

Faking
WITH MY

**BROTHER'S
BESTIE**

SYLVIA RAE

Faking With My Brother's Bestie

A Billionaire Surprise Pregnancy Romance

Sylvia Rae



Faking With My Brother's Bestie

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Felicia

“**W**OW, FAE, YOU LOOK amazing.”

I smile at my brother and hug him, clinging a little tighter than usual. But then again, we haven't seen each other in almost a month. I've been busy running the publishing company almost single-handedly for some time—something I didn't really foresee coming and not something I'd wanted, either.

I don't begrudge Lucas the happiness he's found with Lo. Both of them deserve it. Besides, it's not like I really have much of a social life. Other than my brother, there's nobody I see regularly.

He holds on longer than normal, too, and some of the tension inside melts away. I'm used to having to wear masks around people. It's been that way for too much of my life, but around Seth, I can just be me.

“I've missed you,” I tell him.

“Yeah, well, being a super-successful editor-in-chief/acting CEO before thirty kind of kills the social life,” he teases as we finally break apart.

The maître d’ who’d escorted me to our table still stands silently to the side, making an excellent impersonation of a statue, coming to life only when we’ve finished our greeting. He moves to pull out my seat, but Seth waves him off. “Thank you, Felipe. Bring out a bottle of the best Scotch you have for me and my sister, will you?”

We’re in a posh Hollywood establishment. I know from experience that a bottle of the best Scotch on the house won’t be cheap, but I’m not surprised by my brother’s request.

Technically, he’s my step-brother, but we’re close and have been since his father married Mom when I was fifteen and he was almost eighteen. We shouldn’t have connected—he was a rich California kid who hadn’t known a lot about struggle during his life, while I was the child of a single mom who had spent most of my life only seeing her in snatches in the morning and at night as she dashed off between one of her two jobs. She and Dad had been engaged to be married when he died during deployment—she’d been four months pregnant with me, and most of her life had been a struggle.

I’d never doubted how much she loved me, or how much my father had loved me, even though he’d never gotten to meet me. There were letters I kept tucked away in a special box and read once a year on my birthday—he’d written them once a week after Mom told him about me.

Those letters connected me and Seth. He'd seen me carrying my box in and asked about it. I'd gotten defensive and snapped his head off in front of Mom, her new boyfriend, and the teenager I assumed was just a party kid.

Seth had backed off, his hands raised.

Mom later told him they were letters from Dad, and I was very protective of them—even she hadn't read them. He'd signed and sealed them and kept them aside until I was old enough.

That night, Seth knocked on my door and shoved a journal into my hands.

"It's from Mom. She started it when she found out she had cancer." He was red in the face as he held my eyes. "She wrote to me almost every day until the last few weeks. Then she had Dad write them. She wanted to make sure I had something to know her by."

Somehow, we'd connected. We'd kept each other together six years later when our parents were killed when the small-engine plane they were flying in went down in the mountains, killing both them and the pilot.

Until the last five or six months, we usually had dinner or lunch twice a month; it's only now that I realize how much I miss that—I miss *him*.

"We have to stay in touch better," I tell him.

"I keep telling you that." He winks at me.

I roll my eyes. "No, you don't. I'm usually the one to make sure we set up lunch or dinner dates, and you're all like, *hey*,

whatever is good for you.”

“Are you griping because I’m accommodating?” He spreads his arms wide, his perpetually cheerful face trying to look stern.

Felipe returns with the bottle of Scotch and shows it first to Seth, then to me, before serving us both. He disappears as discreetly as he’d appeared, and I pick up my glass, swirling the amber liquid around and breathing it in.

“Mmm...” I savor my first sip.

Seth tosses his back like it’s moonshine. “Not bad.”

“You’re a heathen,” I tell him.

“You love me anyway. How is that job going? Scarlett coming back, or is that still up in the air?”

Putting my drink down, I meet his eyes. “Actually, we had lunch yesterday, and Lucas offered me the position of CEO, pending board approval.”

“That’s fantastic!” Seth’s eyes widen, and he looks like he’s going to jump up and give me a hug. Not even two seconds later, he’s scrutinizing me more closely. “But you don’t know if you want the position ... do you?”

“You know me too well.” Stroking my finger over the rim of my glass, I stare at the etched crystal and roll the dilemma over in my mind yet again. “I like finding new voices, Seth. I like helping my authors bring their stories to life. If I’m running the business, I won’t be doing that—or at least I won’t have the option to do it as much, and certainly not as well.”

“And you don’t like to commit to anything if you can’t give it your best.” He nods, and I know he understands. A grimace twists his features as he says, “I like Lucas and know he’ll get it if you tell him it’s just not for you. And if it’s not, don’t do it, Felicia. Life is too short to be at a job where you’re not happy.”

Something in his voice has me eying him more closely. I wonder, “Speaking from experience?”

“Yes.” He shrugs, looking sheepish. “I appreciate everything Dad did for me—for us, but running this huge software company. It’s not my thing. I don’t have the brains for it. If it weren’t for Lincoln and some of my other advisers, I wouldn’t even know up from down.”

“Ever thought about selling it?” I lift a shoulder in a shrug. “You know, I’d sign whatever paperwork was needed if you think that’s what’s best for you.”

With a level look, he says, “More often than you can imagine.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“Every time I start seriously looking at it, something comes up. The last time I was really serious, the pandemic hit. Now we’re bouncing back from that and I was considering it, but...”

A shadow falls over the table, and Seth looks up. A smile unlike any I’d ever seen spreads over his face and he rises from his chair. “Sweetheart!”

Sweetheart?

I shift my gaze just as Seth wraps his arms around a willowy redhead. Well, this is an interesting development. He goes to pull back; she grazes a pair of French tips down his cheek and leans in, planting a hot, lazy kiss on his lips.

He laughs nervously and breaks the kiss, his ruddy cheeks even redder than usual as he wraps his arm around her shoulders and shifts so they're both facing me.

"Baby, this is my sister Felicia."

A slim hand, tipped with a pricy manicure is offered, and I shake it. It's an odd shake—she just lets her hand lie in mine, almost like I'm expected to kiss it.

Sure thing, the princess amused me as she turned her head toward Seth again and kissed him on the cheek.

"Felicia, this is Layla." He gives her a bit of a prod, smiles, cajoling at her while she plays with his fingers, petting and stroking him.

Barf, I can't help but think. I mean, I love my brother—he's a great guy, and any woman would be lucky to have him. But there's something cloying about her manner here.

Layla finally drags her gaze from him and looks at me, offering a smile so sweet, I feel like I'll gain ten pounds and get cavities—and it's utterly false, behind the soft female warmth in her blue eyes, there's something hard and practiced.

Immediately, my teeth go on edge. I keep the reaction hidden and smile back. "Layla. Lovely to meet you."

There's caution in Seth's gaze. "I hope it's okay, having her join us, sis. I know we haven't caught up in a while, but when she heard we were having dinner, she all but insisted on coming."

"Yes," Layla says, speaking for the first time since that cooing *sweetheart*. But she's already shifted her gaze back to Seth. "My sweetie here just keeps talking about you, on and on ... I just *had* to meet you."

"Any friend of Seth's," I tell her, smiling politely. I'm willing to give anybody he cares about a chance. One.

"Friends?" She looks back at me now and blinks. A smile spreads across her face and she giggles, shaking her head. "Oh, no, honey. We're not *friends*, right, baby?"

She strokes her hand down Seth's cheek again, and he catches it, clearly not comfortable with public displays of affection. "Of course, we're friends," he says affectionately. "It's just that we're ... more."

I pick up my Scotch and take a healthy swallow, downing half this time with little care for the fine quality or taste. Maybe Seth has the right idea when it comes to booze—just pound it back. "Oh, trust me, Seth. I get the picture."

"Um, yeah, well. About that. The picture is ..." Seth grins. "Layla and I are..."

She flings her hand out and I feel like I've been sucker-punched. The ring there, no.

"Seth," I whisper.

He curses and grabs Layla's hand, pulling it down. "It's not Mom's ring. It's a copy."

My head is spinning, and I feel lightheaded. I grab my water and take a drink and my belly pitches and roils like it's going to reject the water and the booze I'd ingested. Grimly, I breathe in slowly, concentrating on that and only that, the feeling of air moving in and out of my lungs.

"It's an excellent copy," I finally say.

It looked identical to the ring my stepfather had custom-made for Mom—a ring I hadn't seen in seven years, not since they'd left for their *little weekend excursion*. The ring, like everything else, had been destroyed in the blaze.

Somebody touches me, and I flinch. I freeze just in time as Seth crouches next to me. His eyes are somber.

"I'm a dumbass," he says. "I didn't realize how it might hurt seeing a ring so similar to Mom's ... but it's not identical. I wouldn't have done that. And the designer wouldn't copy his own design anyway. I should have ..."

"It's fine," I tell him, acutely aware that we're both being watched.

I don't like the feel of that gaze. I don't like the sensation of appraisal I sense going on behind Layla's seemingly vapid blue eyes. But I'm not about to point any of that out in front of her.

My brother is a good man—a kind one. Maybe too kind. And he's still watching me with worry in his eyes.

Leaning forward, I hug him. “It’s *fine*. So, I assume if there’s an engagement ring ...”

I look at Layla. She gives me a broad, beaming smile and mutters, “Yes. We’re *engaged!*”

“Congratulations,” I tell her. This is not what I expected to find out tonight. I return her smile and look at Seth. “I didn’t even know you were dating.”

“It’s been kind of a whirlwind.” He returns to his seat and takes Layla’s hand.

A server comes by to check on us, and Layla asks him to tell us about the menu. He does so in great detail, and I take that chance to study her as casually as possible.

Once he’s done, I tell him, “I’ll take the filet mignon, baby potatoes and roasted asparagus.”

“Red meat is *terrible* for you, Felicia,” Layla says before placing an order for a salad—a *small* salad.

“You only live once.” I give her my best polite *fuck you* smile.

Her eyes harden slightly. Seth doesn’t notice. He’s asking about the pasta special and after placing his order, he looks back at us. “Layla wants me to cut out the carbs from my diet so I can lose some weight before the wedding, but ... hell, we’re celebrating, right?”

I lift my glass to him.

“Indeed.”

“You’re beautiful just like you are, Seth,” she tells him, rubbing his arm. “I just want you all strong and healthy. That’s all. And the wedding isn’t for six months, you’ve got time. And so do you, Felicia.”

I blink as she swings her gaze at me.

“Time for what?” I ask coolly.

“Time to lose weight!” she beams. “Seth wants you at the wedding party, and I know you’ll want to look your best.”

“Oh, no, Felicia, you’re already gorgeous,” Seth cuts in, looking nervous.

I just smile and pick up my Scotch, draining it. The happy couple shares a sharp look as I pour another serving. “This is good Scotch, Seth. Really, really good.”



Linc

“**T**O SETH!”

Seth flushes as the four of us lift our glasses to him. It's not a typical bachelor party—Seth isn't into that kind of partying, and neither am I. One guy had tried hard to talk us into it, but I told Brandt to fuck off. If he wanted to spend his night at a strip club and the next two days hung over, he was welcome to it, but that wasn't my thing.

He'd shown up, anyway. I'm not surprised. The prick could never turn down the chance to drink on somebody else's dime. He's in for a surprise tonight because I've already liberated Seth's wallet, so he wouldn't try to pay for everything. After the first two rounds, people are on their own.

I'm bankrolling the rides, food, and anything Seth wants, but that's it. It's not that I'm cheap. Okay, maybe I am a little. I grew up broke, and it's only been since I started working for Appleton Enterprises that I ever had clothes that weren't either hand-me-downs or clearance rack specials, and sometimes, outright stolen.

But I'm fine with being generous—when the circumstances call for it—paying for a bunch of people to get wasted all to supposedly celebrate a wedding? It's not really something I see as a reason to bankroll, and since Seth had said he adamantly *didn't* want some all-out party and would rather just go out for some drinks with me and the guys, I'm doing it my way.

Seth tosses back the 25-year-old Scotch we'd ordered for the first year and slams his glass down. "I'm getting married!"

The four of us lift our glasses to him and cheer, the private room at the Malibu restaurant erupting into chaos for several minutes.

"To the bride!" Brandt calls out as the noise finally levels off. "And what a lovely one she is."

"Bet your ass," Seth says, lifting his glass again. "I'm a lucky bastard."

We offer another salute and if anybody notices the lack of enthusiasm, well, at least Seth doesn't.

I think Brandt does but he makes no comment. I don't know how he feels about Layla Hampton, but I can't stand her. She's not good enough for Seth by a mile, yet there's nothing I can do but let him figure that out for himself. He still hasn't signed the prenup I put together for him, but he's promised he will and that she'll sign it, too.

It's about as ironclad as I can make it. I'm a damn good lawyer, so it's the best I can do. Time's running out on that—

the seven-day rule in California is a real thing; they have to have it signed before the wedding in less than two weeks. But that's a talk I'll have with him tomorrow.

Once the prenup is signed, I can say I've done my part. The company is already well-protected. We took care of that years ago. It's not common knowledge, but Seth owns only 34% of the company, while I own 33%, and his sister owns the other 33%. I'm unsure if Felicia will prioritize her own interests over her brother's in the long run, but the company's ownership requires all three of us to agree to any sale. In the event their marriage really goes south, one-sixth of Appleton won't add up to a huge percentage of Seth's net worth—although, even that I've covered in that prenup if they'd just sign the damn thing.

Nothing is perfect, of course, but I've done what I can.

“I ran into Felicia at a pub over the weekend.” Yizé Liu, one of the top developers at the company and one guy who'd come on with us from college grins at Seth over his glass of Scotch. “She's looking ... *fine*. Think I stand a chance now?”

“Yizé.” Seth leans forward. “She could crush your head between her hands.”

The skinnier, younger man smiles. “Maybe I'm fine with that.”

He's younger than us by four years—one of those wunderkinds who graduated high school when he was like nine. Okay. That's exaggerating it. He graduated at like fifteen and started college early, although he didn't graduate from

college until twenty because he kept taking class after class and changing his major.

“I asked her if she was coming to the wedding, though. Made her promise to dance with me.” Yizé sighs and mimes a throbbing heart by shoving his hand under his shirt. “She’s still so...perfect.”

His crush on Felicia is well-known, although I’d almost forgotten about it. I try not to think about Felicia. She’d come into Seth’s life like a rocket and sent a ripple effect through it—Seth and I had been friends even then, and anything that affected him had affected me. So, when she’d all but bailed on him a couple of months after their parents died, I’d been the one to pick up the pieces. I’d been the one to help him figure out how to run the company.

She’d come back a couple of years later, and they’d picked up like nothing happened, but I hadn’t forgiven her for abandoning him.

“I’m surprised she even noticed you,” Brandt says in a dismissive voice.

Yizé flipped him off. “I’ll have you know we went out to dinner, fuckface. *Her* idea.”

Seth’s brows shoot up. “Yeah?”

“Uh-huh. Felicia has just gotten back into town from a wedding—that guy who owns the publishing company she’s running.” Yizé makes a face. “She’s running herself ragged. Says she agreed to keep up as acting CEO until he got back

from his honeymoon since everything was happening so close together—his wedding and yours ...”

“CEO?” It slips out of me with no conscious thought, and once it’s out, I can’t take it back.

Seth looks at me, pride written all over his face. “Yeah. Didn’t I tell you? She was one of the head editors for one publisher here in California—Scarlet Ink. But the CEO was in a terrible wreck a few years ago ...” He grimaces and grabs his Scotch. “I know you had to hear about it. It was a big scandal—the COO was involved, too. Both the COO and Lucas’s wife were killed.”

“Yeah.” I lean back, recalling the news stories about it. “I didn’t know Felicia was involved.”

“In that mess? She wasn’t. But she was one of Lucas’s assistant editors. A lot of shake-ups went down; after everything was said and done, she was the one left standing. She worked her way up to the editor, and they became friends. Nobody else had the spine to stand up to him, so she picked up more and more responsibilities, and, eventually, the board elected to take over as acting CEO. And then Lucas finally came out of his hole; he wanted to make it official.”

“I bet that made her day.”

“She hates it,” Yizé says. “Too much responsibility, and she doesn’t interact with her authors the way she wants to. Once she’s back from Seth’s wedding, Lucas will focus on getting a new CEO on board so she can get back to editing.”

“It’s a good thing she loves me,” Seth says with a feigned, forlorn sigh. “Otherwise, she’d probably make up an excuse for coming to the wedding. She’s allergic to romance, I swear.”

“Not a bad thing,” Brandt says. “She looks more like a guy than a woman.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I tell him before Seth can.

“Hey, when a woman spends that much time in a gym, what do you think will happen?”

“I think the woman will get strong enough to crush your head with her thighs,” Yizé replies. And he’s got a look in his eyes that makes me think he daydreams about it.

“My sister is gorgeous,” Seth states, ignoring Yizé and everybody else to focus on Brandt. “She’s smart, driven, and there’s not a damn thing wrong with her. Keep your remarks behind your teeth unless you want me to do something about it.”

Brandt stiffens, looking surprised. I smirk, then tip my glass to Seth. “To your sister, buddy.”

“To Felicia!”

* * * * *

Brandt shoots me a dirty look as he turns over his card to pay his bill.

Yizé had helpfully produced a copy of the email I’d sent out, outlining the plan for the night—including where I’d stated I’d

cover food and the first two rounds of booze, but then they were on their own, and Brandt had been one of the ones to respond, so his bullshit comment, *I don't remember that*, fell on deaf ears.

We all know how he is, and nobody was eager to pay his tab when he claimed he was running short. He made close to what I did—I know because he likes to brag about his income to anybody who'll listen. He shouldn't constantly be broke, but the man also lives above his means so he can figure his own finances out.

As we all head down to where the hired cars are waiting, I draw next to Seth and keep an eye on him. I'd only had the two drinks and Yizé hadn't much. Seth's between buzzed and drunk, talking nonstop about Layla, his dad, the marriage between his dad and Felicia's mom, and how glad he was that Felicia was going to be at the wedding—and why the fuck did she work so hard.

Once everybody is piled in their respective cars, I steer Seth to the final black Escalade and open the door, all but pouring him in.

“Told her she had to lose some weight, ya know? I asked her what the fuck she was talking about. Felicia's not fat—she's a body-builder.”

I nod as I help him with his seatbelt. He's missed four times already. Circling the car, I climb in and settle next to him. After a glance at me, the driver pulls away from the curb, and we're gliding through the still-buzzing streets.

“So Felicia’s not bringing anybody to the wedding?”

Seth rolls his head on the back of the seat to look at me.

“Nope.” He snorts a laugh. “Allergic to romance, remember? She told me that once.”

Given the number of failed relationships I’d witnessed, I could empathize, but I was taken aback.

“Did she get burned?” I ask. I’m not even sure *why* I’m asking.

“I don’t know. If Felicia did, she never told me about him. I thought maybe she was into women. I asked her once, not like I’d care, as long as she’s happy. She laughed and told me she didn’t have time in her life for anybody.” He frowns, clarity briefly shining in his drink-hazed eyes. “It’s weird because she’s lonely.”

“She told you that?”

He glances at me. “Felicia doesn’t have to. She’s my sister. I see it in her eyes. But she doesn’t want to get involved with anybody, either. People are *complicated*, man.”

Yeah. Tell me about it.

Later, while Seth snored away on my guest bed, I searched for Felicia Appleton. Several pictures pop up, most of them related to Scarlet Ink. I click on one of them and lean back as her face and figure fill the oversized computer monitor on my desk.

Fuck me. Felicia is dressed for some sort of formal event—a literacy function Scarlet Ink was sponsoring. No, Felicia isn't fat. Some people might call her thick—she has thighs that look like they could grip a man's hips and ride him until they were both ready to collapse.

The image seized me and refused to let go, heat swelling in my loins until my cock was hard and ready. The dress Felicia is wearing is a clingy Grecian deal, leaving one arm bare while a capelet of sorts trails from one shoulder to the other side. The soft white makes her naturally tawny skin glow; how it drapes over full breasts and equally full hips highlights a bombshell figure.

She's pulled her midnight dark hair back into a high and tight ponytail, leaving her stunning face on display. She has very little makeup, but her lips are scarlet and curved in a hint of a smile.

“Fuck me,” I mutter, staring at her image.

Then, I close the picture, clear the search, and shut down the computer. I just wish I could wipe the memory from my mind as easily.



Felicia

'HAVE FUN WITH THE dragon.'

I roll my eyes and send my friend Lo one last text just as the taxi comes to a stop in front of the resort. Seth had offered to send a car, but I didn't see the point in having a limo or whatever else he splurged on just for me, my carry-on and dress bag.

I travel enough that I'm the queen of packing light: the bridesmaid dress and the other two dresses I need are in my garment bag, along with the shoes, and everything else is in my carry-on. I have an appointment to get my thick, dark hair styled at the resort's spa, so there was no need to worry about excess styling products, cutting down on even more items to pack. Save for my small makeup kit and toiletries, I have a few changes of clothes, my laptop, and a book.

That's it.

I have the garment bag in hand by the time the taxi driver gets my suitcase from the trunk and I tip him in cash and brace

myself. I've been dreading this wedding.

Layla is every bit as bad as I'd thought she'd be after meeting that first night.

At least I could use my job as an excuse to get out of the *weeklong festivities* that had been listed as part of the bridesmaid's *responsibilities*.

Lo had required none of that bullshit, but then again, Layla is nothing like my funny, sweet friend Lo. Lucas is too levelheaded to marry somebody like Layla.

And yeah, I know what that says about my brother. I adore him, but Seth has always had a shitty taste when it comes to women.

“Oh, *there* you are!”

Hearing that chirpy voice almost has me clenching my teeth, but I set my face in a smile instead as I turn to find Layla and the other women in the wedding party all crowded around the white limo I'd seen pulling up as we waited for space to clear in the taxi lane.

The taxi I'd arrived in pulls away behind me as I shift my bags and Layla's eyes widen. “Oh, *honey*, you should have asked if you couldn't afford a better car! I'm sure Seth or me could have helped—”

“Seth offered,” I tell her, cutting her off before she can devolve into her prattle. “I didn't see the point in hiring a car for me and one bag.”

A bellhop appears with a big rack and starts loading package after package onto it from the limo's trunk.

“Of course.” Layla smiles. There's something shark-like in that smile and she comes rushing closer. “You know, we'll probably have more than we can carry—we just spent the day shopping in Honolulu and went a *teeny* bit overboard ... can you help us with a few things? You're so much more muscled than I am.”

After her jabs at me needing to lose weight had failed, she'd started commenting on my physique, but those comments had just as much impact.

I back up, subtly turning so nothing can be pushed into my hands. “I've got a Zoom call with an author shortly. I can't miss it. It is the one thing I can't get rescheduled.”

“Why did you even *ask* to be a bridesmaid if you're constantly ducking out on your responsibilities?” Layla narrows her pretty blue eyes at me.

“I'm here because Seth asked me to be a part of the wedding party.” I adopt the same look of faux innocence she uses around him, pretending confusion. “I thought he and you both wanted me in it ... but if that's not what you want, I can call him...he already knows I'm here, so he's probably on his way down. It's okay, really. I can tell him it's my fault, Layla, that I don't want to do it and—”

“It's fine.” She clenches then unclenches her teeth, her smile garish and sharp before she turns away. A minute later, she and the rest of the bitchy bridal party are back congregating around

the luggage cart, shoving bags at the bellhop and squealing over their purchases.

“Well done.”

I jump at the low-voiced compliment that comes from just over my shoulder.

My nipples tighten in response and my heart hitches. Even though I haven't seen him in years, even though we haven't spoken in ages, I know exactly who is standing behind me.

Turning, I see Lincoln Ransom waiting there, his forest green eyes alight with humor and cynicism, his hair the color of winter wheat falling into his eyes and just begging to be brushed away. I fist my hand around the strap of my garment bag, refusing to think about how many times I thought about doing just that—brushing his hair back, then maybe touching his mouth, that full, lower lip on that too-beautiful mouth.

“Hello, Linc, long time no see.”

A grin tugged up the corners of his mouth, “I've never seen anybody handle Layla so well. Do you offer classes?”

I arch a brow. “I do not know what you mean.”

“Sure you don't.” His smile widens.

My heart speeds up. “It's nice to see you. I've got to go.”

It takes all my self-control not to rush past him. I manage a nice, sedate pace.

There. I'd handled one hurdle. It's not the hardest one, but it's still a hurdle. I'd talked to Linc, and I'm reasonably positive

that he still does not know about the crush I used to have on him or the dreams that still occasionally haunt me.

Damn him for still being so ridiculously good-looking. It would have been too simple for him to become ugly. Or develop bad breath, something.

But I'd *handled* it—handled seeing him.

That's good news.

The bad news: dealing with Linc this time would be the easy part. Don't think about the hard part, girl, I warn myself.

Not yet. One step at a time.

Acutely aware of the man behind me and feeling his gaze on my back as I stride toward the check-in counter, I told myself I'd get through this the same way I got through everything else.

Just one step at a time. One foot in front of the other.



Linc

I'D SEEN HER CLIMB out of the car and it was like taking a punch to the solar plexus.

Damn.

Just damn.

I almost walk straight up to her but stop myself, texting Seth instead to let him know Felicia has arrived. By the time I am done with that, Layla and her horde are honing in on Felicia; this time, I know I can't just stand back.

“Why did you even *ask* to be a bridesmaid if you're constantly ducking out on your responsibilities?”

Layla's high-pitched wheedle drives me nuts, but this almost makes me laugh. Felicia did *not* ask to be at the wedding. I recognize the tactic Layla's using and close in quicker; loyalty to the Appleton family drives me more than anything else. I stop a few feet away, though. Layla's shit didn't bother Felicia.

“I'm here because Seth asked me to be a part of the wedding party. I thought he and you both wanted me in it, but if that's

not what you want, I can call him; he already knows I'm here, so he's probably on his way down." She makes a show of looking for her phone. I catch a glimpse of her face, see the faux concern, so patently, perfectly false, and I wonder if she's been studying Layla for inspiration.

"It's okay, really. I can tell Seth it's my fault, Layla, that I don't want to do it and—"

"It's fine." Layla is almost red in the face now.

Yeah, sweetheart. You don't want to make Seth feel like he has to choose between you and her. He adores his little sister.

With a too-bright smile, Layla turns away and waves her friends back to the limo.

Disaster averted.

"Well done."

Felicia spins around. We're only a couple of feet apart, and I want to make it less. An insane urge hits me. I want to kiss her.

Whoa. What the fuck?

Her brows arch. A wash of color drifts over her dusky cheekbones, then disappears.

"Hello, Linc, long time, no see."

Yeah, long time no see. Not since the funeral. The desire to kiss Felicia dies, and I want to shake her instead. I bury it and glance over her shoulder toward the other woman.

"I've seen nobody handle Layla so well. Do you offer classes?"

“I do not know what you mean.” She lifts an elegantly plucked and shaped black brow while one corner of her mouth curves up.

Oh, she knows exactly what I meant. Surprise, surprise. The two of us had something in common, finally. We didn’t like Layla Hampton.

“Sure you don’t.” I won’t call her on the lie—not here, at least. There’s a dubious look in her eyes, and she falls back a step. “It’s nice to see you. I’ve got to go.”

I watch her as she disappears into the resort; not even a minute passes before I wander after her. Denim shorts encase one of the roundest, sweetest asses I’ve ever seen. I try not to blatantly stare as she strides across the highly polished floor to check in.

I’m not the only one who notices her, and a strange irritation works through me as other men check her out. I linger by a column, watching her for reasons I can’t entirely explain; when she turns away from the counter, I take in the lines of her face, trying to match them to the girl I’d been angry with for much of the past eight years.

A bellhop comes to take her carry-on and the garment bag, and she smiles at him and says something that makes the kid break out into a brilliant grin before he takes off.

“Felicia!”

Her face lights up as she turns to the sound of that voice.

I recognize Seth's voice but stay where I am as I watch them rush to meet each other in the resort lobby. He sweeps her up into a hug and swings her around, and Felicia laughs, the sound bright and warm as it drifts over to me.

When Seth puts her down, she reaches up to cup his face and tugs him down so she can kiss each cheek.

The obvious affection between them manages to both annoy and soothe me. I know how much Seth adores her, and in that moment, unguarded, it was easy to see that she feels the same about him. But at the same time, I can't help but think back to those long, hard months after they'd lost their parents, and she'd just disappeared, abandoning Seth to deal with everything on his own.

They talk for a few minutes but he gestures to the bar and she winces and checks her phone, shakes her head. After they exchanged a few more words, she nods, and they both smile and hug once more; then, she hurried off to the elevator while Seth sighs.

I hear his soon-to-be wife approaching—it's almost like a gaggle of geese, the way she and her friends are constantly chirping and giggling and going in/ I move forward, catching Seth's arm and guiding him to the bar.

I still have gotten nothing concrete from him about the prenup. I know Layla had a copy. I'd been the one to deliver it to her lawyer, who had confirmed delivering it over two weeks ago.

Seth gives me a sour look as I nudge him to the bar.

“I talked to her this morning,” he says, spreading his hands.

“And ...?”

“She says she’s still reading it.”

I rub my face. “Dude, she’ll still be saying that *after* the wedding. You realize there’s something off with the way she’s handling this, right?”

He gives me a shamefaced look. “Yeah, I know. It’s just Layla looks so hurt when I bring it up—she says it’s like we’re *planning to fail*.”

“No. It’s just planning.” I hold up my hands. “I’ll be the bad guy. I’ll grab a couple of people from the wedding party. Her friend, Autumn, is her lawyer, so it won’t be hard to pin her in place. We’ll all have a little signing party, complete with witnesses. The resort has a notary public on staff—I’ll request his services. We’ll get it taken care of tomorrow. We’re supposed to have lunch, so we’ll do it then.”

Seth heaves out a relieved sigh. “That will be great. I mean, I know we need to do it, but ...”

He’s given me the same talk when we have had to fire friends of his from the company—friends *he* wanted to hire, not me or anybody else. Seth’s problem is that his heart is too damn big, and he doesn’t have a head for business. He can do it, but it’s just not what he wants.

“I’ll handle it,” I tell him. “That’s what I’m here for.”

“What are you handling now?” Brandt asks, moving to join us at the bar. He looks around. “We drinking or what?”

“I’m not,” Seth and I both say in unison. Seth grins at me.

“Then why are we in the bar?” Brandt looks irritated now.

I shrug and say, “Easy fix.”

Seth and I head out through the door. Brandt follows along, looking disgruntled. Too bad I hadn’t invited him.

“Why aren’t we sitting inside and relaxing, having a brew?” Brandt asks.

“Go inside and have a brew if you want,” Seth says, shrugging. “I’m meeting Felicia for a drink in a little over an hour, so I will not start drinking now.”

“Ah, your sister is in, huh?”

Something about the way he says it annoys me. It doesn’t take much with him. Brandt isn’t one of my favorite people. Actually, he’s the opposite, but I tolerate him because for some reason, Seth likes him.

