



HER
BILLIONAIRE
BARGAIN

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
QUINN

HER BILLIONAIRE BARGAIN

AN OPPOSITES ATTRACT OFFICE
ROMANCE

KENSINGTON SQUARE

BOOK 3

TARYN QUINN



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Her Billionaire Bargain

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HER BILLIONAIRE BARGAIN

Hiring an interior designer to redo my McMansion led to me...falling in love with a total stranger?

And trying to figure out how to make her fall in love with *me*.

Shelby Wilde is a driven single mom who started an up-and-coming design firm, Designing Women, with three friends.

She is not looking for love. Or lust. Or my particular brand of chaos with a side of many happy moments while naked.

But in no time, I'm ready to give up my wild, freewheeling single days for her and her little girl.

She can still redesign my house. The only thing is, she needs to find a way to make herself and Berry part of the design.

Because I don't want any home without her and the little girl I want to make my daughter.

***Author's note:** Her Billionaire Bargain is a standalone office romantic comedy set in our small town Kensington Square, which is near Crescent Cove. It has a happily-ever-after ending and no cliffhanger.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to our lovely editor, Kelli Collins. She was a total rockstar in helping us out with this book.

ADHD is an ever changing diagnosis. It seems like every day doctors study its effects on children versus adults. We tried to be mindful of that fact. Please forgive any mistakes we made.

Sometimes we make up fictional places that end up having the same names as actual places. These are our fictional interpretations only. Please grant us leeway if our creative vision isn't true to reality.

*To all found families. Sometimes you meet those meant to be
yours regardless of blood.*

ONE

Dexter

I HAD NEVER SMOKED A DAY IN MY LIFE, BUT I HAD A FEELING today might be the day I started.

Why had I canceled the cleaning crew I'd hired? Oh, yeah, because I'd told them I could handle the party I'd foolishly held to celebrate six months of running Shaw, LLC solely on my own. I wasn't used to having staff in my home. As a very single guy, I didn't usually make that much of a mess.

Then again, I normally didn't host parties. I went to parties.

But tonight was different. The champagne fountain had been flowing all night. The fondue fountain had been bubbling. My side table had at least three slips of paper with phone numbers from interested women, and the headache that had been brewing all evening had been beaten back by Advil and a shot of Jack.

I was officially winning at life.

If you didn't look around my living room at the sheer destruction that surrounded me, that is. By all appearances, a band of unruly children, aka fellow lawyers and friends and their spouses, had charged through and left chaos in their wake.

Part of the chaos was Bob, my pug, who'd slumped next to a half-eaten slab of cake that had landed on my Aubusson rug. And he'd just burped.

Or I had. It was hard to tell at this point.

My house was trashed.

On top of that, I didn't even like how it looked when it was all put together. This place was styled to suit my father. Stuff Isaac Shaw. Not wild, freewheeling Dexter Shaw. I should not have priceless antiques in my house. Especially ones I'd had some mindless decorator place in appropriate corners so I seemed rich enough to draw in the fanciest clients—so I could keep on affording this monstrosity of a house.

I was thoroughly sick of this endless cycle, and just skirting close enough to the line of drunkenness to be ready to do something about it.

Grabbing the bottle of Jack like Linus from the Peanuts cartoon with his blue blankie, I headed down the hall to my office, moving to the huge oak desk that my older brother, Preston, would probably drool over. Me, I just kept banging my knee on the heavy file drawers every damn time I sat down.

I jerked my mouse, and my computer woke from the intergalactic screensaver that made my eyeballs pound. Maybe those space lasers weren't ideal right now. I shut my eyes for a moment, and then tapped in my password before I logged into Shaw, LLC's server. It took a couple minutes, but I found the digital address book of names and numbers my all-too-capable assistant, Isis Jenkins, kept for me.

Better yet, she filled in the blanks when I jotted down a phone number and labeled the name in a way I could remember...like "Hottie in Pink Pantsuit."

Yes, that had been a real entry. Ever since my diagnosis of Adult Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, I'd given in to the temptation of leaving myself visual cues to trigger my memory.

Sometimes it was a beautiful woman in a pink pantsuit who stuck.

But Isis helped me out by filling in the blanks with the correct information, like actual names, so I was confident that I'd be able to find the details for the interior decorator my

friend Bishop had hired back in the fall. She'd help him set up his new office with my brother Preston, aka Benedict Arnold Shaw.

Or PMS, his girlfriend's nickname for him worked too.

In the scheme of things, I was fairly certain the decorator had probably endured worst jobs than the one I was about to dump in her lap. I wasn't fussy. I was just tired of wearing an itchy suit that didn't fit, and lately that wasn't only my job, but my house too.

In retrospect, I probably should've kept my bachelor pad at the Clarendon Apartments, even though my father didn't think it offered the appropriate image for an esteemed attorney.

I swear, end up on the news just one time for noise complaints and public nudity and it was impossible to live it down. And the nudity hadn't even been mine.

Unfortunately.

I'd never given two shits about image. There was a reason I wore graphic T-shirts under my suit jackets most days at work, assuming I wasn't due into court. I might stretch the boundaries a bit, but I wasn't a masochist. Judges didn't take kindly to what they viewed as not respecting their authority. And I liked to win.

Fifteen minutes later, I gave up searching for Pink Pantsuit Hottie's number and called Isis, my best friend-slash-assistant-slash ruler of my universe. She did everything but sleep with me, though I'd technically never tried because she would rip off my stones.

Part of why she was my best friend.

"What?"

"Well, hello to you too."

She sighed heavily. "Dexterous, I went home to go to bed. It's late. I'm officially off the clock."

"Best friends are 24-7. It's in the handbook. I checked."

“Your handbook is missing at least several chapters, including the one where if I kill you and bury your body with my bare hands, it’s justifiable homicide and I can’t get jail time.”

“Oh, I definitely didn’t see that chapter.”

“You’re too blitzed to see much.”

I glanced at the bottle of Jack beside the mouse. “Nah, just a little fuzzy.”

“Truer words.” She sighed again. “What do you need?”

“I need to know the name and number of pink pantsuit hottie.”

She choked. “Excuse me?”

“Pink Pantsuit Hot—”

“Listen to me carefully. Put down the alcohol, pour your rank self into a hot shower then put yourself to bed and sleep off your latest psychosis. Call me in the morning once you’re sober. And you better be sober in the morning, my friend, or your mother is getting a phone call. Don’t even bother begging.”

“If I ever begged you for anything, sweetness, you wouldn’t ask me not to.”

“Oh, Lord, you and your supposed charm is enough to give me nightmares. I can’t believe those corny-ass lines actually work for you.”

I grinned. “I could tell you stories.”

“And if you even try to, I’ll move away and leave no forwarding address.”

My gasp wasn’t the least bit faked. “You can’t leave me. I can’t get by at work without you. You’re the glue that holds me together. The glass that keeps me contained. The jelly that layers perfectly with my peanut butter—”

“The Kevlar jacket that prevents people from choosing violence against you. Yeah, on with it. Who or what is Pink Pantsuit Hottie?”

“I don’t know.”

“Dex, I’m going to kick your ass so hard your ancestors are going to cry.”

“If that means my father, I’m okay with it. He probably deserves a good ass-kicking.” No probably there, but the alcohol was making me a little sentimental. Or loopy. “I’m serious, I don’t know. I just put down that notation to remember her in the address book, and boy, do I remember that pantsuit she was wearing the last time I saw her. It gapped just a bit in front and she wore this lacy thing under it.”

“You put that recollection in your address book?”

“She was no-nonsense, but that hint of lace was just a knockout.”

“Great. I’m sure I’d want to do her if I wasn’t strictly dickly. What do you want from me?”

“Hopefully, her name and contact info. You started altering the record, but you stopped halfway through. Maybe you had to look up her info?”

“How would I know the number for your pink hottie?”

“She wasn’t pink, just her pantsuit. Maybe we talked about her.” I snapped my fingers. “I mentioned that she was decorating Bishop’s office with my traitor of a sibling.”

“Oh.” She paused. “Ohhh. You mean Shelby.”

“Shelby.” I rolled the name around on my tongue. It sounded good there. As if that was a name I could say every day.

Especially while I still had Jack left in the bottle. I shook it with amusement.

“Is that a yes?”

“Yeah, I think so. Sounds familiar.”

“I just bet.”

“It’s been months and months,” I said stubbornly. “I’m going to contact her.”

“Why, you drunken horndog.”

I probably shouldn't have laughed. Isis clearly wasn't in the mood to be amused by me. “That's not why I wanted her info. I've had an epiphany tonight, you could say.”

“You're drunk,” my best friend said flatly.

“Au contraire. I'm more sober than I've been in a while.” I tapped the revolving mini world globe in a stand on my desk. It spun, finally coming to a stop with Antarctica in view. A little extreme, but nothing was off the table. “Do you know how long it's been since I've been on a vacation?”

“I don't keep your personal calendar. I trust you can handle that yourself.”

“I can, because I haven't been on one in a year or more. Ever since Preston started grumbling about following Dad out the door.” I took a deep breath. “I'm trying to be someone I'm not, Ice. I thought I could do it. But when I realized I was on my way to drunk to deal with people I don't like that much when I'm sober, I decided my decor was all wrong.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, finally. I've been waiting for you to see the farce you're trying to pull off. You should call that guy Bishop recommended outsourcing some of the firm's overflow cases to—wait a second. Say what?” She huffed out a breath. “You want to change your damn decor? That's your big life decision?”

“Yeah. It's a start, right? My house looks like a freaking museum. What did I work so much for, to have a home that could be in *Architectural Digest*? You know what I did last night, Ice? First time since I moved in.”

“If this is pornographic, I swear to—”

“Hardly. I lay on my couch with my shoes on. My real estate agent would've died. My mother would die too. But whatever. I need a house where I can put my shoes on the couch. Bob is sick of living on plastic.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve been keeping him mostly in the family room and my bedroom because the formal living room has that really fucking expensive couch and his claws will mess with the leather. But sometimes he runs in anyway so I have this plastic cover.” Sighing, I braced my forehead against my hand. “It squeaks and I hate it.”

“Your thought process is disturbing. And what does any of this have to do with taking a vacation?”

“I’ve put too much of my real life aside to live a life I don’t want. I’m going to redo this house to suit me and I’m going to find someone to take on the grunt work of some of my cases. I don’t mind going to court, but the rest isn’t my forte.”

“You can say that again. But it’s not all your fault.”

I blinked. “Excuse me? Is Isis Jenkins actually defending me? Voluntarily? Without someone holding a blade to her throat?”

She laughed. “I know you’ve been trying your best to handle all of this all on your own without asking for help, Dexterous.”

“I always ask you.”

“That’s different. You pay me handsomely, and besides, it’s in the best friend contract. But there’s no shame in bringing in someone like Bishop’s friend Eli to take some of the load off. Assuming he’s still available. You’ve dicked around forever and people’s situations change. But even if he isn’t interested, someone will be. You have to face facts. You aren’t a one-man lawyering wonder like Preston. And news flash: that’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

I rolled my shoulders as I sat back in my chair. I’d been trying to come to terms with not being as brilliant or skilled or competent in a million different ways as my older brother for many years now. My one saving grace was that I always had an admirable social life while he worked constantly.

At least that was how it used to be.

Now I worked constantly and I was still always behind and most of my friends had stopped calling because I was always busy. I still wasn't as incredible as Preston—and I never would be—and now I was even doing a piss-poor impression of myself.

Now Preston was the one with the noteworthy social life. He wasn't out partying and learning to surf during the few months of the year we had good weather on the East Coast. Oh, no, he was happily shackled up with a sexy-as-hell witch who didn't seem interested in marriage or procreation, but kept him strolling around with a smug smile on his face. He'd even opened his own firm with his best friend Bishop, and was clearly satisfied in his career choices as well, choosing to leave divorce law behind in favor of family law.

The bastard.

How had he landed the damn jackpot? I didn't know, but it seemed patently unfair.

As for me? I couldn't even remember the last time I'd been happy at this point.

"I'll give Eli a call," I said finally, giving the globe one more spin. "What can it hurt to talk to him?"

"That's the spirit."

"But first, I want to talk to Pink Pantsuit—" I cleared my throat as Isis growled. "Sorry, Shelby. Bishop recommended her work highly and I want to take this place down to the studs. I need this place to be family friendly."

Isis had apparently chosen that moment to take a sip of some liquid, because she sputtered and went into a coughing fit nearly intense enough to warrant a call to 911. "What did you say?"

"I'm a dog dad, hello. Pets are family. Are you leaving out other family that doesn't have stinky diapers? How incredibly judgmental of you."

"Bob has bad breath, which is almost as bad as dirty diapers. But whew. I thought you'd been spending too much time with Bishop and had decided your new life means you

have to settle down. Like...what would that even look like for Dexterous Shaw? We both know you got that name for reasons that had nothing to do with work.”

“And you’re the one who snatched it out of the halls of our high school and slapped it on my forehead like a banner. Since you won’t marry me, you have no idea if that’s even truth in advertising. Your loss,” I added lightly.

“I won’t marry you because you can’t handle me, and I don’t want to find out how I look in prison orange. Besides, we both know you’ll never get married. The very idea is preposterous.”

“We used to say that about Preston and look at him now.”

“He’s still not married.”

“Don’t argue with me. Just saying you never really know with people.”

She let out a loud huff. “Whatever. The day Dexterous Shaw settles down in a serious, settled relationship without being blackmailed into it is the day I’ll give you Shelby’s phone number. She doesn’t need your brand of chaos. She has enough going on in her life.”

“I’ll be perfectly gentlemanly,” I promised. “Besides, I could just ask Bishop, you know. He’d be a reference for me.” I was pretty sure, anyway. “Why are you so protective of her? I didn’t even know you were friends.”

“We go way back.”

“As way back as we do?”

She snorted. “Since practically birth? Nah. Our moms being best friends cast that die for us a long time ago.”

“You’re not close with Preston.”

“Maybe I *like* your brand of chaos. Particularly because you always keep your pants on in my presence.”

“As I will with Shelby.” The regret in my voice was hard to disguise. I hadn’t forgotten the way she’d slapped me back in the fall with her smart mouth or her long wavy brown hair

or how she'd thought I was some random weirdo trying to talk to her young daughter.

Fuck. I'd forgotten the kid. She'd been cute as a button actually, but she was still a child.

"Yeah, Shelby is entirely safe from my wiles." My tone brooked no argument.

The surest chastity belt for a man like me was a woman with a young child. Kids were fun and all, but I knew when I was out of my depth and stayed out of the damn water.

"You know about Berry, huh?" Ice sounded smug. "I should've known you would never go there."

"You're perfectly safe giving me her number."

"Fine." She sounded weary. "But call at a reasonable hour. She's running herself ragged as is. None of this calling at-two-am-drunk crap you love to pull."

"It is nowhere near two am and I am not officially drunk."

"Dex—"

I sighed. "I promise. Now gimme. And hey, while you're at it, put her address in her digital listing, would you?" Before my best friend could rail at me, I added, "Her business address. Jeez. Chill out. If you knew how long it has been since I've had sex, you'd rethink your lecherous beliefs in my direction."

"Oh, that's even worse. A shark who hasn't tasted fresh blood in a while is even more desperate and dangerous."

"Trust me, I'm not desperate. Far from it."

"So you say. I'm sure you have your usual assortment of floozies to choose from. But Shelby isn't like them."

"Just her number, Ice. I want her professional talents. Nothing else. And I'm willing to pay for them."

She laughed richly before rattling off the number. "Oh, trust me, you will be. Good luck."

TWO



I WOKE TO THE SOUND OF BELLS RINGING. I SLAMMED MY hand in the general vicinity of my nightstand, trying futilely to silence the intrusion. I'd been having the very best dream about Jason Momoa or his nearest statistical equivalent—

And the damn bells would not stop.

I pried open one eyelid, glared at my phone, and willed it to cease making noise immediately. It was a fucking Saturday. My one day to sleep in. Why was work calling me?

This was what I got for not silencing notifications on a day I was not working. And I wasn't. No matter what. TJ knew the rule. Unless the client had more money than God and a willingness to spend it, Saturdays were sacrosanct.

I grabbed the phone, swiping to accept the call. "Seriously, Teej?"

"I know, I know, I seriously debated calling for like five minutes. But you gotta hear who it's for."

"Not even a text? C'mon, man. I was having the very best dream, and I swear, if you just ruined my only dream O for the month—"

"Dear God, if that's true for you, I'm seriously sorry. Also, I've never had that kind of dream. At least that took me all the way to the finish line. For real?"

"When it's a Jason Momoa lookalike, it kinda happens spontaneously. Or it would have if you hadn't ruined it."

She sighed heavily. “I knew no good would come from you browsing that architectural magazine.”

“It’s aspirational. Besides, you neglected to tell me what that builder Kainoa N’ai looked like. Thanks for nothing, by the way.”

“As if it matters. Your vagina is locked tighter than a vault to all but dream men.”

“Yeah, but dream me is a ho, obviously. Still not talking, Teej, and I’m about to hang up.”

“Wait, wait, wait, he’s richer than sin and comes with excellent refs.”

“The Pope?”

She huffed out a laugh. “Not that excellent.”

“K, unless I get a name, bye now.”

“Dexter Shaw.”

“Who?”

She let out an impatient breath. “If you ever pulled your head out of parenting magazines for a minute, you would’ve seen he was listed in New York Magazine’s 40 under 40 to watch just last month.”

“Big whoop. And I read far more design mags than parenting. Those are too preachy.” I didn’t have a clue about this 40 under 40 thing she’d mentioned, but that name sounded vaguely familiar. Or maybe more than vaguely. “What does he want?”

“You.”

I pulled myself up into a semi-seated position. “Why me?”

“Apparently, you wore a pink pantsuit when he met you and treated him like crap, thereby somehow rocking his world. I swear, men are masochists.”

I must still be dreaming because none of this conversation made any sense. “What?”

“Yeah, kinda blew my mind too. Since when do you wear pantsuits?”

“Since never.”

Except for that one time last fall...

I blew out a noisy breath as the memory of a far too handsome man talking to my little girl and playing with her ball filled my mind. To be fair, he hadn't said anything untoward to her that I knew of or acted the least bit strangely. But the fact remained that gorgeous lawyers did not make a habit of even acknowledging Berry existed under most circumstances.

And he'd not only acknowledged her, but he'd also talked to her as if she was an actual human being with a brain, not just a dumb kid.

She'd liked him, too, to the point she'd kept bringing him up the whole night. I hadn't understood why because they'd spent a sum total of, what, maybe twenty minutes together? But my girl was an excellent judge of character and something about his personality had struck her in a good way.

Too bad he'd had the word “player” written in invisible ink on his forehead.

“You must've worn one once for him to be so fixated.”

“Okay, okay, fine. I wore one once, the day I had my first parent/teacher conference at Newfield Academy.”

I'd dreaded it for days beforehand, sure I'd come across as an overwhelmed, frazzled, incompetent farce of a mother, not the together career woman and loving mom I'd hoped to seem like.

I'd met with Preston Shaw and Bishop Stone at their new office building afterward. I'd had Berry with me, since I'd pulled her out of her normal school aftercare spot because I'd needed to talk to her and give her a big hug. The first parent-teacher conference at a new school—especially an upper-crust one I had no business sending my daughter to—was always nerve-wracking.

Even if my daughter's teacher couldn't stop raving about her performance.

Now six months after that first meeting, the law office had been successfully renovated. I'd just finished it a couple weeks ago, in fact. Berry was still doing amazing at Newfield. Her teacher had mentioned at the last conference Berry could have mood swings, but what kid didn't?

I still couldn't afford her school. I was hanging on, just barely. Hoping I could manage to make it the next few weeks until summer break.

I was juggling every single plate I could to pay all the bills—the mortgage on our cottage and the utilities, along with Berry's piano and language lessons, and my many professional organizations, plus this pricey tuition—but one by one, they were starting to drop.

Starting with the cable late payment warning I'd received yesterday.

No big deal, I reminded myself. Berry preferred streaming Discovery Plus anyway. I'd just have to look into their parental controls. She was good about not watching stuff she shouldn't, but she was nearly nine and far too smart. And curious.

God only knows what she could find to watch.

Teej snapped her fingers. "Shelby? Are you spiraling?"

"How did you know?" I asked guiltily.

"When you're quiet, you're in your head. Never a good thing. He found you attractive. Which turned out to be a good thing, since he remembered you enough to want to hire you for this fucking amazing life-changing job. And not just for you. For Designing Women. Your innate hotness is going to put us on the map, baby girl."

My snort gusted across the phone. "Innate hotness? I think you have the wrong number."

I hadn't showered in two days. I wouldn't even consider how long it had been since I'd shaved my legs.

Never mind other more forest-like parts of my anatomy that hadn't seen any action since many moons ago.

“He has a nickname for you, toots. He didn't mean to say it, I don't think. After, he tried to explain it away that he had memory issues, so he named people that way to trigger his recollection...”

“What nickname?” This particular question broke my no-loud-voices rule so violently that I winced, knowing there wasn't a chance in hell my enhanced bat-hearing child wouldn't hear it. Therefore ensuring any chance of my going back to sleep went up like a poof of smoke.

Fuck my life.

But my bedroom door remained closed. I cocked my head, listening closely for any noises that indicated Berry would soon be on the warpath. Nothing.

Which had me worrying for another reason altogether.

“Yeah, I know. It's kinda out there, but he honestly seems nice. No weirdo vibes. He claims Bishop will give him a glowing recommendation, but he isn't as certain about his brother, though he claims that's due to Preston's lifelong jealousy in his direction.”

“Oh, sure. I believe that.”

“You know how it is with siblings.”

“Actually, no, I don't.” I sighed. “I basically grew up without my brother around, remember?” Casey was a decade older than me, and he'd split for the opposite coast the minute he turned eighteen. Visits were still rare.

“Sorry, forgot you're the next thing to a lonely only.”

“My kid too, and she's not the next thing. Just only. That was the last thing I wanted for her after I grew up without brothers and sisters around.” I blew out a breath. “Not relevant, sorry. Did you make an appointment for Mr. Wonderful?”

“Yeah.” Her wince came through loud and clear in her voice, and preemptively, I tugged the covers over my head

because I just knew what she was going to say next. “In ninety minutes. Give or take. Look, I’m sorry! I know it’s Saturday. But I also know you have cashflow issues. *We* have cashflow issues. Just talk to the guy. He’s not going to bite.”

“He sounds like he’s more interested in my clothes than anything else.”

“Not entirely. He also asked about Ber.”

“My daughter?”

“Do you have another Ber? Yes, Shelby. He didn’t remember her name,” she hastened to add. “I filled him in. But he did ask about Fire-Breathing Mama’s cute kid.”

I was not going to soften toward this man. Using the kid as leverage was a prime tactic of a certain kind of man. Probably one like Dexter Shaw, who certainly was used to getting his way. “Fire-Breathing Mama, huh?”

I preened just a little. Far better than spineless, like a certain someone used to call me. But when it came to my daughter, I was anything but.

“Yeah. He said it like a compliment.”

“It is a compliment, no matter how he said it. Fine, I’ll meet him at the office in ninety minutes.”

I was already juggling my schedule in my head. Hopefully, my parents could watch Berry. They were almost always good for a last-minute visit from her, but I didn’t know if they were even home. It was an almost summer weekend, after all.

“Uh, how about his house?”

“His house?” There was no tempering my screech. I’d have to go see what Berry was up to momentarily anyway. Her silence concerned me. “Not sure what kind of meeting he’s looking for, but it ain’t happening.”

“No, no, nothing like that.” TJ let out a bawdy laugh. “He wants to redo his place and wants you to see what you’re working with first.”

“Jeez, how come he didn’t request for me to swing by after dark?”

“If you’d prefer that, I can call him back—”

“You’re an ass. Verify that Bishop rec and get back to me. Assuming Bishop says he’s not a dick, I’ll go to his damn house. Address?”

She rattled off the address of a house on the lake road that wound around Crescent Lake in nearby Crescent Cove.

Big money, all capital letters.

Big sprawling houses with spectacular waterfront views.

Big time ass-kicking for both Dexter and my bestie if this turned out to be a waste of my Saturday.

“Just reel in this giant fish for us. Bat those baby browns.”

“Whatever. Text me that rec. Bye.” I clambered out of bed and crossed to the bedroom door, yanking it open and charging into the hall barefoot. “Berry?”

No reply.

I tried again. “Berry? Are you up?” Her sleeping past seven am on a weekend was unheard of, but just in case, I hurried to her bedroom and opened the door.

Her bed was in its usual state of chaos along with the room itself. But no bright red hair and sparkling hazel eyes and mischievous giggle.

Where was she?

My skin went cold as visions of kids being stolen from their bedrooms filled my head. I rushed to her row of windows to check them. I huffed out a breath as I realized all the locks were still firmly in place.

Not stolen. Not stolen.

I gripped my throat and raced downstairs into the living room. She was probably just watching cartoons—

The living room was undisturbed. No chaos to be found.

I checked the kitchen. She liked to get herself a bowl of cereal while I was sleeping in, but all the dishes were still neatly stacked in the drying rack. I didn't even see any evidence that she'd eaten cereal and washed the dish and put it back.

Swallowing hard, I rushed to the front door. Where else could she be?

Soon as I opened the door, the sound of running water made me whirl toward the driveway—where my daughter was plastered with water and aiming the hose at my small SUV. A bucket of soapy water was next to her feet and a soap-laden sponge had been tossed on the hood.

“Berry?”

She spun around, forgetting to lower the hose, and I was instantly drenched—and instantly squealing and laughing despite being outside in my now dripping pajamas.

“Oops, sorry, Mom! I didn't see you there!”

Somehow I was still laughing. My panic had subsided into hysterical giggles and Berry was just staring at me as if she was confused.

She wasn't the only one.

“You're washing my car?” I mean, it was fairly obvious, but she'd never done it before.

“Huh?” she shouted over the water.

“Turn off the hose, Berry.”

“Huh?” she repeated.

I mimed putting down the hose and she finally got the message to turn it off. “I wasn't done yet,” she complained. “It's still all soapy.”

That was the truth. Soapy rivulets were running down the doors and collecting on the tires.

“You can finish in a second. Why did you decide to wash it?”

“Because it was dirty.”

My daughter was far too logical—and a bit of a smartass. No idea where she’d gotten that from.

“Want me to help you finish?”

“I’ve got it.”

She was stubborn too. That was definitely not one of my traits.

“Okay. Thank you for washing it.”

She shrugged, flinging water everywhere from her long curls. “No big.” She gave me a critical glance. “You should take a shower. You’re kind of a mess.”

“Gee, thanks. How do you feel about going to Grams and Pops’ house today for a while so I can meet with a client?”

Potential client, I reminded myself.

“Whatevs.” She’d already turned on the hose again.

Supposed we were done.

I trudged inside, peeling off my sopping pajamas as I went. I dumped them in the basket in the laundry room then headed up to shower and dress after I placed a quick call to my mom and dad.

Thankfully, they didn’t have plans and couldn’t wait to spend time with Berry. I’d truly lucked out with them.

What I hadn’t lucked out with? My unruly hair.

I showered and washed it, then I got out and dried myself off and tamed it into a semblance of a style. Then I went to evaluate the contents of my closet. After some deliberation, I slipped into a white wrap dress with a modest thigh slit.

I’d intentionally bypassed my pink pantsuit. Only Dexter Shaw could somehow develop a fixation on such a completely non-revealing piece of clothing.

Not that I knew anything about the man. Except he’d seemed smug and insufferable upon our first meeting.

For one, he was far too good-looking. Men like that were dangerous.

If you were a woman looking to meet a man, that is. I was not. I was basically a born-again virgin with a child.

A text came through and I rooted around through the bedding on my unmade bed until I found my phone.

TJ

Bishop said he's a decent dude and he pays well and on time. Magic words!

I forced myself to unclench my fingers around my case.

K. Guess I'll go see what he's looking for.

TJ

Maybe he's looking for you.

The guy doesn't have enough money. Later.

I went to the closet and got out my favorite purse, red patent leather. Completely impractical. Went with my red heels. I didn't know why I chose those. My arches would be screaming later.

Maybe now I'd be Red Heels Hottie instead.

And maybe Dexter Shaw would regret this day. Somehow I had a feeling he was about to be officially in over his head.

Or maybe that was me.

THREE

Dexter

MY PUG HAD GAS. SO MUCH FOR AN AUSPICIOUS START TO THE day.

“Dude, you smell rank. What the hell did you get into?”

He'd had some cake last night. Decent cake, but not for dogs. I didn't know who had fed it to him, but it sure wasn't me. I was a conscientious pet parent, dammit.

I'd kept this dog alive for six whole months now since my buddy Clint had suggested I adopt him. He was in great health. His vet even said so. And that his vet was Clint didn't mean I'd paid him off or in any other way unduly influenced him. Clint couldn't be swayed through bribes.

“You're happy here, aren't you, buddy?” I ruffled his fur between his ears.

From Bob's position face down on the couch, his stump of a tail wagged halfheartedly.

I would've been similarly afflicted if those kinds of smells were coming out of me too. As it was, I'd already popped enough Tylenol to give me a rebound headache.

Drinking was very bad.

I was picking up crushed paper plates laden with cake remnants near the kitchen trash can when my gong of a doorbell signaled Shelby's arrival. I didn't know if my partygoers the night before had missed the trash can or if Bob had snooped around and somehow dragged out more fruit from the poisoned tree.

Should I text Clint and make sure cake wasn't bad for dogs? It was all vanilla. Even as a fledgling dog parent, I knew chocolate was bad for fur kids.

The gong sounded again, impatience clear in the sound. I didn't know how I knew Shelby was impatient just from the bell—the fucking annoying bell—but I did.

Rubbing my hands together in anticipation, I headed down the miles-long hall in the direction of the front door. Only to be nearly tripped by a rocket-shaped Bob, aiming for the front hall as if he'd ordered DoorDash.

I snatched him by his collar and hauled him back although he'd never been a flight risk before. But his tongue was lolling out of his mouth as I opened the door at the same instant the gong sounded yet again—and then it was a contest to see which of us looked more gobsmacked.

Probably Bob, since my tongue was still in my mouth. At least I was pretty sure.

Her arms were already crossed. Pre-annoyed for the win. “Dexter Shaw?” One delicate brown eyebrow climbed for her hairline as she took in my attire. “Or should I call you Dexterous?”

I grinned, the gesture mostly an attempt to hide my annoyance at my best friend. “Talked to Isis, have you?”

“She called to tell me about you.”

“Tell you what?”

“Not exactly a warning, but kind of one. She was just looking out for me.”

I tried and failed not to growl. “What exactly did she say? And that nickname is ridiculous and from many years ago, by the way. I'm not saying it's inaccurate unless you're disgusted, and if so, then it's hardly relevant.” I lifted the hand not holding Bob and wiggled my fingers to show their innate innocence.

The eyebrow climbed higher. “She didn't explain the nickname.”

Thanks, Isis. Though her not mentioning it at all would have been better.

“Oh, then never mind. Won’t you come in?”

She hiked her tiny bright red purse higher on her shoulder. “Now you’ve piqued my curiosity. Also, why are you cradling that dog like a baby slash football?”

Bob chose that moment to lurch out of my arms to French kiss my hopefully new decorator. She shrieked not unlike Lucy from *It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, when Snoopy grabbed the same apple while they were bobbing for apples.

To her credit, she recovered quickly, probably because Bob let out an offended bark.

I was offended on his behalf.

“I brush his teeth,” I offered, earning her scowl.

“You know, I had a feeling this would be a waste of my time.”

I sputtered in indignation, but she wasn’t nearly through.

“I expected you to be an arrogant lawyerly type. I did not expect you to have on an Ant Man T-shirt and to own a kissing dog.” She made a show of wiping her mouth.

Why did I have a feeling she might do the same if I tried to kiss her? Admittedly, my technique had miles on Bob’s. He did have me on innate cuteness though.

“He’s never kissed anyone before.”

“Good thing with that breath.”

“You get used to it.”

When she remained silent, I continued. “I can be arrogant, but only sometimes. I’ve worked hard for—”

“In your daddy’s firm?”

“My firm,” I corrected sharply. “Both my brother and my father left me alone. Preston and Bishop started their own firm, Shaw and Stone Family Law, LLC. Which you know,

since you decorated their new office for them.” He exhaled. “I mean, I took charge now that they’re gone.”

A brief smile lifted her blood-red lips. “I’m sure.” She looked past me into the hall. “May I come in?”

“I invited you in earlier. You were just too busy taking potshots at me and my dog to hear me. I hope that’s not your usual MO. I need someone open to feedback.”

Her forehead pinched as if she couldn’t believe I was correcting her. Guess it was just supposed to be open season on me, the paying client.

Or would be paying client, assuming we found a way to see eye to eye. Or eye to mid-chest because she was a good bit shorter than I was.

Her personality, however, was towering.

“I have many satisfied clients,” she said in an undertone. Then she seemed to shake herself. “Might I remind you that you called my firm and requested me specifically, although I must admit I’ve never been referred to by my attire before.”

Deliberately, I gave her a leisurely perusal. Not a salacious one. In fact, I lingered more on her shoes than on the rest of her. Fucking hot. And since when were ankles sexy? It had to be the damn heels. “That’s a shame. I didn’t mean to insult you with the nickname, by the way. It was a compliment. This outfit is worthy of a nickname too.”

Her arms tightened across her chest to the point I worried about her airflow. “You know, the dog routine almost gave me hope that you weren’t the stereotypical player I’d had you pegged as. But here we go. Reverting to form.”

“Who’s playing? I made a simple comment. I did not ask you out. I did not ask you in either, in any manner other than a businesslike one. Sorry, you’re not my type.” A total lie but it was worth it to see her expression pinch. “Now would you like to come in, or do you feel safer talking to me from your position on the doormat?”

We both glanced down at the distressed wood of the porch. “Metaphorically speaking.”

I'd never gotten a doormat. Doormats said home to me. Family. Until Bob, this place had been closer to a mausoleum with a view than an actual home.

If I ever got a doormat, it would mean something important.

Bob decided he was more than done with this conversation and launched himself out of my arms toward the black and white marble floor with a huff of disgust. Then he took off at top speed, probably to excavate his food dish. His nails clacked noisily as Shelby stepped inside and gave me a dismissive glance. "His nails need trimming."

"Just had them done. They're fine." I decided to mirror her crossed arms stance. She immediately resumed it once she was inside.

She stared up at the ostentatious chandelier in the front hall, dripping with faceted crystals and done in a gold leaf design my father had insisted was understated yet screamed class.

"Did you choose that thing?" She gestured vaguely in the direction of the ceiling.

"Yes," I said immediately. "I fell in love with it upon first sight. You love it too, don't you?"

"You're messing with me."

"Maybe a little."

"TJ indicated you said I could do whatever I wished. Carte blanche."

I rubbed my scruffy chin. In my quest to clean up my disaster of a house this morning from last night's party, I'd run out of time to shave. But I thought this look was rather rakish.

Though she'd barely glanced my way. The chandelier was far more fascinating.

Designer problems, I'd say.

Worst of all? Looking into the family room off the foyer, I could see I'd missed more than a few spots in my cleaning.

Like the wine bottle tipped over underneath the end table next to the couch.

Which unfortunately accounted for the dark purple splotch on one of the arms of undetermined origin. I'd say wine but I hadn't even served wine.

Then again, I had a very open alcohol policy.

At least this sofa wasn't forced to wear plastic as a fashion accessory. Small favors. Then again, if it had worn plastic, no stain.

Shelby wandered the room, looking at things with a noncommittal expression. Belatedly, I remembered I'd left the pile of women's phone numbers from my pocket in the beak of the oversized gold swan lamp on the end table.

Phone numbers that Shelby had caught sight of and was now rifling through with obvious disdain.

Then she opened the drawer that had been closed with a scrap of lace hanging out and held up a pair of panties in virulent pink.

I'd definitely missed those. What the hell?

"Those aren't mine," I said quickly.

"I didn't assume so. But thanks for the clarification."

"That's not what I mean. You know what I meant." I strode forward and snatched the panties off her red nail tipped finger.

And nearly jolted where I stood. That was some static shock. Or else the daggers shooting from her eyes had taken physical form as she let her gaze travel down my body much as I'd done to her in the doorway.

"Doesn't seem to be your size."

"Thanks for noticing. I have no idea who these belong to." My voice was full of righteous indignation. I had no clue why. I didn't owe this woman an explanation.

I just didn't want her to think she'd been right about me. So far, I was batting precisely zero.

“Maybe one of these fine ladies?” She opened the swan lamp’s beak and removed the papers, flapping the stacks against the back of her hand.

I wasn’t even sure how she’d zeroed in on them so easily. Most likely, my choice of storage spot had caught her attention, though the stack of paper was innocuous enough.

Probably Mom Eyes. They had to be adept at seeing things in a moment that others missed entirely.

“Hey, where’s Berry?” I asked suddenly, impressed her name had materialized in my head without help. “I told TJ you could bring her.” Or maybe I’d just meant to. I shrugged. “I think I did anyway. In case you didn’t have a babysitter. She can’t stay alone yet, I’m assuming.”

“She’s eight. TJ must’ve told you her name,” she prompted.

“I can’t confirm or deny.” Now that she mentioned it, I didn’t think I’d remembered it on my own.

But it had been months, man. Toss me a fricking bone.

“Yeah, she told you.” She put the swan down with a snap and stuck the stack of numbers back in its beak. “Let me guess, this lamp was love at first sight too?”

I shrugged. “It’s kitschy.”

“One word for it.” She closed her eyes and threw back her shoulders again as she took a deep breath. Then she held out a hand. “Can we start over?”

I read vague panic in her oak brown eyes. I didn’t know where it originated and if I’d somehow had something to do with it. But I didn’t like it one bit. “I liked our first start. But sure, why not?” I shook her offered hand and wasn’t at all surprised that our palms seemed to sizzle.

Could be just on my end. My dry spell had been quite long, and Shelby Wilde was damn pretty. Especially with fire in her eyes.

Which I immensely preferred to that brief—and thankfully, gone—look of banked fear.

“My daughter likes you,” she said, finally releasing my hand after I couldn’t let her go.

I wanted to shake my hand to try to restore regular feeling but I didn’t want to seem...well, lame. Even if I felt that way while I waited for my pulse to level out.

“She does?”

“Yeah. I don’t get it either.” That look came back and disappeared just as fast. “I mean, she barely knows you. But she was excited to hear I was meeting with you today.”

“See, you should’ve brought her.”

What the hell was I saying? I didn’t have a clue what to do with kids. Maybe she’d like my Snoopy collection in my game room. God knows my father thought it was ridiculous.

And I was officially done with giving a shit about his design choices or much else. The man was hardly an example I wanted to follow in literally any way.

Shelby looked up at me as if I’d shown myself to be an alien life form. “Why?”

I jerked a shoulder. “She seemed fun. She should meet Bob. He loves kids and God knows I don’t know any he can play with. Well, Bishop’s in a year or two, I guess. It’s not even born yet.”

“No? Oh, poor April. They must be having sex hourly to move it along.” As if she’d just realized what she’d said, she flushed deep pink and rushed across the room. “Where is Bob anyway?”

I was already trailing after her and not to pursue that line of inquiry more fully.

Not entirely.

No, Bob’s current location was now my biggest concern. He normally came at any mention of his name, in case there might be treats involved.

Remembering the bag of trash I’d gathered and forgotten on the kitchen floor just before Shelby’s arrival, I darted

around her in the mile long hall. “Excuse me, emergency.”

I made it into the kitchen just as my dog let out the loudest, smelliest belch I’d ever heard from him a second before he rolled over on his back, paws up.

Oh my God. I’d killed my dog with forgotten sweets.

Shelby let out a small shriek as I dropped to my knees and spoke softly to my panting dog. He shifted and I soon saw why.

Cake was smeared all over his side and belly and chin. I didn’t know where he’d found more, but the demolished plate half shoved under the fancy ass oven I stored pans in—and sometimes takeout containers—was a strong clue.

Shelby lowered herself to the floor at my side and stroked Bob’s chin. “Aww, poor hungry boy. Did you eat something you shouldn’t?”

I was pretty sure Bob was no longer hungry. Not after gorging himself.

Me on the other hand? Starving—and not for food.

For fuck’s sake, had she really had to drop to a crouch in that tight skirt with that slit up to *there*? And her legs should’ve been illegal. Especially in those heels.

Shelby was talking but I wasn’t listening. I tried. I legitimately did. But her subtly floral perfume was doing unexpected things to my head.

“Fuck, you’re pretty.”

She pressed her lips together and stared at me until I was sure a slap was imminent.

My dick did not get hard. That would’ve been insane. I wasn’t a masochist.

At least I hadn’t been before this woman, now ignoring me in favor of stroking my dog. Who had pressed his slobbery cheek to her leg in obvious adoration.

I couldn’t fault his taste, that was for sure.

“He may need medical attention,” she said in a crisp voice that didn’t help my situation.

“He’s not the only one.” Before she could offer me a well-deserved retort, I held up a hand. “Look, it’s probably obvious I find you attractive.”

“Even though you said I wasn’t your type?”

“That was a pathetic attempt to save my shriveled male ego.”

Her gaze dropped to my groin for like a nanosecond. “I don’t think any part of you is shriveled.”

I laughed, long and hard. Then I gazed at her, still comforting my distressed dog, and my lust shifted to something infinitely more concerning.

Affection.

“I apologize for my untoward behavior. I understand you’re a single mom and really need this job. I won’t make it weird, I promise.”

“You do? What did TJ say to you?”

“Nothing.” I scratched the back of my neck.

“Did you talk to Isis?”

“No. Not about you. She’s tighter than a vault. I did some recon. And I have a lot of contacts.”

She paled. “What kind of recon?”

“I know some people.”

Shelby gripped her throat, massaging it as if to keep the question from getting stuck. “What does that mean?” Her voice was too quiet now.

It had taken me a couple of net searches to realize her ex was old friends with my father—which was far from a recommendation of his character.

“Meaning I know your ex-husband is a fucking tool. He doesn’t deserve a cute kid like Berry.” I swallowed hard. “Definitely never deserved a wife like you.”

She jerked to her feet and poor Bob released a pitiful whine as he slumped to the floor. I didn't blame him.

Wrong move yet again. I knew better than to lead with honesty. It never ended well.

I sat back on my haunches, wincing a little as my cock deflated painfully fast. At least it made it easier to fumble my phone out of my pocket as I shifted Bob's head into my lap. He moaned again, slightly less pitifully this time.

"I'm calling my vet," I announced.

No response and a quick glance over my shoulder showed she was gone.

Okay then. Not my priority right now.

I hit the speed dial and relaxed a fraction when my buddy Clint answered. "Thank God you're there. I need a house call. Cost is no object," I reminded him when he started to remind me of his on-call schedule. "Bob got into cake. I need help."

A moment later, the front door slammed shut.

I shifted until I could lean back against the stove, thereby positioning my ass in the plate of leftover cake.

Fabulous. Frosted buns, anyone?

FOUR



I SAT IN MY CAR FOR A FULL FIVE MINUTES, TRYING TO breathe through the anxiety at the mere mention of my ex-husband.

I didn't know what the hell my problem was. I hadn't freaked at this near stranger's obvious erection in my direction. Granted, it wasn't as if this guy was hard to look at. He was sexy with muscled shoulders that strained the seams of his faded T-shirt and dark tattoos that snaked out from under his short sleeves. He was also kind of funny, although not strictly on purpose.

His green eyes had a kind of puppy dog quality that made him endearing—despite my clear lack of anything approaching warmth for him.

In fact, I was the exact opposite. I'd been primed to hate him.

Instead, he'd been so cute with his clear concern over his dog and offering to pay any amount for his vet to come fix him. And he'd addressed the elephant cock in the room by promising not to make things weird on the job.

Before he made things weirdest of all by mentioning my fucking ex.

I didn't know where I was going. Or what I intended to do. Leaving like I had wasn't exactly professional, but then neither was Dex's erection. But I supposed he couldn't help his biological reaction, and it wasn't as if he'd made any untoward moves on me. I didn't know why he'd had that reaction but in

the right light, his obvious attraction to me might even seem... flattering.

If not for the ex bit.

Recon. And how exactly did he know my ex? Was it just an acquaintances type deal? Or had he made the statements he had just to show his support for me without knowing him at all? Though that didn't make sense either. I had a feeling he at least knew of the esteemed judge and not just because he'd met him in court.

I had to ask him. I couldn't just run out of there with my metaphorical tail between my legs. I wasn't afraid of his cock. He'd been a perfect gentleman. And I really wanted his job. I needed the money, yes. But his house definitely could use some help. My brand of help. I already had ideas though he hadn't given me a clue what he wanted. I figured we could discuss my thoughts and he'd let me know if he was on board or not.

Could he be an actual customer who trusted me to create a vision from the bottom up? I should show him my look book of homes and businesses I'd decorated for previous clients.

I slapped myself in the forehead. That I'd left at home on my kitchen table.

Terrific, Shelby. You're definitely in the place to take on the biggest job of your life.

If I was even still in the running for it.

I blinked as a hulking forest-green SUV screeched as it took a hard left into Dex's driveway. A tall dark-haired man in a fisherman's sweater climbed down from the driver's seat with what looked like an old-fashioned doctor's satchel in one hand. He hurried up the short flight of stairs and rushed inside the stately home without knocking.

Oh, God, Bob. How had I forgotten? I'd been consumed with my own issues.

I started to open my door then stopped. I still didn't have my look book. I absolutely did not want to address the

awkwardness of my leaving in front of a stranger—his vet, no less. Maybe we could just table that until...forever.

Sounded good to me.

As for how he knew Judge Davenport—that could wait too. I had to make sure Bob was okay, and if he was, if I still had a job offer.

Nothing else mattered right now.

I got out of my car and realized I'd dropped my purse somewhere along the way. I had stuck my car keys in my pocket, so I hadn't known until just now. I was totally out of my element here and fumbling any number of balls.

Yet I wasn't leaving. Oh, I'd fully intended to when I stormed out. But once I was out in the fresh air, something had told me not to be hasty. Not to run.

I didn't know why. Except my gut never steered me wrong. And neither did my daughter.

I lifted my hand to knock with the heavy brass dragon's head knocker on the door—earlier I'd used the gong-like doorbell, and I wasn't doing that again—when the door flew open. Dex stepped forward, my red patent leather purse over one shoulder.

A laugh burst out of me at the ridiculousness of this muscled, tattooed guy wearing a tiny purse over one shoulder. Then I glimpsed Bob on a blanket on the floor in the family room while the vet administered some shot and I forgot all about accessories.

“Oh, Bob, is he going to be okay?” I rushed past Dex into the other room while the vet glanced up at me and smiled.

He had the best patient vet smile I'd ever seen. And patient green eyes. “He's going to be just fine. Just cake wasted.”

I laughed again, and Bob weakly lifted his head and wagged his stubby tail at the sound of my laughter. “Hi, Bob. Did your dad give you too much cake?” I stroked his nose, and he moaned in canine pleasure.

“His dad gave him no cake. I know better. He stole it.” Dex came over to sit on the edge of the coffee table, close but not too close. Still wearing the purse.

He’d changed his jeans to a lighter denim wash. Odd.

I gestured to the syringe the vet was now putting back in his doctor’s satchel. “So what was that for then?”

“Some pain meds while his stomach is so full. He’s probably uncomfortable right now, although he’s already seeming more at ease. He likes all the attention, don’t you, big boy?” He rubbed Bob’s belly and instead of seeming distressed, he rolled around in obvious delight.

“Same way the women react to this dude.” Dex’s open disgust made his pal grin.

“Yeah, right. You know there’s only one woman for me, wise guy.” The vet pointed at Dex. “Since you were my best man a mere six weeks ago.”

Best man? Dex? I didn’t know why that surprised me. He seemed like the sort who was allergic to weddings, but as long as it wasn’t his own, maybe it was just fine.

“Yeah.” Dex shuddered before he flashed a smile. “Gotta make that woman of yours honest before she pops.”

“Getting married pre-childbirth isn’t necessary anymore,” I announced primly as both grinning men looked my way. “Just saying,” I added as all conversation ceased.

Great. I didn’t even know the vet and I was lecturing him about his marriage. I barely knew Dex. Maybe I should get the hell out of there once and for all.

“I’m Clint,” the vet said, extending a hand to me. “And you are?”

“My new decorator,” Dex informed him, thereby answering the question in my head if my job offer still remained. “Shelby Wilde. Or Pink Pantsuit Hottie,” he added as I flushed. But he wasn’t done. “Or today, Sherbet. Because her skin doesn’t turn pink when she’s embarrassed. More peach.”

I was tempted to kick him in the nuts. But I was too busy shaking Clint's hand and smiling like a dolt.

Nothing odd here. Nope.

"Oh, okay. Hi Shelby. Is it okay if I call you Shelby?"

"Sure." I dropped his hand and rubbed my damp one on my skirt. Not damp from Clint. He was damn good-looking—and newly married.

No, my nerves were solely due to the guy in the super hero T-shirt with the smart mouth.

"Please do. No nicknames needed."

"Not even Fire-Breathing Mama?" Dex lifted his brows innocently while Bob looked back and forth between us all as if he was wondering why he was no longer getting pets.

"Oh, do you have children? I mean, makes sense from your previous statement..."

"Just one. Berry. She's almost nine. Give it a few more minutes, and Dex will tell you my life history."

"I would if I knew it. Unfortunately, I only know the barest of bones. You left this, by the way." He finally handed over my purse.

I had the strangest urge to check to see if everything was still in it. Not because I thought he was a thief. He just seemed like someone who liked to snatch things from people, whether odd little details or some trinket.

"Oh, that's yours. I thought the purse was an unusual fashion choice for Dex. Never know though." Clint gave Bob an absent head rub and then got to his feet. "Just make sure he keeps well-hydrated and uses the bathroom as he should. You can give him some of that chicken broth I brought you to help settle his stomach a bit later too. Any unusual symptoms, you know where to find me."

"Thanks, man. You're a lifesaver. Really." He stood and gave Clint one of those clap on the back type hugs.

“No problem. Get that locking trash can I linked you, too, okay?”

Dex moved back and saluted. “Will do. What do I owe you?”

Clint waved him off. “We’re good.”

“Wow, you have a vet who works for free?” Slowly, I shook my head. “You know this guy is swimming in money, right? Look at this house. Dripping luxury, minus the swan lamp.”

“Hey, it’s unique,” Dex protested.

Clint glanced around, his gaze locking on the panties still hanging out of the drawer. “I’m assuming those aren’t yours?”

“Absolutely not,” I said hotly as Dex moved to grab them and the stack of phone numbers, depositing both in the trash along with a discarded wine bottle on the floor.

“Not mine either. Had a party last night. They got a little messy.” Proving it, he walked around the room, picking up trash while Bob dozed, snoring loudly on his blanket like the king of the house he apparently was.

“And didn’t invite me and Kitty? Nice, man.”

“It was work-related. Not my actual friends.”

“You bring your cat to parties?”

Dex barked out a laugh. “Kitty is his wife. Handy for a vet, right?”

“Her full name is Katherine.”

“More nicknames. Yay.” I blew out a breath and held up a hand as both men turned to look at me as if I was one pencil short of a pack. I couldn’t even blame them. “Sorry. I’m off my game today. Excuse my rudeness.”

“I’ve known this guy since college.” Clint jerked a thumb toward Dex. “We’re still tight. I have a high capacity for rudeness, so you’ll have to try harder.”

I gave him a weak smile as Dex thanked him profusely and ushered him out the door, since Clint was on call at the vet clinic. He mentioned something about having dinner soon and then we were alone again with a still snoring Bob. The sounds he was making spoke of utter contentment.

“I’m sorry I pulled that crap on you about the judge.” He seemed genuinely contrite as he went back to picking up random trash and righting items that had been knocked over or apparently moved from their rightful spaces. “This place still looks like a damn war zone. I should’ve started cleaning up earlier today but I, uh, overindulged last night.”

“Frequent for you?”

“No. All I do lately is work. And I’m still fucking falling behind. Someday I’ll get it together.” He sat on the edge of the coffee table again and raked a hand through his hair, making it stand up in spikes all over his head. It was only then I noticed the bags under his eyes to go with the far-too-attractive crinkles at the corners.

I gave into impulse and sat beside him on the coffee table. “How do you know my ex?”

He hesitated. “I don’t exactly know him. I presented a case before him some time back. He’s a royal dick.” He cleared his throat. “Sorry, I know he’s your daughter’s father. Though, really, how did you do that?”

I had to laugh. Simply had to so I didn’t start crying. “Young and stupid. He wooed me.”

“I find that hard to believe. That you were ever stupid,” he added softly.

“Oh. I thought you meant the wooing.”

“That was a close second.”

“Rich, powerful guy. He offered me the world. I was dazzled. My parents are amazing, and it never occurred to me he’d be anything different than they were. Did I mention I was young? My first big decorating job.”

“How young?”

“Eighteen.”

“Ouch. He’s an old fucker.” He looked up at the ceiling. “I can be polite, I swear. I have manners somewhere down deep. My cock just doesn’t know it. But all is calm on that front there.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh, to feel relieved or dismayed that apparently his attraction to me had already been tempered. Not that it was a surprise. I’d been obnoxious enough to turn anyone off. “You’re refreshingly honest. I hate men who play games. Well, anyone who plays games.”

“Definitely not me. Preston always said it was a wonder women wanted to go out with me since I always said upfront I wasn’t looking for anything serious.”

“In general, that’s an after-going-to-bed statement.”

“Not for me. I’m not into being stalked. Or hurting anyone’s feelings if it can be helped. Better everyone knows the score right off.”

“I agree.”

Subtly, he shifted toward me on the coffee table. “You’re upfront like that too?”

“Hardly. I don’t date.” Just as subtly, I shifted away. “It’s different when you have a kid. You can’t bring people in and out of their lives who won’t stick around. Not that I want anyone to stick around,” I added hastily. “I’m perfectly happy alone. I have Berry and my family and good friends. I don’t need anyone else.”

A frown line appeared between his brows, something I already recognized as a tell that most likely an inappropriate comment was coming. Not that it was a leap. At least half of what he said bordered on improper.

Why didn’t that bother me as much as it should?

“How old are you? If I may ask.”

“Twenty-seven. You?” Why was I asking? Why did it matter?

“Thirty in September.” His jaw locked. “I gotta say, your devotion to your girl is admirable.”

“She’s the most important person in my life.”

“Yeah. Admirable.” He rubbed at the hole in the knee of his faded jeans, molded to his long legs and curved along parts of his anatomy I shouldn’t have ever noticed in the first place. Too late now. “But you’re young. There are...needs. Right?”

I wasn’t blushing. Nope. Even if that telltale burning sensation in my cheeks indicated otherwise. “I’m not overly interested in that aspect of life.”

“I’m so sorry.” His genuine contrition made me laugh again, hard enough for Bob to lift his head and open one dark eye before grunting and rolling over to flop on his notable stomach.

“I see why you get so many chicks.”

Somehow he was making me as loose-lipped as he was. But it wasn’t only my words that were flowing easily. The tension in my shoulders had drained for the first time in what felt like forever.

“You do? Because gotta say, none of this,” he waved a hand at his house and at himself, “is showing me at my finest hour.”

“You’re charming and a straight shooter. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“Me neither. Anyone like me. Or like you.” He cocked his head, a shock of his blond-streaked-brown hair flopping into his disturbingly green eyes. “Is that a good thing?”

I had to grin. “A couple hours ago, I probably would’ve said no. Now? I’m beginning to think it just might be.”

FIVE

Dexter

MY NEW DECORATOR HAD NOT QUIT. SHE HAD NOT STORMED out in a fit of pique—well, after the first time. Better yet, we spent the bulk of the day together going over every nook and cranny of my ridiculously large home while she made copious notes and asked questions and offered suggestions when my answers ranged from, “I don’t know what I want, just not this,” to “how about you pick stuff and I’ll veto if necessary.”

And instead of glaring at me, she laughed more often than not now. I didn’t know what had caused that change in her, but I liked it. I especially liked the way her brown eyes glowed from within when she was passionate about a topic—in this particular case, wall hangings and bathroom fixtures—and how her cheeks shone that alluring peachy-pink when I agreed with her.

Which I was doing a fucking lot since I was so out of my depth here, I didn’t even pretend otherwise.

We were in the master bathroom—the fifth full bathroom—when she asked me what I thought about matte black fixtures and if I wanted a soaking tub along with a standalone shower.

“I don’t really have a preference. Do I have to? I mean, I’m a shower guy. That deal over there looks nice, I guess,” I gestured to the claw-footed vintage tub that had been here when I moved in, “but I’m single. I don’t have anyone chilling in there with AirPods and champagne, so what’s the point?”

She poised with her pen over her pad and angled her head as if I was a truly fascinating subject. “So, you don’t have women over. Or men,” she added. “Whichever your poison is.”

“Women, but no, not usually. My house is sacrosanct and usually exempt from sleepovers.”

“But not from work parties?”

“That was a...miscalculation. Ever since my father retired and my brother left to start his new firm with Bishop, I’ve been treading water. The party was supposed to solidify my status as the new head of Shaw Law Firm, LLC.”

She went back to making notes, probably more about pendant lighting. That seemed to be one of her fascinations. “So, how did that lead to me?”

“I’m living a lie, Shelby.”

That made her head come up. “Do I want to know?”

“Probably not. My brother decided he didn’t want to be a divorce attorney anymore so he quit to make baskets with Bishop.”

Her lips twitched. “You forget I decorated their office. I saw no baskets being weaved.”

I waved a hand. “Fine, hyperbole. I’m just saying. It seems like people can only enjoy litigating high-profile divorces for so long. You can only wade into the muck and mud for so long over who gets custody of Piper the poodle and the beach house in Tahiti and three luxury cars.”

“Some people have no trouble doing it forever. My attorney seemed to have no trouble. Though the only major thing at stake in mine was my child.”

“Who was your divorce attorney?”

Her expression clouded. “Eli Turner.”

