pretty much the only friends she had in Texas.

“Well, we don’t have to worry about that anymore, right?” She gave a little *I guess* shrug, and I felt as low as a person could possibly feel. Reaching back to pick up my phone from my nightstand, I said, “If you want, I can add you to the group chat with the guys. That way you don’t miss anything.”

She lifted her eyes to mine with confusion. “I thought I was already in the group chat.”

“Yeah, the work one. We keep it pretty much professional, but this one is

much more entertaining. Bode calls it the NSFW chat, and I can't promise what you may or may not hear."

"I grew up with four brothers. I think I'm immune from being offended, so go ahead and add me if you don't think the guys would mind."

"As long as you promise not to sue anyone for sexual harassment, they won't care."

She laughed. "I promise."

After adding her to the text group, I tapped out a message before handing Anna her phone. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Woody: Hey, bitches! I added Taz to the group, so no sending pics of your balls in here.

Hawk: Ahem... Bode!

Bode: What??? It was ONE TIME. I just wanted to know if that mole looked normal.

Bode: And hey, Taz!

She was laughing already and set her thumbs to her phone as I followed along on my own.

Taz: Hey, Bode. Hope your ball mole was okay.

Tank: LOL. So glad you're here, Tazzy!

Bode: Thank you, Taz. You're apparently the only one in here that's concerned with my testicular health.

Cam: What's up, T? Sorry about Bode. He's uncontrollable.

Shark: Hi, Taz. Welcome to the shit show.

Taz: Thanks, guys! Glad to be here.

Bode: Taz, I think we've bonded over the mole situation. If you have any suspicious moles you're embarrassed to show anyone else, private message me. I'm not a gynecologist, but I'm happy to take a look.

Hawk: Annnnd, sexual harassment lawsuit in 3... 2... 1...

Taz: Ha! I have 4 brothers, so I'm actually feeling quite at home right about now.

Hawk: Happy to hear it. We're glad you're here.

She looked up at me with a huge smile on her face and quietly said, “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” I told her. She was still giggling when I rose and headed toward the bathroom, my insides filling with a warmth I hadn’t felt in a long while.



My mouth dropped open, and I almost dropped my coffee cup when Anna walked into the kitchen. “Wow, Anna. You look fantastic.”

“Really? You think this suit is okay? It’s not too loud?” She brushed her hands nervously down the fire-engine-red jacket that looked like it had been made for her. Her matching pants were slim-fitting, and she’d left most of her hair down, only pulling up a couple of strands with a small, silver clip.

“Not at all,” I said, walking a slow circle around her. “The color is great on you.”

She puffed out a sigh of relief. “Okay, good. Gram picked this one out. It was her favorite.”

“You ready to go?” At her questioning look, I explained. “I’ll walk you to the house. I am a dutiful husband, after all.”

“Ah, yes. Of course.”

I waited as she gathered her purse, and then we headed out the door, taking the worn path toward the big house. “I’ll be at the shooting range for most of the morning. Joe said I have to qualify for firearms before I can be on his team.”

Her eyes widened as she glanced over at me. “He doesn’t know?” I shook my head, a mischievous curve taking over my lips. “And you didn’t think to tell him you’re almost as good as me?”

“Excuse me? I’m a much better shot than you.”

“Pfft. Your range is maybe fifty yards better than mine, but I’m far superior with a moving target.”

“Hmm, I’ll concede that you’re *slightly* superior on that front.”

“I’ll take it,” she said, looking pleased with herself.

I reached for her hand as we approached the mansion and knocked on the door. It was opened by a short, stout woman with steel-gray hair and a no-nonsense black pantsuit.

“Hello, you must be the Diazes.”

We both shook her hand as she guided us into the foyer, and I set my black gun case on the floor beside the door. “Yes, I’m Mario, and this is my wife, Anna.”

“Excellent. I’m Mrs. Allen, the house manager. Did you find your accommodations satisfactory?”

“Yes, everything is very nice. Thank you,” Anna replied.

“If there’s anything you need, anything at all, don’t hesitate to contact me. My number is on your refrigerator. If I’m not mistaken, Mario, you’ll be working in security, correct? Have you met Joe?”

Forcing a smile onto my face, I said, “Yes on both counts. In fact, I’m supposed to meet him here this morning. We’re doing some weapons training.”

The door opened behind me, and Mrs. Allen smiled at the newcomer before turning back to me. “Speak of the devil. I’ll let you two get to it, and I’ll take Anna around to the office.”

“Good morning, Anna,” Joe said, with a kind of puppy dog look on his stupid face.

“Morning, Joe. I hear you’re going to the shooting range today. Don’t be too hard on my husband, okay?”

“Hmph. I hope he can keep up. I have very high standards for my team, and I wasn’t even allowed to interview him. I was just told he was a new hire.” He shot a look at me that said he was none too happy about my presence here.

“Now, Joe. You know Miss Ervin is the big boss here, and that trumps head of security,” Mrs. Allen scolded. As they bantered back and forth about safety concerns and who was *really* in charge, I pulled Anna to me by her waist.

The look on her face was nothing short of gleeful as she leaned up to whisper in my ear. “Give him hell for me, okay?”

Her minty breath fanned against my cheek, and I pulled her just a bit closer. “Just for you, *cariño*,” I growled so that only she could hear. Then I raised my voice to a more normal level for the benefit of the onlookers. “I hope you have a good first day, baby. Call or text me if you need anything.”

“Okay, you too.”

She started to pull away, but I bound her tightly to me with a firm arm around her waist. “Aren’t you forgetting something, honey?” My other hand slid up her spine to cup the back of her head as my lips descended on hers. She’d said no tongue, so I complied with that. But just barely.

I started with a peck and then moved on to softly sucking against her plump lips. Her arms encircled my neck, and I could feel her nipples hardening against my chest. When her mouth parted, mine did too, and we shared a quiet moan as we breathed the same air.

Though I'd started this kiss as a big *fuck you* to Joe, it was now entirely for my benefit. And for Anna's because, if her response was any indication, she was totally into it as well. She sighed contentedly into my mouth, and I swallowed the sound, wanting nothing more than to take this kiss deeper. And to take it back to our bungalow so we could be alone and see where things went.

Stop. It. She's nowhere near ready for that yet. You have to gain her trust before anything like that can happen.

Pulling back slowly, I maintained lip contact for as long as possible, not wanting to give up the taste and feel of her.

"We really don't have time for this. We have an appointment at the range," Joe said snarkily, so I leaned back into Anna for another long smooch before finally releasing her.

Her eyes looked a little dazed, and I'll admit mine probably looked the exact same as I backed away and gave her a quick wink. "See you tonight, Anna."

"I'm looking forward to it, babe," she said with a sly grin as she dragged her hand slowly down my chest.

I was pretty sure my fake wife was flirting with me, and I thought that was pretty fucking awesome.

CHAPTER 19



“SO YOU AND TA— um, Anna are pretty serious, huh?”

I glanced over at the blond man from my passenger seat in the big, black SUV as he maneuvered through Los Angeles traffic.

We’d been supposedly dating for a year. I couldn’t exactly say we weren’t serious, but Joe needed to be kept on a strict information diet, in my opinion, so I replied with a simple, “Yep.”

“Where did you meet?”

“At work.”

“Hmmm.” The rest of the drive was made in silence, which was fine by me. As we drove, the city slowly faded away until we were traveling down a narrow, isolated asphalt road, which made me a little nervous. The man beside me didn’t like me, but surely he—

That thought was cut off when we rounded a sharp curve and a two-story glass and metal building came into view, the word **LOCKED AND**

LOADED in a bold, block print over the door.

The sounds of gunfire were muffled inside the vehicle, but they relaxed me. Shooting ranges were my happy place since the very first time my father took me to one. He worked away a lot and wanted to make sure his family was safe while we were home alone, also teaching my sisters and my mother to be proficient and comfortable with firearms.

Luckily, there had only been one incident while my father was away, and that was when I was almost eighteen years old. A dopehead used a crowbar to pry open our front door in the middle of the night, and he wasn't quiet about it. I'd silently crawled out of bed and to the small gun safe in my bedroom, quickly punching in my code in the darkness and retrieving my .38 Special.

I found the skinny man in our living room and held him at gunpoint until the police arrived. My heartbeat stayed slow and steady the entire time, and that's when I knew that protection was what I wanted to do. Thankfully, I didn't have to take that man's life, but it felt good to know that I had protected my family. No one in the house even stirred until I went to wake my mom because the police wanted to talk to her.

She was in tears, of course, and called my dad immediately after the police left with their perp in handcuffs. He asked to speak to me and told me how proud he was of me for protecting my mom, sisters, and brother, who was only five at the time. I'd gone to the Navy recruiting office the very next day and declared my intention to join.

And here I am now, a sharpshooter entering a gun range with the man who has completely underestimated my abilities and was once—and still may be—in love with my fake wife. Who I'm fake-dating. And who I would very much like to date for real.

Well hell. Let's get this party started, shall we?

We entered the heavy glass doors and approached a painfully thin Asian man who appeared to be in his sixties standing behind the reception desk.

“Hey, Joe. How’s it going?”

“Good, man. Real good. Busy day?”

He tilted his head back and forth a couple times. “Not too shabby for a Monday. Who’s your friend?”

Joe flashed his eyes quickly to me. “This is Mario Diaz. I’m here to see if he’s good enough with a gun to work with me or if I need to put him on surveillance duty until I can get him trained.”

My jaw tightened, but I showed no other outward sign of my annoyance other than that. “Nice to meet you,” I said, extending my hand for a shake.

“Daniel Nguyen. Happy to have you, Mario.”

“Thank you. This is a really nice place you have here,” I told him, looking around at the fully-stocked gun store to the left and what looked like a restaurant to the right.

“Thanks. Make yourself at home. Miss Ervin has a full membership for her staff, so everything’s covered, including ammo. We have the store if you’re looking to purchase or upgrade. Cole can help you out there. He’s an excellent gunsmith and can provide any services you may need.” Daniel tilted his head in the other direction. “That’s our bar and restaurant, *Reload*. You’re welcome to grab a bite to eat, but no alcohol before shooting, of course.”

“Of course,” I agreed with a nod. This place was swanky, what some of us called a Guntry Club, and I couldn’t help but think that I wanted to bring Anna here.

“We need to get started,” Joe said, nudging me with an elbow. “Daniel, I think we’ll start at the indoor range upstairs. If Mario can keep up through that, we might try the tactical range out back later.”

This asshole was really starting to piss me off, but I just nodded and said, “All right then. Let’s throw a little lead.”



“What the fuck?” Joe asked, anger sliding through his every word as he inspected my target with an extremely tight grouping of holes. In fact, they were so tight, there was just one large hole in the middle with another smaller one about a half inch to the right.

“I know,” I said tapping on the single outlier. “I must be out of practice.” It was a totally smartass reply, but I didn’t give a damn.

He eyed me suspiciously. “Are you a competition shooter or something?”

“I was in high school,” I said. “State champ all four years and national champ my junior and senior years.”

“Hmph. Well competition shooting is a lot different than real-world situations.”

“I’m aware,” I said mildly.

“Hey, guys. How’s it going in here?” Daniel asked from behind us before entering my lane and inspecting the used target in Joe’s hand. “Wow, man! You’ve really been practicing.”

I could practically hear Joe’s teeth cracking as he grinded them together. “This is his,” he snapped, jerking his head in my direction.

Daniel let out a low whistle as he continued peering over Joe’s shoulder. “Damn. You should give me some warning next time you bring Rambo to my establishment. I need to prepare myself.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see how he does—”

“Holy crap, Mario. Is that a Kimber 1911?” Daniel exclaimed excitedly as his eyes fell on the gun I’d laid on the table.

“Yes, sir.” I handed over my baby, and the man’s face cracked into a huge grin, running his fingers reverently over the surface as he turned it over. After handing it back to me, he hit a button on his cell phone and brought it to his ear. “Cole, get up to Lane Three right now.”

The old man turned to Joe and said, “How’s your shooting today?” Joe mumbled something under his breath as he and I followed Daniel around the divider to Lane Four. “Not bad,” Daniel told him as he looked over his target with a much larger scatter. “You just keep practicing, and you’ll be almost as good as Mario someday.” He patted Joe on the shoulder, and I could tell he had meant the comment more as encouragement than as an insult.

Joe’s face flushed red, and I actually felt a little sorry for him. Taking pity, I asked, “Joe, are you right- or left-eye dominant?”

He turned a glare in my direction. “I’m right-handed.”

I nodded. “Yes, but your dominant eye and your dominant hand aren’t necessarily the same. Hold on.” I clipped on another target and hit the button to deploy it out to about twenty feet. “Now, keep both eyes open and make a small circle with your hands, holding your arms out straight.” I demonstrated, and he reluctantly followed suit. “Center the target in the hole and then close your right eye. Can you still see the target?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Open your right eye and close your left.”

“What the hell? It disappeared.” He lowered his arms and looked up at me in confusion. “What does that mean?”

“It means you’re left-eye dominant, so that’s the eye you need to sight with. You may have to slightly adjust your head position from what you’re used to,

but once you get the hang of it, it will really help your accuracy.” I pushed the target out to fifty yards. “Try it again.”

Daniel and I stepped back, and we all donned our earmuffs as Joe took his position. The first two shots were way off, but as he made the necessary adjustments, his results improved drastically.

When he was done, he set down his firearm, took off his earmuffs and glasses, and turned directly to me. Hell, the sonofabitch *almost* gave me a full smile. “Thanks, Mario.”

“No problem,” I said, slapping him on the back. “Glad to help.” *See? I can play nice.*

“Oh, here’s Cole,” Daniel said, waving over a man about my age with dark-blond hair and sharp green eyes. “Cole, this is Mario Diaz. You have to see his Kimber.”

The man gave me a semi-complicated handshake and called me dude before we all walked the few steps back to my lane. Cole immediately homed in on my gun sitting on the table, glancing back at me for permission to pick it up, and I nodded. He immediately checked to make sure it wasn’t loaded before inspecting every inch of it like his life depended on it.

“Duuuuude, this is a sweet piece! Kimber Super Jägare, forty-two ounces, KimPro phenolic resin finish...”

I listened with a smile as Cole rattled off every statistic known to man by memory. It was fun to meet another true enthusiast. He finally finished, and then his eyes found mine. “Hold up. This isn’t the regular grip, is it? This gun usually has Micarta grips.”

“Good eye,” I told him. “I had it customized with walnut because I like the look and feel of it better.”

“Me too. It’s gorgeous! I’d give a bag of hookers to have this gun.”

We all laughed at his excitement, and I nodded toward the end of the range.
“You want to take her for a spin?”

His eyes literally lit up. “Seriously, man? You’d let me?”

“Of course. Go ahead.” He put on his safety glasses and muffs before loading the gun from the box of ammo provided. When he was done, we inspected his target.

“Good job, Cole,” Daniel praised, “but take a look at Mario’s.” He handed it over, and Cole stared at it in almost reverence.

“Holy shitballs in a snowstorm!” He grinned over at me. “You’re damn amazing, Mario. When you get done, we gotta have lunch in *Reload*. My treat.”

Joe broke in. “After we go to the tactical range, we need to be getting back to Malibu.”

“Come onnnn, Joe! Don’t be a spoilsport,” Cole cajoled before lowering his voice to a faux whisper. “I’ll give you a free box of ammo to take home.”

Joe rolled his eyes but said, “Okay, fine. It’s hard to turn down free ammunition.”

“Awesome! Mario, you as good with a rifle as you are with a handgun?”

“Yep,” I said. *Even better*, I didn’t say.

“Oooh, let’s get you on the course then. It’s got varied distances from different positions, standing, lying down, and kneeling. Stationary and moving targets. We even have a compound bow as one of the tasks. And the last target is five-hundred yards.”

Five-hundred? Pssh. I could do that in my sleep.



A few hours later, I had aced the course, including easily nailing the longest shot directly through the center of the target. Then we'd all had lunch together, and it was nice, but all I really wanted to do was get back to the house and tell Anna about my day. She was absolutely going to love this place, and I couldn't wait to bring her.

"Dude, come back anytime, and bring Anna. If she's really as good as you say she is, I'd love to watch her work."

A chuckle rose up in my throat. Yes, I had bragged about my *wife*. "She's as good or better," I said. "I'll bring her when we both have a day off."

He walked us to the door and pulled me into a bro hug, smacking me hard on the back. "Oops, you're a little dusty," he said, turning me and brushing a hand down my back several times."

"Hell, y'all had me running around and rolling in the dirt like a dog," I said with a laugh. "I'm too old for this shit."

"Oh whatever. You broke the damn course record. By the time you come back, we'll have your plaque up on the wall."

I shook my head. "You really don't have to do that. I was just having fun."

"Nope. It's tradition, and it's been six years since someone broke the record. Mills is going to be pissed you took his title."

A wry grin twisted my lips to the side. "Well, remind me to avoid Mills when I'm here."

At Joe's prodding, we got in the truck and headed back to Malibu. He was silent for most of the drive, until we were only a few miles away from the Ervin compound.

"I fucked up letting Taz go all those years ago."

I wasn't sure what he wanted me to say to that, so I just grunted.

His jaw worked back and forth a few times before he said, “I’m going to fight to get her back.”

This little motherfucker...

Rage was thrumming through every cell in my body, and that’s when I realized exactly how much that strong, gorgeous woman meant to me. I didn’t want her to be with anyone else because I wanted her to be with *me*.

I wasn’t crazy enough to call it love, but I definitely had feelings for Anna, and they grew stronger the more time I spent with her.

Letting the silence hang in the air for a moment, I finally spoke with a calm voice that belied my anger. “I look forward to the challenge, Joe, because I’m not giving her up.”

“Hmm. May the best man win then.”

Oh I certainly will, Joe. You can bet your ass on it.

CHAPTER 20



“LIKE, DO YOU KNOW how to, like, work this thing, Anna?”

I glanced up at Heather—the assistant to the personal assistant—and I could feel a frown taking over my forehead. “The copy machine?”

“Yeah. Like, I don’t remember how it works.”

I rose from my large glass and steel desk and walked over to the machine, pushing the button that read, *Copy* in big, bold letters. A sheet of paper slid smoothly from the side.

“Cool. Like, thanks.”

Attempting to contain my sigh, I sat back down at my desk and continued filling in the calendar on the sleek laptop. Claudia, the current PA, had gone home a little early today after showing me the ropes. She’d warned me that Heather was a bit of a dingbat, but I wasn’t sure I’d realized the depth of the warning until I was alone with her.

Heather was the quintessential Malibu Barbie. Blonde hair, tanned skin, and a sculpted body, topped off by the Valley Girl vernacular.

She was a really sweet girl, but damn! She'd been here for six months and still couldn't make a copy?

"Anna?"

"Hmm?" I hummed, not looking up from my computer. *She probably needs help figuring out how to use a pencil.*

"Umm, like, what happened to your leg?"

Making up a new story on the fly, I said, "I was down in Louisiana, and a friend of mine dared me to wrestle an alligator."

From my peripheral vision, I could see her eyes widen. "And, like, the gator ate your leg?"

Still typing, I shook my head. "No, I kicked his scaly ass, but on the way home, we were carjacked by a deranged man with a machete."

"Ohmigodddd! Seriously?"

Lifting my eyes from the screen, I grinned at her. "No, I'm just kidding. I lost it in a car accident. Sorry, sometimes I have a weird sense of humor."

Her pretty face broke into a smile. "You're like, really funny, Anna. I like that you can have a sense of humor about it." She stared down at her perfectly pink fingernails and then back up at me. "I know it's not, you know, the same as losing a leg, but my dad lost most of his hearing while he was in the Air Force. He was never the same and hardly ever smiled when he came home from his last deployment. It was really sad to see him like that."

My heart broke a little for her. I knew the families of service members suffered right along with the injured person. "I'm sorry to hear that, Heather. A loss is a loss, no matter if it's a limb or one of your senses. It's hard to

learn to live again when a part of you has been taken away. Is your dad still alive?”

The corners of her lips turned down, and she shook her head, her blonde ponytail dancing from side to side. “No, he died about three years ago.”

“I’m so sorry about that. Do you still have your mom?”

Her face brightened a little. “Yes, she’s the one who helped me get this job. She works in the kitchen here. Oops, that’s probably her,” Heather said, reaching for the ringing phone on her smaller desk. “Hi, Mom... sure, that sounds good. Can my friend Anna come?”

She pulled the phone away from her ear and asked, “Do you want to, like, have lunch with me and my mom?”

Before the words were all the way out of her mouth, Mario appeared in the doorway, and Heather froze, her mouth agape as she stared at the fine-as-hell man standing there.

“Hey, babe. I wanted to see if you’d had lunch,” he asked, his lips popping up on one side in a sexy little smile.

Heather managed to pull her chin from the floor and spoke into the phone again, her eyes fixated on my fake husband. “Scratch that, Mom. Anna’s husband is here... Okay, I’ll tell her.” Disconnecting, she turned to me with a not-so-subtle wink. “My mom is sending lunch up here for you two lovebirds.”

Remembering that we were indeed supposed to be freshly wed lovebirds, I stood and rounded my desk, standing on my tiptoes for a kiss from my husband. I wasn’t sure if I wanted another kiss like the one he’d given me in the foyer this morning or not. Mario had adhered to my *no tongue* rule, but it hadn’t stopped him from freaking owning my mouth.

The majority of my body wanted another kiss *exactly* like that one, but the

one functioning brain cell I had left warned me that I was getting into dangerous territory. I shouldn't enjoy that level of sensuality with Mario since we were only acting, but God help me, I did.

Luckily, he held my body away from his by my waist and gave me a soft brush of his lips and an apology. "Sorry, I'm filthy. You may not want to get too close to me."

At the scent of dirt, sweat, and firearm propellant on his skin, all of the slutty brain cells overrode that one logical one, and I took a step closer to him. "It's okay. You smell good."

The curve of his lips told me he liked that answer a lot, and he lowered his head for a slower kiss this time. Large hands cupped my face as he pressed his lips to mine, pulling back with a tender suction before going back for more. I'm pretty sure it would have been less intimate if we'd actually done a little tongue tangling.

The feel of his soft facial hair against my skin threatened to turn me into a complete idiot who didn't even know how to operate a copy machine.

Maybe that's what's wrong with Heather, I mused. Perhaps she has a boyfriend with a sexy beard who kisses her goodbye like this every morning and leaves her with a malfunctioning brain.

Speaking of Heather...

I broke away from the lips that managed to be sweet and dirty at the same time and opened my hazy eyes to find that his looked just as dazed. Clearing my throat, I said, "Mario, I wanted to introduce you to my assistant, Heather." Pivoting away from him, I saw her grinning from ear to ear. "Heather, this is my husband."

She literally squealed and pulled us into an awkward group hug before stepping back, her eyes flitting from me to Mario. "Like, you two are, like,

sooooo hot together!” Her shoulders shimmied, and her thin eyebrows wiggled up and down. “Your babies are going to be, like, so gorgeous!”

A noise that sounded like *fluh* escaped my lips, and I clamped them shut, breathing short, quick breaths through my nose. Sure, it was the norm for everyone to start talking babies before a couple could even make it back up the wedding aisle, but holy smokes! I was freaking flustered here. Mario wrapped a thick arm around me, his hand resting on my hip in a gesture that seemed way too comfortable.

My eyes lifted to his for some assistance, but he appeared calm and confident in the midst of this discussion about our non-existent children. Cocky even. Then he fucking *winked* at me, holding my gaze as he spoke to my assistant.

“Trust me, Heather. If I didn’t want to keep my gorgeous wife all to myself for a while, I’d already have my baby inside her.”

“Baby?” I croaked, forcing a smile onto my face. “Wow. Yes. Babies. Can’t wait for that, ha ha. I’m, like, soooo excited.” *Geez. Only half a day in, and I’m already starting to talk like Heather.*

Mario leaned down and kissed right in front of my ear before whispering, “Take a breath, Anna.”

I did exactly that, and it calmed me... some. He dragged his nose against my cheek until he was nuzzling my own, and I relaxed a bit more before pulling my reluctant eyes from his. Heather was still smiling, and I could see the hearts flashing in her eyes.

“We definitely want to wait awhile,” I explained, proud that my voice didn’t sound at all tremulous. “We’re having too much fun just being a couple.”

A knock on the doorframe had us all turning in that direction to find an

older version of Heather standing there with a tray of food. “Hello, you must be the Diazes. I’m Iris.”

Mario politely took the tray from her and set it on my desk as we made our introductions.

When the two women turned to leave, Heather said, “I’m going to lock the door, so you two can, like, have some *private time*.”

“Heather!” her mother scolded, and the girl giggled.

“I can’t help it, Mom. You should have seen the way he looked at her. And kissed her. Like, swoon flippin’ city! Mario and Anna are, like, my absolute favoritest couple in the world now. Even better than Mila Kunis and Ashton Kutcher.”

We could still hear her babbling as she closed and locked the door behind her. “They totes need a nickname like Brangelina or Bennifer or Jalena. Let’s see. Mario and Anna. Anna and Mario. Maybe Annario? Ooh, ooh, wait! What about Manna?”

As her voice faded away down the hallway, Mario’s head turned ever so slowly toward me, his eyebrows lifting to the ceiling. “Manna?”

I snickered. “Yep, Manna. That’s us.”

He sank down into the chair in front of my desk as I settled into my own across from him. “Is it normal that I feel dumber after listening to all that?”

“Dude, you have no clue. I’ve been with her all morning. I think my IQ has fallen to somewhere around slug level. She’s actually really sweet though.” Pulling the lids off the food containers, I asked in a teasing voice, “How did things go at the gun range? Did you qualify?”

Mario smirked as he poured us each a glass of iced tea. “I managed to scrape by. That place was amazing, by the way. Cole, the gunsmith, can’t wait to meet you.”

My hands stilled as I was putting a spoon in each bowl. “Me? Why me?”

He shrugged as he placed a linen napkin in front of each of us. “I told him all about you.”

“Wh-why?”

“I don’t know. I guess I was just thinking about you or something.” The slightest hue pinkened his cheeks. “I mean, I thought you would really like the place. They had some high-quality firearms and a really cool course you could run.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll have to check it out.” *He was thinking about me? What the fuck?*

He stared at his bowl, stirring the pasta salad around with his spoon before looking up at me. “I thought we could go together. You know, I could show you the ropes since I’ve already been there?”

I gave him a soft smile. He really was trying to be nice. “That sounds good. I’m going to go stark-raving mad sitting behind this desk all day. I’m jealous you got the good job.”

Mario’s eyes rolled upward. “Not all that great when I have to deal with Joe. Did everything go okay this morning? Did you meet any of the staff?”

Taking a bite of pasta mixed with veggies, cheese, and deli meats, I nodded. “God yes. I met Guillermo. The poor man. He came in here first thing to let me know he could fulfill all our dietary requests except the lobster because Ella is severely allergic. He doesn’t even allow it in his kitchen. Wanted to know if he could substitute crabs because Ella doesn’t have a reaction to those.”

A loud guffaw burst from his lips. “No shit? I didn’t think anyone would really take that form seriously. I feel like an ass now.”

I waved a dismissive hand at him. “I handled it. Told him we were just

playing around, and that we would be happy with pizza and beer for every meal. He looked aghast, like I'd told him we enjoyed eating rocks with a turpentine chaser. I finally made him understand that we don't require any special meals and would be happy with whatever he fixes."

"This is good," he observed, pointing his spoon at the food in his bowl. "And I'm not even hungry. We ate at the gun place."

"You ate there?"

"Yeah, they have a restaurant on site. It's a total Guntry Club."

"Ooh, I've heard of places like that. I think they have one in Austin."

He nodded, taking another bite. "We should go some time once we get back home. It's just a few hours to Austin. We could make a weekend of it."

I blinked, my mind going a little blank. "You want to go with *me*?" I asked, pointing at myself in case he didn't know who *me* was.

One large shoulder raised and dropped. "I mean, yeah. Why not? It's something both of us would enjoy. Hey, you know what would be really cool?"

"What?" I asked, taking a sip of my tea.

"A road trip where we travel around and visit all the coolest gun ranges in the country. I heard there's a really great one in Arizona."

A sense of excitement worked its way up my spine at the idea. If you'd asked me a week ago if I'd like to go on a road trip with Mario Diaz, I would have split my pants laughing at the absurdity. But now? Well, I didn't want to stab my eyeballs out with a rusty switchblade, so that was progress, right?

"There's one in Miami, I think."

Mario's head bobbed up and down vigorously. "Heard of that one. They have themed experiences like Scarface and 007. I've always wanted to go there."

I swallowed my last bite and tamped down my excitement. I actually enjoyed spending time with Mario. He was kind, funny, and attentive, but I had to remind myself...

Once he turns back into asshole Woody, all bets are off.

CHAPTER 21



I WASN'T SURE WHERE the idea of a road trip with Anna came from, but the more I thought about it, the more I liked it. She was nothing like I'd previously thought. She was funny and easy to be around, even when she was sassing me.

Especially when she was sassing me.

When my phone notified me I had a message, I pulled it from my pocket and found a text from Beau Atwood.

"Shark wants an update," I told Anna.

She started gathering our dishes and stacking them on the corner of her desk. "Ask him if he wants to do a Zoom meeting. We can update him together. And the other guys, if they're available."

After tapping out the message, I moved my chair around to her side of the desk. My eyes shot to the door when the knob wiggled, followed by a light knock. Making my way to the door, I swung it open to find fucking Joe—the

bane of my existence—standing there. He looked as happy to see me as I was to see him.

“Can I help you?”

“Not really. I came to see Anna. I wanted to see if she’d had lunch.” He peered around me, putting on a big smile when he caught sight of her. “Hi, Anna. I thought we might go on a picnic,” he said, ignoring me as he held up a brown wicker basket.

The man had obviously taken time with his appearance after we’d returned from the range. His hair was still damp from a shower, and he’d changed into a button-down shirt and khakis. I suddenly felt like a stinky mess. *Dammit. Why didn’t I think to go clean up before I came to see her?*

But maybe she didn’t mind a little dirt and sweat. She didn’t seem to earlier when she stepped into my space to continue our *hello*.

“Hey, Joe,” Anna greeted, coming up beside me with an apologetic little smile on her face. “Sorry, Mario and I already ate, and we’re about to have a meeting with our boss.”

The way she apologized to him irked the crap out of me. *Would she rather have had lunch with him than me? Does she still harbor feelings for this prick?*

The thought made me a little sick to my stomach, though I did get a thrill when Joe puffed out a frustrated breath, glaring at me like I had spoiled his carefully laid plans. Scratching my eyebrow with my middle finger, I faked a smile.

Obviously noticing my little *fuck you, Joe* gesture, Anna barely contained a snort and bumped me with her hip.

“Thank you for thinking of me, Joe, but I’ll have to take a rain check.”

“I’ll definitely take you up on that,” he said with a sappy-ass smile that I

wanted to wipe off his face. With a frying pan. Then his eyes jerked to me, and his tone took on an icy quality as the smile faded into nothingness. “Don’t be late tonight, Mario,” he snapped over his shoulder as he left with his fancy little basket.

“I’ll do my best. Sometimes it’s hard to pull myself away from my gorgeous wife,” I called, mentally patting myself on the back when his steps faltered slightly.

“Do you have to antagonize him”? Anna asked as we seated ourselves behind the desk and clicked on the meeting link.

“He started it,” I said, sounding a bit like a first grader.

“You’re not in elementary school, Mario. Grow up and be the bigger man. What is your beef with him anyway? Joe’s really nice.”

“He wants you, and that pisses me off,” I said, my voice taking on a growly quality that I couldn’t quite control. “We told him we’re dating, and he’s still trying to make a move on you right in front of me. That doesn’t seem very fucking nice, Anna.”

Her pretty almond-shaped eyes widened. “Joe isn’t trying to make a move on me, Mario. He’s just trying to... I don’t know... we haven’t seen each other in a while, so I guess he wants to catch up.”

Yeah, catch up in bed.

Doing my best to rein in my temper, I said, “To everyone here except for three people, you’re a married woman, Anna. You’re supposed to be acting like my wife. How would it look if you were seen going on a romantic picnic with another man?”

Her face fell a little. “I didn’t think of that. You’re completely right, even though I don’t think Joe meant it as a romantic gesture, just as a friendly one. You’re reading way too much into this.”

“Are you still in love with him?”

I swear, I don't know where those words came from. They just popped out. Anna seemed as surprised by the question as I was.

“No, but—”

“Hey, guys.” Shark's voice came from the computer, but Anna and I were locked in a stare. I wanted to know what she was going to say after that *but*.

But I still have strong feelings for my ex. But I want to fuck him. But I'd like to see where things go between me and Joe. But if you punched him in the face, then we could be together.

What was it? What was she going to say? Probably not that last one, though it was my favorite of the choices.

“Um, are we interrupting something?”

Anna broke our eye contact to face the computer and answer Shark's question. “Nope. I was just doing a Jedi mind trick thing on Mario, but I'm all done now. Gotta do something to keep him in line.”

I rolled my eyes, a mirthful smile sliding across my lips as I focused on the screen. All the guys were there in the conference room at DFW Security Force, and damn I missed those fuckers. Shark was at the head of the oblong table with Cam and Tank seated on one side, and Hawk and Bode on the other.

“I know you've just been there for a day, but we wanted to check in and see if there's anything y'all needed,” Shark said, his deep voice commanding the room.

“What he means is that he wanted to make sure you're both still alive,” Cam said, bright blue eyes twinkling.

“Yeah, I got twenty on Taz,” Tank said before rubbing a gigantic hand through his blond hair and adding, “Sorry, Woody.”

“I don’t know,” Hawk mused, rubbing two fingers through his dark beard, “I think Woodster’s size could be an advantage.”

“But Taz is faster. Plus, she could take off her leg and hit him with it,” Bode added.

“True. She tried to do that to me in the bouncy castle at the triplets’ birthday party.”

Shark’s hand slapped hard against the wood of the table. “Are we done fucking around here so we can get some actual work done?” he barked.

Fists covered mouths to hide the smiles around the room, and on our end, Anna leaned forward, slim forearms resting on the desk. “There is one thing we could use an opinion on.”

My curiosity was piqued, and I reached for my glass of tea to take a sip.

Anna’s face was dead serious. “Which do you like better? Annario or Manna?”

Tea spewed from my mouth and all over the desk as Anna and I burst into hysterical laughter. We were the only ones. The guys all looked confused as hell.

“What’s that even mean?” Bode asked, shaking his manbunned head as we continued to laugh.

Across the table, Cam shrugged. “I think they’re high.”

Tears ran down my face, and I reached for my napkin as Hawk cracked a grin. “They’ve only been in Cali for a day, and they’re already smoking the devil’s lettuce.”

“Inside joke,” I croaked, and Anna pounded me on the back as a coughing fit overtook me.

Shark glared, unimpressed with our antics, though I thought I saw the corners of his lips twitch just a little. “I’m glad you two seem to be getting

along, but back to the matter at hand. Do you have any suspects yet? Anyone Tank needs to give a little more scrutiny to?”

Tank, a six-foot-eight giant with the biggest heart in the world, was our resident tech guru.

“Joe,” I blurted out. “James Joseph Williams. He’s very suspicious.”

“Wait, that’s the head of security for Ella,” Shark practically yelled, his face turning red as he leaned forward.

“And he’s *not* a suspect,” Anna said, punching me in the arm. “He and Mario just don’t get along.”

“Because he provokes me,” I shot back.

She turned back to the camera. “He’s just pissy because Joe made him test to see if he was qualified to carry a firearm.” The entire conference room exploded in an uproar of laughter, and Anna smiled indulgently.

“Oh my god. Seriously? Woody was one of the top snipers in the entire Navy when he was serving,” Cam said, wiping tears from beneath his eyes. “How did you do, man? Were you nervous?” He let out another snicker.

“Shaking in my tennis shoes,” I joked.

“Whatever,” Bode said with an eye roll. “My buddy has fucking ice in his veins. You kicked ass, didn’t you?”

My shoulders lifted and fell once. “I broke the course record.”

Anna’s head whipped around, a huge smile on her pretty face. “You did? That’s awesome, Mario.” Then she turned back to the guys with a smug tilt of her lips as she jerked a thumb at me. “He’s going to take me some time, and I’ll break his record.”

All the guys were full-on chuckling now. “I’d pay money to see this showdown,” Shark commented. “It does seem like the guy is acting like a

prick. In the dossiers I sent to him, I clearly stated that both of you were expert markspersons. Any other reason you think he's suspicious?"

I couldn't exactly tell them about what he'd said in the vehicle about fighting for Anna and how that made me feel because then I would have to admit I was crushing hard on the woman who was supposed to be my fake wife. So I simply muttered, "Not really. Just a vibe."

Tank's blue eyes were lasered on mine, and I gave him a subtle nod, which he returned. He already did a basic background search on everyone in this compound and everyone who had access to Ella, but I knew he could do a deep dive and root out any buried information that might help.

"Have you guys met anyone else since you've been there? Anyone you can potentially rule out?" Cam asked, and I gestured to Anna to go first.

"Claudia, Ella's current PA, of course. She's about to go on maternity leave, so I'm training for her job. She and Ella have been friends since grade school, and she's highly supportive of the singer. I don't think she's a threat at all. Also, Claudia's assistant—who will be my assistant now—Heather Myers. Not to be mean, but after spending the morning with her, she doesn't have the brain power to pull off a complicated stalking scheme and an attempt on Ella's life like in Dallas."

"We met her mother, Iris, today too. She works in the kitchen and seemed nice enough, though we only talked to her for a few seconds."

We went through the rest of the staff we'd met in person so far, including the driver, one of the other security guys, and the house manager, none of whom gave us any cause for concern.

"Oh, and I met Guillermo this morning. The head chef," Anna added, sliding her eyes slyly to me, and I chuckled as we shared a look.

"What was that look?" Bode asked, and I turned back to the screen.

“What look?”

“That sneaky one you two just had on your faces.” He wiggled his finger at us.

I breathed out a sigh. “It was nothing. Anna and I had a little fun filling out the dietary request form before bed last night. That’s all.”

After a few seconds, Bode held up a hand, palm out as his eyes narrowed. “Bed? Hold on a minute. You two are posing as a married couple, right?”

Ah. I was wondering when this was going to come up.

“Yes, we’re fake married.”

“So what are the, uh, accommodations like?” His lips turned up in a shrewd grin.

“We have our own bungalow on the Ervin estate,” I hedged.

Cam leaned forward with his elbows on the table as he caught on. “And how many bedrooms are in this bungalow?”

“Guys,” Shark warned, “don’t make this uncomfortable for them. They’re just doing their jobs.”

“Yeah, because we’re all about making one another comfortable,” Hawk quipped. “That’s what we’re known for.”

Anna laughed and lifted her chin a little. “It’s no big deal. Yes, there’s only one bedroom, but Mario and I are going to be working opposite hours, so we’ll hardly ever be there at the same time. Plus, I made a pillow barrier down the middle of the bed last night to establish some boundaries.” She sliced her hand back and forth in a straight line to demonstrate.

“It was a marvel of modern engineering,” I threw in, not offering up the fact that the pillow wall had been decimated at some point during the night, and Anna had ended up wrapped in my arms. That was none of anyone’s business. Nor was the monster erection I’d been sporting.

