



HIS  
FAVORITE

*Mistake*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TARYN  
QUINN

# HIS FAVORITE MISTAKE

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AN AGE GAP STEAMY SMALL TOWN ROMANCE

TARYN QUINN



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## HIS FAVORITE MISTAKE

Speeding past my limits is all I want...

I craved just one night to break out of the rhythm I've been stuck in for way too long. As a successful singer beyond my wildest dreams, I can't help wanting more—to write my own music, to head into edgier territory, to have some fun.

Particularly the naughty kind that doesn't match my innocent image.

An illicit joyride in a borrowed Porsche leads me straight to stern ex-Detective and current romantic suspense author Jed Knight, who has been straining at the confines of his own mold recently. After turning his back on being a cop, he's been on the straight and narrow for too long—but he's ready and willing to show me the ropes.

And the cuffs.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*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.*

ONE

## JED

BEER. BOXING. BED. IN THAT ORDER.

Idling at a light, I breathed a sigh of relief that my day was done. My dog Freddy would share the couch with me, of course, but he'd have to abstain from the beer, despite the fact that the mutt had developed a taste for it some years ago at a college frat party.

Too bad. I wasn't about to contribute to the delinquency of a geriatric dog.

A red car blitzed past me, barely waiting until the light turned green, going so fast it was clear the driver never intended to slow down. At a glance, I glimpsed dealer plates, and shit, was that a Porsche?

Up ahead it slammed on its brakes at another light, then screeched forward as soon as the light turned green.

I hit the gas, giving chase as years of training had taught me to do. A car like that in Kensington Square, operating at that rate of speed, couldn't be a good sign.

It didn't take me long to catch up with the car, in spite of how fast it was going. Coming up behind the vehicle, I switched lanes until I was right on its tail before flashing my lights several times.

*Pull over, jerk.*

The car slowed at the flash of my lights then sped up. Clenching my jaw, I stomped on the accelerator out of instinct.

I'd given chase a few times in my career, and the burst of adrenaline that zinged through my veins was like pure kerosene. In fact, it was one of the things I enjoyed most—

*Missed most.*



I wasn't a cop, not anymore. And I had no reason to be flagging down a suspicious car. This wasn't my department issued Crown Vic, and I no longer had a Detective's badge in my wallet.

I was a Dateline NBC episode waiting to happen.

*Man pretends to be cop to corner innocent female victim. News at eleven.*

Not that I could be certain she was female. Hell, she could've been a six-hundred pound dude in a gorilla suit for all I knew. I'd just seen someone breaking the law and reacted.

Easing off the gas, I switched lanes. I didn't back off entirely.

*I'm a citizen, aren't I? I can make an arrest anyway.*

Yeah, there was some rationalization. As if citizen's arrests ever held up in court. The cases that got thrown out on a technicality were a sore enough spot in the department without imagining the look on the DA's face when this file came across his desk.

I sighed, flexing my hand around the steering wheel. Pursuing this speed demon wasn't going to get me anywhere good. Even if she/he/it was still signaling in and out of lanes like a damn drag racer.

I was no longer a member of law enforcement. If I called this in, dispatch would probably blow me off. It was Friday night. They had more important things to handle than a joyrider.

The driver took a sharp right, then a sharp left, drawing us deeper into a residential area. At least the traffic was much less dense here. Fewer opportunities for the driver to do serious damage to someone else—or himself.

I continued to follow her. Arresting her wasn't an option but tailing her was. That wasn't illegal. If they didn't stop soon, I'd just call it in and be done with it.

I patted my pockets and glanced around the front seat. Where was my damn phone?

A bang up ahead made me jerk the wheel in reflex. The Porsche fishtailed in an intersection and curbed it hard enough to snap an axle. "Fucking asshole."

I finally located my phone, sending it flying to the floor in the process. "Dammit." I fumbled around the dark floorboard. I glanced up and saw a small figure jump out of the car and appear to slump over the vehicle's almost nonexistent back end.

Oh God, was she hurt?

Heart racing, I gave up on the phone and signaled toward the side street closest to the intersection before slamming on the brakes. The lack of traffic at this time of night in this neighborhood was a godsend.

Another car pulled over to help—or boost the rims off the fancy sports car. You just never knew for sure, and after the years I'd spent on the force, unfortunately, I'd lost a lot of faith in the kindness of humans.

I climbed out and stalked toward the irresponsible driver. The man from the other car swiftly got back into his vehicle and fled the scene.

Yep. So much for her good Samaritan. I might no longer be a cop, but I clearly hadn't lost my cop face.

Small favors.

As I approached, it was clear she wasn't slumped over as I'd first guessed. No, she was kicking the tire with the pointy-toed boots that ended approximately a millimeter below indecency. Her clingy dress ended just above that creamy glimpse of her thigh.

From the quick lurch of my cock, evidently some parts of me didn't give a shit if she was a little rulebreaker or not.

Worse, that was making me even harder.

“Did you boost this car?” I demanded without saying hello.

She stopped kicking long enough to give me a look of pure malevolence out of eyes that could've been blue or green. They were light in contrast to all the dark hair whipping around her shoulders like a cape. “Boost? Did we wake up in *Gone in Sixty Seconds*?”

“If we did, I want my money back, because you're sure as hell no Angelina Jolie.”

So that was a bit of a half-truth. No, this woman did not look like Angelina, especially in that particular movie since Angie had been sporting blond braids. But it wasn't because this one wasn't just as beautiful. Between the wild dark hair, that curvy body wrapped in stretchy material, and the boots—Dear God, the boots—she could've given a few Hollywood starlets a run for their money.

“Yeah, well, break my heart. This car ruined my night. Popping a tire when I wasn't going more than—”

“Eighty-five?” I asked blandly, crossing my arms.

She flushed brightly enough I could see her cheeks blazing in the moonlight. “Barely over eighty,” she whispered, ducking her head.

Hmm. A bad girl but not comfortable with it. Bad girl in training? Or

maybe bad girl on the run from something even worse?

*Don't know. Don't care. Not my circus. Not my monkeys.*

In spite of the hard knock of common sense in my gut, I moved closer. “Have you been drinking?”

“What? No. Not a drop.”

Her vehemence seemed sincere. Or maybe I was just a sucker. “Are you hurt?”

I didn't think so, judging from the way she was still occasionally halfheartedly kicking the tire. But then she turned her face away and let out a sniffle and I couldn't help wondering what exactly was going on here.

If she'd been out for a simple Friday night joyride, it hadn't taken much to steal her joy. Then again, maybe the car really was stolen.

Fuck, I needed my phone to call this in.

“You flashed your lights at me.” She lifted her chin before I could move. “You wanted me to pull over.”

No, it was better altogether if I denied my intention to make her do just that. I wasn't allowed to try to corral speeders while in a civilian vehicle or otherwise.

“You're mistaken.”

“No, I'm not. You slinked up behind me in traffic and screwed up my rhythm and tried to run me off the road.”

“Hardly.”

“Let me guess.” She charged over to me. “You're one of Taylor's goons. Gotta keep the talent in line, right? So, take me back.” She shifted her head and I caught the gleam of tears.

Blue. They were definitely blue.

“I don't know who Taylor is, and I'm definitely not one of his goons.”

From the set of her jaw, she didn't believe me. “Don't bother lying. You've got that tough guy bodyguard look about you. Bet you even have cuffs to make it easier for you to haul me back—”

“Don't mention cuffs or you'll get what you asked for.” I didn't mean to say it, didn't even realize I'd been thinking it, but man, her anger and even the slap of her hair in my face was nudging me toward a place I rarely went anymore.

I'd closed a lot of doors when I left the force. Switching careers hadn't been enough. I'd closed down some of my darker urges as well, wanting to see if time away from what had once given me pleasure would help pull off a

total system reboot.

Instead, I only craved it more.

She stared at me, worrying her full lower lip between blindingly white teeth. “Are y-you a cop?”

“That’s one guess,” I taunted in a low voice, moving subtly closer. “The other is that I’m your worst nightmare.”

I wanted to see if she shrank back, if some of the fire in her eyes banked. Words like I’d just uttered on a darkened street would make some women run.

*Smart women.*

But hell, I was probably already halfway to a charge of impersonating an officer, once she calmed down enough to realize that yes, I had been trying to flag her down, and no, I wasn’t one of Taylor’s goons. Whoever that was. And whoever *she* was that she needed to run away in such an expensive vehicle.

“Do you know who I am?” Her voice was breathless.

*Oh, here we go.* There was always someone who tried to posture their way out of a ticket. “No, lady, I don’t have the first fucking clue who you are.”

I braced for her ire. Maybe even more of her tears.

What I did *not* expect was for her to shoot me a blinding grin before she flung herself into my arms and attached her mouth to mine.

TWO

## PEYTON

I WAS KISSING A STRANGER. A POSSIBLY DANGEROUS STRANGER. AND OH MY God, it was even better than I'd ever imagined.

I slung my arms around his neck and slipped my tongue between his lips, tasting something dark and sweet. Coffee. He tasted like a big ol' cup of java, and while I never would've guessed that flavor would set my engine purring, right now it so did.

He made some sort of noise in his throat, a rumble—of pleasure or warning, I wasn't sure—so I doubled down and tightened my hold on him, pressing my nipples into his big, brawny chest.

As far as adventures went, I wasn't doing so badly after one hell of a false start.

“Enough.” His command sliced through me as he pushed me back, nearly sending me toppling to the pavement thanks to my insane boots. He gripped my arms to steady me and ground his teeth together loudly enough to make me shiver. “What the heck is wrong with you, lady?”

He'd called me lady twice so far. I'd only minded once.

Who was I kidding? I didn't mind anything that flew out of this sexy, hulking stranger's mouth. And oh, what a mouth it was.

Sculpted lips surrounded by a hint of stubble, white teeth, and a tongue that had given me ten seconds of glory before he shoved me back.

Next time I'd aim for twenty.

“I have a name.” The haughty tone entered my voice without conscious thought. Hearing it, I cursed under my breath. I didn't want to be that girl any longer. The perfect, untouched woman everyone wanted to keep under glass because I'd made a fortune that way. I was my family's cash cow—and

Bellavia Records too, for that matter—and no one wanted to jeopardize a good thing.

Except me. If I didn't jeopardize something fast, I was going to lose my mind.

The guy I'd just mouth-mauled gave me a thin smile. "Really? Me too. We're both kinda special, aren't we?" With another glance at my Porsche, he shook his head. "This needs to be reported. You had an accident. And those plates need to be run." He clamped his teeth together again audibly. "The chips will fall where they may."

"You do know who I am, don't you? That bit about not being a bodyguard was all just bullshit." I dragged out my phone from my tiny hip purse. "I'm calling a tow truck and a cab, in that order. Your threats about the police don't faze me. I'll pay the fines. You know I'm good for it."

"Wait." He gripped my wrist and I let my cell slide back in my purse. "You own that car?"

This guy must be new. If he was following me, how had he missed my trip to Walters Porsche and BMW? I'd been in there for almost an hour. And no, the car wasn't technically mine, but I'd borrowed it with an option to buy. They *expected* me to buy. I was a star after all, and stars on the verge of a downward spiral bought fancy cars and wrecked them just because they were spoiled brats.

Just like I was acting like right now.

Defeated, I sank down on the nearby curb, letting the cold from the concrete seep through my stupidly expensive dress. I was hot all over, partly from the adrenaline from the chase and partly from being kissed by a real man with a hard as hell body and no small amount of disgust in my direction.

Well-earned, because he'd pegged me accurately within a few moments. Even without knowing all the particulars, my behavior was a red flag. I might have escaped from my fortress tonight to taste freedom, but I was going to regret it all tomorrow.

I already was.

"They trusted me with the car. It wasn't its fault I curbed it and popped the tire. Hopefully, I didn't mess up the other tire too badly." Peering at the toes of my boots in the darkness, I sighed. "I'll pay whatever I owe for damages. I shouldn't have taken such a risk. It was inexcusably irresponsible."

God, it had felt so good. For those few moments, I'd felt like I was flying

down the streets. I'd never driven that fast in my life. The music had been playing—not mine, never mine—and the spring night air had tossed my hair into a delightful frenzy. Nothing about me was photo shoot-ready right now. I was a mess from head to toe, and I'd never felt more alive.

Miserable at this very second, true, but alive.

“You won't hear me arguing with you.” He ran his thumb along the thin chain around his neck. I'd noticed that chain and its small Saint Michael medal right away. My uncle Griff, a cop, used to wear the same medal. Supposedly, it offered protection to the wearer.

Too bad it hadn't helped Uncle Griff.

Right or wrongly, I couldn't help gravitating to this stranger because of that small sign. It seemed like a good omen. This man felt safe to me, even as he offered me an intoxicating hint of danger. Contradictory impulses aside, I couldn't deny the pull toward him.

Didn't want to.

“You could have seriously injured someone or yourself,” he continued when I remained silent.

What could I say? That I'd done a full diva trip and should be embarrassed? I already knew that. Tomorrow I'd hide in bed all day and try to convince myself one more time that not making the kind of music I wanted to make was no big deal.

So what if I thought I'd die if I had to sing one more slickly produced song about falling in love for the first time? That was my job. I was no better than the thousands of people who went to work every day at jobs they hated, and most of them weren't compensated as handsomely as I was. I had absolutely no right to bitch, even in my own head.

“You're sure you didn't hurt yourself. You're okay?”

Nodding glumly, I stared at the pavement. Already the metal bars around my life were clanging shut once more.

And best of all, now I'd get to explain my reckless behavior to my parents. Which was complete bullshit. I was twenty-three. Plenty old enough to stand on my own two feet and make my own decisions.

Next time I'd start with some smart ones, just for a change of pace.

A hand appeared in my line of vision. “Get up.”

As tempting as it was to say “no” and remain right where I was, I took his offered hand and rose, eyeing him warily. Just in case I'd categorized him wrong from the little bit I had to go on, I needed to lay my cards out on the



table. "I'm not going to pay you off to hide this."