“Yeah.” Seth checked his watch. “She’s got a Zoom meeting but won’t be too long—said it was just a quick check-in.”

“She’s a hot-shot CEO now. Why doesn’t she have assistants doing that shit?”

Seth glances at me. I roll my eyes.

“I’m assuming because part of being a hot-shot CEO is because you still have to do your job—if her job involves Zoom meetings,” Seth says in a cool voice. “Then she’s going to have to do the Zoom meetings and not pass them off.”

The annoyance gets through this time and Brandt lifts his hands. “Hey, I’m just curious. I hate those dumbass meetings—I’d dump them any chance I could.”

“You do,” I point out.

The jackass laughs like it’s some joke. I keep my annoyance off my face and rise to my feet. “I’ll let you know the details once I have them, Seth.”

As I walk by, I clap my hand on his shoulder. “Thanks, buddy.”

I’m almost to the doors when I hear Brandt again. “So, man, how is your sister doing these days?”



Felicia

THERE'S A TEXT ON my phone when I get to my room. I want to scream the second I read it, but that won't accomplish anything.

Cheyena just called. She can't make the Zoom meeting.

The text is from my assistant Renee; instead of a period, there is a monkey emoji with the monkey covering his eyes, as if neither Renee nor the little cartoon figure wants to witness my imminent implosion.

I don't particularly want to witness my imminent implosion, either. I didn't have time for the meeting anyway, but Cheyena insisted that this was the best day for her. I'd tried to make it happen so we could hopefully make progress with this book.

This is her last book in her contract, and the way she's going, it's going to be her last book with us, period. I sent Renee a text back.

If she wants to reschedule, it will have to wait until I'm back in the office—and not Monday or Tuesday, either. I'll be

swamped. Toward the end of the week, maybe.

Renee's response came while I was stripping out of my sweaty travel clothes.

She's gonna bitch. She's already whining about how close she is to missing the extended deadline.

I'm about to send a pithy reply when Renee adds one of her own.

But maybe she should stick to her meetings and communicate better. I'll email her just to let her know. Try to enjoy yourself. Have a drink on the beach, dip your toes in the water. Go find a hot guy and do whatever you do with hot guys. It's been so long, I think I've forgotten.

I laugh because Renee's idea of *long* and mine are very different: she barely goes more than a month without finding a new love interest. As I'm climbing into the shower, I think about the hot guy I've already met here—not that we needed to be introduced.

I hadn't adequately prepared myself to see Linc Ransom. It's kind of hard to prepare yourself for Linc, even knowing what to expect, but it's been almost eight years, and he packs even more of a wallop now than he did then.

Relax, Renee had told me. *Go find a hot guy.*

If only it's that easy for me.

Relationships are anything but easy.

Even sex is messy.

I have a hard time relaxing around men, letting my guard down so I can trust them. I never really *trust* the guys I'm with—it's just short, anonymous encounters where I can be completely in control.

If it weren't for *Gilt*, the private club I'd found out about a few years ago, sex would probably be nonexistent for me. But at *Gilt*, I can find a guy after a screening process who'll be into what I'm willing to give—and damn, are these guys into it! The one-nighters do little of anything to help with the loneliness, but my issues with trusting people run deep.

Now, with the hot fall of water pouring down on me, I'm suddenly entranced by the idea of *Linc* at my mercy and tied to the bed, staring at me as I strip naked for him, as I slide my lips along that heavy, muscled chest.

My belly tightens. Leaning back against the wall of the shower, I cup my breasts and pinch my nipples, giving in to the fantasy a little more. I'd let Linc lick them—he'd been good at it. He'd know how to use that pretty mouth of his. He could bite and nibble until I was wet and rocking against his cock.

Sliding one hand down my belly, I gasp and find myself already wet. I push my fingers deeper and picture Linc; me straddling him, taking him inside me, and he's touching me. I don't see him tied to the headboard anymore. His hands are free and he grabs my butt, lifts me, drags me down, and lifts me again, over and over, until I'm panting and sweaty and we're both ready to come.

His green eyes capture mine as he looks at me.

“Say you want me,” I tell him.

My voice echoes in the steam-drenched bathroom. My imagination feeds back what I need in that minute.

“I want you, Felicia ... let me come. Tell me I can.”

“Yes ...”

I come quick and hard, so hard that my knees are wobbling when it's over and my heart is hammering in my chest.

“Well,” I murmured, lifting my face to the spray of water.

“That's one way to get rid of some tension.”

* * * * *

I spend several careful weeks shopping for the clothes I'll need for this damn wedding. Now that one of the bigger events is just a couple of hours away, I stare at the pieces I'd packed while dragging a brush through my damp hair and blowing it dry.

Aside from the bridesmaid's dress, I have two dresses and only two. The dinner tonight is a casual affair for everybody in the wedding party to just talk and chat. Tomorrow, we're supposed to be busy with various “errands,” and the rehearsal dinner is the day after. The other dress is for the rehearsal dinner.

Tonight, I'm wearing a form-fitting sarong-style dress, strapless, save for a narrow cord that travels from the sweetheart neckline to wrap around my neck. As a mock-wrap

style, it allows for freedom of movement—all of my clothing does. If I can't move in it, I don't buy it. Thus, I don't wear it.

This dress is sexy as hell, but it's also comfortable. And I look fantastic in it.

The strapless bodice plays up my shoulders—my shoulders are excellent—strong and defined from my years of weight-lifting. I haven't been into it as heavily over the past year because of my increased responsibilities at the publishing house, but I'm still cut.

It also flatters my hourglass figure, one I'd inherited from Mom. It's deep turquoise and glows against my skin. The shoes are flats. I don't mind heels, but I'm not comfortable in them and everything in me rebels at wearing them for any part of this trip.

My hair is finally dry. I turn away from the clothes I have selected to wear, like armor. Forcing myself to breathe in a slow, careful rhythm, I put up the hairdryer and smooth my brush through my hair a couple more times. I tucked a sample packet for smoothing and taming thick hair into my toiletry case. I'd use one before twisting my hair up off my neck.

I wiggle into a bra, pull on a pair of tight-fitting shaper boy's shorts under the dress, and pull it on, deliberately not letting myself think about who I'd soon be seeing.

It's just a dinner.

I can get through a dinner.

I don't have to look at him.

I don't have to talk to him.

I just have to get through the dinner.

In the same slow, methodical way I'd dried my hair, I get dressed, watching the time so I'm not late for the drink I plan on having with Seth beforehand. It was probably stupid to agree to have the drink. I can only have the one. If I drink more than that, my nerves are going to be even more on edge. But I can handle the one.

Before I know it, I'm done and ready to head out the door. I've delayed as much as I can. I don't want to leave the safety of the room, but there's nowhere else to go and nothing else to do except sit here. Doing that will only make me more nervous—or worse, it might make me lock the door and refuse to leave. I've been in that space before, and I don't want to go back to that scared, nervous girl again.

"It's been years. You're stronger. You're not who you were," I tell myself.

I want to believe it, but it's difficult. I say it again and again until my nerves settle; then I leave the room, taking a small purse that holds only my cell phone. I have a digital key stored on my phone, so I need nothing else. The more I carry, the more I'll have to fidget with that's definitely something I want to avoid.

The resort is massive. I get off on the second-floor mezzanine. The restaurant where we're eating is here. Seth had told me to meet him in the bar early for drinks. I'm about as far from the restaurant as I can be. From the quick look I've taken at the

schedule I was sent, it looks like I'm pretty damn far away from everything else, too, which means I'll be rushing back and forth from my room to whatever venue throughout the weekend, but that's fine. The less time I have to spend around the bitchy bride, the better.

Finding myself in what's clearly the convention area of the resort, I stop and look around. "You took a wrong turn in Albuquerque, Bugs," I mutter.

There is nothing but shadowy halls before me. I rub my neck as I turn back. Everything looks the same and after two more halls, I end up in a smaller version of the massive area I'd just been in.

"What the hell?"

Retracing my steps doesn't help, because I'm not even sure where I went wrong. A quiet noise from somewhere close by sends a shiver down my spine. It's soft and muffled, sort of; I swallow as it comes again. It's the sound of a footstep against the carpet. There's somebody else in this big, cavernous space with me.

Panic tries to take my brain over and shut me down, but I push past it and keep moving. My stomach, already twisted into knots from nerves, pitches so hard I feel sick. I make myself walk quicker, doubly grateful I hadn't worn heels, although my legs are short, and I can only walk so fast. Of course, I don't mind running if need be.

A hall that looks vaguely familiar looms ahead, and I turn down it. I'm less than halfway down when I realize I'm going

nowhere. It leads to a boardroom and a couple of bathrooms. Swearing, I swing back around.

Somebody is standing behind me. I hadn't heard him get so close. My heart is pounding so hard now that it's not a surprise. It's booming in my ears, thudding loud and hard, and my blood is roaring right along with it. It's a miracle I can even hear myself think.

He's a big guy. I *should* have heard him. I should have heard *something*. Lights limn a powerful body, broad shoulders as he lifts a hand. I react out of instinct and step forward, lifting a fist and driving it straight upward, planning to use my strength and momentum to deliver an uppercut to him that will set his ears to ringing.

Time slows down as he moves with me. I still don't know where in the fuck I am, but I'd seen exit signs. I'll bust straight the hell out through one of those ifs I have to. That isn't a problem for me at all.

I just need to get him out of my way, but then he grabs my fist—he actually *catches* it. Panic slams into me this time, and I can't stop it. My brain barely processes his movement as he shifts further, trapping my forearm against his body. I jerk in reaction as the oxygen in my lungs escapes in a sharp sound that's far too close to a whine. I suck in another breath, ready to scream.

“Felicia!”

That voice is an icy splash of cold water on my face. Our abbreviated scuffle has moved him out of the one bright light

in this long, gloomy hall so that he's no longer backlit by it. I can clearly make out his features—and no doubt, he can make out mine.

His forest green eyes are locked on my face, seeing too deep, probing, and insightful, and I know he's aware of just how unnerved I am.

Perfect.

Just perfect.

My heart won't stop racing, and standing there, pressed so close to him, it's obvious he can *feel* it.

“Are you okay?” His brows, a few shades darker than his rich blond hair, dip low over his eyes as he studies me.

“I'm a little turned around.”

He's still watching me. He's still touching me.

Clearing my throat, I add, “I'd be fine if you'd let me *go*.”

Everything's fine—nothing to see here.



Linc

HER HURRIED STEPS COME to an abrupt halt just as I'm about to say her name, and she swings around. The one bright light in the hall is just above me. I move to step out of it, knowing she probably can't see me as well as I can see her, thanks to the lighting's angle. But just as I shift, I see her fist come flying at me.

Startled, both by the unexpected attack and the *speed* of it, I react mostly out of the instincts I've honed through a very misbegotten youth and a childhood spent dodging my father's fist, not to mention years of martial arts training I'd taken up to help control a brutal temper. I catch her fist instead of deflecting the blow, my other hand going to grip her other wrist.

Two breaths from making a sarcastic quip about the rude greeting, I see the light in her eyes. It's pure panic, and it cuts right through me.

"Felicia, it's me," I say, my voice strangely gritty. I know that look. I've seen it before. On my mother's face and my sister's.

People I knew back in the miserable area where I'd lived before I got out. I never expected to see it on *Felicia's* face.

She doesn't hear me. Releasing her fist, I grip her upper arms. It's a dangerous risk, letting go of her hands. She's learned how to fight, and I don't want to think about why—mostly because I already have a bad feeling. I *know* why.

But she's not hearing or seeing me yet.

"Felicia!" I say her name louder and shake her just a little.

She blinks, her lashes fluttering over big, silvery gray eyes, and she gasps, the first real breath she's taken in several seconds. "Lincoln."

"Are you okay?" I stroke my thumbs gently over her upper arms, wanting to pull her close and cuddle her until the fine tremor of her limbs stops. But I don't dare, not with Felicia.

"I'm a little turned around." She swallows, and her gaze slides away before jerking back to mine as if she fears I'll see some weakness.

She tugs at my hold on her. I don't want to let her go. There's something impossibly fragile about her right now. Fragile and soft are words I wouldn't have associated with her. I don't enjoy doing it now, either. I don't like thinking that something might have tried to break her.

"I'd be fine if you'd let me *go*," she says, pulling away again, harder this time.

I let go because that panic was rising in her eyes again.

“I’m not—”

“Felicia...”

An amused, somewhat mocking voice rises from the maze of hallways behind us. I scowl, recognizing it but before I can tell Brandt to fuck off, I catch sight of the look on Felicia’s face.

She goes pale. Her skin is usually a warm, mellow gold, courtesy of her birth father’s half-Latino heritage. He died while her mother was still carrying her; she was raised with only her mother’s memories of him, but her mixed heritage is clear in the inky, straight black hair and the dusky hue of her skin.

Right now, all that warm color has drained away, and the trembling that had eased is back. Fury burns inside and without questioning, I move to stand next to her and take her hand. “You’re safe,” I say without thinking about why I feel the need to assure her of that.

Stranger still is the fact that she leans into me and grips my hand tighter.

“Felicia, sweetheart, where did you go? I saw you rushing around down here. It seems you still get all turned around as easily as ever. Come on. Maybe I’ll be nice and help you out.”

Her body is rigid, taut as a bowstring.

“Walk with me,” I tell her in a low voice, adjusting our grip so I have her hand tucked into the crook of my arm. Up ahead, I see a shadow fall across the one beam of light in the next intersection of hallways.

She nods, her face strangely blank. Brandt appears at the end of the hall, a wide grin on his face. I don't like the look of that grin. But I do like the way it wobbles, then fades when he catches sight of me.

"Brandt," I say mildly. "Kind of rude of you to interrupt us. Come on, Felicia. We'll finish talking later. Let's head on to dinner."

We pass by him before he finds his voice. "Felicia, darling, you're my partner for the weekend," Brandt says. "I guess you hadn't heard."

Her fingers go tight, nails digging into my forearm, and I hear a sharp gasp escape her throat. I cover her hand with my free one and look back over my shoulder with a sharp smile. "I guess you hadn't heard. There's been a change in plans. I talked to Seth and asked if Fee and I could partner up. Seth said he'd take care of it."

"Bullshit," Brandt snaps.

I hitch up a shoulder, moderating my rising anger through sheer will alone.

Felicia is trembling next to me. I slide my arm around her shoulders, knowing it looks possessive, and not caring. At that moment, I *felt* possessive; it was more than that draw I'd felt toward her when we'd first met. Back then, she'd annoyed the fuck out of me, and I'd been foolishly possessive of Seth and sharing the only friend I'd ever had, but I'd always wanted her.

This is more than that. And the more Brandt focuses on her, the more I'm determined to keep him away from her.

"You know, these forced hook-ups some people want to do at weddings have always made me feel kind of ... disgusted, especially when it's obvious one wants nothing to do with the other," I say, smiling at him with an arrogance I know will piss him off. "And it's damn obvious that fee wasn't consulted. Seth won't like it. Seth knows I haven't been able to talk to her in ages. So, yeah, sure, you run along and ask him if he has a problem with *me* being her partner for the weekend." I narrowed my eyes at him. "I don't mind being an asshole for the weekend, and Seth won't give a fuck saying something if he knows his sister is being made uncomfortable. So, the question is, are *you* going to tell him that Felicia doesn't want to be around you?"

Felicia is the one to speak. "No," she says in a cool, clear voice. "He's not. Fuck off, Brandt. I'm not spending a minute with you. Seth is bankrolling the whole damn wedding. I figure if his sister and best friend want to hang out a little and catch up, he won't mind at all."

I'm glad to see she's thrown off whatever fear had almost overtaken her.

"So you're going to upset the bride?" Brandt asks, glaring at Felicia.

"I'd rip my fingernails out with pliers in the middle of the ceremony before spending a *minute* in your company, Brandt." She gives him a smile of such sharp sweetness that I'm

surprised he doesn't start bleeding on the spot. Then, her smile shifting to a warm, intimate one, she angles her head up to me. "Care to buy me a drink before dinner?"

"It would be my pleasure." As we walk by Brandt, I flash him another cool smile.

Felicia doesn't even look at him. As we turn the corner, her trembling starts back up.

"You're fine," I tell her, keeping my voice low. "Brandt is still watching us. Breathe."

She gives a subtle nod. I guide her to the reserved banquet room the long way. "There's a lounge down this hall. Quieter than the lobby bar."

"Alright." One last tremor goes through her, and she looks up at me.

Our gazes lock, and for that one moment, it's like the world falls away. Time does the same thing, and I'm staring at the gorgeous girl who all but put me on my ass with her beauty and the sheer life inside her. Her tongue slides out to dampen her lips; then she jerks her gaze away as nerves overwhelm her. I haven't seen Felicia nervous in a long time.

"Thank you," she murmurs, staring straight ahead. "For helping me."



Felicia

“S TILL WANT THAT DRINK?” Linc’s hand is steady on my back as I settle on the seat at a small table in the quiet, dim bar. “Or was that just an excuse to get away from Brandt?”

“Can’t it be both?” I meet his eyes for the first time since this complete debacle had started, half afraid of what I’ll see.

But there’s no mockery in his eyes, none of the cool distance I associate with him in the years since I’ve met him. He actually looks almost gentle. Later, it will probably piss me off. I don’t want gentleness from him. How easily that can turn to pity. And pity from him just might break me.

Right now, I’m on the edge and it’s been so long since anybody has been there to offer support. With the echo of Brandt’s leering grin hovering at the outer edges of my memory, I’m almost desperate for something, *anything*, to wash it away—rather, wash *him* away.

“Sure. I can totally understand the need to both escape and wash away the aftertaste of dealing with Brandt Turner. Fuck knows how your brother can stand him.”

We both go quiet as a server approaches and I order a double of their best Scotch, unsurprised when Linc echoes the order. I offer a hint of a smile. “My brother’s rubbed off on you.”

“He has that effect.” His eyes remain on my face. I can’t pretend I don’t see the question in his eyes.

I try. “Seth’s just never been exposed to the ugly side guys like Brandt have. He doesn’t have that in him, and Brandt knows better than to show it. It’s as simple as that.”

“But you’ve seen it.”

It’s not a question, so I don’t respond.

“What happened between you two, Fae?”

The old nickname, one given to me by Seth that Linc hadn’t used in years; even back then, it had been rare. It unsettles me. Shifting on the seat, I search my mind desperately for a way to distract him, but it’s a fool’s hope. Linc’s never been the distractible kind. But he is the *take-a-hint* kind; I tell myself as the server returns with our drinks.

After a sip of Scotch to bolster myself, I give him a steady look. “I don’t want to talk about it. But I will not spend a second with him—I don’t give a shit what protocol says or what the precious bride wants.”

A slow smile spreads across Linc’s face.

“So, you’re as charmed by Her Majesty as I am.”

Unable to help myself, I say, “She’s a conniving bitch who just wants inside Seth’s wallet.”

“Again, you clearly see what Seth can’t.” He takes a healthy drink from his Scotch, his eyes narrowing in consideration. “Have you tried telling him that?”

“You *have* met my brother, right?” Cocking my head, I pretend to be puzzled. “Taller than you. Stocky. Ginger. Blue eyes and looks kind of like a friendly, out-of-place grizzly. Would trust a thief if he found the thief’s hand in his pocket? But stubborn as a mule?”

A laugh ensues like a snort. “Yeah, I think I know the guy. Point taken. But he might listen to you.”

“No.” I sip my Scotch, staring down into it. “He has to figure this out for himself. You’ll have him protected on the financial front as much as possible, and the rest, Seth, has to live his life and make his own mistakes. Otherwise, he won’t learn from them and he’ll just be there, ripe for the next viper.”

“Why does it sound like you’ve had this argument with yourself several times over?”

I smirk at him. “Because I have—but only after I had it with our dad several *hundred* times over.” Tracing my finger through the condensation on my glass, I ask, “Do you remember Dina? That girl he was dating the year after his dad married Mom?”

He grimaces. “Who could forget? That hyena-like cackle of hers still haunts my nightmares.”

“Yeah, well, *I’m* the reason she suddenly stopped needing rides home from work.” Even now, so many years later, I feel smug satisfaction at how I’d handled her—just another money-grubbing snake. My stepfather, Bax, had found me out and taken me aside; he told me with a mix of consternation and amusement that while he appreciated me protecting my brother, eventually, Seth had to figure out for himself how to differentiate between those who wanted *him* and those who wanted his money.

He still hasn’t figured it out. I made myself stop stepping in years ago, and I can’t do it now, either.

“I’m impressed.”

Meeting Linc’s eyes, I shrug. “She was easy.”

“She wasn’t all that bright—sly, maybe, but not bright. If she hadn’t had certain considerable assets, Seth probably would have seen her for what she was and figured things out on his own.”

Blowing out a sigh, I say, “I know. Which is why I made myself stop stepping in. Those mistakes back then. I should have left Seth alone to make them. I finally stopped stepping in, but he’s still doing it, letting twits like Layla use him. I have to let him figure things out the hard way. Besides, *she* is bright. And sly and determined. She won’t be so easy to trip up.”

Linc's looking at me as if he's never seen me before. I grab my drink, downing it as my throat goes dry.

Something flickers in his eyes, and he dips his head, almost like a nod, although I haven't asked a question. "If you'll trust me, I think I can help you with Brandt."

"Help me how?" Speculating, I lean back in my chair and study him.

"Easy. I'll just tell your brother he's right and I'm going to quit wasting time."

Still confused, I cock a brow and mutter, "That explains *nothing*."

"You mean Seth's never told you?"

"Told me *what*?"

Linc reaches over and picks up my hand. Something jolts through me at the contact; it is so simple, so innocent. My blood heats, and things quiver inside—things that have no business *quivering*. Slowly, he turns my hand palm up and traces a pattern over the inside of my palm.

"Seth used to tease me years ago about having a thing for you," he murmurs, slanting a look up at me from under his lashes, revealing that intense, beautiful green. "I never told him the truth. But I'm going to tell him tonight."

I've stopped breathing. My chest hurts. I force air into my lungs and somehow squeak out an unsteady, "*What?*"

“You heard me,” he says mildly. “I’m going to tell Seth that I’m interested in you. I’m tired of waiting for the right time, so I want to spend the weekend as your partner. He’ll make it happen.”

“You think my brother is going to believe that?”

“I wanted you the first time I saw you.”

My lungs had stopped working again. I make myself breathe. Linc keeps talking like I’m not suffering from oxygen deprivation.

“You were fourteen ... almost fifteen, but still. I was almost eighteen and a hard eighteen at that. Sometimes, being around Seth, I felt old. I figured you’d be as naïve and guileless as he was. You weren’t, although it took me a while to see it. I made myself stay away from you. You were too young. Then...” He looks away. “Then life happened. Your parents died. Seth needed me with the company. We all grew apart.”

His gaze comes back to me and the green smolders with heat. “But there won’t be any question of getting Seth to believe me because it’s the damn truth.”



Linc

IT FEELS LIKE A weight's fallen away from me as I lead Felicia to the dining room, where we're joining the others. I'd told her nothing but the truth, although it's a truth I've hidden from everyone, even myself, for years. At first, I wouldn't acknowledge it because she was too young, and I wasn't altogether sure of the marriage between her mom and Baxter Appleton, Seth's father. That man had been more of a father to me than my own ever had. He had done more for me in my life than anybody I'd ever known, including my mother.

As it became obvious how crazy Bax and Barbara were about each other, I started letting my dad's hated voice creep into mine—I wasn't good enough for the Appletons. I didn't need to bring them down with my sorry ass, and Felicia, who had already known enough trouble, could go so far and do so much.

By the time I'd gotten through that and was trying to work up the nerve to approach her, things changed—again. Baxter and Barbara died in that awful crash; while Seth tried to hold

everything together for the corporation and his dad's legacy, Felicia had retreated, sometimes going weeks or even a month or two without talking to her brother.

That had driven a wedge between us, one of my making. I couldn't say we'd ever been friends, and that was because of me, a deliberate attempt to keep her at a distance between the powerful emotions she'd evoked in me almost from the beginning.

When she'd retreated from Seth after the deaths of their parents, it had hurt him. That had pissed me off so much—*so* much. He'd needed her, and she hadn't been there. But now I'm left wondering just how much of her abrupt retreat had to do with Brandt.

He'd always chased after her. I'd warned him away more than once, not out of jealousy because she'd shown no interest in him. She'd been too young, yes, but Brandt always struck me as unsafe. And when Felicia didn't show any interest in him in return, even as she got older, I'd always stepped between them.

As we'd gotten older, I hadn't always been there. Felicia had followed us—followed *Seth*—to college and there would have been many chances for Brandt to approach her without my knowledge.

Even if I have to beat it out of him, I'll find out. It will be a pleasure, actually.

But I'd rather have Felicia tell me.

They set the music in the large private banquet room on low, the lights set to flatter and the clink of crystal stemware adds to the elegant atmosphere. Layla might use Seth's money to bankroll everything, but she sure knows how to arrange a party.

"Let's find Seth," I say to the quiet woman at my side.

She nods but says nothing, and I can feel the tension. I want to stroke and soothe it away, but I'm probably a source, so I doubt it will do any good.

Seth is in a cluster of people, laughing and telling a story. I can't hear him, but I know my best friend well, and the grin on his face and the way he uses his hands is familiar.

"What do you want to bet he's talking about his last fishing trip?" Felicia asks in a low voice, a split second after her brother holds out his hands so they're spread almost three feet across.

I smother a laugh. "The fish was maybe half that size."

"I'm not surprised. As a businessman, Seth's honest as the day is long, but you can't trust him for telling stories. Especially when he's talking about fishing and his other exploits." She lets out a soft, warm chuckle.

I look down at her and the expression in her eyes is so vibrant and full of the emotions she carries for her brother that a wave of shame washes over me. I feel shame for the anger I've harbored at her.

"You love him very much."

Her gaze slips to mine, surprised. “Yes.”

The urge to apologize to her hits hard and fast, but that’s a complicated conversation, one best left for private, and we’re not even remotely private.

Later, I tell myself it can wait. I just nod and nudge Felicia closer. It doesn’t take Seth long to notice us and his grin widens impossibly more as he sees us. He puts his drink down and strides over, going straight to Felicia and wrapping her in a tight embrace that makes her laugh, one hand coming up to pat his shoulder.

“Hey, big brother,” she murmurs.

“Hey, little sister.” He folds her into his arms, stooping slightly and bending forward, his posture protective. One of his hands closes gently over the back of her hair. I wonder how many times he’s held her like that. She strokes his shoulder with her free hand like she’s reassuring him. The sight causes an ache to settle in my chest. Even as close as Seth and I are, we don’t have quite this bond.

Finally, they pull back, and Seth tucks Felicia’s hand into his arm, saying to nobody in particular, “Excuse me for a bit. I’m going to get a drink into Felicia and Linc’s hands.”

I don’t bother pointing out that I’m still carrying my half-empty Scotch from the bar Felicia and I had hit on our way here. Getting a drink will work to talk to him privately for a minute or two, anyway.

“I feel like Christmas came early,” Seth says with a wide grin as he walks Felicia to one of the three open bars erected in the banquet room. “The two of you coming in here together and neither of you sniping at each other. To what do I owe this miracle?”

I give him a dry look while Felicia sighs. The bartender takes our requests, and we retreat to the seats at the far end, Seth turning his back to the group in what might be a pointless request for privacy.

“I have a favor to ask,” I utter. There’s no point in dancing around it. “Felicia and I would like to be paired together for the weekend.”

Seth pauses in the middle of taking a sip of his bourbon. Slowly, he lowers the glass back to the highly polished wooden surface of the bar; then, with great dramatic flair, he reaches up and rubs at the patch of skin in front of his ear. “I’m sorry. I’m not hearing right.”

Oh, fuck you, I think, stifling my laugh. I just smile, because I’ve got a promise to keep. I catch sight of Brandt from the corner of my eye. He’s talking to a familiar, tall, slim woman. Layla.

“Can you pair me and Felicia for the weekend?”

Seth’s blue eyes flare wide. “What, seriously?”

He looks between the two of us before focusing his attention on his sister. “Are you okay with this?”

“If I wasn’t, would I be standing here?” she replies in a calm voice, the hint of a smile curving her lips upward. The hand she has on my arm is light.

She carries a subtle tension within her. I can sense, even if nobody else can. I doubt anybody, but I can sense. I want to wrap my arms around her and soothe it away, then ease her into trusting me with her secrets so I can fix this problem.

Only I know how guarded she is. Getting her to trust me will take more than a few minutes and a drink in some corner of a crazy, crowded pre-wedding practice reception or whatever the fuck Layla is calling this mess.

Seth still looks puzzled, but as he glances between us again, I see the glint in his eye, and I offer a faint, sheepish smile, then a shrug. A grin suddenly splits his face, and he looks at his sister. “Fae, I bet you haven’t talked to Cynthia Falkner in a while ... come here...” He takes Felicia’s hand and tugs her over to a young woman. Cyn had been Felicia’s shadow for a while before the Falkners had moved so their father could handle a restructuring and takeover on the East Coast. They’d recently moved back, but the distraction did not fool me.

He wants a minute to gloat. I’m happy to let him. Keeping Felicia from being pressed into Brandt’s company matters. Maybe not *all* that matters. But it’s the main thing right now. Felicia slants a look at me, one brow cocked. I wink as I release her hand; her lips twitch in a half smile before she lets Seth lead her away.

He's back at my side in seconds, but I give him a look when he tries to guide me further away.

It's one he recognizes, and he huffs out a laugh. In a quiet voice, he asks, "What, you afraid somebody will steal Felicia away?"

"You've got a flair from the dramatic, Seth; always did. Are you okay with this? Me spending time with her this weekend?"

"Fuck, yes," he says bluntly. "I just wonder what took you so long to admit it and why *now*."

The look in his eyes is one *I* know, but I shake my head. "Too complicated for here and now. But can you get us partnered up?"

"Again, *fuck*, yes. You two are practically made for each other. I just don't know why it took *you* so long to see that."

The emphasis on *you* sticks out, but I don't have the chance to ask why. Layla and Brandt are bearing down on us. "Incoming," I say in warning. "FYI, I already told Brandt I was making this happen; he was pissed and went for reinforcements."

"You two are like kids," Seth mumbles under his breath as he turns to face his fiancée.

I cut around him and move to Felicia's side. She must sense the coming storm because she's already kissing Cyn on the cheek. She turns to me before I reach her and takes a step in my direction, just as Brandt appears at her side. I use my body

to block his before he tries to take her arm. She cringes away from him. She doesn't look at him. I'm not sure if he said something to her—I heard nothing, but I didn't see her look at him.

It's like his very presence puts her on high alert, and that low-level sense of wrongness from earlier comes back. This is a big fucking problem. The need to know more pushes me harder, but I shelve it. Not the time, not the place.

Offering my arm to Felicia, I smile. “Seth's going to handle it. For the time being, you're mine, all mine, Fae.”

“And what if I decide I want *you* to be *mine, all mine?*” she counters, ignoring Brandt as I lead her back to Seth's side.