“Okay, if there’s nothing else, we’ll let you two get back to work,” Shark said, looking a little weary. “I think we’ve had enough inappropriateness for one day.”

That’s for damn sure.

CHAPTER 22



A QUIET NOISE AWAKENED me, and I checked the time on my phone. Fifteen minutes after four in the morning.

“Mario?” I called.

“Yeah, it’s me.” He appeared in the doorway as I snapped the switch to turn on the lamp. “Sorry, I was trying to be careful not to wake you this morning.” He really should be used to it. I’d woken up every morning this week when he got done with his shift.

It was not even dawn on Saturday, and I was looking forward to us both having the entire day off since he was taking me to the fancy-shmancy shooting range today.

“No prob. I’ll be able to go right back to sleep. Anything exciting happen tonight? You know I have to live vicariously through you since I have a boring desk job.”

“I can’t believe you can wake up from a dead sleep and form the word vicariously,” he said with a chuckle. “I can barely remember my own name before I have at least two cups of coffee.”

“I’m multi-talented. So?” I prodded as he sat on the edge of the bed and removed his shoes and socks. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Let’s see... exciting happenings in the security office...” he mused. “Oh yeah. Joe tried to write me up for being late.”

“What?” I cried, leaning up on my elbow as Mario went into the bathroom, leaving the door cracked a little so we could still talk. It was strange how comfortable we’d grown with each other in less than a week. “You left here thirty minutes before your shift started.”

“Yep,” he said loudly when he cranked up the shower. “I got there and clocked in early before making my circuit around the grounds. He came in and thought I wasn’t there yet. Already had the paperwork all filled out when I returned, but then he had to eat crow when I showed him my login on the timesheet. Hold on. Getting in the shower.”

From my vantage point, I had a prime view of the back of his naked body when he stepped into the huge, teal-blue-tiled shower. It’s possible I ogled a tad, even though it was only a sliver. But a sliver was all I needed to kick my fantasies into overdrive.

Mario stepped from the shower, and my eyes took their time drifting downward, enjoying the sight of his wet, muscular body. If the man was a dream completely dry, he was a beautiful delusion directly out of the shower.

He was widest through the shoulders and chest, his dark skin glistening with the water dripping down his firm body. I remembered the way his chest hair felt against my nipples, the slight roughness stimulating them to tingle,

hard peaks. My hand involuntarily went beneath the fabric of my pajamas to my left breast, squeezing and pinching the little bud. But it wasn't enough.

I needed his hands. His fingers. He was the only one that could bring me the kind of bliss I'd been craving for so long. The man knew his way around a female body, and he shared that knowledge in the most carnal way possible.

My gaze lowered to his abdomen, fully appreciating each hill and valley carved into his caramel skin. My tongue ached to trace each hard-carved line. And then I would move lower... lower... to the promised land.

Heavy balls hung between his thick thighs. I'd never been particularly enamored of a man's testicles, but Mario had a pair worth staring at. Firm. Round. Full of little babies that he'd admitted wanting to put inside me.

As I watched, the smooth head of his cock inched closer to me as he hardened under my inspection. It was like watching a very naughty 3-D movie. He lengthened and swelled beautifully without even touching himself, and that made my head swim.

He was hard because of me.

My eyes lifted, slowly retracing their previous path because, why not? It was quite a path. When I finally reached his face, I saw everything I needed to in the set of his jaw and the fire in his eyes.

We both wanted the same thing. Him on top of me, inside me, pumping furiously until we both lost ourselves in the pleasure.

"Anna." His voice was so deep and delicious, I could practically feel the vibrations of it between my legs.

That's right, big boy. Say my name.

"Anna?" he said again, though this time it sounded like more of a question. And then I realized... I was no longer in Fantasy Land.

Mario was actually out of the shower. He was actually facing me. And—

holy hell— he was *actually* watching me ogle him like a fucking pervert.

Plus, to add insult to my horndog injury, his eyes dropped to my chest... where I was still pulling and pinching at my nipple beneath my shirt.

I popped off with the only excuse that came to mind as to why I was fondling myself. “I was just checking for, um, chafing.”

His eyes were locked on my breast where, for some reason, I was still engaging in some very indulgent nipple play. *Stop it, Taz! Christ!* I pulled my hand from my shirt and tugged the covers up over my chest.

“You find anything, or would you like some help?”

“Nope. No. Nothing to see here. The tits are great.”

“I can’t say I disagree,” he said, walking toward me, one unhurried step at a time, a slice of his body visible in the gap between the door and the doorframe.

It may be worth mentioning that the man was still entirely naked, and the best parts were gloriously framed in that gap. *Framed penis, anyone? Maybe the Louvre could pop a painting of Mario’s exquisite cock right up there beside the Mona Lisa. Bet her eyes would shift in that direction. And her smile would undoubtedly widen.*

My addled, insane thoughts halted when Mario reached the door and inched it open, graciously granting me a full frontal view of his delectable body as he propped one veiny forearm on the doorframe. His big dick was still hard. I hadn’t dreamed that part.

“Anything else you need help with?” His voice was low and gritty, his implication clear.

My body was screaming *yes!* *We need all the help we can get over here!* while my heart was wagging one pitiful finger at me, reminding me of what

happened last time I indulged in this man. Rather, the *aftermath* of what happened last time.

My heart won out, reaching up and taking my head in her firm grasp and shaking it from side to side.

He looked disappointed, if I wasn't mistaken, but he gave me a short nod and licked his bottom lip. The lighter pink of his tongue sliding against the darker pink of that lip had even my heart reconsidering her previous position on his offer.

When his teeth sunk into that pliant flesh, I slammed my eyelids shut so hard, I was sure I had broken them. I kept them in that position until I heard him re-enter the bedroom. One of them cracked open and was relieved—and maybe a tiny bit disappointed—that Mario was now wearing a pair of dark-blue boxer briefs.

He stopped directly in front of me, and what was at eye level in my prone position made wetness pool in my panties. He was still erect behind the thin fabric of his underwear, and I somehow managed to lift my eyes from the sight until I was staring directly at his smirk.

“I’m curious about something,” he said, running a thick finger over the silkiness covering my shoulder.

Me too. Do you still taste as good as you look? Will that thing still fit? Can you crack a walnut with those thighs?

“What?”

“Are these the only pajamas you own, or do you have a drawer full of these exact ones?”

“Oh, um, there was a packing mishap. I usually sleep in big, comfy T-shirts, but they somehow all disappeared from my suitcase while Gram and I were having a tequila-shooting party in my living room.”

His eyebrows narrowed, and I explained. “Bristol, the *master packer* offered to arrange my suitcases for me. She packed some other stuff to sleep in, but it was all... well, none of it was exactly decent.” I could feel my cheeks turning a bright shade of pink as he smiled and turned to stride across the room, pulling a dark-gray T-shirt from the top drawer of his dresser. He dropped it on the bed near my head.

“You can wear this if you want. I have plenty.”

I rolled my lips inward and nodded. “Thank you.”

As he walked around the bed, he commented, “I see you made some additions to the pillow obstruction.”

Before I went to bed last night, I’d added three more pillows, forming a double-stacked wall between us. “I thought it needed additional fortification since you can’t seem to stay on your side.”

He chuckled, and I felt the mattress dip as he crawled in and laid down. “It’s not me with the problem, sweetheart. You’re always on my side in the morning.”

He was right, but I wasn’t about to admit that. Every morning this week, when I woke up to get ready for work, I was on Mario’s side of the bed. Wrapped in his arms to be specific. The pillows had been flung—by whom, I didn’t know—to the floor at the end of the bed.

“Just admit you’re a cuddle bunny, Diaz. There’s no shame in that game.”

“Whatever,” he replied, but I could hear the smile in his voice. I couldn’t see it, of course, because of all the damn pillows separating us, but I knew it was there.

As I turned off the lamp, he left me with one parting thought in the darkness. “For the record, Anna, I don’t mind indecent sleepwear.”

Oh jeez.



It was day one post-Penis-Ogling-Nipple-Fondling Apocalypse, and once again, I woke up with my back pressed snugly against Mario's front. No pillow wall in sight. Add in the fact that my nose was buried deeply in the folds of his T-shirt, and this day was off to a rip-roaringly humiliating start.

After taking one last delicious sniff, I carefully folded the shirt and pushed it to the edge of the bed where Mario had placed it early this morning.

When I tried to move away, he grumbled something in his sleep and scooped me even closer to him, which I hadn't thought was even possible. "Gotta go to the bathroom," I whispered, and he grumbled again and removed his arm.

Sitting up, I reached for my leg and began the process of putting it on in the semi-dark room.

"You can turn the light on," came a voice from behind me.

"Nah, it's okay. I could do this in my sleep." He reached around me and flicked it on anyway before resting his head on my pillow and closing his eyes. I resisted the urge to smooth his ruffled hair, and instead told him, "Why don't you sleep for a bit longer. It's only eight-thirty. I can make breakfast and wake you in an hour."

"Mmhmm," he hummed, pressing his face further into the pillowy softness. By the time I finished in the bathroom, he was snoring softly, so I grabbed my phone from the charger and turned off the lamp.

It rang as soon as I got into the living room, and I answered immediately. "Hello?"

“Hey, baby sister,” came the deep reply, and I broke into a happy smile.

“Chayton! Hey, I’m so glad to hear from you.” Even though he was a huge pain in my ass, I loved my oldest brother more than anyone in the world.

“Figured I should call since you haven’t called me in almost a week.”

“Sorry. It’s been crazy busy here. I told you I was on an undercover assignment, right?” I asked, settling on the soft couch.

“Ah, yes. Your very mysterious assignment. How’s it going?”

“I’m posing as a PA, so pretty boring desk work most of the time, though my partner and I are going to a gun range today.”

“That sounds fun. Tell me about your partner.” I rolled my eyes at his not-so-casual inquiry. “And stop rolling your eyes at me.”

“His name is Mario, and everything is going fine. That’s all you need to know.”

“I need his phone number.”

“Chayton! No! You can’t interfere with my job,” I scolded.

“I’m not going to interfere. I promise. Since you’re out of town, I need an emergency contact number for you. That’s all,” he cajoled. “What if something happened to Mom or Dad, and I couldn’t get in touch with you because your phone is dead or something?”

Guilt instantly flooded my gut, and I breathed out a loud sigh. “Okay, hold on a sec,” I told him, quickly sending Mario’s contact information before putting the phone back to my ear. “How are the parentals anyway? I talked to them for a few minutes earlier this week, and they said Dad’s health was good?”

“Yeah, he’s actually taking his blood pressure medicine now, so I feel a lot better about it.”

“Okay, good. That makes me feel better too. You know they don’t tell me

much because they don't want me to worry."

"Uh-huh. They're so overprotective sometimes."

"Hello kettle. Meet the pot," I cracked, earning me a small chuckle from my brother.

"So, you're in Malibu, right?"

"Yep. It's so nice here. We're staying right on the beach, and the waves are so calming. I can't wait to get my foot wet."

He laughed at my dumb foot joke. "You always did like the ocean. Are you staying in a hotel?"

"No, Mario and I have a small house," I blurted before I could censor myself.

"Together?" Chayton snapped, and I dropped my chin to my chest.

"Yes, Chay. We're undercover as a couple, so we're staying in the same house."

I could hear heavy breathing, and then, "Fuck! I don't like this, Tazanna. Not one little bit. Do you have separate rooms?"

"Chayton, that is absolutely none of your business."

"So you don't. Jesus. Is he at least sleeping on the couch or something?" I didn't answer because I hated lying to my brother. "In the same fucking bed? Are you kidding me right now?"

"No," I hissed, "I'm not kidding you right now. In case you've forgotten, I'm twenty-seven and can sleep wherever the hell I want. But just so you'll shut the hell up, absolutely nothing is going on between us." *Except for me watching him shower and fantasizing about more. Other than that though...*

"Your boss really shouldn't have put you in this position, Taz. Anything could happen. He could be a psycho."

"You really think Shark would employ a psycho and then send me away

with him, Chayton? Seriously?”

“No, I guess not,” he mumbled. My brother had met my boss once when he came to Texas to visit me, and he really liked and respected the man. Everyone did.

“Anyway, I’m using one of your old tricks. Remember our trip to Florida when I was five and you were nine?”

“The one where the hotel messed up our room reservation, and we had to share a bed?”

“That’s the one.”

Then it hit him. “Ohhhh, you made a pillow wall. Good job, Razzmatazz!”

I didn’t mention that so far, the damn wall had been completely ineffective. “You were so pissed that you had to share a bed with your little sister,” I said, snorting out a laugh.

“Well fuck. You kicked like a kangaroo. I had to protect myself.”

“And if it makes you feel any better, Mario works nights, and I work days, so we’re hardly in that room together at all.”

“That does make me feel a little better. I can’t stand the thought of my baby sister in the same bed with a man.”

“You do realize I’ve had sex before, right Chay?”

“I didn’t hear that! Lalalalala! Didn’t hear a thing. Gotta go... love you... bye.”

Shaking my head at his ridiculousness, I tossed my phone on the couch and headed to the kitchen to make breakfast.

CHAPTER 23



“WOW, SHE’S REALLY SOMETHING,” Cole said from beside me as Anna dove to the ground, rolled beneath the wooden obstacle, and then flattened herself on her belly to take the final shot. She fucking nailed it. Of course.

We walked over as she laid down the rifle and pulled herself to her feet. “How’d I do?” she asked immediately, brushing dirt from her hands.

“Really good, babe,” I told her, leaning down to give her a soft kiss on the cheek.

“Did I beat your time?”

“Not quite. You were nine seconds off.”

A frown creased her gorgeous face, and Cole jumped in. “But the course was a little muddier today than it was when Mario ran it. If it hadn’t rained on Thursday, I think you would have done it.” He patted her affectionately on the shoulder. “You’ll come back and try again, won’t you?”

“Sure,” she said, giving him a little half-smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Seriously, *cariño*. You absolutely killed it. That crossbow shot was way better than mine.”

“Really?” she asked, perking up a little.

“Definitely. You were dead-ass center, and mine was a half inch to the right.”

“Come on. Let’s go get some lunch,” Cole said, slapping his hands together once.

“Hold up. Let me clean Anna off a bit,” I said, turning her and picking some grass from her long braid before brushing the dirt from her back. I took my time swiping her butt, and she twisted her head around to lift her eyebrows at me.

“I’m pretty sure you got it all,” she said, a wry grin on her face.

“Just making sure,” I said, giving her a nice, hard swat on her spectacular ass.

“Did you just spank me?” Anna asked, turning around with her hands on her hips.

“Uh-huh. And there’s more where that came from.”

Cole smirked and politely averted his eyes as I winked at my pretty *wife*.

“Watch yourself, Diaz.”

“You watch *yourself*, Diaz,” I retorted, smacking her butt again, causing her to jump and squeal. “And you know you liked it.”

“Mario,” she hissed, but she was giggling as she tilted the top of her head toward Cole and widened her eyes at me in warning.

“I’m just gonna go tell the restaurant that we’ll need a table,” he said, ambling toward the main building with his hands in his pockets. “You two

take your time.”

Since everything that had transpired early this morning, I was viewing my relationship with Anna in a different light. I’d thought that my feelings were unrequited, but the want in her eyes as she’d checked me out told a different story.

Maybe it was simply lust, but then again, maybe it was more. I was certainly feeling more, and I wanted to act on it, but I needed to take it slow. Show more and more of the affection I wanted to shower on her, even when we weren’t putting on a show for other people.

No time like the present.

Stepping into her space, I held the curve of her hips with my hands, resisting the urge to squeeze. “I’m really fucking proud of you, Anna. You were fantastic out there today.”

She looked pleased by my praise, her teeth biting into that dark-pink bottom lip. “Thanks,” she said a bit shyly.

“And you looked completely hot doing it. I think you gave Cole a boner.” She was wearing black cargo pants and a fitted black tee, and she had a smudge of dirt on her cheek. She’d never looked sexier to me.

A quick burst of laughter spilled from her mouth, and she smacked me on the chest. “I did not.”

“You gave me one.”

The smile faded from her face, and I thought maybe my playful teasing had gone too far, but then she lifted on her toes and pressed her lips against mine.

God. Yes! This was the first time she’d initiated a kiss when we didn’t have an audience, and I wrapped my arms fully around her as she encircled my neck with hers. The kiss was tender and sweet, but there was some fire bubbling deep. I wanted to bring that fire to the surface. Sliding one hand

down to her ass, I snugged her against my growing erection as my other hand cupped the back of her head so I could devour her mouth.

When her tongue slipped into my mouth, my goddamn knees almost buckled, and I sucked softly on it, drawing a moan from her.

“Shit,” she mumbled, pulling back after a few seconds. “Sorry about that. I’m just over here breaking one of our rules.”

“Sweetheart, those are your rules, not mine.” I brushed my thumb just beneath the dirt on her cheek. I didn’t want to wipe it away. I kinda liked it there, a slight blemish against the perfection of her face. “I have absolutely no rules, okay? Zero. Nada. I’m down for anything. Whatever you want to do to me, I’m here for it without a single reservation. You should feel free to molest me at your will.”

She giggled at my rambling monologue and tugged playfully at my hair. “Don’t make fun of my rules. I need them.”

I knew. Because of me, she felt like she needed to keep some distance between us, and that made me feel like shit. I really needed to explain everything to her, but now wasn’t the time. Three men were approaching the course, joking with and insulting each other as they walked.

Looping an arm around her neck, I handed Anna her rifle and guided her back up to the main building, glaring at the men when they checked her out. She really did look badass dressed all in black and toting an M82.



“Anna, I hope this isn’t a sensitive subject, but I didn’t even realize you had a prosthetic until your pant leg rode up while you were crossing the bars,” Cole

said. “You did remarkably well considering that.”

She nodded as she chewed a bite of her brie and prosciutto sandwich. “Yeah, it’s been about six years. I, um…” I could tell she was floundering to remember her backstory, so I stepped in.

“She lost it in a car accident.”

He shook his head sadly. “Dude, that sucks. I thought maybe you were in the Navy too, like your hubby.”

“No, I wasn’t. I’m actually an Army fan though,” she said, picking up the narrative as if she hadn’t missed a beat. “Makes it interesting in our house come football season.” Her eyebrows wiggled as she took another bite, and Cole let out a loud guffaw.

“I can imagine. My mom is a USC fan, and my dad grew up loving UCLA. My siblings and I used to find anywhere else to be when those two teams played. Our house was like a battleground, constant pranking going on the entire weekend.”

“Shit. I can imagine. Are they still married?” I asked.

Cole waved around his sandwich, some kind of vegetarian thing with sprouts poking out from the edges, and nodded. “Thirty years and still going strong, so don’t let football come between you.” He grinned and said, “I’m sure you won’t. I’ve never seen a more solid couple than the two of you. You were made for each other,” before taking a big bite of the disgusting-looking sandwich.

Something thumped hard in my chest, and I reached over and slipped a stray piece of hair behind Anna’s ear. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Two hours later, Anna and I had finished our long lunch, visited the gun store—including a mini-tour of Cole’s workshop—and were back in the white SUV.

“It was really nice of Ella to provide us with a vehicle,” I said, glancing over at Anna as I drove. “I had been thinking about renting a car so we could go out and explore on the weekends.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, staring distantly out the side window, her hand propped beneath her chin.

“And it was great of her to give us each a million dollars,” I said, testing to see if she was really listening.

“Yeah, that was nice,” she uttered. *Nope. Not listening at all.*

“Anna, what’s wrong?”

Her head whipped around. “What? Why do you think something’s wrong?”

“Because you’re lost in your thoughts. What’s going on?”

“I almost fucked up back there,” she said with a long, frustrated sigh, her hand massaging one temple. “I nearly blurted out that I’d lost my leg due to a roadside bomb. If you hadn’t stepped in... What if we’d been in front of someone at the compound and I said the wrong thing?”

“Hey, it’s okay,” I told her soothingly, reaching over to link my fingers with hers. “I almost did the same thing the other day when one of the other guards was talking about his family. It was right on the tip of my tongue to mention that I had two sisters, and that’s not what my cover story says.”

“Really?” she asked, hope dawning in her brown eyes.

“Yes really. And you recovered so well. I just had to say one sentence, and you were completely back on track.”

“Thanks for saving my ass,” she said, a tiny smile shining through.

“I promise I’ll make anything to do with your ass my top priority.”

“God you’re incorrigible,” she said, rolling her eyes at me. But she was grinning, and that’s all I cared about.

Rubbing my thumb along the edge of her hand, I changed the subject. “So

we've got dinner at the main house tomorrow night, huh? And we'll get to meet Ella's family and her boyfriend."

"Yep, and we have to dress up. I didn't really want to wear my business attire, but luckily, Gram and Bristol talked me into buying a kind of dressy outfit for an occasion like this. Bristol was Ella's stylist for about six months, so her knowledge really came in handy."

"I can't wait to see you in it," I told her. "I know you'll look beautiful."

Her skin flushed to a dark pink over her high cheekbones. "Thanks, Mario. I hope so."

Baby, I know so...



I hadn't been wrong. When Anna walked out of the bedroom, I had to adjust my tie because the damn thing was suddenly choking me. She looked absolutely radiant in a red satin top with thin straps that bared her shoulders and positively glowed against her dark skin. She'd paired it with black wide-legged pants that hugged her hips and waist perfectly.

"Holy smokes, Anna. I'm the luckiest fucking fake husband in the entire world. You look gorgeous. More than gorgeous."

She'd applied a little makeup, which she really didn't need on her flawless skin, but it looked good on her. "Thanks," she said with a beaming smile. "Does this shirt look okay tucked in? Because I can untuck it, but then I'd have to iron it so it wouldn't be wrinkled on the bottom."

Stepping closer to her, I encircled her slim waist with my hands. They almost reached all the way around her. "I like it like this. It shows off your

curves.”

She seemed pleased with that answer. “Oh. Well. Okay then. You look really good too. I hardly ever see you in a tie.” Her hands reached up and straightened the red material. “And it matches my top.”

“Almost like we planned it,” I said with a chuckle, leaning my head down to kiss the corner of her mouth. “Are you ready to go?”

She nodded, and I took her hand as we walked up to the big house.

“Anna and Mario!” Ella squealed when she opened the door and gave us each a hug. “You two look fab-u-lous. Did you dress alike on purpose?” I was also wearing a black shirt and pants, so we did look like a matching couple.

“Of course,” Anna piped up. “And you look stunning, Ella.” The singer was outfitted in a simple but elegant emerald-green dress that did indeed look great on her. But she was nowhere close to as beautiful as my wife. *Pretend wife*, I reminded myself.

“Come on into the living room. I want you to meet Lawrence and my family.”

Lawrence Wallace was Ella’s longtime boyfriend, and we’d already done a deep dive into his background because it wasn’t unusual at all for a victim’s significant other to be the culprit. So far, we’d come up with zilch on the man.

Ella introduced us, and we shook hands. Lawrence was maybe an inch shorter than me and had a slight build, hazel eyes, and brown hair. “It’s so nice to meet you both. Ella has told me a lot about you, and we’re very happy to welcome you to the staff.”

Hopefully, for her sake, Ella didn’t tell him *everything* about us. Only the singer, her now-on-maternity-leave-PA, Claudia, and Joe were supposed to

know Anna's and my true identities.

We chatted with the couple for a few minutes, and nothing jumped out as a red flag against Lawrence. In fact, he seemed like a very supportive boyfriend.

"And who is this?" a petite blond asked, joining our circle as Lawrence excused himself to go to the bar.

Ella hugged and pressed a kiss to the woman's cheek. With their blonde hair and matching blue eyes, it was obvious the two were related, and I assumed the newcomer was Ella's sister.

She confirmed it when she said, "Sis, this is Anna and Mario Diaz. They're new on staff. Guys, this is my sister, Emily." The two smiled fondly at each other.

"What do you two do here?" Emily asked us.

"I'm taking Claudia's place," Anna informed her. "And my handsome husband is on the security team." She smiled up at me, and I draped an arm around her waist and tucked her into my side.

"Em is one of my backup singers," Ella said proudly. "She has a beautiful voice."

"Oh, stop it," Emily said, bumping her sister with her hip. "You're the superstar here."

"You're both my superstars," a man who was probably in his fifties said, coming up behind the women and placing an arm around each of their shoulders. He shared their eye color, though his hair was a few shades lighter than their pale blonde locks.

"Hey, Dad," Emily said, standing on tiptoe to kiss his jaw, and Ella followed suit. After we were introduced to Enoch Ervin, Iris came in to announce that dinner was ready.

Ella sat at the head of the long dining table with Lawrence on her right and Anna on her left. I was directly beside Anna, and I edged my chair closer until our thighs were touching, earning me a quick look and a contented smile from my pretend wife.

Iris and another woman brought salads on a large tray and placed one pale-blue crystal bowl in front of each of us. “Everyone dig in!” Ella announced. “Guillermo’s seafood salad is to die for.”

Her boyfriend leaned over and whispered something in her ear, and she giggled.

“This looks so good,” Anna commented, forking up some salad and taking a bite.

“It’s my favorite,” Ella said, picking up her own fork and lifting a bit of the greens with seafood on top to her lips.

Everyone around the table gasped when Anna slapped the fork from the singer’s hand and shouted, “No!”

“Anna?” I jumped from my chair, alarm bells immediately going off when Anna grabbed Ella’s wrist to prevent her from reaching for the fork that had clattered to the table.

“What the hell?” Enoch said loudly, but I’m not sure Anna heard it or the other anxious murmurs coming from around the table.

She swung her head around to me and said, “Get that bowl away from her. There’s lobster in the salad.”

CHAPTER 24



THE AFTERMATH OF THE attempt on Ella's life was pure chaos, especially when she passed out. I caught her before she hit the ground, but everyone in the room was crowding around, yelling, and trying to see what was going on.

Luckily, her loss of consciousness wasn't because she came in contact with the lobster meat; she passed out due to fear.

After the police and medical personnel were cleared from the house, Ella was tucked safely in her bed after being administered a sedative. Her personal doctor had been called and rushed over, giving her a thorough check-up, even though she'd already been checked out by paramedics. Lawrence decided to stay over and was with her now.

"I feel bad for Guillermo," I told Mario as we walked back into our bungalow. "The man was bawling like a baby, and it was obvious he had

nothing to do with that lobster being in the salad. Did you see his face when we told him?”

“Yeah, he was completely shocked. The rest of the staff agreed that he was always adamant about no lobster products—not even fake lobster—being allowed in his kitchen. But it is his kitchen, so I think it was the smart thing to do to put him and the rest of the kitchen workers on administrative leave.”

Pursing my lips, I nodded. “I know, but it still seems unfair. At least they’re getting paid until this all gets straightened out. I’ll get started on finding an entirely new kitchen staff tomorrow. I’ll get Tank to handle the background checks before I hire anyone.”

“Good girl,” he said, and all the blood in my body migrated south at those two little words. “Until then, maybe you can be the chef.” A smartass smirk spread across his lips as he sat down at our dining room table.

“Kiss my ass, Diaz. My cooking isn’t that bad.”

Okay, it actually was *that bad*. The eggs I’d cooked this morning had the approximate consistency of a rubber ball, and I’d burned the bottoms of the biscuits. And we’re not even going to talk about the disaster that was my attempt at gravy.

“The bacon wasn’t too horrible.”

“That’s because it was microwave bacon. All I had to do was put it in and set the timer.”

“Well you pushed those buttons just right, baby. I’m so proud of you.” Mario lifted my hand to his lips and kissed, his brown eyes holding a heavy dose of humor when they met mine.

“Stop patronizing me, you jerk,” I said with a laugh, pulling my hand away and shoving his shoulder. “I’m going to change clothes and get comfortable.”

When I came back a few minutes later wearing a pair of running shorts and

Mario's T-shirt with U.S. Navy in block yellow print across the chest, an appreciative smile formed on his mouth behind that dark beard.

He had removed his tie and rolled his sleeves up to reveal the finest pair of forearms I'd ever seen. Someone should seriously write a song about those thick arms. *What rhymes with veiny?* Maybe I'd ask Ella when she was feeling better. She was a phenomenal songwriter.

Um, yeah. Ella? If it wouldn't be too much trouble, would you mind helping me with a song about my pretend husband's arms? Should I put the part about the scattering of black hair at the beginning of the tune or save that till the chorus?

"What's so funny?" Mario asked as I took the seat beside him.

I hadn't realized I was smiling so big. "Nothing, just amusing myself in my head. You got the footage pulled up?"

"Yes. It's a shame that there are no cameras actually inside the kitchen. Then this whole mystery would be over. This is from the hall leading to that room though."

He cued it up, and we watched, taking notes as people entered and left the professional-grade kitchen. "Damn, it's like Grand Central Station in there," Mario mused.

"Okay, so we've got Guillermo, the three other kitchen workers, Emily, Joe, Enoch, Mrs. Allen, and Lawrence all going into the kitchen at some point since the staff started dinner prep at four this afternoon. One of them had to have slipped the lobster into the seafood mixture." I paused as another man came into view. "Who is that guy?"

"That's Timothy Freeman, another one of the security guys. I've only worked with him once, but he was a nice enough guy." We watched as Timothy left the kitchen a few minutes later with a small tray of sandwiches.

“Fuck. There’s nothing suspicious in any of their movements. No one is carrying a bag marked *Deadly Lobster*.”

“It’s never that easy,” I mused. “Let’s check this list against the one from the first incident a few weeks ago.”

“Right. Good idea. I’ll grab the folder from the safe in our room.” It no longer startled me when he called it our room. I was slowly growing used to the idea that we shared a bedroom.

After retrieving the folder, Mario heated us up some leftover soup from yesterday since no one got anything to eat tonight. He set a bowl and a bottle of beer in front of each of us.

“Now, refresh me on the first threat,” he said, eating a large spoonful of vegetables and beef.

“Hmm, the note was sent by mail and mentioned what Ella was wearing when she left the house to go to a studio for a video shoot. She left from the enclosed garage wearing casual clothes and changed into her costume in the limo, so the only people who knew what she was wearing were people inside this house.” I took a long sip of my beer and added, “Or Arnold, the driver.”

“And he was off today and nowhere near the kitchen, so we can tentatively rule him out. Who else is on both lists?”

My index fingers ran down each record, comparing as I went. “Shit. Everyone. Lawrence had spent the night and left at the same time she did. Emily was in the limo with her sister, and Enoch had lunch with them that day. All the same household staff were on duty. No, wait. Joe wasn’t on duty the day of the first incident.”

“But he lives upstairs and has access to the cameras, so he could potentially have seen her leaving in those clothes.”

I thought Mario was being silly for suspecting Joe. The person tasked with

Ella's safety seemed like the last person who would threaten her, but I left his name on the potential list anyway, just to be safe.

Taking a bite of soup, I said, "Run through motives with me, one by one."

Mario took over the list. "First of all, we have Joe." I suppressed an eye roll. Of course he would start with the one person he hated. I took another drink, feeling the tingle of bubbles as they slid down my throat.

"Motive?"

A concentration line formed between his eyebrows as he thought about it. "None that I can think of. Same with Timothy. Sending threats to the person they're supposed to be protecting would only make them look inept."

My eyes locked on his lips when they wrapped around the bottle. He tilted his head back, and his throat bobbed when he swallowed. *Why is that so sexy?* I shook off the thought and managed to regain my concentration on the case.

"Agreed. What about the dad? Do you think it's like a Britney Spears situation since Enoch used to be her manager until she hit the big time? Then he got all pissy because he wasn't directly involved in all her business?"

"Good thought," Mario said, marking a star beside Enoch Ervin's name. "But shit. What does he really have to be mad about? Have you seen the house that Ella had built for him? It's as big as Axel and Blaire's home."

"I don't know. Maybe he was skimming off the top, and now that he's not the manager, he lost access to his bonuses," I said, doing air quotes around the last word.

"Fuck, that's smart, Anna. I'll have Tank look into Ella's finances while Enoch was in charge. If there's anything suspicious, he'll find it. What about Emily?"

"Same thing. She's living in a house provided by her sister. She has a cushy

job and everything she could ever want, including a brand new Porsche.”

“Yeah, I don’t see her being the one.”

“And it’s a little hard to believe that one of the staff is doing it. Have you seen their salaries? Ella is super generous.”

“What if one of them is being blackmailed by someone outside the house for information?”

“That’s not a bad theory, though the blackmail would have to be pretty serious for one of them to basically try and poison Ella tonight. I could see passing information, but murder?” A shiver ran down my spine. “She could be living in that house with a fucking attempted murderer.”

“I’ll get Tank on the staff too. I mean, he’s done the basics on everyone, but I’ll see if he can hack their phones and find any suspicious phone calls or texts.”

“It sucks that they have to have their privacy violated like that.” When Mario started to speak, I held up my hand. “I know. We’ve gotta do everything in our power to find out who’s doing this, but I still hate it.”

“Last on the list is Lawrence, the boyfriend.”

“I didn’t...” A yawn interrupted me, and I covered my mouth. “Sorry, I didn’t get any type of vibe from him. He has his own career as a lawyer, so he’s not completely dependent on Ella, though if they get married...”

“They’ve been together for years. What if she wants him to sign a prenup, and he’s pissed about it? Or one of them cheated? Or they’re having problems they don’t show to anyone else? It could be a million things.”

I nodded and yawned again. “Leave him on the list.”

Mario rose and took our dishes into the kitchen, and I laid my forehead against the cool surface of the table. *Just for a second to rest my eyes.*

I was being lifted by strong arms, and I let out a sleepy whimper in protest.

“Shhh, I’ve got you, *cariño*.” Gentle lips kissed my own, and it was sweet, so very sweet. My arms looped lazily around his neck, and I snuggled into his firm chest as the sway of movement lulled me back to sleep.

My eyes squinted open a crack when the lamp flicked on. I was on the bed, and Mario was kneeling between my legs, rolling down the sleeve on my right thigh.

“What’r’y’doin’?” I slurred.

“Taking your leg off so you can sleep,” he replied, his voice soft, and I tried to sit up.

“I can...” A hand pressed between my breasts and pushed me back to the mattress.

“Let me take care of you, *amor*.”

I resisted the urge—barely—to spread my legs and tell him exactly how he could take care of me.

Apparently sleepy me is a bit of a whore.

Once my prosthetic was removed, my heart rate ratcheted up when thick fingers grasped the waistband of my running shorts and slid them down my legs. He paused at my knees, and I dragged my eyelids open to find Mario’s face an inch from my black lace panties, his eyes closed, and his nostrils flaring as he inhaled... *me*.

A flood of wetness gushed from my pussy, and as if he could sense—or smell?—it, his eyes snapped open and met mine. Rising slowly above me like a big, sexy mountain, his gaze held me pinned to the bed as he removed my shorts the rest of the way.

He unbuttoned his shirt, and *dear sweet Jesus*, his muscled torso came into view, shoulders rolling and bunching as he pulled the shirt off and tossed it aside. When he reached for his belt, I almost climbed that mountain.

Calm down, dumbass. This is a road you do not want to go down. Again.

So I closed my eyes, blocking out the sight of him, though I could still smell the scent of his cologne. And his skin. His manly, slightly salty skin. Slowing my breathing to something resembling a sleepy and not-turned-on-at-all woman, I relaxed down into the mattress.

The bed shifted, and then I was being turned on my side and the flat pillow was placed between my legs. *Why does he have to be so damned doting and thoughtful? It makes me want to let down all my walls and just...*

“The pillow wall,” I mumbled, and Mario chuckled as he climbed into bed behind me.

“Fuck the goddamn pillow wall,” he said, wrapping his arm around me as he plastered himself to my back. “We’re going to end up like this anyway. Might as well enjoy it all night.”

I’d like to enjoy you all night, I thought and then inwardly cringed.

No, no! Bad Taz!

His hand wasn’t helping my resolve. My shirt was riding high, and that roughness was resting against the bare skin of my belly. His thumb moved. At least, I thought it did. It was just a ghost of a touch that was still enough to have me squeezing my legs against the pillow between them.

Mario moved my braid out of the way and nuzzled the back of my neck with his nose. “Relax, Anna. No matter how much I want it to, nothing’s going to happen until we get some things out in the open, and we’re not doing that while you’re sleepy and tipsy from one beer.”

No matter how much he wants it to? What the hell is that supposed to mean?

It means he’s horny, as evidenced by the steel rod resting against your ass. He just wants sex.

Well, that's a big fat... maybe? Not right now?

No! It's definitely a no.

“I’m not tipsy,” I muttered, and his breath warmed my neck as he laughed softly.

“Go to sleep, Anna,” he commanded, and I closed my eyes, shut down my thoughts, and complied.

Like a good girl.

CHAPTER 25



IT HAD BEEN THREE weeks since the lobster incident, and we were no closer to finding out who had tried to poison Ella. No one on the list had raised any red flags, but Mario and I both liked the blackmail scenario since no one seemed to have any personal motive to threaten her. We'd asked Tank to check bank records for all of Ella's staff, not just the ones on our short list.

That included Arnold the driver, the house manager, and two housekeepers, Alondra and Esmerelda.

I'd befriended the women when they would come into the office to empty the trash, and they were quiet and kind. Both Hispanic, so I conversed in my broken Spanish, and they indulged me.

I took French in high school, and found that I enjoyed learning a new language, so I'd started learning Spanish through an online course about a year ago.

And no, the timing of that wasn't lost on me.

I tried to pretend it was simply personal enrichment, learning something new, but the truth is that hearing those smooth, sexy words from Mario's lips last year made me want to learn more of the language.

“What are you thinking about?”

I turned my head toward Mario as we walked together, holding hands. He always held my hand now, even when no one else was looking.

“I was thinking that we've been here over a month, and this is the first time we've gotten to go to the beach.”

“Well it rained the past two weekends, so we really didn't have the chance. Beautiful weather today though.” He glanced down and then slowed to a stop, lowering his aviators as he bent to look at my prosthetic. “Is that...”

“No, it's not my regular leg. This is my test leg, the one I was initially fitted with before my final prosthetic was done. They gave it to me to use for going to the beach or the pool, to decrease wear and tear on my good one.”

He was quiet as he stood and began walking again. Finally he said, “You have to deal with a lot more than people think. I mean, I just assumed you get a prosthetic and then continue your life as usual, but being an amputee affects everything, doesn't it? Even something as simple as going to the beach.”

I was pretty impressed with his insight to be honest, and squeezed his hand. “This is normal for me now. Just like a diabetic having to adjust their diet. It was hard to adapt at first, but I'm used to it. It's not that big a deal.”

A lump rose and fell in his throat as he swallowed. “I think it's a big deal. I think you're amazing and so fucking strong, Anna.”

“Thank you for saying that, but I don't really see myself like that.”

He stopped our forward movement and stepped in front of me, one of his hands resting lightly on my cheek. “I do. I didn't realize what you go through on a daily basis, but I do now that we've lived together. If I have to go to the

bathroom in the middle of the night, I get up and go. You have to strap on a whole new appendage.”

His eyes searched my face, and the look was so intense, I couldn't bear to look directly at him. My chin dipped, but he lifted it right back up with his thumb, and his eyes compelled my attention. “And I've never once heard you complain.”

“I complain inside my head,” I said, dragging my teeth over my bottom lip.