I slapped my thigh. “No fucking way.”

“Yes, way. Why?”

“I may see if he still wants to join my firm. What did you think of him?”

“He was fine.”

“There’s a ringing endorsement.”

“I don’t think it was about him as much as about my ex’s power. He got what he wanted.”

“What did he want?”

“Basically, not to give me anything, including support, in exchange for not trying to get custody of Berry. He knew I’d lose.”

“Wait a second. He doesn’t support his own kid?”

“He pays the minimum stipulated by law in exchange for not requesting any visitation.”

“I knew he was a prick.”

Even more so than I’d guessed. Holy shit.

“Can’t argue there.”

I swore ripely and rose to pace around the large bathroom. Bob ambled in and trotted forward to get pets from Shelby then turned tail and waddled out again.

In between naps, he’d followed us on our journey around the house. Luckily, he seemed back to normal. Peeing every other hour and sniffing the yard thoroughly, then showing up in the kitchen for dinner precisely at six like normal.

“How can he not want to see his own child?” She didn’t answer. I didn’t expect her to. “How can he use her as a tool to make sure he retains all his toys?”

Shelby crossed her legs and clutched her notebook that much tighter. “You’d have to ask him that.” She held up a hand. “Please don’t.”

I reached behind me to grab the pedestal sink. “Sorry, not my place to ask those questions. It just pisses me the fuck off. I used to look at it as a game, you know?”

She slid me a sidelong glance. “Not really.”

“Besting the other client’s attorney. Sure, people got hurt, but that wasn’t my fault.” I kept going, needing her to understand. “And hey, as long as my client was happy, I’d done my job. Besides, mostly they hated each other by that time, so I was helping them. At least that’s what I told myself. But I never saw the before.” My gaze lasered to hers. “The part with the love.”

“If it ever existed,” she said distantly.

“You didn’t love him?”

“I had fond feelings.” She chose her words carefully. “Then I got pregnant, and it seemed the right thing to do when he proposed.”

My fingers tightened on the edge of the sink but I stayed silent. Rare for me.

She turned over her wrist to look at her bangle watch and gasped. “I didn’t realize it was this late. My parents must think I’ve fallen off the face of the earth.” She jerked to her feet, and I realized I didn’t want her to go.

It made no sense. I didn’t know this woman. She was a mother and had bigger responsibilities than removing all the ridiculous gold leaf filagree in this house—there was even some on the light fixtures in here, for fuck’s sake—and replacing it with something less gaudy.

“When can I see you again?” I asked suddenly, swallowing hard at the sheer panic that crossed her expressive features. “Not like that. I mean, for house stuff. There’s a lot to do. A lot. We barely scratched the surface. I didn’t even show you the wine room or the movie theater or the pool and exercise room—”

Her eyes went wide and then she cleared her throat. “I have a whole team I work with. I only work on the preliminary sketches and then consult and then my team—”

“I want you. And I’m prepared to pay for the privilege. Whatever it costs.”

“Dex—”

“Don’t ‘Dex’ me and try to talk me out of it. I know what I want.”

“You don’t even know me. I could have the worst eye.”

“My brother doesn’t stop raving about you. Neither does Bishop. Both say you intuited what they wanted before they even knew themselves.”

“Oh, well, that was different.” She rubbed her throat. “I’m a good listener. Not psychic.”

“What about The Windsor House? Or the Revere Library? Did you or did you not design those two buildings?”

“Not the whole buildings, just certain parts.”

“Right. But what you put your stamp on is stunning. Don’t you want me to have a stunning place too?”

“My partners in Designing Women are incredible. TJ, Dahlia, and Avery each have their own areas of expertise and you’ll meet each of them soon. The people we hire to work with us—our subcontractors—are amazing too. I’d still be involved just—”

“You’re trying to be a participant. I want you to spearhead the whole damn thing. So tell me your price. What will it cost me for what I want?”

She licked her lips and looked down at her heels. “Does this have to do with what I told you about Berry’s father? I’m not destitute, Dex.”

“No. It has to do with me trusting my gut and wanting you to do here what I’ve seen you do elsewhere. If it would convince you to take the job, I can be totally hands off. I don’t even have to be here if I make you uncomfortable somehow. I’m fine with just signing the checks.”

“No,” she said quickly. “I don’t have any problem with you.”

“Good.” I stepped closer, just a fraction of an inch. “I don’t have a problem with you either.”

She was back to rubbing her throat. “Just as long as we both understand it’s strictly a professional arrangement.”

“I understand that. Do you?”

Her eyes flashed. “Of course.”

“Just checking since you included yourself in that understanding. Thought maybe you were warning yourself to keep the boundaries up.” Before she bared her teeth at me, I lifted my hands palms out. “So, now that we’re both crystal clear, go pick up your daughter. And text me when you’re free for our next meeting. Though you can bring her, you know. I have a movie room. A pool. Tons of vintage video games to entertain her.” I paused and dropped my kill shot. “Bob loves kids.”

“You said that earlier.” She shut her eyes tightly. “I imagine you’re a very good lawyer.”

“So I’ve been told. At least when Isis is helping me. Sometimes I get lost in the minutiae.” I nearly told her about my recent ADHD diagnosis, but something held me back. I didn’t want to seem less in her eyes, as crazy as that was. Even though plenty of people had been diagnosed with the same thing, even as adults.

Yeah, but you’re not doing anything to try to improve your situation. No meds. No counseling besides those first couple tries. Haven’t even read up on it. All you’ve done is ignore it.

“Isis mentioned she was your admin.”

“Yeah. My lifesaver really.”

“She said she was your best friend.”

“Absolutely.”

“Have you slept with her?” She held up a hand before I could answer. “None of my business.”

I placed my hand over my heart. “Why, Shelby Wilde, I can’t believe you’d ask such a thing. Hasn’t my behavior been above reproach?”

“Your behavior has, yes. But your cock, not so much.”

“He’s been on a short leash for a while. Doesn’t approve of the abstinent life.” I shrugged. “Can’t help you’re so fucking beautiful that I reacted. But I’m not making an issue out of it. I told you it won’t come up again.”

“Literally?” Her lips twitched again as her gaze dropped and lifted almost immediately. “Well-trained.”

“Bad choice of words. No, I have not slept with Isis. Not for lack of trying,” I admitted. “Years ago. Now I know our friendship is far too valuable to risk it for an orgasm.”

“Why do I believe you?”

“Because I’m a man of the law?”

“Definitely not that.”

“You wound me. But that you believe me is enough.”

“What’s your budget? I’ll need at least...” She paused and named a figure that I could tell was supposed to make me reconsider the entire project.

I shrugged. “Works for me.”

“No way.”

“I told TJ money is no object.”

“Lots of people say that and balk when they see all the zeroes.”

“Not me. I don’t say what I don’t mean.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I need a ten percent down payment.”

“I’ll give you twenty. So, do we have an agreement?”

She nodded and held out her hand. “We do. But I’m not naming a final price until we see what all is on the table, so we’ll just have to guess what constitutes twenty percent.”

“Fine by me. Anything else?”

“I’ll name my total figure once we’re finished and we see what actual costs turn out to be. My team will have to weigh in too.”

“Of course.”

“Still interested?”

“More than ever. You’ve got a deal, Shelby Wilde.” I grasped her hand and shook it vigorously, forcing myself to let go when the residual buzz nearly made me hang on. Something about her skin against mine created a damn near chemical reaction.

From the way her pupils blew wide as we touched, she felt it too. And that was more than enough.

For now.

SIX



I FELT AS IF I'D STEPPED INTO A FAIRYTALE WORLD.

One where my talents were so valued I'd been given what amounted to a blank check to basically create a new home for a virtual stranger. My dream job handed to me on a silver platter. The basic canvas of the place was truly a luxurious playground for a designer like me. His house was huge and spacious with expansive lake views and a budget as big as I could dream up.

What had I done to deserve such a windfall?

I mean, I'd insisted on ten percent down and the guy had upped it to twenty. Was he even real?

He's real, all right. Really intending on snowing you. Right now, you're a challenge.

Sitting in the front seat of my SUV, I took a few quick notes on things I didn't want to forget for the house. I'd already let my parents know I was running late and would be there soon, which they were fine with. Berry was having fun, as she always did with them.

I hadn't dropped any glass balls yet. Just rubber ones so far. And this money would make such a huge difference in our bottom line, not to mention all the referral business I would get having such a showpiece location on my resumé.

This would be an incredible accomplishment, assuming I could pull off the vision starting to form in my head. Thank God I had incredible partners and we worked with equally talented people, like Gideon Gets It Done's growing crew,

local to Crescent Cove. They kept costs reasonable without cutting corners.

Dex's house would be exactly what he wanted by the time we were done—even if he didn't exactly know what he wanted quite yet. But he knew what he *didn't* want, and for now, that was a good start.

The pink light of the imminent sunset crawled across the skyline in the distance as I drove to my parents' home in nearby Turnbull. In the meantime, I called Isis through my in-dash screen.

She picked up right away. "Tell me he didn't fuck it up."

"No. He didn't fuck anything up." I exhaled. "We spent the day together."

"What?"

I had to laugh. "Not like that. Going over the house. Making notes. Laughing here and there when I didn't want to slug him."

"You resisted? You're a better woman than I." Her voice lowered. "He didn't put the moves on you?"

"No. Not really."

"Not really?"

I didn't want to mention the little—okay, not so little—uplifting situation in his jeans earlier. It seemed too personal to mention. Besides, neither of us had made an issue out of it and it hadn't come up again.

At the next stoplight, I covered my face with my hand and forged ahead. There was a pun. "No. He's charming though. You didn't tell me that part."

"He is." She sighed. "Why women fall for him like dominos."

"But not you?"

"Not me. Not because I'm so wise, but because I love him too much to hate him after he pulls a Dex."

I laughed. “Why does that make sense to me?”

“Because you’ve already seen his appeal. Not just the green eyes and the walking sex persona or hell, the tattoos. He’s a decent guy. He hides it well, but he is. And man, those are rare nowadays.”

“Yeah. I asked for ten percent down and he gave me twenty. Check’s sitting in my purse, and I’ve had to stop myself from staring at it all the way to my parents’ house. I’ve never seen that many zeroes, Ice.” I told her how much and she whistled.

“Damn. He came to play ball.”

“He did. I’m trying to be chill about the whole thing, but if I don’t hyperventilate at some point, it’ll be a damn miracle.”

“He has faith in you. You need to have faith in yourself.”

“I do. Just it’s all kind of overwhelming.”

“That’s Dex in a nutshell. He seems like the biggest good-time guy ever, but he can blast the panties off a girl. She’ll still be smiling when he walks off. Somehow all his exes are still his friends.”

“I wouldn’t be friends with him after.”

“Uh oh.”

“What uh oh?”

“A statement like that means he’s got his claws in you already.”

“No. Not me. A decade ago, maybe. Maybe pre-Berry. But I’m not the me I used to be. I don’t take those kinds of chances anymore.”

She let out a windy sigh. “I hear you, girl. I do.”

“But?”

“But I really hate your ex, and I’ve never even laid eyes on him.”

“Dex has.” I swallowed deeply before telling her briefly what Dex had said about my ex-husband.

“Confirms what I already know about the dude. He’s a complete asshole, and I’ve never even laid eyes on him. Don’t want to.”

“I’d say I wish I hadn’t, but I won’t wish away my girl. She’s the best of both of us.”

“And you’re an amazing mother. I’m just sorry he was such a prick.”

“Me too.” Blinking away the sudden heat in my eyes, I turned on my signal and drove into my parents’ cozy neighborhood.

It was filled with tree-lined streets and houses with neat vegetable gardens in back and kids’ bikes tossed carelessly on the lawns. The kind of houses meant for raising a family.

I’d been lucky enough to grow up here with my older brother Casey, who had split at eighteen to go make his fortune as a tattoo artist in LA. We were both artists of a very different sort. He rarely made time to come home, but we loved each other even though we didn’t know each other as well as we should. In my mind, I’d practically been an only child.

I didn’t want that life for my own daughter, despite no prospects for changing that circumstance on the horizon.

“He told me I could bring Berry while working on his house,” I said quietly, bypassing my parents’ driveway at the last minute.

Maybe I wasn’t quite ready for this unexpectedly magical day to come to a close yet.

“Sounds like Dex.”

“Is he really like that?”

“Yeah. He really is. Oh, he’s not perfect, but he wouldn’t use your kid as a bargaining chip, so no worries there. He’s too cognizant of his own father’s marital games to be that thoughtless.”

“Thanks. I appreciate your perspective.”

“Don’t worry about him, Shelb. He barks but he doesn’t bite. And if he makes an agreement, he sticks with it. Plus, his bottom line is crazy. I know, because I do his calendar. Work calendar,” she amended, as if she knew I was already assuming social calendar despite his various comments to the contrary.

If one was paying attention, one might even wonder if Dex hadn’t gone out of his way to make sure I knew he wasn’t seeing anyone. Or even randomly sleeping with anyone.

Not like it mattered to me. Sex and relationships had no place in my already too-full life.

“Not worrying. Trying not to anyway.”

“Have some chocolate and celebrate the positive changes coming to your budget, okay?”

“Will do. Lunch later this week?”

“Sure. I’ll text you when I’m free. Later.”

I clicked off the call. I’d met Isis years ago when she’d wanted a bedroom redux on her new bungalow and I’d tagged along with TJ, Designing Women’s master carpenter. I wasn’t sure if TJ still hung out with her, but Isis and I had clicked right away. We usually had lunch once a month or more often if we could swing it, which was rare with both of our schedules.

Isis had only started working for Dex about six months ago, and I hadn’t yet visited her at work. She always swung by Designing Women to pick me up.

Maybe this time I’d drive over to the law office so I could get a look at Dex’s work lay of the land. Just out of curiosity.

Not because I was already looking forward to the next time I’d see him. That would be preposterous.

I headed toward downtown Kensington Square, hoping that Berry hadn’t been peering out the window at my parents’ place at the right time to see me drive by like a stranger. She liked to watch for me when it was time for me to arrive.

Though I’d blown by that time a bit ago.

Dusk was setting in. The days were getting longer, but it was still late May. And since it wasn't a school night, picking up Berry from my parents' house later than planned shouldn't cause too much chaos. I hoped.

The Honey Pot sign caught my eye across the street from Dex's law office. My dad had a sweet tooth and his granddaughter was just as bad. I tried to limit them both, but right now, I was definitely in screw-it mode.

Or maybe just celebration mode. Whatever, it called for sugar.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I parked and crossed the street to the bakery.

"We're closing up in a few minutes. Tarts are two for one," a happy voice chirped from the back of the room.

I could handle a tart or four.

I peered into the display case and my stomach growled loudly. I definitely hadn't made time for anything to eat beyond a salad from a drive-thru chain on the way to Dex's this afternoon. And most of it had been dumped into the trash when I ran out of time to eat it in the parking lot before I headed to Dex's.

Congeaed strawberries and soggy croutons were not appealing.

However, those raspberry-apple tarts were calling my name. And the rhubarb ones would put me in favored child status with my dad for at least a week.

Okay, maybe three days.

A dark-haired woman with friendly brown eyes came through the doorway wiping her hands on her sunny yellow apron. "Hey there." She tipped her head. "I think I've seen you in here before. Not sure we ever introduced ourselves." She fixed the apron ties behind her. "I'm Dre."

"Shelby. I work down the street."

She snapped her fingers. "Right. That cool designer place. Designing Women. Makes me laugh every time I pass it."

I rolled my eyes. “Inside joke that became my life.”

“Those are the best kinds.” She pointed to the back wall with her thumb. “Pretty much how I ended up with Pooh Bear as my mascot.”

The wall had a hand-painted version of the famous bear, but just different enough not to get in trouble with the Mouse House. She’d gone with the original storybook look instead, and I found it adorably on point for the proprietress’s personality.

Dre turned back to the counter behind her with a white box. “In fact, if you’re looking for something a little different, I just pulled these testers out of the oven.”

I went onto my toes. Whatever it was smelled amazing. “I shouldn’t.”

“That means you definitely should.” She grinned. “Honey-cross buns.”

“Dear God.” My stomach grumbled loudly.

Dre laughed. “That’s a definite yes. On the house. Just let me know if you like them the next time you see me.”

“Will do. I’ll take four tarts too.” I rattled off the kinds I knew my family would enjoy, and we talked about the mundane things of life for a few minutes.

By the time I got to the register, my mood had lifted even more. I wasn’t sure if meeting Dexter Shaw would turn out to be the score it seemed to be right now, but there would be delicious pastries in my future regardless.

I slipped a ten into her tip jar while her back was turned to tie up the yellow boxes imprinted with her logo.

“I’ll definitely let you know about the buns. I’m not sure they’ll make it to my parents’ house.”

She slid the box toward me. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

“Bad for my hips, but worth it.”

“Girl, you don’t have hips. I don’t want to hear it.” She slapped her own hips, which were lush in all the right ways.

“With the way these smell, your goddess designation fits those curves.”

She plucked a cookie out of the small display near the register and wrapped it in wax paper with little honey bees on it. “You definitely deserve a cookie for that one.”

I took it with a laugh. I could never resist chocolate chip cookies. “Thanks for the pick-me-up.”

“Same. See ya around, Shelby.”

I smiled at her and backed out of the door with my bounty, my step remarkably lighter. Juggling my boxes, I unlocked my Subaru Forester and stacked my food on the passenger seat. I grinned at the unicorn tucked under the seat and plopped it on top.

Berry would be looking for that near bedtime. It was one of the few things she had to have with her all the time. The universe was letting me have yet another win today. That would have been a long night of crying if I hadn't found it.

It was a nice evening, so I rolled down my window and cranked up my radio before I shamelessly ate my cookie before dinner. I sang along to a Britney anthem of my youth as I made my way out of Kensington Square, past Crescent Cove and into Turnbull, where my folks lived.

The sun was flickering through the big oak's leaves beside the house. I parked behind my mom's sturdy Ford Bronco and my heart turned over as Berry and her lopsided auburn pigtails came flying at me from around the back of the house.

“Mama! I thought you weren't going to be late.”

I climbed out and braced myself for contact as she slammed into my body, wrapping her arms around my waist. I leaned down and kissed the top of her head. “Me too, sweetie. But it took longer than expected to go through my client's house. It's really big. So, here I am.”

“Yay!”

“I have treats too.”

She wrinkled her freckled nose as she looked up at me. “It’s not yogurt or something, is it?”

I laughed. I supposed I had been a little heavy-handed on the healthy treats recently. “Definitely not yogurt.”

“Excellent!” She pushed away from me and took off for the back of the house.

I shook my head and grabbed my boxes before following her. The lush grass teased my ankles and my mother’s favorite pansies were on display along the side of the house. She always said she planted them because she couldn’t kill them, but I knew better.

My mom had the greenest thumb of anyone I knew. I’d inherited it, thankfully, even if my garden was much smaller on the postage stamp we called a backyard of my old cottage. I heard the laughter before I got to the backyard. My dad had an armful of Berry while she excitedly told him we had treats.

My dad’s dark eyes shone, both for his granddaughter and the treats.

The screen door slapped as my mom came out. “What’s all the commotion?” She spotted me and my boxes. “Oh, what did you bring us?” She took the boxes and put them on the well-worn picnic table, then she gave me a quick hug, as was her practice. Her scent of lilacs settled me that last little bit.

I hugged her back tighter.

She gripped my arms. “What’s this?”

“Just a weird day. My newest client is a handful.” I hadn’t even meant to say Dex was my client. I was still reserving judgment, even if I’d agreed to take his job.

Just none of it seemed real yet. I was still expecting him and his check to disappear into the ether like some fever dream.

She took me by the hand and dragged me over to the table. “Danny, you and Berry get us some plates.”

Berry raced inside, the door slamming behind her. My dad shook his head and followed. “That girl is always rushing

somewhere.”

“Like her mama.”

I rolled my eyes and stepped over the bench to take a seat. “You should have seen this man-child, Mom. Some parts of his house looked like they had been written into that old movie, *Weekend At Bernie’s*. Remember it?”

“Oh, my. The over-the-top rich guy, right?”

“Exactly. Dexter Shaw has much more money than sense.”

“Shaw? Don’t you already have a client with that name?”

I grinned at my mom. “You always remember my clients. I don’t know how you do it.” I fussed with the knot on the bakery box, and suddenly, I noticed a pocket knife had been put beside it. I had the same one in my purse, which I’d left in the car.

My knife was magenta, and my mother’s, the OG, was red and full of battle scars from heavy use.

“Thanks.” I flicked out the little knife and lifted the top of the box.

“Oh, well, those are sinful.” My mom leaned forward. “Not good for my butt, Shelby Lee.”

The door squeaked again as my daughter flew outside, her pigtailed bouncing. “Mom, what did you get? What did you get?” She set the paper plates and forks on the table and crowded into me.

“Give me a plate and sit like a civilized human and you’ll find out.”

Berry huffed out a breath and crawled under the table to the other side. So much for civilized. She popped up on the other side and laced her fingers together, practically vibrating. Maybe more sugar was not a good idea.

My other sugar fiend loomed over me. “Whatcha got?”

“If you sit down, I’ll give you this rhubarb tart I got especially for you.”

My dad hurried around the table to sit next to Berry and laced his fingers to match. “Ready.”

I laughed. This was exactly what I’d needed. I passed out tarts to the oohs and ahhs of my happy family.

“Look at those berries!”

Berry hadn’t gotten her nickname for any other reason than her absolute obsession with all things berries. She’d spit out most fruits as a baby until we’d tried raspberries and strawberries. After that, her fingers were usually stained red.

I grinned at her as she took a huge bite of the berry-apple tart. A ring of raspberry laced her smile. Instead of using my own fork, I took an equally big bite and her giggles smoothed out the last of my edges.

This kid was everything.

Dexter Shaw was officially tomorrow’s problem.

SEVEN

Dexter

I'D NEVER CLEANED IN SUCH A FRENZY IN MY LIFE. BUT AFTER Shelby had left—and I was still kicking my own ass for not ordering dinner for us—I'd decided that she wouldn't walk into my place looking like a den of iniquity again.

In retrospect, it probably didn't make sense to scrub the place from the floorboards to the beams in the ceiling just as I was redoing it, but better late than never had been my life motto since birth.

It had even been kind of fun in a sick, twisted sort of way. I'd blasted rock music from my youth, and Bob and I had danced around in our underwear—well, he favored his birthday suit—in between tossing trash and scrubbing questionable stains out of the carpet.

“No more carpeting, Bob,” I said around the duster clamped between my teeth. “Hardwoods all the way. Far easier to keep clean.”

He just stared at me dubiously. Then I took him out for one final nightly pee and gave him the last of his kibble for dinner. One more thing for my To Do list. It was looking like Santa's gift list at this point, unfurling down the street.

Last I remembered, I'd been on my hands and knees tugging unknown items out from under the sofa where someone had shoved them. Or more likely, multiple someones.

No more parties. Ever.

I woke face down on the floor in my living room with a tongue against my cheek. For an instant, hope bloomed that a

certain smart-mouthed woman who'd showed up in my dreams was willing to soothe all that ailed me.

Then a blast of truly foul breath wafted over my face and I rolled onto my back, throwing my hands up in a defensive move that just made Bob think we were playing. He thrust his considerable bulk onto my belly, his claws digging into my skin as I howled.

Which was how I then got his tongue in my mouth.

French-kissed by a pudgy pug was not the way I wanted to start my morning.

I rolled to my knees and begged Siri for the time. Eleven-eighteen am.

Or...my almost afternoon.

Neither was looking up, and coming face-to-face—or face-to-knee—with the smug expression of my older brother, who'd crossed his ankle onto his opposite knee and steepled his fingers over his stomach while he watched the show.

I rolled back onto the rug and allowed Bob to attack me without putting up a fight.

My brother's black brow winged up before he spoke. "I'd ask you how you are, but I'd say the results speak for themselves." He gestured vaguely to my position on the floor.

Knowing he assumed I was loaded pissed me off enough I just grunted and flipped him off.

"He's out of kibble," a deep voice called from the kitchen, to which Bob let out a sharp bark in disgust.

Or maybe alarm. Bob's moods weren't always distinguishable.

I closed my eyes and swallowed a groan. "Check to see if there's a spare bag in the bottom cabinet," I called back. I was pretty sure I'd used that up too but hope sprang eternal. "Who let you people in here?" I asked no one in particular.

"The door was unlocked, but you gave me a key."

"And Bishop? He has a pass too apparently?"

“He pretty much goes where I go.”

“Does your girlfriend know you’re now conjoined?”

“What makes you think she minds?”

I pressed a hand to my muzzy head. I was too fucking old to sleep on the floor. “Too kinky this early in the morning, pal.”

“It’s halfway to dinnertime.”

“Yeah, if you’re rolling up to the senior’s early bird special at the Denny’s down the road.”

Bishop appeared in the doorway and moved down the steps into the sunken living room with more energy than I could’ve summoned if I tried. “No kibble there either.” He frowned. “Hey, does that Pac Man pinball machine work?”

I knew it did because I’d gotten the bright idea to play with it last night before I hauled it in here to get it out of my office. Why? Why did any man do what he did when it was four am and he was bleary-eyed and trying to makeover his life?

A question for the ages.

Bob let out a pitiful whine.

I forced myself up into a sitting position and waited for the room to come into sharper focus. It had to eventually, right?

“Yes, it works.”

“Why is it in the center of your living room?”

“It’s off to the side. Ish. I’m redoing the place and it’ll be going in my new man cave. I’ve got a new designer.”

“Another one? What happened to the last one?”

“When I bought the place?”

“Yeah. Just hire them again.”

“If I liked what Jacques had done, why would I be redoing the house so soon?”

“That is a point.” Preston tapped his chin. “You live alone. Isn’t the whole house your man cave?”

“Yes. So, if I want to have a game machine in the center of the foyer, my business. Why are you here? Both of you?”

“Isis thought you were dead. She’s called, and I quote, many, many times.”

And I’d heard absolutely none of them. Then again, I think I’d turned off notifications before I passed out last night.

Two late nights in a row made for a very exhausted Dexter. And last night hadn’t even included a single drop of alcohol.

“Can you sound a little more dismayed by that possibility?” I shook my head. “You’re a sadist, Preston.”

“She said you weren’t answering her calls and she’s knee-deep in painting her kitchen so she wouldn’t be able to get over here until later. I mean, if you really were dead, there was no rush, right?”

“Comedians, the whole lot of you.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Did you and your conjoined twin actually need anything or did you just come by to put the final nail in my coffin? And no, Bishop, you’re not getting my Pac Man machine in the will.”

He laughed and dropped down in my huge overstuffed recliner. “Thanks for the update.”

“Did your wife pop yet?”

They’d eloped to Fiji around Valentine’s Day. Blew my mind, but then again, the fact that they’d fallen in love on a weeklong Fiji trip still did too.

Between him and my brother, they were basically spokespersons for instalove.

I wasn’t jealous one bit. Even if such madness seemed like...madness.

“Nope. Still cooking.”

“Are you divorced yet?”

“Nope.” His continual cheerfulness set my teeth on edge, so I glared at him.

“Why are you two so goddamned happy all the time?”

Pres shrugged. “Not sure you want to know.”

I sighed, already veering back into despondency. I was certain it likely had to do with kinky sex. Though at this point, any sex would be kinky to me. “Probably right.”

Bishop and Preston exchanged glances. “I got an interesting call this morning,” Bishop announced.

They’d always had this secret unspoken best friend communication deal that made me feel left out, as stupid as that was. I hadn’t been close to my older brother in more years than I could count, and to be honest, there had been times I’d hung out with Bishop more than Preston. I’d never felt as judged by Bishop.

Preston didn’t even have to exert effort to make me feel as if he was looking down at me. It just came part and parcel with the fact he was ridiculously smart and competent in all things, along with more driven than I’d ever been.

Early on, I’d discovered school wasn’t my thing, so I’d worked on majoring in having fun. But I’d never wanted anyone to know I wasn’t capable of leading a law firm. Instead, I made it seem as if I just didn’t choose to be as relentlessly excellent as my older brother.

Reality was a dish best served very cold.

“Aren’t you curious who called me?” Bishop asked while I debated using Bob as a pillow to continue my nap.

I shrugged.

“Eli Turner from my former place of employment. He’d heard through the grapevine that you were looking to expand.”

“What grapevine?” I hadn’t discussed the Eli possibility with anyone but Isis.

But if Isis thought she was helping me, it wouldn’t be above her to go to Bishop before I’d even finished considering the possibility.

Some might think that was disloyal of her, but if she thought she could ensure Eli would consider my suggestion, she would. And I suspected she was concerned I'd taken too long so she thought time was of the essence in contacting him.

Not everyone got our relationship, but I knew she always had my back. Even if it didn't always look that way at first glance.

And the truth was, I *had* taken too long to contact him.

It hadn't helped that I was under vastly more stress with my brother and father gone. Before, stress was a word I'd avoided like the plague.

As close as Isis and I were, even she didn't know about my recent ADHD diagnosis. I'd only figured out what was wrong with me a matter of months ago.

Who found out they had ADHD when they were an adult? Me, that was who.

My mom had gotten me tutors in high school, and then in college I'd worked with them of my own volition, because I'd been determined to get through law school one way or another. And I had, even if I'd failed the bar twice.

Shaking his head, Bishop got to his feet. "Expanding, really? So you've been making payroll?"

I gestured around me. "Do I look like I'm suffering, man?"

"No. You look worn out. The bags under your eyes are deep enough to swim in."

Preston leaned forward and locked his hands between his knees. "Look, Dex, I can come by, take a look at things. Maybe help out some during this transition period—"

"No," I snapped. And as much as I loved Isis, we would be discussing the need for discretion when it came to work matters. Even if she thought she was helping me.

I didn't need that kind of help. Not yet. I could handle this.

I *would* handle it one way or another.

Actually, I preferred people thinking I was just a screwup rather than telling them there was a reason. ADHD was something that kids got. Not grown men. Not lawyers. Even if I'd likely had it since I was a child.

“Look, Isis was trying to help but I'm not expanding yet. Not saying I won't be, but I'm not right now. So, please let Eli know I don't need him. Just like I didn't need you.”

Of course not, because Bishop hadn't wanted to work with me in Preston's stead. Oh, the option had been on the table after Preston had given his notice, but the traitor had jumped ship to do family law with my brother. Naturally. No one cared if I drowned on my own.

Worse, I half wondered if they were waiting for it to happen.

Deep down, I knew I should talk to Eli. I just wanted to put it off as long as possible.

“Jeez. Your famed charm is missing with your deodorant today, huh?”

I resisted the urge to sniff my pits to make sure. I'd showered yesterday morning, but then I'd cleaned most of my house. Maybe I did smell rank.

“Are you sure you're doing okay? I can help, man.” Preston's voice almost sounded...kind. Not smug and know-it-all. “Honestly, I always wanted you to just admit you needed —”

“Needed what? *You?*” I snorted. If that had been his big plan all along, he was about to be sorely disappointed. I wasn't good at admitting I needed help. “I'm not about to tank the company, big bro, fear not.”

“No one's worried about that. Your flair for the dramatic in court has always served you well.”

I straightened my shoulders. That was one thing no one could doubt I was good at. Truthfully, I probably should've gone into acting instead of law, but I'd wanted to stay local and central New York wasn't exactly a hub of the entertainment industry.

Swallowing hard, I rose. My mouth was as dry as dust. I needed a quart of water and some Tylenol. Yesterday's headache had returned without needing to party first. "I hate to cut this short, but I have a full schedule today."

What, I had no clue. But it sounded better than saying I had nothing planned.

My dog whined and leaned against my leg. "You hungry, buddy?"

"I'd say so. Probably has to pee too, since I'd guess you've been unconscious for a while," Preston offered helpfully.

"Thanks. Glad I can count on you in a crisis."

"What crisis? You're alive. The dog's alive. You said the firm is fine. Didn't you? We probably should've offered to help a long time ago. Just got busy and didn't take the time to. I regret that." Preston's probing stare activated the throb at the base of my skull.

"Everything is fine." It wasn't, but if and when we had to have this intervention, I wasn't going to talk to my brother in front of Bishop. Yes, he was the next best thing to family, especially in my brother's eyes, but I really wanted to minimize the number of people who bore witness to my come-to-Jesus moment.

Bad enough I felt as though I'd have to tell my father, the ultimate understanding man. Except not at all.

Did I technically have to? No. But it was his legacy I wasn't handling the way he'd want me to. Some would say screw him, but that wasn't me.

"So you're in over your head, but yet you're redecorating? Doesn't that seem a little, I don't know, odd?"

I narrowed my eyes at Bishop. "Did I say I was in over my head?"

"No, but you typically don't consider bringing on new attorneys if you can handle the current caseload. I'm not saying that's a bad thing. Having a lot of work is good." He

shot a sidelong glance at my brother. “A problem we’d like to have.”

“We’re doing just fine,” Preston said evenly, returning his gaze to me. “But there’s a point when you have too much for current resources. Admitting that is operating from a position of strength.”

“Sure, it is.” Bishop nodded enthusiastically. “But for what it’s worth, I gave Shelby Wilde’s partner TJ a glowing recommendation for you yesterday.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, I told her you were a decent guy. Honorable man of the law who pays on time and is fun to talk to and also far too charming for your own good.”

“Is that part of being a decent guy?”

“It helped me in my single days.” He grinned.

“Is April doing okay? Tell her I miss her. Maybe I should call her.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I said you were too charming for your own good. That wasn’t an invitation for you to flirt with my wife.”

I had to laugh. “I only flirted with April to keep my skills sharp. She knew I wasn’t serious. Besides, that belly of hers could knock a guy’s eye out.”

A besotted expression flitted over Bishop’s face, and I had to smother the impulse to roll my eyes. Love was a thorny business. “She’s radiant.”

I cocked a brow. “If you talk to her like that every day, no wonder she married you.”

He shrugged. “Just saying.”

“I’m happy for you, man. That honeymoon phase looks like it’s treating you well. And she’s already knocked up, so hey, happy times, am I right?” I waggled my brows as he coughed through a laugh.

Evidently, Bob had given up hope lunch would be forthcoming anytime soon and flopped to the floor with a sigh of obvious doggie disgust.

“As for Shelby, she’s not interested in anything other than work, and I can respect that. Her role as a mother is her priority, and I definitely respect that.”

“Good to hear.” Preston shook his head. “This wasn’t the crisis I anticipated discussing this afternoon, gotta say.”

Bishop smirked. “A woman doesn’t want to have sex with him. This is definitely a crisis.”

“She didn’t say she didn’t want to have sex with me,” I informed Bishop, though I had no doubt that was the truth. “I’d assume her partner TJ is just hoping to circumvent a problem with me. If I was going to be one.”

“Yeah.” Bishop shoved a hand through his cropped short brown hair. “Are you?”

“I still don’t know what exactly that means. I never push myself on women. I rarely drink to excess.”

Preston coughed. “Right. Yet you chose to do it during the firm’s first open house? I heard from Isis you were loaded. And what the hell were you having an open house at your home for, anyway? Sounds as if you have enough business to begin with.”

He was not wrong. Actually, the idea of more business made me want to throw up. “Loaded is overstating things a bit, and I didn’t drink at all last night. I had the party for the optics.”

“*What* optics? Showing off the gold toilets?”

I was officially through talking to both of them.

“Tell Shelby—or TJ—if she wants to know if I can be professional to ask me herself. I don’t bite unless a lady says please.”

I headed into the kitchen with my dog nipping at my heels. Too bad I’d have to go out to buy him his kibble. Where the heck was my Amazon order? Had I even placed it this month?

I'd automated that task with a subscription order, as I tried to do with as many things as I could manage so I didn't forget stuff and get overwhelmed.

Good luck there, pal.

I shook my dog food bin dejectedly, hoping kibble would magically appear. It did not and from Bob's whine, he wasn't amused.

Neither was I.

All this talk with Bishop and my brother was making me second-guess my day with Shelby yesterday. I thought we'd had fun mixed with lots of house talk. Perhaps what I'd thought was harmless flirting wasn't. Had I pushed her with my deal demands? Maybe I'd been inadvertently heavy-handed.

Just like her dick husband. You know, the guy who posed with your jerk of a father in a million local award pictures. That's definitely the image you want to present, asshole.

I returned to the living room and tried a winning smile. Bishop and Preston immediately went silent.

"Don't suppose you'd give me Shelby's address? I want to apologize to her."

Bishop's dark brow winged up. "For what?"

"Just some potential miscommunication." I'd even let her keep the down payment and then, if she wanted to keep the deal open, I could do that. Last thing I wanted to do was to seem anything like her ex. I was open to negotiation.

At least some of the time.

Okay, *this* time.

Preston cleared his throat. "I'm not sure going to her house on the weekend strikes the right note."

"Okay, I'll text her and apologize. How's that?"

"Send her an email," Bishop suggested. "A professional one at Designing Women."

“I could do that too.”

But I wanted to see her. And my wants didn't necessarily hold any weight at all.

Thankfully, neither of them knew of my unexpected erection situation yesterday.

Once I emerged a half hour later, the bozo twins were gone and my hungry dog was eating the piece of cheese one of them had given him. I caught sight of my reflection in the stainless-steel refrigerator door and cocked my head.

I looked entirely respectable. My graphic T-shirt, jeans, boots, and nicely combed hair proved I was a man who could be trusted not to do anything inappropriate.

Whatever that was.

I grabbed my keys and my wallet, snapped on Bob's leash, and headed out to my cherry-red vintage Mustang. The day was sunny and warm with a nice breeze, the perfect day to roll the top down and cruise by a pretty girl's—sorry, capable professional's—home to apologize with the bouquet of fresh flowers I hoped would be readily available at the drugstore near the pet store.

Bob hopped into the passenger seat, his tongue already lolling out of his mouth from excitement over the pending drive. I flipped him a couple of Pupperonis—the last of my stash—and he slobbered all over my black leather seats as he gobbled them down. Then I ruffled his soft ears and asked Siri to call Ice.

She answered sounding peeved.

“I sent Preston over so I didn't have to talk to you while I'm painting.”

“Love you too. Gimme Shelby's address.” I'd ask for her email address if I had to, but I'd start at the top and work my way down.

“What? No. Stalker.”

I laughed as I started the car and my baby Vi purred to life. She sounded like a dream. My hands tingled as I wrapped

them around the steering wheel. “It’s just so we can discuss work. I’ll be a complete gentleman.”

“Liar. You think she’s hot.”

“I didn’t notice. Besides, I’m saving myself for you.”

“Shut up. Don’t make me regret this, Shaw. I’m so not kidding.” She rattled off an address. “If you piss her off, I will lie and say you raided my phone. I’m trusting you, Dexterous.”

“Like I can trust you not to tell Bishop about my considering Eli?”

Understandably, she said nothing.

I sighed. “Look, I get you probably thought you were helping to pave the way for me contacting him by getting Bishop to put in a good word.”

“Did he not?”

“I have no idea. But I wasn’t ready to contact Eli in any case. Not just yet.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.” I sighed. “But I know your heart was in the right place.”

“It was. You know I love you. But if this supposed reno goes sideways in any way, you can find yourself another admin. Count on it.”

“I’m on it. Plus, I’ll bring her flowers. Always works.”

“And Nestlé Crunch for Berry. Though Shelby sneaks half when she thinks no one is looking.”

Hopefully, the drugstore would have candy and decent fresh flowers.

“Dex?”

“Sure thing. Nestlé Crunch it is.”

“Don’t be weird about the kid. Shelby is prickly to begin with and super on guard for any slights against Berry. They... haven’t had it easy. Being a single mom, man, it’s tough. Ask

my mom.” Isis let out a long exhale. “Better yet, ask your mom. She heard all about it.”

“Yeah. I get you, Ice. We talked about her ex some yesterday. I get that he was an asshole,” I said quietly, signaling as I veered left at the stop sign. “I don’t want to make anything harder for her. In fact, that’s exactly why this meeting can’t wait. I want her to know she’s in charge here.”

“Hmm.”

“I mean it.”

“Dex, what aren’t you telling me?”

I signaled again onto the road that would take me to the highway. “Nothing. Just I want to apologize to Shelby. I might have...miscalculated how to handle this job.”

“You better spill it to me next time we talk.”

“I will.”

“You have her address now, so leave me alone.”

“Thanks, Ice. Talk to you later. Don’t worry. You can trust me, I swear.”

Just before she hung up, she sighed. “I do trust you. And Shelby could use a friend. Maybe she could even use—God help me—a Dex.”

I laughed and punched her address into my GPS. Maybe I’d skip the flowers and candy in favor of pure honesty. “God help us both then.”

EIGHT



WEEKENDS WERE FOR CATCHING UP. I'D LOVE TO BELIEVE they were for relaxing, but with an eight-year-old, even relaxing was often full of juggling fun with actual chores.

Structure was a good word. Even if my kid didn't believe me. She would when she was older. I was almost sure of it.

"Mom! Can I have a juice box?"

"No. But you can have a water." I stepped down off my stool, watering jug in hand. The late-May warmth was already seeping into the house, but I was loath to turn on the air conditioning. As soon as I started, it was hard to stop.

But my poor plants required some extra tending thanks to the late spring heat.

I heard the put-upon sigh and the slam of the fridge, but the crunch of crushed ice from the ice machine on the door told me she listened. At least for now. Berry came tearing through the four-seasons room as she slurped up icy water through one of her wild, brightly colored straws.

"Judy looks very fetching."

I laughed as I poured water into the variegated Philodendron. "Where did you learn that word?"

"Harry Potter."

I fluffed the leaves on Judy. "Well, why don't you go over there and water the students from Hogwarts?"

“Okay.” Berry sucked down half of the cup of water before plunking it on a shelf, then rushed over to fill her watering can at the mini sink I’d installed in the atrium.

Also why I had her drink water instead of juice. The girl would float away with all the liquids she consumed a day. Juice was far too full of sugar for my already hyper kid. Rerouting her energy was always a struggle and a joy.

Luckily, she’d taken after her mama and her gram with her love for taking care of plants. Probably a little had to do with her aunt Avery too. My partner in Designing Women loved to bring Berry on some of the smaller landscaping projects for our business.

My very enterprising and far-too-smart-for-her-own-good daughter liked to name our plants. Judy had been with us since I’d bought the fixer-upper four years ago post-divorce. It had taken me a damn long time to save enough money to put a sizable down payment on the cottage on the edge of Kensington Square.

I’d been determined to get out of Turnbull, as much as I loved it. My clientele lived mostly in the affluent Crescent Cove or Kensington Square areas, and I wanted to be in the middle of the action. That, and I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it.

Single women with a kid and a growing business could survive and even thrive, dammit. If I convinced myself, it would happen. Maybe. I was pretty sure surviving was the only part of the equation I was getting right most days.

I glanced at my little girl, who twirled from one plant stand to another with her own little watering can. At least one of us was thriving.

She was talking animatedly to all the smaller plants she’d named after the students at Hogwarts. Harry Potter was one of her favorite things on this planet. She was a book maniac and well above her reading level. I’d worried a little bit about the darker aspects of the later novels in the series, but she was more intuitive and bright than even I gave her credit for.

The books continued to be an enduring favorite, and she'd recently branched out into graphic novels. Good thing I made a decent living because not even the library could keep up with the voracious reading appetites of my little girl.

Not so little anymore.

The sound of tires rolling up the drive, easily heard from this part of my small home, had me rushing to the window. A red convertible Mustang idled in the driveway with a pudgy dog in the front seat, his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

No. Why was he here? I hadn't invited him. He hadn't texted me to give me fair warning.

Had I forgotten something in our conversation?

Well, other than setting an appointment to sign a contract before I started any sort of work. The damn man had rattled me enough I'd forgotten my steps. And I never forgot my steps.

"Mama, doggie! Did you see the doggie?"

I put my hand on her silky hair and prayed for strength. "I did, honey. His name is Bob."

And he and his ridiculously attractive owner were walking up the driveway to my back door. Bob trotted beside Dex on his pink sparkly leash, some sort of bone clamped between his jaws, while Berry wiggled at my side in obvious joy.

Most people would've headed for the front door right away. It was painted a nice deep blue to catch the eye, so there was no way he could've missed it. But nope, here he was strolling toward the back, chatting in a low voice to Bob, who paid him no mind as he sniffed and marked every bush and plant I'd so lovingly added along the drive to go with the few that had already been there when we moved in.

"Mama, he's peeing all over."

"Yeah, honey, he is."

"Can we have a dog? I'll walk him and feed him and put him to bed in my rocker bed."

Her rocker bed was a remnant from her childhood, made by her grandpa. Originally, it had been intended for one of her dolls, but she'd decided she liked to nap in it back when she was a tiny girl herself. I'd never been able to break her of the habit until she'd outgrown it.

Imagining Bob under the covers in the rocker bed made me swallow a laugh. Why did I have a feeling he'd be just fine with that level of coddling?

Dex spotted us in the window and lifted his hand in a wave as a devastating grin lifted his lips. Bob followed his gaze and started to bark.

"Oh, hey, it's him, Mama." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "He's wearing a Spiderman shirt."

So he was. Along with another pair of faded jeans torn at the knees. Did he get them specially measured to his long, lean body? There was no way they could fit that well just off the rack.

"You didn't mention he had a doggie!" Berry waved exuberantly, barely able to contain her excitement as she ran to the back door.

"Honey, he hasn't even knocked yet," I called. Under my breath, I added, "Or stated his business."

She yanked open the door and ran outside, colliding with Dex as he unclipped Bob's leash. He laughed, grabbing her shoulders to right her when she would've skidded on the wet flagstone from the overnight rain. "Hey, kiddo. Slow down. You're going to slip—"

She was already on her knees with her arms around Bob while he slobber-kissed her as if they were long-term best friends. The sound of my little girl's laughter warmed me so much that I leaned against the doorjamb, just to take in her big smile as she cuddled Bob.

Maybe I should get her a puppy. She was a responsible kid. If I ended up taking on a bit more of his care, so what? If Berry was happy, it would all be worth it.

I looked up to notice Dex watching me. And his expression wasn't exactly one of fondness. More... wolf-ish.

I did not have room in my life for expressions like that. If I'd acted from instinct, I would've backed into the house and slammed the door shut. Instead, I threw back my shoulders and met his stare—which was how I didn't notice right away Bob had spotted a bright red ball in the bushes and had broken away from Berry to snatch it.

He streaked down the driveway as the ball tumbled out of his mouth and Berry let out a joyful shriek as she chased after him.

I rushed out onto the minuscule back porch, leaning over the railing with Dex at my side. "Hey, wait, that's the neighbors' ball." The kids were forever accidentally tossing it over into our yard.

Berry and Bob paid no mind, happily racing down the driveway in pursuit of their prize. Bob kept grabbing it and then losing it and Berry grabbed it and sent it bouncing again. I started to admonish Berry, then decided to let her have her fun with the dog. They weren't hurting anything.

"I can go get the ball." Dex was so close that his warm, minty breath was ruffling my hair. And I didn't mind. Nor did I mind his large palm resting protectively on my back, probably to keep me from pitching over the railing in my attempt to keep my girl and his dog in my sights.

But I needed to make sure the boundaries were firmly in place.

"It's fine. They're having fun." I glanced at him. "I won't fall, Dex."

"Maybe I will. Ever thought of that?" The twinkle in his green eyes was far too riveting. "You could be saving me from a near catastrophe."

"Hardly." I snorted. "This porch is six feet off the ground."

Bob let out a sharp bark, and I looked over toward them to see Berry scrambling after the ball toward the street with Bob hot on her heels. A loud air horn from the big freight truck

lumbering toward them sucked the oxygen from my lungs and the scream on its way out of my mouth. Visions of my little girl broken and battered in the road flashed in my head as I blindly rushed down the steps, my cheeks already wet.

God, no. This couldn't be happening.

Then I realized Dex was already on the move, having leaped over the railing. His long legs ate up the ground amazingly fast and his shouts to my daughter were commanding and decisive—and had her stopping at the edge of the road to grab Bob's collar as she looked back at him while the truck sped past.

Dex snatched the back of her shirt and hauled her against him in a hug that probably caused some bruises, but was so damn sweet that I couldn't help crying. That had to be why I was crying.

She was fine. She was safe.

At the edge of the driveway, I stopped running and closed my eyes, willing my tears back. My jagged emotions that I was losing control of my precariously balanced house of cards were spilling out all over.

And fear. Couldn't forget the bone-crushing fear.

“Mama? Why you crying?”

I opened my eyes and stared into my baby's worried hazel eyes. Dropping to my knees in front of her, I cuddled her close, burying my face in her hair so I could inhale the sweetness of her smell. Lavender and soap and maybe a bit of dog.

A dog who was now nosing between my legs in true embarrassing canine fashion.

“Bob, have some damn manners.” Dex hauled him back by his pink sparkly collar and flashed me a grin as I peeked up from Berry's hair. “You okay?” he mouthed, concern etched in the lines in his forehead and in his eye crinkles.

Sexy eye crinkles.

My daughter could have been seriously injured—or so much worse—and I was noticing his eye crinkles. Something was seriously wrong with me.

Berry gave me a halfhearted pat and started to run toward our postage stamp backyard with Bob in tow.

“Alice Anne Wilde, you wait. You are not to ever run toward the road like that again. You know we’ve talked about that.”

“But the ball—”

“There are millions of balls in the world. There’s only one you.” I made my voice as authoritative as possible, considering my internal organs were still quivering. “Promise me.”

“I promise. I’m sorry, Mama.” She glanced at Dex. “I’m sorry. Please can he stay for a while?”

“Bob? Sure. He’s got nothing but time.” Dex glanced at me. “As long as it’s okay with your mom.”

There were a million reasons it shouldn’t have been okay. But then there was the fact that this man who barely knew me—barely knew us—had charged after my daughter and would have run into the street in front of a truck barreling down on her, just to ensure her safety.

More than her own father would have done. By far.

“It’s okay. Just stay in the fenced backyard, please.”

“Okay.” Head down, Berry nudged Bob in front of her and the two of them headed into the back, real and metaphorical tails between their legs.

I let out a half laugh, half sob as I finally rose. I’d kneeled in a damn puddle from the rain last night, and I was sure the hem of my sundress was all muddy. I looked downward and sighed. Dirty knees, dirty dress. “Awesome.”

“I’m sorry that happened. I should’ve stopped them with that ball.”

“What?” My head jerked up. “She’s not your responsibility. I should’ve stopped them. But they were just having fun—”

“Yeah, until they weren’t. I forgot how fast kids are. But I know I have to keep a better eye on Bob. My fault for being distracted.”

I didn’t want to ask. I knew I shouldn’t. And yet...

“Why were you distracted?”

“The slant of the sunlight on the porch is just perfect to observe the Monarchs in your bush.”

The laugh burst out of me. “You are such an asshole.”

“Thanks. It’s one of my finest qualities.” He held out his arm to me. When I linked mine with his, he led me toward the backyard. “You haven’t yelled at me for being here yet.”

“I don’t think I’m ever going to yell at you again.” I frowned. “Not that I ever yelled at you.”

“No, you didn’t. But why not?”

“You dove into traffic after my little girl. I owe you everything.”

He gazed down at me, eye crinkles in full effect and his expression warm enough for me to feel like I had on a ball gown, not a muddy thrift store find. “You owe me nothing. I was the reason she did that. Me and my making up excuses to see you again before you were ready.”

“I was ready.” As his eyebrow hiked, I hurried to clarify my errant thoughts. “I mean, to talk about your house. More about it. That’s what you meant, right?”

“No.” The corner of his mouth lifted. “But we can pretend if it makes it easier for you.”

“Thanks.” I rubbed my suddenly pounding temple. “I need to get your contract drawn up. You have to sign it before any work can begin, including discussions about what you want.”

“Okay. That’s fine. But I owe you an apology.”

“For what?”

“I might have come on too strong yesterday. If it seemed like I was forcing you or trying to strong-arm you into taking this job—”

“No,” I replied quickly. “Absolutely not. I want to do it. Why would you think that?”

“Just in case.” His gaze lowered to our linked arms as we reached the wrought iron gate to the backyard. A gate that would not be nearly strong enough to secure a dog like Bob if he ever tried hard to escape. “It’s always your choice, Sherbet. I just can be...pushy. I’ll try to keep that in line.”

“I have a voice and my own heart and mind. I’ll speak up if you make me feel—”

Everything.

“If it’s too much,” I added softly.

“Promise?” His gaze dropped to our locked arms again before he reached down to open the latch of the gate for me, as if we were on a date and this wasn’t my own backyard.

“I promise.” I swallowed deeply as Bob barked and ran in circles around my laughing daughter. Her cheeks were rosy with exertion, making her freckles seem even brighter. “Want to come in and hang out for a while? I know this isn’t how you intended for today to go.”

“I’d love to. Besides, I have papers to sign first, right? So, until you have those, we probably should shelve work.”

“Well, we can talk off the books, I just can’t bring in the crew yet.”

“Or we can just...not.” He gave me that winsome grin once again and I was toast. “We can just get to know each other. And I can get to know Berry. And Bob can be Bob. And hey, think Berry would like to go to the pet store with me? He needs kibble. And maybe a few more toys.”

I couldn’t help laughing at the hopeful expression in his eyes. “Sure. We can all go. Assuming we can fit in that shiny rat trap of yours.”

I was so lying. I was a sucker for vintage convertibles. Especially candy-apple red ones.

“Rat trap?” He put a hand over his heart. “You wound me.”

I frowned up at the darker clouds moving across the bright blue sky. “You’ll have to put up the top. Rain is due.”

“Eh, later.” Waving a hand, he stepped into the yard. “Hey Berry, want to go on a field trip with me and Bob?” He shot me a glance. “And your mother?”

She immediately stopped running and widened her eyes. “Really? We can all go?”

“I don’t keep her chained in the basement, I swear,” I muttered as Dex gestured for us to follow him back down the driveway to his car.

“Only when I’m in trouble,” Berry said in a singsong voice while she skipped along after Dex with Bob trailing right behind.

“Funny girl.”

A lump formed in my throat. He was being so nice. Why? What did he want?

You know what he wants. What all men want. Until they don't. And he's the key to you bettering your life for you and your child.

All this was for Berry.

Having fun was all well and good. But I wouldn’t forget my daughter’s needs came first.

Dex shot me a grin over his shoulder before he opened the passenger door with a flourish for Berry and then for me to get in. I slipped inside and tried not to purr at the feeling of the leather seats against the backs of my legs. I looked around the flawless interior, imagining racing down curvy back country roads with the wind in my hair and seventies music pumping out of the speakers.

On a non-rainy day of course.

My needs? Just didn't matter.

NINE

Dexter

A FIELD TRIP TO THE PET STORE WITH A WOMAN I BARELY knew and her increasingly charming young daughter—and oh, couldn't forget Bob—wasn't how I'd planned to spend my day, but man, I was enjoying it.

“Watch his leash. Keep tension in the lead,” Shelby told Berry as we walked the aisles of Pet-o-Rama.

Well, I walked. Strolled, really, hands in my pockets, since I didn't even have to hang on to my dog. Shelby?

Marched at the pace of a drill sergeant with a list a mile long of things to accomplish. She wasn't even a pet owner, but she had a schedule to keep.

Berry moved at a pace in the middle, meandering with Bob to sniff and check out every single thing.

She didn't sniff, however. Bob did enough sniffing for both of them.

“Berry, you're slackening on the leash. If he gets loose—”

“If he gets loose, he'll flop over and show his belly to the first person who offers him treats or pets. Or both. Bob is not an attack dog,” I reminded her, just in case she'd somehow missed this fact.

Shelby shot me a narrow-eyed look over her shoulder as she continued her march through the store. “And if he encounters other dogs?”

I made a show of glancing around. At this particular moment, no other dogs were in sight, just a few couples and

some senior citizens. Of course, that could change at any moment.

If it did, Shelby the Fearsome would be ready.

I shrugged. “Depends on if said dog has a toy. Bob might run into him and slobber him into submission in an attempt to make him his best friend. Then he’d steal the toy.”

Shelby sighed as if there was no helping me, but I saw her lips twitch.

Bob and I were similar, personality-wise. We didn’t get worked up over much. And if we lacked other methods to win someone over, we used our innate charm.

His was much more powerful than mine, but having a cute dog also helped.

Berry’s eyes lit up. “Can we get him a toy?”

“Sure.” He had a giant bin of them already, but what was one more? I almost always got him some on every trip.

Berry picked up the pace in search of the toy aisle and Bob hurried to keep up with her. She had to clear three more aisles of dishes, bowls, mats, beds, and leashes, and other assorted dog and cat paraphernalia. She came upon the dog toy aisle with a gasp as if she’d just found F.A.O. Schwartz in New York City.

Bob plopped down on her sneakered foot and together, they scanned the shelves that extended far above their heads. Every possible toy was crowded together. Plastic toys, stuffed toys, rope toys, balls, and many more.

“Can we get him one?” Berry asked again breathlessly, as if she hadn’t believed me the first time.

“Definitely. Get him whatever you want.”

Shelby glanced at me, aghast. “Not whatever. Some will be too expensive.”

Grasping that this was somehow a teachable moment since a child was involved, I nodded sternly. “Yes, no more than, I don’t know, fifty.”

“Fifty?” Berry’s eyes widened to the size of silver dollars.

“No, not fifty,” Shelby snapped. “He meant ten.”

“Did you mean ten?” Berry questioned.

“Uh, sure?” I was already tapping my fingers on my leg as I scanned the shelves while Bob did his anticipatory dance. He leaned up against my leg, clearly understanding who held the checkbook. I wouldn’t say the control, because it already seemed as if Shelby was in charge.

“Maybe just a bit more than ten?” Berry snatched a purple owl from a good, supposedly non-destructible brand and pushed on the squeaker, making Bob flop over in doggie glee, paws up and tongue lolling.

All three of us laughed.

“Drama king,” I chided him, bending down to rub his belly. “As if you don’t have a million toys at home.”

“A million?” Berry cocked her head. “Can I see his toys? Do you have room where he can run?” She cast a sidelong look at her mother. “Safely?”

