



Findings
REDEMPTION

USA TODAY & WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TERRI ANNE
BROWNING

finding redemption

TERRI ANNE BROWNING

Copyright © Terri Anne Browning/Anna Henson 2024

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of Terri Anne Browning, except as permitted under the US Copyright Act of 1976.

Finding Redemption

Written by Terri Anne Browning

All Rights Reserved ©Terri Anne Browning 2024

Edited by Lisa Hollett of Silently Correcting Your Grammar

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Finding Redemption is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book can be reproduced in any form by electronic or mechanical means, including storage or retrieval systems, without the express permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer who may quote short excerpts in a review.

contents

1. [Brooke](#)
2. [Brooke](#)
3. [Brooke](#)
4. [Paxton](#)
5. [Brooke](#)
6. [Paxton](#)
7. [Brooke](#)
8. [Brooke](#)
9. [Brooke](#)
10. [Paxton](#)
11. [Brooke](#)
12. [Brooke](#)
13. [Paxton](#)
14. [Brooke](#)
15. [Brooke](#)
16. [Brooke](#)
17. [Paxton](#)
18. [Brooke](#)
19. [Brooke](#)
20. [Paxton](#)
21. [Brooke](#)
22. [Brooke](#)
23. [Brooke](#)
24. [Paxton](#)
25. [Brooke](#)
26. [Brooke](#)
27. [Paxton](#)
28. [Brooke](#)
29. [Brooke](#)

30. Brooke
31. Paxton
32. Brooke
33. Paxton
34. Brooke

CHAPTER ONE

brooke

IT WAS NOT my aspiration to become a Disney-themed princess. That totally happened by accident.

Kinda.

I blamed it on my hair. It had a tendency to cause me trouble—that, and I ran my mouth a lot. But I was definitely blaming the princess BS on my hair.

As I'd left a catering job one night, my boss, Sandra, had stopped me and asked if I'd ever done any cosplaying for children's parties. I'd stood there for a few moments, trying to get a read on the woman. After working for her for two months, I hadn't gotten any weird vibes from her, but was that how sex traffickers snatched young girls these days—by sending in an older woman who appeared safe and getting the victim's guard down.

I, more than anyone, should have understood that.

But I'd been intrigued.

And a little short on cash.

Turned out, my boss's daughter was a huge Rapunzel fan and wanted her favorite princess to come to her eighth birthday party. Sandra offered me three hundred dollars, pizza,

and cake. There was a gleam in her eyes, though, a desperation I saw and understood.

“Five hundred. Throw in some wings and the prime second slice of cake—the birthday person should always get first dibs—and it’s a deal.”

“Done!”

Sandra’s quick acceptance made me wonder if I could have haggled for a grand, but I was getting birthday cake, so I wasn’t going to be sad over the negotiation results. Her daughter’s birthday was a success, and I found other moms asking me to come to their little girl’s parties.

That was six months ago, and I’d worked at least one birthday party a weekend ever since. I’d learned to market myself a little better, even though my clients were all word of mouth. But now, I had more of a business plan.

My packages included the option of arriving early to braid the birthday girl’s hair, tea party add-ons, arts and crafts, and princess-themed games. Getting the full princess treatment took at least four hours, and I charged a thousand dollars plus expenses.

And the bonus, I always got the second slice of cake. That was nonnegotiable.

During the week, I still worked for Sandra, who catered events for the rich and famous. But every Saturday, I was a princess. I wasn’t living paycheck to paycheck, thanks to the new gig, but when my roommate offered to cover my half of the rent for the next three months if I did her a favor and covered her friend’s daughter’s birthday party, I couldn’t turn it down.

I was working on adding the usual flowers and charms to my hair in the living room when Sariah walked in dressed like Jasmine. I blinked up at her a few times, my mouth hanging open as I drooled a bit over the sight of the beautiful woman standing before me in a sky-blue bedlah top that pushed up her amazing boobs, leaving her flat belly bare. Her matching salwar pants had a V-shaped waistline. She even wore the golden shoes and the jeweled headband, although she had left her thick, rich dark-brown hair in its natural curls.

“Wow,” I gasped, dazed at the sight of my roommate.

Sariah and I had been roommates for the past nine months, but I didn’t know much about her personal life. I’d lucked out finding a nice apartment in a decent part of town. Sariah could have been a model, with her flawless caramel skin, perfect body, long legs, and all that gorgeous hair.

It was her eyes that had sucked me in, though. They were honey brown, more often than not full of sadness that broke my heart every time I looked into them for too long.

She wasn’t a model, though. At least, not that I was aware. She was a waitress at one of the city’s most popular restaurants, and from what I could tell, she made bank off her tips. It was the kind of place where the prices for appetizers were what most families spent on a week’s worth of groceries. Not that I’d ever been inside. Or even walked past the place. But I’d heard one of Sandra’s clients talk about the restaurant at an event. The food was to die for, but the prices were not for those even in the upper-middle class.

“Riah, if you were going to dress up, why waste money on me?” I scoffed. “I could have worked at another party, and you could have saved yourself three months of my portion of the rent.”

“Everyone is dressing up as their favorite princess,” she said with a grimace, adjusting her top. “And Bella deserves a real princess at her party.”

My mouth snapped shut at the compliment, an unwelcome sting of tears tickling my nose. Clearing my throat, I turned my gaze back to my reflection in the portable vanity I’d set up in the living room so I had more room to work on my hair.

“Tell me more about the birthday girl so I can make this her best birthday ever.”

Sariah sat beside me and adjusted one of my charms. “Bella is six going on sixteen,” she said with a smile as she threaded a daisy through my braid. “She’s beautiful and amazing and so damn sassy.”

Grabbing her phone, she clicked something then turned the screen to show me. A little girl with a mischievous smile stared back at me. She had a deep dimple in her left cheek, and her little button nose was scrunched up. Her skin was a few shades lighter than Sariah’s, but she had the same wild, gorgeous, curly hair.

Before I could stop myself, I traced my finger over her dimple. There was something in those laughing brown eyes that sucked me in. I wanted to know what had made her smile like that.

Shaking the thought away, I returned to getting my hair right for the party. “Who is her favorite princess?”

“Leia.”

A surprised giggle bubbled out of me. “What? Are you for real?”

Sariah nodded, her beauty only more enhanced by her beaming smile. “I know. She’s such a little science fiction

geek.”

“Why not give her a Star Wars theme, then?”

Her smile faded. “I didn’t know until last night, but apparently all the girls in her class were giving her a hard time. So she’d given in and told them she was having a princess party. By the time I knew she preferred Leia, it was too late for Paxton to change the decorations and cake.”

Anger began to simmer in my belly. Those mean little brats.

“I know,” Sariah said with a groan, seeing the look on my face. “But Bella still insists that she wants everything to be princess-themed. She wants all the other girls to think she’s cool. Cinderella came to her friend’s party a few weeks ago, and after Bella told the others she was going to have Rapunzel visiting for her birthday, everyone wanted to attend.”

“That’s because Cinderella is boring, with a weak prince.” I smirked at my friend. “Blondie got an adventure and a guy who loved her so much he was willing to die to keep her safe.”

“You have a weird crush on Flynn Rider,” she said with a snicker.

“I prefer the name Eugene, thank you,” I said with a playful glower.

Laughing, she tugged on a lock of my hair. “You’re adorable.” She stood but then paused and looked down at me with warmth in her expression. It made her eyes so much more dazzling than the sadness that was almost always there. “Thank you for doing this, Brooke.”

“You’re my friend, Riah. I might not have a lot of experience, but I’m told friends help each other.”

CHAPTER TWO

brooke

I WAS STILL LOOKING through my bag when the Uber paused at a gate. Beside me, Sariah powered down her window, and I finally lifted my head. Only for my jaw to drop to my chest.

My clients had all been well-off, but none of them had been gigantic mansion surrounded by a huge fence with a guard shack at the end of the driveway rich. “Riah, is your friend Daddy Warbucks?”

She gave me a grimace. “I forgot to tell you. Bella’s dad is Paxton Foster.”

“Okay...and?” While that name did sound familiar, it didn’t ring any bells except from the few times Sariah had mentioned “Paxton” earlier that day when we’d talked about the party.

A bemused expression fell over her face at my ignorance of her friend’s identity, while the Uber driver turned in his seat with a grunt. “You don’t know who Paxton Foster is?”

“Not off the top of my head,” I said with a shrug.

“Paxton Foster, *the* Paxton ‘Deathstroke’ Foster. MMA world champion. Hall of Famer.” I sat there staring at the man like he was speaking another language because, to me, he was. Muttering something under his breath, he gave me a

disparaging shake of his head. “You’re not from around here, are you, honey?”

“I’m not your ‘honey,’ a-hole.” I gave him a withering look until he shrank down and turned back around in his seat. It didn’t take as much effort these days to hide my revulsion of anyone calling me what the world deemed endearments. But I still couldn’t stop the mental shudder.

“Miss Grant.” A guard stepped out of the shack with a clipboard. “We were expecting you to arrive with Mr. Foster’s driver.”

Sariah pressed her lips together at the obvious admonishment in the man’s voice, remaining silent. A muscle ticked in his jaw before he knocked on the Uber driver’s window. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You will leave your license with me. Drop Miss Grant and her guest at the front of the house. You have five minutes. If you do not return by then, my colleagues will escort you off the property.”

Our driver fumbled around for his ID, his hand slightly shaking as he handed it over to the guard.

“Okay, Cezar Vargas, sign here. You will get your license back when you leave.” Stepping back, the guard gave the driver a hard glare. “Your five minutes begin now.”

Face gray, Cezar carefully pulled forward. I lifted my brows at my roommate. “Should I expect to be patted down when we get out?”

I was only half joking. The guard had been...intense.

Sariah slumped down. “I’m just going to apologize for Paxton now. He has fans trying to get in all the time, but mostly, he’s just overprotective of those he cares about. Bella’s safety is his number one priority.”

“Don’t apologize.” I grasped her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “If every little girl had a daddy to protect them like Bella does, the world would be a much better place.”

She gave me a small smile. “Yeah,” she choked out as the driver slowed to a stop in front of the mansion.

Several sports cars, a limo, and three SUVs were already parked off to the side. I had been told the party wouldn’t start until four, which meant I still had over an hour to spend some time with Bella and do her hair before her friends were due to arrive.

Getting out, I reached back in for the goodies we’d stopped to buy on our way, my excitement for this party climbing. Every other one, I’d been half dreading, but they paid my bills, and I was good at being a pretend princess. But this time, I was going to have fun.

I was gathering the second bag when I heard a growl behind me. A shiver went through me, goose bumps pebbling on my skin. Holy shiitake! How could a growl be so sexy?

“Why the fuck didn’t you wait for my driver?”

Spine snapping straight, I turned. Sexy or not, no one talked to my friend like that. My temper was already starting to boil, but he kept snarling at her.

“You got into some stranger’s car dressed like that? Jesus Christ.” Sariah cringed, lowering her head as a man dressed in black slacks with a black dress shirt stretched over his shoulders yelled at her. I got a brief peek of dark ink on his chest since the top few buttons were undone, as well as tattoos on both his hands, but I was too angry to focus on them. “What the fuck am I going to do with you?”

I gently grasped Sariah's arm, tugging her out of the way so I could deal with the jerkwad. "You do not talk to her like that. Ever." My bags hit the ground as I slapped a hand against his chest.

Ouch. It was like smacking a concrete wall.

Tipping my head back, I glared up, up, up. And up some more. At five foot one, I was used to having to crane my neck to meet people's eyes. But for Pete's sake, the man in front of me was a literal giant. With muscles. Hard, perfectly sculpted muscles. That I had a sudden urge to lick.

Holy hotcakes. How could a man be both pretty and masculine at the same time? It made zero sense to my brain, yet there I was, looking up into a face that was exactly that. He was the kind of good-looking that only got better with age, proof of which was the light sprinkle of gray in his dark-brown hair, the longer locks on top pushed back from his face. I would have guessed he was closer to forty than thirty, but I had no idea if I was even close. He could have been a movie star with a face that gorgeous.

I had to blink a few times to break the spell I suddenly felt drawn into.

This asshole had just yelled at my friend. He might have been pretty to look at, but it was obviously only skin-deep. I smacked at his chest again, just for being a dickhead. "Sariah is a grown woman. She doesn't need you to play daddy and boss her around like she can't make a simple logistics decision on her own. News flash, she's a big girl. She can get from Point A to Point B without a big, strong man holding her hand."

From beside me, I heard Sariah make a choking sound, but I was so caught up in my lecture of Mr. Muscles to see if she

was upset or amused.

“And why the heck does it even matter what she’s wearing? Hello, women can go outside dressed however they want without needing a man’s permission.”

“Brooke,” Sariah murmured. “It’s okay. Really—”

“No, it is not okay,” I growled. “This overgrown baboon’s butt is going to stop snarling and apologize. Right now.”

Hazel eyes narrowed on me. “Excuse me?”

“There is no excuse for you.” I crossed my arms over my chest, tapping my foot. “We’re waiting.”

He ran his gaze over me, twice. My entire body felt as if he had physically touched me, and I was thankful my dress hid my hard nipples. One side of his mouth ticked up. “Sariah, is this your new roommate?”

“Paxton...”

I threw up my hands in disgust. “You are Paxton? As in Bella the birthday girl’s father?” He slowly nodded. “You have an impressionable six-year-old running around, and yet you act like...like...like...”

There were a hundred different names I wanted to call him, but every one of them would have made my momma wash my mouth out with soap when I was a kid.

“Ah, so she’s an idiot.” He nodded to himself.

Sucking in a sharp breath, I stabbed my finger into the center of his chest. “You’re nothing but a misogynistic asshole, high off his own chauvinism. And we are still waiting for that apology.”

His lip twitched upward again. “I sent a car to collect the both of you. Instead, you show up here in a fucking Uber. Do you know how dangerous it is for any woman, but especially ones who are as beautiful as the two of you, to get into a stranger’s car?”

“Stop cursing at us,” I chastised. “Taking an Uber is perfectly safe. I use them all the time and have never had an issue.”

A rumbling sound came from his chest. “That will be stopping as of now.”

“Sure thing, Daddy. Let me get right on making you happy.” Rolling my eyes, I went back to tapping my foot impatiently. “You’re wasting my time, Mr. Foster. The birthday girl is waiting.”

His gaze shot from Sariah to me and back again. “She’s serious?”

Sariah made a humming noise. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t apologize to him. We don’t say sorry for someone else’s bad behavior,” I gently reprimanded. “*He* will apologize to *you*.”

“No, I will not,” he gritted out.

“You have until the count of five. Or I will leave, and Bella will have to be disappointed.” I really didn’t want to do that. All I could imagine was the sweet face from the picture Sariah had shown me earlier. But I was not going to be around anyone who disrespected my friend.

“You’re such a little brat.”

“Oh, how dare I demand respect for those I care about.” I put my hand in his face and lowered my thumb. “Five. Four.

Three...”

I would not punch him in the face if I got to zero and he hadn't apologized. I wouldn't. I was better than that. Momma would be so disappointed.

But I really, really wanted to.

“Two—”

“I apologize,” he huffed.

“With sincerity,” I reproached.

He ground his teeth together so hard I could hear the enamel crumbling into dust. Nostrils flaring, he looked at Sariah. “I'm sorry for speaking to you that way, sweetheart.”

Surprise filled her face. “Um...it's okay. Thank you?”

“That wasn't so hard, was it?” I bent to pick up the bags I'd dropped, ignoring the shot of revulsion that always accompanied that particular endearment. “Now, where can I find the birthday princess?”

CHAPTER THREE

brooke

SARIAH LED the way through the maze of a house while I tried not to gape at everything. Marble floors. Crystal chandelier. Two staircases. Several maids in black skirts, black dress shirts, and white aprons, their hair pulled back into severe buns. A guy in a suit standing inside the front door with a white communication device attached to his ear like he was secret service.

Everything screamed “money” on an epic level. It gave me hives. Memories I’d thought were buried deep threatened to bombard me, but I refused to allow them free admission into my mind.

“Remind me how you and Bella’s parents became friends,” I said with a small laugh as we walked along the corridor of the third floor, in an attempt to distract myself. I thought I’d seen an elevator when we’d reached the landing.

“Paxton is a...” Sariah paused, searching for the right words, and settled on, “Family friend.”

I wasn’t sure how to process that. Was it in the literal sense, as in Paxton Foster was friends with her parents? Or... something completely different? What I really wanted to know but couldn’t bring myself to ask—because it wasn’t my business in the least, yet I wanted to know so badly, I was

already choking back the question—was had Sariah and Paxton hooked up?

And why that bothered me, I wasn't going to explore.

As if she could read my mind, Sariah's eyes got huge. "Ew, no! Gross, Brooke." Laughing, she stopped in front of a set of double doors. "Paxton is...just Paxton."

For some reason, I had a feeling she had meant to say something other than "just Paxton," but I didn't call her out on it. Shrugging, I adjusted my grip on the bags. "Okay. It's just the way he called you sweetheart seemed like more than just as a friend."

"Nope," she snickered. "Like I said, that's just Paxton."

"Riah!" a little voice squealed moments after one of the double doors was pulled open.

Sariah swooped down and lifted her up as Bella wrapped her legs around her waist. "Happy birthday, Bella-Boo!"

"I'm so happy you came," she cried, burying her face in my friend's hair. "I was so scared you wouldn't."

"I would never miss the most important day of the year," Sariah assured her softly, rocking her side to side. Her eyes closed as she rubbed Bella's back. "I missed you so much."

Bella lifted her head, her dimple popping as she beamed at Sariah. "I missed you more."

Laughing, Sariah walked into the little girl's room still holding her, while I followed. "That isn't possible. I missed you the most."

"How much?" Bella challenged.

"Infinity."

Her nose scrunched up. “That’s a lot. But not as much as I missed you.”

“Since it’s your birthday, I’ll let you win this round.” Placing Bella on her feet, Sariah stepped back. Bella was dressed in mismatched sleep attire of a Groggu shirt and Cookie Monster pants. “Why are you still in pajamas?”

“Kayla made me sleep in.” She spotted me and froze. “Hi,” she greeted shyly.

“Wait a minute. What do you mean, Kayla made you sleep in?” Sariah’s face turned dark. I’d seen uncertain Sariah plenty. And I loved when I got soft Sariah. But the glitter of anger in her eyes gave her an added strength I wished she carried around all the time. “Where is Kayla?”

Bella shrugged. “Dunno. When I woke up this morning, she yelled and told me to go back to sleep. So, I just stayed in bed and watched videos on my tablet.”

Fire blazing in her eyes, Sariah inhaled deeply as if trying to contain the rage I saw simmer just below the surface. “Brooke, this is Bella. Bella, this is my friend Brooke. She’s a real-life princess, and she’s going to play with you and your friends today.”

“You look just like Rapunzel,” Bella breathed in awe, making my face heat. “Do you have a best friend named Pascal?”

“I wish! But my mom never let me have a pet.” I gave Sariah a glance. “Do you think Riah will dress up as a chameleon for us?”

Giggling, Bella shook her head, beautiful curls swinging around her face. “No way. She hates lizards.”

“Darn!” I said with disappointment and carefully placed my bags on the end of her king-size bed. The entire room was a dream, from the canopy over the bed, to the huge play area off to the side in what I assumed would have normally been a sitting area, and the fully decked-out entertainment center on one wall that was more suited to a teenager than a six-year-old. “Then maybe we can play with these?”

Curiously, she stood at my elbow as I reached into one bag and pulled out two lightsabers. I’d already put the batteries in them, so when I handed one to Bella, all I had to do was flip the switch on mine, causing it to light up and make the iconic high-pitched, metallic-humming sound.

Bella was practically vibrating with excitement—but only for a few brief moments. Right before my eyes, she seemed to deflate. “My friends and their mommies won’t like playing with lightsabers. Kayla said it’s stupid. My friends all agreed. Everyone wants a tea party with a princess.”

“Kayla said what?” Sariah asked quietly, pulling my gaze from Bella to her.

I had no idea who Kayla was, but I hoped she stepped in dog poop. And that Sariah tripped her and rubbed her face in an even bigger steaming pile.

Bella shrugged. “Kayla said that Star Wars is stupid. Only boys are allowed to like it. She told me all my friends will hate me if I don’t give them the right party. And when I asked my friends about it, they all said they would be mad if a princess wasn’t at my party because that was the only reason they were coming.” Her shoulders drooped. “That, and their mommies are making them because their mommies like looking at Daddy. Kayla said they are thirsty, and she’s going to show

them because she's going to have a hot costume that Daddy won't be able to tear his eyes off."

Sariah's laugh was on the maniacal side. "Bella, Brooke is going to help you get ready. Listen to her and trust her. Real princesses are cool."

"Are you leaving?" Disappointment laced her voice.

Sariah crouched down in front of her, cupping her face in both hands. "No, Bella-Boo. I'm just going to go talk to Kayla about her costume. What if she wears the same one as me, huh?"

Bella grinned. "You're going to make her change?"

"Absolutely. I'm the only Jasmine in this family." Winking, she stood. But before she turned, she caught my gaze.

I gave her a nod, letting her know I would take good care of the birthday girl.

As the door closed behind her, I was already laying out two more lightsabers, all of them turned on so we could see their colors. "Do you know what a blue light means, Bella?"

She shook her head, but her brown eyes were darting from blue to red to green to purple.

"Blue means loyalty, stability, truth, and justice. Red is usually reserved for the dark side because it means power, anger, and even hatred. Green is more commonly known for growth, safety, harmony." I picked up the purple lightsaber. "And then there is mine. It represents nobility—because I am a princess after all—and wisdom."

"Which one am I?" she asked hesitantly.

I tapped my finger against my chin in contemplation. “Definitely not the red. You are a bit too young to be purple, but I have no doubt you will gain the wisdom needed to become a royal-purple lightsaber wielder.” After another moment of considering it, and having Bella watch me nervously, I picked up the blue.

“Bella Foster, kneel before your princess,” I commanded in my most regal voice.

She dropped to her knees before me, those brown eyes boring into me, melting my heart in places I didn’t even know were frozen. “You, Bella Foster, are a loyal and truthful Jedi. You will fight for justice and the stability of our galaxy.” I tapped her on each shoulder with the end of the purple lightsaber. “Rise and fight by my side.”

Her excitement filled the room, but she didn’t jump up to accept the blue lightsaber. Doubt clouded her eyes. “But Kayla said...”

“*Pfft*. Kayla doesn’t know everything. Who are you going to trust? Some mean-girl wannabe or me, an actual princess? Because let me tell you, Bella-Boo, I will take fighting the dark side over weak tea and cucumber sandwiches any day of the week.”

With a delight-filled squeal, Bella jumped up and took the blue lightsaber. “This is going to be so awesome!” She jumped up on her bed, trying out her Jedi skills as she bounced on the mattress.

“Young Padawan,” I called after giving her a minute to play. “I believe pajamas are not the best attire to fight the Sith. Shall we get dressed?”

Opening the second bag, I pulled out the cloak I'd gotten for myself to cover my Rapunzel outfit. Reaching back in, I slowly extracted the Rey costume I'd bought. As soon as she realized what I was holding, Bella's mouth fell open.

"I get to be Rey?" she whispered. "But...Kayla said I have to be Tiana. Because that's the only princess who fits...me."

I was going to stomp Kayla's face into the first pile of dog crap I saw.

"Who the heck is Kayla anyway?" I grouched.

"My nanny," Bella said with a heavy sigh, then groaned. Dropping her lightsaber on the bed, she wrapped her arms around her middle. That was when I heard her stomach growl.

Remembering she'd said Kayla had made her stay in bed, I realized she most likely hadn't eaten breakfast, let alone lunch.

Dog poop was too good for Kayla the nanny. She deserved to be shoved into a mountain of horse shit.

Carefully placing the costume on a chair, I held out my hand. "I'm so hungry I could eat a Wookiee. Let's sneak down to the kitchen for snacks. Princesses get very grumpy if we don't eat when we're hungry. We can munch on them to hold me over until the party."

"Can I have a turkey and cheese sandwich? It's my favorite."

I took her hand. "What, no way? That's my favorite too." As we left the bedroom, I considered it. "Okay, maybe my second favorite. My ultimate favorite is grilled cheese. And sometimes I want peanut butter. But turkey is the far superior deli meat, in my opinion."

Bella giggled as we skipped down the hall to the stairs. “I love both of those! Grape jelly or strawberry?”

“My list is marshmallow fluff with banana, grape jelly, strawberry jam, and then just plain peanut butter.”

“Marshmallow fluff?” she questioned skeptically. “With banana? No way that tastes good.”

“My dear Bella-Boo.” I glared down my nose at her, making her giggle with my haughty tone. “I assure you, it’s absolutely delicious. A royal delicacy of the highest degree.”

“Nope. Don’t believe you.”

Chaos was going on in the kitchen. A catering company was setting up but hadn’t started cooking yet. They were so busy, no one even paid us any attention. A few platters of prepared appetizers were already set up, though.

One was overfilled with chocolate chip cookies. Another one had what looked like fancy pizza bites.

Bella and I shared a look.

“Change of plans?” I suggested.

“Depends. Can I have two cookies?”

I twirled one of her silky curls around my finger. “It’s your birthday. Why are we putting limits on cookies?”

CHAPTER FOUR

paxton

ICE CLINKING in glass made me grimace as I sipped my forty-two-year-old whisky neat. My skin felt too tight, and I wanted nothing more than to be in my home gym, kicking the shit out of a sandbag. I couldn't stand the thought of good scotch being watered down, and that was exactly what they were doing when they poured it over ice and sipped it. That they were doing it with my favorite, eight grand a bottle Glenrothes just irritated me that much more.

I hadn't always had money. Way back then, breakfast was never an option, and I usually inhaled the free lunches at school, because it was more than likely dinner was going to be instant potatoes on the best of nights and watered-down powdered milk on the worst. My shoes were often too tight or had holes in them. Coats were never something we could afford, and I'd always been so big that the Christmas clothing drive the local churches hosted rarely had a sweatshirt that would fit me, let alone a coat.

But then I started pounding on people, and a local MMA coach had seen me in action. From that moment on, my entire life changed. With my first big paycheck, I'd moved my mom out of the neighborhood, and we never looked back.

I should have glanced back at least once, though.

Guilt, my ever-present companion, twisted inside me, and I took a large swallow of my whisky in an attempt to drown it as someone else dropped a few cubes of ice into their glass. With a grunt, I grabbed the bottle before they could get their grubby hands on it and poured myself another healthy measure. If my best friend and business partner, Luck, didn't show up soon, I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep from knocking some motherfucker over the head with the bottle of scotch.

My house was about to be overrun with kindergarteners and their simpering mothers. A few pompous papas would join, I was sure. Those fuckers never turned down the chance to rub elbows with Paxton "Deathstroke" Foster. I hated that moniker, but some sportswriter had dubbed me that after my first knockout win.

It wasn't as if I'd killed someone. At least, not intentionally. But it stuck, and the name had followed me for the rest of my career. Now, seven years after retiring from MMA, assholes still called me by that annoying nickname.

There was still an hour before Bella's party began, and five couples had already arrived. Their snot-nosed little brats were off in a group, whispering and giggling, as their parents sipped wine and desecrated my Glenrothes. Each kid was dressed up as their favorite princess, as per Bella's request. But so were their mothers. While the six-year-old girls all wore cute costumes with their hair mostly done up like Cinderella, their mothers appeared to be using the occasion to advertise their plastic surgeons' skills. One sneeze and their assets would be on full display.

Charming.

I swallowed another gulp from my glass and avoided looking at the woman dressed in some kind of corset that

pushed her tits up to her throat. She kept licking her lips and blinking at me. It was supposed to be sexy, I was sure. But all it did was make her look like she had one of her lash extensions poking her in the eye, and she was definitely going to need some ChapStick before the party was over. I'd never been a monk, but I hadn't had anyone but my hand for companionship since Bella was born.

If my sweet Bella-Boo hadn't asked me for this fucking party, I wouldn't have let any of the little spawn and their annoying-as-hell parents past the front gate. But she'd looked up at me with those pleading brown eyes, so like her mother's, and I did what any man besotted with his little girl would do—offered her whatever the hell her heart desired.

“Paxton!”

Hearing the distress in Sariah's voice, I tossed back the rest of my drink and turned to find her stomping into the great room. Sariah hated to have attention on her, but she was too beautiful not to draw every person's gaze the moment she entered a room. In the princess costume she'd chosen for the party, she was likely to cause a riot if she was out in public for long.

She avoided conflict to the point that people thought they could walk all over her. And she tended to allow them. Typically, I was the one who was the wall between Sariah and those who would stomp all over her. Which was why I was still reeling from the little tornado that had arrived with her earlier.

Brooke was not what I was expecting. Not only was she not my type, but she'd knocked me half on my ass when she'd put herself between Sariah and me. She didn't even come up past my sternum, yet she'd laid into me and made me feel like

she was looking down her slightly upturned nose at me. Sariah was a good eight inches taller than Brooke, but Brooke had put herself between us fearlessly, demanding I apologize and refusing to back down until I complied.

My cock was still feeling the effects of the first meeting. When she'd called me "Daddy," I'd envisioned wrapping her thick braid around my fist and pounding her against the nearest wall. Miss Princess might not have been my type, but my body had reacted to her overwhelmingly fast. That never happened.

I was more into leggy brunettes with skin like rich mocha. Brooke was five foot nothing with hair like spun gold and the clearest emerald eyes I'd ever seen. While tiny, she was no girl next door. She had soft curves and a classic beauty that was almost surreal.

But the feral yet regal way she'd lit into me was the hottest thing I'd seen in my life.

All that fire and protectiveness packaged into something so small and breathtakingly gorgeous. She reminded me of a lynx. Sleek, wild, graceful, deadly.

Shaking the image of the little blond from my mind, I focused on Sariah and the flames dancing in her brown eyes. She was so upset, her chest was heaving, and I instinctively stepped closer to her. Not only to block her from the view of the men already panting over the sight of her in that Princess Jasmine outfit, but because I'd never seen Sariah so angry before.

Her mother had done a number on her growing up. Her self-esteem was basically nonexistent, and if she'd ever had any backbone, Jannel had broken it long before I'd met the girl.

Grasping her by her elbows, I ran my eyes over her, looking for injuries. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

She pushed my hands away and crossed her arms, the rage in her eyes only spiking higher. “Where is Kayla?”

“I thought she was in Bella’s room.” I shrugged. “I haven’t seen either of them all day.”

I’d hoped to have breakfast with Bella today or at least brunch, but Kayla had texted me that morning to tell me Bella wanted to sleep in. Since it was her birthday and I knew she was nervous about her party, I’d allowed it.

Sariah snorted but then stiffened when movement caught her attention. Some of the fight went out of her, but not all of it. She stepped closer and lowered her voice. “I want Kayla gone.”

“Riah,” I groaned in frustration. We went through this every few months with a new nanny. So far, Kayla had been around the longest. They were never good enough for Sariah’s peace of mind. And every time, I gave in because I needed her to be comfortable.

“No,” she hissed. “I’m not doing this. We agreed. Kayla will be gone. Today.”

“Why?” I gritted.

She lifted her chin, one hip popping to the side. The action reminded me of my brief encounter with Brooke, and I found myself fighting a grin even though Sariah was dropping shit on me. Her new roommate was obviously rubbing off on her, and I couldn’t say I hated it.

“This is not the time or place for this conversation,” she said between clenched teeth. “Get her out of here. Now.”

I scrubbed my hands over my face in agitation. “Fine,” I muttered, giving in without a fight. If Sariah wasn’t happy, then I sure as fuck wasn’t happy. “But we will discuss this after the party.”

“Damned right we will.”

CHAPTER FIVE

brooke

AFTER ADDING A LITTLE MORE PRODUCT, I secured Bella's hair into a perfect knot on top of her head. With the gray capri pants, off-white tunic, boots, and armbands, she was Rey personified. By the time I stepped back to inspect her with an approving nod, she was practically vibrating with excitement.

Grabbing my phone, I took a few pictures of the birthday girl to send to Sariah since she hadn't returned to the bedroom yet.

"Let me see!" Bella glanced over my arm at the screen as I selected three of the pictures to send to my friend. "I look so pretty."

"You are beautiful," I agreed with a smile, tucking the phone away after hitting send. "I think it's time to put on my cloak, and then we can start your party."

Her happy glow dimmed. I wasn't sure who I was angrier with, her friends or the faceless nanny, Kayla. Taking her smaller hands in mine, I crouched down in front of her.