His smile was soft and sexy as he freed my lip and bent to kiss it. “You can complain to me any time. I don't mind.”

“Okay, but you have no idea what you're asking for, Diaz. My brain can be pretty whiny.”

He laughed and patted me on the bottom. “Enough serious talk. Let's go have a little fun.”

I looked up to see that we were right on the edge of Ella's private beach, and I took off at a dead run toward the ocean. “Last one in is a rotten egg,” I yelled, dropping my towel in the sand and stripping off my long cover-up.

“Dammit, woman. That's not fair!” Mario called, and I could hear his footsteps pounding the sand behind me as he laughed. He reached the water a split second behind me and picked me up by the waist before tossing me into the deeper water.

I squealed and then clamped my mouth shut just before my head went under. Spluttering as I surfaced, I looked around for Mario but didn't see him. A smile crept across my face. I was so fucking happy that he felt comfortable enough to be rough and playful with me. Most people treated me like a delicate little injured person, but Mario just treated me like a *person*.

I spun in a circle, a little concerned when I still didn't find him.

“Mar— aggggghhh!” I screamed when something grabbed my leg from

beneath me. “Damn you,” I laughed when he popped up from the water with a huge grin on his face. “I thought I was being attacked by a shark.”

“Nope,” he sang, swiping his face with his big hand. “You were being attacked by me.”

He didn’t mean it sexually—at least, I didn’t think he did—but everything beneath my bikini bottoms tightened deliciously. “I’m thinking that’s probably worse than a shark attack,” I said wryly.

“You may be right, but you’d definitely enjoy it a lot more.” His grin was slow and suggestive, and my nipples hardened at the memories that flooded my mind.

His mouth biting and sucking my ass cheeks. The animalistic way he fucked.

Yep, Mario Diaz was by far the most dangerous predator I’d ever encountered.

His eyes dropped to my chest, and I sank down into the water a little more to hide the evidence of my dirty thoughts. He’d been exceedingly more flirty with me the past couple of weeks, and I wasn’t sure how to feel about it, though I felt like my resolve was waning.

I was trying to be strong, but living day in and day out with a man who was so attentive—not to mention attractive—was slowly chipping away at my walls. Speaking of walls, the morning after we’d fallen asleep pressed together, I woke up to find the “bricks” of my pillow wall had been placed neatly back on the shelf in the closet.

Neither of us mentioned it, but the pillow barrier was now officially a thing of the past. I’d resigned myself to Mario spooning me when he returned from his night shifts. Not that it was all that much a hardship. In fact, I hadn’t gotten such restful sleep since before my injury.

Thank goodness I didn't have to reply to his *you'd definitely enjoy it a lot more* comment because a nice-sized wave rose up in front of me. "Wave!" I screamed happily, jumping toward it and holding my breath as it engulfed me. I loved the feeling of being surrounded by the ocean.

Until... *shit!* My legs were kicking furiously, but it felt strange. I couldn't reach the surface, and my lungs were beginning to burn. Cupping my hands, I used my upper body to propel myself upward until my face met clean, fresh air. I gratefully heaved in a couple of breaths, my arms and legs struggling to keep me afloat in the churning water.

Then I felt strong arms band around me from behind. "I got you, baby," he said against my ear, and my panic began to wane slightly. Another wave approached, this one thankfully smaller, and Mario kept me safely against his big body as we rode it up and then back down.

He tucked one arm beneath my breasts and used the other one to pull us into shallower waters. He and my other coworkers had been Navy SEALs, and those boys could swim like fish. Once we were out of the deep, he turned us to face each other and pulled my legs around his waist.

"Hold onto me," he demanded, and I had absolutely no problem with following that order. Admittedly, I was a bit shaken. I didn't like feeling out of control, but that's exactly how I'd felt a few seconds ago.

Allowing myself a moment of weakness, I clung to him, my face buried in his thick neck as I apologized over and over. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Shh, it's okay. You're okay, baby. I've got you," he said in answer to each of my declarations. His hand rubbed soothingly up and down my back as his other arm held me against him. Tight. Solid. Safe.

I coughed and then lifted my head to face him, feeling the need to apologize once again. "I'm sorry. I—"

“Would you please stop apologizing for almost drowning?” he snapped, though he was still comforting me with his hand stroking my back.

“I didn’t almost drown. I just... I lost control for a few seconds and... I got scared.” I whispered that last part, shame coloring my cheeks.

“Do you know how to swim, Anna?”

I laughed at that. “Yes, I was actually on my swim team in high school. I was a very strong swimmer. But I had two normal legs then.”

“Can you tell me what happened just now? Why were you struggling?”

“This is the first time I’ve swam in an ocean since my accident. I’ve been in pools lots of times and did fine.” My head shook back and forth. “I don’t know what happened, but my leg felt foreign or something. Maybe it’s the salt water.”

“Well, pools are calmer and more contained than a huge body of water. And there’s always a ledge nearby that you can grab onto.”

“Yes,” I breathed. “I think that was probably it. I guess I haven’t had enough practice swimming in water that deep with my prosthetic. Even in the deepest part of the pool, I can always get to the ledge pretty quickly.”

His face was solemn as his eyes bore into mine. “I’ll always be your ledge.” His voice was quiet, but the sincerity rang through loud and clear.

My heart turned over in my chest as my hands grasped Mario’s face. And I kissed him. Like *really* kissed him. When my tongue plunged between his parted lips, he groaned into my mouth, the sound rumbling down into my core.

“Fuck, Anna.”

Wrapping my braid around his hand, he tugged, changing the angle and taking the kiss deeper. I felt like I was drowning in him, like I couldn’t quite catch my breath, but the sensation was a hundred percent different from what

I'd experienced in the water. This was overwhelming in the very best of ways.

Mario's mouth was dominant and hungry, his tongue circling and caressing mine as his arms tightened around me. When he pulled back, I thought he'd had his fill, but he looked at my lips like a man who'd been starving for months before going back in for more.

This kiss though... it was slower. Coaxing and sweet.

I had walls in place—figuratively and literally—but this man was busting through them all like a big, sexy bull. And with his tongue doing very seductive things to my mouth, it was hard to remember why I had put them up in the first place.

The steel rod in his pants lengthened and hardened beneath me, and my hips felt the need to gift me with a sample. Rocking back and forth over him, my pussy came to life like she'd been in a sexual hibernation for a year. Which, I guess she had. The only action the poor girl had seen had been my vibrator.

My hands smoothed up his bare chest and over his shoulders, loving the feel of his damp, sizzling-hot skin beneath my fingertips. As one hand trailed up and down his upper spine, the other made its way into his thick, wet hair. I gave his big cock a deep, hard grind before fucking against him like an animal.

That's what Mario did to me. Turned me feral. The chemistry between us was like nothing I'd ever experienced.

"Slow down, *cariño*. You're going to make me come in my shorts," he gasped, but his actions didn't match his words. As the waves splashed around us, he grasped my ass with both hands and pulled me closer so I could ride him harder.

His sensual mouth dropped to my neck, finding the spot that made me wild. I wasn't just chasing my orgasm. I was doing a forty-yard dash toward the damn thing. "Please," I moaned against his temple. "Please tell me you have a condom in your pocket."

"Fuck. No." He lifted his head, his eyes looking as forlorn as if someone had kicked his puppy. "I didn't even bring any with me to Cali. I didn't think..."

I dropped my head forward until our foreheads touched. "I didn't either," I admitted. *Not in a million years.*

"I can go to the store later, but we really need to talk first. I need to explain what happened last year, and then, if you still want me after you've heard everything, I'm a million percent in. I just need to get this off my chest first."

He needed to get something off his chest? What kind of...

Things started clicking into place in my mind.

No way.

Yes way. That would explain everything. Why he didn't want anyone to know about our night together. Why he was so pissed at me all the time.

"Di-did you have a girlfriend? When we... you know?"

Mario's eyes widened in shock, and then he laughed. He fucking *laughed*. Placing my hands on his shoulders, I tried to shove him away, but he pulled me right back and kissed me softly on the jaw.

"No, sweetheart. I was completely single when we were together. It was nothing like that."

"Are you sure?" I asked suspiciously.

"I promise you, *cariño*. There was no other woman even remotely on my radar."

Searching his eyes, I saw zero deception there. "Whatever you have to tell

me... it sounds heavy.”

“It is,” he affirmed with two short nods.

My eyes drifted away, toward the alluring, sun-drenched beach, before coming back to him. “Can we talk about it tonight?” A wistful smile curled up one side of my lips. “Today...”

“Today you want to have a little fun?”

My grin widened, and I bobbed my head up and down. With one more smacking kiss against my lips, Mario pulled me around to his back and swam out a little deeper.

As a wave rose up above us, he turned his head, finding my eyes. “I’ve got you, Anna. I won’t let go.” His hands tightened around my legs, which were wrapped around him.

“Yeah, that’s what Rose said in *Titanic*. Just before she let Jack go,” I joked.

He laughed and dove into the wave with me clinging to his back. True to his word, he didn’t let go of me for even a second, using his thick, strong thighs to push us back to the surface. He was like a damned dolphin in the water.

“You okay?” he asked immediately, and I laughed. I hadn’t felt this happy and exhilarated in forever.

“Better than okay. Do it again, Daddy!”

“You’ll be calling me Daddy later,” he growled as another wave approached.

I barely closed my gaping mouth in time for the wave to hit us, the cool water doing little to chill the heat building between my thighs at his last sentence. Fuck. Why was that so hot?

We spent the next thirty minutes playing in the water with me doing my

best impression of a spider monkey on Mario's back. He showed no sign of fatigue, but I knew he must be getting tired, so I finally suggested we hit the beach for a while.

As he walked us out of the water and onto the sand, I rested my cheek against the warmth of his back. I always tried to be strong and independent, stubbornly preferring not to rely on anyone else, but with Mario? Well, it felt natural to lean on him, to let my walls down a bit.

I smiled against his skin as I thought of his words from earlier.

I'll always be your ledge.

Would it really be so terrible to have someone standing behind me? Someone I could trust to let me be my own person while also being a ledge to grab onto when I needed it?

No, I didn't think that sounded terrible at all.

CHAPTER 26



I LET ANNA SLIDE from my back once we were back on solid ground. I didn't want to. She'd scared the shit out of me earlier, and I wanted to stay locked together with her for a very long time. Thankfully, it wasn't as bad as it could have been because I got to her quickly.

Any other woman, I would have gotten her immediately out of the water, perhaps even suggested leaving the beach for the day. But not Anna. She was strong and fearless, and I innately knew she would want to get right back on the horse.

And I wanted to be the horse. *Fuck! Now I'm thinking about her riding me reverse cowgirl while I play with her tight little ass.* It's really not my fault. That damn kiss almost did me in. She'd fucking attacked my mouth—not that I was complaining one little bit—and finally allowed me a real kiss.

Complete with riding my dick with her legs wrapped around me.

This train of thought is not helping.

Adjusting myself in my shorts, I turned and gave her a wide smile. “What do you want to do now? We could sunbathe, or I brought a football.”

“Football!” she squealed, and *goddamn, she’s cute. And hot.* Her lime green bikini set off the gorgeous tone of her skin, and pushed her tits up in a way that made my hands want to remove themselves from my body and attach permanently to her.

Anna’s body was firm, with defined abs that she obviously worked hard on, but she was soft in all the right places. Places I liked to hold. The curve of her hips. The swell of her tits. She was a walking dream come true.

“Okay, *cariño*. Let’s see what you’ve got.” I reached down to retrieve the navy-blue and white striped beach bag I’d thrown to the ground when she took off running toward the water earlier. I’d also tossed my shirt, hat, and sunglasses on my sprint to chase my girl, so I gathered that stuff and shoved my hat on backward before pulling out the ball.

When I glanced back up, Anna’s eyes were narrowed on me. “What?”

“Do you guys do that on purpose?”

“What?” I asked again.

“Wear your hats backward because you know girls think it’s hot.” She wiggled an accusing finger at my head.

“I wasn’t aware of that, but I am now,” I said, tossing the ball up and catching it before winking at her. “Thanks for the tip.”

She snatched the football from me and called me a smartass before saying, “Okay, go long.” I jogged out about five yards, turned and held my hands up, but she tilted her head in exasperation. “Is that what you call long? Do you think I’m gonna throw like a girl or something?”

My lips twisted in a smile. “No, ma’am. I wouldn’t dare think such a thought.” I turned around and sprinted another fifteen yards, and when I

looked over my shoulder, the ball was headed right toward me. I pivoted, caught it, and grinned at her. “Nice spiral, Anna. Where did you learn to throw like that?”

Tossing the ball back, I was further impressed when she caught it easily. “My third brother, Koda, was a receiver, so I had to be the quarterback when he practiced in the backyard.”

“He any good?”

She nodded as she made another perfect spiral throw. “Phenomenal, actually. He played for Colorado, but then he got his ACL blown his junior year. He’d been predicted to go early in the second round of the NFL draft.”

“Damn, that sucks. How old is he again?”

We continued to play catch while we talked. “Twenty-four. He’s a high school coach now. He loves the game so much, so coaching was the right fit for him.”

Her next pass hit me directly in the chest, and I almost bobbled it. “Still sucks. Hey, we should introduce him to Axel if your family ever comes to visit.”

She caught my next toss and stared at me for a long moment before nodding. “He would love that. Axel is one of his favorite players.”

She was probably wondering why the hell I’d said *we* like I was going to actually meet her family or something. I mean, I wasn’t opposed to the idea. In fact, I’d really like to meet them, but I was probably getting a little ahead of myself. One kiss, and I was having thoughts I most likely shouldn’t be having.

I threw the ball again, and while it was still in the air, I charged at her. “What the—” Just as she caught it, I lowered my shoulder and tossed her over it with her pretty ass up in the air. “Mario! What are you doing?” she

screached, laughing as she hit me repeatedly on the butt with the football. “This is *not* tackle football.”

Spinning us in a circle, I laughed with her. “I didn’t actually tackle you. If I’d tackled you, you would be flat on your back in the sand.” *That sounds like a good idea to me*, my dick said. On instinct, I turned my head and bit her playfully on the side, drawing a giggling scream from her.

“Penalty flag,” she yelled as I set her back on her feet.

“Oh yeah?” I asked, propping my hands on my hips. I didn’t miss the way her eyes rolled down my body, and I had to stop myself from flexing. That would have been a total douche move. “What was the penalty?”

“Um, roughing the receiver or something. Oh wait! Unsportsmanlike conduct,” she said, poking me in the chest with her finger.

“I thought you liked it rough,” I retorted, and her eyebrows lifted.

“I like it any way I can get it,” she shot back, flipping the ball to me with her trademark sass. Every blood cell in my body shot like a million tiny rockets into my shorts, but she calmly called, “Fade route,” and jogged away.

When she reached the shoreline, which I assumed she was using as a makeshift sideline, she smirked at me and nodded before taking off in a straight route. Unable to even take time to recover from her last remark, I dropped back and launched a high, hard pass to where I thought she would end up.

The ball went about a yard long, and she had to dive for it, but she made the catch, landing in the wet sand. I let out a loud whoop and dashed toward her, falling on the ground beside her. “That was amazing!” I gushed, pulling her to me and sneaking a kiss. “That dive!”

Anna laughed against my lips. “Thanks, I should’ve run a little harder, and I wouldn’t have had to dive.”

“Nah, that was my bad. I overshot you.”

She leaned into me, and I kissed her again, this one with some tongue. When I pulled back, she licked her lips, her expression bordering on shy. “We’re getting all sandy.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, picking up a handful and plopping it right on her hip before rubbing it in. “It’s good for exfoliating.”

“You jerk,” she hissed, reaching behind her to grab some sand, which I was positive was going to end up somewhere on my body. Hopefully not down my pants. Before I could roll away, I noticed her wince and pull her empty left hand to her belly.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, instantly serious.

“Nothing,” she said, but she was tentatively flexing her fingers.

“Did you hurt your hand? Let me see.” I reached for her, but she pulled away.

“It’s fine. Probably just sprained my wrist. I can move my fingers.”

Lowering my voice, I said, “Anna. Let. Me. See.”

She lifted her hand from her stomach. “It’s okay. I’m fine,” she insisted, but I caught another flinch when she showed me that she could wiggle her fingers.

“It hurts, doesn’t it?” I asked, gently taking her arm and finding that her wrist was already swollen.

“No,” she lied.

“We’re going to the emergency room,” I announced, and she sat up suddenly, shaking her head.

“No, we’re not.”

She was seriously about to piss me off. “Look here, you stubborn-ass woman. You need an X-ray. We. Are. Going.”

“You can’t make me do something I don’t want to do.”

“Wanna bet?” I asked, scooping my arms beneath her and picking her up as I stood. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Your choice.”

“It’s going to have to be the hard way then, because I’m not going.”

“Fine,” I said, walking us out into the water.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“Rinsing the sand off us. We can’t go to the ER like this.”

“Well, good, because we’re not going to the ER. I—I don’t like hospitals.”

Something flashed in her eyes, and I paused. That was a fair point. She’d probably spent more time than she ever wanted to in hospitals. “Okay,” I said, softening my tone. “I’ll take you to urgent care instead. But I definitely think you need to get checked out. You’re really swollen.”

“And if I refuse?” Her own voice was softer, more teasing now than obstinate.

Dipping both of us down into the water, I flashed a little smile. “Then I’ll have them sedate you, and then, when I get you home, I’m going to turn you over my knee for being such a pain in the ass about it.”

Most of the anger in her eyes was flushed away by desire, and she pursed her lips. “You wouldn’t.”

Walking back toward our things with her still in my arms, I laughed. “Oh, *cariño*. I think we both know I would, and I would enjoy every second of it.”

Anna puffed out a resigned sigh. “Fine. We can go to the urgent care place, but if they say nothing is wrong, I get to turn you over *my* knee.”

“Okay, whatever you say,” I agreed, amusement pushing my cheeks upward.

“And I can walk. There’s nothing wrong with my legs. My leg,” she corrected as she wiggled in my arms.

After setting her on her feet, I grabbed a towel and dried her off—despite her protests— and then hung the towel around my neck. I quickly gathered up our things and pulled my phone from my bag. Hitting a number, I waited for the answer as we walked side by side.

“This is Ella.”

“Hi, Ella. This is Mario. Can you tell me where the closest urgent care medical facility is?”

“Oh gosh. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. Anna hurt her wrist, and I think she needs an X-ray.”

“I’m fine. He’s being silly,” Anna yelled toward the phone, and I heard Ella laugh.

“Tell her I said to do as she’s told,” Ella said. “Where are you now?”

“Coming up from the beach.”

“Okay, I’ll have Arnold drive you. He’ll meet you at the gate to the beach entrance.”

“That’s really not—”

“Ah! You will also do as you’re told, Mister Diaz.” She cut me off with a teasing lilt to her voice.

“Yes, Your Highness,” I cooed, drawing a tinkling laugh from her before she hung up. “Ella said for both of us to do as we’re told, and that Arnold is driving us.”

“Jesus. I hate being a pain in the ass, Mario. Why couldn’t you just let it go?”

“Number one, you’re not— No, scratch that. You *are* a pain in my ass, but I don’t mind. It’s what keeps this marriage interesting.”

“We’re *not* married,” she hissed as we approached the gate. “And I can’t go looking like this.” She waved a hand up and down her bikini-clad body.

“Hmm, you have a point,” I said, looking her up and down. I didn’t want anyone else seeing her with practically no clothes on.

Arnold pulled up and jumped out of the black limo, but I waved him off and opened the back door myself. “Can we make a quick stop by our bungalow so I can get Anna some clothes?”

“Of course, sir.”

I made Anna stay in the car and jogged inside, grabbing her a pair of shorts, a T-shirt, and some silky blue panties that I would like to spend a little private time with at a later date. After quickly changing into dry clothes myself, I pulled Anna’s pretty bra from a hook in the closet and picked up her tennis shoes that she liked to wear as well as her phone from the nightstand.

“Here you go,” I told her when I re-entered the car and handed over the clothes and phone.

“I don’t see why I couldn’t have just gone in and changed.”

“It would have taken too long. We’re in a hurry.”

“Good grief! You’re acting like this is some big emergency. I told you, I’m fine,” she snipped, but I noticed that her left hand was resting limply on her leg.

Raising the partition, I ordered, “Get dressed.”

“Turn around.”

Doing my best not to roll my eyes, I puffed out a sigh. “Christ, Anna. We sleep in the same bed every night, usually with my hard dick resting up against your gorgeous little ass. I think you can get dressed in front of me.”

She held her thumb and forefinger about an inch apart and pushed them toward my face. “Could I at least have *this much* privacy? I’m trying to maintain a little bit of dignity here,” she snapped, and I grudgingly swiveled in my seat until my back was to her.

Quiet noises of frustration accompanied the rustling of clothes, and I asked, “You having trouble?”

“Can’t... get... this top... untied.”

“I’m going to help you,” I informed her a second before I turned to face her. She was attempting to undo her swim top with one hand, and I reached for the strings at her neck and across her back, easily untying them. “You need help with the bottoms too?”

Please need help with the bottoms.

She held the flimsy fabric to her breasts with one hand and almost smiled as she looked coyly over her shoulder at me. “I think I can handle my bottoms but thank you for the assist.”

“I don’t mind handling your bottom. You just let me know.”

She leveled me with a look, but her shoulders were shaking with silent laughter. She nodded her head pointedly toward my window, and I obligingly faced away from her. “What about your bra?” I asked as the palm trees whizzed by outside the car.

“It’s a front clasp. I can do it.”

“You suuuure? Bras are kind of my specialty,” I cajoled and heard her snort.

“You’re probably more practiced at taking bras *off* than putting them *on*.” There was a pause, and then, “Ohhh, unless you like to wear ladies’ undergarments?”

I chuckled. She just never stopped. “I don’t make a habit of it, but if that’s the kind of kinky shit you’re into, babe, I’ll give it a go.”

“God you’re infuriating,” she grumbled. “Okay, I’m decent now. I can’t believe I’m going to a doctor’s appointment in the back of a limousine. This is ridiculous.”

“Hmmm, I don’t think we’ll be out of place,” I said, tilting my head down to look out of the window.

Anna did the same. “Concierge Care of Malibu?” she read from the large, glossy sign in front of a mirrored glass building. There was even a designated section of the parking lot with extra-long spaces for limos, about half of which were filled. “Good lord, this is over the top.”

“We’re rolling high today, baby. Let’s go,” I said when Arnold pulled up to the curb.

CHAPTER 27



ONCE INSIDE, WE WERE greeted in the lobby by a woman in a royal-blue skirt and jacket. She looked a bit like a flight attendant. “Good afternoon. Welcome to Concierge Care of Malibu. Of course we’re saddened by your illness or injury, but we’re so happy you’ve chosen us for your medical care today.”

“Oh, um, thank you,” Anna said as the woman handed us each a clear glass of sparkling water with a cucumber slice on the rim.

“My name is Sarah. Follow me, and I’ll get you into an intake room.” Her matching heels clicked against the hardwood floor as she led us beneath a giant chandelier to a room with a desk and two recliners. *Freaking recliners, for fucks sake.* Sitting behind the desk, she smiled at us both before landing on Anna. “Miss Ervin called ahead and told us you were coming. Are you Miss Birdsong?”

Anna saluted her with her fancy water. “That’s me.”

I was thrown off by the “Miss Birdsong” name at first, until I realized that her real name would be the one on her insurance card. Anna must have realized it too because her eyes widened as she glanced at me.

“I’m sorry, Sarah. We came here straight from the beach, and I don’t have my purse with my insurance card in it.” She started to stand. “We can come back later.”

Sarah held up a slim hand. “It’s no problem at all. You can fax or email it to us later.”

Anna sank back into her chair, an adorable pout on her lips. She’d thought she was getting out of this.

“Actually, we have the same employer and the same insurance,” I said, reaching for the wallet I’d hastily stuffed in my back pocket back at the bungalow. I handed over my own card. “Should be the same group number and everything. Does that help?”

“Yes, thank you so much. I can look it up with this and Miss Birdsong’s social security number.”

She took all of Anna’s information before leading us through another door and into a wide hallway with recessed lighting and a pale-blue tiled floor. “Here we are. This will be your private room. Your concierge will be here momentarily to take care of any of your needs. Do you prefer male or female massage therapists?”

Anna and I shared an incredulous look. “Male, I guess,” she said, and Sarah turned to me, her hands clasped primly in front of her.

“And for you, Mister Diaz?”

I had no clue how she knew my name or why the hell I needed a massage therapist, so I answered, “It doesn’t really matter to me.”

“Excellent. There are a variety of complimentary beverages in the

refrigerator. Please help yourselves.” She gestured toward a freaking full-sized, glass-fronted refrigerator in the corner.

Once she departed, Anna’s eyes met mine, and we both burst into laughter. “Medical care for the rich and famous,” I commented, and she giggled harder.

“And I forgot to wear my custom-made Versace prosthesis today.”

There was a light knock, and then a woman entered—also in a blue suit—carrying a silver tray with tiny, fancy sandwiches and set them on the small dining table near the window. “Here’s a little snack for you while you wait. Is there anything else I can get for you? There are several excellent restaurants near here, and I can bring you a menu if you’d like for us to order you something special.”

Anna gave me a smirking grin, and I could tell she was thinking about saying something smartass, but she shook her head and thanked the woman.

“What in the—”

I didn’t get to finish my thought because two huge men entered, each pushing a strange-looking black chair into the room, which they set up near the dining table. *Why is there even a dining table in a treatment room?*

“Time for your complimentary massages,” the blond one said, twisting a knob on the wall and lowering the lights. “Miss Birdsong,” he said, taking her by the elbow and directing her to straddle the chair with her face resting in a hole. “I’m Maverick, and I’ll be taking care of you today.”

The dark-haired one turned to me. “I’m Thunder, and you’ll be with me, Mister Diaz.”

Maverick and Thunder? What the fuck kinds of names were those?

Holding up one hand, I shook my head. “I’m actually not a patient here. I’m just here for moral support.”

Thunder—*seriously... what the fuck?*—smiled indulgently. “Guests of our patients are also our guests. Please have a seat. We want everyone to be as comfortable as possible while visiting Concierge Care of Malibu.”

“Yeah, honey,” Anna piped up, lifting her head with a sugary sweet smile in my direction. “It was your idea to come here. You should get the full Concierge treatment.”

Smartass.

I wasn’t sure how comfortable I would be with some giant dude named Thunder giving me a massage, but I sat down anyway, letting my chest rest against the slightly forward-reclining chair. It actually wasn’t too bad.

A few seconds later, Thunder’s hands were on my shoulders, his thumbs digging into a muscle I didn’t even know I owned. “Holy shit,” I muttered, and I heard Anna hum in agreement. For the next twenty minutes, every muscle in my back, shoulders, and arms was completely worked over. I’d never had a massage before, but damn. I was now a fan.

Anna let out a soft moan, and I imagined big hands on her body, bringing her pleasure. In my imagination, Maverick’s hands morphed into my hands. Touching Anna and eliciting those soft noises.

And then... *Shit... is that... no, no, it couldn’t be.* But yes, it was. An ill-timed erection was making itself known between my legs. Trying to ignore it, I pressed my face more firmly against the little face cushion. I could *not* be getting wood while a strange man was rubbing my back.

Something hard pressed up and down the muscle beside my spine. I think it was Thunder’s elbow. At least, I hoped to hell it was his elbow.

“My, my, we are hard, aren’t we?” he asked in a soothing voice, and my head jerked up and twisted around like something out of *The Exorcist*.

“N-no, why would you say that?”

He pressed my head back into the hole before resuming whatever fantastic thing he was doing against my back. “These muscles here are so tight, Mister Diaz. You really need to get regular massages to keep you loosened up.”

Oh. He was talking about my back. Not my...

The door opened a crack and a quiet voice said, “Guys, wrap it up. We’re almost ready for Miss Birdsong.”

“Ah, time for the best part,” I heard Thunder say as he buried his fingers in my hair, giving me a scalp massage that almost made me drool.

I assumed Maverick was doing the same to Anna, because she let out another sultry groan. “God that feels sooo good.”

“You want it harder?” he asked her.

“Mmm, yes please,” she purred.

Motherfucker. Now my dick was standing at full attention, ready to fucking go.

A large hand patted my shoulder. “Okay, Mister Diaz. All done. How does everything feel?”

Well, my cock feels like it’s about to explode. Thank you for asking, Thunder.

“Fine. Good,” I managed to mutter.

There was a long silence, and then, “Take your time getting up. I don’t want to rush you.”

In other words, get the hell out of my chair so I can go. My teeth grinded together as I tried to figure out how to get off this chair without anyone seeing my obvious arousal.

I unstraddled, stood, and grabbed the closest thing I could reach—the tray of sandwiches—and held it awkwardly in front of my crotch.

Anna was already standing, and she looked at me quizzically. “Hungry?”

“Uh-huh,” I said, grabbing a dainty sandwich as proof and stuffing it into my mouth. The filling was creamy and delicious, and the bread was like a savory pillow on my tongue. “Mmm. Mmmmm, that’s really good.”

I picked up another one and held it up for Anna. She took a bite and rolled her eyes heavenward before leaning forward for the other half. Her tongue brushed lightly against my index finger, and my erection jerked in my shorts.

Goddammit, calm down.

“We’ll leave our contact information here,” Maverick said, placing a card down on the table. “This is just our side gig. We own a spa not far from here, and we’d love to have you two come in for a couple’s hot oil massage.”

“You’d really enjoy it,” Thunder added. “It’s much more extensive than the chair massages you just had. Of course, you’d both be unclothed to the extent you’re comfortable, and your tables would be close enough that you could hold hands. It adds to the sensuality between the lovers.”

Anna’s eyes held a hint of panic, and my cock went wild, trying to escape the confines of my pants. *Naked Anna. Hot oil. Moans and hands and all that fucking rubbing.*

“We’ll think about it,” I croaked, and Maverick gave me a knowing wink before they left the room.

“Come sit on the bed with me,” Anna said, and a strangled noise escaped my throat. *The bed?* “Bring the sandwiches.”

Of course I was bringing the fucking sandwiches because I needed the damn tray to cover up the fact that I was sailing at full mast.

It didn’t help that the bed she sat on didn’t look the least bit clinical. It had a wood frame and a fluffy white comforter. There was medical equipment on one side, but otherwise it looked like an excellent place to fuck.

Stop it!

I realized Anna was looking at me with a confused frown on her face—probably because my feet were rooted to the floor and I was holding a tray of tea sandwiches over my dick—so I walked stiffly to the bed and sat down on the edge, keeping the platter in my lap.

She reached out with her good hand and tried to pull the tray toward her, but I resisted, resulting in an awkward kind of tug-of-war. “Mario, why are you being weird? I want to see what kind of sandwiches are on here. I’m suddenly starving.”

Me too but not for food. With the greatest reluctance, I released the tray, and Anna’s eyes went directly to the very obvious tent in my shorts.

“Oh. My. God. You’ve got a boner,” she practically yelled, and I waved my hand at her to shush her.

“Keep it down, all right? I’m quite aware of what’s going on down there.”

“Why do you have a boner?”

“First of all, can you please stop saying boner? He perks up every time you mention it.”

She giggled. “Okay then. Tell me why Captain Happy has made an appearance.”

Burying my face in one hand, I shook my head. I couldn’t exactly tell her that her innocent moaning had turned my cock into a tree trunk.

“I don’t know, Anna. I’m sure it’s perfectly normal for men to get, um, a reaction during a massage. Don’t you think? Probably happens all the time.” I forced myself to sound confident, nodding my head up and down for extra effect.

“Hmmm, I’m not sure, but I can find out.” She pulled out her phone and typed with her good hand for a few seconds. She was probably Googling erections and massages.

She set her phone face down on the bed when a woman in royal-blue scrubs entered the room. “Hello, I’m Ava, and I’ll be your nurse today. The doctor wants us to go ahead and get some X-rays.” Anna scowled but nodded her assent. “First, we need to do a pregnancy test, so if you’ll just step into the restroom there, you can give us a urine sample.”

Anna’s head shook from side to side. “Oh, that’s really not necessary.”

Ava’s eyes flitted between us, and she lifted a brow at who she assumed was my girlfriend. “I’m pretty sure we should do one, just to be on the safe side. No birth control is a hundred percent, and if you do happen to have a bun in the oven, we need to know about it before we do any type of scan.”

With a resigned pulse of breath from her lips, Anna stood and took the little cup into the bathroom. Five minutes later, she was pronounced unpregnant, and Ava took her to radiology.

My phone was going crazy in my pocket, so I pulled it out to find tons of notifications from our group text. Opening the app, I stared in disbelief.

Taz: Hey, guys. I have a penis question.

Bode: You’ve come to the right place. We’re penile experts.

Cam: How may we help you, grasshopper?

Taz: Is it normal for a man to pop a boner while getting a massage?

Apparently, she hadn't turned to Google for the answers. She'd requested a consultation from my best friends, and I was never going to live this down. Swallowing hard, I glanced back down at the rapidly appearing messages.

Shark: Can we assume you're talking about Woody?

Taz: I don't want to mention any names.

Taz: But yes.

I was going to murder her, the little shit.

Hawk: Well, if the massage therapist was hot, then it's not unusual.

Tank: Not to get too personal, but it happened to me when Bristol gave me a massage.

Cam: So did he have a hottie rubbing all over him?

Taz: Definitely a hottie.

Bode: Perfectly reasonable then.

Okay, Anna. Just leave it right there. Don't say anything else. She apparently didn't hear my plea because the next message...

Taz: His name was Thunder.

Goddammit.

Shark: Did you say "Thunder?"

Bode: Did you say "he?"

Hawk: OMFG!

Cam: Woody Diaz! Have some fucking control, man.

Tank: I'm laughing so hard. Woody got a woody from a guy named Thunder.

Taz: In Mario's defense, he was very handsome. And about your size, Tank.

Bode: Trying to think of a lightning rod joke right now. Give me a minute.

My thumbs jabbed against the phone as I typed out a message.

Woody: Anna, aren't you supposed to be getting X-rays right now?

Taz: I'm next. They're just finishing up the previous patient. Did this information help you at all?

Little wiseass. I was unable to respond because my phone rang immediately.

“Yeah?” I answered.

Shark's voice roared down the phone line. “What the fuck is Anna having X-rays for?”

I inhaled and then blew it out, feeling guilty and hoping that Shark didn't blame me for not keeping her safe. “We were playing football on the beach, and she came down wrong on her arm.” *And then I kissed her. Again.*

“Shit. Is she okay?”

“She's being... I don't know if it's tough or fucking stubborn, but she keeps saying she's fine. She refused to go to the ER, so I made her come to a quick care center because her wrist is pretty swollen.”

“Keep me updated on what they find. I mean, as soon as you hear anything, I want to know about it,” he demanded.

“I will, Shark.”

“She's quite a handful, isn't she?” he asked with a chuckle.

“That's a fucking understatement,” I muttered.

“And don't worry about the guys. I'll set them straight.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“Just know that we’ll support you one hundred percent. Because when you find the Thunder to your Lightning Rod—”

“Fuck off, you asshole,” I snapped, hanging up before he could finish. I could practically hear his laughter from here.

I’ve gotta get some new fucking friends.

I didn’t even get my phone back in my pocket before it rang again. Checking the display, I cursed under my breath.

How the hell am I supposed to handle this? I wondered as I clicked to accept the call.

CHAPTER 28



STOMPING OUT OF CONCIERGE Care of Malibu, I risked a glance at Mario, and he smiled at me. *Dammit. Stop being nice to me.*

“Aren’t you going to gloat?” I snapped.

He stopped us on the sidewalk and stepped in front of me, grasping me by the back of my neck. “No, I’m not going to gloat, Anna. I’m really upset that your arm is broken.”

His dreamy brown eyes were filled only with concern, and that made them even more dreamy. “It’s just a hairline fracture in my wrist,” I mumbled.

“Which, if not treated properly, could affect your ability to do so many things, Anna, including shooting. Is that what you want?”

I looked down because he was annoyingly right, and his grip on my neck tightened, forcing my face back up to his. “No,” I answered, “but I hate having a fuss made over me. This isn’t even close to the worst thing that’s ever happened to me.”

His hand gentled, stroking down my long braid. “I know, baby. I know you’ve been through much worse, but that doesn’t mean that this doesn’t hurt or that it’s not inconvenient. So if you need help with anything, I want you to ask me. Otherwise, I’ll just be bumbling around like an idiot and doing things to annoy you in my efforts to be helpful, okay?”

“Okay.” I gave him a tiny smile. “Thank you for making me come to this ridiculous place.”

He laughed loudly. “Massages, fancy food, and swag bags? Yeah, it is pretty ridiculous. But at least they gave me a bag too since I was a guest of their patient.” He pressed a hand to my back and guided me toward the limo pulling up to the curb. “Now let’s get in our limousine and see what kind of swag we got, dahhhling.”

We laughed and poked fun at each other the entire ride back to Ella’s, pulling out huge custom tumblers, those little ice/heat packs with the bubble things inside, and royal-blue sleep masks with *Concierge Care of Malibu* printed on them.

“Ooh, looky,” I said, opening a small bottle that I found inside my bag. “Holy crap, Mario. This is a Creed perfume. This stuff is hella expensive.”

He rummaged around inside his own blue bag topped with a pretty white ribbon. “I got cologne. Christian Dior.” Putting a little on the pulse point of his neck, he lifted his chin. “How does it smell?”

I leaned forward and took a whiff, smelling the cologne with undercurrents of the beach and Mario. And I drenched my panties. *Is orgasmic a smell?*

“I-it’s good,” I stammered, simultaneously wanting him to wear it every day and praying that he wouldn’t.

“Let me smell yours,” he said, not seeming to notice how affected I was, even though my nose was currently still pressed against his neck, inhaling the

intoxicating scent of him.

Back away, crazy, I directed myself and finally managed to do so, picking up my bottle and applying a dab to my neck.

Mario's breath warmed my skin when he nestled his nose beneath my chin, and then a scattering of goosebumps appeared when he growled. "Fuck, Anna. I don't know if you should wear this around me." He took another long sniff. "Might not be safe."

Holy horned frogs!

"Um, maybe we should end the sniff fest then," I said, my voice sounding breathless. "Let's see what else is in the bags."

A soft kiss grazed my neck before he pulled back, shifting in his seat. I tried not to glance down—I really did—but my attempt was futile. It was like my eyes had a brain of their own. A dirty, horny little brain.

Captain Happy was back for a visit, and I squeezed my thighs together to help relieve some of the pressure growing there as I stared at the outline of his cock. Mario tugged his bag closer to him, impeding my view of the Captain, which was probably a good thing.

Diving one hand into the bag in an attempt to keep it from diving somewhere it had no business being, I pulled out a couple more items. "A T-shirt. Nice. And a little portable speaker," I said with all the chirpiness I could muster, but Mario's eyes were locked on my face. They were pure fire fueled by lust.

Shaking his head once, he snapped his eyes from me and peeked into his own bag. "Same," he said shortly. Then his breath hitched a little, and he closed his eyes.

"What? What else did you get?"

"Nothing," he muttered, but now I was curious.

“Let me see,” I cajoled, pulling the edge of his bag wider and peeking inside. “Oh. Well, okay.” I reached my hand inside and pulled out a strip of three condoms, the package featuring the logo of the medical facility. “These are noice,” I teased. “Ribbed for her pleasure. And look! They’re lubricated.”