The punch of arousal that floods through me is powerful. I want to press my mouth to hers, find somewhere private so I can taste that mouth the way I've longed to do for years. I set my jaw against the urge.

“I can work with that, too.”

We reach Seth's side, and Layla turns to us, her smile broad, pretty, and so false that I don't know how my best friend can't see through it.

“Linc, it's *so* sweet you want to keep Felicia company, but I was just telling Seth that it won't work. She's not the maid of honor and—”

“It's got nothing to do with being sweet,” I say, cutting her off before she can spill out any sweetly worded barbs that can cut

like silken razors. “I want to spend time with her. This is my best chance—we don’t see enough of each other.”

“Her dress doesn’t suit—”

“What does her dress have to do with anything?” Seth demands. “You wanted me and the groomsmen all wearing the same thing; the only difference between Fae’s dress and the maid of honors is that Ginny’s wearing a dress that stops at her knees while the others are wearing the *same* dress but it goes almost to the ankle.”

Layla opens her mouth, closes it, and finally turns to look at Seth. “I worked *hard* on these plans, Seth. I had the pairings, and everything was done a specific way for a reason. And...” She blinks rapidly; taking a deep breath, she blurts out, “And Ginny *likes* Linc. She’ll be terribly embarrassed if she knows I told *either* of you, so you have to promise not to tell—”

“Not interested,” I say, cutting her off ... again.

She jolts at the cool dismissal, her eyes narrowing.

Seth attempts to cover his laugh with a cough, and she whips her head around to glare at him. “Are you *laughing* at my friend liking him?”

I doubt Ginny gives damns about me. This is just another one of Layla’s attempts at manipulation, although I don’t know why she’s determined to get Felicia with Brandt for the weekend.

“No,” Seth says, giving up trying to hide his amusement. “It’s just...”

His eyes flick to me, then to Felicia. I know he's not sure what I've said to Felicia. I feel a little bad because I haven't been completely upfront with him—I am attracted to Felicia, but whether anything can ever come from it, I don't know. I haven't been fair to her. But that doesn't mean I won't let Layla know where things stand. I decide. Later, I'll clear the air between Felicia and me.

Looking at the woman who'd schemed her way into my best friend's life, I give her a blunt, level stare. "I asked to spend the weekend with Felicia because I'm interested in *her*. Seth knows that—he's always known it."

Next to me, Felicia jerks a little. I cover my hand with hers, stroking her thumb. To my surprise, she twines our fingers.

"Other than who walks with whom during the procession," Felicia says. "I see little of an issue on why it matters if Linc and I prefer each other's company, Layla. Even as far as the pictures go, I'm sure you want some with just your maid of honor and the best man, and that's fine. Linc can be in as many of those as you can talk him into. If Seth hadn't insisted, I wouldn't even be at the wedding party, anyway." She offers a pretty smile that holds no warmth, and her eyes are as hard as diamonds. "I'm just here for my brother, Layla."

Layla's cheeks go a florid pink, and she opens her mouth. Seth steps forward and hugs her. He doesn't see the expression on Layla's face. I lift a brow, daring her to say any of the ugly shit I know is running through her mind.

Loathing floods her gaze. I wink at her.

Her features contort with wrath, but a moment later, her face is serene, save for a fine line between her brows, and her voice is gentle as she says, “Felicia, I hope you haven’t gotten the impression I don’t want you as part of this wedding...I *want* to be part of the family you and Seth created.”

“Of course.” Felicia smiles blandly. But her eyes remain hard.

Layla must realize she’s come up against a much harder target than Seth. She inclines her chin but offers a sweet smile, looking between the two of us. “Look, we can work this out. After all, it’s just a couple of dinners and the wedding.”

“Exactly. So why is it a big deal if I’m eating with Felicia instead of Ginny since I’d be watching her most of the time, anyway?” I flick a look at Brandt to make sure he knows that means I’d be watching *him*, too. “Every free moment I have, I’ll be with her. Ginny could end up feeling insulted. You’re better off pairing her with Brandt. He lives to flirt anyway. I never bother.”

“Layla, you’ve had your way with everything—from the suit I’m wearing to the meals—which includes foods I can’t stand. You told me it was *important* to set the right tone with everything, including the food—although what the tone is when the groom hates half of everything, I don’t know.” Seth’s voice goes chilly.

It’s rare for him to get angry, but once he does, he doesn’t hide it and doesn’t back down easily.

“But I’m getting married, too. You picked all my groomsmen—I don’t even *know* the two of them. But that’s fine. I love

you, and I want you to be happy.”

She turns to him, all big eyes and trembling lips. “That’s just it —”

“I’m not done,” he says. “Felicia doesn’t like Brandt—she’s never been comfortable with him. When I saw the plans, I told you to make sure she was fine with the pairing. You promised you would. Clearly, you didn’t.”

Felicia had stiffened. I cover her hand, my gaze on Seth. Sometimes, my friend sees deeper than I realize. Smoothing my thumb over her skin to soothe her, I watch Seth.

“Since you didn’t take care of it, I am. Even if I wasn’t delighted that my best friend is *finally* showing some sense and doing what I thought he should have done years ago, I will not force my baby sister to spend time with somebody she doesn’t enjoy being around to suit whatever fucked-up plan you’ve got in your head.” Seth stares at her.

Brandt’s face is a mottled red. He goes to speak. I shift, catching his eye, and when he looks at me, I give him a look of warning. He turns away, stride jerky, and leaves.

Floundering and not knowing how to handle the man she’s always manipulated so easily, Layla offers a sulky nod. “Of course, Seth. I, well, it must have slipped my mind that Felicia gets so easily overwhelmed by men.”

I snort, not bothering to hide my derision.

“Yes,” Felicia says in a voice of mock deference. “That’s me. A veritable delicate flower.”

Seth bites back a laugh, and I clap him on the shoulder. “Thanks, man. Now, I’m starving. I’ll sit with Felicia at her table. If I see Brandt, I’ll send him your way. Finally.”

“No.” Layla clears her throat. “I’ll find him and talk to him. It’s best if I smooth this over. And I’ll let Ginny know.”

She slants me a look before leaning over to kiss Seth. Her lashes partially mask it, but the glint there is apparent. She’s not happy. I offer a bland smile before looking at Felicia. With her, I let the shields fall away; it’s possible that it’s the first time in years, if ever. Her eyes widen slightly as I smile at her and ask, “Ready to go find our seats?”



Felicia

THE TABLE WHERE I'VE been placed is an insult. As part of the wedding party *and* Seth's only living family member, I should have been seated at the table with my brother—or at least close. Instead, I'm practically at the back, and if it weren't for Linc, I wouldn't know anybody.

I'm used to having conversations with strangers. It's part of the job. But the people at the table are cool or just outright rude, so I focus most of my conversation on Linc, the topics politely bland, no doubt boring to those around us. They're listening. I can tell. More than once, I see the woman sitting next to me furiously texting somebody on our phone. I suspect others are doing the same unless they're just really interested in their laps.

"I heard you worked for a publisher," the woman across from me says, her smile so wide that it's almost comical. "What do you do? PR work? Editor assistant?"

I smile coolly. "I'm the acting CEO of a small publishing house."

“Scarlet Ink isn’t that small,” Linc says softly.

One man at the table looks up. “Lucas Scarletti isn’t the CEO anymore?”

“He was recently married and is thinking about a fresh line of work,” I told him. “He’s looking at his options.”

In reality, Lucas is thinking about pursuing writing full time, but few people know this. If we weren’t friends, I wouldn’t know.

The dessert course is served. I’m glad, hopeful for a couple of minutes of silence. It’s less than one.

“I really *shouldn’t* eat this.”

This comes from the brunette with bubble tits and a bubble ass on Linc’s side. I’ve mentally named her *Bubbles* since nobody, save for a quiet older couple, introduced themselves when I sat down.

Bubbles glances around the table with a giggle and adds, “All the *calories*. I don’t want to look bloated for the pictures.”

The lime sherbet served after the main course probably doesn’t have enough calories for a week-old baby bird, but I manage not to roll my eyes. But then Bubbles looks at me.

“I hear you’ve spent a *lot* of time at the gym.” She blinks, looking all innocent. “Do you have tips on helping burn excess calories?”

I scoop up a healthy bite of the sherbet—it *is* delicious. Linc has tensed next to me, and I give him a subtle shake of my

head.

After swallowing, I dab at my lips with a napkin and pretend to consider the question. “Well, I doubt what works for me will work for you.”

“Why not?”

I smile serenely. “My type of workout burns a lot of calories, but I eat a fairly healthy, caloric-rich diet with plenty of carbs and protein, as well as a decent percentage of fat. I need it because I’m a power lifter. I doubt my workout routine is anything like what you’d be looking for.”

Linc chuckles next to me. Bubbles looks at me blankly.

“Powerlifting.” That comes from the older gentleman across the table. Along with his wife, he’s been mostly silent, but now he’s smiling. “You mean those seriously heavy weights ... like Olympic-class weight-lifting?”

A stab of remembered pain pierces my heart, but it’s older now, less fresh. “Actually, there was a time when I was competing on the national level, and my coach in college was encouraging me to go for the Olympics.” My hand tightens on my spoon, and I consciously relax my fingers. I’d only recently told Seth about that; let him assume it was the death of our parents that had thrown me off. He’d hugged me, and we’d talked wistfully about Mom and Dad; he remembered, none the wiser about the truth. I plan to keep it that way. I don’t want him to know. I don’t want anybody to know.

“I never knew that,” Linc says softly, touching his fingers to my shoulder.

“It was before ...” I glance at him, then away.

“I’m sorry.” His hand lingers another moment.

It’s strange how such a simple touch can offer so much comfort. I nod and focus back on the man across from me. Jameson, he’d told me. His name was Jameson Mayhue.

The older man seems to recognize something has happened, and instead of pushing for more, he smiles. “How much can you lift?”

I tell him, and he whistles. “Damn, honey.”

He’s so nice, so I don’t fuss at him about the *honey*.

“Bullshit.”

That comes from Bubbles’ date, and I look at him with cool disinterest. “Would you like to arm wrestle?”

“I wouldn’t,” Linc tells him, a smirk on his face. “I’ve seen her beat guys bigger than you ... and that was ten years ago. She’s lifting more now than she did then. I’ve seen her lift, so she’s not bullshitting you.”

Music starts playing overhead. I glance toward the front, at the raised dais where my soon-to-be sister-in-law adjusts a microphone.

It screeches loudly. Everybody in the room flinches.

It clears up just in time for us to pick up Layla’s savage, “*Cheap-ass piece of shit...work!*”

“I’m detecting operator error,” Linc says in a neutral voice, but his eyes are amused.

I bite my lip to keep from smiling. Bubbles gives us both a pithy look. I grin at her. Layla had put me at this table for some of her friends to taunt and mess with me. Bubbles’ last jab had made that clear. Well, fuck them, and fuck her.

I fix my gaze on Layla’s face as she launches into a speech, thanking everybody for being here to celebrate her wedding—no mention of Seth.

My brother deserves *so* much better than her. So much better.

“Time for some dancing! And the first dance is for *me!*” She ends with a giggle and rushes off the stage, apparently to Seth, because they appear on the dance floor moments later.

Waiters are still clearing the tables from dessert, but the lights dim, a glittery spotlight fixing on Seth and Layla.

My throat tightens at the look on my brother’s face.

It’s obvious he cares for this woman.

He’s going to be so hurt when he realizes it’s all one-sided.

But what am I supposed to do to make it stop?

Linc’s hand folds over mine under the table and squeezes gently. Looking at him, I see the same frustration in his eyes, and I realize he can see through Layla the same as me, and he’s just as worried, just as frustrated. I want to ask him if there’s anything we can do. But I know there isn’t. Some

lessons, you just have to learn for yourself. So, I squeeze his hand back as the music plays on.

* * * * *

Their dance ends and Linc is already on his feet, his hand on the back of my chair. My skin prickles in self-awareness. I've been trying not to think about what he's said to Seth and what he said to *me* to make sure Seth would get why he wanted to take over Brandt's spot.

I know Linc. In some ways, I know him *too* well. I know he has been angry with me since my parents died—and why. I wasn't there for Seth when I should have been, but I was too busy trying to pull myself back together after the other tragedy in my life, one that followed all too closely on the heels of the one that had stolen my mom and stepdad.

Linc and I have always had a tense relationship. I kept myself held back from him for reasons that mainly included a crush I'd admitted to nobody. Seth probably knows. He's hinted at it, yes, but he knows better than to push me.

When I was younger, I used to dream he was as into me as I was into him. I gave up on that dream years ago. But earlier, after he'd told me how he planned to explain to Seth why he wanted to spend the coming days paired up with me, I'd seen something in his eyes—and it was blatantly obvious. He *is* attracted to me.

Now, as I slide from the chair, he extends a hand to me, and the invitation in his eyes is obvious. I'm afraid to take it.

“Linc!”

That smooth, husky voice is like honey and velvet. I wonder if she ever sings—she’d probably be amazing. Looking over as Ginny rushes up to us, I can’t decide if I’m relieved or irritated by her sudden appearance. She all but plasters herself to Linc, grabbing his upper arm and pressing in close, her breasts nearly spilling from her strapless top as she peers up at him.

“I’ve been looking all *over* for you. I just now read my messages and saw we won’t be paired up after all. I’m *heartbroken*. Come on, dance with me and explain this.”

“I’m getting ready to dance with Felicia,” Linc says, extricating himself with remarkable ease. He’s polite, but there’s a cool finality in his voice as he adds, “Talk to Seth if Layla can’t make it clear. He’ll make sure you understand.”

“But—” She reaches for him again.

Linc steps forward, out of her range, and takes my hand. I’m caught off-guard as he lifts it upward and presses a kiss to my lips.

“It feels years overdue asking this ... Felicia, will you dance with me?”

My breath catches in my chest. My heart hammers in my throat. I’m not entirely certain this is real. But as I move closer to Linc, I glimpse Brandt lingering nearby. Far too close. And he’s watching with malice in his gaze.

Yes. It’s real.

Linc sees my expression change, and he moves in closer.
“What is it?”

I shake my head. “Nothing. I’m fine. Come on, didn’t you ask me to dance?”

He leads me to the dance floor, tucked against his side like I’m somebody precious to him, somebody he wants to protect. I’m not used to it. I’m not a woman men want to protect. Seth, yes, but he’s my brother. That’s different.

Even as Linc pulls me into his embrace, his arms strong and warm around me, something about how he holds me conveys protectiveness and desire.

I shiver, longing washing over me. I’ve suppressed the feelings I’ve had for Linc for a long, long time, stopped thinking about them, stopped thinking about *him* because I wanted him too much, and then wanting those things became out of the question.

Even when I took back some of my sexuality, things were different. They still are. Would Linc even be able to accept what I needed, what I could take now?

His hand skims up my back. “You’re trembling.”

The words are soft, close to my ear.

“Nerves, I guess. I’m not cold.” I’m tempted to bury my head against his chest, but I meet his gaze and ask, “Why are you doing this?”

He has a hand low on my back. The design of my dress bares the skin; the feel of him touching me is shockingly intimate

and incredibly arousing.

“It’s obvious something happened between you and Brandt,” he says finally. “I won’t push, although I’m here if you want to listen. I...” He pauses a moment, then continues in a soft voice, “You know how and where I grew up. I saw too many guys who thought it was okay to use force to get what they wanted, Fae.”

My face colors hotly, and I look away. Linc is patient and says nothing.

Finally, I said, “I don’t want to talk about it. And Seth, he doesn’t know. I don’t want that changing.”

“I assumed as much.” The hand on my back makes another soothing sweep. “See, if Seth knew, Brandt wouldn’t be breathing, and your brother probably would have called me to help him bury the bastard.”

It startles a laugh out of me. “You’re a lawyer.”

“So is the Daredevil.”

The playful comment makes me look at him, and I’m surprised I can smile. He’s not. His eyes are locked on mine, burning and intense.

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” I say, forcing the words out.

“Of all the things I’ve felt for you, Felicia, pity’s never been one of them.”

My breath catches; there’s a look in his eyes, one that holds secrets, and the longer we look at each other, the more those

secrets reveal themselves.

I sway toward him.

His head lowers.

The microphone screeches.

Again.

I jolt backward instinctively.



Linc

GINNY'S GAZE FINDS MINE in the dim lighting, a determined look in her eyes as the music fades away. Even before she says anything, I know what's coming.

I see the satisfied smirk on Layla's face as she hooks her arm through Seth's. But she hasn't learned shit about me.

I don't give a damn about playing nice in public the way she seems to think I will.

Ginny announces, "It's time for all the couples in the wedding party to pair up: the bride and groom, maid of honor and best man, all the way down the line!"

Felicia stiffens, but I offer her my arm. "Come on. I'm ready for a break. Let's hit the lobby bar up."

She gapes at me. I smile wickedly. "I never was one to play nice with others, Fae. You can't have forgotten that about me."

Her lips bow upward in a slow smile, and she tucks her hand into the crook of my arm. We're near to the door when I hear Ginny calling my name, just barely, over the rising swell of

music. I don't stop. Brandt hovers on the edge of my vision, and I slant a look at him. He blanches at the sight of me and backpedals.

"He really doesn't like you," Felicia murmurs.

"Good." Once we're out of the banquet room, I pull my arm from hers, but when she goes to step away, I shift my hand to the small of her back, keeping her close.

She smells like some exotic flower, along with a hint of vanilla. It's an intoxicating blend, and I want more of it. I'm tempted to turn my face into her hair and breathe in that subtle scent, but I hold back, knowing she wouldn't like me to bury my face against her and just absorb her, inhale her like I'm trying to take her into my very cells.

Emotion and desire are a turbulent storm inside me. It's been hard keeping my distance from Felicia all these years, but the frustration I'd felt had forced me to do it. Now, angry at myself for not seeing how badly I'd misjudged her, I want to fix everything. But I know too well that some things just can't be fixed. You can only try to do better and apologize.

That apology would be hard to make and now wasn't the time or place.

"Lincoln!"

"She did not follow us out here," Felicia mutters under her breath.

Ginny's strident voice follows us as we come to a stop at the elevator bay, disproving Felicia's disbelieving comment.

Sighing, I stopped and turned to give Ginny a bland look.

“Didn’t you talk to Seth?” I ask pointedly.

She opens her mouth and closes it, and stark blotches of color paint her cheeks a vivid red. “It’s Linc, and we’re supposed to dance.”

“I don’t recall agreeing to that. I agreed to stand up with Seth at the wedding. Make a toast. I have to be in some pictures. That’s it.” Offering a cool smile, I shrug and add, “Beyond that, I agreed to nothing else. I certainly didn’t agree to dance with anybody, but with those I *choose* to dance with.”

“But ...” Her eyes jerk back and forth from Felicia to me; she steps forward and, in a low voice, adds, “People are *waiting* for us.”

“That’s your problem.” I shrug and guide Felicia back around so we’re facing the elevator. “Next time Layla thinks trying to goad me into behaving how she thinks I should act—or use one of her friends—with another display like that? She might want to reconsider.” I glance at Ginny over my shoulder. “I don’t give a fuck what any of you think.”

Ginny’s jaw drops open as the elevator bell chimes, announcing the car’s arrival. Felicia and I are inside a moment later, gliding down to the lobby floor.

“Do you want another drink?” I ask as we draw closer to the bar. “Or would you like to take a walk out on the beach?”

She doesn’t hesitate. “The beach.”

The night wraps around us, soft, a path to the beach stretching out in front of us, lined by solar torches.

“Layla will not let it go,” Felicia murmurs.

Unable to keep from touching her, I stroke a hand up her back. The open-back design of her halter dress leaves her spine bare. Her skin is silky soft and warm, tempting me to do more than touch. “Probably not. She can’t stand having somebody do things without consulting her.”

“This is rude, but I’m asking anyway—you *did* get Seth to sign a prenup, right?”

“The company and house are fairly safe,” I tell her. “The house belongs jointly to you and Seth; that’s not common knowledge, of course. And you and Seth both own 35% of the company.” Five years ago, I’d bought into the company, too, and owned 30% of it. Even if Seth passed away—unlikely—or ended up married to a gold digger who tried to take him for everything he was worth, the company wouldn’t likely end up in a vulnerable position. “I’m still advising him financially. He’s invested a fair amount of his liquid assets recently, so the bulk of his fortune isn’t just sitting in an account for her to play with.”

“And in all those words, I don’t hear *prenup*,” Felicia says, her tone dry and humorless.

“I’m handling it.” Giving her a grimace, I announce, “I keep telling him he needs it signed *before* the wedding. It should have already been done. I feel he’s approached her, and she keeps putting him off. So I’m talking to them both tomorrow.”

“I’d love to see her try to use the same tactics on you that she uses on my brother,” Felicia says lightly.

I grin. “Somehow, I don’t think they’ll be as effective.”

She laughs. The sound is warm and throaty and strokes over my skin, making me want to pull her to a stop so I can look into her eyes as I try to make her laugh again.

I don’t.

“How did they meet?” she asks.

“Golfing.”

She snorts. “Seth *hates* golfing.”

“I know. Seth was meeting a potential client, and she was there with somebody or another, and” I sigh, wishing I hadn’t brushed Seth off when he tried to talk me into going with him. But I hate golfing even more than he does. “They started talking when her group wanted to play through. One thing led to another.”

“And you’re still pissed off at yourself for not being with him and chasing her off,” Felicia murmurs.

I shoot her a dark look. She only smiles.

“What makes you think I wasn’t there?”

“Because she hung around.” Amusement dances in her gaze.

“You’re even scarier than me for chasing people away, Linc.”

“Only for certain people and only when they need the help,” I inform her.

She stops and moves to the side of the trail, settling on the nearby bench and bending over. I watch as she takes one shoe, then the other off, rotating her ankles, the toned muscles in her calves flexing with the movements.

“Seth needs a guardian angel more than most.” She tips her head back and smiles at me. “I’ve known nobody so determined to see the good in people, even to the point of their own detriment.”

The smile on her face is distracting—too distracting. My fingers itch to touch her full lower lip and the upper one, which is just slightly fuller than the bottom, giving her mouth a deliciously lopsided look. I’ve wanted to kiss her for longer than I like to think about.

The smile fades, and an apprehensive look enters her eyes, one I’m too familiar with—one *I’m* responsible for putting there.

Hoping to chase it away, I say, “Seth’s the angel, and I’m the devil. We’ve always been that way. Come on. Let’s get to the beach.”

I offer my hand. Felicia takes it, holding her heels by the straps, but she squeezes my fingers, her eyes solemnly locked with mine as she watches me. “You’re no devil, Linc. Maybe you play the devil’s advocate sometimes, but Seth needs that. You’ve always been there for him.”

I don’t know what to say to that. I’m not used to compliments. I don’t like them. Tugging on Felicia’s hand, I urge her to stroll with me as I fumble for words. She’s not expecting any, but I

feel like I owe her something after the antipathy of our interactions over the past few years.

“Seth’s my brother in everything but blood,” I finally say. “I’m there for him because he’s always been there for me.”

She squeezes my hand. “I know.” A wistful sigh escapes her. “I used to be jealous of the friendship between you two. Even as much as Seth spoiled me, I didn’t have that connection. I’d never had a friendship like that, and I envied it.”

“Past tense?” The pathway opened up just a few feet ahead. I glance over as we move onto the beach, wanting to see her face as she sees the way the fat, pale gleam of the moon shimmers off the waves as it slowly rises into the sky.

Her breath catches, and she whispers, “Whoa, how beautiful.”

“Yes.” But I’m looking at her, not the moon or the beach.

She’s too focused on the horizon to see. Maybe that’s for the better. Another minute passes before she answers my question. “It took me a while, but I found my circle of friends, so, yes, Linc. It’s past tense. Grace, my college roommate, for one.” A hint of a smile curves her lips, although there’s a tinge of sadness to it. “And Lucas, my old boss ... he and his wife Lo, they’ve become best friends over the past year. Lucas was always a friend, even when he didn’t want to admit it. But he’s changed since he met his wife. He’s not so guarded.”

It’s shitty that I feel jealous over the warmth I hear in her voice. I should be better than that, but I’m not. That’s not the only emotion, though. I’m unsettled. She’s only a couple of

years younger than me, and she's talking about the friendships she's made over the past couple of years and one she made after starting college.

I've been friends with Seth since the third grade. It hits me just now how much of her life she's spent alone. I'd aggravated that with my bitterness toward her over the past few years, castigating her outside of Seth's hearing, mocking her, and treating her with cool disregard over slights I'd *thought* she'd made. But she'd been off licking her wounds.

Fury boils in me, and I bury it deep before she can see.

"I think their party looks more fun than what's going on inside," Felicia murmurs.

I follow her gaze and see a bonfire a few hundred yards down the beach; people gathered around in small groups, some dancing, some eating. Strains of laughter and music float to us.

"Maybe we should join them," I say.

"I don't think." Felicia smiles, though.

"We can always dance right here."

She glances at me, and I tug her, sliding one arm around her waist, the other taking her hand. "Dance with me," I whisper, urging her closer.

She nods. The feel of her resting her head against my chest soothes something inside me I hadn't realized was gaping and raw. *She fits*, I think. She fits like she's made to be here with me.

There's a strange awareness in the back of my mind, one I don't want to think about right now because my thoughts are a mess, and I'm still struggling with the urge not to press for answers about Brandt.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" she asks softly.

I fist the hand I placed at the small of her back, my eyes locked on the dark water of the Pacific. "Am I not allowed to be nice?"

"You usually aren't. Not to me."

The words sound vulnerable, and she shakes her head even as I start mentally kicking myself. "Never mind. Forget I said that."

"No. You're right. I can be an asshole. I've been an asshole to you when I shouldn't have been," I reveal, the words coming out of my throat like broken gravel, rough. "I'm sorry."

"It's because of Seth." Her head is pressed to my chest, but I don't think it's out of some sudden romantic pining. She just doesn't want to look at me. "You're angry at me for not being there after our parents died."

"You always saw shit a little too easily," I mutter, my face hot. I'm glad the sun has set. The brilliance of the moon, only half-full, isn't enough for her to see how red my face has turned, and we're too far from the solar lanterns along the pathway.

"I wanted to be there for him."

"You don't owe me any explanations," I insist, smoothing my hand up her back, then down. She shivers.

Turning my face slightly toward hers, I ask, “Cold?”

She shakes her head in the negative, and I hear her breath catch.

“Good.”

Silence falls between us. We move together easily, our bodies perfectly aligned, the sleekly powerful lines of hers combined with the feminine curves so wildly sexy, that my blood pounds hotter, heavier. She moves in closer, and I clench my jaw while drumming up baseball stats and thinking about the talk I have to have with Seth the following day, anything to cool the blood trying to turn molten in my veins.

It doesn't work. The feel of Felicia swaying so close is almost too much. In desperation, I started on Shakespeare, the St. Crispin's Day speech I'd had to memorize my senior year of high school. We, a happy few, forming a band of brothers ...

“Linc?”

Her lips brush my neck as she turns her head and murmurs my name.

The light touch explodes through me like napalm, and I fist my hand in the material of her dress, right above the full curve of her ass. “Yeah?”

“Why haven't you asked me about Brandt?”

Just like that, the need twists me into knots and fades into the background, replaced by a deep, burning rage. Easing back, I meet Felicia's eyes.

“Do I really need to?”

Shame fills her expression. I suppress my rage to avoid the possibility of her misunderstanding its direction.

“Don’t,” I say, cupping her cheek and guiding her gaze back to mine when she looks away.

She doesn’t pretend to understand. She just looks at me with solemn eyes. The feel of her skin under my fingers is silken, soft and so, so warm.

Stroking my thumb along her strong, stubborn jawline, I watch her lips part.

When the heat floods her eyes, the need swims back over me so strongly I think I’ll drown in it.

I don’t want to drown alone. “Felicia?” I murmur.

Her lashes flutter.

“Tell me now if you don’t want me to kiss you.”

To my surprise, her lips bow up. “I wanted you to kiss me the first day we met.”

We stare at each other, and my heart pounds at the feminine awareness that burns in her lovely eyes. The shame from earlier and the uncertainty is gone, replaced by a sensual confidence that burns me all the way through. With a groan, I lower my head and rub my lips over hers, a quick, light caress.

Her mouth parts. Unable to resist the invitation, I trace my tongue over her lower lip, then the upper one. She’s soft. I capture her moan with a deeper kiss as I pull her more fully

against me. As her arms come around my neck, a heady, certain sureness settles over me.

This is something I should have done a long, long time ago.



Felicia

“DANCE WITH ME.”

Linc’s request leaves my head spinning, although not as much as the press of his body against mine as he pulls me closer. It’s like every dream I’ve ever had has come to life right here, right now. We’re swaying on a beach lit by moonlight as the waves of the Pacific Ocean crash into the sand just a few away. The music from the fire, maybe thirty yards away, drifts to us softly in the air, and the warmth of his breath teases the strands of my hair as his cheek presses to my temple.

His body is hard against mine, but I don’t feel any fear.

How can I?

It’s Linc.

He’s everything I’ve ever wanted and every dream I’ve made myself let go because I know he’ll never want me.

The hand at the small of my back clenches into a fist, then slowly relaxes, and I feel the tension in his body—a tension

that sets my body to singing because I know what caused it. *He wants me.* My heart stutters in my chest, only to clench painfully as something occurs to me.

Maybe this is just a game to him. Maybe he just has an itch, and I'm handy.

Maybe—

The question blurts out before I can stop it. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

The hand at my back clenches again as his chest rises, then falls into an erratic rhythm.

“Am I not allowed to be nice?” It comes out in a husky rumble that dances over my skin like a caress.

“You usually aren't. Not to me.” My voice sounds small, and immediately, I regret voicing them. Hating myself for showing that weakness, I shake my head. “Never mind. Forget I said that.”

“No. You're right. I can be an asshole. I've been an asshole to you when I shouldn't have been.”

He's grown even more tense, but it's different now. I recognize this tension, too. He's angry, although not at me. It's strange how easily I can read him, how easily I can understand his moods. Or maybe not. I've known him for almost half my life.

“I'm sorry.”

“It's because of Seth.” I don't know why I'm saying it. It's a truth I've been aware of it for years, one I acknowledged once

I finally emerged from the cocoon of guilt, grief, and shame following the attack that changed the shape of my life. “You’re angry at me for not being there after our parents died.”

“You always saw shit a little too easily.”

He’s clearly uncomfortable now. I wish I hadn’t brought it up, but there’s no way to turn the clock back now. Swallowing, I whisper, “I wanted to be there for him.”

“You don’t owe me any explanations.” He rubs his cheek against me, his hand stroking my back in a slow, steady sweeps.

The soothing caresses send a shiver through me. Linc’s lips brush against my cheek as he turns his face to mine. “Cold?”

Far, far from it. I shake my head, unable to speak to tell him no—at least not without whimpering. How did this wave of need come on so fast? And how did I handle it?

“Good.”