His rough laughter caught me off-guard. Big time. How could there be such melody in such a discordant sound? It was like sandpaper over skin, abrasive, even derogatory. Yet I shifted closer, wanting to hear it again. Desperate to see if it made his eyes flare with color and life.

I was eager for that most of all. Life. Experiences. Material to help me write the kind of edgy songs I longed for. I didn't want to be just bubblegum anymore. I wanted to grow.

And how pretentious was that? Other people were struggling just to get by, and I was worried about feeding my stupid soul.

"Honey, you couldn't afford me, I guarantee you."

I cupped my elbows and tilted my head. "Everyone has a price."

"Not me." He seemed almost smug in his assertion.

"I used to say the same thing." I gazed off into the distance, smiling wistfully at the rows of homes with the curtains pulled tight over windows backlit by the glow of lamps or TVs. We were at the edge of Kensington Square where businesses flowed into homes. A lot of windows were dark, because it was late for this neighborhood full of families.

I wouldn't know about that. I barely saw my parents except when they wanted to keep me in line, and it had been that way since I'd begun finding success with music. Not so surprisingly, *now* they were more attentive.

At least when they worried their cash cow might stop giving milk.

"What's yours?" he asked softly, surprising me into bringing my gaze back to his. He wasn't the sort of man I'd have pegged as my type. Oh, he was handsome all right, but in a brutish sort of way. His jaw was sharp under his stubble, his eyes hard and unrelenting in their perusal. And I was pretty sure I'd yet to come out on the positive side of the ledger, not that I could blame him there.

Honestly, his lack of regard toward me was rather...refreshing. He didn't act charmed or impressed or even all that aware of me as a woman. I was just a person. A bratty, petulant one at the moment, granted.

What would it take to make those unforgiving eyes warm with approval? Was it even possible?

Maybe honesty would. I could give him that, even if he turned out to be in cahoots with Taylor. What difference did it make if I told someone how I really felt? No one paid me any mind. Maybe if I told someone I could nudge the elephant off my chest so I could breathe again.

“My price was approval,” I said quietly.

I hadn’t changed one bit. Here I was standing on a dark street corner, trying to please some man I didn’t know by telling him something real. That was my nature. People pleaser. Approval seeker.

*Pop princess, go home and slip into your ivory tower. That’s where you belong.*

“Isn’t everybody’s?” His dry response teased a smile out of me. “Look, I like chatting with you and all, but we need to call this in. Even if this car is yours, you need to do an accident report. You might need to be looked at by a medical professional.”

I laughed at that one. “Because I’m talking all crazy?”

“You said it, not me.”

“I did.” I sighed. “Yeah. We can call the cops. Might as well keep it all above board.” I brightened. “Maybe this will end up in the papers?”

I probably shouldn’t want that, on account of the whole diva-in-danger headline that was sure to accompany the article. Plus, it was a shitty thing to do, to borrow a car and mess it up, even in a minor, repairable way.

But maybe just maybe someone would look at me a little differently. Perhaps they’d wonder if something more lurked beneath my perfect hair and plastic smile.

Or maybe they’d just up my life insurance policy.

“You want this in the paper?” His brow furrowed. “Why?”

“Well, I’m of two minds.”

He crossed his arms. “No kidding.”

Swallowing hard, I strode toward the Porsche. Why was I baring myself to this stranger? Kissing him was one thing. Even going home with him—

Wait. No, I could not do that. A, he hadn’t asked. B, he was showing no inclination to ask. C, if he wasn’t my manager’s hired muscle, he had to be in the security field. Something cop-related. He had eyes like the bodyguards I dealt with day in and day out.

Then there was the medal.

Unless he was just a dangerous man, as he’d warned. Some of them probably had suspicious eyes and unusual jewelry too. Not that I had a lot of experience with dangerous types, but that seemed reasonable.

“Where are you going?”

“Just getting my stuff.” I waved a hand over my shoulder. “Call who you need to. I’m ready to face the music.” I tugged open the door of the Porsche

and grabbed my guitar case out of the passenger seat.

So much for running away from my life. I couldn't even manage to do it without taking the tools of my trade. This battered case covered in a million band stamps and patches and random stickers I'd been collecting since I was a teen represented so much more than an instrument to me. It stood for the heart and soul of my music. Even if I didn't get many opportunities to play my own songs, that didn't mean I intended to give up. I'd just keep pushing.

One day I'd break through. And in the meantime, I'd collect experiences for the jar in my mind that would give me fodder to create better songs.

I couldn't create without living.

Turning back, I startled at his proximity. He moved as silently and stealthily as a cat.

"Literally," he said, staring down at the guitar case I held between us like a shield. I'd been entertaining less than innocent thoughts in his direction, but now that he was in the dominant position, looming over me, trapping me between his arms braced on the top of the car and the door, suddenly going home alone didn't seem so bad.

This was not the sort of man I was used to.

"W-what?" God, I hoped the question only sounded like a squeak in my head.

He indicated my case with the dip of his chin. His very strong, masculine chin, dark with five o'clock shadow. "You said face the music, then you whipped out a guitar."

"Oh, yeah." Blindly, I glanced down at the case and wondered how my boneless fingers didn't drop it to the ground. "I'm a singer."

"And someone gave you their Porsche." His disbelief was obvious.

"No. I kind of borrowed it. With their permission," I added hastily. "The dealership let me take it for a test drive because I told them I wanted to buy it."

"Oh, really." He set his elbow on the top of the car and leaned his cheek on his fist like he was curling up for story time. "And your say so is enough for you to just stroll out with a car like this. A car worth a hundred grand—"

I cocked a brow. "Try one twenty-five."

"Oh, so very sorry." His smirk did something not entirely unpleasant to my belly. "My original statement stands. Your word's enough to walk out—and wreck—a car like this."

"Yes." Temper licked up my spine, making my smile tight. "Have you

ever heard of Peyton Pryor?”

His blank expression both annoyed and intrigued me. Either he was the finest actor I'd ever encountered or else he really didn't know my name. “No. I have not. Should I know her?”

So much for him being part of the security detail, which made him infinitely more interesting. He was an unknown quantity.

I tilted my head and softened my smile. Seduction was only part of my repertoire on stage, and only sanitized sex. I appealed to teen girls who still had posters on their walls and teen boys who had the hots for the chick next door. But I had an inner vamp somewhere down deep. The boots and the tight dress I'd bought this afternoon before my trip to the car dealership proved it.

Now I had to put that vamp to work.

Trailing a fingertip up his beefy arm, revealed by the short sleeves of his T-shirt, I gathered my courage. “Do you want to?”

THREE

## JED

THIS NIGHT WAS NOT GOING THE WAY I'D ANTICIPATED.

My beer and boxing match were fading further into the rearview mirror with every moment that passed. What I *should* do was call my buddy on the force to put this whole mess away.

I had to make sure the car was towed and returned to its rightful owner. That was my civic duty.

"Are you lucid?" I asked finally. "Did you hit your head in the crash?"

When she rolled her eyes, I tamped down on the urge to give her firm ass a not-so-gentle tap.

"No. I'm not injured. I was just suggesting that maybe we get to know each other in private." She wet her lush red lips. The brief taste I'd gotten wasn't nearly enough to satisfy my hunger in her direction. "After we contact the authorities and a tow truck, of course."

My cock veered abruptly against my zipper. Or maybe it wasn't so abrupt, since I'd been on a low simmer for the last few minutes. "Clarify get to know each other."

"That depends on you."

"No, honey, it does not."

She adjusted her hold on her guitar case, not so subtly pressing it into my chest and groin. Damn shame that my groin wasn't averse to the contact.

At least it gave me something to hide my hard-on behind.

"Hmm, not sure if I like it better when you call me lady. You could try my name though, just for kicks." She set the case on the ground between her feet and pried out her phone, holding it to her ear. "Hi, I'm Peyton Pryor and I was looking to buy a Porsche—" She stopped, her smile transforming her

face.

She had such a range of them. So far I'd seen witchy smile, pissed smile and seductive smile. Now this was something else altogether. As beautiful as it was, it was utterly fake.

"Yes, that's correct. I'm afraid there was a mishap with the vehicle." She ignored my pointed stare. "Oh, no, I'm fine. Not a mark on me. The car's fine too. Well, mostly. No, really, I appreciate your concern." Her smile warmed fractionally. "Thank you, Steve. That's really sweet of you to offer to come meet me where I am. I don't want you to go to any trouble. I can just have a tow truck...oh, if you're sure it's no bother. A ride would be—"

"Unnecessary," I cut in, surprised by how much I didn't want her to disappear with this Steve guy.

Her chin lifted and she continued speaking as if I hadn't said a thing. I fisted my hands at my sides to stop myself from grabbing her phone. She wasn't mine, even for a night, and I was practicing being more easygoing.

True, my practicing hadn't yet paid off, and this one seemed to push my buttons more than most. But I was making progress.

I was also making progress on leaving police work firmly in the past, my instincts aside. Even so, I needed to deal with the police right now.

I pulled out my phone and turned away as I called my old buddy Thomas to find out the best way to handle this situation. It wasn't really one for the overtaxed 911 system, but an officer should be sent to the scene. There was a good chance they'd want to give Peyton a Breathalyzer, and of course they'd need to run her record to see if she had any outstanding warrants.

I eyed her, still chatting merrily with "Steve", while I relayed what had happened to my old pal on the force. Almost offhandedly, I mentioned the name "Peyton Pryor" and Thomas sucked in a breath.

"Not *the* Peyton Pryor," he said, his tone somehow reverent.

Husky feminine laughter made me aim a hard stare in *the* Peyton's direction. "Apparently," I muttered, hating that even her giggling was making me hard. Okay, harder, since liftoff had been achieved a while ago.

Damn her and bless her, all at once.

"So, ah, mind filling me in?" I asked in a low voice.

Peyton was too busy flipping her hair around her fingers and flirting with the dude who didn't seem to give a fig that she'd curbed his expensive car to notice how long *I* was taking on the phone.

Steve had probably been mesmerized by the boots. My gaze darted up her

shapely expanse of thigh. I wasn't the only one.

"On what?" Thomas questioned, still sounding a bit dazed.

Peyton seemed to inspire that reaction in men easily. Too easily, from where I was standing.

My gaze lifted from her sexy legs to the face she'd upturned to the night. Her eyes were closed and she was still smiling as she talked, the wind playing with her long dark hair. Lifting and separating the strands before letting them fall against the bodice of her clingy sweater dress. If she were naked, her hair would coyly curve around her nipples in a naughty version of peek-a-boo.

*Dammit.*

Thomas started to respond but I didn't hear him, because Peyton's eyes had opened to focus on mine. From the smug little smile she wore, she knew exactly what she was doing. She was fucking teasing me, flirting with that other dude just to get my attention in spite of how inappropriate it was considering the situation. She'd just had an accident and she didn't even know my name.

I could be a serial killer. A man who collected body parts as trophies for my den. A guy who couldn't stop thinking about paddling her taut little ass.

But that hadn't stopped her from asking me home for the night. And it hadn't stopped me from being ridiculously tempted.

Thomas used the phrase "one of the biggest pop stars" and I swallowed hard, though my mouth had gone dry.

Fuck me, I was going to do this.

It had been too long, and I didn't give a shit about repercussions right now. She was a grown woman, and I was a grown man. If Steve didn't give a whit about his damaged vehicle, then neither did I.

"Get someone out here to deal with this, please. Thanks, man. Talk to you later," I said, abruptly cutting off my friend. I'd feel bad for it tomorrow, but I'd hit my limit.

Soon enough she'd understand exactly what she'd unleashed.

Pocketing my phone, I strode to her and inclined my chin. "He's coming to collect the car?"

I half-expected her to ignore me or worse, argue. Instead she gave me a shaky nod and told Steve where he could find his car. She apologized profusely, stating again that she'd pay for any damages, and then she hung up and stared at me, her pale throat working.

*Not so in control now, huh, pop princess?*



Silently, she waited for me to make a move.

I moved closer. Her chest lifted and fell with a quick intake of breath. At least around me, her practiced seduction faltered.

Good. I intended to see in what other ways I could knock her off her game.

“Were you serious about us getting to know each other?” I brushed against the guitar case she’d gone back to clutching like a lifeline.

She nodded.

My mouth curled. I had a feeling she wasn’t quiet very often. “Cat got your tongue?”

“No.” She bit the fullness of her lower lip and I nearly groaned. “I just don’t want my big mouth to make you change your mind.”

“Active mouths don’t bother me...as long as they’re used for the right things.”

Her pupils widened and now that lower lip dropped as if I’d scandalized her. “You—you’re not referring to— Yes, you are.”

Liking her reaction entirely too much, I stepped closer and stroked my calloused thumb over her petal-soft cheek. “Look at you, dropping right into the gutter.”

“I have never been in the gutter. Not one time.” Her vehemence—and seeming disgust—at that fact made twin flags of color rise in her cheeks. She was so animated, every thought telegraphing across her face. It made me want to give her more experiences, just to watch her process them.

“But you want to be?” I couldn’t disguise his surprise.

“Yes.” No hesitation whatsoever. “I’ve never been anything but the good girl. I’d never even speeded before tonight.” Her laughter held a note of desperation. “Hell, I hardly even get to drive myself anymore. Do you know what that’s like, to lose something that’s as much a part of you as your left arm?”

“Yeah.” I had to clear my throat. I understood all too well.

“I used to love to drive. Now I’m herded everywhere, from appearances to interviews to shows and back to whichever hotel I’m staying in, where I hide to avoid paparazzi.” As if realizing what she’d said, she glanced around and smiled faintly. “Hey, we’re still alone.”

“Not for long,” I muttered. “So you’re really a...pop star?”

I didn’t really even understand what that meant. Was she like a solo Americanized version of One Direction, with the addition of breasts? I had no

clue who the current pop stars were, or even what that kind of music sounded like. Probably something my niece Jenny would listen to. She listened to bubblegum stuff that made my ears ring within a few moments of her turning it on.

She winced. “I thought you didn’t know who I was.”