“Actually, I do. And sure, we can go back to my place after we leave here. Your mom is going to be renovating it for me.” I continued rubbing Bob while I looked up at Shelby. “Maybe?”

“No maybe,” she said with a small smile. “We just need to sign those papers. First, I need to get them drawn up with our office manager.” She sighed.

“So, come over and we can just table work until you have the papers.”

Her lips shifted into a frown as if it was their most natural state. “But I have a lot of paperwork to get done today. Not yours. Shockingly, I have other clients.”

I held a hand to my heart. “Tell me it isn’t so.”

Again that lip twitch.

“Bring it with you?” I suggested. “I can hang with Berry and Bob and you can camp out wherever you like to work.

You can even spread out on the bedroom terrace if this rain lets up.” I looked up at the ceiling while the thunderous sound of drumming rain filled the building.

The storm had just begun, as predicted by the gloom sayer. But at least the top was up on the convertible, thanks to her.

Berry clutched the owl in one hand and the waist of her mother’s sundress with the other while Shelby stared me down, indecision and acceptance at war on her beautiful face.

Beautiful, worried face.

I had to do something to take it away. Seeing her in conflict made me feel guilty and I didn’t like that feeling.

I didn’t like that I’d inadvertently caused it.

“Or we can do it another day.” I tried not to react to Berry’s crestfallen body language. Slumped shoulders, lowered head, downturned mouth. Even Bob stopped gyrating, and I knew he hadn’t gotten that far in his Duolingo English lessons.

But if Shelby needed space, we’d give it to her.

“Mama.” Berry sighed heavily. “Why does work always come first? It’s Sunday.”

“That it is.” Shelby tugged lightly on one of her daughter’s pigtails and seemed to gather herself as she glanced at me. “I really do need to work.”

I gave Bob one more pat and lifted my hands, palms out. “We’ll let you work. We’ll even order in sandwiches so you don’t have to be disturbed.” I smiled. “Working lunch.”

“Sandwiches like Big Macs?” Berry whispered the question out of the side of her mouth.

“Nice try, kid.” Shelby laughed. “Sandwiches like actual sandwiches. Such as tuna like Grandma makes you.”

Having evidently selected the owl as Bob’s toy—though it exceeded our ten-dollar allotted price tag, but Shelby appeared to have other tuna to fry at the moment—we resumed our trek down the aisle.

Store aisle. Not any other kind of aisle.

These pseudo family outings, despite the fact we all barely knew each other, were kind of trippy.

No wonder my brother had stumbled into happy cohabitation so easily with Ryan, though they didn't seem to be in any hurry to push things further. Ryan's doing, I was sure. Preston was as traditional as they came—or he had been before he'd fallen in love with a woman who identified as a witch. He'd offhandedly indicated something about “otherworldly sex,” which was definitely intriguing.

Yet, I enjoyed the kind from this world just fine.

If I had a woman I loved, I was pretty sure I'd want to put a ring on it. I'd never been in love. Not even for a weekend. Deep down, I was concerned I was more like my father than I wished. I had my doubts he'd ever loved my mother, since he'd been cheating on her for years, with her tacit agreement.

Then why the hell be married at all?

“Dex?”

I blinked, looking at Shelby while she grabbed Bob's leash and drew him away from a container of colorful footballs. “What did I miss?”

“Just your dog about to swan dive into that bin.”

Berry giggled. “He wanted to climb in.”

“Bob? I don't believe it.”

My dog flashed me his most innocent expression. I was not fooled. I glanced at Berry. “Do you want to pick out a football for the little rascal?”

Her cheeks flushed. “Yes!” She glanced at her mom. “Can I?”

Shelby gave a quick nod. “Why not?”

Berry picked out a pink and white one that Bob immediately snatched—carefully, so he didn't hurt her—and together, we headed for the checkout.

“Why not indeed,” I said under my breath as I gently nudged Shelby forward with a hand on her lower back. She shot me a look, but it was closer to speculation than a warning.

Progress.

Even if I had no clue what my end game was in this situation, other than making my home into a place that actually felt like me. The me I really was instead of the role I’d slipped into at work. Successful shark of a divorce lawyer who always wore a smile and would take your ex to the cleaners while still asking about the family and slipping Milk Bones to the dog. It was a fine line to walk.

It was also bullshit, more and more every day. I was beginning to understand why Preston had tired of the farce and had decided to start his own firm with his best friend.

Of course, I didn’t have a best friend who was a lawyer. But I had Isis, so if I wanted to do something different, maybe branch out a little, she’d be by my side. Cheering me on and/or threatening to sic the combined powers of our mothers on me if I didn’t straighten up and fly right, just as she always did.

I was a lucky bastard.

Berry grabbed some dog bones for Bob at the counter and slipped them into our order without her mother being any the wiser. I nodded and smiled to let her know it was fine and we grinned at our shared secret.

“Stopped raining,” I said cheerfully as we approached the dripping car, drying in the sun.

“Yep.” Shelby cornered me by the trunk as we put away our purchases.

Including the kibble, which I’d had to go back inside to get since I’d forgotten it, despite it being the express purpose for going to the store.

Until I’d seen Berry’s delight in shopping for Bob. Then that had become the purpose and nothing else mattered.

Bob would have begged to differ at dinnertime, however.

“I saw that dog bone slip,” she said in an undertone as Berry clambered into the car with Bob.

I lifted my eyebrows. “Are you accusing moi?”

“No, I’m saying she’s having fun and I...thank you. I know this is probably lame for you.”

“It’s not lame. I like your daughter, Shelby. I have from the first, when you called me a weirdo for talking to her.”

“I did not call you a weirdo. Out loud,” she amended.

I laughed. “I like her. She’s honest and straightforward. I’m finding that quality to be very attractive in her mother too.”

“So, you’re a masochist.”

“At times.” I shrugged. “I know you don’t trust me. That’s fine. I probably wouldn’t trust me either. That comes in time—or it doesn’t.”

Her nose wrinkled as she tried to brush off the now-drying dirt on the hem of her dress. I’d never even noticed. Somehow it didn’t dim her beauty in that swifty dress one iota.

“Stop fussing.” I stilled her hand. “You look lovely.”

“Do you need glasses? I kneeled in a puddle.”

“You should meet my mother. Gardening is her life. Her outfit isn’t complete if she doesn’t have dirt on her clothes or on her face or both.”

To my surprise, her lips curved into a genuine smile. “Maybe she could give me some tips. I love gardening, but I can’t spend nearly enough time on it.” She bit her lip. “And I’m probably not going to meet her, so that’s not going to happen. Shut up, Shelby.”

“Why wouldn’t you meet her?”

She slammed the trunk, just barely missing my tapping thumb. “Why *would* I meet her?” she countered as Berry peered at us curiously from the backseat. Bob had flopped down on her lap and was too busy staring at her adoringly to worry about us.

“Because you have a common interest?”

“You?”

“I was thinking of gardening, but if you consider me an interest, good for you. Be loud and proud about it.”

She screwed up her face in a way that was more cute than threatening before she marched around to get in on the passenger side before I could open her door.

Feisty.

I got behind the wheel and had barely rolled down the top and started the car before Berry announced, “Do you like my mom?”

Clearing my throat, I met her inquisitive blue eyes in the rearview mirror. “I don’t know her very well, but I like her well enough. Why?”

“You act like the boy in my class who is always kicking my chair. Patty said he likes me.”

While I puzzled over that, Shelby swiveled around to stare at her daughter. “What boy? Do I need to talk to your teacher?”

“No, Mom.” It was almost impressive how many syllables she made both of those words.

Though I wasn’t sure what it said about my level of game that it was similar to an eight-year-old’s.

“He doesn’t like me. He doesn’t know me. We are friends...friendly,” Shelby corrected. “We are working together.”

“If you say so. But you’re not at work now.”

“She has a good point,” I said in a low voice.

Shelby ignored me. “Are you sure I don’t need to know about this boy?”

“He’s just a dumb boy. He’s not even cute.”

“You are a harsh woman,” I said to the rearview mirror before I reversed out of the space. “Looks aren’t everything.”

“Why are you looking at boys, anyway?” Shelby demanded.

“I have eyes?”

“Another good point.”

Shelby pierced me with a glance that said shut up without using actual words. It was fairly impressive and just a little scary in a hot way.

Berry fed Bob a dog bone and he chomped it thoughtfully before going back to gazing at her with a level of love heretofore unseen.

I was kind of afraid I’d end up doing the same with Shelby. I wasn’t even sure why. Was it the challenge of her? That I admired her absolute militant devotion to being a good parent? Or that she was fucking hot, especially when she unconsciously rubbed her calves together and her sundress inched higher on her ridiculously toned thighs?

Probably some combination of all of the above.

Under an hour later, Shelby and the soft-sided briefcase stuffed with paperwork she’d had me drive her home to pick up were stationed at the glass-topped table on the terrace off my bedroom. Berry, Bob, and I were racing around the backyard, chasing the football and each other with an exuberance that soon had me yelling, “Uncle!”

The post-rain humidity had me whipping off my T-shirt to mop the sweat off my face. It was only after I idly glanced up at the terrace that I realized my own ulterior motives.

I wanted Shelby to check me out. And she didn’t disappoint me. Her head was peeking over the high railing, just enough that I could see the high bun she’d shoved her long hair into with one of the pink hair bands around her wrist.

When Berry and Bob were off poking at the koi in my pond, I approached the terrace and called up, “Take a picture. It’ll last longer.”

Her blondish-brown bun disappeared from over the railing and I swallowed a laugh.

I knew I looked good. I rode my bike and spent enough hours in the gym to make sure of it. I didn't even work out obsessively for the sake of my body. I needed to work off the stress. I had a fucking intense job. I also had a lot of energy I wasn't expending in other vital ways and that adrenaline built up if I didn't find constructive ways to burn it off.

Speaking of burning off energy, Bob was not going to need an extra walk tonight with the way he and Berry were still tearing around the yard. He kept finding sticks to bring her to throw and he insisted on fetching every one—until he finally sprawled in a patch of shade, tongue out.

“Get up, Bob. Bob, fetch.” Berry tossed the football and it very nearly landed in the koi pond.

Bob didn't even lift his head.

“He's a low energy dog,” I explained when she propped her hands on her hips and stared at him as if he was malfunctioning. “He pretty much expended it all already.”

“What's expended?”

“Used up.” I pulled my shirt back on and crouched down so I was closer to her level. “Do you like to play games? I have a vintage Ms. Pac Man pinball machine in the house.”

She frowned. “What's vintage?”

“Old but cooler.”

“Hmm.” She bit her lip, revealing a gap between her two front teeth. “What else do you have to do?”

I tapped my chin. “I have a PlayStation.”

Her eyes lit up.

“Alice, no PlayStation until your homework is done.” Shelby's voice carried down to us from the terrace. Clearly, she'd heard every word of our conversation.

Berry rolled her eyes, but she dipped her head down first, effectively hiding the bit of sass from her mother's watchful gaze. “I don't have my homework with me.”

“You could help me with some paperwork,” I offered.

“Like what?”

“I’m a lawyer, and I need to make lists of what forms Isis—my admin—needs to send some clients. There are certain ones that have to be sent and signed before we can close cases, and if she has a list of what is still outstanding—needs to be done—it goes quicker.”

She seemed to think that over before nodding. “Sure. In your office?”

“Yeah. My home office.” I rose and offhandedly ruffled her hair. I looked up to see Shelby watching us. “That okay?” I asked Shelby.

“Sure.” She shrugged and went back to work.

Berry and I went inside, pausing just inside the threshold. “Shouldn’t we put Bob to bed? Does he have one?” She looked back to where Bob was still flat out on the grass.

“He has about five,” I said dryly. “All over the house. He rarely uses them.”

“Should we call him in though? Is he safe alone out here?”

“He’s very safe,” I assured her, noting she had the same wrinkle her mom got between her eyes. Safety was a big thing with these two, but two women—even a pint-sized one—living alone couldn’t be too careful. “But if you’d rather, I can bring him in.”

“I can go pick him up if he’s too tired to walk.”

“No need.” I opened the right cabinet over the counter in the kitchen and almost immediately heard the scrabble of paws and claws. I grinned at Berry as I took down the bag of dog treats. “Works every time. Let him in, would you?”

She already was. As soon as he trotted inside, he aimed straight for the water dish beside the fancy-ass-top-of-the-line stove I never used. He shoved his face in the bowl, his little pink tongue on hyper speed. Then he waddled over to me, plopped his butt down on the tile, and looked up at me expectantly.

Berry had a similar expression on her face, so I handed her the bag of all-natural dental chews. “Just four,” I told her.

She nodded solemnly as if she’d been tasked with something vitally important.

“Just four,” she told Bob before he plucked the first from between her fingers.

“Gentle,” I admonished him. “Don’t nip.”

He was much more careful the next three times. Proving me a liar, after he’d had his four treats, he dutifully padded to his cushy and largely unused bed in the corner and did a belly flop inside.

“He must be really tired,” Berry commented.

“He has a lot of struggle. It’s hard being a pampered pooch.”

Berry giggled. “Hey, can you tell my mom she should let me have a dog?”

“No,” I said immediately, already imagining her stern expression. “I absolutely cannot.”

“Why?”

“Because I want her to renovate my house, not think I’m a jerk.”

Berry glanced around in obvious awe. Seeing it from her perspective, I could get it. You could probably fit four of her mom’s cute, slightly rundown cottages just on my first floor. An exaggeration, but only slightly. “Why does it need renovating?” She lisped a little on the middle of the word. “It’s already...wow.”

“I don’t like it.” I scratched the back of my neck.

“Why?” She peered up at me curiously.

“It’s not made for me. I mean, you have a bedroom, right?”

She nodded, wrinkling her freckled nose. “It’s still decorated for a little girl, and I’m grown now, but Mama said I could make it rainbow colors for my birthday.”

“Rainbow colors, huh?”

She nodded vigorously.

“When’s your birthday?”

“June 24th. Right after the end of school.” She counted off on her fingers. “I’ll be nine. Six-seven-eight-nine,” she pronounced carefully.

“You certainly are grown. You’re almost old enough for college now.”

She let out a giggle. “That’s old.”

“I’m done with college and law school. So, does that make me ancient?”

Her nod was so somber that I had to laugh. “Kinda. How old are you?”

“Older than nine. I’d have to double up on my digits to count it off.”

“That’s okay. Just old is good enough.” She bit her lip as if she’d said something she shouldn’t. “Hey, when are we eating?”

We started walking down the hall toward the stairs that led to the second floor. “Good question. What do you say we see if your mom is hungry yet? I think the deli closes early on Sundays—” I broke off as Shelby appeared on the landing, the large stained-glass window behind her sending shafts of rainbow light over the blondish-brown waves tumbling over her shoulders.

Rainbows were apparently the day’s theme. I was becoming inordinately fond of them.

“Mama, are you hungry?” Berry bounded up the stairs. “I want a double decker club. Do you think they have those? Both ham and turkey.”

“Maybe, sweetie. We can look at a menu online.” Shelby swallowed hard and came down a couple steps as her gaze met mine.

Her expression was far too grave for a lunch conversation.

“Get a lot of work done?” I asked as cheerfully as I could manage while my lower back tightened. Always where I carried stress and why I scheduled regular massages.

“Yes. I talked to Ro, our office manager, and she’ll have the contract ready for you to sign by later this week.”

“Oh, great. Whenever you need me, I can come by to sign it. Or you can courier it over to my office—”

“If by courier, you mean I can drop it off, yes, I can do that.”

“Or I can meet you. Wherever or whenever.” I cleared my throat as Berry looked back and forth between us as if she was vastly entertained.

“Whatever.” Shelby waved it off. “The papers should be ready by midweek. And yes, I’m hungry now.”

Bob trotted up the stairs to join our conference, and Berry immediately started begging to take him to go pee. I tried to explain I just usually let him into the yard, but she wanted to “take him out” so “she could watch him carefully” and I didn’t have the heart to say no. Shelby agreed, so Berry instructed Bob to follow her into the back.

A moment later, the back door thumped closed and I pounced.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded.

Shelby blinked then brushed her hair back. “I lost my hair tie,” she said vaguely.

“So? Your hair is beautiful. Leave it down.” I climbed another step until I was officially taller than she was again, although she remained two stairs above me. “Shelby, what’s wrong?”

“What are you doing Saturday night?” she blurted.

TEN



I'D OFFICIALLY LOST MY MIND.

It was Saturday night, the night of the annual Tri-State Animal Foundation gala, and I was sorting through my closet faster than Bob could eat his Milk Bones. Which was damn fast. The dog was a Hoover cloaked in fur.

That dog was why I was in this pickle. Bob and my ex. My ex was even more to blame.

“Shel, chill out. You just gotta make an appearance. Looks good for Designing Women to be involved in charity work in the community.”

“Yeah, yeah. As Judge Davenport knows it looks good for him, and why I'm sure he will be there too. Ugh.”

“I didn't think of that. Man. Sorry. But it'll be a brief appearance, and you drew the short straw because Avery is still visiting her folks. I went to the last two shindigs.”

“What about Dahlia?” I grumbled. “She excels at this crap.”

“She did the last three before mine. What's wrong with this one?” TJ snatched up the slinky red dress that showed off my rack to maximum advantage and had a daring slit that revealed far too much leg.

I'd bought it for my pre-pregnancy body and had not tried to shove the current incarnation of my figure into it yet. That meant it had been taking up valuable closet space without being worn for nearly nine years.

“I don’t think it fits anymore.” I went back to rifling through hangers. “I should’ve gone shopping. None of these work. I probably don’t fit in a single one.”

“Have you tried any of them?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know they don’t fit?”

“I had a baby, Teej. That changes the shape of things.”

“You had your baby nearly a decade ago. You ride that ancient exercise bike in your basement enough for both of us. There’s not an extra bit of anything on you anywhere but your behind, and trust me, that’s a good thing.” TJ picked up the red dress again and marched over to hold it against me, her braids clacking as she moved. And she moved a lot. The woman was constantly in motion. “Just try it on. For me?”

I grabbed the red dress, biting my lip. “You don’t think it sends the wrong message?”

“What message is that? That you’re not even thirty and beautiful and successful and have every right to be at a gala that fuckwit is gonna be at?”

“We don’t know for certain he’ll be there,” I said distantly, rubbing my fingers over the silky material. The soft sheen to it offset my skin well. Or so I’d thought before I’d bought it for a date with the ex, then chickened out on wearing it and shoved it to the back of my closet where it had lived since with a family of mothballs.

I peered in said closet and took a shaky breath. “I haven’t cleaned this closet in forever. I really need to go through it. Maybe I’ll stay home—”

“Shelby, look at me.” TJ tossed the red dress back on the heaping pile of clothes on the bed then gripped my shoulders and spun me around to face her. We were similar heights so there was no avoiding her probing dark gaze. “Why are you afraid to be happy?”

“What?”

“You heard me. It’s just a date. Dex is fine. I had to wipe the drool off my chin when I dropped off the papers to his law office. Where he was counseling a sobbing soon-to-be divorcee. He actually seemed concerned about her. Compassionate. Two qualities rarely seen from lawyer types in my experience.”

“That’s exactly my point. He was so gung ho about getting started and you dropped off those papers days ago. He hasn’t signed them. Hasn’t contacted me with questions or issues. Just...vanished.” I held up a hand and blew out a breath. “I know I’m not giving him enough time. I’m overthinking this.”

“Um, bingo in one. Didn’t you say he texted earlier to confirm what time he should pick you up? He also asked what color you would be wearing so he could coordinate, right? And you said red, which means deep down you want to wear that smokin’ dress.”

“Well, yes, but I mean he vanished regarding work. Anyway, ignore me. I’m probably freaking out over nothing.”

“Correct. I’m sure the guy is busy. Maybe he didn’t have time to go over the papers. He’s not going to agree to a hefty budget and give you twenty percent down then take off.”

I slipped away from her and picked up the red dress again, stroking the silky fabric absently. A dress that beautiful shouldn’t be hidden away in a dark closet with the mothballs. Besides, it wasn’t as if I had any other options. The other dresses weren’t right either. But maybe if I wore something like this, I’d be more confident.

I’d have to be to pull off a number like this. It practically demanded self-assurance.

“You’re probably right,” I admitted. “And dammit, I’m not going to let David do this to me. He’s taken enough years of my life from me. I miss dancing.” I squeezed my eyes shut. “I miss a lot of things I hate to admit.”

“Like sex?”

My eyes popped open. “No,” I replied immediately while TJ smirked.

“I’m no poacher, but did I say that man is fine? Not that it matters because he’s laser-focused on you. He asked how you were no fewer than three times in the fifteen minutes I was in his office.”

“He did?” I cleared my throat so I didn’t smile like a dope. “I’m sure just in a professional capacity. He wants me to get started soon.”

“He wants you, full stop. Not sure how you stumbled into such a sexual gold mine but I suspect you are very, very overdue. And hey, just because he’s pretty doesn’t mean he knows what to do in bed. But finding out is half the fun.”

I kept stroking the dress to have something to do with my hands. Dex and I were alike that way. Lots of energy. I’d noticed he couldn’t seem to keep his hands still for a moment. And during lunch on his gorgeous off-bedroom terrace last weekend, his leg had never stopped jiggling under the table.

The table set with fancy china for deli takeout sandwiches, along with a thriving potted violet he’d claimed was a present from his mother. He’d also brought out funky mismatched candles because Berry mentioned we didn’t eat in restaurants often, so he’d wanted to make it more of an event for her.

I hadn’t asked him to. He’d just done it.

“Isis calls him Dexterous and mentioned something about it being an old high school nickname. Not that there’s necessarily anything to appreciate about what a high school girl says about dexterity but...”

TJ rolled her eyes. “A high school girl is probably getting way more action than you, girlfriend. Sorry to say.”

Oh, the accuracy, it burned.

I clutched the dress to my chest. “You know what? Fuck it. I’m gonna squeeze my ass into this dress, and I’m going to go have fun. At least I’ll get a decent meal and maybe a couple dances out of the deal. I don’t know if he dances. But who cares, I’ll dance by myself if I have to. The best revenge is living well, isn’t it?”

“Yes. And you asked Dex out because he’s handsome as hell and successful and will make David swallow his dentures.”

I choked down a laugh. “David doesn’t have dentures.”

“Figure of speech.” TJ patted my arm. “Now let me see that booty in this rocking dress. Go on now.”

I was going.

An hour later, I wore heavier makeup than usual, and I was cinched into my dress—lo and behold, it still fit, slightly more tightness in the backend aside. My hair was done in an elegant updo I never could have managed without TJ’s help, and my toes were squeezed into a pair of heels that I hadn’t worn in so long I’d forgotten how to walk in them.

Forget dancing. I’d probably fall and break my nose.

I was so nervous I was on the verge of texting Dex to tell him I had the flu.

“I shouldn’t have asked him. He’s a client. I was just desperate.”

“You weren’t desperate. You know a good man when you see one. He likes you. You like him. Just because David was a fucking A-1 dick doesn’t mean you don’t have good judgment, sweetie.” TJ straightened the shoulders of my dress and then stepped back to smile at me. “You are fucking hot. Trust me. Dex will swallow his tongue.”

“We have a professional relationship—”

She snapped her fingers. “Not yet you don’t. He hasn’t signed those papers yet.”

I cocked my head. “You think that’s why?”

She shrugged. “It could be. And if it is, he already knows you pretty damn well. Impressive in such a short time.”

“I spent most of the weekend with him. Platonically,” I added quickly, recapping what had happened. “It ended up being most of Saturday, and then Sunday we were at his house until after dinnertime. He ordered out both times.”

TJ feigned a gasp. “And you tolerated such?”

“Berry loves takeout. She gets so excited.” I jerked a shoulder. “I mean, I don’t want her to expect—”

“You can expect good things sometimes. It’s not character building to always anticipate drudgery.”

I had to laugh. “I don’t. I just don’t want her to want things I can’t always deliver.”

“Not your job to police her wants. She’s a smart kid. Both of you need some fun in your life. Trust Aunt Teej.” She leaned in to grab my sparkly clutch. “You got condoms in this tiny thing?”

“No.” I snatched the bag back. “Why would I?”

“Just in case. I know you’ll relax more if all the angles are covered.” She wiggled a strip of foil packets she pried out of the pocket of her tight jeans and dropped them in my bag before returning it to me. Then she reached up to close my lips. “Live a little. You can go back to being sensible Shelbster on Monday.”

I fumbled in my bag for my phone. Not to run my fingertips over those condoms as if reassuring myself they were real. That this whole date was really happening.

Assuming he showed.

“I need to check on Berry,” I mumbled as I yanked out my phone.

“No, you don’t.” TJ closed my bag on my fingers. “She’s at your parents’ house, probably baking cookies and watching cartoons. Not like she’s at a rave.”

“Do they even have raves anymore?”

“Who knows?” TJ waved her sparkly lime-green fingernails. “She’s fine. You’re fine. Stop overthinking for a couple hours and go have some fun.”

The doorbell rang and my face must’ve revealed my sheer panic, because TJ hurried down the stairs and went to open the door. “Fluff your hair,” she mouthed.

I followed her, fluffing my hair for all I was worth while I lamented not wearing something less revealing. Did they sell burlap sacks anywhere nearby?

The bell rang again just as TJ turned the knob. I turned away from the door. He'd probably be able to see my heart on the verge of throbbing through my chest.

"Hi TJ. Is Shelby—hi, Shelby?" The question in his tone had me turning toward the open doorway. My gaze snagged on Dex in his tux—not a suit, a damn tuxedo—and I tried to formulate words as he held out a single white rose. "For you," he said, probably thinking I'd bolt and let him give it to TJ.

He wasn't wrong.

"You look stunning," he rasped, his voice husky in a way that made my belly quiver.

Had any man ever looked at me with such unabashed appreciation before?

I marshaled my forces, took a bolstering breath, and stepped past a smirking TJ to accept the flower. "It's beautiful, thank you." I shifted to put it in the vase with the wildflowers I'd splurged on. "Would you like to come in?"

"We have a reservation at," he looked at the chunky gold watch on his wrist, "seven, which is ten minutes from now."

"Where?" I cleared my throat, trying to subdue the nerves trying to make me sick.

"La Luna. It's near the gala's location and they have really good seafood. You said you liked seafood last weekend, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Just La Luna is really..." I trailed off and smiled as I caught TJ's warning expression. "Lovely."

"It is. Where's Berry?" He peered over my shoulder. "Are you babysitting her?" he asked TJ.

I'd had men feign interest in my daughter to ingratiate themselves to me. This didn't feel like that. His interest in her whereabouts seemed genuine.

“Nope, she’s with Shelby’s parents. I’m about to split. Have fun, you two.” She gave my shoulder a supportive squeeze before ducking out between us and jogging across the porch and down the walk to her sedan parked at the curb.

Dex’s convertible sat in the driveway behind my small SUV, gleaming in the moonlight. Top down in deference to the beautiful weather.

The night was clear, moonlit, warm with a slight breeze. The perfect setting for romance.

I was so fucked.

“Shelby?”

I bit my lip and glanced at Dex. “Yeah?”

“Are you okay?” He surprised the hell out of me by crossing the porch to drop down on the top step. He patted the spot beside him. “We can just sit for a few if you want.”

I pursed my lips. “I haven’t swept since last week.”

“Don’t horrify me so.” He cocked his head. “My lap is available if you prefer.”

Quickly, I perched on the edge of the step. “Didn’t you say we have a reservation?”

“Yeah, but they’ll take us whenever we arrive.”

I frowned. “But the gala is—”

“We can make an appearance whenever, no problem.” He waved a hand as if it couldn’t have mattered less. “No rush.”

“Is this how the other half lives? People wait for you instead of the other way around?”

He shrugged. “I give them very generous donations to make up for my personal gaffes, and everyone is happy.”

I tried not to stare at him in his damn tux with his sexy hair and piercing eyes and toothpaste-commercial-smile, and failed. “You could not be less like my ex if you tried.”

He grinned. “Aww, don’t flatter me so.”

I had to laugh. Just like that, the ball of stress and tension and unmet expectations—ones I couldn't meet, not Dex—dissolved in my belly. “How do you know him?”

He took a moment to answer. “Paths crossed in professional circles. He looked down his nose at me for being a nepo baby, you know, the usual.”

“Nepo baby? First, you are fully grown.” I kept my gaze way above the neck. I actually fixated on the post above his head just to be safe. “Second, you aren't in the entertainment industry.”

“No, but my father cast a large shadow in the law field. My brother did too. I'm kind of the also-ran lawyer, although I got lucky early on and handled some very high-profile divorces that meant I'd be basically set for life. Assuming I control my Laffy Taffy addiction.”

I choked out a laugh, sure he was teasing me. “Your what?”

“Laffy Taffy. Specifically grape but watermelon will do in a pinch.” He slipped his hand into his pocket and came out with a few small purple strips and a green strip. “Dealer's choice.”

I grabbed a purple one and unwrapped the candy, taking a bite and laughing a little when it got caught in my teeth.

He dug into the green one and then produced more from his other pocket. “These are for Berry. I was hoping she'd be here.”

“On a date?”

“Well, not on the actual date, but hey, why not? It's not like we're doing anything but eating and glad-handing and maybe some dancing. Right?”

“You are not at all what I thought you'd be.” I managed to swallow my taffy and immediately went back for another bite. It probably wasn't the best choice when my throat was still tight with nerves, although they were fading with every passing moment.

“I’m not at all what my father expected me to be either. Hey, you know, I appreciate the invite to this shindig, especially since you’ll be the most beautiful chick in the room in that dress. Or out of it. I mean, the dress isn’t what makes you beautiful, Sherbet.” He popped more taffy in his mouth, and I smiled around my own piece. “But you seemed nervous enough to jump out of your skin when TJ opened your front door, so I’m thinking you probably aren’t relishing seeing pompous dickhead. Assuming he might be there. So...we don’t have to.”

“No? I’m supposed to put in an appearance to raise Designing Women’s social profile in the community. We want to show how committed we are to social causes.”

“A check does that just as well. Or you could volunteer with me.”

“You volunteer?” I didn’t say no. Because I had no desire to go to this stupid gala thing. Not even just because pompous dickhead—err, David—was probably going to be there, but I didn’t relish socializing with a bunch of wealthy people I didn’t know.

I had no problem selling an image via a home. In fact, I adored ferreting out and maximizing a home’s potential. But I didn’t want to be the showpiece.

I preferred being in the background, thank you very much.

Exactly why I never should have assumed I could even fake the role of a judge’s wife competently. I was much more comfortable working with my team and poring over swatch books and design magazines.

“Sure. At least an afternoon or two a month at Kitten Around, the cat rescue that specifically helps critical kittens. Clint helps out there too, and my brother. They encouraged me to spend some hours there, and then I liked it so much I added another day every month.” His expression was entirely too earnest. “But you could come with me. You’d get the same effect and then you’d get TJ off your back. Or, better yet, send her to the gala next time.”

“Apparently, she and Dahlia have already been doing all the social heavy lifting for Designing Women. But she really wanted me to go out with you tonight.”

He broke off another piece of taffy, slipping it to me. “She’s just worried about you.”

“How did you get that out of her?”

TJ wasn’t exactly an open book, especially with people she wasn’t close to. She was almost as suspicious as I was, and that was saying a lot.

“A divorce attorney is half lawyer, half psychologist. We have to be comfortable reading people to know what levers to turn to get our clients what they want.”

“And you’re good at that, obviously.” Unthinkingly, I reached over to still his jumpy knee with my hand, yanking it back as if I’d touched a burning-hot stove.

“I am. But I like getting to know people. Who they really are, under the mask.” He glanced at the hand I’d balled in my lap. “You can keep on touching me. I didn’t mind.”

“Just your leg...you’re never still. I didn’t mean to do that. Just habit. I do it with Berry sometimes too, my way of easing her.” I shoved more taffy in my mouth, and he slipped me another wrapped piece from his pocket without a word.

I wondered if they were magic pockets. Their depths seemed endless.

I was pondering that very complicated question when I chanced a glance at his face and realized his multicolored bowtie was actually Spiderman-themed. I couldn’t help the giggle that spilled out.

He reached out, whip-fast, and cupped my chin. “No, don’t stop. That sound. I want more of it.”

I blinked at him, trying not to stiffen up. His fingers against my skin were so firm and so gentle at the same time. I shifted toward him, helpless to resist the pull of his force field. His cologne was smoky, woody, a campfire at dusk, drawing me closer to the flame.

We might as well have been surrounded by the woods. And I was safe in the dark green flickering depths of his eyes.

His lips touched mine, tasting of grape. Sweet. Not the least bit intimidating. I leaned in for more, taking a tentative lick at the seam of his lips, waiting to be invited in.

He slipped his tongue out to tangle with mine, again so gently. Persuasively. Nothing the least bit aggressive or threatening. No pressure. Just a light, friendly kiss between people who were going to work together.

That had me drawing back, but not far. Just enough that the uneven hiss of his breath cascading over my lips made my heart skip. He dropped his forehead to mine, his calloused fingertips drifting over my cheekbones. “I could kick his ass, you know. I wouldn’t break any bones. Soft tissue injuries only.”

His voice was husky and he was out of breath. He *sounded* as if he’d been kissing me. Which caused a butterfly beat at the apex of my thighs while my own breath shuddered.

“It wasn’t all his fault. Entirely. I was young and...I don’t want to talk about him when my lips are still wet from you,” I realized aloud.

Not all that was wet. Not even close.

Dex tucked a loose curl behind my ear. “Can’t say I want to either. Just, I wish I’d known you before he made you think you couldn’t trust.”

“How do you know he did?”

He lowered his gaze to my hand as he lifted it from where it was still balled in my lap. Carefully, he moved each of my fingers, loosening them where they’d been tightly clenched, protectively covered by my thumb. “My father has cheated on my mother for years. She knows. I wouldn’t say she approves of it, more that she tolerates it.”

“Why?”

“I can’t say for sure, but I’d guess because she likes her house, likes her life. Didn’t want it disrupted with the

messiness of a divorce. Who would know better what splitting up entails, right?” He let out a brittle laugh. “My brother was so shocked that I knew and was okay with it. He just found out last year. He saw the great Isaac at lunch with his admin, and they weren’t just sharing the shrimp.”

“Ugh.” I sucked in air, forcing my gaze upward to the pinprick stars in the sky. A veritable carpet of them spread out in all directions. “We do not know how to do post-kissing conversation. From threats of violence to cheating fathers.”

He laughed softly. “I thought you’d want to knee me in the nuts for not immediately refusing to speak to him ever again. I thought about it,” he added. “But I couldn’t make my mom’s choices for her. She chose her road. When she chooses another, I’ll be there for her. Until then, I’ll play the game if it makes it easier for her. Not for him. He chose his road too.”

“I’ll volunteer with you,” I blurted.

“Good. I’m glad.” He tangled his finger in my loose curl again. “Berry can come too. She’ll love playing with the kittens.”

“Yeah, she will.” I wasn’t going to second-guess this. Being around him felt good. My daughter liked being with him and his dog too.

Berry was an excellent judge of character, I reminded myself silently.

She’d decided years ago she didn’t want to see her own father. And since he had used my supposed indiscretions against me to get out of visitation and support, it wasn’t as if he was aching to see her.

And she had also liked Dex from day one. She asked about him all the time. Even tonight, she’d talked about him.

“Berry wanted to come with us tonight,” I admitted. “Even knowing it was kind of a friendly date.” I did air quotes. “She really likes you. Said it was okay if we kissed as long as we weren’t gross about it—well, in her almost-nine-year-old’s slang. I did not mention kissing,” I added hastily.

“I’m glad she approves,” he said seriously. “Her opinion is as important as yours. If not more so.”

“Yeah. But we probably shouldn’t be...well, anything, when I’m taking your money.”

“You’re taking my money to do a job for me. One I very much want you to do. It has nothing to do with this.” He circled his fingers between us.

“Then why are you sitting on the paperwork?” I asked suddenly.

I had not intended to ask that—or even think it. But there we were.

His quirked lips made me think he’d done it intentionally. “I haven’t had a chance to review the papers yet. And...”

“And what?”

“And I knew if I signed them before our date, you’d use them as an excuse why we shouldn’t go out.”

“Even though I asked you out?”

“I suspect that was a moment of duress. I used my powers of deduction to assume you’d heard pompous dickhead would be there and the last thing you wanted to do was show up alone. I can’t blame you. And hey, I was there, right? Plus, I’d stunned you with my shirtless physical specimen in the backyard, and you were so dazzled—”

I reached over to close his lips. “You talk too much.”

I didn’t expect him to kiss my fingertips. “Do you want to skip the fancy eats and the gala altogether?”

“Yes.” My answer was immediate. “But I feel bad making you come out here.”

“I didn’t mean we cancel the date entirely. We just skip that crap. We can still have fun. Why waste a babysitter, right?” His gaze dropped to my bare thighs for a millisecond. “And that dress.”

“Right. Wait, what are we going to do?”

“Well, dressed as we are, our options are more along the upscale variety. How do you feel about wine and hard cider?”

I blinked. “I haven’t had either in a very long time.”

“That settles it then.” He rose and held out a hand to help me up. “Have you been to Brothers Three Orchard? They just opened for the summer season.”

“Oh, nice.”

He laughed. “Are you not interested? We can do something else. But they have musical entertainment most weekends of the summer, both in The Lodge and outside in their concert venue for the bigger bands. And not that Muzak crap. Actual rockstars go there too. Probably some even Berry knows.”

I did my best to look excited. “Oh, yay, rockstars.”

He laughed again and took my hand to lead me down the steps to the passenger side of his convertible. “If you’re not into it, we’ll leave. The drive to the orchard is nice in any case and the weather is perfect tonight.”

I glanced up at the stars, not shocked to catch a glimpse of one shooting through the sky. Maybe my luck was turning.

He opened my door, and I gripped it, turning to give him a smile. “Thanks for being so cool about this. I know I’m uptight and nervous and—”

“And beautiful and talented and funny and smart. God, the hardship.” He kissed my forehead and nudged me into the car.

Yeah, maybe my luck was turning. I’d kissed a gorgeous man and hadn’t freaked out or overanalyzed it. Yet. He was starting the engine of his sinful convertible, and we were on a date.

A real honest-to-God date on a lovely evening.

I wasn’t just a mom. I was a woman too. I wasn’t going to fuck this up, I vowed. I was going to relax and enjoy every moment as it came.

But I didn’t need condoms. It wasn’t that kind of date.

I sneaked a glance at his handsome profile as he reversed out of the drive, one arm on the back of my seat.

Dammit.

ELEVEN

Dexter

THIS NIGHT HAD BEEN ILLUMINATING ON A NUMBER OF LEVELS.

Shelby liked to dance. She had endless energy when there was music involved and libations.

Not that she overindulged. No indeed. She just sipped her wine on breaks from dancing in front of the entertainment stage at The Lodge at Brothers Three Orchard, where tonight's musical guest—one Ian Kagan all the way from Britain by way of California—was using the more intimate space to try out some new music. Currently, he was singing in his accented lilt about finding that one woman who made everything make sense.

I wasn't analyzing that overmuch, thanks.

Realizing the tempo had slowed, Shelby dropped down into the chair across from me and grabbed her white wine spritzer, gulping it and fanning herself with her hand. Both hands. Her cheeks were flushed that attractive apricot color that had earned her nickname and only became more so the faster she gulped.

I had kept up with her on the dance floor, but only just. She'd had no desire to sit. At least until the slow music started and couples filtered in, swaying together unabashedly.

I nudged my untouched glass of ice water toward her and she took it gratefully, sipping that too now that her wine and her own water were gone. The flush in her cheeks remained.

“Want me to order some food?”

She waved me off. “Nah, I’m not hungry yet. I’ll take another of those spritzers though.” She smacked her lips together and ran her hand over the back of her neck, lifting the loose tendrils of hair that had come free from her updo. “I’m dying of the heat.”

“Not surprising. You’ve been on the move for hours.”

She pouted. “Not hours.”

I checked my watch. “Yep, pretty much hours. I wore the wrong clothes for this.” I was sweating too. Good thing I owned this tux. It wasn’t built for such physical activities, more for standing around and looking rich and important.

I snagged the attention of a server as she wandered past and ordered two more waters, some zucchini bites and fries, and another wine spritzer for the lady.

The lady who was still chair dancing, as if she was the one who couldn’t stay still tonight. As I was finding myself addicted to her laughter, I was glad to see it. She seemed as if she didn’t have enough fun in her life.

How could she, when she had to be both mom and dad to one active, inquisitive little girl?

Ian shifted into what sounded like a rousing sea shanty and members of the crowd let out war whoops as the dance floor filled once more. The house lights came up in deference to the faster beat, and colorful lights bounced around the stage, making Ian laugh uproariously. “Are you all with me? The night is still young, mates!”

“It is!” Shelby lurched to her feet and propped her hands on her hips. “You could take off your jacket, you know. Probably not your shirt. Not here. But elsewhere...”

I cleared my throat. Had she waggled her eyebrows at me? I was fairly certain she had, and I was now regretting that second spritzer I’d ordered for her. She’d also had a hard cider upon first arriving, and she hadn’t eaten.

Then again, she didn’t get to do this kind of thing very often. I wanted her to feel free to have fun. She was safe with me, so where was the harm?

I just hoped she didn't get all Shelby about it later and indicate that because she'd had a good time with me, we clearly couldn't have a working relationship or ever see each other again, because dear God, having fun was contagious.

Or something equally Shelby-ish.

"C'mon, slowpoke. Time's a-wasting." She made an impatient hand gesture, cocking her hip and showcasing all those sumptuous curves I'd noticed more than one man checking out over the course of the evening.

I stood and removed my jacket, half tempted to wrap it around her to keep the circling men from ogling her body. I barely was allowing myself to enjoy the ogle, so they damn well weren't allowed to.

She snagged my hand and dragged me onto the dance floor, turning to fit herself against me in a way that made it extremely difficult not to notice her rack. The dress highlighted it perfectly and though she leaned more toward slight than curvy, she definitely was packed in all the right places.

And so was I, so unless I wanted to send a distinct message, keeping her body away from certain areas of my anatomy was an imperative.

Luckily, she was way into the music, laughing and throwing her hands above her head. Her joy spread to the couples around us, and soon enough, we'd started doing some quadrangle type thing that I couldn't quantify. Passing partners back and forth and moving with the uproarious beat in a way that amped up the already stifling heat in the room, despite the many large fans stationed around the dance floor. The large windows were open too, but that many bodies moving that fast made for a cauldron of heat.

Shelby whirled back to me, plastering herself to my chest as she smiled up at me. Cheeks flushed, lips parted, eyes aglow. I could see her daughter in her excited expression and when she tilted her face up to mine, I couldn't resist.

I took her mouth with mine, her soft moan pouring into me like a lit match to the kerosene in my bloodstream. My hips sought the pliant vee of her thighs and her eyes widened at my erection, but she didn't pull away. If anything, she cleaved even closer, her damp lips parting under mine as she moaned again.

I tried to keep it light, easy. Despite the heat of our bodies and the way her heartbeat raced against mine, I knew she wasn't looking for something too intense. Hell, I wasn't either. We were working together and she had other priorities.

And she was cupping my cock.

"I know this is wrong," she said between kisses as I shifted my body to protectively guard hers. I didn't want anyone to see what was happening between us, beyond the kisses we couldn't hide. The unsteady breaths. The need that had me shifting my mouth to her neck, where her vanilla and paint—*paint?*—scent was strongest. She writhed against me, her strong hand moving up and down at a rate guaranteed to speed this night along.

She's drunk. At least buzzed. You need to stop her.

Yet we didn't stop. We kept dancing and groping and kissing and panting until I managed to gather enough wits to guide us into a darkened corner as Ian shifted into a song he said was "for the lovers."

Not ideal for us at the moment.

I reached up and fisted my hands in her hair, scattering pins and clips. "You need food."

"No. I need to feel like this. Always. I haven't felt like this in so long. Maybe ever." She licked her lips, her gaze locked on my mouth. "You'll take care of me."

"Yes." I wasn't sure what she was saying, but it didn't matter because I would. In whatever way she needed for however long she needed it.

Needed *me*.

No one ever needed me, just me. Not what I could do for them.

Her hazel eyes were unfocused, not quite clear. But her voice was strong enough I felt she had enough faculties to know what she was doing. She might be a little buzzed but she wasn't all the way to drunk. She knew what she was doing. I hoped.

At least she'd kissed me the first time pre-alcohol. I could take comfort in that.

"Do you want to leave?" I asked carefully as she glanced at the door.

"No," she said firmly.

I was a little deflated, I had to admit, even as I nodded. "Sure. We can stay as long as you want—"

"No. Dex, they have rooms upstairs here at The Lodge. It's a swanky place." She bit her lip. "Not rent by the hour."

I had to laugh though I tried to stifle it. Did she realize what she was saying? Probably not. But I did, and I would keep her safe. I'd let her have her fun, but I wouldn't let her go too far or take advantage.

"We can get a room," I said gently, brushing her lips with mine. She opened to me immediately and I slipped inside, tasting the wine and flavors of cinnamon and apple on her tongue. She could make me drunk just from her kisses. The alcohol was just a bonus. "We don't have to stay all night though. I mean, if you want to, we can, and I'll call your parents to make sure—"

"Stop talking. Didn't I say you talk too much?" She removed her hand from my cock and held it to her head. "Don't make the buzz leave."

I nodded. I'd call her parents to make sure Berry was okay. Even if she didn't tell me their names so I could find their phone number, Isis would know. Thank God for Isis. She'd also know we were in a room together, but I could make an excuse.

I lied every day of my life.

No, he wasn't at his secretary's house that night. Or if he was, it was because he'd had to drop off papers to be notarized.

No, she isn't involved with her tennis instructor. She just paid for extra lessons to work on her swing.

No, the paternity of the child isn't in question.

Reason number 1,000 why I didn't actually date, just had sex when the need arose. Not because I couldn't be trusted, but because I had my doubts about the bulk of humanity on that score.

I also liked variety. Playing the field. But maybe that wasn't because I was fickle, just that I hadn't met someone who made me want to slow down and go deeper. Not merely live in the shallow end of the sea, but actually swim down into the depths. Really get to know someone. Their likes, dislikes.

What made her laugh and made that beautiful peachy glow come into her cheeks.

"Sherbet," I murmured as she blinked up at me, adorably fuzzy. Soft. Warm. I'd be perfectly happy to see her spread out on the sheets, her long tawny curls flowing over the bedding as she let me bring her pleasure.

I had a feeling she hadn't had nearly enough of that in her life either. And giving her things she wasn't used to—whether it was ordering meals out twice in one day or multiple orgasms—was fast becoming an addiction for me.

"Dex?"

"Whatever you want, it's up to you. We can dance, though maybe not for much longer," I said as Ian seemed to be wrapping up his show.

Techs roamed near the stage, and he promised one last song. He had introduced the beautiful silver-haired woman off to the side as his wife, and she patted her heavily pregnant belly under her flowing rainbow-colored top.

More rainbows. More kids. I was surrounded by both lately. Shockingly, I didn't mind it either. Kids were fun. They didn't play head games. And they were up for adventure—just like me.

Why hadn't I realized how cool kids were earlier? Not that I'd ever been around them. Maybe it was just Berry.

I glanced back at her mother. Just as I was beginning to wonder if my sudden interest in sticking to one woman was just Shelby.

“Yeah. I've had enough dancing.”

I glanced down at her heels. “I don't know how you managed in those shoes.”

“Mind over matter.” She flashed me a quick grin and then fumbled a pair of folded slippers out of her clutch. “Ballet shoes,” she explained, bracing her hand on my shoulder as she fumbled off her heels and slipped her feet into the ballet slippers. She looped the straps of her heels around her fingers and let out a moan of pure bliss. “Much better. Now I can think.”

“The Lodge has hot tubs in some of the rooms. If your feet hurt,” I added quickly, though my first thought had not been about sore arches.

Not thinking with my eager dick was proving difficult.

Her expression turned sly. “Well, that sounds promising. But I didn't bring a suit. And it's late—and fuck it.” She huffed out a breath that ruffled the damp curls sticking to her cheeks. “When will I get this chance again?”

I started to answer whenever you want but she cut me off with a loud, “Never!” before I could.

“Let's go.” She pushed through the crowd of people now heading for the exit.

Okay, then.

She indicated another door that led to the front desk check-in and we headed there, Shelby leading the way. Marching

there, in fact. The couple inches she'd lost from removing her heels didn't diminish her sense of authority.

I didn't mind her taking charge now and then. It was damn hot.

A young woman behind the counter with her blond hair pulled back and a name tag that said Cara gave us a sweet smile. "Do you have a room?"

"No, we want one. One with a hot tub. Unless they all have them?" Shelby propped her chin on her hand as if she was fascinated.

Knowing her profession, maybe she was.

Cara started running through the particulars for their standard bedroom suites while I pulled out my credit card and slipped it her way. She took it discreetly, palming it and swiping it through the reader before producing a key card and returning it with my credit card just as smoothly.

I rested my hand on the small of Shelby's back once Cara finished her explanation of the different rooms and guided her to the sweeping staircase that led upstairs. Beyond the stairs, a huge apple tree speared through the atrium.

I expected her to offer an objection to...something—she was Shelby, after all—but she took out her phone, hit a button and began talking rapidly, all traces of a buzz gone.

"I'm still on my date. Is Berry all right? You sure? Okay, good. No, we're getting a room. With a hot tub." The tops of her cheeks bloomed with color, but her voice never faltered. "Are you sure it's all right? I know it's unexpected—" She sneaked a look at me before returning her gaze straight ahead as she climbed the stairs. "I'll be back early tomorrow. Any problems, let me know. I owe you, Mom. Big time. Thanks." She clicked off on her call and dumped her phone in her purse.

"Berry okay?" I asked as casually as possible as we reached our floor and headed up the carpeted, church-silent hallway.

"She's fine, already in bed with her stack of books. She suggested they get a dog tonight. Pugs are nice, she's heard."

Shelby's lips twitched. "Wonder where that came from."

I shrugged innocently. "Pugs are nice. Speaking of," I took out my phone, "I should check in with my sitter."

"Your sitter?"

I hit the speed dial button for Kate. "Yes, for Bob. Bishop used a service for his bird while he was in Fiji banging his wife—not that they were married then—and I took down the name. Bob can get into trouble on his own." I smiled as the sitter answered. "Kate, hi." I wasn't sure if I was imagining the way Shelby seemed to stiffen at my side. "It's Dex. How's Bob?"

"Oh, hi. He's great. I had to put new child locks on the garbage because he broke in again. He's a wily one."

"That he is." Exactly why I'd sprung for a sitter. "Look, I won't be home tonight. I hope you can make that work. I'll ensure you are well compensated for the unexpected extension."

This time there was no mistaking how Shelby bristled.

"Twice your normal hourly rate for overnight," I added, just in case Shelby had a suspicious mind and thought I meant some other sort of compensation. Though, really, how good could her pet-sitting service be?

"Oh, Mr. Shaw, of course I can do that. You're far too generous." As she continued to coo her thanks, I held the phone away from my ear and fitted the key card into the door. It popped open with a soft snick when I turned the handle, and Shelby slipped inside with a narrowed-eyed glance over her shoulder.

"I'll be home early tomorrow," I told Kate. "Thanks again. You're a lifesaver." I clicked off and blew out a breath.

Now what had I done? It was anyone's guess.

Shelby stepped into the spacious fireplace room and stopped dead, looking around in wonderment at the high-beamed ceilings, wide windows that overlooked the orchard, and luxurious bedding piled high on the bed. "Holy shit."

I grinned and gripped her shoulders to pull her back against me. “You like?”

“I like. Thanks.” She reached up to grip her throat. “Is Kate cute?”

“She’s attractive,” I said noncommittally.

“You’re just used to women fawning over you then. Used to them tripping into your bed as a matter of course.”

“No. I just didn’t notice her that way. She’s barely twenty. And she hasn’t tripped into my bed.” I shifted her to face me, tilting up her chin. “You’re jealous. Why?”

“Why?” she repeated. “Have you looked at yourself? I’m sure you have to beat them off with sticks. Even me. I don’t do this.” She waved her hand around herself. “I don’t impulsively ask men to spend the night with me. Or the hour. Or whatever it turns out to be.”

“Good. I’m glad. I seriously doubt you were so bowled over by that glimpse of my physique last weekend, but if that weakened you in my direction, I’ll take it.”

“You don’t think it was your mad skills on the dance floor?”

“Could be all of the above. I’m supremely gifted in many areas. As you’re about to find out, assuming you don’t rip all my hair out if I try to go down on you.” I flicked her nose as she flushed. “Never can be sure with you. Part of why I like you.”

“What’s the other part?” she asked quietly, lowering her gaze to right about level with my Adam’s apple.

“That you put your child above every single other thing, including your own enjoyment. Says a lot about a person. You’re so worried about not doing anything out of line. You have morals. Rules for living. You’re honorable and smart and beautiful and—”

“An occasionally shrewish pain in the ass?”

“You said it, I didn’t. But there’s room for improvement for all of us.” I brushed her hair back from her face. “You’ll be

happy to know Kate's designation in my phone book is a dog face emoji. No Pink Pantsuit Hottie for her."

She grinned. "You really liked that pink pantsuit. I only grabbed it on a whim. I just wanted to look professional for my parent-teacher meeting before I—"

I gripped her chin and tipped her mouth up to mine, taking it with my own with every bit of the hunger I'd banked earlier. She moaned, the sound filled with lust tinged with relief.

Finally.

I felt the same, and it wasn't even that we'd known each other long. Just something about having her against me, her full breasts pressed to my chest, her capable hands clutching the lapels of my jacket, her tongue playfully teasing mine...it all felt brand-new and exciting but also somehow familiar. I wanted to chase these feelings, to hear more of her moans.

To know what her face looked like when she came.

"Dex," she whispered, not even fully pulling back, just sucking down air in between our desperate kisses. No more hesitation here. "You have to promise me."

"Anything."

"This won't change our...working...that we will work, it still will happen, right?" She nipped my lower lip and my cock reared against my zipper so forcefully that she looked down with widened eyes. "Is that a yes?" Choked laughter filled her breathless question.

"That's a he really wants inside you."

She lifted her head, eyes so wide I might've thought her a virgin if I hadn't known better. It had just been a really long time for her, so no matter what I needed, this was about her. Period. "This has nothing to do with the renovation. As far as I'm concerned, we're two different people in this room tonight. Nothing will change and I'll sign the papers on Monday." I ran my fingertip over her damp lower lip.

Seeing her wet from me was ridiculously arousing. And that was just from a kiss. I wanted more.

Wanted all.

“Promise me, Dex.”

Her eyes were so heavy, filled with so many doubts. I had to ease them. Had to make this worth her while and prove myself worthy of her trust.

“I promise, baby. What do you like?” I asked before moving my wet fingertip from her lip to the deep vee in her dress.

I’d noticed her tugging at it more than once, as if she wasn’t used to dressing this way. Revealing much of anything even if it was mostly shadows and curves. But that mere hint of her shape was more tantalizing than a bikini.

I followed my finger with my mouth, dipping my tongue under the edge of the material and then sliding downward to tease the edge of her lacy bra. I nudged the strap of her dress out of the way, inadvertently pulling down the cup of her bra with it. Her tight peachy nipple popped free, and I captured it with my mouth, sucking strongly while she palmed my head and made the most erotic breathy noises I’d ever heard.

“I like that,” she offered, massaging the back of my neck while she impatiently shoved down the other strap of her dress and freed her other breast, as well.

I had to grin around her breast in my mouth. “Message received. Can I take it off?”

She swallowed hard and drew back from me to hike up the dress entirely. She drew it up over her head, wiggling in a sexy striptease that had me pressing on my cock to get it to behave. She tossed the dress on the bed and faced me with her bra twisted beneath her breasts, pushing them up and out, her puckered peach nipples just begging for my mouth. Her tiny silky bikini underwear cupped between her legs, covered with...fireworks?

Catching the direction of my gaze, she flicked her nail under the waistband. “Memorial Day theme. I started amusing myself with themed lingerie sets a couple years ago. Not sure why, they just made me laugh. See?” She turned and then

looked at me under her lashes over her shoulder. “Statue of Liberty on my—”

I moved toward her and squeezed her ass. “You are gorgeous. I want to kiss and touch and lick every part of you.”

She swallowed audibly then murmured, “Best get started then.”

“Take them off. Take everything off, Shelby. Let me look at you before I enjoy every inch.” I brushed a kiss over the freckles on her shoulder as I reached up to cup her breasts. “I’ve got this part.” I made quick work of the clasp and let the bra drop while I filled my hands with her cleavage, pinching the taut tips.

“You sure do.” She dipped her head to my shoulder as she started to shimmy out of her panties, doing her best to not disrupt what I was doing. “Fuck, that feels good.”

“Let’s see.” Without warning, my hand slipped into the bikinis now stretched across the top of her thighs. I skimmed my fingertips over her slick cleft, smothering my groan in the thick tumble of her hair, now half up and half down. The rich vanilla scent of her shampoo hijacked my senses as her wetness soaked my fingers and the quick pulse of her clit made me want to delve deeper.

Completely without finesse, I touched her eagerly, slipping in all that she’d made for me while I used my other hand to twist her nipple. I wasn’t gentle. Almost immediately, I was rewarded with harder pulses of her clit. Every bit of her was swelling and tightening around my fingers as I pushed them inside, stretching the panties around my hand until the rip of the seams spurred me on.

I shifted and pulled her back against me so I could grip her pussy hard, squeezing and fingering her until she gasped and turned her head to fuse our mouths together. Her moans spilled into my mouth as I scissored two fingers inside her, going so deep that her thighs trembled.

“I’m—I can’t.” She wavered on her feet. “I’m close.”

“Don’t hold back on me. Do you hear that?” I sucked her lower lip between my teeth as my fingers created the most wonderful wet noises while they worked her into a frenzy. Every time her knees weakened, and I had to release her breast to hold her up, my dick reared against my zipper. Against the soft fullness of her ass in her loosened panties, barely hanging on to her curves.

