

K.C. MILLS

EMOTIONAL
descent

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READER NOTE

Hello, beautiful people:

If you're returning, welcome back. If you're new... welcome to my crazy world.

Emotional Descent is a standalone novella that highlights two people who are struggling with the ability to land on the right side of love.

I'm introducing two beautiful souls who have **intense feelings, fast and heavy**, which neither can explain or deny.

Balor is a bounty hunter who is emotionally damaged by his mother's absence when he was a young boy. Her loud rejection forces him to close off his feelings so that rejection does not have an opportunity to surface in his life again.

Keiris is learning that what you want isn't always what's best. Misplaced expectations with a relationship that never should have been have Keiris searching when she should be comfortable with remaining still.

This novella is not connected to any prior novel/series. All main characters are being newly introduced so you will be meeting them for the first time.

Trigger Warning:

Mention of miscarriage - brief not shown on page

Language

Mature Content

Please be mindful that the foundation of this story is simply learning how to love and be loved. For those of you that prefer my more urban/street-lit stories, this one might not feed your soul.

However, it is not void of my signature style with that alpha male who isn't afraid to show his heart. If you're open to falling in love with love, then please proceed!

As always,

Crafting Romance with an Edge!

Sincerely,

K.C. Mills ♥

NAME PRONUNCIATION

The crew:

Keiris - Care-es - similar to Heiress

Balor - Bay-lor

Dreeya - Dree-ah

Tynan - Tie-nan

CHAPTER
ONE

Keiris.

“So you own a bookstore?” I sensed from his expression that he wasn’t impressed. The idea that he wasn’t offended me a little. Coffee BookNook was my baby. I was tempted to brush off the question and change the subject. But as a proud parent, I never missed an opportunity to brag about my pride and joy.

“It’s not really a bookstore. I don’t sell books. It’s more of a book swap.”

“Books that you don’t sell means a waste of money. What’s the point?” I cringed and he pinned me with a deadpan look, waiting for an answer.

“I sell coffee and snacks. The books are there for the customers to read while enjoying their coffee. They bring them to share, swap, or just donate. It’s—”

“Boring. Who the fuck cares that much about books?”

My posture stiffened and I placed my hands on the table. “I do.”

“I hope so since you own the place,” he rattled off rudely.

This was why I didn’t do online dating or just dating in general. People were rude, inconsiderate, and typically only wanted sex. No one truly cared about getting to know people anymore. I would bet my entire life savings if I told this guy I wanted a quickie in the bathroom, he’d be all in.

“Thank you for dinner but I think I’m going to head out.”

His face twisted in annoyance and his eyes lowered to my half empty plate of pasta then back up to my face.

“You barely touched that shit and you’re leaving?”

Okay, done being nice...

“Look, you’re an asshole. You’ve barely listened to anything I’ve shared

the entire time we've been here. You have no interest in me or getting to know who I am, so yes, I'm leaving this date and this cheap ass pasta. Thank you for dinner. Maybe you can try again to match with someone a little less *boring.*" I tossed my napkin on my plate and lifted from my seat but a deep voice startled me when it growled a demand from behind.

"Sit down."

"What?"

My eyes shot up to the guy who owned the voice and I gasped. He was in all black—jeans, tee, leather jacket, and hat pulled down over his head. I barely caught his eyes from the reach of the bib, but they appeared to be black too.

This guy is dark. He was also massive with his long body which was solid and imposing. *Dark and dangerous.* Those were my first thoughts, so instead of sitting, I attempted to walk away. He caught my wrist and yanked hard until I landed in the chair I had just vacated.

"What the hell..."

"I said sit." Those intense dark eyes landed on me and I sucked in a sharp breath.

"Who are you?"

"Trouble."

"Trouble?" I said slowly. It fit and also made my pulse quicken because who the hell had the name Trouble unless they were indeed trouble?

The angry look he offered was enough for me to leave the topic alone so I asked another question instead. "I'm guessing you two know each other? I'll let you talk. I was just leaving."

"You can leave when I say leave," Trouble growled at me but kept his eyes on my date. He also still had his large hand wrapped firmly around my wrist. When I tugged gently, hoping to free myself, he squeezed tighter. Not to a painful degree but enough pressure to let me know I wasn't getting away from him unless I caused a scene.

Speaking of...

I glanced around the back of the restaurant where we were sitting. Where Chris had requested a table when the server attempted to seat us near the front. No one was paying us any attention which had my pulse racing. Was this why he'd wanted to be in the back?

Oh God. Are they in this together? Are they going to...

Trouble's deep, angry voice danced around us again.

“You are costing me money. That pisses me off.”

Chris finally spoke up. “Who the fuck are you?”

“I’m sure you just heard me give her my name.”

Chris’s eyes bounced between me and Trouble. He was anxious. And if I had to guess, he looked about ready to bolt. They weren’t in this together. They were not acquaintances which had me wondering whose side I needed to be on. Even though I now had bad vibes from both of them, one or the other would be my saving grace. With the “I just pissed my pants” look on Chris’s face, I was leaning more toward building an alliance with Trouble. He wanted Chris not me.

“I heard your name. Your name is not who you are, so again, who the fuck are...”

Trouble moved so quickly I barely caught the motion but when Chris grabbed his neck gagging, I realized what that movement had been. Trouble had skillfully punched him in the throat while still holding onto my wrist. Impressive. I shouldn’t have been impressed but I was. The minute Chris called my BookNook boring, I had wanted to do the same thing.

“Wha..what...the...fu..fuck,” Chris gasped, struggling to the point of almost tipping his chair over. I tensed watching their interaction and tugged my arm again. Trouble’s eyes landed on me and I cringed.

“I’d like to go, please.”

“You will, but not yet. He has something that belongs to you.”

“He...what...?” My eyes darted between the two of them. Chris shot to his feet and that was when Trouble set me free, but only to reach into his jacket and remove a gun, which he placed on the table. Chris paused, lifting both hands. Trouble kept his wrapped around the gun but he didn’t lift or aim it at anyone.

“Let’s go. I’ve wasted three days chasing your stupid ass.”

“If I don’t...” Chris challenged but kept his hands up, palms facing Trouble. He only smirked darkly.

“I’m licensed to carry and you are a wanted man. You tell me what happens if you don’t?”

Once more, Chris’s eyes darted between me and Trouble. I could sense he was considering bolting again, but decided against it.

“Fine, let’s go. Doesn’t matter. I’ll be out again in less than twenty-four hours.”

Out?

Out of what? Jail?

My eyes narrowed on Chris. What in the world was happening? Trouble lifted, extending to his full height, hand still wrapped around the gun which he didn't bother putting away. He did, however, return his hand to my wrist and yank me to my feet.

"Let's go."

"What, no. You two do whatever you need to do. Someone needs to pay for this..." I lowered my eyes to the table and Trouble grunted. He released my wrist, removed cash from his pocket and a hundred dollar bill landed on the table. He grabbed me again and tugged me toward the area I recognized as the kitchen. I stumbled, trying to pull away, but he glared at me.

"Stay the fuck still. You'll be free to go in a minute."

"But I can go now. Why are you taking me with you? Obviously this is between you and Chris, not me."

"Is that what he told you his name was?" he mumbled lowly and my eyes narrowed and shot up to him.

"Yes, why."

Trouble grunted again and, surprisingly, as we moved through the kitchen, no one stopped us. *What in the entire hell? Are people that insensitive?* This guy had a gun, holding one man hostage and manhandling me.

He had his eyes on Chris. We stopped at a metal door and Trouble tossed his chin toward it. "Out, now."

Chris, or not Chris because I was thinking now that wasn't his name, pushed through it and stepped out into the dimly lit alley. His head swung left and right...

"Run if you want, I will shoot you," Trouble said firmly but lowly. Chris didn't move while the guy walked us over to a black vehicle, yanked open the passenger door, then shoved me toward the empty seat.

"Get in."

"No, absolutely not. I'd like to leave now while you do whatever with..."

"I said I will shoot you. Do you want to test that theory?"

I cringed but realized he wasn't talking to me. His eyes were on me but the statement was for Chris—not Chris—who threw his hands up again.

What the hell? Did this guy have supernatural peripheral vision?

"Please get in the car. You can leave after I get him situated."

"But why can't I leave now?" I asserted and he groaned in annoyance.

“Get in the fucking car.”

I huffed and sank into the seat, barely pulling my legs up before he slammed the door. I watched through the windshield as he tucked the gun behind his back, then approached Chris who looked like he was about to bolt again, but Trouble punched him hard. Three times, dead in the face, snapping his head back violently each time.

He grabbed one of Chris’s arms, twisted it behind his back, forced him against the exterior brick wall, shoving him hard to keep him contained. One hand reached into Chris’s pocket and removed something that Trouble transitioned to his own pocket. A few minutes more of searching his person occurred then Chris was in handcuffs while being dragged to the car. I seriously thought about running but instead watched through the rearview as Chris was dumped into the trunk.

“What is going on?” I whispered with my heart pounding. When the driver's side door opened, I yanked open the passenger one but before I could make my escape, his hand was on my forearm holding me in place.

“I didn’t see anything. Can I just go please?”

When I turned my head, Trouble was staring at me. His dark expression lightened just a little because of the cocky smile but he still looked scary.

“You didn’t see anything because I didn’t do anything.”

My eyes narrowed. “You just kidnapped two people at gunpoint. Punched one in the face, handcuffed him, and threw him in the trunk.”

“He’s a wanted man.”

“And you’re not? Your name is Trouble.”

He smirked in such a cocky manner that I wanted to smile but the guy had a gun on me.

“No I’m not and I told you I wasn’t gonna do shit to you. I actually just saved your ass and your bank account.”

“What?”

He let me go and reached into his pocket, removing my wallet which he held up.

“How...” I glanced over my shoulder. “He stole my wallet?”

“Yeah, I watched him do it.”

My eyes narrowed again. “How long were you there?”

“I followed him to the restaurant. Saw you arrive in your Uber and came inside to watch the very painful exchange you two had.”

“You spied on us all night.”

“I watched my target to determine the best time to drag him away.”

“At my expense?” I glared at him and he smiled.

“You went on a date with the guy. It wasn’t my job to save you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Can I have my wallet please?”

He eased my license out, glanced at my name, then me. “Say thank you first, Keiris.”

“Absolutely not. Give me that.” I extended a hand and he moved the contents out of my reach, shifting his hand between the seat and the door.

“You’re ungrateful,” he muttered.

“You’re insane.”

“You met a guy online that you don’t know shit about, went on a date, and I’m insane?”

“You kidnapped him, beat him up, and are now holding me hostage, so yes.” I glared his way again. “But wait, how do you know I met him online?”

“Because that’s what he does or rather has been doing to fund his expenses while he’s dodging his pending court cases.”

“Court cases?” I choked out. “What did Chris do?”

“First of all his name isn’t Chris. It’s Derrick Jordan and he’s been setting up women like you for years. Set up the wrong one though. One who has a lot of money and connections so he’s currently facing felony charges for fraud and theft. They let him out on bail but he didn’t show up for his hearing two weeks ago.”

“How do you know all this?”

“It’s what I do. I track down pieces of shit like him.”

“You’re a bounty hunter.”

He nodded, amusement dancing in his eyes. I would guess that amusement was because of how incredibly stupid I felt which would have been easy for him to pick up on.

“Can I have my wallet? I’d like to go home please.”

“I’ll take you.”

“You have a man in your trunk. No thank you.”

“A man who’s legally in my possession. No one gives a fuck about him being in the trunk. Let me take you home.”

“I...” My eyes did a slow drag up to his and I shook my head. “No thank you. I’ll schedule a ride.”

“Thirty-four twelve Crescent Pointe Trace. Keiris Dorian. I know your name and where you live...”

“Are you threatening me?”

He barked a laugh and shook his head. “I don’t have a reason to threaten you, Keiris. I could see you doing the whole, ‘I don’t want him to know where I live thing’ in your head. I was just letting you know it’s pointless. I know where you live. I know your name. Let me take you home. You’ve had a rough night.”

“Yeah I did.” My glare was on him again and he ignored me, starting his car and tossing my wallet into my lap.

“I didn’t say yes.” I watched as he yanked off the hat that covered his head exposing freshly cut hair which had a swirl of low waves. The beard that covered his face, matched the color and texture, both appeared as if he spent time grooming them on a regular basis.

His skin was tempting and rich like a Hershey bar which had my teeth aching because, well damn...

He didn’t respond and instead began navigating from the alley behind the restaurant where my disastrous evening had begun. We drove in silence until I couldn’t take it anymore and I began asking questions. It was only right since he was unwillingly kidnapping me by offering a ride home after the worst date in history. I watched each street, turn, and landmark to make sure we were indeed heading toward my house. But oddly enough I trusted this guy. I also had horrible taste in men so there was that.

“What’s your real name?”

He didn’t respond. I stared at his profile, enjoying the view. He was attractive and he smelled good. I smelled him all throughout his car.

“I know Trouble can’t be your real name. No mother would name her son that.”

“Maybe mine did.” He glanced at me and I wanted to smile because the guy was too good looking for his own good. Too handsome to be a kidnapper named Trouble.

“Did she?”

He glanced at me again but didn’t respond. He didn’t say another word for the rest of the trip so I decided to cut my losses, let this man take me home, and forget the night ever happened.

CHAPTER
TWO

B alor.

I was annoyed.

So fucking annoyed.

Not only did I have a payoff in my trunk but I had a woman who I didn't know in my passenger seat, which meant I was playing taxi. I couldn't rightfully blame her. She didn't want me taking her home. That was all my idea and a terrible one now that her aroma of fruit and chocolate had my dick incredibly hard.

Another reason I was annoyed. I had been chasing Jordan for the past two weeks. It shouldn't have been as complicated to find him but he wasn't leaving me much to work with. He'd shut down his social media accounts, his bank accounts were empty, and the apartment he kept was desolate. He'd moved out a few days before skipping his hearing.

The guy was surviving on the money he'd stolen from unsuspecting women like the one currently in my passenger seat. Unfortunately he wouldn't have gotten much from her. He likely assumed because she owned a business that she would be good for a lump sum of cash or maybe a few grand off her credit cards. But from the little research I had done, Keiris was struggling financially. Her business was doing well but she was only in the second year so I would bet she hadn't completely turned a profit yet.

I was happy as hell when a profile for Jordan had shown up on several dating apps. One of our guys hacked his profile and was able to see what he was doing. When he matched with Keiris, and she agreed to dinner after a few days of bullshit conversations she likely thought were genuine, I was even more excited. Jordan said all the right things but I knew his type which

meant I had insight that he was playing her.

She agreed to meeting him for dinner in a public place. Women thought that protected them. In some ways it did, but not always. Men could drug their drinks, drag them out of a place with the assumption that the women were tipsy, then horrible things happened. I had tracked down men who had taken advantage of women that way.

My fingers gripped my steering wheel with the reminder of those cases and I wanted to look at Keiris but controlled the urge. She was physically safe. Jordan didn't assault or rape women that I knew of. The sex was always consensual according to his victims. I had seen the police reports but he stole from them. Some six figures, others a couple thousand. That was his plan with Keiris which had me happy as fuck I'd found him. She didn't have the money and the authorities wouldn't give a shit about making sure she got it back if Jordan had been successful.

But I was still fucking annoyed that she hadn't seen through his bullshit. When I reached her house, I pulled into the driveway that faced a basic ranch home, small but nice. I turned to her and she faced me, glaring through her annoyance.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"You're not going to come back, are you?"

I smirked, allowing my eyes to move over her body. Keiris was thick and I appreciated her curves. I would love to *appreciate* them with my hands amongst other things. "Not unless you invite me."

She tensed and her glare thinned a little more. "I won't."

"Then I won't come back."

"Good."

I chuckled as she reached for the door and just before she got out, I grabbed her arm again. She glared at my hand like it was diseased then lifted her eyes to me. So I released a sigh, hating that I'd stopped her but unable to hold my tongue.

"Don't date men online. They rarely ever want anything serious. Mostly just sex and money. Some want worse things that I won't detail but I'm sure you can think of what I'm referring to without me having to say."

She rolled her shoulders back and nodded. "First and last."

"Good, but if you change your mind, don't meet them in public places thinking that's safe. It's not."

She stared at me for a moment and lifted a brow. “You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

“I am but not my own. You’re not safe meeting strangers in public. A guy can drug you, pretend you’re drunk, and no one would think twice about him dragging you out of a bar or restaurant.”

“Right because that is far less invasive than being dragged out of a restaurant by a guy holding a gun.”

I smirked. “People are self absorbed. Most don’t give a shit about what’s going on around them.”