"When I was a little girl, I didn't have any friends," I confided.

"Why?"

I shrugged, fighting the knot of emotion that tried to choke me. “There were a bunch of reasons, most of which I didn’t understand until I was much older. But I have friends now. Riah is one.”

“And me,” Bella announced, her little fingers twisting in mine until she was the one holding my hands. “I’m your friend too, Brooke.”

“And I am your friend, Bella,” I said softly. “You don’t understand yet, but trust me when I tell you that having a few great friends is a million times better than having many people who are just pretending.”

“It’s not about friends.” Her chin wobbled. “I just don’t want to be lonely anymore, Brooke.”

Heart breaking because I got that more than she realized, I pulled her in for a hug. “Yeah, precious. I completely understand.” The endearment slipped out without my giving it much thought, other than it felt natural to say to Bella. Pulling back so I could see her face, I offered her an encouraging smile. “How about, for the day, we not care about what anyone else thinks is cool?”

She nibbled her bottom lip but gave me a nod.

I straightened and reached for my cloak. “Yay! Okay, let me think... You are Bella-Rey, my faithful Jedi warrior slash bodyguard. I need to be escorted to the most prestigious party in the galaxy, but the dreadful Sith Lord wants to kidnap me, Princess Brooke.”

“Yes!” She grabbed her lightsaber and flipped it on. “I’ll protect you better than any other Jedi, Princess Brooke.”

“I know you will. You have my complete faith, Bella-Rey.”

After I put the cloak on over my dress and tucked my hair beneath the hood, she helped me strap on a lightsaber—just in case the Sith Lord ambushed us and we needed an extra weapon. Adjusting the hood down over my face, I clasped my hands together.

“Ready?” she asked solemnly.

“Ready,” I affirmed, pressing my lips into a firm line to keep from grinning. I’d never had so much fun at a party before, and technically, the party hadn’t even begun yet.

Eyes on the floor in front of me, I gave my trusty Jedi complete control, allowing her to escort me through the treacherous halls, down the winding staircase of doom, and into the great room of despair—or so Bella-Rey assured me. We arrived unharmed. I could hear laughter and voices while instrumental versions of Disney princess songs played in the background.

And then we stepped into the party, and I sensed my new friend freezing up.

I peeked at the others in the room, seeing men in dress shirts and slacks. A few women were dressed in designer dresses, but the majority of the mothers were dolled up as sexy versions of various princesses, while little girls stood around in groups of threes and fours, dressed, I assumed, as their own favorite princesses.

“Do you sense danger, Bella-Rey?” I asked quietly, trying to pull her back into our make-believe world.

She reached her hand up and grasped mine. “They’re going to think I look stupid. I should have just been Tiana like Kayla said.”

“Do *I* look stupid?” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a few people look our way. Giggles reached my ears, some amused, some in that irritating, high-pitched, mean-girl way that made me want to pull someone’s hair. Not all of them were from the little girls.

Bella-Rey’s brow furrowed, her brown eyes raking over me critically. “No. You look beautiful. And mysterious. But also like a princess.” She huffed. “It’s a princess party, Brooke. And I’m not a princess. I’m a Jedi.”

“Exactly.” I squeezed her fingers and then released her, once again folding my hands together in front of me. “They’re just jealous because they aren’t awesome enough to have their own Jedi bodyguard to protect them. How sad.”

I felt eyes on me, and I peeked from under my hood again, scanning the large number of partygoers. When my gaze locked on a pair of hazel eyes glowing with hunger, I quickly looked away. Heat filled my face, spreading across my entire body. Paxton Foster was intoxicatingly intense. I could have gotten drunk off simply watching him.

Too bad he was such an a-hole.

Ignoring him, I gently nudged Bella-Rey forward. “It’s very crowded in there. I think you should clear a path for me. To make your job of protecting me easier.”

She straightened her shoulders and gave me a firm nod. “Make way!” she announced, drawing everyone’s attention. She cleared her throat and called louder, “Clear a path for Princess Brooke!”

Whispers and more giggles rose up, but not nearly as many in the mean-girl pitch this time. Bella-Rey walked forward, and I could sense people hastily moving aside for her as I

followed a few steps behind until she reached the center of the room. When she stopped, her head moving swiftly left and right to assess for danger but much too fast to see anything, I pushed back the hood of my cloak and pulled my thick braid over my shoulder.

Little girls gasped, and a few sharp hisses from the parents filled the room. Fitting. I imagined many of the mothers in the room were treacherous snakes. Their rich and glamorous lifestyles might have been a foreign concept to me, something I had only been allowed to see from afar in small, teasing increments when I was younger, but I was all too familiar with the types of mothers who raised their children to be mean-spirited little brats.

Keeping my face stoic, I glanced around dispassionately and fell into the role I had improvised for myself for this party.

“Thank you, Bella-Rey. The journey here has been long and full of dangers, but you have served me well.” I winked down at her, earning me a dimpled grin before we both quickly returned to the seriousness of our roles. “There has never been a Jedi wiser, braver, nor more loyal than you.”

“It’s my honor to serve you, Princess.” One small hand on the lightsaber attached to her hip, she gazed around at the others without blinking.

While she continued her duty of protecting me, I glanced at all the little princesses who were moving closer. Which ones had been mean to Bella? It was hard to determine the hierarchy with a simple pass-over of the crowd, but a closer look at the way some of them rolled their eyes at Bella and me was enough to give me a guess.

A loud commotion behind me had me turning, but before I could see what the cause was, Bella-Rey pushed me aside. In

her excitement, she was a bit too forceful, and I stumbled. Hard arms wrapped around me, keeping my backside from slamming into the floor. Instinctively, I knew who had rescued me before I looked up into a pair of hazel eyes.

Startled squeals and excited chatter quickly had me finding Bella-Rey in the crowd. She stood, feet braced apart, her lightsaber on and at the ready, as someone dressed as Kylo Ren stormed forward, his own red lightsaber in hand.

They weren't dressed in a cheap costume, like my princess dress and cloak or the Rey outfit I'd found at the toy store on the way to the party. This Kylo looked like he'd stepped off the set of a Star Wars movie and straight into the great room. Everything about his outfit looked custom-made, possibly even from the film itself. It wouldn't surprise me if it were true.

Not expecting that particular twist, I glanced around until I saw Sariah slipping into the room. Sticking to the wall, she circled around, while watching the show. She had a hint of a smile on her face as she watched the scene unfolding in the center of the room. When she caught sight of me, I began to grin, sure that she had secretly set this up.

But she quickly looked away, and for some niggling reason, I suddenly felt like she was keeping something from me.

“You'll never take Princess Brooke!” Bella-Rey shouted, causing me to shake away the lingering feeling. She was my fierce protector, so adorably beautiful with her lightsaber in hand, less than half the size of the villain before her.

Wordlessly, Kylo stepped forward, accepting her challenge.

“Be careful, Bella-Rey,” I implored.

She turned her head to smirk at me. “Don’t worry about me, Princess. I’m a Jedi.”

Kylo was almost to her. “Behind you!” I cried. Blue and red lightsabers clashed, the sound of the metallic hiss-hum as the force fields collided drowning out the soft Disney princess theme songs in the background.

Whoever was in the Kylo costume moved with a kind of gracefulness I wouldn’t have expected from someone so tall and wide in the shoulders. It seemed almost choreographed, but since all of this had been improvised, I knew that wasn’t possible. Yet Bella-Rey and Kylo fought like this wasn’t their first time battling.

A deep laugh snared my attention. Tilting my head back, I looked up at Paxton, my breath rushing from my lungs. This close, I could see a multitude of different shades of brown and green that swirled together to make the hazel of his irises. His nose was only a little crooked, and I had the sudden urge to trace my finger down the bridge. And then there was his mouth.

I’d never noticed a man’s lips before, other than to take note of their emotions. Yet there I was, entranced by the shape of his top lip, the wide V in the center, the fuller bottom one, and how utterly beautiful he was when those lips tipped upward into a smile that made my knees weak.

Paxton Foster was a man who was potentially lethal to a girl’s heart.

“I don’t know if I was more worried Bella would be bored at this damned thing or if I would,” he muttered so low that it was meant for my ears only. The warmth of his breath mixed

with the scent of whatever alcohol he must have been drinking went straight to my head. “Yet it’s already a hundred times better than any party I’ve ever been to.”

“I doubt that,” I chided with a light snort.

Hazel shifted into a beautiful moss color, with what seemed like warm honey swirling around their depths. I heard his sharp inhale at the same time as his hand contracted on my waist, and only then did I realize he was still holding on to me.

A voice in the back of my mind started shouting to get far, far away because this man was danger personified, but my body refused to respond. His heat was soaking into me, and just as his intense gaze had intoxicated me only minutes before, his nearness made me unsteady.

Collective surprised “Oh!”s thankfully forced my attention back to Bella-Rey, who had Kylo on the floor, the blue light of her weapon at Kylo’s throat. Breathing hard, she glared down at her foe. “Pledge fealty to Princess Brooke, and I will let you live.”

Disappointed that I’d missed the entire fight, I pushed Paxton’s hand away and strolled forward, reclaiming the role I’d undertaken. Stopping behind my brave Jedi, I gave the man on the floor a displeased glower. “What will it be, Kylo? We demand your answer.”

Reaching up, he tore off his helmet. My pain-filled, shocked gasp was not part of the role I was playing. All pretense left me as I gazed down at the man before me, my mind rioting.

Messy blond hair with just a hint of curl to it. Golden-brown stubble along his jaw. A tiny scar through his left brow that was real and not the handiwork of a barber, which seemed

to be the masculine fashion trend because of a particular movie star. I had no idea how the man on the floor had gotten that scar, but he'd told me who had given it to him the first time we'd met.

Tears burned my eyes, and I struggled to filter through all the emotions swarming me.

Anger. Regret. Disgust.

The last time I'd set eyes on this man, my heart had been breaking. Losing my mom had been the worst day of my life, quickly followed by the day I'd buried her. Family secrets had been spilled that day, ones I never wanted to think about again.

Eyes the same shade of green as my own snapped to mine, and he jerked as if he'd been cut by a lightsaber. "The fuck are you doing here, kid?"

"Hello, Luck."

CHAPTER SIX

paxton

EYES MANIC, my best friend jerked to his feet, grabbed Brooke by an elbow, and stomped out of the room, half dragging her behind him. Without any argument, she let him. I had an overpowering urge to follow them and find out what the hell was going on, but then I saw Bella watching them go, confusion scrunching up her brows. I wasn't sure if I should chase after Luck and the princess or stay and comfort my daughter.

Around me, the other parents were whispering in their groups, already spinning their own stories of what had just happened, despite everyone witnessing it firsthand. Fucking annoying assholes.

All the little girls quickly swarmed Bella, distracting me from their pain-in-the-ass parents. "That was so cool!" someone gushed to her, and for the first time since she'd walked into the party, Bella genuinely smiled. "This is so much more fun than Uma's party last month."

"I'm not even mad that it's better than my party," another girl giggled—Uma, I assumed. "I wanna watch *Star Wars* now."

"I want to play with the light sword," someone cried. "Do you have any more?"

“I want a turn!”

Bella’s eyes narrowed, her smile dimming with irritation. “It’s called a *lightsaber*, not a sword. And I have a few more in my room. Princess Brooke gave them to me for my birthday.”

“Let’s go get them,” a taller blond girl, one of the few who didn’t have her hair up in the Cinderella style, suggested.

Sariah stepped out of the crowd with a large box in her hands. I hadn’t seen her since she’d stormed off after demanding I fire Kayla. I assumed she had gone to get rid of the newest nanny since the woman hadn’t joined the party yet. When it came to the person who was trusted to watch over Bella when I couldn’t, Sariah didn’t fuck around. She’d been the one to fire the last three caretakers.

“Who wants a lightsaber?” she enticed. “Look, Bella-Boo, your uncle Luck brought one for each of your friends.”

“Me!”

They all swarmed her, including Bella. Satisfied that she wasn’t upset any longer, I followed Luck. There was no sign of him or Brooke when I exited the great room. Expecting him to have taken her to my office, I turned in that direction.

Finding the door slightly ajar, I started to push it open, but Brooke’s wobbling voice gave me pause. “Don’t! You don’t have the right to question me like I’m a criminal. You’re the one who left. I was the one forgotten.”

“That wasn’t what happened, and you know it!” Luck yelled. Of the two of us, I was the hothead. It took a lot for him to blow up, but it sounded as if he was close to detonation. “I thought you were with them. That you were safe. Happy. Cared for. After everything else, that was all I wanted for you.”

Brooke snorted. “You were just glad I wasn’t your problem.”

“I would have done anything to keep you with me. You are all I have left. He fought me for you. He—”

“He abandoned me just like you did. Like every other man does in the end. I’d hoped it would be different with you. That we could be a family. But all you did was let me down. And now you’re going to stand there and yell at me for making my own life?” The wobble in her voice was gone, replaced by the fire she’d burned me with earlier.

My hands clenched into fists. I’d enjoyed her spark, her sass, and I found myself not liking that she was directing even an ounce of her ire toward my best friend. Pushing the door open, I walked in.

I had an all too brief moment to take them in. Luck in his black costume, towering over the delicate-in-appearance-only princess. Her hair looked like sunlight had been spun into each strand, the flowers and charms braided into the thick tresses adding a hint of innocence to her ethereal beauty.

She snapped her head around, her eyes full of emerald flames...and so much sadness it nearly knocked me on my ass. Luck didn’t take his gaze off her, but I saw the same emotions twisting his face.

“This is a private conversation,” she said dismissively. “You weren’t invited.”

Even with the tension in the room and my own mind in chaos, my lips twitched in amusement. “Then maybe not have it in *my* office, kitten.”

“Kitten,” she repeated, those dazzling emeralds spitting flames at me once again. I soaked up the warmth.

“Pax, man,” Luck groaned. “You don’t want to go there with her. She’s not like other girls. She’s too much like her grandmother.”

I ignored him and how irritated it made me that he knew so much about her.

“Shut up, Luck,” Brooke snapped. “You don’t know anything. How could you when you walked away just a few weeks after meeting me?”

“Sweetheart—”

“I am not your sweetheart.” She didn’t shout, yet Luck flinched at her tone. “And I’m sure as heck not your kitten. What I am, is done.”

Walking to the door meant she had to pass me. Head held high like the princess she was cosplaying, she leveled me with a cool glare. “Please apologize to Bella for me, but if I stay, it might ruin her party.”

“You’re not leaving,” Luck reached out to grab her, but he froze when she turned her head in his direction. “Brooke, goddamn it. Just let me explain. Please.”

“The time for explaining has passed. I’ve moved on. You should too.”

I couldn’t watch her go, but when Luck would have followed her, I stepped in his way. She wouldn’t get far, and even if she did, I knew exactly where she lived. “How about you explain it to me?”

He thrust his fingers into his hair in agitation. “She’s my niece, my twin sister’s kid.”

I sucked in a sharp breath, and he nodded, knowing I understood now.

“When Maggie got pregnant, our parents disowned her, thinking she would fall in line if they cut her off. We thought she married the douchebag, that she was happy. She cut all ties to us, including me. God, if she’d just come to me, I would have helped her. But she was scared. Fuck. Several years later, we found out the motherfucker had married someone else. They already had a few kids of their own by then. But there was no sign of my sister or the baby. My mom went crazy, realizing Maggie had been left pregnant and alone. She blamed my dad since he was the reason they’d tried to manipulate Maggie into terminating the pregnancy.”

“That’s why they divorced?”

Luck shrugged, his face haggard. “One of the reasons. You know how my old man was.”

I nodded. No one had mourned when Luck’s dad died. But his mother passed soon after. Luck had never shared much about his parents’ marriage—and even less about his sister who had disappeared while Luck was in college. But I’d been there when he’d gotten the news years later that his sister had died. He’d taken off without a word to anyone for weeks, and when he’d come back, he was a wreck. All he would say was that he’d met his niece, but he wasn’t able to have a relationship with her.

Not long after that, Bella had been born, and my life had been tossed upside down and right side up in one fell swoop. Luck had helped me through it, and in a way, it seemed to have helped him too. He hadn’t mentioned his sister or his niece again.

“Why does she think you abandoned her?”

He hung his head. “Because without realizing it, I did. She was only sixteen when her mom died. Her father said he

wanted custody of her. He was married, had kids around her age, a more stable environment than I had going on at the time.” He clenched his jaw, and I sighed.

What he meant was that his reputation had worked against him. He’d been lost, broken. Drinking. Drugs. Women. They were all how he’d chosen to self-medicate back then. And the world knew it. How could they not, with the way people ate up every crumb of celebrity news they were given?

Even with his money, a judge wouldn’t have been stupid enough to grant Luck custody of a sixteen-year-old. Fuck, we’d had to grease a lot of palms just so I could get Bella.

But we’d both changed our lifestyles when Bella was born. Started our business, gotten away from the darker side of being in the spotlight.

“Her dad and stepmother wouldn’t let me be part of her life. Said I was too much of a bad influence. They were from prominent families, had their own money. But I sent support checks every month, hoping it would count for something. It didn’t. Because they shipped Brooke off to some all-girls boarding school up north. Or what I thought was a boarding school. I had no clue what was going on until the cops showed up at my place one night to see if she was with me.”

Every muscle in my body tensed. “The cops? Why?”

“She ran away. Completely disappeared. Her dad figured she would come to me. She didn’t.” His eyes were haunted when he met my gaze, and I realized just how crappy of a friend I’d been.

He’d gone through that shit, and I hadn’t had a clue. Admittedly, I’d had a lot going on at the time. Between Sariah and then getting custody of Bella, I’d felt like I couldn’t

breathe. But fuck, Luck had been at my side the entire time. If it weren't for him, I didn't think I would have survived any of it.

He swallowed hard, looking green. "It wasn't a boarding school."

"Then what the fuck was it?"

"Hell on earth."

CHAPTER SEVEN

brooke

WITH EACH STEP, that feeling of loneliness that I barely paid attention to these days tried to suffocate me. It had been a while since I'd allowed myself to think about my uncle. His abandoning me had hurt more than the betrayal I'd felt when my father and stepmother had dropped me off on the front steps of St. Andrew's.

Blinking against the sting of tears I refused to let fall, I paused outside the double doors of the great room where Bella's party was going strong. Trying to stay out of sight, I chanced a peek inside. The instrumental versions of Disney princess songs continued. Adults were mingling, drinking glasses of champagne, wine, and something amber-colored, while the catering waitstaff tried to blend into the scenery with their trays of drinks and hors d'oeuvres. Around them, little girls dressed as princesses were swinging their own lightsabers, some of them dueling.

Their giggles lifted my heart for a moment, but when I spotted Bella, it sank again. She was standing with a group of five other girls, all of them chatting animatedly. Even with the distance between us, I could tell her smile didn't reach her eyes. She kept glancing around as if searching for someone.

She was surrounded by at least sixty people, yet she looked like she was all alone in the world. Remembering the pain in her voice when she'd said she didn't want to be lonely anymore, I had to curl my toes in my shoes to keep from going over there and pulling her into my arms.

I didn't want to be one more person who made her feel alone. She didn't need me—but rather, the adults in her life—to step up. They needed to be there for her instead of expecting the money they had to fix everything.

A big part of me wanted to be someone who eased that loneliness for Bella. But it was more than likely I would never see her again. Fresh tears blinded me at that thought, and I determinedly put one foot in front of the other as I walked to the front of the house.

Outside, two men with communication devices in their ears stood beside the entrance, security that looked like the secret service. Neither of them moved as I passed, as if they were statues and not actual humans. Expensive cars lined the long driveway as I walked down to the front gate after ordering a ride. The gate was closed, but the guard in the little shack stepped out and then through the door on to my side of the fence as I neared.

“Ma’am?” he said with a frown, glancing over my shoulder repeatedly.

I gave him a tight smile. “My ride is picking me up down the road a bit. After how disgruntled everyone was about my arriving in an Uber, I figured it would be best not to expect one to pick me up at the front step.”

“Ride shares aren't safe, ma'am,” he said, not moving aside to let me through the door or even attempting to open the

gate. “Boss said his driver would be taking you home at the end of the party.”

“He’s your boss, not mine,” I dismissed. “Please move so I can leave.”

His eyes flickered over my head again, and I turned my head to follow his gaze, curious what kept drawing his attention. My breath caught when I saw Paxton Foster walking down the driveway. He didn’t have one of those excessive swaggers, the kind of power walk most guys used because they wanted to pull attention their way. He didn’t need one. Something about the man just attracted the eye, and it wasn’t only how tall and broad he was.

Linking my fingers together in front of me, I pretended like I wasn’t frustrated at the continued delay to my escape. Was it too much to ask to be left with a little bit of my dignity so I could go home and cry in peace?

Paxton stopped a foot away before thrusting his hands into the front pockets of his black slacks. I lifted my chin, not afraid to meet his gaze. No one would have enough power to intimidate me ever again. One side of his mouth tipped up, just a ghost of a smile, but it was enough to let me know he was amused.

There he was, towering over me in all his muscled glory, staring down at me with his head almost touching the clouds, he was so tall. But I’d perfected the ability to give the illusion of staring down my nose at people. The majority of the adult population might have been taller than me, but I’d never allow anyone to make me feel small and weak again.

“Tell your minion to let me out,” I instructed, striving to hold on to my patience.

“I won’t stop you from going home, but at least let my driver take you,” he urged, his tone gentle.

I liked every tone I’d heard him use since meeting him, except for the way he had initially spoken to Sariah, but that gentleness brushed up against something I’d buried deep, deep in the abyss I’d fallen into when my father and stepmother had left me with a smirk on the steps of what had become my prison.

Shaking the thought away, I extracted my phone from my dress pocket. “That isn’t necessary. I already have an Uber on the way. According to the app, my driver is five minutes away. I would rather not keep them waiting. It’s rude.”

“You would trust a complete stranger over my hired driver?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation.

“Why?”

I had plenty of reasons I could have given, but the truth came down to one simple point of contention. Control. Mine had been taken away once. I would die before I ever willingly gave it up again.

“They’re both strangers to me,” I answered with a shrug. “But I feel like I’m the one in control when it comes to an Uber.”

“And control is important to you,” he murmured with a nod, understanding flashing in his hazel depths.

Since it was a statement and not a question, I didn’t respond. He gave me a long appraisal before speaking again. “Let’s compromise. You and I are no longer strangers. Let me drive you home.”

“No.” It made me angry that he was even offering. “It’s Bella’s birthday. You should be in there with her, celebrating. I’m no one to you. She’s your daughter. Pull your head out of your behind and focus on what’s important. After today, you’ll never even see me again.”

He made a low, growling sound that I studiously ignored.

“That precious little girl woke up this morning on what should have been an exciting day for her, alone. There was no one there to soothe her nervousness over a party with kids who already made her feel like she didn’t belong.”

Paxton’s face closed up. “Her nanny—”

“Is not her parent,” I finished for him, cutting off whatever pathetic excuse he might have. “And that doesn’t even matter. She feels lost and alone in there right now. But you’re out here, with me, someone you only just met. There are these things called priorities. I’m not yours. Bella is. So get back in there and make sure she understands that.”

“How do you know how she feels?” He seemed to vibrate with anger. “You walked in here all prim and proper an hour ago. You don’t know shit about my kid or me.”

“Maybe ask yourself how I, the one who met your daughter a mere hour ago, seem to know more about her than you, her father, do.” I turned back to the gate. Finding the guard was back in his shack, I pushed through the door.

“Stubborn-ass woman!” Paxton grumbled to himself, but I heard his shoes crunch on the gravel as I walked down the street. “Fine. Take your fucking Uber.”

“I feel so much better now that you have given me your permission.” Rolling my eyes, I stopped several yards from the entrance to his estate.

He stopped beside me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him cross his arms over his chest. If he weren't so massive, he would have looked like a petulant boy. I had to press my lips together to stifle the urge to laugh.

Apparently he was going to be waiting with me until the Uber arrived. A charged silence descended on us. I checked my phone again to see how close my driver was. It was easier to look at the screen than to try to focus on anything other than the giant beside me. Beautiful giant that he was.

Ugh. I'd never noticed men before. At least, not to do more than determine if they were a threat or not. Once I was satisfied that they weren't a perv, I pushed them from my mind. Anyone with a penis was a waste of oxygen. Every man I'd ever met had repeatedly proven that to me.

Yet, for whatever reason, Paxton Foster was firmly on my radar. Which was annoying, but not nearly as bad as how my heart kept giving little leaps every time I met those hazel eyes.

"Sariah asked me to fire Kayla, by the way," he announced after a tense minute passed.

"Kayla, the nanny?" I was sure that was what Bella called her, although I hadn't met the woman.

"Yeah." He rubbed a hand over his jaw, and I tried not to notice the dark stubble that was starting to darken it. Maybe he was a two-shave-a-day kind of man. My mouth went dry as I watched, my tongue sneaking out to dampen my bottom lip. "Kayla is—was—nanny number three in nine months. I think we're on number eight since Bella was born. Kayla managed to hold on to the position the longest. But none of them ever works out."

“Riah is just looking out for Bella.” I defended my friend and roommate. “Bella said a few things that made me think Kayla wasn’t the right fit.”

Grimacing, he nodded. “They never are, it seems. I love Bella, and I want the best for her. But I’m a single dad who works odd hours. There are times I have to travel. Having a nanny ensures that Bella’s needs are met.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

“I never explain myself, but I find myself wanting to with you.”

I was not going to get all warm and fuzzy over that, I mentally scolded myself.

He grunted when I didn’t respond, and once again, I had to fight back a smile. Silence fell between us once more, but this time, it wasn’t nearly as strained.

“What makes you think Bella is lonely?”

Glancing at my phone, I saw my driver was less than a minute away, and I looked up at Paxton. “Because she told me.”

Some of the color drained from his face. “She did?” When I nodded, he groaned. “Fuck. She’s never said anything to me.”

There was nothing I could say to that. I didn’t know and didn’t want to assume why Bella hadn’t confided in her father that she was lonely. Hearing a car slowing behind me, I stepped back. “You know now,” I told him as a white Honda Civic stopped on the road in front of us. “What you do with that information is all that matters.”

“Looking for Brooke,” the driver, a skinny guy who looked like he was barely out of high school, called out.

Jaw clenched, Paxton extracted his phone from his pocket. Before I could reach the car, he blocked me from getting in and bent to snap a picture of the guy through the open passenger window. “If she doesn’t text me when she gets to her destination, I’m calling the cops and giving them your picture and license plate information,” he growled.

“I... Um... Y-yes, sir, Mr. Deathstroke, sir,” the poor kid finally wheezed out.

With a grin that seemed mostly feral, Paxton finally straightened and opened the back door. But not before snatching my phone from my hand. “Hey!”

“Making sure you have my number, kitten.”

Revulsion churned in my stomach. Even coming from him, my skin still crawled from having a cute endearment aimed at me. “Do not call me ‘kitten.’”

Laughing, he offered my phone back. “Text me as soon as you get there.”

I’d rolled my eyes so much in the past ten minutes I felt a headache coming on, but I still did it as I slipped the phone into my pocket. “Sure thing, Daddy.”

His choked inhale had heat filling my face.

And spreading throughout my entire treacherous body.

CHAPTER EIGHT

brooke

I BARELY GOT through the apartment door when I received a text.

Paxton: I know exactly how long it takes to get from here to Riah's apartment. You should have been there ten minutes ago.

If my head hadn't already been pulsing with a growing migraine, I would have rolled my eyes. Instead, I went into my bedroom, making sure to lock my door behind me. Sariah and I shared the living room and kitchen area, but our bedrooms were strictly off-limits. She was my friend, but I didn't trust anyone enough to be in the space where I slept.

Now, however, I was wondering just how much of a friend she really was. I remembered the way she'd acted when I'd caught her gaze during Bella's exciting fight with Kylo. She'd had guilt all over her face, but I'd been too distracted to really question it.

Now, I understood.

Pressing my back against the door, I finally let the reality of coming face-to-face with my uncle sink in. My legs no longer wanting to support me, I slid to the floor and buried my face in my hands, my sob filling the quiet room.

Sariah had known. I didn't know how she knew, but now, I was sure of it. She knew who Luck was to me, and she'd set today up.

She was the only friend I had, and now she'd become one more person who had let me down.

I was used to it at this point in my life, but it still stung.

When I was growing up, my mom seemed to go through one relationship after another. Although she always said all she needed was me, I never felt like that was true. Men came and went, but they never stuck around for more than a few months at a time. It didn't take me long to realize that men were undependable.

When I was sixteen, my mom had been out on a date with her newest boyfriend when they were struck by a drunk driver. My entire world had been tossed upside down. Child Protective Services had shown up at our apartment the next morning with the cops. They broke the news to me that she'd died, then gave me half an hour to pack what I needed before dropping me on my father's doorstep.

I'd never met the man before that day. To me, he'd been nothing more than a name on my birth certificate. Stepping into that house, with his wife and their children, was the beginning of my hell.

Shaking away all thoughts of those nightmares, I focused on the moment I'd met Luck. I was still emotionally numb the day of Mom's funeral. My focus had been on her casket, which had remained closed the entire ceremony. My father had had his driver take me to the funeral, refusing to attend it with me. Not that I'd cared. I hadn't wanted an audience while I'd said goodbye to the only family I'd ever known.

It was at the grave site, as the casket was being lowered into the ground while the last prayer was being spoken, that I noticed the man directly across from me.

Wearing sunglasses, in a suit that was obviously tailored to his muscular frame, he'd had his head cocked in a way that told me he was looking straight at me. Through dry, gritty eyes, I'd taken in his blond curls, the angle of his jaw, the shape of his nose. It didn't take a genius to realize that this man was related to my mother. Other than his height, he looked like the perfect male version of her.

While the few other people who had come to pay their final respects to my mom had slowly dispersed, he had walked around the grave.

"You must be Brooke," he'd rasped, a sad smile tilting one side of his mouth. His taking off his sunglasses had drawn my attention to the scar through his brow. Noticing where my gaze was, he'd rubbed his index finger over it. "Maggie's handiwork."

A startled laugh escaped me, the first true emotion I'd felt in days. "My mom did that to you?"

His green eyes, so like my mom's, lit up, but the glow did nothing to hide the evidence that he'd been crying. "You look just like her," he whispered. "God, it's like being teleported back to when we were kids."

"Are you a cousin or something?" Mom never spoke of her family. I'd asked once when I had to do a genealogy report for school, but all she'd said was my dad was an only child. I'd assumed that meant she was as well.

Throat bobbing, the man before me gave me another sad smile. "I'm your uncle Luck. Maggie is..." He made a choking

sound, whispering, "She was my twin sister."

Another text alert drew my attention. Scrubbing a hand over my damp cheeks, I read the new message.

Paxton: Answer me, kitten.

Angrily, I typed out a reply.

Me: I'm home. Now leave me alone. And stop calling me "kitten" or any other kind of cute little nickname.

Three dots immediately popped up, and then a new text appeared.

Paxton: Tell me why it bothers you.

Me: I don't owe you an explanation.

Paxton: You're right, you don't owe me anything. But I wish you would tell me.

Without understanding why, I found my fingers flying across the screen as I unloaded. Paxton was the last person I should want to vent to, but I couldn't stop myself. After I'd seen my uncle and found out my roommate and only friend must have known all along who he was to me, my emotions were a jumbled mess.

Me: My father and stepmother sent me away to a boarding school up north when I was sixteen. When the headmistress would lock me in the cage, she would say things like, "Now, honey, if you would only learn to behave, I wouldn't have to put you in time-out again." I was put in "time-out" a lot while I was there. But the cage was preferable to the beatings. What's a few days in a confined space without water or food when the alternative is being beaten so badly you can't walk? All while being called "honey" and "sweetheart" and "sugar."

After I hit send, I powered off my phone and threw it on my bed. He knew I was home, so there was no reason for him to ever text me again. But that didn't mean he would leave me alone. I'd felt a tug, a connection with Paxton the moment I'd met him. Even as I'd demanded he apologize, I'd continued to feel it. But it was dangerous. My heart was already too vulnerable. If I wasn't careful, he might steal what little was left of it after surviving the nightmare that had been labeled a boarding school.

My time at St. Andrew's had been traumatic, but I wouldn't live my life as a victim. I'd found a way to move on. Mostly. When I'd had the chance to run away, I'd taken it. It meant being unable to finish my education. No high school diploma made it difficult to find a job, so I'd been on the streets and in and out of shelters for a few years.