We continue to move, my body all but melting against his, with no conscious decision on my part as I seek to get closer. My breasts feel heavy. I want to pull at the buttons of his shirt and push away his clothes until I feel nothing but hard, warm skin. I bury my face against his shirt and make myself breathe through the fog of need clouding my head.

There are too many unspoken things between us, too much history. Some part of me still waits for those questions. Linc hasn’t asked a single one.

He will. Right?

As confusion and want to wage war inside me, I shove the need to the side and focus. “Linc?”

The hand resting right above my butt suddenly tightens on the material of my dress, and his body turns hard as iron.

“Yeah?”

“Why haven’t you asked me about Brandt?”

A harsh breath escapes him, and then there’s distance between us—and not just physical. I’d just thrown ice water on the palpable, hot sexual tension that had crept up on us in a way I’d never expected.

He stares at me with searing intensity, a muscle jerking in his cheek. “Do I really need to?”

My cheeks turn red, and I avert my gaze. Linc's hand cups my cheek and guides my face back around until we’re looking at each other once more.

“Don’t.”

He’s looking at me with a gentleness he rarely shows as he strokes along the line of my jaw. A gasp stutters free, and the need is back just like that. And damn it all to hell; I see the same desire echoing back at me when I stare into his eyes.

“Felicia, tell me now if you don’t want me to kiss you.”

Blunt honesty has always been a fatal flaw of mine, and the truth comes spilling out of me. “I wanted you to kiss me the first day we met.”

A deep, rumbling groan emanates from him as he lowers his head. I lean in and meet him as he rubs his lips over mine, the caress over with almost before it begins; but then he offers another, his tongue sweeping over my lower lip as my mouth parts.

He grips my upper arms and pulls me firmly against him, adjusting his grasp once I'm pressed fully to him, one arm banding around my waist, the other cradling the back of my skull. It's a possessive, protective embrace — one I'd typically never allow. I like the feel of his arms around me, like the feel of him, and I move closer, curling my arms around his neck, desperate to get ever closer.

Another hungry sound of masculine need rumbles out of him; it makes my nerve endings sing while things inside me go hot and damp. I clench my thighs and rock my hips forward, seeking the heavy length of his cock as it presses into my belly. He's huge, and I can feel how he's pulsating, throbbing —ready for me through his clothing.

I moan and tangle my hand in his hair, the other sliding to his waist, nails pricking at his skin through the fine material of his dress shirt. His response is electric. He shoves his fingers into my hair, sending the dark strands spilling free, while the other hand skims up my side to palm my breast.

Somewhere down the beach, a child's high-pitched shriek of laughter slices through the air, and the spell shatters. Just like that, it's too much. There's too much sensation. His hands are too hard; there's too much contact on my skin.

I wrench away, breathing hard as sensory memories try to well up from the back of my mind and take me over.

“Felicia?”

Stumbling back, I shake my head. He reaches out a hand.

“No,” I whisper, feeling foolish and weak.

He ignores me, stroking a soothing hand down my back. I hate how good it feels. I want to turn into him and let him keep calming me until I feel ready to continue.

“I should get back,” I announce, the words coming out stilted and harsh.

“I’ll walk you.”

“I’m tired.”

“Then I’ll make sure you get to your room.”

Meeting his gaze, finally braced for pity or sympathy, I find him looking at me with the lingering embers of need and determination. His face softens just a touch, and he reaches up and cradles my cheek.

“Come on,” he murmurs. “Let me walk you to your room. I’ll promise to be a gentleman, even.”

The playful comment startles a laugh out of me, and when he holds out his hand, I accept. This was the Linc I’d seen during those years after I first met Seth—the Linc I’d fallen for. In all honesty, this is the Linc I’d do better off avoiding because I don’t need to tumble head over heels in love with him—not

again. But I've never been able to resist that crooked, charming smile.



Linc

WE WALK BACK TO the hotel side by side, close but not touching. I want to take Felicia's hand, but there's a guardedness to her now that holds me back. I'm on edge, too. My head is spinning from the heat that exploded between us.

I want to say something, but I'm not sure what *to* say—*hey, maybe I shouldn't have been such an ass all these years* doesn't exactly seem to cover it.

“Mr. Linc! Mr. Linc!”

The pint-sized girl with light brown skin and eyes of startling green-gold hurtling up the pathway toward us has both Felicia and me going still. In a low voice, Felicia murmurs, “Mr. Linc?”

“Talk to her mom. I keep saying *Linc* is fine, but Shayera won't hear of it.”

“Shayera ... Shay's here?” Pleasure fills her voice.

“Doing the cake. That’s the one thing—aside from earlier—that your brother put his foot down on.” I grin at her just before swooping down and grabbing the little girl in my arms. “Hello, Marisol. Where’s your mom and dad?”

“Talking to mi abuela. They’re talking about mi tío. Again,” Marisol says, linking her arms around my neck and grinning back at me. She slides flawlessly back and forth between English and Spanish. Her eyes land on Felicia assessing her; then she leans in and whispers in Spanish, “Who is that?”

“Me llamo Felicia,” Felicia replies with a barely hidden smile, although it’s shining in her eyes. “Cómo estás, Marisol?”

Marisol’s eyes widen, and then she talks in a rapid-fire Spanish I can barely keep up with. “How do you know my name? You speak Spanish very well. Are you Mexican? Are you Senor Linc’s girlfriend? Are you friends with the bride?”

Felicia is laughing by the time Marisol pauses for a breath.

“I’m actually friends with your mamá,” she responds, pronouncing with the same accent Marisol used. “We were in school together. Seth is my older brother.”

“You’re Felicia!” Her eyes get even bigger. “You’re the weightlifter! You’re strong like She-Hulk!”

“I don’t know if I’m that strong.” Felicia smiles, her eyes warm and gentle as she strokes a hand over Marisol’s small, sturdy shoulder. “I haven’t seen your mamá.”

“She’s working on the cake.” She looks around, then leans toward Felicia. “Can I tell you a secret?”

Felicia nods.

“I don’t think my mamá likes the woman your brother is marrying. But she makes a *lot* of money making fancy cakes; she likes your brother, so she would not say no.” Marisol scrunched up her face. “I don’t like the woman, either. Don’t tell anybody.”

Soberly, Felicia crosses her heart. “I won’t tell anybody, I promise.”

Marisol tucks her head against my chest. “Thank you.”

“Mari!”

She tenses and lifts her head guiltily. “Uh oh.”

“I think that’s your dad,” I tell her.

Marisol tightens her arms around me, clinging like a limpet. “I just wanted to say hi, Uncle Linc. I haven’t seen you in *forever*.”

“Yes, I know. All of four weeks since your birthday party.”

“That’s an entire month!”

“Marisol,” a familiar voice says on the heels of her dramatic statement. “What did I tell you about running off here?”

I look up at Jorge, the girl’s father, and one of our top tech people. He’d met Shayera at one of Seth’s cookouts maybe eight years ago; they’d been married less than six months later, the two falling head over heels. Marisol was born less than a year later, and Jorge became close friends with Seth.

“I didn’t run off, papá.” Marisol stays cuddled against me, her voice softening to the sweet, coaxing tone she uses to try and get out of trouble. “I saw Mr. Linc. I had to come to say hi. He misses me.”

Jorge’s gaze slides to me, the dark brown glinting with humor, but his voice stays firm as he says, “Mi bebé. Don’t charm your way out of a scolding with me. If you had to rush off, you could have taken one minute to tell me where you were going. What if you were hurt or somebody tried to grab my little girl?”

“I’m sorry.”

She reaches for him. I turn the child over to him, a familiar tightening in my chest as I see them hug each other. This ache is one I’ve gotten used to over the past couple of years, even if it’s one I’d never expected to experience, not after my childhood.

“It’s okay, Marisol, but remember, you can’t run off like that.” Jorge strokes a gentle hand down his daughter’s back before looking at me with a weary smile. “She will run us both ragged, I swear.”

His eyes shift to Felicia, and recognition flickers there.

“Hello, Jorge.” She smiles at him. I remember that she’d been at Shay’s wedding. There’s some brief memory of Seth mentioning that she’d been planning to attend the baby shower Shay’s friends had thrown when the other woman was pregnant with Marisol several years ago. They had invited me. Seth told me I could go with him; some of our other friends

had gone, but what the hell did I know about babies? I'd sent a gift instead, picked out by my assistant.

My main reason for not going had been the woman next to me, not that I'd ever admit it. Now, I regret all the times I'd avoided places where she would be. If I'd spent even ten minutes talking to her, would I have realized what a dumbass I was sooner?

"Excuse me, I'm worn out..."

"Of course, Felicia. Have a good night."

I look up, focusing on their faces, as I realize I'd zoned out, missing something important.

Felicia gives me a puzzled look.

"I'm sorry. My mind was wandering." I admit.

"I was just telling you both good night. I'm exhausted." She offers a hesitant smile. I feel she's expecting me to rebuff her, as I've done a hundred times over the years.

"I can walk you," I say.

"No." She smiles, the expression in her eyes softening. "I'll be fine."

"I want to—"

"Hey, Linc!"

I curse under my breath as I look over to see two groomsmen heading my way.

Felicia smiles and shakes her head. "I'll see you later."

“Wait,” I tell her.

But she’s already walking away, up the curving path of stone toward the hotel, the solar torches lighting the way.

Eyes on her back, I wait for the guys to reach me.

“Hey, buddy, you got a minute?”

“Just one,” I reply, still watching Felicia. I see movement from the corner of my eye: somebody is breaking away from the party.

“We were wondering about trying to sneak off with Seth tomorrow,” Duncan says, wicked humor in his voice. “One last party for the man.”

“He won’t like it.” I shoot him a hard look. “He’s already made that clear. If you want to find a strip bar, do it on your own.”

I look back just as the shadow makes its way close enough to the light for me to see who it is—Brandt. “Excuse me.”

They’re still protesting, only for Jorge to shut them down. “Hey, mind the little ears, guys.”

I ignore them, lengthening my stride just as Brandt hits the pathway halfway between Felicia and me. She was a few feet from the hotel entrance, but I cut between him and her and flashed him a toothy smile.

“Going somewhere?”

He stiffens at the sight of me, the smug smile in his eyes dying a quick death as wariness appears.

“Hey, Linc.” He tries for a smile and manages, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Guess you got your way after all, huh? You always could wrap Seth around your finger.”

“Nah. We’re just best friends who respect each other; that’s not something a piece of shit like you would understand.” Crossing my arms over my chest, I narrow my eyes. “Why are you trying to tag after Felicia—again—after she’s made it clear she wants nothing to do with you?”

Fine lines form next to his eyes before he curls his lip in a sneer. “Felicia is just fucking around with me. Me and her, we’ve got a lot of history.”

A slimy smugness to his words makes me want to pound him into the dirt. Shooting out a hand, I fist it in his shirt and haul him close. He opens his mouth, surprise sputtering out.

“Be quiet,” I warn him. “Otherwise, I drag Seth into this conversation. I don’t think you want him knowing just *why* Felicia doesn’t want you near her.”

The color drains out of his face, confirming my suspicions. I’d never betray Felicia's trust, though. He recovers quickly, but not quickly enough.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.” He grabs onto my wrist and pulls. “Stop being a fucking thug. I thought you grew out of that—or is it just something you can’t leave behind?”

“Keep pushing, Turner, and you’ll find out,” I warn with a menacing smile.

The color Brandt had regained fades away again. “What the fuck do you want, Ransom?” he asks. “You want a go at her? She’s mediocre but fine. Have it your way—dude, what the *fuck*—?”

Threads in his expensive shirt tear as I haul him to his toes. “Shut your mouth,” I breathe. “Before I decide to shut it for you.”

He shuts up.

“Smart move. Now, here’s how it’s going to be, Turner. You’ll stay away from Felicia—not just for the duration of the time we’re here—but *period*. I’ll destroy you if I even hear a whisper that you’ve been near her.”

“You ain’t got that much power.” Turner’s lip curls. “And if you lift a finger toward me, I’ll have you hauled in for assault.”

“You really want to do that?” I ease my grip on him, smiling. “Imagine the story I’ll tell and what I might say to Seth to explain why I was so furious with you and what I know about the shit you did to Felicia.”

Blood turns his face a furious shade of red.

“You fucking piece of—”

I shake him slightly.

“Who do you think he’ll listen to?” I ask, smiling with menace. “And if he asks Felicia, you really think she can lie to *him*? His best friend and his beloved little sister, Turner. You’ll be history. And if he doesn’t beat you into a pulp, you’ll never

work anywhere in the industry again by the time he's destroyed you. Not once he's done."

Sweat beaded on Brandt's brow, his eyes too wide, too dark.

"I think you get the picture." Releasing him, I clap him on the face almost companionably. Anybody watching will think I'm showing an old friend affection.

Brandt flinches under the touch. We're old *acquaintances*, not friends; he knows me far too well.

"Stay away from her, Turner," I say again. "And I'll stay away from you. Otherwise..."

I give him one last smile, letting all the bitter anger I feel show through. He backs away, not speaking a word. He also doesn't turn away until there's a good ten feet between us. I watch him until he's back at the pavilion where the party continues, music thumping and lights pulsing.

Turning, I look at the hotel. Felicia is no longer in sight. Pulling my phone out, I dial a number I've known by heart for years.

"Hello?"

"I just wanted to make sure you got to your room okay," I tell her.

"I'm still walking down the hallway to get to my elevator," she says with a sigh. "I'm in the tower farther from the wedding pavilion. The good news is maybe I'll see less of Layla and her screeching friends."

I chuckle. “Maybe I should see if there’s a room open in that tower, too.”

“Can I tell you a secret?” she says in an echo of Marisol’s words.

“Only if I can tell you mine after.”

She laughs. “I really don’t like the bride.”

“Neither do I.” I blow out a breath. “I’ve never wanted to shake sense into Seth as much as I have over the past few months.”

“I know.” Her frustration comes through loud and clear. “I feel the same. But he has to figure this out for himself. There’s nothing we can do to make him see it. He’d resent us in the long run.”

A soft chiming sound echoes over the phone. “You at the elevator?”

“Yes. One thing is certain: I won’t have to worry. I’m not getting in enough walking while I’m here.”

I laugh and look down at the expanse of gleaming white towers. “You’re in the far tower? They sure as hell put you out of the way, didn’t they?”

“Yes. I suspect it was intentional. But I’m fine with it. I really *don’t* want to mingle with anybody. I can visit my brother back home—and I will. Layla will have to deal with me whether or not she likes it. I’m not looking to socialize or play nice with her or her friends. I’ll visit with Seth and the others I know on my terms, but that’s it.”

“You got Shay’s number, right? She’ll want to see you.”

“I have it. It’s been, hell, probably a year or more since I’ve seen her, though. I’ve been so busy with CI.”

We keep a quiet, steady stream of chatter until she’s in her room.

“Get some rest,” I tell her. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Linc.”

I wait for her to speak.

“Thank you ... for everything today. I appreciate it.”

“There’s no need to thank me, Fee,” I respond. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Let me know when you’re up and moving so we can hook up.”

“You don’t have to walk over every minute of the weekend.”

“And what if I want to spend time with you?” I keep my tone casual, but the desire burns inside me. I wasted too much time already. I’m not wasting another minute, not if I don’t have to.

“Unless you don’t want that.”

“I ... no. I enjoy spending time with you,” Felicia confesses, her voice husky.

“Good. What room are you in? Maybe I can meet you up there, and we’ll see about breakfast.”

She tells me, and a strange, heady warmth fills me. “Text me when you wake up.” Ending the call, I head back to the pavilion, although all I plan to do is tell Seth good night.

I smile to find him in the middle of the dance floor with Marisol holding his hands as they dance, grinning at each other. I skim the periphery of the outdoor venue automatically. I don't see Brandt. Layla's at the opposite end from where I stand; she casts a casual look around before slipping out. That look is a little *too* casual, though, and I'm suspicious.

Curious, I ease back in the edges of the crowd and circle the pavilion, catching sight of her just as she would have disappeared into the garden ahead.

I stay far enough back and in the shadows off the path that she won't see me if she looks back, but Layla never does. Moving forward with a sense of purpose, she rarely displays around Seth.

I wait outside the garden before entering, listening until the echo of her shoes on the bamboo path fades before entering the carefully landscaped area myself. I tiptoe out of habit, even in my dress shoes. As a child, they had scolded me more than once for being too loud and waking a stoned parent, so I learned to be silent at an early age.

They don't hear me.

"Dumb bitch, interfering like this."

"I don't know why you wanted to hook up with her *anyway*. She's a fucking cow."

"Matter ... you wanted, Lay ... and that ... Linc."

"Be okay ... wedding ... will ...relax."

I miss half the conversation, but I recognize the voices. Brandt is the other person. There's a familiarity between them I've never noticed when they speak around me and Seth. What the fuck?

I retreat, already pulling my phone from my pocket. I check the time and hesitate for less than fifteen seconds before putting the call through.

"Damn it, Ransom," the husky female voice says. "You know how late I was up last night?"

"Do you know how much your retainer is?" I reply.

"Yeah, yeah. What does Appleton need from me?" Aurora Maynard, a top-notch private investigator, no longer sounds sleepy.

"Actually, I'll be the one hiring you. I'll pay the hourly fee plus a 10% bonus if you get me anything relevant before Sunday."

There's a brief pause before she asks, "Is this about the wedding?"

"Yes."

She huffs out a breath. "I've already investigated the bride, man. There wasn't much of anything there."

"Look again. I just overheard her having a little chat with Brandt Turner. I couldn't hear much, but something has me uneasy."

“Turner ... he works for AE, right?” Her pause is a minute before she pushes on. “Okay, I’ll look again. No promises, though.”

“Just do what you can. That will be enough.”

I slide the phone away and return to the pavilion. I’m there less than five minutes before Layla reappears. Brandt doesn’t.

On the off chance that he goes hassle Felicia, I catch Seth’s eye and wave at him, mouthing, “Turning in.”

He smiles and nods, moving toward his fiancée with a warm smile. That he can’t see how devoid of genuine warmth hers is drives me crazy, but Felicia is right. He has to see this for himself. I have to know where the fuck Brandt is. Just to make sure.

It takes less than ten minutes to find him in the bar, pounding back whiskey with a determination that tells me he’s not leaving soon. When he does, he’ll be too drunk to do much more than stagger to his room and pass out.

Still, I head to the front desk and after talking to the night manager; I get moved to the far tower, just a few doors down from Felicia’s. When he offers to have the bellhop move my stuff, I take him up on it, a knot loosening in my chest.

Now, hopefully, I can sleep tonight.



Felicia

“JUST OUT OF CURIOSITY,” I murmur to Linc as Seth tries to soothe Layla. Again. “How many *practice sessions* do we need to do for this wedding? This isn’t Princess Di’s wedding, you know.”

“You want to be the one to tell her that?”

He slides me a wicked grin that hits me in all kinds of funny ways.

I smile. “Is that a challenge?”

I push off the wall. Linc grabs me before I take more than two steps, hauling me back with a smothered laugh. “Don’t you dare!”

He has his arm around my upper chest, and now I’m trapped with my back to his torso. I can feel his body vibrating with suppressed laughter. The rest of the wedding party looked at us, the groomsmen mildly interested, but the bridesmaids all irritated. They’ve been trying to be supportive, but we’ve already run through the wedding *five times*. The minister is

sitting down, waving a fan back and forth in front of his face — a silk fan with an Asian design I keep in my bag. Considering that he’s a solid six foot three and probably weighs over two-fifty, it’s a sight, seeing him fluttering a pretty, delicate fan in front of him, but his face had been getting so red and flushed earlier that I’d been worried.

Seth had already intervened and told Layla there was no reason for the minister to practice *his* walk repeatedly—she’d already had him do it three times. Now Bill, the minister, is sipping ice water and trying to cool off. It’s not overly hot to me, but I’m not wearing all black.

Tempers are getting short, and I’m hungry.

“You’re no fun,” I say in a soft voice, just as Ginny whips her head around to glare at us.

“We’re not *here* to have fun,” she hisses. “We’re here—”

“What are you bitching about?” Layla snaps from a few feet away.

I look over and inwardly wince. She’s in front of her best friend, face flushed and eyes wide.

“You’re not having *fun*?”

“No, of course, I’m having fun, Layla.” Ginny reaches out to hug her friend.

Layla slaps her hands away—hard. Ginny gapes at her.

“Enough,” I say before I think it through. “She was talking to me. I was grumbling under my breath about how many times

we'd practiced already. I'm hot, and I'm hungry. Ginny was just tired of listening, and she was standing up for you. You should treat your friends better."

Several people suck in their breath. Layla shoves past Ginny, her eyes furious. Seth gets between us.

"Enough, Layla. We've had enough run-throughs of the ceremony. We've got to do another tomorrow indoors, anyway, in case it rains." He has his hands on her shoulders.

She's actually trying to get around him. It would be funny if the whole mess wasn't so ridiculous. Talk about a Bridezilla. Layla yells at Seth. He has a look of long-suffering patience on his face, and when she pauses for breath, he shoots Linc a familiar look.

Linc takes my hand and squeezes. I get the message, too.

Linc, voice carrying, calls out, "Okay, everybody. We're done for the morning. Go eat, do whatever. You've got the itinerary, so you know when we're meeting up again. Let's give the bride and groom some space."

"No, Seth!" Layla's all but crying.

Seth wraps his arm around her. "Come on, honey. Let's go for a walk on the beach. Or do you want to go shopping, just you and me?"

"I ..." Her plaintive cry is like an ice pick.

I grit my teeth and move over to the minister. "Brother Bill, would you like to walk up to the hotel with Linc and me?" I offer my hand.

“Why, yes, that sounds lovely.” His smooth, dark face is gleaming in the bright morning sunshine. He darts a look at Layla and Seth before accepting my hand. Once he’s on his feet, he tucks my hand into the crook of his arm. Linc falls into step next to us as we head to the hotel.

“Tell me what you’ve been up to the past few years, Felicia. I haven’t seen you around much.”

I mentally cringe, not really up for a conversation with the man who’d run the church where my mom and stepfather had attended church, but there’s no getting out of it.

Filling the silence with talk about my job and a couple of authors I figure he’ll find interesting. I breathe a sigh of relief once we’re inside, and he says he’s going to retire to his room for a nice nap. Behind us, I hear Brandt talking to one bridesmaid, his voice scraping over my nerves and leaving them raw.

Linc seems to know exactly what’s wrong. He takes my hand and tugs me farther away. “Any plans now that we’ve gotten away from the Royal wedding?” he teases.

I roll my eyes, but I can’t quite hide the smile.

“A shower to wash off the sweat. Then...” Huffing out a breath, I shrug. “Honestly, I planned to spend as much time as possible in my room, working.”

“Deadline?”

I bite my lip and slant a look at him. “Honestly...?”

“No.” In a sober voice, he adds, “Lie to me. Please.”

I laugh, amazed at how easy it is to do with him. Here. I'd been dreading coming to this wedding, seeing Brandt—even seeing him and having to fight how I've always been drawn to him. And now, my cheeks heat, and I avert my gaze. “Honestly, there's nothing so pressing I have to work the entire time I'm here. I just told everybody that because I didn't want to risk running into Brandt more than necessary. That's awful, isn't it?”

“It sounds smart to me.” He took my hand and stroked his thumb over the back. “But it's not a problem now. So, how about we have lunch together?”

“I'd like that.”

We make our way in silence to the far tower. Yesterday, I learned that he had been moved closer to me and had been waiting for me before going to breakfast.

So far, Brandt hadn't so much as come within five feet of me outside the wedding rehearsals, and that only been in the company of others. He hadn't spoken to me at all.

There have been some looks. I'm not convinced Brandt has decided to completely let go of whatever fucked up obsession he's developed, and I have to figure out what I'm going to do about it. But I know that as long as Linc is nearby, Brandt won't come near me.

Something hot and angry is growing inside me—a rage I should have dealt with years ago. But I don't want to be angry right now. I want to spend time with the man I've always

wanted. I do not know how long this will last, and I want to enjoy it while I can.

We reach my room way too soon, and I glance up and smile. “I won’t need long.”

Our gazes catch and lock, and then he dips to my mouth. My breath catches.

One of us moves forward.

I think it’s me. We’re kissing, and I tangle my hand in Linc’s hair, fist my free one in the loose linen of his shirt, rising onto my toes to get closer. His tongue traces over the entrance to my mouth, and I open for him. He growls when I suck on him, then shudders when I nip and bite. I haven’t been this hungry from a man in, maybe ever.

He pulls me closer, and I pivot, turning so I can push him against the door to my room. Somebody’s laughing. We break apart just as the door two down from mine opens.

“You have your room key?” Linc asks in a voice that’s remarkably calm, considering we’d just been wrapped around each other.

“If I didn’t lose it.” With a blank smile and my heart rising, I check my purse and find it in the outer pocket. “Twenty minutes?”

He moves closer and presses a kiss to my temple. “Make it thirty. I have something I need to take care of.”

Against my hip, I feel the hard, urgent press of his erection, and I barely swallow my groan. “Same,” I whisper weakly.

“Fuck.” The word comes out low and taut only moments before a couple passes us by, chatting about a luau they were planning to attend. As we break apart, his eyes meet mine, and they’re smoldering, so alight with heat that I’m surprised we don’t ignite right there. I cut around him and unlocked my door with my keycard. As I slip inside, I look back at him. He’s standing there, still watching me.

My mouth goes dry.

I want more than anything to ask him in.

But I don’t dare.

Not yet.



Linc

“IT’S GOING TO RAIN,” Felicia calmly says as Layla glares at the pretty young woman she’d asked to sing a solo during the wedding.

“We’re *fine*, Felicia. It won’t rain for another half hour. I checked the weather.” Layla doesn’t bother looking at us, Her gaze is locked on the nervous teenage girl she’d introduced as her cousin, a freshman in college who was singing in lieu of a traditional wedding march. “*Again*, Sienna. Try to sound like you know *how* to sing this time.”

“Layla, enough,” Seth warns in a tight voice. He looks at Sienna and smiles. “You sound lovely, Sie. Can you do it once more?”

She nods jerkily as the wind whips her hair into her eyes. Layla turns on her heel and stomps back to where the arbor is for the wedding. Felicia’s frustrated sigh makes me want to wrap my arm around her and cuddle her close.

The only reason I don't try is because the wedding photographer is going around snapping pictures; she's already taken a few pictures of us, and Layla yelled at her a few minutes ago that *she* was the fucking bride, not Felicia.

Seth's temper is finally about to snap, and although I'm happy to see that myself, the photographer needs no more of Layla's attitude.

"Why are we going through this outside again?" Ginny grumbles as Sienna sings.

Ginny seems as irritated with her best friend at this point as everybody else. Maybe there's hope for her.

"Because the princess has spoken." That comes from one groomsman, and both Felicia and I share a look, our lips twitching on a smile that almost turns into a laugh. Then the wind kicks up just as Sienna's voice hits a high note.

A fat drop of rain falls and lands square on Felicia's nose, and she hisses out a breath. "That was a short half hour."

I grin and look at her, then up at the sky. Another drop falls and hits me straight in the eye.

"Layla ..." Seth says warily, and the sky opens up.

Layla screeches and takes off, running for the hotel, the rest of us behind her. Felicia and I quickly passed her. Felicia had already kicked off her dressier shoes, as had several of the bridesmaids, although Layla had insisted on practicing in a pair of heels despite the sand. I glance back and see Seth steady her when she wobbles; then she stops to fight with her

shoes as Sienna darts around her, carrying her heels and looking like she's torn between laughter and tears.

I send the girl a quick wink, and she gives me a grateful smile. We all get inside before Seth and Layla, although Felicia and I linger by the door, completely soaked. Several hotel employees are there, offering towels and asking after each guest as we enter.

Layla snaps, "Of course, I'm not alright!"

"We're fine," Seth says, speaking over her, his hand on her arm just above her elbow. "Let's get you changed, babe." His jawline is grim, and he jerks a head at me.

I recognize the look and nod, moving toward the staff, already pulling my wallet out. After giving each employee a tip for their help and doubling the cash for the one Layla had snarled at, I looked at Felicia. Everybody else has left. She shivers in the chilled air. I pull her against me, accepting another towel from the apologetic employee closest to us.

"Don't apologize," Felicia says with a reassuring smile. "You're not in control of the weather, despite what Bridezilla thinks."

The guy's eyes widen. So do Felicia's.

"Crap. I said that out loud, didn't I?"

"I heard nothing, ma'am," he replies, his eyes bright with humor.

"Me, neither," I tell them. "I've got water in my ears. Let's go take care of that, Fae."

She grins at me, a faint flush to her cheeks. She keeps shivering as we make our way to the elevator that services our tower, and I rub her arm, trying to warm her. Lightning flickers outside the large windows in the lobby atrium as we pass through, followed by a boom of thunder, and she jolts, then laughs a little.

“You wanna bet Layla’s bitching about the storm she didn’t order?”

“She bitches about everything,” I say, shrugging. “No fun in a bet like that.”

It’s several more minutes before we get to our floor. Felicia’s hands are shaking, so I take her purse and pull out the keycard from where she keeps it in the exterior pocket.

Swiping it over the electronic lock, I wait for the light.

Nothing.

I try again.

Felicia groans.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she mumbles.

“Afraid not.” I nuzzle her temple as I pull out my wallet and remove the keycard I tucked inside earlier.

My door opens easily, and I step aside, offering her a reassuring smile. “You want to come in and call the front desk? I can wait here with the door open.”

“You don’t have to keep the door open.” Her cheeks pinked slightly, but her eyes met mine. “I trust you, Linc.”

The words did something to me. I can't stop myself from stroking a hand down Felicia's back as she eases past me to enter.

"Let me get you a blanket. You're freezing."

"I'm fine," she protests.

Ignoring her, I whip the comforter off the bed and tuck it around her as she calls down to the desk about her room key. She rolls her eyes at me, then smiles and tucks her head against my chest as she speaks on the phone, the conversation brief. Once she's done, she hangs up and then cuddles closer.

"It will probably be a few minutes."

"I guess I can handle having you all wet and pressed against me for a few," I say with a feigned sigh.

"Hmm. I can try to distract you." She kisses my neck and shivers. "How are you so warm?"

I take her mouth and kiss her; the touch is lazy and sweet at first. It turns hotter and heavier, and it happens fast. Before either of us realizes it, we're against the wall; the blanket catches her shoulders while we gorge on each other. Her hands jerk at my shirt while I pull her skirt up and fill my hands with the rich curve of her hips and the plump, firm roundness of her ass: sleek, toned muscle and soft skin, such a sexy, delicious combination.

"Your ass, Fae," I mutter against her neck. "I want to worship this fucking ass."

She bites my lower lip. "Stop talking. Kiss me."

I groan as she tangles a hand in my hair, her nails scraping over my scalp. Desperate for more soft, silken skin, I slide my free hand up over her waist and cup her breast. She arches just as a knock sounds on the door. We break apart, breathing hard and staring at each other. I open the door. I'm vaguely aware of her wrapping back in the blanket, furtively tugging at her clothes.