“Thanks for the advice. Have a nice life.”

“You’re welcome, Keiris. Make better choices.”

She groaned, slipped out of my car, and slammed the door. I watched her until she was inside the house then left. I had money to collect and the payoff was in my trunk.

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“What happened to his face?” my brother Tynan asked after he helped me pull Jordan from the trunk.

“I gave him the option to come willingly but he chose not to accept.”

“You didn’t give me the option,” Jordan mumbled and both Ty and I glanced at the guy as we dragged him toward the building.

“You not talking is the safest option to my brother not making your face worse than it already is.”

Once we got him inside and secured to the wall, I walked to the office and settled behind my desk. Ty followed, leaning against the wall once he was inside.

“Where did you find him?”

“At a restaurant, on a date.”

“A date.” Ty grinned and I leaned back, nodding.

“Yeah, met her online, stole her wallet at some point, which meant he would have been ghost again.”

“Damn. She didn’t know?”

I shook my head. “Not a damn clue.”

“He got her?”

I glowered at my brother and he clarified. “Money? I don’t give a damn if he fucked her.”

I did. That was the problem.

“No, but he would have.”

“She say thank you?”

“Not exactly,” I mumbled, raking a hand down my face in aggravation.

“What did your hostile ass do?”

I smirked, leaning back and closing my eyes. “Nothing.”

“You did her a solid and she didn’t say thank you. That translates to you did something.”

“Women don’t like being wrong,” I mumbled, keeping my eyes closed.

“Nah, it’s not that. You pissed her off. She cute?”

“She was a woman on a date with a man who wanted to fuck her and steal her money. That’s all I remember about her.”

It was a lie. I remembered everything about her. Her smile, her short dark hair, the way her jeans hugged her thick thighs and ass. The way she smelled. Yeah, all that shit.

Ty was quiet but I didn’t bother looking at him. Eventually he gave me his thoughts I hadn’t asked for.

“Women are not the enemy, Balor. You need to get over that shit and find one who will tolerate your ill-tempered ass.”

I snorted at the thought. My brother and I were alike in a lot of ways but also very different. Our past had sent us in two completely opposite directions. Our mother’s abandonment made me not trust women. With Tynan it was the opposite. He clung to each and every one who opened their legs for him. Ty needed a woman around constantly and I didn’t.

He was searching for something in those women he would never find. Answers to why she’d left. I didn’t give a damn. She was gone, not much I could do about it so I didn’t care.

“Women might not be the enemy but they are your downfall. You spend far too much time believing they’ll be something they’re not.”

“And you don’t spend enough time experiencing what they are.”

I snorted again. I spent time with women physically and not even on some “I’m going to fuck my life away with no emotional connection” type shit. I had relationships, they just never worked.

After a few months, they always decided I was not emotionally available. I functioned robotically in my life. Their words, not mine, and mostly that was true. I did the dates and bought them things. Showed up to fix flats or broken cabinets around their homes, but when it came to pouring my heart

out, it never happened. It wouldn't happen. No one would get that side of me again.

Once was enough and she'd fucked me over. I'd been fucked over twice actually because I'd loved my mother and she still packed her shit and left. I was eight but I understood exactly how little I'd meant to her when she pulled my arms from her, shoved me away, and slammed the door after she walked out. That was the last time I saw her and it ruined something in me.

Being raised by a father who was emotionally damaged after the love of his life left him hadn't made things any easier. My brother and I weren't allowed to acknowledge we were also affected by her leaving.

Our father didn't acknowledge that she'd hurt him, but he acted on that hurt and shut off his own emotions. *Be men, suck that shit up.* My brother and I heard that so much it became ingrained. It pushed Ty to seek what he was missing from others. It taught me to live without it.

"Are you my therapist now?" I opened my eyes and turned my head to him. Ty was two years younger than me. We were thirty-six and thirty-four. He was the baby which made him sensitive about certain things and me pressing him about being in touch with his emotions was a sore spot. Ty was just as much an asshole as I tended to be but women were one of his weak spots. Emotions were another.

"I'm trying to save your ass from ending up like him but do what the fuck you do, Balor. It works."

"Yeah it does," I murmured, closing my eyes again but this time I saw her face. As quickly as I acknowledged the thoughts of Keiris, I pushed them away. "You want to take him tonight or tomorrow?" I questioned about Jordan, needing something else to focus on.

"Tomorrow. Let him sweat it out. I'll reach out to Copeland and let him know to meet us in the morning. I have plans anyway."

Of course you do.

"Aight, just call in the morning and I'll meet you."

"You want me to take care of him?"

"No, I'll do it." I sat up and glanced past my brother near the door. He smirked.

"Never mind, maybe I should handle it. You go. You already ruined the guy's face."

I chuckled and shrugged. "I told you what happened and Copeland won't care. He'll probably thank me since the guy ran."

“Right, but the courts don’t like it. They’ve already warned us enough times.”

“Then you handle it. I’m heading home.” I lifted and rounded my desk, passing my brother on the way out before I stopped. “You know I just like giving you shit and all women are not the enemy.”

“They’re not, but I think you really believe they are.”

“I don’t.” I stared at him hard and he nodded stiffly. Neither of us said anything else about the lingering issues we harbored but as I headed to the door, I heard him talking to Jordan.

“It’s your lucky day, asshole. You get me and not my brother. You need to use the bathroom before I lock you in the cage?”

“You’re keeping me here?” Jordan sounded worried.

“Just for the night. Bathroom or no?”

“Fuck you.”

I chuckled and walked out to the sound of my brother punching Jordan. “I see why my brother fucked up your face.”

As soon as I stepped out into the dark, I glanced at the parking lot and decided to take my bike instead of the Charger my brother and I shared for our company, Quick Track. The ride was short but I appreciated the peace of being on my Tesi H2. It was always my first choice.

As soon as I parked in my garage, my phone was vibrating in my pocket. I glanced at the screen and hit ignore, not in the mood to deal with my father’s shit. But he called back twice more so I answered the third call.

“Yeah.”

My father didn’t respond right away. Our relationship was complicated. I loved him but I hated him too. Our mother had started the damage, but he’d finished it. Donald was never physically or even verbally abusive for that matter but he was cold, closed off, and hard on us. The way he treated Tynan and me made it impossible to love or respect the guy.

“I need you to come by the house.”

“I’m busy.”

“Not tonight, tomorrow.”

“I’m busy tomorrow too.”

“Balor, come to the house. Tomorrow,” he barked and ended the call. I didn’t get the chance to tell him to fuck off like I wanted to. Instead I texted Ty.

You heard from your father?

No, why?

He just called. Asked me to come by the house tomorrow.

Fuck him.

My thoughts exactly.

You going?

Yeah.

You want me to come?

No, I'll deal with him.

The dots danced then went away. Ty wouldn't respond again. I hated our father but tolerated him. Ty hated him and *didn't* tolerate him. Their relationship was even more complicated.

I locked my phone and shrugged out of my jacket, tossing on one end of the sofa and settling onto the other side. Slouching low, I lifted the remote and turned on the TV, flipping to SportsCenter to get caught up on what I'd missed. Once I was done, I would shower and fall into bed. After a week of chasing Jordan I was annoyed. His bond was one hundred twenty-five thousand and at twenty-five percent I would clear a little over thirty grand for two weeks' work. That meant I could take a couple easy jobs or take time off completely.

I rarely ever did. Work kept me distracted and distracted meant not dealing with how empty my life felt at times. Not that I was going to do anything about it. I never did.

&

The next day I pulled up at our father's place, staring at the door once I shut off my bike. I had no idea what he needed but hoped this would be quick. He had a way of demolishing my mood but it was better for me to deal with him than Ty having to do it. Our father hadn't worked in years. After an accident on a job site, he drew disability. Ty and I paid off the house so his check was enough to cover his expenses.

I occasionally left him additional money because he had a bad habit of blowing his on women. At least he wasn't an alcoholic or drug addict but women could be just as addictive and hit your pockets just as hard.

Our father was handsome and, although he had a few back issues, in fairly decent shape which meant the twenty somethings he liked to entertain found him alluring. Older, distinguished, and a good time, but they didn't

know him. He was kind to them. Fucked them and bought them things which made them see the good in Donald. To his sons, he was a goddamn ice house, void of emotions.

After taking a minute to wrap my brain around being here, I yanked off my helmet, lifted off my bike, and headed to the door with my helmet tucked under my arm. I let myself in and headed straight for the living room where my father spent most of his time. As soon as he laid eyes on me, he scowled like he didn't want me here as if he wasn't the one who'd demanded I come.

"Your brother's not with you."

"He's busy."

He glared at me like I was lying. "So are you but you're here."

"What do you need, Pop?" I wasn't doing this with him.

"You can't have a conversation with me?"

I exhaled my frustration, raking a hand down my face. "Do you really want to talk to me? If so you could have just said whatever when you called instead of demanding to see me then acting like my presence annoys you."

He glared again then lifted from the armchair that had a permanent dent from his body. His place was nicely furnished mostly, thanks to me. Aside from that chair and his bed, which he shared with the women he rotated in and out of the house, most of the space inside remained untouched. This armchair and the TV was how he spent his time at home.

I followed him to the kitchen. After lifting a stack of papers from a drawer he moved my way again, shoving them at my chest.

"I need you to figure that out."

My very thin patience was close to snapping.

"What's this?"

"Read it and figure it out. That's why I called you."

Tynan was the one with the degree in business. Although both of us were naturally intelligent, he was the legal mind. If my father had issues, he should have called Ty, not me. The minute I opened the second letter I understood why he'd dumped this on my shoulders.

"When did you get these?"

Several letters from Social Security, the last was the most current.

"A week, maybe two," he muttered from his throne.

I stood in the living room entrance reading them with several words standing out.

Wife. Salary. Money owed.

“What’s it say?”

“You didn’t read them?”

“Not really.”

“You owe money from when they paid benefits for me and Ty. Thirty grand, Pop. You didn’t think this was important enough to pay some attention to?”

“I don’t owe them shit. They gave you the money. I never asked for it. You and Ty can pay it back.”

We could. I likely would handle it because...

I closed my eyes, shaking my head. “You never divorced her?”

His eyes shot up to me, stormy and brutal. “She left. What difference would it have made?”

“Thirty thousand is a lot of *difference*.”

“That’s their mistake which is why I want you to handle it. She doesn’t live here. She left. Her money shouldn’t matter with what they gave you and Tynan.”

“It matters when she’s still your *wife*. You should have divorced her.”

“Well I didn’t. Just handle it, won’t you?”

I wasn’t in the mood to argue. Not about a wife he both loved and hated so much he’d never moved on with his life. Not about a woman who’d walked out on her sons for who fucking knows why.

“I’ll handle it.”

“Good.”

His eyes cut to mine then moved back to the TV. Conversation over. I didn’t bother saying goodbye, just folded the letters, shoved them in my pocket, and left. Our mother was alive and well.

Obviously financially stable if Social Security wanted money back from our father for benefits Ty and I had received years ago. I didn’t give a damn about her or the money. The problem was Ty would. That was why our father had called me. I wasn’t sure I could keep this from Tynan, or if I should, which was an entirely different issue I had to figure out.

This morning I woke up feeling off and wasn’t sure why but being gut punched with thoughts about my mother would explain the issue. I didn’t believe in weird shit like that but I did know the way I was feeling had to be attributed to something.

Uneasy energy settled into my body and had me craving a distraction. I wasn’t prepared to deal with this shit concerning my mother and the

distraction I was seeking wasn't going to be the gym like it normally would have been. Today, I wanted her...

CHAPTER
THREE

Keiris.

“Are you serious? Why didn’t you call me?” My girl Dreeya swiped the caramel and hazelnut latte I’d prepared and pointed to the glass display. “Let me get a danish too.”

I slid the door open and snagged her one with a gloved hand and dropped it in a craft paper sandwich bag to hand over. She moved to the side and I glanced at Logan, a college student who worked the day shift. “I’m taking a break. I’ll jump in if it gets busy.” Morning and lunch were our busiest times. It was well after five so she would be fine on her own. If not, I’d help out.

For now I was grabbing a spot with my best friend to catch up. “You were international last week. I didn’t know when to call.”

“You can call anytime and you should have called. A man kidnapped you...”

“He didn’t kidnap me and you were a nine-hour flight away. What could you have done?”

“Something.” She took a huge bite of the danish and pointed it at me. “And he did kidnap you. He had a gun, made you go with him, and put your date in his trunk after he beat him up. Friend, you were in a whole hood movie.”

“Please don’t remind me.”

“Are you okay though? You sure he didn’t do anything...”

“No, he didn’t. He drove me home and that was it. It’s been a week and I haven’t seen him at all so I don’t think it was about me. He was weirdly nice.”

“You said he punched Chris in the face.”

“Weirdly nice to *me*. And the guy’s name wasn’t Chris. It was Derrick and I blame you for all of this. Do the dating apps, meet in a public place. You’ll be safe. Safe, I was not.”

“You said he didn’t do anything to you.” She smiled smugly, taking another bite of her danish. Only Dreeya would use an armed stranger’s willingness not to murder and rape me to her advantage. I shot her a dark look and she grinned wider.

“Okay fine, but you are safe and I’m sorry that things went so terribly wrong. You forgive me?”

“I just gave you free coffee and a danish. What do you think?”

“I think you want me to continue being a loyal customer. That’s what this is.” She tipped the danish my way.

“Loyal customers patronize establishments. You don’t pay, Dree. *Customer* is a stretch but yes, I forgive you.”

“Good and no more online dating. We’ll find another way to connect you to the man of your dreams.”

“No, we will not. I’m done for a while. Last week was a lot. It’s probably best if I focus on BookNook right now.”

“Business is good, friend. You can stand to spend some time on your personal life.”

“It’s *decent* but could be better. I was thinking about not bringing back one of the students after fall break and taking the hours myself.”

“No, you will not. The goal was not to work yourself to death with this place. It was to build something that allows you money and freedom to live. Have you forgotten the business plan?”

This was the shitty part of including your best friend in all of your dreams.

“No, I haven’t,” I huffed. “Quality of life.”

“Exactly! You work thirty hours a week. That’s enough. The plan was not to punch anyone else’s clock so you could enjoy life more. If you don’t want to search for a man, fine, I’ll pull back. But just in case one falls in your lap, you will have the available time to enjoy him.” She narrowed her eyes at me and I rolled mine.

“Okay. When do you leave again?”

“Tomorrow morning. I’ll be gone for four days. When I get back, we’re hanging out.”

“No clubs.”

“No clubs but we’re doing something.”

“I’ll agree when I know what that *something* is.”

“Don’t be a bad best friend, Keiris.” She grinned.

“I won’t if you won’t.” Just as I sank into the comfy bean bean bag sofa with my bestie, a crowd of about ten college students came bustling through the door. Before I moved, I listened to what they were ordering and relaxed knowing the first few only wanted coffee. The next group also wanted food which meant Logan would need help. Being near Crescent Falls University kept a constant flow of business. I was grateful for selecting the location above all the others I’d looked into.

“I…”

“Go. I’m going to head out. I need to take care of a few things before I leave tomorrow but you owe me a friend-date when I get back in town.”

“I know and I promise I’m all yours.” I leaned in and kissed her cheek before hurrying to the counter. After washing my hands and pulling on gloves I let Logan take orders while I began preparing them. Dreeya left about ten minutes later.

An hour after we got the crowd under control they’d settled in for a study session. By seven they were still deep into their study group meeting so I sent Logan home and allowed them an extra hour past closing to finish up. In appreciation for allowing them to stay late, they purchased pre-made snacks and filled the tip jar. I also made a huge dent in a book I had been reading for the past couple days.

By nine they were gone. I locked up and headed home for the night only to be surprised by a visitor when I pulled into my driveway. I wasn’t sure why I recognized him because I had only met the guy once under duress but I noticed him the minute I laid eyes on him sitting on my porch.

His long, jean clad legs were extended while he leaned back on his elbows. He held a device in one hand with the other hanging loosely next to him. Although his jeans were a dark wash instead of black, his upper body was covered in a black Henley and the same leather jacket from a week ago. The man was unfairly handsome and presented like an ad for sexy Black bikers since there was a helmet sitting next to him with leather gloves resting on top.

I pushed back my irritation and approached the small porch that led to my house. He didn’t bother acknowledging me until I was right below him, standing at the first step. He slowly dragged his eyes from my legs up the rest

of my body, glaring at my face like me being here was somehow an issue.

It's my house, buddy.

"You're late."

"Late?"

"Yeah, late. Your store closes at seven. It's a twenty minute drive. He glanced at his phone. "It's nine twenty-eight."