“I didn’t, but Thomas did.”

At Thomas’s name, her face brightened. “Tommy? I know his brother Gabe from the country club. Or at least I used to.” She frowned. “A long time ago, back before everything exploded.”

“Your career? Or your life?”

“Both. It seemed to happen together.” Her chin trembled. “Did you call your buddies to take me in? Are you a cop?”

“Used to be,” I said before my brain kicked in. I didn’t want to make this personal.

*What’s more personal than sex? Because you know damn well you didn’t want to take her home to split a beer.*

Luckily, a radio car pulled up just then, lights off. The officer who stepped out, Jensen, was another old friend, and bonus, he processed the scene without becoming starstruck by *the* Peyton Prior. He didn’t question her to find out if she’d been drinking, but she appeared more than coherent as she admitted matter-of-factly that yes, she’d been speeding before causing the minor accident, and yes, the car belonged to the dealership. She seemed very apologetic and Jensen made no mention of other charges, since she indicated she’d already been in contact with the dealership about making reparations.

The Pryor effect was in full force.

I was tempted to pull Jensen aside to ask if he knew who she was, but from the wink he threw her just before he got back in his cruiser, I realized I’d been outgunned again.

Everyone knew Peyton it seemed. Except me.

A fact I intended to change soon.

The equally smitten Steve arrived just as Jensen was leaving, and he didn’t seem to appreciate me tugging Peyton away before he could chat her up beyond getting her insurance information and a few other particulars. Several times, she’d shot grateful looks at me that Jensen hadn’t “thrown the book at her”—something she’d mentioned numerous times, as if she got a charge out of the phrase—and she didn’t complain when I insisted it was time to go home.

“Your home?” she asked hopefully the moment we were out of Steve’s earshot.

I glanced back. Despite the arrival of the tow truck, the other man was still staring after them unhappily, his damaged Porsche the least of his concerns. Granted, he had insurance too, and retaining someone like Peyton as a client apparently mattered more than any lost time or inconvenience.

Though I would bet a thousand bucks that Steve wasn’t going easy on her in the hopes of recouping some money down the road if she purchased a vehicle.

He wanted *her*.

“Fucking boots,” I muttered, unlocking my truck and pulling open the passenger door.

“What?” Baffled, she glanced up at me.

“Never mind. Get in.” I took the guitar case out of her hand. Feeling her gaze on me, I opened the back door and put it gently on the seat.

Apparently satisfied that I wasn’t going to rough up her prize instrument, she nodded and slipped into the passenger seat, drawing her mile-long legs up and tucking them in.

I tried not to stare. Tried not to feel the pulse of blood in my cock as I visually traced the zipper from the back of her calf to her foot.

“Problem, officer?”

Her voice was silky. Too silky for my liking, because she still thought she had the upper hand.

Time to show her otherwise.

I shut the back door. “Detective,” I corrected, giving her a quick, disarming smile. It was the one I’d used dozens of times on perps to get them to let down their guard. “Ex-detective.”

She caught her breath and smiled back. “As you wish.”

My smile fell away. “What do you have on under that dress?”

Most other women either would’ve cursed at me for being so forward or they would’ve come back at me with a sexy response. Peyton just screwed up her mouth and appeared to think over the question. “I’m not sure, actually. I was more concerned with the wrapping than the box and this dress is new—” She broke off as I smiled, genuinely this time. “What?”

“I’m concerned enough with the box for both of us, Rulebreaker.”

She flushed. “You have a filthy mouth to go with the filthy mind.”

“Oh, you have no idea.”

“Will I get to?”

“So eager.” I touched her face again, just a quick skim of my fingers over her cheek. “I imagine in your life you’ve been with all kinds of men.”

“I wish. Mostly self-indulgent rockstars and the occasional accountant who worked for the label.”

The disparaging way she dismissed being with rockstars made me smother a grin. “How about ex-detectives? Ever been with one of those?”

Her flush deepened. “Not a one,” she said softly, cupping her hand over mine against her face. “I’m hoping to change that tonight.”

My heart skipped a beat. Or three. I might’ve been annoyed at my reaction, if not for the fact that it had been more than a year since I’d had a girlfriend...or sex.

I didn’t date, ever. My interests were such that it usually didn’t take me long to find out I’d be incompatible in the bedroom with someone new. Little Miss Pop Star didn’t fit neatly in line with the needs I’d turned my back on, but I didn’t intend to fully let them out of the box anyway.

I’d just crack the lid a little and offer her a taste.

There was another taste I wanted more than my next breath. But I’d never take that step without making sure she was on the same page.

I glanced in the direction of the Porsche just as the tow truck hauled it down the street. Steve was already gone.

Shifting my gaze back to Peyton, I let my thumb drop to her lower lip and gave it a quick, firm stroke. She gasped as if I’d licked her nipple.

Something else I wanted to do. Fiercely.

“May I kiss you?”

I waited for her nod of acknowledgement before I pulled her around sideways on the seat. She startled, eyes going wide. They only went wider when I planted a hand on her belly and pushed her backward, looming over her until she got the message to recline on the seat. She went to her elbows, parting her legs instinctively.

Still not far enough for me.

I pushed up her dress and wrenched her thighs apart, nearly going cross-eyed at the polka dot panties that awaited me. White on black. So freaking sweet.

“You’re going to kill me, baby girl.”

“W-what are you—Oh God,” she moaned as I bent my head to lick her through the cotton.

I couldn't stop my grin. "Call me Jed."

FOUR

## PEYTON

*JED.* WHAT A PERFECTLY WONDERFUL NAME.

I probably should've asked for his name earlier but it hadn't seemed important. What was important was this.

Just *this*.

His tongue pressed against me, dampening the fabric that didn't need much help. His rough, raspy voice was enough to start me up all on its own. Add in his penetrating stare and that smirky mouth and I was done for.

Done for on a shadowy road in small town Kensington Square. This night had certainly taken an interesting turn.

His big hands spread my thighs and I peeked over the dashboard, half expecting to see a camera crew setting up at the other end of the street. This was a quiet residential neighborhood, and I was in the front seat of a decidedly non-flashy Ford Bronco, but my jig would be up soon.

Surely someone would spot us and—

“Oh,” I whispered as his teeth closed on my soft inner thigh. The flash of pain was unexpected and sent a bolt of liquid heat unfurling inside me, paving the way for his hungry licks.

Not that he'd delved beneath the material yet. Why did he need to? If he kept this up, he was going to make me soak right through it.

“Eyes on me,” he commanded, and it didn't occur to me to disagree. Something about him told me he was a man not used to tolerating arguments. That irrefutable sense of authority made my riotous emotions go quiet and still, but not because he was stifling me. Quite the contrary. The way he took charge let me know I didn't have to be in control.

Right now, I could just be. He would handle everything.

Handle *me*.

“Good girl.” He kissed the spot he’d just bitten, and I let my head fall back, letting the warmth of his praise and his ministrations carry me to another place. One with no worries and no responsibilities and no concerns about disappointing anyone.

I didn’t care right now about record units or ticket sales or artistic integrity. There was just enjoying the insistent laps of his tongue, and the electric drag of his teeth, and the seductive slide of his fingertips on my damp inner legs. He didn’t put his fingers where I needed them, just circled around and around, using his mouth to drive me insane.

He rubbed his nose against my clit while he nuzzled my swollen lower lips. I jolted at the contact, surprised at the giggle that almost escaped.

“Like that, huh?”

“It tickles.”

He did it again and this time it didn’t tickle at all. The pressure right where I needed it grew, becoming an ache that made me grind my hips into the seat.

I fought my impulse to pull on his hair. I didn’t know how he’d react, and God, I didn’t want him to stop. It had been so long, and I was so close.

“Do it,” he rumbled against my drenched flesh, and I exhaled, relieved. He understood, and he didn’t mind.

I sank my fingers into his dense brown hair, creating more spikes. The style was close to his scalp, but he still had enough on top to give me something to hold onto. Pulling him into me only made the slide of his tongue that more intense, and he growled as I instinctually drew my legs closer to my chest to give him more room to work.

Following my wordless lead, he flattened his mouth against my slit and did the most marvelous thing with his tongue, swirling it, alternating his outside the panties action with some playful nips and bites that didn’t seem to match his personality at all. I tugged harder on his hair and he growled, causing me to cry out. My panties were going to disintegrate under all that hot, focused attention. My clit was positively throbbing, and I couldn’t stop shifting restlessly against the seat.

Too much. I needed to come and he just kept going on and on, never landing long enough to allow me the release I so desperately craved.

“I bet if I slid my tongue down farther, you’d be wet back there too.” His voice burned against my overstimulated flesh. “You’re dripping.”



I flushed, but not from embarrassment. Only excitement and anticipation fueled me now. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Detective.”

Whether it was my subtle tease or the use of the term Detective that pushed him into action, I didn’t know. One moment I was on my back with my toes pointing toward the roof of his truck and the next I was on my knees, ass in the air with my hands flat on the driver’s seat. And my panties were gone.

I moaned as he buried his face between my legs, stabbing his tongue deep to mimic the act I longed for. He didn’t stop until I was pressing my bottom against his face, helpless to stifle my cries. Just when I thought he’d finally let me climax, he slid his mouth up to the tight pucker between my cheeks and tongued me there while his fingers played a rhythm along my plump lips.

Darting in, out. Over and over.

Finally, he circled my clit with his thumb, once, twice, and I shattered, bumping my head against the steering wheel as I rode out the spasms. His fingers and tongue never stopped, taking me to the limits of my endurance and then past them.

When I’d lost the ability to even gasp, I sagged to the seat, my knees giving out. “Holy sweet mother of...”

He chuckled and scooped me up as if I was weightless, setting me back to rights on the seat. He tugged my dress down to a discreet level, then swore and pulled harder. Evidently, he wanted to cover me up, since I was pretty sure he wasn’t the type to be overly concerned if I was cold.

“You asked to kiss me,” I mumbled, not entirely certain I sounded lucid. My brain waves had flatlined the moment he’d kissed me down *there*.

“I did. You said yes.”

I managed to lift my head far enough for our gazes to collide. I was hard-pressed to decide if I was more mesmerized by the intensity of his stare or the wetness that coated his mouth.

If I kissed him for real right now, he’d taste like *me*. Heat rushed into my face. *All* of me.

“You didn’t specify where you intended to kiss me.”

He chuckled again. “Nope, you assumed. And you know what they say about that.”

After belting me in—since I hadn’t yet recovered the ability to do it myself—and closing my door, he rounded the hood to get behind the wheel.

We drove in silence for a few moments. Then he sighed. “Do you always

fidget so much?”

Guiltily, I slipped my hands beneath my legs. He hadn't bitten me in those spots, but the sting from the little love nips he'd peppered along my inner thighs traveled straight up my legs too.

I liked it. Wanted more. The flash of soreness made sure I never forgot for an instant what we'd shared—

*Uh-uh.* Nope. Not going there.

We hadn't shared anything, and I was *not* going to romanticize this. I didn't even know his last name or where he lived. He could be taking me to his studio apartment above a strip joint for all I knew.

Not that that would be bad. I wanted more experiences, and I'd never been to a strip joint. Though hopefully, I'd get some other experiences before that particular one. But it'd be interesting to see his response to the request in any case.

I cast a quick look at his strong profile, illuminated by the passing headlights. “If I wanted to go to a...” I fumbled around for the phrase I'd heard some of the roadies use. “...titty bar, would you come with me?”

His lips twitched. “When you break out of your shell, you go big or go home.”

With a laugh, I settled back in my seat, curling my hands together in my lap. His answer soothed me immeasurably.

This was a man who would never say no to my desires, no matter how wild or outlandish. I didn't know how I knew that with such certainty, but I did.

He might laugh, he might give me that look that said he thought I was just this side of batshit, but he'd never say no.

And he'd given me an orgasm without expecting one in return.

Catching him glancing my way while he licked the inside of his lower lip, I tried not to squirm from sheer delight. *Yet.*

FIVE

## JED

SHE LOOKED AT EVERYTHING. QUESTIONED EVERYTHING, EVEN WHEN SHE didn't voice those questions aloud.

I had a feeling she was probably noting things on a little checklist inside her busy brain.

Where would I rate after this night was through?

We parked in the driveway beside my house. By my best guess, the small ranch wasn't exactly the type of home she normally spent time in.

She didn't say a word as she climbed down from the vehicle. I shut the door behind her and retrieved her guitar from the back, figuring she was probably used to people holding open doors and carrying things for her. I would have anyway. My mother had taught me well.

A lady deserved to be pampered, and Peyton was definitely a lady through and through.

Following her up the solar lit flagstone walk, I grinned to myself. Lady or not, she sure could scream. I liked that about her too. She didn't have an ounce of shame in her responses. If something felt good to her, she was happy to let me know it.

It just made me more eager to make sure she was happy often.

At least for tonight.

"I like your house," she said while I searched my pockets for my keys.

"You can't even see it. It's dark out here."

"The frogs next to the walk give off some light." I heard the smile in her voice. "They're cute."

Finding the key, I shoved it in the lock and turned my face away in case she could see my flush. Somehow she'd made me blush because she liked my

solar frogs. Maybe because I even *had* solar frogs. Compared to her life of limos and lounge lizards, they probably seemed hopelessly quaint.

Better hopelessly quaint than a washed-up used-to-be cop who sat around in unbuttoned jeans in front of my laptop all day, resisting the whiskey in my cabinet and the Camels I'd quit while I pounded on the keys.

I hadn't intended to choose this life, but I'd discovered along the way that it suited me. Facing myself and the character voices in my head every morning was both therapy and punishment.

Over the past two years, I'd sought both.

I pushed open the front door and flipped on the light in the foyer, stepping aside to let my guest inside. I shut the door and set down her guitar case, then I took my sweet time turning back to face her.

She must be wondering how she'd ended up in a rundown place like this with a guy like me.

A guy she'd gone home with without even asking my last name.

Unable to deny the urge, I turned back and took a long sniff of her hair. Her scent was lightly floral, as if she'd used the appropriate two spritzes of her fancy perfume before she'd gone joyriding through town.