"ID?" the security employee asked briskly.

Felicia pulled out her license and handed it over wordlessly. He glanced at it, typed something into his computer, then passed her a keycard. "Room 318. Elevators are to the left."

With that, he turned away, back to his paperwork. I looked at Felicia hopefully, wanting to continue our earlier lighthearted banter, but her posture was tense now, her gaze distracted. Something about the curt interaction with the guard had put her on edge, making it clear our intimate moment was over. The ease between us had vanished as quickly as the guard himself.

My blood is so hot, it's a miracle steam isn't rising from my skin.

My dick is so hard it hurts.

But I stay where I am.

"We're moving too fast, aren't we?" It's harder than hell to keep my voice level.

"I ..." She swallows and looks away.

"It's okay, Felicia," I whisper. "I don't want to rush you."

A strangled laugh escapes. “I’m *fine* with rushing, Linc. I’ve wanted you for so long that it’s like an itch inside me. One that never goes away.” Then she looks at me, and her eyes are dark and lost. “But you don’t understand something. I’m fucked up inside. Really fucked up. I’m sorry.”

“No.”

Her jaw goes tight.

“You are *not* fucked up inside,” I say.

“You don’t *know*—”

“I’m not saying you don’t have scars and pain.” I hold up my hands, hoping like hell I can find the right words here because she matters. She matters so much, and she always has. “I *know* Brandt hurt you. You don’t have to tell me when, how, or what he did. But I know.”

She flinches, and I ease closer and catch her face in my hands, ready for her to break away. She doesn’t, and I slowly and carefully lower my mouth to press a kiss to her forehead, then her nose, each closed eyelid, before nuzzling my lips over hers.

“If you need a room, I’ll give you room. But you’ve always been inside me, Felicia. And now that we’ve finally found each other, I don’t want to let this go. I don’t want to let *you* go. Not if you feel anything like what I’m feeling.”

Her breath catches in her throat, and her voice stutters, “Linc...”

She shudders, then drops the blanket and grabs onto my waist,
her fingers digging in.



Felicia

HE FEELS SO HOT under my hands, the damp material of his shirt an unwanted barrier, that I want to tear away so I can touch him without restriction. But I swallow and force myself to speak.

“Being with me ... it’s complicated,” I say, the words coming out slow and hard because I have to force them. “I *do* feel something.”

Hell, I’m still half in love with him. That crush I’d had for him as a kid should have gone away. Maybe it did, or it would have, but he’s always been there at the periphery of my life, and even when he was distant from me, what I saw of him only made me want him more—not just the physical, but *all* of him. And the past few days, now I’m lost. I can’t go any further without telling him the truth.

“Everybody is complicated, Felicia,” he murmurs against my temple, one hand tripping up my spine to cup over my neck.

The possessiveness of the touch doesn't set off warnings the way I expect, but he's not caging me in. His touch is careful, his free hand resting lightly on my hip as if he knows I can't take too much.

"Whatever it is ... just tell me."

I felt something, but he didn't understand how complicated it might be with me.

"I..." Swallowing hard, I nudge him back and take a few steps away. Another shiver wracks me, and before I can bend over to grab the blanket, he's done it, wrapping me up, smoothing his hands up and down my arms to warm me. He's always been like that: such a caretaker, such a protector.

"I need boundaries," I tell him, the words suddenly coming a little easier. "A lot of them."

"If you need time—"

I cover his mouth with my hand, gripping the blanket with my other. "No. It's not that. I need to..." I suck in a breath. This part *isn't* so easy. "I have to be in control, Linc. All the way. That's the only way I can feel safe having sex with a guy."

Over my hand, I see a hint of awareness light in his eyes, and I slowly lower my hand.

"Just how much control are we talking about here, Fae?"

"I tie men up," I say bluntly. "I'm in charge. The entire time."

"I can handle that."

Heat licks his gaze and spills over, threatening to burn me. My nipples draw tight, so tight they hurt, and I've grown slick and wet between my thighs. I'm not the only one aroused, either. His cheeks have a dull red flush, and his breathing is harder, heavier.

"You're certain?"

He dips his chin. "Can I ask a couple of questions?"

"Yes."

He reaches out and cups my chin. "I'm assuming you're into bondage, then."

"Yes." He hasn't freaked out, making it easier for me to relax. He's not into the lifestyle—I can't explain how I know, but he's not unfamiliar with it, either—he probably had a girlfriend or two who he played with. "I'm not hardcore or anything, but it's the only way I can get what I need when it comes to sex, so ..." I hitch up a shoulder.

"So, am I out of luck if I was suddenly hoping to see you decked out in leather with a whip?"

I catch the teasing glint in his eyes, and it's easy to smile. "I've got leather. I've never been into whips or impact play, though. I just need to tie my male partners up."

"Male." He ran his tongue along the inside of his lip. "You've specified that a couple of times. You've been with women before, haven't you?"

"Yes."

“Now I’m going to get down on my knees and whimper.”

“You’re a pig,” I say, surprised when I find myself laughing.

He catches the laugh with his mouth. I moan into his kiss, tangling my fingers in his hair, the blanket falling to the floor to puddle around my feet once more. His hands linger on my waist, and I groan, wanting more. Finally, I grab his left hand and guide it to my breast, shoving against him. He swears against my mouth, teasing my nipple with his thumb and forefinger through my bra while I bite his lower lip.

“Will a tie work?” he asks against my mouth.

“I ...”

He tears his mouth away, and we stare at each other.

“I didn’t come to Hawaii prepared to let the sexiest woman I’ve ever met tie me up, but I’m good at innovating. I’ve got several ties. I’ll even tear up a shirt or two. What will work?”

I’m breathing hard now as I stare at him, my breasts heavy and full, the need to twist my belly into knots.

“Either will work,” I say. “If you’re sure.”

He cups my head in his hands and kisses me, the contact deep, torrid, and tender, as I matter. Like I’m everything. When it ends, my chest is tight, and my veins feel hot, molten, and golden; they’re filled with something more than blood, something effervescent and powerful.

“I want you more than I want to keep breathing,” he whispers, his lips still brushing mine. “If tying my hands up makes you

feel safe enough to be with me, then I'm fine with it. I'm fine with anything that makes you feel safe enough to let me keep kissing you, tasting you..."

As if to emphasize, he skims his lips down my neck and presses a hungry kiss at the spot where it curves into my shoulder.

"I want to caress your breasts, suck on your nipples. Can I?"

I swallow, nerves pushing forward, and I shake my head. "Not yet."

He groans but nods. "Alright. Kisses, then."

His mouth is back on mine. I'm lost in the greedy contact, pressing against him like I, too, need those kisses more than air. We're greedy for the other, and before long, I have him backed against the wall, and his shirt is unbuttoned. Raking my nails down his chest, I skim my palms down his chest, loving the feel of the light dusting of hair, the warmth and strength.

I need to feel more, and I pull back, my hands braced on his shoulders. Looking into his eyes, I command, "Unbutton my shirt."

Our gazes lock as he reaches up to do it, the contact intimate, our breaths mingling as we stare into each other's eyes. He finally has my shirt open. I pushed him off, then mine, leaving me in the strapless bra I'd worn with the sexy button-down halter that left my shoulders and back on display. His eyes

darken as he lowers them to stare at my breasts, curving up over the plunging confines of the push-up bra.

“Please tell me I can taste those pretty tits now,” he murmurs.

Slowly, I turn around. “Take the bra off.”

I don't think I'm imagining it when I feel his fingers trembling as he unhooks the bra. I feel powerful as he dips his head and kisses my neck from behind, his breathing hot and shaking as he whispers, “Fuck me, Felicia. You're so fucking gorgeous.”

I turn and face him. He lifts a hand, then stops, eyes burning into mine.

“Go sit on the bed.”

He moves, powerful muscles coiled, ready. There, he waits and watches me.

“Take your shirt all the way off.”

He shrugs it off and tosses it to the side.

“Shoes.”

He kicks them off as well. Watching him, I reach behind and undo the zipper of my skirt. He closes his eyes, squeezing them tight, and looks back at me, eyes blazing with a hungry green fire and his chest heaving. With a wiggle of my hips, I shimmy out of the skirt, standing in front of him wearing only a pair of lacy black panties that hug my hips like a lover.

His mouth parts as he looks me over, from the top of my head down to my feet and back up.

“I want to eat you alive,” he says in a low, hungry, practically feral voice.

“Maybe I’ll let you.”

He grabs onto the edge of the mattress. “Let me touch you.”

I move closer, standing between his knees. “Touch me where?”

“Anywhere. Fuck, I don’t care.” He tips his head back, breathing labored when the force of his want. “I’ll kiss your feet, nibble onto the inside of your knee. I just want my hands on you.”

“Show me your hands.” I take them when he holds them out and guides them to my breasts, shuddering as the wide, hard palms cradle me with infinite care. “Harder. I won’t break.”

He growls and turns his face into me, nuzzling me. “Can I taste?”

“Yes.”

I cry out as he wraps his lips around one nipple, scoring it with his teeth. He’s undoing me, turning my knees to molasses while other parts of me threaten to ignite. I sway closer, gripping the hard ridge of his shoulders. He steadies me with one arm around my waist, his mouth worshipping my breasts as I roll my hips toward him in desperate hunger.

Breaking away, I brace my hands on his shoulders and stare at him, panting. Finally, I back up a step. “Get naked.”

He stands up, our bodies so close that his chest brushes my nipples.

We both groan. I turn away. “Where are the ties? And we need something sharp in case we have to cut you free.”

“The ties are in a case in the drawer of my dresser. Use any but the red or blue pin-striped—and the one for the wedding—you’ll recognize it. The others were gifts. I’ve got a pocket knife in the zipper pocket of my suitcase. Will that work?”

“Yes. I’ll get it. Get on the bed, please.”

I hear shuffling and movement behind the whisper of fabric and his breathing. And his eyes. I can feel him watching me as I cross the suitcase that’s sitting propped up on the luggage stand. It’s mostly empty, but I found the knife and a box of condoms. I pull them out, then find the wooden case that has several ties, all neatly rolled and waiting for use.

I grab a black one, although I stroke the green one, thinking about how it matches his eyes. That’s why I leave it alone. In case I have to cut the fabric. Turning, I find him on the bed, the fat, fluffy down comforter folded back, along with the plain white top sheet, his nude body framed by the remaining fitted sheet.

My brain almost seizes up on me as I stare at him. He’s even more beautiful than I’d expected. And he’s looking at me like he wants me more than his next breath.



Linc

TYING A LOVER UP isn't anything new to me. I've messed around with light bondage games before, although I've only had one or two lovers who wanted to be in control—and only upon occasion. But there's nothing Felicia can do or say that could dim my need for her. Her lips part as she turns and catches sight of me, the dark brown seeming to go almost black while her throat works on a ragged breath.

I stare at her lips, my cock pulsing in anticipation. I want her more than I've ever wanted, anything or anybody. She glides to me slowly, although her movements aren't hesitant. With each step, she settles more into her skin, and as she comes to kneel on the bed next to me, she has a faint smile on her skin.

“You're sure about this?” she asks in a husky voice.

“Felicia, if you don't put your hands on me, I might just lose my damn mind.”

She chuckles and reaches up, guiding one hand, then the other, over my head. The movement brings one rich, rose-brown

nipple within reach of my mouth, and I exhale roughly. The flesh pebbles and puckers, drawing tight. I want to lick it, suck it between my lips so I can learn her taste.

“What are the rules here?” I demand, my jaw going tight as I fight the urge to claim her. “Can I taste you? Lick you?”

She jolts. The movement rocks her whole body, almost as if she’d been jabbed with an electric cattle prod. A split second later, she bends over me, eye to eye. “You’re not used to being in this position, are you?”

“I’ve been tied up before.” I hold her eyes and tug experimentally on one wrist. She’d managed to tie my left wrist in the brief moments that lovely, tightly puckered nipple had distracted me. “A couple of times.”

“There’s tied up, and then there’s giving up control.” A smile flirts with her lips. “How many times have you given up control?”

“Maybe twice. And I sucked at it.” I lift my head, keeping my hands in place, even though I badly wanted to use my free one to cup that plump breast and tug on her nipple, tease it, and taste it. “But I’ll try ... for you. That’s why I asked instead of doing what I really wanted to do.”

“And what did you want to do?”

I drop my gaze.

Obligingly, she levers higher off of me, and I stare boldly at her naked breasts. “I wanted to lick your nipple as you bent

close, suck on it, maybe use the edge of my teeth before I took a good long taste of you.”

“Linc ...” She shivers and rubs her lips over mine. She doesn’t give me an answer, only goes back to what she was doing; this time, she has to stretch over me to reach my other wrist, and the proximity of her tits has me groaning in frustration.

She laughs softly. “Waiting for me to say you can? Trying to be good?”

“I’m barely holding it together.” I stare at her, breathing roughly. “You need to give me some rules. I do better with rules—even if I hate them.”

She swings one leg over my hips. The pressure of her heated pussy against my cock has me swearing and arching up instinctively. Her breath catches, and she slams her hands down on my shoulders, her nails sinking into my skin in a soft, luscious bite.

“Lincoln ...” It comes out in a broken moan that sends all sorts of savage satisfaction through me even as I crave a deeper, more intimate contact.

She rubs against me once, twice, then swears. “Stop it, or I’ll come just from doing that.”

“Think I’ll mind?” I can smell the soft, erotic feminine musk of her. I want to lick her up and taste that wetness between her thighs. But I’ll wait. I’m going to lie there and let her do what she wants. As torturous as this is, it’s also delicious. Because it’s *her*, it’s Felicia, and she’s touching me.

“Rule one,” she says. “I’m not coming until I have a chance to touch this big, beautiful body of yours.”

Her lids hang low as she smiles down at me, then bends and presses her lips to mine.

“I’ve dreamed about touching you, Linc ... so many times.”

“Then do it.” I wrap my fingers around the silk of the tie, holding me restrained, trying not to yank at it. She’s left enough slack that the silk isn’t biting into my wrists, but I can’t slip my hands-free, either.

“How can I touch you, Linc?” She works her way down my body, pressing her mouth to my neck, seeking the pulse before biting — almost hard enough to leave a mark, but not quite.

“However you want. Just touch me.”

She rubs her cheek over my pectoral, then turns her head and flicks her tongue over my nipple. I hiss and arch up, seeking to get closer. Her nails rake over my sides as she goes lower.

Then lower.

I snarl out a curse as she scrapes them lightly over my sac. I tense, my spine arching into a bow while my cock turns to iron, pulsating, throbbing. It moves in time with my heart. I pant, rough, as she repeats the caress over and over, moving ever higher until she can wrap her hand around the base of my cock.

“Fuck, Felicia!”

She fists me and strokes up, murmuring, “You’re so big, so hard...”

“Are you trying to kill me?” I demand.

“No.” She pumps me again, even as she wriggles onto her knees and peers down at me from my side. “Would you like to lick my nipples, Linc?”

“Fuck, yes.”

She releases my penis and straddles me again, but instead of bending lower to give me access, she strokes her hands up her torso and cups her breasts, lifting them and plumping them in her hands before moving her fingers inward to pinch her nipples.

She shivers, watching me through slitted eyes.

“I like teeth,” she murmurs as she lazily leans over me and plants her hands on the wooden headboard, the muscles in her toned arms flexing as she lowers herself inch by slow inch, a delicious, teasing display.

“I can do that.”

“Not yet.” She gives another teasing smile. “You haven’t asked me yet.”

“Felicia, can I please taste you, for fuck’s sake? Before I go insane?”

Amusement mixed with arousal, She dipped just low enough, her hands gripping the headboard while her breasts hung above my head, the nipples taut and hard.

“You may,” she tells me.

I rear up and catch the tip of her left breast between my teeth. She gasps at the sudden movement, but I keep the contact light, almost soft. A broken sigh escapes her, mingling with the sound of blood roaring in my ears. She quivers on top of me as I tease the furred bud with my tongue, then suck it into my mouth.

That has her arching into me, one hand diving into my hair and tangling tight. She grinds her hips against me, and I feel the hot, wet flesh of her core. It’s a damn miracle I don’t come right then and there.

“Linc ...”

I let go of her nipple with a slow, teasing suction and fall back onto the bed to stare up at her.

“Yes, Felicia?”

Her eyes are vague and hot with want, her lips parted. For a second, she looks confused. Then her gaze clears a bit; a slow smile curves her lips, and she braces both hands on my chest and begins to move against me, slow and lazy so that I can feel the soft, hot, wet woman. But it’s torture because she hasn’t let me enter her.

“I’ve got condoms in my suitcase,” I reveal, somehow able to speak. My voice is all grit and gravel.

“No, you don’t.” She bends low and catches my lower lip, biting down. “I already got them out.”

Before I could respond, she backed up and presented me with her breasts. “I want your mouth on me again.”

She doesn't have to ask twice. Swirling my tongue over the nipple she's offered, I ache to feel more of her—*all* of her. More than anything, I want my hands on the full curve of her ass as she sinks down on my cock. I clutch at the tie and focus on the hot, hard bud of her nipple, listening to the cues of her body to learn what she likes and what she *loves*.

She *does* love teeth. Working my way down to scrape them over the soft underside of her breast, I murmur her name. She writhes atop me and moans.

“I want to fuck you so bad, Fae, damn it, baby.”

“Say please,” she orders, cupping my face in her hands and staring at me with wide, hungry eyes. “Say please, Linc, and *I* will fuck *you*.”

“Please,” I rasp out, my gaze locked with hers. “Fuck me, damn it, now. *Please*.”

A wicked laugh escapes her, and she slithers down to kneel astride my thighs before reaching over and grabbing the box of condoms I hadn't even noticed.

I'm so hard that I hurt. I hiss a breath as Felicia unrolls a latex sheath down over my length. She trails a soft path of kisses up my thigh; the brush of her hair over my thighs and abdomen, then up my chest, has me cursing a blue streak. Felicia hovers above me, that seductive female smile in place. I go still as she reaches down and wraps her fingers around my rigid flesh.

“Shall I fuck you now, Linc?”

“*Please*,” I half growl it, half beg.

I’d beg on my knees if she asked.

She’s content with that demanding snarl—delighted with it, if looks are any indication. Mere heartbeats later, she fit me against her entrance. I clench my teeth against the litany of cuss words that want to pour out. Lifting my head as much as possible, I stare down, watching as she takes me. I can’t be still. I flex my hips and push up, straining to be deeper and hungry; female sounds escape as my penis swells inside her.

Slowly, so damn slowly, she sinks onto me, only a couple of inches; then she rises back up, rocking forward to brace her hands on my chest for support. Her nails sink in. Each point of contact is another sweet thrill jolting down my spine. And her pussy. I shudder as she clenches tight around me. Half of my length is bedded inside her now.

She starts to slide back up, and my hips jerk instinctively.

“Fuck, baby,” I swear. “Stop teasing...”

Her lips twitch as she meets my gaze. “Make me.”

I stare at her for a long moment. “Fay?”

She bends down and bites my lower lip. “Do I have to repeat myself?”

“Hell, no.” Planting my heels into the mattress, I arch up, bowing until only shoulders and heels touch the bed as I drive into her sleek, tight, clenching core.

She cries out, her head falling forward. I sink down, then thrust up into her again. Felicia's knees tighten around me, as do the snug, sleek tissues gripping me, her eyes burning into mine.

She's wet and tight and perfect. I need more, so much more. I drive into her again and again. Soon, she meets me, thrust for thrust.

"I want your mouth," I tell her, surprised my voice is even remotely understandable.

She kisses me, even as I'm kissing her, our tongues tangling, her hands in my hair as we rub against each other and rock together.

Instinctively, I know she wants control even here, so I yield it and rasp, "I'm going to come."

"Do it."

She's barely moving down, grinding into me, hard, deep movements that have me acutely aware of her. Then she's clenching tight around me, over and over, as she climaxes. Before I can brace myself, I'm coming, too. Hot and hard and so damn perfect, I feel lost as I sink down into it.

Lost and somehow whole.

* * * * *

I'm not really asleep, but my brain is numb with pleasure, so numb I barely realize what she's doing until she's already taken care of the condom. To my surprise, my face heats over the basic act. It's something I've done several times without

thinking about it, but having her do it makes me feel weird. She moves out of sight. I shift around as much as I can with my hands still bound.

I heard the water in the bathroom turn on, run briefly, and then get shut off. A moment later, she's back, and her eyes are warm and soft as she smiles down at me.

A warm, wet washcloth slides over my groin, stroking over my cock. Then Felicia moves away. When she comes back, she reaches over my head and works loose the tie. "I don't need the knife, but this is close to it," she murmurs as one hand finally comes free.

Blood rushes into that arm. I bite back the groan of relief as a pin-and-needle feeling sweeps through. I flex my fingers and shake my hand while she finishes. My arms are almost numb by the time she moves away, dropping the tie on the nightstand next to the bed. I sit up, automatically rotating my shoulders, but she nudges at me with her hands on my chest.

"Lie back down ... on your stomach."

I give her a side eye but do as asked, lying face down. She stops me when I stack my hands under my cheek, and a moment later, I realize why. Strong fingers dig into the muscles along my shoulders, working loose the tension that had gathered there.

A harsh groan rumbles out of me. "Too much?"

"It's fine. You can stop, never."

She laughs huskily, and the sound hits hard right in the center of my chest.

How had I ever thought she was aloof? She swings a leg over my back, sitting with her weight mostly on her knees as she massages the tension out of my muscles.

When she finishes with a kiss at the nape of my neck, she asks, “Better?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt better in my life,” I say honestly, closing one hand around the calf tucked against me.

She slides off and tucks herself next to me. I roll over onto my side to study her.

Outside, the rain has eased up. The last thing I want to do is leave, but it’s not really that late, and we hadn’t eaten before dashing up here.

“You want to go get something to eat?”

She gives a tiny shake of her head. “I’m not hungry. Are you?”

“No.” I catch a lock of her hair and wind it around my finger, holding her gaze. “What do you want to do?”

Her face shifts, then softens, making my heart clench in my chest. Before I know it, she’s pressing tight to me, snuggling close with a contented sigh. “Can I just stay here? Right here?”

“Fine by me.” I mean it. Curling my arm around her, I turn my face into her hair and breathe in her soft, lush scent; then, I close my eyes.



Felicia

I COME AWAKE TO a storm—two different ones, really. Outside, thunder booms as lightning lashes the sky. Inside, passion crashes within me. Linc’s mouth is skating over my spine while his hand cups my breast, and his penis thrusts again into my backside.

I’m already wet and gripping his thigh as I thrust back against him, seeking a deeper connection. Judging by how hard he was and how aroused I was, we’d been entwined for some time before the storm fully woke us. I’m aware of the moment he fully awakens.

He freezes. “Felicia, *fuck* ...” There’s horror in his voice.

I place my hand on the one he has cupping my breast and whisper, “Please don’t stop.”

It’s the first time in forever that a man has touched me like this without terror taking hold, and I don’t want it to slip away.

“Fay?”

“Don’t stop. I’m, I’m not afraid. I don’t want to lose this, please.”

He groans and rakes his teeth down my neck. “Anything you want from me, it’s yours. *Anything.*”

He shifts slightly; the arm that had been under my neck moves a bit, so now he’s palming my breast with that hand, his grip sure and possessive, molding my flesh with a knowing touch. The other slides down my hip, then catches my thigh, bringing it up and back over his, opening me. I gasp as he trails his fingers through me.

“Yes?” he murmurs against my neck.

“Fuck, yes ...” I whimper in response, shivering with need. Against my butt, I feel the hungry thrust of Linc's erection, and I work myself against it. He growls in pleasure even as he strokes a finger through the wet folds of my core. “You’re so damn soft and wet,” he says, voice harsh, rough with need. “You’re killing me.”

“Linc ...”

He brings his fingers up, and I gasp as he moves, just enough so my upper body goes flat, and I have a close-up view as he slides those two glistening wet fingers into his mouth.

“Delicious,” he whispers. He slides them down my body and plunges them back into me, setting a quick, smooth rhythm that brings me almost to the precipice. *Right* before I would have come, he stops and brings his fingers back up, circles them over my nipple. I jerk in surprise, then cry out in need as

he dips his head to lick the wetness from my nipple. He thrusts those fingers back into me and fucks me right into orgasm.

“Again,” he murmurs against my swollen nipple. “I want you to come again.”

I shove my hand into his hair and jerk. He lifts, staring down into my eyes.

“Not like this,” I tell him, my voice raw. “I want you inside. *Now.*”

“Anything you want of me?” He shifts us again, remaining mostly behind me, not once using his body weight to cage or pin me. Instead, he’s on his side, hips still cradling mine from the back as I lie with my upper torso flat on the bed and his gaze boring into mine. The eye contact is incredibly intimate as he pushes into me, and my breath catches and lodges in my chest. Both of us realize the issue at the same time.

“No condom,” he says, the words a snarl.

“I’ve got an IUD,” I tell him. “And I don’t have any diseases ... I get checked every three months.”

“A couple of times a year. Same. Still ...” Lightning flashes, and in the brief glow, I catch sight of a bead of sweat that’s formed, rolling down his temple as he watches me.

“We should stop.”

“I don’t want to.”

He flexes his hips and fills me completely. “Neither do I.”

I groan as I clench around him, the sensations indescribable.

“Fuck, Felicia ... you’re like silk,” he breathes out. He withdraws just a couple of inches, then thrusts into me again. The position keeps his movement limited; he has to rely fully on the strength of his lower body, but that’s substantial. I whimper as the thickness of his cock strokes all the sensitive, swollen places within me.

He puts his hand on my belly, fingers flexing as if he craves even more contact, *deeper* contact. I catch his shoulder, staring up at him, feeling helpless yet powerful because the look on his face every time lightning floods the room is so intense, so wracked with pleasure, and it’s all because of *me*.

“Felicia,” he rasps.

I shudder and clench around him, reaching up to grab his shoulder.

“Harder.”

He swears and shifts his grip to my hip, holding me steady as he complies, and I’m lost to the power of the thrusts, lost to the sensation, lost to him. Without thinking, I slide my free hand down and stroke my clitoris. His eyes shoot down, and he stares with rapt fascination as I stroke myself. Erotic delight curls through me, and I reach up and stroke my wet fingers over his lips.

He licks them. “More.”

“Say please,” I demand.

“Please, Fae, give more of that sweet pussy.”

I whimper even as I reach down, stroking myself, letting my fingers play around where he fills me, where I'm stretched tight around him. He grunts in pleasure, then growls as I paint the wetness over his lips, opening his mouth to suck the tips inside.

He moves harder, faster. I reach up, hooking my hands over the top of the mattress to brace myself so I can grind against him. We're crashing into each other, and the pleasure is mind-racking. The orgasm slams into me, stealing my breath, and I feel his cock swell, feeling his grip on me tighten.

“Felicia!”

We're both caught up in it as we climax, leaving us panting and dazed.

The rain is still pelting down on the windows, thunder booming across the sky as he pulls me back into the curve of his body. I yawn and snuggle back into him, and even as he kisses my shoulder, I slip back into sleep.

* * * * *

Brilliant sunlight burns through my eyelids. At least, it feels that way. It's a far cry from how I'd woken up in the middle of the night, wrapped in a feverish, hungry embrace and pressed against a hot, masculine body as the man I've always wanted kissed and stroked me.

I'm still wet between the thighs from our lovemaking. Even as I think about it, I flush. I rarely thought of my sexual exploits in such terms, but *this* had felt like just that: *making love*. But

maybe I'm just being a foolish girl, still half in love with Lincoln Ransom, the way I've always been.

I roll onto my back, sweeping out my hand in search of him even though I already know he's not in the bed with me. The sheets are still vaguely warm, hinting at his presence. I smile as I hear a murmuring voice somewhere in the suite.

He's still here. The knowledge makes my toes curl. I'm so ridiculously happy; I almost feel like that teenage girl again, the first time I'd seen him. I sit up, and the dampness between my thighs reminds me again of what we'd done, hitting home a little harder this time.

I hadn't been to bed with a new partner like that ever. I'd had a couple of long-term lovers I'd eventually been with protection, but never after just one encounter. Even though I had an IUD and pregnancy wasn't much of a concern, there were other issues—like sexually transmitted infections. I hadn't exaggerated when I'd told him I was tested every few months.

I trust him to be honest with me about the same. Still, it seems like something we should talk about. Rising, I stretch, grimacing at the pull and tenderness between my thighs. I can still hear him talking, suspecting he's on the phone, so I grab one of his shirts, the one I'd all but torn off him the night before, and pull it on. I move to the bathroom on the far side of the suite, taking care to be quiet as I close the door behind me.

When I emerge, I can still hear him talking, and I follow the sound of his voice to the smaller second bedroom off the

kitchen. He's staring out the window, and the moment I see him, the conversation seems to come to an abrupt halt. I freeze, wondering if I'm interrupting something I shouldn't. But there's no tension in him as he nods; he ends the call in a soft but relaxed voice before looking up as if he'd just now taken notice of me.

His eyes are warm, and he has a deep, intimate smile on his face. "Good morning, Felicia," he says, pushing away from the counter in the small, fully equipped kitchen to walk over to me. He's long, muscled, and more beautiful than he has a right to be. Just looking at him makes my heart hurt.

He dips his head to kiss me. As I respond, I lean into him, curling my fingers into his biceps.

"Sleep well?" he murmurs against my lips as the kiss ends.

I nod. "Better than I have in a while."

"Me, too." He curls his arms around me, drawing me into the curve of his body, and I relax against him, amazed at how right this feels. How natural.

I'd like to just go on like this forever. But ...

"Maybe we should talk about last night," I say, forcing the words out.



Linc

IT'S PURE DUMB LUCK I am awake when the phone rings. I had to use the bathroom and was thirsty, so I went into the small kitchen in the suite for some water; while there, I heard the phone ring. Leaning against the wall in the smaller second bedroom where I'd retreated when I answered the call, I listened as Rori described the information she had collected.

“There’s nothing concrete yet, but I think there’s a solid chance Layla Hampton and Brandt Turner were at least acquainted during college,” she continues in her brisk, professional tone. “I know for a fact that they’ve met up a few times over the years. My initial investigation has placed him at her place of employment twice—it’s under the guise of meetings, but he knows her.”

My gut is tight with apprehension. Sure, it could be nothing, but why hadn’t Brandt or Layla brought up their acquaintance?

“Where did she work?” I ask.

When Rori mentions an investment firm, my dread only grows.

“Now, from what I understand, you and Turner have known each other since high school...is that correct?”

I grimace. “Of speaking. He’s been friends with Seth for years. I know him because of my relationship with Seth. He’s a year behind us in school, but the two of us? We’re not close.”

“Do you know anything about why he had to take several weeks off of school during his sophomore year of college? He also missed a pretty important basketball tournament.”

I think back, but come up empty. “I never paid that much attention to Brandt unless he was harassing Seth for money.”

His sophomore year, I consider it. It was the same year Felicia had left the same university we’d all been attending. She’d eventually started back at a different college on the opposite side of the country, and I hadn’t seen her again for several years.