“God, don’t stop. Please.” She kissed me harder, almost desperately. Impatient with herself. Frustration leaked from her pores as she ground herself into my hand, her movements jerky.

Instead of speeding up, I slowed my fingers down, circling her clit with light touches as I circled my cock against her ass. Almost immediately, she dropped her head to my shoulder and her breathing eased before picking up again as she rocked against me. “Yes. That. That.” She widened her stance, rolling her hips until I got the message to slip inside her again. One finger, then two while I kissed the side of her neck.

“Is that what you need? Tell me. Tell me what you do when you’re alone.”

“Nothing.” She let out a pained laugh then reached down to lace her fingers with mine in her panties, guiding me as if we were partners in her orgasm. “There. Slow. Inside. Oh, God. So good. Dex.” She gasped my name again and again and then I switched things up, yanking my hand out of her panties to rub my fingers over her lips.

“Open. Taste yourself as I’m going to.”

She licked at my fingers, drawing them in as her eyelids closed. Then I turned her, nudging her toward the bed. I gave her a light push and she dropped to the mattress, kicking off the torn panties with irritation.

“I’m sorry,” she said miserably as I kneeled between her legs.

“Shh. We have all the time in the world.” I kissed one kneecap and then the other until she got the message and widened her legs. I shrugged off my jacket and pulled off my

bowtie, tossing them on the bed beside her. When I rolled up my sleeves, she giggled helplessly and leaned back on her hands, her relaxed pose stretching tight every muscle in my body. “You’re very distracting.”

“You’re not. Why do you get to stay dressed while I’m as naked as a jaybird?”

“Because I’m in charge until you say otherwise. And I like the view.”

I took in the details. I wouldn’t rush. Rushing was the exact opposite of what she needed.

I kissed my way up her inner thigh, swallowing a groan at the neatly trimmed hair above her swollen pussy.

Had she thought we might end up here, even if she’d never admit it?

She was still so wet, and I ached for a taste. I skimmed her puffy lower lips with my thumb and leaned in to trace my tongue around the heart of her, dipping inside when her breath caught. Doing it again and again as she flattened her hands on the comforter, throwing back her head to draw in air.

I used my fingers and my tongue and even my teeth for an unexpected nip now and then. Her clit was pulsing again, and I used every trick in my arsenal to slow things down, to gentle the pump of my fingers as I rested my forehead against her mound and lightly breathed against her. I sucked the glistening pearl of her clit between my lips, hard and harder still while the pace of my fingers remained easy.

Her wetness pooled and there was no way for me to catch all of it even as she brought her legs up to brace her heels on the edge of the mattress. She lifted into my strokes, dragging me up and right into the cradle of her body as she locked her mouth onto mine.

“Fuck me. Please.” Her pupils were blown out, her expression glazed with need. “I need you to fill me. Condoms are in my purse.” She reared up in bed and fisted my hair. My cock throbbed against the thin material separating us. “Where’s my purse?”

“You dropped it by the door. But I have my own.”

“Of course you do.”

I fumbled my wallet out of my pocket and reached for the condom tucked in the second slot. “I didn’t have any until today. I’d been out for a damn long time.” I kissed her hard, silencing her next comment. “If you’re mad I wanted to be careful just in case—”

“I’m not mad at anything.” She smiled and my heart turned over in my chest as she brushed my hair away from my forehead. “I’m feeling pretty damn charitable at the moment.”

“But you didn’t come.” And I hated not being able to make that happen for her.

I would, I vowed. Even if it took all night and the morning besides.

“No. But it’s been a lifetime since I’ve been that close. Twice now. Three is the magic number.” She rubbed her heel against the back of my calf, tugging up my pants. Even that much skin on skin had me shuddering. “Get naked.”

TWELVE



RENEWED DETERMINATION LOCKED HIS JAW AS HE LIFTED himself off me with obvious reluctance.

Not all that was obvious. The tent in his tuxedo pants might've freaked out a lesser woman.

Yeah, it freaked me out too.

“Do you have a training version of that?” I asked, not even realizing I'd spoken aloud until he stopped unbuttoning his shirt to chuckle.

At me.

With me, because somehow I laughed too. I was being ridiculous. I'd had a baby. I could handle him.

I hoped.

“Trust me, we'll be just fine.” He kept unbuttoning, going so slowly that my hips moved restlessly. I was tempted to cover the stretch marks on my belly but when my fingers crept toward them, he reached down to grasp my wrist, kissing my hand almost offhandedly before he set it back on the bedding.

“You undress too slow,” I said to cover my embarrassment as he resumed his leisurely trek down the buttons.

“Don't try to hide yourself from me or I won't undress at all. My cock works just as well with my shirt on.”

“There's a relief,” I muttered. “What am I doing here?”

“You're about to get thoroughly fucked, in case you've forgotten.” He tossed aside his shirt, baring his stupidly hot

torso for my perusal. I'd seen it before, but it bore closer review.

Before I could, he undid his belt, snapping it free from its loops with an authority that had me peeking up from the tangle of my hair.

I couldn't be a spectator now.

I had to touch.

Taste.

Have.

I sat up, tossed back my hair, and used my legs to draw him in closer so I could run my nails up the lightly furred planes of his belly. "You must work out a lot."

"Enough. I like to long-distance bike ride," he said, intercepting my next question as I traced my fingertips over the helmet tattoo on his right side. It was inked in black with red on the helmet with a sketch of a bike behind it, simple yet intricate with its shading and shadows. On his left side, he had a crest of some sort, with a dragon with a forked tail on top. "Family crest," he added before I could ask. "You don't have any ink?" He sounded unsurprised.

With some glee, I lifted my right arm and nudged aside my breast to reveal the bright green four-leaf clover with a cursive A hidden there. "I actually do. The A is for Alice, Berry's real first name. Alice was for my maternal grandmother. She died when I was young, but she was so wonderful, I had to name Berry for her."

"Kind of racy spot for a tat, Ms. Wilde." He touched the A with his thumb, somehow setting off a brand-new throb between my legs.

Then again, it could have been from his arched eyebrow and quirked lips.

The man was stupidly sexy.

"I knew it'd be my one and only so I went for it. I also wanted it hidden away, something just for me. Your tattoos aren't on display either, Mr. Lawyer."

“No.” He fisted a handful of my hair. “I can’t stop looking at you.”

I swallowed hard. “Same.” I eased forward and slipped my hands into the back of his loosened pants, discovering he’d gone commando. “Thanks for dressing for speed.”

One squeeze of his bitable ass cheeks and the blunt head of his cock popped over his waistband, making me swallow again. I’d need a gallon of water at this rate.

He nudged down his pants, kicking them off so that I could see every bit of him. Strong, muscular legs, feet clad in Spiderman socks, and a cock that made me smother a whimper. He tipped up my chin and bent to kiss me, driving me back against the bedding before I could take a taste as I’d planned.

“Later,” he murmured, shifting me on my side as he stretched out behind me. “Ladies first.”

“But you’ve already—” I broke off as he lifted my arm and ducked his head under to kiss my tattoo. Then he shifted his mouth to my nipple, sucking it between his teeth so that arousal arced through me. I couldn’t stop the shudder as he brushed his hand down my belly, his target clear.

His thumb found my clit and he began to strum me as slowly as if he had all night. But his contact with my breast was very different. There, his suction was hard and demanding, almost painful. Between my legs, he kept the pace relaxed and uneven, never letting me know what to expect next.

In no time, I was drenched and writhing. I wanted him inside me. I wanted him to fill me up with that beautiful, brutal cock and I didn’t want to pretend I didn’t. I didn’t want to try to convince myself I didn’t like sex or that I didn’t need it.

Because here and now, I did. I needed sex with him. Dexter Shaw, this mercurial, unexpected man who didn’t hesitate to go down on me and wore Spiderman socks under his tux.

And right now, in bed.

“Stop thinking. Just arch your back, just like that. Take my fingers inside you. Good girl.”

“I’m not a dog,” I mumbled, though doing as he said made the spiral inside me tighten that much faster.

He chuckled, shifting back from my breast to lightly blow a stream of air over my straining nipple. “No indeed. Just listen. Feel what I’m saying. Stop fighting me. Stop fighting yourself.”

I rocked into his movements, so close that my thighs were shaking and my wetness as he worked me was almost embarrassing. He was so hard and his suction on my breast would leave a mark, I knew it.

I wanted it.

Then he twisted his fingers just right, his pressure firm on the exact place I needed it, and I finally went flying. I reached up to grip his hair as my body detonated, frustrated tears flooding my eyes before I was coming too hard to do anything but moan.

And possibly scream.

“Good girl,” he murmured throughout, mixing the phrase with words of praise that verged on porn talk. But in his raspy, turned-on voice, they were like sex poetry.

“You’re so fucking sexy. I could die happy just watching you come. Making you come. Again,” he said, rolling me onto my belly before I could recover.

At once, he latched his mouth on my over sensitized pussy.

I wasn’t even sure I’d finished coming when he gripped my ass, his tongue spearing me as he let out an unholy groan. He lapped at me and fingered me until I was helpless to do anything but splinter apart as he held me down. Something about not being able to get away as he literally forced pleasure on me set off an endless round of shudders.

Half-delirious, I kicked out at him as I fumbled for one of the pillows piled at the head of the bed. He just laughed and kept going.

“Sadist,” I muttered, pulling a pillow down under my head.

I drifted.

I didn’t even try to fight it. I just slipped away into the comfortable haze my body wanted so badly to float on.

When I opened my eyes again, my mouth was dust-dry and using the facilities was an imperative. I lifted my head, already flushing as pictures from the night before tried to fill my brain.

Aided by the gorgeous, very naked man passed out in the bed beside me.

Dear God, I’d passed out on him like a drunk sex neophyte. How had he not thrown me off him and just left?

Right there, that proved he was an amazingly decent guy. At least compared to the ones I’d known.

I was covered up to my shoulders with the sheet and comforter while said naked man barely had a sheet up to his hips. Scarcely covering his very notable morning erection.

Cripes, was it actually morning? I couldn’t tell because he’d pulled the heavy blackout drapes across the window while I was sawing them off.

How lame. How embarrassing.

How many orgasms had he given me? I’d lost count after two and the second was rather fuzzy. But I wasn’t entirely sure he hadn’t continued on even while I was sleeping.

My whole body was still buzzing.

And his cock was right there...and he was clearly still in need of relief. Since I’d fallen asleep before we’d even managed to have sex.

Just all the orgasms for me. I was one greedy, semi-satisfied—only because I still wanted more—bitch.

And I really had to pee.

As soundlessly as possible, I wiggled out of bed and realized I was still lacking clothes. No wonder my nipples

were like skewers. Of course, watching him sleep didn't help on that score.

His body was...unfair. Especially when paired with that face and that mobile mouth that curved into a smile so easily.

He couldn't have been any less like the pompous dickhead if he tried.

I tiptoed around the bed into the gorgeously appointed bathroom, noting the slate-gray tiles edged in silver. Swanky indeed.

And man, was that a heated floor near the huge hot tub? It certainly seemed to be, motion activated no less. No cold feet in the morning in here.

Hmm, I'd have to add that to my notes for Dex's bathroom. He'd seemed open-minded design-wise, and that was certainly a nice feature to have.

Especially if you hope to be spending time in his bathroom—and in his bed, you hussy.

I mean, we hadn't even gotten to the main event, so of course I was still curious. Who could blame me after that orgasm appetizer?

Quickly, I used the facilities and had just finished washing my hands—and trying to finger-comb my currently messy hair—when a soft knock sounded at the door.

I stared at it, panicked. After sex talk with a man you barely knew was the worst.

When you hadn't even made it to the sex before noping out...

"Just a minute," I called, palming my suddenly overheated cheeks as I looked down at my naked body, attractively decorated with Dex's five o'clock shadow marks and that lovely half bruise over the nipple he'd sucked so persistently.

My gaze as always went to my stretch marks. No hiding them either.

He's seen everything already from all the angles.

My gaze landed on the overflowing courtesy basket of bath goods on the wicker stand beside the tub. Bubbles. Lots and lots of bubbles. I could talk to him if I didn't have to face him completely nude first thing when I didn't have a nice buzz in my bloodstream and orgasm anticipation.

Or hope. Orgasms were rare for me, so I didn't exactly anticipate them on the regular.

Muttering to myself, I dumped in freesia-scented bubbles and turned the water on warm. I slipped inside with a whimper I couldn't stifle.

He started knocking harder. "Shelby?"

Oh, God, maybe he had to use the bathroom.

I lathered up with some shampoo super-fast then used the handheld sprayer to rinse. After, I sank down deeper into the bubbles, swallowing the next moan that wanted to slip out as the fragrant warm water massaged my aching calves and feet.

Too much dancing. Out of practice.

I spotted a puffy eye mask in the toiletry basket and slipped it on, just in case he had to, well, use the facilities. With the loudness of the tub still filling with water, it would almost give him privacy. Almost.

"Come in," I called, ducking down in the bubbles. When he didn't enter right away, I shoved up my eye mask just in time to see him stroll in, comfortably naked.

He didn't attempt to disguise his morning wood in the slightest. Hell, as he saw me in the tub, the damn thing practically saluted me. "I woke up and missed you."

"Sorry?"

"I didn't think you'd be taking a bath." He crossed his arms. "I must've missed my invitation."

"Me either. On the bath," I said hurriedly. "As for joining..." I cleared my throat. "This tub is plenty roomy but —"

"But," he prompted when I fell silent.

“You seem to have urgent needs that can’t be accomplished in here.”

“I went to the bathroom an hour ago if that’s what you mean. While you were still in dreamland.” He crossed the room to crouch beside the tub, trailing his fingers through my sudsy hair. His touch felt glorious but it was hard to concentrate with his erection practically on eye level.

“No, I meant that.” I wavered between his legs and looked away before I was tempted to stare.

I hadn’t made a study of cocks—his only being the third I’d seen in the flesh and only two more if we were counting adult movies—but his seemed unnaturally attractive. It went well with the rest of him. Even his muscled legs weren’t overly hairy. Just enough to prove his virility.

“That?” I could hear the smile in his question. “Are you referring to my cock?”

“Yes. You’re going to have to...take care of that and this tub isn’t *that* roomy.”

“Sure it is. You get on top and all works out fine.”

“Hmm.” I kept staring at the wall, wondering if he’d be offended if I pulled down the eye mask.

I felt so shy and awkward and like I had no clue of my moves in this situation. He’d seen my whole body already and it wasn’t like we were in full sunshine or anything but being totally sober sucked.

“Hmm? Do I have to ply you with wine spritzers for you to admit you’re attracted to me?”

“Hello, I came multiple times. And I don’t do that. Ever. So, I’d say the attraction is noted.”

“And mutual in all ways,” he reminded me.

“I appreciate it.”

“You appreciate I’m attracted to you? And still so hard from hours ago that your gaze is literally magnetized to my erection?”

I snorted. “All men are hard in the morning. It’s no different if you saw my naked body first thing or sausage links on a plate next to scrambled eggs. It’s biological.”

“I can assure you my reaction to you is far more overwhelming than my enjoyment of sausage links, though I do have quite the fondness for them. But fine.” He released my hair and lifted his hands, palms out. “If you’re not into it, or into me right now, I’ll leave you to your bath. I won’t beg.”

He started to stand up and nausea churned in my belly as I grabbed his knee. “Wait. Don’t go. I’m messing this up.” I let him go and buried my face in my soapy hands.

“Yes.” His tone was remarkably cheerful. “You are. But I expected no less. Or no more.”

I frowned and dropped my hands. “You expected me to freak out?”

“Oh, yeah. I expected it last night. You surprised me there, but I knew we were overdue.”

“You’re kind of an ass sometimes.”

“Your point?”

I was so annoyed, I stood up in the tub and spread my arms wide. “I mostly freaked at you taking a good look at me in the light of day, stretch marks and all. But you know what? Now you can. Go ahead and look. I am what I am. You’re not ashamed you could’ve poked my eye out with that wand of temptation, so I won’t be ashamed I gave birth to a nine-pound baby girl with a minimum amount of drugs.”

“Wow. Really?” His gaze was filled with admiration and stayed steady on mine. “I was just a little over eight and my mom said she asked for every drug known to man.”

“I would next time, now that I know. I mean, if there was a next time and obviously there isn’t and probably won’t be, so...yeah.” I huffed out a breath. “But you have to do the drugs early enough to give them time to work. Changing your mind later isn’t as effective.”

“How do you know there won’t be a next time?” He stepped closer to wash off my bubbles with the handheld spray and then he briskly toweled me off with one of the thick fluffy towels from the rack. “Any man would be lucky to father your children, Shelby.”

My head swam from the heat of the water and from hunger. Not from what he’d said or the intensity in his solemn green gaze.

I wasn’t foolish enough to be swayed by sweet words. Not anymore.

So, I shut him up with a hard kiss and just hung on when he lifted me into his arms and set me on the wide counter next to the double sinks. I locked my legs around his hips as one kiss quickly led to more, each one more desperate than the last. He palmed my breast, coaxing me with those erotic tugs on my nipples that had worked such magic last night. I arched against him, fitting his length against my already wet slit with a sureness that made us both groan.

“Let me get a condom, baby.”

I wrapped myself around him, arms and legs. “Take me with you. I don’t want any more delays.”

“Me either. Okay. Hang on.” He picked me up and carted me into the bedroom, not seeming to struggle at all from my weight.

He dumped me on the bed, making me giggle. Then he bent down to take out a condom from his wallet. With a quick, efficient movement, he rolled on the latex before he grabbed my foot and yanked me to the edge of the mattress.

He swallowed audibly. “We don’t have to do this, Sherbet. No matter what happened last night. We aren’t in any rush.” He let out a laugh. “In fact, I expressly told myself before the date we could not possibly do this. I wanted to prove to you I’m more than the manwhore I’m sure my friends have told you I am.”

“They didn’t—they wouldn’t—”

“Yes, they would and they did. It’s mostly harmless talk, but they’re worried about you with me. That I’d push my luck and take advantage when you’re not ready for that.”

“Yet you’re standing there hard enough to dent something and making sure I’m okay with this. When I literally told you to fuck me last night.”

“You’d been drinking—”

“There’s condoms in my purse, Dex. TJ put them there but I didn’t stop her. Because deep down, some part of me wanted to end up right here.” Deliberately, I lifted my heel onto his shoulder, spreading my legs wide enough there was no way he could miss how very ready I was at this moment.

Sure, maybe I was nervous, but not about him as much as myself. I didn’t trust myself in these scenarios. I worried I’d either make too much of something, or somehow even worse, that I’d run from a possibly good—maybe great—thing and tell myself it was smart because I was protecting myself.

And my little girl. Always my little girl.

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he looked his fill. “I’m just saying this has weight, you know? Usually, it doesn’t. But you’re not just looking for a good time. And neither am I anymore.” He swallowed again and lifted his gaze to mine. “I want more.”

My heart started beating too fast so I did the only thing I could to bring this back down to a manageable level. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you talk too much.”

One corner of his lips lifted. “Noted.”

Then he bent to kiss me—but not my mouth. He aimed right between my legs, not hesitating to dive right in there one more time. Avidly. Hungrily. Making those appreciative noises that stoked the fire simmering in my belly and set it to blazing so much faster than last night.

He’d primed me now. Figured out the key to my lock and turned it, expertly. Nudging me up to the ledge where I trembled, begging to fall.

Until he thrust two fingers inside me and crooked them just right to make me come apart for him.

This time, there was no doubt I screamed. My aching throat told the tale. And I clung to that knowledge like a formerly repressed woman's sexual trophy.

I could have multiple orgasms, dammit, and I could scream when I came.

He crawled up my body and kissed me with lips that tasted of me. I didn't shy away from that either. I dragged my nails down his sculpted back to his taut ass, digging in to encourage him to get this show on the road. He got my message and hiked my legs up high, folding them into my chest until his face was close to mine.

Then he plunged into me with one deep-as-hell thrust that forced more sounds from my throat.

Possibly terror that I'd never walk right again. But mostly pleasure.

Sounds I didn't recognize as my own left me as he began to sink in and out of me. He angled me upward, swiveling his hips to hit just right.

And oh God, he did. I felt suspended on the edge of orgasm again from just a few strokes.

His fever-bright emerald gaze settled on my face. "Go on. Do it. Get yourself off while I fuck you."

I didn't think. I just obeyed. Fumbled my hand down between us, my fingers too thick and clumsy to properly circle my clit at first. He sped up to match my frantic pace, sweat dripping down his temple as he went faster, then faster still.

I leaned up to lick his neck, making him groan until he caught my mouth with his own. Not what I'd wanted to swallow last night, but this salty bit of him worked right now.

"What do you need? Do you want me to flip you over? Or you want to ride me?"

When I didn't answer, so focused on the feel of him so big and demanding inside me, he gripped my chin and made me

look at him. “You know what you like. Tell me.”

“I like this,” I began, though I already knew I wouldn’t come this way. But it didn’t always have to be about me. Except he wanted to know and I wanted to be honest.

“From behind,” I said. “Side by side.”

He pulled out of me so abruptly I nearly came just from the friction alone. He rolled me onto my side and lifted my leg, rubbing my clit with the heel of his hand until I was near consumed with grinding against his palm. It was dirty and frantic and my pussy was so swollen and wet that nearly anything would’ve sent me over at that moment.

He held my leg high and drove into me so silkily that I had to bury my face in the bedding. “There you go. Right there. Come on me. You can do it.” His coaxing, husky voice was my undoing.

The tidal wave he’d built inside me crashed over me. Inescapable. Endless. He filled me so deeply I couldn’t think beyond him or what he was doing to me.

Breaking me open, making me his.

I bit the cords of the forearm he’d braced on the mattress as he worked himself in and out of my claspings pussy. I was half on my side, half on my stomach, and he was still powering in and out of me, twisting my legs in a way I knew would hurt later on.

I didn’t care. I wanted the mania. Craved it.

His body went rigid, and I knew he was close. “Dex,” I whispered, reaching down to toy with my clit. He groaned as I squeezed him from within, rubbing my clit hard enough to nearly send me over one more time.

But that wasn’t what made me come again. It was when he pulled back, surging into me one last time and sinking deep with a sound dangerously close to victory.

I wrapped my arm around him behind me while he shook, hanging on as if I’d die if I let go. He said my name over and over against my hair as he finally found his release.

That sounded like victory too, my victory.

I didn't fall asleep this time post-orgasm. Neither did he. We just rolled into yet another round, somehow forgetting that thing called a recovery period.

Apparently, his cock wasn't only beautiful, it was built to last too.

Then he cuddled me in his arms, throwing the sheet over both of us and dragging my eye mask down from where it had fallen behind my head, barely clinging to my hair. He tugged it into place over my eyes, making me laugh. "Go to sleep." He kissed the mask and my temple. "Time runs nigh."

A shiver of unease worked its way up my spine. Sleepovers were fun, but morning always came eventually.

Just a few more minutes of sleep, I promised myself, then I'd go get my daughter.

THIRTEEN

Dexter

THE RINGING PHONE SHOT ME UPWARD, STILL HALF ASLEEP. IT wasn't my phone. I didn't recognize the ringtone.

But Shelby did.

She shoved my arm off her and sat up, tearing off her eye mask as if it offended her. Her eyes were bleary, her hair sticking up in all directions from the mask and from my hands.

We looked at each other. "Berry," we said simultaneously, both racing off the bed in the direction of her purse on the floor just inside the door.

I reached her purse first because she got tangled in the sheet and fell on the floor. I yanked out her phone, recognizing it as a much older iPhone. I swiped to answer the call identified as Mom while Shelby glared at me from the other side of the bed. "Hello?"

"Hello," a warm female voice replied. "I'm looking for Shelby."

"Hi, Mrs. Wilde. I'm Dexter Shaw, your daughter's... client," I said when other words failed me.

Smart words. Words that didn't make Shelby's eyes turn into lasers capable of rendering me sterile with a mere flash.

"Give me my phone," she said in a whispered yell. I hadn't known such a thing existed until this very moment.

I held up a finger. Technically, she was right. I was wrong. Berry wasn't my business. But I had to make sure she was okay.

If somehow she wasn't and this whole night had been... well, not even my idea, but I'd benefited for sure. As had Shelby. I just wanted to hear she was okay, then I'd butt out.

"Berry all right? Sorry, this was unexpected."

"Oh, yes. She's fine. She just..." She faltered. "Can I speak to Shelby, please?"

"Sure. Of course." I walked closer to Shelby, holding the phone out of her reach when she made a grab for it. It was a miracle she didn't swing at my junk. "You're sure she's fine though?"

"She's fine. I didn't realize you knew Berry?"

"We met a few times. She likes my dog, Bob. He's a pug." Shelby stomped on my foot hard enough to make me curse and then she snatched the phone.

I didn't put up a fight. I knew I was far overstepping my bounds. I'd just been worried and needed to hear for myself Berry was okay.

Somehow I'd gotten in way too deep.

With a sigh, I flopped on the bed and rubbed my foot. First time I'd ever been assaulted post multiple orgasms.

First time for everything.

I listened to Shelby's side of the conversation, hushed as it was from the bathroom. She'd slammed the door shut so she clearly didn't want me involved.

Didn't matter.

I still rose to press my ear to the door to get a read on the situation. The word nightmare was mentioned several times. I winced, feeling for Berry. Those were rough for adults, never mind little kids on a night without their mom.

When Shelby emerged five minutes later, a towel wrapped around her and her face ashen, I went to her and tugged her into my arms. I'd already put on my clothes. "Get dressed and we'll go get her."

"What do you mean *we*?"

“I’ll drive you,” I said patiently, already expecting her ire. She wasn’t wrong either. “I know I crossed a line by taking your phone. I’m sorry. I just wanted to hear for myself she’s okay.”

Indignation raced across her flushed features. “You don’t trust me to tell the truth about my own kid?”

“Of course, I do. I just had a moment of lawyer dickishness. I admit it, I’m used to being in charge and don’t know how to stay in my own damn lane.” I lifted my hands. “Go ahead. Free shot.”

Her shoulders slumped and she moved into me, pressing her forehead into my chest. “She had a nightmare. Her first one and I wasn’t there.”

“Oh, honey.” I stroked her hair, holding her even as she shuddered.

“You were really worried about her?” She peeked up at me through the still-damp ropes of her hair.

“I really was. She’s a good kid.”

“Yeah.” She let out a hitching breath. “Worse was why she had the nightmare.”

“Snuck up to watch a scary movie?”

She shook her head silently.

“Too much candy before bed?”

She shook her head again.

“Then what?”

“She saw her father on TV. At the gala. There was a clip on the early news. I’m so glad we didn’t go. That you understood I so did not want to go, no matter how good it would look for Designing Women.” She pressed her face against my throat and I hated the wetness on her cheeks.

Absolutely hated it.

I threaded my fingers through her hair. All I wanted to do was cradle her against me and make any memories of that

asshole disappear. “Volunteering will look even better, and you’ll get to spend time with me. Win-win.”

With a faint smile, she eased back and closed her eyes. “My baby is that frightened of her own father, and I was here, having incredible sex with you.” Before I could speak, she held up a hand. “Which I do not regret one minute of. I just wish she didn’t have a rough night.”

I chose my words carefully, fighting to keep my hold on her easy. The emotions moving through me didn’t lend themselves to gentleness. I was feeling far too violent. “What did he do to her?”

“Nothing,” Shelby said, almost too quickly.

“Then what?”

“It was me,” she said quietly as I fisted my hands against her spine. “Not like you’re thinking. He just raised a hand to me once. Berry saw it.”

“Raised a hand?” I asked slowly, taking a deep breath to ensure my voice was even. “Explain that to me.”

“Literally that. We were arguing and he was accusing me of terrible things, as he always did. He claimed to have seen me that day in an incriminating clinch with Greg, my client. I’d hugged the guy because a family member wasn’t doing well, and David saw it. Wasn’t anything, but he made it into something and got pissed as hell. He lifted his hand, and I didn’t realize Berry was hiding behind the door. She assumed he was going to hit me.”

“Did he?”

“No. He never did. Look at me, Dex. I’m telling the truth.” She gripped the lapels of my jacket, shaking me until I met her eyes. “He never laid a finger on me or Berry. But she thought he would or that he could, and that was almost as bad.”

I forced myself to unclench my hands so that I could smooth them up and down her back. “I would like to drive you to your parents so I can see Berry. And maybe meet your folks, so they know I’m not a bastard too.”

She reached up to skim her fingers over my cheek. “I can feel the rage in you. You’re a coiled spring. Normally, you don’t stay still a moment. Now you’re just...locked up.”

With effort, I unclenched my jaw. “I hate that the prick ever threatened you and accused you of something you weren’t doing.”

“How do you know I wasn’t?”

“Because I know you already.”

“You’re right. I wasn’t.” She lowered her gaze to somewhere in the distance before lifting it again, almost defiantly. “I was spending a lot of time with that client. He was younger, closer to my age. David was always yelling about me fucking him, about not wanting to sleep with my husband ‘because I’d gotten it out of my system’ at Greg’s house. Which, of course, was utter bullshit. I didn’t want to sleep with him because by then he’d poisoned whatever love I’d had for him. Worked out for him just the same, since it gave him a convenient excuse to make sure I got basically nothing in the divorce. He claimed he had or could get pictures. I had no idea of what and just shut it all down. I didn’t want to be dragged through the mud anymore.” She threw back her shoulders. “I’m sure you think I’m weak.”

“Just the opposite, in fact. I think you’re brave as hell.”

“I got my daughter, which is all I needed anyway.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “Pompous dickhead is right.”

“I want to raise a hand to him myself. See how he likes it. Bet he won’t be as excited to fight with me as he was to threaten a woman. His *wife*. The mother of his daughter.”

“Dex, it’s over. We’re divorced. I don’t have to talk to him or see him. Neither does Berry. He even raised questions about her paternity and somehow finagled a sweetheart deal where he only paid me a pittance for support with no visitation. Pulled a few strings, I’m sure. Everything goes your way when you’re a powerful judge with equally powerful friends.”

Powerful friends like my father, which I hadn’t yet told Shelby. In my defense, I didn’t know how friendly they were.

I'd only seen a couple photos online, some at awards banquets, some on the golf course. But my dad would golf with anyone.

And my memory sucked, so I had no idea if my father had ever mentioned him to me in passing. I hadn't even remembered the long-ago nepo baby conversation with the dick until I'd done my most recent internet search.

I hissed out a breath. "If I see him, I'm not going to be responsible for my actions. Actually, yes, I will. I'll take the charge and go to fucking jail if I can teach him a lesson he'll never forget."

"So, you can lose your license to practice law? For a—"

"If you're going to say for a woman I barely know, don't. Just don't. I told you this had weight for me, and that wasn't a line. If that's not true for you, give me time to at least shower you off my skin before you poke holes in me, okay?" I raked a hand through my hair before I turned away to try to get myself together.

It was all fucking true. I didn't know how I was already so invested with Shelby and her daughter. I didn't know them well, there was no denying that. But we'd connected.

Or at least I'd connected.

If I was the only one on that score, well, I'd better fucking figure myself out.

"If I didn't...if it wasn't important to me, I wouldn't be here. I'm not one for casual sex, Dex, if you hadn't grasped that yet." I shifted back to her as she exhaled. "I mean, I don't want you to think that if you sleep with the lonely single mom, expect to deal with a clinger."

"What if I'm saying I'd like you to cling? Okay, maybe not cling. But just lean a little bit now and then? I have big strong shoulders, and I very much enjoy spending time with you and Berry. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing." She blinked so furiously that I worried she was crying. Then she rapidly started searching for her clothes, tugging things on as fast as possible.

Until she picked up her shredded underwear and started to laugh.

“Lady Liberty is in two.” She held up both pieces, still laughing. “I loved this underwear. But so worth it.”

“I’ll buy you more. Not that I know where to get these. What do I search for, Statue of Liberty lingerie?”

She laughed harder while I dug out my shoes from under the bed and slipped them on.

“I’m actually not sure where I got them. I don’t need a replacement though. I have many other holidays on tap.”

“I look forward to seeing them.” When she opened her mouth, I pointed at her. “Don’t. It’s not classy to refuse another date when still on the current one.”

“I’m not refusing. Also can’t say I’m worried overmuch about class when you’ve already seen me from an array of angles.” She shimmied back into her dress and shoved her feet into her heels, wincing all the while. “I need to soak my feet for like a decade.”

“I also have a hot tub. Just saying.”

“I happen to know that, as I’ve already started making many, many notes about how to refresh and update the Spanish look of the original architecture while still making the whole open-concept floor plan more you. I want heated floors in the master bath.” She bit her lip. “I mean, I want that for you. It’s your home. So, you know, if you think you’d like that.”

Her nervousness now as she walked me through design ideas was adorable. She hadn’t been nervous last weekend discussing this stuff, but apparently, our mutual nudity changed things. Her cheeks had that warm apricot glow again that made her smattering of freckles stand out. Freckles just like her daughter’s.

“Sure, it gets fuck-all cold in winter here and who doesn’t appreciate warm feet on a freezing morning?” I grabbed my keys off the nightstand, shoving my remaining condom back in my wallet with more than a little regret. “I’ll drive you to your parents’ place.” My tone brooked no argument.

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to. I want to see Berry. Maybe she’ll feel better with some Bob...snuggles.” The word snuggles sounded weird to me, but what the hell did I call it? “Bob therapy,” I continued. “He accepts hugs. All the hugs she can give him.”

“You want her to go to your place? I think she needs to be at home with her own things.”

Her worry for her daughter was sweet if stifling. I imagined it could be that way for her kid too.

“I can bring Bob over there. Not for an overnight. Just for some fun.” I moved to her and gripped her hips, tugging her against me. “You remember what fun is, right? No stress. No worries that I think having your sweet pussy this morning means we are now betrothed. Though it’s worthy of betrothal,” I added, tipping up her chin when she flushed.

“A man who uses the word betrothal is hot even if you’re being a jerk again.”

“Happens often.” I tossed her my keys, which she caught effortlessly. “Wanna drive my car? Fun,” I said again. “Unless you suck at driving and scratch my Vi, then you’ll see my dark side.”

“Your Vi?”

“Uh huh. The way her engine purrs for me, of course she has to be a female. C’mon. Checkout time is approaching, and I refuse to pay extra because you’re a slowpoke.” I nudged her ahead of me with a quick slap on her behind.

The look she shot me could’ve frozen water. I had no doubt she’d make me pay for that later.

We went through the checkout process quickly. In no time, we were back in my car, driving the winding back country roads in the misty morning to the address she shared for her parents’ house. They weren’t far from the orchard at all.

Good thing, since Shelby gripped the steering wheel as if she was on a rocket ship about to veer off to Mars at any moment.

Deliberately, I leaned my arm on the window while I rested my other hand on her thigh. Her muscles were so tight, she jumped at my touch. “She handles like a dream, right?”

“Yes,” she said through clenched teeth. “How much did this car cost?”

“It’s priceless to me.”

“Thanks for easing my fears.”

“Fears of what? You’re not going to crash.”

“How do you know?”

“I have untold psychic gifts. Stop clenching so hard. You’re going to get a headache.”

“Too late there.” But she worked on relaxing her jaw as she flexed her fingers around the wheel. “Do you let everyone drive your Mustang?”

“Bite your tongue. I only allowed my brother to drive it once, mainly because he said what a horrible investment it was until he let it rip on the back roads. You are not letting it rip,” I observed, noting we’d barely reached thirty-five on a road marked fifty-five.

“Sorry. I’m just tense.”

“No kidding.” I lifted my voice over the wind. At least she hadn’t made me put up the convertible top in case the one dark cloud in the sky turned into rain. “This has a V-8 engine. Made to handle these curves. I wouldn’t have let you drive if I didn’t want you to have fun with it.”

She cast me a sidelong look. “You use that word an awful lot.”

“Yeah. Preston gets annoyed too. Probably why Bishop is his best friend and I’m not.”

“They did seem pretty tight. But that doesn’t mean your outlook is wrong. It’s just different.” She stepped on the gas on a particularly curvy stretch of road a mile or so from her parents’ home. “Okay, here we go, Vi.” Her lips curved. “And we’re off.”

She wasn't lying. We flew down a steep hill fast enough that her gorgeous curls blew behind her in the morning breeze. Bright green leaves fluttered on the trees along the road, bursting with color with their new growth after the hard winter. Summer was on the way, popping up in the wildflowers dotting the landscape.

She laughed with glee as we raced toward the horizon. I couldn't help reaching up to grab a fistful of her soft, wild hair, needing to touch her as she shifted to grin at me with pure pleasure in her eyes. It helped that these back roads were basically deserted at this time of day on a Sunday. "You're beautiful."

"You ain't bad yourself."

She whipped around the winding roads like an old pro then let out a long breath as she slowed down on the approach to her parents' street.

Reluctantly, I released her hair. I really wanted to kiss her while she was still flushed and breathless with the thrill of speed, but now wasn't the time. Who knew who could be watching?

She signaled to turn into the long driveway of her folks' charming ranch. Cheerful flowers bloomed out front and along the side. Berry was on the porch swing—did anything say bucolic family home more than one of those—pumping her legs to go faster than she probably should've.

Upon spotting my car, she hopped down and descended the steps, jogging across the lawn just as I opened my door. "Where's Bob?" she demanded.

"Alice Anne, where are your manners?" Shelby scolded as she climbed out of the car before I could even get around the hood to open her door.

Not that I could've anyway since Berry was standing right in front of me, hands on her hips, lower lip stuck out in a pout.

She was basically a miniaturized version of Shelby except her hair was tinged with more red and she had more freckles.

“Hi, kiddo.” I ruffled her hair in its long twin ponytails and she arched an eyebrow at me, making me laugh. “Excuse me. Hi, Miss Berry,” I said formally, bending at the waist to hopefully make her laugh.

Worked like a charm.

“Hi, can I please ask where is Bob, the pug dog?”

I laughed again and even Shelby joined in this time. “He’s at my house. Would you like to come over for a visit this afternoon?” I glanced at Shelby. “Your mom too, of course.”

“Yes. Can we get ice cream? The stand up the road just opened for the season.” She cocked her head, clutching the battered stuffed unicorn under her arm that much tighter. “They have pup cups. Just plain vanilla cause dogs can’t have chocolate. But I can.”

“After lunch,” Shelby said just as I was about to say sure, why not?

Clearly, I did not know my moves when it came to dealing with kids.

The front screen door banged open and Shelby’s parents appeared as a solid unit. “There you are. We wondered if you’d gotten lost on the way back.” Her mom stepped forward and waited for me to climb the steps to shake her outstretched hand. “I’m Shelby’s mother. What are your intentions?”

“Mom, for Pete’s sake, I haven’t even had a chance to do introductions yet. Dex, meet my mom, Jenna Wilde, and my dad, Danny Wilde. This is Dexter Shaw.”

“Hi, I’m Dex. Nice to meet you.”

Her father decided to join in. “Yes, we know you’re Dex. Now what are your intentions toward our Shelby?”

Shelby wrapped her arm around Berry’s shoulders and hurried her past us on the steps. “Let’s go get you packed up.”

“It’s rude to leave guests.” Berry craned her neck to keep her eyes on me and her grandparents, even as Shelby tried to hustle her inside.

“He’s not a guest.”

“I’m not a guest,” I agreed.

Her parents both shot me speculative looks. They were not rolling out any welcome mats, literally or figuratively.

Shelby sent me an apologetic look before the screen door slammed shut behind her and Berry.

“So, where were we?” I tried aiming a smile at her parents and found it did nothing to melt their ice. “My intentions, right.”

“A man doesn’t turn a date into a sleepover unless he has plans of a certain nature.”

“Actually, Shelby turned it into a sleepover, not me. She’d had a bit too much wine,” I added hurriedly. “So, she didn’t want to come home to her daughter in that state.”

“Shelby rarely drinks.” Danny narrowed his eyes. “Were you plying her with alcohol?”

“Absolutely not. She just was dancing a lot and not eating enough and it went to her head. The wine, I mean.” I tried another smile. “I’m a respectable lawyer, I assure you, Mr. and Mrs. Wilde.”

“The last one was a lawyer too,” her father muttered. “Try again.”

He did have a point there.

“I’m nothing like Davenport.” I didn’t growl but it was a close thing. “I barely know Berry, but I’m already finding reasons to spend *more* time with her, not less. And Shelby too,” I added.

“Mmm-hmm. Time will tell.” Her father opened the door. “Are you staying for lunch?”

“Am I invited?”

“That’s up to Shelby. But we’d like a chance to talk to you more.”

He means to grill you.

Though I smiled and nodded as I followed him and his wife inside, I considered the very real possibility I wouldn't make it out of there fully intact.

Then I grinned. Worth it for the night I'd spent with Shelby.

FOURTEEN



WE SPENT A PERFECTLY PLEASANT AFTERNOON TOGETHER.

First with my parents over a lovely lunch of turkey, tomato, and cucumber sandwiches—which Berry tucked in a napkin that she then left in a plant in the front hall—and bowls of raspberries and cream, which my daughter so did not merit after her hiding-food trick. I was onto her hiding-food deal because she'd tried it at home a few times. But she'd had a rough night—though she'd claimed Uni her unicorn had the nightmare, not her—so I let it slide.

For now.

During lunch, my parents had grilled Dex though I was pretty sure they thought they were slick about it.

What is your law specialty?

When he'd said divorce, they'd exchanged a weighted look as if he'd said infidelity. As if there weren't myriad reasons for people to end their union. Just because David had leaped on my supposed transgressions to end ours—when I'd balked at ending it for Berry's sake—didn't mean other people didn't simply grow apart or just realize they were never well-suited in the first place.

Have you ever been married?

No.

Any children?

Not that I'm aware of.

They'd definitely exchanged looks at that one. Leave it to Dex to be painfully honest rather than give the easiest answer.

When was your last relationship?

I nearly told them that was none of their business, but he interrupted and said, quite seriously, "Right now."

After I'd ascertained Berry was playing with her unicorn under the table and not paying attention to the "boring conversation" of the adults, I relaxed. His answer made me want to give him a kiss right there.

Especially since it made no sense.

We scarcely knew each other. We were in a professional relationship. Mixing the personal with it was a recipe for disaster. Wasn't it?

Then again, David and I had seemed like a decent couple on paper, minus our very obvious age gap. And to say we'd crashed and burned was an understatement. But now I'd gotten involved with two different men who'd hired me for professional reasons.

But at least I'd met Dex last fall at his brother's law office. He'd hired me precisely because of that meeting and due to my design of Preston and Bishop's new office.

But still, I really hated being predictable. Or possibly repeating my mistakes.

To be fair, I had virtually no chance of meeting anyone otherwise unless I swiped left online—which, ick, no, never—or if they were somehow in my work sphere. I didn't socialize. Lunch with female friends or associates consisted of my entire social life.

Or spending time with my parents and occasionally my brother when he visited once or twice a year. Though I was pretty sure blood relatives didn't count as a social life.

After the relationship awkwardness, Berry took center stage by spilling her nearly full glass of water and then somehow managing to pull off the tablecloth while she attempted to mop it up. She saved Uni from drowning, which

was a positive, and Dex took over helping her clean up before her stuffed unicorn got washed away in the flood along with the silverware.

They actually had that very conversation while my parents looked on in stunned silence before they jumped into action.

Nice to see Dex mystified them too.

“Are you actually real?” I asked as I tossed some of Berry’s favorite toys in her bag to bring home with her. She had some toys and clothes that always stayed at my parents’ house but every time she stayed over, she brought some new things she just had to have overnight. Like Uni. He had to be with her every night at bedtime and usually at all meals too.

“Me? I’m very real. This book is wild.” He was lying on Berry’s twin bed—my parents had converted my brother’s old bedroom into Berry’s room for when she visited—and paging through some novel-like book he’d found tucked under her pillow.

AKA a non-sanctioned book she had not gotten from her bookshelf. Definitely not Harry Potter, which she’d read multiple times.

“What is that?” I snatched it from his hand, noting the school library bar code on the spine. It looked to be a teen romance. “Wild how? Is there sex in it?”

“They’re like twelve, Sherbet. No. I have come across no sex. Though I’m only on chapter five. Short chapters.” He cocked his head. “Were you having sex at twelve? And if so, why weren’t you in my class?”

I couldn’t help laughing. He was just ridiculous. “Absolutely not. I was a virgin until eighteen in college.”

“Oh. Hmm. Yeah, I wasn’t.” He sprung off the bed and wandered to the window to peer out. “Your parents are nice,” he said, lowering his voice to practically a whisper. “Are they susceptible to bribes?”

“Bribes like what?”

“I don’t know. What do regular new boyf—dates give to the parents of the women they like?”

I put down the questionable novel for later perusal. “I don’t think they normally give them anything.”

“That wasn’t the answer I wanted.”

“I’m sure. You seem to use your money as often as you can. And not in a pompous way, just as extra grease in the wheels.”

“If it makes life easier...” He strode over to me and quickly disassembled my fast braid. “I love when you leave it down. Looked so pretty streaming in the breeze when you were speeding here.”

“You need to get your eyes checked. I most certainly was not speeding.” But I eagerly lifted my mouth to his as he gripped my chin.

“Are you having the sex?”

I jerked back from him so quick he nearly drew blood. “What?” I squeaked, whirling to face the doorway where Berry stood, arms crossed over her chest.

“We are definitely not having the sex at this moment,” Dex clarified, recovering much faster than I did. Shocker. His only tell was the fingers he kept drumming on his hip. He rarely stayed still for long.

Berry looked between us dubiously before her gaze landed on her book on the bed. “Were you reading my book?” she demanded, hurrying over to put it in the bag I’d packed instead of back under her pillow.

“I was reading it.” Dex kept tapping. “When does the good stuff start?”

“What good stuff? Magic stuff?”

“Yeah, magic and—”

Before he could elaborate, I whacked him in the belly. “Alice, is that a kissing book? Why haven’t I seen it before?”

“I just borrowed it from school on Friday.” She picked up her bag and looped it over her shoulder. “Okay, let’s go see Bob.”

Dex nudged me when I didn’t move. “You heard the lady. Let’s go see Bob.”

“I have to stop by home to get my briefcase. I have work.”

Even as I spoke, my mind whirled.

Was this going to be a habit now? Just spending weekends with Dex?

Even if it felt natural and Berry seemed to like going over there, I didn’t want to confuse her or send mixed messages.

“Where did you hear about the sex?” I demanded, ruing that I’d even opened my mouth.

She rolled her eyes. “Everyone knows about it. C’mon, let’s go. The ice cream stand closes at five and I need to get the money from my piggy bank.”

Dex reached over to ruffle her hair. “I can spot you, kiddo. Or I could’ve if you hadn’t hidden your lunch in your napkin.”

I didn’t know which of us was more surprised. “You caught that?”

He shrugged. “I used to pick out all the tomatoes in stuff. There are probably old husks of them still under the refrigerator in my parents’ house where I kicked them.”

“Oh.” Berry nodded sagely, and I was tempted to kick *him*. “Good one.”

He went back to tapping on his thigh. “I thought the sandwiches were good though.”

She jerked a shoulder. “Mid.”

“What does that mean?” he asked, glancing at me.

“Not good. You’re old and don’t know anything.” I turned to walk out of the room, glancing back as the two of them engaged in a playful shoving contest.

“Old, huh?”

“She said it! I didn’t.”

“Uh-huh.”

Berry’s high-pitched giggles followed us down the steps, where my mother was staring upstairs as if we’d shouted for help.

“I heard laughter.”

“Is it that rare?” Dex slung an arm around my shoulders as we reached the bottom, tossing a glance over his shoulder at Berry. “No, this is also not having the sex, Berrster.”

My mother’s eyes widened before she tossed up her hands and fled to the safety of the kitchen. I was tempted to follow.

I supposed this line of questioning meant it was time I sit Berry down for “the talk”, assuming she didn’t know everything from some fellow nine-year-old.

God save me.

We said our goodbyes to my shellshocked parents—I think they were still trying to grasp that I could be seeing someone, since I’d been divorced for years with nary a date—and hit the road back to the cottage to pick up my briefcase for that afternoon’s workload.

Soon as Dex signed the papers, we needed to get going on a preliminary timeline of when we were going to start work on his home, which included lining up Designing Women’s different departments—well, our different women. We didn’t exactly have departments yet.

But we would, in time. We were still in the early years of growing our business.

Each woman had a specific area of expertise, and she picked subcontractors to execute her vision. Or in the case of TJ, who handled a lot of the hands-on carpentry work, she got down and dirty herself and just hired on extra manpower as needed, most often some of the members on John Gideon’s crew from Gideon Gets It Done.

Hopefully, my daughter would see my dedication to our women-owned business and maybe one day she would follow

suit. Or maybe not. The world was her oyster and I wanted her to do whatever would make her happy. I just wanted her to see she had options.

She didn't have to marry the first rich man who happened along and said he wanted to "take care of her", so she didn't have to work "menial" jobs all her life.

I'd learned quite well how that worked out.

Dex stopped at the ice cream stand. Berry got—what else—a berry and vanilla twist and a vanilla pup cup for Bob that even came with a little insulated bag to reduce melting. She seemed even more excited about the dog's treat than her own.

I tried to beg off anything but Dex got a chocolate cone and foisted a chocolate-vanilla twist cone on me that I ended up eating before we even got to my place.

"Missed a spot," he teased when I wiped off my cheek, waiting to kiss me until Berry raced inside to get some vitally important homework she'd forgotten.

It was remarkably hard to detangle myself from him to go in and get my paperwork—and not only because he tasted deliciously of chocolate.

Hadn't I had enough of him last night and this morning? Survey said emphatically no.

I couldn't even pretend not to be disappointed we couldn't curl up on one of the many luxurious beds in his home for the afternoon and, well, not work. At all.

By the time I made it back to his car, briefcase bulging with even more work than last week, Berry was questioning Dex if I was going to tear down his house and build a new one. Where she'd gotten that idea, I had no clue.

I still needed to talk to her about her nightmare from the previous evening. I hadn't wanted to discuss it in front of Dex, just in case she wasn't comfortable with that. Now we were spending the afternoon at his place again, so I wasn't sure when we'd get a chance to discuss it.

I really couldn't keep spending my weekends with Dex. Even though I'd only done it twice so far, I was already setting a dangerous precedent.

We parked in his driveway beside a cute sky-blue coupe and walked in the house, laughing over Berry asking what neutering meant for Bob and too bad he couldn't find a girlfriend to make puppies with. But as soon as Ms. Perky Tits met us at the door, all of that fell away.

To be fair, my own pair was still reasonably perky. I'd always judge them due to breastfeeding and yet more stretch marks, but all in all, they were in fine shape. Just Kate's were about two inches below her neck, I was almost sure.

Even her name was perky.

"Oh, Mr. Shaw, there you are. Just ignore those voicemails I left. Everything is fine. I just wanted to make sure you were okay..." She trailed off, spotting me and Berry behind him. "Oh, hi! I'm Kate." She held out a hand to me then to my daughter. "I didn't know you were bringing over friends."

I had to literally bite my tongue not to announce I wasn't a friend, I was the woman who'd been in his bed this morning. The little girl hopping from foot to foot beside me in her impatience to see Bob put the kibosh on that.

As did my last shred of sense.

"Oh, these aren't friends. Shelby is Berry's mom. And Shelby and I are—"

"Dating," I interjected with a vehemence I certainly hadn't shown with my parents.

Berry nodded importantly. "Pretty sure they're having the sex."

Kate's blue eyes widened to the size of half dollars as she glanced up at Dex. "Really?" The question came out as a squeak. "You didn't tell me?"

"Why would he need to tell his pet-sitter?"

Her mouth rounded. "I didn't think that was all I was."

She ignored Dex's attempts to get her attention as she rushed to grab her purse off the hall table and bolted out the front door before her cute little coupe zipped down the drive.

Awkward silence descended until the unmistakable click of Bob's claws sounded on the hardwood. He appeared with his jowls dripping with water, indicating why he'd taken his sweet time coming to the door. He stopped briefly for Dex to bend down to give him the requisite hug hello before beelining to Berry and leaning up on his chubby legs for her to embrace him.

Then they took off running down the hall, Berry toting his ice cream treat as if it was a priceless probably melted jewel.

"I'll just go get started on my work—"

"Shelby, wait. I don't know what just happened with Kate, but I guarantee whatever you're thinking isn't accurate." He scraped a hand through his messily gorgeous windblown hair and blew out a breath. "And I have a feeling I'll have to find a new dog-sitter too, which sucks."

"Oh, what I'm thinking isn't accurate." I held my briefcase tighter just in case I was tempted to use it as a projectile. "Did you or did you not tell me you did not sleep with her?"

"I haven't."

"Then why was she looking so damn crushed?"

A shifty expression came into his eyes. "I never dissuaded her as much as I probably should have."

"I just bet." I threw back my shoulders. "On second thought, maybe Berry and I should go home. She can see Bob some other time."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Nothing happened with us. Nor did I ever indicate it might. She's a damn kid, Shelby. So what if I let her harbor some harmless crush? I never intended to act on it."

"You just liked her fawning over you and letting her think she might have a chance with you. Got it." I brushed past him to walk down the hall. "I'm going up to the terrace."

“At least you’re not stomping off.”

“Stomping off is still on the docket. I just want Berry to have some fun first. She had a hard night.”

He pivoted to stare me down. “Yes, I know, because I was leading you on so you spent the night with me and left her on her own, right? Is that next on my list of transgressions, though you made it pretty clear I was your entertainment last night, not the other way around.”

Because that assessment was dangerously close to accurate even if I hadn’t used those exact words, I clamped down on my tongue and headed upstairs so I could cool off.

I did not stomp. Much.

He didn’t follow me. Nor did he take off his shirt when he joined Berry and Bob in the backyard. His laughter rang out often but he didn’t so much as glance my way for the next couple of hours while I tried to concentrate on work.

Long enough that the sun dipped lower in the sky. Plenty of time for regret to set in.

I’d made assumptions and not trusted his word, although he’d never given me reason not to. The popular scuttlebutt had made me suspicious—and of course my own past. But that wasn’t an excuse to treat him so shoddily when he’d been pretty damn awesome to both me and my daughter.

And when I was undertaking one of the biggest jobs of my career with him as soon as he signed those papers.

If he signed them, now that I’d run my damn mouth yet again.

Best guess? I was going to remain single forever. And my self-righteous indignation was going to feel mighty cold when I was alone in bed.

Finally, I got up the nerve to pack away my mostly undone paperwork to join them in the backyard. I went outside to hear Dex talking to Berry while they kicked around a soccer ball, mostly for Bob’s benefit. He just took many rests in between, usually to watch the koi in the pond.

I really wanted to expand the water feature back there near the fish. I was picturing a waterfall and river rocks and maybe even a pergola type area with seating for guests and possibly a fire pit as well. I'd have to get his thoughts there.

Assuming he was still speaking to me.

"I used to get bad nightmares." Dex's tone was conversational, as if he was talking about the weather. "They would stay with me all through the next day. Do you want to talk about yours?"

"No. Hey, Bob, come get the ball!" She gave it a hard kick and Bob watched, head on his paws, tongue lolling.

"You sure?"

"It's no big deal. I just saw my dad on TV. And it just got stuck in my head, I guess." She put her hands on her hips as she faced Dex. "What were your nightmares about?"

"Failing tests, usually. Flunking out of school. My brother getting better grades than me. That was my reality though." Dex still hadn't spotted me standing in the shadows just outside the back door, and he sat on the ground to mop his sweaty brow with the hem of his shirt. He'd changed into shorts and an old baseball jersey, and he looked casually sexy in a way I couldn't ignore.

I couldn't ignore anything about him if I tried. No matter how scared I was.

I didn't want to be in this situation with him. I'd wanted to keep it strictly professional. If I had, I wouldn't have been fretting all day about cute brunettes with perky tits and liquid blue eyes and hurting his feelings because I was jealous.

I was so jealous. What was I supposed to do with that?

You could try being an adult and apologize. You know, giving your daughter that good example you wanted to be for her.

While I was lost in my recriminations, Dex and Berry headed for the house, with Bob bringing up the lollygagging rear.

I started to tuck away the paperwork I'd brought down to have Dex sign—I'd seen his chaotic desk drawers on my last visit, so I figured he might need another copy—but I wasn't nimble enough and dropped the damn briefcase, sending files in about fifty different directions.

Great job, Wilde. Show him how flustered you are. As if he doesn't already know.

Bob veered around Dex and Berry and hurried up the steps to the patio, just in case I'd happened to spill Milk Bones along with every file I'd ever owned.

Dex immediately crouched to help me pick up the paperwork. He didn't speak or smile. The loss of his easy affection, so much a part of him, struck me in the face like an icy-cold wind. I'd come to enjoy it in such a short time.

And my snap judgments and insecurity were what made it go away.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled miserably.

He didn't even look at me as he continued shuffling papers into my briefcase, all out of order. I'd have a devil of a time putting them back to rights. But he was helping so I shut the hell up instead of pouring gasoline on the wounds I'd caused.

"Me too. But not surprised. Want to stay for pizza?" He asked it dismissively as if he assumed I'd refuse.

I didn't want him to be right, especially when Berry had immediately stood taller with excitement. But it was one thing for him to pay for stuff when we were, kind of, seeing each other. Now I felt as if we were absolutely not seeing each other, which put his generosity in a stickier category.

"If I can pay for our share—"

"Jesus, Shelby." He shoved my briefcase at me and rose to muss Berry's hair. "Another time, kiddo."

Her lip jutted out as the excitement in her hazel eyes dimmed. "You won't forget?"

"I can promise you I will forget nothing that happened today." His intense green gaze landed on my face for a

painfully long moment before he whistled to Bob and headed inside. “Oh, and I saw the papers for me to sign. I have my own copy, but good to see where your priorities lie.”

The barb hit me directly in the chest so I clamped down on my tongue as the back door slapped shut.

“I wanted to stay for pizza, Mom. We were having fun.”