Once I got my GED, things turned around. Sandra hired me. She paid well, and I got decent tips, especially after the bigger events. I saved up and was able to afford the rent on my current apartment. I even had a small savings and a little extra money, thanks to my weekend princess party business.

It didn't matter that Sariah had betrayed me. Honestly, I'd expected it to happen eventually. Not the way it had, but I'd figured it would be something somewhere down the line. All I had to do was reinforce the walls around my heart and I'd be fine.

I gave myself until the end of my shower to cry, but as soon as I turned off the water, I dried my tears with my fluffy towel and crawled into bed.

I was safe.

I wasn't bleeding or broken anywhere.

I had a soft bed to sleep in and food in the fridge that I could eat whenever I wanted.

After repeating those affirmations aloud, I closed my eyes and let sleep take me.

CHAPTER NINE

brooke

DRINKING WAS NOT something I'd ever allowed myself to experiment with. I didn't even indulge when I turned twenty-one. At the time, I'd been in a women-only homeless shelter and alcohol and drugs were prohibited, but I wouldn't have touched either if I'd been given the chance.

A drunk driver had taken my mom from me. There was no way I would ever touch that poison.

Yet when I crawled out of bed the next afternoon, having slept for eighteen straight hours, I imagined the pounding in my head and the way my stomach was tossing were similar to how a hangover might have felt. My entire face felt swollen, not just my dry, gritty eyes. Migraines sucked.

Only lifting my eyelids enough to see where I was going, I whimpered as the brightness of the living room and kitchen caused the pain in my head to pulse harder. I needed caffeine and some Excedrin. That was the only migraine treatment I could afford. Doctors' visits were expensive, and medication was even more so. Unless it was life or death, I saw no reason to spend my hard-earned money.

Although, there were times I prayed for death just to get away from the agony of the debilitating headaches.

Stumbling to the kitchen, I made a strong pot of coffee and then opened the cabinet where Sariah kept over-the-counter medication. Tylenol. Advil. Aspirin.

“Please have some,” I muttered to myself as I shifted bottles around, blinking against the tears that burned my eyes from the harsh glare of the sunlight.

I’d been meaning to stop to grab a bottle of Excedrin Migraine after taking the last two I’d had the week before, but it kept slipping my mind. Tears spilled from the corners of my eyes, but now I wasn’t sure if they were from the light sensitivity, the pounding behind my eyeballs, or in utter defeat because Sariah was missing the one product I was desperate for.

Aspirin and the other over-the-counter pain relief wouldn’t touch the throbbing agony I was in. Most of them would just upset my stomach more than it already was. Holding back a whine, I poured a large mug of coffee and grabbed the chilled eye mask from the freezer.

My dark room was a small relief, and I carefully made my way back to bed. Propping myself up against the pillows, I secured the mask over my eyes and then sipped at my coffee until it was gone. I hoped it would be enough, but I went through this torment at least five times a month. I had to wait it out, because there was no way I was going to be able to function enough to get to a pharmacy for what I needed.

And I’d rather suffer than ask Sariah to help me.

At least, that’s what I told myself. But two hours later, when I’d cleaned myself up after vomiting all the coffee I’d been able to suck down, I had a drastic change of heart. Groaning, I searched for my phone. With trembling fingers, I

powered it back on and hit connect on the first number in my recent call log.

Not wasting time, I started talking as soon as I heard the ringing stop. “Riah, migraine. Excedrin. I’m out. Please. I’ll pay you back.”

My stomach started heaving again, and I dropped the phone in my rush back to the bathroom, hoping Sariah had understood my garbled plea.

* * *

A loud crash jerked me from my misery sometime later. I was lying on my bathroom floor, curled into a ball, a damp washcloth over my eyes. From the smell alone, I knew I had stomach acid in my hair. At one point, I’d passed out and come to, retching on myself. This was by far the worst migraine of my life.

Between the warring emotions of meeting my uncle again, the unwanted memories of my father, stepmother, and St. Andrew’s, added on top of my period being close, I wasn’t surprised. My cycle was a huge migraine trigger. Stupid hormones. I’d gotten my first taste of a migraine only days before I’d had my first period at the age of nine. At the time, I’d thought both were signs I was dying. My mom hadn’t started her own cycle until she was twelve, so she’d thought she had plenty of time to prepare me for the monthly visits.

Now, it took too much effort to care if someone had broken in to the apartment, but I whined when heavy footsteps sounded like a herd of elephants charging toward me.

Maybe they would stampede over me and put an end to this agony.

Cursing was followed by someone lifting the top half of my body off the tiled floor. “Jesus,” grumbled a deep voice I vaguely recognized through the migraine haze. The part of my brain that was still able to work told me it was Paxton, but that made no sense.

Keeping my eyes clenched closed, I tried to twist away from whoever was holding me. “I made a mess.”

“Shh,” the voice soothed. “No one cares about that.”

“Hurts,” I whimpered.

“I’ve got you.” He lifted me off the floor, tucking me against his hard body. “You’re going to be okay. I promise.”

Zero part of me believed him, but I was in too much pain to argue. Cool air hit my skin, and I shivered. I didn’t know where he was carrying me or why he was there. Again, my jumbled mind said it was Paxton, but I didn’t believe it.

Every noise was too loud, the dimmest of lights absolute agony to my eyes. I tried to block it all out and focus on what was happening around me, but nothing made sense.

When something stabbed into my arm, I jolted, yet not even that was enough to pull me from the pain-filled stupor I had fallen into. But soon after, the pounding in my head dulled, and I moaned with relief.

A kiss was brushed over my brow. “Sleep. I’m here with you.”

Surprisingly, I took comfort in that. Blindly reaching out, I grasped his callused hand and pressed it to my cheek, allowing myself the luxury of relaxing now that the headache had eased into something tolerable. I couldn’t remember the last time someone had taken care of me. Maybe when I was a kid,

before Mom started becoming more obsessed with finding “the one” to love her.

Rough fingers skimmed over my cheek soothingly before brushing my hair back from my face. Another kiss touched just above my right eye, firm but heart-clenchingly gentle.

Reality came back slowly. Smells that could only ever be associated with hospitals. Sounds of wheels rolling on tiled floors, the beeping of a heart monitor in the distance, low voices. Feeling something scratch against my skin, the chill of the room on my face, neck, and arms. There was what I assumed was an IV in my left arm, the tape around the site tugging on my skin.

I missed the comfort of the hand that had been pillowed under my cheek, the gruff promises of making certain everything was okay. I lifted my lashes carefully, taking caution in case the lights were too bright. I found myself in a dimly lit hospital room, a chair placed right beside the head of the bed that looked way too small for someone of Paxton’s size to have fit in. Across the room, the door had been left cracked open.

From the hall, I caught the sound of voices right outside the door, but I couldn’t make out the words until I heard Paxton’s unmistakable voice. “And you’re sure it was just a migraine?”

“According to her roommate, she gets them often. I see no other signs of anything to suggest this was something more. I do recommend a follow-up with a neurologist. If she suffers as often as the roommate assumes, I’m surprised she can function. There are preventatives she can be prescribed, as well as other medications that can combat the headaches more effectively than anything over the counter.”

Pushing my unruly hair out of my way, I sat up. My head felt heavy, a dull ache echoing throughout my entire skull, but it was definitely bearable. Hearing me shifting around, Paxton opened the door to glance in at me. Finding me sitting up, he quickly crossed to me. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better.” Heat filled my face, embarrassment choking me. Although the migraine had passed, I felt like crap. My body hurt, and I could still smell something foul coming from the general direction of my hair. I remembered making a mess in my bathroom, and there was no way I hadn’t gotten vomit in my wild tresses.

Of course the most beautiful man on the planet had seen me like that. He was still looking at me, sincere concern darkening his face. This man had taken care of me when I was at my most vulnerable. I wasn’t sure anyone else would have bothered. Scratch that. I *knew* they would have.

Unable to meet his gaze as he neared, I focused on the end of the bed. “Thank you. For everything. I don’t know how I’ll repay you, but I will.”

He muttered something to himself, low and vicious, but I didn’t hear what he said. Firm fingers tipped up my chin, and I had no choice but to meet his hazel eyes in the low light. “All that matters is that you are okay. How is the head?”

“T-tender,” I whispered and licked my dry bottom lip. Hazel was replaced by moss, liquid gold swirling around inside in a way that had my heart jumping in my chest. “You saved me, Paxton.”

Worry darkened his face while his eyes searched mine. Maybe he didn’t believe I was feeling better, or he was unsure how long the reprieve from my migraine would last. I couldn’t reassure him about the latter, however much I wished I could.

This close to my period, I could easily have one every day until my cycle ended. What had made this one so bad was that I hadn't prepared for it. I would stock up on my over-the-counter meds so I never had to risk this again.

Paxton's thumb rubbed over my cheek before he dropped his hand. "Riah packed you a few things. Change of clothes and hygiene items. The bathroom is small, but there is a shower if you're up to it."

I touched the IV in the back of my hand, but I was surprised to find no line attached to it.

"They gave you two rounds of fluids while you were resting," he provided, capturing my fingers to stop me from fidgeting with the medical tape. Turning my hand over in his much larger one, he threaded our fingers together for a moment before helping me to my feet.

"Is this your polite way of telling me I stink?" I teased, not sure if I was trying to distract him or myself. I liked the way he held my hand way too much for my peace of mind.

His grin was so freaking beautiful, my breath stuttered out of me. There should definitely be a warning label on this man's forehead. But I doubted even that would distract from his masculine beauty.

"No, Brooke. You definitely don't stink. I took a washcloth to the stomach acid in your hair."

Embarrassment heated my skin, and I cringed inwardly. But at the same time, my stomach got a butterflies-flapping-in-my-belly sensation. It was the kind of feeling I'd heard other girls talking about at school before I was sent to St. Andrew's.

What is going on here?

Am I crushing on Paxton Foster?

No. No, no, no.

I don't like this. At. All.

I promised myself that I would never let a man take over my life. Ever. Just because Paxton had taken care of me for a few hours didn't mean I should lose my mind completely and fall for him.

Crap. I'd gone from "crush" to "fall for" in less than a second. I needed to get as far away from this man as possible.

Paxton didn't realize I was having a mini mental breakdown. "Riah says you're so particular about your hair that she insisted on packing your shampoo and conditioner, as well as all the other products you use."

Right. Focus on washing my hair and not how my heart was thumping against my chest at his nearness. Or how good he smelled, cedar and citrus. Ugh. Why was that such an intoxicating combination? I felt an overwhelming urge to lick him to determine whether he tasted as good as he smelled, but I fought it down.

I didn't have any suitcases, but one of Sariah's overnight bags was sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed. Paxton bent to retrieve it, but when I tried to take it from him, he shook his head. "I'll carry it for you."

Trying not to gulp, I entered the tiny bathroom. It held a toilet, a sink, and a shower. After setting the bag on the sink, he left, but only to retrieve several towels and a washcloth for me. "You have so much hair, I didn't think one would be enough."

My smile felt brittle. "Thank you. Again." When he just stood there, I shoved at his arm, desperate to get him out of the small, confined space. Holy macaroni. He was solid muscle.

Hard. Tight. My fingers clenched on his bicep, and I realized I was basically clawing at him. My mind might have been screaming “Danger, danger, danger!” but my body was trying to get closer.

“Out,” I growled, more as a reminder to myself than him. “I can take it from here.”

Paxton’s sigh told me how reluctant he was, causing my stomach to start fluttering again. “Leave the door cracked. You’re still a little unsteady.”

“I’m fine.” I pushed him until he was out the door, although I knew he wouldn’t have moved an inch if he didn’t want to. There was no way I was going to be able to shower with the door slightly ajar. Closing it behind him, I flipped the lock. You didn’t live in homeless shelters for years and not need the safety of a locked bathroom door.

CHAPTER TEN

paxton

IT WAS LATE when my driver pulled up in front of the ER entrance. He stepped out, but I waved him off, opening the back door for Brooke myself. With her damp hair braided and pulled over one shoulder, dressed in a pair of sweats and a hoodie, she was just as beautiful as she had been the day before when she'd been a princess.

Even pale, with dark circles under her emerald eyes, she appeared to sparkle under the harsh lights coming from the hospital.

“Thank you,” she murmured as she slid in.

Once she was settled, I placed her bag in the trunk and then joined her. Seat belt on, she sat with her hands folded in her lap, one finger toying with the bandage over the small wound left at her IV site.

“Was Riah with you when I called?” she asked after we were on the road. “Not that I’m unappreciative of your help. I am very thankful for everything you’ve done for me. But I’m just confused why you...rescued me.”

“You called me, not Riah.”

That had her head lifting, confusion filling those pretty eyes. “No, I called Riah.”

“You thought you did, but it was me.” I knew she’d thought it was Sariah when I’d picked up. I’d barely understood her, but I’d gotten the gist of it. She was in pain. All alone. I had already been on my feet, already jogging through the house when I heard her being sick. I’d kept the connection open the entire nerve-racking drive to the apartment, up until I kicked in her bedroom door.

“I thought she was home.”

“No, she stayed over with Bella last night. They had a sleepover and then spent the morning playing with lightsabers in the backyard.” I couldn’t help smiling at the memory. Watching the two of them together never failed to soothe something deep in my dark soul. “I called Riah after we got to the hospital and you were being tended to. She rushed over to the apartment to pack you a few things, but she’s back with Bella now. She volunteered to help me out until I can find a new nanny.”

“Oh.” She gave me a grim smile. “Do you use an agency or something?”

“Yes, but obviously, they weren’t the cream of the crop.” I shifted my shoulders so I could look at her better. With the city lights shining through the window, she was cast in a halo. Her head must have been aching because her eyes were slightly squinted against the brightness. “Actually, I have someone in mind. But I’m not sure if she will be interested.”

“It doesn’t cost you anything to ask,” she said with a lift of one shoulder.

I soaked in the sight of her for another moment before speaking again. “You’re right. I have a proposal for you.”

“Wait, me?” Her surprised laugh was musical, but when she realized I was serious, she scoffed. “You would not want me, Paxton. I have no experience taking care of kids. I’m a waitress and a birthday-party princess.”

You have no idea what I want, kitten.

I bit back the words, knowing the little pet name would upset her. Instead, I told her the truth. “Riah has given you a stellar recommendation, and Bella also voiced her approval of my choice. Just to be clear, Riah has never liked any of the previous nannies.”

Brooke couldn’t hide her flinch. “Oh.”

“What’s that about?” I demanded, not liking the sudden tension in her shoulders. She was squinting a little more, and without thinking, I reached out to squeeze the back of her neck.

She went stiff under my touch, but when I continued the massage, she let her head fall forward and released a breathy moan. My body’s reaction to that sexy sound was instant and intense. Fuck.

“Brooke?” I couldn’t let it go, no matter how good it felt to touch her. “Is something going on with you and Riah? Did the two of you argue?”

She leaned into my hand for another moment before shrugging me away. Reluctantly, I pulled back.

“I haven’t spoken to her since before the party,” she dismissed, keeping her face turned toward the side window.

“That doesn’t tell me anything.” She shrank back into the seat without speaking. “Come on, Brooke. Talk to me. Riah has done nothing but talk about you since you moved in with her. She was happy, and I was glad to see her coming out of

her shell a little. That was because of you. I know it, because I saw your influence firsthand yesterday.”

In the reflection in the window, I watched as she sucked her bottom lip between her teeth.

“And you were a fierce little thing when we first met, stepping between Riah and me without hesitation. You didn’t blink before you lit into me. It was refreshing as hell.”

And hot. So goddamn hot.

I’d replayed it over and over in my head all night. She was tiny and young—fucking hell, was she young—but not a single inch of her looked childlike. She had the body of a goddess, the perfect amount of curves that a man craved. Everything I didn’t even know I would want until I set eyes on her.

Brooke was the complete opposite of the type of woman I was normally attracted to, but it wasn’t just the outside package that had snared my attention. It was her fire. Her passion while protecting her friend. Her sassy-as-fuck mouth. Her gentle yet firm handling of Bella as she reassured her everything would be okay. Her absolute kindness that radiated out of her from head to toe.

That was the kind of person I wanted in my daughter’s life. She would make a great nanny and companion for Bella.

“Bella likes you. She’s liked exactly zero of the previous nannies. Tolerated them, yes. Liked them, not even for a minute. She was kind of heartbroken when you left without saying goodbye.”

Her heavy exhale made me feel guilty, but not enough to be sorry. I could see every emotion that flitted across her face from the reflection in the window. I wasn’t above using her

kind heart against her to get what I wanted. Making Bella happy was my number one goal. I'd made a promise the moment she was placed in my arms, and I would never break it.

With Brooke, everyone would be happy. Bella. Sariah. Me. Probably Luck too.

I just had to hunt him down and drag his no-doubt-drunk ass into a shower before dropping him into his room at my house. I'd tried calling him when I first got Brooke to the hospital, just as a courtesy to let him know what was going on with his niece. But he hadn't answered. Which told me loud and clear he'd left the party the night before and gotten wasted.

Typical Luck behavior from seven years before. But he'd cleaned up his act when Bella came along. He hadn't gotten drunk since she was in diapers. But the ghosts of his past had hit him hard.

"I have a job," Brooke said with a sigh. "Two of them, in fact."

"Do either of them offer you benefits like health insurance?" Her silence was answer enough. "I provide all my staff with a full package of benefits that include health and dental insurance, as well as retirement."

"That's very generous of you."

"It's the bare minimum of a decent employer," I argued. "Brooke, I know your migraines are a frequent issue. The ER doctor told me how debilitating they can be. Neither of us could understand how you have been able to live with this pain and still work."

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip, as if she didn't understand how she'd had the strength to do it either. But I could see it so easily. This little goddess was a fighter.

“Take the job as Bella's nanny, and I can help with that,” I enticed. “Not only will you be able to afford regular visits to a specialist, but your meds as well.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

brooke

HEAD STILL ACHING, though thankfully, it was just a dull throb, I climbed out of bed and straight into the shower.

Sandra's catering business was fairly popular. Her staff had steady work throughout the week and most Saturday nights. We were given a schedule two weeks in advance so we knew where and when to show up.

I had a corporate cocktail party that evening. Since it wasn't dinner, the staff would be limited to just a few servers and two kitchen staff making hors d'oeuvres. I figured I would be walking around with a tray of canapés or crab cakes all evening. Easy enough to handle even if I had a raging migraine. I'd done it plenty of times in the past. With the small discomfort from the lingering headache, I'd be more than capable of doing my job.

I was halfway through drying my hair, something that took well over an hour to do, when my phone rang. Seeing my boss's name on the screen, I felt a sinking sensation in my stomach.

"Hello?"

"Brooke, glad I caught you," Sandra greeted, sounding as no-nonsense as usual. "I won't be needing you tonight after all."

Crap. I couldn't afford to miss even a day of work. Not only did we get an hourly wage for the events, but tips as well. Tips were the majority of my income. I would have to dip into what little savings I'd been able to set aside. Especially now that I'd decided I was still going to pay my share of the rent for the months Sariah had offered to cover it if I was a princess for Bella's party.

For one, I hadn't fulfilled my obligation to the birthday girl.

For another, Sariah had set me up.

"Was the event canceled?" I asked.

"No, not canceled," she said briskly. "I just don't need you at this event."

"If you don't need a waitress, I can help in the kitchen." That would mean no tips, but at least I would still have some money for the day. With rent to pay, an expensive trip to the hospital, and paying back Paxton for all he'd done for me the day before, I needed every last dime.

Sandra's sigh only made my stomach knot up. "I'm having to make some hard decisions. Business isn't going as I hoped, and I have to let a few people go. Unfortunately, that means you. It's nothing personal."

I grabbed the edge of the sink when I began to sway. "How long have you known this was coming?"

"It's a new development."

"If you had warned me, I could have been looking for a new job," I gritted out, pushing down my panic so I didn't burst into tears on the phone with the woman who had just turned my entire life upside down and shaken it like a freaking snow globe.

“I’ll give you a good reference if you need it,” she offered, but she had zero remorse in her voice. “Good luck, Brooke.”

Gaping at my reflection in the bathroom mirror as the phone went silent in my ear, I tried to control the hysteria that wanted to take over. Everything would be fine. I still had three more birthday parties scheduled for the coming weeks, and two of them were for the full package option I offered. That meant I would have enough money to cover my bills, and I would only have to dip into my savings for groceries.

I was so proud of that small sum of money I’d been able to set aside. Finally—freaking finally—I’d been able to breathe and not have to live paycheck to paycheck while basically starving myself by only eating instant noodles and spaghetti.

Promising myself that finding another job wouldn’t be nearly as hard if Sandra followed through with giving me a recommendation, I focused on drying my hair and then getting dressed. It was late afternoon, but I had time to put in a few applications and drop off my résumé.

Grabbing my bag, I ignored the voice in the back of my head reminding me I had a job lined up already. Paxton’s offer from the night before rang in my ears, but I shook my head. I’d told him I would think about it, but I wasn’t even going to consider it. Bella deserved someone better than me playing nanny.

I was about to walk into the diner two blocks from my apartment to ask if they were hiring when I got the first text. As soon as I read it, I felt like my feet had been kicked out from under me.

The mom who had hired me for a birthday party that Saturday was canceling. She’d booked the full package, which meant a huge paycheck.

While I stood there, trying to digest the new turn of events, I received two more texts. Both of them from the other mothers, regarding their daughters' parties that I'd been scheduled to play princess for.

By the time the third and final text came in, I was still dazed, but anger had begun to set in. This wasn't a coincidence. Losing my job and having three different clients cancel on me in just a matter of hours was not simply some stroke of bad luck.

Someone had obviously orchestrated this. Manipulating my life in such a manner was uncalled for, but even if I had only one guess who had done it, I wouldn't have to think too hard.

Closing my eyes, I sucked in a fortifying breath, fighting back the sting of frustrated tears, and attempted to leash my anger. Once I trusted myself not to cause anyone bodily harm, I ordered an Uber.

Paxton Foster did not get to play God with my life.

I hadn't paid attention during the ride to or from Paxton's home on the previous trip, but I realized quickly that his house wasn't even the largest mansion in the neighborhood. It wasn't anywhere near the smallest either. When my Uber driver pulled up outside the gate, the same guard came over to speak to him.

Powering down the window, I glared at the man who already had a vein pulsing in his forehead. "This going to be a frequent issue?" he asked.

"Since this is the last time I ever plan on coming here, no." He huffed, but I decided that since he was only doing his job, and that job included protecting the precious little girl who

lived there, I wouldn't give him a hard time. "I can walk up to the house if it makes you feel better."

"Sariah isn't here," he informed me.

"I'm here to speak to your boss." It wasn't like I wanted to see my roommate anyway. I was still feeling raw about her setting me up.

If I couldn't find a job in a hurry, I wouldn't even be able to afford living with Sariah any longer.

Gulping back the fear that I might end up on the streets again, I steeled my spine. "Is Paxton home?"

Maybe I should have texted him before making the trip all the way out to his house. It had been impulsive, and I'd spent money I could have used to get to and from whatever job I hopefully found soon, but my anger had been too intense for me not to confront him.

Percy the guard, according to his name tag, blew out a heavy breath. "Your driver will leave his license and pick it up on the way back. He has five minutes. Do not make me have someone escort him off the property."

"Thank you," I muttered, sitting back while the driver patiently gave over his ID. He wasn't nearly as starstruck about the mansion, and he wasn't half as nervous as the last driver had been on Saturday. It was likely he had no clue who lived there, or if he did, he didn't care about MMA or celebrities in general.

After he dropped me off at the front steps, I watched him disappear down the long driveway before walking to the door and ringing the bell. A minute passed before one of the maids in a black skirt and a button-down with a white apron around her waist answered.

“May I help you?” she asked with a blank face. She had a sprinkle of gray through her dark hair that was pulled back into a bun so severe, it seemed to give her aging face a bit of a lift.

“I’ve got it,” Paxton’s smooth, deep voice said from behind her.

Every muscle in my body clenched, heat spreading through my belly and out to my limbs. Trying hard not to shiver, I watched as the maid stepped back, dipped her head to the beautiful man who appeared in the doorway, and quickly walked away.

Paxton smirked down at me, and I had to assume Percy had called ahead to let him know I was coming. There was no way this man answered his own front door on purpose.

I tried not to drool over the sight of him in dark-wash jeans and a retro band T-shirt stretched impossibly tight over his hard chest and massive arms. I was small, but his all-around largeness made me feel delicate, though not fragile. It was a little disconcerting, but scorchingly hot.

And then he opened his mouth. “Does this mean you’ve thought about my offer?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

brooke

MY ANGER WAS REIGNITED at his smug tone. “You’re despicable,” I seethed. “How dare you play games with my life?”

“Offering you a job is despicable?” he asked with a laugh, but I saw the flare of unease in his eyes.

“My boss fired me this afternoon. And then all three of my clients who had birthday parties scheduled for the coming weeks canceled.” I glared at him, not trying to hide the accusation in my face or my tone.

He winced. “Ouch. That sucks. But how is any of that my fault?”

“Are you really going to stand there and pretend you had nothing to do with this?” Hands on my hips, I tipped my head back. He was so tall, I got a cramp in the back of my neck looking up at him.

“Yes, because I didn’t.”

There was a ring of sincerity to his voice, but I refused to acknowledge it. I was angry but also hurt, and I hated that he’d been able to elicit so many emotions from me. He’d taken care of me when I was at my most vulnerable. My walls had been down, and he’d worked his way inside—the sneaky jerkface.

“I get why you want someone Bella is comfortable with to be her caregiver, but disrupting my life, taking away my sources of income, was a dick move. And definitely not the smartest course of action to get me to fall in line.” My frustrated tears spilled down my cheeks before I could stop them. “I worked my behind off to become financially stable. And now, if I don’t figure something out soon, I’m going to be back in a homeless shelter.”

With a curse, Paxton stepped forward, but I was quick to back away. If he touched me, I knew I would embarrass myself and start sobbing. Or knee him in the balls. I wasn’t entirely sure which, but either way, neither outcome would be in Paxton’s favor.

“Brooke, I swear to you, I had nothing to do with you losing your jobs,” he choked out. “I don’t know what happened, but please believe me when I say I would never do anything to hurt you.”

Snorting my disbelief, I dashed away my tears. “Sorry, not sorry, but I don’t believe you. It’s awfully convenient that you offer me a job, I don’t accept it, and then the ones I have that pay my bills, keep me off the streets, and put food in my belly suddenly disappear. All gone in a single afternoon. Not even the lingering smell of smoke to alert anyone that my life just went up in flames. Just, poof.”

He groaned, rubbing a hand over his stubbled jaw as he watched me with hooded eyes. “I’m not saying this isn’t suspicious. And yes, I would suspect me too. But I swear on my daughter’s life, it wasn’t me.”

I heard genuine distress in his voice that told me loud and clear he meant what he said. I believed him, but it was more than that. I *wanted* to believe him. Some of my steam

evaporated. Blowing out a heavy breath, I wrapped my arms around my middle. “It doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t have even come here. Sorry to have bothered you. It won’t happen again.”

Paxton wrapped his fingers around my wrist before I had fully turned away. “Don’t go,” he rasped. “I hate that you’re scared right now. I promise I’ll find out what happened because I can’t stand the thought of you hurting. But no matter the reasons, I’m just glad you’re here now.”

He rubbed his thumb over my wrist, and there was no way he missed how my pulse kicked up at the caress of his rough skin on mine. With a gentle tug, he turned me. As if I were under a compulsion, I looked up without meaning to, my breath catching when I saw the flames banked in his mossy eyes. Watching the gold swirl in their depths enthralled me.

“Stay,” he implored quietly, causing a fresh wave of tears to burn my eyes. He had me twisted up inside. I hated it. Hated it. But a part of me craved...more. “Even if it’s just until you find another job. Stay. Please.”

My body gave in before my mind could fully catch up. Paxton must have sensed how close I was, how much I needed to let go, because he pulled me against him. Releasing my wrist, he wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me into him at the same time I felt his lips brush over the top of my head.

“Come inside,” he urged, his voice barely above a whisper. “Let me take care of you.”

I buried my face in his chest, inhaling that wonderful cedar and citrus scent that was all his. It felt too good to be held by him to even try to protest. I wasn’t a liar, and even if I did play at being a princess on the weekends, I refused to pretend with

Paxton. But I should at least be a little smart. “If I’m going to work for you, *temporarily*, then you shouldn’t be taking care of me. That seems unethical. A huge HR nightmare.”

“Shh,” he growled, his hand contracting on my hip for a fraction of a second. “Give me two full minutes before you start running that smart mouth again.”

Pressing my lips together, I closed my eyes and took another deep breath. Between his delicious scent, the heat of his body soaking into mine, and the sound of his heart beating erratically in my ear, my senses were overwhelmed.

I gave him his two minutes.

Maybe I was giving them to myself as well.

“Promise me again that it wasn’t you who got me fired, and I’ll believe you,” I murmured when the time was up. Lifting my head, I looked at him with pleading eyes. “Tell me it wasn’t you, Paxton. I really want to believe you.”

With his thumb under my chin, his gaze didn’t falter from mine. “It wasn’t me, but I will find out who did. I won’t let anyone hurt you and get away with it, kitten.”

For once, I didn’t shudder at a cute nickname directed at me. It was crazy, but I believed him. Not an hour before, I’d suspected him of destroying my world. But deep down, I’d known he wouldn’t do that to me. Which was insanity. I knew better than to trust anyone.

Yet I couldn’t stop myself from putting faith in Paxton.

I was tired of being alone. Of not having someone in my corner. It was a relief to know he was there. That he cared.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

paxton

MY DRIVER STOPPED outside of Sariah's apartment, and I bit back a groan. It was a nice neighborhood. Low crime. Sariah had wanted something cheap, thinking she didn't deserve anything. I'd wanted her to be safe, protected, because I thought she deserved the fucking world.

This place hadn't been the cheapest, but it had a lower crime rate than the more expensive apartments I'd considered. Bigger and flashier attracted the wrong kind of attention.

Sariah had taken Bella with her for the evening, something I'd been even more thankful for when Brooke had shown up earlier. Now, however, I wasn't looking forward to the conversation we were about to have.

After the party Saturday, Sariah had been the one to suggest Brooke step in as Bella's nanny, but suddenly, I had no idea what her motives were for that or where she was mentally. I had too many unanswered questions after Brooke's crazy afternoon not to wonder if Sariah had had something to do with it.

I'd left Brooke at the house to get settled in with the promise of grabbing a few of her things when I picked Bella up. Convincing her to take the job had been surprisingly easy, but according to her, it was just a temporary position. My

stubborn kitten was adamant that she would find a new job. Thankfully, I'd had enough forethought to have my attorney draw up a contract for a trial period.

Three months. That was how long I had to sort everything out. It was better than nothing, but I still felt the pressure of the clock ticking down. I wanted to grab Bella and get back to the house so I didn't waste another minute of precious time with Brooke. But first, I needed to sort out Sariah.

Leaving my driver, who was also a member of my security team, I took the elevator up and knocked. As the door swung inward, the sound of music was masked only by Bella's giggles. Sariah stood with her hair pulled back, a carefree grin on her face.

"Just in time." She waved me in. "We're getting Brooke's stuff packed up so she doesn't have to worry about it."

Muttering a curse under my breath, I stepped into the apartment. Bella ran out of what I assumed was Brooke's room, her hair in a knot similar to Sariah's. Seeing them side by side never failed to make my heart lift. In another lifetime, maybe things would have been different, but I'd already driven myself crazy enough over the what-ifs to want to ruin what little peace I'd finally found.

"Daddy, Riah said Brooke is coming to live with us." Bella threw herself into my arms, and I swung her up, kissing both her cheeks. "I've been helping pack up all her pretty princess dresses."

"She's been a big help," Sariah praised. "I couldn't have done it without her. And Brooke will be so happy you helped, Bella-Boo."

Placing Bella on her feet, I turned her toward the bedroom. “You go finish up. I need to talk to Riah.”

Bella glanced at me over her shoulder, her brown eyes full of concern. “Is she in trouble?”

“Maybe.” There was no use in lying about it. Nudging her, I waited until she was out of the room before I turned to face the woman standing there waiting.

From the way she wouldn’t meet my gaze all of a sudden, I was that much more convinced she wasn’t innocent. “What did you do, Riah?”

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip. “What do you mean?”

I scrubbed a hand over my jaw in frustration. “It would be a hell of a lot more convincing if you didn’t look guilty as fuck right now. Talk.”