Mario’s lips twitched on one side, and then he took all my air away when his lips met my ear. “You don’t need lubrication if you prepare your woman properly.”

Thoughts. I was having very, very bad and dirty thoughts. Memories of exactly how he prepared “his woman” flooded my brain—and my crotchal area— and I tilted my face up, nuzzling my nose in his beard. *How would it feel to use this beard as a fucking saddle?*

“We’re home,” Arnold called out, and I wasn’t sure whether to be ecstatic or angry. Because I’d been about two seconds away from finding out the answer to my question.

As if he could read my filthy thoughts, Mario rubbed his beard against the side of my face several times before murmuring, “Let’s go, *cariño*.”



“I’m done in the shower,” Mario said, walking into the living room looking all damp and delicious in only a pair of red basketball shorts. His attitude had cooled considerably since we got home. His answers to me were polite, but only polite, and I wondered if he was pissed at me about the texting thing.

I giggled to myself as I walked down the hallway to our room. The guys had ragged on him so hard about Thunder, and Cam messaged me privately

earlier to ask for the mailing address here. I wasn't sure what that was about, but I was sure it was going to be entertaining.

After undressing, I rested on the edge of the tub to switch to my shower leg. After about five minutes of trying to get my regular prosthesis off, I was almost in tears. I couldn't do it. The stupid brace on my arm kept me from being able to use my fingers and palm properly, and I thumped my head over onto the tiled wall in frustration.

"Anna, are you okay?" came a concerned voice from the bedroom.

"Yes. No... I don't know."

"Well, that clears that up. Do you need some help with something?"

This was my weakness. Asking for help. After my brother had kicked my ass into gear and I started walking again, I felt a sense of freedom, and I never wanted to feel like a weakling again. So, I did everything myself, brushing off anyone who tried to help me. I was *not* a goddamned damsel in distress.

Except right now, I kinda was.

Dashing away the single tear that was running down my face like an escaped fugitive, I reached for my robe and wrapped it around me.

I took a deep breath and called, "Yes, I do need some help." They were some of the hardest words for me to say, and I bit my bottom lip to keep it from trembling.

Mario walked into the bathroom and padded barefoot over to me. "What do you need help with?"

Rolling my lips between my teeth because *shit, this is hard*, I gestured to my leg. "I can't..."

He kneeled, understanding immediately, and rolled down my outer sleeve like a pro.

“You’re pretty good at that.”

His eyes mostly stayed focused on his task, but he glanced up at me once with a soft smile before going back to my prosthetic. “I’ve been watching you,” he said quietly.

After the last step, removing my liner from my stump, he took my face in his hands. “All you have to do is ask, Anna. Don’t let yourself sit here and get frustrated. Just call me.”

My head bobbed up and down. “It’s hard for me, but I’ll try. You just seemed... mad at me or something, and I didn’t want to bother you.”

“You always bother me, *cariño*,” he said, giving me the first genuine smile I’d seen in hours. Since we’d been laughing in the limousine. “But it’s quickly becoming my favorite thing.”

“Okay, I’ll continue being an asshole just for you.” That brought me a much-desired laugh from him.

Reaching for my shower leg, Mario stared at it for a minute. “I’ve never actually seen you put this one on.”

“It’s easy,” I said, giving him the simple instructions, which he followed to the letter.

Once I was done showering and had sleep clothes on, Mario came in and removed my temporary leg and dried my limb off with a fluffy white towel. “You ready for bed, or do you want to stay up for a while?”

“Bed,” I said, and he lifted me in his arms. “Wait, what are you doing?”

“Carrying you to bed. There’s no reason to put your leg back on for you to walk a few feet and then take it off again. Right?”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said, feeling like that damsel I hated so much.

After setting me on the bed, Mario kneeled on the floor, resting his forearms beside me. “Needing help sometimes doesn’t make you weak,

Anna. Sometimes it means you're strong because the hardest thing to do is ask for or accept help."

"Stop reading my thoughts, you weirdo," I whispered, and he smiled.

Lowering his chin to his forearms, he kept his eyes on me. "Just think of me as your own personal concierge."

My teeth sank into the inside of my cheek. "Would you bring me fancy-pants tea sandwiches?"

His deep chuckle rumbled the bed beneath me. "If that's what you require, madam."

"I'd rather have chicken wings with spicy garlic Buffalo sauce."

Reaching out, he toyed with the hem of the T-shirt I was wearing, another of his that he gave me to sleep in. "Me too."

Rubbing my good hand through his hair, I thought about today and realized we'd had a breakthrough in the ocean. The way he just knew me and what I needed had weakened my barriers. And that scorching kiss smashed right the hell through them like a bull in a china shop.

"Will you kiss me goodnight?" I asked quietly.

"Of course," he said, rising to his feet and pressing a chaste kiss to my lips. "Goodnight, Anna."

Flicking off the lamp, he rounded the bed and laid down. On his back. Not even touching me.

I puffed out a long, frustrated breath as the air in the room thickened with tension. That was not what I meant when I said I wanted a goodnight kiss.

"What's wrong?" I heard in the darkness. "I can practically hear your brain ticking like a time bomb, so just go ahead and tell me."

"I was wondering why you're way over there, and I'm way over here."

The mattress shifted as he turned onto his side. "I was just trying to give

you some space. I didn't want to hu—”

“If you say something about not hurting my arm, I'm going to be pissed. I'm not asking you to put me in a full nelson, Mario. I've just... I've gotten used to sleeping right beside you.”

After a moment, a large hand wrapped around my belly and dragged me into his warmth. Sliding his arm beneath my head, Mario kissed the back of my neck. “Better?”

“Mmhmm,” I hummed happily, rubbing my face against the thick bicep pillow.

As I was drifting off to sleep, I heard him say, “Demanding little brat,” but he kissed my shoulder sweetly, and I smiled.

CHAPTER 29



“BYE, HEATHER,” I SAID, gathering my purse from the filing cabinet behind my desk.

“Bye, Anna. I hope you, like, have a good night. And thanks for showing me how to use the copy machine today.”

Again, I thought wryly as I left my office for the day. When I reached the foyer, my stomach clenched when I didn’t find Mario. Every day for the past month, he’d met me in the same spot and walked me home after I’d finished my workday. Then we had dinner together and talked about any new developments in the case, sometimes even Facetiming Shark to give him updates.

But he wasn’t here today. It’s not like I couldn’t walk myself home, but I’d grown accustomed to him waiting for me and holding my hand as we strolled across the grounds to our bungalow. Just like I’d grown accustomed to him spooning me when he was in the bed with me. I’d had to ask him to do that

last night, and a sense of trepidation told me that something wasn't quite right.

Yesterday, Mario had been hot and heavy with me until I hurt my arm, and then he went into *caretaker mode*. And what the hell was the deal with that sad little peck of a goodnight kiss? After what we'd shared in the ocean, I thought for sure Mario would ravage my mouth again and maybe... more? Especially with me lying on the bed in a T-shirt and panties, asking him for a kiss.

It was like the Joe situation all over again. No teasing touches. No passion. Just *taking care of me*, and that was it. I was finally ready to put the past behind me and take things further with Mario, but then he managed to bring up a different set of hurts. A part of my past that I thought I was finally over.

So lost was I in my thoughts, I practically jumped out of my skin when I opened the door and found Joe standing there. "Hey, Anna."

"Oh. You startled me," I said, patting my chest.

"I thought maybe we could grab dinner together. You still haven't taken me up on the raincheck."

Shit. Not this again. A couple times a week, Joe came to my office or found me in the kitchen to ask if I wanted to have dinner with him. I managed to put him off every time with various excuses, but I really needed to sit down with him and let him know that whatever he wanted to happen, wasn't happening.

"I can't tonight," I said, and his face fell. "How about Wednesday though?" That would give me two days to come up with something to say.

"Really?" His eyes were hopeful like a puppy begging for attention, and I felt a little bad that I was going to have to burst his bubble.

"Yeah, sure. I usually sit out back after Mario goes to work, so just come around there about eight."

“I’ll be there,” he said, smiling broadly before heading into the main house. *Lord, help me get through that conversation.* And the one I was about to have with Mario. While I appreciated how sweet he’s been, I wanted to discuss what he really wanted from me. He’d been flirty as hell for a month, but last night, he’d just seemed to turn it off.

The man had me all twisted up and confused, and I needed answers. Was he simply flirting with me when he knew I had no interest, and then when I finally did show some interest, the fun was over? Like some kind of game? And what was the thing he wanted to explain to me about why he’d acted like a jerk since the night we’d spent together?

Tonight, I was going to get some answers.

As I approached our bungalow, I heard laughter from inside. I recognized both laughs, and a deep furrow formed between my eyebrows. *That can’t be. Those two voices do not belong together.*

My hand twisted the doorknob, and I pushed forward, my eyes immediately going to the two men on the couch, laughing hysterically.

“Chayton?” I asked, and my brother’s head whipped around, his long, black ponytail swinging in an arc.

“Taz!” He yelled, jumping up from the couch and rushing me. His strong, roppy arms surrounded my back, and I burst into tears when he picked me up and swung me around.

Smashing my face against his neck, I inhaled my brother’s earthy scent. Dirt, leather, and home. That’s what he smelled like. “Chay, what are you doing here? Oh god. I’m so glad to see you.”

“I’m glad to see you too, Taz,” he said, placing me back on solid ground before widening his eyes. “Or I guess I should say *Anna*.”

“H-how did you know to call me Anna, and how did you know where I

was, and how did you get here?" My questions came out in a rush, and he laughed.

Best sound in the entire world.

"Slow down, princess, and I'll answer your questions. Mario, Mario, and an airplane."

"What?"

"Those are the answers. Mario told me I had to call you Anna while I was here, and he also told me where you were when I said I wanted to come visit. But don't worry, everything is in the vault. I won't blow your cover, okay?"

"And you flew here?"

"No, when I said I took an airplane, I meant that I stole one and taxied it here from Colorado. Didn't even get pulled over once." He rolled his slanted brown eyes that were mirror images of my own. "Of course I flew here, you freak."

"Still a smartass, I see."

"You know it, little sis." His warm, rough hands held both of mine, spreading them out so he could roll his eyes up and down my frame. "Look at you! You look fantastic, and you're wearing a skirt!"

"Oh, uh, yeah." My eyes flashed to Mario, who was sitting on the couch with a big shit-eating grin on his face. "That crazy guy over there talked me into wearing it this morning."

"He's a smart man," Chayton said. "Come on and sit. I know you've probably had a busy day."

His big hand engulfed mine as he led me to the couch and settled me between him and Mario, who leaned over and kissed the corner of my mouth as he slipped an arm around my shoulders. "Told you the skirt looked good," he whispered.

My eyes flashed to my brother, expecting him to go nuclear at the familiar gesture between Mario and me. But he was smiling fondly at us. *What the actual hell?*

“Okay, start from the beginning. You said you talked to Mario?”

Chayton nodded. “Yep. You gave me his phone number, remember?”

“That was for emergencies,” I retorted.

My brother waved his hand dismissively. “Pshh. Whatever. I contacted Mario a few weeks ago just to introduce myself in case he needed to get in touch with me. We talk a couple times a week.”

My head snapped back toward the big man with a sheepish grin on his face. “Your brother just worries about you, so he calls to check in. He called yesterday while you were getting X-rays, and I told him about your accident. After I texted him later that you had a fracture, he insisted on coming to make sure you were okay.”

“May I?” Chayton asked, his fingers going to one of the Velcro closures on my brace.

“Yeah, fine,” I sighed, and he removed my brace, gently inspecting my wrist and hand before locking his eyes with mine.

“How bad does it hurt on a scale of one to ten?”

“A one,” I replied, and he shot Mario a look.

“Told you she would say that. She could have a bone poking out, and she’d be like, ‘Oh, it’s about a one and a half.’” He said that last part in a high squawk that I assumed was supposed to sound like me.

“I don’t sound anything like that, assface.”

My brother expertly replaced my brace and patted me on the knee. “At least you’re not one of those people who chip a nail and scream the place down that their pain is an eleven.” Chayton was an occupational therapist who

worked with inpatient and acute care patients back in Colorado. “Do you mind if I request a copy of the X-rays and your records? That way I can develop a treatment plan for you once the brace is off.”

“That’s fine,” I told him with a nod. My heart was bursting, and I hugged my oldest brother again. “I’m so happy you’re here, but you really didn’t have to come all this way. As you can see, I’m fine.”

“How are you handling getting in and out of your prosthetic?”

“It’s difficult,” I admitted. “Mario helped me last night, and then he got up with me when I was getting ready for work and put it on for me.”

“I also got up to make her breakfast, because... you know...” The two men shared a sneaky look. *What the frick was that all about?*

“Thanks, bro,” he said, shooting a grateful look at my fake husband, and my jaw dropped open. “I appreciate you looking after princess here.”

“Why do you keep calling her princess?” Mario asked, and I leveled a warning glare at my brother.

“Don’t do it,” I said through gritted teeth, but he completely disregarded me. Of course.

“She didn’t tell you? Tazanna means princess in our native tongue.”

“Shut. Up. Chayton!” I hissed, but the jerk just laughed.

“You should call her that all the time, Mario. She loves it.”

“I hate it, and don’t you dare,” I said, swinging my fiercest look from the smartass I was related to, to the smartass I was fake married to.

Mario’s grin was positively wicked as he pulled me until I was leaning against him, and he kissed the top of my head. Again, not a single crazy reaction from my brother, and I felt like I was in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Even though I dated Joe for almost two years, Chayton still hated

witnessing any signs of affection between us, but Mario had kissed me twice, and... nothing.

Shaking my head at the conundrum, I changed the subject. “Are you hungry? I could probably whip us up something to eat.”

“No!” both men shouted at the same time.

“Oh, come on. My cooking isn’t that bad.”

“Uh-huh, right. Mario was just telling me about the lovely breakfast you made for him recently. Dude, tell me about the gravy again.” They were both cackling in amusement.

“I went to pick up the serving spoon, and the entire bowl of gravy came with it. That stuff was so congealed, I could turn it upside down, and not a drop spilled out. It was like a gravy popsicle.”

Tears were running down my brother’s face as he howled, and I couldn’t help but crack a grin. It had been pretty terrible gravy.

“You can both kiss my brown butt,” I said, trying to school my expression into one of anger, but it was hard not to smile when the idiots were laughing like maniacs.

Mario kissed me on the forehead. “Aww, don’t be mad, princess. We’re just teasing you. And besides, I ordered food.” His eyebrows wiggled up and down. “Spicy garlic chicken wings.”

Twisting my lips to the side, I pretended to think about it. “Okay, I guess I forgive you. Chicken wings are like the universal apology food.” *Some women may love chocolates, but present me with wings, and I’m a very happy girl.*

“Why don’t you go change clothes and get comfy,” Mario said, patting my hip. “The food should be here soon.”

Again, no response from Chayton at the intimate gesture, and I wondered if

this was really my brother or some alien he'd been replaced with.

After dinner, Mario headed to work with the promise that he would come by during his rounds at nine-thirty to help me with my leg shit.

As he walked out the door, I thought, *Is it weird that I miss him already?*

CHAPTER 30



“I REALLY LIKE HIM,” Chayton said as soon as Mario was gone.

“You do?” I asked, incredulity coating my words.

My brother elbowed me with a mischievous look on his face. “Each time I talk to him, he goes on and on about you. *Taz is such an amazing shooter. Taz is kicking ass at her new job. Taz this and Taz that.* I think he’s quite smitten.”

“And yet you haven’t threatened to decapitate him. Who are you, and what have you done with my brother?” I glanced under the coffee table and lifted a couch cushion, pretending to search for the real Chayton.

“Stop it,” he laughed. “I know in the past I’ve been a little...”

“Overbearing? Domineering? Bossy?” I supplied.

He cut his eyes at me. “I was going to say protective. But god, Anna. You seem to pick the biggest douchebags to date. It drives me crazy!”

“Joe wasn’t a douche.”

Chayton tilted his head back and forth, his ponytail swishing across his back. “He was nice, I guess, but totally not right for you.”

I wanted to tell him that was for me to decide, but I was curious as to exactly what he meant. “In what way?”

He twisted his body to face me and tugged at a lock of my long hair. “Anna, I love you more than anything, but you’re a bit of a pain in the ass.”

“Gee. Thanks. I’m so glad you flew all this way to insult me. When are you leaving again?” I asked sardonically.

His broad grin took up the entire lower half of his face. “Wednesday morning, and I didn’t mean that as an insult. I just mean that you’re very headstrong, and you need a certain type of man to deal with that.”

Not completely inaccurate. He may have a point there. Picking up my beer from the coffee table, I tipped the bottle at my brother. “Go on.” I took a long drink.

“To be blunt, you need a man with some big ole balls.”

Beer went up my nose when I snorted, and a coughing fit made it difficult for me to breathe. “Chayton!” I hacked, and he patted me on the back.

“Figuratively speaking, of course.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that Mario had more than *figurative* big balls. The man was *literally* toting a couple of apples down there. “And you think Joe’s balls were lacking somehow?”

“I prefer not to think about another man’s testicles, thank you very much, but yeah. Like grape-sized ones.” He was quiet for a second before saying, “To use a horse analogy, you have to loosen the reins and give a horse its head. Let her go where she needs to go.”

“So now I’m a horse. This keeps getting better and better. What time is your flight on Wednesday?”

He laughed at my joke. “I just don’t think Joe did that. Don’t get me wrong, he was a nice enough guy, and he really stepped up after your injury and surgeries. He took care of you, and I was so grateful for that. I’m just saying he did it a little too well. He catered to you like you couldn’t do *anything* for yourself. Remember, he wouldn’t even let you carry your own purse when you went out, for Pete’s sake?”

My mind wandered back to that time. “Yeah, he definitely babied me too much. He would hardly let me get off the couch.”

“And then you moved in with me, and I kicked your little ass into shape.”

“You made me get up and make my own plate, and you made me do the dishes every night since you cooked. Plus, you dragged my ass to the shooting range every weekend and reminded me how much I loved it instead of letting me become a sad little couch potato.” I smiled fondly at him. “But you always stayed right beside me in case I needed you.”

He nodded, his eyes filled with emotion. “Yeah. I don’t know, Anna. I just feel like Mario is the kind of man you need to be dating. A man that’s there when you need them, but he knows when to take a step back and let you do things for yourself. “

“A man like my dear brother,” I said, poking him with my elbow. “And you think Mario is like that?”

Chayton shrugged. “I mean, he doesn’t have a cool-ass ponytail like me, but other than that, yeah. A man has to have a lot of confidence to be with an independent woman, and Diaz seems like the kind of guy that doesn’t mind when you give him shit because he’s gonna give it right back to you.”

“That’s for damn sure. Yesterday, he threatened to have me sedated when I didn’t want to go get my arm checked out,” I said indignantly.

My brother pinched his lips together in an effort to control himself, but he

finally lost the battle with a loud, “Bahahaha. Oh shit. That’s funny.”

“It is not,” I insisted, but a little giggle escaped my lips as well.

Looping an arm around me, Chayton pulled my head against his shoulder.

“I want you to be with a man that respects every facet of your complicated self. Someone who will open doors for you but will also take you to play football on the beach. Someone who is aware that you’d rather have chicken wings than a five-star meal in a fancy restaurant,” he said, gesturing at the remnants of our dinner on the coffee table. “You need a man that understands that your ideal day would be throwing some lead at a shooting range, and he’s okay with that.”

My brother was describing Mario Diaz to a tee, and my heart swelled against the inside of my ribcage.

“I think you may be right.”

Firm lips kissed the top of my head. “I know, sis. I always am.”



After my shower, Mario carried me to our bed and sat down on the edge beside me as I propped myself up against the headboard. “Are you mad that I didn’t tell you about Chayton coming to town?”

I thought about it for a second. “No, I’m not mad. I think you should have asked me before you called and told him about my arm though.”

“I didn’t. He called me, and... shit. I didn’t know what to say. He said he’d been calling your phone, and you weren’t answering. That was while you were getting X-rays.”

“Oh yeah. I had to leave my phone outside when I went into the little room.”

“Anyway, he wanted to know where you were, and I just blurted it out. I’m really sorry, Anna. I didn’t mean to tell your private business. Then he insisted on flying here today but asked me not to tell you because he wanted to surprise you. I didn’t know what else to do.”

Stroking a hand through his beard, I offered him a smile. “It’s okay. It was the best surprise I’ve had in a while.”

Mario breathed out a sigh of relief. “Good. I was a nervous wreck all night last night because I didn’t want you to be mad.”

A smile crept across my lips as I understood. “Is that why you gave me such a lame-ass goodnight kiss?”

His mouth dropped open, and then he frowned. “That wasn’t a lame-ass kiss.”

“I beg to differ. It was a pretty weak attempt, Diaz. I thought you had more pride in your kissing abilities.”

His eyelids dropped low over his flashing brown eyes, his voice going flat. “I’m so sorry to have disappointed you.”

Giving him a sad little smile, I said, “It’s my cross to bear for having a husband that can’t properly kiss his wife.”

His strong jaw worked back and forth before his tongue slid over his bottom lip. “I feel insulted.”

“Then prove me wrong,” I retorted, lifting one challenging eyebrow.

He huffed out a little “huh,” halfway between a laugh and a grunt, before standing and walking to the dresser. His eyes met mine in the mirror as he removed his walkie talkie and placed it on the wooden surface. Then he

stripped off his gun belt—*fuck me... why is that so hot?*—and placed it carefully beside the walkie.

Stalking back toward me, he moved with the grace of a hungry panther with his dark hair, black fitted tee, and black cargo pants. My teeth sank into my bottom lip, and his sharp eyes zeroed in on the movement.

Placing one knee on the bed, he pressed his fists into the mattress beside my hips and hovered over me.

“I suggest you stop biting that lip.”

“Why?” was my breathy reply.

His mouth was barely touching mine when he whispered, “Because that’s my job.”

Then he bit me... hard... before sucking my lip into his mouth, letting his tongue slide deliciously over the tender flesh. “Oh,” I whimpered when he slung one long leg over both of mine until he was straddling my lap, effectively trapping me against the headboard.

As his tongue slid smoothly into my mouth, his hands trailed up my sides, taking a short detour long enough to tweak my nipples with his thumbs. One of his big hands fisted the hair at the back of my head, and the other rested on the side of my neck, his thumb wrapped around the front in a show of complete dominance.

And I wasn’t complaining.

His tongue plundered crudely into my mouth, taking complete control of me within seconds. Bunching my hands into the front of his shirt, I pulled him closer as he devoured me. His dick was already a rod of steel against my belly, and he grinded it into me, his hips swiveling in tiny circles.

The fresh pair of panties I’d just put on were utterly drenched. I was surprised they hadn’t melted completely off my body. Yanking my head

roughly to the side, Mario's mouth descended on the side of my neck, his tongue swirling and his teeth nipping.

"This turning you on, sweetheart?" he growled, licking obscenely up the side of my neck.

"Y-y-y," I stammered, unable to even get the wimple word out.

"Answer me," he barked, his teeth biting down on my earlobe.

"Yes," I finally managed to moan through the overwhelming sensations that were invading every cell of my being.

His mouth was back on mine, swallowing every single one of my breaths as our tongues slid and thrust and licked against one another. It was feral. Untamed.

And hot as fuck.

Mario sucked my tongue into his mouth, circling the tip of it with his own as his knees tightened around my hips like a vice. I was completely trapped by this big animal, but it was a willing confinement.

"This the kind of kiss you were looking for, *amor*? Is this what it takes to make *my wife's* pretty cunt drip for me?"

Running my hands up the sides of his neck, I buried my fingers in his thick hair and nodded. A low, gritty sound of frustration rose up from his throat, and I quickly answered, "Yes, my panties are soaked. For you."

He dipped his head and inhaled. "*Te puedo oler.*" When his eyes met mine, he translated. "I can smell you."

Sweet Jesus!

His hand moved down and skated beneath the hem of the shirt I was wearing, searching and finding the skinny strap over my hip. "Now I need to taste you."

He broke the thin line of fabric with one rip, and *holy fuck, I think I'm*

about to come.

“Diaz, you there?” I didn’t know where that scratchy voice was coming from, but I ignored it, jerking my hips upward in anticipation.

“Mario, please. Put your—”

“Diaz, respond. We have a potential intruder at the west gate.”

“Mierda,” Mario bellowed, ripping my panties the rest of the way off and sticking them in his pocket as he extricated himself from the bed. He pressed his lips to mine in a quick, hard kiss.

“Sorry, baby. Probably just kids trying to break into the pool, but I’ve gotta check it out. “

Hustling over to the dresser while adjusting himself, he hastily answered the call that he was on his way as he strapped his equipment back on and headed to the door. Turning in the doorway, he gave me his cockiest grin.

“Did my wife find that kiss more to her liking?”

Giving him a thumbs up and a weak, sappy smile, I could hear his chuckle as he departed.



“Hey, Birdsong! We’re drinking when we get back to base. You in?” Franklin asked.

Holding onto the seat as we bumped along the rough road, I nodded. “You know I am.”

“Me too!” came an enthusiastic voice from my right. I turned my head to look at Cornett, the newest member of our unit, and gave him a smile. The kid

was still wet behind the ears, probably not even old enough to drink, but no one cared. The regular rules didn't apply over here.

Garcia, sitting on the other side of Cornett, smacked the new guy on the top of his helmet. "Watch yourself, young buck. Don't let Birdie's size fool ya. She'll drink your ass under the table, and you'll be useless tomorrow."

Everyone else in the back of the truck chuckled knowingly, a few tossing good-natured insults at Cornett, but he just grinned. He was a nice kid, a little overeager, but they all were when they first arrived.

The truck dipped precariously, and I braced myself with a hand on the roof. "For fuck's sake, Martin!" I yelled toward the cab of the vehicle. "Your mission isn't to hit every damn pothole in Af—"

The rest of the word was ripped away when I realized we were upside down, and then I was flying.

I think I went out for a minute because, when I opened my eyes, I was flat on my back in the dirt. Blinking hard a few times, I tried to clear my vision through the grit and smoke surrounding me.

Fuck. This can't be good.

My mouth opened to try and call out, but no words came. Lifting on one elbow, I tilted my head to the side and heaved up a mouthful of sand, spitting and choking until I could actually feel my tongue again.

"Shit! Garcia? Martin? Everybody okay?" My voice was scratchy, as I continued calling out names but all I could hear were moans, yells, and the ominous crackle of fire. I couldn't see anyone through the heavy black smoke, but as it began to clear, I was blinded by the scorching sun.

I breathed a sigh of relief as a looming shadow blocked out the light, forming a halo around the silhouette of a man. When he kneeled near my head in the hot sand, I was able to make out his face.

“Franklin! Fuck! You’re bleeding.” I sat up to check the gash on his forehead, but he pushed me back down and swiped his face on the shoulder of his BDU shirt.

“Be still, Birdie. You could have a spinal injury. Does anything hurt?”

My eyes were focused on the deep crimson staining the tan fabric on his shoulder, and I think I mumbled something about him needing stitches.

“I’m good. Just a little blood. Tell me what hurts, Birdie.”

“I’m fine. Think I bumped my head a little. Was it a bomb?”

“Yeah, fucking coward-ass bastards,” he spat.

“Who?” I asked. Just one word, but he knew what I was asking.

“You’re only the second person I’ve found.” He didn’t say anything else, so I knew the first one was bad. Ripping open my shirt, he checked me for injuries, and I turned my head to the right.

The kid was lying in the sand about ten feet away from me, covered with filth and blood, his head bent at an unnatural angle. The bright blue eyes were open and staring blankly at me, all enthusiasm completely gone now.

“Cornett!” I screamed, scrambling to crawl across the ground toward him, but Franklin hauled me back with two hands fisted in my shirt.

“Birdsong, look at me,” he yelled. “Now!”

“We have to help him,” I yelled back, my eyes locked on the gruesome sight of that sweet kid whose blood was now forever part of the sand in this godforsaken place.

Franklin smacked me twice on the cheek, forcing my eyes back to his. “We have to help him,” I repeated, this time without any force behind it. Because I knew. I fucking knew.

“We can’t help him, Birdie, okay?” His lips pressed together as he shook his head, his eyes swimming with emotion. “The kid’s gone, so we need to

focus on you.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me. Help me up.”

“For Christ’s sake, be still and let me finish checking you.” He moved down my body, and I rolled my eyes. There was nothing wrong with me. Yeah, my head was pounding a little, and I’d probably have to use a gallon of eye wash and water to get the sand cleared from my eyes and mouth, but other than that, nothing hurt.

Franklin had reached my legs, but I wasn’t even watching him. My eyes were darting around trying to find anyone else, though my gaze staunchly avoided the area to my right. Where...

“Goddammit, motherfucking shit,” Franklin uttered from near my legs before screaming, “Medic! I need a medic right fucking now!”

“What? What is it?”

His face was suddenly two inches from mine, his hazel eyes filled with fear and... was that pity?

“You have a leg injury, Birdie. Just... just don’t look down, okay? Keep your eyes on me, and don’t look down.”

Being the stubborn ass that I am, I looked down.

That’s when the pain hit.

And then came the screaming.

CHAPTER 31



SNEAKING INTO THE BUNGALOW, I tried my damndest to be quiet so I didn't wake up Anna. She awakened every single time I got home before dawn, so this morning I undressed in the living room and padded silently down the tiled hallway in only my boxer briefs.

I paused outside the door when I heard a low groan and smiled. Was she touching herself? After I chased off the kids who were attempting to sneak onto Ella's property on a dare earlier, I'd had to go to the bathroom and jack off with Anna's panties against my nose.

And it was all because of that kiss. Fuck, it had been amazing, and my cock kept rising to the occasion every time I remembered it. Maybe that's what Anna was thinking about right now.

Pushing open the door, I saw movement on the bed and opened my mouth to tease her about not waiting for me.

And then she screamed loudly enough to turn my blood cold. Dropping my clothes on the floor, I sprinted to the bed in a panic to find Anna thrashing around in the clutches of what I assumed was a nightmare.

Shit! What am I supposed to do? Lights on or off? Wake her or not? I can't remember. Bode had had night terrors a few times, but it had been years ago. *Very little light, I think.* Grabbing a T-shirt, I tossed it over the lampshade to mute the light when I turned it on.

I was able to see her a little more clearly, and I sat on the edge of the bed, placing my hand gently on her shoulder. She kicked violently, but her legs were bound by the twisted sheet, so I tugged until she was free. That seemed to calm her a little, and I rubbed my hand up and down her arm.

It was slowly coming back to me. If the nightmare was severe, then you should try and gently wake the person up, so I repeated her name softly. “Anna? Tazanna?” It didn’t work. She let out a hoarse cry and swung her arm out wildly, hitting me in the chest. “Birdsong, can you hear me?”

She sat bolt upright, inhaling a long, gasping breath before reaching for her right leg. “My leg, Franklin. My fucking leg.”

I didn’t know who Franklin was, but I rolled with it. “I know, Birdsong, but it’s okay now. You’re all healed. You had surgery, and you can walk again.”

She swiveled her head toward me, her pupils dilated with virtually no brown showing. “I can?”

“Of course. You’re so strong, nothing could hold you back, right?”

Her head bobbed in short, tight movements as she seemed to regain her breath. “Yeah. Strong.” Her pupils came down a little, and her eyebrows pinched together in confusion. “Mario?”

I nodded. “I’m here, and you’re okay.”

Anna’s hand reached down and stroked over the end of her limb. “I’m

okay. It doesn't hurt."

"It was just a nightmare," I told her softly, caressing her back with my hand. Her shirt was drenched with sweat, and I could feel her muscles quivering with tension. "It's all okay now. You're safe."

A gut-wrenching sob filled the air, and I had to bite back tears as I laid beside her and pulled her face to my bare chest. "I've got you. You don't have to be afraid. I won't let anything happen to you."

"Okay," she whispered against my chest. "Just hold me, please." We lay clinging to each other, her tears dripping down my chest. Fifteen minutes later, the tears were gone, but her hands were still shaking uncontrollably.

"Anna," I said, desperation filling my words, "please tell me what I can do for you. How can I fix this?"

"Y-you can't. I have to... to relax myself."

I lifted her chin with my fingers so that I could see her face. "Okay, baby, but let me help you. Do you need a drink? A bath? Do you want me to sing to you?"

"Y-you're a terrible singer," she replied, and my lips turned up in a mirthful smile.

"Okay, you're right. No singing. What else would relax you? What do you usually do?"

"I usually... a girl I knew from my PTSD support group told me something that worked for her." Her lips rolled in, tucking themselves between her teeth before she puffed out a breath. "She has a boyfriend, and one night they figured out something that really, you know, *relaxed her*." Her face flushed bright red, and I understood.

"You need a release. An orgasm."

Anna closed her eyes, her face clenched in embarrassment as she nodded. "I

know you think I'm some kind of creepy weirdo, but—”

“I do not. Not at all. I think you're a very strong woman who is smart enough to ask for what she needs to get through something very difficult.” Wedging my leg between hers, I pressed my thigh against her center and kissed her forehead. “Take what you need, *mi amor*.”

Her voice was muffled as she pressed her face into the side of my neck. “It usually doesn't take long, and then I can go back to sleep. You can go to the other room if you want.”

“I'm not going anywhere, Anna. I can't leave you alone like this.” So *scared and vulnerable*. I pulled her closer and rested my hand against her lower back. “Hold onto me, baby.”

Her hands clutched around my neck as she made one tentative rock of her hips against my leg. “That's it, sweet girl,” I encouraged, guiding her gently with my hand. She was still pantiless since I'd stolen hers earlier, and I felt the first hint of wetness against my thigh as she rolled her hips. “That's my good girl.”

I held her as she moved slowly against me. What we were doing was sweet, unhurried, and intimate. It didn't feel dirty. It wasn't wild and loud. It didn't even feel sexual.

It was simply a woman quietly comforting herself on the man who...

I tilted my cheek down to rest on the top of her head before finishing my thought.

...the man who loved her.

CHAPTER 32



ANNA HAD BEEN RIGHT. She'd fallen into an exhausted slumber as soon as she had come, her body seeming to melt as soon as the softest of *ohhs* had left her lips. I, on the other hand, had lain there for over an hour, brushing my hand through her long hair and sorting through the realization that I was in love with this woman.

Though I'd only just admitted it to myself, it had probably been coming for quite a while, maybe even since that first time we were together a year ago. That night had been sexy as hell, for sure, but there had also been moments where I'd seen Anna's soft side. The one she tried to keep hidden.

Then I'd fucked up and wasted eleven months that we could've spent together instead of at each other's throats all the time. I really needed to get all that out in the open so that we could move forward. If she would still have me.

Reaching for my phone, I sent a quick text to Ella, telling her that Anna needed a day off. She responded back instantly that it was fine, and I rolled back to my girl.

My girl. That felt good to say, even in my head, and I closed my eyes and grinned.

“What’s so funny?”

I lifted my lids and found Anna looking up at me. “Just happy, I guess,” I told her, squeezing her tighter against me. “How are you feeling this morning?”

“I’m okay.” Her gaze dropped to my chest before lifting back to my face. “I feel like I should be embarrassed about what happened, but I’m not.”

“Good, because you shouldn’t be.”

Her eyes moved slowly back and forth between mine. “You make me feel... I don’t know... I guess comfortable would be the best word. I feel like you actually see the real me, and you like me anyway.”

“Hmmm, self-deprecation so early in the morning,” I mused, kissing the tip of her nose, and she laughed.

“What time is it?”

“It’s almost eight, but don’t worry. You’re playing hooky from work today. I already messaged Ella that you needed a day.”

“Really?” Her eyes brightened up.

“Yep. I thought you might need some downtime. Plus, this way, you can spend the day with your brother since he’s leaving tomorrow.”

Her teeth trapped her bottom lip, and she nodded. “That sounds really good actually. I might take him to Locked and Loaded. Will you go with us, or do you need to sleep?”

“You want me to go? I won’t be offended if you just want to hang out with

Chayton.”

Her big brown eyes sucked me in, and last night’s feelings grew in size and intensity, solidifying the fact that I was indeed in love with this beautiful, wonderful woman.

I nuzzled against her hand when her fingernails scratched lightly in my beard, reveling in her touch. “I want you to. I’d like you to get to know my brother.” Then a wry curve of her lips made me want to kiss them. “I mean, I know you already have this bro-mance thing going on, so maybe you want me to stay here, so you two can bond?”

“I’d rather bond with you, smarty butt,” I growled, smacking her naked bottom and pulling a giggle from her. I couldn’t help but think it was significant that she wanted me to spend time with her brother.

The softening of her face and her shy smile told me she was about to be vulnerable with me, and I adored vulnerable Anna as much as sassy Anna. “We could bond in the shower,” she said quietly, nibbling on the corner of her lip. “I mean, not bond like *that*, not literally, but since we both probably need to shower, then...” One shoulder bobbed up and down.

“Then it makes sense for us to do it together.” I filled in, taking the pressure off her. “In the name of water conservation of course. Not because you want to ogle my luscious bod.”

That earned me a full-throated laugh. “Of course. Who in their right mind would want to look at all this?” she asked, stroking one hand down my chest and torso. “Seriously, Mario, you’re quite hideous with all these muscles.” She effected a faux shudder.

“You can just keep your eyes closed then, I guess. So I don’t offend you.”

“Oh, I’ll manage,” she retorted lightly. “Hand me my phone, and I’ll text Chayton the plan.”

Two minutes later, I scooped Anna up and carried her into the bathroom. “I feel weird when you carry me like this,” she informed me. “I don’t like feeling like the damsel in distress. You know, like weak and helpless.”

I looked at her in surprise. “I won’t do it if you don’t want me to, but I think you’re giving me too much credit. Maybe I just get a cheap thrill from holding you like this.”

She giggled. “Oh really?”

“Uh-huh,” I told her with a nod. “Rest assured, my motives are completely un-noble. Entirely in the name of having your tight little body against me.”

“Pervert.”

“Takes one to know one.”

“God you’re such a juvenile.”

“A juvenile pervert. You nailed me, Anna,” I said, setting her on the wide vanity. We both brushed our teeth, and I turned on the shower to warm up the water before turning back to her. “I like seeing you in my T-shirts,” I said, my voice sounding more gravelly than usual as I reached for the hem of the one she was wearing. “May I?”

“I do usually shower without a shirt on,” she retorted.

“Don’t get cute with me, woman,” I said, allowing the backs of my fingers to brush against her skin as I slowly pulled the shirt up and over her head. Goosebumps erupted along the trail, and I wanted nothing more than to lick them, warming her skin with my tongue until they disappeared.

Her breasts were as full and perfect as I remembered them, and my lips ached to suckle every inch of them. The pretty rosy nipples pebbled under my gaze, and my cock twitched behind the thin fabric of my underwear.

“*Dios, eres hermosa,*” I whispered, and she smiled.

“You think I’m beautiful?”

“The most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” I assured her, and her breath hitched a little in her chest. “I didn’t know you knew Spanish.”

“A little. I’ve been working on it. I learned French in high school, though I’ve forgotten most of it since I never use it. Spanish is much more useful in Texas.”