“Yeah, I know, baby. I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

I was having fun with him too. Probably too much fun.

We started to walk back around the house to the driveway until I suddenly recalled he’d driven us here. Lovely. My purse was upstairs on the terrace.

No phone. No way to make a seamless escape.

Ugh. Kill me now.

I glanced down at my annoyed daughter.

“I have to go in to get my bag so I can call an Uber.”

“Why?” She placed her hands on her hips. “Dex has a car. He will drive us. Or at least me.”

The accuracy of her statements burrowed a new hole in my already hollowed-out chest. I bit my lip, trying to decide how to handle this mess, when the front door opened.

Dex jogged out, holding my purse. “Forget this?”

I nodded gratefully as I took it from him. “Yeah. Thank you.”

“Need a ride?” His lips quirked but the gesture held no warmth. “I can drop you on my way.”

“On your way where? I thought you were getting pizza.”

“Change of plans. Meeting a friend.”

I tried to keep my face neutral, but it was nearly impossible. Had my snap judgment driven him into someone else’s arms?

Hello, that itself is yet another snap judgment. He probably has plenty of friends he doesn’t sleep with.

Besides, after this morning, could he really need more action so soon?

I waited for him to explain his friend was Clint or another old college buddy or someone I didn't have to concoct stupid stories about. But he said nothing, finally raising his eyebrows and indicating his car. "You ladies ready to go?"

"No," Berry said with a pout as she looked back at the house. "Bob will be sad all alone."

"I won't be gone that long. He'll be fine. He stays alone while I'm at work most of the time, too, though I usually swing by home on my lunch. I didn't feel comfortable last night because I didn't know how late I'd be." He cleared his throat and nudged us ahead of him toward the car.

Berry giggled as he opened the passenger door and bowed at the waist like some fancy manservant while she climbed into the back. They were so cute together. Berry really liked him.

She wasn't the only one.

It was harder than I expected to just keep walking and smile as he gestured for me to follow her into the car. To not throw caution to the wind and then grab his face and kiss the hell out of him before I made him listen to my apology.

It didn't make sense. He was a virtual stranger. But I knew I'd hurt him and that sat in my belly like lead.

I didn't want to become a woman who believed no one. Trusted no one.

Ruined good things in a supposed effort to protect myself.

She'd wanted pizza. My stomach growled. I did too.

If I'd just not made a fuss, he'd be staying home for pizza not possibly going out to meet some woman who probably had no issue coming and made sure he came first to ensure he'd return for more.

I was too much work on about fifty levels.

The ride to my cottage was punctuated with Berry's occasional out-of-nowhere questions. Like about the koi. What did they eat? Did they always live outside? Did they count as a pet?

Then where did he get Bob? Were there more of his family to adopt?

She didn't add *hint, hint* to me, but I grasped her point just the same.

"We're going to volunteer soon and maybe..." I sneaked a glance at his ridiculously handsome profile as I trailed off woefully. That was likely out the window too.

"Volunteer where?" Berry asked.

"At Kitten Around, a critical care cat rescue. They're having a speed-dating event for both dogs and cats in a couple weeks, and I figured that'd be the perfect photo op for you." He looked at me pointedly, looping one wrist over the wheel as he drove.

Everything the man did was sexy. Or did it just seem that way now that we'd had the sex?

God, I needed to stop referring to it that way, even in my thoughts.

"I don't just want a photo op. I want to snuggle some babies. Kittens," I clarified quickly.

"There will be kittens and cats and puppies and dogs. Maybe even some guinea pigs."

Berry's head popped between the seats as he turned onto our street. Dusk was imminent and the last rays of sunshine made her freckles super evident. "I wanna go. Can I go? Can I?"

"Where's your seat belt? Sit back, Alice. Now."

She gave a huff of disgust and snapped her belt back on as Dex swung into the driveway. "I can help too. I can clean cages or mop or sweep."

"You don't like to mop or sweep here."

“Mooom, I wanna see the kittens and puppies. Please. I’ll sweep and mop forever.”

“I think you’d be a big help.” Dex put the car in park. “But it depends what your mom thinks, Berrasaurus.”

Sure, right. As if he hadn’t neatly boxed me in. He had a way of doing that with charm and a smile, so I didn’t even always realize.

I sighed and looked back at my daughter, just so grateful he hadn’t shut the door on us volunteering that I didn’t even mind he’d given me no option about Berry. Not that she wouldn’t be a big help. She definitely would. She had a real way with animals.

But odds were good we’d be coming home with a kitten or puppy that day.

“Fine. You win. You both win. Happy?”

“Not even close,” Dex murmured, piercing me with one of those direct looks that shot between my thighs like an electric jolt.

I almost begged him not to meet his “friend.” Somehow I managed to retain my dignity, and Berry and I got out of the car.

But dignity wouldn’t keep me warm tonight, that was for sure.

FIFTEEN

Dexter

YOU WIN.

Sure. As if I ever won for long with Shelby Wilde.

If I did, then the fall was twice as hard.

“Cal, give me a Harp.” I leaned on the bar polished to a high sheen and studied my reflection between the many multicolored bottles lined up in front of the mirror behind the bar.

I looked like shit. Probably because I hadn’t slept much last night and then today I’d been kicked in the metaphorical nuts.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in. Heard you’d given up drinking.”

“I gave up drinking to excess, son. Not drinking period. One Harp is my new limit. And who was gossiping about me in any case?”

“Sorry, as a loyal publican, my lips are sealed.” Callahan Brinkley mimed zipping his lips and tossing away the key as he strolled toward me, his shock of dark hair dipping into his so-called “dreamy” eyes.

Isis was the one who’d proclaimed them dreamy the one and only time she’d visited Lonegan’s Bar. Cal ran a tight ship here. He saw this place as his lucky break, having won the bar in a high-stakes poker game some years ago.

Unsurprisingly, he hadn’t much liked being poor—and working behind the bar mostly for tips for years before it had

become his—and was determined never to return to that state. Not only that, he'd added on another bar in nearby Crescent Cove, although in that zip code it was referred to as a tavern. I supposed they thought that classed it up some.

Whatever it was called, Cal knew what he was doing, and he was a good friend besides. He listened and didn't gossip. Usually.

"Where's your usual crowd?" he asked after shoving my bottle across the bar at me.

As if on cue, Bishop and Preston appeared in the doorway, laughing together as they always were. The familiar longing settled in my gut but I shoved it down as I tipped back my beer.

I had enough to dwell on tonight. I wasn't adding the fact that I would never come first with my brother as he'd always been with me.

"Hey there, Dex." Bishop clapped me on the shoulder before he dropped onto the stool at my side. Preston took the stool on his other side rather than the one next to me.

Yep. Business as usual.

"Hiya, Bishop. Wife still carrying that baby?"

"She sure is, but they think it'll be this week. She's trying to hang on for natural childbirth with a midwife and all that."

I couldn't keep my horror off my face. "Not in a hospital? Without an actual doctor and lots of drugs?"

He nodded. "Exactly. She's a damn warrior, man."

I couldn't process this series of events. "Why no drugs? Why no capable medical team?"

"Some women prefer a more soothing setting for their baby's arrival into the world. Not sterile like a hospital," Preston chimed in, ordering an unsweetened iced tea with both a lemon and a lime wedge.

The guy was a damn party animal.

“Oh, do they now? When did you become an expert on woman’s childbirth preferences?”

“Didn’t say I was. Just Ryan and I discussed it.”

“Childbirth? What, did you run out of other topics of discussion already? Can’t imagine ever settling on that one.”

“You can’t even imagine settling down with one woman, so of course you can’t imagine willfully choosing to discuss marriage and children.”

The barb stuck in my ribs, as intended.

Playboy Dex who never had a serious thought or ever considered anything beyond having fun or next weekend’s party. I couldn’t possibly understand meeting someone who made me want more.

But I wanted more with Shelby. Why? Because I wanted to prove myself worthy of her? Or did I truly see more behind her eyes and in her laughter? In how fully she lived in the moment when she danced?

I also couldn’t help how I fucking lit up inside when she touched me or when happiness made her skin glow. It was a damn chemical reaction I had no control over.

And there was Berry. How could I already love that kid and be halfway—or more—in love with her mother?

“I can imagine more than you’d ever give me credit for.”

Bishop ordered a Harp like me than cocked his head. “You trying to tell us something?”

“Yes. No.” I exhaled heavily. “I have questionable taste. I mean, not because she’s not awesome. She is. But she’s probably out of my league.”

“She who?” Preston asked, leaning forward to peer around Bishop.

“No one. Nobody.” I tipped back my beer, draining it far too quickly. I wanted more, but I ordered an ice water. Good enough. I wasn’t getting drunk tonight.

Bishop bumped my arm. “Tease.”

“Me?” I jerked a thumb down the bar toward my brother. “That one’s acting like it’s totally usual conversation with your girlfriend to discuss childbirth every day of the week.”

“Her best friend is giving birth, asshat. It’s not that shocking the thought would enter her head.” He sucked down water in big gulps. “We’ve been dating almost a year. Living together for most of that. It makes sense the serious subjects would come up for a committed couple.”

Bishop winced. “Ouch. Burn.”

“Especially for you two. You both were ready to settle down within five minutes of meeting.”

My snark didn’t carry the same weight it used to, considering I was experiencing something similar. Not that I wanted to settle down yet, even if Shelby was interested.

Just the possibility seemed more likely than in the old days.

Now the idea of coming home at night with someone there didn’t seem uncomfortable, like a shirt with a starched collar. I didn’t know what was going on with me and how I could be thinking about that sort of thing in such a short time. I’d met Shelby last fall, but I’d only thought of her half a dozen or so times since then. I’d had no reasonable reason to contact her, so I hadn’t. But when I’d had that ill-fated work gathering and decided I needed to redo my home—and my life—she’d been the first person on my mind.

True, I didn’t know any other designers, and Preston and Bishop had been more than pleased with her work. It made sense for me to hire her to renovate my house.

What didn’t make sense? To fall for her so damn fast. Her and her daughter. Not only did I really like both of them, but I was also protective of them, and not just because Shelby’s ex was a royal asshole.

Though it did play a sizable part.

“I blame the two of you.” I snapped my empty Harp on the bar and Cal appeared at once, assuming I would want another. My water didn’t even seem to register with him.

I waved him off but placed a hefty tip under the bottle. It wasn't my buddy's fault that everyone I knew wanted to settle down prematurely and they were all messing with my head.

Except Cal, although that could change at any moment the way things were going.

Bishop exchanged a look with Preston. "For what? Being stupidly happy?"

"Yes." I sipped my ice water and rued trying to live a responsible life. That was their fault too. Guilt by association and all that.

Back when they'd both been single and freewheeling—well, at least Bishop had been, Preston never really had partied much—I'd never encountered these uncomfortable feelings.

I'd been blissfully happy in my ignorance about all things romantic. I'd never thought there was anything to it. Ball and chain and all that. Not cuddling in bed and dancing and in-jokes and running around the yard with Bob and Berry. Never mind family-like mealtimes.

All crap I'd never cared about before.

"Okay, what aren't you telling us?"

"Me? Nothing."

"Sure, right. Then what's up with all the cryptic comments?"

I traced a fingertip through the condensation under my bottle. "What, you're not enjoying life tips with Dex?"

My brother leaned behind Bishop and thumped me on the back. "There were life tips and I missed them? Dammit."

I forced myself to grin when I felt like doing anything but. "Haven't exactly gotten there yet. And maybe I want your life tips, not the other way around."

"Tips for what?"

"Like how did you, you know, nail down April?" At Bishop's smug smirk, I rolled my eyes and drank more water. A piss-poor substitute for beer, but I'd take what I could get

right now. “I’m not referring to sex, dude. That’s one area I usually have no concerns. In fact,” I heaved out a sigh, “it’s actually the cause of my current predicament. Though I didn’t even have the sex I’ve been accused of.”

“We gave you a glowing review to her,” my brother said. “Wrong move?”

“*We* did?” I repeated. “I thought it was Bishop.”

“*We* both said you were honest and pay on time, which you do. We didn’t mention your sex life. At least I didn’t,” Bishop chimed in. “Besides, as long as you’re single, you’re free to sleep with who you want.”

“Yeah, but I’d rather he not sleep with Shelby. She’s had enough to deal with—” Preston must’ve seen my expression because he fell silent. “Too late there, huh?”

“Look, it’s not like you think,” I muttered, staring into what was left of my water as if it held the answers like magical tea leaves.

Answers to what, I didn’t even know. Just somehow, I’d gone way off course.

You think anyone is surprised? They expected exactly that from you. As did Shelby herself.

“What did you do this time?” Preston muttered, ordering another round of drinks though I’d begged off on anything but water. “Drink or not drink, your choice,” he said as Cal uncapped my second Harp and nudged it my way.

I shoved the beer at Bishop. He ignored it for the time being.

“It would be easier to talk about this shit if you two hadn’t found pots of gold romantically. Kind of intimidating.” I shook my head. “Bishop, you met April and she was it for you in how long?”

“About an hour.”

“Yeah, intimidating as hell.” I used my bottle to point at my brother. “You’re even worse. Ryan hadn’t even arrived for her first day at work yet, and you were already salivating.”

“You, intimidated by me?” Preston scoffed, raising his voice over the growing noise in the bar. It was Sunday, so Cal would be closing soon, but still, the crowd had grown since I’d arrived forty-five minutes ago. “Since when? Up until Ryan, you used to say I hadn’t gotten laid since college.”

Oh, if he only knew how jealous I’d been of him his entire life.

“Not true anymore, so quit whining.”

His grin was entirely too knowing. “No indeed.”

I held up a hand. “Don’t start with your witchy sex business. Not in the mood.”

“Because you don’t know the magic of such.” He shrugged. “Your call. I don’t need to brag.”

Bishop smiled around his bottle as he tipped it back. “Yes, you do.”

Preston smiled back. “Yeah. I kind of do. I earned it, man. I had a hell of a dry spell before Ms. Moon. And Bishop did too before April. You gotta wait for the good sometimes.” He frowned at me. “You never had to wait. Ever. Your bedroom should’ve had a damn turnstile.”

“Thanks for the exaggeration. Not true. I was not nearly as indiscriminate as you think. And before Shelby,” I drank some of my water to cover my groan at accidentally admitting it aloud, “well, let’s just say it had been a damn long time.”

“Why her?” Bishop asked quietly. “I know you had a thing for her from the start, but why? She’s pretty, sure.”

“She’s a fucking knockout, but that’s not why. It’s not even the half.”

“Then?”

“She’s so damn strong for her and her child. Like she’d shut down everything she ever wanted or needed to take care of her kid and that just blows my mind. And Berry is a fucking miracle. She’s so smart and tough and takes zero crap, but she’s so interested in everything. She loves Bob and Bob adores her. Every time she comes over, we just run around like

lunatics the entire time while Shelby works and—” I stopped talking, realizing both my brother and Bishop were staring at me as if I’d sprouted another head. “What?”

“Do you hear yourself?” Preston shook his head as if he was dazed. “You sound like...”

“Us,” Bishop finished.

“What? No. I definitely don’t sound like you two lovesick fools. How could I? I barely know her. Them. It takes a certain amount of time to—” I broke off and shoved away my glass to drop my head in my hands. “I’m fucking screwed.”

Bishop laughed and squeezed my shoulder. “I fell for April overnight. Sure, the kid makes it thornier, but it’s definitely possible. And your brother here fell over email.”

“Actually, hearing her voice on her podcast sealed the deal but it definitely started over email. She hated me. It was so fucking sexy.”

“You Shaws have some kind of deviant sadistic streak that becomes obsessed if a woman doesn’t seem to like you.”

I nodded miserably. “Yeah. That was the start for me. And the pink—”

Bishop held up a hand. “We don’t need those details, son.”

“Pantsuit,” I finished, laughing despite myself.

If these two clowns could find lasting love in such unbelievable ways, so could I. Even if I still wanted to throw up at the very idea.

“She isn’t ready to love me,” I said under my breath, picturing the look on her face when I’d said I was meeting a friend. Deliberately, hoping she got the wrong idea because I wanted to punish her for thinking I’d lied about Kate. I didn’t fucking lie. If I said I hadn’t touched her, that was because I hadn’t. I wasn’t a prick like Davenport.

But the idea of her thinking I had twisted a sharp blade right through my gut. I hated that wounded expression I’d seen in her beautiful eyes—the direct opposite of the free, joyful expression she’d worn the night before as we’d danced. That it

was an expression I'd inadvertently put there by being a reformed manho just made it that much worse.

I was trying. Mostly, I was doing pretty good.

Okay, maybe I hadn't fully come clean to Shelby about my semi-recent discovery her ex was friends with my asshole father. But I didn't know how close they were. I'd never seen them together in the flesh. Hell, even my brief interaction with the man when he'd taunted me with the term nepo baby was in the distant past. I'd practically forgotten it.

I had no desire to remember anything about Davenport, period.

What consumed me was Shelby. Her happiness was like oxygen to me already. Absolutely vital.

I had to fix this messed-up situation somehow. She had to believe me.

I slammed my bottle down. "I have to figure out how to be the man she can be with. Maybe even," I gulped, "love."

If Preston's brows had climbed any higher, he would've strained something. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. I've never even seen you ask a woman for a second date, never mind whatever this is." He flapped his hand at me. "Here Dad thought you were just drowning at work. Little did he know his baby boy's in loooove."

Halfway off the stool, I stared at him. "He's been talking to you about me again? Why the fuck can't he speak to me himself if he thinks I can't handle the business?"

"He doesn't think you'll admit it. He's sure you'll just go down with the ship à là the violinists on the Titanic."

"I talked to Eli as you asked me to. You know, to tell him you don't need help," Bishop offered. "But he's not backing down about helping with your overflow. Give him a call. He'll work something out with you."

"Yeah, okay." Much as I wished I could figure this out all on my own, I could put a stop to the imminent slide by

reaching out to Bishop's former associate.

I just needed a damn life raft.

I might even talk to that therapist I'd talked to via Zoom some months ago after I'd gotten my ADHD diagnosis. As soon as he'd mentioned meds, I'd been out of there.

Could be it was time to discuss them again. Just to see. I didn't have to stay on them if they didn't work for me. And I could try different ones if necessary. Nothing was a must-do. I could just *try*.

My jittering knee bumped the rail around the bar, and I blew out a breath as pain sang through my leg. Yeah, I'd talk to that therapist again. And I'd talk to Eli.

As for talking to my father, I'd probably have to do that soon too. Just not quite yet.

I wanted to get a handle on things myself before I had to lift the white flag. And maybe if Eli came onboard, I wouldn't even need to.

Redecorating my place was a start toward living my life for *me*, but it wasn't actually tackling the main thrust of the problem.

But now that problem overshadowed all the rest, because if I'd screwed things up with Shelby, did the rest even matter?

"I need to sign those damn papers," I mumbled.

"What papers?" Bishop asked, shifting toward me on his stool.

"The contract to redo my house. I was holding off because I didn't want her to decide she couldn't go out with me if I was officially a client. Now I think she's assuming I'm gonna bail on her. I wouldn't. I couldn't." I shoved a hand through my hair and shut my eyes. "I'm making such a mess of things."

"If she didn't make you sign those papers the very first thing, she's operating out of character. She wouldn't even show us her color samples until we'd signed in triplicate and practically promised our firstborns as collateral."

“Really? We spent a day together with no discussion of money or anything. She only left then because she had to go pick up her daughter.” My shoulders slumped. “She had a bad dream last night while we were together, and I didn’t get to finish asking her about it. Just everything went off-kilter, and the worst of it is, I miss her. Them. Already. How can that be possible?”

“Oh, it’s very possible. I could barely hang around by myself the morning after April and I spent our first night together. Her absence was like missing an arm.” Bishop tossed back the last of his beer. “Pres, we gotta help him.”

My brother sighed monumentally as if Bishop had just asked him for the favor of his life. “I know.”

“I got this far on my own. Though I don’t know what’s next. If I play it cool, even though the idea of not driving to their house right from here seems all wrong. I don’t want this...*bullshit* between us. I didn’t sleep with some twenty-year-old. Shelby and her daughter need someone they can trust.” I rolled my cool beer bottle over my flaming-hot forehead. I hadn’t imbibed any, but the coolness was coming in handy. Maybe I was getting sick. No wonder I felt feverish. “Not some guy who is after any available chick.”

“To be fair, you used to be that guy,” Pres commented. “Though you left them all smiling, so where was the bad?”

“I wasn’t smiling. I was—am—lonely as hell. I don’t even have a doormat.”

They shared puzzled glances while my phone went off in my pocket. Isis. I clicked on the call.

“I need your wisdom,” I told her more than a little desperately.

“I’m with the mothers. Yours is wondering why her baby boy hasn’t been to see her lately, or even called. Says every time she texts you, you’re busy. This weekend, she tried three times, and every call went to voicemail.”

“Yeah.” There was no helping my depressed tone. “I did the one thing I was warned against.”

“*One* thing? I’ve warned you about fifty things in the last month. Did you have another stupid work shindig and let fools wreck your place while you were face down in the punch bowl?”

“No, I did not do that.” Small favors.

“Then?”

I took a bolstering breath and said in an undertone, “I kind of slept with Shelby.”

She sighed. “I am terribly shocked.”

“I know, okay? In my defense, she asked me out, not the other way around. I tried to keep the date platonic.”

She snorted out a laugh as I plugged my opposite ear so I could hear her over the melee in the bar. “You’ve never kept anything platonic. And women definitely do not want to keep it platonic with you, either. Dexterous, you’re sweet and adventurous in a non-annoying way and rich and you look like a walking orgasm. No woman wants a platonic night with you, sorry to say. If they ask you out, they want what you have to give.”

“You didn’t,” I reminded her.

“I never asked you out. I knew what I’d get, and I value your friendship too much to play fast and loose with it.”

“You do?”

There was a shuffling noise and my mom’s voice came on the line. “She does. And she damn well should. Now who is this woman who only wants you for sex?”

I braced my chin in my hand. “Why are you listening to our conversation?”

“How else am I going to know anything? God knows you won’t tell me.”

“You expect me to tell my mother who I’m having sex with at my age?”

Pres leaned around Bishop, his brows lifting higher by the second. “Who are you talking to?”

“Our mother,” I mouthed.

He held out a hand for my phone. Grateful for the reprieve, I handed it to him.

“Hi, Mom. No, he’s fine. Just falling for someone for the first time, and he didn’t even want to drink so you know it’s serious.”

I dropped my head in my hands and considered changing my fledgling no-alcohol stance with the quickness.

“He’s not sick. No, I’m sure. Hang on.” Preston pressed my phone to his shoulder. “Are you feverish?” he questioned.

I groaned. Loudly. “No.”

“He’s not sick, Mom. Oh, come on, it isn’t a crisis. It was bound to happen someday. He spent so much time on the open market, odds were eventually he’d find her. Or him. Whatever. Not judging. No, it’s not a him. She’s actually a single mom. Yeah. I know, right? Into the deep end with the first stroke.”

They continued discussing me as if I wasn’t sitting right there while Bishop patted my back sympathetically until his own phone went off and he forgot all about me.

I switched to patting *his* back as he barked questions at his caller and sucked down air. Preston turned his back on his best friend to continue talking about how I was so clueless with our mother. Nothing he hadn’t done a thousand times before, though he usually talked to my dad instead. But we were both avoiding him for the most part now.

Being a cheating horndog on your wonderful wife tended to cause such reactions from your adult sons, especially when they were both divorce lawyers.

Well, Preston used to be a divorce lawyer. Now he handled adoptions and custody agreements and things of that nature.

But once a zebra, always a zebra. Your stripes remained.

I was about to ask for my phone back from Preston when Bishop leaped off his stool. “*Now?* Like right now? Oh my God. I’m on the way. Actually, no, I’m not.” He hit my brother

hard in the back of the neck. “Get off the damn phone, my wife’s in labor and you’re driving!”

Preston jumped about two feet in the air. My phone went flying behind the bar and Cal was nowhere in sight to retrieve it. I whistled to the closest bartender, a new guy who paid me little mind as he chatted with a pair of blonds and held up a hand to indicate for me to wait. Bishop hauled Pres off his stool and my brother instructed Bishop to take deep breaths, since his face was now bright red, and he seemed to need oxygen.

Then his words sank in. “April’s in labor? *Now?* She can’t be.”

“She is,” Bishop gasped, sitting on his stool again for approximately one moment before bending to put his head between his knees. At least that was what I assumed he was doing.

“Yeah, brother, what are you drinking?” the new bartender asked, loudly snapping his gum as he came to a stop before us.

“I’ll take a scotch on the rocks,” Bishop managed.

“Can you give it to us to go?” I interjected a little maniacally. “We have a baby to get born.”

The bartender’s brown eyes wheeled. “We can’t do to-go cups for alcohol, man.”

“Fine, how’s a Coke?”

Cal appeared at his side, dark hair askew, bright flags of color in his cheeks and even one of his suspenders out of place. Normally, he was impeccably dressed and unflappable, not out of breath and with sweaty temples. He looked like he’d been...well, let’s just say not slinging drinks. Slinging something else entirely.

“I’ll take a Coke,” Bishop croaked.

Cal took over, producing a plastic cup nearly overflowing with soda and shoving it toward Bishop, sloshing some over the rim. “Man, drink up. On the house. Is she okay? Is the baby crowning yet?”

“Breathe,” Preston instructed as Bishop tried to speak, only to slump over the bar face first as if he was about to faint. “He gets panic attacks,” my brother explained to me behind Bishop’s back, indicating with his hand to keep everything calm.

As if *I* was the one freaking out.

I was just about the only one who wasn’t losing their shit.

I gripped a handful of Bishop’s hair and lifted his head from the bar. “Where is she? What hospital?” Even as I asked, I remembered the non-hospital birth nonsense. It seemed even more like nonsense now that I would likely be a party to it.

God help me.

“She’s at home.” Preston jangled his keys. “The midwife should be there. I’m sure she’s there.”

“She’s not there,” Bishop moaned miserably. “She went outlet shopping today with her mother and got caught in traffic on the way back.”

I grabbed the soda Bishop had yet to touch and tossed it back as if it was straight whiskey.

“Ginny will be there soon.” Bishop sounded as if he was clinging to the side of a boat by his fingernails and was about to leap into the drink. “She has to be. I can’t birth a baby.”

“The baby is yours,” I reminded him just in case he’d forgotten that small detail.

“I know. And it was even my idea. I just assumed there would be a doctor involved.” He buried his head in his hands. “I should’ve put my foot down about this midwife stuff.”

My brother rolled his eyes. “Sure. Okay. I heard you talking to her about it. Everything was, ‘it’s your choice, and whatever you want, love,’. No feet involved.”

“Ryan encouraged her! And Luna. Your woman is the one who’s into the all-natural stuff.”

“But she’s come to her senses. When we have a baby, she wants drugs.”

“Since when are you having a baby?” I asked.

“Not now. She’ll be wearing a ring first. It’s a process, but I’m wearing her down.”

“Sure.” He’d been trying to wear Ryan down since basically the first time they’d slept together. But that knowledge didn’t amuse me as much as it once had. “Hey Cal,” I called as he ambled back up toward our end of the bar, mopping up his forehead with a bar towel. “Do you see my phone back there by any chance? This one caused it to be thrown in back.” I grabbed the back of Bishop’s shirt and lifted him as evidence, although Pres had actually been the culprit. But Bishop’s act of violence had led to it.

Bishop moaned and dropped back down. “I need a ride.”

“He’s gonna need smelling salts soon,” my brother muttered.

Cal bent to root around on the floor behind the bar, his furrowed brow not making me feel confident about the current state of my cell. Then he finally lifted it above his head victoriously—and it was dripping. I didn’t even want to know where it had landed.

“This your phone?” He turned the clearly cracked screen toward me. “Or *was* your phone?” he added ominously.

SIXTEEN

Dexter

MY PHONE WAS TRASHED. MY DAY THUS FAR HAD BEEN THE same.

I'd figured if I hung out with Preston and Bishop tonight, they could advise me on how to proceed with Shelby.

How I could be less...like me and more like them, since they were both in successful long-term relationships and I was not. Had never been in one.

The mere idea that I might want to try to be in a relationship was enough to cause my near and dear to fear for my very well-being. Or maybe they were fearing for Shelby's. None of them had gotten specific.

Probably a good thing.

"Take slow, even breaths," my brother advised Bishop from the driver's seat as he, in deference to the urgency of the situation, was speeding through Kensington Square approximately seven miles above the speed limit. Sometimes even eight.

I could tell from the way he was clutching the wheel he felt as if he was being completely reckless.

"I can't help her birth this baby. *Our* baby. I'm going to throw up."

"No, you are not," I said calmly from the backseat, my contribution to the situation. "Women have been giving birth without assistance since the dawn of time. For years, there

were no medical teams to help. They had to squat down in the woods and let nature take its course.”

“Seriously?” Preston met my gaze in the rearview mirror. “That’s your idea of help?”

I jerked a shoulder as Preston took a hard left without even signaling. Clearly, we now were facing dire straits. “It’s true. Women know so much more than us as a whole. Even first-time moms. I bet April will do just fine. She’s utterly capable in every possible way. Her grandmother is there, right?”

“Yes.” Bishop grabbed onto the “oh, shit” handle above the passenger door as Preston gassed it to approximately twelve miles over the speed limit. We were practically racing now. “Grams and Key and Michaela and Luna and—”

“And Ryan,” Preston added before Bishop could. “They’re setting up a circle of warmth for the baby.”

“Warmth? It’s been nearly eighty today.”

“Not that warmth. A witchy thing. So, the baby feels comfortable and loved as he or she makes his journey into the world.”

“Oh. Hmm.” This was all new to me. I was reasonably sure such a thing would be new to Shelby, too, and she’d actually given birth before. “Well, whatever works. How is she feeling? April, I mean.”

“She’s okay. She’s so strong. So fucking strong.” Bishop mopped his brow with his sleeve. “Hopefully, Ginny is getting close. They only went to Waterloo, so she wasn’t that far. Why she felt comfortable going.”

I leaned forward to rub his shoulder. “Everything is going to be fine. Trust me.”

He took a shaky inward breath and clapped my hand. “You’re right. With that crew, she’ll be just fine. Ginny will be there soon. Maybe she’s there already.” He stared hard at the side of Preston’s head. “Can’t this thing go any faster?”

Preston floored it. Well, his idea of flooring it, which meant we might have made it fifteen miles above the speed

limit.

“Hey, guys, while we have some spare time here,” I gestured around us, since we were still a good number of miles from Bishop and April’s new home, “what would you say I should do if I want to win over a woman?”

“Really? Is now the time for this?” Preston snapped.

“It’s a good distraction, right? I mean, she was won over enough to sleep with me, but she thought the worst of me with the pet-sitter and I don’t think I reacted appropriately to her questions. I was pissed,” I added, rather than keeping them in suspense. “So, I let her think I could be meeting a woman tonight instead of you two. What should I do? I thought maybe not talking to her until she realized her error would work,” I gripped the headrest of Bishop’s seat when Preston slammed on his brakes at the next light, “but, well, I can’t wait that long. She’s stubborn as hell. For all I know, she might freeze me out until Halloween.”

We had our volunteering session coming up, but still. I didn’t want to depend on external events to ensure she was going to speak to me. We also had the renovation ahead, but I wanted to keep our relationship personal, too, not just professional.

I wanted Berry to keep coming over to play with Bob. I really wanted Shelby to spend the night at my place while Berry stayed down the hall.

Like a real couple, for fuck’s sake. Was that just a pipe dream?

“Just tell her you spent the night with us and Bishop’s having a baby and you wanted to help him.”

“Have his baby?”

“Just play up how moved you are by the whole process. She has a daughter, right? The more moved you are, the better.”

“You’re telling him to lie to a woman to get her not to be mad at him?” Bishop reached up to run his fingertip along his collar. “Bad move. *Bad.*”

“Not lie. Okay, it’s Dex, it’s probably a lie. Look, dude, do you want a real relationship with marriage and children, or just indiscriminate sex?” Preston’s voice was ear-piercingly sharp.

“I just want sex with her. Not indiscriminate. I mean, I’d be good with high frequency, yeah, but only with her. And I want to be real with her, not put on some fake front to woo her. I think I’m basically a good, albeit clueless dude about the ways of relationships.”

“You think?” Preston flicked his signal on and zoomed up a hill. “At least you’re not in total denial. That’s positive.”

“Thanks. I think.”

A short while later, we took one of the winding roads between Turnbull and Crescent Cove, flying along with the wind in our hair and the acrid taste of fear singeing my throat. I wasn’t verging on terrified like Bishop, just...concerned.

I didn’t know what I’d see, and I didn’t like not having a working phone to call for help. Not that my brother and Bishop weren’t prepared if they needed to do exactly that.

I was sure the excited crowd was equally prepared in April’s bedroom. They’d just finished their home within the last month, stationed directly between the Cove and Turnbull. Turnbull was where Shelby’s parents lived and the location of the orchard where Shelby and I had our unexpected night of passion.

Okay, more like morning of passion. Whatever. There was passion of the naked variety. Had that only been today?

Was this the longest day of my life or did it just seem that way? I had a feeling it was just beginning.

Preston’s phone went off and he talked to our mom through his in-dash screen. “Yeah, he broke his phone.”

“*You* broke my phone,” I reminded him tersely.

He ignored me and kept talking. “He’s fine, really. He’s just seeing someone new and freaked out about it. You remember how I was the early days with Ryan.”

She laughed and mumbled something about tarot cards.

“No, I don’t need a tarot reading,” I answered aloud. “Neither does Shelby. We’ll figure it out on our own, Mom, thanks. Can we talk later? We’re about to birth a baby.”

My mom’s screech nearly popped my eardrum.

“Not us, literally,” I added as Bishop groaned and tightly clamped his eyes shut.

“I already did a reading for you with Isis and Naima a little while ago. The Queen of Wands came up. The most beautiful queen in my deck,” she added pointedly.

“Shelby is beautiful. Maybe the queen signifies her.” I started to ask questions then thought better of it. Once my mom started down that road, she wasn’t easy to divert. “Look, whatever that means, hope it’s a good sign. I’ll come over soon, I swear, and you can do a reading for me in person. Ice and her mom can join in then too if they want. Have a good night, Mom.”

I motioned for Preston to click off on the call, which he did very slowly. He met my gaze in the rearview. “You really are cool with coming to the baby birthing?”

“We’re almost there, aren’t we?”

“Yeah, but you didn’t balk at all. You’ve really changed, Dex.”

His clearly confused praise rang in my ears until we arrived. We trooped inside April and Bishop’s home silently, the music coming from the bedroom seeming to fill the house. It reminded me of spiritual Tibetan tones. A lot of copper wind chimes and maybe even some bowls and shit.

I did not feel Zen at this moment. I hoped it was working well for April, however.

April’s women surrounded not the bed, but the large soaking tub in the en suite bathroom. It was filled with warm, fragrant water covered in rose petals. Pink ones.

April was moaning in what seemed to be a foreign language.

Bishop rushed to her side and knelt down, speaking softly to her. I half expected him to start foreign language moaning, too, but April just embraced him and they whispered lovey-dovey things to each other.

So, I had to interrupt with one of my questions.

“Do babies inherently know how to swim?”

Everyone turned to look at me, and I smiled to try to break the tension. Also so April wasn't tempted to bash my head in with one of the gallon-sized shampoo bottles around the tub.

“I'm just kidding.”

“No, you weren't,” my brother muttered, thereby killing the last of the fading glow from his car compliment.

“Okay, fine, I'll admit this process seems counterintuitive to me. The whole water thing with a live child.”

My brother did something on his phone then pressed it into my hand, already playing a video that made me want to immediately turn it off. “Educate yourself,” he snapped.

Ryan turned to him from where she was sitting behind April on the edge of the tub. “PMS, there is no room for that kind of hostility in this room. Please re-energize.”

He leaned down to her and within a moment, they were laughing softly, which apparently was part of re-energizing.

And I was never going on YouTube again.

April let out a loud moan and grasped Bishop's arm. “It hurts! I'm trying to count down and it fucking really hurts!”

On the other side of the tub, her other witchy bestie, Luna, stroked her hair and held up a large pink crystal. She'd recently given birth herself so I imagined she was somewhat of an expert on the process. “Focus on feeling the light fill you with warmth—”

“Oh, fuck the hell off,” April gasped and let out a blood-curdling scream while possibly breaking Bishop's forearm.

After that, things moved very quickly.

Ginny the midwife rushed in with someone else of the medical variety, a young man who flashed me a grim smile as we made room in the very crowded bathroom. Bishop's little sister Michaela rushed in with a cup of ice chips for the mother-to-be, who was too busy screaming to care.

April's grandmother pulled up a stool next to the tub and instructed for Bishop to move out of the way, she was taking over.

Bishop seemed quite fine with that option. Couldn't say I blamed the man.

Ginny was coaching April through her breathing and pushing, and I did my best to make myself turn into a decorative shelving unit in the corner so I wouldn't be called into some sort of service.

Just in case I *could* help, I grabbed a spare towel and tried to resist hiding my face as April obviously reached some sort of pinnacle, crying, screaming, and sweating buckets. But then the most marvelous cry tore through the air. A moment later, Ginny lifted the squirming, squishy, red-faced child while she squalled murderously.

And Bishop embraced April, the two of them laughing and crying and sharing words of love as April cradled her baby against her bare chest. Ryan and my brother did the same—minus baby-cradling—although their love sonnets consisted of a lot more insults.

Me, I stood in the corner, just outside the fray while everyone celebrated.

Common theme lately.

But when the time came, I stepped up to the tub and knelt to get a closer look of the now sweetly sleeping little one, swaddled in a blanket. "She's beautiful," I murmured, trying to swallow over the lump in my throat. "Congratulations, guys. She's amazing."

And she was. She had a tiny perfect nose and the cutest bow lips and the softest-looking eyelashes. Little Adeline seemed too small to touch. Utterly breakable.

“Thanks. She’s so fucking strong. My warrior.” Bishop brushed a kiss over April’s forehead.

“I still might be one and done,” April reminded him in a weary voice.

“Your choice.”

And who could blame her?

I grinned. “You’re definitely a rockstar, April.”

“Are you put off children forever now?” she asked me with a tired smile.

“No.” I had to clear my throat. “Not at all.”

Exactly the opposite, honestly. What the hell was happening to me?

SEVENTEEN



IT HAD OFFICIALLY BEEN FOUR DAYS SINCE I'D ACCUSED DEX of sleeping with the pet-sitter. And he wasn't taking my calls.

Well, more accurately, he wasn't *able* to take my calls because his voicemail was full.

I'd sent over another copy of the paperwork yesterday after no word from him, with a hot-pink sticky note to please sign and return by the end of the business day.

He had not signed and returned by the end of the business day.

It was now the beginning of business on Thursday, and I still couldn't leave a message or speak to the stupid jerk I missed very much.

My body missed him even more. Which was neither here nor there. And I had freaking PMS to boot.

Plus, Berry had slept horribly the night before, waking up with bad dreams not once but twice. I'd read her some of the book I'd gotten her about nightmares that she was quite capable of reading to herself, but it had steadied both of us to sit together reading on her bed in the glow of her elephant nightlight.

Worst of all, the second time, she'd asked me if I was still fighting with Dex. I'd had to say yes because I didn't want to build her hopes too high, since I had zero confidence I could fix the mess I'd made.

At this point, I didn't even care if he'd slept with the pet-sitter. We hadn't even been talking then. As long as she was above eighteen, it was none of my business. And if he'd been telling the truth, and I was just an overly suspicious harpy, I needed to apologize.

Not that it mattered. His box was probably full from women begging to get another ride on his carousel horse. Of course, he was going to entertain their many and varied offers because what could I possibly have to give after I'd been such a grade-A witch?

Clearly, I wasn't cut out for not blurring the lines, and he didn't seem to be speaking to me at the current time. So, probably the smartest move would be to snip off this loose end entirely. It was better for both of us.

Even if it absolutely did *not* feel like the best move. Honestly? It felt like cutting off a toe would hurt less.

What could a man like Dexter Shaw want with a single mom and her young child?

Must be because I was a challenge, I decided, as I flipped through a book of paint samples to the soothing Gregorian chants playing through my phone.

Not that I'd been any sort of challenge when I'd thrown myself at him Saturday night.

What I needed right now was to focus on work. And *only* work.

I'd been advised by Dahlia, our lead designer, that one Ms. Renee Ballswig was unhappy with the entire design we'd come up with for her master suite and would need a complete redo, down to paint colors, furniture, area rugs, and even throw pillows. She even hated the matching cat bed I'd sourced for her from a specialty shop in Switzerland. The shade of green felt "icky" to her, not relaxing.

Try again, chumps.

She hadn't added the chumps part but it was heavily implied. Since Renee's job was the most profitable one we had on the books pre-Dex, we really wanted to make her happy. As

she'd told us about one hundred times so far, she had many high-profile friends who just loved to design and re-design their highfalutin homes and businesses.

The door to my office flew open, the knob hitting the wall from the force Dahlia had used. "That woman is on my last nerve. Actually, she's already worked my last nerve and I'm left with shreds. Why are rich people so exhausting?"

I winced in sympathy as I rose to come around the desk. "That bad, huh? Is it something in the air?"

"It must be because the she-devils are out in force." Dahlia dropped into one of my visitors' chairs, her normally perfectly coiffed sleek dark hair looking as if she'd been caught in a wind tunnel. One of her fake eyelashes was sticking to her cheek and she flung it off with disgust.

I forced myself to stand my ground as a supportive friend and colleague and not go looking for the caterpillar-esque eyelashes now somewhere on my freshly vacuumed gray rug. I always stress-vacuumed and my rug had been spotless before the eyelashes arrived.

She dragged her giant book of images and swatches and ideas out of her bulging soft-sided briefcase and flopped it open on my desk, knocking off my aspirational gold nameplate and pen and Berry's framed third grade school picture. "Whoops." She tried to grab the picture and somehow hit my letter tray, sending paperwork scattering. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I should've just stayed in bed today."

I had to laugh. "I'm having the same kind of day. Make that week. It's all been crap." I hustled across the room and bent in my tight skirt to pick up the scattered papers, shuffling them into the trays without paying attention to the labels. I'd worry about that later.

At least she hadn't thrown over my travel mug of raspberry coffee, heavy on the double chocolate creamer.

Dahlia crouched in her much more agility-friendly trousers and inched forward to grab my pen from where it had rolled under my desk. "Yeah? What's up with your mega deal?"

I made a face and stuffed more papers into the tray, creasing some in the process. “Not talking about that.”

“Why? Did he pull out?”

Something about that phrasing struck me as ridiculously funny considering the circumstances. I laughed and laughed and kept right on laughing as my ankle twisted and I ended up on my ass on the floor, still cackling.

Dahlia angled her head and tossed my pen on the desk, following suit with my now scuffed nameplate. “Okay, let me in on the joke. I’d like to laugh too.”

“He definitely did not pull out.”

“Why do I think we aren’t talking about renovations anymore?”

“Because we aren’t?” My laughter was now subsiding into silence.

The bad kind that would quickly end in frustrated tears if I didn’t get busy putting my office back to rights.

She pivoted on her pumps to smack my thigh. “No way. Nooooo way. Why, you hussy!”

That made the laughter sputter weakly back to life. “Hardly. I suck at impromptu sex and meeting men. Like I’m the worst ever. Maybe I should try Tinder like you did.”

A few things occurred at once. Dahlia also fell over on her ass after backing into one of the visitors’ chairs and losing her balance. The door she’d left open banged against the wall for a second time, disturbing some of the wall art and knocking off my diploma from Frasier Art Institute.

Dex appeared in the doorway in a pristine suit including an actual dress shirt—no graphic T-shirt in sight—his bright yellow tie flopped over one shoulder and absolute murder on his face.

That face that usually only smiled now reflected a man who looked ready to do serious harm. I couldn’t deny the shudder that worked through me, although it was most definitely not from fear.

The man was damn hot. I'd slept with him. I would've said *go me* if not for the fact misery had once again taken residence in my brain.

I glanced at Dahlia in her shell-shocked position and poked her in the arm. "Close your mouth."

She closed it and swallowed hard. "Welcome to Designing Women, sir. How may we help you?" From her tone, she wouldn't have hesitated to offer him quite personal service.

Couldn't say I blamed her. I considered my fortress against men to be basically impenetrable at this point, and he'd repeatedly breached it—and I was fighting depression at the thought he might never breach it again.

Clearly, I was hopeless.

He pointed at me. "She's mine. I mean, I'm already working with her. I'm Dexter Shaw," he explained, stepping into the office and immediately stooping to pick up my diploma. "Frasier Art School," he murmured as if he was filing the tidbit away before he carefully re-hung my diploma on its hook.

Something about his care made my heart speed up so fast my breath tripped. Didn't that sum him up in a nutshell though? He cared, even when he didn't have to.

"Oh." Dahlia looked between us for a long humming moment. "She's not on Tinder," she added helpfully. "I'd venture a guess she's never swiped right or left in her life. She's old school."

"Thanks, Dal," I said dryly, forcing myself to my feet and setting my trays back on the desk, papers sticking out in all directions. I turned back, finally noticing the sheaf of papers he clutched. "You could have used a courier to return them." I was so proud of myself for keeping my voice steady.

As if it was no big deal. He could sign them or not.

At this point, it wasn't even about the money or how the size of his job could help put Designing Women on the map.

It was that him not talking to me already felt like being annexed to a distant, ice cold, frightfully lonely planet.

“I’m the courier in this case.” He slammed down the papers on my desk, planting his obscenely large fist on top. Again, the tremor that went through me had nothing to do with fear. “Thought you needed to send another copy, huh? Really?”

Dahlia choked and waved a hand at her throat as she popped to her feet. Even with her pumps, she didn’t come up much higher than Dex’s upper arms. “This seems like a personal conversation. I’ll just see myself out and we can discuss the she-devil—I mean, Ms. Balls—um, yeah, never mind—we’ll talk later, Shelbs. Good luck,” she called over her shoulder on her flight out of the room, ending the statement with a door slam that yet again caused my diploma to fall.

Fitting for the week so far.

Dex pinned me with a look. “Tinder? I do not think so.”

“I’m not on Tinder.”

“Why would you say that then?”

“Because I’m pissed off and it’s my own fault and yet I’m still fucking annoyed.”

“Why?” he asked in his usual all-too-reasonable Dex tone as I crossed the room to pick up my abused diploma. I was surprised the glass hadn’t cracked.

“Because I don’t know how to casually date. I don’t know how to date, period. I was okay at it in high school, I guess, but once you throw a young, impressionable kid into the mix, everything changes.”

Wordlessly, he came up behind me. He gripped my shoulders before gently taking the diploma from my hand to hang it above my head. “I get that. I do.”

I turned toward him, full of fire. Until I realized I was right next to his ridiculously broad chest, and this close, his alluring, expensive cologne was making me light-headed. “Then why won’t you give me a second chance?”

Okay, that was *not* what I'd intended to say. At all. Ever. On my cold, lonely, distant planet or any other.

His face softened, degree by degree as he lifted his hand to cradle my cheek. "Baby, I will give you a million chances. You don't even have to ask."

"You w-will?" Great, now I'd added a stutter to my lameness too. Awesome. "Then why have you been freezing me out?"

"I have not. I *would* not. I have been helping to give birth. I've been holding the baby who was birthed and talking a good friend through panic attacks that he won't be a good father. He will legit be the best father ever. And I've been getting a new phone after mine was destroyed and having one problem after another transferring my account. Add in the work I was already behind on and that I've had three different court appointments in the last two days, and I didn't even realize that you were trying to get a hold of me." He raked a hand through his hair. "I should have known. I should have. I'm... spiraling, Shelby. Not the first time. I'm going to have to go on meds to handle my life and I really don't want to."

He sat in one of my visitors' chairs and I crouched beside him instead of sitting in the other chair like a sensible adult. But he seemed wounded, and the other chair just wasn't close enough.

"There's a lot to unpack in what you just said," I began hesitantly.

"The most important thing is that my week was absolutely shit without you and Berry." The raw honesty in his voice made my belly tremble.

I just wanted to climb into his lap and wrap my arms around him and burrow into his strength—and none of that was normally like me. I wasn't that sort of woman. Even before David, I hadn't been, and I definitely was not now.

"I missed you too. I've been such a jerk to everyone all week because I mistreated you."

“You made a valid assumption considering my past. But yeah, it hurt. A lot.”

“I’m sorry. I feel horrible.” I reached up to brush his hair back from his forehead and my heart lurched as he grabbed my hand to kiss my knuckles. “I got to the point I didn’t even care. We weren’t...anything before this weekend and she’s legal, so what business is it of mine?”

“It’s your business just like it’s mine that you can never even download Tinder. Let me see your phone.”

I was so relieved he wasn’t mad that I almost handed it over.

Then he grinned. “Nah. I’ll make you forget those clowns.” He urged me to my feet and had me sit on his lap. Almost immediately, the fingers he’d had tapping against his hip stilled and he smoothed his palm down my legs.

I should’ve declined. We were in my professional office. This wasn’t sending the right message.

Then he drew my legs closer, his touch easing me as I wrapped my arms around his neck. This man was making me mental.

“I missed you,” I said again, not even fighting it when he took my mouth.

“That’s why you practically threatened me via hot-pink Post-it? Sign these papers now or else,” he said between kisses, his lips curving.

“I didn’t say that. I just wanted to get your attention.”

“You did that the first time we met, Sherbet. I gotta say, after watching the miracle of childbirth this week,” he shook his head as he traced the hem of my skirt with his fingers, “I’m convinced all women are rockstars. You should all be given crowns at birth. I could *not* do that. I couldn’t.”

“Well, no, you couldn’t. You aren’t built for childbirth.” I had to laugh. “I assume we’re talking about April? She let you watch her have her child? I didn’t realize you were that close.”

“There was an issue with the midwife...” He trailed off. “I can’t discuss it. I still haven’t recovered. But yeah. I missed a lot of the nitty gritty, thank God. My brother took the brunt and he’s still talking about having kids with his girlfriend. Love is fucking weird.”

“It is.” I frowned. “I still am trying to process. You were actually in the room for some of it? While she...” I hissed out a breath. “So, let me guess. Now you’re firmly against ever procreating? If you ever even considered it, which you probably did not.”

“For me? No. My longest relationship was like two weeks. Not exactly long enough to consider such things. At least before.”

Before what? Us?

He hurried ahead. “I never went out with anyone in that mindset, either. Probably on purpose. But their baby girl is so incredible. So soft and pink and tiny. She held my finger.” His green eyes held a wondrous glow. “Not right after the delivery, of course, but when I came back in a day or two. April had a real little human and...unreal. Adeline’s so beautiful and perfect and has such perfect fingers and toes—” He broke off as my cell rang in my purse tucked into my top desk drawer.

I hesitated through two rings. I really had no desire to move. Maybe forever.

Not to mention Dex’s obvious wonder about April and Bishop’s newborn was doing funny, inexplicable things to my belly.

He raised his brows. “You should probably get that.”

“Yeah.” I sighed and slid off his lap to snatch my phone out of my bag. “Mom? What’s up?”

“Dexter sent Berry a stuffed dog.”

I glanced back at the man in question, who was stroking my shiny gold pen in a highly suggestive way while looking at me in a manner that was not appropriate for a place of business. “What does the card say?”

“It says for the days Bob and I can’t be there, here’s a pug of your very own to play with. Or sleep with when you have nightmares. She or he can be named whatever you want.”

I sniffled. Loudly. This man.

Dex looked at me with alarm and I waved a hand at my nose. “Allergies,” I mouthed while my mom prattled on about moving too fast.

Then she let out a loud sigh. “This dog is so soft. Perfectly snuggly. He’s wooing you, princess. And I’m not sure I’d be strong enough to resist his woo.”

She wasn’t the only one.

“I’ll take that under advisement.”

“Why did he send the dog here and not directly to you?”

“I screwed up. All my fault.” I blew out a breath. “I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Whatever you did, it can’t be as bad as all that. Should I set the dog aside for Berry?”

Dex had probably figured my parents were easier targets. Obviously, he hadn’t realized yet how many times I’d tried to contact him this week.

So many times.

“Yes, please.” My voice was barely a whisper. “I’ll call tonight.”

“Okay, sugar plum. Don’t sound so sad. He stood up to our questions. He clearly likes Berry. And you. Whatever happened, it doesn’t mean it’s a disaster in the making, just because David turned out to be a scumbag.”

Indeed.

“Yeah. Bye, Mom. Love you.” I hung up and bowed my head, so unsure of my moves I didn’t know what to say next.

“Shelby?” He was already on his feet and coming around the desk. “What’s wrong?”

“Berry will love the dog you sent her. Thank you.”

“Oh.” He stopped and shoved his hands in his pockets. “I forgot that was being delivered today. Thought it already arrived yesterday and maybe you didn’t like it or wanted to threaten me via Post-it rather than discuss stuffed pugs.”

I grinned despite the prickling behind my eyes. “I didn’t threaten you via Post-it.”

“You also threatened me indirectly with Tinder.” He stepped closer, lifting a hand to stroke my hair, not saying a word as I simply turned into him. Melted against his chest and stopped fighting...everything.

Me, most of all.

“What’s the matter? Is Berry okay?”

“Yeah. She had another nightmare.”

“Aww. Poor kid.”

“I just feel like I’m bungling everything. I used to at least feel certain about work. I mean, you saw this place, coming in. It’s small and as professional as we can make it, but we’re still building, you know? Looking for our big breaks and doing our best with lots of small ones.” I gestured toward the mess of paint samples on my desk and various other paperwork that had been knocked out of its rightful place during Hurricane Dahlia’s arrival. “Your job is the biggest I personally have handled. And look how that is going.”

He released me to grab the stack of papers he’d put on the desk with the rest, snatching my gold pen and, going from page to page, signing each one with a flourish.

“You need to read those,” I said weakly as he handed the stack to me.

“I trust you,” he said simply as I sank into my desk chair, holding the papers to my chest.

“Why?”

He leaned over and braced his hands on the arms of my chair. “Because I’ve seen your work. I know how much this all matters to you. You take everything so seriously and want to do your best, Shelby. I’d have to be a fool not to understand

how important this is to you. But there's just one problem." He leaned down into my space. "And I'm only just now realizing how huge it is."

EIGHTEEN

Dexter

I NEEDED TO SHOW SHELBY WHAT THE PROBLEM WAS, NOT TELL her.

Namely that I wanted her to redesign my house for a life I didn't have yet. One I wanted to build with my designer and her daughter.

Holy fuck. I expected the sky to split with lightning anytime now.

But for this all to happen, she needed to know who I truly was down deep. And whom I was becoming.

Which was why we were on the road to my parents' place in the middle of the day with no warning.

Forget warning. I hadn't even realized what I'd been hoping for with my house redesign until I'd taken in the utter hopelessness in Shelby's eyes and realized all at once what my house was missing most.

"I thought you could just, you know, figure out the design thing as you went. There are things I like, of course, but I'm not super wedded to anything. Honestly, I should have just stayed in my apartment. I bought that place for all the wrong reasons. Maybe I should just sell it and start over fresh."

Shelby stared at me from the passenger seat with wide eyes. "What?"

"Just rambling. Pay me no mind. I do this stuff." I gestured wildly. "Normally, when I'm caught in my head, I go for a long bike ride around Byer's Pass. I ride up and down the hills

and curves until all my muscles are aching, and the only thing I can think about is a cold beer, a hot shower, and TV to veg out. But I haven't done that lately so my mind's spinning in about one hundred directions. And then there's you. And Berry. All new territory for me, never mind work. That's also new. Not the mechanics of it, just that the firm is all on my shoulders."

She clutched her hands in her lap and let me meander verbally. And I appreciated her listening more than I could ever say.

"But it's not about paint or new furniture or getting those godawful statues off the shelves in the library. I should've told my father to shove his ideas. Gold leaf? What the actual hell? I wanted a home, not a museum. But I couldn't build a real home from just stuff. Somehow I just didn't get that until right now, today, in your office."

"No. That's too true," Shelby said quietly, pushing back her wild hair as the wind sent it flying. It was a beautiful late spring day, all sun and warm breezes, and she looked good enough to devour in her prim skirt and frilly blouse. She started to tie up her hair with the pink band she snapped off her wrist, and I stopped her with a quick squeeze of her neck. "Can you leave it down until we get there?"

Her brows pinched together but she gave a quick nod. "Sure."

Instead of continuing with my ramble, I turned up the radio on the oldies station and took the scenic route to my parents' home on the edge of Kensington Square. Their place was high in the hills and while the view wasn't as pretty when the leaves were all green, rather than the rainbow of hues they took on in the fall, the cloudless blue sky was definitely something to see.

Shelby shocked me by singing along softly, slipping off her heels and wiggling her bare toes. I laughed and joined her by yanking off my tie and tossing it into her lap. She used it as a kind of flag out the window, waving it in the wind as the car picked up speed on the final hill before we reached my

parents' huge ranch house with its circular drive and endless number of flowers and plants.

"My mom's pride and joy," I explained as the car rolled past them to a stop just before the three-car garage.

Dad's car wasn't in his spot, but my mom's was. Though Dad was now retired, he didn't actually spend much time at home. I imagined he had quite the schedule visiting his girlfriends.

"Oh, yeah, you said she was big into plants." Shelby unclicked her seat belt and dropped my looped tie around the gear shift before slipping her heels back on. "Um, I didn't know I'd be meeting your parents today."

"Me either. Life is full of surprises." I put a hand on her shoulder. "If she mentions you just wanting me for sex, just roll with it. A tiny misunderstanding from the other day. Mostly Isis's fault." As Shelby gaped at me, I shrugged. "Our moms are best friends. Have been for years. They love to get together and talk about how I'm screwing up my life now."

"That is a complete mischaracterization and you know it." My mom circled around from the backyard with soil on her chin and dusting the edge of her open yellow button-down shirt. It matched her yellow shorts and T-shirt, both also dusted with dirt. She brushed off her hands and smoothed a hand over her neat light brown bob. "Sorry, I was in the dirt."