With a huff, she put distance between us, a pout already on her face. “Brooke deserves better.”

This woman-child was going to drive me insane. Her explanation didn’t tell me shit. “Sariah.”

“I...” Swallowing loudly, she walked over to a stack of boxes, each neatly labeled. “Luck told me about his niece a while back. It’s been maybe a year.”

My eyes narrowed at the way she ducked her head at the mention of my best friend. I did not like the way Sariah seemed to go all shy when his name came up, but I’d been ignoring the niggling sensation for a while now. Fuck. Another thing to worry about with her.

“By then, he’d stopped looking for her. He’d been doing his own investigating until that point, because her dad and stepmom were supposedly looking for her too, and he didn’t

want to draw their attention with a PI snooping around. I didn't understand it, but I didn't think it was my place to ask questions."

"Because it wasn't," I gritted out.

She shrugged, as if she didn't necessarily agree, and that pissed me off. "He talked about her again a few weeks later, and I could tell it was weighing on him. I still didn't understand, but it hurt to see him like that." Her eyes drifted to the open bedroom door. "I had a few favors left over from... back in the day. I didn't think anything would come of it, but I found her."

I was going to ignore the fact that she had admitted to having contact with people from her past, people she had promised me she would never associate with again. But I sure as fuck wouldn't forget. She would definitely be getting another member of my security team shadowing her more now.

For the moment, however, I needed to focus on what she'd done to make Brooke cry. "But you didn't tell Luck?"

Sariah grimaced. "I wanted to make sure she wasn't going to hurt him more than he already was. And... I don't know, Paxton, okay? I don't know, but there was something about her when I saw her that day. She's different from anyone else I've ever met. There is good in her. The kind of good that gets sucked out of normal people."

I didn't need her to tell me that. I knew it. Had seen it firsthand only a few days before. It made no sense to me either. Especially after Luck told me a little of what had happened to Brooke, but it was there, nonetheless.

“It wasn’t that I was trying to keep her a secret from him. I simply wanted to get to know her better.” She tucked a curl that had fallen from her knot behind her ear. “And maybe I was a little selfish and wanted some of her magic for myself.”

“Sweetheart, I’m not blaming you for that. No one would,” I assured her gently. “I’m just trying to understand what you’ve done. In case I need to fix it.”

“You don’t have to fix anything. Not this time.” Taking a seat on the couch, she looked up at me. “For once, I fixed it for everyone.”

“Sariah—”

“I kept putting up flyers about the apartment where Brooke would see them. I got a lot of calls before she finally reached out.” She pressed her lips into a hard line. “I tried to figure out what would be a fair price she could pay without denting her pride or making her struggle.”

I’d wondered about that when she’d first told me she was getting a roommate. Her apartment was paid for, so she didn’t need help with rent. I’d thought maybe she was just doing it because they cut her hours at the restaurant, and she needed the extra cash. But since Luck owned the damn place, and after a call to the manager, I knew that wasn’t the case. Still, I’d kept my mouth shut because she’d stayed out of trouble, which was all I cared about.

“Brooke moved in, and we were getting to know each other. I saw just how great she is. But I felt guilty because Luck still seemed down.” Her gaze dropped to her hands as she played with her fingers while she talked. “I don’t know why I didn’t tell him. Okay, that’s a lie. It was because I had a friend. A real friend. For the first time in my entire life, it felt like I had a person. She didn’t know my past or who my

parents are. There was no judgment. It was nice to have her in my corner.”

“Then why did you let her walk into that birthday party without warning her about Luck?” I demanded, unable to mask my anger. “You blindsided her. Set her up to be hurt. You don’t do that to a friend, Riah.”

“I know,” she whispered, her chin wobbling. “But I couldn’t figure out how to explain it to her without ruining everything.”

“Regardless of what you were trying to do, you still messed up, and you need to apologize.”

“I will, I promise.” Still playing with her fingers, she looked up at me through her lashes. “But I had other reasons for not telling her about Luck. Not just because of her past with him.”

“Jesus,” I grumbled. “What the hell else did you do?”

“Nothing. I didn’t do anything, because I already knew how it would play out.” With a pleased smile, she stood. “Bella loves her. I knew she would be the perfect fit. For both of you.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

brooke

CLOSING THE BOOK, I climbed off the bed and tucked the covers around Bella. Week one as her nanny was over, and we were both exhausted. She gave me a sleepy smile as I brushed a curl off her forehead.

“I’m going to ask Daddy if I can take karate classes,” she announced, fighting a yawn.

“That’s something you can discuss over breakfast tomorrow. For now, you sleep.” Making sure she had her cup of water within reach, I stepped back. “Good night, Bella.”

“Night, Brooke.” I was almost to the door when I heard her whisper, “I hope you stay. I really want you to stay.”

I paused with my hand on the door, but I had tears in my eyes, so I didn’t dare turn around to face her. With the glow of her night-light, I wouldn’t be able to hide the glitter in my eyes. “Sleep, precious.”

Her small huff made me smile despite the tears still blinding me. She and I had fallen into an easy routine from the beginning. I found that I enjoyed being her nanny, mostly because it didn’t feel like what I was doing was work. Bella was easy to love because I’d opened my heart to her the day of her birthday party. A week of spending hour on top of hour

together had only reinforced how much I cared for the little girl.

Sleep would have been the smart option after my shower, but I felt wired. Leaving my hair damp, I went down to the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea. A robe wasn't something I owned, but I was wearing a baggy shirt that swallowed me and sleep pants that I had to roll up so I didn't trip over all the extra material since they were obviously made for someone considerably taller than I was.

Thankfully, the cook wasn't a grump about anyone using her kitchen. Verona was a nice older woman who didn't mind if I made myself a cup of tea or a late-night snack. Meanwhile, the house manager, Julia, who was in charge of the rest of the house, was a total witch. Bella had told me to avoid her at all costs, and I'd figured out quickly why. Julia must have been a drill sergeant in a previous life. She never smiled and had a way of looking through a person that made you feel like you weren't even in the room.

Mostly, we hadn't interacted because I stuck close to Bella, who wouldn't willingly go near Julia even if I bribed her with ice cream. Julia didn't scare me, though. She might appear to be intimidating, but she was nothing like the headmistress at St. Andrew's, so I didn't have a problem with her.

While the kettle heated, I grabbed everything I needed, then opened the fridge. Bella got hungry in the middle of the night, so I'd started making sure to have a container of fresh fruit ready for her so she wouldn't raid the pantry. After finding two bags of potato chips in her bed earlier in the week, I'd asked the cook not to buy so much junk food and focus more on fruits, veggies, and yogurt.

From the first day I'd worked there, I'd noticed that Paxton was kind of a health nut when it came to his diet, but he didn't know anything about what his daughter ate. Apparently, that had been something the previous nannies had overseen. I hadn't been happy learning that little nugget of information.

There might have been an argument.

And Paxton might have spent a few hours in his home gym working off how angry I'd made him after yelling. But I didn't regret it. He could get upset all he wanted, but someone needed to make him more accountable where Bella was concerned.

After slicing the strawberries, I snapped the top onto the container and placed it on the shelf I'd labeled just for Bella. I had bottled water and smoothies lined up for her to reach easily. Closing the refrigerator door, I turned to take the kettle off the flame before it could whistle.

Mug in hand, I turned around just as the kitchen door opened, and I struggled not to swallow my tongue at the sight of Paxton in nothing but a pair of athletic shorts, leaving all of his ink on display. Holy mother above, he had so much beautiful ink, he hardly had an inch of free skin. Across his chest, down his arms, and even on his hands and fingers. His hair was soaked with sweat. Wiping his face with the towel hanging from his neck, he paused when he noticed me. My heart jackhammered against my ribs, making it seem like I'd been the one who had just come from a workout. His chest glistened, a bead of sweat trailing down his rock-hard eight-pack toward the sharply cut V exposed by his low-hanging shorts.

It should have been illegal to look that delicious after spending hours doing cardio.

“I thought you would be in bed by now,” he murmured. “Did Bella give you any trouble about going to sleep?”

I tightened my fingers around the handle of the mug to keep them from trembling, and I had to lower my lashes to force myself to look away from his lickable anatomy. I could have spent hours tracing every intricate piece of art on his body. He was a walking masterpiece. “She never gives me trouble. I came down for a cup of tea in hopes of helping me fall asleep.”

Sensing movement, I snapped my eyes open to find him only a few steps away. Concern pulled at his brow. “Are you feeling okay? Headache?”

“No, I’m fine,” I squeaked, and I quickly took a sip of the tea to give myself something to do before my gaze traveled back into dangerous territory. Being close enough to inhale the cedar and citrus scent of his body that not even the heavy coating of sweat on his skin could mask made me light-headed. And achy. So, so achy. It wasn’t anything new when it came to Paxton, but it got worse every day.

“You have a doctor’s appointment on Friday,” he reminded me, his body brushing against mine on his way to the fridge for a bottle of water. “Unfortunately, I’ll be out of town from tomorrow until Sunday night. But I want to know how the visit goes.”

I couldn’t stop myself from watching his throat work as he gulped down half the bottle of water. Wiping the back of his hand over his mouth, he glanced my way, and I ducked my head, blowing air over my tea to cool it before taking a sip so he didn’t think I was a perv.

“What exactly is it that you do?” I asked, wanting to linger a little longer in his company, when I knew the smart thing to

do was to go to my room. “I mean, I know you used to be some big shot MMA fighter. Mr. Hall of Fame champion.” He smirked, and I leaned back against the island. At times, he drove me so crazy I wanted to smack him upside the head, but even then, I enjoyed being near him. “But you run a business now. With...him.”

I took another drink of my tea, avoiding his gaze when I mentioned my uncle. Neither of us had brought up Luck since I’d started working as Bella’s nanny, and I preferred it that way. But it was part of Paxton’s job, and I was curious.

“It started out as a random idea,” he said after a pause. “Open a gym exclusive to fighters. When I was competing, it was difficult to find somewhere to work out when I was on the road. As I moved up in rank, it got worse. Between the fans and the media, it became a nightmare.”

He set his bottle on the counter and leaned forward on his forearms. I watched over the rim of my mug, trying not to drool at how his muscles flexed with each breath he took. But I was enjoying the sound of his voice too. A smooth baritone that caressed over me. It rubbed down my spine, skimmed across my skin like a physical touch. Addictive.

“It was just talk at first, but when I retired, I was bored. Luck and I bought an old warehouse and remodeled it. Starting a gym was easy enough, but it was the security aspect we had to figure out.” His mouth ticked up on one side. “I honestly thought it would just be a one-and-done kind of thing. But now we have thirty, spread out across the country. It’s still primarily for fighters, but we have an extensive athlete clientele. Olympians, footballers, basketball and baseball players, soccer stars. They all have a safe place to work out while they’re traveling.”

“You seem passionate about it,” I observed. “But when you mention traveling, you look upset.”

“That’s not because of work,” he dismissed.

“Then what is it?”

“Maybe I don’t want to leave you.”

Heart pounding, I carefully set the cup of tea on the counter before I dropped it. “Oh,” I whispered, ducking my head. “You don’t have to worry. Bella and I have settled in well together. The two of us will be fine while you’re gone.”

Paxton blew out a harsh breath as he straightened. “I’m not worried about you and Bella. I just don’t want to be away from *you*, kitten. If you didn’t have that doctor’s appointment, I would insist you come with me.”

“But Bella has school,” I muttered. He called me kitten all the time now, but I’d discovered I liked it. It was when anyone else but him tried to call me sweetheart or honey that my skin felt too tight. When he spoke to me, I had no flashbacks of confined spaces or the memory of how badly my body had ached after being beaten until I couldn’t stand on my own.

Laughing, he moved until only a few inches separated us. I could feel the heat coming off his body, and it took every last ounce of willpower I possessed not to lean toward him. “You’re a real pain in the ass, do you know that?” I shrugged, causing him to laugh again. “I don’t want to go. If I could get out of this, I would, but I fucking can’t.”

“Because you’re so worried about what the doctor will say?” I finally tipped my head up enough to see his face. He clenched his jaw, and I took that as a yes. “People suffer from migraines all the time. Many of them have it worse than I do. Mine aren’t nearly as frequent compared to them.”

“I want to be there with you, but that’s not the only reason I don’t want to go.” He lowered his head until his breath brushed over my cheek. “I don’t want to be anywhere you aren’t.”

All the air left my lungs in a rush. My mouth wouldn’t work, even if I could have articulated a full sentence. Four of my five senses failed me, because all I could see was him. His thick, sooty eyelashes. A thin scar just beneath his bottom lip that I’d never noticed before, mostly because if I was close enough to see his mouth, I couldn’t look at anything else, not even the edges of the tattoo that slightly climbed his neck.

“Paxton.” I wasn’t sure what I was going to say, but I hadn’t meant for his name to come out all husky, almost sexy.

Seeing his eyes dilate told me he liked it. “Say it again.” He growled the command. “Say my name, kitten.”

“Paxton,” I breathed, taking an unconscious step closer.

“Fuck,” he groaned, pressing his forehead to mine. “I feel weak when you’re this close. But then you look up at me, and I feel like a motherfucking god. Which is the truth? Who holds the power, kitten?”

“I-I don’t know,” I answered honestly, but I wished I had the answer. Because he was right. One of us had some serious power here, and I wasn’t confident that it was me.

He wrapped his arms around me, tucking me against all his hardness.

All his hardness.

A shuddery breath left me. My entire body was trembling. Every inch of me felt like it was wrapped in fire, but I only wanted to get closer. Not even the voice of reason screaming *Danger!* in the back of my mind could make me move away

from him, though. My arms snuck around his waist, my hands flattening against his sticky back. His skin was still slightly sweaty, and I wanted to write my name in it, brand him as mine.

“Kitten,” Paxton rasped. “I need you to turn around and go upstairs. Every part of me is screaming to kiss you, and I know that I won’t stop at just your lips. Ah fuck, baby. I sure as hell won’t be leaving in the morning if that happens. There is no way I can leave this house if I get more than a little taste of you. So, please. I’m begging you. Run.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

brooke

WHEN MY ALARM BLARED, I was tempted to throw it against the wall. I'd tossed and turned, trying to ignore the ache deep between my legs. Twice, I'd gotten out of bed, but I'd stopped myself from going to Paxton's room before I'd gotten to the door.

One kiss wouldn't hurt anyone...would it?

He'd been exaggerating when he'd said he wouldn't be able to stop at my lips...just a little?

There was no way he'd meant it about not wanting to be anywhere I wasn't...right?

Dawn was breaking when sleep finally took me prisoner, but I couldn't escape Paxton in dreamland. I was haunted by the feel of his arms around me, the ghost of his mouth brushing over mine. My imagination had run rampant, and I'd dreamed of him kissing me. Everywhere. That was when my alarm went off, and I'd had to open my eyes to the harsh reality of a new day.

Every inch of my body ached, and even after another shower, I felt sticky between my legs.

Fighting a yawn, I walked into Bella's room to get her ready for the day. As expected, the container of fruit I'd

prepared for her the night before was on the nightstand beside her, along with an empty smoothie bottle. Grabbing both, I got my precious charge up and motivated her to get dressed for school.

Bella was considerably more rested and in a much better mood than I was as she pulled on her uniform and then sat down at her vanity so I could braid her hair. As soon as the last charm was in place, she grabbed her backpack and skipped out of the room, leaving me to follow at a slower pace.

Between the almost-kiss and the dreams, I was not looking forward to facing Paxton. I almost wished he had decided to leave early for the airport, but I quickly chastised myself for being selfish. Bella looked forward to her mornings with her father before school. It was her favorite part of the day because it was the only guaranteed time she had with him. With him going out of town for work for several days, they would both miss out on that ritual.

“Daddy, I want to take karate classes!” Bella announced without preamble as she took her usual spot at the dining room table.

Paxton laughed at her enthusiasm. “That’s random, Bella-Boo. But I’m learning that you’re full of surprises lately.” He shifted his gaze to me as I crossed to the table, and I watched the amusement in those hazel depths darken in a way that made my already-aching body pulse. “I know someone who runs a martial arts studio. I’ll call him, figure out a good time for her to watch one of the beginner classes to see if she will like it before we commit to classes. Sound good to you?”

“I’ll add it to our itinerary,” I murmured as I took my seat and poured myself a cup of coffee.

Bella smeared jam over her toast and took a loud bite. “If I’m going to be a real Jedi, I need skills, Daddy.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, please.” I filled her glass with orange juice before adding fruit to her plate.

She chewed and swallowed before speaking again. “Do you really have to go to Las Vegas, Daddy?”

“Unfortunately,” he grumbled before giving her a grim smile. “I’ll be back Sunday night.”

“Why so long?” she complained, stabbing at a raspberry with her fork, her bottom lip pouted out. She was so dang cute. Even when she was being stubborn, I couldn’t help thinking she was adorable. I tried to be firm with her about it, but she melted my heart too much for me to be able to stay stern for long.

“Fuck if I know.” I shot him a glare at his curse, and he raised a brow. This wasn’t the first time I’d had an issue with his using strong language in front of Bella. “She asked a question, and I was being honest.”

“Try answering without the curse words next time,” I advised with a roll of my eyes.

“Can’t make any promises. She knows what words are for grown-ups only. Right Bella-Boo?”

“Yup! I’m not a baby, Brooke.”

He smirked, and I was tempted to stick my tongue out at him. Ugh, what was it about him and his daughter? They both pulled at something deep inside me that wanted to grab them both and never let go. Not just my heart, but in my soul.

“Can’t Uncle Luck go instead?” Bella asked sullenly.

I picked up my coffee, trying to hide my flinch at the mention of my uncle, but Paxton was looking right at me. Seeing my reaction, he clenched his jaw. “Uncle Luck is going with me, sweetheart. There’s a fight Saturday night, or I would be home earlier.”

“But why do you have to be there?” she demanded, pushing her plate away angrily, causing her fork to clatter on the table. “It’s not fair. I don’t want you to go. Stay home with me and Brooke.”

“Trust me, I’d much rather be home with the two of you.”

“Then stay!” she cried. “You’re an adult. You can do whatever you want.”

Paxton said something savage under his breath that I couldn’t hear while Bella stared him down, daring him to argue with her. Setting my mug on the table, I turned in my chair and took both of her hands gently. “I know it seems like grown-ups get to do what they please whenever they want, but that isn’t reality, Bella. Daddy doesn’t *want* to go, but he *has* to because it’s his job. If he could stay home with you, he would.”

Angry tears spilled out of her brown eyes. “Having a job is stupid. Being a grown-up is stupid too.”

“She’s not wrong,” Paxton agreed with a hint of a smile. Pushing back his chair, he stood, lifting Bella into a tight hug.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, her little shoulders shaking as she sobbed into his chest. My heart broke at the gut-wrenching sounds that left her, and from the grief on Paxton’s face, I knew he was feeling something similar. He looked imploringly at me, seeking help, but I had none to offer.

“Don’t cry, Bella-Boo,” he pleaded raggedly. “We’re going to talk every night before you go to bed.”

“V-video c-c-call?” She sniffled, her sobs turning into hiccups.

“Every night,” he promised.

“U-Uncle Luck too?” She wiped her nose on his shirt and lifted her head, hope mixing in with her tears.

“Of course Uncle Luck too.” He scoffed as if she’d said something ridiculous. “He lives for video calls with his favorite little Jedi.” She dropped her head back onto his shoulder, but the faintest hint of a smile was teasing at her lips, causing her dimple to pop slightly. Paxton kissed her brow. “Don’t be sad. It’s hard enough having to leave you and Brooke as it is.”

“But I’m g-going to m-miss you, Daddy,” she whispered.

Hazel eyes met mine, but I quickly looked away at the intensity I saw there. “I’m going to miss you too. Both of you. But Brooke is here. She takes such good care of you that you don’t even notice when I’m around most of the time.”

Bella’s wet eyes drifted over to me, and she nodded her agreement. “That’s true. But what if she leaves? Like Kayla. Or Christy. Or—”

“She’s not going to leave,” he snapped, but he quickly cleared his throat and gentled his tone. “She won’t leave. Will you, Brooke?”

More than anything, I wanted to stay, but I knew that wasn’t smart. My emotions were already too deep. If I stayed, everything would only get more complicated. There wasn’t just me to consider. Bella was too precious and innocent for me to play games that could end with her shattered.

I didn't want to hurt her feelings, though, or make her sadder than she already was, so I forced a smile when she gave me those big, hope-filled brown eyes. "The only place I plan on going today is to drop you off at school." Standing, I grabbed her backpack from where she'd tossed it earlier. "And if we don't hurry, you're going to be late."

"But if I skip school, we could go with Daddy," she suggested, already nodding up and down as if she were mentally planning everything out. "There will be plenty of room on Uncle Luck's plane. And there is always an extra bed in the penthouse when Daddy and Uncle Luck stay at the hotels. You and me can share, Brooke."

"You and I," I automatically corrected. "But nice try. Skipping won't get you out of that spelling test. And I thought you wanted to start karate classes. We have to sort that out. How do you plan on learning to be a real Jedi from hundreds of miles away?"

"Fine," she huffed. She hugged Paxton's neck tightly before smacking a kiss against his cheek. "Be careful, Daddy. Love you. Bye!"

"Love you, Bella-Boo," he choked out as he placed her on her feet.

I pointed toward the door. "Go wash your face, and then we can go. Hurry. We don't want to make Henry wait for us."

"Okay, geesh. Give me a minute." My eyes narrowed at her tone, and she ducked her head contritely. "Sorry, Brooke."

Bella ran down the hall to the guest bathroom. I would have followed or at least waited for her by the front door, but Paxton caught my arm, locking me in place. As soon as his

daughter's energy faded from the room, he jerked me against him. "Promise me you're not going anywhere."

I twisted my fingers in his shirt, playing with the buttons to keep from having to look up at him. He was really hung up on my staying. Ironic, because it was everyone else who left me. Always.

With my heart pounding against my ribs, I could barely hear myself when I spoke. "I signed a contract, so the only place I'm going for the next three months is to take Bella to school."

His growl vibrated through me, making that ache deep in my belly throb. "You know what I mean, Brooke." With his thumb under my chin, he tipped my head back. My breath caught, seeing that the hazel had turned to the moss color I loved so much. Watching the gold swirling around in them was hypnotic.

Sucking in a steady breath, I tried to be reasonable. "It's only been a week. That's not nearly enough time to determine whether this is a good fit for all of us. Isn't that the entire point of having a trial period?"

"Fine," he grumbled, reminding me so much of Bella that I had to press my lips together to fight a smile. "Can I at least have a goodbye kiss since I'm not going to get a promise?"

"I thought you wouldn't be able to stop at my lips?" My knees felt weak. I wanted his kiss, but I was scared that I might beg him to stay just as Bella had only minutes before.

"That was last night. I've gotten control over myself. For the most part." Lowering his head, he brushed his lips over the shell of my ear, whispering, "My cock is raw from how many times I jerked myself off."

A little squeak left me as heat flooded my face, making him laugh. “Ah, kitten, your blush is so damn pretty.”

“I... Um, I should go,” I mumbled. “Bella—”

“One kiss.” His breath teased over my cheek. “Just one, to hold me over until I can touch you again.”

Unable to find my voice, all I could do was nod, but that seemed to be enough for him. He skimmed his thumb down my throat before he pushed my hair over my shoulder, the heavy tresses falling down my back as he dropped his hand to my hip, molding our lower bodies together. Feeling his hardness digging into my belly made me whimper. I liked knowing that I could affect him so powerfully.

Lashes lowering, I didn't have to wait long before his lips lightly brushed over mine. I tasted coffee, and I had no idea where the hint of cinnamon came from, but suddenly, it was my new favorite flavor. His tongue skimmed over my bottom lip, and I immediately opened for him, my fingers clutching at his shirt as he deepened our kiss. My breasts felt too big for my bra, my nipples so hard they scraped painfully over the fabric of the cups. I arched into him, wanting him to touch me. Wanting his hands everywhere at the same time to ease the ache that was clawing at the fibers of my sanity.

Breathing heavily, he lifted his head. It was over before I was ready. Honestly, I wasn't sure I would ever be ready, but just a few seconds was way too short. “I'll call you tonight.”

Gasping, I tried desperately to clear the fog from my head. “I... Um, I'll make sure Bella—”

“Luck and I will call Bella,” he interrupted, squeezing my hip before letting me go, thankfully ensuring I was steady on my feet before releasing me. “But I will be calling you, kitten.

Afterward.” He brushed his lips over my brow. “And you better fucking answer.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

brooke

HENRY STOPPED behind another vehicle in the pickup line. After making sure I didn't have any missed messages, I opened the door and stepped out, rolling my eyes at myself as I did. Of course Paxton hadn't texted. Why would I expect him to take time out of his busy day to send me a random text, like he missed me or something. He might have called to tell me goodnight the previous evening as he said he would, but we'd barely talked for a minute before he'd abruptly hung up.

I'd thought he would want to chat a little longer, especially after that kiss, but obviously, I was delusional.

Even more so when I'd woken up this morning, half hoping he would send me a "Good morning, kitten," text. But of course, that was absurd. We'd had a moment, but that was all. This wasn't a fantasy. He was no prince, and I was not a real princess, no matter how many times I'd pretended to be one. I needed to focus on my new job and not the insane crush I had on my much older, incredibly hot boss.

As I walked toward where the kindergarten class would be released, a mixture of other nannies, mannies, and a few parents were already waiting. The first day I'd come to pick up Bella, I'd gotten a few curious looks, but once they realized who I was there for, I'd been quickly dismissed after hearing a

couple of them muttering, “Oh, she’s Foster’s new nanny. I wonder how long this one will last?”

While the school went from kindergarten up to fifth grade, only the kindergarteners had to be picked up in person. Moving off to the side so I wasn’t in the way, I couldn’t help but sneak a peek at my phone one more time. Disappointment hit me all over again at the absence of a text, and I shoved the device deep into the pocket of my skirt.

Movement to my right caught my attention, and I took a step back when someone I didn’t recognize stepped closer to me. Her exotic perfume hit me before I could even see her face. Her shoes were designer, with the kind of heel that I knew I would break my neck in if I tried to wear them. Long, toned legs that she must have spent hours in the gym shaping. She wore a pantsuit that was tailored to her trim waist and impressive chest, hair that was cut in a chic bob at her chin, red lips that were spread into a brilliant white smile. She was gorgeous with her perfect mocha skin and the biggest brown eyes I’d ever seen, but there was a vibe coming off her that caused me to take another step back.

“Hi.” Her smile only got bigger when I didn’t return the greeting. “You’re new around here.” She offered her hand. “I’m Jannel.”

Not wanting to be rude, even though she was setting off all kinds of alarms inside me, I shook her hand. As soon as I could, I pulled away. “Brooke.”

Before she could say anything else, the doors to the kindergarten wing opened, and the aides led the children out. As soon as she spotted me, Bella broke away from the group and skipped over to me. “Brooke! I drew you a picture,” she announced, thrusting a piece of construction paper into my

hands. “It’s you as a princess and me as Bella-Rey. I’m protecting you from the Sith Lord.”

Grinning, I took in all the details, loving that she’d overembellished my long blond hair and added little butterfly charms into the wild curls. “This is beautiful. Thank you!” I hugged her and then took her backpack from her. “How was your day?”

“Mostly boring,” she complained, placing her little hand in mine. “But... Oh.” She broke off when Jannel stepped in front of us, Bella’s eyes going wide when she saw the other woman.

I steered Bella around her. “Excuse us,” I said coolly and pointedly ignoring her as we walked to where Henry was already standing, waiting to open the back door of the SUV for us. “Boring, huh? Is that why you turned into Frida Kahlo on me?”

Her brow scrunched up in confusion. “Frida who?”

“Kahlo. She’s a famous artist.” I swung our joined hands back and forth, making her giggle. “You’re not getting this picture back. I’m now the proud owner of an original Bella Foster.” I gasped. “That sounds so cool, doesn’t it? You have such an awesome name.”

“You think I’m a good artist?” she asked skeptically.

“I think you’re great at everything you try your best at,” I told her honestly. “Like fighting Sith Lords to protect innocent princesses.”

Henry helped Bella into the back seat and then stepped back to let me climb in. I thanked him as he shut the door and then double-checked to make sure Bella had her seat belt on correctly. By the time my own belt was fastened, Henry had pulled into traffic. He was a nice enough guy, quiet and

professional. Not to mention intimidating, with the constant scowl on his stoic face and his three-piece suits. It was obvious he was more than just a driver. His sheer size screamed bodyguard, but I tried not to overthink that. At least Paxton took Bella's safety seriously.

"Can we stop for a snack?" she asked not two minutes into the drive.

"We have snacks at home." Her huff made me have to fight hard to hide my smile, but I didn't relent. "I'll make you something small before you start on homework."

"No one else ever made me do homework," she grumbled, but no sooner had the words left her than she tensed up, her face filling with regret. "I mean...all the other nannies didn't, but... It's okay that you make me do homework. I guess. I don't mind doing it. If it means you will stay, I'll even do extra homework."

Heart clenching, I grasped her hand and gave it a little squeeze. "I know what you meant, precious."

Her chin wobbled. "I really want you to stay, Brooke. It didn't really matter to me that the others didn't stick around. I kind of knew they wouldn't. Daddy didn't like them very much, and Riah hated all of them. But we all like you. I don't want you to leave."

"Want to know a secret?" Lips trembling, she still nodded, and I lowered my voice. "I don't want to leave either. You're my very best friend."

Hope filled those brown eyes I loved so much. I didn't know which was my favorite, her brown or her father's hazel—or the moss color his sometimes turned. It was definitely a three-way tie.

“Does that mean you’ll stay?”

“I’m going to try really hard.”

Her shoulders drooped. “That’s not a yes.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. “But it’s not a no either. We don’t know what the future holds. I don’t want to make promises I can’t keep. That isn’t fair to you. But I will do my very best to be what you need, Bella.”

Biting her bottom lip, she considered my answer for a moment before sighing. “Okay.”

Stroking a hand over her hair, I gave her an encouraging smile. “Friends?”

She nodded. “Best friends.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

paxton

GOOD MUSIC PULSED through the club. My glass was constantly being refilled with my favorite scotch. Half-naked women were all around me. And I was bored out of my fucking mind. Partying had been fun when I was in my twenties. I'd even tolerated it fairly well in my thirties. Now I was halfway through my forties and tired of the whole club scene.

I didn't want to be there, and I seriously didn't want to be babysitting Luck, who was the only reason I had even agreed to go out for the evening. We'd had dinner with the current MMA champion and a few members of his team, and before I'd realized what my friend was doing, he'd committed us to going with the others to the club.

Thankfully, I'd talked to Bella earlier in the evening. By now, she should already be tucked into bed. And I should have been back at the hotel, talking to Brooke.

Fuck, what I should have been doing was climbing into bed with Brooke at home. I'd take that any day of the year over having to spend time with people I didn't even like to begin with.

Gritting my teeth, I tossed back the contents of my glass. A blonde clad in a dress that barely contained her tits and ass

leaned over my arm with a giggle to pour me a refill. I jerked back when she pressed her rack into my arm. “Get the fuck off,” I snarled, but she was either too stupid or too drunk to realize I meant it. She dipped her head, trying to kiss me, and I shoved her off the arm of the chair where I was sitting.

Luck blinked over at me, his green eyes looking owlsh, while everyone around us laughed like hyenas. Someone helped the blonde up off the floor. She was still giggling, not even embarrassed. I bet she didn’t even realize I’d pushed her off me. Taking a seat on the champ’s lap, she tipped the bottle to his lips. Idiot. He had a fight in three days. Instead of getting wasted, he should have been in bed, resting to keep his body in fighting condition for the event Saturday night.

Annoyed, I got to my feet and grabbed Luck at the elbow. “We’re done.”

Surprisingly, he stood without arguing. Even in his drunken state, he realized how close to blowing I was. Not that my anger would sober him up. He hadn’t been clearheaded since Bella’s party, and I was getting damn tired of his bullshit. If he wanted to make things up to Brooke, he had to straighten his shit out.

Our driver was already waiting when we stepped out of the club. I barely noticed the flashing lights of the paparazzi over the glaring neon signs from the casinos all around the club. I shoved Luck into the back of the car before climbing in after him.

“You’ve been in a pissy mood all evening,” he grumbled, rubbing his hands over his face. “You need to get laid. Whatever penance you think you owe, seven years without getting your dick wet has paid it.”