“What month did this happen?”

She tells me, and I stiffen.

Several seconds pass, and she quietly asks, “Linc, are you okay?”

“I’m not sure. Find out more—whatever you can.”

“I will.” She breathes in roughly. “If there’s something there, I take it.”

“I’m not sure.” Staring out the window, I think of Felicia’s abrupt disappearance from our lives and know I’m lying. There *is* something there. I just don’t know what yet.

“I’ll find out everything I can. Talk to you soon, Linc.”

She hangs up without another word, and I lower the phone and turn. Felicia is standing in the doorway, her eyes wary. My heart clenches up tight at the sight of her.

Is this what it feels like to fall in love? The question hits me out of the blue, and the conversation with Rori falls out of my mind, forgotten for the moment.

“Is everything okay?”

“More than.” It’s an honest answer, a smile spreading across my face as I look her over, taking in her sleep-rumpled, flushed appearance. “Seeing you make everything better, and I was already doing just fine.”

Her cheeks take on a dusky hue, and she rolls her eyes. “Whatever.”

Moving toward her, I slip my phone into the pockets of my loose-fitting athletic pants and catch her face in the palms of my hands.

“Seriously. I could get used to seeing you every morning. All flush from sleep, hair tousled, sexy as fuck.” I kiss her, then nuzzle my way down to her neck before breathing in the sweet scent.

She catches hold of my biceps. “I wouldn’t have pegged you for a sweet-talker, Linc.”

“I can be plenty sweet.” Catching her ear between my teeth, I tug lightly. “Or I can be dirty as hell. Which do you prefer?”

“Do I have to choose?” She turns her face into my neck and bites me just above my pulse, quickly, but not with enough pressure to leave a mark.

“No. I can give you both.” My head spinning at the gift of her, I nudge her back against the wall but move my hands to bracket either side of her, not wanting her to feel trapped. Lifting my head, I meet her eyes.

She licks her lips as she studies me.

“Last night ...” Her breath catches.

I wait, the muscles in my belly clenching nervously.

“I haven’t done anything so reckless in a long time.”

“Neither have I,” I confess. Cradling Felicia's cheek in my hand, I stroke my thumb over her lower lip. “But I don’t regret it. I want to be as close to you as I can be. I can promise to always wear a rubber from here on out. No matter what. It’s your call.”

“No.” She wraps her fingers around my wrist, still staring into my eyes. “You said you get tested regularly. When was the last time?”

“Just under six months ago. I broke up with a girlfriend and found out she’d been seeing somebody else, although we were supposed to be exclusive—her request, not mine.” I hadn’t had serious romantic feelings about Rebecca. We’d liked each other, and I had *thought* we respected each other. The

relationship had been about companionship and, frankly, convenience. I liked sex. Having a committed partner made it easier to be engaged in regular sex safely, but if that partner was going to lie to you and cheat behind your back, it wasn't all that safe—or convenient. “I got tested the week I ended it, and another test a month later and ninety days later to rule everything out. I haven't been with anybody else since.”

Rebecca had tried to argue and cry and plead for another chance, but as I hadn't had any deep feelings for her beyond friendship and attraction—and the friendship had died when I realized who she really was under the skin — her tears hadn't mattered.

“Did you care about her?” Felicia's eyes search mine.

“We were friends until I found out she'd been lying to me behind my back. That ended it for me. We had nothing more than friendship and attraction—not on my part. It would have become nothing more, either.” I don't tell Felicia the truth that's slowly becoming more clear. I haven't been in a committed relationship with anybody, ever. She's a huge part of why. Even when I was angry with her—wrongly angry—I'd only wanted her.

“I'm sorry she lied to you,” Felicia murmurs as she turns her face into my hand and kisses my palm.

“Don't be. Rebecca doesn't matter.” Pushing my fingers into her hair, I tug until she tips her head back. “You do. You matter, *this* matters.”

She gasps into my mouth, and I deepen the kiss. It's soft, wet, and deep, leaving me hard and aching. She reaches between us to grasp my cock, and I groan, arching into her hand, but when she goes to reach inside my pants, I pull away. Felicia gives me a sulky pout, and I dip my head and nip her lower lip.

“Can I ask you how you feel about having a man go down on you?”

She shivered, her breath a quaking sigh over my lips and her nails biting into my shoulders. “I've never let a man do it,” she admits.

“Why not? Trust?”

She nods.

“Would you let me?” I nuzzle her neck, sliding my hand between her thighs to her hot, wet sex. She bucks against my touch, a soft whimper escaping her. “You can tie me down again ... I'm hard just thinking about it. Crawl up my body and ride my face while I lick and taste and eat that delicious pussy.”

“Fuck ...” It comes out a broken moan.

Stroking my finger into her heat, I push into the wet, waiting depths. She clenches around me, lush and hot.

“Is that a yes?”

“You're dangerous, Linc,” she breathes out, rocking back and forth on my hand.

“Never to you.” Dipping my head, I flick open several buttons on the shirt she’d pulled on—*my* shirt, I think possessively.

“To my sanity, you are.”

I smile as I kiss my way down the upper slope of her breast. “Well, that’s only fair. You’ve been driving me crazy since the day we met. Let me have a nice, long taste of that pussy, Fee. I’ll stop if you don’t like it.”

Her broken *yes* is like music.

Pulling back, I take her hand. “Lead the way.”

* * * * *

“You won’t get bored, will you?” Watching her through my lids as she eases me down to lie flat with my hands now tied behind my back, I have to bite back a groan.

She straddles me, a sly smile on her lips. “I’ll try not to be.”

She doesn’t need to worry about that. One thing Felicia Appleton has always done with ease is fascinating to me.

“No worries there,” I promise her.

Licking my lips as she reaches up to flick open the buttons of the shirt she’d borrowed, she undoes them slowly; each move a slow tease that threatens to drive me out of my mind. Watching each inch of skin as it’s bared is enough to have my cock raging in demand.

She shivers as she feels my pulse against her, and her lids droop. “I think your cock has plans that differ from yours.”

Slowly, lazily, she rubs against me.

“My cock always has plans ... damn thing has a mind of its own.” Letting my gaze lower, I focus on the vee of her thighs. “But I want to taste you. Will you let me, Fay? Please?”

She bends over me, her mouth pressing to mine. “Tell me where Linc. You said you could be sweet *and* dirty. Show me.”

“I want to taste that pretty, wet pussy, Felicia,” I tell her, nipping her lower lip and lapping the small nub with my tongue before I continue. “I want to lick you and stroke you and learn all the ways to please you until you come all over my face, against my mouth. I want to do it until I make you moan and cry out my name.”

She quivers atop me, her hands gripping my shoulders.

“You’re good at the dirty talk.”

“Give me some pussy, and I’ll be even better,” I promise wickedly.

A strangled laugh escapes her. Still, she hesitates, lifting to peer at me, and I sense the nerves she’s hiding behind her heated smile.

“I’ll stop if you don’t like it,” I remind her. “It’s intimate, and it’s fine to be nervous ... but if you give me a chance and it’s not something you enjoy, I won’t push.”

She nods, the movement jerky, then eases up, shimmying up an inch or two. “I like your mouth on my nipples.”

When she offers them to me, I don’t refuse.

I catch one between my teeth and tug, then suck and nip it until it pulses against my tongue. When Felicia is rolling her hips against my stomach, I shift my attention to the breast I'd neglected, going back and forth until she's breathing harder. I kiss my way to her sternum and nuzzle. "Move up more, baby. I'm dying for a taste."

She breathes out shakily; a moment later, she's kneeling across my shoulders. I nip one inner thigh, then the other. "Closer."

She sways forward, and I sense rather than see as she braces her hands on the wall overhead. She's spread open over me now. I nuzzle the wet folds of her sex, lick at her gently, just the barest touch, letting her adjust before I go deeper.

Felicia whimpers. Teasing her clitoris, I close my lips around it and suck, gradually working the bud into my mouth while she gasps over me.

"Lincoln ..." She shoves her fingers into my hair, the bewildered pleasure in her voice enough to slay me.

I don't stop.

Working myself against the mattress until my shoulders wedge her thighs wider apart, I lift my head and press against her more fully, digging my tongue into her now, simulating the act of sex, thrusting in, out, in, and out. She cries out and moves against me in earnest, riding my face while the juices from her pussy coat my lips, mouth, and chin.

"Please," she whimpers, hips jerking again.

Without thinking, I try to move my hands, wanting to slide my fingers into her and urge her to climax. But they're trapped, tied behind me. I groan in frustration, then refocus on my task. I'll kick myself if I can't bring her to climax this way. Repeatedly.

She's close, though. Her hands are kneading my scalp, nails pricking over my flesh as she moves against me with sensual female grace. "Linc, oh, *hell* yes!"

I stab at her clitoris with my tongue, tug on it with my teeth, suck it into my mouth. She climaxes, hands wrenching at my hair with enough force to sting.

I love every second.



Felicia

WE'D SHOWERED AFTER I'D untied him. I'd gone to touch him, but he'd caught my hands and kissed me, telling me we needed to get downstairs for breakfast—one of the organized events, I remember now as we walk arm and arm into the large banquet room.

Several gazes slide our way, then move off. I can't help the tension that climbs up my spine. I shake it off, but some small part of me wonders if they're thinking about me, if Brandt's told them lies—he'd done it before. I immediately push the thoughts away, hating that I'm doubting myself again. I've been through so much therapy and did so much work on myself, but just being around him can make me doubt myself like this all over again.

“Are you okay?”

Linc's question is gentle. I tip my head back to meet his gaze, trying to find the easy, confident smile I've used over the years, but it doesn't come out the way I want. It's hesitant and nervous. Exactly the way I feel right now. I've been off

balance since I slid off him after that mind-blowing orgasm. I'd undone the bonds I'd used on him, but instead of massaging the tension from his shoulders or any of the stuff I'd normally do after being with a lover, I'd restrained myself.

Linc had been the one to hold me, stroke soothing hands down my spine. He's turning everything upside down, and I don't know how to handle it.

"We won't see much of each other today," he murmurs as he leads me to the assigned table. "You've got the bachelorette party. I'm taking Seth out for golf and dinner to make sure he's not kidnapped for a bachelor party."

I slant a look up at him. "Why can't *I* get in on that?"

"You want to?" He grins. "I doubt Seth would mind."

I consider it seriously. But then I sigh and shake my head. "No. I've given Layla enough to bitch about me. For Seth's sake, I'll try to play nice with her today."

"I hate his guts, but I'll invite Brandt to join us." He grimaces, then adds, "If I offer to pay and toss in a bet that he can't beat me — he'll go. That way, I don't have to worry. He'll hassle you while I'm not here."

"You don't have to do that."

He leans in and nuzzles me. "I want to. I don't like how he looks at you. I won't if you don't want to do this, but I'd feel better if I did. Will you let me?"

That he asks and seems to care has my heart clenching into a tight knot in my chest. Blinking away the stinging prick of

tears in my eyes, I nod.

“Yes.”

Then there’s no more time to talk. Several more wedding party guests join us, although thankfully, none of Layla’s closer cohorts. Breakfast is over too fast. I linger in the dining room until I get a text from Linc that assures me Brandt is going to be with him and Seth most of the day.

He’s off buying some new clothes since he hadn’t planned golf, although naturally, he has his clubs. You all have that spa thing, so you should be busy until we’re gone. I already saw him climb into a car out front, so you’re good.

Three more pop up, then disappear.

A few seconds later, they appear again.

Then they’re gone.

They don’t reappear.

Whatever he’d been about to say, he decided not to say it.

I have a hundred things I could tell him, but I don’t know where to start, and I’ve got to get up to my room and out of this dress; it’s not one I’m wearing down to the spa, even if they do have lockers for our things. With a sigh, I tuck the phone away and slip out just as Layla looks my way.

I think I hear her call my name, but I’m already moving at a quick clip toward the main hall, and whatever it is she wants must not be important because she doesn’t follow me.

* * * * *

Nobody else puts their phones away as we're changing into plush robes and slippers for the spa session, so I don't either. Pocketing mine and some cash to tip my attendant, I follow the rest of the bridal party out, hoping I'm able to enjoy the massage, mani, and pedi to some extent. I love the pampering attention of a good spa session, but it's hard to imagine relaxing here in this den of she-vipers.

I settle by Sienna, Layla's teenage cousin, who sings the solo during the ceremony and offers her a tentative smile. I'm surprised when she returns it, albeit after shooting Layla a nervous look. I understand and give her a playful wink, letting her know I understand. I've dealt with people far worse than Layla, and I know what it's like to feel you have no control.

Some of the tension drains out of her, but we don't talk. Her mother is Dorothy, or *Dee*, as she insists on being called, and she's acting as mother-of-the-bride since Layla's mom hasn't been in her life for years.

I pull out of my phone and open up a manuscript I've been trying to read during what little free time I've had since boarding the plane bound for Hawaii.

I make it through twenty pages, using my notepad app to jot down a couple of thoughts as the attendant soaks, scrubs, and massages my feet.

Just as she gets to work on my toenails, my phone rings. I smile even as Layla snipes about this being a *bonding experience* for the girls, and when the attendant asks if I need a moment, I nod. She helps me slide the slippers on and guides

me to a private room, shutting the door behind me as I greet my old friend.

“I hate to bother you, considering where you are,” Grace says, her soft, sweet voice tight with apprehension. “I figured you’d want to know right away.”

The pleasure I’d felt turns to dust because Grace isn’t a doom-and-gloom type. She’s lighthearted and optimistic, so whatever has her sounding this grim will probably put me in an even more somber mood.

“What is it, Grace?” I ask, forcing the muscles in my shoulders to relax.

“Somebody called just now; it was a private investigator.” She swallows so loud that I can hear it over the phone.

“A private investigator?” Confused, I rub the back of my neck. “What are they asking?”

“Brandt,” she says, her voice chilling until it’s almost pure ice.

She says nothing else, but she doesn’t need to. There’s only *one* thing about Brandt she’d feel the need to call over. My gut clenched, going slippery with cold and dread.

“What did he want to know?” I ask, even though I already have a good idea.

“She ...” Grace tells me, “was asking why Brandt was out of school for those weeks and why he wasn’t at the tournament. She could talk to a few of his friends, but they weren’t sharing any information. I didn’t give her any concrete information, but I didn’t feel right now saying *anything* because that prick

is dangerous. So, I told her he'd hurt somebody, and that's why he was incommunicado for a while. She pressed for details, but I'd never violate your confidence."

"I know that," I tell her distractedly, my mind racing.

Who in the hell could be calling and asking about that *now*? My mind tries to slip back to that night, and I wrench it to the present with a massive force of will.

"Fay, are you okay?"

"Give me a second," I murmur, trying to think past the buzzing in my ears, past the noise and panic and memories. It takes longer than I want to center myself, but I'm able to do it. I've worked hard to overcome that panic, and I refuse to let myself backslide over this. "I'm fine, Grace. Thank you."

"She left a number. She'd like to talk to you."

I huff a laugh that sounds dry and bitter even to my own ears.

"I bet."

"Do you want the number, or should I just throw it away?"

"I'll take it." My mouth is dry. "I'll call her."

"You don't have to," Grace says. "You don't owe anybody anything."

"I know that. But I can't stand the thought of Brandt ever hurting anybody else, and if this could help somebody ..." I blink back the tears, fight back the guilt. I hadn't had the strength to press charges back then, and that's one thing I've

never forgiven myself for. I won't hide away now. Not now.
"I'll call her."

* * * * *

It takes the rest of the spa session and a very talented masseuse for me to recenter my thoughts. I'm not calm. I won't be calm for some time, but blocking out the other people in the room and focusing on the music centers me enough that I can focus; when I leave, I know I'm in a clear frame of mind as I can expect to be.

A text comes through on my phone right before I leave the spa, and as I head back to my room, I read it.

We're back to the hotel. We'll leave for dinner in about an hour to an hour and a half — watch out for Brandt. He said he was hitting the bar and wanted some time to himself. I'm going to watch him, but just in case, keep your eyes peeled.

I send back a thumbs-up emoji, not having the energy for anything else. I'm hyper-aware of everything around me, though. Some part of me almost wishes Brandt *would* try to get close to me right now. One hard blow to his pretty face and he'd regret ever looking at me. My hand flexes in anticipation of such an act, and I clench it, savoring the prospect.

But he doesn't appear, and I make it to my room without running into anybody I know. Inside, I open the second-line phone app I use when I make the occasional hook-up through an online fetish site. I haven't used the anonymous phone number in over a year, but I pay the low monthly fee to keep access to it just in case.

The number has an area code out of Dallas, Texas, a city and state I've never been to and have no desire to visit; it is just one more way to protect my anonymity. The only name associated with it is Roxann, the screen name I use on the fetish site.

I activated the VPN on my phone, choosing a server through Japan. Even if the private investigator is really, *really* good, she won't be able to track this number to me. That done, I poured myself a glass of Scotch from the bottle I'd had delivered the other day and sat down by the window, eyes on the endless expanse of the ocean.

Dialing the number, I wait for the answer.

"Aurora Maynard."

There's something familiar about the name, but I can't put my finger on what.

"Hello. You contacted my friend, Grace, who mentioned you wanted to speak to me."

There's a faint pause. "Oh, hello ... Ms. ...?"

"No names, please." It's easy to say that. I've done it often enough in sexual encounters, and in this, it's even more important to protect my privacy. "You wanted to know about Brandt Turner."

"Yes." Her voice was gentle. "Ma'am, if you give me your name, I promise to keep it confidential."

"I'm not sharing my name. Ask again, and I'll hang up. You won't hear from me again."

“Understood. My apologies. I’m trying to get more information about why he was missing from school for a specific period; he also wasn’t able to play during a basketball tournament. He was there on scholarship and, from what I’ve learned, was good enough to go pro, maybe, then he disappeared during one of the biggest events of his career. I can’t find out why.”

My hand tightens on the glass.

“There was a party,” I tell her. “The team was celebrating, making it to the tournament. They had invited me: Brandt was there. He flirted with me and asked me to dance. I didn’t want to dance and said no. Later, he brought me a drink. I knew him and figured it was okay. I took it and went back to talking with my friends. I don’t know how much I drank, but I started feeling sick, like I’d passed out. I remember a little after that until ...” My heart is pounding hard now, and I pause.

“Take your time.” Her voice is so gentle. So kind.

“I’m fine,” I tell her, the words robotic. “I woke up. I don’t think I drank enough for the drugs in it to take full effect. I hadn’t had any other booze that night, either, and I’d gone out for pizza before heading to the party.” I’d had an unpleasant experience before, partying on an empty stomach. “I woke up, and he was on top of me, thrusting and ...” My stomach roils, just as it did back then. “I got sick. He jerked away. I puked everywhere. He was yelling. I was terrified, and he was yelling, and when he went to grab me, I hit him.”

That had surprised Brandt. I'd already been doing serious weight-lifting by then. I'd started my junior year in high school and was competing on a national level by my freshman year in college. When I hit Brandt, he went down *hard*.

"He yelled and tried to grab my ankle, and I kicked him." Something broke inside me. I'd kicked him again, falling down because my balance was so bad. He tried to hit back, but that first hit, I'd broken his nose, and the swelling was already affecting his vision. I was like a wild animal, hitting, kicking, and biting.

Somebody came into the room after hearing us. I don't know who it was, even now. I might have killed Brandt if that unknown person hadn't startled me. I'd bolted up, thrown up again all over the dress he hadn't even bothered to remove, then taken off running.

"When I fought back, it surprised him enough that I could get away."

"Did you press charges?"

"No." I swallow the bitterness rising in my throat. I'd threatened to, but only because he'd showed up at my door the next day, shouting and banging on it, saying he was going to have me arrested for assault—I'd broken one bone in his hand and smashed several in his foot at some point. That was why he couldn't play in the tournament. His basketball career ended that night. It was one thing that still makes me furiously happy.

Because of Grace, my roommate and still one of my best friends, I'd had an arsenal as a backup against his threats. She'd made me save my clothes, including the panties he'd only pulled to the side. She'd taken pictures. She'd understood why I hadn't wanted to call the cops or go to the hospital, but she'd told me it would be wise to save as much evidence as we could, just in case. When I told Brandt I'd saved all the clothes, including panties that had his semen on them and had pictures of the bruises he'd put on me, he backed off.

"How many people know about what he did to you?" Aurora asks.

"Only me, him, and Grace," I say. "Unless he was stupid enough to tell others, and I doubt that." If word had gotten back to Seth, he would have problems because Seth knows I'd never have slept with Brandt.

She asks a few more questions. I answer what I can without risking my privacy, and the call ends. As soon as the line goes dead, I toss back the Scotch and close my eyes. All over again, I feel dirty.

* * * * *

I've been wandering around the hotel with no actual destination in mind for almost an hour when I finally head down to the beach. Halfway there, I bump into Sienna. The pretty teenager offers a shy smile, and although the last thing I want is company, I smile back.

"Are you looking for Lincoln?" she asks.

I go to say no because I'm not. Then I realize Linc *is* why I'm walking around.

I want to see him. No, I *need* to see him. I need to feel his arms around me, and the urge to tell him about what happened all the years ago is already boiling up in my throat as if it was just waiting for me to acknowledge it.

"Yes. Any chance you've seen him?" I know he's probably in the hotel somewhere with Seth, maybe even Brandt, but it can't hurt to ask.

"He's back there on the beach with Seth." She rolls her eyes. "They look *super* serious."

"Oh, thank you." I hesitate, then ask, "Anybody else with them?"

Like Brandt?

"No. It's just them." She smiles again, then offers a small wave before moving back toward the hotel.

Giving into the driving urge to see Linc, I continue down the path. As I round the bend, I hear their voices. Brandt's name is mentioned. Instinctively, I freeze.

"...assaulted. There was no police report, but the PI talked to several people who knew Brandt during that time. She beat the ever-loving fuck out of him. That's why he stopped playing ball and he lost his scholarship, Seth."

Seth says something, but I don't hear it. Hurt and disappointment careen through me. Stepping around the lush

greenery that had concealed me, I stare at both Seth and Linc.
“*You* hired the private investigator?” I demand.

Linc’s gaze flies to me.

There’s confusion in his eyes.

That makes little sense.

But I can’t linger on that.

I linger on what matters.

Striding over to him, I shove him back. “Who the fuck do you think you are, violating my privacy like that? Damn it, I was already telling you practically everything! Wasn’t that enough? Couldn’t you have just *asked* me!”



Linc

REALIZATION CRASHES THROUGH ME as Felicia's hands slam into my chest a second time.

“Why?” she demands. “You want to know all the sick, sordid details? Then, *fine*, I'll tell you!”

I catch hold of her hands. “Felicia, stop ... wait ...”

She wrenches away with violence that stuns me. But maybe it shouldn't.

Rori's words came back to me. *I tracked down his coach, Linc, and talked to him, and although the coach mentioned nothing about an assault, somebody beat the ever-loving shit out of him. What little I could get out of his ex-roommate. It sounds like a woman did it. I'm only speculating here, but chances are it was a victim or would-be victim—and from what I'm learning, he's had several.*

Felicia was one of them.

Fuck.

“He raped me,” Felicia says, her eyes tear-filled, her face stark. “It was at the party celebrating them, making it into the tournament. He tried to get me to dance, but I turned him down. He brought me a drink later, and I figured, why not? I was with a friend, but she went to dance with another friend. I started feeling sick. Then I blacked out. I woke up with Brandt on top of me.”

Seth goes rigid next to me.

Fury almost blinds me, but I’m also sick inside at the pain I’ve forced Felicia to relieve. “Felicia, stop,” I say, trying again to catch her hands. “You don’t have to tell us this.”

“You fucking wanted to know!” Her voice is almost hysterical. “So, hey, now you know. I puked all over him, and he freaks out, gets off me, and I’m able to get to my feet. I could probably get most of the drug out of my system—I don’t think I drank all the booze he gave me, and my head cleared a little until I figured out what was happening, and then I lost it. I beat the shit out of him. Yes, *I’m* the reason he didn’t keep playing ball.” She throws her arms wide. “He threatened to charge me with assault ... isn’t that funny? Is there anything else you want to know, or did you strip me bare enough for your satisfaction, councilor?”

I wince. “Felicia. I wasn’t trying to,”

But she’s backing away and shaking her head.

Seth reaches out a hand. “Sweetheart ...”

“Just stay away from me, both of you.” She turns on her heel and takes off running.

I give Seth a tortured look. “I didn’t know it was her.”

I don’t even know if he hears me.

“I’m going to kill that son-of-a-bitch,” he murmurs.

“I have to talk to Felicia.”

He nods, looking distracted. “Go. Make sure she’s okay.”

I catch up to her before she reaches the hotel, but I stay quiet and keep far enough back that she doesn’t notice me. When we reached the lobby, I let the crowd hide me. I wait until she’s in the elevator before I move any closer. The last thing I want is to upset her more and do it in public; no, I won’t hurt her that way.

When I reach our floor, she’s leaning against the door, her hands covering her face as she shudders and sobs. I touch her arms, and she tears away from me.

“Don’t *touch* me,” she says, voice icy and flat. “Just stay *away*.”

“Felicia, *please* ... I’m *sorry*.”

“Your words mean *nothing*.”

Swallowing, I nod, backing up a few spaces. “How can I fix this? Just tell me.”

“You want to fix this?” She looks at me with dead eyes. “You can do it by staying the hell away from me.”

It’s like she’s driven a knife through my chest.

But it's what she asked for, and right now, I can't do anything to make this better. "Okay. I'll give you time."

She swipes her keycard over the black pad on the door and shoves inside without looking back. Feeling raw and empty, utterly hollow, I turn and head back for the elevator. I can't go to my room. I'll just sit and stare at the door, thinking about Felicia, sitting a few feet away.

Aimlessly, I head back outside, thinking maybe I'd walk along the beach. Maybe some brilliant insight will come to me. But as I push through the doors, Brandt stumbles past me, then crashes to the ground, with Seth on top of him.

Seth is a stocky guy, built like a linebacker—he'd played in high school and had a chance his freshman year in college but decided he didn't want to. But he's still pretty fit and strong—and fast. Faster than most people would believe. Except me. And he's got a temper that rarely breaks loose.

Right now, all that fury is unleashed. I stare, feeling oddly disconnected, as Seth grabs the front of Brandt's shirt, hauls him up, and smashes his fist into Brandt's face, square into his nose. Hotel employees run up, and I grimace; as much as I'd love to enjoy watching Seth tear Brandt apart, he's still my best friend, and I don't want him suffering for what he's doing.

Before they can grab him, though, a tall, curvy redhead launches herself at Seth's back, beating at him with her fists.

"What are you *doing*? Let him *go*!" Layla screams and screeches.

Hotel security wades in, and I sigh, moving in to join them. They get Layla, and I get Seth, hauling him up in a bear hug even as he tries to lunge back for the bloodied, beaten man on the ground.

“Think about your sister,” I say in a low voice. “She won’t want the attention.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Layla shouts.

Seth looks at her, breathing hard, his face red with fury and exertion. “You don’t know what he did!”

“Is this about your darling sister?” She sneers at him. “What lies has she told you?”

Seth goes stiff. Brandt sits up with the help of a security guard, his gaze snapping to Layla. Her eyes jump to his, and she pales. Both Seth and I notice the reaction, though. How can we not?

“You knew,” I breathe.

She laughs, the sound squeaky, nervous. “Knew what?”

Seth jerks against my hold. “Let me go, Linc. I’m fine.”

Warily, I do so and watch as he makes his way over to Layla.

“Give me the ring. The wedding is off.”

Layla gapes at him.

“You heard me.”

“But, we’ve already paid ...”

“I’ve already paid, and I’ll be happy to pay whatever fee is required for calling it off. Anything to avoid being married to

a shark like you.” He remains there, his hand outstretched.
“Now give me the *fucking* ring.”

She wrenches it off and hurls it at him.

He snatches it out of the air. “I never want to see you near me or my sister again.” He shoots Brandt a dark look. “Either of you. Your office will be cleared out and your shit sent to you.”

“You Seth ...” The words come out thick and nasal-sounding.

Seth turns and strides away.

I catch Brandt’s eyes. “You heard him. And Brandt? This?” I looked at the blood on him and took in his swollen nose and bruised eyes. “It will seem like a sweet dream compared to what *I* do if I find out you try to come near either of them, especially Felicia.”

Layla says something under her breath, and I look at her.

“I already know the two of you are up to something. I know you two have known each other for a while. I’ll find out the rest. It would be better if you two kept a fucking distance because otherwise when I find out?” I give her a stiff smile. “I’ll fucking destroy you.”

She pales and grabs Brandt’s hand. I watch them until they both scurry toward the hotel then add, “And by the way ... let your family know that after tonight, they’re on their own here. And so are you. Your bank account is officially closed after that.”

“You can’t *do* that,” she hisses.

I smile at her. “Want to bet?”



Felicia

“WOULD YOU CARE FOR a drink, Ms. Appleton?”
Looking away from the window, I manage a wan smile for the airline attendant and shake my head. As much as I’d like to lose myself in a couple of drinks, it won’t solve anything. Thanks to not sleeping much the night before, I’d slept for the first two hours of the flight.

There’s still probably three hours left of the flight, though, and so many days stretched out ahead as I work on forgetting all the time I’ve spent with Lincoln Ransom. And to think I’d thought we were actually ...

“Have a drink, Fay,” Seth tells me. “I think there’s something we need to talk about.”

He gives me a nervous look before focusing on the airline attendant and requesting two Scotches. I don’t want the damn drink, but I don’t have the energy to argue with Seth, either. He’d knocked on my door late last night. I hadn’t answered at first, but he’d kept knocking until I opened it. He’d looked so

lost and miserable that I hugged him. When he asked what I wanted to do, I said I wanted to go home, so now, here we are, flying back on two first-class seats. I don't even know how he had come across them, but he had.

The conversation had been stilted, focused on pleasantries and so fucking miserable that I'd stayed silent just to avoid awkwardness.

And now he wants to *talk*.

Once we have our drinks in front of us, I grip mine in both hands just so I have something to hold; the chill in my clammy hands makes me shiver.

"Listen, sis ..." He stops and clears his throat before trying again, only to stop and lift his drink.

His knuckles are red, swollen, and scraped raw. I noticed last night but hadn't had the energy to ask. I don't know, either. He puts the drink down without taking a sip and turns to face me as much as the seatbelt will allow.

"What you heard between Linc and me ..."

"I don't want to talk about it," I tell him stiffly, my cheeks flushing hot even as my skin goes cold.

"We have to," he says, touching my hand when I go to turn away. "Because you misunderstood."

"Just *what* did I misunderstand?" I demand, knocking his touch away, angry at him and *hurt*. So hurt. "Did I misunderstand that Linc violated my privacy? *Did I?*"

“Yes,” Seth responds with uncharacteristic bluntness, his eyes holding mine without flinching. “We didn’t *know* who Brandt had assaulted, Felicia ... not until *you* told us.”

The words fall between us like a lead weight.

I feel sick.