"There are so many things wrong with what you just said that I don't know where to begin but I'll start with why are you here?"

"I needed a distraction," he mumbled and I angled my head to the side, watching while he sat up and brought his legs closer. The shift had his feet resting on the step below him and those long legs were no longer fully extended.

"I can give you a list of places to go and things to do which will resolve your need for a distraction but my house is not one of them. Please leave."

His eyes landed on my face. "Can't do that but you can invite me in."

"I could but I won't. It's been a really long day. I want food, wine, and to relax. Please leave. You being here is very inappropriate."

"You're probably right but..."

"I *am* right. We're not friends or even acquaintances."

He leaned forward, growling at me, "We're not, but I saved your ass last week. Whether you know me or not, you know I'm a lot safer than Jordan, don't you Keiris?"

The way he studied my face, waiting for the smallest sign of a lie, unnerved me. Because he was in my head when the word yes flowed through my mind after his "don't you, Keiris?"

"A gut feeling only gets you so far but regardless, I don't want you here, so will you please leave?"

A sinfully slow smile eased onto his face. "You don't want me here?"

"No." I locked my arms over my chest and he grinned wider.

"What if I buy dinner?"

So we're negotiating.

"I can buy my own dinner."

"I don't doubt you can but I'm offering. Anything you want, on me."

"Why are you so pressed about spending time with me?"

"I don't know. So do we have a deal?"

I must have been caught in a moment of insanity because I considered saying yes.

“Where’s your gun?”

“At home.”

I narrowed my eyes and he stood, opening his jacket. “You can check. I’m not working so I don’t have it.”

“Chris...”

“Derrick Jordan,” he corrected.

“Derrick Jordan, is in jail?”

“Yeah, why? Has he contacted you?”

“No, so thank you. I guess I do owe you for ridding me of that fuck up.” I climbed the stairs, stepping over his helmet. When I pushed the key into the lock, I glanced at him over my shoulder. “You can buy me dinner. We eat then you promise not to come here again.”

“I promise not to come here again without your permission.”

I noticed how he amended the statement but I was too tired to agree. And maybe I was insane for inviting this stranger into my house but he had been correct to say I trusted him. I had no idea why I felt so strongly about this man's intentions with and for me. He wouldn’t hurt me.

Once I had my door unlocked and stepped inside, I blocked the entrance so he couldn’t follow. “Before I let you in my house you have to give me your real name.”

His jaw flexed as if he were chewing on anger but he gave me what I asked for. “Balor Allen.” And wow. It fit. I wasn’t sure why but his name made him that much darker and handsome at the same time.

I stepped back, widening the door, and he moved inside, changing the entire feel of my home. There was no explanation of how or why but the minute Balor crossed over my threshold, everything around me felt different.

CHAPTER
FOUR

B alor.

Her house was welcoming and comfortable. My body relaxed instantly upon entering her space. The acknowledgment of that fact annoyed me for reasons I didn't understand and had my guard up as I followed her through the tiny walkway that dropped us into the kitchen. She dumped her things on the counter and turned to me, pointing to a small shelf near a door in the corner.

"You can put your helmet and gloves over there." She shrugged out of her coat—a jean jacket—and draped it over the rear of a wooden chair, one of four that surrounded a kitchen table. After I placed my helmet on the shelf, I sank into one of them and watched Keiris cross the kitchen. She washed and dried her hands before heading to the refrigerator where she pulled out a bottle of wine.

"I'm drinking this. You can choose from water, tea, orange juice, and soda."

"You're not sharing your wine with me?"

"Nope."

I chuckled and watched as she placed the bottle on the counter. She used an electric opener then removed a glass that was so large she was able to pour the entire bottle into it.

When she joined me at the table I watched her take a sip then close her eyes as if it was the best thing she'd ever had in her life. Watching her do it could have easily been the best thing I had ever witnessed in mine.

"You're really not gonna share?"

"No, I'm not. Now can I have your phone?"

“Why?”

“You promised me dinner.” She wiggled her fingers, waiting with her hand extended near me.

“You order, I’ll send you the money.”

“Not doing that. You just want my number.”

“How do you know I don’t already have it?”

“Judging from the way you showed up on my doorstep like a lost puppy I know you don’t have my number or you would have already used it.”

She was right, I would have.

“I know where you live but you don’t want me to have your number.”

Keiris lifted the glass and drank more, shaking her head after she swallowed. “If you show up I don’t have to let you in.”

“If I call or text, you don’t have to answer or respond.”

She grinned. “If you show up, it’s easy for me to call the cops and report a creepy guy in all black hovering outside my house.”

I chuckled, leaning closer. “If I call or text, you can block me.”

“And you can call or text from another number which can get exhausting if I have to keep blocking you. Phone, please.”

I removed the device from the table, unlocked it, and slid it her way, getting a smile before she also gave an animated, “Thank you.”

She swiped a few times then glared at the screen.

“Where are your food apps?”

“Second screen.”

“Ahhh, got it.” She swiped with a thumb while she casually sipped wine. Watching the process was oddly soothing, and again, comfortable like her damn house. That was when I realized why it bothered me so much. Her house felt like a home.

A home I hadn’t had since I was a kid before my mother left but barely even then. She wasn’t maternal and she wasn’t affectionate with my father, at least not that I remembered, which was why it bothered me so much that my mother leaving had cut him so deeply.

“It’s late, our options are limited. Any...” She paused and when my eyes found hers, the way she stared back bothered me. Concern was etched in her expression. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“You look upset.”

“You’re making me buy you dinner and refuse to share your wine.” I

forced a smile and hers surfaced slowly after.

“You forced your way into my house with the offer of buying me dinner. You’re a little confused on the facts, Balor Allen.” The way she said my name with such familiarity and candor rubbed me wrong also but I fought to keep those feelings pushed down deep.

“I was saying, it’s late, so our options are limited. Do you have any suggestions?”

“What do you like?”

“Food.” She grinned lazily at me and drank more wine. *Damn I like her.*

“Phat Fish is open until midnight. If you’re cool with that...”

Her entire spirit lit up over the mention of fish. I almost laughed at the enthusiasm. “Oh, I love them. I haven’t had it in a while.”

After a few minutes of swiping and tapping she extended the phone back to me. I added my order, paid, and waited for confirmation before I locked the device.

“Twenty-five to thirty minutes.”

Keiris groaned like I told her the food would never arrive. “My stomach just growled because of the wait. I was fine before you mentioned it.”

“That’s how shit goes.”

“Since you’re here *uninvited*, do I get an explanation of what you needed a distraction from?”

I tossed the idea of being honest around in my head then decided against it. She didn’t know me or my family so it wouldn’t matter. I also likely wouldn’t see her after tonight was the follow up thought, but that was a lie. I would see her because I wanted to. I almost felt like I needed to.

“Family shit.”

“Family shit can be exhausting so I’ll give you a pass. But why me? You’re a very nice looking man. A bit pushy and mean but still nice looking and women love an angsty, tortured soul that comes in a good-looking package. Why show up here when there are plenty of available women who would be open to buying *you* dinner?”

I smirked at her little spiel. She thought I was nice looking. I was. My parents had good genes. And as much as I disliked them both, they’d created beautiful children. My brother and I didn’t have issues pulling the attention of women. What bothered me was her assessment of my angsty, tortured soul.

“How is it you think I’m mean when I saved you from a date from hell and likely prevented Jordan from draining your bank account? That was

chivalry at its best.”

“Not exactly when you did all of the above at gunpoint.”

“Him, not you. I was nice to *you*.”

“Questionably up for debate whether you were nice or just tolerating my involvement in the situation.”

I laughed because she was funny as fuck and cute. Heavy on the cute.

“You can label it how you want. I’m sticking with nice.”

“Ehhh...” She lifted a shoulder nonchalantly. “I still want to know why you ended up here.”

There’s something about you I couldn’t ignore.

“I like you.”

“What little you know about me, which is basically nothing.”

“Doesn’t matter how much I know, what I do know is I like those parts.”

My eyes roamed freely over her frame and hers narrowed on me, bringing out my smile.

“You should do that more. It looks really nice on you. Not so angry.”

“I smile enough. Once or twice a day is about my quota.”

“See, *angry*.”

“It’s a business tool. Would you be afraid of a bounty hunter that smiled all the damn time?”

“Maybe. Some people smile and it’s more fearsome than a frown or hard expression.” She sipped her wine then tipped the glass to me. “But not you. Your smile isn’t threatening. It makes you more likable. When you work, don’t smile. When you force your way into my house, you smile.”

“You made me promise not to come back.”

“And you promised not to come back uninvited.”

“Doesn’t that mean you’re going to invite me back?”

“Nope, it does not. But if I do, you smile when you’re around me. That’s the rule.”

“We have rules?”

“Not we, I have rules for you.”

I chuckled, leaned forward, and grabbed her wine glass. Since she released it freely I pulled it close and sampled the deep burgundy blend before she snatched it back. “Life is not fair, Balor Allen. And my wine is not communal.”

She stared at me with amusement flickering in her golden brown eyes. The Edison bulbs above our heads highlighted streaks that were slightly

brighter, making them look like tiger stones. Her eyes stood out dramatically because of the deep, rich brown skin that surrounded them. She wore a Coffee BookNook t-shirt and jeans with retro Black Cement 2s. Her style matched my fly but why the hell did I care how she dressed or what her style was?

Because you're feeling her.

"You're pretty as hell."

"And you're equally handsome." She smiled as her lips met her glass. After she sipped she added, "You also smell really good but if the world ended today, those are details that wouldn't mean a damn thing."

"What would mean something then?"

"If we made each other feel something. Looks are superficial but when that time comes what matters the most is how people made us feel."

I nodded. "That's deep as fuck and a little cryptic at the same time."

She smiled widely. "I'm not your average woman, Balor Allen. I'm layered."

"That you are."

A few hours later, Keiris was done with her wine, we'd both had our fill of fried fish and sides and she hadn't put me out. By midnight we were comfortable in her living room. Keiris was stretched out on the floor with her feet lifted to the edge of the sofa. I was one cushion away, sitting in the corner of that sofa, staring down at her while she explained her love for coffee and books.

The thrill and passion that laced her words felt good. The smile on her face had me wanting to buy a truckload of books and have them delivered to her spot just to ensure she never came up empty with the thing that put that cute ass smile on her face.

While I sat listening I realized something very different about the time I had been in her presence. Being with Keiris there existed no pretense, expectation, or rush. I was perfectly content sitting on the sofa, listening to her talk about books and coffee blends. I also realized my attraction to Keiris was deeper than the physical.

I noticed the curve of her hips, the fullness of her breasts, and that ass that I wanted to sink my fingers into while she rode me hard. But those things were second to her energy, vibe, and the peaceful state I settled into just from her proximity.

"They're really good and I make them daily. Some stuff I have delivered

but most of it I like to make in house.”

My eyes lowered and connected with hers. She wrinkled her nose and those pretty lips shifted into a pout. “You are not listening to me, are you?”

I grinned, shaking my head. “Nah, I wasn’t. Sorry. Got stuck in my head.”

“What were you thinking about?”

“You.”

Her smile blossomed slowly, almost cautiously. “What about me?”

“How cute you are lying here talking about coffee and books. Neither of which I give a damn about but I feel invested because you love this shit.”

That pretty smile grew more. “You just admitted you weren’t listening to me.”

“Not at that exact moment, but I’ve been listening. I don’t have a clue about half the shit you were talking about but it’s important to you.”

“What’s important to you?” she sang through her big ass smile. Whether she gave a damn or not, I felt like she did.

“My family. Well, my brother. That’s pretty much it.”

“What about your parents?”

My jaw flexed and her eyes fluttered like she sensed my unease. “My parents are complicated. My brother is not.”

“Oh...” She fumbled a little to sit up and tugged her knees into her chest, resting her face sideways on folded arms. “You can tell me when you’re ready. I won’t push.”

That should have annoyed me but instead I laughed lightly. “What makes you think I’ll tell you all my secrets?”

“Because I’ll protect them and you’ll trust me to do it.”

“You gonna trust me with yours?”

“If I had any, I would.”

“Everybody has secrets, Keiris.”

She grinned when I called her name. “Maybe I’m the exception. Exceptions are game changers.”

“Maybe you are.”

She stared at me for a minute longer then exhaled a sigh. Her face twisted in aggravation which had me asking, “What’s wrong?”

“I like you.” She sighed again.

I grinned and lifted a brow. “You said that like admitting you do is torture.”

“Because it is torture. You’re a problem I don’t need.”

“Damn.” I chuckled. “Why do I have to be a problem? Maybe I’m the solution.”

She shook her head. “You’re not and if you are, you’re also the problem and problems mean complications. I don’t like complications. I like simple and there’s nothing concerning you that’s simple. You should probably go.”

She was saying I should leave but also delivered the words like they pained her. She didn’t want me to go.

“It’s late, I probably should. But agree to have dinner with me first.”

Her brows furrowed and she shook her head. “I just said you were a complication I don’t want or need.”

“You did.”

“And you asked me to have dinner with you.”

“I did, because regardless of what you think I am, you already admitted you like me.”

“I like a lot of things. I like strawberries a lot but they give me hives so I avoid them like the plague.”

I chuckled and stood. After adjusting my jeans, which she not so discreetly watched, I extended a hand to help her up. She accepted and I pulled Keiris to her feet and into me, locking her in place with an arm behind her back. She gasped but didn’t attempt to pull away.

“Have dinner with me.”

“No.”

I leaned in closer, brushing my lips over hers. They were soft like I expected and carried a hint of wine. I wanted to kiss her so damn bad, but instead...

“Have dinner with me, Keiris.”

“I’m scared of you.”

“Because of how we met? I’m not a danger to you. What you saw was me doing my job. That’s all.”

She huffed, closing her eyes. “It’s not the physical thing. It’s this feeling. The same one that has been pulsing around and through me since you walked in my house tonight. That’s what I’m scared of.”

I leaned close to the side of her face and kissed just below the earlobe. “Then we’re in the same place because I feel that shit too. I don’t like it, but I want more of it, *of you*. Have dinner with me.”

“Dinner, that’s all,” she said lowly and I smiled, pulling back enough to

see her face. She was in distress but in the most adorable way.

“I’m gonna go. But I need your number or I’ll have to pull up again without permission in order to take you to dinner and I promised I wouldn’t.”

“You already have it.” Her brows pinched as did mine, so she explained. “I saved it in your phone before I ordered my food.”

I chuckled and nodded. “Come walk me to the door.”

Just before I left, I pulled her into a hug and enjoyed the way she felt like she was already mine. I would have enjoyed her more but I had my helmet in one hand so I couldn’t connect the way I wanted to. Regardless, she felt right. I’d claimed women before but never had one claimed me. Not to the extent that Keiris had and I was sure she wasn’t trying. She was just existing and her *existence* attached to mine.

“I’ll see you soon, Keiris.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” She smiled sweetly and I left her there, climbing on my bike knowing she would be my downfall but I didn’t give a damn.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Keiris.

“You called me twice and texted 911. What’s wrong?” Dreeya rushed out and I could hear the chaos in the background.

“You’re at the airport?”

“Yes, my first flight is in an hour. Heading to L.A.”

“Oh well...”

“Keiris, what’s wrong?”

“I need two egg croissants.” Logan swiped a card and I nodded, pressing the phone to my ear with my shoulder.

“Nothing’s wrong. I just...”

Pushing through the swinging doors that led to the kitchen, I washed my hands and moved to the center workstation.

“Spit it out, babe, so I’ll know if I need to cancel this flight or not.”

I grinned as I cracked six eggs and whipped them in a metal bowl. “It’s not that kind of emergency, and I can’t afford to house and feed you, so please don’t cancel your flight.”

“We can share a bed and eat ramen. We’ll be fine, now tell me.”

“I met someone.”

“Last night? Damn that was fast.”

I moved to the grill, placed six egg rings on the hot surface, and carefully filled each one with the egg mixture.

“No, not last night. Last week.”

“Who...wait, the bounty guy?”

When the eggs formed enough to flip, I lifted the frames and grabbed a spatula.

“Yes and before you judge...”

“Hey, be careful with my bag, asshole,” Dreeya yelled.

“You’re not supposed to be on your phone,” someone said in the background.

“And you’re not supposed to be manhandling my things. Ris, hang on. I’m going through security.”

I heard a thud, muffled voices, then some beeping. After a long pause she was back complaining.

“These damn TSA employees for the airline crew really don’t give a damn. They treat us like we’re public enemy number one and let these passengers through without paying them any mind. They’re the ones who are always sneaking guns and shit on the plane. Not us. I’m not trying to blow up shit and lose my life.”