I nodded my understanding. “Desvísteme.” At her blank look, my lips curled up at the corners. “Undress me.”

Anna’s lips pressed together, and her fingers hooked into the waistband of my boxer briefs, slowly edging them down until I could step out of them.

Her eyes were fixated between my legs. “I’m trying not to look,” she said. “I really am.”

Leaning in, I kissed her cheek just in front of her ear. “It’s okay, *cariño*. I’m looking too.” I removed her arm brace and pressed my lips against her wrist before stroking my fingertips up to her elbow.

“Does it hurt today?” I asked, and she shook her head.

This time, instead of cradling her in my arms, I picked her up with her legs wrapped around me. Carrying her into the shower, I settled her on her one good leg and held her waist until she seemed steady.

“Can I wash your hair for you?”

She nodded, and I dragged her against me, turning us until she could lean her head back under the rainfall showerhead. My vision went slightly blurry at the sight of her, head tilted back, hair flowing to her ass, breasts jutting forward. But her neck enchanted me most of all, the slim line of it arched and ripe for my mouth.

With one hand at the curve of her lower back, I slid the other down her hair to wet it as my lips pressed a gentle kiss in the hollow of her throat.

“Hold onto me,” I murmured, lifting her arms to my shoulders. “Careful of

your wrist.”

I reached for her shampoo, squirting a generous dollop into my palm before streaking it through her hair. Working it through the long, dark strands, I spent extra time on her scalp.

“Mmm, you’re even better at that than Maverick,” she groaned, her eyes closed as my fingertips massaged her.

“Maybe I should quit my job and become a professional head massager.”

“Mmhmm, then you could work with Thunder every day.”

“Fucking wise ass,” I growled, tugging lightly on her hair. “I can’t believe you put that in the group text.”

The tiniest of smiles curled her lips. “Are you mad at me?”

I chuckled as I rinsed the shampoo from her hair. “No, but just be warned. Paybacks are a bitch.”

“Bring it, Diaz,” she said with a laugh.

After I’d conditioned and rinsed her hair, I kissed her softly on the lips.

“Thanks,” she said shyly.

“Well, I owed you.” Her eyes narrowed in confusion, and I clarified. “Last time, I told you I would wash your hair for you.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “You mean when you jizzed in my hair?”

“Yes, after you wrapped it around my cock and jerked me off.”

She covered her eyes with one hand. “God, I can’t believe I did that. I’ve never done anything like that before.”

Pulling her tighter against me, I felt the tips of her nipples press against my chest as I pulled her hand away. “Don’t be embarrassed, *cariño*. It was the hottest damn thing I’d ever seen. I’m a little obsessed with your hair.”

Her lips turned down into a wistful frown. “Joe tried to get me to cut it after my accident. Said it would be easier to take care of.”

Anger bubbled hot in my belly. “That’s... that’s fucking ridiculous, Anna. Doesn’t he know that long hair represents strength or power to Native Americans?”

Her eyes widened in surprise as I stroked my finger through her long locks. “I explained it to him, but he didn’t get it. He said it was just hair.” She dipped her head before looking back up at me. “How did you know that?”

“I, um, I thought it was common knowledge.” I didn’t tell her I’d looked it up because that would make me sound like a big, stalkery freak.

“My family wasn’t totally militant about it. We were allowed to get trims to keep it neat and healthy-looking. I like it long though because I can braid it. The three strands of the braid signify mind, body, and spirit, and I like that because a person needs all three in equal measure to form a complete being.”

Then her eyes widened. “Crap! How am I going to braid my hair with a lame wrist?” Her face crinkled into a frown. “I guess it’ll be okay for a few weeks. I do wear it down sometimes, depending on my mood.”

I grinned at her. “I have got you covered, girl. I’ll have you know I’m the best hair braider at DFW Security Force. Present company excluded, of course.”

She laughed, her teeth sparkling against her dark-pink lips. “How the hell do you guys know how to braid?”

I shrugged one shoulder. “We helped with Carrie a lot when Blaire was in med school. Trust me, we’re all experts on all little girl issues. Bode excelled at shopping, and Hawk is the fastest diaper changer.”

“Do I even want to know how you know that about Hawk?”

“We timed each other.”

Anna let out a cute giggle. “Should’ve known you guys would turn even diaper changing into a competition.” Then she reached for my bottle of

shampoo. “Your turn.”

She tried to cover her wince when she attempted to use her left hand to squirt out the shampoo, but I noticed and I took the bottle carefully from her. “Let’s do it together.” Squirting some into her right palm, I pressed mine against it, sliding it around until both our hands were coated. Then we washed my hair, each of us with one hand, and we shared a smile each time our fingers brushed.

Once I’d rinsed, I picked up Anna’s bottle of floral body wash. “Will you let me wash you?”

Her breathing picked up a notch, but mine stalled in my lungs as I waited for her answer.

And then she nodded.

CHAPTER 33



MARIO SOAPED UP HIS hands, and I pressed my back against the tile wall. I needed it for support because he was about to have his hands on me, and from the glint in his eyes, he wanted to touch me *everywhere*.

And I wanted him to. I wanted to feel the roughness of his fingers against my skin. It had been so long...

He started with my injured hand, washing it with so much care, it almost brought tears to my eyes. Then he worked his way up my arm and down the other, washing every part of me with precision. When he took two of my fingers and fucked them with his fist, I had to grab onto the handrail beside me to stay upright.

His eyes were glued to mine as he continued the sexually charged in and out motion, and every bit of my saliva abandoned my mouth, leaving me feeling like I'd swallowed a gallon of sand.

When he moved his hands to my breasts, I thought I might just collapse into a heap on the floor. “You’re very thorough,” I commented as he focused his fingers on *cleaning* my nipples.

His grin was so cocky, I wanted to slap him and kiss him at the same time. But mostly kiss him.

“I take pride in my work, Mrs. Diaz. My pretend wife will have the cleanest nipples in the state once I’m done. Unless you’d like to lodge a formal complaint.”

When he pinched my extremely clean peaks, I dropped my head back against the wall and panted, “No, no complaints here. Carry on.”

“I do think I’ve missed a spot here,” he said, abandoning one of my breasts and blazing a soapy trail up my chest until his hand was wrapped around my throat.

“Oh god,” I moaned a split second before his lips descended on mine in a kiss that rivaled the steam level of this shower. He owned my mouth with his dominating tongue while his hand stroked up and down my throat, occasionally squeezing just enough to leave me breathless.

His other hand inched downward until it was between my legs, his fingers finding every crease and crevice. “Mario, please,” I begged into his mouth.

“What is it you want, Anna? Tell me.”

“Your fingers inside me. Please.”

He rinsed the body wash off his fingers and gave me a crooked grin. “Don’t want any unauthorized substances in there.”

“Huh?” I asked in dazed confusion.

Mario shook his head. “A story Bode told us. It involved cayenne pepper massage oil and a trip to the ER.”

“Oh shit,” I said with a giggle, which quickly faded away when a thick

finger slid slowly inside me. A second finger joined the first, and my eyes rolled back in my head. “Yeah, right there.”

His mouth devoured my neck while his hands worked at my breast and my pussy. A hard, steel rod pressed against my hip, and as he finger-fucked me, his hips moved in the same rhythm. All the delicious sensations took over my brain and I wobbled a little, catching myself on Mario’s shoulder. “Oops, sorry.”

“I got you,” he said, lifting me with *one fucking arm* as his other hand stayed between my legs. “You’d better sit down, *cariño*, because I’m about to make your fucking knees buckle.”

Holy hell. This man and his filthy mouth are going to be the death of me.

Mario carried me a few steps and deposited me on the corner bench before kneeling in front of me. “Time to worship at the Altar of Anna,” he murmured, leaning forward and lapping at my clit. “Put your legs over my shoulders, baby.”

I did, leaning back against the tiles as his mouth explored my pussy and his fingers owned it with hard, rough pumps. My hand went to the back of his head, threading through the thick, black hair there as my hips rocked against his face.

Just as I’d suspected, Mario’s beard added another layer of decadence to the act, the soft abrasion sublime and exhilarating all at the same time.

A loud cry escaped my lips when he curled his fingers forward and caressed the spot inside me that made me forget how to use words. “That’s... oh, oh... I’m...”

The orgasm stole the rest of what I was going to say, and I felt like I was splitting in two. Half of me was on the shower bench, receiving the most

intense pleasure a man can give to a woman, and the other half was floating near the ceiling, looking down at the erotic scene.

Mario on his knees, indeed worshipping me like I was his goddess, and me with my head pitched back as I enjoyed the sensual ride.

“Damn,” I panted as his mouth and fingers slowed between my thighs, “have I told you how much I love that beard?”

He looked up, his mouth shiny with my arousal, and grinned. “Then it’s definitely a keeper, *mi amor*.” His lips pressed to my lower belly as he pulled his fingers from me and wiped them on my nipples.

Then he cleaned them off with his mouth, and he took his sweet time with it, lapping and sucking as the aftershocks of the orgasm finally wore off. “Perfecta,” he murmured with one last kiss against my breast.

As he rose onto his knees to brush his lips across mine, I felt his erection against my inner thigh. He inhaled sharply when I reached for it and trailed my fingertips across the head and down the shaft.

“Is this okay?” I whispered, and he nodded.

“I think I might actually die if you stop.” I smiled against his lips and traced the engorged veins weaving up and down his girth. “I’ve missed your touch, *cariño*. I think about it all the time.”

I didn’t know how the hell to respond to that, but thankfully, I didn’t have to. His hot tongue plunged into my mouth, and I wrapped my fist around his erection and squeezed, earning me a low moan. Our mouths melded together as we shared each other’s air, and his hips began to fuck slowly into my fist.

“I’ve missed your touch too. It’s what I think about when…” I hesitated.

“When you get yourself off?” he finished, and I nodded.

“I like that, sweetheart,” he said, his gorgeous eyes flickering with hints of gold.

Working him with unhurried strokes, I allowed myself the opportunity to reacquaint myself with his cock. The thickness. The mushroom head. The smooth velvety texture wrapped around hard steel.

I added a little twist on each upstroke, and Mario's head dropped back, his lips parting. "Fuck, you're good at that. You know exactly what my cock needs."

My cheeks flushed at his praise, and I bent my head to lap at his nipple. His hand twisted in my wet hair as his breathing became labored. Kissing up his chest and settling my mouth at the crook of his neck, I bit him lightly, and his hips jerked.

"You like when I bite you, baby? You like the way I stroke this big dick?"

"Hell yes, Anna. I love everything you do to me." I let my thumb stroked over the sensitive head of him, and he gritted his teeth as a low growl rumbled through his chest. "I'm ready to blow in your hand, *amor*. So. Fucking. Close."

I flicked my tongue over his earlobe and then nipped it with my teeth. "If you stand up, I'll let you come on my tits," I whispered, and I swear the man was on his feet before I'd gotten all the words out.

Scooting my butt forward on the bench until I was almost laying down, I continued to jack him off as his hands pressed against the wall over my head. There was nothing in the world sexier than this man hovering over me like a giant beast. Just like he'd done with that steamy-ass kiss last night. That one had left me speechless for at least ten minutes after he left.

The grind of his hips against my hand became more erratic as he neared his completion, and I loved that I could make him lose control like that. "Fuck, Anna. Coming," he grunted a second before the first spurt of his cum hit my left breast.

He bit down on his bottom lip and then curses filled the air as he covered me with his seed. “Goddamn, that’s the prettiest sight I’ve ever seen,” he said through heavy breaths, dropping one hand to my stomach to smear his load across my skin.

I loosened my grip on him until he was done and then released him. He still had a semi, and I leaned forward to lick his tip. He hummed a deep sound of approval. The taste was different, but I liked it, so I surrounded his crown with my lips and swirled my tongue to eat up any remnants.

“Christ, Anna. That’s fucking sexy.” His hand was rubbing softly against the top of my head. “Give me a second to remember how to breathe, and I’ll clean you up. Shit, I think I may have punctured a lung.” His big hand went dramatically to his chest.

I pulled my mouth from him and giggled at that. “If you did, then that makes me the master of the hand job universe.”

He laughed and kissed me softly on the lips as he scooped his hands beneath my butt and lifted me. “Stop being so fucking perfect, or I may decide to keep you forever.”

On the outside, I scoffed, even rolled my eyes. “You couldn’t handle me, Diaz.”

But on the inside... well, on the inside, I didn’t think that sounded like a bad idea at all.

CHAPTER 34



“GUYS, I’M SORRY I can’t have lunch with you, but I’ve got a Beretta that needs complete servicing by the end of today,” Cole told us at the entrance to *Reload*, the restaurant at the shooting range.

“It’s okay. Thanks for hanging with us this morning,” Anna told him, and he wrapped an arm around her neck and squeezed. The simple hug had my jaw clenching, but I tamped my annoyance down because I knew he didn’t mean anything by it.

“Karen, their lunch is on me today,” he said, rapping twice on the hostess podium, and the blonde woman smiled and nodded.

“You don’t have to do that, Cole,” I protested.

“No,” he said, shaking his head vehemently. “I love when you guys come here. It’s a treat to watch how much talent you have.” He turned to Anna. “And thanks for bringing your cousin in today. Chayton, dude, I’ve never

seen anyone handle a bow like you did. I mean... pshewwww!" He did the little mind blown gesture, and Chayton laughed.

"No prob, man. This place is something else. Thanks for having me."

"Any time, dude. Any time," he said, slapping hands with me and Chay before he headed back to his workshop.

Anna's backstory didn't contain a brother named Chayton, so we'd had to fib and introduce him as her cousin. It would only take one mention of *Anna's brother, Chayton* to another of Ella's security guards, and our entire story would begin to unravel. If anyone was looking closely enough.

Cole wasn't wrong about Chayton's abilities though. I was great with a bow and arrow. Anna was outstanding. But her brother? Yeah, he was fucking deadly. And fast. He'd amazed us all with a compound bow, a crossbow, and even an old-fashioned longbow, shooting moving targets like they were standing still.

"Can I call you Katniss?" I asked Chayton—referring to the female character in *The Hunger Games*—when we were seated in a large, round booth.

"Yeah, if you want me to hate you," he retorted with a grin as he picked up his menu. "What's good here?"

"The elk chops," I reported.

"So is the field greens salad with walnuts and mandarin oranges," Anna added with a glint of mischief in her eyes.

"Woman, what is wrong with you? A salad?" He lowered his voice. "Me man. Me need meat."

"God you're ridiculous," she said, swatting him on the back of head with her menu.

After the server took our orders and brought our drinks, Anna elbowed her

brother. “Tell Mario the joke.”

“Which one? I got a million of ’em.”

She pursed her lips and glared at him. “You know the one... about the names?”

“Oh yeah.” He leaned his forearms on the table and looked around Anna. “Okay, Mario...”

Chayton launched into a completely inappropriate joke about a little Native American boy and delivered the irreverent punchline at the exact moment I took a drink of my water, which ended up spewed across the table.

“Shit,” I croaked, dabbing at the liquid with my napkin. “I can tell you two are related.”

Anna, despite obviously having heard that joke before, was slumped back in the booth with her hands over her belly as she laughed. I loved her laugh. It was completely uninhibited and so... *her*.

“Whew!” she said, fanning her face. “I need to go to the restroom. I almost wet my pants.”

Sliding from the booth, I held my hand out, and she took it, shooting me a wink before she headed toward the back of the restaurant. I didn’t even realize I was standing there staring at her back until Chayton cleared his throat.

“You really like her, don’t you?”

Seating myself, I nodded at the man. “Yeah, I do. She’s amazing.” I took another drink of my water. “You good with that?”

“I’m good with it as long as you’re good to her, and I think you will be.”

Giving him a nod, I said, “I’ll do my damndest, if it’s what she wants. She’s a tough nut to crack, but I think we’re getting there.”

“You’ll have your hands full, for sure,” he said with a knowing grin.

“She’ll cut your nuts off if you fuck up.”

I hated to break it to him, but I already had. I just hoped she would forgive me. And let me keep my nuts intact.

“Don’t I know it? We butted heads for a long time, but the more I get to know her, the more I like her.”

Chayton slapped me on the shoulder. “You’ll get there. She’s been through a lot of shit, but it’s made her the strongest person I know.”

I sensed her as soon as she was back in the room, and my eyes went immediately to Anna striding confidently across the dining area. My heart beat double time when she smiled at me.

“I completely agree, bro.”



As soon as we pulled up at the bungalow, my phone rang. “It’s Ella,” I informed Anna as I climbed out of Chayton’s rental car.

“Hi, Ella.”

“Mario.” It was only one word, but I could hear the strain loud and clear.

“What’s wrong?”

“Another package arrived for me today. Can you meet me in my office?”

“Of course. I’ll be right there.”

“And bring Anna if she’s feeling okay,” she said before we disconnected.

Anna was right beside me, sensing that something was wrong. “What is it?”

“Ella needs to see us. She received another package.”

“Okay, we need to go. Chay...”

Her brother waved us off. “You two have work to do. I’ll just head back to my hotel. Let me know if you get things wrapped up by dinnertime, and I’ll join you.”

Anna gave him a swift kiss on the cheek and then grabbed my hand to pull me into the house to grab an evidence kit before we hoofed it up to the main house.

We found Ella pacing back and forth in her private office, arms crossed over her chest as her sister gnawed on her thumbnail. “It’s there,” Ella said, nodding her head at a box on her glass-topped desk.

Anna and I each pulled on gloves, and she lifted the lid. There was a stack of four 8X10 color photos on top, and we inspected each one. It was a series of shots of Ella and Lawrence asleep on her bed.

“Fucking creepy,” Anna said to me under her breath, and I agreed. Setting the pictures aside, she reached for the item at the bottom of the box. “Is this your shirt, Ella?” she asked softly, and the singer nodded.

“It’s mine. I have—*had*—one just like it, but it’s missing. That’s the first thing I checked. It’s not in my closet.”

“Did you check the laundry?”

She shook her head. “No, laundry is done a couple times a week, and I haven’t worn this shirt since... I think it was week before last. So it should definitely have been in my closet. Unless someone took it,” she said, flailing an arm toward the tee in Anna’s hand.

She was on the verge of tears, and Anna guided her to the creamy leather couch in the sitting area. Emily pushed from her chair and sat on the other side of her sister, wrapping a comforting arm around her waist.

“It’s okay,” she said soothingly. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, sissy.”

“Did you call the police already?” Anna asked.

Ella massaged her forehead with her fingers. “Yes, they’ll be here shortly. I wanted to show you two first.” Anna shot me a look and I nodded my understanding, pulling out my phone and taking pics of the photos and T-shirt.

Anna held out her hand for the pictures, and I handed them over. “It looks like you’re wearing this shirt in the photographs. Can you remember the last time you wore it?”

Frustration creased our boss’s forehead. “I wear it a lot. It was my favorite shirt, but now I don’t think I’ll ever be able to wear it again. Someone was in my damn bedroom while I was asleep, Anna, and I was only wearing a T-shirt and underwear. This is really starting to freak me out.”

“I understand,” Anna said calmly, bringing one of the 8X10s closer to her face. “These were definitely taken during the daytime because of the amount of light in the room. You can see out the balcony door on this one. That’s on... let’s see...” She turned her head from side to side, one finger wiggling thoughtfully in the air. “The balcony is on the west side of the house. This is full sun, so I’m guessing the pictures were taken in the afternoon.”

Pride swelled in my chest. She was so fucking good at this. I’d noticed that the pictures were snapped during the day, of course, but I hadn’t even thought to determine the approximate time.

Ella’s sister sat in wide-eyed amazement as she watched Anna work her way through the details. “I can’t believe you can tell all of that from a picture. You’re really smart, Anna.”

“Thanks,” she said, giving her a tight smile before turning her attention back to Ella. “Do you remember if you and Lawrence have taken an afternoon nap recently? Then we can check out surveillance videos for that day.”

Ella snapped her fingers a couple of times, her eyes brightening. “Wait! We did. We stayed up really late binge watching *Breaking Bad* a couple of weeks ago, and we were so tired, we took a nap after lunch the next day. Around two o’clock, I think.”

“Can you remember what day of the week it was?”

“Um, crap. I have no idea.”

“Hmmm, what did you do before you started watching TV?”

Ella’s eyes rolled up in thought. “Oh, I remember. It was after that recording session ran long in my studio.”

“That was on a Tuesday, so that means these pics were taken the next day, Wednesday,” Anna filled in, and the singer looked at her quizzically. “I’m the keeper of the schedule, so I know these things,” she teased, and I could see Ella visibly relax.

“God, you’re so amazing. Both of you.”

“Hey, I’m just here for the muscle,” I said. “Anna is the brains of this operation.” The smile she gave me was everything, and I felt myself falling even deeper into the rabbit hole of love.

The rabbit hole of love? What the hell is this woman doing to me? I thought with a silly grin on my face.

Pushing those thoughts from my head, I said, “Anna, would you go up to the security office and pull the surveillance films from that Wednesday? I’ll stay here with Ella until the police arrive. Then we can spend the rest of the day going through it to see who was in the house that day.”

She nodded and stood. “I’ll also pull the employee records to see who was on duty.”

“Smart idea.”

Ella turned to her sister. “Would you please bring me a cup of tea, Em? My

nerves are shot.”

“Of course,” Emily said with a curt nod, rising to follow Anna from the room.

“You really like her,” Ella noted as soon as the women were gone, and I realized I was staring at the door she’d disappeared through like a lovesick puppy.

Turning with chagrin written all over my face, I stuffed my hands in my pockets and shrugged. “Why does everyone keep saying that?”

Ella laughed. “Maybe because you look like you want to eat her up, take her to bed, and marry her all at the same time.”

That last one surprised me but didn’t make me feel weird at all. In fact, it made my heart rate pick up in... was that excitement?

“Yes to all three,” I admitted.

“Good. I like you two together. I’m sorry I interrupted her day off. Is she okay? Was her wrist hurting too badly?”

“If it was, she would never admit it. The stubborn ass wouldn’t even let me fill the prescription for the pain pills she was prescribed. I did get her to take two Advil this morning for the swelling.” I ran a hand through my hair, resting my hand at the back of my neck. “She just had a bad night. Not her arm. Something else.”

“I understand,” Ella said kindly. “I checked in on her a couple times yesterday, but she seemed to be handling everything with ease. She actually types one-handed on the keyboard faster than me with both hands.”

That made me laugh. “Yeah, she’s pretty... adaptable.”

A thought seemed to occur to her. “Is she able to get her leg on and off with a broken wrist? I’ve never actually seen someone put on a prosthetic leg, so I’m not sure what all that entails.”

My head shook side to side. “Actually, no, she can’t. You have to use your palms to smooth up the liner so you don’t poke a hole in it with your fingernails, which would affect the seal. And since her left palm is covered with the brace, she can’t do it. But it’s fine. I’ve been doing it for her.”

There was a long pause. “You help her put it on before work?” I nodded, and she continued. “But you work nights. Aren’t you supposed to still be sleeping when she leaves for work?”

My shoulders lifted and lowered in a shrug. “It’s no big deal. I don’t mind getting up with her, and I usually catch a nap in the afternoon.”

“But it would be easier if you worked days.” It was more of a musing statement than a question, but I answered it anyway.

“Well, yeah, but it’s fine. I’ve gone with lots less sleep in the past, and I promise you, I can still do my job.”

She waved a slim hand at me. “I’m not worried about that. I want to make things as easy as possible for you and Anna. I’m telling Joe to put you on days from now on. Starting with the new schedule next week.”

I probably should have argued, but I didn’t. Because the thought of being able to go to bed with Anna every single night thrilled me to my very core.

CHAPTER 35



THE WHINE OF THE drill pierced the room as I attached the tiny camera above the molding. “Can you see it?” I asked quietly, looking down from where I was standing on a ladder.

Anna walked around, checking it from different angles. “Nope. Can’t see a thing. Good job.”

I was just climbing down when Ella Ervin’s dad and sister came through the front door with beach towels in their hands.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Enoch asked, smacking me on the back of the shoulder.

Fuck. I had absolutely no reason to be up on a ladder with a drill in someone else’s home.

Of course, Anna’s sharp brain took over. “There was a loose piece of molding, and my husband just *had* to fix it.” She grinned affectionately up at me and took my hand, and it was so sweet and natural, it was almost like she

wasn't acting. "He can't seem to help himself. My mother loves when he comes over because he does all the things my dad has been putting off."

"The honey-do lists can take a toll on a man," Enoch said with a genuine grin. "Mario, do you get along well with Anna's family?"

Releasing my pretend wife's hand, I wrapped my arm around her shoulders, pulling her body tightly against mine. "Best in-laws ever. They treated me like family from day one." Anna's brown eyes met my own, and I wasn't acting a bit when I kissed her softly on the lips and said, "I'm a very lucky man."

"Gahh! Why can't I find a man who looks at me like that?" Emily said, stomping one flip-flopped foot, and her dad chuckled.

"You will one day, honey. Just be patient." They headed back toward the pool, and Enoch said over his shoulder, "Just call maintenance next time you see something that needs to be fixed, Mario. That's what they get paid for."

"Will do, sir." I waited until they cleared the back door before pulling Anna to face me, my hands falling easily to her hips. "Thanks, babe. I couldn't think of a thing to say."

"It's what I'm here for. I'm the brains of the operation after all." Her voice was light and teasing, and I swatted her on the ass. My dick twitched in my pants when her pupils dilated and her lips parted, desire written all over her face.

"You like that, *cariño*? Because—"

"Hey, guys."

Annoyance. I was filled with it. Every single pore in my body was oozing with the stuff.

Curling an arm around Anna's waist, I turned to face the newcomer. "Hello, Joe," I said flatly as his eyes trolled up and down my wife's body. "Did you

see anything on the surveillance videos?” *And would you like to live without those eyeballs for the rest of your life?*

He raised his gaze to mine, pressing his lips into a thin line and shaking his head. “No, just the usual people coming in and out of the house. Nothing unusual. If only Ella would let us put cameras upstairs.” His lip turned up in a sneer.

Anna’s tone was disapproving, and I took some petty satisfaction in that. “She doesn’t allow it because that’s her private area, Joe.”

“Yeah, bu—”

“But nothing. Would you like to have cameras all up in your business? In and around your bedroom? Your bathroom?” *God she’s so fucking sexy when she’s throwing the sass.*

He stuffed his hands in his pockets, shoulders slumping at the admonishment. “No, you’re right. Did you guys get the camera installed down here?”

“Mario just finished,” she said, her fingers tightening on my waist. “He put it up above the molding where you can’t even see it, but it gives a full view of the base of the stairs. Hopefully, it will catch it if some unauthorized person tries to go up there.”

“What if they take the elevator?” Joe asked smugly.

“Already put a hidden camera up above it,” I informed him with just as much smugness. “Anyone who goes upstairs will be recorded, but this way, it still allows Ella some privacy in her private quarters.”

His lips twisted to the side. “Okay then. Ella told me she gave you the night off.” His tone was disapproving but I didn’t give a shit.

“Uh-huh. Anna and I are going to go through the video some more after dinner. *My wife* has an excellent eye.”

Joe's jaw tightened as he turned to head up the stairs. "Fine. I'll cover for you this time."

"Do you get actual enjoyment from riling him up?" Anna asked with a smirk once her nimrod of an ex was gone.

"Yep. Highlight of my day." I pivoted in front of her and wrapped both arms around her waist. "Now, where were we before we were so rudely interrupted?"

"Ummm, let's see. You spanked my ass and then asked if I liked it."

"Oh, that's right, but you don't have to answer. I know you did."

"You're so fucking cocky," she said, but she wrapped her arms up and around my neck.

"I'm also cocky fucking."

She laughed and pulled me closer. "Kiss me, you idiot."

I closed my mouth over hers, letting my lips gently caress and suck at hers until her lips parted. Then I took full advantage, pressing my tongue into her mouth as my hand wrapped around her braid.

The kiss was sweet, slow, and hot, and my hand roved up and down her back as she arched into me, molding her breasts to my torso.

Ping!

"Shit," Anna muttered into my mouth as her phone signaled an incoming message.

"Fuck it," I said, sliding my tongue against hers. Then we were kissing again, her hand twisting into the hair at my nape and mine cupping her cheek.

Ping!

"See who it is," I told her, reluctantly releasing her from my hold.

She checked her phone. "It's my brother. He's on the way, and he's bringing dinner."

“All right, as soon as we make sure this camera is working, we can head back to the bungalow.”

We both pulled up the app on our phones, and I saw a clear live image of Anna and I standing at the base of the wide stairway. As I watched, she lifted her eyes from her screen, looked directly at the camera, and blew me a kiss. I looked up and blew one right back to her.

She giggled as she took my hand. “Why are we so damned cheesy?”

I didn’t know, but I liked it.

We Facetimed with Shark as soon as we got settled on our couch, and I was surprised to find him with a huge smile on his face. The man was generally pretty stoic, but here he was grinning like the Cheshire cat.

“Why the hell do you look so happy?” I asked. “Did Charli sneak into your office to give you a little mid-afternoon *pick-me-up*?”

The corners of his lips pushed further up and he laughed. “No, that was this morning. I was actually just checking the video feed on the app to see if you’d gotten the cameras installed.”

Anna tensed beside me, and I laid my hand on her thigh, squeezing slightly.

“Yep, all good,” I said.

“That camera at the base of the stairs is working *very* well,” Shark said, his sharp eyes moving between our faces. “The video came through perfectly.”

Fuck. He saw the kiss.

“It’s a good system,” I hedged. “Great optics.”

He nodded, tapping his bottom lip with his forefinger. “I’d say the optics were very interesting.” He lifted his finger and waggled it back and forth between our faces on his screen. “You two seem to be... *playing your parts* well.”

Anna tried a smile, though it looked forced. “Yep. We’re pretty awesome at

it. That's why you pay us the medium bucks, boss."

Shark smiled at her joke and then leaned forward with his arms on his desk. "Maybe you two should look into getting a couple stars on that Hollywood Walk of Fame while you're in California because your acting skills are top-notch. And it looks like you're having a *spanking* good time doing it."

Christ.

Heaving out a sigh, I rolled my eyes. "Would you like to actually talk about the case, or do you want to just keep commenting on how easy I find it to kiss a gorgeous woman who I care very much for?"

If there had been a record player in the room, it would have screeched loudly. Anna's head whipped to face me, and Shark's astute green eyes widened.

Perhaps I've said too much...



We'd made it through the rest of the phone call with Shark and then dinner with Chayton. Now Anna and her brother were taking a drive while I went through the surveillance videos again.

"Nothing," I muttered, switching to the view of the pool again. "There's fucking nothing here." I fast-forwarded, slowing it down each time I saw a person, but nothing stuck out. Only household staff and family were in the house that day.

Something caught my eye, and I hit rewind. Placing my thumb and finger on the screen of the laptop, I pulled out to zoom in. The beach was visible in

the distance, and I could now see that two people were standing in the sand, and it looked like they were arguing.

“Hey, I’m back,” Anna chirped, coming through the front door. “Chayton said to tell you thanks for everything, and he was glad he got to meet you. He’s headed back to the hotel since his flight leaves at the asscrack of dawn.”

“Yeah, it was good,” I said distractedly.

“Whatcha looking at?” she asked, coming up behind me, hanging her arms over my shoulders, and resting her head beside mine. Her coconut scent tugged at me, and I rotated my head to kiss her cheek.

“Sorry, I was preoccupied with this. Take a look.”

She rounded the chair and sat on my lap as I started that section of the video again. Peering at the screen, she asked, “Is that Lawrence and Ella?”

“I think so. It’s so far away, it’s hard to tell for sure though.”

“They’re definitely having some kind of disagreement. Look. His hands are on his hips and hers are flapping around.”

“That’s what I thought too. It’s probably nothing; couples have disagreements all the time.”

“What time is it in this clip?”

I checked the time stamp. “It was at 1:04 in the afternoon.”

“Hmm. Ella said she and Lawrence didn’t go up for their nap until around two, but she didn’t mention an argument between the two of them.”

We watched the screen as the pair separated, Lawrence heading toward the house and the woman stomping off down the beach.

“She probably didn’t mention it because it was a private moment between two people, and she doesn’t want to air their dirty laundry.”

“And they were obviously fine with each other less than an hour later. They were cuddled up together in those pictures.”

I clicked out of the video and placed my hand on Anna's thigh. "Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure."

"It's about what happened that night when we were together last year."

She pressed her lips together, her pretty eyes meeting mine. "Oh. The *discussion.*"

Chuffing out a nervous laugh, I nodded. "Yeah, that." I rubbed my hand up and down her leg. "You're going to be mad at me."

"I was mad at you for almost a year, so that's nothing new."

"You've got a point." Taking a deep breath, I began. "So, early that morning, after the third time we were together, I got up to go to the bathroom, and while I was in there, I heard something."

Her eyebrows narrowed. "What?"

"I heard a man come into the house."

"Like an intruder?" she asked with alarm, and I shook my head.

You're screwing this up. Just blurt it out.

"No, it was Jake. Of course, I didn't know his name at the time. He yelled 'Honey, I'm home,' and I was confused because I didn't know who the hell this guy was. He said your name, so I knew he was calling for you. And then I noticed that there were men's and women's items in the bathroom and in the closet."

"Yeah, I stayed in his room while he was out of town because my room was being painted and re-floored."

"I know that now, but I didn't know it then. I thought... I thought he was your boyfriend." My eyes pleaded with her to understand my position.

She closed her eyes for a long moment, and I could see her face transforming. When she opened them again, there was nothing but angry fire

there.

“You thought Jake was my boyfriend after I’d spent the whole night fucking you?” Her voice was deceptively quiet, but I nodded.

Anna stood and paced away before stopping with her arms crossed over her stomach.

“Anna, I’m sorry. I jumped to conclusions and... fuck. I’m just sorry. I snuck out while he was in the shower, and I was so damned pissed at you.”

“You haven’t even begun to see pissed,” she said, before whirling around, her dark braid swinging. “You thought I was the kind of person who would cheat on her boyfriend? You obviously don’t think very much of me, do you?” Her voice was bitter and angry, and I fucking hated doing this to her.

Stepping toward her, I held out my hand, needing to touch her, but she slapped it away and took a step back. “Don’t touch me,” she warned.

I held both hands up in a gesture of surrender. “Okay, I won’t touch you. And I don’t think anything bad about you now. I like everything about you. I think you’re fucking amazing.”

“But not then.”

I shook my head, feeling like a complete shithead. “Given the information I had, I did jump to the conclusion that you’d used me.”

Jabbing a finger in my direction, she hissed, “You may not be the stupidest man alive, but you’d better hope he doesn’t die.”

I had to try really hard not to laugh at that because this woman’s snark was completely unrivaled, even during one of the most *unfunny* moments of my life.

“Why didn’t you just talk to me, Mario? Why didn’t you come wake me up and say, ‘Hey, who is this dude in your house?’”

“That’s what I should have done,” I admitted. “But I was in such a hurry to

get dressed and get out of there. I saw the cop uniforms in the closet, and I didn't want to get my ass shot."

She rolled her eyes up and to the side, bobbing her head a couple times. "Okay, I'll concede that point. It was probably wise to get out of dodge." Then her hot gaze was back on me. "Now let's talk about what happened in the breakroom two days later."

That's where I had *really* fucked up. Colossally.

"Every single word I said that day, I wish I could take it back, Anna. Everything I said was a goddamn lie, and I'm so sorry."

"How do I know you were lying then and that you're not lying to me now about lying to me then?"

Huh? It took me a second to decipher that, but I finally worked out what she was saying. "I don't know what to say to make you believe me, Anna. All I know is that I started catching feelings for you that night we were together. *Real* feelings, and the thought that it didn't mean anything to you hurt me."

Her eyebrows shot up so violently, I was surprised they didn't fly off, and she took a step toward me. "Hurt *you*? You wanna talk about hurt... how about this? How about someone tells you that you were a mistake? Or how about someone makes you feel so shitty about yourself that you can't even bring yourself to be with another man? *Huh?* How about that?"

Her voice had risen to a near yell, but I welcomed it. I deserved it.

"I am so sorry, sweetheart. You did absolutely nothing wrong, and you didn't deserve for me to make you feel like that. You're perfect. This was all on me. Cheating is a sensitive topic for me, and I let that cloud my judgment."

She threw up her hands and shook her head. "I don't like cheating either, Mario. Something you would have known if you'd talked to me like I was a

person.”

Pushing my hands down in my pockets so that I didn't try and touch her again—because god I wanted to—I told her, “You can hit me if you want.”

“Can I shoot you?”

I almost laughed at that, but she looked dead serious. “I'd rather you didn't.”

“Would it make you feel better if I hit you?”

“Actually, I think it would.”

“Then no,” she snapped. “I don't want you to feel better. In fact, I want you to get the fuck out, *Woody*.”

It wasn't lost on me that she used my nickname instead of Mario.

“Anna, can I just explain why—”

“No, you can get out.” Her voice had turned wobbly, and all I wanted to do was hold her. Comfort her. But I was the reason she needed comforting in the first place. “Please,” she said, and I could hear the tears threatening in the rasp of that single word.

I knew she probably needed to cry, and she sure as hell didn't want to do it in front of me, so I did as she asked. I left the house.



I ended up on the roof of Ella's house. It provided an excellent view of our bungalow, and I sat there with my legs bent, forearms resting on my knees. Watching. Staring at the little house where I'd left the woman that I loved.

Though I couldn't see her, I imagined her pacing back and forth, working through everything I'd told her. She'd probably cry or scream or a

combination of both, and the thought of her hurting urged a tear to slip down my face.

Then another.

And another.

So this is what love feels like. Your heart breaking because you can't stand the thought of her in pain. Especially when you're the one who caused it.

When I heard the door open behind me, I swiped at my face and sniffled a couple times to clear my nose.

“Hey, man. Can I join you?” Preston, one of the other security guards, asked as he made his way onto the roof.

No. Leave me alone to wallow and stare at a house.

“Sure,” I said, and he sat beside me, mirroring my position before pulling a pack of Marlboros from his pocket.

Tapping one out, he offered the pack to me. “Want one?” I stared at it for a long minute. I’d only smoked two cigarettes in my life, and that had been in high school when I was trying to look cool for a girl.

“Why the hell not?” I said, reaching for one and placing it in my mouth.

Preston cupped his hand around the lighter and lit my cigarette before holding the flame to his own. We sat in silence for a while, me puffing and blowing out streams of smoke without ever properly inhaling.

“What are you doing up here?” he finally asked.

“Had an argument with Anna.”

“Damn,” he said, taking another puff and blowing a perfect smoke ring.

“Your fault or hers?”

“Completely mine.”

He nodded, and we sat in the darkness, the only sound the gentle crashing of the waves.

“You apologize?”

“Several times.”

“Grovel?”

“Yeah, I even offered to let her hit me.”

From my peripheral vision, I saw the red tip of his cigarette flare. “Did you cheat on her?”

“Never. I would never do that,” I said immediately.

“Good, because if you did, I would throw you off this roof. Anna is a nice lady.”

Pressing my palm against my temple, I shook my head. “If she would just let me explain something to her, she might understand. I had a good reason for thinking what I thought that morning. I know she’ll still be hurt, but if she understands what I went through—what my family went through—then maybe she can forgive me for being an idiot.”

I knew I was rambling, and Preston had no fucking clue what I was talking about, but he was nice enough to just listen.