"Do you do this often?" I growled, unable to temper my sudden possessiveness as I buried my face in the long dark waves spilling over her shoulders.

Her scent was stronger at the base of her neck and I wallowed in it, letting myself drown in the memory of her swollen clit pounding against my lips.

One thought echoed in my head.

*Mine, mine, mine.*

She stiffened for the first time in the last hour, but she didn't pull away. "Do what?"

"Go home with strange men. Men you don't bother asking for their names."

Her shoulders relaxed. "I know yours." She swiveled to face me. This close, her perfume clung to me like smoke. "It's Jed."

I groaned at the melodic way she said my name. It rolled off her tongue until I wanted to taste that sound just like I'd sampled the rest of her. Simply swallow it until I could carry her teasing, sexy voice with me forever.

The heavy thud of paws and click of nails on the hardwood floor heralded Freddy's arrival, if the loud bark he let out wasn't a big enough clue. A wide smile broke on her face as she turned to greet my gold and brown mutt. She

dropped to her knees to circle her arms around his neck while Freddy tried to lick her into submission.

“Hey there, boy. Off the pretty girl’s dress.” I hooked a finger in Freddy’s collar and tried to drag him back, letting out a grunt when Freddy planted his sizeable rump and refused to move.

“He’s fine.” Peyton laughed and continued trading kisses with my dog. She didn’t balk at the way Freddy surged against her, getting his muddy paws all over her legs. Even when he pushed his wet nose in all the places he shouldn’t, her grin only grew.

I rocked back on my heels and tried to ignore the tickle in my throat. Loving my boy was a serious turn-on.

“You like dogs.” The understatement of the century.

“I do. I always wanted one, but with my lifestyle, it doesn’t seem fair.”

“Surely you have...handlers who can take care of one for you while you’re away.”

“I suppose.” She stroked Freddy’s furry cheek, some of the joy in her expression dimming. I hated that I’d done that to her, even for a moment. “It’s just hard. I wouldn’t want my puppy or my kid to be raised by people who wouldn’t love them like I would.”

“So you deny yourself entirely.”

She shot me a look under her thick tangled lashes. “I’m good at that.”

“That stops while you’re with me.” I brushed a hand over her hair and she leaned into my palm, giggling as Freddy punctuated the comment with a long lick of her hand.

She continued to stroke the dog and lean into me, seemingly content. She clearly enjoyed affectionate touches—and I was beginning to think she hadn’t experienced nearly enough of them.

“On average, how much do you travel?” I asked.

Not that it mattered to me one way or the another, since this was just a one-night deal. But the idea of her never sleeping in the same bed two nights running seemed wrong. A woman like the one cavorting on the floor in front of me seemed made to own a dog with a goofy smile and a big tongue lolling out of his mouth. She should be able to run in the park and dance in the rain without having to look over her shoulder for the paparazzi.

Nor should she have to “borrow” a car to go joyriding just to evade her life.

And now I was being like Freddy, sticking my nose where I shouldn’t.

She jerked a shoulder and let her forehead drop to Freddy's soft neck. "It's easier to count the days I'm home," she said quietly.

"Where is home exactly?"

"Brooklyn. I have a townhouse. But my aunt lives in Kensington Square, so I took a ride up north."

I lifted a brow. "Not a penthouse in Manhattan? You surprise me, Rulebreaker."

"When I'm on my own, I don't want to be surrounded by glitz. I want something real. I want to look out the window at the Brooklyn Bridge and watch little kids making snowmen. I don't want to be surrounded by nightclubs and famous people and faux everything." She rose and sighed as my dog laid his head against her thigh, his devotion obvious. "Can I keep him?"

*If I can keep you.*

I didn't know where the thought came from, and I sure as hell intended to send it right back into the ether. I wasn't a romantic—or at least I hadn't been until I'd decided to play hero and rescue a gorgeous, inexplicable brunette from her not-quite-a-wreck.

"How do you feel about joint custody?" I stepped closer and caught my fingers in her curls, pulling lightly. "He's gotten used to me."

The corner of her mouth lifted. "I can see how that could happen."

Another step forward brought my chest flush with hers, though we weren't as close as we could have been, thanks to the canine interloper between us. "He likes my bed."

"Does he now?" She licked her lips. "Again, I have to say I can see why."

"Don't say that before—" A playful tug on her hair led to it tipping precariously on her head. I blinked and reached up to slide my hand through it, absorbing her wince as I drew the mass of dark curls away to reveal a sleek fall of platinum blond.

What the hell?

I stared at the wig in my fist then looked back at her, nearly swallowing my tongue at the full effect. White-blond hair dipped over one bluer than blue eye and pale pink lips curved into a pout worthy of any pinup calendar.

Fucking A, she was glorious.

I wasn't surprised she graced teenagers' walls all over the country. What truly surprised me was that she hadn't taken over the world.

"Sorry." Her grimace intensified. "I should've told you, but I've always

wanted to be a brunette.”

“So commit to it. Dye your hair, don’t put on this fake crap.” Deliberately emphasizing the word *fake*, I tossed the hair on the table by the door.

Freddy watched the wig fly through the air and immediately rushed over to the table to seize his prize. He trotted away with it in his mouth, causing me to swear and turn to follow.

“No, let him play.” Peyton laughed and grabbed my arm. “You’re right. It doesn’t suit me. It’s also hot as hell.”

“I didn’t say that. Everything suits you. You make my throat hurt, just looking at you.”

Her hand came up to *her* throat, and she stroked it as a wrinkle formed between her light brows. “That sounds bad.”

“Try feeling it.” I threaded my fingers through her fine pin-straight hair and let my gaze drift down her body. “Anything else fake that I should know about?”

Frowning, she stepped back. Maybe this was it. I’d gone too far, been a little too honest, and now she would call for a limo and sail out of my life as abruptly as she’d entered it.

Except I wouldn’t be able to forget. I’d sit down at his computer and be forced to download some pop shit I normally wouldn’t listen to if someone paid me, just to hear her voice in my head in reality rather than conjuring up a memory.

She reached back and unzipped her dress, letting it pool around her incredible boots. Then she flicked her fingers over the front clasp of her modest polka dot bra, causing that to fall away too.

Once she’d shed the panties I’d already savored thoroughly, she stood before me in all her blond glory, blushing in a way that told me she didn’t put herself on display like this very often.

“All real from here on out,” she whispered.

“That so?” I looked my fill, waiting for her to squirm and try to cover herself. But she stood tall and proud, shoulders back. My thumb circled one shell pink nipple until it beaded.

“These too?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

There was no part of her gorgeous body that hadn’t been granted by nature. She had no visible piercings beyond her ears, no tattoos. Even the groomed tuft of blond curls between her legs showed that she didn’t always gravitate toward artifice.



“Very real.” She gave him a tremulous smile. “If I’d bought them, I’d have gone a little bigger.”

“Why? You got a problem with perfection?”

Her sharp intake of breath came even before I dipped his head to take the nipple I’d stroked into my mouth. I tugged hard with my teeth, enjoying her gasp of surprise and the clutch of her fingers in my hair.

Hell, I frigging *loved* how she pulled my hair.

“You’re a sweet talker. I wouldn’t have guessed.”

Laughter rumbled through my chest. “There’s no part of me that’s sweet. You’ll discover that soon enough.” I nipped her breast and she cried out, the sound breaking across my skin like waves at the shore.

I hadn’t surfed in years, but I felt precariously balanced right now, riding a line I’d deliberately not crossed in so long.

And if I *did* cross it, I definitely shouldn’t cross it with someone who smelled like some fancy Parisian perfume and had skin so pale she’d wear any mark I gave her for weeks.

That wasn’t exactly a bad thing.

Her fingers clenched that much harder in my hair. “What does that mean?”

I debated painting a rosy picture for her, or better yet, sidestepping the question altogether. Then I remembered her search for reality, and what I craved was as real as it got. “Should I tell you or should I show you?”

“Show,” she replied breathlessly. “Definitely show.”

Shaking my head, I lifted her wrist and grazed the soft skin there with my teeth. “Are you always so lax with your safety?”

“Am I not...safe with you?”

“I won’t hurt you—unless you ask me to.” I let her absorb that while I studied the maze of veins under her near translucent skin.

Any makeup at all beyond mascara and lipstick would make her look garish. She had such a delicate beauty. In my grip, her arm felt fragile. But she wasn’t. I could tell that just from the defiant tilt of her chin.

“But I’ll push you, and I’ll test you, and I won’t allow you to take the easy way out.”

“Okay.”

Her easy acceptance baffled and aroused me. It also stirred the protective instincts I’d fought to shove down for so long. Assimilating to civilian life again had been difficult but stifling my desire to shield seemed impossible

right now.

This woman made me want to stop bullets for her, even as I wanted to give her things she'd never known before. Open her eyes in a way she'd never imagined.

At least I didn't think she had. We were still strangers. Strangers who'd come together faster than the speed of doubt.

Steadily, I met her gaze. "You need a safe word."

I was risking so much by putting this on the table between us, but God, I needed to know if what I sensed between us could be true. If this path we were on was meant to go somewhere past the superficiality I'd lived with for way too long.

"What is that, exactly?"

"It's a word you'll say if what we do is too much for you. When you say it, we'll stop, no matter what point we're at." At the silent questions in her eyes, I brushed a kiss over the spot on her inner wrist I'd grazed with his teeth. "No always works. This is just one extra safeguard."

"I'm guessing missionary's not on the agenda tonight?"

The sparkle in her eyes made me laugh in spite of the clamp around my chest. "It may be. There's a whole lot of things I'd love to do with you." My voice lowered. "And to you."

She took a shaky breath. "Music. That's my word."

"Fitting." Without saying more, I gripped her hips and spun her around to face the long table along the wall. "Hang on. We're about to go for a ride."

SIX

## PEYTON

HE HADN'T KISSED ME YET. WELL, ON THE MOUTH ANYWAY.

My face flushed. I had no complaints about where he *had* kissed me, but it seemed strange that he'd started below the waist, moved on to talk of safe words, and now had me facing the wall while he caressed my naked curves.

Oh, and my wig had been absconded with by the dog. Weirdness aplenty.

"This first time will be fast," Jed said, brushing a line of kisses down my spine.

"Fast is good." I arched into the sensation, craving more.

Craving all.

His mouth incited flames to come to life beneath the surface, causing a full-body meltdown until my bones verged on melting. My knees were shaking again, and the bite of his fingers on my hips as he pressed his sizable erection against my behind did nothing to steady me.

Maybe I'd never be steady again. And wouldn't that be wonderful?

"I like fast," I added, in case he didn't grasp how much.

At some point, I should argue. Intellectually, I knew that. I just didn't want to yet.

I was responsible for so much on a daily basis that his tendency to tell me what would occur next—while always making it clear I had a choice whether or not to agree—lessened the weight that constantly hovered on my shoulders.

I never would've believed it could be freeing to be commanded, but it was when your partner somehow understood what you desired without you even having to say a word.

The sound of a zipper behind her startled me.

Oh, God. It was happening already.

My thighs were still slick from his earlier efforts, and they'd only become more so during their discussion. With one lick of my nipple, I'd been ready to go.

"You're so pink all over. Pink and wet." His fingers strummed between my legs again, and I pressed my cheek against the wall, loving this position though I'd never experienced it before.

Being able to hide my face offered me anonymity that allowed me to chase every reaction. I didn't have to hold back with him. He would catch me if I fell.

He *wanted* me to.

His finger slipped inside me and pumped deep, twisting in a way that coaxed all the simmering nerve endings back to brutal awareness. I rocked into his hand, wordlessly asking for more, and he slid in another finger, curving them and circling the spot inside that caused my knees to tremble even harder.

My thighs shook and I gasped for the air that suddenly seemed to be in short supply.

God, what was he doing to me?

He didn't continue to slide in and out. He barely even moved his fingers. But that laser-like touch right where I hadn't realized I needed it was bringing me higher than I'd ever been before.

"Jed," I moaned, digging my nails into his table. I couldn't hold on. Couldn't let go. "It's too much."

"Take more."

What choice did I have? He was still rubbing my flesh, the rough pads of his fingers insistent, and the urgency inside my core was rolling out to encompass every part of me. Every cell.

I folded over the table, caught between trying to escape his hand and to trap it inside me, rising up on my tiptoes to seek more of the impossible heat growing inside me. I couldn't bear it. My nipples dragged over the wood, and I squirmed, trying to get relief for my swollen nipples without relinquishing my hold on the table.

I needed his hands everywhere. His mouth.

His cock.

"I'm going to remove my fingers now."

I could only whimper. He'd hypnotized me with his ministrations and his

voice.

God, his voice.

“As soon as I thrust inside you, you’re going to come. Understand me, Peyton?”

Not Rulebreaker. Just my name, used to seduce.

I jerked my head in my best imitation of a nod, hoping it was enough. The sound of a foil packet being opened made me relax even as he drew his hand away, though the heavy wet pressure of his fingers on my hip as he positioned me reminded me without a doubt who was in charge.

*Both of us.*

He might make the rules, but I was the one who said if they worked. I knew he would stop if I asked.

The knowledge was improbable, considering I’d known him all of a couple of hours. That didn’t mean it was wrong. I trusted my instincts.

I also trusted that the thick cock pressing against my soaked pussy was going to rock my world in ways I’d never imagined.

“Ready?” he said against my ear, his hot breath making me shiver.

I could only nod. I hadn’t forgotten his command, and boy, my body was prepared to comply.

He grabbed my hips and pulled me backward, impaling me to the hilt. Somehow he dragged over that sensitive spot inside my walls just right to bring me to the edge of orgasm, though the spasms didn’t fully move through me until he started to pull out, so slowly that I would’ve sworn his cock was finishing the work his fingers had started.

Applying pressure just *there*.

My head dropped back to his shoulder as he wrapped his arm around my midsection and hauled me upward, making me take his cock deeper even while my body clenched and released. He grunted in my ear and bent his legs, powering into me so hard that I kicked off against the table, my booted foot anchoring to the edge.