My throat is scratchy and dry.

My ears roar.

“No,” I whisper.

Seth’s gaze is gentle. “Sweetheart, nobody gave the investigator a *name*,” he tells me softly. “Linc told me that the friend the PI talked to refused to share any personal information, and nobody else would, either.”

Face on fire now, I grab my drink and toss back half the Scotch, even though my belly is pitching and rolling. Shaky, I look outside.

“So...” My voice cracks at the word. I stop, focus on breathing deeply, and even until I think I can speak without crying. “Linc was just telling you about somebody Brandt had assaulted; as far as you knew, it was a random girl.”

“We didn’t even know it was somebody attending college with us, Fay.” He touches my shoulder. “I wish to God you would have told me because I would have beat the shit out of him, but Linc didn’t violate your confidence.”

“Why was he even investigating Brandt *anyway*?” I demand.

“Because he came across Brandt and Layla a few days ago after the dinner,” Seth says, and he sounds disgusted.

Welcome to find something else to focus on; I look at him, but he’s staring into his drink. As if sensing my attention, he jerks up a shoulder. “The way they were acting made Linc suspicious, so he called up the PI we keep on retainer. And the story about Brandt came out, but your name *never* did.”

I feel foolish now. Foolish, embarrassed, and a little lost.

My brother wraps his arm around my shoulders, and I lean against him.

Moments pass, and I reach out to touch the bruised, scraped knuckles of his free hand. “You beat Brandt up, didn’t you?”

“Damn straight.”

I laugh; it comes out wobbly and a little wet.

“My hero.”

“I’ll do it again if you want.”

“No.” Closing my eyes, I lean against him more fully. “Once is good.”

* * * * *

Seth spent the next two days with me. He should have been in Italy on his honeymoon. The night before he decides to go back home, we head to an Italian restaurant and gorge on lasagna. Seth says he has more fun with me than he would have had with Layla.

Something about the way he says it makes me wonder if he's not half serious.

"Do you even love her?" I ask him as we split a massive plate of tiramisu.

"I thought I did," he admits, his blue eyes thoughtful. He cuts a bit of the dessert off, pops it into his mouth, and chews as he considers the question. When he looks at me again, he has a wry, cynical smile on his face that hurts my heart.

"It's pretty clear she and Brandt had put their heads together. She kept putting me off about signing the prenup. I haven't told Linc. I let him think I kept forgetting, but if he knew she was stonewalling me a ..."

He sighs. "I should have seen it then, but I didn't. I guess I didn't want to."

"You've always wanted to see the good in people, Seth. That's not a bad thing."

"When you almost marry a person out to hurt you ..."

There's grief in his eyes and a hardness I've never seen before. It makes me angry. I hate knowing those two tarnished my optimistic, cheerful brother's outlook on life.

Taking his hand, I squeeze it. "I don't want them taking anything more from us."

After a moment, he manages a half-hearted smile. It's better than nothing, and for now, that's all I guess either of us can ask for.

* * * * *

I don't let myself think about Linc. Sure, it *sounds* easy, and maybe it wouldn't be so simple, but self-preservation is an amazing thing. I'd probably ruined things between us, lashing out at him like that. Because it hurts to think too much about him, and it's embarrassing, I mostly manage, save for the deep, dark hours of the night. Soon, I'll have to make myself reach out and apologize, but I'm not ready yet.

I should have known better than to think he'd go behind my back like that. Even when the two of us hadn't talked much at all, I'd known him better than that. He'd always had integrity. He wasn't the kind of person to go digging around in somebody's past and share their secrets with others.

I'm not naïve. Obviously, Linc might go digging into somebody's background, but he'll keep what he finds to himself unless he has a good reason not to.. But he wouldn't have found out about me and then run to Seth about it.

It would have been too humiliating for me, and he'd know that. I should have trusted him more than that, and now I've got the ashes of our relationship between us as a reminder.

Those thoughts haunt me throughout the night, and as a result, when my clock goes off Monday morning, I wake up groggy and nowhere near prepared for what will be a miserable day at work. I'm still the interim CEO at Scarlet Ink and juggling most of my authors on top, so all the workable to do or take to Hawaii for the last half of the week will be there waiting for me.

Because of all the time I spent with Linc, I hadn't stayed on top of projects as easily as I'd expected, but even now, with the aching hollow in my chest, I can't regret it. My assistant, Johan, is already pouring coffee when I come into the office, and I give him a grateful look. "You're my hero," I tell him.

"So you keep telling me," he says in a calm voice, the words lightly accented. He puts the coffee down and then recounts the day's agenda. When he finishes, he asks, "Do you want a rundown on the messages you missed?"

I sip my coffee and sigh. "Not really."

He laughs. "I agree with you, but it's sort of your job to keep up with them and *my* job to keep you apprised of them."

"Fine."

He hands me a small stack of notes, reciting from memory as I flip through them. I hesitate when I get to the third name; it has several notes scrawled on it.

"She's called *four* times since I left last week?"

"Yes." Johan's face was carefully blank, but I picked up on the annoyance in his voice, regardless. "She's quite insistent the two of you speak."

"I'm pretty sure we spoke on Monday, and at that time, I told her there was nothing left to be said," I mutter.

The messages were from Ardina Howell, a writer we'd picked up after she'd made a name for herself in indie romance. However, the manuscript she'd turned in to the editor who'd acquired her ended up in my lap after she went on early

maternity leave. *I* had been the one to notice the similarities between Ardina's writing and another popular indie author.

I found many instances after running the work through software intended to scan for plagiarism. Since that was something Scarlet Ink wouldn't tolerate, we'd ended the contract. I'd contacted her agent and clarified that we wouldn't be publishing Ardina's work, and she was expected to return her advance. That had been over two weeks ago.

Ardina apparently still hasn't accepted it.

"Contact Royce," I tell Johan. "Find out when he's available for a conference call with Ardina, then reach out to her and find a good time. If she's going to keep calling, I might as well talk to her, but I'm not doing it without legal on the line with me."

"Sounds like a smart move."

We finish the messages, and I log in just in time for a cover conference.

It's nearly six by the time I leave. I'm not the last one, but it's close enough.

I'm so worn out that I don't have the energy to head to the gym, even though I've missed almost a week's worth of workouts.

"Tomorrow," I tell myself as I push through the door, double-checking to make sure it's locked behind me.

The security system chirps out its brief message as I pull my keys from my pocket and head to my car, carrying my purse

and workbag. I make it three feet before I notice the man leaning against my car. My breath catches in my chest as he pushes out of the car and crosses to stand in front of me.

“Linc ...”



Linc

WAITING OUTSIDE THE PUBLISHING house where Felicia works, I play the events of the past week through my head, then turn the calendar back even further.

Other than Seth, there aren't really any people in my life that I trust, and there haven't been since his father, Baxter, died. I hadn't let myself get to know his wife well, although she'd tried. I'd been polite because I wouldn't have hurt Baxter or Seth, but there had always been a distance between us.

That had carried over to Felicia, although the attraction that's always been there bridged some of that distance. But then Bax and Barbara had died, and Felicia had retreated—not for reasons I'd thought. My inability to trust people had cost me more time with her.

Now, because there were no bonds of trust between us, I might have lost her.

It doesn't matter that she'd made a mistake when she overheard Seth and me. I probably would have had a similar reaction. If

I'd had *any* idea, she'd been the one Rori was referring to, well, I might even now be sitting in jail back in Hawaii because if I hadn't seen the look on Felicia's face, my first instinct would have been to kill Brandt.

He can't matter right now. Felicia is my only focus.

I'd talked to Seth earlier and told him I wanted to make things right with Felicia and try to build a relationship with her; he'd asked me what in the hell I was waiting for.

So, I'd driven from San Diego to Scarlet Ink Publishing, in a suburb on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Seth told me she usually worked at the office Monday through Thursday and from home on Fridays, leaving around five. It's now just after six, and she hasn't come out. Her car is here—I'm leaning right against it, so I know she didn't slip past me.

I think again about calling her, but if she sees my number, I'm worried she'll ignore the call. Movement from the front of the building has me retreating from the car, and my breath catches as she strides out, wearing a simple, olive green sheath under a white, waist-length jacket that shows off her curves to perfection. Her eyes move around, taking in her surroundings, although she looks toward her car—and me last.

When she sees me, there's a faint hitch in her step. Tension grips me. Her pace steadies, and she keeps walking. Moving away from the car, I head in her direction, stopping just a few feet away. Close, so close I can touch her. But I don't.

“Linc ...”

It comes out a little shaky, and unless I'm mistaken, there's need and longing in her eyes. She hasn't told me to fuck off or kiss her ass yet. I want to think that's a good sign, but I'm not ready to breathe easily just yet. Hell, I'm surprised I *can* breathe. I hadn't taken a deep breath since I caught sight of the look on her face when she came upon Seth and me as I updated him on the news I'd uncovered about Brandt.

"Can we talk?" I ask. "Fifteen minutes, Felicia. Please."

To my surprise, a wobbly smile curves her lips. It falls away almost immediately, and she averts her gaze. "You really think fifteen minutes is enough time?"

"Well, I'd ask for dinner, but I doubt you'll give me that."

She shifts her gaze back to me. "I know you haven't been digging around about me. Seth told me. I ..." She swallows, then offers, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"Don't apologize," I say without thinking it through. "There's ... fuck. I would have done the same thing."

Her brows arch. I drag my hands down my face and pace a few feet away before coming back to stand in front of her. "I don't need an apology. I get it. But please, can we talk? Maybe dinner?"

"Ah ..." She blows out a breath, then nods. "But I need to take my car home. I can't leave it here overnight."

"Okay if I follow?" I want to tell her I can bring her back, but I am unwilling to give her a chance to change her mind. She's

already easing toward her car, and I get the feeling she needs a few minutes to herself.

You've waited this long, Linc, I tell myself.

I can wait a little longer.

As it is, it feels like I've waited for her most of my life.

Another hour, give or take, won't make any difference.

* * * * *

We end up at a hole-in-the-wall sort of place up in the mountains, fairly quiet; once our entrees are brought out, a bottle of wine between us, the server leaves us in peace.

"I have issues trusting people," I tell her softly.

Felicia's gaze meets mine over the table, but she doesn't comment. She takes a bite of the pasta she ordered and waits for me to continue. She's always been like that, content to wait and let people say what they have to say rather than push.

"It's one reason I wasn't real big on you and your mom when you first came around," I admit.

Now she smiles, although it's a cynical twist of her lips more than anything humorous. "Both Mom and I figured that out, Linc."

"That's not surprising," I mutter.

She laughs.

"Mom talked to Bax about it, asking if there was anything she could do to make you more comfortable. He just said if you were going to come around, you needed to do it on your own.

He also said not to take it personally. You hadn't had the easiest life." She shrugs and glances at me over her wineglass. "That was something we'd also figured out on our own, although having a run-in with your mom didn't exactly hurt."

I grimace. "Yeah, we can just erase that event from history." Pushing the memory aside because it's not a good one, I reach for my wine and drink deep, hoping to wash the bad taste away—that bad taste always came around with memories of my parents, my mom in particular. I will not dwell on her right now. I want to focus on Felicia, *only* on Felicia.

"Maybe if I didn't have such a hang-up on trusting people, what happened the other day wouldn't have happened."

Felicia's gaze falls away. "That happened because *I* didn't trust *you*."

"And when have I given you a reason to?" Taking her hand and hoping she won't pull away, I stroke my thumb over the back of her fingers.

Her breath catches, and she stares at me with wide eyes. And she doesn't pull away.

"For several years, I've made it pretty clear I had a problem with you—and I was being a dick, too, because you weren't pulling back from your brother like I thought." I'm baring myself here, fully ready for her to cut and run.

She keeps listening. So I keep talking. "And maybe if I hadn't been such a dick and had reached out like this little voice in my head had told me I should, to try doing you and me ..."

My throat's gone tight and rusty, and I need a drink, but I don't dare stop now. "I always wanted you, Fae. Maybe if I'd made a move sooner and tried talking to you, you and I would have already had a relationship where you would have trusted me to tell me things."

I don't tell her the worst that's occurred to me; *maybe if I'd reached out, you would have been with me that night, and Brandt never could have touched you.* These sorts of *what-ifs* and *maybes* don't do anybody any good.

But fuck, if it's not killing me.

"But I'm hoping it's not too late to build one," I say, clearing my throat again and finally reaching for my wine. It tastes like sawdust, but I've said what I had to say, and that's what matters.

Felicia closes her eyes, then opens them to look at me, tears shimmering briefly in the dark brown depths. She offers a smile that wobbles and falls away, and for a second, my heart threatens to tear wide open.

"Is that what you want?"

I lean toward her and take the back of her neck to draw her to me. "I want *you*."

I kiss her, desperate, starving for her. She sighs into the kiss, soft, and tasting of wine—it tastes so much better on her.

"Take me home," she murmurs when the kiss breaks.

I pull back and stare at her.

She touches my lips with the tips of her fingers. “I only slept in your arms once, but I missed it. Take me home, Linc.”



Felicia

THE DRIVE FROM THE restaurant seems to take far longer, but finally, we're at home. Linc gives me a look that is uncertain. I take his hand and lead him to the house.

He's not the only one who's uncertain, and once we're in the pretty, ranch-style house I've renovated over the years since moving in, I feel walls sliding back up. I don't fight them, not right now.

I've felt these walls before, although never with somebody who mattered as much as Linc does. Intimacy has always unsettled me, and tying it to emotion is a recipe for disaster. If I'm not careful, I might have a flashback, especially with thoughts of Brandt so heavy on my mind.

Because of those worries, instead of leading him to my bedroom, I go to the lesser-used bedroom I've shared with very few partners. Pushing the door open, I lean back against the frame and let him walk inside.

“Some might call this a playroom,” I tell him. “I don’t like that term. I don’t like *dungeon*, either.”

He doesn’t ask questions, just walks around, looking at a bed clearly designed with bondage in mind: a heavy-duty wrought-iron bed with a canopy, with rings for tying my partners up affixed or built into the sidebars overhead and the headboard and each of the four posters. The bed’s a work of art, though — nothing gauche or gaudy — and plenty wouldn’t think twice unless somebody *knows* it’s designed for bondage. That was how I’d designed it and worked with the person I’d selected to build it.

He pauses by another set-up, a luxuriously padded chaise lounge that wouldn’t raise eyebrows in the most posh of bedrooms. But the wooden frame’s clever design sports several areas designed for restraints.

Linc glances up at me, and I shrug. “In case the bed gets boring.”

“If you’re in it, that could never happen.”

His gaze is hooded, eyes hungry. “Tell me what you want.”

I walk over to him slowly, stopping until just inches separate us. My skin is hot, too sensitive, and I want to press against him.

“What will you give me?”

“Everything,” he whispers.

My heart lunges hard against my ribs at the bare, honest answer, and I fight to keep from trembling.

“And if I want to keep it?”

“Then keep it. I’m already yours anyway,” Linc tells me.

I think my heart is going to spill over at his feet. “But what if it doesn’t work? I suck at relationships, Linc.”

“Then we keep trying unless that isn’t what you want.” He traces a finger down my cheek. “Whatever you’re willing to give, Fae, that’s what I’ll take. I’m greedy for all of you, but I’ll only take what you’re willing and able to give me.”

No. My heart will not spill over. It’s going to melt; it’s already doing so.

“Get naked,” I tell him.

He does so in quick, efficient movements as I move to the chest by the far wall, taking out the jute rope I use for shibari. Placing a coil of black on the bed where it stands in stark relief against the pure white sheets, I turn around and watch as he hooks his thumbs in his boxer briefs and shoves them down, baring himself completely.

My mouth waters as his cock springs free, hard, thick, and erect.

I curl my finger at him. “Come here.”

He walked over as I picked up the rope. Stroking the bundle of soft rope down his chest, I hold his gaze. “I want to tie you up.”

“Alright.” He flicks his eyes at the bed, then to me. “Should I lay down?”

“Just alright? No questions?”

“I’ve already told you I’m yours.” Desire burns so brightly in his eyes, and it sears me. “I trust you.”

That levels me, and I turn away from him, closing my eyes as a blast of emotion washes over me. “Unzip my dress.”

He does, slowly, the rasping sound of the zipper loud in the room. Needing some manner of control back, I command, “Make sure you fold it neatly and drape it over the chest.”

I wait until I hear his footsteps before I turn back, taking a seat at the foot of the bed. Crossing my legs, I lift my foot. “My shoes.”

A hint of a smile curls his lips as he kneels. I fight a shiver when he closes long fingers around my ankle, sliding off a high heel in a vivid purple. He sets it down, lowers my foot, and then takes the other shoe. Then, eyes holding mine, he applies pressure to the arch of my foot, strong fingers digging in, releasing and repeating the movements over and over.

I moan in approval, curling my fingers over the edge of the mattress. Linc works that foot for several minutes, then shifts to the other one, staying on his knees the entire time, his eyes holding mine.

My lids get heavier and heavier, but I stay focused on his too-handsome face.

“If I wanted you to stay there and do nothing but pleasure me, would you?”

“Do you even have to ask?” He bends down and presses his lips to my knees.

Standing, still feeling out of control but needing him, I grip the wrought iron over my head and hold his gaze. “Take off my panties, Linc, then lick my pussy.”

A sound akin to a wolf’s growl escapes him, but his movements stay slow and restrained as he drags my panties down. His palms smooth the skin of my thighs; his skin is rough and sensually abrasive, leaving a trail of fire in his wake.

After tugging the panties out of the way, he nudges my ankles apart and looks up at me. “Will you open for me, Felicia?”

I spread my thighs wider, tightening my grip on the iron circles where I caught hold a few moments earlier, bracing myself. Linc nuzzles my belly, hands moving to cup my hips.

“Can I make you come?” he asks.

“Yes. I want to climax against your mouth.”

“Fuck, yeah,” he mutters, kissing a path down the slope of my belly.

His tongue dips into the nest of curls between my thighs, and I cry out, tightening my hands on the metal. I’m not sure if I’ll be able to stay upright through this. But I realize I can be vulnerable with him, maybe *only* with him, because I trust him, too.

He nudges my thighs wider and presses against me more firmly, mouth closing around my clitoris. He sucks, and I arch

my spine, crying out as a bolt of pleasure lances through my belly, followed by another as he circles that hardened nub of flesh and stabs it with his tongue, over and over.

He retreats, and I whimper, trying to follow, but all he's doing is repositioning himself; and this time, when he licks me again, it's complete, the contact so intimate, I can't stand it. But it's too good to deny him.

He thrusts his tongue into me, one hand moving behind my knee to grip and lift it. "Fae?"

"Yes," I tell him, although I'm not even sure what he's asking for.

Then he has my legs draped over his shoulders, his hands supporting my ass while I grip the wrought iron bed frame, thrusting and riding his mouth with an urgent demand. The muscles in my shoulders take a portion of my weight, but he's holding much of my lower body as he licks and sucks on me, making hungry noises as he drives his tongue in and out.

He shifts his weight and mutters something. It barely makes sense, but then he says something else, and my brain processes it. My body understands quicker, however, and complies before I can think it through. He catches my weight as I let go of the bedframe, guiding me to the mattress and settling me on the bed. He goes back to kneeling fully between my splayed thighs, hauling me to the edge.

"So fucking delicious, Fae," he whispers, using two fingers to spread me open. "I could eat this pussy all night."

I thrust my hips up and catch his hair in my hands, hauling his mouth back to mine. “Stop talking.”

He laughs against me and circles his tongue around my clit. “Yes, ma’am.”

I arch up, crying out as he pushes two fingers into me, twisting them.

The climax hits hard and fast, stealing my breath away.

* * * * *

“It’s a pretty basic tie,” I tell him.

Logically, I know my body has recovered from the climaxes he’d given me just a short time earlier. But I still feel like putty. And for some reason, I feel shy. It’s easier to slip into the role I’m used to, taking control of the situation. Talking keeps the nerves at bay, although I should have better control—I shouldn’t *be* nervous, not about this, should I?

I am, though, and I use the words to distract me. “The technique is called shibari. It’s gotten a fair amount of attention in the media lately, so you might have seen something about it a time or two,” I tell him as I loop the rope around one strong wrist after and over, using simple knots that added to the aesthetic appeal. The jute rope is soft and feels familiar in my hands. I let the routine of it, the ease of the known, steady the odd hitch that keeps trying to tangle me up.

A small voice in the back of my mind keeps trying to interrupt. *It’s not so odd, Fae. You know why you’re nervous. You’ve brought nobody here who matters as much as Linc.* Nobody

has ever mattered as much as Linc. Are you sure you want to do this?

I already know the answer, and it terrifies me. If this falls apart, I'll never be the same. I'll never recover.

But I don't stop. "You might have marks on your wrists, especially if you pull against the ropes," I say as I finish one tie, allowing his wrist, bound in black rope, to rest on the mattress by his head. I'll wait until I've done the other before securing him to the bed. And then, my blood heats as I think about them, *and then*, what will I do?

Everything I've ever dreamed about, I think, not needing more than a moment to consider it. The thought of having that powerful body submitting to me, Linc willingly making himself vulnerable to me, made my hands suddenly go clumsy, and I dropped the second bundle of rope.

"Felicia?"

I meet his eyes, and my breath squeezes in my chest at the look in his eyes.

This is no submissive who has put himself in my hands, and I know it. Somehow, that makes this that much more erotic. Without planning to, I lower my head and kiss him, stroking my tongue over his lower lip before catching the full curve in my mouth and biting, teasing until he opens for me. When he did, I slid inside, controlling the kiss the way I planned to control his body.

Linc lets me, and I realize he's sensed how off-balance I am. No matter how this all turns out, I'm never going to be the same. It's a gut-deep kind of knowing, and the more cowardly part of me wonders if it won't be better if I just shut everything down tonight and send him away.

But I can't.

Breaking the kiss, I lift and hold his gaze for a long moment. I see the speculation in his eyes and wonder if he isn't aware of my thoughts, even now.

When I move to start the tie on his other wrist, something in him relaxes, and I know I'm right. He's so acutely aware of me; it's uncanny.

His breathing is ragged, and by the time I'm done with the second tie, the sexual tension in the air is thick enough to cut with a knife.

"I'm going to secure your wrists to the headboard now."

He bobs his head in a short, stiff nod, eyes flicking to follow me. I'd have asked if he was nervous, but the look in his eyes was pure, molten heat. It's enough to make my knees feel weak; it takes more concentration than normal to bind his left wrist to the specific ring on the corresponding bedpost. I double-checked to make sure the scissors were where I needed them, just in case, before moving to the other side of the bed and repeating the actions.

Then, moving to where I could stand at his feet, I study him, the muscles in his biceps bulging as his arms stretch over his

head, hands in loose fists, while his gaze is locked intently on me. His penis is a dark, ruddy red, hard and swollen, pulsating. Under my attention, it jerks.

“You’re trying to fucking torture me,” he says.

“No, but if I were ...” I smile, some nerves washing away under a blast of pure, undiluted heat. “Would I be succeeding?”

“I’m about to come, and all you’ve done is tie me up.” The words are a growl. “Does that answer your question?”

“I think,” I utter slowly. “I might enjoy a bit of sensual torture.”

Normally, my only actual goal with my partners is release—for both of us — because I don’t care to be greedy. But sex is just that for me—a physical release. Even with my more long-term partners, the one or two I’d developed deeper feelings for, I’d never had romantic, emotional involvement with sex. I never had any desire to play or indulge, and I’d avoided partners who might want that.

But with Linc, it’s different.

Everything is different with him.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell him.

He groans and closes his eyes.

I’m only gone a minute, quickly retrieving what I needed from my meticulously organized closet. I kneel on the bed next to

Line and show him the black silk scarf. “Any objections to being blindfolded?”

“Only that I can’t look at you.” A half smile teases his lips.

“Do your worst, Felicia.”

I smile and secure it in place. “Can you see?”

“I’ve closed my eyes. I won’t try to look.”

“You’re very well-behaved.”

A feral look crosses his face, and he says, “For now.”

I kiss him, cupping his jaw in one hand. I push him back down when he tries to follow me as I end the contact. “Stay.”

“So you *are* going to torture me?” He groans but subsides, going quiescent on the bed.

I dip my head down and press my lips to his chest. He catches his breath. Trailing my fingers along the taut muscles of his belly, I stroke downward until I reach his erection.

“Maybe I will. Starting ...” I shift until I can bend down and brush a kiss over the head of his cock. “Here.”

He swears and arches up. “*Fuck!*”

“Be still,” I tell him, scraping my nails down one thigh in a warning.



Linc

B *E STILL?*
She's crazy, I think. She has to be.

Then she takes the head of my cock into her mouth, and the thought ceases.

Her teeth rake over the sensitive underside of my cock, and I think I'm going to lose my mind. "*Fuck,*" I groan, arching up again, mindless.

She pulls back. "I said, *be still.*"

Instinctively, I reach for her—or try to. The ropes on my wrists are secure. There's no way I'm getting loose. I swear, my jaw clenching reflexively. "Fine." I lock my spine and tell myself I can handle this new, seductive form of torture, even if it kills me.

It just might.

Her breasts rub over my belly as she slithers up to brush her lips over mine.

“*Fine...? Fine what, Linc?*” she asks, a taunting smile in her voice.

“I’ll be still,” I tell her, ready to beg.

With a delicate kiss, she murmurs, “Good boy.”

I snarl, then bite my inner cheek to smother the expression. Now she laughs, and I feel her breasts vibrate against me as she works her way back down my body. The damp heat between her thighs brushed against my cock for a few briefs, delicious seconds before moving away. She settles between my legs, wrapping long, cool fingers around my length.

“Let’s try this again,” she says.

She licks me, root to tip, before taking me completely into her mouth. I shudder and groan and go to arch up before stopping myself. My hands are fisted so tightly my knuckles hurt, but I lay there. She rewards me, taking my cock deeper, harder, faster.

I’m panting now, panting and praying and praising her. She scrapes her nails over my balls, and my dick jerks demandingly, warning prickles racing down my spine as my climax edges closer.

“Felicia, baby...” I’m able to groan out those few words.

She makes a little humming sound in her throat and adds one of her hands into the mix. I want more than anything to cup her head between my hands and pump my cock back and forth between her pretty lips. But my hands are bound, and I can’t move them—and she told me *not* to move anything else.

“Felicia, damn it, I’m going to come,” I warn her.

She’s barely gotten started, and she’s already got me on the edge.

“Fay!”

She moves faster, making a demanding sound in her throat, and I know she wants me to let go. I don’t have a choice. Resisting her is like resisting the waves in the ocean, impossible. With a groan, I arch and thrust up, breaking the rule she’d laid down, but it’s too late, and I can’t stop. I’m already climaxing, the blindfold keeping me from seeing her, but it doesn’t matter. In my mind’s eye, she’s there before me, clear as day, the black sweep of her hair spread over my thighs as she takes me in her mouth, moving up and down, one hand working my cock, the other stroking my thigh. I’m emptying myself, surrendering everything.

I am giving her everything.

* * * * *

She’s still sleeping the next morning when I wake up. Rolling onto my side, I study her. Her thick, jet-black hair is tousled, and the thick fringe of her lashes is so heavy that they cast a faint shadow on her cheeks in the light that’s filtered through the windows.

I’m tempted to wake her up with kisses and sex, but this thing between us is new, and I’d have to be an idiot not to have sensed her nerves from the night before. And I’m not an idiot. There’s no way I’m going to risk scaring her off.

Still, I can't leave the bed without kissing her, so I brush my lips over her cheek, breathing in the familiar scent of her before breaking away.

In the kitchen, I poke around until I find enough food to make breakfast. I'm craving bacon and eggs, but there's no bacon. I know Felicia loves it, but she's careful about her diet. I didn't need to see the gym I'd glimpsed on our walk through her place last night to know why: it's obvious she still takes her weightlifting pretty seriously just by looking at her.

Since I can't get bacon, I opt for western omelets, using some frozen diced chicken instead of ham. I'm almost done with them when I hear movement behind me.

"I smell both coffee *and* breakfast. I'm about ready to swear I've died and gone to heaven."

Turning, I find her wearing just a tank top and panties, her hair still mussed and her face flushed with sleep.

"I'm pretty sure I just did," I tell her.

She gives me a puzzled look as she pours a cup of coffee from the steaming carafe.

"Died and gone to heaven."

"Oh." She laughs softly and rolls her eyes. "I'm not awake yet. The fuel has to hit." She nods at the coffee, then takes a sip, followed quickly by a second, then a third. By the fourth, her eyes look a little clearer, and she shuffles over to kiss my cheek. "What are you cooking?"

"Western omelets. Hope that's okay."

“You’re making me food ... it’s more than okay.” Her smile is as bright as the sunrise and ten times more beautiful.

After I serve the omelets, we sit side by side at the kitchen island to eat, the silence easy.

“Don’t you have to work today?” she asks after finishing her food.

“The boss gave me a day or two off.” I gave her a sly smile. “I’m in tight with the guy. He said if I needed another couple of days to work things out, just let him know. I can always do most of my work from wherever, as long I have my computer.”

“Nice guy, your boss.” Her lips twitch, but her face quickly sobers. “I hope he’s going to be okay.”

Reaching out, I stroked my knuckles down the long, elegant line of her spine.

“He’ll be fine. I never saw the two of them fitting. I didn’t think he was really in love with her, to begin with. This was a rude wake-up call for him, but I think he’s figuring out what I already knew, and I think you knew it, too.”

She sighs, a deep breath making her shoulders rise and fall with the action.

“No, I don’t think he loved her. I think he loved the image she presented. She did a good job tarnishing that over the past few days, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt, letting go of what he thought they had.” She leans her head against my shoulder.

We sit like that for a few minutes before she asks, “And what about us, Linc? What do we do now?”

I face her and cup her cheeks in my hand. “Now we see how well *we* fit. I think we already have a good idea, but I want to make this work, Felicia.”

“I’m not too good at the romance thing, Linc.” Her eyes are solemn.

“I may suck at it. I’ve never tried for anything serious.” If I realized it, I’d been too busy waiting for her. “But I want a chance, Fay. Give us a chance.”



Felicia

“**Y**OU LIED.”

Scowling at Linc over our breakfast plates, I demand, “Excuse me?”

He offers a serene smile and scoops a fluffy bite of egg, vegetable, and ham into his mouth. It’s been a month since we officially started dating—a month to the day. He spent last night at my house. We’ve been talking about moving in together and him telecommuting to the office three days a week.

We’ve finally hired a permanent CEO at Scarlet Ink, and I’m back in my position as senior editor. However, they decided I would keep the pay raise I’d gotten when I temporarily took over for Lucas. The board had decided I’d earned it.

Most of the time, I can telecommute two days a week, but I still need to be in the office more often than Linc. We might sell my place, though, and find someplace between L.A. and San Diego to help cut down on his drive time. Some days, I

still can't believe this is all happening: that he's here with me, that he loves me. On other days, it all feels so right and natural that it's hard to picture my life without him.