I grinned, lifting the eggs one by one onto a metal tray next to the grill. “You do realize more airline employees than passengers sneak weapons and explosives onto planes, right?”

“Well shit, not me.”

“They don’t know that, friend. They’re doing their job.”

“Fuck them and this job, now back to you and the bounty hunter. Did you see him again?”

“Yes, last night. He brought me dinner.”

“Hmmm...”

“What?”

“Keiris, we need two more eggs but biscuits, not croissants.” I nodded to Logan and she disappeared again.

“You let him buy you dinner?”

At my house but I wouldn’t tell her that part just yet.

“I like him but he feels like a bad idea in a very good way.”

“Oh, you really like him.”

“I do. Tell me this is crazy and I shouldn’t see him again.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because he’s a good kind of bad.”

“Then he’s exactly what you need. You’re seeing him again and I want to meet him when I get back. I have to go, be safe and I love you. Get out of your way and let this be whatever it is, okay?”

“Okay,” I huffed.

“I mean it, Ris. Don’t sabotage this.”

“There is no *this*.” I grinned and felt her eyes roll.

“*This* definitely exists, babe, or you wouldn’t have called me. Give it a chance unless his bad is the type you need to fear or stay away from.”

To protect my heart, possibly...

“More emotionally bad than anything.”

“Oh it’s deep deep. You already have all the feels.”

“I do.”

“Good, let it happen. I’ll call you tonight. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

After I ended the call, I eased my phone into my back pocket, yanked on plastic gloves and pulled together the orders Logan had asked for. Once I loaded them on a tray, I pushed through the doors and handled them off, then yanked off my gloves to start taking orders to assist with getting the line down.

By the end of our breakfast and lunch rush, I was able to steal some time away in my office. I needed to place orders and work on the schedule for the next week but my mind was distracted. Every so often I found myself revisiting the evening I had with Balor.

He was handsome and broody but it was deeper than what I experienced. He had a darkness to him that made me want to be an escape from whatever issues he had. However, dependency was a thing whether it was with vices or people. I felt an unhealthy fixation forming between us and we had only really shared one moment.

My mother always taught me that there were two kinds of love—developed and natural. Both were noteworthy but the unexpected love, the kind that found you when you weren’t searching was the type of love that extended beyond boundaries. I never understood that until now because the feelings I had for Balor felt like I loved him in another lifetime and we were now finding each other in this one.

That was scary and exciting at the same time. Also confusing because I didn’t know him at all. However I felt like I knew his soul better than I knew my own.

“Keiris, there’s someone here to see you. A guy.” The way Logan had a dreamy look in her eyes let me know who was here to see me and there was also the rush of energy pulsing deep in my bones.

Balor.

“Tell him I’ll be out in a minute.” My cheeks warmed as I forced a hold

on the smile that threatened to surface. When she left my office I yanked open the drawer and removed a mirror, checking out my appearance.

My hair was pulled back into a ponytail, a few random strands were free. My cut was short, landing at the nape of my neck because I wasn't a hair person. Easily-maintained worked best. Since I spent so much time at BookNook, it stayed in a ponytail or clipped behind my head. My blunt cut worked great.

I tucked the mirror away and moved to the door, tugging at my company shirt and brushing my hands over my jeans. The loose fit made them sit low on my waist and they were frayed at the thighs, exposing a bit of skin. That was about as sexy as I could offer while at work but a part of me didn't think Balor was here for that. He was here for *me*.

When I pushed through the door, I laid eyes on his tall frame in a navy, cotton, long-sleeved tee pushed up his forearms, dark jeans and 1s. I grinned, imagining what his closet looked like. A sea of darkness.

But his image appealed more to me than what covered him. Broad shoulders, trim waist, and long legs that bowed slightly as he stood with them comfortably distanced. Then he glanced over his shoulder, his expression warm instead of his typical icy demeanor while his eyes moved over every inch of me. Then he smiled. It was barely there, ghosted his lips, but I'd caught it.

"It's not exactly dinner time yet."

He returned the book he had been examining to the shelf and turned fully. "Just checking in. I wanted to see what this was all about."

His eyes circled the store and danced across the patrons who were cozy, enjoying treats and books.

"I have a website."

"I can't feel *you* from a website." The way he lowered his eyes had my pulse racing.

"Well then welcome to my happy place. Can I get you anything? Coffee?"

"I don't do coffee. The shit is nasty."

My eyes expanded. "Blasphemy."

He chuckled. "Come sit, I just want to see you for a minute."

"You'll see me tonight."

"And I'm seeing you now." I followed him to the only empty space in the readers' corner, a two-person bean bag lounge. He sat then brought me down

next to him, which sent me tumbling into his side.

“These people really fuck with you I see.”

“Being near the college helps. Most of my money comes from students.”

He nodded. “I can see that. This feels like some shit they would love.”

“They do, so you’re not ruining lunches by chasing bad guys today?”

He smirked, staring at me. My face felt a flush of warmth from how his stare devoured me. “No, I haven’t accepted any new assignments. The last meal I ruined paid off pretty well.”

“You make good money chasing the bad guys?”

“Decent.”

“Maybe I should try it.”

He chuckled. “Nah, stick with this. It’s a better fit.” He looked around, then brought his eyes back to me.

“I told my best friend about you.”

“What did you tell her? I kidnapped you then showed up at your house to buy you dinner as an apology?”

“Is that what last night was?”

“Last night was whatever you wanted it to be.”

I nodded. “I told her I met someone I like but also that he’s a good kind of bad.”

“And what did she have to say?”

I smiled softly. “She told me to get out of my own way and give this a chance.”

His smile was beautiful. Mostly because it was so rare. “I think I like your friend.”

“You should be careful about liking anyone other than me.”

He laughed and placed a hand over mine, lacing our fingers, which he lifted and kissed. “I like her as an extension of you. Not the same.”

“Good.”

“Jealous?”

“No.”

“Liar.”

“More like denial. Not the same.”

“I’ll give you that. Dinner. Any suggestions on what you want?”

“Food,” I asserted with confidence. I wasn’t a picky eater but then a thought occurred to me. “I’ll cook for you.”

“I’m supposed to be taking you to dinner.”

“You will. You can pick me up from my house at five and drive me to yours. I’ll grab what I need on my way home then cook for you at your place.”

He frowned hard as if conflicted or annoyed by the suggestion so I pulled away slightly. “Is that a problem? If you don’t want me at your house—”

“You cooking for me is not a problem, just not what I expected. I’m cool with you coming to my place too, so get out of your head.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” His expression was still tense but I did my best not to let it bother me. Instead I smiled and decided to let it go.

“I can cook just about anything. Do you have a preference of what you would like to eat?”

“No, I’m easy. As long as you can cook, I’m down for whatever. You can cook, right?”

“Maybe. You’ll have to wait and see.”

He groaned but his mood lightened, just a little.

“I’m going to trust you but if you fuck it up, I’m not going to eat it to save your feelings.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.”

“Aight, well I need to head out. I have to meet my brother in a few.”

As much as I hated the thought of our temporary separation, I lifted. Once I was steady on my feet, I extended a hand which he accepted but I could tell from the lightness of his touch I hadn’t done much to assist in getting him to his feet.

Balor wrapped me in a tight hug and my body went haywire coming alive. When he let me go I felt my pout but so did he. Or maybe he saw it on my face. “You get me in a few hours. Stop with all that before you have me pissing my brother off by not showing up.”

“Fine. I’ll see you later.”

“You will.”

I watched him leave my shop and was further convinced this man was about to disrupt everything I trusted in my life.

CHAPTER

SIX

B alor.

“He in there?” I asked as soon as I vacated my bike and settled in the passenger seat of the Charger my brother had arrived in.

“Yeah, been in there for a little over an hour.”

He had been tracking a guy for the past two days, Deandre Morris aka TekNine. He was a local gang member rumored to have several bodies on him but was awaiting trial for armed robbery. His grandmother had put up her house as collateral for bail but under duress from what we were told. TekNine sent members of his gang to threaten her.

I couldn't believe he'd threatened his own grandmother. Shit annoyed the fuck out of me and Tynan. So when he didn't show Tynan made it a personal mission to track him down for Lucky, the bondsman we got most of our work from. He felt bad for making the deal, only finding out about the personal threats after he'd paid to get TekNine out. Lucky didn't want TekNine's grandmother to lose her house.

“Just him?”

“A woman, Cheryl, and her kid. A little boy like five, maybe six.”

“His kid?” I scowled, hating the idea of a mother placing her child in danger by associating with a felon.

“No, not his.” Tynan looked at me, studying my profile. “You good?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Just asking. I can do this if...”

I shot him a look and he shook his head. Tynan was good at this—we both were—but some runners weren't worth the risk. They were purposely eluding the law because they didn't want the consequences which meant

anything goes when it came to them continuing to run. Sometimes the jobs were easy, sometimes they weren't. This one was the latter.

"You found out anything about the money he owes yet?"

I kept my eyes on the door we were watching, not surprised Tynan knew about our father's debt. Our father liked to pit us against each other, or at least try. It never worked. The only constant in either of our lives was each other.

"No but I haven't reached out to anyone. I'm probably gonna just pay the money."

I felt him glaring. Knowing what was on his mind, I turned to face him. "There's no point in traveling down that road, Ty."

"You don't want to know?"

"I don't."

He snorted, shaking his head and turning back to watch the door. After a long punishing silence, laced with his heavy ass thoughts pulsing around me, he spoke again. "It doesn't fuck with you that she's out there, obviously doing well, but not giving a damn about us?"

"No and it shouldn't bother you either. Fuck her and her reasons. Knowing won't change what she did, Ty."

"It might help though. You more than me."

I laughed dryly. "I don't need help that's connected to her."

"Yeah the fuck you don't, *Trouble*." He put emphasis on my nickname. One I'd earned as a kid because I couldn't seem to do what was right. I was angry as hell and didn't know what to do with my anger. My father refusing to be the one to acknowledge my displaced anger only made things worse. *Your punk ass crying over her when she don't give a damn about any of us.*

He was quick to single out my reactions but denied his own. Our father shut off his emotions, which meant shutting us out. You couldn't be emotionally detached and properly raise your kids. He was mean, unfeeling, and the model that created me. I was my father just with more aggression.

"I'm good."

"You're not good. When is the last time you connected with someone?"

Last night.

"Why you always trying to fix me, Ty? You think I'm broken?"

"You are broken. When's the last time you were in a relationship?"

I glared at my brother, trying to figure out what the fuck we were doing. "I don't need you analyzing my life. We both have shit to figure out. I've

done relationships so stop trying to say I have issues with women because of *her*.”

“You’ve had women who you fucked with but they weren’t relationships. At least not on your end. They might have been in something serious with you, but it was damn sure single-sided and that is about *her*. You don’t want to give anyone a chance to bounce out of your life like she did.”

“And you fall in love with every pretty face that smiles at you because you want them to be what she never was. *Present*.”

He shrugged. “I do that. I won’t lie and say I don’t but at least I know I have issues. You act like you don’t and the shit is just fucking sad. She did that to us and she’s out there somewhere living her life like she didn’t play a role in giving us life. Fuck her, Balor. We deserve to be happy.” His voice elevated and I noticed his fingers curl into his palms which had my posture relaxing. Our father brushed over our emotions or refused to let us acknowledge them. Since we got enough of that from him, I wouldn’t do that to my brother. That was the one thing I did pay attention to and work on. I was going to be a better man to myself and my brother than the one who’d raised us.

“You can’t replace what you don’t understand and I can’t trust what I’ve never had.”

For both of us that was the acceptance and unconditional love from our mother.

“But I want to try to trust.”

Ty’s eyes landed on me hard and I fessed up. “I met someone.”

His expression shifted a little so I kept going. “Shit is weird, though.”

“How?”

Men were men. Protectors, providers, and support for the women they loved but they weren’t supposed to be emotional or weak. I usually wasn’t but since meeting Keiris I had been emotional as fuck and that had me conflicted. I felt things for her that were new and all consuming but I couldn’t trust what I was feeling because I barely knew her.

I had been with my ex for almost a year and what I felt for her didn’t even scratch the surface of what I was feeling for Keiris. When my ex drew the line, placed demands about me being open or she was done, I told her this was the best she would ever get from me. She packed her things and left and I didn’t care.

I couldn’t get Keiris out of my fucking head. I wanted to be around her all

the damn time and for no reason other than to be around her.

“I was at her house and the minute I walked in I got angry. My muscles locked so tightly it made me feel volatile and the shit didn’t make sense. I wasn’t feeling it but even though I wasn’t, I wanted to be there. The longer I was there, the more I realized why I was so damn angry.”

“Why were you angry? What she do?”

“It’s not what she did, it was just the presence. We lived in the same house all our lives. *She* lived there with him for the first eight years of my life but it never felt like a home. Even after she was gone, shit still didn’t feel like a home.”

“Ol’ girl’s house felt like a home.”

“Yeah it did. Had me thinking about shit I never considered before. I wondered how many bedrooms she had because if we had kids they would need space. I thought about whether or not she would have dinner for me, or fuck, if I would have it ready for her when she came home.”

He laughed hard. “Yo’ ass can’t cook.”

“Exactly but I would for her. Shit was weird as fuck, Ty. I wanted all that and I barely know her ass. Then I got pissed again for wanting any of what I was considering because I felt like a pussy for being hopeful. Shit like that doesn’t last.”

“Nah see that’s the part we got fucked up. It lasts when you want it. Our mother just didn’t want it and I hate her for that. I know you do too. So yeah, we’re broken but that’s okay because everybody isn’t *her*. We just gotta find the women that are gonna help us be whole.”

I glared at my brother and he smiled big as shit. “Don’t look at me like that. That bill from Dr. Tate hits my account religiously every month and I don’t just show up staring at the clock. I listen and learn some shit. You should try it.”

“It’s not for me.”

He shook his head, staring at the door again. “That’s because you let him get in your head. A man is still a man even if he needs help sorting through the shit that clouds his mind.”

“It’s not that...”

He shot me a sideways glance and I grinned. “Sounds like you’re gonna be taking clients soon.”

He smirked and lifted a finger. “Nah, I’m good on the couch not sitting in the chair with the notepad.”

“I’m not so sure.” I chuckled. I hated that he was right. I was a product of my environment. I wasn’t comfortable with embracing my feelings which was why I was so damn conflicted with what I was feeling for Keiris. I wanted to be around her, wanted everything she had to offer, and was also angry because I did. Fear edged into the recesses of my mind that she could do to me what my mother had to my father and us.

Trust. I didn’t know how or if I could trust her.

“Ay, look.” Tynan motioned to the door. I watched as TekNine stepped out of the apartment. He had his hand at his waist as he looked around.

“What car is he in?”

“Accord, over there. It’s hers but he’s been driving it.”

“Let’s go. When you get out, don’t shut your door. Don’t want him looking this way. And safety off. If he blinks hard, you shoot him.”

Tynan grinned. “You act like I need to be told.”

“Just making sure. Let’s go.”

We got out and I moved so I would come up behind TekNine and Ty approached from the side. “We’ve been looking for you, *Deandre*.”

The minute he heard my brother’s voice TekNine pushed his arm around to his back but I fired a shot that hit him in his shoulder and had him stumbling to the ground. Tynan rushed him, fisted the locs tied at the back of his head, and yanked him forward until the guy’s face met the asphalt parking lot.

I grabbed the gun TekNine had reached for while Tynan pressed his foot on the guy’s neck. “For a guy who’s hiding like a little bitch, you’re not very smart, *Deandre*. You don’t go to the pussy, you let it come to you. That way you can be more aware of your surroundings.”

“Fuck you.”

“Be careful about that, *Deandre*, because where you’re going statements like that get you fucked, *literally*.”

While I cuffed him, Tynan called EMS. They arrived and carted TekNine off to the hospital. Tynan and I met his bondsman there along with the cops and gave our statements, then I was on my way. By the time we were done it was after six which fucked up my plans so I made an adjustment. I sat on my bike in the parking lot of the hospital and dialed Keiris.

“You’re late.”

“I apologize. I had to help my brother with something.”

“You shouldn’t demand dinner then not be available for it to happen.” I

smiled goofy as shit noticing not only the annoyance in her tone but the slight tinge of disappointment. I needed to rectify that.

“Couldn’t be helped.”

“Are you on your way?”

“No...”

“Right. Thanks for wasting my time.”

I chuckled, amused because now there was just disappointment. “I was calling to see if we could switch things up a bit. If you don’t mind driving, you can meet me at my place. I have a keypad on the door next to the garage. You can get in from there. I’m leaving the hospital...”