“Yes. Just like that.” He closed his big hand over one of my needy breasts and my toes curled in my boots.

Quivers rolled down my legs and I couldn’t find purchase. My freestanding leg wobbled, threatening to send me to the floor. Only his strong arm around my belly and the fullness of his cock driving me up again and again kept me from collapsing in a heap.

He’d fucked me boneless, and he wasn’t close to through.

His teeth grazed the side of my neck and I shifted my head, offering him more. I wanted him to bite me, to give an outlet to the ache already building inside me again.

But he only teased me, licking, nuzzling. He rolled his hips with every thrust, finding new angles to blow my mind.

I should participate. I *wanted* to participate. But I also wanted to absorb. If I never got to experience this again, I needed to wring each second dry.

Besides, I didn't dare interrupt the most perfect rhythm I'd ever known. No song I'd ever composed could come close.

"That's it. Tighten up on me again." His hand found my clit and I jerked against him, driving him so deep that a cry flew from my lips. One twist of his hips and he was seated in a way that promised fulfillment lurked a stroke away.

Then his thumb skimmed my clit, almost offhandedly, and I exploded around him. Moans spilled out of my mouth as I doubled over and rode out the ecstasy that seized me.

I was barely aware of him pulling out. My body had gone into autopilot.

"Uh-uh. Not done with you yet," he said gruffly as I tried to crawl away.

I whimpered. I was too sensitive, my clit throbbing from overuse, but he didn't seem interested in granting me a reprieve.

Bless him.

He scooped me up and carried me into the next room. I opened my eyes, squinting against the lights he flipped on, then I was facedown on the couch, my ass in the air again. He slapped it and I gasped, shocked at the warmth that blossomed from the point of contact.

One more slap against the other side and I was biting the cushion beneath my cheek, wiggling my ass at him, asking for something I couldn't name and longed for with way more than my body.

"Tell me you want this." His voice sounded ragged and raw, as if his own control had thinned to a wire. I ached to trip it.

To see what happened when this man went over the edge.

"I want it." Even on my knees, I felt more powerful than I'd ever been before. I threw back my hair and shot him a look over my shoulder, making sure he understood that I was with him every step of the way. "What are you waiting for?"

He examined my position before him with a gleam in his dark green eyes that would've made me shiver if I hadn't been strung impossibly tight. Just

moments after an amazing orgasm and I was already hovering on the precipice again just from the intensity in his gaze.

“Then take it.” Roughly, he sank into me again, so deep that I forgot to cry out.

Forgot to breathe.

My life up to that point disappeared. I was just a body to be filled.

Just his to use. *Thoroughly*.

My cells screamed for oxygen as I bit the cushion to keep from screaming as he rammed into me again and again.

My limits disappeared. With him, I had none. I just shook for more.

“Good girl.” The praise made me smile even in the midst of insanity. “So fucking good.”

The pleasure mixed with a ripe pain that tore open something inside my chest. I didn’t have to hold back anymore. I didn’t have to lie to him. He wouldn’t accept lies anyway.

There was only truth, and heat, and pleasure. And him.

Always him.



SEVEN

## PEYTON

I WOKE ON THE SAME COUCH WHERE I'D BEEN BANGED INTO NEXT TUESDAY.

A fuzzy blanket covered me up to my chin, but a quick pat of my chest and hip helped me to ascertain that yes, I was indeed naked.

Normally, I would've blushed over that fact. Winding up naked on a stranger's couch after oral activities and a little spanking mid-sex wasn't exactly part of the usual setlist of my life.

Sex itself was as rare as a blue moon.

In my profession, any dalliance I had involved taking a risk. If I didn't want to end up in the gossip rags, I had to tread carefully.

Not that I had a single worry about Jed selling information about me. Every moment I spent in his company increased my sense that he was a decent guy. He obviously liked things a bit on the rougher end, which I'd enjoyed immensely.

If that was what he'd meant by pushing and testing me, I was happy to sign up for more of the same.

I hadn't been pushed or tested in so long that I'd forgotten the satisfaction afterward. That whispered "good girl" had affected me more profoundly than a thousand empty compliments.

Knowing he was sharing the pleasure with me had made me damn near euphoric. I'd given him that. My willingness to be who he needed for a night—and who I'd never dared to be before—had offered us both so much.

And now I was alone on his couch.

Sitting up, I rubbed my eyes and took in my surroundings. A small lamp shone from a table in the corner, casting the room in a soft glow. A plate and cup sat on the coffee table in front of the couch, and I grinned at the cheese

and crackers and cup of tea he'd left for me.

Aww. So much for him not being sweet. Maybe he was in denial.

I reached for the cup and took a sip, unsurprised it was lukewarm. I didn't know how much time I'd been out. It could've been ten minutes or three hours. Darkness still pushed at the window behind the couch so it couldn't have been too long.

So where was my lover?

Whoa. That word didn't sit easy, probably because I hadn't had nearly enough of them. So maybe I should rectify that, huh? Now that I'd taken this step tonight, I could bang with impunity. Just say to hell with my life, throw on a wig and let fate blow me where it would.

Too bad I didn't want to be blown anywhere except in the direction of my sexy ex-cop.

Who absolutely was *not* mine. He hadn't even brought me up to his bed, for God's sake.

But he had tucked me in and left me a snack. And tea. Spiced tea, with a hint of vanilla. The kind that made me want to curl up with a novel and dream.

I took a quick glance around the room at the matching armchairs, widescreen TV, and books and newspapers stacked on every available surface. When it came to reading material, I'd have my pick here. Why didn't it surprise me that he was a reader?

My attention snagged on a cardboard box next to the couch and I leaned over the arm to poke through the contents. It was a box of books. Not different books, the same one. There had to be at least twenty-five copies.

I pried out one of them and bit my lip. *Final Justice* by Danny Markham. I'd never heard of the author, though I did enjoy the occasional suspense novel. This one had the White House on the cover and some covert spy dude hiding in the bushes.

Interesting.

So why did Jed have a box of this guy's books? Maybe he was a friend. Or maybe Jed was the author.

I frowned. Nah, that probably wasn't likely. He'd said he was an ex-Detective but he hadn't said a thing about writing.

Then again, if these were his books, he had a pseudonym for a reason. Obviously, he didn't want people to know his true identity.

Damn, I should've thought of that when I'd used Peyton as my stage

name. Anything to add another layer between the real person and the public eye was a good idea. Helped save one's sanity.

"Too late now," I said under my breath, sitting back with the novel.

I flipped to the acknowledgments page, my eyes widening as I read Danny's thanks to "the boys in blue". Hmm. So maybe Jed and I weren't so far apart after all. We both dealt with the public, in very different ways.

Now to get him to admit this was really him...

Unable to stifle my curiosity, I read a few pages while nibbling on the cheese and crackers he'd left me. My growling stomach appreciated the snack, and the book fed my love of thrillers. I was on chapter three and thoroughly sucked into the female protagonist's problem of how to get into the White House to reach the endangered President before I looked up again. I set the book aside and rose, dragging the blanket with me.

If Jed wasn't coming back to me, I'd just have to find him.

I checked out the modest dining room and kitchen, smiling at the homey touches of a rooster wall clock and framed family photos. Best of all was the plaid dog bed beneath the kitchen table, full of a gold and brown sleeping pooch. And he had a tangled dark mass between his front paws that could only be my wig.

Swallowing a giggle, I padded down the hall to what must be the bedrooms as quietly as possible in my boots. I probably should just take them off, but Jed seemed to like them.

Hell, *I* liked them. They gave me a boost. Though I didn't have self-image issues most of the time, other than the relentless need to watch my weight unless I wanted to read scathing critiques in the trades, I didn't get a ton of opportunities to feel sexy. My look was more homespun than that.

These boots definitely were *not* homespun in any shape or form.

The first doorway was a small bathroom with the standard tub/shower setup and a single sink. A total bachelor's bathroom. Smiling, I moved to the next doorway and discovered what must be a guest bedroom. In the moonlight pouring through the window, I glimpsed a neatly made bed along with a nightstand and dresser. Nothing unusual there.

The final doorway led me to the jackpot. Soft, almost unintelligible music played from unseen speakers. The room was dark, and the man in bed with a laptop in his lap typed by the light from the screen. His fingers kept up an endless rhythm over the keys and I lurked in the doorway, fascinated. He'd slipped on a pair of reading glasses and his brown spiky hair looked even

more so from my hands. My belly tightened and my nipples grew taut, reminding me I was still nude under my blanket.

And apparently still really horny.

“You planning on coming in or just going to stand there and watch me all night?”

His low voice startled me enough to make me waver where I stood. He chuckled as I sucked in a breath and gripped the doorframe, evidently enjoying my surprise. “I didn’t realize you knew I was here.”

“Former cop,” he said lightly, sparing me a brief glance that still managed to pin me in place with its intensity. “Plus hooker boots.”

Biting my lip, I glanced down at them thoughtfully. “They are kind of like the ones Julia wore in *Pretty Woman*, aren’t they?”

“Mmm-hmm.” His noncommittal answer made me need to press for more. I already craved his praise like a junkie with a fix.

Which probably wasn’t good.

“Do you like them?”

“Did I or did I not nail you in my front hall?”

“Yeah.” There was no smothering my laugh as I unzipped the boots in question and wriggled out of them, abandoning them just inside the doorway. “You so did.”

Giving up on any attempt at maintaining distance, I crossed the room and crawled over the distressingly neat bedding—who could be that tidy while in bed?—to curl against his side.

I wasn’t surprised when he snapped his laptop closed, but I was disappointed. It would’ve been nice if he’d opened up to me about his true identity, especially since I already knew.

Besides, who would understand better than I would? We were both artists of a sort. Did he get to create as he saw fit or was he hamstrung by rules and standards he didn’t agree with too?

But I didn’t ask. I just dropped my head to his shoulder and slid my arm around his waist. “I woke up alone. I didn’t like it.”

“You found me well enough.” He pushed his laptop aside and shifted toward me, tilting my chin upward. Even in the darkened room, I felt his probing stare. “Are you okay?”

I sighed. “You’re not going to ruin some awesome sex with some *not* awesome talking about it, are you? Because really, I’m cool with putting a period on it and just not going there.”

“I spanked you.” His voice held a note of something dark I didn’t fully understand. Nor was I sure I wanted to.

“Yeah. You did.” I snuggled closer and slid my fingers into the waistband of his silky pajama bottoms. He’d skipped a shirt and I was tempted to let my hands do the walking on his ripped chest and torso. “It was fucking incredible.”

“That’s it? You’re not unnerved?”

“Should I be?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know. We don’t know each other, Peyton, and I did something with you that pushed us into the realm of the familiar awfully quickly.”

“What better icebreaker is there? Questions about favorite colors and meals are so tedious.”

His sigh as he removed his glasses and set them on the nightstand made me grin, though I schooled my features into sober lines as he turned back to face me. “I half expected you to call a car to come get you as soon as you woke up.”

A new layer of disappointment crashed into the first. I tried to suppress it. If I was going to do this—or keep doing it, since I’d already gotten that ball rolling—the key was to not get my heart involved.

Except, oops, too late. Evidently, my butt and my chest were connected. A spanking, a few words of praise and some hot lovin’ later, and I thought I had a boyfriend.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

I cleared my throat. “In case you didn’t notice, I’m not in a real big hurry to get back to my life. I didn’t even turn on my phone.”

Forget turn on. I hadn’t even looked for it yet. My purse was probably in the front hall where I’d dropped it pre-sex and I really didn’t much care.

“You must have people looking for you.”

“I must. Hopefully they won’t be able to find me.”

“So, what, you’re running away?”

I snorted. “Like I could. I have a show in Edgewood next Friday night and rehearsals and meet and greets before then. Gotta give back to the fans, you know. Smaller venues are more intimate and help keep ticket prices more affordable.”

“And you care about that.” Doubt laced his statement.

“Of course I do. I was a fan who once went to concerts that were out of

my price range too.” Okay, slight exaggeration since I’d never been allowed the freedom to go to many concerts even before I was famous, but I did understand the concept.

He toyed with the ends of my hair. My real hair now since my wig had ended up as a doggie chew toy. “So this is what to you? A vacation?”

Was he trying to get a bead on how I viewed all of this? *Us*? And was that a good thing or bad?

Perhaps he’d developed feelings from our encounter and was hoping I had too. Or maybe he didn’t have any and wanted to make sure I didn’t either.

A pop star with as much money as the Kardashians could be trouble, and Jed probably wanted to head me off at the pass.

*Sorry, sweetheart, I spank all the girls I pick up on the side of the road and bring home. You’re not special.*

“It’s just a night I spent with a cool new guy I met,” I said quietly, hoping he couldn’t hear anything else in my voice. I’d spent years learning to add the appropriate inflection to the words I sang. Hopefully the reverse was true and I could keep it out when I needed to as well. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

“That so?”

“That so.” I snapped the waistband of his pajamas against his drum tight abs. “Unless you’re getting sweet on me.” Deliberately, I kept my tone light and airy. “Then we better put a stop to this, because I’m afraid that I don’t have time to deal with any boyish crushes.”

His growl caused a flurry of tingles to skate over my already overworked nerve endings. “I’m no fucking boy.” He dragged me onto his lap and peeled away the blanket, leaning up to nibble on the eager tips of my breasts.

He didn’t kiss nearly as often as he bit. I had no idea why that aroused me so.

Linking my arms around his neck, I pressed my lips to his forehead. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“You’re goddamn gorgeous. I’ve never seen an ass half as perfect as yours in thirty years.”

The gruff praise against my skin made me grin. “So you were perving on bums at the preschool? Bad boy.”

He growled again and moved his hand down my hip to rub the area he’d spanked before.

Even expecting the slap on my ass, it still made me jolt—and moan.

Warmth seeped through me to throb between my legs. My pussy went damp so fast that I feared I'd get his pajamas wet. I tried to press my thighs together but he just spread his legs wider, making me widen my straddling stance to accommodate him. Then he gripped my other ass cheek hard enough to bruise, his palm rubbing brisk circles for a moment before another sharp slap stung the air.