“Then why are you up here and not down there talking to your wife?” he asked, bobbing his head toward our bungalow.

“She booted me out. I think she needed time to cool off. She threatened to shoot me.”

Preston let out a soft chuckle and waved his hand back and forth. “Just run in a zigzag pattern. Makes it harder for them to hit you.”

I wanted to laugh and tell him that wouldn’t stop my talented wife from hitting her target.

“You know,” he said, “sometimes when a person is left alone to cool off, they get in their head, and it only makes them madder.”

“You think I should go back down there?”

“Is Anna worth getting shot over?”

“A million percent yes.”

He pulled the cigarette from my fingers and waved it at me. “Then what are you doing up here smoking with me? These fucking things will kill ya.”

I laughed and stood up, heading for the door. “Thanks, Pres. I appreciate you talking to me.”

“Mario?” he called, and I turned around. “Bulletproof vests are in the cabinet downstairs.”

CHAPTER 36



I HEARD THE FRONT door open and wiped my face on my T-shirt. Mario had been gone for about thirty minutes, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to see him yet. Then again, all I wanted was to see him.

Be strong, Taz.

Standing, I lifted my chin and pivoted around to face him and tell him to fuck off. Instead, I burst into laughter.

The idiot was wearing a flak jacket.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Your moronic fake husband is home.”

Motioning up and down his body, I asked, “And why are you wearing body armor?”

“Safety precaution.” He took another step into the room and closed the door behind him. “Anna, I'd really like to tell you something very important, and I hope you'll listen. It'll only take a few minutes, and then, if you want, I'll go

get a hotel room for the night. And tomorrow, we can decide how we want to proceed with,” he gestured between us, “all this.”

His eyes... God, why did he have such sweet, soulful eyes that were literally begging me to listen?

I nodded curtly, and his body seemed to deflate with relief.

We settled onto the couch with a wide gap between us, both of us facing forward. After removing his vest, Mario leaned forward, swiping a hand over his face and propping his arms on his thighs.

“This is really hard for me to talk about, so I’d appreciate it if you’d bear with me.”

The strain in his voice hit me right in the chest, and my fingers ached to inch over and link with his. To comfort him. But I kept them clasped tightly in my lap and murmured, “Okay.”

“First of all, my little brother, Marco, isn’t biologically my brother. He’s my cousin.” *Well, that came out of left field...* My body tilted slightly toward him to hear his quiet words. “His father was my dad’s brother, Uncle Tito, who was my favorite person in the world. He’d always wanted a kid, but he and his wife, Margot, had trouble conceiving, so me and my sisters were like his kids.”

His head dipped down until it was almost between his knees, and again, I wanted to reach out to him.

“Uncle Tito was good to all of us, even my mom. He would come and check on us whenever my dad was out of town. Take us kids out for ice cream to give my mother a break. Work on my mom’s car. He loved going camping, but my sisters weren’t interested in that. They were too girly, so it was usually just him and me. He was like a second father to me.”

He paused again. This was obviously hard for him.

“Margot had problems with substance abuse. It would get pretty bad at times, but Tito would take her to a facility and get her dried out, and when she would come home, everything would be fine for a while. He was always so proud of her while she was in recovery. That was just Tito though. So forgiving, even though some people in the family told him he would be better off without her.”

Mario’s head shook back and forth as he stared at the floor. “He wouldn’t hear of it. He loved her with all his heart. Said he promised her ‘for better or worse, for sickness and in health’ on their wedding day, and he meant every word of it.

“When they got pregnant with Marco, I was twelve. Turned thirteen just before he was born. Uncle Tito was so excited, but he always made sure to let me know that I was important to him, that we would still hang out and get ice cream and go camping.” There was a long pause, and then Mario whispered, “He promised me.”

Fuck it. I couldn’t take it anymore and reached a hand over and laid it gently on his back. I knew that whatever he was about to tell me was going to be much worse than me getting my feelings hurt.

“Margot did well and stayed off the junk while she was pregnant. I don’t know when she started using again, but when Marco was about one, Uncle Tito came home and found her in bed with another man. He called my dad in tears. His heart was fucking broken.”

Mario shook his head angrily and finally glanced over at me for the first time. “He loved that woman, took care of her through everything, and she fucking cheated on him.”

“I’m sorry, Mario.”

He leaned against the back of the couch, staring at the ceiling. My fingers

intertwined with his, and he tugged gently, asking me to move closer to him. I did, and his shoulders seemed to lose a bit of their tension.

“My dad begged him to get Marco and come stay at our house. Tito promised that he would the next day, but he wanted one night to process it by himself.” Mario’s jaw tightened as he continued to look up at the ceiling. “He went to a bar instead and got shitfaced drunk.”

Those big soulful brown eyes rolled toward me, holding me spellbound as he spoke his next words. “Then he drove off a bridge on the way home.”

Oh. God.

Every bit of anger dissolved from my body, and I crawled onto his lap, straddling him and holding him more tightly than I had ever held anyone. He wrapped his arms around me, and I could feel his warm, wet tears soaking my shirt.

“It’s been nineteen years, and I still miss him so much, Anna. So fucking much.”

“I know, baby. I know,” I cooed, rubbing his hair and kissing the side of his head.

“When... when I thought I had been with someone else’s woman, all I could think was, what if I just fucked up someone’s entire world? What if I’m the cause of someone’s death because of what I did? And then, later on, what if there’s a little boy out there missing his uncle, and he’s gone because of me?”

I lifted my head and grabbed his face between my hands, pressing feverish kisses all over his face and murmuring to him as our tears mixed together. “It’s okay, baby. You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s okay.”

“It was never really about you, Anna. It was about me and my guilt over what I thought I’d done. Yes, I was mad at you, but mostly I was mad at

myself.”

My head tipped forward to rest against his. “Now you don’t have to be mad at anyone because we’re okay.”

“But the way I’ve acted the past year.” His finger traced the shell of my ear and then trailed across my cheek. “I’m so sorry, Anna.”

“Water under the bridge. The way you’ve treated me since we’ve gotten here has more than made up for it. You’ve...” I swallowed, unable to get the next words out just yet. “I know I’m a hard person to get close to. I keep people on the outskirts, you know? I’m the funny girl that can shoot really well, but that’s it.”

He pulled my face up with a knuckle beneath my chin. “No, that’s not it. You’re so much more than that, Anna. You’re so warm inside, and I feel it every time I’m with you. You’ve become my everything.”

I smiled. “That’s exactly what I was going to say.” My eyes flashed away and then back to his. “I have trouble expressing it with words, but you’ve become my everything too. Not just helping with the physical stuff. I have barriers, and you’ve been so patient with me, slowly tearing down those walls until you found the real me.”

“I really, really like the real you.”

“I really, really like you too,” I admitted.

“Do you want to hear the rest of it, or have you had enough for tonight?”

Jesus, there’s more?

“I’d like to know everything.”

He let out a breath with a long *pshewww* sound. “Okay, so the day after Tito called our house, my dad went looking for him because he wasn’t answering his phone. No one knew what happened to him yet. Dad went to

their house and banged on the door, but there was no answer. He could hear the baby crying, so he used his emergency key to let himself in.”

Mario’s jaw worked angrily back and forth. “There were drugs every-fucking-where. Needles and pipes and shit. Margot and some man were passed out in the living room. Apparently, after her husband caught her fucking someone, she decided to get high instead of going to look for him and apologizing.”

“God, what a bitch.”

He nodded his agreement. “Dad got Marco from his crib—and thank god he was in his crib because I don’t even want to think about a baby crawling around with all that shit lying everywhere. So, Dad got him changed out of his soaked diaper and got him a snack.

“Margot and the other crackhead didn’t even wake up. My father took pictures of everything and then took the baby with him. He met some cops coming up the walk, and that’s when they told him about finding Tito’s car in the river.”

“God, that must have been so hard.”

Mario nodded. “It was, but his focus turned to Marco and how they could keep him safe. Two fucking days later, Margot finally came looking for the kid.”

My hand lifted to cover my mouth. I couldn’t even imagine what would have happened to that poor baby if Mister Diaz hadn’t gotten him away from there.

“Dad told her what the police told him about Uncle Tito and that our family was taking Marco. She tried to protest, but my father said he would show the pictures of all the drugs in the house to the police if she didn’t sign over her parental rights.”

“Good for him!” I fumed. “She had no business being around that poor baby.”

His eyes closed, and I rubbed my fingertips through his soft beard. He tilted into my touch before opening his eyes again. “The cops ruled it an accident... what happened with Tito. They think he was just too drunk and went through the guard rail.” His lips tightened. “That’s what I believe too. No matter how upset he was, I don’t think he would’ve left his son on purpose. He loved him too much.”

I nodded. “Whatever happened with Margot?”

Mario sighed heavily. “She signed over her rights to Marco, and my parents adopted him. She died a few months later.” He chewed on his bottom lip. “Of AIDS.”

My mouth dropped open, and a sense of unease slipped down my spine. “How long had she had it?”

His eyes were steady on mine, his hand brushing up and down my back. “We’re not sure. Probably for years, but Marco was fine. She miraculously didn’t pass it on to him.”

“He’s healthy?”

“Yeah, *cariño*. He’s healthy as a horse. Played baseball in high school, and now he’s twenty and in college.”

Dropping my head to his shoulder, I let the tears fall again as he held me tightly. “Thank God,” I breathed before lifting my head and swiping away my tears. “I want to meet him.”

Mario’s face cracked into a smile. “I’d really like that. Marco loves the ocean, so my parents moved here to Cali after I was done with high school so he could go anytime he wanted. They live in Long Beach now.”

“Really?” I squealed. “That’s not far from here.”

“I know. My sisters moved here too, so the whole damn family is here. Did I ever tell you how I got the nickname Woody?” I shook my head. “When I was about to leave for basic training, my little brother gave me a Woody doll. You know, from *Toy Story*. Woody was his favorite character, and Marco said he would watch over me.”

“Aww, that's sweet.”

“I carried the doll with me, and some of the guys—not Shark and all them, different guys—saw it and started making fun of me.”

“Those assholes!”

“I told them my baby brother gave me that to me to keep me safe, and I threatened to kick their asses if they didn't shut their fucking mouths. They backed down, but ever since then, I've been Woody.”

“I love this story so, so much. Do you still have the doll?”

“Of course. I keep it in my sock drawer.”

My teeth sunk into my bottom lip, and I was suddenly feeling a bit shy. “Can I see it?”

Mario's face broke into a wide grin. “You really want to?” I nodded happily, and he stood, holding me to him as he walked us to our bedroom.

Setting me on my feet, he pulled open his drawer and pulled out the slightly ragged Woody doll. When he handed it to me to hold, it felt somehow like... more. Like he was trusting me with a very important part of him.

“I feel like I'm witnessing a part of history or something,” I whispered, holding the toy reverently, and Mario laughed. “You really shouldn't keep this hidden away. You should have it out where you can see it every day.”

I placed it carefully on the top of the dresser, adjusting the little plush hat on the doll's head before looking up at Mario. *Shit. Maybe I'm overstepping here.*

But he pulled me to him in a bone-crushing hug, swaying our bodies back and forth. “God, you’re so fucking incredible, Tazanna Birdsong. What did I ever do without you?”

“I don’t know. Your life was probably pretty boring since you didn’t have anyone to argue with every day.”

He laughed and pulled back a few inches, cupping my chin with one big hand as his face turned serious. “I meant what I said. I want you to meet my family because... because I want them to get to know the woman I’m in love with.”

CHAPTER 37



SHE CLIMBED ME. LIKE a lineman ascending an electrical pole, Tazanna Birdsong climbed my body and crushed her lips to mine so hard I tasted blood.

Didn't give a fuck. I melted into the kiss, holding her beneath her ass with one arm so my other hand was free to touch her. Everywhere. Her strong little tongue thrust against mine as I shoved my hand beneath her shirt to feel the warm skin of her back.

God I loved her skin. It was... vibrant, like I could feel her lifeblood thrumming beneath it. Her mouth slowed on mine, turning sensual, and my fingers dug into her flesh.

Finally pulling back, she grinned, and I wasn't sure I had ever seen so much joy on her gorgeous face. I reached up to stroke my thumb along her high, smooth cheekbone, reveling in the soft pink color that developed beneath my touch.

“I love you too, you big idiot.”

My laugh burst spontaneously from my swollen lips. “I think that’s about the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I’m serious! I’ve been... I don’t know... I’ve been feeling things. In here.” She put her hand over her chest. “And I didn’t know how to decipher them. I didn’t know why I was letting you in. Letting you see me.”

Her smile was luminous, her voice excited with the thought of loving me. Hell, I was excited too. I’d never been more thrilled than in this very moment. I was in love. *We* were in love.

“I do see you, Tazanna.”

Her forehead pressed to mine, and she closed her eyelids. “I know you do, and I’m not scared. That’s how I know this is real.” Her eyes opened. “Did you know that since I’ve gotten my prosthetic leg, I’ve never allowed anyone to help me remove it or put it on. *Never*. Not since the first time the prosthetist showed me how.”

I shook my head, swallowing hard at the significance of that.

She lifted her braced hand. “I know this factored into it, but I could have found another solution. I could’ve removed the brace long enough to get my leg on and off.”

“But the doctor said...”

“I know what he said. Not to use the hand at all without the brace on, but I would’ve done it anyway. Have you forgotten that I’m the most stubborn woman in existence?”

“How could I forget that, *cariño*?” I purred, and she smiled before closing her eyes again.

“I think, deep down, I wanted to let you in. To let you help me. Because, to me, that’s the most intimate thing in the world. Even more intimate than all

the sexual things we've done."

God this woman...

"I love you, my sweet Anna."

She lifted her head and scowled. "Don't call me sweet. You'll ruin my reputation."

I couldn't hold back my laugh. "Okay, how about this? I love you, you syphilitic anal lesion."

That earned me a laugh that shook her entire body. "How about we find something in the middle."

Cupping her face, I kissed her lips and tried again. "I love you, you gorgeous, brilliant, talented, funny, stubborn, brave, irreverent, sassy, vibrant, strong woman."

Her cheeks turned a beautiful rose color, and her eyes filled with tears. "And I love you, my handsome, smart, crazy, well-endowed, loving, hilarious, strong, big-hearted, gentle man."

"Hmmm, what was that fourth one again?"

"Conceited?" she asked, blinking at me with faux innocence.

"I forgot to add smartass to your list."

She shrugged. "I think it was implied. And speaking of your endowment, we haven't consummated this fake marriage yet."

My dick perked up like someone had called his name. *Excuse me, sir and madam. Has my presence been requested?*

Anna shifted her hips against me, obviously sensing the beginning of my erection. "Feels like someone likes that idea."

I was suddenly desperate for her. "I want to be inside you right now."

"Say it in Spanish," she breathed.

"Quiero estar dentro de ti ahora mismo."

Anna moaned. “God that’s hot.” She reached between us to grip my fast-growing erection and tried out a little Spanish of her own.

“*Necesito tu pollo.*” My lips quirked, and she frowned. “What? Did I not say it right?”

“You just told me you need my chicken.” A giggle escaped from her, and I corrected her. “I think you meant to say, ‘*Necesito tu polla.*’ You need my cock.”

“Yes, I do,” she confirmed, sticking her hand down my pants and gripping my dick. My legs practically liquefied.

“Fuck, baby. Let me sit down if you want to play with it.”

Striding quickly to the bed, I sank down on the edge of it with Anna straddling me. She pulled the waistband of my sweats down far enough that I could spring free, and then she wrapped her hand around me and started moving it up and down, gathering my precum with her palm to lubricate her grip.

My hands pressed into the mattress behind me as I leaned back and watched her work. “That’s it, *mi amor*. I love seeing your hand on me.” Her hips moved innately in the same rhythm as her hand, and I groaned. “Dammit, why are you so fucking sexy?”

“I took a class,” she responded immediately. “It was called Sexy Native American Amputees of the Twenty-First Century.”

I fell back on the bed and laughed. I’d never had anyone that could make me laugh and turn me on at the same time.

“Where do you come up with this shit?”

“It’s a talent.”

Pulling her hand from me, I kissed her palm and rolled until she was on her back. “Better stop or I’m going to come in your very talented hand, and that’s

not where I want to finish.” I unsnapped her shorts, and she lifted her hips so I could work her pants down her legs. Cupping her warm pussy, I told her, “This sweet cunt will take everything I give her tonight.”

“Lucky girl,” she panted as I slipped a finger beneath the crotch of her panties. She was already soaked for me, and I circled her clit with two fingers. “Mario... more.”

“You’re so fucking beautiful when you beg, Anna. Tell me exactly what you want. Beg me for your orgasm.”

“Put your fingers inside me and your thumb on my clit. Make me come all over your big hand. Please. I need it. Please.”

My cock throbbed against her hip, wanting to get in on this action, but I did as she asked, sliding two fingers slowly inside of her, loving the hot tightness of her inner walls. When my thumb grazed her little button, her hips jerked up off the bed.

“Yes! That!”

I lowered my lips to her neck, kissing and sucking on the damp flesh there. My fingers worked her down below, and her breathing became erratic as I whispered sweet words against her throat in a mixture of English and Spanish.

“*Tan bonita*. You are so fucking beautiful and sexy, *mi amor*. *Tan mojado para mí*. So fucking wet.” Her hips were pulsing against my fingers as I fucked her deeper. “*Te amo, cariño*. I love you so much.”

Her pussy tightened around me, and she tipped her head back, wailing her release to the sky. I slowed my fingers to a soothing pace as she smiled at the ceiling before bringing her gaze to my face.

“That was... really, really good,” she said through stilted breaths.

“Thank you, ma’am. I do my best.”

Her teeth bit into her bottom lip as I pulled my fingers out and brought them to my mouth. I didn't think I would ever tire of her taste. Methodically licking them clean while she watched, I pushed back a strand of her hair that had escaped her braid.

"That last one pushed me over the edge," she admitted and then smiled shyly. "*Te amo, Mario.*"

"*Te amo, Anna,*" I replied, my heart doing a little stutter step in my chest.

"Did I say that one right? I didn't tell you I love your mop or something, did I?"

I laughed and kissed her hard on the mouth. "No, you said you love me."

"Good," she said with a grin. "That's what I was going for." She lowered her gaze and then looked up at me through her lashes, but she didn't speak.

"I love when you give me that bashful look, baby. It means you want to tell or ask me something you're embarrassed about." Her lips pursed at my observation, and I tickled her side. "Out with it."

"I was just wondering how many... you know... what's your body count since we've been together?"

"You want to know how many women I've slept with since last year?" She nodded, gnawing nervously on the inside of her cheek. "None."

Anna's eyes widened, and she smacked at my chest. "Bullshit."

Shaking my head, I assured her, "Absolutely no bullshit. The only one I've been with is Rosie."

Her face creased into a frown until I held up my hand. "Rosie Palms. She's been quite effective, but nowhere near as good as the real thing."

"Oh my god. You're so ridiculous. If you don't want to tell me, just say that. I know you've been out with Bode and Hawk. I've heard them mention that y'all pick up women."

I looked away uncomfortably. “Yeah, I’ve picked up women when I was with the guys, but... let’s just say there’s a certain percentage of ladies in the Dallas area who believe I have severe digestive issues.”

She frowned. “I don’t even know what that means.”

Puffing out a sigh, I looked back at her. “It means whenever Bode would want us to hook up with a couple of girls, I would get mine in the car and then fake a stomachache so I had an excuse to take her home.”

Anna’s eyes darted between mine in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“Fuck. I didn’t understand it at first either, Anna. And how the hell was I supposed to explain it to my friends if I had no clue why I had no desire for a random hookup?” I shrugged. “So, I faked it. Acted like I was cool with taking a woman home, so I didn’t have to tell my friends that I couldn’t even think about sleeping with one of those girls.”

“So you just had no sex drive?”

My head shook side to side. “No, I definitely had a sex drive, and that’s where my friend Rosie came in.” I gave her a crooked grin. “But I know now why I wasn’t interested in anyone else.”

“Why,” she whispered so quietly I barely heard her.

“Because none of them had your hair. Your eyes. Your insane sense of humor. No one else would have made me do the ridiculous pink-condomed-helicopter move.” I paused and stroked my hand down her cheek. “None of them were you, Anna.”

“Mario...”

“I didn’t understand it until recently but now I know that I was waiting for you. For my love.”

A tear slid over her cheekbone, and I swiped it away with my finger. Her hand went to my face, and she lifted up to kiss my jaw.

“Mario Diaz, I think I’d like to get very, very naked with you right now.”

CHAPTER 38



MARIO HAD US VERY, very naked before I could even blink.

“How do you want it, baby? I don’t care as long as I can see your face,” he murmured as his fingertips drifted slowly down my side. Chill bumps followed his touch, and I shivered.

“I want to feel you on top of me.”

Wedging his knee between my legs, he parted them and started to roll on top of me before freezing. “Shit. Where is that swag bag thing? I need a condom.” He twisted his head to look around the room.

I took a deep breath, boosting my boldness, and asked, “Do you?” His face swung back around to me. “Do you really want to wear one?”

“Fuck no, I don’t want to, *amor*. I’d love nothing more than to feel every hot inch of you with my bare cock.” His hand swept some hair from my forehead. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

“I’m on the birth control shot to regulate my cycle, so we’re protected there, but if you don’t want to...”

“I do. I want it more than anything.” He wedged himself between my thighs, his big body covering mine, and he kissed me. A deep, soul-bending kiss that made my heart thud like a kick drum.

Mario’s hands cradled my face as he continued to fucking ruin me with his lips. I would absolutely never be the same after tonight. The kiss was loving and tender with the perfect amount of steam to make it the best kiss I’d ever had. Ever.

With his lips still fused to mine, he reached between us and gripped himself, rubbing the head through my sex. I could smell it the instant my desire mixed with his, like a chemical reaction had occurred and turned two scents into one intoxicating aroma.

“I’m ready,” I murmured into his mouth, and he let out a soft groan, pushing just the tip inside me. I whimpered at the sensations. Hot. Smooth. Slick. And so full. I already felt full, and he was barely in.

“This may be over before it starts,” he growled against my lips.

But he was wrong. He took his time entering me. *One thick inch. And then another. Pull out to the tip and start all over.*

Holding his cheeks in my hands, I assured him, “I’m okay, Mario. You can move faster if you want,” but he shook his head back and forth.

“No, *mi amor*. I’m going to take my time because I want to awaken every single nerve ending inside you. One. At. A. Time. I want you to feel every inch of your pussy heat up and come alive and know that it’s me giving you that pleasure.”

He retreated and then pushed in a little more, reaching a new part of me, and I saw exactly what he meant. Tingles, heat, and a little pinch of pain

resurrected long-forgotten nerve endings, and I wrapped my legs around him to bring him closer.

I thought I'd made love before, but I was undeniably mistaken. No one had ever drawn emotions like this from me simply with sex. I'd never experienced the true magnificence of lovemaking, of having a man so acutely focused on the act of bringing me pleasure—of loving me so thoroughly—that I forgot we were actually two separate beings.

In a word, it was beautiful.

“You okay, baby?”

I blinked the mist from my eyes to find him looking down at me with concern, so I nodded. “Just a little overwhelmed because this is so perfect.”

Mario pressed in the last inch and held himself there, his breathing ragged against my lips as he hovered over me. Then he began to move in long, unhurried thrusts, using every part of his erection to stroke me from the inside.

My legs around his waist rose and fell as he rolled his back to fuck me more thoroughly than I could have even imagined. Our noses were touching as he bucked slowly in and out of me, setting my soul on fire.

“You feel so good around me, *amor*. So wet and tight. I never thought anything could feel like this.”

A rush of emotions took over me, and I buried my face in his shoulder and cinched my eyes shut. His facial hair rasped against my neck as he kissed me there over and over, whispering and groaning into my skin. His hips never once sped up or lost control, even when I clenched around his thick hardness.

“I'm coming,” I cried, my teeth sinking into the muscle of his shoulder.

“Me... too,” he panted, wrapping both arms beneath me to bind me to him. That's what it felt like. A binding. A forever.

When we exploded together, I could feel him inside me, and not just down below. Mario had infiltrated every cell in my body, from my toes to my scalp, and everything tingled with elation.

He held himself deep and filled me, something I had never experienced before. It was a heady feeling knowing that the man I loved was the first one to ever come inside me.

Mario pulled his arms from beneath me and propped up on his elbows, looking down on me with a sated smile on his perfect lips. I imagined that my face looked the same to him.

“I don’t know about you, but I thought we nailed that,” he said, his tongue snaking out to brush along my bottom lip.

“Ten out of ten,” I agreed, and he grinned mischievously at me.

“I’m going for an eleven next time.”

“I’m not sure I would survive an eleven, to be honest.”

His face turned serious. “I think we could survive anything together.”

“Me too,” I whispered.

He rolled us to the side, hitching my leg over his hip so he could remain buried inside me for a little while longer. We lay in silence, simply holding each other, the only sounds our slowing breaths and the muted waves of the ocean outside.

When he softened and slipped out of me, he kissed my forehead. “Let me get a cloth to clean you up, and then we’ll get you de-legged.”

I smiled at his use of my slang and curled up on my side, my eyes closing as my mind was vaguely aware of water running in the bathroom.

“Hmmm?” I hummed when I felt warmth between my legs.

“Shh, go back to sleep, baby. Just cleaning you up.”

“M’kay,” I mumbled, dozing back off.

Something was happening with my leg, and I reached down only to have my hand gently pushed away.

“Relax, I’ve got you,” came the deep, sweet voice.

Then it was completely dark, my nose was nestled in warm fuzz, and strong arms were wrapped around me.

Just before I drifted away, I heard, “I love you, Taz.”



Two hours later, we were back at it again, but this time it wasn’t sweet, gentle, and loving. No, it was fast, rough, and very, *very* filthy.

“Ah, yeah, baby. Take this cock in that tight pussy. I’m going to fucking break it so you won’t be able to walk straight for a week.”

“Yes! Rip me in half with that big dick. Give it to me harder.” I wasn’t sure who this person was that was speaking with my voice, but she obviously really liked getting railed.

“Don’t boss me, woman. You’ll get it exactly how I want to give it to you.” He slapped me hard across the ass, and I felt an orgasm rising to the surface. Another one. Number three if my addled brain wasn’t miscalculating.

He gripped my hips and pulled me back onto him as he pumped hard against me. His sweat dripped onto my back, each tiny droplet practically sizzling on my overheated skin.

Grabbing a handful of my hair—which was all over the place since he’d fucked me so hard, my braid came loose—Mario pulled me up until my back collided with his hard chest.

“Who is the fucking boss in this bed, Anna?” he hissed into my ear as he continued plunging up into me.

Smiling at the ceiling, I answered, “Me.”

His chuckle was deep and dark. “Try again, sweetheart.” His hand smacked my clit, and I yelped.

“Me,” I said, but it sounded much weaker and a little squeaky that time.

“Anna...” His voice held a warning, and I finally relented.

“You’re the boss of this bed, Mario.”

“Mmm, good girl. You’re a good fucking slut for Papi, aren’t you?”

Jesus, why was that so hot?

“Yes, Papi,” I purred and was rewarded with his middle finger massaging my clit.

“Goddamn, you’re sexy, *cariño*. You’re about to make me come. You want to come with me while I fill this cunt up so full, I’ll be dripping out of you for days?”

“Yes. Please.” I could hear the desperation in my own voice.

Mario’s finger moved faster and faster against my clit, rivaling the speed of my favorite rabbit vibe. He was like a human B.O.B. Add that to the wide crown of his cock pummeling my G-spot, and I was ready to detonate.

“I’m...”

“Don’t you dare come without me. I’m not done with this pussy yet. Tell me who it belongs to.” He bit my earlobe and then sucked it between his full lips, and everything inside of me tightened.

“Y-you,” I stammered, trying to hold off the impending monster orgasm that was right on the horizon.

“Who is the only man allowed to lick your cunt and make you scream?”

“You are.”

“Fuck, I love hearing that,” he growled, his beard abrading the side of my neck. “Now get that pretty ass in the air for me and let me finish you off.”

He pushed my head down to the bed, and *dear god!* If I’d thought he was rough and dirty before, he kicked it into overdrive, falling over my back and riding me down to the mattress.

His hand was trapped between me and the sheet, and his finger began moving at lightning speed against my clit as his pelvis slapped against my ass. I was pretty sure he was going to need hip replacement surgery after tonight.

“You’re mine, Anna. I own every fucking part of you, and I’ll kill anyone who tries to take you away from me.”

Yeah, Mario Diaz is a tad possessive.

I clutched at the sheet with my good hand as the headboard banged against the wall with resounding thuds.

“Coming,” I warned, and he grinded deep, his hips circling against my bottom. “Come inside me, Mario.”

“Fuck yeah! Squeeze Papi’s cock, baby girl,” he roared. “Milk me, Taz. Take it all.”

My back arched against his chest, and I screamed my release into the soft sheets.

I could feel his cock jerking and spurting inside me, and I had to work hard to pull enough oxygen into my lungs to remain conscious.

“Christ, woman,” he panted against my neck. “Are you trying to kill me?”

He pulled out and rolled off me, pulling me against his side with my head on his chest.

“Me? You were the one that was a complete animal,” I teased, my heavy breaths making the dark hair on his chest sway.

“Well, you encouraged me with the whole pony thing”

My cheeks flushed even more than they already were, and I burrowed into his chest, muffling my voice. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Did you bump your head?”

He scoffed, his hand rubbing softly up and down my side. “I think your exact words were, ‘Ride me like a pony, Mario. Harder, baby. Faster.’”

“Hmmm, that doesn’t sound like me.”

“Maybe I should check the video.”

My head popped up. “What video?”

“From the camera I installed in here earlier,” he said nonchalantly.

“You’d better go put the body armor back on if you recorded us without asking me first.”

The fool laughed and kissed the top of my head. “I would never do that without your permission, sweetheart.” He tightened his arms around me. “But what about *with* your permission? Would you like to have a recording of us that we can watch again and again?”

My mouth gaped open, and I stared up at him. “Are you crazy? What if someone got hold of it?”

His voice was soft as he stroked the backs of his knuckles down my cheek. “Do you honestly think I would let anyone see my woman like that? Fuck, Anna. You know me better than that. It would be under lock and key at all times unless we were using it.”

“Yeah, Pam and Tommy thought theirs was safe too, and look how that turned out.”

“Did you watch that series?” he asked.

I nodded. “The talking penis kind of freaked me out.”

Mario laughed, and I loved the feel of it rumbling beneath my cheek. “That

was so fucking weird.”

We were quiet for a while, his hands gentle and sweet now as he touched and caressed me.

“You’d really want to video us?” I asked.

Tilting my chin up to look at him, he said, “Only if you want to, Anna. I would never pressure you to do something you don’t want to do.” He paused. “Except for anal. I would beg for that.”

I giggled and attempted to tickle him, but he didn’t even flinch. “Shut up, you big goof. I’ll think about it.”

“Which part? The anal or the videoing?”

Wrapping my arm around his waist, I closed my eyes and yawned.

“Both.”

CHAPTER 39



I HAD COMPLETELY FORGOTTEN about telling Joe to come over on Wednesday until he actually showed up.

With a damn picnic basket.

Christ on a cricket.

“Hi, Anna!” he said enthusiastically, and I put on a fake smile that attempted to convey that I wasn’t completely annoyed. I’d just gotten to Chapter seven in an AK Landow book, and the things they were doing with that grapefruit had me giggling into my wine glass.

“Hello, Joe,” I said, sticking a bookmark in to mark my place before reluctantly wedging the spicy rom-com back into my little beach bag.

“You want me to set up our dinner on the table?”

Though there was a nice little patio behind our bungalow, complete with furniture, I preferred feeling the soft grass beneath me, so I always sat out here underneath a large palm tree with a glass of wine to read. I usually liked

beer, but there was just something about a crisp, fruity wine that paired well with romantic comedies.

I'd always been a dirt and grass kind of girl, much to my mother's dismay, but she didn't complain too much. My father always teased that he'd have been a rich man if he'd only bought stock in Spray 'N Wash.

"No, I'm comfortable right here," I told him. "And I'm not really very hungry. Mario made paella for me tonight."

He scrunched his nose up. "Too spicy for me."

Yep, and so am I, Joe.

He sat gingerly in the grass, as if he didn't want to mess up his jeans, setting the basket beside me. Pulling the top open, he pulled out a bottle of red wine and a corkscrew.

"I brought us some wine to share."

I held up the glass I was literally drinking from and lifted an eyebrow, and Joe's lips turned down in disappointment.

"You go ahead and have some. I know you prefer red." I paused before adding. "And I like white." *Which you should know since I've told you a million times, but you always bought red anyway.*

"Oh, I thought you liked red."

No use explaining it. Again. So, I just said, "Nope."

Joe opened his bottle and poured himself a glass before turning his attention to me. "How's your arm?"

"It doesn't really hurt. I just have to wear this brace for four weeks to make sure it heals properly."

"That's good." There was an awkward silence while we both sipped from our glasses. "So, do you like it here in Malibu?"

I nodded. "Yeah, it's great. I've always loved the ocean. There's something

about the smell of the air that's very soothing to me."

He smiled broadly. "I'm so glad to hear that. I want you to be happy here."

"Um, thanks. How's your family doing?" I asked to change the subject.

"Really good. I know they'd love to see you." When I didn't say anything, he pressed on. "They only live about an hour away. We could go visit one weekend."

I shifted uncomfortably against the tree. "That's not really a good idea, Joe."

"Why not?"

Closing my eyes, I exhaled slowly before opening them again. "I always got the impression your parents didn't like me much."

"My dad did," he said and then caught himself. "I mean, they both did, but my dad is just easier to warm up to people, you know?"

I hummed noncommittally.

"My mom didn't *dislike* you or anything. She thought you were really nice, but you two just didn't have much in common. She's more... ladylike, and you were kind of... not."

I shot him one raised eyebrow, but he kept talking. "But you're older now, and I'm sure you've grown up a lot and gotten over all that."

"All what?" I asked, metaphorically handing him a shovel and telling him to keep digging himself into a hole.

"You know, the guns and stuff. And your attitude."

I tossed back the rest of the wine in a most unladylike fashion and tried to rein in that attitude he was talking about before I did something stupid.

"Your mom really liked that other girl you used to date. The blonde one with the blue eyes."

"Phoebe?"

“Yeah, that’s the one. Your mom used to go on and on and *on* about what pretty babies you and Phoebe would have had.” *As if Tazanna’s darkness would taint all the blondness of her future grandchildren.*

“In fact, she made sure to mention it every time she was around me. I guess to let me know where I stood in her eyes.” *And here’s that attitude you’re so fond of, Joe. Enjoy.*

I reached for my bottle of wine in the portable wine chiller I brought outside with me and refilled my glass as Joe stammered.

“I-I’m sure that’s not what it was. It... she... you know, she kinda bonded with Phoebe, but I’m sure you and Mom could bond too, if you just gave her a chance.”

“And why would I do that, Joe? Why would I want to be around someone that obviously doesn’t really like me? I don’t understand why you’re pushing this all of a sudden.”

His head tilted to the side, and he smiled. “Because I want you to get along with my family. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“You wanted to talk to me about getting along with your family?”

“No, not per se. Um, it’s more about *us* getting along.”

“Us?”

“Yes, you and me.”

“I thought we were getting along, Joe. Here we are, sharing a glass of wine together and talking about the good old days.”

He either ignored or completely missed my sarcasm because he smiled. “Yeah, it’s really nice. See how good it would be if we got back together?”

My wine glass paused halfway to my lips, and I chuckled. “Not gonna happen, Joe.”

“Why not?” he whined, and I resisted the urge to pour the contents of my

glass over his head. Only because it would be a damn shame to waste wine like that.

“Because we’re not compatible, you and I. But the main reason is that I’m in love with Mario.”

“Are you?” he asked skeptically.

“Yes, I am.” I loved the confidence I felt when I said that.

“Why?”

He was really starting to piss me off, so I blurted, “Because he’s hung like a horse and has a tongue like a rattlesnake.”

And he respects me and loves me for who I am, I thought but didn’t add. I thought the dick thing was plenty for him to process right now.

“Do you have to be so crass?” he huffed, but I shrugged and took another sip of wine.

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to.”

We sat in silence, Joe drinking his red wine and me drinking my white.

When he’d finished his glass, he reached over and put his hand on my upper arm. “Taz, I want you to move here.”

I almost spat out my wine but managed to successfully swallow it. “What?”

“I want you to move here. With me.” I stared at him like he’d grown a second head, but he was undeterred. “I’ve already got it all worked out. You can move into my room on the fourth floor. It’s nice, and everything is provided. Meals and laundry and all that.”

My head shook side to side. “I don’t want that, Joe.”

He frowned. “You’re right. My quarters might be too small for two people, so maybe I can ask Ella if we can live here. In this bungalow. It’s the nicest one.”

He nodded to himself, lost in his little fantasy world where he and I were

going to get back together. “Or, if you don’t want to do that, there’s a house for sale two doors down from my parents. It would be a commute for me, but I’d do it to be close to them.”

I honestly can’t think of anything I’d like less.

“Joe, I’m not staying here. My job is in Texas.”

He waved his hand, dismissing my protest. “Don’t worry about that. I can get you a job here. If there’s not a position for you in the office once Claudia comes back, maybe you could work in the kitchen,” he said brightly. “You don’t need to be working in security anyway. That’s a man’s job.”

Joe was about to have his face rearranged. He leaned toward me, his eyes on my lips like he was thinking about kissing me.

“I’m still in love with you, Taz.”

Oh jeez.

CHAPTER 40



I CHUCKLED AS I looked down at my phone.

“What’s so funny,” Preston asked.

Glancing up at him, I smiled. “Just some funny text messages from earlier today. With Anna and some of my friends.”

“Cool. If you don’t mind, I’m going to head up to the roof for a break.”

I’d started receiving “gifts” in the mail today from the guys, all of them fucking thunder related. Some goofy socks from Bode with a lightning and thunder cloud print; a little plush thundercloud toy from Tank; and a decal for my truck window that read, “Don’t be a Thundercunt” from Cam.

Since I’d told Anna to expect payback for starting all this shit, I’d initiated a text thread of my own while she was at work this afternoon. Scrolling back to the top, I read all the messages again.

Woody: *Hey, guys. Just for shits and giggs, look up what Tazanna means.*

Taz: *Dammit, Woody! No you did not just do that.*

Shark: *Ok. Checking it out.*

Taz: *I'd rather you didn't.*

Cam: *Ohhhh, well, hello there, Your Highness.*

Hawk: *Should we bow or curtsy next time we see you, princess?*

Taz: *You really want me to tell you what you should do next time you see me, Hawk? Because it involves both hands and a large cucumber.*

Hawk: *Ouch. Harsh.*

[Fifteen GIFs of women curtsying and prancing around in fluffy dresses and crowns]

Taz: Does anyone know what kind of poison works best on a six foot Hispanic male? Asking for a friend.

Tank: LOL

Taz: Not sure if it's relevant to the amount of poison to be administered, but I've heard this particular male has teeny tiny little balls.

Bode: Oh damn. Shots fired!

Woody: That's not what you said last night, Anna.

Taz: Don't flatter yourself, Diaz. The only thing I said last night was that you're not allowed to eat beans before bed anymore.