"I am stunned. Hi, Mom." I rounded the car, opened Shelby's door, then leaned in to give my mother a hug. "Sorry I've been out of touch."

"You've been busy lately." My mom made a show of looking in the backseat of the convertible before she wheezed out a sigh. "Where's the kid, dammit?"

"Berry's in school." Shelby glanced at her watch. "Not for much longer though. I have to pick her up in under an hour. This day didn't go as planned," she added in a near whisper, moving into my side. "But at least you finally signed the damn papers."

"I did, but that was never in danger."

“What wasn’t?” my mom asked.

“Shelby’s been concerned that because we’re dating, I wouldn’t still want to renovate my house.” Little did she know that meeting her had completely altered my design plans.

And my entire life.

“Why? What does one have to do with the other?”

I gestured to my mom. “See? She knows me.”

Shelby’s smile faltered but she made a concerted effort to shore it back up. I could tell how hard she was trying from the furrows in her brow. “He started saying he might just move on the way over here. So, it makes sense I’d be...concerned.”

“Oh, don’t listen to him. He says a million different things every day. Stream of consciousness thinking defines my boy.” My mom reached up to give my cheek a pat.

“It’s so nice to meet you, Mrs. Shaw,” Shelby said belatedly, holding out her hand.

“Ditto, Shelby. She’s gorgeous, Dex,” my mom said out of the corner of her mouth. “You weren’t lying there.”

Shelby flushed. “He told you about me?”

“Just a little here and there.” My mother grinned. “Now what’s this I hear about you using him for sex?”

“No.” Shelby flushed practically to the roots of her hair. “And if I was, I haven’t gotten much return yet.”

“Her fault, not mine,” I said easily, knocking my shoulder into hers as we entered the backyard.

My mom winked at us. She wasn’t one to get all uptight about such things, unlike Shelby. But already the tightness in her shoulders seemed to be abating.

“Shelby’s redesigning my house, but I’m thinking maybe I should just sell the monstrosity and start over. I shouldn’t have had Dad help me with the sale. What do you think?”

“In this market, it would sell fast,” my mom said, rubbing the back of her hand over her cheek and sighing when it came

away dirty. “I put in some new perennials. Wanna see? You too, Shelby. Do you garden?” she asked as she led the way into the fairy-garden-like backyard space.

Shelby was too busy marveling at the large space crammed artfully with growing things to answer. She craned her neck in every direction, checking out the riot of exploding colorful blooms around the many stone walkways, offset by the occasional stone gnome or dragon. Whatever caught my mom’s whimsical eye.

“She does garden,” I answered for Shelby while she darted around the yard to check things out. “She has such a pretty yard, Mom. You should come see her cottage.”

Shelby finally turned back, her face glowing as she gestured to one of the flowering trees. “I mean, nothing like yours, Mrs. Shaw. I got some native talent from my mother. She gardens too. But I’ve only been trying to build mine for a couple of years and I don’t give it enough time because I work too much—” She paused to huff out a breath.

My mom wandered over to Shelby and rubbed her arm. “And you have a little one. They eat up a lot of hours in the very best way.”

“They do. Especially mine. She’s all over the place.” She swallowed audibly. “You have your son’s smile.” She sounded dazed as she looked between us. “His eyes too.”

“Yep and his distractible nature. My boys are so different. Preston can focus like a laser. Dex and I can’t keep our thoughts from darting off in twenty directions at once.”

I started to blow off my mother’s comment as I normally did, but instead, I widened my stance in the bright sunshine and faced the music. “I have ADHD, Mom. It’s not just a distractible nature. I was diagnosed some time ago.”

Deliberately, I avoided Shelby’s sharp look. It might’ve been cowardly to tell people this way with no warning, but at least I wasn’t hiding it any longer.

“That’s what you started to tell me in my office,” Shelby said slowly.

“Yeah. I’ve been mostly in denial for a long time.”

“Oh, my sweet boy. We will figure it out.” My mom crossed the yard to give me a tight squeeze. “But Shelby’s here, so let’s talk about that later, shall we?”

“Sure.” I rubbed her back before letting her go. “We can’t stay long because we have to pick up Berry from school soon.”

My mom let out a bright, choppy laugh. I supposed I’d laid too much on her all at once. “He adores your daughter, Shelby. In case you hadn’t figured it out yet.”

“She probably has,” I said easily, dropping down on the nearest bench and kicking out my long legs.

Shelby pushed back her wild hair. She still hadn’t tied it up. Maybe because she knew how much I loved it when she left it loose?

Or maybe she knew bigger things were afoot than her chaotic curls.

“Berry loves you too,” she said quietly. “We should stop and snag the stuffed pug on the way to get her at school. She’ll be so excited.”

“I got her a stuffed dog like Bob,” I told my mom. “I sent it to Shelby’s parents’ house in case she still hated me. Long story.”

“Oh, how nice.” She slid Shelby a sidelong look full of innuendo. “I don’t think Shelby hates you.”

“I definitely do not hate him.” Shelby held up a hand. “No, I was not using him for sex. I don’t even want to know what that’s all about.”

I swallowed a chuckle. “Blame Isis.”

“Comedy of errors there, but when you don’t tell me stuff, I fill in the blanks myself.” My mom rolled her eyes as she dropped down beside me on the bench. “You’re in a full monkey suit today. Court?”

“Yeah, damn Donnelly case. I think Harvey’s giving in finally. Mary wants the Colorado estate, and he seems amenable. Finally. Between Pres and I, we’ve been dealing with their damn divorce for the better part of two years.” I raked a hand through my hair, before I pinned Shelby in my gaze. “How long did your divorce drag on?”

When she didn’t immediately answer, I tipped back my head and stared up into the sun. I’d left my damn sunglasses in the car. “I need flash cards. I should know better than to ask things like that.”

She sat next to me on my other side and cupped my suddenly jiggling knee. My mom’s gaze lingered on us, but her smile warmed enough to prove she had no problem with our closeness.

Not that I would’ve moved away in any case.

This near week apart had made me do some hard thinking. I had no idea what this was between us or what it could be, but whatever happened, we would handle it.

I would help Shelby handle it, no matter what it took. I wasn’t running or taking an easy out. Being with her—with them—was worth any difficulties or bumps in the road.

“At the time, it seemed like forever,” Shelby cleared her throat, “but all the papers were signed and the custody agreement was in place in less than a year.”

We linked fingers on my leg. Just her touch was enough to settle me, and I couldn’t help drawing her into my arms, even with my mother right there.

My mom didn’t blink, just skipped right to more garden talk.

“Best part about those camellias over there, the showy pink flowers, is they grow in dappled sun. We finally had those trees cut back along the fence but the lack of shade over there isn’t a problem for the flowers. Not only are the camellias beautiful, but if Fifi eats them, no problem. Not that she does. She’s the typical chihuahua, never staying still for a minute.”

“They’re so pretty. I’ve never seen that particular flower before.”

“Oh, I’ve been researching dog-safe ones. All of the flowers I’ve been putting in over the past couple of years are. Those tall sunflowers over there, the magnolias, the bamboo... all safe.” My mom grabbed her straw hat off the hook on the back of the bench. “That also means you can bring Bob over to run around anytime you like, Dex. Fifi likes him. Hint, hint.”

“Last time, Bob tried to hump her.”

“So? She’s spayed. No harm, no foul.” My mom looked pointedly at Shelby. “And bring Berry by too, please. I’d be thrilled to meet her.”

“Oh, she’d love that. Speaking of,” Shelby turned over her wrist to look at her bangle watch, “it’s just about time to go pick her up.”

“We can stop by your parents’ house on the way to her school?” I was already rising and tugging Shelby with me.

“Don’t you have to go back to work?”

“Nah. On court days, I usually leave early. But I’m meeting with someone to help with my workload in any case. Tomorrow, as a matter of fact.” I shifted to look at my mother. “Is Dad going to be home later?”

“You’d have to ask *him*. We’re getting divorced.” Her smile never dimmed, but the gleam in her eyes died down, just a fraction.

So, I wasn’t the only one keeping secrets.

“You can’t be that surprised,” she said as we walked back through the backyard and circled the house to reach my car. “I know you and Preston disapproved of my choices.”

“Not your choices, his choices.”

“I can’t blame him for what I chose to tolerate. I should’ve divorced him years ago. But, well, I didn’t see any reason to. He did what he wanted with his life and so did I.”

Shelby's body went rigid at my side as she moved even faster. "I can leave you two alone," she began, yanking open the passenger door before I could.

"No, it's fine." I rested my hand on the small of her back. "I'm not hiding anything, and besides, as your sex toy of record—"

She turned and whacked my arm. "You're incorrigible. I'm sorry, Mrs. Shaw. About the divorce," she added in case my mother didn't grasp what she was referring to. "No matter what leads up to it, they're so hard. Especially the longer the marriage. When there are children involved, it just makes it all so much more difficult."

"Luckily, mine are fully grown and can decide for themselves how they feel about their father. And me, for that matter." She pushed her hat farther back on her head and took a bolstering breath. "I'm seeing someone too."

"Oh." I rubbed my chest. "That's a new one."

"Not that new. I started seeing Vince before Christmas."

"Oh. Okay, then. New for me. For us. Does Preston know?"

"Absolutely not. But you can tell him if you want. Or not. You know how your brother is."

"I do. I mean, I did. But I don't think he's so set in his ways anymore, ever since Ryan. His girlfriend is a witch. If that doesn't expand your consciousness, I don't know what would. And now that April's had her baby, and that crew is all in love with the kid..." I trailed off and scratched the back of my neck. I was also kind of in love with the new baby. "Just saying I wouldn't be surprised if Pres and Ryan had an announcement of their own soon."

"Yeah, you gotta tell me the rest of that birth story," Shelby said in an undertone.

"I will after we get Berry." I squeezed her hand before I released her to get into the car. Then I stepped back to give my mom a long hug. "I'm happy for you. If you're happy." I eased back and peered closely at her face. "Are you happy, Mom?"

“Getting there.” She let out a shaky breath. “I’m not getting remarried anytime soon, I’ll tell you that. But I think your father might because he can’t do his own laundry.” Her face remained sober for another half minute before she laughed hard enough that her eyes brightened with tears. “I wish I was joking.”

I couldn’t laugh right now. “He should get hired help then and not a wife or girlfriend. What the fuck.” I shook my head and drew her in for another hug. “We’ll bring Berry and Bob over soon. But if you need to talk, call me. And if you need a voodoo curse, contact Ryan. I’m sure she knows all about them, and she doesn’t like Dad one bit.”

She laughed and patted my back before giving me a light shove backward. “Go on, you two. I’ll be just fine. I’m so glad to meet you, Shelby.” She leaned over the passenger door to speak softly to Shelby as she shot me a look. “You’re the first woman he’s brought home to meet his mama. Just saying.”

Shelby’s eyebrows rose. “Really?”

“As if you didn’t know that,” I interjected. “Reformed playboy, remember? Nice term from the seventies, by the way. But they don’t bring dates home to their parents. In fact, they hardly ever have relationships that last long enough to make it to girlfriend status.”

Shelby wrinkled her nose. “Thanks for the reminder.”

“His reputation is far worse than the reality,” my mother said lightly.

She was so right. At least I didn’t have to try to convince her.

“You two will have to come to dinner soon. Well, three. Of course Berry is invited here too. I’m keeping the house,” she added. “I’ve done far too much to this garden to put it on the market.”

“Who’s going to represent him in the divorce?” Before she could answer, I rounded the car and got in behind the wheel. “Never mind. I don’t want to know. As long as it’s not me or

Pres, officially not our problem.” I turned on the engine and winked at her. “Sock it to him, Mom.”

Once we’d pulled out of the long driveway, Shelby turned off the radio and gripped my thigh. “I’m sorry. That has to be so hard for you.”

“I’ve known about his affairs for years,” I reminded her.

“Even so, he’s still your father. Even if he makes unsavory choices.”

I laughed although the sound scraped its way out of my chest, leaving an unexpected ache behind. “Yeah. He served as a good example of what not to do. He’s part of why I stopped...playing the field.”

“Too much variety?”

“Too much feeling as though I was cut from the old Shaw cloth. Preston didn’t date for years before Ryan. She changed his life, man. And, well, maybe I want some of that too.” I slid her a sidelong look. “That wasn’t going to happen for me if I never stopped to get to know someone for real. If I took the easy way out every damn time.”

Instead of laughing off what I said, she fumbled her sunglasses out of her purse and shoved them on in deference to the full afternoon sun. There was no shade out here, that was for sure. Unless she wanted to hide away from what I’d said.

I couldn’t entirely blame her.

“Why me?” she asked softly. “Not saying that I’m not awesome, because I actually am, the last couple of weeks aside. I had a shitty marriage, but you know, I keep going. I do everything to make sure my daughter has a good life. That we have a good life. I’m a responsible daughter and a great designer and I work hard. Just...the fun part I’m struggling with.”

I reached over to take her hand. That she gave it freely made my stomach tighten in the best possible way. “I can help you with that. You’ve got everything else on lock. You’re an amazing designer. My brother checked all your references like one hundred times before he and Bishop hired you. He was

impressed—and he’s hard as hell to impress.” I laughed dryly as I plugged the name of Berry’s school into my GPS. Newfield Elementary was twenty miles from where we were, so with afternoon traffic and schools letting out all over the area, we were in for a bit of a drive. “I’ve certainly never managed to do it.”

“I don’t know why I trust you.”

“Because I haven’t given you any reason not to?”

“Yeah.” She took a deep breath as she played with my fingers. “Yeah.”

“I didn’t touch Kate. Not one time. I told myself I didn’t care if you didn’t believe me, but it turns out I do. Being a decent person is important and not just to get a woman in bed. Or to keep her in your bed. The woman being you, in case that wasn’t clear.”

“I believe you, Dex. My reaction was unwarranted. I was just overwhelmed from what had happened between us and I took it out on you. And I have a very bad habit of expecting bad things to happen if I have a good day. Or night. Or both.”

“Your husband hurt you badly. I get that. I know you’re still dealing with repercussions.”

“I am. And I never saw a therapist, because honestly, I truly was okay with never dating again. Never having sex again. Just being a daughter and a mom and a designer. I didn’t need more. At least I thought I didn’t.” She swallowed hard. “But I do. I like being with you. And there’s nothing wrong with that. I can still be a great mom and a great designer and learn to have multiple Os, dammit.”

“You sure can. Pretty sure you figured out the last one already. But practice makes perfect.” I tugged at her pencil skirt while keeping my gaze on the road. “What do you have under here, Ms. Wilde?”

“Nothing.”

I literally gasped, which made her giggle, my favorite sound in the entire universe.

“Are you pulling my leg?”

“Not the body part I’d like to pull.” Her flirty expression made me hard in an instant, even if I was sure she wasn’t telling the truth. “But yeah, I’m lying. I did wear my flag panties today though. And it’s not even June yet.”

“Imagine that. Did you find new Statue of Liberty ones? Shit.” I stopped at a light. “I wanted to go by your parents’ place first to get the dog.”

“We can after. She’ll be so excited she’ll want to see it right away.” She bit her lip. “You’re sure this isn’t wrecking your afternoon?”

“Nah, Isis will handle whatever needs to be handled and push off any appointments as necessary. She’s a goddess in many ways. I wish she had a law degree. Hmm, maybe I can convince her. I’ve never been able to before, but hey, maybe I’m becoming more persuasive as I age?”

“You’d probably pay for her law degree, wouldn’t you?”

“She’ll never go for it. I’m not that persuasive, babe.” The endearment rolled off my tongue and she didn’t immediately stiffen.

Progress. I’d take whatever I could get.

Shelby started to reply when her phone went off in her purse. She pried it out and frowned. “It’s Berry’s school. Hi, this is Shelby Wilde.” She listened for a minute, then said “okay, thank you” a couple of times and told whoever it was we were almost there.

Then she clicked off and stared at me with strands of her hair clinging to her lips, though she didn’t seem to notice. “Her teacher wants to talk to me. Berry had a rough day today. She spilled some of her supplies then had an outburst about cleaning them up.”

“You said she had more nightmares?”

“Yeah. Her sleep hasn’t been great, that’s for sure. But her teacher is concerned about bigger things based on a pattern of

her behavior. Things I chalked up to normal kid stuff but maybe it's just...not. I haven't been paying enough attention."

"Bigger things like what?" I shifted toward her on the seat.

"Her teacher thinks she may have ADHD."

NINETEEN

Dexter

SHELBY SEEMED STUNNED AS I PULLED UP TO THE SCHOOL AND found a space in the nearly full parking lot.

“Do you want me to come in with you?”

I wasn't surprised when she shook her head, but it left me feeling helpless. Clearly, she was confused and worried and probably blaming herself. From what I could tell, that was what parents seemed to do about everything when it came to their kids, and it was even worse for single parents.

My friend Grant, the lead vet at the practice where my buddy Clint worked, was a single dad and he seemed to doubt his actions all the time when it came to handling things with his young daughter, Poppy. Just showed their dedication, as far as I was concerned.

“What can I do?” I asked quietly as Shelby picked up her purse and reached for her door handle.

She hesitated, biting her lip. “Just you being here helps. Especially now that you've told me what you're facing too.”

“Seems kind of crazy. I mean, what are the chances? Not that I was diagnosed now. It's been months. I only saw the therapist my doctor suggested a couple times over Zoom and then basically buried my head.”

“It's a lot to take in. You said—you said there are meds?”

“Yeah. I've never tried them.”

“But you're thinking of trying them?”

“Yeah.” I undid the first couple buttons of my dress shirt. Damn thing was making me itch. “If it’ll help me, if it’ll maybe help Berry...I will.”

“Thank you.” She cupped my jiggling knee, and immediately, I steadied. “Thank you for being here and for being honest about what you’re dealing with. It helps so much.”

“I’ll help in any way I can. If you need me, just text. I’ll come right in.” I squeezed her fingers. “I’m not her father, Shelby, but I care. Believe me on that.”

“I do.” She leaned over the seat to lay her lips lightly on mine. “Thank you,” she said again before slipping away and shutting the door behind her.

The entire time she was inside, I fidgeted. I knew what I was doing and knew I should make the effort to stop, yet I didn’t. Now that I had an explanation for my behavior, I’d realized I had been fidgeting a good part of my life. It wasn’t always a part of ADHD, but it was for me. I was restless in mind, in body, in everything.

Especially when I didn’t do my bike rides or employed other ways of burning energy or when I had more on my mind than usual.

I texted Isis.

Did Eli get back to me yet? I left a message at his firm earlier. He wanted to meet tomorrow but something came up this afternoon. I want to be available jic.

I’d actually called before I reached Shelby’s office, because I’d wanted to keep my schedule open in case we needed to...reconcile. Not that she’d take the day off. But now Berry was in the mix too.

ISIS

Well, hello to you too. Are u going to be gracing us with your presence this afternoon?

What us?

ISIS

Your father was here for a couple of hours. U just missed him.

I was pretty sure I growled like a wild animal.

Checking up on me?

ISIS

I suspect so, yes. He was happy to hear that Eli might be coming on board, altho u haven't even interviewed him yet. But I forgot myself and let it slip you'd contacted him & next thing I know, Isaac was all up my butt wanting his every personal detail so he could do a background run.

Tell him to eff off.

ISIS

Yeah, right. U ok? Did your mom tell u the news?

Yeah, I was w her. We were w her.

ISIS

Shelby's there too?

Yeah. Save the comments, ok? It's been a day & it's not over yet.

As if I'd summoned them, Shelby and Berry walked out of the building. Berry was moving fast as she always did, clutching her book bag tightly to her side. But when she looked up and saw my car, her face cracked into the biggest smile.

The shitty day—hell, week—I'd had suddenly became so much better. Spending time with Shelby had started it, but Berry's obvious joy at my presence was the capper.

“Bob’s not with me,” I shouted out the window as she began running despite her mom’s admonitions. Then her mom gave in and smiled too.

Was there any bigger gift than having these two beautiful ladies in my life, in whatever capacity that turned out to be?

“Hi!” Berry surprised the hell out of me by opening my door and flinging herself into my arms.

“Hey, kiddo. Missed you.” I wasn’t even laying it on thick, just the honest-to-God truth. I returned her hug, marveling at how she smelled like peanut butter and grape jelly. Childhood in one whiff.

“Are you guys done fighting?” she demanded, easing back to put her hands on her tiny hips as she looked back and forth between us.

“We are done fighting,” I announced, not even checking in with Shelby. If she had lingering concerns, we could talk them out like adult-like people.

“Good. Now let’s go get Bob.” She opened the passenger door and tossed her book bag inside before climbing in.

“You heard the woman,” I said to Shelby, who stood motionless beside the open door.

When she didn’t say anything, just stared at the ground, I angled my head. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Her breathing was way too fast. “Just... assimilating.”

I got out to give her a hug, since she seemed frozen in place. “She seems fine,” I said in a low voice. “It’s not the most horrible thing in the world, Sherbet.”

Her gaze flew up to mine as I gripped her shoulders. “Having a diagnosis means you’re on the path to figuring stuff out for the better. Remind me of this, would you, when I forget in like ten minutes?”

Her lips curved. “Yeah. We can remind each other.” She reached up to cup my hands. “I’m really glad you’re here.”

“I’m glad I am too. And I’m going to ask you to spend the night. Both of you. So, we’ll get her dog and then I’ll take you back to work to get your stuff and then you can pack a bag for you and Berry. Tomorrow’s a school day but—”

“Actually, no, it’s a resource day. Almost summer. Though I have work—” She cut herself off, stepping closer to lift her face to mine. “Guess who my main client is now? You might know him.”

I captured her soft warm lips with mine, savoring the now familiar taste of her peach lip gloss. We got all of two minutes to dive into the kiss before Berry started making retching noises in the car.

“*Ewww*. Disgusting!”

Shelby pulled back, laughing as she rubbed lip gloss off my mouth. “Messed you up already.”

“Hope you intend to do more of it.” As Berry’s puking noises got louder and more inventive, I turned back around to face the car and made a horror movie slashing motion in front of my neck. “Can it, kiddo, unless you want me to keep what I got you.”

Instantly, she quieted and cocked her head. “You got me something?” She leaned up and braced her hands on the front seats. “Let’s go!”

“It’s at Grams and Pops’. We’re going to stop by and pick it up.”

Berry flopped back down in her seat. “Why is it there?”

“To heighten the surprise,” I replied.

No need to mention more about the fight that no longer mattered. At least I hoped it didn’t. Every couple had to have a first fight. Now we had that out of the way, I hoped we wouldn’t have to have any others.

Yeah, sure. Right. Dude, an optimistic attitude is one thing. Complete denial is another.

Berry pelted me with questions all the way to her grandparents’ house. What color was it? What size was it?

Could she carry it in her backpack? Did it have regular feeding times?

“You wish, kid.” Shelby shook her head. “But remember we have that speed-dating thing coming up at Kitten Around.”

“Oh, yeah. I want a kitten. And a dog. Or a puppy.”

“A puppy is a dog,” I reminded her gently.

“I know. But it doesn’t have to be a baby.” She kicked the back of my seat until I made the slashing motions again in front of my neck, which somehow seemed to be understandable kid language.

Hey, whatever worked.

Shelby’s dad was rocking on the porch swing when we drove up. The minute he saw us, he rose and made a show of hiding something behind his back. “What do we have here?” he asked in a booming voice as Berry giggled so like her mother and ran up the steps to try to see behind his back.

“C’mon, let me see! It’s for meeeee.” Berry looked back toward me and her mom. “I already had to see them kiss so c’mon!”

Shelby buried her face in her hands while I laughed.

Berry paid us no mind as she square danced with her grandfather in an effort for him to give up the goods. He held out admirably until she shot around him, grabbed the dog, and squealed loud enough to break the sound barrier.

“I have my own Bob!”

I sat down next to her on the swing to admire her new stuffed pug while Shelby and her father went inside to talk, probably about Berry’s possible diagnosis. It wouldn’t be quick, involving testing and potentially therapy, but if they were on that road, Shelby was smart to keep her parents informed.

While Berry and I swung back and forth and chattered about dogs and kittens and koi fish and if koi liked dogs, Shelby’s mom pulled up in a battered Ford Bronco that immediately made me want to play Santa and replace it.

If Shelby wasn't even sure about letting me pay for meals, I could just imagine how she'd react if I sprung a new vehicle on her parents.

Second fight, starting in 3-2-1...

"Are you going to marry my mom?" Berry asked abruptly, stopping the swing with her foot as her grandma hauled a bag of groceries up the walk.

I was so stupefied by the question that Mrs. Wilde had made it all the way to the top porch step before my manners kicked in enough for me to take the bag from her. "Let me get that, Mrs. Wilde."

She handed over the overflowing bag without a qualm. "Oh, you're back. Did she make you pay?"

"Why? Are you hoping she did?"

"Just checking. Berry, look at you and that dog."

"I'm naming her Bobbie," Berry announced. "She's Bob's sister."

"Younger or older?" her grandmother asked.

"Older because she's wise." Berry patted the dog's head. "She can be the flower girl when you marry my mom," she tacked on, apparently oblivious to the fact I was still on the verge of hyperventilating from the last time she'd mentioned marriage.

Shelby's mom cast me a dubious look. "I was only gone an hour."

I shrugged. "I'm not involved."

She laughed and patted my back. "Guess that means you've given your blessing then?" she asked Berry.

Berry shrugged. "They already kissed, so why not?"

She had a valid point.

"Oh, is that the deciding factor?" Shelby's mom took my spot on the swing and gave it a push with her foot. "Tell me more."

Apparently, my cardiac issues weren't a cause for concern, so I made do with rooting through the bag of groceries until I found a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos and dug in.

Berry stopped talking about marriage and held out a hand. "Gimme."

"Berry, is that how you ask for something?"

"*He* didn't ask."

Another valid point. She was racking them up today. I just handed over the bag.

"Why are you asking about marriage, sweet pea?"

Berry shrugged. "My mom gets lonely. Isn't that what you get a husband for?"

"Among other things. It helps if they're handy with a hammer." Mrs. Shaw stole some chips and cocked a brow at me. "How are you with manual tasks?"

"I'm not going to hang out a shingle anytime soon, but I can do a few things. Like what are we talking here? Putting a cabinet together or a new roof?"

The screen door swung open and I looked back in time to see Shelby cock her head. "Who needs a new roof?"

"You, apparently."

She took a sip from the bottle of Coke she was carrying. "No, not my roof. I need lots of things but my roof is in pretty good shape. What gave you that idea?"

"Your mom was asking if I was good at manual tasks because Berry seems to think we're getting married."

She choked and Coke went flying over her pretty white blouse.

I didn't mean to laugh, but I couldn't help it. At least I wasn't the only one whose mind was blown at the possibility.

Then again, did I like that her mind was *that* blown? Granted, we still barely knew each other.

“Just saying, Bishop and April were in love within days. Same with Preston and Ryan. Pretty sure Pres more than Ryan, to be fair. At least at the beginning.”

“And your point?”

I shrugged and ate more Doritos.

“Mom, could you come in and sit with me and Dad for a couple minutes?” Shelby’s throat rippled with her hard swallow.

“Sure. Something a matter?” She rolled up the bag of Doritos and stuck it in with the rest of the groceries then went inside.

“They’re talking about me,” Berry said sadly, kicking the swing back into gear with vehemence.

“Hey, hey, not in a bad way. Your mom just wants them to know what’s going on with you.”

“Yeah. Still sucks.”

“It does. But can I tell you a secret? You have to promise not to tell anyone else.” I turned toward her on the swing.

Her face brightened. “Like a pinky swear?”

“Sure.”

She held out her hand, pinky extended. Then stared at me when I didn’t mimic her gesture. “Hello?”

I finally caught on and did the same thing she did. “Where did you learn this?”

“Some old TV show my mom was watching.” She hooked her pinky around mine and that meant we had made a sacred oath. Better than a blood bond, I supposed. “There,” she pronounced self-importantly. “Now what is the secret?”

“I have ADHD too.”

“What? No way.” She played with the buckle on her shoe. “I mean, it’s not for sure yet. I gotta take stupid tests first.”

“Yeah, tests are stupid.” I probably shouldn’t agree, but it was basically a universal fact, right?

She clutched Bobbie the pug to her chest. “My mom was almost crying. I could tell she didn’t want to.”

“No, she’s pretty hardcore about not wanting to cry. But sometimes you just gotta. Lets out the feelings you have.”

Berry swallowed audibly. “Do you cry?”

“I have before, yeah.”

“When?”

This kid wouldn’t let someone get away with anything.

I thought back. “I did when I first got Bob. He was in a lot of pain from a wound he got until Clint fixed him up. And he didn’t have a family. He’d been abandoned.”

“But now you’re his family.”

“Yeah.”

“I want us to be his family too.” She hopped off the swing and held out her hand to me. “Wanna go see the backyard here so you feel okay with Bob coming over here sometimes?”

I started to tell her the plan was for her and her mom to spend the night at my place, but hey, plans could change. Nothing wrong with that. And we would have other days.

Right now, I was Mr. All About the Future.

I took her hand and rose. “Sure. Let’s go check it out.”

TWENTY



A SHORT WHILE LATER, MY PARENTS FACED ME ACROSS THE kitchen table. “Are you doing okay?”

“Yeah. I am. I’m doing fine. And Berry will be fine, as we figure out what works best for her now. Change isn’t always a bad thing.”

In my head, I was arguing with myself.

Yes, this is a bad thing. Of course it is. My little girl has issues that may not be able to be fixed with anything but meds. What did you do to help cause this?

But then I thought of Dex and how sweet and compassionate he was, and knowing him, there was no way I could see his diagnosis—and therefore Berry’s—as a crisis. Sure, it affected everyone differently, but being differently abled was actually a positive thing. He would help her, and I had a feeling she would help him too.

We would all help each other, day by day.

“I knew those nightmares were going to be a problem,” my father said in a low voice, reaching across the table to grip my hand. “Not your fault,” he added quickly. “We all know quite well whose fault it is.”

I squeezed his hand. “He’s irrelevant right now. He isn’t part of our life, and we are going to be just fine. I know we are.”

“And Dex?” My mom rose to put away the nonperishable groceries still on the counter. “How does he factor into this?”

I started to explain his diagnosis then realized that wasn't for me to tell. It was up to him to decide who he felt comfortable sharing the information with, not me. "We're seeing each other." I stood to go to the refrigerator to get some filtered water. Suddenly, my throat was dust dry. "Taking it hour by hour."

"Mmm-hmm. Is that why Berry wanted to know when you're getting married?"

It took every fiber of my being not to sputter on my water as I took a long drink. "She likes him. I guess she likes the idea of having a family. I mean, her and I and the two of you are a family, of course. But most of her friends at school have a more typical family unit, and maybe that's influencing her. I can't really say."

"Could be. Or she could be worried about you." My mom grabbed a couple of Doritos then turned to face me. "You've been alone a long time."

I started to argue. I was never alone, not really. I had my family and my friends and my colleagues, didn't I?

But that wasn't the same as a relationship.

"I have. And I was content with that. Or at least I thought I was. But maybe that's not all that's meant for me."

At the war whoop in the backyard, I went to the window to see Dex pushing Berry on the swing my dad had just put up within the last week. She was swinging almost frightfully high, but her endless giggles were worth my moments of gut-squeezing nerves. And he was laughing with her as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"He was meant to be a father." I didn't even realize I'd said it aloud until my mother loudly cleared her throat.

"From what I've seen of him and Berry, I'm inclined to agree."

As I turned to face her, she held up a hand. "Not that I think you should rush into anything."

"I'm not rushing."

“No matter what Berry thinks,” my father added, smiling in a benevolent way that indicated he didn’t think the idea was as crazy as I would’ve figured.

It was completely crazy. We barely knew each other. I wasn’t someone who rushed into things like that. I had once before, and God, could that whole thing have been more of a disaster?

But then more laughter rang out, and I turned just as Berry leaped down off the swing from up high—nearly ripping a shout from my throat until Dex caught her effortlessly and they fell back, laughing.

“They’re both nuts,” I muttered, covering my face with my hands even as my heart rejoiced. Seeing the way they were together made me so happy. I couldn’t shove it down or tuck it away. They were joy personified.

“Baby girl, you need to follow your heart. It will never lead you astray.” My dad pulled me into a hug. “You know deep down where you’re meant to be. No matter how your mind fights it, you’ll end up there one way or another.”

I pressed my face against his strong shoulder. “I think you’re right. I’m trying not to be afraid.”

“Nothing to be afraid of,” my mom said, crowding into me from behind to make us into a family sandwich. It was impossible not to laugh. “We have a shovel if we need to bury the body, so nothing to worry about. Right, Danny?”

“Right.” My dad’s voice was gruff. “How many times have we talked about finding David and turning him into food for the fish?”

“No reason to take it out on the poor fish. They deserve better.” I let out a sniffling laugh as the back door opened and my two favorite people headed inside, laughing like fools despite the fact that Berry’s lower legs were caked with dirt and Dex’s suit had a tear in the knee. She was still carting the stuffed pug, though he too wore some new patches of dirt.

It was true though. In no time, Dex had also become one of my favorites.

Sidestepping my parents, I wiped my eyes and swallowed down the last of the tears. “What have you two been up to?”

At once, Dex grew serious and crossed the kitchen to grip my chin. “What’s wrong?” His voice was backed with steel.

“Nothing. Everything’s good.” I reached up to encircle his wrist with my fingers. His pulse was so strong and true, so absolutely steady as his concerned green eyes scanned my face.

I leaned up to kiss him until I recalled at the last second we most definitely were not alone—a fact I had forgotten the literal moment his gaze landed on mine.

I was thoroughly fucked.

Berry started humming the “Wedding March” until my mom shushed her and tugged her out of the room. My father soon followed.

He filled his hands with my hair and took my mouth, sinking in with a sound caught between hunger and relief. The same sound echoed in my throat. It felt like it’d been so long since I’d been in his arms, and the brief embraces today just hadn’t put a dent in my need.

“Berry’s cool with spending the night. Are you cool with it?” He eased back to smooth his thumb over my lower lip before leaning in to nibble it while our eyes met. “Please God tell me you’re cool with it, because I may die if I can’t have you again in the next five hours.”

“What if it takes six?”

“Death by Shelby. Pussy deprivation. It’s a thing. Surely you’re not that cruel.”

Flushing, I nipped his thumb then soothed it with a soft suck. Someday I wouldn’t blush every time he used dirty words with me. Maybe. “Probably not. Berry’s bedtime is nine on school nights. I’m very cool with spending the night, by the way.”

“Good. Bring your summer season underwear. Maybe one themed for a cookout?”

I snorted out a laugh. “If you insist. I do have other kinds of lingerie though. Not even holiday-themed.”

“Huh, color me intrigued. Okay, go for whatever strikes your fancy. You could even try a set outside the proper—”

“Mama! Dex!” Berry’s sudden wail from upstairs had us both racing for the stairs, although he stepped back and let me go first despite the clear indecision on his face.

We rushed upstairs, checking rooms until we finally realized Berry was in the bathroom, kneeling beside the partially full tub and clutching not only her sopping pug to her chest but also Uni. I didn’t even realize she had Uni with her today. She must’ve hidden him away in her book bag. Tears streaked down her cheeks.

“What’s wrong, honey?” I asked as my parents emerged from the other end of the house, just a few steps before we made it into the bathroom.

“I was trying to get the mud off Bobbie.” She rubbed harder at Bobbie the pug’s cheek where a definite rip showed. She wouldn’t stop rubbing, circling her big flower-shaped soap over the splotch and the hole. “I ruined her.”

“Aww, sweetheart, she’s not ruined. It’s just a tiny hole.” Dex knelt at her side and pulled her into a quick hug before he stroked his fingers over the hole to smooth the fabric back into place. Even with his magic touch, he couldn’t make it disappear.

“But it’s a hole. I messed her up.” Tears dripped off her chin. “Dad always said I was too rough,” she muttered as she wrinkled her nose.

I started to step in, but Dex cupped her cheek and spoke to her in a clear, strong but loving voice. “You are not too rough. You’re just right. Sometimes accidents happen. No big deal.” He tucked Bobbie under his arm and ruffled the fur on top of her head. “We can get her a cool hat, and no one will ever be able to tell—”

Berry kept crying, knuckling her eyes, and my heart broke in a dozen pieces.

“I have an idea.” Dex jumped to his feet. “Bobbie needs to be bandaged up, right?”

Berry nodded.

“Well, who would do that but a vet?”

He didn’t wait for an answer before he hurried out of the room.

“Aww, princess, it’ll be just fine.” My dad hustled in the room with my mom right behind him. “Let good ol’ Pops make you a snack, how about that? Maybe some of those pizza rolls your Gram made?”

Berry nodded and got to her feet, clutching the still-dripping Uni as if she would never let him go. Then she turned to wrap her arms around my middle, squeezing me tightly for a moment before she ran off down the hall with my parents.

Dex came back a couple of minutes later while I was cleaning up the mess on the floor from the impromptu bath my daughter had given her stuffed animals.

“He’s on his way,” he announced. “I left Bobbie on the couch for him to take a look at.”

For an instant, the only *he* that filled my mind was Berry’s father, the one who’d told her she was too rough. How many more ways could memories of that man harm my child?

But Dex explained when I just remained silent. “Clint. He’s a vet, remember?”

“Yeah, but Bobbie is a stuffed dog.”

“I know that, and you know that, but he’ll convince her he’ll fix her up. Trust him.” He knelt at my side and took the sponge out of my hand before tossing it in the tub with a splash. “Trust *me*. There isn’t anything I won’t do to make both of you happy.”

The lump in my throat prevented me from speaking, so I just pressed my forehead against his upper arm and tried to get myself back in line.

“Let me take care of you both for a while,” he murmured, brushing his mouth over my hair. “I want to do it.”

All I could do was nod. Somehow now that I was being offered a lifeline more often, instead of feeling stronger, I felt the opposite. I was so afraid I’d give in to my need to cling to him. Let him be the one in command for a while.

“I’m so fucking tired,” I whispered.

He brushed his fingertips over my cheek. “Just let me, Sherbet. I want to and I can.”

Before I could reply, he urged me up to sit on the commode while *he* finished cleaning the bathroom. He’d just finished mopping up the last of the water when the front doorbell rang and we went down to find Berry already chatting urgently with Clint, who was kneeling in front of the couch while he examined the patient.

“Best patient ever,” I muttered before I stuck out a hand to Clint. “We appreciate this so much. You must be so busy.”

“Never too busy for friends, Shelby.” He gave my hand a squeeze and went back to taking Bobbie’s vitals while Berry watched in rapt attention and peppered him with questions. “Her heartbeat is perfect,” he told her, making Berry beam. “How’s yours? Want me to check yours too?”

She nodded enthusiastically, thereby diverting the conversation from her check of Bobbie’s vitals.

“Your heart rate is perfect too.”

“Is Bobbie in pain?” Berry screwed up her face. “I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

“She’s gonna be just fine. We’ll bandage her up and give her a little something for pain and she’ll be right as rain.” Clint spoke softly to Berry as he took out a brightly colored Band-Aid with a graphic character on it and carefully pressed it to Bobbie’s furry cheek. “There we go. Look good to you?”

“Yes, she does, Mr. Vet. Thank you.” Berry’s cheeks glowed as she hugged Bobbie to her chest. “What about the pain pill?”

Clint took back the dog and slipped what looked like a piece of candy near the dog's mouth then discreetly palmed it and slipped it between his own lips. "All done. Bobbie will be on the mend soon."

"Thank you so much." Berry covered Bobbie's furry face with about a dozen kisses. "Dex, you gotta pay him!"

The two men exchanged amused glances. "Oh, I will. I brought my biggest credit card so I can afford him."

"I can take some from my piggy bank." Berry glanced at me seriously. "Had to be for something special, right?"

"Yeah, but Dex has it covered." After a quick hair ruffle, I tugged her and her pup in for a tight hug. "I love you so much, munchkin. And Bobbie too," I added when my daughter nudged the dog between us.

"Dex bought me this dog before I get a real one. Or when Bob gets to be mine when Dex marries my mommy," Berry announced, while I hoped I disappeared into the floor beneath me.

Maybe I should get her that dog she wants.

It would be much easier than getting her Dex as her father.

"Bob can be yours anyway." Dex clapped Clint on the shoulder. "Thanks, man. As always, I can't thank you enough."

"No problem. It was great to meet Berry. Have a feeling I'll be seeing her around more often," he added in an undertone, lifting his brows.

"Your feeling is spot on." Dex clapped him some more as he got to his feet. "Now that I've had that wedding practice by being your best man..."

The two of them kept laughing, as men did, apparently not realizing I was a minute or two from hyperventilation.

He's just kidding. That's what people do.

"Shelby, it was nice seeing you again." Clint turned to smile at me. "Thanks for letting me practice." He gave me a

quick wink before bending to talk to Berry in a hushed voice. When he finished, Berry leaned up on her tiptoes to wrap her arms around his neck.

“What kind of practice?”

“He’s having a baby,” Dex said in a low voice. “Well, his wife is. Closer to the end of the year.”

“So, he gives you wedding practice and you give him child access?”

Dex grinned. “Something like that.” He shifted to wave at Clint. “Dinner next week, don’t forget. Jimmy will have my ass if I don’t bring you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Later, brother.” The door closed with a soft thud behind him.

“Is he your brother?” Berry demanded.

“No. My brother’s name is Preston.”

“Would I like him?”

Dex shrugged. “I don’t always like him myself so I’m not sure.”

Seemingly satisfied with that, Berry tucked Bobbie under her arm and gave Dex a big hug. “Thank you for fixing up my dog.” Then she ran off to have some pizza rolls made by my dad before we left for Dex’s.

“I’ve already got a new one on order,” he said softly as he sat on the sofa and patted his lap. “For when she’s ‘healed’.” He made finger quotes.

I frowned at his lap. “I can’t sit there with my parents just down the hall.”

“Sure you can.” He put his finger up to his lips. “Just be quiet.”

Shaking my head, I perched on his lap and gave in to a smile as I toyed with his hair. “You make my daughter very happy, you know that? Calling a vet to patch up her stuffed animal is just so sweet.”

He brushed my hair back from my face. “Now how can I make *you* very happy? Any hints?”

“You seemed to do just fine the night of our date.” I leaned in to kiss his jaw. “Just don’t get too many ideas.”

On purpose, I made my voice sound teasing, but I wasn’t referring to sex. Pretty sure there wasn’t anything there that was off-limits.

But all these wedding jokes were freaking me out. What was boggling me the most was that *he* didn’t seem vexed. What was that all about? No matter how laid-back he was, there had to be a point where it was too much.

“Too late there, Ms. Wilde. I’m having all kinds of ideas about you.” He gripped a handful of my hair and tugged it back just hard enough to send a frisson of awareness right to my nipples. “Trust me, I’ll make sure you enjoy them.”

TWENTY-ONE

Dexter

SHELBY WAS TRYING TO ACT NATURAL AND FAILING MISERABLY. There was only one thing left to do.

I needed to make her come hard enough she forgot to worry about, well, everything.

“At least it’s not a school night, so getting used to the new bedroom shouldn’t be a big deal.” Shelby was making notes where she sat on the chaise lounge in the master bedroom’s seating area. I couldn’t wait for the Victorian-style furniture to be retired in favor of something actually comfortable to sit on.

Not that she probably paid it any mind. She was sitting upright and making notes at a speed that caused my hand to cramp in sympathy.

“The bed is plenty comfortable,” I offered.

She lifted her head and pinned me in her glare. Yes, I happened to be on the bed, but as it was mine, its comfort was nothing new.

“I meant Berry’s in the guest bedroom.”

“Oh. Good.” Back to note-taking at Mach speed.

Murder averted. At least tonight.

“What are you working on?” I asked in as casual a voice as I could muster.

I was not going to seem like the kind of man who wasn’t supportive of my woman’s career. Of course I was, even on the occasions I wasn’t going to personally benefit from it. I just

wanted another sort of benefit now, especially when I'd loaned Berry my best headphones so she could watch something on YouTube before bed.

Parental controls carefully checked beforehand. Go me.

“On someone's large project. You might know him. Someone who insists on basically tearing down everything to the studs and donating most of the current furnishings for the very large tax write-offs.”

“Not just for tax write-offs.” I undid my tie and looped it over the spindle of the four-poster bed before rising to cross the room to her chaise. Not that she so much as lifted her head. “I know someone else might even like this stuff.”

She kept scribbling, head bent, her long hair draping across her cheek. “I left a stack of magazines in the living room, just for you to get an idea of possibilities. I also have lots of other images you can peruse through when you have some free time—what are you doing?” She looked up as I guided her sweater off her shoulders and down her arms.

“You looked warm.” I folded it and set it on the antique bench at the foot of the bed before turning back to remove her pumps. I set them aside then returned to nudge up her skirt so I could roll off her thigh-highs. One glimpse of her red satin panties caused me to make a sound of approval in my throat. “I like those.”

“Which those are you referring to?”

Was I imagining the husky quality of her voice? She hadn't even removed her reading glasses yet. She'd just straightened her posture to watch me slowly undress her.

As if I was meant to do her bidding.

“Your panties. You know you wore them for me.” I gestured to her outfit, the same skirt now paired with a simple top and a cardigan—now removed.

“I didn't change my skirt when I went home.”

“But I still bet you changed your underwear.” I drew my fingers up the inside of her legs, swallowing a groan at her

obvious shudder as her thighs parted so easily for me. “What about your bra? Same or different?”

“I always match my sets, so I changed both.” She swallowed audibly. “I don’t know why.”

“You wanted to feel sexier. But you can’t *not* be sexy to me. Impossible. Though I gotta say...” I paused to work her panties down her legs, nearly swallowing my tongue at the fresh trim of the golden curls guarding her pussy. “I prefer you naked most of all.”

“Same goes. Though yet again, you’re doing me first. Uh-uh, not this time.” She waited until I tossed her panties and skirt aside then scooted across the chaise, stretching her legs on either side as she sat at the end to undo my pants. Her movements were seductively economical though I didn’t miss the fine tremor in her hands as she tugged at my button and zipper.

Or the hiss of her breath as she freed me from my boxer briefs and gave me a long, thorough stroke that made me groan despite my efforts to not make noise.

I wasn’t used to having a little girl just down the hall.

“Music?” I suggested through gritted teeth as she finally set aside her reading glasses. Though fucking her while she wore them had some possibilities.

Shelby bit her lip, nodding.

Quickly, I shoved myself back in my boxer briefs and made sure my pants would remain up before I moved away to grab the remote. I found a mellow jazz station on my music system and left the volume on low before returning to the chaise, bowing my head to kiss the top of her hair. “Think we need to add soundproofing into the redesign.”

Her head snapped up, and only fast reflexes kept us from colliding. Good thing because I was rather fond of my nose. “But if Berry needs me...”

“If she needs *us*, we can install some kind of alarm system so she can call us. Doesn’t have to be full soundproofing either, just a little...cushioning of the sound, maybe.” I stroked

my fingers through her hair, continuing all the way to the ends. “I don’t want you to feel inhibited.”

When she opened her mouth to argue, I placed one finger against it. “Yes, I want the soundproofing for us. You and me. Because none of this is temporary. But I also want Berry to know we’re available no matter what. Got it, Wilde?”

My lower back tightened when she merely nodded, her eyes so big and trusting that I wanted to give her the world. More than that, I wanted to be the kind of man she deserved, and for a long time, I hadn’t been. But everything was different now.

Me, most of all.

I brushed my thumb over her feather-soft cheek. “Get on the bed. Lose the bra and top while you’re at it.”

I expected her to balk at my authoritative tone, but she merely rose and shed her top, then reached behind herself to slowly undo the bra that was barely containing her gorgeous breasts and let it fall. She sent me a look over her shoulder as she moved toward the bed, her ass twitching in invitation.

One I fully intended to accept.

Shaking back her long, wavy hair, she draped her head over her arm as she lay down on her side, positioning herself so seductively that I had to adjust myself. I didn’t even bother trying to hide it.

Her gaze dropped to my hand. “Don’t stop there. You’re the one who put it away, not me.”

She did have a point.

I removed both my trousers and my boxer briefs, letting out a relieved breath at finally being able to move freely. I did the same with my dress shirt—my jacket was long gone—and joined her on the bed, wasting no time pulling her in my arms.

Before I could even kiss her, she slammed a hand on my chest. “Did you lock the door?”

“Um, no?” Obviously, I should have, and she had a point there too.

“I can do it.”

“Nah, I’ll do it. This kid thing is new to me,” I said under my breath as I rolled out of bed to make sure the door was secure.

I turned back and realized I’d forgotten condoms too. I dug my wallet out of my pants and tossed it on the bed and then I drew her back into my arms. “Now where were we?”

She looked up at me under her thick dark lashes. “I was going to suck you off.”

The part of me in question jerked against her hand as she leaned in to take a long lick, swiveling her head to increase the sensation as her hand twisted in tandem. I gathered her hair in my hands, tentatively pulling it to see her reaction.

Her low moan was all the encouragement I needed.

She increased her suction and slid down lower, and lower still, taking me in until she made the hottest little gagging noise and eased back, her moisture coating almost my entire length. The sheen in her eyes had me drawing her all the way off. “You okay?”

Rather than answering me, she grasped my hand and drew it between her legs. Her thighs were soaked. “So okay,” she said hoarsely.

“Fuck. You blow my mind.”

At her giggle, I grinned and knotted a hand in her hair to bring her mouth to mine for a long, lingering kiss. “As intended.”

“You succeeded.”

She drew back to stare at my shaft. “But I wanted to finish that way too.” Her pout somehow had me thickening even more, which she noticed with a self-satisfied smile as she trailed warm, wet kisses over my swollen length. “I’m sure you’re good for it.”

“Oh, I’m good for it.” There was no holding back my growl as she spread her lips to swallow me down one more

time. “Way I’m feeling I could finish in your mouth, on your tits, and in your pussy before you need a nap.”

“We’ll see,” she said airily, kissing a meandering line up my length before she explored the crown of my cock. Then she sucked me inside her mouth.

“Fuck, Sherbet, you’re about to be made a fine mess of.”

She slid down almost to the base of me, squeezing the root just right to keep me hovering on the edge. With her other hand, she reached up to toy with my nipples, first one and then the other.

In no time, she was on the move south again, though this time she lifted my erection to dart underneath to lick my sac. The slippery slide of her tongue had me fisting the sheets and throwing back my head to drag in air. Even the repetitive clench of her hand around my thigh was making me quiver.

What was this woman doing to me? Not letting me come, that was what.

But I still had some tricks up my sleeve.

I leaned back on my elbow, doing my best imitation of an arrogant king being served, letting her do her worst to me while I threaded the fingers of my other hand through her cascading hair. I kept pushing it out of her face so I could see every movement—the suction of her cheeks, the way her lips stretched so obscenely around me, the slumberous expression in her amber eyes just before the shield of her lashes came down to block me.

“Reach down and show me how wet this is making you.”

She didn’t hesitate, just palmed herself. Her moan rippled along my shaft as I fisted my hand in her hair to make her keep her eyes directed on mine as she got herself off. I didn’t think she would, but she kept surprising me tonight.

I loved it. These new sides she was showing me were making me somehow even harder—especially when she painted her wetness down my abs.

“Jesus, Shelby.” I couldn’t get enough air and the throb at the base of my spine couldn’t be staved off. “Lick it up. Taste yourself like I’m going to taste you. Just lift you right up on my mouth.”

I kept expecting to reach the line of too far, but she complied without question. A brief flicker of indecision moved through her gaze. Then she shimmied up my body just enough to make a show of licking my stomach where she’d wet my skin, whimpering at her own taste and then going a step further, inching up to capture my mouth with her own. Before she could slip back, I slid my hands into her hair and pulled her down against me, fitting us together so perfectly that not groaning was impossible.

“I want you just like this.” I flexed my hips, notching my cock between her legs. Swallowing her moan, taking it inside me to fill up all the places that had been empty without her this past week. “Just you and me, just skin.”

There was no mistaking the momentary panic in her gaze. “I can’t.”

“I know.” I sucked on her lower lip, finally releasing it with a small pop. “I’m just greedy. I want all of you, Shelby. Everything you can give me.”

And every word was sterling truth. I wasn’t a guy who said anything for an orgasm. I could get myself off just fine. But this woman—this relationship—was unlike any I’d ever had before, and I wanted more.

“I’m on the pill but still.” She gestured wildly, and despite what we were talking about, I had to grin. “I’m fertile! Hello!”

I shrugged. “I’m okay with it.”

I was. There wasn’t even a maybe involved. I had no problem taking that chance because to me, it wasn’t bad in any possible way.

Good Lord, I’d turned into Bishop Stone when I wasn’t looking. And that made me grin wider while she stared at me as if I’d lost my marbles.

“We don’t have to. Or not now, anyway.” I slipped my hand between us and parted her damp thighs, realizing with amazement she was even wetter now. “It turns you on I have no interest in making reasonable plans?”

“A little. I don’t know how or why.” She closed her eyes as I stroked her swollen clit, her hips rising and falling as if she wasn’t even controlling her own body. “You do things to me, Dexter Shaw.”

“Right now, I’m making you come. If you’ll fucking cooperate.” When she opened her eyes and growled playfully, I grinned at her, absolutely delighted by her and by life. “Get up on my face.”

The second I maneuvered myself back into the pillows, she climbed up and situated herself near my shoulders.

Close but not close enough.

I dragged her into position and pressed my face against her cleft, drinking down the taste of her with short, fast swipes of my tongue. From behind, I teased that forbidden place between her ass cheeks with the dampened tip of my finger, testing us both with quick little bits of pressure. She arched her back and rode my mouth with abandon, reaching behind herself to hold my hand just where it was.

Surprising me once more.

I used the fingers of my other hand to pump in and out in time with the lashes of my tongue, losing myself in the squeeze of her thighs and her heavy, unsteady breaths.

“Dex...”

Before she could finish the thought, her orgasm hit her hard, making her double over with her fingers tight to my scalp. The flash of pain ripped a sensual groan from me, and I reacted by flipping her off me and onto the mattress. Without warning, I reared up, hiked up her leg, and poised at the entrance to her pussy, about to drive home—

And I stopped, closing my eyes tightly. “Condom. Right. Fuck.” But I fumbled for my wallet and tore one open, rolling it on.

“Someday maybe we won’t,” she whispered, and those words filled my head as I thrust forward, filling her with one long, deep stroke.

Once I was seated, I didn’t move.

“Are you okay?” She brushed my damp hair back from my forehead.

“Savoring,” I replied, again relishing her giggle.

I would never, ever get enough of Shelby’s laughter. Especially when she was naked and wrapped around me, clutching me for all she was worth.

Inside and out.

She leaned up to fuse her lips to mine, and together, we raced toward that pinnacle one more time. Well, she was on her second, and I was still reaching for the first. So close. Sweat dripped into my eyes, and when I ripped my head away to suck in air, her vanilla scent filled me with...peace.

Words I’d never said or even thought before toward a partner hovered *right there*.

It would be so easy to say them and make her deal with what they meant. But I didn’t want this time with us to become anything but light and fun and hot as hell. I didn’t want to be another man who made her life harder. Anything but that.

I also didn’t want to say something meaningful at a time she could dismiss it as sex talk. It was anything but.

I drew her leg up even higher, pounding my frustration at suddenly being the needy one into the giving softness of her body. Her moans took over my thoughts and then I wasn’t forcing her to feel. I didn’t have to. All I wanted to do was give her more. More pleasure, more time. More space to feel whatever she was ready to in that moment.

I wasn’t going anywhere.

On the verge, I pulled back and rocketed forward one last time, sinking into her with a sound of pure satisfaction. Her whimper erupted into a damn near scream as her body went wild around mine.

At the last second, I remembered to cover her mouth. She thrashed around me, biting my palm while my cock punished her pussy because she hadn't quite yet realized I was in love with her.

But I was.

TWENTY-TWO



ALTHOUGH IT WAS NOWHERE NEAR MORNING, A SHORT TIME later I woke on my belly, with someone licking me between my thighs.

Which meant I woke seconds before orgasm. Literally seconds. I opened my mouth and moans came out, not words.

Just unintelligible grunts that ended in Dex's name.

"Good girl, coming on command." He kissed the small of my back. "I knew you'd figure it out."

Some part of me wanted to be annoyed at his heavy-handedness. The rest was happily humming through multiple orgasms yet again.

"It gives your mouth something to do besides running," I mumbled into my arm, letting out a squeal when he spanked my ass.

Hard.

I craned my neck to give him a rude glance. Where was my training-wheel spanking like they had in all the dirty books TJ was always plying me with to "spur my imagination"?

But Dex wasn't looking back at me because he was too busy kissing the place he'd spanked.

So, I sighed and clutched my pillow and let him do whatever he wanted to me for a while. I was too boneless to protest.

Not that I would have anyway.

I'd recently discovered sex was definitely not something I wanted to go without. I wasn't sure how I had for so long.

Then his dog scrabbled at the door.

It took me a few minutes to realize what I'd heard was doggie claws since I didn't have a pet at home, but once I did, I shot straight up on my elbows in bed, making Dex jerk up mid-lick and look around blearily. "What? What happened?"

"Berry. Bob."

"What about them?"

I rolled over and grabbed the sheet, awkwardly yanking it off the bed and hauling it up over my bare breasts. Dex flopped onto the mattress, as naked as could be, pressing his face into his arms on an aggrieved groan that would've made me laugh if I hadn't been worried.

"Why is he coming to us? He could get her to take him out. Though what time is it?"

"Late for her," Dex mumbled.

I hopped up and started searching for my clothes. Somehow my bra was under the chaise, my panties nearby. I put on my panties then I spotted my skirt and one heel and put on my top sans bra. Skipping my thigh-highs seemed prudent too.

After I grabbed my sweater and shoved my arms into the sleeves, I scanned the room for my other heel. It was almost under the bed. I slipped my foot into it gratefully and rushed to the door, throwing it open.