And my flesh.

"God," I whimpered, tucking my face into the crook between his neck and shoulder. "Why does that feel so incredible?"

"Because you're a kinky little thing." Wonder edged his voice, and even that was a form of praise. He seemed amazed I could be into this.

Oh, I was. So much.

"And you're a kinky big thing." I rocked against his silk-covered length, tearing a groan from his throat. "So big," I added with a purr.

"Flattery will get you nowhere but crammed full of my cock, Rulebreaker."

I nearly trembled at his dirty talk alone. Damn, this man knew how to work me over good. "Then allow me to tell you that you're not only a handsome man, but also witty and articulate—"

His laughter surprised and thrilled me almost as much as it did to find myself on my back beneath him, hips already raised.

I'd never been so primed to fuck in all my life.

Hell, I'd never even thought in those terms except when my songwriting went to a level I didn't feel comfortable expressing normally. I'd written a few songs on the naughtier end of the spectrum, ones no one would ever hear because I probably wouldn't get another chance to spread my wings.

Not after my first attempt had been such a failure.

I closed my eyes to fight back the tears. Not here, not now. *This* right here was definitely a form of growth. I'd never known anything like this night before.

*And you never will again once dawn comes and your one-night-stand turns into a memory.*

"Hey."

I turned up her face, hoping he'd ixnay the conversation for a kiss instead. But why would he when he hadn't kissed me yet on the mouth? Maybe that was standard one-nighter etiquette and I'd somehow skipped that chapter.

"Hey," he said again and I had no choice but to open my eyes. "Where



did you go?”

For once, words weren't there. I fell back on them for so many things. To cajole, to seduce the public, to capitulate to my parents and record label. They'd never failed me before. Even when all I could do was parrot the words others had written for me, whether in speeches or in my music, I still had them, screaming away madly in my head.

Not now.

In the silence, I heard my voice come over the speakers. *My* song. One of my favorites actually, from the flop of an album that had been heavily weighted with my own material.

*No more of that. Clearly you don't have your finger on the pulse.*

But why was Jed listening to my pop crap?

My gaze flew to his and I clutched his shoulders at the small smile waiting for me. He obviously thought I'd be pleased to hear my own stuff while in his bed.

“Turn it off,” I demanded, shoving at his immovable frame. He had the body mass of granite, especially when draped on top of me with that delicious cock pressing so intimately against me.

But I couldn't think about that, because the music was still playing, and I didn't know how to make it stop.

“Why?”

Ignoring the question, I leaned around him, trying to see in the dimness of the room. The moonlight wasn't helping much. “Dammit, where is it coming from?”

“What's wrong with it? I thought you'd be happy to hear—”

“Happy to have that intrude on us?” I knew I sounded hysterical and couldn't help it. “Tonight was about a chance to be someone else. Not to feel the same lead weights dragging me down.”

He moved back, straddling my thighs in a way that still kept me firmly pinned. He crossed his arms and even without seeing it, I could just guess he'd raised an eyebrow. “Explain.”

“Please,” I said, more quietly now. The song was winding down, and if I kept talking I wouldn't have to hear it anywhere but in my own head. “Surely you have something else we could listen to. Or just silence.”

Silence would be glorious.

His chuckle sounded anything but amused. “You think I'll ever let you be silent with me? Like hell. You're going to be panting and screaming loudly

enough to drown out any music.” His fingers brushed over my cheek and I shut my eyes again. “That still doesn’t explain why your own music makes you so sad.”

“I’m not sad. No fucking way.” I let out a too loud laugh and cringed away from the sound of it. Too many sounds, and none of them were what I wanted to hear.

All I wanted was the music of Jed and I moving together like we had earlier.

He was right. I would never be silent with him. He would never allow it and thank God for that.

Before he could counter the move, I blindly reached out toward the nightstand beside the bed. I tugged on the drawer and shoved my hand inside, searching for condoms. “Protection?”

“I used one earlier.”

I hadn’t even noticed but I trusted him and kept digging around. What I found made me swallow a gasp.

I lifted the item and bit my lip as the moonlight glinted off metal. “So you really do have handcuffs,” I managed once I’d caught my breath again.

“Former cop,” he said easily, but I had a feeling he was waiting to see how I’d react.

Knowing he was watching me as I ran a fingernail along the links made my skin prickle with awareness. “So this thick padding is standard issue? I didn’t realize that the police force in this jurisdiction is so concerned with comfort.” I lifted my gaze to his. “Very admirable.”

“Oh, sweetness, the one thing I’m not is admirable.”

“Technically I was referring to the force, not you. But if that’s so, even better. I think Billy Joel said it best. You know, laughing with the sinners and all that. Being good all the time kind of sucks.” Catching my tongue between my teeth, I leaned up to press my breasts into his chest.

And when he lowered his head to skim his mouth over my ear, I closed the cuffs around his wrist.

He stilled. Not moving, not breathing. Then he turned his head and bit my earlobe hard enough to make me whimper. “Fast reflexes.”

*Uh-oh.* He sounded...displeased.

Trepidation snaked through my veins and extinguished the quick glow of pride. “The crew calls me monkey,” I said flippantly. “I used to climb up the lighting rigs all the time.”

He cocked his head, eyes gleaming. “That so?” He tipped up my chin with his thumb. “How many positions can you get into?”

I hated that I flushed. How annoying. We’d already had sex, for God’s sake. “We should figure out how many *you* can get into, since you’re cuffed and at my mercy.”

Even as I said it, I realized the ridiculousness of my response. He had one wrist cuffed—and it wasn’t even attached to anything. He basically had the same freedom of movement as he’d had before, with the addition of an annoying piece of padded metal to slightly hamper his speed.

Jed lifted his arm and let the cuff dangle near my face. “You think so?”

That glint in his eyes was starting to freak me out. Wetness trickled down my inner thighs as I scampered backward on the bed, expecting him to lurch forward and slam into me without even giving me time to cry out. Craving that.

But he only reclined beside me, spreading out his big body over his tidy sheets. Then he reached up and snapped his cuff over the headboard.

My eyes nearly bugged out of my head. “What did you—why?”

“You wanted me at your mercy.” His mouth curved. “Do your worst.”

EIGHT

## JED

WATCHING PEYTON WORRY HER BOTTOM LIP AS SHE CONSIDERED WHAT SHE'D set in motion almost made being cuffed worth it.

Almost. Not quite.

I debated pushing down the waistband of my pajamas to give my dick room to breathe. Maybe that would spur her into action.

She'd gone stone still, her big eyes taking me in while she rubbed her palms over her hips. Clearly she hadn't expected me to adapt so readily to this change of events.

That made two of us.

"More condoms are in the back of the drawer you found these in." I jerked my chin in the direction of the nightstand. She still didn't move.

"So, ahh, what can I do to you?"

My brow lifted. "What do you have in mind, wildcat?"

A hint of a smile lifted her lush mouth before she turned to root through the nightstand. She returned with a handful of condoms and tossed them beside me before tugging my pajama bottoms down.

A moment later, they were on the floor and she was viewing me with open appreciation. She wrapped her fingers around the base of my erection, stretching them to try to get them to meet.

Between the teasing look on her face and her fluttering fingers, I should tell her right now to save her effort. At this rate, I'd keep growing until she lost her hold on me entirely.

"If I ask you to do something, you'll comply." She tilted her head. Her hand kept moving, gliding through the wetness from my seeping tip.

Wetness that only kept increasing.

“Do I need a safe word?”

I was kidding. Of course I was.

Insisting on safe words was my jurisdiction, even if I rarely allowed myself the pleasure anymore. Though after tonight, I didn't know if I'd be able to shove my needs back in the closet anytime soon.

It had been hard as hell to shut them down before Peyton. After, I felt changed in ways I wasn't sure I'd ever make it all the way back from.

And that wasn't just impossible, it was idiotic. We didn't know each other. Compatibility in the sack meant...

So fucking much.

But it wasn't just that. It was also how she smiled and laughed, along with her insatiable curiosity and urgency to live life on her own terms. Those traits not only stirred my protective instincts, they made me want to rip down the fence around my own boundaries.

I'd been locked away in a cage of my own making for so long that she represented a kind of freedom I'd never expected to get to taste again.

Peyton Pryor could easily become a dangerous addiction for me.

In every possible way.

Even her voice. I hadn't expected to like her music. I'd figured the pop princess probably couldn't sing without the help of Auto Tune or some other mechanical aid like too many of the current artists.

How wrong I was.

Maybe all her song selections weren't for me, but the voice singing those words worked for me on every level.

Sexy, husky, teasing. Coaxing me to go on the adventure of my life, if I only dared.

“Do you have one?” She cocked her head while she caressed my shaft. Her thumb circled over the tip of my erection before she darted along the underside to rub over the ridged spot that made my breath go short. “A safe word?”

“No. I'm not a switch,” I bit off. From her silence, I gathered she didn't know what that was. “I'm dominant, not submissive.”

She bent to lap at the liquid she'd created, making a *mmm* noise that nearly caused my eyes to roll back. “But you're cuffed right now.” Lightly, she blew a stream of air over the wetness from her mouth. “At my mercy, remember?”

“Fuck.” This woman. She was going to kill me, and I'd probably die

happy.

With all the years I'd spent grouchy and alone, that seemed wrong.

"You said so," she said in a singsong voice that caused me to grin.

"I did. Fucking tease."

"I'm not teasing. I'm going to deliver on all promises, both direct and implied. Your safe word, Sir."

"Again," I demanded, needing to hear that word from her mouth. Needing to hear it directed at *me*.

Despite the oddness of her using it while they were discussing my need for a safe word, hearing it from her soft pink lips still satisfied something primal inside me.

"Sir?" Her voice wobbled. "Is that...is that part of this? The whole safe word deal? I've heard bits and pieces. My makeup artist is into this sort of thing, I think." She huffed out a breath. "Tell me your safe word, Sir."

I had to laugh. God, she was turning everything on its ear. Even me.

Especially me.

"Pink," I murmured, knowing she was flushing as she ducked her head. Probably between her legs too. Her liquid heat had leaked through my bottoms earlier and I could still feel how tight and wet she'd been when we'd been together the first time.

She was easily embarrassed and so seductively curious. So hot in every way.

"Speaking of pink," she released my cock to shimmy up my body, "if I were to sit on your face, what would you do?"

"Thank the God I haven't prayed to since Catholic school," I muttered, absorbing her laughter from the lie I'd told.

I'd prayed Talbot wouldn't die, and I'd been rewarded there. I'd also promised to start praying again more regularly after that, but that had turned out to be a mistruth like so many other things.

That I was okay. That walking away from the force hadn't scarred me. That I'd never faltered in choosing a new path. Thankfully that path had not only proved to be a good one, but it had also ultimately saved me.

I'd gotten lucky.

Evidently, my luck was in again tonight, because there was a warm, wet pussy inches above my mouth and all I had to do was lean up to take a long, hungry lick.

She cried out and gripped a handful of my hair, pulling the way I'd

already discovered I adored. The action sent heat straight to my groin, and I could feel my cock leaking pre-cum.

Fuck, I was on the verge of coming just from eating her out, and I'd barely begun my feast.

With the cuff holding me in position more than I would've liked, I used my free hand to toy with her responsive little clit while I licked her from top to bottom. Her excitement flowed sweetly over my tongue, so I drove deeper to scoop out more.

She rocked against me without shame, still pulling my hair while she wiggled the ass I intended to spank nice and red for this stunt.

Though in all honesty, I didn't mind that she tried to top from the bottom. Nudging her back into line would be so rewarding.

*One night. This is just for one night. Don't forget that.*

I pushed the annoying voice of reason out of my head and focused on my task. I licked her harder, alternating the pressure of my fingers and my tongue on her clit, offering the occasional bite to make her jolt and squeal.

She had the widest array of sounds I'd ever heard. And oh, how she panted. I might've feared she'd need oxygen soon if I wasn't in the same damn state from pressing my face into all that delicious drenched heat.

I rubbed my nose against her, drawing in a greedy breath. So good. Her smell, her taste, the uninhibited squeezes of her thighs around my head the closer she came to orgasm. Praise fell against her flesh, the kind I couldn't hold back.

She needed to know exactly how freaking sexy she was and how much I wanted her.

How I never wanted this night to end.

When the pulsing against my mouth turned into a drumbeat, I slid two fingers inside her pussy and flexed them to find the spot she'd gotten so much pleasure from earlier. Two strokes and she was coming in my mouth, her honeyed taste making me groan as I fought to swallow every drop. Even losing one would be a waste.

She sagged over me, the hand in my hair going limp. Then she lifted up and smiled down at me, her wild eyes surrounded by her angelic halo of white-blond hair. "You have a gifted tongue."

"You have a gifted pussy. I could make it come for days."

The squeeze of her thighs indicated her embarrassment—or a new rush of arousal—but she got over it quickly, offering me a soft laugh. She wiggled



down my body, making sure to rub her still dripping slit over my aching cock. She laughed again at my pained grunt.

“You like torturing me, vixen?” I had so many nicknames for her already. She was like a dozen women in one, depending on which showed up to play from one moment to the next. The serious one, the petulant one, the seductive one. The one who cried so easily and laughed with even more abandon.

She'd be a wonder to watch on stage. I didn't doubt for a moment that she'd been born to own that space. That dramatic, over the top personality probably riveted crowds with the same speed that she'd riveted me.

“Maybe just a little. But don't worry. I was taught to give after I receive.” Then she slipped her mouth over the straining head of my cock.

NINE

## PEYTON

I HAD NEVER BEEN A HUGE FAN OF GIVING BJs.

It wasn't like I hated them or anything, and I definitely understood the "give so you can receive" theory I'd just espoused, but the guys I'd been with tended to pull on my hair—and not in a sexy way like my new lover did—while bruising my throat in the process. No finesse at all.

Jed Knight was not one of those men.