Tank: Oh fuck. I just spit water all over Bristol. You're hardcore, Taz.

I was laughing out loud by the time I got to the end. Damn, I loved that woman, even though she was a bit of a savage.

My eyes flitted to the monitors in front of me, checking for any movement. Ella and Lawrence were in the pool, so I clicked off the feed to that camera to

give them some privacy. I noticed Emily taking her dog—some kind of little ankle biter—for a walk, but no one else was moving around the compound.

A *bump bump bump* thudded in my chest when my gaze fell on the lower left screen, the feed from the camera pointed toward the back of our bungalow. Anna was leaning against her palm tree with a glass of wine and a book, like she was most nights, and my finger traced over her stunning face.

I literally had to force myself to move to the next screen because I could sit here and watch her read all night. I was such a chump for my girl, but that's the way it should be. That's how my dad was with my mother. They were both in their fifties, and he still stared at her like they were teenagers.

My phone trilled with my brother's ringtone, and I answered immediately. "Bruuuuuh!"

"Bruuuuuh!" he yelled back, and I laughed.

"How are you, Marco?"

"Good. School just ended for the summer, so I have a few weeks to relax before the fall semester begins."

"You work too hard, little bro. You should've taken the summer off to chill."

"Naw, I'm ready to be done so I can enter the exciting world of corporate finance."

I didn't even pretend to understand Marco's obsession with finance. It sounded like the most boring thing in the world to me, but he was totally into it, so I supported him one hundred percent.

"I'm so proud of you, Marco."

"I'm proud of you too, Mario. You're... you're like a hero to me."

Clearing my throat to rid it of the lump that had formed there, I said, "Thanks, dude. What else is going on in your life?"

“Oh! That’s what I called to tell you. I got an interview for an internship next summer.”

“That’s awesome! Where would the internship be?”

“It’s in L.A., so I can still live at home. I just... I have to buy a suit for the interview.” I could hear the concern in his voice. “I have that old one, but it’s cheap looking, and the sleeves are getting too short. I’ve been saving up my money to buy a nicer one, but I don’t know anything about suits. And Dad for sure doesn’t, you know? Mom has to practically strangle him to get him to wear a tie.”

“Yeah, she does,” I said with a laugh. “What do you need help with?”

“Like, everything. I’m not sure what kind of fabric or what color tie to get. I just wear mine to funerals and stuff, but this place I’m interviewing at is pretty swank. I don’t want to make a butthole of myself.”

I laughed. “You won’t. You’ll dazzle them with your brilliance. How about this? What if I went suit shopping with you?”

“You’d do that?” he asked, his voice rising with excitement, but it quickly fell. “No, that won’t work. The interview is in two weeks.”

“You know how I told you I would be on an undercover job for a few months?”

“Uh-huh.”

“It turns out that the job is in Malibu.”

“But... but... that’s not very far from here.”

“I know. I thought I would come see you guys this weekend.”

Marco’s voice turned into a yell as he held the phone away from his mouth. “Mama! Mamaaaaaa! Mario is coming here this weekend!” Then he was back on the line with me. “Are you serious? You’re really coming?”

My own excitement filled me at the thought of seeing all my family again,

and I laughed happily. “I really am. If you guys don’t have plans, that is.”

“No! We’re not doing anything.” He was gone again. “Mama! Did you hear me? Mario’s in California!”

“*Dios mio*, Marco. I’m standing right here. Stop shouting.” My heart warmed at the sound of my mother’s voice.

“Sorry, Mama. Mario said he would go suit shopping with me though. Isn’t that cool?”

“Ay! *Mi hijo*. My little boy is growing up and buying a suit. I can’t stand it.” I could hear the snuffle in her voice and could picture her fanning her face to keep the tears at bay. “You’re going to be such a good man, like your Papi and your brother.”

Mama was full-on sobbing, and it sounded like Marco was hugging her. “It’s okay, Mama. I’ll still be living here so you can see me every day.”

“But then you’ll leave in a couple years, and I’ll be stuck here alone with your father. He’s going to make me watch *Lonesome Dove* every other week.” She sobbed harder.

Chuckling quietly, I shook my head. It was kind of a game in our house to see who would get stuck watching the old western miniseries with my dad. All of us hated it, but Mama seemed to be the only one who could get out of it, always remembering *something important* she needed to do in the kitchen. That left us kids forced to endure the next six hours in misery.

No one knew why Papi couldn’t simply watch the movie by himself. It was one of life’s great mysteries in the Diaz household.

I propped my chin on my hand as I listened to my brother and mother have an entire conversation while I waited on the line. My eyes scanned the monitors again while I waited, but nothing seemed out of place.

Finally, I spoke loudly into the phone. “Hello? Can anyone hear me?”

There was silence, and then I heard Marco's sheepish voice. "Hey. Sorry about that."

"It's okay, bro. So, this weekend is okay?"

Mama and Marco had another brief conversation where our mother started making dinner plans.

"Oh, and I'm bringing a friend with me," I told my brother when he came back on.

"Is it Tank? I've always wanted to meet him in person. Is he really as big as a Tank?"

Laughing softly, I informed him, "No, it's not Tank. It's a woman."

"Mamaaa! Mario's bringing a girlfriend!"

"I'm still right here, *hijo*. Stop yelling. And what do you mean a girlfriend? Give me that."

There was a tussle where it sounded like they were fighting over the phone, which our mother apparently won because I heard her voice loud and clear down the line.

"Mario, you're bringing a girl home?"

"Hi, Mama. Yes. Is that okay with you?"

Rather than answering my question, she began babbling. "I'll make up your old room. Do you think she likes tamales? What's she like? Ohhh, I'm so excited. I'll tell your sisters to be here for dinner too because I know they'll want to meet her. You know, Catalina has a beautiful singing voice, if you need someone to sing *Ave Maria* at the wedding." She paused long enough to sniffle. "Your Uncle Tito sang that at our wedding. Such a beautiful song."

My stomach hurt from trying to hold in my laughter, but my heart also ached with the thought of marrying Tazanna Birdsong. For real. Not a fake marriage.

I rubbed at the tightness in my chest and did my best to answer all of Mama’s questions. “And please don’t start talking about weddings in front of her, okay? We’re still new, and I don’t want you to scare her off.”

“I would never do that,” she said indignantly. “And don’t worry about Daniela and Catalina. I’ll tell your sisters to be on their best behavior.”

My eyes rolled to the ceiling. *Yeah, like that’s ever going to happen.*

Something on the monitor caught my attention, and I said, “Mama, I need to go. I’m at work, but I’ll see you on Saturday.”

“Okay, be safe, *mi hijo*. I love you.”

“Love you too,” I said before hanging up the phone and stretching my neck toward the lower left screen.

“Hey, is that Joe?” Preston asked, seating himself beside me.

“It is,” I snapped, watching as the prick sat drinking wine with my girl.

We watched as they seemed to be in some deep discussion, and Joe edged a little closer to her. When he touched her arm, my vision clouded into a red haze in my periphery.

“That’s not fucking cool,” Preston said. “He knows she’s married. What are you going to do, Mario?”

As Joe leaned in closer to Anna, I slid my chair smoothly to the right, over to the maintenance panel, and hovered my finger over the button labeled *Sprinklers*.

Then I pushed it.



Joe stomped into the surveillance room, dripping water all over the floor.

“Dude, what happened to you?” I asked, innocence coating my every word.

“Fucking sprinklers came on while I was right in the middle of a very important conversation. Fucked everything up. Where is Manish?”

“He’s out tonight,” Preston said, shooting me a look that said he had my back. “What was the important conversation?”

Joe looked suspiciously between us. “None of your business. Just... some plans for... never mind. Why the hell did the sprinklers come on?”

Plans? Plans for what?

Barely holding onto my control, I shrugged. “I thought they were on a timer.”

“They are. They’re supposed to come on at ten.”

“Huh,” Preston said. “Probably because of the time change.”

“What time change?” Joe yelled, tossing his hands in the air in frustration.

“You know, like Daylight Savings Time or whatever. The system has to prepare for that since it’s coming up in October. Like a test run or something.”

Covering my mouth with my fist to hide my smile at that complete bullshit answer, I turned my head away.

“I didn’t think of that,” Joe said as I wondered what plans he and Anna were discussing. “I’m going to take a shower.”

As soon as he was gone, Preston turned to me. “Go ahead.”

“Go ahead with what?”

“Go talk to your wife. I know you want to, but I really don’t think you have anything to worry about. You two are rock solid. Plus, Anna looked like she’d rather punch him than kiss him.”

Preston thought we were married, an established couple, not knowing that we were at the very beginning of our relationship. Instead of *rock solid*, I felt

more like *hanging off the edge of a cliff by my fingertips*.

“Thanks, Pres,” I mumbled, rising from my seat. “And thanks for having my back just now.”

“No prob. That was a total dick move, and he deserved to get sprayed.”

Yeah, but Anna didn't.

CHAPTER 41



WALKING OUT ONTO THE patio, I found Anna sitting on one of the lounge chairs, drying her hair with a towel. She'd already changed into dry clothes, and I felt like total crap that she'd gotten soaked by the sprinklers.

"Hi, *cariño*."

Looking up, she lifted her dark eyebrows at me. "You're lucky my bag is waterproof so you didn't ruin my book with that little stunt. You owe me a bottle of wine, by the way."

I bit down on the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling at her matter-of-fact tone. My girl never held back. "I already bought you a bottle. It's in the wine fridge in the laundry room."

"What kind did you get?" she asked, eyeballing me suspiciously.

"The kind you always drink. That peach pinot grigio. I picked up an extra bottle for you today."

Her face softened and she beckoned me forward. “You know what kind of wine I drink?” Taking my hands she guided me to straddle the chair, and then she looped her legs over mine and scooted until she was in my lap.

“Yeah, why?”

“No reason,” she said, but she kissed the hell out of me, and I made a mental note to buy three more bottles tomorrow.

She pulled back and tipped her forehead against mine as my hands gripped her hips. “I’m sorry about the sprinkler thing. How did you know it was me?”

“Because I know you, Diaz.” Her fingers toyed with the back of my hair. “And for the record, I’m not mad at you. I’d have probably done the same thing if someone was hitting on my man.”

Nausea rose up in my throat as my suspicions were confirmed. “He was hitting on you?”

“Yes,” she said, pressing a kiss against the corner of my mouth as she reassured me, “but you have absolutely nothing to worry about with Joe.”

“Why?”

Leaning forward and nestling her face into my neck, she said, “Because he doesn’t know what kind of wine I drink.” I didn’t know what the hell that meant, so I simply pulled her closer and kissed her damp head.

Maybe I should buy her five bottles.

Her next soft words vibrated against my skin. “Sometimes the most insignificant things are the most significant.”



“Just warning you. My family is really loud,” I said when I opened the SUV’s passenger door for Anna on Saturday.

“That’s okay,” she said, linking her fingers with mine as we rounded the truck.

“Would you prefer them to call you Anna or Taz?”

Her mouth twisted as she tilted her head side to side in thought. “Taz, I think, since the Anna thing is just temporary.”

“Okay, babe. Now, my mom will—” I was cut off when a Marco cannonball shot through the door and down the walkway.

“Bruhhhhh!” he yelled as he hurtled into me, and I dropped Taz’s hand to wrap my arms around my brother and lift him off his feet.

“Bruhhhh!” I yelled back because that’s just the silly thing we did. Every time we talked or saw each other. “Damn, you’ve gotten tall,” I said, noticing his feet were only about an inch off the ground.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” he murmured into my shoulder, and I patted him between the shoulder blades before settling him back on the ground.

“Me too, Marco. Hey, I want to you meet... well, okay then.” I could barely even see Taz when I turned. She was covered by the rest of my family, and they were hugging and chattering loudly around her. I thought she would be overwhelmed by all the attention, but she looked... happy.

She’d confided that she was a little nervous to meet my family because Joe’s had been less than welcoming to her. I’d tried to explain it to her, but I don’t think she’d truly believed me until this moment.

My family was like a pack of adorable but slightly feral puppies. And I loved the fuck out of them.

Clearing my throat noisily, I asked, “Do you mind if I introduce you all before you molest my girlfriend?”

They all finally seemed to notice I was there, and then it was my turn as they descended on me with a flurry of hugs, kisses, and even a couple of cheek pinches. *Thanks, Mama.*

“So good to see you, son,” my dad said, holding me close after patiently waiting his turn.

“You too, Papi.”

He took a step back and smiled over at Taz. “Now, tell us who this beautiful lady is.”

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, smiling down at her before facing my family. “This is Tazanna Birdsong, my girlfriend. You can call her Taz.” She wiggled her fingers in a cute wave, and my entire family beamed like I’d just introduced them to Jesus Christ.

“Babe, these are my parents, Maria and Andre. And my sisters, Catalina and Daniela.”

“I’m the younger one,” Catalina declared to Taz.

“And I’m the prettier one,” Daniela shot back.

“You are not. I’m the pretty one.”

“You can’t be the pretty one *and* the young one.”

My sisters were facing off now as the rest of the family just looked on. There wasn’t much more you could do when they got like this.

“Why the hell not? Those two things aren’t mutually exclusive. Look at the Hemsworth brothers. Liam is the youngest, and he’s definitely the prettiest.”

“*Dios mio*, you’re a psycho. Have you *seen* Chris’s jawline? He was fucking *Thor*, for Christ’s sake. And no one even pays attention to that older one—whatshisname.”

“Girls.” My dad’s voice was quiet, but it meant business, and my sisters shut their traps.

Jumping in before Cat and Daniela started arguing about exactly what shade of green the grass was or some such nonsense, I finished introducing Taz. “And this is my brother, Marco.”

She stepped to him and gave him a warm hug, which he returned enthusiastically. “Hi, Marco. I’ve heard all about you from Mario.”

“He talks about me?”

“Of course. He says you’re *pretty much* his favorite brother.”

“Pretty much?” he asked with a laugh, still holding tightly to Taz. “I’m his only brother.”

“You’re not even going to be that if you don’t let go of my girl,” I teased.

“But she smells so good,” he complained before finally releasing her. “Why can’t I keep her?”

“Because she’s mine,” I said softly, my eyes locking on hers.

“Ah, hell. Here we go,” Catalina said. “They’re doing the *miradas amorosas*.”

“We’re not doing the goo goo eyes,” I protested.

“Yes you are,” Daniela said in a rare agreement with my other sister. “And why are we standing outside in the heat? I’m growing a human here.” She rubbed both hands over her burgeoning belly.

“Yeah, same,” Cat added, patting her tiny bump.

“Whatever,” Daniela said, leading the way into the house. “You’re, like, five minutes pregnant.”

“Well, excuse me for not getting knocked up as quickly as you. My husband works in the oilfield, and he’s gone for two months at a time. While he’s away, I have to rely on my—”

“Can we not talk about this right now?” I groaned. I didn’t want to know anything about my sister’s alleged toy collection.

“Okay,” Cat said easily. “When would you like to talk about it?”

“A week from never,” I retorted. “You can make an appointment with my secretary.”

Taz was giggling at my side. “So you’re both pregnant at the same time? That must be kinda cool.”

“You know what would be even cooler?” Catalina asked, linking arms with my girlfriend. “If we were *all three* preggers at the same time.”

“Cat...” I warned with a growl, but she simply grinned at me.

“Get upstairs and make it happen, little bro,” my youngest younger sister said, snapping her fingers at me and pointing at the ceiling.

“Taz, I’m sorry,” I hissed, my face flushing red.

In true Taz fashion, she winked at me and said, “No, I think it’s a good idea. We’ve been dating almost a week, so adding a baby seems like a fine plan.”

In front of us, my older sister laughed raucously. “Oh god. She’s a keeper, Mar. Taz is gonna fit right in with this family.”

My annoyance of a few seconds ago faded into happiness, pride, and a whole lot of love. My girl did fit in with my family. We’d only been here a few minutes, and she was already joining in with my sisters’ smartassery.

“Sit. Sit,” my mom ordered as soon as we were in the dining room. “We’re just having sandwiches for lunch since I’m making tamales for dinner.”

“My mom makes the best tamales ever,” I told Taz, and my mother blushed before pinching my cheek. Again.

“Taz, I didn’t know what you liked, so I made ham, turkey, and roast beef.”

“You didn’t have to go to all that trouble, Mrs. Diaz. I eat pretty much anything.”

“Hush up with that Mrs. Diaz nonsense. Call me Maria or Mama.”

We all sat, and Papi blessed the food before we dug in. Taz fielded questions from my family like a champ, telling them about her family and where she grew up in Colorado.

“And you two work together?” Daniela asked, waving a Dorito between us.

“Yes, we’ve been working together for about a year and a half.”

“Why are we just hearing about Taz if you’ve known each other that long?” Mama asked.

“Oh,” I said uncomfortably, looking over at my now-girlfriend. “We didn’t get along well at first.”

“Because he was jealous of my shooting skills,” Taz said, and my father’s head popped up.

“You’re a good shooter?”

She swallowed a bite of her sandwich and nodded. “Yes, sir. I can shoot a gnat off a squirrel’s ass from five-hundred yards.”

My entire family chuckled.

“She’s almost as good as me,” I bantered. “I can shoot the eye out of a gnat on a squirrel’s ass from five-hundred yards.”

“As long as the squirrel is dead and not moving,” she snapped back.

I laughed along with everyone at the table, and Daniela dabbed at her eyes with her napkin. “Mario, you’ve got your hands full with this one, and I freaking love it.”

Papi leaned forward, his gaze intent on my girlfriend. “Taz, have you ever seen *Lonesome Dove*?” Everyone groaned.

Except for Taz. Her eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. “I have. Best miniseries of all time.”

Catalina looked across the table at me and shook her head sadly. “And I really thought I liked her.”



“You sure you don’t want to come with us?” I asked, kissing Taz on her forehead as Marco and I prepared to go suit shopping.

“No, I’ll be fine. Your dad and I are going to watch *Lonesome Dove* together.” She turned her head toward my mother, who was drying the husks for the tamales and pretending not to eavesdrop. “Unless Maria needs my help in the kitchen.”

“Oh god no! Please don’t. We’d like the food to be edible,” I cried dramatically.

That was apparently the wrong thing to say because my tiny mother stormed toward me, snatching a dish towel from her shoulder and proceeding to whip me on the head with it. Repeatedly.

“What. Did. You. Say? I didn’t raise you to speak to your girlfriend like that, Mario Andre Diaz.”

Covering my head with my arms, I ducked out of her reach. “Mama, I was just teasing. Taz and I tease each other all the time. It’s okay.”

Her hands were fisted on her hips as she glared at me. “Apologize to her. Now.” She snapped her towel in my girlfriend’s direction.

Dipping my head contritely, I purred, “Taz, I’m so sorry I insulted your cooking. I was trying unsuccessfully to be funny. You’re an excellent cook, and your gravy is particularly outstanding.”

Her lips twitched. To my mother, it sounded like a genuine apology, but Taz knew I was still poking. “Thank you, Mario. That makes me feel so much better.” She lifted her middle finger and scratched the side of her neck,

away from where Mama could see. “In fact, I’ll make gravy for you every day this week.”

“*Smartass*,” I mouthed when my mother turned back to her husks.



Two hours later, Marco and I were in a dressing room the size of a garage at some fancy store Bristol had recommended. We were Facetiming with her as she directed our shopping efforts. We already had the suit, shirt, and shoes picked out, but now we were trying to decide on a tie.

“Show me the red ones again,” Bris said. “Red is a power color, but you have to choose the perfect shade, or it can be a disaster.” I thought that sounded a little dramatic, but I did as she asked, turning the camera toward the long line of red ties laid out on the white marble table.

She studied them, giving her comments. “Hmm, too bright, too textured, not textured enough, that’s a possibility, too shiny, just no, too dark, maybe, maybe, and no.”

Marco and I shared a look, and he grinned. The kid was having the time of his life. “Have we made a decision?” I asked, and I heard Bristol’s voice answer.

“I think the fourth one from the left. Hold it up against the suit and let me see.” My hand reached for one, and she said, “No, your other left, dingleberry.”

Marco let out a snort of amusement as I picked up the *correct* tie and held it beneath his chin, turning the camera to face him.

“Yesss!” she cheered. “That’s the perfect shade of crimson. Marco, you’re a total stud.”

My brother’s face turned the exact hue of the *crimson* tie as he stumbled through a thank you.

I swiveled the phone around to face me. “I appreciate you so much, Bris. How are you feeling?”

“Really good, but I’m already showing. I think this kid is going to be as big as his or her daddy.”

“Lord have mercy. Bless your heart,” I said with a laugh. “Thanks again for all your help.”

“No problem. Has Taz worn the leather shorts yet?”

My head popped back on my neck a couple inches. “What leather shorts?”

Bristol’s grin was positively gleeful. “Ask her about the leather shorts. Then you can send me a gift to properly thank me. I’m very fond of chocolate chip cookies at the moment.”

While my brother got dressed, I went and paid for his clothes because there was no fucking way I wasn’t going to. As we walked out to the car, he thanked me for the millionth time before saying, “Mario, can I ask you a serious question?”

“Of course, buddy. What’s up?”

“Are all the girls you know as hot as Taz and Bristol?”

CHAPTER 42



“YOUR MOM IS ADORABLE. I can’t believe she cried over Marco’s suit,” I said as I propped myself against the bathroom counter and dried off.

Mario smiled fondly. “Yes, she cries at the drop of a hat these days. I think it’s the combination of having her first two grandchildren on the way and Marco preparing to leave the nest in a couple of years.”

“I really like your family.”

He scooped me up in his arms and carried me from the en suite bathroom into his bedroom. “They like you too. A lot.”

“Are you sure it’s okay if we sleep in the same room?”

He laughed as he laid me down on the bed. “Trust me. If it wasn’t, we wouldn’t be in here together.”

Turning on the bedside lamp, I put my damn arm brace on as Mario checked the door lock and turned off the overhead light.

“We’re not having sex in your parents’ house.”

He lifted one eyebrow at me and pulled off the towel he'd had knotted around his waist. *Holy shit, he is magnificent.*

"We're not," I stated again, and it sounded more like I was trying to convince myself than him. He just smiled and stalked toward the bed, his cock already rising to the occasion. "Mario, maybe you should put some clothes on."

"I just want to feel you while I sleep. I've gotten used to your skin against mine this week."

I closed my eyes and tried to control my breathing. Mario and I had been very... *active* this week. It was like a dam had broken, and all the sex had poured out into our bed. All of it. We couldn't get enough of each other.

"Aren't you going to get me one of your shirts to sleep in?"

He shook his head, kneeling beside me on the bed as his finger teased a strand of my hair from my cheek. He was hovering over me, and he knew damn well it made me horny when he hovered like a big beast toying with his prey.

"You're not going to get lucky tonight, Mario."

His grin was slow and sexy, those perfect lips pulling up on one corner as his wandering finger trailed down my bare side. "No, but you are."

Giving him my best glare, I hissed, "No. We're not doing it. You can wait until tomorrow."

"Yeah, but can you?"

"Of course I can." I think I sounded pretty adamant. Maybe. Kinda. *Sigh... not really.*

"Okay, you win," he said, flipping off the lamp and sliding beneath the covers with me. His big body enveloped me as he easily pulled my back against his chest. "We'll just sleep."

My hips gave an involuntary wiggle as I snuggled down into the mattress of the queen-sized bed.

“Stop grinding your ass against my cock if you’re not going to let me fuck you.”

I smiled into the darkness. “I wasn’t grinding my ass. I was just getting comfortable.”

“Hmm,” he hummed, sounding unconvinced. A few seconds later, his erection was between my legs, pressing against my center.

“Mario, you’re making this really hard,” I complained.

His dick flexed against me. “And you’re making *this* really hard. You know I can’t control this thing when you’re dripping all over me.”

I was really wet. Feeling his big, hard body and his thick length drew a response from me that I couldn’t manage to thwart, no matter how hard I tried. And to be honest, I wasn’t really trying all that hard.

“Fine. Put it in,” I huffed.

“I love you too,” he said, and I could feel his lips smiling against the back of my neck.

“And don’t be grunting like a big animal.”

“You’re awfully demanding tonight. Maybe I won’t fuck you after all.”

There was a long silence, and then I reached between my legs and grasped his erection, guiding it to my entrance and earning me a satisfied groan from him.

Mario’s hand went to my hip, holding me in place as he pushed slowly up into me. We both sighed, both wanting this. Needing this.

“My parents’ bedroom is downstairs, so they won’t hear anything if we don’t get too wild.” I groaned softly as he hit the end of me. “That’s it, pretty girl. Let me hear those sweet noises.”

He began to move in and out of me, his breath steamy against my neck. His tongue drew lazy circles on my skin as he worked me slow and steady, the push and pull of his cock urging my desire to the surface of my skin until I was tingling all over.

A soft noise escaped my lips, and Mario wrapped his lower arm beneath me and pressed his big hand flat against my stomach, his fingers spanning from one side of me to the other.

Something about his hand there, binding me to him, pushed the crown of his erection directly against my happy spot, and I clenched around him. His other hand had been toying with my nipple, but when he sensed I was getting close, he lowered it between my legs.

“Mmm, I can feel my cock fucking you, *cariño*.” His first two fingers spread on either side of his erection, pressing firmly against my lips as he maintained his slow and steady pace. “You’re soaking my fingers and my dick. I never want to go a day without being inside you. I need it, *mi amor*. I need you.”

“I need you too. I love you,” I said, twisting my head around for a kiss. As soon as his tongue met mine, the intensity increased tenfold. His thrusts became faster and harder, pulling low squeaks from the bedsprings. At that point, I didn’t care about the noises. I just wanted more.

“I’m about to come, baby,” he groaned against my lips. “I need you to come with me.” His fingers found my clit with the perfect amount of pressure, and I felt my orgasm right on the cusp.

“So close,” I panted, pulling my face away and burying it in the pillow beneath me.

“I want you, Taz. I want you forever. I belong to you now. Come for me and show me you belong to me too.”

Those words—*god, those sweet, beautiful words*—pushed me over the edge, and my body exploded in bliss. I was like confetti, shattering into a million tiny pieces that raced up and up and up until they reached their peaks, and then each shred drifted lazily back to Earth.

Mario was filling me up, throbbing with each spurt that he released into me, as he grunted softly into the side of my neck.

“You’re mine,” he proclaimed, his lips kissing me softly.

“I’m yours,” I assured him as I drifted off to sleep with him still inside me.

CHAPTER 43



AS I SAT AT my desk, I did some of the hand and wrist exercises Chayton had prescribed for me. I'd had my four-week check-up on my wrist yesterday and was told I was fully healed and could remove the brace.

I was thrilled that I could finally do everything for myself once again, though I found that Mario helping me didn't bother me as much as it used to. Because everything he did came from a place of love, not pity or obligation.

Shifting in my seat, I winced at the soreness there. Bristol had told Mario about my leather shorts, and he'd insisted that I wear them last night. That Jose Cuervo-inspired impulse buy had fit right in at the Latino dance club he'd taken me to. I hadn't felt the least bit self-conscious, mostly because he couldn't keep his hands off my ass the entire night.

We'd danced the night away in a flurry of sweat, groping, pounding music, and grinding hips. I plucked at my bottom lip and tried not to moan at the

memories flooding my mind like a tsunami. My man certainly knew how to use his hips.

When we'd gotten back home, we barely made it through the door before my shorts were ripped down my legs and I was pinned to the wall by a very worked up male. We were both drenched with sweat, and the skin of our exposed bodies clung together like almost-dried glue.

It had been our wildest sex yet, him pounding roughly—*very* roughly—up into me as I licked the salt from the skin of his neck like he was my own personal lollipop. His hands had mine locked above my head as he fucked me like a rabid animal, and all I could do was take it. All of it. Every delicious inch and growling thrust.

I had no complaints.

Every little detail was seared into my skull and probably would be for the rest of eternity. I closed my eyes and let my mind wander back to what had happened afterward.

“Jesus, Mario,” I panted as he released my hands and dropped his head forward against the wall behind me.

“You’re so fucking hot, Anna. Your ass in those goddamn shorts has had me hard as a rock all night.”

Grinning the grin of the completely sated, I kissed his sweaty temple. “I’m aware. You were rubbing it all over me the entire time.”

Mario lifted his head and kissed the corner of my mouth. “Gonna have to send Bristol some more cookies for telling me about those shorts. Otherwise, you might have kept them hidden from me forever.”

“Bristol, huh?” I asked, narrowing my eyes as his lips twisted in chagrin.

“Yeah, don’t be mad at her.”

“I’m not. I may send Gram some cookies too because she actually picked

them out.”

He chuckled and gripped my hips with his big hands as he pulled out of me.

“I’m dripping,” I complained, and he reached between my legs and smeared his cum up my thighs and all over my pussy.

“You’re a fucking mess down here, amor. You like being covered in our juices?”

I nodded, unable to speak because the look he was giving me spoke volumes. He wasn’t done with my body yet.

Mario’s jaw tightened as he slid his slippery finger back until he was pressing against the tightness of my asshole. “This okay?”

“Yes.” My whisper turned into a groan when his thick finger penetrated me back there.

“I want this ass. Tonight.”

I wanted it too. At least, I wanted to try, but I was going to make him work for it.

“Convince me,” I said boldly, and his jaw unclenched into a devious, challenge-accepted smile a second before he dropped to his knees in front of me.

“Mario, you... you just came inside me,” I squeaked when he ran his nose through me.

“Mmm, you have no idea how good it smells to me when we’re both coating this cunt, Anna. The idea of me mixed with you turns me on.”

In the dim light, I watched as he palmed his dick, which was once again showing signs of life.

“You’re already reloading?” I asked.

He flicked his wicked tongue against my clit, and my knees threatened to give out. “I should be ready to shoot again in a few minutes, baby.” His

finger pressed into my back hole a little farther. “And this is my fucking target.”

“Shit,” I moaned as he threw one of my legs over his shoulder and went to work on my clit, that talented tongue of his gliding roughly over me.

His middle finger slid into my pussy, and when it was soaked, he added it to the back door along with his other one. It was a tight fit and burned at first, but the feel of his mouth and his carnal grunts of enjoyment soon had me rocking against him, wanting him deeper.

When he allowed his teeth to graze against my most sensitive spot, I lost it, riding his face and his fingers at the same time as I cried out my release with a shaky breath.

“Okay, okay,” I breathed as my chest heaved up and down. “I’m convinced. You’re granted access to the forbidden zone.”

Before I knew what was happening, I was tossed over his shoulder and being toted to the bedroom as he tugged his pants up to his thighs with one hand so that he could walk without tripping.

“You don’t waste any time, do you?” I quipped, smacking his firm ass with my palm.

“Nope,” he said, dumping me unceremoniously onto the bed. “Get undressed. I want you so fucking naked, Anna.”

He fistfisted both sides of his silky black shirt and ripped it open, the buttons pinging against the floor. It was the very picture of lust mixed with eagerness, and it was hot as fuck.

“Now,” he barked, as I stared at that broad, tanned chest and those chiseled abs.

“Yes, sir,” I barked back, quickly pulling my shirt and bra off before he started ripping my clothes too.

By the time I looked back up, his pants, underwear, socks, and shoes were on the floor, and he was reaching into the nightstand for the small blue bottle of thick lube.

Leaning over me, he cupped my chin and kissed me. It was fierce, but there was a sweetness behind every stroke of his tongue. "I'll take care of you, cariño. I promise."

He started to back away, but I pulled his mouth back to mine, murmuring against his lips, "I like the way we taste together too." Groaning, he tossed the bottle on the bed, and pushed me down to the mattress with his big body. We kissed for so long I could barely taste the erotic blend of us on his tongue anymore.

Then he dipped his head and gave my hard nipples the attention they were craving as his fingers slid back inside my ass once again. His thumb circled my clit, and I lifted my hips from the bed.

"Why does that feel so good?"

Biting down on my left nipple, he battered it with his tongue until I was going wild beneath him. "Because you're a kinky little slut who wants her ass fucked like there's no tomorrow?" he suggested, lifting his eyes to me as his tongue licked obscenely up my chest.

"That must be it," I panted. "I'm ready, Mario."

"Fuck," he said, his cock twitching against my hip. "Roll over, mi amor. I'm going to get us a towel, and when I get back in this room, I better see what's mine raised up in the air and waiting for me."

He pulled his fingers out and flipped me over like a flapjack, smacking me on the butt before heading to the bathroom. When he returned, I was on my knees with my ass as high in the air as I could get it, my chest pressed to the bed.

Twisting my head to face him, my heartbeat picked up when his steps faltered and his mouth dropped open at the sight of me.

“Fucking gorgeous, Anna. Just fucking gorgeous.” He walked slowly toward me, his eyes never leaving my body as he rounded the foot of the bed. My body flushed under his scrutiny, and I tensed when he kneeled behind me.

“Not yet, amor. I’m just going to love on you for a while.” His voice was so soft, I could barely hear it, but it still sent a shiver down my spine. His fingers traced the tremor and then wrapped around my waist. Starting at the bottom, he kissed each of my vertebrae with gentle lips until he reached my neck. Then he pressed his thick erection inside my pussy and held it there.

“This is all I need, Anna. I’ll never, ever get tired of it, so if this is all you want to do, I’ll be the luckiest man in the world.”

On the verge of tears, I croaked out, “I want everything with you. Te amo, Mario,” and he rested his forehead against the back of my head before he began to move, deep, hard thrusts that had me whimpering beneath him.

“I love you too. You ready for me, mi amor?” he asked, and I nodded against the mattress.

“Make my ass yours.”

Mario groaned, and with one last kiss to the back of my head, he pulled out, laid the towel beneath me, and picked up the bottle of lube. Spreading my cheeks, he dribbled the cool gel down my crack and worked it into me before generously lubing himself up.

“It’ll hurt at first, but I’ll go slow. Tell me if you need a break.” He rubbed his tip against me, and everything back there tingled with anticipation.

Then he pushed forward, popping through my sphincter, and it hurt like a motherfucker. “Shit. Shit,” I whimpered into the mattress as he stilled, his hands caressing my ass.

“You okay, baby?”

I made a little noncommittal noise because I wasn't sure, and Mario reached around and beneath me, fondling my clit with the perfect amount of pressure.

“Th-that's better,” I stammered as I felt my body loosen slightly, and he pushed in another inch. With his fingers doing magical things between my legs, the pain eased, and I felt my spine begin to relax.

“You're stunning, Anna. I wish you could see how good it looks with my cock in your ass.”

“Mmmm, more,” I moaned, his words sparking something inside me, and he pushed in a little more before pulling back and entering me again with an unhurried thrust.

“Fuck, this feels good.” His fingers sped up on my clit, and I rocked my hips back, taking him a little deeper. “That's it, baby. Be my good girl and take all this dick.”

And I did. It took a few minutes before he was completely seated inside me, but once he was, I was desperate for him to move. It was intimate and erotic, and I wanted to feel him taking what he needed from my body.

I wiggled my ass, and he took that as permission to pull out to the tip and slide back into me to the hilt.

Turning my head toward the mirror, I watched from the side as he moved. His eyes were downcast, wholly focused on where he was entering me, and his lips were parted, forming words I couldn't hear.

He was lost in his pleasure, and I was lost in him. His body was made to fuck, and he was beautiful when he did it. The slow roll of his back and ass as he fucked me was mesmerizing, and I couldn't pull my eyes away.

“Anna,” he breathed, my name like a prayer from his full lips.

“Harder,” I demanded, and he took my hand and placed it between my legs.

“Get yourself off while I fuck this pretty ass, baby. And I’d better hear my name on your lips when I come inside you.”

With one hand on my hip and the other in my hair, he slammed into me and growled out a curse. My fingers kept themselves busy on my clit while his twisted and twirled through my sweat-soaked hair.

“I’ve never felt anything hotter and tighter than your ass, Anna. Fuck, it’s perfect.” He sped up, knocking me up the bed before dragging me back and tightening his grip until I was sure I would bear his marks tomorrow.

My free hand clamped onto the sheet, fingernails scratching the soft surface as an orgasm brewed deep in my core.

“God, Mario. Give it to me. Faster.”

He began to fuck me with force, and I watched raptly in the mirror as his head tilted back and his eyes closed in pure ecstasy. His ass hollowed with every forward thrust, and he was grunting out curses and filthy words in Spanish.

Seeing him lose control brought my orgasm to the surface, and my entire body began to quake. “I’m... oh, I’m coming,” I cried. “Mario!”

“Me. Too,” he growled, his hips pistoning faster and harder. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. Anna...”

CHAPTER 44



“ANNA? ANNA?”

I popped my eyes open to find Heather smiling down at me. “Sorry, did I, like, interrupt your nap?”

Shaking my head, I inhaled a deep breath and blew it out. “No, sorry. Just lost in thought.”

“What were you thinking about?”

My lips rolled inward as I tried to come up with an appropriate answer. “Dancing.”

“Ohh, I love dancing.” She toyed nervously with a piece of her hair. “Joe finally asked me out.”

I couldn’t help the broad smile that widened across my lips. “Did he? That’s awesome, Heather.”

“Yeah, I’ve been crushing on him for a while, but I didn’t think he was interested.”

“I’m sure he is. You’re gorgeous.”

I was pleased. This had actually been my idea. After we’d returned from Mario’s family’s house three weeks ago, I’d sat down and had a long talk with Joe, setting him straight on his misguided intentions. Then I’d suggested he ask Heather out. *His mother will love her. She’s very... blonde.*

“Anyway, here’s the mail and your lunch.”

She set a tray of food on my desk with a stack of envelopes wedged beneath the plate before heading downstairs. I took a bite of my chicken salad sandwich and chewed. It wasn’t nearly as good as Guillermo’s, and I wished we could get this case wrapped up so he and his staff could have their old jobs back.

Once I was done eating, I picked up my phone and grinned.

Should I do it?

I thought of the stack of tiaras and that big, fluffy pink dress the guys from DFW Security Force had sent to me—thanks to Mario sharing the meaning of Tazanna—and nodded my head. *It’s go time, Diaz.*

My fingers tapped on my phone screen, and I sent the picture of Mario as a little boy, all dressed up with makeup and eyelashes, in the group text.

And I waited. It didn’t take long. And I wasn’t disappointed.

Shark: What the fuck is this?

Cam: I think it’s a power play by our princess.

Hawk: Wait, wait, wait. Is that Woody?

Woody: *Goddammit, Taz.*

Tank: *Oh my god. It is!*

Bode: *Taz, you have just made my year. Marry me.*

Woody: *Shut up, Bode.*

Cam: *I can't fucking breathe right now. What's the deal with those eyebrows?*

Woody: *My sisters did this to me. I was just a little kid and had no say in anything.*

Hawk: *I don't know. You're smiling awfully big. You look like you're enjoying it.*

Woody: *So, Tank, you gotten any new dick hats lately?*

Tank: *Don't try to change the subject. This is your day to shine, gorgeous.*

Bode: *For real though, Tank, did you like that one I sent you for Fourth of July?*

Tank: *The camo helmet? Yeah, that was real nice. Thank you.*

Bode: *You're welcome.*

Tank: *Bris loved it. There was lots of "saluting" going on.*

Cam: *Can we get back to pretty little Woody? What the fuck is up with that hat?*

Shark: *Yeah, maybe Tank's grandma would like to borrow it.*

Tank: *Nah, Gram wouldn't wear it. She'd call it an old lady hat. Plus, it would clash with her pink hair.*

Woody: *This is me bending over so you all can kiss my ass.*

Hawk: *Don't let your panties show when you bend over.*

Woody: *Birdsong, I'm on my way to your office right now. You've been warned.*

Bode: *Oh shit! Taz, send proof of life!*

Woody: Taz can't come to the phone right now. Please try your call again later.