"Um, Shelby—"

I turned back, belatedly realizing Dex was still ass up and still naked. Whoops.

Hot damn, I was a lucky woman.

Thankfully, just Bob was in the hall, not my daughter. Near miss there. My brain was addled from too many orgasms.

There was something I didn't think often. Or ever.

I crouched to pet Bob before I hightailed it down the thankfully very long hall to my daughter's temporary room. Tentatively, I inched open the door, already imagining worst-case scenarios. Though it was past ten, so she should be long asleep.

And so she was, curled up on the floor amidst a million pillows and blankets, far more than she'd started with, surrounded by a dozen dog toys and Uni and Bobbie the pug, who was still wearing her face bandage.

Bob immediately trotted over to Berry and licked her cheek before settling at her side and sticking his nose under her arm. She clutched him close and fell back to sleep without even opening her eyes.

Love squeezed my chest so hard that I had to take a long, steadying breath.

Dex appeared at my side, fully dressed in a pair of silky pajamas, moving as silently as a ghost. He stuck his head in Berry's temporary bedroom and, once he'd ascertained Berry and Bob were asleep, he used the opportunity to kiss my neck.

"Everything okay?" he whispered.

I gestured and his eyes crinkled in the way that never failed to make me want to climb on top of him. "They're so cute. Wonder if I can join in?"

He didn't wait for my answer, just nudged me aside and grabbed a pile of blankets and pillows and camped out, grinning like a loon.

I could fall for this man.

The knowledge settled in my belly as I tightened my fingers around the doorjamb. I didn't run from it. Didn't try to deny it, even to myself. Just let the certainty wash over me and tried to come to terms with the reality.

Here I'd thought he was so crazy, and apparently, I was the same. Or more alike than different. Or maybe it was just chemical and not involving love at all.

Bob jumped up and scampered over to his owner, clomping onto his stomach and making him howl from the weight of his bulk. Berry woke up and started giggling as Dex tried to wrestle Bob off him.

He did not succeed.

Soon enough, I was laughing too. Helplessly. Kind of shocked that this was now my life and so, so grateful for it.

And I wanted to get in that pillow fort really badly. So, screw it, I was going to.

I crossed the room and snagged a couple of pillows and a blanket from the pile on the other side of Dex before wading into the fray. I picked a spot and fell backward laughing as Bob decided to show his excitement for my presence at the party.

He flung himself at me, not settling until I gave him a big hug and accepted his doggie kiss square on the mouth. Berry's laughter rang out in competition with Dex's and it took all my willpower not to jump up to run to the bathroom to wash out my mouth. Bob's breath was a lot under the best of circumstances. But I just buried my face in his fur and shrieked as Dex pried off my heels to tickle my bare feet.

"Your toes are rainbow-colored," he commented, sounding fascinated.

"I did them for her," Berry announced proudly. "But it's been days. You should get a new color." She popped up and cocked her head, staring at Dex. "Do you have any nail polish here?"

He frowned. "Me?"

Berry nodded enthusiastically. "Boys in my class do their nails sometimes."

His frown grew. "I've never thought of it. But now I'm wondering why not."

"I can do your nails!" Berry scrabbled forward and grabbed his hand mid-tickle. "Oh, you need lotion."

I wanted to dispute that, but I wasn't ready for that conversation with my almost-nine-year-old daughter.

"Hey, can we order Amazon overnight? My friend does that sometimes when she stays at her dad's house. He bribes her that way." Berry gave me a knowing look.

"No, we cannot," I said before Dex could indulge her. Because he would. He'd order her a Barbie castle one-hour delivery if such a thing existed.

And it probably did.

"Oh, I have some in my bookbag!" Her delight lasted long enough to grab the bag in question so she could root through the front pocket. "Babs traded with me for my rainbow. Gave me sparkle black." She held up the bottle triumphantly, and I couldn't say which of us was more dismayed.

There were probably worse colors.

An hour later, I had fresh toenail polish—she'd polished right over my peeling rainbow since, hey, black covered all—and Dex had his first manicure. Which he kept staring at as if he was intrigued. "I have court tomorrow afternoon. That should be interesting."

"I think you look handsome." I tried to keep a straight face but the idea of him going to court with manicured nails made me laugh. He decided to take the opportunity to tickle me again and we fell into the pillow pile, laughing like fools.

Again. Seemed to be a common theme lately.

Berry stood up. "Bob has to pee."

Before she could march out of the room, Dex was up on his feet. "I'll take him."

Berry started to protest but Dex and Bob took off before she could do more than sputter. She dropped down onto her butt and wrapped her arms around her updrawn legs. "I wanted to go."

"Next time."

Berry wrinkled her nose. "Whatever."

I slung my arm around her shoulders. “We didn’t really get to talk today very much. Did your teacher tell you what she wanted to talk to me about?”

“Yeah. Kind of. She said it was a ‘process,’” air quotes included, “to figure out the best way to help me. But I’ve missed some homework.”

“What homework have you missed?”

“Nothing much,” Berry said quickly. “Just a few dumb worksheets.”

I shut my eyes. “Your teacher said she had more to tell me and asked me to come in next week, so that must’ve been part of that. I’ve been distracted. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. You never have any fun. Or you didn’t before. Like...none, Mom.”

I opened my eyes and found her hazel ones locked on mine with a far-too-adult expression. I wasn’t ready to see that look in her eyes.

She was worried about *me*, and that so wasn’t her job.

“I know you’re upset because I caused trouble today,” she said in a small voice.

“Oh, honey, I’m not upset about that. I’m upset if you’ve needed help and didn’t feel like you could come to me.” I cuddled her into my side and kissed the top of her hair.

She didn’t say anything.

“You know you can, right? No matter what. I’m never too busy for you. And I never will be. Anything you need we will figure out a way to make happen. Unless it’s a Barbie castle,” I said to make her smile.

She didn’t even care about dolls all that much anymore. She was more a racing-around-outside kind of girl.

“I like being here,” she said softly.

“Here? Like this house?”

“Well, yeah, it’s nice, but it’s not about the house. I just like being with Bob and Dex and you when you’re happy.” She lowered her gaze. “I only knew the difference after. Before, I thought that was just you.”

I didn’t know what to say. For a minute, I wished for Dex—and that was nuts, because he wasn’t a parent. I was the one who should know how to handle this. But I just did not because there was truth in her words.

“I’m trying,” I murmured.

“I know. Me too.” She let out a world-weary sigh that was way too heavy for an almost-nine-year-old.

“We’ll figure it out together.” I leaned my cheek on her head.

“With Dex too?”

There was no point in arguing that I didn’t know about Dex yet. Obviously, everything was too new with us, but if I followed my heart, it would lead me to him every time. That didn’t mean it was right—or that I could trust these feelings—but I also couldn’t deny my happiness any longer.

I had to try. Not even just for me, but for my daughter.

“With Dex too,” I murmured, resisting the urge to add on qualifiers. “We’re all going to try.”

TWENTY-THREE

Dexter

I CAME BACK IN TO FIND MY GIRLS ASLEEP IN THE PILLOW fort.

Chairs held up one of the larger blankets so they could sleep under the tent-like contraption. Their arms and legs were tangled, and both were sawing them off.

Love surged through me too fast for me to deny. It wasn't even a question. More like...oh, okay, *that's* what that unsettled feeling was.

I didn't have to ask Bishop or Preston. Neither of those clowns had told me that when it happens for real, there was nothing to wonder about. You knew. Or at least *I* knew.

My only question was how I was going to convince her.

Maybe I should ask Clint about the whole convincing thing. Bishop and Preston were far too smug about the entire process.

I fought back a yawn as Bob burst forward and leaped into the pillow fort with his usual grace, ending up sprawled in his typical undignified manner. But he was happily asleep in mere minutes while I debated if I should go back to my bed or if I should make sure Shelby and Berry had enough covers under the blanket tent since it was a windy night despite the late spring warmth.

Then Shelby rolled over and opened her eyes long enough to extend her arm in my direction. "Why are you so far away?" she asked in a sleepy voice.

I did not know.

I joined the pile, making sure I didn't take up more than my share of room. I'd never been part of a pillow fort before. Even one that was now, other than the one draping blanket, basically just a pile of bedding and toys, mostly of the dog variety.

Not to mention, I was practically certain I'd need to get a massage tomorrow after sleeping at this odd angle, but I didn't care. Some pains were more than worth it.

And then Shelby wiggled forward to curl under my arm and hell, yeah, it was worth it.

The next time I opened my eyes, the room was empty. Even my dog had abandoned me.

But I smiled at the memory just the same—until I rolled over and my back cramped in a wicked spasm.

“Ow, fuck me.”

“Can I take a rain check right now?” Shelby was standing barefoot in the doorway, a cup of something steaming in her hands.

I tried to reply and only groaned instead.

“What's wrong with you?”

“Back,” I managed, feeling like an old man as I tried to shift on my pile of pillows to something that approached a comfortable position.

“Oh, no. What happened to it?”

I gestured around myself. “I knew better and yet I wanted to spoon. Or spork. Or just cuddle with someone besides my dragon-breath dog.”

“Aww, or else your athletics last night.” She came closer, hiding her smile behind her mug as her eyebrows lifted pointedly.

“I'm not even thirty, for fuck's sake. I think my problem is I haven't been getting *enough* athletics. You and Berry should move in.”

I only heard myself when her eyes widened. Her grip faltered on the mug, and she bobbed the cup, splashing the leg of my pajamas. “W—what?”

I frowned at myself. So much for convincing her through traditional means. Should’ve figured I’d never be patient enough to ask a friend for help, and, you know, actually execute a plan.

I got up on my knees and walked over to her that way, doing my best not to wince at the ache in my lower back. “I mean, it makes sense, right?”

“Sense how?” Her voice was officially in squeak mode.

“I love being with you. I love being with Berry. If you both were always here, I can’t say I’d mind.”

“It’s really that simple for you. You have a whim, so why not make it reality?”

“Pretty much.” I jerked a shoulder. “Not a whim I’ve ever had before, admittedly, but I’m willing to roll with it. What the hell, right? I know you’re going to say you can’t live on a whim for your daughter, but she’s like me. She’d be into it, we both know it.” I gripped her hips and kissed the little slice of skin visible above the stretchy pants she’d changed into. “So, let’s just go for it.”

“Dex, she’s not even nine. Sure, she’d be into it. She also thinks two scoops of ice cream is a perfectly acceptable dinner.”

“It’s not?” When she laughed, I kissed her belly one more time. “It’s a wild ride, I know. But I like wild rides. I want to go on this one, but only with you and Berry. And I won’t change my mind next week.” I lifted my gaze to hers. “I won’t *ever* change my mind. Not when it’s made up like this. I promise you.”

“Last weekend, I accused you of sleeping with the pet-sitter. Remember that?”

“Vaguely.”

“You let me believe you were meeting a female friend—”

“I met my brother and Bishop and then we went to attend April’s bath birth. The female I spent most of the night with was expelling a large, surprisingly cute baby girl from her nether regions. So, you weren’t altogether wrong on the area involved, I just didn’t do the implanting.”

“You are officially crazy, you know that?” She brushed her fingers through my hair and gulped what smelled like coffee.

“I am. And we don’t make any kind of sense on paper. I know you think I’m halfway insane.”

“Three-fourths?”

I shrugged. “Fair. But I never did any of this with anyone else. Know why?”

Her lips trembled. “No. I honestly have no idea.”

“Because they weren’t you.”

She shut her eyes and steadied herself with a hand on my shoulder. “I’m not saying no.”

I let out the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding in a rush.

“I’m also not saying yes.”

“And now we’re back to normal.” I kissed her belly again. “It’s not a limited-time offer. Take all the time you need.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’m not asking you to make your life harder. I’m asking you because I fucking love my house being full with my two girls. I know I sound like a sap, but I don’t care. You both make me happy. So, why wouldn’t I ask? Hell, why wouldn’t I beg?” I motioned to myself. “Even on my knees.”

She stroked my hair and held me against her belly until I shifted and pain arced through my back. “You should be in bed. Or on the couch. Or maybe you need a warm shower first then a massage and meds.”

I stood and wrapped my arms around her. “Don’t suppose you’re interested in a shower too?”

“I would be if Berry wasn’t camped out in the living room with a bowl of cereal and some cartoon she found.” She tipped her forehead to mine and lowered her voice. “I’m still hoping she slept through last night’s shenanigans.”

“We were quiet. Mostly. Or I was. You, on the other hand...” I grinned. “Hard to keep a lid on your...enthusiasm.”

Trying not to laugh, she whacked my arm, her eyes going soft as I gripped her hand and kissed her knuckles. “You’re far more romantic than I ever imagined, Dexter Shaw.”

“I’m more romantic than I ever guessed either,” I admitted before I led her out of the room and down the hall to the master bedroom.

I wandered around picking up the remaining clothes we’d neglected to grab the night before—I was tempted to keep her thigh-high tights for posterity—and then realized I was in no shape to be bending for any reason. I swallowed a groan and set aside the hose on the bench at the end of the bed. Maybe she’d forget to take them home.

A guy in pain could hope, right?

I turned back to see her lingering in the doorway, sipping from her mug and watching me thoughtfully. “What?” I asked.

“I can see myself here with you,” she said slowly, pursing her lips. “I never would’ve thought it could be possible, but I actually can.”

I made myself keep my face neutral as I walked back to her. “So, you’re cool with my wild sex parties?”

“I must’ve missed those.”

“Me too.” I braced my arm above her head on the doorframe. “I can see you here with me too. I can see Berry here too. Especially since she likes taking out Bob so much.”

Her lips twitched. “She took him out twice today already.”

“Figured that’s why he hadn’t tried to pounce on me in my sleep.”

“She fed him too. Without being asked to.” Shelby took a long breath. “She really likes being here. She trusts you.”

“Good. I’m glad. I like having her here. And hey, if she wants to adopt—”

My cell phone went off from where I’d left it somewhere in the tangled bedsheets. I turned to the bed and dug around for the phone, finally unearthing it by the third ring.

“What’s up, Ice?”

“Did you neglect to reschedule your meeting with one Eli Turner?”

“Um, we didn’t actually manage to connect yesterday.”

“So, that’s a yes. What do you want me to do with him?” She sounded uncharacteristically grumpy.

Futilely, I rubbed the muscle currently spasming in my lower back. “I don’t suppose he’ll come back later? Or next week maybe?”

“I don’t suppose you could ascertain that yourself?”

Definitely grumpy. “Okay, put him on.”

I expected more attitude since giving me sass was one of the things she did best, but she didn’t say anything before a smooth voice greeted me.

Was he hanging out by her desk? Usually, she kept visitors in the waiting area, not by her station.

“Hi, Eli. I’m sorry I’m not there. I hurt my back.” Better to blame my tardiness on that than on sexual sleepovers and pillow forts.

“Oh, no problem. I get having back problems in this business.” He laughed drily. “Since I already cleared my calendar for a couple hours for this, I can swing by your place. Does that work for you?”

Hmm. The guy must really want to take on some of my overflow. Or maybe I was being benevolently granted some help from the universe due to past good deeds or something.

But if my father liked the guy, some small, petty part of me wanted to cancel the plan altogether. I couldn't do that though. I had to do what was best for the firm.

“Sure, that works.” I glanced toward the doorway—which was now empty. “Hey, you handled Shelby Wilde’s divorce?”

“I did. Why?”

“She’s my girl.”

“Oh, okay. No problem.”

“I didn’t assume there would be, but I just wanted to put it out there.”

“All good. She’s a great woman and mom, far as I’m concerned. Her ex, however...”

“Yeah. We’re of one mind there. See you when you get here.”

“Great. Here’s Isis.”

“All set, boss?” Her voice was practically frosty.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing. I’m at work as agreed upon. What’s wrong with you is a better question. Back problems? Since when?”

“I have this irritating spasm sometimes. Look, Ice, I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you for flaking out on today’s meeting. I meant to reschedule, but I forget to call him back last night to say today wouldn’t work. I’m sorry.”

“Because you were on pleasure island, I’m guessing?”

She didn’t sound the least bit pleased with me. Not an unusual situation, but this time, I wasn’t completely sure why. “Suppose you could say that. But I’ll make it up to you. Eli coming on board would be a good thing, right?”

“Jury is out on that one. Later.” She clicked off.

I shook my head as I set my phone on the nightstand and went to get ready for my meeting. Women were amazing as a whole, but sometimes, I just did not get them.

And now you want to bring two into your home voluntarily?

I had to grin as I stripped out of my pajamas next to the shower. I most definitely did. I wanted to explore whatever came with them. I'd always been looking for my next adventure.

It just had never occurred to me that my biggest adventure could be coming home to a family every night.

My family.

I stepped into the shower and turned the water on high and hot. I grabbed my alpine shampoo, meant to remind me of downhill skiing on a winter's day even when it was hot as hell out. That wasn't just yet, as we were in the late spring here, but the invigorating mint hit my nose, waking me up the rest of the way.

I tipped back my head as the needles of steaming water dug into my neck and cramping back, trying and failing not to moan.

Then the shower door opened with a screech. Naked Shelby stood on the other side, peering up at the track of the door while I was mesmerized by her curves waking up the one part of me that never seemed to need much rest.

Thank God.

"That needs to be fixed. On the mental list." She angled her head, her eyes widening at my morning predicament. "Well, good morning to you too."

"Hi." I tilted my head, looking my fill at her sumptuous curves. She didn't have a ton of them, but the ones she had were choice. "I'm really onboard with that heated floor we talked about, by the way. My shampoo is making me think of winter and that would be really nice."

She wrinkled her nose. "Your mind is a wild and wonderful place. How do you feel about a towel-warming rack too, in keeping with the theme?"

"Can I bend you over this warming rack? Then yes."

When she only grinned up at me, I gripped her elbows and lifted her into the shower, delighting myself with her squeal even as my back protested.

“Mmm,” she murmured, “you smell good. Manly. Is that...” She grabbed the green bar of soap and took a large sniff as I set her on her feet. “Eucalyptus. My favorite.”

Before I could comment, she slathered the soap over her generous breasts, her heavy lashes coming down as she released a sigh of pure pleasure. “Stop watching me and get washing. Berry will be back in with Bob in no time and I’m already thinking I should be watching her out back.”

“She’ll be fine. Wow, you’re letting her take him out on her own?”

“Yeah. I need to chill out. Not like this is a dangerous neighborhood and the road isn’t even that close.” She bit her lip as she put the soap back on the shelf. “And I’m a little bit addicted to you. Not sure if I can tackle my day without one more taste.”

Joy rolled through me in one continuous wave, and for a minute, I forgot to focus on the pain knotting my back. “Only one?”

“No. As many as I can get while that door’s locked.” She leaned up on her tiptoes, locking her arms around my neck while she pressed her hard nipples into my chest. “I called into work too,” she added. “Well, I told them I’m working,” she kissed my neck, “off,” more kisses across my shoulder, “the premises today.”

“Good. I’d like to work you off the premises.” I slipped my hand over her breasts and then over her curvy backside, slipping in the suds on my way to slide between her legs. She was already wet for me, but when I tried to urge her upward, to climb onto my hips so I could back her into the shower wall, she merely dug her fingers into my lower back.

I moaned for a whole different reason as she kneaded my tight muscles.

“Nope, not even doing that. You need to relax and feel better.”

“I will feel better if you—Jesus, woman, do you have magic hands or what?”

She merely gave me a secret smile before she dropped down to her knees before me. “A magic mouth too,” she said silkily a moment before she rimmed my cock with her tongue. She sucked me down as I squeezed my eyes shut and braced my fists on the tiled wall above her head.

Her mouth was like heaven, distracting me from my pain and all the thoughts swirling through my head.

Isis’s odd behavior, my dad, work.

All the problems simply disappeared under her focused attention as she drew strongly on me and cupped my sac, teasing out my groan. I was helpless against my need to thrust into her mouth, and she encouraged me, meeting my gaze with every stroke. Squeezing me just right that I didn’t go off but I was so damn close. She knew it, playing me expertly.

She eased back, whispering my name. “Look at me, baby.”

While I marveled at her use of the endearment, she cupped her arm under her tits, offering me a visual I couldn’t look away from. I tried not to push her. Tried not to be rough as I wove my fingers through her hair, but she’d resumed sucking me so strongly, she tempted my darker urges out of their hiding place.

And when I pulled harder, she moaned, the sound moving along my length and shoving me up to the edge then over it. She swallowed and swallowed and then she shifted back, letting some drip from her mouth onto her breasts.

Her unbelievably beautiful breasts.

While I was still gasping for air, she stood and kissed me dead on the mouth, letting me taste myself on her plump lips. Between us, she dipped her fingers between her legs.

“I could get myself off just from that. It excites me to excite you,” she confessed, dropping her forehead to my

shoulder. “I’m just not used to touching myself.”

“We’ll figure it out.” My fingers tangled with hers on her pussy and I caught her mouth to swallow her moans as we kissed.

The dirty, erotic kiss, flavored with what she’d given me, stretched and lingered until I was nudging her back against the tiles and driving my fingers into her, deep and hard.

“Mine,” I murmured, dragging my teeth over her full lower lip. “I want you to be mine.” She was already nodding, her hips rising and falling in response to my touch, her needy whimpers inflaming me until I wasn’t even sure what all I’d said.

“Yes. Yes, I want to be yours,” she panted back, her expression dazed as if she didn’t even know what she was agreeing to.

“Come for me, Shelby. Come for *you*.”

That was what sent her flying. Her eyes opened and locked on mine and the relief and pleasure I saw twined there made me want to haul her up so I could plow into her, despite my back.

I could handle it. Maybe. Or maybe I’d make a damn fool out of myself.

As if she could read my mind, she reached up to cup my cheek before she gave me a quick soaping with the bar she grabbed off the shelf. “No,” she said shakily. “Not until you’re feeling better. Or maybe when you’re stretched out on the couch, I can climb on top of you and ride you...”

“Maybe means yes.” I hurriedly rinsed off our bubbles and dumped some shampoo on both of our heads. Hers went into her eyes and she flailed at me, flapping her hands and making me laugh long and low.

Her laughter would forever be one of my favorite sounds.

What wasn’t one of my favorite sounds? The sharp rap on the bathroom door from what sounded like a forceful hand. “Dex?”

Eli. What the actual fuck?

I exchanged a glance with Shelby. Forget a peachy glow. She was now approximately the color of the setting sun, her cheeks blazing. “Is that—”

I nodded grimly. “Your divorce lawyer,” I mouthed, grabbing the nearest towel and enfolding her in it as she started batting at my hands.

“Dex!” Shelby’s whisper was panicked.

“I’ll handle it,” I said in a low, confident voice, wrapping a towel around my waist and tucking her behind me in the hopes of hiding her behind the door once I opened it. “Coming, Eli.”

I pulled open the door, simultaneously nudging Shelby behind it. Unfortunately, I nudged too hard and she tripped on the bath mat, knocking over the metal stand with bathroom stuff like the plunger and cleaning stuff I’d neglected to put away the last time I’d taken a sponge to the damn shower.

That taught me to try to keep shit clean.

Somehow I kept the smile on my face while greeting Eli, but it faltered at the sight of Isis beside him—and it disappeared entirely when I saw the little girl peeking out from behind *her*.

“Berry, what are you doing here? This is the bathroom. It should be...private.” It took all I could do not to glance furtively over my shoulder to ensure Shelby was more covered than...not.

“Then why aren’t you alone?” she replied. “I see you hiding, Mom.”

“Thanks, kid,” she muttered, banging into something behind me and letting an impressive string of curse words fly.

I barely managed not to laugh.

“C’mon, Berrtastic, we’ll let your mom finish getting ready in here and we can give Bob his post-walk treat,” I said, herding her away from the bathroom door as best as I could despite Isis and Eli’s gawking.

Hadn't those two ever taken a shower with a significant other before? Where was the excitement?

Surreptitiously, I looked down at myself to make sure nothing was revealed. Not a damn thing. Unless Shelby was revealing something, and I wasn't turning to check her out just in case.

Though I wanted to.

"We shouldn't be here. Berry ran off and we chased after her... Anyway, we'll wait in the...seating area," Isis decided, grabbing Eli's arm as I urged Berry to head into the hall.

"Good idea." Better than a bathroom conference at least.

Bob trotted upstairs to meet us, his mouth dotted with crumbs indicating he'd already had his treat. But what was one more if it distracted Berry from thinking about sex? Or worse, questioning me about having sex with her mother?

Dear Lord.

I shuffled Berry and Bob downstairs to get a couple more treats from the kitchen. Bob ate them as if he'd been starving silently to death, as he usually did. Then he flopped down on the floor to gnaw on his rawhide bone and I led Berry back upstairs to her temporary room, casually asking what she thought about the current color scheme.

And would she like it if we maybe painted the room in shades of rainbow this coming weekend?

To which she squealed uproariously and forgot about nearly seeing her mother and I naked together. I would fervently hope she hadn't seen anything scandalous until the end of time.

"I have to go talk to my coworker and possible coworker," I started backing out of the room, "but I'll be back in a bit and we can figure out lunch. We'll surprise your mom, how's that?"

"Okay." Then she propped her hands on her hips. "Why do you like to have the sex in the shower? There's, like, zero room."

I started to say “you can make it work” before I recalled I should not be saying that. Instead, I sent up a brief mental plea to Shelby for some sex guidance.

“She came in to rub my back because I’m in pain. From my back,” I added, demonstrating by rubbing my spine.

She nodded soberly. “Sure thing.”

“No, really. When I’m stressed out, my back gets sore and this floor is hard and I should’ve slept in my bed, not in here, but the pillow fort was so cool and—okay, I’m just going to go.” I pointed past her at the nearest wall. “Rainbows!”

The sound of her giggling followed me down the hall to the master bedroom, where Shelby, Isis, and Eli were camped out on the settee and chairs in the seating area, chatting like old friends.

I supposed they *were* old friends, sort of. Or at least knew each other.

But Shelby seemed decidedly more at ease than the other two, despite her attire being several towels, somehow a surprisingly discreet look. Her shoulders, calves, and face were the only skin she was revealing.

Dammit.

“Ice, how did you end up here too?”

Isis jumped to her feet, sliding a sharp sidelong look at Eli before she charged toward me. “Dex, we need to talk. Now.”

“Can I get dressed first?”

“No.”

Eli coughed into his hand, and suddenly, she reversed course. “You know what? Yes. Please get dressed. Let’s keep a modicum of professionalism on the table, shall we?”

I was tempted to remind her she’d been part of the brigade to interrupt us in the shower, but I decided to just nod.

“I’ll be in the kitchen after you put on some damn pants. And a shirt,” she called over her shoulder before shutting the bedroom door behind her.

“Why did she come here?” I asked Eli, who spread his hands wide between his knees.

“Better ask her.”

I frowned and went to grab the bottle of Tylenol off the nightstand. “What is going on?”

“Nothing major,” he said, flashing his most shark-like lawyer smile before rising and following her out. “I’ll be in the kitchen too.”

I dry-swallowed the pills and dropped into the chair Eli had vacated. “Why do I have a feeling this day is going to just be one headache after another?”

“Because you’re very wise. And very cute.” Shelby stood to pat my cheek. “And you do need some pants. Where’s Berry?”

“Pondering why we would have the sex in the shower when there’s, like, zero room.” I hooked my arm around her waist and unceremoniously dumped her in my lap.

Her only response was to cover her face with her hands. “My fault,” she muttered. “I’ve turned into a horny cow with no impulse control.”

“A beautiful one.” I kissed her shoulder and tugged down her hands. “I distracted her with talk of a rainbow bedroom here.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did. I would’ve offered to buy her a pony to get her off that topic.”

“And she would accept it.” Shelby sighed and peeked through the wet ropes of her hair at me. “You don’t play fair.”

“Usually not, no. I play to win.” I frowned. “At the beginning of my career, all I wanted to do was make max money and decimate the opposition as if it was a big video game where I was the lone avenger. You know, my client gets all the toys they want and their former spouse walks away with nothing. Everyone who matters is happy. Or so I used to think.”

She studied my face. “Not anymore?”

“No.” I hitched her up higher on my lap, making sure her towel was still in place. “Now I get why Preston walked away and basically thought I was an asshole for making my peace with it being all about cash. Because it isn’t. These are real people and there are no boats or cars or chateaus in the south of France that make up for making someone miserable. Emotions are more important than money. And if kids are involved...” I tucked her hair behind her ear. “My brother was right. I was an ass.”

“It was your job to get your client what they wanted. You do it well. How does it make you an ass?”

“Because I forgot there were real humans involved. I did it intentionally too. I knew I wouldn’t be able to do this job for long if I didn’t lock the softer parts of me away. And what else could I do? I don’t have any other skills. I’m a showboater in court. Period.”

“You care about people, Dex. If I’d met you when I was going through my divorce...” She paused and cocked an eyebrow as my lips twitched. “I’m not talking about sex for one second.”

“Dammit. Sorry. Keep going. Please. I want to know what you were going to say.” It shocked me how much I needed to hear her thoughts on this.

“Well, that was a time I was scared and felt so alone. It would’ve helped me so much to have a sympathetic ear who made it clear they were on my side. Fighting for me. Not just to say they won but because they cared about me and my daughter, you know?”

“Yeah,” I said quietly, rubbing her knee soothingly. And to my utter surprise, her steady weight on my lap had calmed me to the point my leg wasn’t jiggling.

I wasn’t antsy and restless and eager to get away from this conversation.

“Do you like Eli?” I asked suddenly.

“Yeah. My former lawyer, remember?”

“Yes. Did he seem like he cared about you and Berry? Did he make you think he was on your side?”

She nodded. “He helped us get through it quickly and calmly. No drama. He handled as much as possible so all I needed to do was sign on the dotted line and I got my daughter. Nothing mattered more.”

“I get that. And I get that fighting for any other reason is pointless and empty. And just feels fucking shallow. I just didn’t know why it didn’t feel like enough anymore.” I blew out a breath and rested my forehead on her shoulder. “I also liked working with my family. I never realized how much until they were gone. Even my asshole father. I want to be part of a unit. My brother has his best friend and his woman and I brought on Isis, and she’s a big help, but I want to be part of a team.” I swallowed hard, lifting my head to meet her eyes. “In all things.”

She brushed my hair back from my face, searching my gaze. “Anyone would be lucky to be on your team,” she whispered.

The knock on the bedroom door stirred us both from, well, staring at each other. The moment had felt heavy and important and I didn’t appreciate being interrupted.

Until I heard Eli’s voice.

“Sorry, man, but Isis needs to talk to you. I’ve got some other stuff on the docket—”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to keep you waiting. I’ll be right down,” I called, holding Shelby’s gaze.

“We can talk more later?” I murmured, rubbing her leg to soothe myself as much as or more than her.

She was fast becoming my touchstone in all things. Her and Berry.

“We can. Go talk to Isis and Eli.” She pressed her forehead to mine. “Not that you asked, but if you’re thinking of bringing on Eli, I think he’d be great for your office. Everyone needs help sometimes.” She winced. “Even me.”

“You? No. I’ll never believe it.” I smiled and gave her a quick kiss before nudging her off my lap.

Ten minutes later, I’d dressed and gotten ready, in Dex fashion—which constituted of a suit and a Batman T-shirt—and combed my hair and shaved. Not bad for a home meeting. But I already felt better than I had upon waking, which probably had as much to do with the orgasm as the Tylenol. And maybe even the chat with my girl.

Shelby was a damn blessing in so many ways.

I strode into the kitchen and stopped short when Isis jerked up from the table. She exchanged a glance with Eli, where he stood leaning against the counter, and took a deep breath and announced, “I started to have feelings for you, but it’s over now. So, nothing has to change.”

Then she grabbed one of the frying pans hanging from the rack above the counter and, though she seemed tempted to hit Eli with it, slammed it down on the range. “Eggs anyone?”

TWENTY-FOUR

Dexter

I DIDN'T WALK RIGHT OUT OF THE ROOM AT HER ADMISSION, but it was a close thing.

And that calmness I'd felt upstairs?

Had now left the premises.

"Say what?" I asked, flummoxed. "Why? You think I'm a childish dick, remember?"

Eli's eyebrows lifted, and I remembered suddenly I wanted this man to work with me. "In a manner of speaking," I said to him with a sheepish smile.

"This is none of my business," he said quickly, vacating the room and maybe the house entirely before I could say jack.

I couldn't really blame him.

I shoved a hand through my hair and Isis banged a spatula. "Don't start pushing your hand through your hair."

I did it again just to annoy her.

She heaved out a sigh. "What is wrong with me? I know you're the most annoying man on the planet. Literally. But you're also sweet and you want to make the world a better place, even if you get lost in trying to compete with your brother—"

"Wait, what?"

She waved the spatula. "Who always stops to talk to the new divorcees, even after the case is theoretically over? Last month, you even gave Charlie Dinkums your home number

when he kept crying over his wife. I mean, you were always like that, but you've been doing it even more this past year, which is part of the reason you need Eli. The amount of man hours you spend on each case is just boggling. Why are you staring at me?"

I rubbed my suddenly aching temple. Tylenol was no match for this crowd. "You think I do that already? I thought I didn't do it enough. Charlie is different. We got to be friendly, yeah, but it's not like—"

"What about Mary Donnelly? You talk to her however many times she calls, and she calls a *lot*. Last week, you had me send her a plant and chocolates and wrote out the card yourself with your home number in it. Again. She keeps losing it, and you give it to her again and again although she drives you crazy. Dex, you're a damn saint. That's why your clients can't stop recommending you all over town and you have more business than you could possibly do on your own. And why you need Eli. That know-it-all," she added under her breath.

"You don't like him?" I scratched the back of my neck and fervently hoped he wasn't in earshot.

Although if he was smart, he was probably long gone.

"I don't know him. He just thinks he knows everything. Typical man." She dumped some of the liquid egg batter from the carton into the pan. I had no clue who would be eating that other than Isis, since Berry had already had breakfast and I was already thinking about lunch.

Maybe Shelby would want Isis's eggs. But in any case, I wasn't about to argue with her.

I was still concerned for her mental health if she'd convinced herself she had a thing for me. I truly didn't believe it.

But I clearly had a masochistic streak because I couldn't help asking about it even so.

"Now you have a thing for me, so you've been meaner to me lately because you're mad about it?"

Dark eyes blazing, she whirled on me, and I prepared to be blasted where I stood. Instead, she opened and closed her mouth and let out a long sigh. “Yeah, that about sums it up.” Then she pointed at me. “You can’t make me feel any worse than I do right now, just saying.”

“I don’t want to make you feel worse. I just think you might be...confused.” I leaned against the stove beside her, hoping standing next to her and an open flame weren’t dangerous to my health.

“Confused about what?”

“That, you know, we’ve been single together for a very long time. And now I’m—”

“In love with Shelby, yeah.” She waved me on to continue.

I did a double take. “I didn’t exactly say I was in love with her. It’s so new. We barely know each other. I do love most everything I know about her, but to say I’m in love with her, period, is a lot.” I frowned, recalling last night’s certainty on that very subject. Yeah, I was in love with her. “Then again, I asked her to move in today.”

“You did what?” She hauled me into a rib-crushing hug. “I’m so happy for you.”

I tugged her back to arm’s length. “I don’t think you understand how crushes work.”

She laughed in my face. “I didn’t even know I had a teensy-weensy thing for you until that mansplainer Eli called me on it.”

“How did he call you on having a crush on me?”

“We were talking, and he said I was unnecessarily harsh and he wanted to know if we were engaged in a ‘personal’ relationship because of how protective I was over you.”

“Since when?”

“Since always, you jerk. I can insult you but no one else can, ever.”

“He insulted me?”

“No, he just indicated Bishop had commented you have many interests that keep you busy. And I might’ve threatened to rip off his balls if he said anything like that to you. I know you’re sensitive about being distractible and...well, he’s not allowed to make comments. Ever.”

“Aww, Ice.”

“Then I informed him you were dating Shelby and probably loved her, so of course I couldn’t be interested in you that way. But then maybe that’s why I started to be. I’ve never seen you...domesticated.” She bumped my arm with her own. “It’s kind of hot.”

“You’re pushing it, Jenkins.”

“No, I’m serious. It looks good on you. But yeah, I’ll admit in the back of my mind I always thought maybe the pact we made at fourteen would come into play. You know? You aren’t a bad fail-safe, Shaw.”

“Oh my God. No way.” I started to laugh. Hard. “The married-at-forty pact? If we didn’t find anyone else?”

She nodded somberly.

I stopped laughing. “You’re entirely too good for me.”

“Yeah. I know. But you *are* pretty cute.” She sighed. “I even had a moment when Preston found Ryan. I never thought he’d ever find an actual human woman. Some kind of robot, sure, but an actual human? No way.”

I had to laugh again. “Yeah, it was a mystifying moment. Wait until they procreate. Your head may explode.”

“Oh, God. Or get married.” She shuddered, sliding me a sidelong glance. “Though if you’re moving in with Shelby, you might be first on either of those.”

“Don’t you want to warn her about me?”

“Oh, yeah. I want to warn her you love harder than anyone and you’re the most loyal person ever and you’d go to the end of the Earth for someone who matters to you. Think she can handle all that?”

I swallowed hard and turned to pull her into my arms. “I love you, Ice. You’ll always be my first girl.”

She hugged me back, blinking entirely too fast. “No, I won’t be. But I’m good just being in your life. I’ll get over this verging-on-middle-age loneliness crap I have going on. It won’t be weird. Promise.” She sniffled. “Shelby’s lucky. But so are you. She’s a damn good woman, Dexterous, and don’t you forget it, or I’ll kick your ass.”

“Oh, thank God. I was afraid you were going to promise to be nice to me.” I shuddered. “I can’t abide by that. So, don’t even think about it, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Is that why you came over here? To tell me you don’t know why you have a crush on me?”

“Not a crush exactly. Let’s not talk about it ever again.”

“Sounds good to me. But I’m gonna use it for blackmail with the moms and you can’t stop me.”

“Oh, they already know.” She covered her face with her hands, all of her rings winking. “That’s why they called you that night. Your mom was determined to get you to marry me while I was *amenable* to the idea, as she said. But then she realized you were way into Shelby and basically gave up.”

I choked and then tipped back my head. “Our parents need hobbies, man.”

“Don’t they just.” We walked out of the kitchen and came face-to-face with Eli. “You’re still here?”

“I am,” he said cheerfully. “You two kiss and make up?”

“Not how we make up,” I informed him. “More likely to be with insults and possibly physical violence, though that’s usually on her end.” I held up my hands palms out. “I’m a man who comes only in peace.”

Eli laughed long and low while Isis wisely took that moment to take her leave, promising to call Shelby soon for lunch.

Me, I could get my own lunch. After I cleaned up the congealed egg mess on the stove Isis hadn't even disposed of.

"Women," I said under my breath as Eli and I sat down at the kitchen table a few minutes later. I'd grabbed my briefcase so I could bring him up to date on a couple of our biggest current cases—and so he could sign the NDA I'd had Isis prepare earlier in the week.

"I know. They can be a real mindfuck."

"Oh, yeah. But I didn't even mean that. I'm not sure how we're ever good enough for any of them."

"When it comes to Isis, hell yeah. She's not one to let a guy off easy. Or at all." He let out a whistle.

"You got that right. We've been best friends since we were about eight." I held up a hand. "As for that other business, I don't want to talk about that. I think it was more about everyone in our friend group pairing off than her really wanting anything with me. I tried many times over the years, and she said no anytime I even got close to bringing it up. So, let's just table it all."

"Could be because you're taken now. Makes you more desirable." He shrugged. "Whatever. That's a problem you're lucky to have."

"Whoever ends up with Isis will have their hands full. And I mean that in the best way." I pulled out the NDA and slid it across the table. He gave it one look and immediately pulled out a pen from inside his jacket pocket. "What makes you want to work with the remaining Shaw at Shaw, LLC?" I asked him as I sorted through a file folder of case information.

I sincerely hoped he didn't think I was one nut short of a mixed nuts tray, current situation aside.

"I need a change. My firm is far too big, and I will never stand out from the pack there. I need somewhere new to make my mark. And Bishop spoke highly of you."

"Like by saying I can't focus?" I asked mildly.

He frowned. “He didn’t say that. He just said you had lots of interests, and you are a very busy guy.”

I wasn’t offended, not really. For years, I’d been someone who couldn’t stay still for even a moment.

The time had come for me to start taking steps to hopefully improve that trait, if not correct it. Maybe a cure would never be possible, and I would just learn to live with that.

But I could try the options that were open to me.

“I may not ever fully change. But I’m learning to focus on what I’m good at. Not only putting on a good show in court but connecting with my clients. They are important to me, and a bad divorce can ruin someone’s life for many years. I want to make the process better for the people who trust me to help them. But the paperwork side is not my forté.”

“I fucking hate going to court,” he admitted. “I’ll take paperwork or client meetings any damn day.”

“Yeah?” I grinned. “Sounds like we might be a damn good fit then.”

TWENTY-FIVE



I MADE AN APPOINTMENT WITH BERRY'S TEACHER AND HER doctor for the following week. I should've been freaking the hell out, as was my usual way.

I did not.

Instead, I had several days of breakfast in bed with Dex and then nightcaps with him before falling asleep in his arms.

I also accidentally kicked him out of bed once, but he promised he wouldn't hold a grudge. I made it up to him by giving him a back massage—and a front massage too.

In between, I made lots of preliminary plans for his house with his input. We had a few conferences with my team and scheduled the contractors we'd be working with, plus I had a few house appointments with some of our other clients.

Outside of work, I had lunch with TJ and Dahlia—and Avery, once she finally returned from spending time with her parents on the West Coast. Sunday night meant family dinner with my parents, Dex, and Berry, which was a rousing success.

Well, besides the leg of lamb Berry hid in my mother's calla lily anyway.

The meetings about her ADHD had been full of more questions than answers, and my girl had yet more testing to endure. But they wanted to make sure they fully understood where she was academically speaking too, so I'd just have to be patient. *She'd* have to be patient too, because she didn't like all the questions and the mental probing.

I couldn't say I blamed her one bit.

But Dex made it better by making sure we did something fun on appointment days, whether it was going to get ice cream for Bob or going to the library for new books, or one day, he'd found a petting zoo near the orchard. Whatever he came up with helped both me and Berry not focus on the harder parts.

Basically, life with Dex was just better all around.

Wednesday night, I went over to Dex's place to discuss multilevel patio plans that connected with a new outdoor pool with the crew of Gideon Gets It Done. Shortly thereafter, I commenced an online search for noise-canceling headphones. Dex had some, but I'd need my own set since the crew wasted no time getting to work, that was for sure.

I prepared for dinner with Isis to the sound of whirring drills and saws and various other construction noises. I'd brought the outfit I was wearing over to Dex's just in case he wanted to come, but he'd declined due to his Zoom therapist meeting—which I hoped he'd be able to have during the crew's dinner break. Berry was spending the evening with my parents, though we'd let her bring over Bob too.

I was pretty certain she'd be adopting an animal during the shelter fundraiser we'd be volunteering at next weekend. I was also fairly sure that the cat or dog we adopted would soon also be living with Dex and Bob, just like we would be.

Dear God, I was really thinking of moving in with him. A man I'd barely known for a month. Longer if I counted back to last fall but that one afternoon meeting at Preston's and Bishop's office didn't count for much.

Somehow dinner with Isis was wonderful, despite my endless verbal spewing. She didn't seem to mind, so clearly, she was a candidate for sainthood.

“What can I do with my house? I have years left on my mortgage. And more than that, I *love* my house. It was the first place that was a true home for Berry...” I trailed off, stabbing my spoon into my berry trifle thing. It was delicious, just as

my chicken Francoise had been, but I was mostly panic chattering at this point. “I’m babbling, sorry.”

“No, you’re not. You’re processing out loud. Far different.” Isis finished her own slice of peach pie with a scoop of vanilla and slid the plate away. “I have to tell you something. I don’t want to make it weird between us, but I also don’t want to *not* tell you.”

Uh oh. My stomach twisted as if two fists were pulling in opposite directions. “Okay.”

“Don’t look at me like that. Shelby, he loves you.”

“He hasn’t said it,” I said far too quickly, then bit my lip and shook my head. “Ignore me.”

“Have *you* said it?” Isis demanded.

“Sure, take his side.”

She laughed and reached across the table to squeeze my hand. “I told him I’d developed feelings for him. I don’t know how it happened.”

“I do. He’s amazing.” I sighed.

“You’re not mad at me?”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. For feeling that way and then telling him, but it’s not like I was trying to put the moves on him. Oh, God, I can’t even imagine that.” She started laughing so hard she almost knocked over her water glass. “Him and me naked? Dear Lord, no. What was I thinking? He’s my oldest friend. I could never. Never ever never.”

I didn’t particularly want to think about her getting naked with Dex either.

My Dex, dammit.

“I can’t blame you for loving him,” I interjected over her residual laughter. “And you have that whole friends-to-lovers vibe that’s so popular in romance novels. They always fall for their best friends. It’s a thing.”

“*They who?*”

“The men in TJ’s sex books.”

“Well, it didn’t happen. I didn’t expect it to.”

“No?”

“No. I knew it too. Because deep down, it’s not him I want. I know he’s a good guy. I love him. But I’m not really *in* love with him. I just want the man who’s for me and that doesn’t make it him even if I might’ve weakened enough to want to pretend.” Her shoulders slumped before she took a deep bolstering breath. “He was sweet, but we both knew nothing could come of it, not in this lifetime or any other.”

I rubbed my throat and waited her out.

“I know the man, and the spot he’s in with you is one he’s never been in before. He’s gonna go the long haul with you, Shelbs, so you better get ready. You can’t halfway things with him. He’s an all-or-nothing kind of guy, and he deserves the same back from the woman he loves. Which is you. *Duh.*”

Even as I wanted to laugh, my eyes filled and I grabbed my napkin to dab my eyes so I didn’t ruin my makeup. “It’s so good but I’m going to mess it up. I don’t know how to do any of this. At least not successfully.”

“Seems like you are. He asked you to move in, didn’t he? Crazy guy. Doesn’t say he loves you, just skips ahead.” She shook her head and sipped her vodka tonic, finishing the glass. “I could totally go for another of these, but I won’t.”

“I could go for one too.”

“But if you don’t marry him by forty, he’s mine. The pact says so. Just saying.” With a grin, she motioned over the waiter and ordered vodka tonics for both of us. “We’re fucking celebrating. The time is now. Worrying can wait. Being happy can’t.”

“Damn straight.” We clinked glasses once the waiter brought over our drinks. “Wait, what pact?”

She shared with me the marriage pact she’d made as a kid with Dex—one he didn’t really seem to remember, according

to her. I found that hard to believe since Isis was insanely gorgeous and funny and smart, but if he had somehow forgotten it, that must be part of my new streak of luck.

We were laughing about some other random thing when Dex's brother Preston stopped next to our table. "I thought I recognized your laughter," he said to Isis before turning his attention to me. "Shelby, I've been wanting to speak with you."

"Oh, really? Why?"

He cleared his throat. "I just wanted to let you know I'm here to lend a friendly ear if you ever need one. You know. Just as a friend."

"As a friendly friend?" Isis rolled her eyes and her triangle earrings clinked cheerfully as she propped her chin on her hand. "Pres, my dude, he isn't going to break her heart. So, just keep walking, pal."

"Break my heart?" I cocked my head as I watched the tips of Preston's ears redden. "Why do you think he's going to do that?"

"I didn't say—" He broke off and shoved his hands in the pockets of his dark gray trousers. Every time I'd seen the man, he was wearing a three-piece suit and tie. "I just wanted to offer my support. If you need it."

"She doesn't need support now, Preston." Isis's tone dripped ice, befitting Dex's nickname for her. "He's standing up. Not only is he being the man she needs, he's even being a father figure to her daughter."

I aimed a sharp look at Isis, but not for the reason she probably thought. I agreed one-hundred-ten percent with what she was saying. Absolutely.

But *I* needed to be the one who said it.

Dexter was my guy and he'd supported me since day one, even when I didn't always warrant his standing up. So, I needed to return the favor.

In fact, I was very much behind on that score.

“Exactly,” I agreed quietly to Preston, who still hadn’t lowered his eyebrows from his hairline. “Did you ever think you don’t give your brother enough credit? Or, hell, any credit at all?” I couldn’t keep the bite out of my question.

“Dexter Shaw as a father,” he said softly, shaking his head. “Didn’t think he had it in him, but believe me, I’m happy to be wrong.”

If he’d stopped there, I would’ve been happy too.

But no, he had to tack on, “If I am,” in an undertone.

“You are.” I stood and crossed my arms. “Did it ever occur to you that you see what he wants you to see?”

His lips thinned into a line. “No.”

Isis coughed into her hand. “Preston’s a little rigid.”

I stared at him. “I don’t care what he is. I’m not going to stand here and listen to him insult Dex for no reason. That man has done nothing but try to love me and my child. I still don’t entirely know why, or how exactly all of this happened so fast, but it has. He’s all in and dammit, so am I. I get that you’re shocked.”

Preston’s gaze softened. “I’m not shocked, exactly. Just... surprised. It’s not that I haven’t always known he has a lot of love to give. I have. Just he never let himself trust anyone to that level or allowed himself the time to get to know someone that well.” Preston rotated his heavy gold watch around his wrist as he seemingly thought it through. “I don’t know. Maybe everyone settling down has made him want what we have—”

“Right, because he can’t want something unless you have it first? Is that what you’re saying?” I propped my hands on my hips, realizing immediately I was channeling Berry. “You don’t have a child.”

“No, but we’ve talked about it for maybe in the future.” He expelled a long breath. “But no, I don’t. So, he’s ahead of me there. If this—if you—” He locked his hands behind his neck and sucked in air. “I’m still trying to imagine my younger brother wanting to settle down voluntarily.”

“He’s not playing anymore,” Isis said softly, joining me on her feet. “Took me aback too, but you know what? He’s always known his own mind. If he’s decided he wants something new—someones new,” she carefully emphasized the plural, “then I say good for him. He is always honest and upfront. He is here too. His honesty is just different this time.”

That was enough to have me sagging to my seat. “Yeah.” I tucked my hair behind my ears and let the truth of that sink into my bones, dissolving a lot of the worry that still dogged me.

Since my divorce, I still didn’t quite understand how to accept good things without expecting a door to slam in my face immediately afterward.

Preston dropped a hand on my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

I looked up at him and was instantly struck by the compassion in his eyes that so reminded me of the expression I saw so often in Dex’s. As different as the two men were, Preston’s gaze was practically a damn mirror of his brother’s.

“Yeah, sorry. Ice knows him so well, and he *is* so honest. Brutally so. And to take a page out of his truthfulness book—looking into your eyes is just like looking into Dex’s. Well, within reason,” I hurriedly added as Preston’s grip on my shoulder went slack. “I don’t mean I feel the same way about you, but you both have so much empathy. Must explain why you’re both such good lawyers.”

Preston smiled and squeezed my shoulder before finally letting go. “Tell him you feel that way. For that matter, I think I have some things I need to tell him too. That I should’ve told him a long time ago.”

“Yes.” Isis narrowed her eyes. “You do that. And while you’re at it, maybe get your dickhead father to do some talking too. Dex could use his family around him.”

Preston’s forehead wrinkled. “Is something wrong?”

“No. Multiple things are going very right.” I released a long breath and a lot of the tension bunching my shoulders flowed out with it. “But he’s gone through some growing pains

with the law office, and I just think he would appreciate knowing you have his back.”

Isis nodded. “He really would. He needs his family’s support. Not talking about him behind his back but standing up for him and proving it.” She held up a hand. “And yeah, I’m not perfect either. My behavior has needed some help too. Just sayin’.”

I smiled gently at her. “None of us are perfect. I made my share of mistakes too. But he’s been so great with Berry’s potential diagnosis—” I cut myself off, sliding my gaze to Preston.

“What diagnosis?” Preston swallowed deeply, his eyes crinkling in the same way Dex’s did. “Is she okay?”

They really were more alike than different. So odd that I saw that so clearly now, but I was willing to bet neither of the brothers ever had.

“I can’t talk about it yet. She’ll be fine in the long run.” I softened my tone. “But we’re still figuring things out. Dex is so good with her. I think you’d be surprised in a very good way.”

I also didn’t want to say anything about Dex’s own diagnosis. That was *his* secret to tell—or not.

“Yeah. You know, maybe I’ll come by one day this week. Or next. Depending on his schedule. I want to see the renos.”

“Oh, that will be a bit. We’re just getting started. It’s not going to be quick, that’s for sure.”

“The dude is renovating his entire *life*.” Isis took her seat as she gave me a long look. “Definitely a process.”

“Yeah. I’m still kind of amazed I get to be a part of it.”

“*Part* of it? Girl, you’re driving the damn train. Which is why I had to tell you we’d talked about my stupid crush thing. I want everything to be one-hundred-percent aboveboard because I love you both.” She leaned forward and grinned. “Girl, we good?”

“We’re so good. Thank you for telling me. I’m glad you did.” I reached across the table to squeeze her fingers.

I replayed parts of the dinner in my mind as I drove home. Well, drove to Dex’s. Which already surprisingly did feel like home, no matter how much I questioned myself and analyzed it. Not the physical structure necessarily, because that was in flux right now.

But being with Dex definitely did.

I’d no sooner pulled in the drive behind the Gideon Gets It Done construction trailer that had just taken residence tonight than the front door opened. Dex strolled out, a big smile on his face.

So many lights on in the windows of the rather enormous house behind him. All of them welcoming me. And the man who owned the house was standing on the top step, waiting for me as if I’d always been meant to be there—to be part of everything—but it had taken so long for me to see it. To see *him*.

Not as one more thing to renovate or to tweak, but just to enjoy for his utter perfection right this very minute.

I climbed out of the car, opened my mouth—and started to cry.

His reaction was priceless.

“She told you. Aw, fuck, I should’ve been there. I didn’t think it through. I assumed you’d know it didn’t mean anything to me—I mean, of course it means something because I love her, she’s my best friend in the world, but I’m not *in* love with her, because I’m in love with you.” He didn’t even stop to take a breath, just rolled on as if he’d mentioned grabbing a carton of milk at the store. “But even so, how can you know that if I’m not there to tell you? Especially with all you’ve been through? There’s something else I have to tell you.”

He rushed down the driveway and circled the car to take my elbows in his hands, drawing me up until our gazes were

nearly level. His green eyes were so intent on mine they might as well have been lasers even in the early summer dusk.

“My father is friendly with your ex. I didn’t know it before I met you, I swear. But when I was looking into Judge Dick the first day you came over here for our meeting about the house, I saw them in pictures together online...” He trailed off, frowning as my tears turned into sputtering laughter. “Why are you laughing?”

“Judge Dick. It’s so spot-on. Even if he’s Berry’s father, he really is a dick.”

“Yeah. But I want to be everything he wasn’t.” His Adam’s apple bobbed visibly even in the near complete darkness. That was how much my little girl meant to him.

He couldn’t fake that. He *wouldn’t*.

God, what had I done to get so lucky?

“I love you too.” I reached up to cup his cheek and the lasers wavered before he closed his eyes entirely and just enveloped me, dragging me up onto my toes as he surrounded me with warmth and joy and pleasure. All the very best things.

Oh, and love. Especially love.

Then he was kissing the holy hell out of me and from habit, I stiffened, imagining little eyes peeking out from somewhere and potentially seeing something that would cause a need for future therapy.

But he whispered “She’s not here,” and I sagged against him with relief before yanking him up the drive toward the steps.

“Why are we out here talking? Faster, dammit,” I said to the sound of his laughter as I tugged him across the porch.

And mine. I was laughing too. Because every moment was precious, and we didn’t have any more of them to waste.

TWENTY-SIX



“GET MOVING, BERRY! WE HAVE TO BE AT THE SHELTER IN under an hour.” I was running around like a lunatic, trying to collect all we needed for a weekend at Dex’s.

After a week at Dex’s—or heck, the better part of two weeks there—I was starting to just leave stuff there to save on the packing time.

I loved my little cottage so much, but I knew I’d be leaving it behind soon.

As if the universe was giving me a not-so-subtle nudge, Mr. Farley next door had even stopped by yesterday and left a long note in my mailbox.

Handwritten even.

His nearly middle-aged son had finally—finally!—found a good woman to marry and she had two little ones and they needed a house. ASAP.

When they’d visited him the week before, they’d taken a liking to my house, if I happened to be thinking of selling.

I mean, what were the chances? Not very high.

As I’d read the note, I’d half imagined Dex going over there to pay him off to make the offer. I could see him doing that. He was so romantic in his own cutely devious way. He also had a truly staggering amount of money that had multiplied even more over the years through good investments. He still had a tight bunch of college friends, and

one of them had become a financial planner who'd guided Dex well.

Another was a cop in Crescent Cove. Clint was a vet, as we well knew. And yet another was a real estate investment professional, also in the nearby Cove.

I wouldn't be surprised to hear he had a friend who was a high-ranked politician too. The man seemed to know everyone.

Even my ex-husband the dick, through his father. But Dex had made it clear he'd never had a personal conversation with my ex, unless one counted Judge Dick's rude "nepo baby" comment to him a while ago.

But no, Dex hadn't prodded Mr. Farley. I'd questioned him thoroughly and the older man had been clear that he knew no one named Dex or Shaw and he definitely didn't have any *slimy* lawyers as personal friends.

I still couldn't believe any of this was happening, but I told him I'd be sure to let him know first if I decided to sell.

The *if* was becoming more and more likely every day.

Berry and I were spending so much time at Dex's and for the last few nights, he'd even been helping her with her homework at the brand-new child-sized desk he'd put together and placed in her soon-to-be rainbow-filled room.

Rainbows done in the bright colors of paint they'd picked out together at the paint store while I'd been meeting with a new client in Dex's home office.

I'd come out after the meeting to stacks of paint cans in the front hall and Dex wearing an innocent expression that fooled no one, especially not me. Even Berry was onto him, although she had no reason to try to dissuade him from his antics that benefited her.

I could only imagine what would happen today while we were volunteering at the shelter. God help us all.