“Are you okay? Is your brother okay?” she rushed out and I smiled wide as shit.

“Yeah we’re both good. I’ll explain when I get there. You cool with meeting me at my place?”

“You’re trusting me to go to your house alone?”

There was that word again. Trust.

“Yeah I am so don’t make me regret the decision,” I teased.

“You might want to rethink that *decision*. You said you had secrets. You’re potentially exposing them to me.”

I chuckled. “You won’t find my secrets anywhere in my house.”

“Well that’s disappointing.”

“*But* I’ll tell them to you.”

“Hmmm, that sounds inviting.”

“Don’t be so sure. We have a deal?”

“Yes, but if I find anything I don’t like, I won’t hang around.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to. Hang on....” I texted her the code then lifted the phone again. “I just sent you a message.”

“I got it.”

“I’m like forty minutes away.”

“Ohh, I’m twenty. Let me leave now so I can do some snooping.”

“Yeah, you do that. I’ll see you in a few.”

I ended the call, eager to get home. Not because I didn’t want Keiris alone in my house. Oddly enough I was more eager to see if she felt as comfortable in my space as I’d felt in hers. But more than anything I felt that intense pull to want to be near her. Maybe it was time for me to accept that whether I wanted to or not, I had already let Keiris in and now that my space had been infiltrated by her, I wasn’t open to letting her go.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

K eiris.
Balor's house was nice and very masculine. Not only did it smell like him—hints of cedarwood, cinnamon and citrus—the vibe was similar to the man he was. The furniture in his living room was large and bulky—a thick cushioned sofa which was a deep burgundy that almost appeared to be brown. The tables that surrounded it were mahogany.

There really wasn't anything personalized about his space aside from one photo of him and another man who I assumed was his brother. They stood shoulder to shoulder, both wearing scowls and staring directly at the camera.

They looked angry but both men were handsome and shared a lot of the same features. However, where Balor's hair and beard were low cut, his brother's hair sprouted in coils and his beard extended from his face a few inches. Their eyes were identical though, dark orbs that squinted slightly, hiding their midnight hue. The photo sat on a table near the sofa alone, reminding me of how he'd said his brother was his only family.

As soon as I entered and deposited the groceries in the kitchen I decided to go exploring. My first stop was upstairs where I located three bedrooms. Only two were furnished, the third looked more like a stash spot for random things. Balor's bedroom revealed another layer of what I believed his personality to be.

The space was wide open, with a massive bed lining one wall—a black, distressed wood bed frame and black bedding which was slightly ruffled like he'd rolled out of bed and tossed the covers back in place. I smiled at what the visual would be like then allowed my eyes to roam a little more since staring at his bed had very unhealthy thoughts surfacing.

I traveled to his closet and inhaled deeply because it smelled the most like him. I glided my fingers over the clothes hanging on both sides, playfully rolling my eyes at all the dark colors. My next stop was his bathroom which was clean and smelled like something citrusy which I assumed was from the plug-in hovering from the wall. Then I leaned into the glass enclosure of his shower and lifted his body wash. Spar by JoSi. I was familiar with the brand since Lani, the owner of Rejuvenate, had made it for her husband JV. I'd never had a man I'd wanted to buy it for or one who'd used it. I knew their brand well and loved the scent he'd selected.

As I left his room, I smiled with thoughts of whether or not I could visualize myself here. I could and the admission made me smile wider. I was midway down the stairs when Balor walked in the door. Although his movements were controlled and smooth, his energy loomed large.

"You're still here so I take it you didn't find anything you disapproved of."

"Maybe I did and you caught me just before I made my escape?"

He grinned and lowered his helmet to a stand near the door, meeting me at the stairs. I stopped two before the bottom and he stood with his hand on the wall, which expanded his chest, feet shoulder width apart, and eyes intensely focused on me.

"If that was the plan you should have moved faster. I'm cutting off your escape route." He winked and stepped around me, bypassing any contact but I understood why when he tossed over his shoulder, "I'm going to take a quick shower to wash the day off me."

"I'll get dinner started..." I paused. "Or leave."

He laughed and disappeared at the top of the steps.

By the time he was showered and changed, I was done preparing our meal and waiting for everything to finish baking. He walked right up to the oven and peeked inside, inhaling deeply when the aroma escaped.

"Pizza smells good. Homemade?"

I moved to the refrigerator, removed a bottle of wine and a beer. "Partially. I usually make the flatbread but you sounded like you had a day so I didn't know if you could survive the wait. Beer or wine?" I held up both.

"You sharing this time?"

"Yes and no. I brought two bottles just in case. I'm a one bottle kinda girl."

He reached for the beer. "This is more my speed. Not really a wine

drinker.”

“No coffee, no wine. How will we ever survive this friendship?”

His body stilled and angry eyes landed on me but they softened moments later. “I did have a long day but I would have let you do your thing.”

“Cool. Next time you get homemade flatbread. I made one barbecue chicken and one margarita. I don’t care which one you choose. I like them both or we can do half and half.”

“I’m cool with whatever.”

My eyes swiped the kitchen. “Wine opener?”

“Last drawer in the corner,” he muttered and when I had it, also returning with a glass that wasn’t meant for wine, I handed it over since it wasn’t electric. While he worked to uncork my sweet red blend, I watched him navigate with ease.

“You’re very skillful with that for someone who doesn’t drink wine.”

His face did a thing and I rolled my eyes. “Oh, *she* likes wine.”

“There is no she,” he murmured.

“But there was.” I wasn’t typically the jealous type but the awareness that a woman had existed here before me had me seeing the place with a different perspective. She must not have lived here. If she had, it would have been a long time ago. There was nothing about the place that possessed a woman’s touch.

“It’s been a while. A little over two years.” My eyes shot up to his and he appeared annoyed again.

“You don’t owe me explanations.”

“Yeah, I do because I want them from you. I have to give what I expect to receive.”

I leaned across the counter, lowering my elbows while I twisted the glass with my fingers. “You want to know about the men in my life.”

“Past men in your life because I would hope that if you’re here, there aren’t any current.”

I shook my head. “Nope, but you knew that. You rescued me from the date from hell. A man who I’d met on an app in desperation and fear of never finding my happily ever after.”

He stared at me long and hard and I felt a wave of nervousness settling into the pit of my stomach. I lifted from the counter and cradled my wine, taking a few measured sips.

“So what did you wash off you up there?” I tipped my glass to the ceiling

and his eyes squinted in confusion. “You said you wanted to wash the day off. What kind of day?”

“I helped my brother bring in a guy. Gang member wanted for armed robbery, known for a lot worse. I didn’t want Tynan trying to bring him in on his own.”

“You’re protective.” I smiled and nodded. “I can see that in you. How old is he?”

“Thirty-four.”

“Hmm, how old are you?”

“Thirty-six.”

“So barely older but still protective.”

The timer went off and I lowered my wine, grabbing a dish towel to move to the oven. There hadn’t been a pan large enough to hold the flatbread so after I tossed the plastic wraps they’d come in I’d covered the cardboard bottoms with foil and used them as baking sheets.

“Perfect,” I sang, placing them on the counter one by one.

“Shouldn’t I be the one offering the vote?”

“Nope, if I say they’re perfect, they’re perfect. I think I want to do half and half.”

“Do your thing.”

While I plated our food, he carried my wine, another beer, and napkins to the table. I joined him and we sat across from each other since his table was fairly small. After a quick blessing we were both moaning our approval.

“I guess you agree?”

“With?”

“This is perfect.”

He chuckled and nodded. “Yeah it’s good as hell so I can’t imagine what the upgrade of homemade flatbread is going to be. You’re gonna have to make that happen.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“You already put the offer out there, you can’t renege.”

“I could, but I won’t.”

We finished our dinner, cleaned up together, then ended up on his back porch. He had a small yard with a shed in one corner. It was closed in with a natural wood gate for privacy and the grass was lush and green. The vibe was peaceful and the company made it that much more enjoyable.

“It’s nice out here.”

“Yeah it is.” His eyes did a slow crawl over me. I sat on the wood railing across from him. He filled a wicker chair that went to a small patio set. I needed space which was why I wasn’t beside him. His energy was so large it felt all-consuming at times, but in a good way.

“I want to tell you something but I also don’t want you to think I’m crazy.” I grinned “But maybe I am.”

“Then tell me and let me decide.”

I opened my mouth to say what was on my mind but the words didn’t come out. When he noticed my hesitation, he urged me to speak my mind. “Just say it, Keiris. It can’t be any more crazy than what I’m thinking or have been thinking since the day I met you.”

“Which is?”

A ghost of a smile eased onto his handsome face. “You don’t get my confession until I get yours.”

“And if I choose not to tell you?”

“You will because you’re too damn nosy not to get mine.”

“You have a point.” I gripped the edge of the railing and gently rocked back and forth, using the movement to ground me. “Before you got here, when I was *exploring* your house...”

“Snooping through my shit.”

My smile blossomed. “Getting acquainted with my surroundings.”

“Agree to disagree.”

“Done, but while I was exploring, I was visualizing whether or not I could see myself here.”

“You’re here now. That shouldn’t have been hard to do.”

“That’s not what I mean. I was visualizing myself living here. My things mingled with yours, me in your bed, in your shower, making dinner while I waited for you to come home...” I paused and my eyes met his, narrowing a bit. “...to me.”

His expression was unreadable, almost placid. “And?”

“And what?”

“Could you visualize all those things?”

“Yes. Is that crazy?”

“If you’re crazy then so am I,” he mumbled and narrowed his eyes on me.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I did the same thing last night at your house, minus the cooking part.” He smirked and my smile softened.

“This thing with us feels scary. Like it shouldn’t be this good this fast but it is and I don’t know what to do with any of this.”

“Me neither.”

“Do you want to do something with this?” My eyes remained on his and my pulse quickened because if he said no...

“Before we discuss that, I probably need to tell you something,” he murmured and I felt my heart leap.

“Oh shit. Read the room, Keiris. I...we...never mind. Don’t answer that. Fuck.” I hopped off the railing and was about to run, but he reached for me and yanked me between his legs.

“Hey, relax. You didn’t say or do anything wrong and whatever you’re thinking that caused you to panic, it’s not what you think. Can you let me explain?” His fingers pressed more firmly into my waist and his thumbs slowly moved up and down, relaxing me a bit.

“You can but if you tell me you’re married and it’s complicated, which is why you’ve been shamelessly flirty with me while keeping your distance at the same time, then I reserve the right to punch you in your face, really hard.”

He laughed so freely I would swear to him being relieved. “I’m not married and I’m not positive I’ve been shamelessly flirty with you but I’m not great at much more than sex so maybe I have and just don’t know it.”

“You don’t expect me to believe you don’t flirt with women enough to recognize what it is...” I paused and my eyes went wide. “Oh god, you’re not...”

“Hell no. I love women, Keiris, only women.”

“Then I don’t get what you’re saying.”

He exhaled, pulling me closer and down onto his lap. I shifted until I was comfortable and he locked an arm around my waist like he was afraid I would run. That made me anxious about what he was going to say.

“I’ve had relationships or what I considered relationships. Ty calls them one-sided. The women were always more invested than me.”

“So you’re a sex *only* guy.”

“No, just not a relationship guy.”

“Why?”

“Because my mother left and I don’t know what to do with how her absence changed me.”

“Oh, when did you lose her?”

“When I was eight and she’s not dead. She’s alive and well but not with

us.”

“But you said left?”

“Packed her shit and left. Ty was sick, a virus or something, hell I don’t know. He kept throwing up all over the house which meant she was stuck playing nurse and maid. She was so fucking pissed but she was always like that. Annoyed with us. I thought her behavior was normal. It’s the only way we ever knew her to be. The day she left, our dad was at work, so it was just me, her, and Ty at home. I should have been at school but she kept me home because she didn’t want to deal with Ty. He was always clingy though. Didn’t really like her like I did but he was also younger. I remember him saying he felt better and he wanted to tell her since she was pissed that he was sick. He ran out of our room into theirs. The minute he climbed on the bed to tell her he was good; he threw up all over the bed and her.”

I cringed at the icy delivery of his voice when he said that part and I whispered, “What did she do?”

“She packed her shit and left that same afternoon.”

“She left while you were home alone and your brother was sick?”

“Yeah, it was pretty fucked up. When I realized what she was doing, I ran outside and tried to take her bags out the car. She shoved me down. When that didn’t work, I threw myself at her, trying to get her to change her mind. Not really for me, but for Ty. He wouldn’t understand and I didn’t want him thinking she’d left because of him. But she left anyway and there wasn’t shit I could do about it. My dad never said why but he didn’t have to. She never was a mother to us. Even that young I could tell she didn’t want to be there, didn’t want us. Regardless, when she left we were all pretty fucked up behind it. My dad was the worst. He was cold after that. Ty and I weren’t allowed to talk about her which meant we never got to deal with how her leaving broke our family. Ty dealt with things by falling in love with every woman that smiled at him and I managed by...”

“Not dealing with women at all.”

“I had women in my life but I didn’t trust them with *me*, with my feelings.”

“It’s hard to be in a relationship with someone you don’t trust with your feelings.”

“Exactly, which is why they were mostly one-sided. I was there, did everything most men do in relationships, except be emotionally accessible, which means none of them lasted very long.”

My chest grew tight. “So you don’t do relationships? That’s what you want to tell me so I don’t confuse what this is.”

“I’ve tried in the past, it didn’t work. I’m thinking maybe this time it might, *with you.*”

“With me?”

He nodded. “I don’t know how capable I am. My brother is forever telling me that I’m broken and he’s right. But since I met you, I feel a little *less* broken. You feel right and you make me believe I can figure this shit out. That she didn’t ruin my chances of being happy...”

I kissed him and, God, it felt right. He felt right and as much as whatever this was scared me, I wanted it. I wanted him.

His lips were clouds and his tongue was paradise. I leaned into the kiss, losing myself in the feel and taste of him. His mouth was inviting and his kiss was like a preview of all the things I could expect. He wanted to explore, tease, and torture, and fuck, I would let him. When he backed away I huffed my disappointment but his voice grounded me again.

“I don’t want to fuck this up but I feel like I’m going to. I’ve also never wanted to make this work so maybe I won’t fuck it up.”

“Then this is a gamble. That’s what you’re telling me.” He grimaced, nodding stiffly. “I like the odds, so I’m in.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure and I think we should start testing the ‘what it feels like with me being here’ theory, in your *bedroom.*”

He smiled, lowering his eyes to mine. “You sure you want to start there?”

“Very, unless you don’t want to.”

“Nah, I’m good with that.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

B alor. The time that passed from us leaving my porch and entering my room was a blur. I do remember every second of my tongue and mouth on her pussy, sucking and licking until she came twice but nothing beat this very moment of me deep in her like I'd found my purpose in life.

When I eased into Keiris, the world shifted. I had heard stories about a transfer of energy. Although I wasn't the type to subscribe to things such as spiritual connections, since meeting Keiris I was slowly becoming a believer. I felt things for her that didn't make sense. I needed her in ways that made even less sense. As I entered her, my body felt at ease. I knew this woman was mine.

My weakness. My strength.

I searched her face, trying to see if she felt this. Never in my fucking life had I cared about being alone but if she wasn't with me, then it would totally fuck my head up. When she lifted her hands and gripped the sides of my face, bringing my mouth to hers, I knew.

"I want it all, Keiris." I forced myself deeper and she gasped painfully, so I paused until her hands were on my face again, pulling me back.

"Me too," she rushed out before her tongue pushed past my lips. With the way her pussy throbbed around me, I was drowning. She was slowly fucking killing me in the best possible way.

I thrust into her harder and another sharp gasp escaped. "You want me, Keiris?"

"Yeah," she whispered, pushing her hips up and at an angle that forced me a little deeper. I pushed a hand up her bare stomach to squeeze and

massage her breasts, slowly at first, but the harder I thrust, I pinched her nipples, rocking into her. I lowered my eyes to hers again and she blinked several times then smiled in challenge.

Her thighs rolled away from my sides, opening her body more, and I didn't hesitate to deliver. I thrust hard, back-to-back, and her body clenched, sucking me in deeper, resisting each time I landed deeply.

"Oh God, fuck..." Her hands left my face and wrapped around my biceps. Her nails sank into my skin. "Balor..."

Hearing my name and the feel of her tightening around me caused another shift. One that had my balls tight and my dick throbbing. The sensation was so intense I slammed into her over and over again. The next time I felt her pussy tighten and pulse around me I tipped over the edge and we both cried out. Pleasure jolted down my spine and I emptied into the condom while she soaked it from the other side. I let my weight rest on top of Keiris, feeling the rise and fall of her chest from her ragged breathing until she squirmed beneath me, gently pushing so I would move.