Ignoring him, I fished my phone from my pocket. Brooke would already be in bed, but would she be asleep? “Fuck it,” I muttered, hitting connect on her name.

It rang three times before I was treated to a sleepy little, “Hello?”

All my muscles relaxed at the sound of her voice. “Did you have your tea before bed?”

There was a long pause on her end, and I heard her shifting around. I leaned my head back, closing my eyes as I pictured her in bed wearing that ridiculously huge shirt. It shouldn't have been sexy, but just the memory of her standing in the kitchen with her mug of tea, dressed in her pajamas that swallowed her whole, got me harder than the half-naked blonde back in the club.

Brooke didn't even realize how beautiful she was, but all she had to do was walk into a room and I was ready to sink balls deep into her.

“I'm fairly sure you didn't call to ask about tea,” she muttered.

Hearing the pout in her voice made me grin. “Ah, my kitten is angry with me. I'll have to bring her home something shiny to make up for whatever I've done.”

“Don't you dare bring me something shiny!” she exclaimed.

“I'll bring you whatever I want.” Anyone else would have already told me what diamonds they wanted. She was going to give me so much hell when I brought home an entire jewelry store just to make her wrinkle her nose at me.

“You woke me up to annoy me, didn't you?” Her huff made me laugh. Fuck, I missed her. “Ugh, I'm going back to

sleep.”

“Were you dreaming of me?” Her silence had me adjusting myself. “You were.”

“Goodnight, Paxton.”

“Goodnight, kitten.” I waited until she hung up before lowering the phone.

Beside me, Luck had already fallen asleep, having missed the short conversation I’d had with his niece. I’d forgotten that he was even there while I was talking to Brooke. He would have given me hell if he’d heard me talking to her. He was all kind of fucked up over what had happened with her in the past, and I knew he wasn’t going to be happy when he figured out what was going on with us, but there was nothing he could do to stop me from going after what I wanted.

He hadn’t taken care of her when she’d needed someone the most, so if he didn’t like me with her, he could fuck off.

I wasn’t giving her up for him or anyone else.

* * *

Sleep eluded me all night, but I got up and went to the gym for a hard workout bright and early. I had set an alarm for when I knew Brooke would wake up and sent her a text as soon as it went off. All night, I’d had to stop myself from calling her again, so I thought I should win points for being so considerate by letting her sleep.

Me: Miss you, kitten.

Those three little dots popped up immediately, but several minutes passed without a reply. Was she being shy, or was she still pissed? And what had I done to upset her?

Replaying our conversations over the past few days, I came up with nothing. I'd been so busy with work, and babysitting Luck in the evenings, that I hadn't had much time to call or text her. Henry gave me a daily report on what she and Bella did throughout the day, so I knew she hadn't done anything other than drop Bella off and pick her up after school. Her appointment wasn't until Friday, and Bella's karate class observation wasn't until Thursday.

A possibility filtered through my head, but I quickly laughed it off. No way Brooke was pissed at me because we hadn't talked more than a few minutes. I'd basically had to demand she pick up whenever I called.

Damn it.

Of course that was why she was pissed. My little kitten was so used to people letting her down, and that was exactly what I'd done without meaning to.

Groaning at my own stupidity, I hit connect as I walked into the back office at the gym.

"Hello?"

Her voice hit me like a wrecking ball every time, knocking the air from my lungs while simultaneously easing all the tension in my body. Dropping into the chair behind the desk, I leaned back my sweaty head and closed my eyes. "Good morning, kitten. How did you sleep?"

"Some jerk woke me up last night, and then I couldn't fall back to sleep."

"What you're saying is you tossed and turned thinking about me all night," I teased, hoping like a motherfucker that I was right.

“I didn’t say that!” I loved how offended she sounded. Put out. And guilty. Jesus, she was adorable.

“Not out loud,” I agreed, grinning at the ceiling. “But I’m reading between the lines.”

“Wow, I’m impressed,” she sassed, her tone dry. “I didn’t think you could read.”

Laughing in pure happiness at the insult, I rolled the chair closer to the desk. “I miss you and that smart mouth.”

“Annoying,” she muttered under her breath.

“Tell me you miss me too, kitten.”

“No.”

“Because you don’t miss me, or because you’re mad that you miss me so much?” I held my breath, waiting for her answer.

“I-I have to go. Bella—”

“Brooke,” I growled, cutting her off, no longer playing. This was too damn important. “Answer me.”

A long silence stretched between us, but I wasn’t hanging up until she told me what we both knew was the truth.

“I’m mad,” she whispered. “Because I miss you.”

Breathing out raggedly, I pounded my fist on the desk hard enough to make the computer and keyboard rattle as relief washed over me. “Good, baby. I want you to miss me. I fucking need it.”

“Paxton,” she sighed. “We shouldn’t.”

“All that matters is what we want, and what I want is you.” Hearing her sharp inhale made my cock pulse. “Tell me what you want, Brooke.”

“You.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

brooke

HENRY WAS NEARLY at Bella's school when my phone buzzed with a new text.

Paxton: Send me a pic.

"Bella, can I take a picture of you for your dad?"

"Daddy sent you a text?" She glanced over my arm at my phone screen. "Tell him I said hi!"

"Tell him with your picture," I suggested.

"Okay, but I get to pick which one you send."

"Deal."

I snapped a few of her giving the camera the peace sign, a bright smile on her face. When I was done, I let her choose which one she liked the best and hit send.

Paxton: Beautiful. Now send me one of you.

"He wants one of both of us," I told her with a put-out sigh.

Without questioning it, she leaned in, and I took several pictures of us smiling at the camera. "That one!" She hit send before I could review it, but when I looked, it was the best one.

Paxton: I'm making this one my lock screen. Now send me one of ONLY you.

Me: No. Get back to work.

That earned me a pouty-face emoji in reply as Henry pulled up in front of the school's kindergarten wing. While the driver got out to open our door, I made sure Bella's bag was closed and then straightened her uniform skirt. "I know you're excited to observe the karate class tonight, but try not to overdo it when you're playing today. That will only make you grumpy, and neither one of us wants that."

"I'll do my best, but I can't make any promises." She gave me a smirk that reminded me of her dad.

"You're lucky you're so cute, kid," I grumbled as I stepped out, while she laughed and slid to the ground behind me. Taking her hand, I walked with her to the entrance where the aides were waiting. "Have fun, but stay out of trouble."

She snickered, pointing a finger up at me. "Same."

"I'll try if you do." We shared a look, and then we both burst into giggles. Hugging her, I kissed the top of her head. "Love you. See you later."

"Love you!" she said into my chest, her arms tightening around me for a moment before she ran off. Reaching the aide, she stopped and glanced back, waving at me. I blew her a kiss and waited for her to go inside before starting back to the car, where Henry was waiting.

"Home, Miss Ackerman?" he asked as he assisted me into the lifted SUV. Having short legs was so annoying.

"Henry, please call me Brooke."

"If you insist, miss," he said, stoic as ever.

“Is it a requirement to be annoying if you work for Paxton Foster?” I asked, earning me a ghost of a lip twitch. “Is that a yes?”

“I believe it was on the application, Miss...Brooke.”

“Progress!” I crowed and got another ghostly lip twitch. My goal was to get a full-on smile from him one day.

“Home?” he repeated, and I nodded.

For the rest of the morning, I made sure everything was ready for Bella’s karate class, and I even spent a little time watching YouTube videos on how to tie a karate belt knot because I knew she was going to want to participate. It was better to be prepared when it came to Bella.

Throughout the day, Paxton randomly texted me. He would go from texting me ten times in as many minutes, to nothing for a few hours, to blowing up my phone so often I couldn’t keep up. I had a silly grin on my face by the time Henry rolled to a stop in the pickup line at the end of the school day.

As soon as the aides opened the door, Bella ran over to throw her arms around my middle. “Did you have a good day? Mine was okay. I didn’t cause any trouble, but I wanted to. You’re welcome.”

Laughing, I took her hand as she continued to tell me about her day while we walked to the car. A few times, we had to walk around other kids with their nannies or parents. We barely paid them any attention other than to keep from walking into them, but right before we reached Henry, someone stepped directly into our path, and Bella nearly bumped into them.

Thankfully, she had great reflexes because she jumped back at the last second, but her surprised yelp had me sending the woman in front of us a glare. Jannel, the mom who had introduced herself the day before. At least, I'd assumed she was a mom. None of the other nannies were dressed in designer labels like she was.

"Hello again," Jannel greeted, her smile just as bright as it had been the day before. My alarm bells were blaring loudly in my head, and I instinctively tucked Bella behind me. "Brooke, wasn't it?"

"Great memory," I answered dryly. "Excuse us, we're running late."

"Oh, I'm sure Paxton won't mind if we have a little chat," she dismissed. "He wouldn't notice if you were there or not anyway. If you're not tall enough to be on his eye level, he forgets people are there."

A burst of jealousy shot through me at how comfortable she was at dropping his name. From the confidence in her voice, she seemed to think she knew him well. How well?

She was older than me and beautiful in a way that made me feel like a little girl playing at being an adult. This was Paxton's type, the kind of woman who was supposed to be on his arm at parties and his work events. My stomach cramped, not liking the idea of him with her or anyone else. But given Bella's existence, I knew that was ridiculous. No doubt, there were a lot of women in his past, just as there would be many more in his future.

A dull throb started behind my right eye, and I swallowed my groan. Nope. I was not going to let a stupid migraine ruin Bella's evening. A few over-the-counter tablets and a huge cup

of coffee would be enough to get me through the rest of the day.

I hoped.

Giving Jannel a tight smile, I tried to ignore the pain slicing through my skull. “Since it’s my time and not his to give up for the chat, I’ll have to pass.”

Jannel’s smile disappeared. “You’re a very rude little girl. I suggest you drop the attitude and take a moment to have a conversation with me. You won’t like making an enemy out of me.”

“And I suggest you step aside,” I told her coolly, making sure to keep Bella behind me. It was cute how this woman thought she could scare me. But nothing she could do or say would ever come close to the nightmares my stepmother had personally made sure I endured while at the boarding school she had handpicked for me. “Or I’ll drop you on your backside. Right here in front of everyone, including the children.”

There was hesitation on her face, as if she wasn’t sure she believed me. I stepped closer, tilting my head back—ugh, why was everyone so tall? It felt like we were in a childish staredown, but I didn’t care. She was the one who thought she was entitled to even a moment of my time, trying to intimidate me, attempting to make a scene—to embarrass me or Bella?

Anger boiled in my blood at the thought of anyone wanting to hurt Bella in any way. Jannel might have been taller than me, but I’d learned to protect myself while living on the streets and in homeless shelters. I didn’t like fighting, but I would rip this woman apart in a heartbeat if she tried to harm my Bella-Boo.

She looked away first, taking a step back. I smirked and had to admit to myself that Paxton had rubbed off a little on me. Not that I would ever tell him that.

“I typically respect my elders.” From the way her nose flared, she very much did not like that little barb. “But only when respect is given in return. I guess no one taught you that when you were younger.”

“Brooke?” I was relieved to hear Henry’s voice so close, but I didn’t take my eyes off Jannel to glance his way.

Tightening my hold on Bella, I sidestepped Jannel. “Enjoy the rest of your day, ma’am.”

Bella snickered beside me, and I hastened to meet Henry, not wanting her to be rude to the woman, despite my own actions. The whole do as I say, not as I do rhetoric popped into my head, but I didn’t need to set a bad example. Bella was above that.

“Everything okay?” the bodyguard asked, looking over the top of my head, but when I glanced back, Jannel was already walking toward the line of waiting vehicles.

There was something hauntingly familiar about the other woman, though. I couldn’t put my finger on it. Ruling her out as Bella’s mom—someone Paxton, Sariah, and even Bella herself had never mentioned—was easy enough. Bella would have said something if Jannel was her mom. And the way Jannel had looked at Bella was anything but maternal.

It was malicious.

Calculating.

“Brooke?”

I grimaced as I looked up at Henry. “Can we stop at the pharmacy before we go to Bella’s martial arts class? I need to grab something.”

Concern darkened his brow, and he urged us toward the car. “Of course. Do you have a headache? What do you need? Boss said they can get bad.”

My heart clenched. Even from a state away, Paxton was taking care of me.

Bella’s face darkened with worry as she ran her gaze over me. “Your head hurts again? Will you need to go to the doctor? We can reschedule my class if you don’t feel well.”

“It’s just a little headache. I’ll be fine,” I assured her. There was no way I was letting my headache ruin her evening.

As we walked to the SUV, she kept watching me like she didn’t believe me, and I gave her a hug when we reached the car. “I promise I’m okay. This is nothing that a strong cup of coffee and a few Excedrin can’t fix.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

brooke

I WINCED as a group of kids screamed in unison while doing some complicated martial art move. My head was pounding, the overhead lighting making my eyes water, but this migraine wasn't anywhere close to being as bad as the last one had been.

Thanks to Henry, I'd gotten the Excedrin and a giant iced latte on the way to Bella's class, which had helped tremendously. But the bodyguard must have messaged Paxton to let him know about my headache, because he'd texted me shortly after our arrival.

Paxton: How are you feeling, kitten? Do you need anything? Fuck, I wish I were there.

Heart nothing but goo in my chest, I'd quickly replied.

Me: I'm fine. I promise. I wish you were here too, but only because I miss you.

As soon as I hit send, I regretted my confession. Stupid headache making me say stupid things.

That were totally the truth.

Paxton: Miss you so fucking much, kitten.

"Brooke, watch this!"

Giving Bella my full attention, I took picture after picture of her to send to her dad afterward. What was supposed to be her observing the class had turned into her participating five minutes after it began. She was having a blast, and I was glad I hadn't let my headache spoil it for her.

I was so focused on watching and taking pictures, I didn't notice someone had moved to stand beside me until I bumped my arm into them. "Sorry," I squeaked when I nearly dropped my phone.

"Is your headache making you clumsy?" Sariah asked with concern, her dark eyes brushing over my face as she nibbled on her bottom lip.

I stiffened, torn between wanting to hug her because I'd missed her like crazy and wanting to demand answers for the way she'd basically set me up at Bella's party, only to disappear on me for the last two weeks.

"I was so caught up in taking pictures for Paxton that I wasn't paying attention." Stuffing my phone into my pocket, I crossed my arms over my chest. "Where have you been?"

She glanced over at Bella, who was immersed in learning something new, before dropping her gaze to the floor between us. "I know you're angry."

"How would you know that?" I asked quietly so the other adults waiting wouldn't hear us. "You haven't answered any of my calls. I haven't spoken to you in forever."

"I'm sorry." Releasing a heavy sigh, she forced her eyes back to my face. "I know I suck. Nothing went as it should have. All I wanted was for you and Luck to find each other. To be a family. He's been so torn up over everything, Brooke."

I held up a hand to stop her. “I don’t want to talk about him. This is about you and me. You set me up!”

“No, it wasn’t like that.” My skeptical glare made her grimace. “Okay, it may have been like that a little.”

Another chorus of shouts from the kids made me flinch, and I couldn’t help touching my hand to my head. Sariah shifted her body as if she could protect me from the loudness of the studio. I leaned into her, pressing my forehead to her arm, tears burning my eyes. “I’ve missed you so much, Riah. And you just left me.”

“Never,” she whispered fiercely. “You’re my best friend. I will never leave you.” She gave me a squeeze before leaning back to look down at me. “If you’re willing to give me another chance, I’ll tell you everything. But not here.”

“Fine,” I muttered, not bothering to hesitate. I leaned into her for another moment before straightening. “You’re my best friend too.”

* * *

“Did Paxton ask you to check on me?” I asked later that evening as we sat in the kitchen eating ice cream directly from the container.

“He told me you had a headache, but I was already on my way to the studio when he texted me. I wasn’t going to miss Bella’s first class.” She took a big bite and licked a dollop of whipped cream she’d added to the treat from the corner of her mouth.

Paxton’s cook made it fresh most days, and I put it on Bella’s fruit when she asked for dessert. If she knew I was

pigging out on ice cream without her, she would be so mad at me. She was in bed, sound asleep after I'd tucked her in earlier. We hadn't even gotten through an entire book before she nodded off, exhausted after everything she'd done in her karate class.

"You and Bella are really close," I mused, scooping up a fudge chunk from the container.

"She and Paxton are the only family I have," she said with a shrug. "And Luck."

Ignoring the mention of my uncle, I took another bite of my cold treat. "You don't mention your parents. I didn't even know about Paxton and Bella until the day of the party. You know my sad backstory—I think it's time you spilled a little of your own."

She stuffed more ice cream into her mouth, but I sat there patiently, waiting her out. After the stunt she'd pulled at the birthday party, I wasn't about to let her off without giving me something. She hadn't told me her reasons for orchestrating my dramatic meeting with Luck, and I would rather talk about her family than my mother's brother.

"I don't have a relationship with my mom." She stabbed her spoon into the middle of the ice cream container. "She and my stepfather aren't people I want in my life."

I hummed my understanding. "Okay. You won't get any judgment from me. My own mother was too in love with the idea of love to worry about being a mom. And my stepmother hated me simply for existing. And also because my dad had been dating her and my mom at the same time and got them both pregnant. But she won because Daddy Dearest married her." I made a face that had Sariah smiling. "Although if you

ask me, with him as the prize, she didn't actually win anything."

"They missed out on having you in their lives, so they both lost."

I balled up my napkin and tossed it at her. "Don't you sweet-talk me, Sariah Grant."

Laughing, she tossed the crumpled napkin back. "Just stating a fact. Anyone who meets you can't help but love you, and I sure as hell don't trust anyone who doesn't. You haven't let the past define you or make you bitter. Even now, you could have walked away without giving me a chance to explain or make up for what I've done. But you didn't even hesitate."

"I wanted to," I grumbled a little petulantly.

"But you didn't." Reaching over, she grasped my hand. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

I turned my hand over in hers, squeezing her fingers. "I need you to tell me why you did it."

"Luck—" I flinched, and she blew out a sigh. "If you want me to explain, I need you not to do that every time I say his name."

"I can't make any promises," I muttered, sounding like Bella.

With a sad smile, Sariah shook her head. "Luck owns the restaurant where I work. He and Paxton have been friends since way back before Paxton became an MMA champion. He's even Bella's godfather."

"Not sure I would trust him with that kind of responsibility, but to each their own." I dropped my spoon into

the container we were sharing and sat back.

“I know you have plenty of reasons to think otherwise, but Luck is one of the good guys,” she defended. “He was wild when he was younger, but when your mom died, it changed him. He wanted you to be a part of his life so badly, Brooke.”

Pain sliced through me, and I was thankful that my migraine had mostly eased. “You have such blind faith in him.”

“It’s not blind faith,” she argued. “I watched the change in him with my own eyes. I was eighteen when I met him for the first time. If it weren’t for him and Paxton, I don’t know what would have happened to me. More than likely, I would have killed myself.”

I gasped. She meant what she said. I could see it written all over her face. Realizing that she’d been so close to ending her life made me want to curl into a ball and cry.

“I’m not trying to be dramatic, just giving it to you straight. Back then, I was in a very bad place. And yes, I know that was around the same time that Luck let you down, but I’m telling you he didn’t want to. Losing Maggie hurt him badly, but losing you was a hundred times worse.”

“How do you know this?” I choked out, still stuck on her being suicidal.

“Because he’s my friend. He saved me, and I’ve been trying to find a way to repay him for years.” She leaned forward, her brown eyes searching mine for a long moment. “He tried to get custody of you when your mom died, but your dad and stepmother blocked him.”

“But why?” I cried, jumping to my feet in agitation. “Why would they stop him from taking me if they were just going to

send me off to that...that..." Emotion choked me, and I closed my eyes in an attempt to get control. "Why?"

"I don't know their reasons, but at a guess, your stepmother is a monster. We can put a hit out on her if you want."

A half laugh, half sob escaped me, but Sariah didn't even crack a smile. My eyes widened. "You're not serious."

"I know people," she said with a lift of one shoulder. "Just say the word. No questions asked."

"Riah!" I admonished.

"They'll never find the body."

Snorting, I walked over to fill the kettle. "We're never talking about this again." Mostly because I believed her, and that changed everything. Sariah always seemed so soft, as if a too-strong wind would knock her over. This was a side of her I'd never seen before, but I liked it. "Get back to explaining what happened at Bella's party."

"When you escaped from St. Andrew's, the cops went to Luck. They thought maybe he helped you or at the least knew where you were." I shuddered, thinking about what it had taken to get away from that place—and what came after.

"After I was out of there...and had to live on the streets for a few nights, I thought about going to him," I admitted, keeping my back to her. "But I figured he would just send me back."

"He went a little crazy," she said softly. "When the cops showed up, he nearly killed your dad. He was arrested for assault. I had to bail him out of jail."

“Really?” I turned and gaped at her in surprise. That changed things too. Luck beating up my dad gave me a feeling of vindication. I didn’t want to go so far as to put out a hit on my father and stepmother as my friend had offered, but knowing one of them had possibly shed a little blood didn’t exactly make me sad.

Sariah nodded. “I’m not sure Paxton even knows about that. Luck didn’t explain why he was arrested at the time. He didn’t say much of anything about you or what happened for a long while. It was only about a year ago that everything kind of spilled out of him. I started looking for you myself with the mind-set that if I could reunite the two of you, it might make up for all the chaos I’d caused him over the years.”

“You looked for me?” I repeated, stunned. When I’d asked her to explain things to me, I hadn’t expected all the twists and turns. My emotions were all over the place.

“I just told you I know people who can kill your stepmother,” she said with a grin. “Why are you so surprised that I have connections to find a lost girl?”

“I’m really hoping you’re joking about that first part,” I muttered, grabbing the box of tea bags to have something to do.

“Okay, for your sake, let’s pretend I didn’t say anything about offing the hag,” she said teasingly.

“You obviously spend way too much time with Paxton,” I complained. “You are both seriously annoying.”

Her laugh was so musical, I sometimes wondered if it was real. I loved that sound almost as much as I loved Bella’s giggles.

Sariah sat back in her chair at the island, appearing more carefree than I could ever remember seeing her before. “You will never know how thankful I am to have found you, Brooke. It started off for Luck, but I kept you for myself. I felt guilty about that for a while, but who can blame me? You make everything so much better, and I was selfish enough to want to keep that to myself. Now, I get to share you with the people I love the most.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

paxton

A MEMBER of our marketing department was droning on and on in meeting number two-hundred-and-kill-me-now. Even with yet another hangover, Luck was coherent enough to participate, but I'd given up listening an hour ago and had been watching my phone instead.

Brooke hadn't answered any of my texts since she'd told me she was going into her neurology appointment. Four fucking hours ago. I'd told her to send me updates on what the doctor said, but so far, I'd gotten nothing but silence. Henry hadn't been able to tell me anything other than she was still inside the medical complex. Sariah was with her, but she'd been unresponsive as well. Our meetings had started early, and since it was Friday and there was no way I was staying until next week, we'd worked through lunch, so I hadn't been able to call anyone.

It was only an initial visit, so what the fuck was going on?

Impatiently, I drummed my fingers on the conference table, mentally willing someone to put me out of my misery.

Luck side-eyed me. "What's up with you?" he muttered low enough so he didn't interrupt the presentation.

"Stuff."

“Bella okay?” I nodded, flipping through the previous texts in search of possible hidden messages. “Sariah?”

Hearing the change in my best friend’s voice when he said her name, I turned my head to look at him, momentarily distracted from worrying about Brooke. Luck picked up his coffee mug, sipping it without looking at me. He and Sariah had always been close, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d missed something. She was important to me, and I wouldn’t hesitate to kill him if he did anything to hurt her.

It would be a slow death. I’d make every moment painful, until he was begging me to put him out of his misery. But then I’d cut his tongue out and keep going.

A new message popped up on my phone, saving Luck’s life. My eyes barely scanned the words before I was on my feet, barking over my shoulder, “We’re done. I’m going home.”

The others in the room started whispering anxiously, chattering to one another, upset at my abrupt exit. Some worried I was going to fire them. Some pissed because they thought they were entitled to my time. None of them mattered, though. All I cared about was getting back to Brooke as quickly as possible.

“What the hell, Paxton?” Luck complained as he followed me, jogging to keep up as I navigated the halls toward the front of the gym. “What happened? Is Sariah okay?”

“Sariah is fine,” I growled, bypassing celebrity athletes doing cardio or lifting weights. I was already texting the pilot before reaching the exit, making sure everything would be ready by the time I got to the airport.

“Then what’s going on?” he demanded, grabbing my arm. My mind was racing, my heart like a lead weight in my stomach. Whatever he saw on my face must have scared him because his eyes became wild. “Promise me Sariah and Bella are okay.”

“It’s Brooke,” I snapped. “She had her neurology appointment.”

His face paled. “Why is she seeing a neurologist?”

“Her migraines.”

“Fuck.” He combed his fingers through his hair. “Obviously, I’m missing key points to this conversation. Back up and start from the beginning. You’re in contact with Brooke?”

“Motherfucker, how wasted have you been if you didn’t know she’s Bella’s nanny?” Shaking my head at him in disgust, I had to clench my hands into fists to fight the urge to knock him on his ass.

“I don’t know.” He swallowed hard. “Okay. Shit, okay. Brooke is Bella’s nanny. She gets migraines. And you’re worried enough to cut a business trip short before a major fight that we are cosponsoring. How bad is it?”

My fingers clenched around my phone as I glanced down the road for our driver. If he didn’t hurry up, I was going to grab a cab. “She’s scared,” I choked out.

“Of what?” he shouted, causing the security at the door to tense. “Her dad? Did that bastard try to do something? I swear I will kill him this time if he’s—”

“There was a last-minute cancelation for an MRI,” I explained, cutting him off before someone overheard him threatening to murder his sister’s ex.

“Ah fuck.” He bent over, putting his hands on his knees. “What did they find?”

“Nothing! They haven’t been able to do the scan because she’s been screaming for the last hour.”

Luck slowly straightened, confusion mixing with his obvious relief. “Why?”

“Because she’s terrified of confined spaces, dumbass.”

My kitten was scared, and that alone was unacceptable. She needed me, and nothing was going to keep me from getting to her. As soon as the driver stopped in front of us, I jumped in the back, Luck right behind me. Once we were in motion, I called Sariah to let her know I was on my way.

She picked up, but I didn’t know if she spoke or not because all I could hear was Brooke sobbing in the background. Helplessness flooded me. She needed me. My precious kitten fucking needed me, and I wasn’t there.

Closing my eyes, I tried to focus on getting as much information from Sariah as possible. “How long has she been like that?”

“I don’t know!” Sariah said just loud enough for me to hear her. “The tech said they have claustrophobic patients all the time. She seemed okay when they took her back for the scan, but then about twenty minutes later, I heard her screaming. Do you understand how loud that machine is? And I heard her screaming in the waiting room.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” Fuck, I should have gone home earlier. Luck could have handled everything, and if he couldn’t, then it could have gone to hell for all I cared. Brooke was more important, damn it.

“Because we were in a part of the building that had zero cell reception, and I wasn’t about to leave her just to call you,” she snarled defensively. “She was worse than she is now, but then they mentioned sedating her, and she tried to calm down.”

“Let me talk to her.”

“I’ll try... Brooke,” Sariah said gently. “Paxton is on the phone. Do you want to talk to him?”

“Paxton?” Her hiccupped sob was followed by a shuddering exhale. “I-I’m sorry. I tried s-so hard to be b-brave. I just d-didn’t expect it to be so tight in there. It...brought back...bad memories. And...” She started crying again. “I-I’m sorry.”

“Baby, I’m the one who is sorry,” I groaned. “I should have been there with you. But I’m on my way now. I’ll be there in a few hours.”

“What? No, Paxton! You have meetings, and the fight is tomorrow night.”

“Do not argue with me, kitten. Not about this. You’re more important.”

“I’m ruining everything,” she whispered.

“Swear to fuck, I’m going to spank you for saying that shit.”

She sucked in a breath. I nearly punched myself in the face, thinking I’d scared her, but she surprised the hell out of me when she giggled. I squeezed the back of my neck, relieved that she’d stopped crying, and trying not to get hard at that sexy sound.

“You want that, kitten?” I asked, completely forgetting her uncle was sitting beside me until he made a snarling sound. I

side-eyed him, wondering if I should just throw him out of the moving car so I didn't have to deal with him.

It probably wouldn't kill him.

Maybe break a few bones. Definitely leave road rash. But not kill him.

I wasn't about to risk upsetting Brooke more than she already was, though, so I chose to ignore him instead.

"Maybe," she murmured, sniffing a little. "I-I don't know."

"We will find out," I promised. "Soon."

"I... Okay."

"Good girl."

"Oh my God! Bella!" she cried. "She needs to be picked up from school. I'm going to be late. And I'm a mess. She will be so worried."

"Shh, take it easy," I soothed. "You still have plenty of time. Don't rush."

"Today sucks," she groaned. "I'm so sorry."

"Stop apologizing. Is Sariah close?"

"Yes."

"Let me speak to her, kitten." There was a brief pause, and then Sariah's voice was in my ear. "Riah, I'll be home in a few hours. Can you stay with her?"

"Of course I'm going to stay with her," she grumbled. "Even if you were here, I wouldn't willingly leave her."

"Keep her safe for me. I..." Words failed me. Fuck. In a matter of weeks, Brooke had become the center of my world.

It was killing me to be away from her.

“Paxton,” Sariah said gently. “That’s what I’ve been doing since I met her. I knew she was perfect for you. For all of us. I promise, I won’t let anything happen to her.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

brooke

I WAS STILL TREMBLING by the time Henry got us to Bella's school. My eyes were red and swollen from all the crying I'd done, and my throat felt raw from all my screaming. Bella was going to take one look at me and get upset.

"Here." Sariah pulled a small case from her bag and handed it to me. "Put those on. It will hide your eyes until we get home."

Extracting the sunglasses, I slid them onto my face and reached for the door, but Sariah stopped me. "Oh no, you don't. Keep that behind right there. I'll get Bella."

Henry opened her door, and she climbed out, shooting me a worried frown over her shoulder as she walked toward the group waiting for the kindergartners to be released. The quiet inside the vehicle without Henry behind the wheel or Sariah beside me holding my hand made it feel suffocating.

Rolling down both back windows, I sucked in a few desperate breaths before the pressure in my chest eased. Henry leaned down to see me through the now-open window.

"What can I do?"

His face hadn't changed, but his voice held an edge that melted my heart. He was worried about me.

“I’m okay now.” I tried to reassure him. He kept looking at me, and I found the energy to grin. “Really, I’m fine. But thank you for caring.”

After a few more moments of watching me closely, he nodded and straightened.

Hearing kids laugh and scream, I turned my attention to where the aides had released the children. Bella was taller than everyone in her class, boy or girl, and I spotted her almost immediately. She stood back, her head turning left and right frantically as she looked for me.

“Bella-Boo!” I heard Sariah call for her.

Bella ran over and she said something, but Sariah took her hand without answering, walking with her back to the SUV. Once Bella was close enough to see me through the open window, she dropped Sariah’s hand and sprinted toward me.

Henry opened the door in time for her to launch herself inside. “Are you okay?” She threw her arms around my neck, burying her face in my hair. “Why are you wearing Riah’s sunglasses? I don’t like it when you aren’t there to pick me up. Can you always do it from now on?”

Her hug eased some of my tremors. Stroking my hands up and down her back, I breathed in the comforting scents that reminded me of Bella. Her hair products. Sunshine from playing outside throughout the day. A hint of peanut butter from the sandwich she must have had at lunch.

“I wanted to pick you up today,” Sariah explained as she took her place on the other side of Bella. “Aren’t you happy to see me?”

Slowly, she released me to look at the other woman. “I’m always happy to see you, Riah. But I’m not stupid. Something

is wrong with Brooke.”

“Why do you think that?” Sariah asked, glancing at me.

“Everyone is all tense,” she explained. “And Brooke always picks me up. Always. Even when her head hurts, she’s still there. Plus, she’s wearing your sunglasses. You won’t even let me wear them.”

I’d only been picking her up for the last two weeks, but she was certain that I would never forget about her. Which was true. With each passing day, I knew this was where I was meant to be. With Bella. Maybe with Paxton, too.

“Next time, even if Sariah wants to be the one to pick you up, I’ll come with her,” I promised Bella.

“Thank you.” She hugged me again before I made her put on her seat belt once she was settled on her booster seat. “Is someone going to tell me what happened?”

“Nothing happened,” I fibbed, not wanting to burden her precious heart with my issues. “I was feeling sad earlier. But I had a good cry, and now I’m all better.”