I headed upstairs to check if Berry was almost ready and was surprised to see her at the small desk in her room she

basically hadn't touched for the last year or two. I hadn't really noticed because I'd been too busy, but since I'd been talking to her teacher and now her doctor about her potentially having ADHD, I'd realized all the small changes I'd overlooked.

She'd started hiding homework because she'd run into things she couldn't do, so she'd made up excuses to her teachers and hidden the half-done papers in a secret compartment of her book bag, where I neglected to check.

If we moved in with Dex, we'd *both* be able to keep up with her schoolwork. Not that I'd ever put that on him, but he seemed so willing to be involved—excited even—and Berry seemed to relate to him in a different way from how she and I handled things.

Maybe this would be a positive change for her too. Nothing was set in stone. We would all be flexible and see how things went.

“Hey,” I said softly, knocking gently on the doorjamb. “Getting a jump on homework?”

“No.” She shut the bound notebook she'd been writing in and stroked the cover. “Dex got me this. We saw it at the drugstore next to the paint place. It's a journal.” She turned on her chair and swung her feet. “That way, I won't keep my feelings inside.”

“Oh, wow. That's a good idea.” I walked over to look at the cover. It was a unicorn with flowing hair—rainbow-colored, of course. I swallowed over the lump in my throat. “Is it helping?”

“Yeah. A lot is changing. Not in a bad way,” she added in a rush, as if she was the parent and I was the child.

I'd noticed her doing that a lot, trying to mitigate my concerns before I'd even voiced them.

Yet another thing I hadn't been paying attention to while trying to juggle the bills and work and my daughter.

“I get what you mean.” I sat on the edge of her bed, which was just a couple inches away from her desk. I couldn't compete with the space she'd have at Dex's, so I wasn't even

going to think about it. “You would tell me if something wasn’t working for you? If you were worried or concerned or didn’t like anything?”

She nodded.

“I mean, really? You wouldn’t shove it down and tell that book instead of letting me know something wasn’t making you happy?”

“Mom, Dex loves us.” She said it as if it was the most logical, easy-to-understand concept ever. “He won’t hurt us. He *wants* us there.” She sighed and rolled her eyes. “He’s nothing like Dad. Okay?”

I looked down at my hands as I clenched them in my lap. “When did you get so smart?”

“*Duh*. I’ve always been this smart.”

I had to laugh as a text came through my phone in the pocket of my dress, the ringtone Spiderman’s theme song. It had seemed most appropriate for the man it signified.

I pulled out my cell.

DEX

Woman, where are you two? Hello, we have things to do!

A laugh spilled out of me, and it was only through sheer willpower I didn’t clutch my phone to my heart like a lovesick teen. Also, Berry was staring at me and I didn’t want to reveal how deep I was sunk.

Though she probably already knew. I was almost certain the whole world had figured it out from the hearts shooting from of my eyes at random times.

I hurried to text him back.

We’re on our way.

I stood and barely resisted ruffling Berry’s hair. She hated that and it was a hard habit to break from when she was

younger. “You ready?”

“Yes!” She hopped to her feet and grabbed the metal dog-shaped piggy bank she’d had since she was six. It was stuffed with an assortment of change we hadn’t rolled and taken to the bank in forever. “I’m bringing my money so if I find a puppy or kitten, I’m ready.”

“Aww, honey, you don’t have to pay for our family pet. If we get one,” I added in my sternest voice.

Fat chance *if* there.

“I want to show I’m responsible.” The last word didn’t come out right, but I knew what word she was stumbling over because she’d mentioned that she was about twenty times. Ever since Dex had mentioned the speed dating event happening at Kitten Around, in tandem with the local vet’s office. That was where Dex had adopted Bob the previous fall.

A number of stray pets were held there when dog control brought in the dogs they found who didn’t have homes. Sometimes people brought in stray cats too.

Bottom line, there were so many more animals than there were good homes. Anyone who could help by adopting was encouraged to.

My girl had shown herself to be willing and able to do as much as she could for Bob. I was beginning to believe she really would do just fine taking care of another pet as well.

Assuming Bob was okay not being an only child. That remained to be seen.

Berry picked up her backpack and her overnight bag and I grabbed my own overnight bag before we headed downstairs.

At the last minute, I remembered I needed to water the plants. “You go on out.” I nudged her to the door. “I’ll be right behind you.”

I was *not* right behind her, since I had a number of plants to check on. But as soon as I stepped onto the stoop, Dex hit the horn and I had to laugh at Berry and Bob in the backseat of

the convertible. It was hard to say which of them was wiggling more.

Then again, the same applied to Dex. Not that he was wiggling, but he clearly seemed eager. I could just bet his knee was jiggling, as it often was.

“Why are you bringing your dog to the pet event?” I asked as I hurried down the stairs.

He was already getting out to come take my bag.

Where had he come from? I knew from the other women in Designing Women that finding a man with manners today was just about as rare as seeing multiple shooting stars in one night.

Probably rarer.

“So, we can make sure Bob likes the new dog!” Berry offered from the backseat, grabbing the back of the passenger seat for support for her endless bouncing.

I tried to frown at Dex but it was basically impossible. His windswept dark hair and dancing green eyes just teased a smile free as if I had no control over my own facial features. “Have you been encouraging her?”

“I would never. Hi. You look beautiful.” He leaned down to kiss me as he nimbly took my bag before I could even put up a token protest.

Another thing he made sure to do a lot—kiss me and hug me and generally be super affectionate in front of Berry. She still made puking sounds, but they were beginning to get further and further apart.

I looked down at my simple dark blue dress in deference to the cool, breezy morning and started to blow him off. Then I decided to shut the hell up. “Thank you?”

He laughed. “Better. Next time leave off the question mark.” He nudged me ahead of him so he could discreetly swat my ass before he opened the passenger door with a flourish as he always did.

The backside swat was a new, not unwelcome addition.

I got in the car and put on my belt—after admonishing Berry to do the same—and then sang along to whatever was on the radio, mostly without fully realizing I was doing it. That was also definitely new.

This happiness thing was kind of amazing.

“Okay, do we need a snack before the shelter?”

Berry snuggled Bob into her chest. “Bob says yes.”

“What does Bob want?”

“A burger and fries. The kind that comes with a toy,” Berry announced as I laughed.

After a quick spin through the drive-thru of the restaurant with golden arches, we ate in the parking lot with no concern about fries falling to the floor or wrappers ending up where they shouldn’t.

Dex only fed me six or seven fries. They tasted better when he did.

He fed Bob about five and Berry gave him double that.

To the sounds of Berry slurping her small milkshake, we pulled into the shelter’s nearly full parking lot. Dex actually had to circle around a few times to find a spot. “That’s good for the pets hopefully,” I commented, instead of a concern that Berry would be high on sugar for the afternoon.

Brand-new, easygoing Shelby, trying very hard to report for duty against all odds.

Berry clipped on Bob’s leash and then we made our way into Kitten Around, using the side entrance that was for staff. Lots of people called out greetings to Dex and he showed us where to go to get the smocks we would wear, name tags included. Our name tags just said staff instead of our names, but Berry kept pointing to the tag as if she was official now.

In no time, we were learning the ropes from the other volunteers and organizers, as well as given tasks to perform. Berry was made the door greeter on account of her cuteness—I was told that from one of the senior volunteer coordinators—

and Dex got right to work cleaning out cat stalls as if he was happy as could be doing manual labor.

No one would ever know the guy had serious money. He was just as at home sweeping up dirty floors or cleaning smelly litter boxes as he was getting to know adorable kittens and puppies that were up for adoption.

Mostly, I wandered back and forth getting to know each of the animals in cages or being shown off in small groups while also keeping an eye on Bob, making sure he stayed as chilled out as he'd been pre-event.

An all-natural dog treat with calming properties helped with that, just in case.

I lost track of time helping with all the cute pets and just as cute children who wanted to hug and kiss and sometimes inappropriately grab the pets looking for homes. I was trying to extricate a tiny puppy from a pair of twin girls who were on the verge of coming to blows over who would get to hold him first when a loudly clearing throat made me look up—and I nearly dropped the squirming puppy I'd rescued.

“Shelby, it is you.” My ex-husband cleared his throat again and linked his hands behind his back. No chance of seeing him wielding a broom, that was for sure. “This didn't seem like your sort of milieu.”

“David,” I managed.

I handed off the puppy to the closest staff member, Tracy, who took him with barely a blink. Immediately, I looked around for Berry, who'd abandoned her door post to help Dex scoop out a litter box. My shoulders relaxed as I ascertained Bob still sat patiently at my side, despite all the pet melee that surrounded us. Yay for calming chews. Maybe I should've snagged one too.

“Surprised to see you here,” I added to my ex.

Anything dirty or not strictly sanctioned indicated an environment that David would never want to voluntarily spend time in.

“Doing my duty. Why are you here?” He gave me a thin, barely pleasant smile.

“Volunteering with—” I started to say *my boyfriend* but then I realized that made me sound about sixteen. Not that I had a better term for our situation.

How fucking awkward. Not that the uncomfortable pause on my end was any better.

“Her fiancé. We’re going to get married.” Dex slid his arm around my shoulders and he drew me into his chest in a way I appreciated despite the fact my ears were currently ringing.

We are? I didn’t say it out loud, but damn, it was a very close thing.

“Dexter,” David said with clear surprise contorting his patrician features as he extended a hand to Dex as if I didn’t even exist.

David had a hawk-like nose, cold colorless eyes, and a granite jaw. How had I not seen all of that the first time we’d met?

And he wore just a boring pinstriped shirt under his suit. Definitely no Spiderman.

Nothing at all unique.

Dexter’s grip on me tightened. “David.” He made no move to accept the hand my ex held out.

David dropped his hand and again clasped his hands behind his back, seeming to spot something or someone beyond us that made him step away. “I’ll just let you get back to—”

“Mama, I found a puppy for us!”

Oh, of course. The asshole was retreating from his smart, adorable, sweet-as-hell daughter, currently nuzzling a pug—because of course—puppy.

Dex let me go and immediately embraced Berry and her puppy, acting as if he hadn’t seen her in months. “Oh, he’s perfect, isn’t he?” He bent his head to kiss the puppy even as a

nearby worker admonished him not to until the puppy was adopted. He simply ignored her. “Or she. What name do you like?”

And then this wonderful man who I’d somehow lucked into having in my life turned Berry away before she could see her cowardly asshole of a father melting into the crowd.

I didn’t care that Dex had just announced we were getting married before, oh, even broaching the idea with me. Even as a someday maybe. I just did not care. He could never ask me and just expect me to show up at a church on time one day, and I didn’t think I’d be mad at that either.

Because he loved my daughter and he showed it through actions that made a rock form in my throat as I futilely tried not to blubber over all the puppies and kittens and wild children swarming in our midst.

Belatedly, a tug on the leash still looped around my wrist reminded me Bob was waiting for direction. Thank God. Calming dog chews were the absolute best.

I managed to urge Bob with me to the side exit, where I stumbled outside into the surprisingly brisk afternoon for early June. Or maybe that was my inner state reflecting on my environment.

Suddenly, I wished I’d brought a cardigan against the chill.

I leaned back against the brick building to catch my breath while Bob decided to pee right where he was, because why the hell not?

Not five minutes later, Dex hauled ass out of the side exit, whipping his head right then left before he realized I was standing behind the door. The fact that he was carrying the pug puppy I didn’t think he’d adopted yet just increased his cute factor—and my concerns he was going to get in trouble for dognapping.

“I’m not marrying a criminal,” I announced primly as Bob continued to pee enough for three dogs. What had he had to drink anyway?

Dex turned toward me and let out an audible sigh. “There you are. With my dog.”

“Did you think I ran away?”

“It crossed my mind.” He frowned down at Bob, who was still peeing. “Still not done yet, buddy?”

“I’d say next time tread gently with the calming chews,” I muttered once he finally finished.

“Do *you* need a calming chew?”

“Do you have ones for humans? If so, I’ll try it after today.”

He approached and held up the puppy that now had a pink bow clipped to her collar. “Have a puppy hug. Better than any drug.”

I was about to take hold of her when I cocked my head. “Where’s Berry?”

“She’s helping Tracy at the door. She’s being well-supervised.”

“Oh. Okay. Whew. Hi, sweetheart.” As soon as I traded with Dex—Bob’s leash for the puppy—the puppy’s wet pink tongue swiped over my chin, making me laugh. “Aren’t you the cutest?”

“Her name is Gumdrop. According to Berry,” he added, holding up his hands. “I’m not usurping my authority.”

“No, you did that when you announced we were going to be married.”

His eyes softened. “Aren’t we?”

I did not know how this man hadn’t been snapped up approximately fifteen times before now. I pointed at him, and Gumdrop nipped my fingertip. “You do not even play a little bit fair.”

He shrugged. “I’m not playing.”

I gave up. I didn’t know if this was one of his lawyering techniques or part of ADHD or some other quality of his, but

he was impossible to argue with.

I didn't even want to.

I walked forward and pressed my forehead to his chest while Gumdrop chewed on my hair and Bob probably peed more. "I love you. I should just surrender to it."

"Yes." He sounded inordinately pleased as he kissed the top of my hair. "You should. Also, I love you too."



Epilogue

DEX

MY HOUSE WAS NEVER GOING TO BE FUCKING DONE. LIKE... ever. I'd made my peace with that and with living in chaos.

There were far worse things than a chaotic home. Because you know what living in chaos meant? That I was *living*. I had a family that was occasionally too noisy. And I was so fucking happy with my chaos.

I'd basically prayed for it and through some lucky stroke of karma, the universe had delivered.

I was so grateful.

Every morning, when Bob—and now Gumdrops—dragged me outside at five-fifteen to pee, I kissed both of their noses before I kissed Shelby, where she'd usually face-planted on the pillow beside me. Then I hurried to brush a kiss over Berry's hair where she was sprawled in her room of rainbows down the hall.

Toys were littered all over her rug, and I usually ended up nearly breaking a foot on one of the Legos that seemed to multiply like rodents. But I loved them. I loved every book scattered on the rug. Every stuffed animal, every random pencil.

I loved all the squeaky dog toys determined to kill me, even more now that we had two dogs.

I even loved all the various construction minutiae all over my house and the rooms still in obvious disarray from all the changes. This was the process to shift my house into *our* home for our family and every step was worth it.

And when Bob had been too raucous in the bathroom and pulled almost every sheet of TP off the roll, thereby encouraging his young charge as well? I loved that too.

However, when he rolled in some dead carcass of questionable origin in the backyard and I had to carry in his squirming, rotund body to dump him in the shower before the sun was even up, even my love was tested.

At least Gumdrop paid little attention to his antics once I dispensed her treats.

My dogs always knew where their buns were buttered, and nothing mattered more than snack time.

Once Bob smelled *not* like dead things and his tongue was lolling out and his now-clean brown fur was sticking up in every direction, the love returned.

Especially after I flopped down beside Shelby, who wore something silky and short and trimmed in lace. That I was too tired to properly take advantage of at this stage in the game.

Happy holidays to me.

Gumdrop settled between our pillows and Bob stretched out between us, his fishy breath bracing even in the cold morning air. "Why is he wet," she mumbled, opening one eye.

"Don't ask."

"Okay." Her sleepy agreement was a far cry from the Shelby who'd greeted me not quite seven months ago.

She'd made some changes. I'd made some changes.

Even Berry had changed some too.

We were all subtly changing each other, but not in ways that didn't suit us deep down to the root. There was some discomfort, but overall, mostly just happiness.

Other than the endless sounds of construction. Even that was nearing its end. With winter looming, the last of the renos would pause soon and any future changes wouldn't take place until the snow melted.

In central New York, that probably wouldn't happen until April.

I was pretty sure the house was basically almost perfect now. I even had the final most important detail rolled up in the coat closet.

I fell asleep fast enough to only hear the start of Shelby's soft rumbling snores. But I always made sure she was out before I drifted off.

The next time I opened my eyes, I grunted at the crick in my back from the dogs and human child tap dancing on my vital organs.

Well, the dogs were tap dancing. Berry was just wrestling with them and trying to get Bob's rawhide bone back from him.

Good luck there.

"Berry, be careful with the puppy," Shelby admonished from the seating area. The furniture was different than the set I'd originally had, made for relaxing, and done in a gorgeous dark print.

"Oh, sure," I groaned into the pillow. "Don't hurt the puppy. As for me, go to town."

Berry's high-pitched giggle made me smile despite the massage I'd almost certainly need later on. And I had important plans today.

I had to cut down my first family Christmas tree, Griswold-style. Although at least I'd remember my saw.

Hopefully.

"Off, child!" My sudden exclamation had her rearing back with such speed that she tumbled off the bed and the dogs followed, assuming the roughhousing had moved to the floor. Quickly, I rolled off the bed to try to break up the melee before someone got hurt—other than me and my still protesting back.

"Alice Anne, enough." Shelby's voice lashed out like a whip and had Berry's giggles coming to a halt as she sat up

and shoved her wild curls out of her face. Gumdrop chose that moment to lick her chin with adoration in her big brown eyes.

Not two minutes later, she headed out of the room, her gaze cast downward at the floor as her two canine companions followed her.

“They were okay in here,” I said in an undertone, only barely not groaning as I reclined again on the bed. My back was being seriously annoying lately. Of course, I was still spending far too much time working.

Eli was a big help and he’d actually been perfect to take on some of the workload. Problem was, apparently, Kensington Square was having a divorce boom, if such a thing existed. And I was spending a lot of my time counseling clients rather than drowning in paperwork—and lo and behold, I liked it.

Just my back wanted more time at the masseuse’s.

“You are far too lenient.”

“Well, I’ve only been doing this parenting gig for, what, not even seven months now? The dungeon is still under construction in the basement for when she gets really out of line.”

Shelby crossed the room and set aside her coffee on the nightstand to crawl into bed with me. “Funny man,” she said, laying her head on my chest.

“I try.” I stroked a hand over her hair. “Now, of course, we’ll have to construct two side-by-side cells in the dungeon just in case another one of our brethren comes along. Don’t want them to be left out.”

When she looked up at me, narrowing her eyes, I rubbed my thumb over her lower lip. “No rush on that one. I want Berry to know she’s all we need. The other is an optional add-on, not a requirement.”

She drew a circle on my chest. “I thought I was pregnant last week. I’m not,” she added hurriedly, probably correctly gauging the sudden jump in my heart rate. “But for a day, I thought maybe.”

“Optional add-on,” I repeated lightly, tugging her hair until she gave in and smiled. “Not required. If it happens, all good. All great,” I amended. “If it doesn’t, we just practice harder for the hell of it.”

She stayed quiet for too long.

“Talk to me.”

“I was excited. Not afraid. I didn’t once wonder if you’d be happy. Because I know you would. I *trust* you would.”

“Damn straight I would. And you wouldn’t have to wonder. I already have a sky writing company on standby to say how much I love you and our family. But you know what? I don’t have to wait for the maybe-someday kid. I can do it today. I’ll call and get the guy and his plane over here.” I started to roll out of bed, and she laughed, tugging me back down.

Best of all, her sudden laughter erased the furrow of disappointment between her brows.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “I don’t want a baby to be another thing on your task list.”

She ducked her head. “You know me too well. How do you know me so well?”

“Intense study of my subject.” I tipped her chin up with my fingertip. “I’m so happy right here in this moment. Right where we are. I need you to believe me, Sherbet. I already have my daughter, and I’m the luckiest man on planet Earth.”

She pressed her face into my neck. “You make me so happy that even marriage doesn’t sound like jail anymore.”

“Well, now if that’s not a ringing endorsement, I don’t know what is.” I looped my arms around her and kissed the top of her head. “We have all the time in the world. No rush on anything.”

There was the whole matter of the tree and what I intended to come with it, but we’d just leave that aside right now. She’d find out soon enough.

The rest of the morning included making sure homework was done—even helping Berry with some of it, though I’d had to cheat and check something online—and talking through how to handle it if she didn’t know how to do something.

In the past, that would’ve meant she crumpled up the paper and hid it in her book bag. Now she knew different coping techniques. She could either ask one of us or save the problem to ask her assigned helper at school, which she had gotten after her official ADHD diagnosis.

Her fancy-ass school was expensive as hell, but they had resources she just wouldn’t get elsewhere, so it was more than worth it. Even if Shelby still worried about it endlessly as if her paying for it was a concern. It wasn’t.

Berry was mine. End of story.

I’d told the truth when I’d said there was no rush on timing, but I was keeping one secret. There kind of was because I wanted them both to have my name. I hadn’t told Shelby that yet, and I didn’t know how she’d feel about it, but I really just wanted the world to know they were mine every bit as much as Bob and Gumdrop.

Luckily, with the dogs, it wasn’t a matter of law to formally make them Shaws.

After homework time, we had last night’s leftover meatball casserole for lunch and then headed out to the Christmas Tree Farm at Brothers Three Orchard, the same place that had been the site of my first date with Shelby a mere seven months ago.

The whole ride there, I played Christmas music and sang along, much to Berry’s consternation that I was hurting her ears. Her complaints just made me sing louder. Shelby just laughed and shook her head at us as if we were beyond her comprehension.

Wait until I whipped out the giant car reindeer antlers I’d stashed in the trunk. Soon enough, I’d have to put the convertible away for the winter, but until then, Vi wanted a turn at looking like Rudolph.

I'd no sooner parked at the tree lot and lined us up at the adjacent hot cocoa bus that I noticed a familiar SUV parked nearby.

That of my not-so-beloved father and his soon-to-be new wife.

He'd pushed his divorce through in record time and now he and his former admin Courtney had a love shack outside of town. I was trying not to look at it with bitter eyes, but I couldn't help being pissed on my mother's behalf, though she was happily dating herself.

That wasn't the point. He should've been a better man and not cheated on our mother. Preston had never liked my more open-minded view on our father's choices, and now with the wisdom of loving a woman with a child and a douche ex, I could see his way of thinking much clearer.

Sometimes there was no keeping an open mind when you loved someone. If anything, I'd kept myself above the fray far too much in my life.

As my father walked toward us—and soon realized there was no avoiding us unless he wanted to make it *obvious* he was avoiding us—I tucked Shelby into my side and she tucked Berry. We were like those nesting dolls, as close as we could get.

“Just give it a minute,” I murmured against her ear, though she was already nodding and bracing. We'd spent a good amount of time with my mom over the intervening months, so Shelby knew quite well what my father looked like, due to his passing in and out like a ship in the night. Berry knew who he was too, for that matter.

“Hi, Dad.” My smile was strained at best. “Courtney.”

“Son.” His own smile was barely a slash of his lips. And to think, I'd once been his favorite. Seemed like a lifetime ago. “Hi, Shelby. Hi, Alice.”

Alice. Wow. Which meant Berry had identified herself that way to him?

Mumbled hellos were said back as it started to snow and someone in the hot cocoa bus turned on both the colorful Christmas lights strung around the window and jaunty Christmas tunes.

“Stopping to get a tree?” I asked, a bit redundantly.

“Not much else to do here.”

I motioned to the line we were in. “Hot cocoa is always welcome.”

“Sure.” My dad tucked his hands in his pockets. “Look, Dex, can I talk to you in private for a minute?”

“No.” I kept my face pleasant. “Anything you want to say to me, you can say in front of my family.”

Shelby poked me hard in the side. “It’s fine. We can go look in the store. Look, Berry, they have all kinds of ornaments.”

“No.” My pleasant expression was in danger of disappearing. “In a minute, we’ll all go look together. What’s up, Dad?”

He let out a windy sigh. “Fine. Since your brother is no longer even pretending to speak to me and I’m assuming you’re following his path, I’m not going to bother stopping by your mother’s house for the holiday. We’ve spent enough years on this farce.”

“Yes, we have, at your doing.” Before Shelby could poke me again, I waved a hand. “But Mom says we should be magnanimous, so do as you wish. We’ll be spending the holiday at our house. Mom will be coming over, as she would like.”

“Mom, look at that sign!” Berry pulled on the sleeve of her mother’s coat. “They have so many hot cocoa flavors. Even rocky road. Think that’s as good as the ice cream?”

Shelby grinned. “I’m game to find out.”

“We’re in line for cocoa. Just a minute more,” I murmured, glancing at my dad.

“Does that mean I’m invited too? And Courtney?”

“For cocoa?”

“No, to your house for the holiday.” He gripped the hand of the silent blond woman beside him even more tightly. She didn’t lift her gaze from the ground, maybe because I’d once had a harmless flirtation with her when she was my father’s admin. Thankfully, it hadn’t gone any further than extremely casual.

I glanced at Shelby, and the compassion in her eyes surprised and stirred me and had me agreeing.

When they walked away a moment later, I tugged her into my arms and framed her cold cheeks between my bare hands. “Even after all you’ve gone through, you still think of others.”

“Of course I do. Who hasn’t dealt with crap? And he’s still your dad.” She clutched my hand against her cheek. “Who must not be all bad if he has a son like you.”

“Can I just get some cocoa? Tired of waiting,” Berry lifted her small crossbody bag shaped like a bright red sneaker. “I have my own allowance. I can buy for all of us. This line is *not* moving.”

“Speaking of good parenting...” I murmured, kissing Shelby’s forehead while Berry groaned. “This is good for you. Builds character to learn patience.”

“Here we freaking goooo.” Somehow she made the last word sound seven syllables long.

I had to laugh as I circled my arm around Shelby and turned her toward a faster line at the cocoa bus. “Sure you want another?” she asked in an undertone.

“Yes.” My answer was immediate.

“You are a glutton for punishment.” She leaned her head on my shoulder.

After we each had cups of cocoa, we wandered over to the many, many, *many* Christmas trees in the crowded lot. It was early December so other than the diehards who arrived right

around Thanksgiving, the cream of the crop was still on the premises.

At least to my untrained eye.

But I had very specific requirements, so once Shelby and Berry wandered off to look at God-only-knows-what, I cornered Clay, the owner of the tree farm. “Do you have like twenty-foot trees?”

He cocked his head, his windswept dark hair falling over his brow. “Twenty feet? What kind of ceilings do you have, man?”

I laughed harder than I’d meant to. “Not that high. Or as high as you’re picturing. I have a specific idea in mind for a very ornate Christmas display.”

“I guess so. Outside?”

“Nope.”

His clear puzzlement made me laugh harder as I took out the crumpled page from the magazine I’d happened across at my mom’s one day. Clay took it from me and scanned it, turning his head sideways to examine the included photos from all angles.

“You have a woman—or a man, I assume. Family?”

“Right first guess and second. Not both woman and man.” I shook my head at my own verbal fumble. “Woman and family. First Christmas. Want to do it up big. You know?”

His gaze softened as he scanned the lot until I pointed out my family, currently browsing the arrangements of real wreaths displayed on pegs on wooden racks. Some were already decorated, and others were basically bare other than a big floppy bow in festive Christmas colors.

I blinked through the snow, now falling a lot faster than it had been just a few minutes ago. “I need a huge tree I can chop in parts. Or you can chop in parts. And um, deliver to my home like this evening? I’d also like to have the, what’s it called? Root ball attached? So, we can plant it in the yard after.”

“You have a decent-size property?”

“I do. A couple acres.”

He stroked his dark scruff thoughtfully. “Yeah, we can fix you up.”

“Tonight though? Both my girl and my daughter,” I only stumbled slightly on the word, since I’d been practicing saying it more, “have stuff to do out of the house, but I’ll be home.”

Berry was going to a classmate’s birthday party and Shelby had some design symposium thing she was attending in downtown Kensington Square for Dahlia, who’d gotten a bug and couldn’t go. Shelby was tasked with networking and taking lots of pictures.

I was tasked with turning our house into a Christmas wonderland amazing enough that Shelby would agree to marry me, and Berry would too. Not to marry me, but to be my family. They were already but I wanted to make it official.

Needed to make it official.

Clay’s head whipped my direction. “So, you have a narrow window tonight for it to be delivered and decorated, I’m guessing?”

I winced at the slight panic in his expression. “Well, I was hoping. If it was doable. Is it doable?” Before he could answer, I held up a hand. “I have some friends coming over to help decorate. So, don’t think it’s all on you.”

“Now I feel so much better.” He arched a brow. “I’m assuming you have a healthy budget.”

“Yes, I do. Healthier than my sense of timing.”

Now it was his turn to laugh long and loud as he clapped me on the back. “We’ll get you fixed up. Don’t you worry. Why don’t you go help your girls buy a wreath while I set aside a tree for you to approve then we’ll start planning the next step?”

My breath came out in a big whoosh. “That sounds really good.” We started to walk across the lot crowded with families. “So, you think this sounds sensible?”

“I wouldn’t say sensible, necessarily, but doable is sensible’s first cousin. And I get being in love and wanting to give your significant other an experience they’ll never forget. I just got married not long ago myself.”

“Oh, did you? Congratulations. That’s awesome.”

“Yeah. Scary as hell if you sit and think about all the what ifs, which I do not recommend.”

“Not my way. I have ADHD. Basically, my mind flits from one thought to another with no rhyme or reason.” Just like the daughter thing, I was practicing telling more people about my diagnosis. I was sick and tired of hiding it. There was no reason to.

And if hearing about it helped someone else, well then, even better. I also wanted to make sure Berry had a good example when it came to not feeling she needed to keep her diagnosis a secret.

We had nothing to be ashamed of.

“My wife used to deal with anxiety. She still does sometimes. All of us have something. Or multiple somethings. Just gotta take it day by day.” He clapped my back. “I’m going to go talk to my team while you and your ladies pick out fun stuff to go with your ginormous tree.”

“Sounds good.” I meandered over to where Shelby and Berry were squabbling over which wreath to get. Berry wanted the ultra-traditional one with green bulbs and a large satin red bow, while Shelby liked the more trendy style in golds and silvers and a shimmery light blue bow. Even light blue icicles.

“I have an idea.” I wrapped an arm around each of them.

Shelby shot me a look. “We have no room for both.”

“No room? I beg to differ. I’d be willing to bet we could fit even more of them. Not that we will,” I added hurriedly as she narrowed her eyes.

As usual, Berry sided with me. “We can put red and green on the front door and that blue one on the back door.”

I nodded at Berry. “Sounds like a plan. Or we can put the silver splendor on the garage, so we can see it every time we pull in,” I suggested to Shelby while her lips twitched into a smile.

“Yet again, lawyer wins.”

“We *all* win. But if you’d rather, we can hang yours somewhere else.” I kissed her hair while Berry rolled her eyes and moved on to start looking at a tree covered in unique handmade ornaments.

No puking sounds though, so there was definite progress.

“Somewhere else like by the garbage cans?”

“I was going to say over the bed, but you’re the designer in the family.”

Shelby poked me in the gut, and I laughed, catching her hand to lift to my mouth. I brushed a kiss over her knuckles to Berry’s retching sounds, making me laugh harder. “Hey, Berrster, thought you were off your game.”

“Just mixing it up. Hey, look at this ornament!” She held up a shiny, large, bright green metal pickle.

The pickle also came home with us. It was covered with tiny colorful lights. And our new tree would require many, many ornaments.

Clay informed me before we left that he’d make sure the tree was all set light-wise before it was delivered. He even had lights that you could switch from colorful to white at will. Technology was a marvel.

Then again, I hadn’t even bothered with a tree myself for years. What was the point?

I’d spent most Christmases in recent years on my own. Pre-Bob last fall, I hadn’t even had a pet. My usual idea of holiday spirit was stopping in at Lonagan’s to make sure Cal was doing okay and trading barbs with him while I had a few too many Harps.

Which reminded me. I needed to check in with him too. Maybe he could join that night’s friend brigade for decorating.

Unless he laughed in my face.

Also possible.

“So, did you change your mind about a tree?” Shelby asked as we headed back to the car without a tree in hand.

“Um, no.”

“Where is it?” Berry asked plaintively. “I always get to put on the star.”

I hadn’t even thought about a star. Hopefully, Preston had a suitable extra one. Or something that could pass for one. Or...

“Hey, did you see any stars you liked in there?” I questioned, glancing back at the crowded store we’d literally just left.

“Not really.”

“None?”

“Well, I guess there were one or two I kinda liked...”

“Good. Go get one you like.” I nudged Berry toward the store and tried to pretend I didn’t notice Shelby staring at me.

“Tree is handled,” I mouthed to her.

“Handled how? Where is it? Not that a convertible is the best transport for a Christmas tree.”

“Yeah, I know. It’ll be put in storage soon. We can use your Forrester for the winter, right?”

“Of course. What did you usually use?”

“Depending on how bad the weather was, sometimes I used to drive the convertible. I used to have a Wagoneer too, but I sold it at the end of last winter.” I stroked my hand down her hair as yet again, the snow started falling. We’d had a couple snow-free minutes, but they never lasted long in December in central New York. “I know it must be killing you not to know. You so love surprises.”

“About your Wagoneer? Nah, I don’t care.” She laughed as I was the one to poke her in return. “I’m a little afraid, actually. Your surprises can be...overwhelming.”

“*Me?* No.”

“Um, you got a giant blow-up dinosaur on a bicycle for Berry’s birthday. Who blew bubbles. Remember that?”

“Vaguely.”

“And dressed up Bob to match.”

“I definitely remember that because he tried to eat the bottle of bubble solution.”

She tipped back her head and surprised me by sticking out her tongue to collect snowflakes. So, I did the same. We were still doing it when Berry returned with her bagged star. I’d neglected to give her money so she must have used more of her saved allowance.

“Totally cringe,” she announced.

I looked at Shelby. She just shrugged so I did too. “Thank you.”

With a shake of her head, Berry flounced back to the car.

“Just think, only a few more years until she’s a teenager.”

I sighed. “God help us.”

A short while later, I turned on the Christmas channel as we headed back home. Berry asked several times about the tree, trying to pry the truth out of me, then she gave up and started texting like a mad woman on the cell we’d given her as an early holiday gift. Shelby still thought it wasn’t a wise move.

She was probably right. She usually was.

“We’ll pick you up no later than nine-thirty,” Shelby told her as I pulled up to the curb near Babs’s neat ranch house on the other side of town.

“I didn’t bring my gift!” she wailed just as she was about to get out of the car.

“Where is it? I’ll get it at home and bring it back with me.”

“On my pillow. I think. Or maybe on the nightstand. It’s the purple bag with streamers.”

“Got it.”

Berry nibbled on her thumbnail as she looked back at me.
“You sure?”

“I’m positive. Go have fun. I’ll be back in no time.”

“Okay. Thanks.” She ran off toward the front door, already opening to reveal Babs in the doorway with her hands on her hips.

“You’re a good dad.” Shelby leaned over to give me a kiss.

“I’m trying.”

“You’re succeeding. Now hurry up so you can drop me off too before whatever chaos will come with your ‘surprise.’” Naturally, she did finger air quotes.

I was already on my way. “Oh, ye of little faith.”

After I picked up Berry’s forgotten gift and returned it to her at Babs’ house, I then dropped off Shelby, who had also forgotten her briefcase, so she’d made good use of the trip home.

When I dropped her off at the symposium, I didn’t let her go inside until I’d given her a kiss to think of all evening, hopefully one that would work in my favor when I asked her to marry me. Not that I thought she wouldn’t say yes, but you just never knew for sure until the ring was on her finger.

My buddies showed up on time, more or less—Bishop was running late because Adeline had a cough, and Clint was running late because Kitty was freaking about bottling enough milk for *their* recent addition. Brian Dexter was super cute, but I didn’t want to know anything about the milk situation. Jimmy, the cop in the Cove, was another college buddy, and he hadn’t been able to make it tonight because he had a shift.

Probably good to have fewer people witness the bloodshed, just in case.

By the time the two latecomers arrived, Cal was on their heels and the tree had arrived and been put into place with much fanfare.

Clint, Bishop, and Cal stood on the sidewalk, gawking. The rest of the guys were probably gawking inside.

That gathering of men even included my father, since Preston had claimed *he'd* felt guilty that he wasn't included.

"It is Christmas," he reminded me as if I'd somehow forgotten.

Considering the entire purpose of the night was the giant twinkling tree that currently filled the front bay window and even a window on the second floor—which had been fun, because they didn't exactly line up the way they had in the magazine photo. Then the top piece was on the roof, star in place. And the tree held the bare minimum of decorations, mainly because I needed about one thousand to fill all three pieces.

But that was a tomorrow problem. Berry could help with that. And Shelby too, if she was still speaking to me.

Anyone's guess there. Since there were a sizable number of needles everywhere.

I should've gotten a fake tree to dismember.

Next time.

"That is a choice," Bishop commented. "Even has a star."

I'd found one in the bag of decorations Preston had brought over, which was handy since Berry's bag with hers was lost somewhere in the recesses of my car.

At least I had the wreaths. I'd even hung both.

Preston and my dad came outside to examine the tree from the sidewalk. Isis was the last one out the door and when she saw the tree in its full glory, including the segment on the roof, she started to laugh and covered her mouth. "Dude, she's gonna kill you dead."

Well, there was some encouragement for my romantic gesture.

She pulled me aside a moment later, framing my face between her hands before she gave me a giant hug. "I'm proud

of you. All marital and shit.”

“Maybe. Assuming I’m not dead.”

“She won’t kill you. Probably. Since you didn’t really cut a hole in the roof of the house she’s spent months renovating.” When I didn’t answer, she tilted her head. “Right, Dexterous?”

I gave in and grinned. “Of course not. Tree’s in pieces. But!”

She narrowed her dark eyes. “But what?”

“Tree has a root ball so we can plant it in back and have a marital commemoration piece!”

Isis looked heavenward and made the sign of the cross. “He knows not what he does. He means well.”

“I do mean well. And if she says yes, you’re going to be my best Isis, right?”

“I assume you mean person to stand up for you.”

“Yes, you’re my best friend in the whole world. I can’t get married without you.”

She frowned and dabbed at her eyes. “Your innate cuteness has saved your life more times than I can count. May Shelby agree.”

“Oh, she does.” I tried to keep my smile in place. “I’m almost sure.”

Isis hugged me hard. “I love you. Of course I’ll be your best Isis, you freaking clown with a heart of gold.”

I hugged her back. “Not sure that’s a compliment but thank you anyway.”

The next one who came to bolster me was my brother.

“I’m sorry about Dad,” he said as it once more started to snow. We were all still outside freezing our balls off to the tune of the piped-in Christmas music, thanks to the external speakers Shelby had gotten installed along the eaves earlier in the year.

I was pretty sure my tree display had mesmerized my friends. Or else they were all halfway to drunk.

I'd had not even so much as a shot.

I waved off my brother's apology, turning toward where our father was deep in conversation with Cal. About what, was anyone's guess.

Hopefully, he wasn't giving my buddy dating tips.

I still had no clue who Cal had been...interacting with in the back room or wherever the night Bishop's baby had been born.

"It was a nice gesture," I told Preston.

"Yeah, I'm capable of those sometimes. But sometimes I act like an ass, as I've done with you for the better part of a couple years. Probably before that."

I cocked my head. "I'd say it was since I was about ten but good talk."

He winced. "Probably right. I was always so fucking jealous of you."

"Jealous of me?" I couldn't keep the shock out of my tone.

"Yes. You were always the favorite. Everything always came easy for you. Our parents love you best. Women love you. You could do no wrong."

"Funny, I remember that completely differently. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle."

"I'm proud of you, man. Bringing on Eli, making the office your own. You handled all of it without help from me or dad."

"I had Isis. And Eli has been a big help. Assuming he and Isis don't kill each other, I think we may be on an upward trend." I jerked a shoulder.

Did I get the seeming animosity afoot between those two? No. Had I spent much time thinking about it? Also no.

“Still, man, you don’t give yourself enough credit. And now marrying Shelby and becoming Berry’s dad. You’re a good guy, and I haven’t been cognizant of that enough.”

I smiled as the tips of his ears went visibly red even in the dark. Of course it could’ve been because it felt sub-zero out here.

“Thanks, man. I’ve always looked up to you. So, I really appreciate it.” I looked over my shoulder. “And hey, if we’re confessing...I’ve always been jealous that Bishop was your best friend and not me.”

“What about Isis and you?”

“Yeah. I have an awesome best friend. She’s gonna stand up for me, by the way. But.”

“I wouldn’t expect any less. But what?”

“I still wanted to be your best friend. Guess it just wasn’t in the cards.”

Preston smiled. “We still have time. Long as you don’t expect exclusivity on that score.”

“Nah. I’m good with that role holding a couple people. True for me too.”

“Yeah.” He clapped me on the back before he dragged me into a one-armed hug.

Not long after, everyone headed out after the needed question was added to the roof. Preston had found a company to arrange lights into words, thereby making my night so much easier.

I hadn’t relished possibly breaking my neck and ending up in traction if I’d had to be the one to put the question up there.

Right before my brother left, he let me know Shelby had told him off for not treating me right back in the spring. Isis confirmed it, since that had apparently happened during their dinner.

I couldn’t stop grinning. My hopefully wife-to-be was fucking awesome.

On the way to pick up Shelby and Berry, I played more Christmas music. But I couldn't sing. I was too damn nervous.

Maybe Isis was right, and we were about to start our married life with a homicide.

Mine.

The whole way home, Berry chattered about Babs and what presents she'd received. Shelby and I were unnaturally quiet.

Finally, the mood affected Berry, and she got quiet too.

This was *not* how I'd wanted to do this, but it couldn't be helped.

I'd never wanted something to happen so much. Ever. In my life.

Proving it, I'd barely signaled to pull into the driveway when I stopped the car and placed my hands on the wheel. "I just want to say the reason I did this in this way was because you both deserve a super-huge gesture. You deserve an amazing Christmas. You deserve someone who loves you both so much he'd do just about anything to make you happy—"

Shelby unrolled her window and stuck her head out. "Does that include cutting a hole in the roof?" Her voice was one icicle away from hysteria.

"No. It's an optical illusion."

"It's too freaking cool. Mom, let me out to go see!"

Dazedly, Shelby got out to let Berry out of the car from the backseat. She ran across the lawn, kicking up snow until she stopped suddenly, gazing up at the lighted sign on the roof before she shouted back. "Oh, thank God. I thought you were breaking up!"

"No. I hope not," I added quietly as Shelby read the sign and dropped down into the passenger seat once more, as if she was stunned. Then she shifted toward me, her eyes full of tears.

“You are probably the craziest man I’ve ever met.” She swiped at the tears dripping off her chin.

“Probably. Crazy in love with you. Will you marry me, Shelby Wilde soon-to-be Shaw? Please.”

“As if I could say no. *Yes.* I love you so much, Dexter Shaw.” She slid across the seat to me and threw her arms around my neck, kissing me so hard that my ears rang with enough pressure I almost missed Berry’s telltale puking noises.

Almost but not quite.

We didn’t separate for a good two minutes, but when we finally did, I was swiping away her tears as she did the same with mine.

Berry, however, was not crying. She was making snowballs.

The first one splatted heavily on the windshield, and we both jumped violently enough to nearly hit the ceiling.

“Guess you’re on board,” I shouted once I found my voice.

“Duh.” Another snowball joined the first, and by then, I was climbing out to send some back her way.

Shelby soon joined me, and in no time, snow was flying in all directions. And laughter rang out in the night, sharp and so very welcome.

Welcome.

My damn mat.

I veered away from the snow party and jogged up the steps to charge inside and open the coat closet. I unfurled my welcome mat and took it outside, grinning so widely my cheeks hurt as I slapped it down on the porch.

“Look,” I called out.

They looked, confusion wreathing both of their faces. Shelby rushed up the steps and clapped her hands over her mouth. “The Shaws,” she whispered, frosty plumes of air leaving her mouth with every word.

She rushed toward me, encircling my waist with her arms, and then Berry ran up to do the same to me from behind. I was fully enveloped.

And fully fucking happy.

Finally.

You know we had to go with Isis next. ;)

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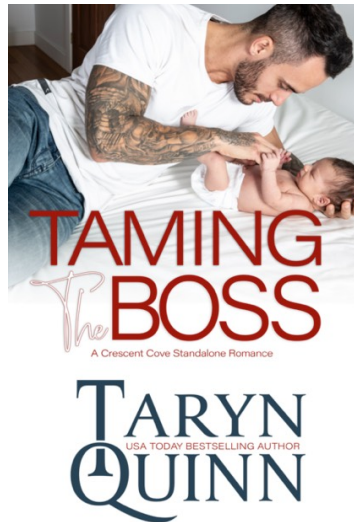
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Katherine



DESPERATELY SEEKING KITTY

AFTER MIDNIGHT, ANYTHING WAS POSSIBLE.

Or so the tarot cards and reheated Chinese told me.

My food wasn't talking to me—I'm not quite that batty yet—but I was having...a moment. I had a pleasantly full belly and Loreena McKennitt was playing while snow swirled beyond my windows on the third floor of my building. Down below, the few cars moved about sluggishly, their jewel tones mixed with a heck of a lot of neutrals.

Kinda like my life.

But right now, I felt cozy. Warm. Safe.

Rare for me as of late.

I'd pulled The Sun and The Star. Positive cards that encouraged me to do what I was about to do.

Even if I half believed fortune telling of any sort was a bunch of hooey.

I shifted on the padded window seat, pressing my suddenly warm cheek to the cold window. Beside me, Princess Goldenrod snored lightly with her wet pink nose pressed against my bare thigh. I tried to tug my robe back into place without disturbing her, then gave up and went back to my phone.

Want ads for all kinds of pet-related items scrolled down my screen. Kitten Around was a local charity that mostly focused on saving the most desperately in-need kittens, usually those that were critical or special needs in some way.

Exactly why I couldn't afford to help them in any way but financial right now. I'd lost my beloved cat earlier this year—Princess Goldenrod's bonded mate—and as much as I empathized with those kittens who needed homes, I couldn't take the risk of losing another so soon.

Couldn't take the risk period.

Not to mention owning or fostering another cat would require more interaction with the outside world. More vet visits, more grocery trips—even if I almost always ordered delivery except in extreme cases—just more of everything.

But my Princess was lonely. So I'd brainstormed another way for her to get her required interaction with her species without her running free as an indoor/outdoor cat. That was too dangerous for a number of reasons—communicable diseases, inclement weather, fights, cars. Just way too many threats out there.

Surely there was another way. And lo and behold, I'd come up with one.

I would rent a cat.

Okay, yes, the idea sounded kind of nuts. I'd certainly never heard of such a thing before. I supposed I could've gone the cat café route—assuming I'd been okay with the whole public interaction thing. That was not an option right now. And I didn't know if you were allowed to bring your own pet to interact with the ones there. Probably not.

Besides, sometimes you had to try something new.

My *new* was helping someone who perhaps was in a financial bind while they handled all the cat's vet visits and other needs. One thing I had was money. In return, I would rent their cat for a pre-approved number of hours a week, depending on what my girl seemed to like best.

It wouldn't be a quick process. She was finicky. Her human mama was even *more* finicky. It had to be exactly the right fit.

So far, I'd been deluged with offers since I'd first placed my ad in Kitten Around's classifieds section two days ago. If

deluged meant zero.

Which meant it was time to change things up.

Maybe I needed to make it seem...I don't know, more appealing? How did one entice someone to be willing to rent out their cat? Just for perfectly innocent cuddling and inter-cat relations of a playful nature.

I wasn't selling sex, although I had reason to know that a hint—or more than a hint—of naughtiness definitely got attention. I could always try an experiment. If it didn't work or my ad attracted some kind of weirdo, I'd just cancel it and go back to living my life as a mysterious oddity who locked herself in her apartment and liked cats more than people and would rather type than talk to anyone.

It was now closer to one a.m. I still had zero bites on my very factual ad.

Princess Goldenrod, a gold—duh—DSH cat, would like to pay for the services of a preferably male cat for afternoon playdates. Several sessions a week with all toys provided (though they will remain at my home after your boy goes home). She is spayed and has all shots. Requesting same. Pay negotiable.

PRGLDNROD

So I used my honed skills at crafting provocative text to write myself a doozy. Only slightly encouraged by two—fine, three—cans of Brothers Three Orchard's hard apple cider.

Seeking pussy for a few playdates a week. I started out wanting a male for my gold girl, but I decided to open the field. So, a male or female can work depending on fit. I have toys and beds, though they will stay on premises. Must be up to date on shots. Top dollar for the right candidate. Discretion is advised.

PRGLDNROD

I reread my ad one last time then finished the last of my cider. My cat had wandered away, so I curled up on the window seat for a short nap. It wasn't the most comfortable position and my ample parts dangled off the cushions, but I just needed a few minutes to rest. I was a night owl, after all, and I had a ton of work to get done tonight. Damn cider had hit me harder than I'd expected.

Two hours later, I shot up into a seated position with my dark curls half covering my face, my eyes bleary, and the snow outside reaching epic levels. Not unusual for my small town in central New York, but I must've somehow missed a weather alert.

I lifted my phone, swiped it awake, and squinted at the screen with one eye, sure I must be seeing things. I'd left my Kitten Around profile open and my mail icon was jumping madly. The red number above it read 213.

What the hell?

I opened my inbox and started reading the messages with growing horror. They got more and more salacious, describing sex acts and positions that even I wasn't familiar with.

And I knew my sex acts. I actually prided myself on my knowledge of a wide array of the ways people got off, so that I could help my editing clients.

These people apparently could teach me a few things. At least intellectually. I wasn't looking for those kind of playdates, thank you very much.

I shuddered. And neither was Princess Goldenrod.

I went through every message. Some went right in the trash bin. A few of them, I noted their contact information in my notes app so I could possibly contact them with questions later.

That left me with three candidates. Three out of the now 226 messages.

I took a deep breath.

Perhaps I'd gone too provocative. I needed a beta reader when I wrote these things, apparently.

This was why I just edited romance novels and didn't write them. I'd probably set the internet on fire if I tried.

Shivering, I tightened my robe as message #227 came in. I wasn't sure I had it in me to read any more about pony play except with cats. Or humans dressed as cats or something along those lines. Hey, you do you, whatever works. I just hadn't expected quite that level of enthusiasm in response to my ad.

Maybe I should have. I hadn't exactly posted it at the best time of day for such things. But who spent the overnight hours trolling Kitten Around's classifieds section?

Color me schooled.

I opened #227 and read it with my heart racing.

ADMIN

Hi, you don't know me, and maybe I'm not understanding what you're looking for, but considering where you posted this, you might want to reword it? I can't imagine the kind of replies you're getting. Actually, I can, but don't tell me because I'm not a pervert and not interested. You probably won't even see this.

I frowned and responded before I thought better of it. Although I probably wouldn't have thought better of it, anyway. I had a vague hard cider buzz and it was three a.m. and my toes were freezing. How those three things worked together, I wasn't certain.

When someone says they aren't a pervert, they most certainly are. It's like someone in a cabin in the woods saying they aren't a serial killer then holding out a handful of candy to a hapless stranger.

I don't know what made me say that. I wasn't that drunk, if I even was at all. But there was a little devil on my shoulder who felt bold behind the screen.

I often did while I did my work, too, despite the fact they weren't my words I was editing. I just rearranged sections that needed help. I didn't *create*.

Kitty Armor, developmental editor, was the brave one, not Katherine Armitage, mousy recluse with a pair of red heels she'd probably never actually wear anywhere other than her own apartment while she edited.

So who was being brave here? Kitty, Katherine, or someone new altogether?

While I pondered that, another message came in. And it wasn't from my cabin-candy giver.

Whom I'd apparently scared away. Even my typed words were intimidating somehow. My dad would shake his head sadly and say he'd told me that men like to make the first move.

I hadn't made any moves. I was looking for a cat, not a man, for fuck's sake.

Then he messaged again. Assuming *he* really was a he.

ADMIN

I just wanted to help. But if you don't need help, fine by me. Good luck on your pussy search. Though maybe next time post this on a more appropriate site.

A pussy is a cat. A CAT. This site is for Kitten Around, a kitten rescue. I posted it exactly where I wanted to. What are YOU doing here, genius?

ADMIN

I'm an admin. An alert went off while I was sleeping about extremely high traffic on the server. I logged in to see someone posting a request for pussy, so I figured I'd send a message first before I removed it. Our servers don't have the bandwidth to support your solicitations.

Solicitations? You think I was trying to get sex?

ADMIN

You tell me.

I am telling you. Do you have access to my first post?

ADMIN

The one you took down?

Yes.

He responded twenty-nine minutes later. Yes, I kept track. In that time, Princess showed up and stared at me for several minutes until I received her telepathic communication that apparently breakfast today wasn't at her normal seven-thirty but at four thirty-six.

After I fed my fuzzy overlord, I returned to find my cabin-candy giver had responded with the message board version of *hmph*.

ADMIN

Your post was poorly worded unless you deliberately were being provocative.

Give the man a ribbon! Assuming he is a man. Also assuming he really works at Kitten Around.

ADMIN

Do you see the Admin tag beside my name?

I did see that, yes. Dammit. Harder to accuse one of things when the proof otherwise was right there, but I wasn't one to go down without a fight.

Maybe you're a hacker.

ADMIN

Sure. And if I was, hacking into Kitten Around's site would be my first target. A site that usually has approximately 3 visitors on an average Saturday night in the midnight to six a.m. time period. Tonight? Over five hundred.

Wow, go me. Maybe I should start writing books.

He didn't reply so I sent another message.

Fine, you're an admin. Maybe you're female.

ADMIN

And if I am? I didn't indicate any interest in the pussy you're seeking, so my sex is irrelevant.

Oh, come on. Women don't get excited by that word. That's a male trigger. You probably have a pussy search-term alert on the server so it flags you first. Sorry to say you were #227 in my inbox.

ADMIN

And maybe you're a man. You're the one seeking pussy. All I want is for you to reword your post for clarity without deliberately inflammatory terminology.

Pussy is slang, not terminology.

He responded quickly this time.

ADMIN

Pussy for a cat is slang? Good to know, since it's the first definition in Webster's. The dictionary in case you're unaware.

Much to my shock, I sat back with a smile. I didn't play chess, but in my brain, someone was screaming *checkmate*.

And that someone was directly connected to my mostly dormant libido.

A man who quoted the dictionary to me? Even if he wasn't a man, I wasn't sure I cared. This person intrigued me.

Then he sent a picture. Probably to kill me dead, the bastard.

ADMIN

For you. Just so you know my sex since that's apparently a concern of yours.

I opened it, expecting a dick pic. Because of course. The possibility disappointed me. I hated when someone turned out to be predictable.

But when I clicked to download it, the picture that emerged was not of an erect penis. No, it was of a golden-skinned man with washboard abs and tattoos of palm fronds on either side of his groin just above the waistband of his plaid flannel pajama bottoms.

Oh, and a cat. He wasn't wearing the cat as an accessory. The cat's fluffy black bulk was draped over cabin-candy guy's discreetly hidden groin, staring at the camera with the cool green disdain that only a cat could pull off.

My mouth was now officially dry. Those abs were things of beauty.

How to respond? I'd just go by instinct.

I can reverse image search that to see if it's widely available, you know.

ADMIN

Be my guest. You going to send one back?

Send what back?

ADMIN

A picture.

Oh, are we internet dating now? Should I tell you my measurements, my astrological sign, and what enneagram I am, or do you want to go first?

ADMIN

Now she's angling for my measurements. Beginning to think someone is a pervert and it's not me.

Again, why would I troll on a kitten rescue site? Isn't that what Tinder is for?

ADMIN

Oh, I knew you seemed familiar. Is your screen name Vulva69 on there?

As much as I liked a snarky man, I didn't respond immediately. Just to ease my mind, I did that reverse image search. No such thing existed.

By then he'd sent another picture, this one of the gold collar with reflective paw prints the black kitty wore in the photo, looped around his fingers. Both collars said Lucky on their little fishy tags.

ADMIN

Enough for you?

Sure. Yeah. I guess. Whatever.

ADMIN

You googled, didn't you?

So you have a pussy.

ADMIN

If you mean cat, yes. As you can see, his name is Lucky and he rules the roost. Are you really wanting playdates with an actual cat for your DSH?

So he *had* gone back to check out my previous post on the server. And he appeared to be comfortable with the term DSH, so he at least knew that much.

I supposed I would tentatively trust hot-abs guy—at least for now. Until he slipped up and I caught him in a lie.

Do you spray tan?

ADMIN

What? No. Of course not.

Do you live in Kensington Square?

ADMIN

I'm local. Are you?

Depends. Where do you live?

ADMIN

Like an address?

No, like spatial coordinates. Yes, an address.

ADMIN

1831 EastView Road on the wooded side of Crescent Lake, but I don't live in a cabin. You?

I frowned as Princess Goldenrod hopped onto my window seat and started kneading on the bottom of my robe, her sharp nails digging into my leg. “Don't worry. I'm not giving our address to a strange man with a spray tan and abs for days. I'm feeling him out.”

Then again, how had I expected to have playdates with a rental cat and my cat if I didn't give out my address? It wasn't as if we could meet in the park in the middle of winter, even if I had been okay with hanging out anywhere but my apartment. It was only November, but we lived in the snowbelt—proven by the fact that it was indeed snowing.

That left us going to hot-abs guy's not-a-cabin. But that didn't feel any safer. Going there held its own dangers, not the least of which was I hated leaving home. At least here I was on my own turf and I could disable him with a two-finger jab to the eyes.

I'm not prepared to disclose that.

ADMIN

Are you prepared to go to bed? It's five-thirty in the morning.

I squinted at my screen. Now that he mentioned it, I was still tired. But I hadn't done the work on my docket. I hadn't set up a playdate for Princess. All I'd done tonight was get halfway to drunk and kind of bantered with a man who'd thought I was soliciting female companionship of a personal nature on a kitten charity site.

Yeah. I'm tired. Good night.

I didn't wait for him to say anything else. Didn't make plans to chat later or meet or exchange more photos. Well, *he'd* be exchanging more. I hadn't sent anything yet.

Maybe I never would.

"Let's go to bed," I said to Princess, scooping her up before she could argue. She tended to do that with a few well-placed meows.

Wonder where she'd picked up that personality trait.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author, Taryn Quinn, is the bestie combo of bestselling authors Taryn Elliott and Cari Quinn. We've been writing together for years and decided to combine forces under one name.

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