For one thing, he was partially cuffed. His free hand only stroked my hair. Never pulling. Never even tugging. Just gentle strokes that made me lean into his touches and wish he'd bump them up a notch. He'd certainly allowed me to go to town on *his* hair.

He didn't seem like he was in any hurry to rush this along though, in spite of how thick and hard he was. Pre-cum hit my tongue every time I licked him, and he seemed to lengthen with each pump of my hand. He had such control.

I wanted to decimate it.

Those limits he'd talked about testing? The time had come for me to nudge his as well.

Hollowing my cheeks, I worked my fingers over him, squeezing in rhythmic pulses. I was getting him all wet, and he wasn't the only one. It had to be obvious that I was raring to go, considering how I kept pushing my thighs together and squirming over his formerly pristine sheets. He probably could smell how much I wanted him.

I sucked him deeper, not giving myself time to flush. I hoped anyway. I was done with being embarrassed.

At least for tonight.

Bending forward, I thrust my ass in the air, circling it in time with the ripples of my throat.

God, I was actually enjoying this. Not just pretending to so it would end quicker.

He grunted and wove his fingers through my hair, leading me down closer to his groin. The combined scents of soap and a light veil of sweat made me moan and he reciprocated as the sound traveled down his cock.

Any minute now he was going to blow, and as much as I wanted to taste him, I wanted to feel him lose it inside me even more.

Reluctantly, I drew back. I continued to work his slick length with one hand—from the contorted expression he wore, he was fully enjoying the strength guitar playing had granted me—and fumbled for a condom with the other.

I ripped open the package with my teeth and stopped stroking him long enough to get it on him. It wasn't as easy as it seemed to be in the movies, but I hadn't practiced much. The few men I'd been with had always done the honors. I bit my lip as I finally got it into place, hoping I hadn't killed the mood with my slowness.

“Haven't done that much, huh?”

His low voice grazed my flesh like gravel over silk. So much for him not noticing my lack of skill in that area. I tried not to duck my head. “No.”

“Hottest thing I ever saw. You pleasing me with your mouth, then trying to make those quick fingers work even faster. Frigging perfect.” His thumb smoothed over my swollen lower lip, pressing his taste deeper inside my mouth. “You're learning new things with me.”

“So many.” I gave up fighting my smile and crawled up his body to cup his scruffy jaw. He'd been working on five o'clock shadow all night but now it was much denser. The short hairs tingled against my palms as I lowered my head, my gaze roaming his face. I wanted to kiss him so badly. “May I?” I whispered, wanting to let him know that despite his cuffs, he still held the control.

By my choice. And his.

“May I, Sir?” I repeated when he didn't reply. With everything they'd done, something about a kiss made him hold back.

Too intimate maybe. Too...much.

He started to argue. His nostrils flared and his jaw tensed and I figured he might finally deny me.

Then he nodded, his full lips opening on an exhale. “That’s cheating, you know.”

Leaning closer, I smiled. I did know. I’d registered his response the first time I called him Sir, and the thickening length wedged against my belly was a strong piece of secondary evidence. “Maybe. But it’s worth it if I get a kiss that tastes like both of us.” I kissed the corner of his mouth. “All dirty and sweet.”

“Fuck, Peyton,” he groaned just before my lips slanted over his.

I tried to go slow. I didn’t need much romance, but when it came to first kisses after first fucks, it seemed like maybe I should try just for the heck of it.

But the instant my tongue tentatively touched his, he sucked me inside, curling around me with a longing I wasn’t strong enough to combat. One pull on my flesh and I rocked my damp slit against his belly, needing him to feel what he was doing to me. He only drew harder, his stubble branding my chin at the same time his lips, tongue, and teeth branded the rest of me.

That single kiss thrummed through me entire body, lighting me up like Christmas and the Fourth of July rolled into one. My nipples grew taut, my clit pounded. And the urge to join with him became a primitive drumbeat in my blood.

Without conscious thought, I positioned myself over him, brushing his covered length with my heat. He growled and pistoned his hips upward, driving into me so deeply that I couldn’t maintain the kiss. I gasped for breath and gripped the pillow beside his head, helpless to do anything but take whatever he dished out as he grabbed my hip and thrust into me again. The cuff rattled and he swore, clearly hating his limitation.

I hated it too. I wanted him to be free to fuck me the way he craved.

Not that he seemed to be having much trouble now. Holy mother.

I wasn’t going to survive this. His hips rose and fell, meeting mine relentlessly, and I couldn’t even gather enough air to kiss him again. The intensity in his stare held me in thrall, and I found myself moving with him from instinct.

This was what I’d been made to do. All the other times that had seemed rushed and clumsy and not half as good as in my romance books had been the trial runs, and paltry ones at that.

*This was the real deal.*

“Get me wet,” he whispered.

My body obliged effortlessly as he pumped in and out of me with long, slow strokes. How he could maintain such precision when I sensed every part of him was coiled to spring, I didn't know.

But I had to push him over. To know I could.

Rolling my hips, I bounced on top of him, leaning back to run my hands over my breasts. I cupped them, feeling more than a little self-conscious, but his curse swiftly killed my nerves. I twisted my nipples, pulling on them until they were tightly puckered.

All the while I continued riding him. Hard, harder. Nothing was hard enough.

When I neared the breaking point, I reached down and fingered my clit, involuntarily vising around his length deep inside me. He swore again and somehow managed to slap my ass without yanking the bedframe apart.

Talented man.

I gasped and circled my clit faster, hoping to goad him into spanking me again. I was so very close, and he felt so incredible inside me, stretching me to the edge of pain.

“Don't hold back on me.” He pinched my hip and in turn I pinched my clit, needing that bite closer to where he was plowing in and out. I glanced down and bit my lip at the sight of him disappearing into my pussy before emerging soaked with my desire.

And soaked was the absolute truth.

The sounds of our bodies coming together were so sexy that I might've been able to climax from that alone.

“Next time you're going to be on your belly again. In between every thrust, I'm going to spank that tight little ass. And you're going to drench me just like you did before. Just like you're doing now.” He gritted his teeth together. “Ah, just like that. Tighten up on me. Let me feel that slick little pussy fist my dick.”

I couldn't speak, couldn't even open my eyes. I didn't know when I'd closed them. My fingers worked frantically in time with my hips as the pleasure inside me reached a crescendo.

I couldn't take it anymore. Teasing him had done me in too.

“Jed, I'm coming.”

“Yeah, you are. Rain down on me. I want to feel every drop.”

I bucked against him, dragging my nails down the tensed muscles of his abdomen as I rode out the intense spasms. I panted his name over and over,

needing that link with him.

Then he was yanking out of me and slamming home one more time, tearing a cry from my throat just before he finally let go inside me. He shouted out his orgasm, the words unintelligible but one.

The most important one.

My name. Over and over.

I collapsed on top of him, so spent I couldn't even breathe.

God, this was it. I was on my way out. He'd fucked me into certain death.

Truly, I wasn't all that mad. There were worse ways to go.

"You okay?" he asked, finally pulling out of me a while later. I didn't know how long. All I knew was that we were drifting, our sweaty bodies pressed tightly together, and it was the most amazing feeling.

So much amazing tonight. I'd never be able to process it all.

I got up and disposed of the condom, since he wasn't exactly mobile yet. Then I returned to bed and sprawled on top of him again.

He made one hell of a comfy man pillow.

"Every time we do it, you ask if I'm okay." Idly, I drew patterns with my nail on his chest. I hadn't seen his back but so far, he didn't have any visible tattoos.

We were both ink-free. Pretty unusual nowadays.

"Do it? Have we regressed to high school?"

"That's the sandbox I live in musically, dude. Deal with it."

He chuckled, surprising me "Well, there's only been twice so far."

I tried not to let hope rear its pointy little head that he might want more. Lost cause there. He'd slipped and said *so far*, hadn't he? That had to be a good sign.

This couldn't just be one night.

We'd gone way beyond regular sex, and not just because he'd spanked me. We'd shared something so much deeper than physical intimacy, as crazy as that seemed.

And he'd let me cuff him, something I imagined he didn't allow often. Or ever.

I glanced at the metal holding him in place. I'd better unlock that soon.

Smiling, I snuggled against his damp chest. Or...not.

"I'm guessing by that Cheshire cat smile that you are. Okay, I mean." He toyed with my hair, his fingers tender against my scalp. He seemed to know intuitively when to push me for more and when to soothe.

Somehow it felt like he knew me already.

“I’m so much better than okay. I didn’t know it could be like that.”

“You’ve never orgasmed before?”

“Duh, of course I have.”

He not-so-lightly patted my bottom and damn if my clit didn’t sit up and take notice. “Next time you use that infernal word, at least add a *Sir* to the end of it.”

Grinning, I leaned up and kissed his stubbled jaw. “Duh, Sir. Yes, I’ve orgasmed before. But not like that. Not even close.”

“Much better.”

“And that wasn’t even flattery. I liked the results from that last time, by the way.” I nibbled my way down his throat. “I’m hoping to—” I broke off and frowned. “Dammit, again?”

Even in the dark, I glimpsed his smile. “Turns out I’m a fan. Who’d’ve thunk it?”

“Yeah, right. You’d never even heard of me before tonight.”

“A fan who was late to the bandwagon.” Possessively, he rubbed my still smarting ass. He tended to put some power behind his slaps, and I loved it. “But I’m making up for lost time.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

He’d chosen yet another cut off my failed album. As if he knew. Those songs were both the brightest and most painful parts of my career. Hearing them while sprawled across his chest mitigated some of the sting, but not all of it.

Especially when I didn’t know exactly why he’d put them into his musical rotation in the first place.

Soon the song ended and another song—thankfully not one of mine—began. I couldn’t wait any longer to ask.

I pulled at a loose thread on the pillowcase. One I’d probably tugged out with my nails. “Are you making fun of me by pretending to like my music?”

“No. Of course not. Why would you say that?”

I snorted. “Because it doesn’t exactly seem like your thing, Mr. Gruff Dominant Ex-Cop.”

And current romantic suspense author, I added mentally. Sometime soon I’d have to acknowledge I knew his secret identity, but I hoped he would voluntarily come clean before I had to.

“I’m not always gruff. Besides, you can’t claim to know my *thing*



already.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. I’ve already gotten pretty acquainted with your thing.”

It was easier to act playful than to acknowledge the very real fears behind my question. I understood my music wasn’t for everyone, and if he didn’t go for it, that was just fine.

Half the time my music wasn’t for *me* either.

No, that wasn’t true. I actually enjoyed most of the material I worked with. I just wanted to do more. Stretch a little. Try different arrangements, broaden my subject matter. I didn’t want to scare away all my younger more innocent fans, but they were getting older, just as I was.

Tonight had shown that to me with crystal clarity. This insulated box I’d been living in hadn’t done me any favors. With all the gifts I’d been given, and opportunities I’d had a chance to enjoy, I’d lost so much else.

A chance at a normal life, with a boyfriend and a home base that actually felt like a home. I was so tired of waking up in new beds in new cities. Just once, I wanted to go to sleep with someone holding me who wanted me for who I was, not my money or fame or what I could do for them.

“Peyton.”

Surprised at his somber tone, I glanced up. His gaze was trained on my face, detecting nuances. Unless I was way off, this guy had a finely honed bullshit detector.

Which meant I was in trouble, because I did the breast-stroke in poo on a daily basis.

I stifled a yawn that was half from fatigue and half a stalling tactic. “Yeah?”

His lifted brow made me reach for the title he seemed to wear so naturally. It felt like a game between us, laced with a seriousness I wasn’t quite ready to accept. Getting closer, though. “Yes, Sir?”

“Good girl. Now tell me why you’d ask me if I was making fun of you by listening to music many, many other people listen to quite often. At least according to your net worth—”

My spine locked. “Why would you look up my net worth?”

“Not because I’m trying to cash in, that’s for damn sure,” he said in a tone that made me look away, ashamed.

I couldn’t help being suspicious. Too many people wanted a piece of me. I was protected from so much of that by my bodyguards and my team but I

never forgot completely that I was viewed as a commodity. One with a value that rose and fell depending on factors that weren't entirely in my control.

Forget entirely. Try *mostly*.

"I'm sorry. Side effect of being—"

"You."

I nodded, sure he could read my misery. I wasn't hiding it very well. It was so hard to meet new people and trust that they cared for me, the person and not me, the performer.

Jed's lack of knowledge about me had seemed like a present. Now he was playing my songs and searching for me online and somehow that tainted what had happened between us.

And that chipped off a corner of my heart.

"I wanted to know who was in my bed." He cupped my cheek, feathering his thumb over my lower lip. Soothing me. "Not that some shiny pictures or overproduced songs or tabloid articles on how much you brought in on your last tour begin to touch who you are as a person. As a woman." His voice dipped on that word, warming it just as he warmed my skin with his hand. "I know enough about that from having you here tonight."

"From sex?"

"No. From watching the way you respond to every new thing. You have the kind of curiosity that could get you in very big trouble, Rulebreaker." He shook his head. "Going home with strange men and letting them spank you. I'm shocked."

My lips twitched but I fought the smile as I reached up to run my nail along the chain around his throat. The lack of light couldn't disguise how he braced. "This made you not a stranger to me. My uncle was a cop."

He didn't speak for a moment. "Was?"

Of course he'd get the salient point right away. That was the blessing and curse of him. "Killed in the line of duty." Somehow my voice didn't wobble. "My aunt who lives in Kensington Square lost him years ago. She never remarried. Doubt she will. But she adopted a cop." I let out a weak laugh. "Well, symbolically adopted. Jimmy has his own family but lived in the neighborhood. Now he's joining the Crescent Cove force."

"Not far from here."

"Nope, just a town over so I've heard."

Jed nodded. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Me too. He was a good guy." I cleared my throat. "I'm glad you're not a

cop anymore.” I rushed ahead as he shifted, obviously preparing to speak. “I’m sorry if that makes me a heartless bitch, or stupid, or any other adjective you want to slap on there. But I’m glad you’re not risking your life every day, even if I won’t get to see you live it.”