“Why were you sad?” she demanded. “Who hurt your feelings?” When I didn’t immediately answer, she glared at Sariah. “You let someone be mean to Brooke? You’re not allowed to go out alone with her now. You either take me, or you don’t go.”

My friend held her hands up in surrender. “Whoa there, mama. No one was mean to Brooke. She just remembered something, and it made her sad.”

Bella reached for my hand. “When we get home, I’m going to make you a tray of cookies and milk. We can watch any movie you want. That always makes me feel better when I get sad.”

“Good idea. What movie should we watch?”

As soon as we walked through the door at home, Bella led me into the family room and pushed me down onto the couch. Grabbing the fluffy throw off the back, she carefully draped it over my lap and tucked it in. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll help,” Sariah offered, putting her sunglasses back in her bag after I took them off. “Maybe we should make Brooke tea instead.”

“Tea tastes gross with Oreos,” she complained. “Right, Brooke?”

“I would definitely appreciate the milk with my cookies,” I agreed, watching them both with a smile. “Thank you both for wanting to make me feel better and taking such good care of me.”

We were almost completely through *Tangled*, my comfort movie, when I heard Paxton demanding to know where I was. Bella, the only one of the three of us who could efficiently work the remote, hit pause as her father stomped into the living room.

I twisted my fingers together nervously while he ran his hazel eyes over me. My little episode during the MRI had completely ruined his work trip, but while I felt somewhat guilty, I was more relieved that he’d come home.

Every few minutes, a fresh wave of suffocating fear would rush up on me. All the times I was put in the cage, barely the size of a large dog crate, left there for days, with no food or water. No light. No sound. Just the feeling of the steel of the bars digging into me. It all came rushing back to me, as if I’d only run away from St. Andrew’s yesterday. I’d tried to hide it from Bella, but each time I’d begin to tremble again, she

would look up at me with those warm brown eyes so full of concern that it broke my heart.

“Daddy!” Bella jumped up, throwing herself into her father’s arms. “You came home early.”

“I missed my girls so much, I couldn’t wait another minute to get back to you,” he told her, kissing her cheek. “Have you been taking care of Brooke for me?”

“I tried. But she’s been sad today.” Bella grabbed his face in both hands, her voice so serious that it made me smile. “You gotta make it better, Daddy. She’s really, really sad.”

He kissed her one more time before placing her on her feet. “I’m going to do my best, Bella-Boo.” His eyes swept over me again, and I had to fight tears.

I didn’t want him to see me like this. Battling the demons from my past. Covered in sweat, eyes swollen, nose snotty. Feeling like a coward because I freaked out over a tight space. Yet there was no one else I wanted to hold me. No one I trusted more not to abandon me in the dark.

Behind him, Luck hesitantly entered the room. My hands gripped the blanket Bella had tucked around me earlier. Seeing my uncle was too much with the day I’d had.

After what Sariah had told me, I understood better. If I’d been given the choice between a day with this amazing family, even if it meant spending the rest of my life alone and missing them, I would take it without hesitation. I couldn’t fault Luck for doing the same thing when presented with that option.

But I couldn’t face him at the moment. I couldn’t look at him when my hands were still shaking, my heart pounding with remembered fear, the darkness pressing in all around me, trying to win. None of that was his fault. My father and

stepmother had blocked him from trying to gain custody of me. I knew that. My brain accepted it as fact because I was all too aware of what a monster my stepmother truly was.

My heart, however, was still angry. Hurt. I couldn't be near him when I was feeling so weak and vulnerable.

On legs that felt like jelly, I quickly got to my feet, planning to excuse myself to go up to my room. But I barely took two steps, and suddenly, Paxton was there, his hands at my waist steadying me, while simultaneously making me weak all over again for an entirely different reason.

Without thinking about what I was doing, I hugged his waist, burying my face in the soft material of the shirt stretched across his chest, inhaling his cedar and citrus scent. One of his giant hands left my waist to cup the back of my head, his fingers tangling in my hair, slightly tugging. Not quite painful, but each flex of his fingers pulled a little more, and the sensation seemed to go straight to my core.

A breathy moan escaped my throat without my permission. That quiet, needy little sound caused an instant reaction in him that I felt growing bigger against my belly by the second.

Paxton kissed the top of my head. "Riah, you have Bella for the rest of the night."

"No," I protested, trying to pull back, but he tightened his hold, not allowing me to move an inch. "That's not necessary. I—"

"Bella and I are going to make spaghetti," Sariah announced, cutting me off. "Luck will help."

"Yes!" Bella agreed, sounding far older than her six years. With Paxton still holding my head so my face was pressed into his shirt, I couldn't see her. "Don't worry about anything,

Brooke. I'll take care of it all. And Daddy will take care of you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

brooke

SARIAH AND BELLA ushered Luck out of the living room. He grumbled halfheartedly as their voices drifted down the hall toward the kitchen. As soon as it faded completely, I released a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

Paxton squeezed the back of my neck, kneading the tense muscles in my shoulders. "Let's get you settled, kitten."

Taking my hand, he led me through the house to the stairs. "You shouldn't have ended your trip because of me," I muttered, keeping my head lowered.

"It wasn't just for you," he growled, pulling my gaze to him. His jaw was clenched, his entire body seeming to vibrate with an energy I didn't fully understand. "I didn't even want to be there without you. It felt like the life was draining out of me being away from you and Bella. Yes, I wanted to be here to hold you and make it all better. But also, I'm a selfish bastard who was looking for an excuse to get back to you sooner."

"Paxton..."

"I'm sorry you were scared," he gritted out, guiding me up the stairs with a hand on my hip. "I'm even more sorry that I wasn't here to begin with. It won't happen again. If you can't travel with me, I won't be going."

I wasn't sure if I was light-headed from his nearness or the intensity of emotions he had swirling around inside me. Too much was happening at once. Between my relief at having him home, my guilt over his ending his trip because of my breakdown, his scent that calmed me, his touch that burned my skin...

It was all so overwhelming that I didn't realize he'd steered me into his bedroom until the door shut behind us with an echoing click. His scent was thick in the air, caressing me like a gentle, physical touch. A king-size bed was the focal point of the room, the comforter and pillowcases in a crimson-and-black abstract pattern that was both masculine and artistic.

There were two pictures on the side table, both of him with Bella, Sariah, and Luck. They were all smiling, Bella's dimple popping. It was a beautiful, mismatched family of choice, the three adults surrounding the little girl lovingly.

My heart jumped into my throat as I glanced up at Paxton. I wanted so badly to be a part of his family. To not be alone ever again. To call him and Bella mine.

His hazel eyes were turbulent as he gazed down at me. "I need to hold you."

I heard an unspoken plea in his voice that had me taking an unconscious step closer to him, my fingers trembling as they toyed with the button on his shirt. "Please," I whispered, needing to be held as much as he said he needed to hold me.

With a groan, he scooped me up with one arm under my knees, the other cradling my back as he carried me to his bed. He carefully laid me down, making sure my hair didn't get tangled.

Paxton kicked off his shoes and shrugged off his shirt before climbing in behind me. I cuddled into him, pillowing my head on his chest, but I felt a little awkward. This was something new for me. No one had ever held me. At least, not since I was a little girl—and never like this.

Grasping my hand, he laid it over his stomach and then lightly ran his fingertips up and down my arm. Closing my eyes, I breathed in the scent on his skin, the perfect combination of woody and herbal, causing me to hum my pleasure. In my entire life, I couldn't remember ever feeling as safe as I did with Paxton holding me.

Under my ear, his heartbeat was a frantic yet soothing rhythm. I could feel how clenched his entire body was, the need that seemed to vibrate out of every pore. My thighs clenched, but I tried not to rub them together, knowing he would guess how turned on I was if I did.

“I've been dreaming about this for weeks,” he confessed, his lips grazing my forehead.

I tilted my head back so I could see his face. “What, getting me in your bed?”

He smirked, but it quickly morphed into something more serious as his tone deepened. “That too, but mostly this. Holding you. I tried to let you get settled in before I touched you. Wanted you to feel at home here, because that's what this is now. I knew once I got my hands on you, tasted you, I'd never let you go. But I wanted you to be comfortable here before I overwhelmed you, kitten.”

He stopped rubbing his fingers over my arm to twist a few locks of my thick hair around them. It was so seamless, I didn't think he was even aware he did it. My hair fascinated

everyone, but I loved how Paxton always seemed entranced by it when he looked at me.

“I missed you,” I whispered, emboldened by his admission. He made me imagine that this could really become home. With him and Bella. I hadn’t had that since before my mom died. Our house had stopped feeling like that a long time before she was killed by a drunk driver. Her obsession with finding someone to love ruined everything.

Back then, I’d sworn to myself that I would never fall in love. But I realized it wasn’t that Mom kept falling in love. She couldn’t find it, so she clung to whatever scraps she was tossed by the creeps she kept dating.

If she, for even one minute, had felt for any of them what I already did feel for Paxton, she would have been happy.

But he made me feel so cared for and protected that I knew if he let me down like everyone else, it would completely break me. That was what my stepmother had hoped my time at St. Andrew’s would accomplish. Destroy my will to survive. To want to give up. Maybe even end my life. I could practically hear her wicked cackle each time the headmistress would lock me in the cage. But I never let her have that kind of satisfaction. She wouldn’t win.

If she knew that Paxton Foster held the kind of power over me that she’d seemed to crave, she would lose her mind.

Rolling me onto my back, Paxton propped his head on one of his hands. I snuggled down into his pillow, feeling shy with him staring down at me with mossy eyes. Every time they changed from hazel, I got a thrill, but then I would get lost in the beauty of the gold swirling around in his irises.

“You are so damn beautiful.” He brushed his free hand over my hair, curling a few tendrils around his index finger. He watched the way the blond locks clung to his flesh with fascination mixed with adoration before he tore his gaze away and met mine. “Now that I have you here, where you belong, don’t you ever fucking leave.”

“This bed or the house?”

“Me,” he rasped, his throat working a few times. “Don’t ever leave me, baby.”

“It’s usually me who gets left.” An emotional lump choked me, my words causing the gold in his eyes to stand out more.

“Never, kitten. You’re mine.”

Given the reverence in his voice, I wanted to believe him. Ached for it. But it scared me. Too many people had hurt me in the past to completely drop my walls and let him all the way in.

He cupped his hand around my throat, tipping my head up with his thumb under my chin. “You are mine, Brooke.”

Despite the way my heart surged with hope, I remained silent.

His nostrils flared. “Say it. Tell me that you are mine.”

“No.”

He tightened his fingers around my throat, surprising a whimper from me that had nothing to do with fear or pain. My back arched, my breaths coming in slightly labored pants, causing my hard nipples to scrape over the material of my bra. Every cell in my body came alive.

Paxton’s pupils dilated at my instant reaction. “My kitten is purring for me,” he husked, his fingers flexing, earning

another whimper that vibrated against his palm. “You like a little pain with the pleasure, don’t you, good girl?”

I nodded, unable to keep my thighs from rubbing together beneath my skirt this time. His touch, his words, his scent were all causing little explosions inside me.

“You’re so perfect,” he praised, lowering his head to nuzzle his nose against my ear. His breath scalded my skin. I felt his mouth graze my jaw, the slightest sting of his teeth before he licked the same spot.

“Please,” I whined, wanting him to kiss me, touch me rougher, make the ache between my legs go away.

“What do you want?” I opened my mouth, but I couldn’t find the right words to explain what I needed from him. “Tell me.”

“You.”

“You have me. Now tell me what you want me to do to you.”

I spread my knees, causing my skirt to sweep up, exposing my thighs. As wet as I was between my legs, my panties clung to me. Paxton’s gaze drifted down my body, his inhaled becoming sharper as he watched me squirm.

“If you tell me what I want to hear, I’ll give it to you.”

Heat burned my face, but my entire body was on fire, demanding I give in to his commands. “I...want you to touch me.” I stumbled over the words. “Between my...legs.”

“Such a good girl.” Keeping one hand around my throat, he trailed the other over my belly, down my right leg. He didn’t pause when he reached the hem of my skirt, but he

caressed his fingers up the inside of my bare thigh, groaning when he reached my drenched sex.

“Ah fuck, kitten.” He shifted my panties to the side and strummed his thumb over the little bundle of nerves hidden there. “You’re soaked for me.”

His hardness tented his black slacks. It dug into my hip, and he thrust against me in a way that seemed unconscious. As if he had no control over what his body did. I reached for him, wanting to know what he felt like—there.

“No,” he gritted out, shaking his head. “This is just for you. Today has been too much for you already. Let me make you come. Forget about everything else. Just spread those legs wider for me. Let me taste that sweet pussy.”

I sucked my lip between my teeth. “But I want you to feel good too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

brooke

HE KISSED the tip of my nose, an action that was so sweet compared to how dirty he was touching my core. He spread my lips with his fingers, holding them apart while he teased over my rosebud, drawing tortured mewls from me, making me feel like the kitten he called me so lovingly. I still couldn't handle when anyone else used nicknames or endearments. But I craved his "kitten" and "baby."

"Next time." Wedging his middle finger into my entrance, he bit off a curse. "Too tight. Too goddamn tiny. I'll have to stretch you out good before I even try to get my cock in this wonderland to keep from hurting you, kitten."

"Paxton," I moaned, and he pushed in a little deeper. It burned, but I loved it. More wetness gushed out of me.

"As soon as you come, I'm going to carry you into the bathroom. You're going to take a long, hot bath."

"With you?" I gasped, willingly spreading my thighs wider as he scooped up my skirt so it was pooled around my waist on the bed. Cool air from the AC brushed over my heated flesh, the wetness already coating my thighs. I shivered, unsure if I was nervous or cold or so turned on I couldn't think straight.

"Come on my face, and let's find out."

When his hand left my throat, I whined at the loss, but I was quickly distracted by Paxton burying his face between my legs. “Oh.” My fingers tugged at his hair, trying to pull him away even as I lifted my hips up to meet his teasing tongue. “Oh yes. No, wait. Please, please, please.”

He pressed my legs wider, making hungry noises as he licked up my slit, twisting and twirling his tongue over my clit before sucking on it with a *pop, pop, pop*. I’ve never felt anything like it, the body-shivering pleasure that made my spine feel like it would snap in half as I fell apart, screaming his name.

My breaths were still labored when he kissed his way back up my body, smoothing my hair back from my face before sealing his lips to mine in a kiss that was so slow, and sweet tears pricked my eyes. He tasted different, and it took me a moment before my brain started working again enough to realize that it was because I was tasting myself. His hardness drilled into my side for a few moments before he pushed back onto his knees with a pained groan.

“Stay right there, kitten,” he commanded. “I’m going to get your bath started.”

I couldn’t have moved even if the house was on fire. My entire body felt boneless, my eyes heavy as I continued to get my breathing under control. Paxton had a wicked mouth, but I couldn’t help wondering—if his tongue felt that good, what would it feel like to have his cock inside me?

Several minutes later, he returned and helped me sit up on the edge of the bed, where he proceeded to strip my dress over my head. His ragged inhale made me smile shyly up at him. He licked his lips hungrily as he reached behind me with one hand, unsnapping my bra with just his thumb and index finger

in a single practiced movement. Dropping a quick kiss on my mouth, he bent to pick me up.

Pressing my forehead into his shoulder, I hid from him while my hair curtained around me, so long and thick, it could have been a blanket. When he carried me into his bathroom, I was surprised to smell my favorite bubble bath filling the air. Lifting my head curiously when he sat me on the edge of a huge spa tub, I saw the familiar bottle. But I was sure he hadn't left to retrieve it from my room.

"I stocked some of your stuff in here," he admitted with a shrug when he noticed what I was looking at. "I may have been giving you time to settle in, but I wasn't going to wait much longer to have you where you belong, kitten."

Another ball of emotion filled my throat, making it impossible to speak as I watched him test the temperature of the water before urging me to my feet. Once I stood, he stripped my panties from me, but instead of tossing them aside, he lifted them to his face, inhaling deeply while my face flamed. His lips tilted up in a small smile, not smug but completely disarming.

Scooping me up, he placed me inside the bathtub so carefully, it was hard to breathe for a moment. But the water felt too good for me to hold back the pleased moan as I melted back into the sweet-scented bubbles. I rolled my head, all the tension fading from my neck and shoulders that I was unable to keep it upright.

Through my lashes, I looked up at Paxton. "Will you join me?" I asked, biting my lip, only a little self-conscious, thanks to the bubbles hiding me.

"You don't have to ask me twice, baby."

Shrugging off his shirt, he made quick work of the rest of his clothes before he slid in behind me. He moved so fast that I didn't have time to get more than a glimpse of him naked, but it was enough to have me gasping. Were men supposed to be pretty...there? Because, like every other part of Paxton, he was beautiful. His cock jutted up past his navel. Veins lined the length pressing against his abdomen, standing out against the dark ink on his skin.

Another moan left me as I felt every inch of his hard body molding to mine, but what caught and held my fascinated attention was the feel of his silk-covered cock nestling right against the seam of my bottom. How could something so hard be so soft?

Grasping my thighs, he rubbed my crack against his thickness, using my body to stroke himself, causing the water to slosh over the rim before he settled me once again. His hold was firm but tender. My core clenched and pulsed feeling his mushroomed head nudging against my forbidden hole.

“One day very soon, I'm going to own every inch of this little body,” he rasped against my ear. “I will claim every hole. Imprint my dick inside your pussy and your asshole. When I tell you that you're mine, you won't even hesitate to agree.”

His words and touch were intoxicating. “Only if you're mine too.”

Paxton wrapped his right hand around my throat. “Always. I've been yours from the minute I saw you. Such a fierce princess, tearing into me for the way I was speaking to her friend.” He cupped his left hand between my legs, slowly pushing two fingers into my entrance. “I'll worship you, protect you, love you until the last breath leaves my body. I belong to you and only you.”

My inner walls clenched around his invading fingers, silently begging him for more. Pressing his lips to the side of my head, he gave me what I wanted. “Purr for me again, kitten,” he instructed, his fingers around my throat tightening ever so slightly. “Let me feel it while you come for me.”

“Mmm,” I moaned, turning my head to look at him over my shoulder. A shiver went through me at the stark need blazing from his moss-colored eyes.

“So fucking beautiful,” he growled, nipping at my ear. “Such a good girl.”

“Yes, please,” I whimpered, working my hips in time to his thrusting fingers. Feeling his hardness against my back hole only heightened my pleasure, his ragged breathing suggesting that he was just as lost as I was. “Tighter. Please, tighter.”

“Fuck.” He clenched his fingers around my throat, almost cutting off all my airflow.

I whined my approval, loving how dominated I felt.

Safe.

Wanted.

Pulling his fingers from me, Paxton thrust three back in, stretching me a little more. There was more burning, and then I felt him brush over a hidden spot that not even I had touched before, that I was always too embarrassed to search for.

“Perfect princess,” he snarled, just as my body began to quake from the force of my release. “Mine, mine, *mine*.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

paxton

WORKING the brush through the last of the tangles in Brooke's hair, I heard her contented sigh and kissed the back of her head. "Are you hungry, kitten?"

"A little, but I don't want to move." She cuddled back into me where I sat with her between my legs so I could dry her hair.

"We're not going to," I assured her, grabbing my phone to text Sariah. Almost as soon as I hit send, she replied to let me know she would bring up a tray, along with a picture of Luck holding Bella by the waist over a pot, stirring the marinara sauce.

Seeing it, Brooke snatched the device from my hand to take a better look. "She's so adorable. I'm sad we missed the fun."

Wrapping her hair around my wrist, I jerked her head back. Hearing her whimper had my cock hard all over again. "We had our own fun," I growled, pressing my lips to her throat. "And if you're not a good girl, I won't be feeding you anytime soon. I'll tie you to this fucking bed and wring orgasm after orgasm out of you."

Her giggle turned into a moan when I bit into her rapidly fluttering pulse. "I'm sorry, are you threatening me or making

promises?”

“That damn smart mouth again.” Kissing the red mark I’d just caused, I lifted my head. “Don’t tempt me, or we will both starve because I’ll keep you in this room, fucking you blind.”

“Still unsure of the context here,” she teased, but there was a breathlessness to her voice that had me reaching under her shirt—my shirt. I’d put it on her after our bath, hiding temptation from me so I could take care of her other needs first. But she wasn’t wearing anything under the simple white T-shirt.

No bra.

No panties to cover her candy-apple-scented pussy that was already soaked for me. But before I could push my fingers into her drenched hole, there was a knock on the door. “Shit,” I hissed, grabbing the comforter to pull up over her bare legs right as the door began to open.

“Hope you’re decent,” Sariah called out. “Because I’m coming in.”

I knew she was bullshitting. She would never willingly risk walking into a room where I was even potentially naked unless she already knew. Considering I’d given a thumbs-up about her bringing us a tray, it had been a safe bet that I would at least have shorts on. But I needed to make sure my kitten was clothed, even if my shirt covered more of her than some of her dresses.

Brooke laughed as Sariah walked over to the bed carrying the tray that had two cereal bowls full of pasta, a basket with garlic bread, and a large dish of salad. Behind her, Bella carried two cans of Diet Coke. And behind her, Luck was grumbling with his arms crossed over his chest.

Seeing him, Brooke ducked her head but then opened her arms for Bella when she jumped up on the bed beside her. “I see someone has already had dessert,” she said with a grin, wiping a smear of chocolate icing from the corner of Bella’s mouth.

Bella’s dimple popped. “I saved you a big piece. Verona promised she would make lemon tortes next week. Just for you!”

“You’re too good to me.”

Worried brown eyes scanned Brooke’s face. “Are you feeling better now that Daddy’s home?”

Heat filled her face, but Brooke nodded. “So much better.”

“Good.” She turned a glare on me. “You can’t go away again without us, Daddy.”

“I can tell you with one hundred percent certainty that I will not be going anywhere without Brooke ever again,” I vowed.

Brooke side-eyed me. “And I can promise you that I will not be going anywhere without Bella.”

“Yeah.” Bella nodded adamantly. “Where she goes, I go. We’re a package. Deal with it.”

Sariah made a sound. I shot her a look to find her eyes filled with tears, but she had a happy smile on her face. “Well, they told you,” she laughed. “I guess we need to figure out the whole outfit situation for the fight tomorrow night.”

I stiffened. “Not happening.”

“We don’t have a choice, Pax,” Luck said with a sigh. “This fight is important, and we have to be there. We’re cosponsoring it, man.”

“Then you go,” I bit out, glaring at my best friend. “Brooke doesn’t want to see grown men pounding on each other. Maybe you weren’t listening just now, but I’m not going anywhere without her.”

“Well, it isn’t something I’ve ever thought about watching, but now maybe I want to see that,” Brooke said with a smirk at Sariah, who winked at her. “It kind of sounds like fun. Muscled guys in little shorts, running around, wrestling.”

“Fuck,” Luck muttered, but a grin was teasing at his mouth. “Do not say that kind of shit in public, kid.”

Her eyes turned frosty when she looked at him. “Do not curse in front of Bella.”

“Now we’re definitely not going,” I growled. “Unless you want me going on a killing spree, keep your eyes off anyone you don’t want me to murder, kitten.”

“I’m not worried about anyone who can’t handle themselves against you.” She picked up one of the bowls from the tray and grabbed a fork. “Bella, this sauce smells so good.”

“I made it just for you,” Bella said proudly. “Well, for Riah and Uncle Luck too. But mostly for you.”

Twirling spaghetti around her fork, she took a small bite and moaned. “It’s delicious.”

While Brooke ate, Sariah sat down on the other side of the bed, her eyes full of so much happiness, my throat felt tight. I’d always hoped to see her like this one day. And there it was. I’d already known Brooke was mine, and I realized I had to share her with everyone I loved. But seeing how much she meant to Sariah pulled at different strings attached to my heart that I didn’t even know could be touched.

“I was thinking we could dress to match,” Sariah told Brooke and Bella. “What do you think about—”

“Riah!” I growled.

“Have you ever been to a fight before?” Brooke asked her, ignoring me. She took another bite, but then frowned, something suddenly bothering her. “What is the dress code? Can I just wear something from my closet?”

“I’ve been to a few. It’s been a while, though.” Sariah tucked one foot under her and pulled Bella onto her lap, making herself comfortable. “There’s not a true dress code, but we want to make a statement. Right, Bella-Boo?”

“I don’t know what that means, but I want to wear blue to match my lightsaber.”

“Well, that’s decided,” Luck said, turning to go, probably to keep me from arguing with him more. “I’ll let the pilot know. We’ll fly out tomorrow and stay the night. Come back Sunday afternoon so that Bella can still go to school on Monday.”

“Ah, man,” Bella muttered. Brooke gave her a stern look, making her quickly change her tune. “I mean school, yay!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

brooke

FLYING WASN'T something I'd ever done. It wasn't that I was afraid of heights, but the opportunity simply had never presented itself. Mom was always working or going out with her boyfriends. And after she died, I was quickly carted off to St. Andrew's. Once I'd run away from that nightmare, I was lucky if I could afford a meal and then rent. Traveling was definitely not in the budget.

I was excited until we stepped inside the plane. From the outside, it appeared spacious. And while chairs and a long couch were spread out to give the illusion of privacy, with the five of us, several members of security, including Henry, the two flight attendants, and the pilots, the plane suddenly felt very cramped.

We were going to be thirty thousand feet in the air in a steel cage.

On unsteady legs, I carefully walked to the couch, trying to pretend that everything was okay. Fake it until you make it and all that jazz.

Bella sat beside me, close enough that she seemed to be half on my lap. Attempting to keep my breaths even, I tucked her hair behind her ear and distracted myself by asking her

about her favorite trips until Luck and Sariah boarded the plane.

My gaze went behind my uncle, wishing Paxton would hurry. He'd been talking to one of the members of security who wasn't going to Las Vegas but had driven us to the private airport.

"Riah said the hotel is closed now, but at least we got to go." Bella was still animated after telling me about going to Disney World over the summer and spending the entire stay at the Star Wars: Galactic Starcruiser hotel. "My second favorite trip was when we went to Cabo."

"That was so much fun," Sariah agreed, taking the chair closest to the couch. "My favorite part was snorkeling."

Bella burst into giggles. "Daddy didn't know how and nearly swallowed a fish!"

I laughed along with her and my friend, but I had to shake off the brief flash of jealousy that filled me. It was no secret that Sariah was close to Paxton and Bella. Their small family of choice that included Luck warmed my heart. But I hadn't thought they went on family vacations together. That seemed too intimate for some reason.

Sariah was such a big part of their everyday lives.

"Si—" Luck abruptly cut himself off and cleared his throat. "Sariah," he gritted instead. "Did you pack everything you need this time?"

"Yes, Luck."

From the expression on his face, it didn't seem he believed her. "It's fine if you didn't. There are enough boutiques in the hotel that you can pick up whatever you forgot. Just charge it to the room."

Bella leaned closer, whispering, “Riah always forgets something. Always.”

Paxton stepped on to the plane with the final member of security traveling with us. As he came to sit beside Bella, one of the flight attendants closed the door. My heart began thumping harder, sweat rolling down my back. I discreetly sucked in a quick breath.

There was more room in the plane than there had been in the MRI machine the day before. I kept reminding myself of that over and over again as the pilot taxied toward the runway. Everyone had elbow room. Henry and another bodyguard even had two seats between them.

My ears began to ring, a dark veil falling over my eyes. The sun was out, shining through the windows. It was a cloudless day, perfect for flying, or so I’d heard Luck telling Bella on the way to the airport. Sun meant light, and light meant no darkness. I was safe. Not confined. If I needed to use that bathroom, I could get up and go whenever I pleased. I didn’t have to hold my bladder until it felt like it was going to burst, only to wet myself after hours of being denied.

“Hey.” Paxton tipped my chin up, his hazel eyes luring me in. “It’s okay, kitten. Breathe. I’ve got you.”

I blinked a few times, realizing he’d moved Bella to his other side so he was now between us. His scent filled my nose with each deep inhale, and some of my panic started to dissipate. As clarity slowly returned, my face began to burn with shame. Tears pricked my eyes at my weakness.

“Who wants to watch a movie?” Sariah asked, thankfully keeping Bella distracted before she could realize I had been seconds away from a full-on freak-out. “Excuse me. Could we get some popcorn, please?”

A voice I didn't recognize said they would get it right away, and I vaguely realized it was one of the flight attendants. "Would anyone like something to drink?"

"Herbal tea," Luck told her. "With honey."

Despite the buzzing still lingering in my ears, I found myself smiling. It had been years, but he still remembered how I liked my tea.

"Milk and cookies, please," Bella said sweetly.

"Beer," Paxton muttered, tucking my head under his chin.

"Make that two," Luck instructed. "And red wine for Sariah."

While she went to get our drinks, the other attendant took care of the security team. Slowly, I began to relax to the sound of Paxton's steady heartbeat under my ear. By the time a cart was rolled out, I was calmer and some of my embarrassment had faded. Bella picked the movie, surprising us all by not choosing something Star Wars-related, but it wasn't a long flight to Las Vegas and we didn't finish it before we landed.

A limo and two cars were already waiting when we touched down, ready to whisk us off to our hotel. I wasn't all that impressed by what I saw on the ride, and neither were Bella and Sariah. When the car stopped in front of the hotel entrance, Henry opened our door.

Bella got out and waited on me. Paxton followed, while Luck and Sariah exited from the other side of the limo. At least fifty other people were coming and going, but my attention was drawn to a woman in a skintight dress who walked toward us. There was barely any cloth to cover her with, the slit down the front leaving everything but her nipples

showing and the hem ending right under the curve of her bottom.

“Hi, Pax,” she purred.

He was talking to one of the other bodyguards and didn't look her way, not even when she shifted her long legs to give a flash of the—thank goodness—underwear she was wearing. It was a thong, but at least it was something, and Bella didn't get a peek at the stranger's no-no.

As she came to stand beside me, Sariah made a hissing noise that was loud enough for the blonde to shoot us a scathing look. But then she saw Sariah and abruptly walked away with the friends I hadn't noticed until they were kicking up dust with their hasty departure.

Bella didn't notice the interaction because she was bouncing up and down, holding on to my hand as she begged me to braid her hair. “Yes, precious,” I promised, hugging her as Paxton walked over to us.

“Kitten, I have something to take care of at the office. But Luck and I will be back in time to get ready for the fight.” He bent to kiss me. I was so lost in the taste of him that I barely heard Bella giggling. When he lifted his head, I saw so much hunger in his moss and gold eyes that my knees went weak. “Go upstairs with Sariah. Someone from the spa will be up to pamper you.”

It took me a moment to process what he'd said, but when I did, I jerked back. “What? No! I don't need that.”

“Don't argue with me, kitten.” Kissing me again, he stepped back, shooting Henry a glance over the top of my head. “They stay in the room. If anyone other than a woman from the spa tries to touch her, kill them.”

“Paxton!” I cried, slapping the back of my hand against his chest, and I glanced at Bella to make sure he hadn’t scared her, but she was giggling at her father’s antics. “Be serious.”

“I am serious. They touch you, they die.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

brooke

I HELD Bella's hand as Sariah and I entered the elevator with Henry and another member of the security team behind us. Sariah scanned a card that Luck had slipped her, bypassing all the other floors and taking us straight to the penthouse. When the doors opened again, we stepped into what could have passed for someone's home rather than a hotel suite.

Three women dressed in linen tunic uniforms stood waiting for us, three massage tables set up in the living room area.

Henry asked for their work identification and checked them against something on his phone before he would even allow the women to speak to us. Once he was satisfied with whatever he saw, he gave me a nod, and then he and the other man melted back into the scenery.

For the next hour, the three of us enjoyed massages. Calm music and ocean sounds filtered through the dimly lit room as I lay naked beneath a warmed sheet. All of it was a first for me, from the spa treatment to staying in a five-star hotel. Afterward, we were served a light snack and cucumber water to hydrate while two different women arrived and worked on styling my hair. Another set of women did the same for Sariah with her hair and makeup. All of them were subjected to the

same treatment from Henry, who diligently inspected their credentials before they were allowed past the foyer.

They were going to do Bella's hair as well, but she was adamant that I be the one to braid her hair. "She's the only one who gets it perfect. You don't mind, do you, Brooke?" Her warm brown eyes pleaded with me. I wouldn't have told her no even if I couldn't move my arms.

"Of course I'm going to do your hair. Bella-Rey doesn't get styled by just anyone."

She smacked a kiss to my cheek. "Thank you! Can I watch TV?"