I lifted my head and scowled. She extended her neck and kissed me. "Bathroom," she hummed.

"Now?"

"Yes, now. But it's your fault. That was a lot of pressure." Her eyes lowered and she grinned. "Still is. I gotta go."

I slowly pulled out, smirking as she winced a little. I rolled onto my back and while she hurried to the bathroom, I brushed both my hands down my face several times. I heard the toilet flush, then water running. After a couple minutes I felt the bed dip but she eased under my bedding and curled up on her side. I leaned closer, kissed the tip of her nose, then moved to the bathroom to clean up as well. I tossed the condom in the trash, noticing the gray washcloth next to the sink.

I lifted its match from the towel bar and cleaned up before placing my palms on the counter, staring at myself in the mirror. Everything about what just happened was foreign to me. Her connection, her touch, the way she kept her eyes on me like she sensed my need to know she was in this with me. All of it was so fucking different and did something to me.

When I returned to the room and entered my bed from the opposite side, she lifted the covers, inviting me into her space.

Her space in my bed.

I pulled her into my frame, so we were face to face, inches apart. She

grinned, extending her neck to kiss me. It was soft but also assuring which was what I expected.

She curled her arm into her chest and tried to move closer but there wasn't any more space to conquer. "Do you want me to leave?"

"No, but don't stay because you think you have to."

"I want to stay," she said quietly.

I frowned, thinking about something we probably needed to discuss. "You know why I don't do relationships but I don't know why you were looking for one on an app."

"Mmm..." she mumbled and her nose scrunched. "You know how they say don't go looking for love, let it find you?"

"Yeah..."

"I learned why in real time." She frowned a little and sighed. "I went through the 'about to be thirty, no man, no kid' thing. I started actively dating. That's how I met my ex..."

The inflection in her tone had me holding her protectively closer but again, no space was between us. "You two didn't end well?"

She shook her head. "He was a decent guy I guess, but because I wanted something I thought I needed so badly, I saw him as the person I wanted him to be. I overlooked a lot of things. We weren't a good fit."

"Something happened?" I almost frowned, feeling like I would find and hurt the guy if he'd hurt her. She smiled and kissed me again.

"Nothing like what you're thinking. We just didn't work or at least not for me. I stayed longer than I should have because I thought maybe it's just me expecting too much."

"Nah, it wasn't you."

She smiled and shook her head. "It wasn't but it wasn't him either. It was us. We weren't a good fit."

"So how did it end?"

"A miscarriage."

"Shit, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm okay but I wasn't when it happened. The crazy part is I was devastated and relieved."

"Devastated that you'd lost the baby but relieved you wouldn't be tied to him," I said with understanding.

"Yeah and I struggled with both for a while. Sometimes I still do because I don't want it to seem like I was happy about losing my child. I wasn't..."

“You don’t have to explain. I get it.”

She nodded softly. “I knew I couldn’t stay with him. When I told him, he argued all the reasons why we worked. Said I was just emotional because I’d lost the baby but it wasn’t me being emotional. It was reality slapping me in the face, telling me I wasn’t where I needed to be. I stood firm on my decision.”

“Then why the app? If you said you didn’t need to look for love. That it needed to find you.”

“That was my best friend Dreeya. She loves me and wants me to be happy. She set it all up. I tried, it didn’t work, and now there’s you... Which I’m not all that upset about.”

I chuckled and brushed my thumb over the curve of her jaw then her lips. One more thing plagued me and I hated to ask but after my mother, I needed to know...

“Do you want kids?”

When she tensed I almost pulled away or maybe I did but her hand made its way to the side of my neck as if she felt the need to ground me or bring me back. “I want to fall in love with an amazing man who makes me happy. I want to build a life with him and if that life includes kids then yes, that’s what I want. If it doesn’t, and it’s just us, then I want that too. I can’t really explain it any way other than that. I could say I don’t want kids or that kids are not in the cards for me but if they are, I want it all. I want to be happy and in love.”

She’s not my mother.

Something settled in me. “You work tomorrow?”

“Nope.” She grinned. “Work life balance. Dreeya is a real hard ass when it comes my balance.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep. Before I had BookNook I worked in sales. I had really high dollar accounts which meant working sixty sometimes seventy hour weeks. I traveled all the time and barely had time for myself or her...” She smiled widely. “When I told Dree I was going to quit and open BookNook she was all in. She was right there with me through the entire process but with one condition...”

“Work life balance,” I said and she nodded.

“Thirty hours a week max is what I’m supposed to work. I usually stick with it but it doesn’t always work. I’m near the college and employ mostly

college kids. They're not always reliable but for the most part I do okay and can stick to my thirty hour schedule. My location is also really good for business."

"She's a good friend."

"The best and you'll be meeting her in a few days so be prepared. She's a lot."

"I think I can manage."

"Don't be so sure."

"If I can't you've got my back." I kissed her again, feeling the weight of the past few hours. "Get some sleep."



THE NEXT MORNING I was up early. My room was still dark when I quietly crept from my bed and settled in the chair across the room, watching the woman who slept peacefully while she had my mind all fucked up.

I was torn between wanting to undo everything that existed between us and forcing her to give me more. I sat for hours staring at Keiris, wondering what I would do if she awakened and decided last night was a mistake. That I was a mistake. That was exactly what my mother had done to my father but after she'd given him two children she never wanted which meant we were a mistake too.

I'm so fucked up. How can I expect her to stay?

At some point the sun came up and I watched light bleed into my room. In the dark I knew she was there, but with day creeping in, I could see her and I liked the visual. Keiris in my bed, smooth brown skin draped in my dark sheets. She was on her side, facing away from me, one leg hiked high, the other extended toward the foot of the bed. So fucking perfect.

Eventually she shifted and rolled over, not bothering to bring the sheet up, which exposed her full breasts. Keiris's face rested in a soft, lazy smile while her eyes narrowed slightly in my direction.

"Good morning," she rasped, smiling wider.

"Good morning."

She pushed a hand under her head and lifted until her face was propped on a balled fist. "You standing guard?"

I smirked. "Maybe. You thinking about running?"

“Nope.”

We stared at each other for a long moment. Not speaking, just in a standoff that felt heavy and peaceful at the same time. She broke the silence first. “Why are you up so early?”

“Thinking?”

“About me?”

I nodded and she narrowed her eyes. “You having second thoughts?”

I shook my head. “No, are you?”

“I don’t think that’s possible. You might suck at relationships but you’re really good at the sex part.”

I chuckled and she sat up. “You sure you’re not having second thoughts? You look real intense sitting over there. I can almost feel your thoughts.”

“And what are my thoughts, Keiris?”

She scooted to the edge of the bed and tugged the sheet over her lower half. We’d slept naked but I was now in a pair of briefs. “You don’t know what to do with any of this.”

“I don’t,” I admitted.

“Neither do I but the good thing is that we don’t have to do anything with it. We can just enjoy things for what they are.”

“What if that’s not good enough?”

“Then tell me what will be good enough and I’ll tell you if I can agree.”

“I want you to stay?”

“Here?”

I shook my head.

Not here at my house but...

“With me.”

She frowned a bit then nodded slowly. “I can do that.”

I smiled and walked to her, kneeling beside the bed. I tugged away the sheet, easing my arms beneath her thighs and yanking her to me. I buried my face between her thighs. My tongue swept through her folds, feverishly exploring. When my mouth latched onto her clit, I slid my fingers through her pussy lips, pressing up hard and spreading them wide.

Her hips rocked closer so I sent my tongue long and wide down her center before I circled her entrance with the tip of my tongue. She groaned and began circling her hips, pushing her pussy forward which had me lifting my eyes.

“My mouth or my dick, Keiris, which one? And decide fast.” I hooked

my fingers up again and pressed hard until she answered.

“You...decide.”

Easy.

I needed to be inside her. I needed the connection I felt last night so I fucked her hard with my fingers until I felt her seconds away from crashing, then I was up, yanking my dick from my briefs and pressing into her. Slowly. With each inch I advanced, I pulled back and gave her one more until I was deep enough to feel her tighten around me.

Just like last night, everything about the moment was perfect. Intense and fucking killing me slowly.

“I need you to stay, Keiris.”

“I will...oh fuck...I will...”

Her pussy tightened and pulsed rapidly and I reached between us, teasing her clit with my thumb until an orgasm was exploding through her body. I continued slamming into her, hard and fast, until just before I felt the rush of my own release. I pulled out and fisted my dick a few times, yanking hard and finishing with my fist covering my dick.

My eyes remained on hers through the process while she watched me cum until I stopped pulsing under my palm. I leaned closer, gripped her chin with my other hand, and lifted her face so her eyes locked with mine.

“If you stay, it has to be for me, not for this.”

She smiled slowly and rolled her eyes. “I want you and that. Package deal.”

I chuckled and nodded. My chest felt light because I believed her. “Come on, let’s shower then we can swing by your place so you can change. I want you to take a ride with me.”

“Oh I like to ride...” She perked up and my dick responded but that wasn’t what I meant so I made it clear.

“On my bike, not my dick, but I promise I’ll let you handle that later.” I winked and walked away to her groaning in displeasure behind me.

If this woman left me I was going to lose my shit. I was really in the thick of it with her and it had only been a few days.

CHAPTER
NINE

Keiris.

Riding on the back of Balor's motorcycle felt like the perfect start to a much needed escape. I had no idea where we were headed and I didn't care as long as it was just the two of us. My mind was in a state of peace. He was the reason. Sex was amazing and further confirmed that whatever this was I was experiencing with Balor was right, but I also had a deeply rooted feeling that it was so much bigger than just the physical.

When we reached our destination and Balor parked his bike, dropping the kickstand and pulling off his helmet, I stayed put. Eventually he glanced over his shoulder and I tipped my chin up to see his face.

"You gonna let me go."

"Nope, I like sitting here, just like this."

He smiled handsomely and unwrapped one of my hands from his waist and brought it to his mouth. After kissing the inside of my wrist he tapped my thigh. "We don't have to be on the bike to be close. Slide down and I'll prove it to you."

Reluctantly, I did as he asked, easing to the side and lifting my leg over the bike until I was standing. Balor joined me, unhooking my helmet which he placed on the back of his bike next to his. Then he grabbed the front of my jeans, pulling me into him. His mouth clashed with mine until I was moving into a kiss that he eventually pulled away from.

"See how that works. What you want you get."

"Be careful about making promises like that."

He chuckled and kissed me again. "I don't need to be careful when I stand behind my words, Keiris."

“So whatever I want?” I arched a brow and he nodded.

“It’s pretty secluded up here.” My fingers moved to his jeans and he caught my wrist.

“Anything but that, for now.”

“See, be careful with your words.”

Balor chuckled and draped an arm around my shoulders. I hooked mine around his side, falling in step with him as we entered a wooded trail. “You plan on telling me your secrets now?”

“You already know my secrets but why do you ask?”

“We drove an hour outside the city, up the mountain to a deserted area. I thought maybe you planned on telling me your secrets then tossing me off a cliff or something.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Your mind is insane as hell.”

“I read a lot of romance fiction books.”

“There isn’t a damn thing romantic about the idea of baring your soul to someone who then throws you over a cliff.”

“It’s endearing and it can be romantic if he goes over the edge with her.”

“No the fuck it’s not.” He frowned down at me. “And I’m not taking you anywhere near the edge of this mountain.”

“Okay so no secrets. Why are we up here?”

“I come up here a lot. It’s peaceful.”

“Mm...” I hummed. “Your secret spot. I feel honored.”

“You should. This is my escape spot. Ty doesn’t even come up here with me.” We navigated through the path until we reached a clearing. There were several fallen trees, massive trunks, and a couple of boulders that looked to have been a part of the mountain at some point. We sat on a low baring one, or rather, Balor sat on one and I climbed into his lap, straddling his waist, needing to be close.

I slipped my arms around his neck and brushed my fingers over the back. “You’re sharing your peace with me.”

“I shared my dick, it’s the least I can do.”

I grinned, rolling my eyes. “I appreciate both.”

“Then I’ll continue to share both.” He leaned closer, allowing his mouth to graze the curve of my chin.

“Mmm, this place kinda reminds me of camping with my family when I was a kid.”

“How you go from appreciating my dick to talking about your family?”

I smiled, inching closer to him so I ended up on his dick. “I’m enjoying the space we’re in and the space reminds me of childhood memories.” Balor narrowed his eyes on my face and I smiled wider. “Sans the dick.”

He chuckled and nodded. “You close to your family?”

“Yes, very close. My parents have been married for forty-three years. They got married when my mom got pregnant.”

“You have siblings?”

I shook my head, frowning a bit. “No.”

“I’m not a math scholar but you’re twenty-eight, that’s fifteen years longer than you’ve been alive.”

“She was pregnant with another baby she miscarried. She was only a couple weeks along. Even though my dad married her to do the right thing, after she lost the baby they got married anyway.”

“And stayed married?”

“Yep.” I smiled at how beautiful my parents’ relationship was. “I truly think my father tried to get her pregnant just so he could marry my mother.”

“I could see that.” His eyes crawled over me.

“So why so long between the first baby and you?”

“The second time wasn’t as easy. I was their miracle baby. You can’t rush perfection.” I brushed imaginary dust from my shoulder and Balor chuckled.

“Nah, you damn sure can’t and I’m glad the universe had a plan of its own. Otherwise you would have been a cougar.”

“How?”

“If your parents had you fifteen years earlier then you would be older than I am.”

“Hmmm, and who says we would have ended up together? Time and space would have controlled that. Our lives may have never aligned.”

“They would have. This...” His hands moved to my back then down to my ass. “Is exactly where we’re both supposed to be.”

My eyes narrowed a little. “Then why now? Why not years ago before either of us were ruined by life?”

“Time and space. I wasn’t ready for you and you weren’t ready for me. We would have fucked it up and missed out on something that was meant to be.”

“But...” I arched a brow. “If it was meant to be, wouldn’t it have worked regardless?”

Balor shook his head. “Nah, because people fuck up good shit daily for a

lot of reasons. Mostly because they don't realize how amazing those things are and sometimes just because they're too stupid to do the right thing."

I nodded, considering his words. "I would have to agree..."

He laughed, leaning in close. "Have to? You said that shit like it pained you to agree with me."

"Maybe it did."

"Word, I thought shit with us felt good, flowed."

"It does but the competitive side of me likes to challenge people. Conceding isn't the easiest."

"Yeah, but I would swear to you conceding a few hours ago, willingly. But then again, that was to this and not my philosophical thoughts."

He thrust his hips upward and rocked me against him. "This is a very convincing argument so..." I shrugged lazily.

He groaned and lifted me off his lap. "The objective of being up here was so that I could get to know you in a place that wouldn't tempt me to learn while we were both naked."

I grinned widely. "Naked facts are fun and very heartfelt. Where do you think the whole naked truth came from?"

He threw his head back and laughed, standing right after and pulling me to him. "Cute but not the same. Let's go. We're going up the trail then back down so I can burn some of this energy off before I have to get back on my bike. Riding with a hard dick is not something I look forward to experiencing."

"I could help with that..." My hand slipped between us and my fingers brushed over his very hard dick.

"I'm not fucking you in the woods, Keiris. We're talking, that's it."

"Who said anything about you fucking me? Maybe I had other plans." My eyes lowered and my tongue purposely glided across my lips. He groaned as if in agony and yanked me to his side.

"Not happening. Tell me about your parents."

I frowned up at him as we started walking until we were back on the trail. "I don't want to talk about my parents. They're great. I love them, they love me."

"Then tell me about Dreeya since I have to meet her soon."

"You're really doing this?"

"I am. Give me what I want now and I'll give you what you want later."

"Ohh, I like that deal."

“I bet your horny ass does, now talk.”

He kissed my cheek and I began delivering the goods on Dreeya. Not that it mattered because she was about as predictable as a toddler learning to walk. You had no clue if, how, or when, and when it came to me, there would be no grace. He would have to earn her trust, no matter how many random details he knew about her. But I had a feeling Balor would be just fine with my bestie.



AFTER THE RIDE we headed back to the city with a promise of Balor showing me where he and his brother worked. As much as he wanted to know about me, I was equally intrigued about the man I felt an unorthodox attachment to.

We pulled up to a free-standing building off the highway. It was small, white, and not surrounded by anything. After we climbed off his bike and removed our helmets, Balor and I walked into the building, hand in hand, but I could tell he was uneasy. He kept glancing at a car parked near the door.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I didn’t know anyone would be here. I guess Ty is working.”