He's still smirking at me, and I pick up my coffee to take a sip. As I lower it, I ask, "Exactly what did I lie about, hot shot?"

"You said you weren't too good at the romance thing," he wonders. "But this is the same meal we had the day I came after you to ask you to give me a chance."

"Whatever." I roll my eyes, but secretly, I'm delighted he remembers and notices. "Except I used *ham*, not chicken."

"You didn't have any ham that day." He grins at me.

"Stop nitpicking on details."

As he laughs, the doorbell rings. I pick up my phone to check the time. It's Saturday—neither of us had to go to work, and we'd planned on a lazy day with nothing to do except maybe hit up a farmer's market and drive by a few houses on the market. It's too early for anybody to visit, and the only visitors I get, other than Linc, are Lucas, Lo, and my brother. Lucas and Lo do little visiting right now, not with how far along Lo is in her pregnancy.

I glance down at my clothes as I slide off the stool, lingering to tie the robe of my belt. I'm covered to mid-thigh, but the pretty black silk robe with its Asian-style print isn't exactly the kind of clothing you wear for accepting company. Since it's not even nine, though, I will not worry about it.

I glance at Linc. “I’ll be right back.” Jabbing a finger at him, I say, “Don’t touch my omelet.”

His smile is pure innocence, and it doesn’t fool me at all. Opening the door, I find the last two people I’d ever expected to see, and my smile dies a fast death as Layla offers a bright, sharp smile while Brandt sneers at me.

Leaning against the door frame to block the entry and keep them from trying to push inside, I cross my arms. “What do you two want?”

“Now that’s no way to greet an old friend,” Brandt says in a taunting voice.

“And when I *see* an old friend, I will offer a better greeting.” I bare my teeth at him and ask again, “What do you want?”

Layla speaks this time. “I want what I’m fucking *owed*,” she says, all attempts at simpering sweetness long gone. “Why don’t you invite us in, Felicia? It will make this easier if we can sit down and talk like adults.”

“You’re not welcome here.” Lifting a shoulder, I say, “If you want to talk, I suggest you start because I’ll get bored fast, then think I should call the cops.”

“You don’t want to do that,” Brandt says, his face twisting into an ugly mask.

“Let me handle this,” Layla snaps, jabbing back at him with her elbow. She looks at me in a snide voice and warns, “You don’t want to do that.”

This is becoming almost comical, but I'll play along for another minute or two. Gesturing with one hand for them to continue, I say, "Oh, but I *do*. Unless there's a reason I *shouldn't*?"

Now she laughs. It's cold, ugly, and jagged, and her eyes look half-wild and pleased. "You *shouldn't*, because if you don't play nice, I'll fucking *ruin* you, Felicia." She leans toward me then, smug satisfaction glowing in her eyes. "You see, I know your *secret*. That dirty, ugly secret you try so hard to hide from everything."

My skin goes cold.

How?

My mind shrieks; *It doesn't matter. Layla knows.*

I'm already talking, though, and my voice comes out placid, so fucking *normal* as I say, "Oh?"

Flicking a piece of lint off my robe, I let it fall to the floor before I glance back at Layla and Brandt, offering them a frown as if confused by their continued presence. "Exactly what *secret* are you talking about?"

"You fucking know!" Layla lunges toward me, but Brandt catches her arm, murmuring to her in a low voice. Whatever he says has her taking a deep breath and smiling, looking at me like she'd looked at my brother when she'd conned another pricy extravagance out of him over the wedding.

I'm not my brother, you bitch, I thought, bracing myself.

“I know *everything*,” she says, breathing hard and fast. She reaches into her purse and fumbles around, finally pulling out a small manilla envelope. It falls to the ground to lie against the pristine ivory of my porch. She tears the photos out of the envelope, brandishing them at me. “It’s all *right* here, and if you don’t pay up for what you cost me by fucking up my wedding, I’m going to ruin your day like you ruined my wedding.”

I still hadn’t seen the pictures, but I could imagine they were bad.

Still...

Lifting a shoulder, I say, “I don’t care what pictures you have, Layla, how you came by them, or who told you they were of me. I will not give you jack shit. You’re done bleeding my family dry. Fuck off.”

Layla’s face turns a lovely shade of red, and she hurls the photos down at my feet, pointing at them.

“You sure about that?” she demands. “Everybody will see these, will see *you*, unconscious, drunk—”

She kept talking. I know she did, but I stopped hearing her. Her voice faded into the background as I looked down at the pictures and processed what I was seeing. I assumed she’d found out about my membership at the club, that she’d heard about Linc and me and what I liked to do—had maybe gotten a picture somehow, but fuck if I know how.

But it wasn’t any of that.

No.

This was me the night Brandt had assaulted me.

He'd taken these ...

Bile rushes up my throat as I process what I see, and I almost puke.

Tearing my eyes away from those pictures takes far, far too much strength, and I feel battered by the time I am done.

“Where did you get these?” I ask; the words are toneless, my face numb, hot, and cold, all at the same time. My lips felt stiff, and my hands were bloodless. I want to grab those pictures and tear each of them into tiny, tiny pieces, then burn them until not even ash is left.

Would that destroy the memory?

No.

Nothing wound.

But fuck if I couldn't try.

“Where did you get them?” I snarled when nobody answered me.

Neither answer and I look at her and see a flicker of worry in her eyes that she quickly hides.

“You don't need to worry about that,” she says calmly. “All you need to worry about are the numbers — the x's and o's you need to put on the check.”

I laugh, and the sound is harsh, almost grating.

“Like I’m paying you *anything*,” I tell her. “You ... *or*
Brandt.”



Linc

ONE THING I'D LEARNED and never forgotten during my years working as a legal intern, then as a law clerk, and while in law school is how fucking stupid some people are about the law. They think money, privilege, and/or looks can protect them from everything. For some, sadly, it is often the case for too long, but I think everybody can—and should—meet their match. But Layla is no criminal mastermind.

When I first thought I heard her voice, I used the security system app on my phone and logged in with the password Felicia had set up for me, checking the camera. I picked up my iPad, opened the app, and circled around to the steps in the laundry room so I could come on them unaware.

It took less than a minute to make my way down the front staircase, out of view of both Brant and Layla and now, leaning against the wall as Layla threw out another taunting jeer. I shove myself away from the wall, going rigid as her words fully connect in my head, making sense.

“You sure about that? “Everybody will see these, will see *you*, unconscious, drunk—”

Something white fluttered toward the floor just inside the door, floating higher for a few seconds as an updraft caused by the air conditioner caught it. It flipped, drifted back down, and came to rest on the bottom step.

Felicia had gone painfully still. I want to grab her, haul her against me. Protect her. But I can't protect her from this.

It's already happened.

I tighten my hand on the iPad, my mind racing as I look at the image resting on the carpeted step just a few feet below me. That sick fucker had taken *pictures* of it the night he assaulted her. And Layla has them.

“Where did you get them?”

I flinch at the sound of Felicia's voice, toneless, lifeless, and flat. There's no answer for several long, strained seconds, and when Layla answers, her voice is no longer so steady and full of arrogance.

“You don't need to worry about that. All you need to worry about are the numbers — the x's and o's you need to put on a check.”

Felicia laughs, the sound grating. Harsh. “Like I'm paying you *anything*. You *or* Brandt.”

“If you don't, I will post these ... *everywhere*.”

I move forward, so angry I can't see straight. Felicia starts and looks over at me. Her eyes widen, then a smile curves on her lips. Her shoulders straighten, and she looks at Layla.

I hesitate, seeing her find her resolve. A sardonic smile spreads across her lips. "You want to show an unconscious woman getting raped by the man you're involved with, Layla? Yeah, that's going to go over *real* well for you *and* him."

"Nobody has to know you were *unconscious*," Layla says after a couple of seconds. She doesn't sound so certain now.

I hear Brandt whispering to her, too. I bet he hadn't expected her to throw him under the bus when she decided she wanted to come over here. But I've had enough. Looking at the iPad, I put the video on full-screen and rewind it to when these two arrived on Felicia's doorstep just moments earlier.

I wait to press play, coming around to stand at Felicia's shoulder, smiling at the dual expressions of surprise on Brandt's and Layla's faces.

Hitting the play, I turn up the volume. "You really should consider a few things before this conversation goes any further, Layla." Flipping the iPad around so she can see the screen—and her fully visible face—I say, "Like the simple fact that blackmail is illegal."

Layla's jaw drops open as her eyes lock on the screen, her gaze darting from the device to me, then around the porch, clearly looking for the cameras she hadn't bothered to search for earlier.

“This is what we in the legal field call a major fuck-up,” I tell her helpfully.

Her face contorted, and she lunged forward, trying to grab the iPad. I step back, pulling Felicia along with me. “And if you come into her place uninvited, it’s unlawful entry; it will compound your blackmail attempt.” With a smirk, I add, “Not that you have any chance of destroying the video feed. It’s on a secure server.”

Layla sags against the doorframe, glaring at us with a gaze so furious that it glows.

“Layla,” Brandt says from behind her. “Let’s go. I told you this was fucking crazy.”

Layla shoves off the doorframe. Through the window, I can see Brandt already moving off the porch.

“Run along, Layla,” Felicia says in a voice that’s almost cheerful. She eases away from me and starts to the door. “Just an FYI, though? Don’t bother collecting your pictures. I’m taking them and the video feed to the cops and turning you in for attempted blackmail.”

A cold, dispassionate mask falls over Layla’s face.

Time slows to a crawl.

I see her reaching into her pocket.

It’s like my legs had frozen to the ground.

I can’t seem to uproot myself.

Layla's arm swings up, and the matte black surface of the gun looms large in my vision. Finally, I can move. She's aiming at Felicia. No. Just ... *no*. But Felicia is also moving. She swings out hard, one hand slamming into Layla's jaw, the other grabbing Layla's wrist, her weapon hand, and bashing it into the doorframe with brutal strength.

Layla collapses with a scream.

The gun hits the floor; Felicia kicks it toward me just as I breach the front door, my stomach in knots. I grab the weapon and check the safety—it is still on, for fuck's sake. I shove it in the back of my jeans, not knowing what else to do with it, and then I grab Felicia and haul her to me.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I whisper, my face buried against her neck.

She's shaking from head to toe. “I think I might be sick,” she whispers in a wan voice.

“Yeah, I know the feeling.”

“No ... I mean, *really*—”

The panic in her voice, combined with how she pushes at me — hard and abrupt — has me releasing her. She spins toward the door but barely makes it two steps before she's bent over. Layla, still lying there, moaning, stirs and awakens with a screech as Felicia vomits on her.

She scurries back in a crab walk and shoves herself to her feet. I catch her, spin her around, and onto the nearest flat surface—the small table on the front patio. “Consider this a citizen's arrest,” I tell her in a flat voice.

She tries to bolt past me, and I shift, blocking her.

“If you move, you’ll make me *very* unhappy.”

Layla shrinks away from me. Satisfied, I yank off my t-shirt and pull the pocketknife I still carry out of habit from my childhood. One cut and two good yanks have my shirt in shreds. Layla’s face is white as death, and she moves again as if to bolt.

“Don’t,” I warn her.

I go around her, catch her hands, and tie her wrists. She shakes and opens her mouth.

“Scream,” I tell her. “It will just get that much more attention when I show everybody *on video* what you just tried to do.”

She spits on me. “Fucking bully.”

“Coming from the woman who just tried blackmail, then pulled a gun because your target won’t cower like you wanted. That’s rich.” Rising, I pull out my phone and call 9-1-1. I move toward Felicia, never taking my eyes off the woman sitting on the table.

“Run, and you’ll have your face all over the news within the next hour—two, tops.”

Felicia sits back on her heels with a moan. Another wave of nausea hits her in the next second, just as the dispatcher takes my 9-1-1 call.



Felicia

“**Y**OUR EYES...? THAT’S GOOD. Now, follow my finger ...”

Disoriented, I follow the instructions even as I try to bat the too-bright light away.

“Alright, I’m done. We can turn this off.”

The bright light is gone, and I blink, my eyes still dazzled by the brightness. As they adjust, I take in several shadowy forms in front of me that slowly coalesce into familiar faces. Okay, *two* familiar faces. The other is recognizable: a doctor.

Linc and Seth are on the other side of my bed, crowding each other to stand as close as possible. Seth has my hand while Linc grips my shoulder, both looking worn and exhausted.

My mouth is dry, and I whisper, “Water?”

“How is your stomach?” the doctor asks. “Any nausea?”

Shaking my head, I repeat, “Water.” It’s not a request this time.

They hold a styrofoam cup to my lips, then pull away after I get one measly drink. I glare at the doctor, and he just smiles. “Let’s make sure that stays down first. You don’t want to throw up again.”

“Throwing ...” My memory swarms back in. I recall my bouts of vomiting on the porch, along with Brandt, the pictures, and *Layla*. “Why am I in the hospital? Please don’t tell me that miserable, flaky bitch *shot* me.”

A strangled laugh that almost sounds like a sob escapes Linc. I look at him, guilt twisting me into pieces. I reach for his hand, and he takes mine and lifts it to his lips. “No, she didn’t shoot you, Fae.”

“You passed out,” the doctor said. “That wouldn’t be so bad—you had an exciting morning. But you were standing rather close to the edge of your porch, and from what I’m told, you hit your head on one of the decorative stones in your flowerbed. You’ve been unconscious for about six hours.”

“Six hours?” Huffing out a weak laugh, I say, “See, Seth? My head’s not that hard.”

His fingers tighten in his hand while Linc kisses my fingertips again. “I don’t know ... I think Linc said the rock was broken. It’s a goner, for sure.”

“Shut the fuck up, Appleton,” Linc mutters, but there’s relief in his voice.

I force my eyelids open. “I’m fine. Both of you. I’m fine.”

“Perhaps you can both step out. I know the officer investigating needs to be notified,” the doctor says, angling his jaw toward the door. “I need to do a quick exam in private.”

Neither of them wants to leave. Seth kisses my forehead. Linc grabs the water cup and gives me another sip, glaring at the doctor. Finally, they both leave, and the doctor closes the door behind them. But instead of starting an exam, he settles on the rolling chair next to the bed and studies me.

“How have you been feeling the last few days? The past week?”

“I ... er ... fine...?” My head hurts like a bitch, but I try to think back. Nothing stands out, but I can still remember what I ate for dinner. Earlier that day, I made Linc the same breakfast I’d made a month ago when he ... that memory makes me smile, and I blush as I find the doctor still studying me.

“Do you know when your last period was?”

Blinking, I consider the question, then shake my head. “I don’t get them. I have an IUD ... the hormonal kind, and after about nine months, I just stopped having them.”

Concern creases his features, and he takes my hand. “When you were admitted earlier, we ran the typical tests on any woman who comes into the hospital.”

Awareness dawns on me. “Oh, fuck,” I whisper.

“Yes, well. The results came in, and they showed that you’re pregnant. We’d have a hard time estimating without knowing your last period.”

I don't have to estimate. I recall that encounter with Linc like it was yesterday, although, logically, it could have been almost any time in the past month. "I'd say probably about five weeks ... maybe less. It's the only real likelihood."

"I see." He's still holding my hand. "There are ... a few concerns since you have an IUD."

My mind, too good at recalling details, flashes back to the pamphlet I'd read and the information I'd skimmed when researching birth control options. "If I want to keep the baby, we need to take it out, don't we?"

"Yes, and the sooner the better. Ideally, before you leave the hospital, if you feel up to making that decision."

* * * * *

I ask several more questions, then request a little privacy. Although I know Seth and Linc are practically hovering outside the door, I roll onto my side and stare at the wall as I consider the decision before me. The doctor had been blunt. Even with removing the IUD, there are some risks.

If I want the baby, I think the risks are worth it. I'm healthy. I've got excellent medical coverage and access to top-quality care. Those aren't benefits afforded to every pregnant person out there, and I'm keenly aware of the privileges I have.

If I want the baby...

I close my eyes and try to think of such a thing — of cradling a baby. One made by Linc and me. Would the baby have my dark eyes or Linc's green ones? His lighter hair or my black

hair? I didn't know. But as warmth unfurls inside, I realize one thing—I *want* this child.

Desperately.

Deeply.

Defiantly.

Risks? I've faced those all my life. Taking a deep breath, I grab the phone the doctor had put on the bedside table, just in my reach.



Linc

WHEN THE MESSAGE FINALLY pops up on my phone, I'm shaken to the core with relief. Shoving the device into my pocket, I look at Seth.

"She's ready for us to come in."

He drags a hand down his face, mumbles under his breath, and joins me at the door. We've all but hovered outside it since the doctor told us he needed a few minutes with her; that was almost forty-five minutes ago.

When he'd come out alone twenty minutes ago, he'd body-blocked us from entering, saying Felicia had *specifically* requested a few minutes to herself, and she'd either call for the nurse when she was ready or otherwise let us know. *Until then, please don't disturb her. She's had a very trying day.*

It had taken all my strength not to barge in there and haul her into my arms.

Now, pushing the door open, I wonder if I've got the strength to keep my legs steady. Felicia is sitting upright now, the head

of the bed elevated and her hair brushed back from her face. She looks young and vulnerable. I could have lost her.

I get all shaky. Seth grips my shoulder, and in a low voice, he whispers, “Steady, man. She’s alright. Don’t fall apart now.”

Then he nudges me forward. Whether it’s the nudge or the need to touch Felicia and remind myself she’s okay, I’m able to move beyond that first step and reach her side, folding my fingers around her hand the moment I’m close enough. She twines our hands together and stares at me, her dark and solemn eyes more intense than I’ve ever seen them.

“I love you.” I had no intention of blurting it out like that right in front of Seth. We’ve barely even touched on bringing our relationship out into the open, but it’s not like he isn’t aware of it. I can’t stop the words that continue to spill out of me now.

“Never scare me like that again.”

“I can’t help that a crazy bitch showed up at my place threatening me,” she says with a weak laugh.

“No.” Seth joins me on the opposite. “Linc’s right. You scared us to death. Don’t do it ever again.”

“Men are impossible.” She rolls her eyes, then reaches up and trails her fingers over my cheek. Her eyes still have that somber, quiet look, a secretive one.

I study her. “Felicia—”

“Excuse me.”

Seth surges toward the door. “Not now, officer.”

I'm on my feet, my hand still tangled with Felicia's even as I turn to block her from the door. The man standing there isn't the same uniformed officer we spoke with earlier. I grind my jaws. "Detective?" I ask.

He inclines his head. "Reardon," he responds. "I'm taking over the investigation from Officer Clemons, considering how involved it may get."

"Involved?" Felicia asks from behind me.

Immediately, I turned to her and explained, "You don't need to do this now. You can wait until you've had some time to rest."

"I can talk to him for a couple of minutes."

I shoot the cop a dark look. He doesn't wilt under it. Mildly, he says, "I only need a couple of minutes for now. I know this must have been traumatizing, and I will be brief. But if Ms. Appleton has had to try a day—"

"Oh, fuck you sideways, detective," she says with an indelicate snort.

Seth claps a hand over his face. I bite back a laugh even as I mentally groan.

"It's been a shitty day, but the only way it would have been *traumatizing* for me would be if that whining bitch had actually shot me," Felicia continues, now glaring daggers at the cop.

"So you can give me a statement." He pulls a notebook from inside his jacket and smiles pleasantly.

“I can give you five minutes, no longer. I’ve got more important concerns right now.”

That comment makes me tense up. I try not to let it show, but I don’t know if I’m successful.

“Something more important than a woman attempting to blackmail *and* kill you?”

Felicia gives him a pithy look. “I’m still here, and she’s currently in jail—will be until Monday at the earliest, correct?”

“You passed out.”

“Yes. I did.” Her smile turns harder. “The clock is ticking.”

He’s still asking questions when the five minutes is up. Felicia just picks up the light and calls for the nurse. Somebody picks up immediately, and she says, “There’s a guy in here who won’t leave, and I’m not feeling well.”

The detective rises with a sigh. “That’s hardly necessary. I only need—”

“I said five minutes.”

The nurse is already at the door, and her eyes narrow on the detective. “Sir.”

As he leaves, Felicia closes her eyes and then looks at me. “I need a couple of minutes with Linc, Seth.”

My gut clenches, turning slippery and cold. Moving back to Felicia's side, I wait for Seth to leave.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, taking her hand. A part of me is prepared for her to jerk away. I think this whole thing scared her, and she needs some time. Okay. I can do that. I love her. I can wait. I can wait forever if she needs—

She tightens her fingers on mine.

“The doctor...” She licks her lips, takes a deep breath, and then focuses on me. “Linc ... I’m pregnant.”

I gape at her. When I finally spoke, it came out a croak. “You’re ... you ... what?”

“I’m pregnant. Morning sickness had me getting sick. As for passing out, the doctor thought maybe I was still dealing with the shock of the morning. I don’t know, but I’m pregnant.”

I grab the plastic pitcher used to refill her cup and guzzle half of it down. Some of it splashes on my shirt. It’s icy cold, a shock against my senses, and I welcome it.

“Are ... how do you feel?”

“Now? Or about the baby?”

I squint and consider that then reply, “Both.”

“My head hurts.” Then a slow smile blooms over her face.

“And I want the baby ... more than anything.”

I don’t recall closing the distance between us, but I’m kissing her. She’s kissing me, and we’re both laughing. She’s crying, too. Maybe I’m doing the same.

But when I go to kiss her again, she covers my lips. “Wait ... wait, Linc. There’s more.”

The happiness that had just been floating through me turns to rain clouds as she explains the IUD and the need to remove it urgently if she wants to keep the baby. The risks include losing the baby and premature delivery, even if the IUD is removed.

My gut tells me to do whatever to protect her. But looking into her eyes, I know there's only one thing I *can* say because I love her.

“Whatever you decide, I’ll support you. I love you.” I kiss her palm, fingertips, and the back of her hand. “And once you decide, I’m going to ask you to marry me.”



Epilogue

STANDING IN FRONT OF the mirror, I turn sideways and draw the material of the dress down over my belly, studying my reflection. The fabric shimmers delicately in the soft light streaming through the windows; the early, golden light of sunset paints the horizon in a thousand shades of orange, gold, and pink.

“If you’re standing there wondering if you look fat, we’re going to have words.”

I look over my shoulder to the door, and the wedding photographer snaps a picture. I scowl. All she does is laugh.

“Mark my words, Felicia, that will be one of the best pictures out of the entire batch.” She checks her camera, smiles in satisfaction, and turns to aim at Seth. He blushes but smiles.

My normally easy-going, laid-back brother gets very tongue-tied around the cute photographer. It’s a fact that both Linc and I have noticed. She flirts with him. I think there is interest there, but I still fight a daily battle with myself to stay out of it. Linc has become more than gun-shy now, something I really didn’t like, despite how often I’d wished he’d show some caution.

After Miranda and her camera are distracted by Lo and her baby, Seth approaches. I hold out my hands; he takes them and squeezes gently.

“Well?”

I study him, puzzled. “Well, what?”

“Were you looking at the mirror, thinking the *F* word?”

“Oh, that.” Laughing, I shake my head. “No.” I place my hand back on my belly and look down, stroking the hard curve. I’d made it to the sixth-month mark; the doctors think I have a good shot at going full term. Regardless, I got past the worst of the dangers, and with that reassurance, I told Linc that we could get married.

Lo and an army of assistants hired by Seth have handled almost everything, and I’ve been just fine with that. The most I’d had to do was taste cakes, select my colors and dress. I could have been more involved, but I wanted to make sure I rested and kept my involvement to a minimum to stave off stress.

Besides, I’m getting my dream: marrying Linc. The rest? All details.

Seth wanders over to the window of the room I’d elected to use as my bridal suite. “I can’t believe you wanted to get married *here*.” He casts me a befuddled look.

“It’s our home,” I tell him.

“Yeah, where’s the romance in that?”

The woman Lo had found for my makeup gives a few more touches, then nods and steps back. I go to join Seth at the window. Pointing to the gazebo that dominates much of the terrace near the pool, I say, “I was in there, drinking lemonade and reading a book the first time I saw Linc. You know what I thought at that moment when I got my first good look at him?”

“No.” Interest sharpens his eyes. “Do I *want* to?”

I grin.

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. For the first time in my life, my mind went absolutely blank. All I could think was, “*damn...*” Hooking my arm through his, I continue. “For the first time, I’d been struck dumb. It took two or three more times before I could actually see him without feeling the urge to stammer or drool. So, if you ask me...” I hitch up my shoulder and smile. “I think there’s plenty of romance involved if you know where to look.”

After a few seconds, his look of speculation shifts, and he’s eyeing me with an altogether different look. “I think you’re more sneaky than I gave you credit for.” He offers his arm once more. “Are you ready to get hitched?”

The look on Linc’s face when he sees me is everything. He’s wearing a suit with a stand-up collar and no tie; his hair is a little longer, just enough that the breeze is teasing it as I stop in front of him.

The minister nods at Seth, and Seth puts my hand over Linc’s. He squeezes my palm, and I squeeze back. The ceremony goes by in a blur. Then he’s sliding a ring onto my finger, and it’s

time for me to do the same. I stare into his eyes as I give him the ring, that wonderful symbol.

“I love you,” I whisper.

He murmurs it back, and then he’s kissing me.

A few people chuckle, and somebody calls out, “It’s not time for that yet.”

The minister is grinning as Linc lifts his head.

“Well, sir. Since you already know this part, would you like to kiss your bride?”

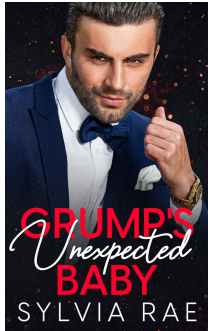
I don’t wait for Linc. I kiss him instead. He places his hand on my belly, and as our lips touch, our baby kicks his hand, showing her approval.

The End



THANK YOU for reading *Faking With My Brother's Bestie!*

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I broke the rules by getting pregnant by my grumpy boss.

I agreed to be his assistant for six months, for a guaranteed promotion.

His gorgeous face and piercing gaze had me wanting more.

But he was my boss.

I didn't want to submit to my wicked desires, yet his stare penetrated my soul.

Of course, nothing went as planned.

In a moment of weakness, I found myself falling under his spell.

The intoxicating and inevitable pull was undeniable.

He whispered dirty things in my ear that makes me melt.

His touch magnified all my senses.

We were both betrayed by people we had trusted in the past.

So boundaries were set and agreed upon.

But two innocent lines changed everything.,

Will he accept the baby, or will I end up with a broken heart again?

Continue on the next page to read the first chapter of [Grump's Unexpected Baby!](#)

Sneak Peek - Grump's Unexpected Baby

T^{WO YEARS EARLIER}
My leg aches.

Spasms tighten up my lower back.

There's a wheelchair available, and they kept a seat open on the aisle nearby, but I don't sit.

My eyes burn as I stare at the simple, white column that holds the elegantly styled urn, my wife's ashes, and the baby she'd been carrying. I still don't know if the child had been mine. It was a possibility.

But it's also possible it had been my partner's—my best friend's. They had been engaged in an affair, and I'd known nothing about it until a month before their deaths.

They buried Darren almost two months ago in a private ceremony.

I'd still been in the ICU, and although Genna had been cremated as she'd wished, there had been no ceremony. I'd

only been released from the rehab facility yesterday and wanted this behind me.

Felicia Appleton, my head editor and one of the few people I still trust, stands beside me, her hand on my back. I glance away as the preacher giving the eulogy pauses and inclines his brow slightly while looking over at me.

I'd already told him I had nothing to say.

Felicia huffs a soft laugh at the faint disapproval on the man's face, and unwittingly, my lips curve in a rueful smile. One thing about her, she can almost always make me smile.

Pain shoots up my spine, and I clamp my lips together to keep from swearing out loud.

But I must have some sound because Felicia leans in and whispers, "Your back?"

With a terse nod, I say, "I'm fine. I want this over."

The preacher drones on. I try to focus on his words—some of me know this entire ordeal is something I need to be aware of and participate in, even if it's just by being here. But I want it *over*.

Another stab of pain shoots up from my knee to my hip to my spine, and I can't silence the grunt this time. Several people look my way, but I focus on the urn—on Genna's ashes (all that remains of my ex-wife).

Memories of that night flashed through my mind.

The music rises in the air, and I close my eyes but immediately snap them open because my balance is shit right now. The therapists and my doctors tell me it will get better.

Are they right? Mostly, I don't care, and right now, the pain in my leg and back is a welcome distraction.

"It's almost over," Felicia tells me, sidling closer and slipping her hand into mine.

Then it is over, and I walk her to the roped-off area by the urn, flowers, and other memorial gifts forming a barricade. She undoes the rope and snaps it closed behind us the second I'm through. "Take all the time you need," she says, brushing her fingers down my arm. "I'll fend off the wolves."

Then she turns and moves back to stand guard between me and everybody who showed up to offer their *condolences*.

Reaching up, I touch the gleaming, pale surface of the ivory urn.

It's cool under my fingers, and I can't help but think of the distance that had grown between Genna and me over the last year of our marriage.

How much of it was my fault for pushing for a family? For kids? She'd always said she wanted the same thing I had. Had it been a lie? Had she just gone along with what I said to keep me happy?

I'd always need answers.

A dull headache begins to throb at the base of my skull as voices swarm closer, my name being spoken in raised tones,

people trying to catch my attention—a bunch of vultures, all of them.

I hadn't gone out in public since the accident—most of my time had been in the hospital, weeks in ICU, then another week in a regular room before transferring to a rehab facility to work on building up my strength after several surgeries.

But it didn't matter that I was here at my wife's memorial service.

They want blood or tears. It doesn't matter which.

They can fuck off.

I'm not giving them anything.

Finally, the voices fade, a few at first, then more and more.

The pain in my leg is a scream now, so bad I'm not sure I can even move, and when Felicia touches my arm, I don't look away from the urn because I know she'll see the signs of pain I can't hide.

“You ready to go?”

“You go on,” I tell her. I stroke a lily's petals from the spray next to the urn's pedestal.

“I'm not leaving you here, boss,” she says.

Because I know her, I give her a tired look. “I'm not sure I can walk.”

“I'll get your chair.”

I hate that fucking chair. But I'll hate falling even more, especially since I know it will set my progress back. There are

pins and rods in my right leg and more in my hip. I've got physical and massage therapists at my house half the fucking day just so I can build up my strength and not be in a ball, crying from the pain when they are done.

Injuring myself further isn't an option.

I'm in the chair in a few brief minutes, and Felicia pushes me along the smooth, concrete path to where my private driver waits.

"Well, you got it over with," she whispers.

"Yes." I clench my hands in my lap and try to tell myself the worst is over.

But I know it isn't.

As we approach the car, she asks, "Are you still insisting you'll be going back to work next week?"

"What else am I supposed to do?"

"Take time to heal? Recover? Give yourself a break?" We stopped by the sleek black car, and she came to stand before me as I levered myself up.

"Time isn't going to do shit," I say bluntly. "I need to work. I need..." to forget. I don't tell her that. "I just need to keep busy. Okay?"

She studies me closely.

But she says nothing.

She realizes there's nothing to say.

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