I groaned when she batted her lashes at me, giving me that innocent little angel look that she knew got me every time. She exploited her cuteness, but I wasn't going to call her out on it. "Fine. But only if you stream something your dad or I have already preapproved."

"Yay. Love you." She skipped away, her small white robe tucked around her. While I'd had a day of firsts, nothing about the trip had been new for her. Private spa experiences with Sariah were a common occurrence.

"Love you too," I called after her.

Beside me, Sariah made a slight noise, and I glanced over to make sure she was okay. Her lips trembled, but she quickly smushed them together to more evenly distribute the lipstick the artist had applied. I held out my hand, and she took it instantly, giving it a squeeze. "Don't be jelly," I teased. "I love you too."

She gave a sound that was half laugh, half sob. "God, I love you so much I can't breathe at times, Brooke."

“That sounds like something you should see a doctor about.” She threw a makeup sponge at me. Laughing, the two of us sat hand in hand while the two stylists finished up with us.

Bella’s hair was done by the time Paxton and Luck got back. Leaving her to get dressed, I went into my room to change into the outfit Sariah had picked out for me. Seeing the long-sleeved black bodysuit and matching leggings, I cringed. I would have preferred a dress. But then I saw the sleeveless tan cardigan that went with it. Slipping it on, I examined myself in the full-length mirror.

The bodysuit and leggings clung to all my curves. With the low cut of the top and the push-up bra Sariah had included, my boobs looked amazing, but the cardigan gave a classy vibe. Knee-high, flat-heeled boots the same color as the cardigan completed the outfit. With my glammed-out makeup and my hair in sexy waves down my back, I didn’t recognize myself.

Paxton walked out of the bathroom dressed in a black tux, minus the tie. His white dress shirt was unbuttoned down past his pecs, showing off the ink on his chest. Scruff darkened his jaw, while his hair was styled back from his face in a way that made me want to run my fingers through it and muss it up. I nearly swooned, but it was the way his eyes raked over me that had my heart thumping against my chest in an almost painful beat.

“Jesus goddamn Christ,” he growled, stalking toward me. “How am I supposed to get through this night without killing every motherfucker who looks at you, kitten?”

I tilted my head back so I could still see his face, my breathing coming in shallow pants. He was too beautiful. Every eye was going to be on him, and I didn’t like it. Not one

little bit. He was mine now, he'd made it a vow, and I would hold him to it. But that didn't mean I liked to share. Not where he was concerned—never when it came to Paxton.

Swooping down, he picked me up with his hands on each hip. I wrapped my legs around his waist, a cry leaving my throat at how hard he already was. I could feel every inch of him through my bodysuit, but the flowy cardigan would hide us if anyone were to walk in. Squeezing my cheeks, he pressed me up against the wall, his mouth attacking mine with a groan that vibrated through him, making me shiver.

I kissed him back, enjoying the feral snarl he made when he realized the bodysuit was like a thong, snapping across my sex and sliding against my most intimate areas. "I'm going to be jealous of this piece of cloth all night, baby. How am I supposed to survive until I can get you back here and pound this sweet little pussy? I will be dripping come every time I look at you."

His filthy mouth only made me wetter. "Is there time to pound me now?"

Groaning, he pressed his face into my neck. "For a quick fuck, yes. But I'm going to savor the first time I get inside you."

"But...I hurt, Paxton."

Thrusting his lower body against my core caused us both to groan. "Me too, kitten. So fucking bad. But I'm not going to hurt you just to get my dick wet. I'll tear you in half with how hard I am right now." He trailed openmouthed kisses up and down my neck, raking his teeth over my flesh, making me clutch at his shoulders as I tried to rock my hips against him in search of relief for the ache he stirred to life inside me.

Paxton's hold on my hips tightened, locking me in place so it was impossible to move, to find the respite I was desperate for. "No, baby, we'll both wait until later. But, swear to Christ, I'm going to spend the rest of the night so deep inside you that I touch your soul."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

paxton

SOME PRICK with a camera called out to Sariah as we walked the red carpet to the private box. With Bella holding one of my hands and the other around Brooke, I couldn't protect her, but Luck was there to keep any asshole at bay. My security team stood out of view of the line of cameras, but close enough to offer me the comfort of knowing my girls were protected.

Photographers were lined up to take everyone's picture, already posting to social media sites about the biggest names in MMA attending the latest fight. Sariah wasn't unknown in this world because she'd been spotted with both Luck and me too many times.

They even knew Bella's name and told her how pretty she was as she gave them a beaming smile. Her only outward sign that she was nervous was how she would reach up to grasp Brooke's fingers, seeking comfort that Brooke readily provided. Each time Bella did it, they would lock eyes and share a silent conversation that would ease whatever fear my daughter had. Then her smile would brighten, and she would slowly drop her hold, until her anxiety spiked again.

But it was Brooke whom the paparazzi didn't know, and it drove them wild. Seeing their interest in her drove me crazy. I wanted to hide her away, keep her all to myself. Which was

impossible. If I wanted to keep her—and I fucking would—I had to share her. With Bella. With Sariah. Not these vultures. I didn't owe them anything, and I sure as hell wasn't going to give them a taste of my sassy little kitten.

Yet even as I wanted to hide her from their view, a part of me was desperate to publicly brand her. Show everyone who she belonged to, so no one would ever question it. When strangers saw her, they would know she was Paxton “Deathstroke” Foster’s woman.

Sariah shifted so that she was in the next blast of flashing lights from the cameras, a fierce look on her beautiful face as she blocked Brooke as much as possible from the people throwing questions her way. I gave her an approving nod, appreciating her need to protect Brooke that came close to matching my own.

“Deathstroke!”

“Over here, Deathstroke!”

“Look this way, Deathstroke!”

With each yell of my name, I twisted my fingers in Brooke’s long vest thing that hid her perfect body outlined by the black leggings and bodysuit she wore beneath. Whenever someone called for me to look their way, I ignored them, keeping my eyes on Brooke.

If they wanted a picture, they could capture my love for her in my eyes, the obsession that painfully twisted my insides the moment I wasn't touching some part of her. When she had to move aside so that Luck and I could be photographed together, every muscle in my body strained toward her.

Henry stood a foot behind Brooke as she and Bella were photographed with Sariah and some other woman I didn't

know. Brooke kept an arm around Bella's chest, kissing her temple every few moments and taking that moment to whisper something to her each time that would make her giggle or burst out laughing. Sariah would grin with them but mostly continued to act as a human shield, blocking Brooke anytime she sensed my girl getting overwhelmed.

As I watched the three of them together, everything felt right with the world. For the first time in my forty-five years, I had exactly what I wanted and needed.

Finally, we made it to the private box. Everyone wanted a cage-side seat, but even that close, they would have to watch the majority of the event on the screens. Our box was the perfect spot, giving us an aerial view to take in each fight. It was soundproof but wired to hear the matches so the noise of the crowd wouldn't intrude.

Three attendants were already waiting to serve us, catering staff walking around with trays of champagne or weird French foods I still didn't know the names of even twenty years after being thrust into this side of being a celebrity. Luck snapped up two glasses of champagne for Sariah and himself. When he tipped the glass toward Brooke, silently asking if she wanted one, she shook her head.

It wasn't just our group of five in the suite. An event as large as this one took a lot of money. I recognized almost everyone already in the glassed-in room, many of them big fans of mixed martial arts fighting long before I was in the business. A movie producer. A politician. A prince from a country I couldn't remember the name of. Billionaires who didn't blink at spending a hundred million to sponsor an event they loved—like Luck.

We had originally met at one of these events, and then we quickly became friends. Now, after carefully investing my money over the years, and then starting the business with Luck, I was a billionaire too. Throwing out the kind of money it cost to be a sponsor for an event of this magnitude didn't even put a dent in my bank accounts.

As we made our way through the crowd, Henry stayed a respectful distance away, while the other members of my security team remained outside the doors waiting. I kept my hand at the small of Brooke's back, always touching her, not just so she felt included when we paused to speak to people and I introduced her, but because I couldn't fucking stop myself.

Luck nudged my shoulder while we were in a group discussing who we favored to win in each weight class. He tipped his head, and I followed the direction, my teeth grinding when I saw Jon Powel. Vaguely, I recognized his date as the blonde who had tried to sit on my lap earlier in the week while Luck and I were out with one of the fighters. I knew she wasn't his wife, because he was going through a messy, public divorce.

Noticing our attention on him, Jon walked over, threading an arm around Sariah's waist like he had the right to touch her whenever he pleased. It made me see red when she flinched and curled into herself. Luck and I both snarled at him, causing him to chuckle, thinking everything was a game.

He was a dirty bastard who didn't hear the word no often. Normally, I wouldn't have been in the same room with the motherfucker, but Powel was a last-minute buy-in. Fuck, I shouldn't have listened to Luck and should have stayed home with my girls.

“Keep your hands to yourself,” Luck snapped, pushing Jon back a foot, causing a stir with the others in the room. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Henry shift closer to Brooke, who tucked Bella behind her protectively.

Jon laughed, enjoying riling up Luck, always loving to cause a scene. I popped my neck, ready to throw the bastard through the window. Sariah touched my arm, shaking her head before shifting her eyes to Brooke and Bella, who were watching us.

“I think someone needs a time-out,” Bella commented to Brooke, her voice small, nervous. She wouldn’t know why the man before her was a slimy scumbag, but she was perceptive enough to sense he was a bad man.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have the power to do that to other adults, precious,” Brooke soothed, her eyes narrowed on Jon. “But obviously, some people didn’t have parents who loved them enough to teach them any manners.”

For the first time, Jon looked at her, and the possessive, obsessed monster inside me was ready to tear him apart. The only thing stopping me was the knowledge that I would scare my girls.

Interest had Jon’s eyes brightening. He took a step toward her but abruptly stopped when I snaked my hand around her waist, letting him know who Brooke belonged to. My eyes shot him a warning, silently daring him to even lift a hand to attempt to touch what was mine. I would break every bone in his body. Would relish the sound of his agonized screams.

“Hi, Paxton,” someone greeted to my left. “I had so much fun the other night. Maybe we can do it again sometime.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

brooke

I FLINCHED at the sound of his name coming from another woman's mouth. As soon as I'd spotted the blonde I'd seen when we had arrived at the hotel earlier that afternoon, I'd been preparing myself. For what, I wasn't exactly sure, but I could sense...something.

Yet I wasn't prepared for how badly it hurt to hear her say his name. I felt like the air was knocked out of me. Paxton felt my reaction, his hazel eyes dropping from the sleazy creep who had invaded Sariah's personal space to me. Rage had been radiating off him only moments before, but now his brows were pulled together in concern.

"Kitten, what's wrong?"

I nibbled at the inside of my bottom lip, trying to read him. Earlier, he hadn't even acknowledged the blonde when she'd tried to speak with him. And if I had to take a guess, I would have said her comment about having fun with him the other night had gone right over his head.

While I was still trying to determine whether I should be hurt, Sariah lunged forward with a growl, grabbing the blonde by the back of the head. Bella screamed, turning so she could hide her face in my chest.

“Ah, hell no,” Sariah snarled, wrenching the blonde’s hair back so hard she was practically bent in half. Clutching at Sariah’s hands, the woman screeched at her to let her go. “Mistake trying to mess with my best friend, Chloe. Big mistake.”

“You psychotic bitch!” Chloe screamed, struggling frantically to get herself untangled from the death hold Sariah had on her. “Let me go!”

“Don’t you ever come near what is mine again,” Sariah seethed. “Keep your disease-infested skank ass on the other side of the room from my family, or I will kill you. If you so much as look at Paxton again, I will gouge your eyes out with your stupid, diamond-encrusted heels. Daddy can’t save you from me. No one can.”

“You are crazy,” Chloe cried. “Insane. Someone get her off me!”

It all happened so fast that it took a moment for anyone to react. But Luck snapped out of it first and grabbed Sariah’s wrists. “Sariah, let go.” Her grip only seemed to tighten in Chloe’s hair. “Baby, whatever set you off, I know she deserves it. There’s not a single person in this room who doesn’t know that. But you have to let her go. Sariah... Siren!”

His voice boomed through the room, and she went weightless. I wasn’t sure if it was the authority in his voice or him calling her “Siren.” But she released Chloe and melted into him.

Feeling Bella tremble, I shook off my shock and bent so I was on her level, ignoring the commotion all around us. Cupping her face in both my hands, I gave her a gentle smile. “Hi, my Bella-Rey.”

“Brooke.” Chin trembling, she covered my hands with hers. “Can we go? I don’t like it here anymore.”

“Of course we can.” Straightening, I took a moment to assess the situation.

Luck was still holding Sariah, whispering to her. I’d suspected, but now I was sure there was something going on between those two. And the rage that filled Paxton’s eyes when he realized it caused my heart to lurch. But it wasn’t just his anger that left me feeling winded. It was the naked, heartbreaking betrayal I saw in those hazel depths.

I took an involuntary step back.

Creepy guy said something that drew Paxton’s attention—and his ire. His rage seemed to win over the other emotions battling for attention, or maybe it was just safer to allow himself to feel that. The two of them began a low, angry conversation, Paxton’s hands clenching and unclenching into fists. It was possible he was about to throw a punch, but I was already done with their issues.

Chloe was complaining as loudly as she could, holding the back of her head and the side of her neck. I didn’t see any signs of blood, but I didn’t doubt Sariah had caused her some serious pain. Several people were watching, whispering, but no one had come over to intervene, offer Chloe help, or demand we all leave.

At a glance, I would have guessed drama wasn’t something unusual for this kind of event. But then again, it was my first experience, so I wasn’t sure. What I did know was that this wasn’t a place for a child.

I turned to Henry. “Bella and I are leaving,” I informed him. “Now.”

With a nod, he steered us toward the door, no questions asked. We left through a discreet exit, thankfully able to avoid the flashing cameras, and got all the way to the elevator before my phone started ringing.

It had taken that long for Paxton to even notice our departure. That neither Bella nor I were still standing where he'd left us.

Forgotten.

Unwanted.

Alone.

Silencing my phone, I rocked a quietly crying Bella against me, humming softly as the elevator quickly ascended to the penthouse. It wasn't just me who had to go through it this time. Bella had been overlooked in the chaos of the little scene as well.

She needed someone she could trust not to forget about her. I would be for her what no one had ever been for me.

Henry's phone rang next.

Giving me a grimace in apology, he lifted it to his ear. "Boss?" He listened for a moment. "I have them both with me. We are on our way back to the suite... Bella is upset, but Brooke is fine." He grunted. "Miss Ackerman is fine."

Realizing Paxton was upset because Henry had used my first name, I rolled my eyes. Well, I was upset too. When he saw my reaction, his lips twitched, but he quickly schooled his expression before the doors opened into the penthouse.

He pointed to the phone, letting me know Paxton wanted to speak to me, silently asking if I was up to it. I shook my head. My emotions were too raw, and I didn't want to chance

having a conversation that could potentially upset Bella more than she already was.

“She’s busy at the moment, boss. But I will tell her you want her to call you.”

Bella and I went straight to her room. Sitting on her bed, she curled up beside me and put her head in my lap.

“Want to talk about it?”

As she shook her head, her silent crying turned into full-on sobs. I just let her while I rubbed her back. Everything had been going well until the creepy guy and the blonde showed up. Bella had been laughing, soaking up the attention from all the other people. Even though I’d been nervous about the event, having Paxton at my side had given me a feeling of being powerful. Each time I met his gaze, I had felt a zing of awareness between us.

Magical.

Until it wasn’t.

In a single moment, everything changed.

Tucking the covers up around Bella after she fell asleep, I went to the room I was supposed to be sharing with Paxton and packed up my things. Bella needed me. She was the one who mattered. Fortunately, Chloe, and then Paxton himself, had reminded me that giving my heart away to any man was a stupid decision.

I just wished I’d been reminded before I’d completely fallen for him.

Not that I had a choice. That was taken from me the moment I met Paxton. I’d fought a losing battle against loving him ever since.

Ugh. I should have fought harder.

How long had Paxton been in love with Sariah? All the signs had been there, but I'd ignored it. They were so close because he loved her. And now, I realized why he wasn't with her.

Did she know how Paxton felt?

Fighting the sting of tears, I zipped up my bag. Going back to Bella's room, I washed the makeup from my face, changed into my pajamas, and crawled into bed beside her. Her arms wrapped around me, clutching, clinging like she thought I might disappear if she didn't hold tight enough.

I held her back, silently promising her I would never let go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

brooke

IT TOOK a while for me to fall asleep, but once I did, I slept so hard. “Brooke,” Bella whispered, shaking my hand.

Hearing the quaver in her voice jerked me awake, only to startle when I felt Paxton’s arm around me. I’d never heard him come in, hadn’t felt him slip into bed behind me or when he’d wrapped his arm over both me and Bella. I’d even cuddled back into him.

Apparently sleep-me was desperate for any contact with him I could get.

He was lightly snoring with his face in my hair, as if he’d fallen asleep smelling it. Bella’s eyes went back and forth from her dad to me. Filing the moment away to pick apart later, I stroked Bella’s cheek. Someone had left the blinds open, giving us plenty of light to see each other now that it was morning. “What’s wrong, precious?”

“I’m hungry,” she whispered, her brow furrowing when she glanced at her father again. “Can we have breakfast? Just you and me. Please.”

“Get dressed,” I told her with a forced smile. “I’m in the mood for waffles.”

While she hopped out of bed and ran into the bathroom, I closed my eyes and soaked in the moment. Paxton's deep, even breaths, the puffs of air against my neck. His scent filling my nose. His heat pressed into my back. How protectively—possessively—he held me in his sleep.

Yesterday, it had felt so good. Right. Like this was what was meant to happen between us. As if I could be his one, because I'd realized he was mine. And that delusion hurt so badly. I wasn't his one. Sariah was.

It wasn't anger at either of them that had me carefully untangling myself from Paxton. How could I be mad about who he loved? I couldn't change it. Couldn't force him to love me when his heart was already engaged elsewhere.

“Kitten,” he sighed, stirring.

Holding my breath because I wasn't ready to talk to him about anything yet, I waited to see if he would sit up. But he only rolled onto his stomach, his arm thrown over one of the extra pillows.

I changed my clothes quickly and then used the bathroom as soon as Bella stepped out. Paxton was still asleep when I opened the door. There was no sign of Luck or Sariah in the rest of the suite. Not wanting a text to disturb anyone, I scrawled a note and left it on the kitchen counter before taking Bella's hand and stepping into the elevator.

We weren't leaving the hotel, so I didn't see any reason to take Henry with us. The hotel had a restaurant on the fifth floor that boasted the best breakfast buffet in all of Vegas. I doubted it, but Bella wanted us to eat away from her family, so it was a better option than room service.

She piled two plates full of waffles, bacon, and eggs and then sat at our table, stuffing her face like she hadn't eaten in a week. I was slower to eat my own waffles, not the least bit hungry but giving Bella time to gather her thoughts if she wanted to talk out her feelings regarding the previous night.

“How are you doing over here, ladies?” our waitress asked with a bright smile. “Did you find everything? Can I get you refills?”

“I need the biggest cup of coffee you have, please,” I told her with a grim smile, pushing my glass of orange juice aside.

“Sure thing, hon.”

She walked away, and Bella finally lowered her fork. “Are you mad at Daddy?”

“No, Bella,” I told her honestly. “I have some big feelings today, but anger isn't one of them.”

“Oh. I... Are you going to leave me?” she finally burst out.

A knot choked me, but I blinked back my tears. “Nope. Sorry. You're stuck with me.”

Hope lit her eyes, making them glitter. “Forever?”

“And ever and ever and ever,” I singsonged, trying to put a threatening edge on it so she would laugh. Her lips twitched with the beginnings of a smile, and I figured that was as close as I would get for the moment.

With a wink, I stole a piece of bacon from her plate just as a shadow darkened our table. “Thank you—”

I thought it was our waitress returning with my coffee, but I was wrong.

Jannel stood beside the table, dressed in another designer outfit, her hair perfectly in place, dark-red lipstick decorating her mouth as she smirked down at us. “Enjoying yourselves, I see.”

Crap, I wished I’d brought Henry after all.

“What a coincidence,” I said dryly. If we’d been back in LA, it might have been. But running into this woman in another state, where there were millions of tourists, hundreds of different hotels to choose from? It wasn’t a bet I would make even if I were a gambler. “Stalker much?”

Jannel laughed like I was hilarious. “I see why they keep you around.” But the amusement died quickly, and she settled her cold gaze on Bella, who shifted in her chair uncomfortably. “Ah, pet, still no hello? My heart is breaking, dearest.”

“Eyes off my kid,” I snarled, my internal alarms screaming at me to get her attention away from Bella. “For whatever reason, you seem to be desperate for a conversation with me. But you will not speak to Bella.”

As she swiveled her head back to me, her dark eyes glittered with some unknown emotion. “Protective little thing, aren’t you? So unlike the others before you.”

“What do you want, lady?” I gritted out, too tired to pretend to be civil, ready for her to say whatever she felt she needed to and get away from us.

“It’s not a crime to want to spend time with my one and only grandchild, is it?”

Surprise had my mouth dropping open for a moment. This was Bella’s grandmother? But she was so young. Or was she?

Cosmetic surgery was the closest anyone would get to eternal youth. Perhaps she had a very skilled doctor.

“Ah, it’s always an ego boost when people respond with such surprise,” Jannel gushed.

While I was processing that, I glanced at Bella, but she didn’t seem surprised. Although, she was definitely not happy to see her grandmother. Timidly, she curled back in her chair, trying to put more distance between Jannel and herself.

“What are you doing here?”

My head jerked at the sound of Sariah’s angry voice. She’d been ready to tear Chloe’s hair out the night before, but that was nothing to the rage sparking in her eyes at the moment. She stormed toward us with her hands already balled into fists.

“Darling, you’re just in time. I was hoping to have some quality bonding time with my daughter and granddaughter.”

Bella’s small, sharply drawn breath was all the outward sign she gave to the bomb that had just been dropped on me. Because I didn’t need Sariah to confirm if that was true or not. With the two women almost side by side, I could suddenly see why Jannel had seemed so familiar to me.

Bella lowered her gaze to her food, again not seeming at all surprised by what Jannel had said.

She knew.

No one had ever talked about Bella’s mother. But I’d assumed it was because the woman was dead and it was too painful for anyone to mention her.

My heart thumping erratically, my mind in a whirlwind, I tried to keep myself composed so as not to scare my poor, sweet Bella. Who had a mother but didn’t call her “Mom.”

Who was always so lonely. She'd asked me only minutes before if I was going to leave her.

Remembering Paxton's reaction to Luck and Sariah's obvious relationship the night before, I felt sick. No wonder he was so torn up over it. He and Sariah had a child together.

Everything made so much sense, I didn't understand how I hadn't put it all together sooner. Their closeness. Sariah going on vacation with them so often.

But it only left me with more questions.

Why?

Why didn't Bella call Sariah "Mom"?

Why weren't Paxton and Sariah together when it was so obvious they were still close?

"I'm going to tell you one more time, Jannel," Sariah said through gritted teeth. "Stay away from my family. If you come near Brooke or Bella again, I will destroy you."

"Sure, darling." Jannel snickered, not taking the threat seriously. She grinned down at me. "It was great chatting with you, but I have a flight to catch. See you at parent pickup, girls."

Her diamond rings caught the light as she gave me a finger wave before walking away, still lightly laughing to herself. I watched her go, reeling over everything I'd just learned.

A large mug was placed on the table in front of me. Our waitress asked Sariah if she was joining us as she filled the cup. I grabbed it as soon as she stopped pouring and took a gulp, needing the hot liquid to get my brain cells to snap to life again.

“No,” Sariah said, watching me cautiously as she spoke. “I’m not hungry. I’ll just be sitting with them.”

Emotions blinded me, and I became caught in my own head, pain shooting behind my eyes like my brain was being sliced with a laser. And then I blinked Sariah into focus. She’d taken the seat to my right, but it was Bella’s quietness that drew me back to reality.

Her sad eyes, once again pleading for me not to leave her.

“How did you meet Jannel?” Sariah asked me, her voice hesitant.

I couldn’t look away from Bella as I answered, sounding like a robot. “She approached me. At school, while I was picking up Bella this week. Twice.”

Bella hadn’t said a word about Jannel then. If anything, she’d changed the subject. Avoidance. Ah, precious girl.

“If you see her in the future, tell me. I’ll handle it.”

Ignoring her, I reached across the table, taking Bella’s hands in mine. “How long have you known?” She shrugged, but I instinctively knew I couldn’t let her hide. “Bella.”

“Three nannies ago,” she said with another shrug. “Christy would take me for ice cream after school every day. Jannel was always there. She told me...stuff.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

brooke

SARIAH CHOKED ON AIR, and I finally glanced at her. Her skin had an unnatural pallor to it, her eyes holding that deer caught in the headlights look.

She hadn't known that Bella knew.

Releasing Bella's right hand, I took one of Sariah's as well, offering her comfort. For what exactly, I wasn't sure, but I could sense she needed my touch to ground her.

"Christy left, and the next one, Kim, started doing the same thing not long after. Then Kayla."

"Wh-what did she tell you?" Sariah gulped.

Bella kept her head turned so that she was only looking at me. "She told me Riah is my mom, but she didn't want to be. I already knew that. Not who my mom was exactly. Daddy never said. And he got mad the times I asked, so I stopped asking. But I figured whoever my mom was didn't want me, and that's why I didn't know who she was. It's okay, though. I don't need a mom."

"No, Bella. That's not true," Sariah whispered, heartbreak filling every word. "I love you. So, so much. But things happened. Things I will never tell you about. I couldn't be

your mom. I couldn't. Please, Bella-Boo. Please understand. I would do anything, give anything, to be able to... But I can't."

Her voice cracked, and I squeezed her fingers.

Bella swallowed hard but still didn't look at Sariah. I gave her an encouraging smile, locking away my anger at Jannel. There would be plenty of time for that later. "What else did Jannel tell you while you ate ice cream?"

"Just that I shouldn't tell anyone I knew who my mom was. Or that she bought me ice cream. Or that I knew her. The ice cream wasn't even that good, but I didn't want to make Daddy mad. She said he would send me away if he found out. That he wouldn't want me anymore either." Her chin wobbled. If Jannel had still been there, I would have shanked her with my fork. Right in her cold, dark heart. "When I saw her talking to you, I thought you would make me eat ice cream with her too. I was so glad you didn't."

"Never, precious. Not ever. I promise."

Relief filled Bella's face, her little shoulders sagging as she released a breath and shrank back into her chair. With Sariah seated beside her, I looked for any similarities that would suggest they were mother and daughter. But other than the brown eyes and Bella's skin tone being a few shades lighter, I couldn't find anything. There wasn't much of Paxton in Bella either, something I already knew. I'd been looking for weeks now, only to assume that Bella must favor her mother.

Yet, she barely did.

What was I missing?

"Henry didn't recognize her," I mused aloud, making my thoughts change direction before I drove myself insane. Sitting there trying to come up with any excuse that wouldn't break

my heart more than it already was—because I wanted Paxton to be free to love me like he said he did—only made me pathetic.

“Henry used to be with Daddy all the time, and Kirk drove me to school,” Bella said. “When you came to live with us, he made Henry do it.”

“Henry is the head of security,” Sariah wheezed, her eyes haunted as she seemed to will Bella to look at her. But she wouldn’t. I didn’t think she could. “Paxton switched things up for you. Apparently the previous guard failed to mention the ice-cream excursions.”

“Jannel always gave the nannies and Kirk money,” Bella explained, absently playing with her utensils. “They thought I didn’t know, but I’m not stupid. I saw her give them a lot of money every time we met her.”

“Of course you’re not,” I assured her, offended on her behalf. “You’re the smartest kid I know. You’re as wise as Yoda himself.”

“Right?” She grinned, causing me to laugh. But her face became serious again all too soon. “I really wish we hadn’t come here this weekend. Can we go home now?”

“Soon,” I promised, taking another drink of my coffee. It was considerably cooler this time, but I wasn’t after taste. It was the caffeine kick I needed. Hopefully I had something for the migraine in my bag upstairs.

“I’m so sorry,” Sariah whispered. “For everything. Bella-Boo. Please, I... God, I’m so, so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Bella said, sounding resigned. Not mad. Not sad. Resigned. At six. The crack in my heart grew a little deeper. “I’m used to it. Do what you want. I’m fine. Because

Brooke loves me. As long as you don't take Brooke away from me, I don't care."

"You're so strong, Bella," she choked out, blinking back tears. "My little miracle who saved me after all the nightmares. You deserve Brooke, and Brooke is the only one deserving of you. I love you, and I know they seem like empty words because I have done nothing to earn your love, but I have to tell you. I love you more than life. More than myself. More than Luck."

"I love you too." Bella curled her fingers in mine. "But I love Brooke more. She's mine."

"Always," I agreed. "And you're mine."

Jumping to her feet, she ran around the table and threw her arms around my neck. "You said I was your kid. That's what you told Jannel."

God, no one had ever needed me or wanted me in their life like Bella. She had been mine the moment I'd met the sad Jedi on her sixth birthday. No matter what happened with her dad and me, there was no way I would ever willingly leave her.

"Then I guess it has to be true," I said.

Feeling eyes on me, I glanced around to find several people at nearby tables watching us. We'd been giving a good portion of Vegas a free show all weekend. First, before the fight the night before. Now, over breakfast. Kissing Bella's cheek, I leaned back. "Did you have enough to eat?" She nodded. "Then let's go back to the room and wake up your dad and Luck so we can get home."

Sariah waved over the waitress. I had brought some cash to pay, but she gave me a stern look and told the woman to charge everything to the penthouse. Pulling a tablet from her

apron, the waitress plugged in our information and then handed it over for Sariah to sign.

I held Bella's hand as we left the restaurant and found the elevators. "How was the fight?" I asked, making conversation to keep things comfortable between the three of us.

Ducking her head, Sariah groaned. "Nothing went as planned last night. After you two left, the reigning champion's wife showed up. There are pictures of her husband and Chloe all over the internet from when they were out earlier this week. That's what she was talking about when she came up to us last night, trying to upset you. I can't stand her. And if she had gotten in your head, I would have killed her. But she's harmless other than being a..." She glanced at Bella to make sure she wasn't looking at us before mouthing, "whore."

Chloe had upset me last night, but only for a moment. It had been the realization that Paxton loved Sariah that had sucker-punched me. Not wanting to think about that, however, I snickered. "But she seemed like such a sweet girl."

"Pfft," Sariah snorted. "Chloe has always been easy. She has a thing for Paxton, but he won't give her the time of day. I'm not surprised she was caught doing the naughty with someone else's husband. She thinks her daddy's money will save her. It didn't save her from me when she tried to hurt you last night, and it sure didn't save her from the beatdown she took from Marcella."

Bella perked up at that news. "Marcella was there last night?"

Grinning, Sariah nodded, giving Bella what I hoped was the watered-down version of the girl-fight before the actual MMA event took place. "Security had to pull them apart. The

only good part was when Jon was told to leave and that he wouldn't be invited to sponsor another event."

"I don't like him very much," Bella said, making a face. "He makes Daddy grumpy."

"Which one was Jon again?" I asked as we stepped into the elevator. "I met so many people, I'm not sure I remember."

"You weren't introduced to Jon," Sariah informed me. "He was the one who tried to grab my butt when he hugged me."

"Creepy guy," I muttered with a nod. "Luck pushed him."

"Yeah, that was him," Sariah confirmed. "He's also Chloe's dad."

I needed to start making notes of who these people were so I didn't get them confused in the future. Not that I planned on going to another event like this one. At least not unless Bella wanted to go. Where she went, I would follow.

"The MMA world is not unlike a soap opera," I concluded.

"Did Marcella's husband win?" Bella asked when the elevator opened into the penthouse.

"Nope. There's a new champ. Oscar got knocked out cold in the second round."

"Yes!" Bella pumped a fist in the air as she skipped into the living room, already looking for the remote. Given the craptastic night and morning, I decided I wasn't going to stop her from enjoying a little mind-rot. "I told Uncle Luck that Baset would get the title. He owes me a hundred bucks."

I slapped my hands on my hips, frowning down at her. "Oh, he does, does he?"

"Uh-oh," she mumbled, looking sheepish.

“Busted,” Sariah laughed, walking to the fridge to get a bottle of water.

“Jedi should not be gambling,” I chided. “No more betting for you, Bella-Rey.”

“Can I at least collect on this one? Please, please, please?” She batted her lashes at me, pouting her bottom lip. “I have something special I want to buy with the money.”