“Oh, I get to meet the family,” I teased, leaning into his side. Balor lowered his head, pulling the glass door open for me to enter and amusement flickered in his brown orbs.

“You gonna play nice?”

“Nope.”

He chuckled, shaking his head as I passed him but we both stopped a few feet inside the door when we laid eyes on a man who I assumed was Tynan in a heated discussion with an older woman. After a few seconds I knew exactly who she was, their mother.

“I know you’re angry...”

“You don’t know shit. You left, remember...”

“I remember, Ty...”

“Don’t call me that shit. We ain’t cool. We ain’t nothing.”

“That’s not true, I’m your mother...”

Tynan advanced, getting so close she backed away. He took another step forward, leaning his face over hers. He had her by at least a foot. Balor moved so quickly I could barely track his movement.

“You aren’t my mother. You aren’t shit to me.” He grabbed his brother around the chest and pulled him back.

“Ty, go in the office.”

“Nah, fuck that. She needs to hear this.”

“Tynan, go in the goddamn office,” Balor growled, shoving his brother hard.

“Yeah aight. Fuck her. I don’t need to hear shit she has to say anyway.”

A few seconds later he was moving and the door to what I assumed was the office slammed. Balor glanced at me but didn’t say anything. I wasn’t sure if he wanted me to stay or leave so I didn’t move until he walked up on his mother. I edged closer, not sure why, but feeling like he needed me to.

Even though he moved with a calmness that contrasted his brother's reaction, he radiated danger and anger.

“Why are you here?”

“Social Security contacted me. I’ve been out of the country, so I just found out.”

He laughed dryly. “I’m gonna pay the money for Pop. Don’t worry, they won’t try to get it from you.”

“I don’t want the money, Balor. I would have paid it.”

“Then why the fuck are you here?”

“I wanted...I thought...” She fidgeted then lifted her chin. “I thought maybe we could talk.”

”Talk?” His voice was eerily cold. “Talk about what? There ain’t shit to say.”

“I’d like to get to know you and your brother maybe...”

He shook his head. “You got kids?”

“No.”

“You married?”

“No. Leaving wasn’t about you and Tynan or even your father. That life just wasn’t for me. He wanted me to love him, to love you, but I just couldn’t. I never wanted any of it.”

“Then why the fuck would you make him believe you did? You should have said no. You shouldn’t have married him; you shouldn’t have had us.”

“I did...” she yelled back. “I told him I didn’t want any of it, but he begged and said it would be fine. It wasn’t. It was selfish and wrong but it’s what I needed. And I’m sorry. I just want to get to know you...”

“Get the fuck out of here.”

“Balor...”

“Leave, now. You were right. Shit you did was selfish as fuck and I’m not gonna force that. Neither is Ty. Go back to your life, *Meredith*.”

I watched him enter the office and the door slammed again. She stared, looking at the closed door then taking a step forward until she heard my voice.

“That’s not a good idea.”

Her head whipped around and confused eyes landed on me. I angled my head to the side until she changed her mind and came my way like she was about to leave. I cut off her path and she frowned at me.

“You need to leave them alone. If they want anything from you, they’ll reach out.”

“Who are you?”

“None of your business just like they’re not yours.”

“They’re my sons.” She rolled her shoulders back and I stepped closer.

“That you left. Why come back now? It’s been twenty-eight years. What did you expect? Did you think they would welcome you with open arms and you could ease into their lives and get to know the men they’ve become?”

Her expression turned dark and I shook my head. “You should have played a role in who they are, but you didn’t so you don’t get to know them. He told you to leave. You should do that and stay away. Let them come to you if that’s what they want. That’s what a good mother would do, but then again, you don’t know anything about that, do you?”

I walked away and sat on the bench near the office so Balor could be there for his brother and I would be here for him.

CHAPTER
TEN

Balor. When I shut the door to the office I watched my brother pacing back and forth. The anger radiating from his body was so strong and loud I could feel it in my own.

“Why the fuck would she come here?”

“Ty...”

“No, don’t tell me I shouldn’t be angry and don’t tell me to let this shit go because she’s wrong. Why. The. Fuck. Would. She. Come. Here.”

“Because she’s selfish,” I stated calmly. Any other time I would have been raging just like my brother but that wasn’t what he needed. I had to balance him and that meant letting him feel whatever the fuck he was feeling.

“You’re damn right she’s selfish. She had no right.” He turned, glaring at me, fists clenched at his sides, muscles locked to the point of pain. I knew because I could feel that same pain. If it was his, it was mine.

“What do you need?”

He snorted and started pacing again. After a few minutes he walked to the space behind my desk and punched the wall several times. His fists crashed through the sheet rock with each blow, creating a hole that inched in size. He dropped his arms back to his sides and both hung loosely while his shoulders dropped. I watched his back expand and contract from the heavy breaths he inhaled and released.

“I need to not feel like I want answers that won’t change how angry I am or how hurt I feel or how fucking unworthy I feel each time I’m reminded that we were unwanted.”

“I can’t give you that.”

“I know.” He turned to face me, leaning against the wall, curling his arms up so his hands rested on his head and his forearms blocked his face.

“But neither can she.”

“I know that shit too,” he gritted but it wasn’t anger I heard. It was pain. She’d hurt him all those years ago and she hurt him again today. The reality made me want to hurt her, but I wouldn’t. She wasn’t worth it and being rejected today by us after all those years had done just that. *We’d hurt her.* It was a small victory and not worth much but it made me feel better.

“Ty...” I crossed the office but didn’t touch him.

“What?”

“You know that stuff you just said is bullshit right?”

He lowered his arms and hard eyes landed on me. “Yeah...” He exhaled his frustration. “I know but no matter how many times I replay that shit in my head, I still feel that way sometimes. That I’m not enough and I don’t like how that makes me feel.”

“But you like how the women you fill the void with make you feel?” I smirked at him and he chuckled, shaking his head.

“You’re not the therapist. I am. Leave that shit to the professionals.”

“When I say that you act all indignant and shit.”

“Indignant?” Ty smirked at me. “You girl must be smart and teaching you some shit.”

“Nigga, I know what the fuck indignant means and not because she told me.”

Tynan smiled wider. “I’ll have to take your word for it.”

My expression softened a little and I searched his face. The pain still existed, hovering below the smile, and I fucking hated she had the ability to cause so much damage. “You gonna be alright?”

“Yeah nigga, damn. I have the right to get upset but that don’t mean the world is gonna end. Are you good?”

He wasn’t good but he also didn’t want me to worry.

“I’m straight.”

“Aight then, let me go introduce myself to your lady so she can decide whether or not she wants to stick with you or upgrade.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “You can try but she’s already been in my bed and on my face. Ain’t a chance in hell of you competing with that.”

“You never know.”

“Try and see what the fuck happens.”

“So she’s really the one then? Got you ready to go to war with me.”

“Yeah...” I glanced at the door. “She’s the one and it doesn’t make a bit of sense because I barely know her and feel like I’ve been with her all my life.”

“Ah fuck, she really put that shit on you.”

I chuckled and nodded. “She did.”

It wasn’t just about the sex, but I wouldn’t tell him that. Mostly because I couldn’t explain why I felt the way I did, but I knew Keiris was my one. It didn’t have to make sense, but it had to happen.

“Let’s go and hopefully she’s still out there.”

“If not, let me get her address so I can shoot my shot.”

“Fuck no.”

We walked to the door and the minute I stepped out of it her eyes were on me. She was sitting on the same bench I’d cuffed Jordan to the night I’d met her. It was crazy how things had come full circle.

She was here for me.

“He thought you would have bailed after all that.” Tynan walked right up to Keiris and smiled down at her. She returned one, shaking her head as her eyes darted past him and landed on me.

“It will take a little more than that to make me bail on your brother.” She turned her attention back to Tynan who smirked and nodded.

“I think you’ve seen the worst of it so the more I think about things, being indoctrinated into our family this way was probably the best. At least you know what you’re dealing with. But...” He glanced over his shoulder at me. “I might be lying when I said you’ve seen the worst.”

She frowned then raised a brow, peeking at me before she asked. “What else is there?”

“That nigga snores like a goddamn bear, can’t cook for shit, and I’m pretty sure he has no fucking clue what being romantic means.”

Her smile surfaced slowly but blossomed so beautifully. “Hmm, I might need to take all of this under advisement before I fully decide.”

“I like her, Bee. She’s pretty and smart.” Tynan dropped an arm around her shoulder. “How about we...”

Before he could finish his sentence I detached Keiris from his person and had her against my chest with my arm draped across hers.

“Ah shit, we done stuck a nerve with his hostile ass. Tell him you’re not gonna bail so he can relax.”

Keiris tilted her head back into my chest and grinned at me. “He knows I’m not going anywhere. I appreciate his peaceful place and his dick.”

“What the hell.” Tynan barked a laugh. “This conversation turned into one I have no interest in hearing. I’mma let y’all have that. Let me go find some business of my own because clearly I have no desire to be a third wheel.”

I chuckled. Keiris pulled away and dipped under my arm. She inched closer to Tynan and spoke softly like she didn’t want me to hear.

“Are you okay?”

His eyes thinned and darted over her head to me then lowered to Keiris. “Yeah I’m good. Don’t worry about what you saw here.”

“I’m worried about you.”

He released a sigh and I swore I felt my heart flip a few times. She didn’t have to give a damn but she did.

“You don’t have to worry about me. He does enough of that on his own.” Tynan smiled and tossed his chin to me. When our eyes met, I felt his thoughts.

She’s the one.

I know.

“Good and for the record, she’s a shitty person. You don’t owe her any space in your heart or your head.”

Tynan nodded tightly. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He glanced at me. “I’ll get with you later.”

A few minutes later he was gone and Keiris had her attention on me. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“She wasn’t here for only him. She was here for you too.”

I cuffed her face and lowered mine. “Nah, she was here for herself. Misplaced guilt, regret, curiosity, or whatever the fuck that was, doesn’t matter. It’s not our place to assist that woman in working through her bad decision.”

She nodded and I kissed her but when I pulled back, she gripped my wrists and kissed me. “Am I allowed to worry about you?”

“You can do whatever you want with me, about me, or for me.”

“Oh, that sounds promising and I think I have some ideas in mind. Maybe we should get going too.”

The way every inch of my body got excited about those ideas was

unnatural.

“Give me a minute to lock up.”

When I said minute, I literally meant a minute. I had never shut down our shop so fast in the six years we had been in this building. But it was either that or fuck Keiris on my desk. Not that I thought she would mind but I didn't want the memory of me enjoying her pussy the way I planned to linger while I was here trying to work.



AS SOON AS we walked in the door Keiris and I stripped out of our clothes, took a shower, then she had my dick in her mouth, sucking my soul through it. A small part of me felt like she was trying to show me I was wanted and worthy of admiration. To return the favor, I fucked her from behind while she was bent over the sink with both of us watching as I made her cum then she made me cum from how fucking beautiful it was watching her cum.

We showered again, then dressed. She wore my tee shirt and briefs and I put on sweat bottoms and we ordered food, laughing in my living room, completely at ease and satiated from just being.

Unfortunately the universe decided one visit from a parent wasn't enough because by eight, my father was banging at my door then forcing himself into my house like he had the right. He had been here twice in eight years. I was surprised he knew how to find me.

No sooner than he was intruding on my evening was he then insulting a woman I was very protective over.

“You must be the woman who thought it was a good idea to mind our family business.”

Keiris reared her head back but before she could open her mouth I stepped to him. “She's not your concern. What do you want?”

My father's angry glare left Keiris and landed on me. “She had no right telling your mother to stay away from us.”

“You cannot be defending that woman.”

“That woman is my wife and their mother.”

“You are fucking delusional. She might be your wife but she ain't shit to me or Tynan. She shouldn't be shit to you. She made a choice twenty-eight years ago and she didn't choose any of us. If you want to drown in your

unrequited feelings then ball the fuck out, old man. But leave me and Tynan out of that shit.” I moved closer. “And if you want any kind of relationship with me, you damn sure better watch how the fuck you talk to her.”

My father’s jaw clamped tight. He stared at me like he wanted to challenge the threat to see how serious I was but he backed away from the idea.

“All she wants is to talk to you boys...”

“Grown men,” Keiris sneered. “She left when they were boys. That was a long time ago.”

“This is not your...”

I stepped closer and he cut off his sentence and looked at me.

“She’s your mother.”

“No, she’s not. She gave me life which I’m grateful for but that’s all I will ever give her credit for. If you want her in your life, that’s up to you. She will not be in mine.”

“And what about your brother?”

It pained me to admit that at some point he might decide to hear her out. I wouldn’t; I didn’t care enough.

“That’s his choice but you won’t make it for him. You can’t guilt him into letting her back in because that’s what you want. If I find out that’s what you’re doing then you’ll deal with me. Now leave.”

Once more he toyed with the idea of challenging me but thought better of following through. “I’ll leave, but keep her out of our family business.”

My father left and I apologized to Keiris. She didn’t seem bothered by the things he’d said but I was curious about something there could only be one explanation for.

“You talked to her?”

Keiris nodded, took my hand, and guided me back to the living room where I sat and she climbed into my lap. “It wasn’t a civil conversation. I wanted to know why now, after all these years, and she didn’t have a response. I told her she needed to leave and never come back. If you and Tynan wanted a relationship with her, you would seek her out and if I overstepped...”

“You didn’t.” I smiled, cupping the back of her neck and bringing her mouth to mine, delivering soft kisses. “I meant what I said. You can do whatever with me.”

“If you change your mind...”

I shook my head. “I won’t. Ty might but I won’t. I used to believe I needed closure for that part of my life and that it had to come from her but it didn’t. It’s always been my decision. I’m deciding to be okay and I’m not saying it’s as easy as saying fuck it and fuck her because it’s not. I just know I’m ready to do the work now so I can be okay.”

“Good, because I want that for you.”

And that was enough to heal a small part of me. The rest I would figure out in time. Time that included the woman I’d fallen hard and fast for.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Keiris.

“This is so perfect,” I mumbled as the masseuse twisted her fist against my back, kneading my sore muscles. The light scent of lavender and citrus danced around me and the warm almond oil that glossed my skin only added to the experience.

“Perfect this is not. Perfect would be if her hands belonged to a him.”

I smiled into the circular cushion that housed my face. Dreeya was so damn extra.

“Is she not doing a good job?”

“She is but *he* would be doing an amazing job. I can’t believe you’re depriving me of the full experience because you have a man now.”

“Would you stop before these women believe we’ve been up in here getting happy endings?”

“They know how things go down with the right masseuse.”

“Dreeya.”

“Okay, damn. No happy endings at least not that kind of happy ending. No sex is involved, just me being happy to have a pair of nice strong hands on me.”

“Dreeya, shut up.”

“Fine.”

Twenty minutes later we were walking out, sipping on raspberry cucumber water, feeling light and refreshed while we headed to the sauna. A good massage and sweat session to release toxins was a blissful combination.

Dreeya and I elected for one of the smaller units so we wouldn’t have to share. After we were inside, she started with the questions about tonight. She

and Balor were officially meeting for the first time. Two weeks had passed since I was blessed enough to meet his family—oh what a joy—and he was finally meeting mine.

Well, in person. Balor had spoken to my parents on the phone and FaceTime and they seemed to get along great. I would know for sure in a few months when we traveled to Tennessee for Christmas. He had also talked to Dreeya on FaceTime. They hadn't shared space because as much as she complained about her job, she loved it enough to stay in the air more than she was on the ground it seemed.

I was both excited and nervous for my two worlds to collide.

"You know I'm not going to be nice just for the sake of being nice."

"I know you, Dree. Why the hell would I think that?"

"You shouldn't but just in case you had a memory lapse about who I am then I didn't want there to be any surprises."

"Nope, I'm very clear on how tonight will go."

"And how is that?"

"Some really good food, a lot of really great wine, and a lot of you threatening his life if he doesn't make me very happy."

"Good. So I'll skip all the prep work." She winked at me and switched gears. "I still can't believe you found your guy before my guy found me."

"Technically he found me. Date from hell, remember?"

"You have a point but either way, I'm happy for you. I'm so damn happy for you because you deserve a good guy!"

"And you don't?"

"No, babe. I absolutely do but I'm more concerned about good dick for the next couple of years. I love my job and I don't see fitting a man in my rotation. At least not one who has expectations."

"Are you sure your job's enough, Dree?"

"Hell yeah it is. I get to travel the world, enjoying international dick and experiencing the kind of life I couldn't even imagine years ago. I'm good. For now, this is enough. The real question is, is he enough for you?"

My smile surfaced quickly. "He is and I don't understand how I know because this was fast and overwhelming but I know he's enough. I'm happy."