I fucking loved these guys.

Setting my phone down, I got to work sorting through the mail, which consisted of junk, requests for appearances by Ella, fan mail, and... *wait. What is this one?*

There was no return address, so just to be safe, I dug in my purse and pulled out a pair of gloves before opening it.

Shit. Another threat from the stalker.

Mario stormed through the door, his expression one of amusement mixed with annoyance as he glanced around to make sure we were alone. "You're just dying to have that pretty ass spanked, aren't you?"

I held up the letter and his demeanor did a complete one-eighty, his shoulders sagging. "Another one?"

"Yep," I sighed, laying the single photo out on the desktop so he could see.

It was another 8X10, a shot I recognized of Ella in her studio. The singer often put pics of herself in action on her social media accounts to keep her fans interested in what she was doing since she wasn't making public appearances at this time.

This particular pic had been posted a couple of weeks ago. Her mouth was open, and her eyes were closed, fingertips resting on one side of her headphones. Emily, the backup singer, was a slightly blurry figure in the background.

The pic had obviously been stolen from Ella's official Instagram account, but the stalker had made some... alterations. A huge red X had been

meticulously drawn directly over Ella's heart, and the words "Die Bitch" had been scrawled across the top and "Soon" across the bottom.

"Christ. Was someone in her studio?" Mario asked, rubbing his hand through his black hair. "That would really narrow things down."

"No, this pic was from her Instagram."

He opened his mouth to speak again when Ella and Emily breezed into the office. "Hey, Mario, Anna. Sorry to interrupt your lunch. I just wanted to show Emily the new T-shirts."

Emily's eyes focused on my hands, and she smiled. "Anna, you got your brace off. But why are you wearing latex gloves?"

"Oh, um..."

"Another one?" Ella's voice managed to be sharp and weary at the same time.

"Yes, I'm sorry," Mario said, stepping in front of the desk to hide the cruel photo. "We'll handle it with the police and let you know if they need to talk to you."

"Was it taken in my bedroom again?" Ella asked, her voice quivering. "Did you pick up anyone on the new cameras you installed?"

"What cameras?" Emily asked, a frown creasing her smooth forehead.

Ella realized her mistake and waved her hand. "It's nothing. I'll tell you about it later."

Speaking up, I said, "It wasn't taken in your room. It was a picture you posted on your Instagram a couple weeks ago. Someone probably just screenshotted it and then printed it out."

Emily's hand swiped up and down her sister's back. "Maybe you shouldn't post anymore pics on your socials, El. It's only going to encourage this crazy person."

Ella nodded absently. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. I was just trying to stay engaged with the fans so my career doesn’t completely fall apart.”

“Your life is more important than your career,” she argued. “And I think you should take a look at the picture, just to be sure nothing stands out to you.”

The singer took a faltering step forward and then steeled her spine as Mario reluctantly stepped aside. Her hand covered her mouth when she saw what was written on the photo, and a single tear streaked down her beautiful face.

“Shit! Who is doing this to me? And why? I’ve never done anything to anyone.”

Emily pulled her sister into her embrace as she cried and looked at us over her shoulder. “I’ll take her into the inner office and fix her some tea. Let me know if you need us.”

We both nodded, and as soon as they were gone, Mario turned and slammed his palm against the wall before resting his forehead against it. “Fuck. I can’t believe we haven’t figured this out yet. And it’s happening right under our noses.”

Wrapping my arms around him from behind, I hugged him, and the steel in his spine softened. He turned and kissed me on the head. “Sorry, baby. I’m just frustrated.”

“Me too,” I said and then puffed out a long breath against his chest. “We’d better call the police, and then we need to update Shark.”



I ran as fast as my legs would carry me before diving to the ground and rolling beneath the wooden obstacle. I ended up on my belly directly in front of the final rifle. Sighting my target, I took the shot and then jumped to my feet before the dust had even settled.

Mario was running toward me with a huge grin on his handsome, furry face. “You did it! You beat my time by a second!”

I leaped at him, and he caught me as my legs wrapped around his waist. “I really did it?”

He nodded proudly and kissed me hard on the lips. “You did, baby.”

“Why aren’t you mad that I beat you?”

He shook his head and laughed. “I’m fucking aggravated as hell, and my mind is trying to figure out how to shave another two seconds off my time so I can beat you again.”

Brushing dirt from my face, his smile turned into something I couldn’t quite define. “But my heart is excited for you. And so fucking proud.”

“Thank you,” I said softly, kissing his cheek with my gritty lips.

Mario set me on my feet as Cole sauntered over with his timer. “That was fucking rad, Anna. You’ve drawn quite a crowd.” He pointed toward the top of the hill, and when I waved at the onlookers, they let loose with cheers and whistles.

It felt good. Really good.

“So, you’ll get her a plaque made?” Mario asked. “To put on the wall?”

I shook my head. “No, you don’t have to go to all that trouble.”

“No trouble, chica, and you earned it. I’ll put the order in today. Just Anna Diaz, or do you have a middle name or something you want on there?”

“Anna Diaz is fine.” It wasn’t my real name, but that was okay. I *had* earned this.

Mario's strong arm snuggled me firmly against his side. "Now, if you don't mind, Cole," his deep brown eyes held me in a lovesick spell, "I'm going to take my wife out to celebrate with chicken wings and beer."

CHAPTER 45



WE'D BEEN HERE FOR over two months, and we still had no idea who was threatening Ella Ervin. Anna and I had brainstormed and decided that we needed fresh eyes on the people closest to the singer.

Anna spent her days interacting with the office and household staff, as well as coordinating Ella's schedule with the studio workers in the basement, and I spent my time with the other security guards, so we decided to switch. Maybe—just maybe—one of us would glean something the other one had missed.

Over the past week, I'd come down from the fourth floor every day to grab a drink or *make rounds*, making a point to speak to every household worker I possibly could. We'd pretty much ruled out the new temporary kitchen staff because they weren't even here until after the lobster attempt.

I'd spoken to housekeepers, groundskeepers, sound guys, the house manager, and Ella's family as they'd come to and gone from the house. No one had seemed even remotely suspicious.

Today, Anna was going to covertly speak to the other security guards, Preston and Timothy, under the guise of bringing them some snacks. It was Saturday, so Joe was off today.

“Here you go, baby,” I said, placing the bakery box in her hands and kissing her between the eyes. “Step outside and talk so we can make sure the comm system is working.”

She walked out and closed the door, and I heard her voice through the tiny, virtually undetectable earpiece in my right ear. “Testing, testing, one, two, three.”

“Well, that’s a boring way to test comms,” I purred, and her throaty chuckle came through loud and clear.

“What exactly did you have in mind, big boy?”

I lowered my voice to the growly pitch I knew she liked. “When you get back, I want you to wear that little mint green number you wore Wednesday night.”

“I’m pretty sure you stretched it out when you bent me over and twisted it in your fist.”

“I was just trying to properly christen the kitchen. That was the last room on our fuck list.”

Her laugh sounded again in my ear. “Why does the woman always have to be the one to dress up for the man? What are you going to wear for me?”

“A hard-on and big, giant smile.”

“If you’re lucky, I’ll kiss both of them.”

“Stop it, woman! You’ve got me chubbing over here.”

“Okay, you goof. I’m approaching the house, so turn your voice off unless you think of something I need to ask.”

“I’ll be listening. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Pressing the button on the device in my ear, I said, “Anna, can you hear me? Anna?”

When I got no reply, I knew I’d successfully gone on listening only mode.

“Hi, Mrs. Allen,” I heard her say, and the woman returned her greeting. She spoke to one of the housekeepers in her version of the Spanish language. I called it Anna’s alleged Spanish.

The other night we’d been right in the middle of some very sexy stuff, and she’d said, “Necesito correr,” or *I need to run* instead of “Necesito correrme,” which means *I need to come*.

Of course, I’d made her come instead of making her run because it was a helluva lot more fun.

As the ping of the elevator came through, I walked out the back door and sat in the grass against Anna’s palm tree.

A minute later, she knocked on what I assumed was the security room door, and then I heard her say, “Hey, guys! I brought you a treat.” I imagined her smiling and holding up the white box with the bright yellow bow that was the signature of the bakery we’d visited earlier today.

“Wow, thanks, Anna.” That was Preston. I’d worked with him the most, but Timothy and I had been on duty together a handful of times. He was quieter than Preston, and both seemed like solid guys. But we were desperate here and had to cover all our bases.

“Mario told me it could get boring sitting up here watching the little monitors all day, so when we had the most *amazing* cookies at this cute bakery in town, I thought it would be nice to get you some. Can I come in?”

The hesitation in Preston’s voice was obvious. “We’re really not supposed to let unauthorized people in here...”

“Oh, come on. It’s just me. I’d love to see how things work since I’m Ella’s PA and everything. I promise I won’t touch a thing.” She giggled, and I was pretty sure she was batting her eyes at him. “Except for one of the red velvet cookies, if you don’t mind sharing. But don’t tell Mario because I’ve already had three today.” She faux whispered that last part, and I smiled at her acting skills.

“Damn, I love red velvet. Okay, come on in, but just for a minute.” I heard the sound of the door closing, and then, “Have you met Timothy?”

After introductions were made, Anna said, “Wow! This is a cool setup. You can really watch everything here, huh? Bet you see some interesting stuff.” Her tone was flirty and light, intended to relax and open the flow of communication.

“Sometimes very interesting,” Preston said with a chuckle. “Tim, what kind of cookie do you want?”

“What’s that blue one?”

“It’s a fucking cookie, Timothy.”

“Okay, give me the yellow one then.”

“Christ, you’re annoying.”

Anna laughed. “You guys are funny. How long have you worked together?”

“Three years,” Preston garbled, his mouth apparently full of food.

“That’s so awesome. It’s great here, isn’t it? I mean, I’ve been here less than three months, and I never want to leave. The beach... the house... everything is perfect. Including Ella. Seriously, have you ever had a better boss than her?”

Good girl, Anna. Nice segue.

“This is definitely the best job I’ve ever had. Don’t you think, Tim?”

“Yep. The best.”

“He’s always quiet, but don’t let him fool you. He loves being here. Especially since he has a bit of a crush on Ella, don’t you, bud?”

“Preston! I told you not to tell anyone.”

My ears perked up at that. Could this be a case of unrequited love gone wrong? Timothy certainly had unfettered access to the entire house and to Ella.

I reached up to press the device in my ear and tell Anna to explore that, but as usual, she was one step ahead of me.

“Aww, don’t tease him, Preston. Who wouldn’t have a crush on her? She’s Ella freaking Ervin, for Pete’s sake. Heck, I’ve got a bit of a girl crush on her myself. And she’s really nice too, right Timothy?”

“Yeah, she really is.”

“Hi, Mario.”

It took me a second to realize the voice was coming from beside me and not through my earpiece.

Shading my eyes with one hand, I looked up. “Oh, hey, Emily. Where’s your poochie?”

“At home,” she said. “What are you doing out here?”

“Just relaxing. Thought I might take a little siesta.” *Now go away so I can listen to what’s going on in the surveillance room.*

“She told me.” At my quizzical look, she stepped into the beam of the sun so I didn’t have to shield my eyes anymore. She was silhouetted by the light, but I could still make out her face, and something in her expression looked... off. “Ella told me who you really are. That you and Anna came here to find the stalker.”

She did little quote marks around the last word. “Though she’s not really a stalker, is she?” *She? Did Emily know something about this case?* “She’s

really more of a person trying to right the wrongs.”

Inside my head, sirens blared. *Holy shit!*

“Yeah, I think so,” I said carefully. “It’s important to do that.”

“You know, don’t you?” I didn’t answer because I was pretty fucking sure I did know. Now. “You know it’s me, don’t you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Emily.”

My new suspicions were confirmed when she pulled a small revolver from her purse and pointed it at my head. “Don’t act like I’m stupid, Mario,” she said calmly, though her hands were shaking.

Well fuck.

Holding my hands up at shoulder level, I forced a smile onto my face. “Whoa! It doesn’t have to be like that, Emily. Of course I suspected that you were the only one around here smart enough to pull off something like this. I just didn’t know why.”

The gun lowered just a little. It would still be a chest or gut shot if she decided to pull the trigger, but I was more likely to survive that than a head shot.

And I had to survive. For Anna.

Anna!

Pretending to scratch my ear, I activated the two-way on the comms unit. At least, I think I did. A dull numbness was seeping through my hands and fingers, making it hard to tell.

“Really? You think I’m smart?”

“Hell yes. You’re way smarter than anyone here.”

Emily looked pleased with that.

“I saw Anna heading up to the house. How long will she be gone?”

“*Anna,*” I said, emphasizing her name and hoping it would catch her

attention, “went to the house to work on some stuff in the office. We have plenty of time before *Anna* gets back, so why don’t you tell me your reasoning behind doing whatever this is with your sister?”

“Why the fuck do you think?” The gun raised back to my head, and I pressed my back hard against the palm tree, the rough bark digging into my flesh through my white T-shirt.

Because you’re jealous? Or criminally insane?

I didn’t voice either of my thoughts. Instead, I gave my best guess. “Because she has something you want?”

“No! Because she has everything I *deserve*. But all anyone cares about is perfect Ella.” Her head tilted to the side a little. “Do you think I’m prettier than my sister? Lawrence doesn’t.” Then her lips turned into a smile that was positively bone chilling. “Well, he did that one night a couple years ago.”

“Oh, so you and Lawrence were together, and that’s why you’re threatening your sister?”

“Correction: that’s why I’m going to kill my sister. Right after I kill you.”

That wicked numbness set in all over my body, and I thought about the last words I’d said to Anna.

Love you.

I hoped she’d remember that.

CHAPTER 46



I WAS TRYING TO concentrate on the conversation around me when I heard my name directly in my ear and shifted my focus to what Mario was saying.

“*Anna* went to the house to work on some stuff in the office. We have plenty of time before *Anna* gets back, so why don’t you tell me your reasoning behind doing whatever this is with your sister?”

Is he talking to me? I don’t even have a sister.

Completely tuning out Preston and Timothy, I listened more closely.

“Why the fuck do you think?” a woman snapped. *Is that... Emily?*

“Because she has something you want?”

“No! Because she has everything I *deserve*. But all anyone cares about is perfect Ella. Do you think I’m prettier than my sister? Lawrence doesn’t. Well, he did that one night a couple years ago.”

Damn, it’s like *Days of our Lives* up in here.

“Oh, so you and Lawrence were together, and that’s why you’re threatening your sister?”

“Correction: that’s why I’m going to kill my sister. Right after I kill you.”

Every single blood cell in my veins froze as the realization finally hit me. Emily is the perp, and she’s about to kill the man I love.

Not if I have any fucking thing to do with it.

Jumping into action, I shoved Timothy’s chair, sending the wheels rolling across the floor.

“What the hell, Anna?”

I ignored him, slapping my palms down on the table in front of the monitors, my eyes scanning the little square screens. And there it was. Our bungalow.

And that crazy bitch had a gun pointed at Mario.

“Preston, where do you keep the rifles?”

“Wha—I’m not allowed—”

Jabbing my finger at the screen, I said, “Emily is the one. Give me a fucking rifle. Now.”

Preston’s eyes widened as he stared at the screen. “But how? Why?”

“Preston! Rifle!” I screamed, and he snapped to attention and ran for a locked cabinet, fumbling with his keys as I turned to the other guard. “Timothy, secure Ella and call the police. Go.” He dashed immediately from the room, his hand on his gun belt.

I was snapping out orders like I owned the place, but I didn’t give a shit. I had to save my man.

Preston had the gun cabinet open and was babbling. “We’ve got a Riley, a Patriot, a Ruger, an S&W…”

“I can shoot all of them,” I said, reaching around him for the first one I laid

my hands on, a Ruger I was very familiar with.

“But how do you... You’re a PA.”

“Follow me and keep your mouth shut. I’m trying to hear what’s going on.” I was no longer Anna, the nice, polite PA for Ella Ervin. I was in the zone, a woman on a mission.

Yanking open the roof access door, I checked the gun as I ran up the stairs, listening carefully to what was being broadcast in my ear. Mario’s breathing sounded heavy and quick, and Emily’s voice sounded fucking crazy.

“Why should Ella’s house be bigger than mine? I don’t even have a pool. I have to use hers.”

Making my way swiftly across the roof, I said, “Mario, can you hear me?”

“Yes, I hear you, Emily, and I totally agree.”

Good boy. He found a way to communicate with me without letting the crazy bitch know.

“And I’m a much better singer than her, but she’s the fucking superstar, and I’m just the backup singer.” Emily was really getting riled up now. That wasn’t good. At all.

I kneeled at the ledge surrounding the roof and surveyed the scene. Mario was sitting on the ground with Emily standing above him, waving the gun around like an unhinged person. It was the worst position he could be in. She was too far away for him to tackle her. He’d be dead before he reached her.

I brought the gun to my shoulder, finding my target in the scope.

“Mario, I’m on the roof with a rifle. *Do not* try to make a move. I’ve got you.” *God, please let me have him.*

Preston interrupted my thoughts. “Anna, this is crazy. No one can make that shot. It’s got to be over two-hundred yards. What if you accidentally—”

“Preston, don’t say another word. I’m trying to concentrate.” He wisely

shut up.

I didn't like the angle from this position. If I wasn't perfect, Mario would be hit. I was a dead-on shot, but what if today was the day I was a couple inches off?

This was absolutely the most important shot I'd ever attempted in my life, and I had to be perfect.

"Changing position for a better angle," I mumbled, standing and sprinting a few yards to my right before kneeling again. Before I brought the gun up, I glanced at the scene below. I couldn't see Mario's face from this distance with my bare eyes, but I heard his soft whisper in my ear.

"I trust you."

I wasn't sure if the voice was real or something I concocted in my head, but I could literally feel the confident vibes he was sending my way.

He trusted me. I just had to trust in myself.

Bringing the gun to my shoulder, I sighted my target and ran through the calculations in my head. Angles, wind, drift, the target's movements. I started counting down out loud so he could hear me.

"Three..."

The world faded away until only my target existed.

"Two..."

Nothing else mattered. Only this one shot.

"One..."

Squeeze the trigger.

I knew it was a hit without even looking, but I looked anyway. In the distance, I could see Mario standing over Emily with her gun in his hand. She'd dropped the weapon because I'd shot her right through the wrist,

practically the smallest target I could possibly hit unless I was aiming for her pinkie toe.

Resisting the urge to jump from the roof to get to my man faster, I turned and sprinted for the stairs with Preston right on my heels.

“How did... that was... who the fuck are you?”

I laughed. “I’ll explain it all to you later, Pres.”

It seemed like Mario was ten miles away as my legs churned to get to him. I was completely drenched in sweat by the time he smacked the pistol into Preston’s hand and grabbed me up so tightly I couldn’t breathe.

But I didn’t need to breathe. *He* was my air. He was my *everything*.

“That was the most amazing shot I’ve ever seen,” he growled into my shoulder as the sounds of approaching sirens almost drowned out the curse-filled cries of Emily on the ground.

I could have easily made a head shot with my eyes closed, but Emily would have died instantly, so I’d made the decision I felt most comfortable with in the blink of an eye.

“You know, they really need more in the training manual about shooting the client’s sister because I feel like they must have skimmed over that a bit,” I said, earning me a deep laugh from Mario.

“God you’re crazy, but that’s why I love you.”

The sounds of chaos around us dwindled into nothingness when I heard those three little words.

“I love you too, Mario Diaz. Now kiss your fake wife.”

And he did.

Very inappropriately.

CHAPTER 47



“I’M SO FUCKING PROUD of you guys,” Shark said as Taz and I sat in the back of the limo on the way to the airport. “Woody, it sounds like you really kept your cool while having a gun pointed at your head. And Taz... Jesus.”

I lifted her hand and kissed it as our eyes met. “She was amazing. She saved my life.”

Shark cleared his throat, and we turned back to my phone to find him smirking. He didn’t seem to be bothered by the shift in our relationship; he actually looked pleased.

“Taz, Woody said that shot was absolutely outstanding, and that’s a lot coming from him. I can’t believe you went with the arm shot.” He was shaking his head in awe.

Beside me, Taz nodded slowly. “It was a lot to process in a short amount of time, but I knew she needed help. Plus, being the client’s sister... It was hard, Shark.”

“I know it was, and I appreciate you making the difficult decision you did in such a short span of time. That’s the sign of a good soldier.”

Pride radiated from her face as her cheeks pinkened. “Thanks, Shark,” she mumbled. “My highest priority was saving Woody, and everything else was secondary. I waited until she was waving the gun away from him and was confident I could make the shot.” I squeezed her leg, and she smiled at me.

“And you did. I hope you two had a nice little vacation this past week and are ready to get back.”

Shark had given us both seven days off, and we’d spent the first two in bed. The rest of the time, we’d explored Malibu, gone to the gun range, gone to visit my family again, and played at the beach.

And I was more in love with Tazanna Birdsong than ever.

“We did. Thank you for the time off.”

Well-deserved,” he said with a quick smile. “Any other updates?”

I hesitated, looking over at Taz, knowing this was a sensitive subject for her. She gave me a curt nod, and I turned back to our boss. “They tried to save Emily’s hand but were unable to.”

“Fuck.” He closed his eyes and shook his head sadly. “I know that’s gotta be weird for you, Taz. How are you handling it?”

“The amputee turning another person into an amputee? It fucking sucks, to be honest.”

Shark’s lips pressed together. “I can imagine. Let me know if you need to talk to someone about that. Our insurance covers all mental health treatments, okay?”

She gave him a smile. As tough of a son of a bitch as Shark Atwood was, he cared about his employees—and friends—very much.

“Thanks. I have someone I used to see at the VA Hospital, so I’ll check in

with him if I feel like I need to.”

“Good. How is Ella handling all this? I’ve spoken with her every day, but she tells me she’s all right.”

“She’s handling it as well as can be expected,” I told him. “Finding out her sister was the one behind this has shaken her, but she’s a strong lady. She broke up with the boyfriend after finding out he slept with Emily a couple years ago while they were briefly broken up.”

“Emily told Woody that, and then Lawrence confirmed it. He did his best to forget about it, but Emily was becoming more and more volatile the past few months. Kept confronting him, wanting him to leave Ella for her,” Taz filled in. “That couple we saw arguing in the background of that video was actually Lawrence and Emily, not Lawrence and Ella.”

“Add that to the fact that Ella was coming out of her self-imposed hibernation and wanting to get back in the public eye... well, that just tossed Emily into a tailspin, and that’s why she started back up with the threats. She wanted to be the famous one with Lawrence by her side and thought that if Ella was out of her way, she could just step right into her life.”

“Christ,” Shark said, rubbing his forehead with his fingertips. “The girl was completely delusional. How about the dad?”

I winced. “Enoch is taking it really hard. Imagine your younger daughter targeting your older daughter. He doesn’t know which way is up right now.”

Taz’s nose scrunched up. “Yeah, I think it’s worse on him than Ella. He keeps saying he feels like he should have known and wondering if it was somehow his fault. But honestly, I never saw him treat Emily any different than Ella. In fact, he spent more time with Emily.”

“Agreed,” I said. “They spent most days together at the pool or the beach. He seems like a really great dad. Emily hid her crazy pretty well.”

Shark's lips thinned. "Poor guy. He's got a tough road ahead, trying to figure out what to do with his injured daughter, who will likely spend a long time in jail or a mental health facility, while also not making Ella feel bad if he chooses to visit Emily."

"He's got a fine line to walk," Taz said. "Ella wants nothing to do with her sister right now, and I don't blame her. Emily literally tried to kill her with that lobster stunt."

"We've managed to keep your names out of the press. They were just told that a member of Ella's security staff was responsible for the shooting," Shark informed us.

Taz rolled her eyes. "The entire estate has been completely surrounded by the press for the past week. It's freaking insane."

"Well, you two will still be able to do undercover work since your identities haven't been outed, so that's good news for us. Anything else?"

Taz and I looked at each other and shook our heads. "I think that's all. Anything new going on back home? I feel like we've been out of the loop all week."

Shark's jaw tensed. "A few new things going on, but don't worry about it right now. You'll catch up when you get here. Just enjoy your flight."

"What new things?" I asked, my curiosity piqued.

"When you get home," he said shortly, leaving no room for argument. "I'll see you guys Monday." And he abruptly hung up.

"What was that all about? He was being weird," Taz commented, a frown creasing her forehead.

I kissed her there, wrapping my arm around her shoulder and pulling her closer to me. "I don't know. I'm curious too, but there's no use hounding him about it. Once Shark makes up his mind, the conversation is over."

We didn't have to wonder for long. As soon as we got checked in at the airport, my phone pinged with a text message. I stopped in the middle of the concourse, my eyes focused on my screen as people streamed around me.

Taz was a few yards ahead before she noticed that my feet had stalled. "What are you looking at?" she asked, coming back to me and peering at the photo on my phone. "Aww, what a cute baby. She looks Hispanic."

"Half-Hispanic," I corrected with a croak.

Her gaze met mine, and something shifted as the rest of the world seemed to fade away. The pause seemed to last forever before she finally asked, "I-is that your child, Woody?" I could hear the strain in her voice, so I shook my head, trying to find my own.

I stared at the picture of the little girl with dark hair and rosy cheeks for another long moment before my eyes returned Taz's and held them.

"It's Bode's."

EPILOGUE



Six Months Later

THE BLUSTERY FEBRUARY WIND blew a strand of hair across my face, and I shoved it away with a gloved hand as I entered DFW Security Force.

Woody was waiting right inside the employee entrance door, and his body warmed me as he snatched me close to him. “Good morning, gorgeous, and happy birthday.”

“You told me that already,” I said with a laugh, raising up on my toes to kiss his cheek.

Woody and I had been living together for two months now since Jake and Charlotte had accidentally gotten pregnant. They decided to have a quickie wedding and move in together. They’d kindly offered to let me stay in my room, but I’d politely declined.

“I know, but I wanted to tell you again. How was Oscar when you left?”

Oscar, a tiny rescue kitten with one missing leg, was my birthday present from Woody, and he was a grumpy little thing, but I loved him already. “Well, he was a bit hissy, to be honest.”

The little shit hissed at everything like the tiny badass that he was. The couch, my prosthetic leg, Woody’s left shoe, the wall. You name it, and Oscar hissed at it.

“Just like his mommy,” he purred, and I pinched his side. “Ow, you beastly woman. Be nice to me. It’s your birthday.”

Rolling my eyes, I patted his face with my purple glove. “I think that means you’re supposed to be nice to *me*.”

“I thought I was *very* nice this morning.” He wiggled his eyebrows at me, and my face melted into a smile.

“Yeah, that was a good one.”

“Hey, guys,” Cam said as he pushed through the door, bringing a shock of cold wind with him.

“Hi, Cam. How is our little Bella doing?” I asked, and his face turned to mush.

When Woody and I had arrived back in Dallas from California six months ago, our phones were blowing up with text messages to get to the hospital because Shiloh was in labor. We’d arrived about ten minutes before Bella Fitz made her appearance into the world.

“She’s so perfect, y’all. She said, ‘buh,’ last night.” He beamed at us as if that was the most astounding accomplishment ever.

“That’s awesome, dude,” Woody said, trying to hide his smile. “She’ll be reciting the Declaration of Independence before you know it.”

Cam’s forehead creased into a frown. “You think I should start working with her on that now? I thought we’d start with the Pledge of Allegiance and

work up to the Declaration.”

Woody nodded sagely. “Yeah, I think that would be better.”

“I’ll talk to Shiloh about it,” Cam said, pulling out his phone and heading to the conference room.

I burst into giggles. “Stop egging him on. The poor kid is still an infant.”

“I can’t help it. Easy target.” He removed my gloves and cupped my hands in his larger ones, lending me his heat. “Sorry I couldn’t ride to work with you today. Shark needed me here early.”

“Yeah, what was that about?”

“I’ll tell you later,” he said as Tank’s huge frame filled the doorway.

“Shit, it’s cold out there,” his voice boomed. “Bristol had Amelia bundled up like a little burrito when I left. She’s visiting with Gram today while Bris works.”

“Aww, I know Gram will love that.” Bristol and Tank’s little daughter was only a couple months old, and her great-grandmother was completely smitten.

Tank laughed. “She looks for any excuse to get her hands on my baby. She told me the other day that I was getting chubby and needed to go to the gym more. Oh, and that she’d be *more* than happy to watch Amelia while I went.”

A giggle escaped my lips. Tank was six foot, eight inches of solid muscle, though he had gained about ten pounds since his wife got pregnant. He carried it well though.

“I agree with Gram. You’ve got that dad bod thing going on,” Woody teased.

Tank grinned unapologetically. “Bristol likes a man with a little meat on his bones.” Then he winked and headed to the conference room.

“Why are we standing out here beside the door? It’s freezing,” I

complained.”

Woody took my hand and led me down the hallway, pushing open the door to our meeting room and letting me enter first. My face heated as I looked around at all the pink and white decorations, complete with a sign that read, “Happy Birthday, princess.”

“You guys!” I said with a laugh. “Thank you, but if anyone calls me *princess* today, I reserve the right to shoot you in the foot.”

“Noted. Have a seat,” Shark said. “We’re having cake for breakfast.”

My eyes cut to Woody. “Is this why you had to leave early this morning?” I asked, and he gave me a guilty nod.

Hawk entered the room and patted me on the back, giving me a sly grin. “Happy birthday, princess.”

“Thanks, Hawk, but I’ve already warned everyone else not to start that princess shit with me today.”

“I’ll try to remember,” he said with a wink.

We all sat down, and Shark started handing out cake. “Okay, we’ve got a new assignment...”

Bode busted through the door, his man bun a little messy and his shirt collar crooked. “Sorry! Traffic was a bitch today. Happy birthday, Taz,” he rushed out.

Shark nodded at Bode’s chair, indicating for him to take the seat next to me. “We just started. I was saying that we have a new client, and we need two people to go undercover.”

“Not it!” everyone yelled at the same time, and our boss rolled his eyes.

“Nice to see I’m working with professionals here. This assignment is a multi-state one, beginning in Arizona.” He tapped the two folders in his hand

against the desk, his eyes falling on me and Woody. “You two are going under as a married couple again.”

He passed the folders to us, and Woody stared at his for a moment before standing up and shaking his head. “No.”

My eyes widened on my boyfriend, and I swatted him on the leg. *What the hell is he doing?*

“Did you say no?” Shark asked.

Woody nodded. “I’m not doing it.” He was refusing to meet my eyes, and I felt a pit growing deep in my gut. My head whipped around to see if Shark’s head had exploded, but he was smiling at me.

Is that some kind of I’m-going-to-happily-kill-your-boyfriend type of smile?

I closed my eyes and pressed my lips together as Woody spoke up again. “Actually, I’ll agree to it on one condition. Taz?”

Peeling my eyes open, I turned my head slowly to look up at him, but he wasn’t standing beside my chair.

He was down on one knee.

Oh. My. God.

Woody’s teeth sank into his bottom lip as he pulled a small box from his pocket and stared directly into my eyes. “I’ll only do it if you agree to be my wife for real, Tazanna Birdsong.”

“Me?” I squeaked, and everyone around the table snickered.

“Well, I’m not marrying any of these other losers. None of them have hair that smells like coconut.”

Pure happiness bubbled up my throat and I laughed. “So you’re marrying me for my hair?”

His grin was mischievous. “I think we’re both aware of just how much I like your hair.” He lifted one flirty eyebrow, and I blushed at the memory

from almost twenty months ago.

Then his face turned serious. “I want you to be my wife, Anna.”

My face turned even redder. He only called me Anna when we were being intimate.

“You’re my soulmate. You let me into your heart when I didn’t deserve to be there, and I don’t plan on leaving any time soon. You challenge me every day, and you love it when I challenge you back.”

His eyes filled with tears—as did mine—and his voice sounded rough and dry. “We were made for each other, and I love you more than anything in the world. Please marry me.”

My face broke into a grin so big, I was afraid my skin was going to crack.

And I nodded through my tears.

“Yes, I’ll marry you, Mario Diaz. I’d love nothing more than to be Mrs. Woody.”

Cheers went up around the table, and I felt pats on my shoulder and quiet *congratulations* being uttered as everyone else filed from the room. Leaving me alone with my fiancé.

He opened the ring box, and my breath froze in my lungs as my hand went to my throat. “It’s... it’s stunning.”

I hadn’t realized the tense set of Woody’s shoulders until they relaxed. “You really like it? I know it’s not traditional, but I wanted something that celebrated your Native American heritage.”

I nodded and held my hand out for him to slip the round cut diamond surrounded by tiny turquoise stones onto my ring finger. “It’s perfect. It means everything that you chose this ring for me.”

He shrugged shyly. “I actually couldn’t find anything I liked, so I had it custom made.”

Throwing myself out of my chair, I knocked Woody over, and we ended up sprawled on the gray carpet of the conference room with me on top of him.

“I love you, Mister Diaz.”

His face radiated love. For me. And acceptance, patience, and all the things I needed that he gave to me daily.

“I love you, soon-to-be Mrs. Diaz.”

He pulled my head down to his for a searing kiss as I buried my fingers in his hair.

“So there’s not really a mission that starts in Arizona?” I asked when we surfaced for air.

He arched one eyebrow at me. “Oh there’s a mission, but it’s our honeymoon. We’re going to road trip to all the fancy gun ranges in America.” A look of worry crossed his face. “Unless you’d rather do something different. Something more romantic.”

I curled my arms around his neck. “That’s the most romantic thing I can think of because I’ll be doing it with my best friend.”

“And your husband,” he threw in, pulling us to our feet and holding me close.

“Yeah, him too.”

He laughed and kissed me again, lifting me until my legs wound around his waist. “Shark gave us the rest of the day off. What do you want to do?”

“Lots of things,” I purred, stroking a single finger up the side of his neck. He growled and nipped at my fingertip. “But first, I would like to celebrate with *our meal*.”

His lips twisted wryly to the side. “You want chicken wings and beer at...” he checked his watch. “Nine-thirty in the morning?”

“Why not? It’s our celebration.”

His face broke into a happy smile. “You’re right. Let’s see if we can find somewhere that serves wings for breakfast.” He set me down and kissed my forehead. “It’s you and me now, chica.”

“And Oscar,” I reminded him. “He’s our hissy little baby.”

“Of course,” Woody said, tucking me against his side and leading me toward the door. “I’m thinking we need to start teaching him the Gettysburg Address as soon as possible.”

I giggled, and my heart swelled in my chest.

This smartass man is truly my soulmate.

ALSO BY JADE

THE FIERCE PROTECTORS SERIES features six super-hot, possessive, growly former Navy SEALs. You've already met them all in this book, but trust me... you'll want to see more of these incredible men. Here are the links.

Dauntless Protector- Shark and Charli's Story

Devoted Protector – Tank and Bristol's Story (including lots of Gram!)

Deadly Protector – Cam and Shiloh's Story

Disgruntled Protector – Thank you for reading!

Determined Protector – Bode's story (coming January 2024)

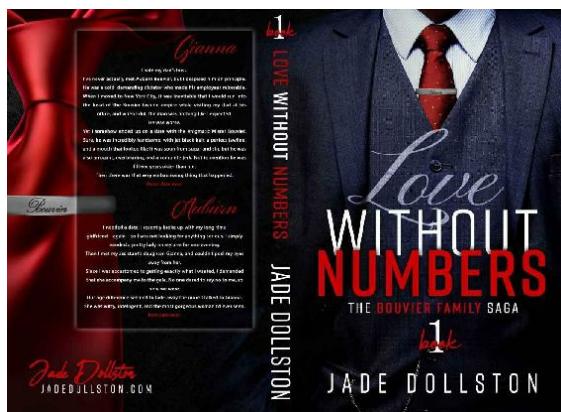
Damaged Protector – Hawk's Story (coming 2024)



Shark Atwood's sister, Blaire, has her very own book that takes place before the Protectors Series starts. See how she ended up with Axel and follow their rocky road to their HEA in **Delay of Game**

I also wrote a spicy rom-com about a dirty-talking Cajun genie named Johnny. This man is so hot, you'll be sweating into your gumbo, so check out **I Dream of Johnny** and let him make all your reading wishes come true.

Upcoming Release by Jade: A steamy billionaire age-gap romance where a strong young woman falls for Daddy's boss – who her dad hates! Yeah... the sparks fly from all directions in **Love Without Numbers: Book 1 in the Bouvier Family Saga**, coming October 20. Preorder is live now!



Additional surprise: The book Taz was reading by AK Landow is a real one! If you'd like to know what the hell was going on with that grapefruit, check out her amazing novel, **Conflicting Ventures**.



Thank you so much for reading **Disgruntled Protector**. One of the most important ways you can support indie authors is to leave a review, so head on over to Amazon after you're done reading and leave me a review.

Check out my website, or for a good time, hit me up on my socials by clicking the links below.

You can also check out my reader's group on Facebook by searching for Jade's Kiss & Tell.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FIRST OF ALL, THANK you so much to my **readers**. It means so much that you took a chance on an indie author, and I appreciate the time you took to read **Disgruntled Protector**. I love when readers reach out to me while they're reading, so feel free to do so on my social media platforms that are listed on the "Also by Jade" page.

To my beta readers: You chickies are amazing! Lizzie, you're my OG beta, and you always keep me in line by not letting me overuse "certain words." Amanda, your Spanish skills are top notch! Thank you for taking the time to help with translations and for answering my preguntas estúpidas. Lakshmi and Thorunn, my days would not be complete without seeing you two argue in the comments. I'll keep writing just for this reason. Also, thanks for the "inspirational" Instagram reels you send me.

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To my ARC and Street Teams: I honestly couldn't do this without you! I love getting to know all of you in the groups, and I just want you to know that I think you're the most amazing, beautiful, fun, book-pimping people on Earth. So keep pimping! Mama's got hot pics to buy for her covers.

PLAYLIST

Do It To It by ACRAZE

Unstoppable by Sia

I Want Us by The Roads Below

I Hate U, I Love U by gnash

Only Love Can Hurt Like This by Paloma Faith

Eyes Don't Lie by Isabel LaRosa

Dance the Night by Dua Lipa

Run It! by Chris Brown

American Woman by Lenny Kravitz

Chicken Fried by Zac Brown Band

Listen to Your Heart by Roxette

Otherside by Red Hot Chili Peppers

Need You Now by Lady A

Strong Enough by Sheryl Crow

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JADE DOLLSTON IS A Texas author who loves reading, Doritos, and rum. She is married to her high school sweetheart, and they have one amazing daughter.

Her love of reading all things smutty has turned into a love of writing all things smutty. She enjoys a diverse selection of romance, and this is reflected in her writing style. Be prepared to laugh, cry, cringe, and fan your face, possibly all in a single chapter.

Jade is so excited to share her work with the world and hopes that you enjoy reading the words from her heart.