“Fine, but just this once.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

paxton

A SHARP KNOCK jerked me awake just as Luck barged into the room. “Get your ass up, man. Pilot is already fueling up.”

“Fuck off.” Grabbing a pillow, I covered my face, blocking out the glare of the sun coming through the window.

“You can be grumpy on the plane. Get up. The girls are ready to go.” I flipped him off, but he just slammed the door behind him.

He was lucky I hadn’t already murdered him. After seeing him with Sariah, realizing how blind I’d been for who the fuck knew how long, I felt like the bastard had stabbed me in the back. He knew how important she was to me.

Groaning, I slowly sat up. I wasn’t sure what time it had been when I’d come in last night after the fight was over. Discovering Brooke wasn’t in our bed had only pissed me off more until I found her cuddled with Bella. Seeing the two of them holding on to each other while the city lights spilled across them through the window had given me a sense of peace.

I’d kicked off my shoes and crawled into bed behind Brooke without taking the time to shower. Surprisingly, sleep had come quickly with the scent of her hair in my nose and the comforting feel of her body pressed against my own.

“Daddy!” Bella called from the other side of the door but didn’t open it. “Please hurry. I wanna go home!”

Something in her voice hit me weird. Not a wobble or a stumble. But it definitely had a note in there that was off. Scrubbing a hand over my face, I got out of bed. My shit was in the other room, the previous night’s clothes feeling too tight and scratchy on my skin. Opening the door, I frowned down at my kid, looking for signs of what had upset her.

Brooke had brought her back to the suite without a word to me the night before. Henry had said Bella was upset but not why. Given the chaos that had followed Sariah’s little scene with Powel’s spoiled daughter, I was glad they had both been out of the line of fire.

Marcella had basically eviscerated the bitch. And then Jon had been sent packing. He was banned from future events. Not because of Chloe’s behavior, but because he’d allegedly been paying the lower-ranking fighters to throw fights and getting his business partners to bet on the matches.

Dirty bastard.

But other than witnessing Sariah’s hissy fit over whatever grudge she had against Chloe Powel, I didn’t understand what Bella had been upset about. She’d seen plenty of MMA matches that had gotten bloody, and she always seemed to enjoy watching the sport. Sariah had barely pulled the blonde’s hair the night before. Child’s play compared to the beating Marcella had unleashed only a few minutes later.

A wariness that hadn’t been in Bella’s eyes before stared back at me. I pressed my thumb into my eye, rubbing away the remains of sleep, but when I looked down at her again, nothing had changed.

“Are you feeling okay, Bella-Boo?”

“I wanna go home,” she repeated and turned to walk away.

From the kitchen, I heard Luck asking if we had everything.

“I just need to grab my bag,” Brooke answered, sounding tired. “Bella is already packed.”

“Siren?”

I clenched my jaw. After his first slip the night before, he hadn’t even attempted to call Sariah anything but the nickname he’d apparently given her.

Goddamn it, when had their relationship started?

How long had my best friend been fucking my—

“Daddy!” Bella shouted. “Hurry up.”

Brooke’s head peeked around the corner, causing my heart to leap at the sight of her. “You are allowed to have emotions, Bella. But you are not allowed to take them out on others.”

Bella’s shoulders dropped. “Sorry.”

“Who should you be apologizing to?” Brooke asked, her tone equally firm and gentle, brows raised.

Turning, my daughter gave me a cool glare but mumbled, “Sorry, Daddy.”

Brooke turned away before Bella was finished, not sparing me a second glance as she answered another mundane question Luck tossed at her. I wished she would go back to ignoring the traitor’s existence.

“Daddy.” Bella’s sigh drew my gaze back to her. “Please.”

Crouching down, I reached for her, but she took a step back. “What’s up, Bella-Boo?”

“Nothing,” she dismissed, crossing her arms over her chest, her hip popping to the side. So much attitude in a small package, it almost made me smile. Brooke was rubbing off on her. “Can we go now?” Her jaw worked as she clenched and unclenched her teeth, gritting out another, “Please.”

“We’re not going anywhere until you tell me what your deal is.” I tried to give her the same stern look Brooke did that never failed to keep her in line. From the way she stared back at me, unblinking, I must have fallen flat. “Bella, it’s too early for this shit.”

“It’s four thirty,” she informed me with a huff. “And don’t curse.”

“Four thirty?” I groaned when she nodded in confirmation. “Jesus.”

“Paxton?” Sariah called out, her voice only slightly hesitant. She popped around the same corner Brooke had disappeared back behind. As soon as I saw her face, I knew something had happened.

All thoughts of her with Luck disappeared, and I took a step forward, needing to get to her, to figure out whatever was wrong. “What is it?” I demanded, reaching for her. “Tell me.”

Her sharp inhale was followed by a gulp. My hands tightened on her arms, and I tried not to shake her. “Tell me what the hell happened, Riah.”

Nervously, she licked her lips. “Jannel,” she whispered.

My blood ran ice-cold for a moment before turning into an inferno of rage. “What?” I barked. “She was here? Why didn’t you come get me?”

“There wasn’t time. I found her with Brooke and Bella at the breakfast buffet—”

“She was where?” I bellowed. A twisted, sick sensation filled my gut. That malicious, vile cunt had been near my girls? Fuck. *Fuck*. I couldn’t see straight for a moment. “How did she get that close to either of them? Luck!”

He was barely out of the kitchen before I was on him. “How the fuck did that woman get that close to my girls? Where was Henry? There is a restraining order in place! She isn’t supposed to be within five hundred feet of anyone in this family.”

“Pax, man, you need to calm down.” He placed his hands on my shoulders, squeezing.

Calm down? How the hell was I supposed to do that when the bitch who had destroyed Sariah had been allowed to breathe the same air as Brooke and Bella?

“Brooke didn’t know anything about Jannel until this morning,” Luck explained. “She thought it was okay to take Bella to get something to eat without Henry.”

“What did she say to her?” I pushed away from him. “What did she do?”

They were questions I should have been asking Brooke, even Bella.

Fuck!

“Kitten?” I entered the kitchen to find Brooke leaning against the giant island that took up most of the room. Just seeing her was enough to help me take a deep breath. As long as my eyes were on her, she was safe. Rounding the island, I pulled her into my arms and buried my face in her hair.

But while her scent filled my nose, I realized she wasn't holding me like I was her. Her arms were stiff at her sides, her spine rigid. She was in my arms, her front molded to mine, but her walls were back up. I could feel the mental distance she'd snapped into place between us.

Something inside me howled with pain. No. Whatever Jannel had done or said, I would fix it.

Cupping her face, I pressed my forehead to hers, praying I *could* fix it.

"Baby, I need you to tell me what happened." My voice came out hoarse, a plea darkening each word. "Everything she said. How she said it. Don't leave anything out."

She flattened her hands against my chest, pushing me back. I gave her a few inches but didn't release her. She narrowed her eyes on me just like she did to Bella when she wanted her to behave, but I only tightened my fingers on her.

Sighing, she rolled her eyes. "I don't know what the big deal is about that awful woman. Sorry, Riah. I know she's your mom, but she is a terrible human. How did she create you? Do you take after your dad or something?"

I choked at Brooke's question, but when I looked into her eyes, she was genuinely curious.

"You don't know," I rasped, unsure if I was relieved or worried that Jannel had chosen to leave that part out of whatever bullshit she was trying to stir up. "She didn't tell you."

Brooke's green eyes turned hard. "She told me plenty. Do we have to do this here? Bella is tired. She's had a very hard, emotional day. No one in this room seems to care about that. Your child is upset, Paxton."

“I don’t care about all of that!” Bella yelled, causing us all to look down at her in surprise. “I don’t care about anything except going home. How many times do I have to say it? It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters. Not Jannel. Not that Sariah is my mom. Or that my daddy isn’t my daddy. I don’t care because none of them care.”

Her voice broke, and I felt her pain all the way down into the cracks in my soul. Her words hurt. Fuck, they hurt.

Falling to my knees in front of her, I bundled her against me, letting my tears fall. “From the moment you came screaming into this world, I have been your daddy, Bella. I don’t know what I’m doing most of the time. I mess up every other day, but I love you. No one in this world will ever love you as much as me.”

“But you’re not,” she sobbed, hitting her fist against my chest. It was the first time she’d ever exploded like that, overwhelmed to the point that she couldn’t control her emotions any longer. “You aren’t my dad. You aren’t. And it makes my heart hurt. No one cares but Brooke. She’s the only one who loves me. She doesn’t lie or pretend.”

I trapped her arms against her sides, afraid she might hurt herself. “No one is pretending, Bella. I *am* your daddy.”

“No, you aren’t! You’re Riah’s daddy, not mine.”

“Wait,” Brooke gasped. “What?”

“Jesus Christ,” Luck groaned. “Bella, what the hell did Jannel tell you when she would take you for ice cream? Tell us all of it this time.”

“E-everything,” she hiccupped brokenly. “She s-said my real daddy w-will steal me if I-I’m n-not g-good. Sh-she said n-no one wants m-me. No-nobody loves me.”

Jannel had a death wish. One I would gladly fulfill for her. For coming near my girls. For daring to speak to them, let alone filling my precious daughter's head full of fears and lies.

"I will never let anyone take you from me. You're mine. I love you." I tried to wipe up all her tears, wanting to fix her broken heart, heal the pain I had been blind to. "I love you so much, and I will never let you go."

"But Jannel said!"

"She lied to you," Sariah grated out, her voice hard, louder than I'd ever heard her speak. She grasped Bella's arms and spun her around to face her. "Bella, listen to me carefully. The man who is the other biological half of you, he won't take you from your daddy. Yes, *your* daddy. Yours and only yours. That man Jannel threatened you with won't take you away because he can't."

"Riah," I warned, knowing it would send her to a dark place to talk about that fucking monster. It always did. I'd nearly lost her to the darkness too many times to count because of him.

"Siren, don't," Luck urged.

"Shut up!" she hissed at us, never taking her eyes off Bella. "Three years ago, he died. Did Jannel tell you that? He's dead."

"N-no," Bella hiccupped, shaking her head.

"Of course she didn't," she laughed dryly, her eyes turning manic for a moment, thinking of her mother. "That's because she wanted you to be scared. Fear makes it easier to control people. Jannel used to scare me every day. That's why when I found out I was pregnant with you, I ran away. I found Paxton.

He helped me, Bella. Up until that day, he didn't even know who I was, but he loved me as soon as we met."

She wiped away the tears that ran down Bella's face, smiling tenderly, giving me hope that she wouldn't let her stepfather win this time. That motherfucker might have been rotting in the ground now, but I still had to live with the fear of his ghost taking away Sariah's will to live. "But then you were born, and Paxton loved you more than he loved anyone. He loved you so much, and I was glad. I couldn't give you a mom, but I found you a dad who would give his life for you."

"R-really?" Bella whispered with so much hope in her voice, my heart felt like it was bleeding.

"Really," she whispered back. "He adopted you. That means he is your daddy. Not biologically, but that's just science. In all the ways that count, you belong to Paxton."

"Promise?"

"Is there like a Jedi oath you want me to take?" Sariah teased. "Yes, Bella-Boo. I promise."

Bella's face scrunched up. "But if he was your dad first... Does that mean he's, like, my grandpa? My friend Adelaide has grandparents, and they are her mom's mommy and daddy."

Luck gave a choked sound that was part laugh, part sob. "Christ, I always dreaded the day when we would have to tell her that she's adopted, but reminding Paxton he's a grandfather is kind of hilarious."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

brooke

BELLA HAD SEEMED okay after breakfast, but as the day had gone on, I couldn't help noticing how quiet she'd become. When Luck had dragged himself out of bed, Sariah had reluctantly told him about what happened with Jannel.

He'd gotten a look on his face that scared me before he schooled his expression and then started questioning all three of us. What had Jannel said? How had she acted? Did she look high? How long had she been having those ice-cream meetups after school with Bella?

I'd had barely any details to contribute. Mostly, it was Bella who had to answer, and the more questions he threw at her, the more I could see her drawing in on herself. Not liking how talking about her evil grandmother was making Bella feel, I tried to stop Luck, but he was adamant about needing to know so he and Paxton could protect her.

Reluctantly, I let him continue, but I kept Bella on my lap during the rest of the questioning, rubbing her back while she unloaded what we thought were all her burdens. But as soon as she had told him everything she had admitted to Sariah and me earlier, I'd put an end to the interrogation.

Now, after seeing firsthand the turmoil that must have been swirling around inside her mind for who knew how long, I

didn't know what to do to help her. Bella's sobs were so full of pain, I couldn't hold back my own tears as I watched her with Paxton.

Helplessly, I stood there and listened to him and Sariah try to reassure Bella, while still attempting to keep up with all the secrets that were suddenly being spilled. In the harsh light of day, knowing the truth instead of taking the assumptions I'd made as reality, everything made so much sense, I felt dizzy.

And with it came overpowering relief. Paxton really did love Sariah—but not in the way I'd originally thought. She was his biological daughter.

His and Jannel's.

Imagining him with Jannel didn't bother me. Not even a little. Whatever their history was, I knew he didn't love her. Sariah was twenty-five. If he'd loved Jannel, she would have been his wife by now. Or at least living with him. Instead, all I'd seen was hate in his eyes at the mention of her. Hate and panic.

From the sick sensation I'd felt when Sariah spoke of the man she couldn't even bring herself to call Bella's father—only labeling him the other biological half of Bella—and the way Luck's face had turned six kinds of scary when she spoke about him, I was getting a clearer picture of why Paxton would loathe Jannel.

Was that why Sariah had wanted to kill herself in the past? Because of Jannel? Or Bella's father? I wanted to hug my friend so hard, hide her past self away from whatever had given her such thoughts. Protect her from the monsters that haunted the dark parts of her mind.

Paxton's shuddery breath drew my eyes from Sariah to him. I wanted to throw my arms around him, hold him and his little girl until all their pain and worry faded into nothing. His unmasked suffering echoed within me.

Tears still leaked down his face, but he shot Luck a glare that promised swift retribution. "We are the same age, dumbass. That means you're old enough to be her grandfather too."

Luck shrank back, his jaw hardening. "Fuck you."

Bella grabbed Paxton's face, squishing his cheeks. "It's okay, Daddy. I don't want a grandpa. What I really want is a mom." She glanced over at me, her dimple popping even as the tears dried on her face.

Paxton followed her gaze, but I quickly looked away without meeting his mossy orbs. Heat climbing my neck, I shifted uncomfortably. I loved Bella. And Sariah. And as much as I'd tried to fight it, I knew I loved Paxton too.

But it was way too soon to be thinking in the direction Bella's sweet thoughts were going.

Sariah gave me a sympathetic smile, but there was a glint in her eyes that gave me pause. I opened my mouth to tell her not to go there. Only the night before, I thought the man I'd stupidly fallen in love with was hopelessly in love with my best friend. Until only minutes before Bella's outburst, I'd still thought that was true.

I'd thought if my stepmother could see how much I cared for Paxton, she would do everything in her power to destroy my newfound happiness. But in reality, I was the one who had nearly done that. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, I'd let insecurities break my own heart.

On top of that, Paxton and I hadn't even been on a date. Marriage was for sure not going to be on the table anytime soon. Or ever.

Needing to distract both Bella and Sariah, I looked to Luck for help, my eyes silently pleading for him to do something.

"Hey now," my uncle groused at Paxton, causing my heart to lift in relief. "What *are* your intentions with my niece?"

Why did I think for even a second that he would help me? Had I not learned my lesson with him already? Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

While I mentally chastised myself, Paxton slowly got to his feet. "You want to go there? Now?" His voice boomed off the kitchen tiles, causing my dull headache to spike a little harder. "You want to tell me how long this thing has been going on between you and Riah?"

Sensing danger, I beckoned Bella over to me on the other side of the island to get her out of the line of fire should either man throw a punch. Skipping over to me, she gave me a tight hug, still beaming. She appeared lighter now that the weight of all the secrets and worries she'd been holding on her small shoulders had been released. Tucking her hair behind her ear, I kissed her cheek before looking over at the others again.

Curving an arm around Sariah's waist, Luck pulled her into his side. She put her hand on his chest, staring up at him with so much adoration, it seemed to fill the entire kitchen. Basking in the glow of her love for him, he dropped his forehead to hers for several heartbeats before he met Paxton's gaze boldly.

"I've loved her for years, man. It feels like she's always been part of my soul. I tried to fight it, but when I realized

how much I was hurting her by denying how I felt, I manned up. We both knew this would cause problems with you, but Pax, I have wasted too much time as it is. If it comes down to it, I will pick her over everything else. Even our friendship.”

Paxton squeezed the back of his neck, muttering something to himself as he glared at the floor. But when he lifted his chin, he had a hint of a smile on his lips. “You love her that much?”

“Yes,” Luck rasped.

He pointed at Sariah. “And you love him?”

“So much.”

With a grunt, he slumped back. “As long as she stays happy, I don’t care. But you hurt her, and I’ll...”

Thankfully, the threat was left hanging, but no less menacing for being unvoiced. Luck held up his free hand in a gesture of understanding, then extended it. “Friends?”

“Friends,” Paxton sighed, shaking his hand. As he turned, his gaze caressed over me before dropping to Bella. “How about we stay an extra day? You can skip school tomorrow. Tonight, we can all go to dinner and then have a movie night as a family.”

“No school?” She started bouncing on her toes. All her doubts and fears were gone. “Can we have an ice cream sundae party and watch *Return of the Jedi*?”

“Absolutely, Bella-Boo.”

“Can I stay up past my bedtime?”

“We’ll see.”

Sensing she had the chance to negotiate, she pressed her luck. “Can I skip school all week?”

To my surprise, Paxton seemed to consider it for a moment. “We’ll see,” he answered again. “But only if you’re up for staying here for a few more days. Daddy has to take care of a few things before we go home.”

“Will you and Brooke be here?” She sounded hesitant.

“Yes, sweetheart,” he said softly. “Where I go, my girls go.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

paxton

IF I'D KNOWN how fucked up the trip to Vegas would turn out, I would have stayed home. In bed. With Brooke.

All fucking weekend.

But as much as I never wanted to put Bella through any of that shit again, I was glad she'd finally told me what was going on. One of my biggest fears was letting her down. Not being enough for her. Not protecting her.

Sariah didn't come into my life until she was eighteen. Pregnant and desperate, she'd run away from her mom and stepfather, unsure if I would even help her. She had no idea what kind of person I was, and even after seeing my lifestyle at the time broadcast all over trashy gossip sites and disparaged on more sports talk shows, she'd decided I was the safer bet for her and her child than the vile humans in her home.

When she'd shown up at my door, I'd been a drunken mess. My house was still trashed from a party two nights before, and there were half-naked women still passed out around the pool and in several of the bedrooms. I'd taken one look at her and told her to fuck off before she could tell me her name.

It wasn't like I knew she was my daughter. Jannel had been my on-again, off-again girlfriend back when I was moving up in the MMA world. But apparently my success hadn't come quickly enough for her. She'd married the son of one of the sponsors of my first-ever event. I'd heard she'd gotten knocked up and his old man had insisted, thinking the kid was the next heir to the family fortune or some shit.

I hadn't given her much thought in the eighteen-plus years since I'd fucked her. My mom had hated Jannel, and for me, it had been more about the easy, convenient pussy rather than being in love with her.

After slamming the door in Sariah's face, I'd gone inside and passed out in front of the TV. It wasn't until the next morning, when Luck had finally untangled himself from the girls he'd spend the weekend having a private party with in the room he used at my place, that he'd found Sariah still on the front steps. She'd sat there all night.

What I'd learned after that had kept me sick to my stomach for months. Did not knowing about my daughter absolve me of the accountability for not being there to protect her? Reason said yes. My fucked-up head and heart said hell no.

When Sariah said she was going to give the baby up for adoption because she couldn't imagine even looking at the child that was the product of her abuse, I begged her to let me have Bella. Maybe it wouldn't make up for what I'd unwittingly put her through, but I had the chance of getting something right with my granddaughter.

At the time, Sariah hadn't cared one way or another. She'd still been in shock and had basically shut down all of her emotions. It wasn't until Bella was born, the doctors placing her on her mother's chest, that she finally snapped out of it.

But while she instantly loved the baby in her arms, just as Luck and I both had, she knew she would never be able to care for Bella as she deserved.

Over the past six years, I'd done my best. Loving Bella wasn't hard. It was all the other stuff that I failed at miserably. Now, I realized how abysmally I'd failed to keep my little girl safe from the same monster who had been responsible for half of her mother's nightmares.

First, I needed to get Bella more settled. Try to make up for all the stress she'd been under and I hadn't seen. Who the fuck cared if I spoiled her? She was my kid. My money. My time. I'd do what I wanted with it. I wasn't trying to buy her love or forgiveness. The only thing I wanted was for her to know that if she needed or wanted anything, all she had to do was tell me.

While I was focused on Bella, I had Luck working on everything else. Security would be tighter. Henry didn't know about Jannel because he'd been my personal guard up until Brooke came into our lives. Kirk, the guard who was previously responsible for driving Bella to school and her overall protection when I wasn't with her, was back in LA.

Before dinner, I'd told Luck to make him disappear. With nothing more than a nod from my best friend, I knew it would be taken care of. Not giving the bastard a second thought, I kept my smile in place as the five of us enjoyed dinner and then walked around the mall attached to one of the nearby hotels.

Bella didn't want anything. She barely glanced in the windows of some of the stores, too focused on seeing how high she could swing Brooke's or my arms as we held her hand during our walk.

Back in the suite, Bella ran off to shower after giving me a detailed list of all the ice cream flavors and toppings she wanted for our sundae party. Brooke hid a grin as I ordered everything from room service, a giggle escaping her when I finally hung up.

I grabbed her by the ass and lifted her onto the kitchen island. “Fuck, I missed that sound. Been almost twenty-hour hours since I last heard it.” I pressed my nose to her throat. “Give it to me again, kitten.”

“Paxton.” She spread her legs wider for me so I could get closer. “Don’t be mad, but I have to confess something to you, and it might—”

My fingers bit into her hips. “You leaving me?”

Swallowing hard, she shook her head. “No. I don’t think I can now. I...”

“If you aren’t leaving me, then nothing you confess will upset me,” I told her solemnly.

Sucking her bottom lip between her teeth, she looked up at me through her lashes. “I still have to tell you.”

“Then say what you need to, baby.”

Inhaling deeply, she blew it out and said in a rush, “Last night, I thought you were in love with Riah, and it nearly killed me. I made assumptions and didn’t talk to you about it. It hurt because I thought if you loved her, then you must have been lying when you said you loved me. It was stupid and childish. I’m sorry.”

Tipping her chin up, I gave her a moment to catch her breath, absorbing everything she had just spilled out like word vomit. “Feel better for getting that off your chest?”

After a pause, she nodded.

“You still think I don’t love you?” She dropped her lashes, not answering me. “Kitten, please.”

Blinking up at me, she lifted one shoulder. “I want you to love me,” she admitted in a voice so quiet I had to strain to hear her, even as close as we were. “I want it so badly. But I’m scared.”

“Loving you is like breathing for me.” Taking one of her hands, I pressed it to the center of my chest. “It’s involuntary. Something I do without thinking. But I need it to survive.”

Her chin trembled. Lowering my head, I kissed the corner of her mouth. “You’re scared, and I get why. I wish I could fix all the things that broke along the way that made you distrust anything good in your life. But all I can do is keep loving you and showing you I’m not going anywhere.”

“That might take a while. I have a lot of baggage.”

Still keeping her hand pressed to my chest, I pressed my free hand over her rapidly beating heart. “Is this mine?”

Biting her lip, she gave me a single nod.

“Say it, kitten,” I commanded.

“It’s yours,” she whispered.

My heart felt like it was going to explode from how happy her words made me. It was more than I could have ever hoped for. Having this beautiful woman love me was more than I deserved. But fuck if I wouldn’t grab on to her and never let go. “Then nothing else matters. I’ll spend every day for the rest of our lives proving you can trust me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

brooke

SOMETIME DURING *RETURN of the Jedi*, I fell asleep. With Bella cuddled into one side of me and Paxton on the other, playing with my hair, I felt too content to fight the heaviness of my lids.

Feeling cool sheets under me and the hot, hard body pressing up against me had me awake in a flash. Turning over, I blinked up at Paxton. We were in the bedroom we were supposed to share Saturday night. All the lights in the room were off, but the curtains were open, letting the glow of the city act as a night-light.

I couldn't tell what color his eyes were, but from his ragged inhales and the way his cock kept flexing against my belly, I knew he was hungry. For me.

Before the movie and our sundae party, I'd changed into a long T-shirt and a pair of sleep pants. My bottoms were missing now, but my shirt was still on. Rubbing my legs against his, I realized he wasn't wearing any pajamas. His chest was bare. I pressed into him, feeling he wasn't wearing any boxer briefs to restrain his erection.

Shyly, I licked my bottom lip. "H-hi."

He pressed a kiss to the middle of my forehead. "Hello, kitten," he husked. "Did I wake you?"

“Yes, but I don’t think I’m mad about it.” He grinned down at me.

“Yeah, why is that?”

Taking his hand, I guided it under the shirt and onto my damp panties. Without hesitation, he cupped me, his thumb teasing up and down my slit through the wet cotton.

“I definitely wouldn’t be mad if you woke me up to this soaked pussy every night,” he agreed.

Pressing down on my clit, he swallowed my whimper with a kiss. My body took over, refusing to let my shyness interfere with the pleasure I knew Paxton could give. While his mouth devoured me, I touched every inch of him I could reach. Absently exploring every vein that popped up on his arms, each defined ridge and valley of his abs.

Wrapping my fingers around his silk-covered beast of a cock had him jerking his head back, a tortured groan filling the room. “Love your touch, kitten. Squeeze me harder. Show me you’re not scared.”

I tightened my grip as I stroked upward and felt a sticky substance coat the tip. Curious, I rubbed my fingers through it and then sucked each digit clean.

With a feral curse, Paxton rolled me to my back. “Watching that innocent mouth suck my come off your fingers is enough to make me blow all over this pretty little kitty. If I come in your mouth, will you swallow it all for me, baby?”

“Yes,” I moaned. “Please let me taste more of you.”

“Fuck,” he groaned. “You’re trying to steal it all before I’m ready. But I’m not giving you another drop until I’m inside you where I belong.”

“Paxton, I-I want to suck your cock.”

His entire body seemed to tremble. “I have to feel you wrapped around me this time. Have to.”

My shirt disappeared. Before it hit the floor, he had his face buried between my breasts, squeezing them together around his cheeks as he left love bites on either side. His scruff scraped over my skin, leaving a delicious burn from the gritty feeling of his stubble as he made his way down my belly and settled between my thighs.

He placed openmouthed kisses along my slit before spreading my lips open. Animalistic noises left him as he ate me up. I twisted my fingers in his hair, holding him closer, his wicked tongue making me see stars.

“You taste so good,” he growled against my sensitive flesh. “Come on my face so I can fill you up.”

“Oh God,” I whined, my hips lifting off the bed. “That feels... You’re going to make me... Paxton!”

He nipped at my clit, sending me spiraling into another universe, my entire body clenching before it exploded into a million brilliant pieces.

His kiss swallowed my scream as he thrust into me, stretching me, but there was no pain. He’d already taken care of the barrier when we’d taken a bath together days before. I’d been so mindless for him in the bathtub and hadn’t felt the rip of my virginity. He’d been so gentle with me after, even brushing my hair while we sat in his bed.

“Perfection,” Paxton groaned, his hips moving in slow, deep thrusts. “Such a good girl, taking all of me.”

“Paxton.” When he called me “good girl,” I clenched around him. I scratched my nails down his back, urging him to

move faster. Harder. “Please. Please. Please.”

“That’s right, kitten. Purr for me.”

“I love you.”

His hips slammed against me, and he stopped. Sweat coated his skin, his chest heaving from exertion. He swallowed hard. “Say it again, Brooke.”

“I love you,” I repeated, too caught in the moment to care how much of myself I was giving away. “I love you.”

“Love you too, baby.”

* * *

Still half asleep, I stumbled into the kitchen. Coffee was already brewed, telling me I wasn’t the first person up. Finding a mug, I filled it full before taking a gulp to make room for the delicious flavored creamer that was sitting beside the pot.

Sipping it, I savored the taste until it was half gone before turning to acknowledge the man sitting at the island with what could have rivaled the buffet Bella and I had had for breakfast the day before.

“Hungry?” Luck asked when I finally met his gaze.

My stomach growled, but I shrugged. “Where’s Riah?”

“She took Bella breakfast in bed.” His face softened, his love for both of them written all over him. “They’re having a chat and cuddling.”

“Are they okay?” I set my cup on the counter, already stepping in the direction of Bella’s room. Emotions were already raw, and I was worried about the two of them.

Luck lifted a hand, stopping me. “Sariah wanted some alone time with her. To make sure Bella is really okay with... everything. Give them a little while. If either of them needs you, they will let you know.”

I knew he was right, but I couldn't help worrying. Bella had been through so much. But so had Sariah. My best friend had demons I was only just beginning to understand. Given what had happened to me, I'd thought I'd had it rough, but that was nothing compared to Sariah's past.

Picking up my mug again to have something to do with my hands, I strained my ears, trying to listen for any signs of distress coming from the direction of Bella's room.

“So...” My uncle stabbed his fork into a sausage link. “You and Paxton.”

“So,” I mocked, “you and Riah.”

He snorted. “This is weird as fuck. My niece is dating my best friend.”

“Yeah, it is super weird,” I agreed with a smirk. “My uncle is dating *my* best friend. I thought she would have better taste.”

A grin split his face. “You're so much like your mom.”

I slammed my mug back down. “I am nothing like her,” I seethed. “Nothing.”

Luck's grin fell away, his hands lifted in time-out. “Take it easy, kid. That's not what I meant. Maggie had her demons, I know that, more than anyone. You don't have to defend yourself to me.”

He blew out a sigh. “What I mean is, you have her sense of humor. Her sass. Her heart. You're so much stronger than her. I'm so proud of you, Brooke.”

“Oh.” Embarrassment burned my cheeks. I might have overreacted. A little. It had been a long time since I’d thought about my mom other than to remember the unpleasant sides of our relationship. Growing up, I’d promised myself I would never be like her. “Um, thanks. I guess.”

Grabbing a few paper towels, I cleaned up the coffee that had sloshed out of my cup. Keeping my back to Luck, I refilled it and added more creamer. I had no signs of a migraine so far, and I was hoping to keep it that way.

I tightened my fingers around the handle, remembering the failed MRI from the previous week. I was going to have to do it all over again for my neurologist to make a proper diagnosis. The tech said I could be fully sedated the next time since I’d had such an intense reaction to the test itself. But just thinking of being back on that narrow slab of a table inside the tight confines of the machine made my heart thump erratically. My ears began to ring as panic tried to steal the air from my lungs.

Bone-melting heat pressed into my back, strong arms wrapping around my waist as Paxton pressed a kiss to my neck, jolting me out of the panic attack I was falling into. “Morning, kitten,” he greeted, his fingers tracing infinity symbols on my belly beneath my sleep shirt.

“G-good morning,” I murmured, leaning back into his arms.

“Did you sleep well?” Nodding, I took a big swallow of my coffee so I didn’t have to speak. I felt him smile before he kissed my neck again. “Are you hungry?”

“A little.”

“Come eat,” he urged. “Luck always orders too much food. Feeding those he cares about is his love language.”

“That’s why I have so many restaurants,” Luck said as we turned. “Come on, kid. Don’t be shy. I ordered waffles and all the toppings. You know you want some of these strawberries. There’s fresh whipped cream.”

When I didn’t immediately reach for a plate, Paxton began loading one up. He spooned fresh berries on top of a waffle and then dolloped extra whipped cream on top. Bending to kiss me, he pushed the plate into my hands. “Eat, or I will feed you myself.”

Sitting at the island, I picked up a fork and knife. It was a struggle to eat in silence, having to hold back a moan after the first bite. Room service was so much better than the buffet the day before.

Paxton dropped another kiss on my lips before making himself a plate. A comfortable silence fell between the three of us, so it was easy to hear bare feet slapping against the floor announcing Bella running out of her room.

“Daddy, Daddy, Daddy,” she chanted happily as she rushed into the kitchen, breathless with excitement. “Riah and Uncle Luck are getting married, and I’m gonna be the flower girl!”

Don’t worry.

Sariah and Luck’s story is coming soon!