"And what about all the stuff with his family?"

I frowned and she angled her head to the side. "What about it?"

"A man who wasn't loved right might not always be able to love right."

"That's not always the case..."

“No, it’s not but sometimes it is. You love hard, babe. I don’t want you to get hurt because you give more than you receive. I also don’t want you to end up empty for that same reason. I love you so I’ll always pour into you but that will only get you so far.”

“I know and I love you for caring about me enough to make me see things from all angles. But I promise, Dree, this won’t be one-sided or unbalanced.”

That had been Balor’s past. As much as it frightened me that he and I could end up in that same space, I felt in my heart we wouldn’t.

“Then I trust you to know he’s what you need.”

“Aww, are we having a moment?” I teased. She rolled her eyes and I added, “Because if we’re having a moment then let me slide in there that you should not be afraid of paying for your coffee the way you’re not afraid of sharing your emotions with me.”

“Hoe...” Dreeya grinned and shot me a bird. “Best friends don’t pay and sisters don’t ask, we take.”

“You a rapper now?”

“Shit I might need to be. You see how nice my ass has been sitting lately and it’s not like I have to have talent. It’s all hype, autotune, and ghostwriters.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“Okay so rapper names...”

“No, absolutely not.”

Dreeya rolled her eyes and smiled. “Fine. I don’t need you. I can think of one all on my own.”

I shook my head, knowing she would. Hell if I knew my best friend at all, she might already have a demo tucked away somewhere.

Cardi, your days might be numbered.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

B alor.
“You’re meeting the best friend?”
“Yeah and no.”

“What you mean no?” He laughed, already knowing what the hell I meant.

“You’re not meeting or fucking her best friend.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll fall in love with her pussy and fall out with her.”

“You fucked her best friend?”

“Bruh, no.”

“Then how do you know what parts of her I’m going to fall in love with?”

“I know you. That’s how you move and I’m not trying to have my lady at war with you so no, to all of it. Get that shit out of your head.”

“Aight damn,” he said with a laugh. “You nervous?”

“No, why would I be?”

“This is real, Bee. You don’t meet family and friends. That’s more my thing.”

“I don’t have to be nervous. I’ve shown up for Keiris as the man I am and I’m going to show up to meet her friend as that same man. I’m a goddamn catch.” I smirked and he chuckled.

“You’re aight, nigga. Simmer down a little.”

“Nah, can’t do that. I know what I bring to the table and so does she.”

“But she is the table, Bee. This is new territory for you.”

“It is but I’m ready. Ten toes down ready.”

“That’s what’s up. Happy for you, Bee.”

“Preciate ya but let me go so I can head out.”

“You sure you don’t want me to fall through with you?”

“Positive. That’s the kind of problem I don’t want or need.”

“You’re a fucking hater, Trouble.”

“Call me whatever the fuck you want, the answer is still no.”

I heard him laughing before the call ended. I tucked my phone into my pocket and left my house ready to face the firing squad.

&

Dinner went well. I ordered so that neither of the ladies had to invest time or money to make sure we were fed. Three surf and turf meals with steaks grilled to perfection from Redmond’s.

After dinner we settled in the living room for drinks while I was blessed with the privilege of watching Dreeya and Keiris interact. The two were more like sisters than friends and I loved that she had someone so solid in her life.

I could tell the two of them loved each other based on their back and forth and stories about their friendship over the years that didn’t present either in a favorable light. They didn’t seem to shy away from allowing me a peek at their history.

“You ate at that taco spot every day for almost a month straight, which by the way was pure torture for me because you were fucking our bathroom up, Ris. I still don’t understand why it took you so long to let that go.”

Keiris threw her head back and laughed. My eyes traveled the length of her neck, reminded of the handful of times she had been in that exact same position, cumming while riding my dick.

“Ooh girl, at least you know he will accept you at your best and worst. I’m literally talking about your explosive bathroom behavior and this man is looking at you like he wants to fuck you right here in my living room.”

My eyes shot over to Dreeya who smirked and I chuckled, circling my eyes to Keiris who looked as if she wouldn’t be opposed to what Dreeya was suggesting. Yeah, it was time to pull up out of here.

“First of all, the food was good as hell. Well going in... coming out not so much. It was cheap and we were broke.” Keiris shrugged. “Sometimes you just have to power through.”

“I disagree.” Dreeya frowned. “Sometimes you need to be considerate of your roommates.”

“It’s not like you didn’t make me suffer through some things. Let’s not forget how many times I woke up at night thinking a gang of hyenas had somehow invaded our dorm.”

Dreeya was the one laughing hard this time. “What the hell? You’re wrong for bringing that up.”

“Care to share? I’m a little lost,” I questioned and Keiris grinned, pointing at Dreeya.

“She had a boyfriend...”

“He wasn’t my boyfriend,” Dreeya defended and rolled her eyes.

“Okay a fuck buddy who sounded like a hyena when they did the deed. It was not very sexy or appealing.”

“He was fucking *me*, not you. It wasn’t supposed to be sexy or appealing.”

“No, it wasn’t but I didn’t want to hear that weird shit either.”

Dreeya shrugged and lifted her wine. “Neither did I but the dick was well worth it so I had to power through.” She winked at Keiris and I chuckled, shaking my head.

“Y’all are wild.”

“You have no idea.” Dreeya winked at me.

“And he will *never* have a clue how wild it got.” Keiris delivered a warning look to her girl and I lowered my eyes and pulled her into my side.

“What happened to sharing all your secrets?”

“I never said *all* and if that’s what we’re doing, you’ll have to share yours too. That means dinner with your brother so I can get the real version and not the remastered one you’re going to share.”

I smirked, shaking my head. “Nah, I’m good with y’all keeping secrets.”

Dreeya narrowed her eyes my way. “Oh he’s hiding some good shit.”

“Not really. Just know I’m not a saint.”

“Mmm, then maybe I need to dig a little deeper before I stamp my approval on this.” She flicked her wrists at us.

“That was then, this is now. We all do shit that has us looking back like what the fuck was I thinking. My wild days are long gone.” I kissed Keiris on the cheek and she smiled up at me.

“Good to know.” Dreeya nodded, tipping her glass to me. “But don’t ever get too comfortable. You hurt her and I will hurt you. Slowly and painfully.”

“Noted.” I tossed my chin her way and Keiris pulled away from my side.

“Okay, the threats have landed. That means we can go now. I’m going to

head to the bathroom. I can't imagine a motorcycle and a full bladder are a good idea."

"They're not," I advised.

"Okay, friend. That will give me a minute to deliver my final words and wrap this up."

"Be nice," Keiris warned.

"Nope, and you already know that I won't, so why waste your time asking me to?"

Keiris groaned and left the living room. Dreeya shifted to the edge of her seat, leveling her eyes with mine.

"I like you."

"Why do I feel like that's not necessarily a good thing?"

She smiled mischievously.

"Sexy and smart. I like that you're perceptive."

"You like me *but...*" I challenged, hoping to get to the point.

"That's my sister in there. I love her like we share the same blood, like we shared a womb, so if you hurt her..."

"I won't," I said firmly, with no reservation.

"I would hope not, but if you do. Then you won't survive the type of wrath I will bring into your life. I will make you hurt ten times more than you hurt her."

"I believe you will but again, I won't hurt Keiris."

"Good, and one more thing, I know you have some shit with you. The thing with your mother..." Her eyes met mine and I nodded stiffly. "You can't depend on her to make you whole or to make you happy. You have to do it yourself. If you do it for her and it ever gets to the point when she's not enough, she will get hurt. You can't depend on Keiris to fix whatever is broken in you but you can depend on her to be there, to support you, and love you through it. Promise me you'll do the work."

She had a very valid point. One I had already considered so I made the promise. When I said I would never hurt Keiris, I meant that with everything in me.

"I'll do the work. I'm giving you my word."

She stared at me for a long moment then smiled. "Thank you."

"Thank you too. You're a good friend and I'm glad that she has you in her life. I also want to be clear, she has me too. I'm making these promises to you, for Keiris, because I know you love her. As her man, I will do

everything in my power to make sure she's happy."

She smiled softly. "Then we understand each other and there won't be any issues."

I chuckled and nodded. "We're on the same page."

I wouldn't hurt Keiris intentionally but that also didn't mean I wouldn't by default. Dreeya was right about one thing, I had to do the work and I planned to.

EPILOGUE

Six months and some change.

“I really struggle with how to move past what she did. There are days when I’m good and it doesn’t bother me then there are those days when I second guess who and what I am. I know I’m a good person and an even better man but there’s always that thought lingering in the back of my mind, fucking with me because I wasn’t good enough for her to *stay*.”

I tensed next to my brother and my fingers curled into my palm. I hated how bothered he was by the past. That was my issue, the anger I felt because of the hurt he felt.

“And have you been reminding yourself of the truths we discussed?” Dr. Tate spoke calmly, looking my brother right in the eyes. That was how she did things. This was our third session together and I had to admit being here helped.

If only for me having a space to express how much I hated that Ty allowed our mother to disrupt his life. Dr. Tate was able to help him see that my anger was not about him, but about her.

“Yeah, I know what it is. I know leaving was her issue not mine. And when she left she didn’t make the decision because I was somehow lacking as a son. I know the facts but they’re really hard to trust at times.”

“It gets easier. When I first started seeing you, you refused to admit that your mother leaving bothered you at all. You harbored the anger but now you express how the void she left makes you feel and how that void also shapes your relationships with other women. You’re honest about the ways she hurt you. In time you’ll be able to accept that her issues don’t create inadequacies in you.”

Tynan nodded as Dr. Tate turned her eyes to me. “You were upset about his confession.”

I frowned and her eyes lowered to my fist, which was still locked tight. “It’s my job to be perceptive. What did he express that angered you, Balor?”

“I don’t like that she has power over him.”

“You’re protective of your brother so that’s understandable,” she said quietly and I nodded. “And does she have power over you?”

I felt Tynan staring but I kept my eyes on Dr. Tate. “No, because I choose not to allow her to. I have too much to lose if I can’t show up for the people in my life.”

“Keiris?” Dr. Tate asked. We had discussed her a few times and she knew the dynamic of our relationship. In a moment of insecurity I’d questioned whether I was so attached to Keiris because of my mother, that maybe I was somehow experiencing what Tynan had all those years. Filling a void.

“Yeah.”

Dr. Tate smiled. “You love her. When you love that strongly, you do the work. She’s a positive in your life, Balor. Keep doing the work, not just for Keiris but for yourself as well.”

“I will.”

She turned to my brother. “And are you still working on your dependency issues?”

Tynan smirked “Uh, yeah I am but I’ve slipped a few times.”

He made a promise to himself to spend a few months without falling in love.

She narrowed her eyes and he grinned. “It’s not a love thing. Just making sure my needs are met. I didn’t even ask them out so that’s progress right?”

She shook her head and I laughed at his dumb ass.

“We’ll discuss that at our individual session. Our time’s up.”

As soon as we left Dr. Tate’s office, Tynan was frowning. “I know she didn’t think I was gonna go six months without sex.”

“You act like that’s impossible.”

“Because it is. I’m not dating but shit, I fucked a few. I don’t even have their numbers so I’m doing good.”

“That’s not how this works. You’re the one who was pressing me about coming here.”

“Yeah because your angry ass needed to talk some shit out but she ain’t telling you not to fuck your girl. Would you go six months without sex?”

“Hell no but I’m not you. Our issues aren’t the same, Ty.” I grinned and he shook his head.

“Nah, they’re not, but change doesn’t happen overnight so I’m doing what I can.”

“Yeah you are. I’m not mad at you. I see the progress.”

When we stepped outside Tynan lingered near the sidewalk instead of heading to his car. He had something on his mind.

“What’s up?”

His brows pinched. “You talked to Pop?”

“No, why?”

“She sent a check. He told me to come by and get it.”

“A check...”

“Yeah, thirty grand.”

I’d paid the state. I guessed she’d sent us the money back as a way of reaching out.

“He can keep that shit. I don’t want anything from her. That all she sent?”

He shook his head. “A number too. Said we could call.”

“You gonna do that?”

“No...” he said quickly.

“If you want answers, Ty...”

“I don’t. I realized when I thought about calling it was only because I wanted to tell her all the ways she was fucked up. I didn’t want anything from her.”

I studied him for a minute and he added, “I used to, but not anymore. Get the check. I know he called me instead of you because he thought I would be the one to reach out.”

“Yeah.” Our father annoyed the fuck out of me with that. We hadn’t seen much of each other since the blow up about Keiris. He made his feelings about her clear. He couldn’t blame us for our mother anymore so he blamed her. He was a hurt and hateful man but he’d have to be that alone. I refused to let her feel the backlash from shit she didn’t cause.

“For the first time in a year, I feel good, Bee. Like I really feel okay. As pissed as I was, I’m glad she showed up that day. I know I’m not all the way there but I will be. I’ll holla at you later though. I got a few things I need to take care of.”

I nodded and watched as he headed to his car and left. After he was gone, I got on my bike, heading to the one person I knew would always keep me

grounded. I wanted Tynan to have that type of stability in his life. One day he would, maybe sooner rather than later since he was no longer searching for it.

I grinned, pulling my helmet down over my head. Lord knows it damn sure found me when I had no intention of falling.

But I was so fucking glad it had.

KEIRIS.

I felt him before he stepped into my office, closing us in, locking my office door. Balor was dressed in his usual—dark jeans, dark tee, and leather jacket. I couldn't help my smile from expanding unnaturally wide when he placed his helmet on the corner of my desk and rounded the side, leaning against it with his chin dipped so his eyes were on me.

“How did it go?”

“Good.”

“Mmm, that's all I get? Good?”

He smirked and nodded. “Not much difference in the last time other than Ty is still fucking women when he's supposed to be taking a break.”

She shrugged. “Six months is a really long time to go without. Would you do that?”

He smiled, shaking his head. “No but I don't have to. That's never been my issue and you sound like him.”

“I understand, Ty.”

“You do?” He arched a brow and I nodded. The past six months I had gotten to know Tynan very well. He crashed our dinners enough times for me to consider him a friend and extended family. It seemed to make Balor happy that I'd accepted his brother.

“I do, but I understand his brother better.” I lifted from my chair, stepped between his legs, and lunged into his body. Both of his hands landed at my hips, bringing me in closer when I tilted my face up. I didn't have to ask for a kiss, it was just natural with us.

I loved this man and was in tune with him in ways that didn't make sense. But it felt right.

“I missed you.”

“You missed me?” He smirked, angling his head to the side. It was just after lunch and I had been in his bed last night, while he had been in me this morning before I left for work.

I nodded and lifted onto my toes, pressing a kiss to his lips. “You didn’t miss me?”

“Nah, I’m not as clingy as you are.”

He smirked and I rolled my eyes. “But you shut and locked my door?”

“I know how you are and remember what happened last time. Logan can’t even look at me without her face turning red as hell.”

She had walked in on me sitting on my desk, while Balor sat in my chair with my legs over his shoulders and his tongue doing amazing things. So amazing that when I heard the door open, and Logan’s gasp before the door slammed shut again, I didn’t bother worrying about what she saw. I did know when I walked him out I had never in my life seen her chestnut brown skin flaming so red with embarrassment.

“That was your fault.”

“Nah it wasn’t. You were having a bad day, I asked you how I could make it better. You hopped on your desk and opened your legs. Was I supposed to turn you down?” He lowered his eyes until they leveled with mine.

“You could have.”

“And I *could have* pissed you off, which I know better than to do.”

“I’m glad to know. So since you locked the door...”

“Nah...” He shook his head. “I have a check to track down. I just wanted to swing through for a minute to see your pretty face.”

I frowned hard because what the hell...

“Why did you lock the door?”

He grabbed my chin and kissed me. “Because I knew your horny ass was gonna think I was about to bless you.”

“What happened to not pissing me off.”

“That’s not what I’m doing. I’m giving you something to look forward to.” He kissed me again but this time it was so intense and deep that I was moaning into his mouth and circling my hips against him. When he pulled back and smiled devilishly at me I could have strangled him.

“I’mma see you tonight.”

“Or not. Maybe I’ll just stay home.”

“You can do that and I’ll fuck you in your bed instead of mine.” He winked and my body smiled at the thought.

“You better be glad I love you.”

“I’m more than glad, Keiris.”

“Good because I’m strongly reconsidering. So you better count your blessings.”

He chuckled and when I tried to step away he pulled me back. “I count them shits daily, sometimes hourly. Trust me, I know I’m blessed and I’mma invest everything I am for the rest of my life proving that to you.”

And so will I.

The End.

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