I hadn’t meant to say the last part. Some self-preservation instinct kicking in, maybe. If I didn’t act like tonight had been life-changing for me, he wouldn’t be able to hurt me.

Yeah, right.

He started to say something, then he cupped my head and pulled me down to his chest. “You’re tired. You should get some rest.”

Yes, my eyelids were heavy, and I’d yawned more than once. That wasn’t what this was about. He didn’t want to have this discussion with me. Allowing me to sleep in his bed as if I truly mattered to him was preferable to having an awkward conversation.

I understood his thought process. Couldn’t stand it, but I understood it.

Arguing about our reality was a waste of time. Tomorrow, I’d go back to Brooklyn. I’d ditched my bodyguards tonight so there would be hell to pay.

My parents had probably left a dozen messages already, demanding I come visit them in Long Island. They’d talk some sense into me, or at least wear me down until I didn’t have any strength left to fight.

The memory of this night would be all I’d have to remind me of the big, wide world outside my golden doors.

I let him tuck me away as so many others had before—and would do again. And I slept.

TEN

## JED

I WOKE UP TO A FIRE IN MY WRIST AND A LEAD WEIGHT ON MY CHEST. OF THE two, the fire bothered me the least.

A tangle of blond hair clung to my mouth. I blew it out as carefully as possible, not wanting to wake my sleeping beauty if I could help it. She didn't stir. She was snoring softly and had her fist pressed to her chin like a kid. I nearly smiled at the picture she made until reality slammed home in the form of a serious ache in my forearm.

A glance back at the bedframe made me stifle a sigh. I was still cuffed.

Add occurrences like *this* to the long list of reasons why I preferred to take the dominant role. I would never leave a submissive tied up all night in such an uncomfortable position.

Not that Peyton knew any better. This had been her maiden voyage when it came to this type of scene. Now that she'd been initiated, she could go off and find another man to—

“Like hell,” I muttered, breaking the stillness.

She still didn't wake.

I looked at the alarm clock. Just past ten a.m. Sunlight streamed through the window, casting the dancing dust motes in a shimmering glow. I'd forgotten to pull the blackout curtains closed before retiring last night. With a career like mine, late nights were a necessity. I'd written into the wee hours many times when a deadline loomed too close.

*“I'm glad you're not a cop anymore. I'm sorry if that makes me a heartless bitch, or stupid, or any other adjective you want to slap on there. But I'm glad you're not risking your life every day, even if I won't get to see you live it.”*

The last part of what she'd said had kept me up for hours. She was honest. Laid things right on the line. I had to respect her for that forthrightness, even if it made me want to punch a wall. But it wasn't as if there could be any real future for the pop princess and the cop. *Former cop.*

That was like a romance novel title gone wrong right there.

*You could be her bodyguard. That would give you a reason to torture yourself with the sight of her daily. Even after she moved on to the new flavor of the moment, you could look at her and remember.*

There was a maudlin idea. Besides, I'd gotten out of the security business entirely.

I liked my new career. Hell, who was I kidding? Writing had become everything to me. I needed it like I'd needed those long walks to clear my head in the days after the shooting, when the investigation had kicked into high gear.

Somewhere along the way my new career had turned into something more. A simple vocation had become a calling. Sometimes the deepest feelings were the most unexpected.

And if I kept thinking this way, I should buy a violin and set this tripe to music.

God, I needed more sleep.

To distract myself, I rubbed my fingers along her arm. At least her soft skin diverted me from mentally spouting any more half-baked poetry before I consumed a bucket of coffee.

During the night, my playlist had shut off. That was probably a blessing because Peyton certainly hadn't appreciated my musical choices. I definitely hadn't expected to enjoy any of her songs I'd downloaded on a whim while she was sleeping on the sofa. I'd expected even less that she would freak out about them.

Thinking I'd play them to make fun of her, for fuck's sake.

For a woman so confident in some ways, she had mile-wide insecurities in others.

"Artistic temperament," she'd say, flashing one of those impish grins that alternately turned my cock to stone in a second flat or made me want to laugh, *really* laugh, in a way I hadn't in too many years to count.

She was sunshine, and for so long, I'd been closed in the dark.

My alarm beeped on. I usually went to bed after it, but that didn't mean I didn't try to keep normal hours.

As the report from the twenty-four-hour news station filled the room, I glanced at Peyton, expecting her to wake up.

She continued to doze. The girl was out.

The announcer blathered on forever about the interest rate and capital gains tax and the weather and a million other bits of useless information. I was debating nudging Peyton awake before my arm went permanently to sleep when the announcer snatched my focus.

“International pop star Peyton Pryor was in a vehicular accident last night that caused significant damage to a borrowed luxury vehicle. She was questioned and released by police. Her spokesperson assures fans that Peyton will still be attending the Pop Smash meet and greet this evening at Ridgeside Mall. The event with Ms. Pryor and Miles Barker, another pop sensation, is expected to draw thousands of fans. Extra security will be on hand at the mall this evening.”

I blinked at Peyton. Happily sleeping Peyton, still snuffling through her dreams. I hated to wake her, but she had a meet and greet and fans to deal with.

Holy shit. I’d read a couple of articles last night and flipped through a couple sites online, but this was insane. Obviously, I had no grasp on her kind of fame.

Proving even more succinctly that there was no way in Hades we could have anything resembling a relationship going forward, even if I’d been prepared to take that step. Which I was not. I’d been single for a while now and that suited me as well as my new life.

*Liar, liar.*

Not that I was tied to a desk anymore. Writing offered me the opportunity to travel if I chose. I could pick up and meet her if—

If I lost my mind, which I clearly was on the path to doing.

We’d spent one night together. One amazing night. One night beyond compare.

I wanted to get to know her better. Definitely wanted to spend more time with her in bed. But I wasn’t the kind of man to fall for someone within a matter of hours.

A couple of my buddies on the force had fallen for women just that fast—hell, Pete had met his lady at the strip club, and they were still together five years after she quit dancing—and I’d enjoyed razzing them to no end. I wasn’t about to become the butt of a joke myself.

Especially when Peyton had told me flat out she wouldn't be around. That translated to she didn't *want* to be around.

No, she'd just been sowing some wild oats. If I was being honest, as much fun as Peyton was, she was entirely too wild and flighty for me. We'd had an excellent night together and that was plenty. I should be grateful I'd been there so she didn't wind up getting herself into trouble with a guy who wasn't so honorable.

*You mean a guy who might spank her on the second date instead?*

Shaking my head, I nudged her shoulder. She apparently had a full day ahead, and I was damn sick of my thoughts.

She didn't budge.

"Peyton." Nothing. "Hey there, Rulebreaker." Another nudge and nada. "Wake up, baby."

Like magic, her bright blue eyes opened sleepily and fastened on mine. A smile curved her mouth. "You called me baby."

Dammit, I had. Leave it to her to wake up just then. "Just a throwaway endearment."

The pleasure in her eyes dimmed, and I instantly regretted my save. "Yeah. Like sweetcheeks. Or honeybun. My mom calls my dad that when she's pissed at him, which is practically hourly." Her smile didn't mitigate how quickly she looked away.

Or the guilt that seized my gut and wouldn't let go.

"You haven't told me much about your parents," I said instead of urging her to get up and get dressed. She had a life to live, and I had stewing to do.

Something I was exceptionally good at.

"There hasn't been a lot of time."

Was that desperation in her voice or was that wishful thinking on my part? The last thing I wanted to do was read more into the situation than was there. I'd be damned if I would be her latest groupie, chasing her around for scraps. She was probably well used to that. A beautiful, single woman with so much talent—God, she must have to beat them off with sticks.

Just like I'd like to do to any man who tried to take my place in her bed.

*My place. Right. As if I had one.*

*Delusional much, Knight?*

"You need to uncuff me." My voice sounded low and rough, as if I'd gone on a bender. But nope, I'd just gone on a Peyton Pryor-induced one, worse than any alcohol.



“Oh my God. I forgot. I’m so sorry, baby.”

Somehow her use of the word *baby* affected me as well. It hit me square in the chest, leaving behind a sting that didn’t abate when she rose onto her knees and let the sheet I’d awkwardly pulled over her fall away like water.

That body in morning sunlight should’ve been a crime. Covering it in clothes would be an even bigger sin. If she was mine, I’d make sure she was naked as often as possible while we were alone. Maybe even during dinner and TV time. Just so I could watch her breasts bounce and see that adorable flush climb up her neck as she realized I was unrepentantly staring at her tits.

And all the rest of her.

“The key’s in the drawer.”

She nodded and scampered away to rifle through the nightstand. I watched her go, my gaze riveted on her heart-shaped ass.

Somehow I hadn’t left a single mark behind. A little redness remained, but that was all.

She wouldn’t even have that much of me as a reminder when she moved on to her big, busy life. Whereas I was reasonably certain that the tingle in my palm would never fully leave me again.

After she returned to my side, she made quick work of undoing the cuff. She grabbed my wrist and rubbed it briskly, regret shadowing her features. “I can’t believe I didn’t do this before I fell asleep. You’ll never want to be submissive again.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “I would never be submissive to anyone but you. It’s just not my nature.”

“But that tendency comes out with me?” Playfully, she nibbled the inside of my wrist. “Looks like we both broke some new ground last night.”

All at once my laughter drained away. Teasing morning-after conversation was just delaying the inevitable. “Your story was on the news.” I jerked a thumb toward the alarm clock, which had thankfully turned off. It was set to only play for fifteen minutes, which was usually more than enough time to rouse my lazy ass out of bed. “They mentioned the crash and the police and some meet and greet you have tonight at the mall. Your spokesperson assured everyone you would still be there.”

Head down, Peyton continued to massage his wrist, saying nothing.

“You planning on hiding out here forever? Because I gotta say, part of me figured you’d slither out as soon as I fell asleep.”

*Not cuddle in and force me to remember how it feels to snuggle with you.*

“I don’t slither.”

“Fine, sashay,” I bit off. “Whatever. You have a lot to return to, and I’m just the guy who spanked your ass and made you come hard enough to see stars.”

Temper flared in her gorgeous eyes. “Boy, think a lot of yourself, don’t you?”

“No, I think I’m fucking hard for you right now and you standing there naked isn’t helping matters.” I shot a pointed glance at my crotch and she gasped, as if just now noticing I was hard enough to drill wood. The sheet partially draped over my cock wasn’t diminishing my current state either.

“So you’re mad because you want to fuck me.” Her voice turned throaty and if anything, I grew even harder. “Is that it?”

“I’m not mad. I’m just saying you don’t need to drag this out for my sake. I’ll be just fine when you move on to deal with your hordes of fans. I didn’t have any illusions about last night, Peyton,” I added as she lifted her head and stared me in the eye.

For a long moment, she didn’t say a word. Then her lower lip trembled, something I never would’ve seen if I hadn’t been watching her so closely. As I had been for the last twelve hours or so since she’d sped into my life.

Hell, I couldn’t take my eyes *off* her. Now I knew how her groupies felt. I’d become one overnight.

“What if I did?” she whispered.

Before I could figure out if she’d really said what I *thought* she had, she picked up her abandoned boots, rushed past the nightstand then headed into the adjoining bathroom, shutting the door with a firm click.

Fabulous.

I’d stuck my foot in my mouth again. Had to be the tenth time since I’d met her. Proof positive the woman was dangerous to my mental health. She rattled me in ways I was certain I’d never been rattled before. She was a new experience unlike any other.

So much for showing her the ropes. Instead, she’d schooled *me*.

I rose, wincing more than a little at my hard-on, and pulled on a pair of clean jeans sans boxers. Some part of me still hoped she’d thaw enough for us to have a round of goodbye sex—I’d even take a spirited hate fuck at this point—and I wanted the fewest layers between us possible.

Once I stood in front of the closed bathroom door, I knocked. Loudly. “Peyton, open up.”

No reply.

I knocked again. “Peyton, come on. I was just trying to make this less awkward.”

A moment later, she opened the door. The hair around her face was wet, as if she’d soaped up, and she smelled of my toothpaste. All she wore were those damn boots.

My cock went from erect to stand-back-or-you-might-lose-an-eye.

Probably noticing the direction of my gaze—aka those ridiculously perky breasts capped with hard pale pink nipples—she crossed her arms over her chest. “Your plan to make this less awkward was acting like a total dick. Gotcha. Can’t say I can fault your method. If you act like a big enough of a jerk, I’ll forget why I ever gave a shit about more.”

She reached back and grabbed something off the sink, then flung it into my hand as she pushed past me. I gripped it and tried valiantly not to watch her hips sway. Really I did. But I was so gone over her that even the tips of her blond hair skimming her shoulder blades could’ve prompted a wet dream. With all the rest combined?

I was toast.

“You know, I could understand your attitude about my profession if yours wasn’t similar.”

With her back to me, she shoved bracelets onto her wrists. I hadn’t even realized she’d removed them. No, scratch that, I hadn’t even noticed her wearing any. Then again, I’d been so consumed with Peyton herself that her jewelry hadn’t registered.

Now her comments weren’t either evidently.

“Say what?” I managed, finally discovering she’d shoved my phone into my hand. Why had she taken my phone? Probably to call her “handlers” from an unknown number.

If I ended up with a bunch of unsolicited calls, I’d be pretty—

Happy, actually, because that would be one more link to her. I was a sick bastard.

“You have a lot of nerve acting as if I’m just some kind of peddler to the masses when you do the same thing. We’re both artists, just a different kind.”

“Whoa, hold up. Peddler of what? I just said you have fans to meet and hordes that adore you. I saw the pictures online, Peyton. The girls crying as they waited for you to sign autographs and the men trying to get a piece of you on the red carpet. It’s nothing to be ashamed of—”

“Who said I was ashamed?” Whirling to face me, she planted her hands on her spectacular hips. That she stood there so *unself-consciously* naked made me proud way down deep. She might have momentary doubts, but she fought them back.

Just like she was fighting me right now.

“In fact, *you’re* the one who’s ashamed, not me. At least I was honest about who I am. You, on the other hand, were not.”

*Did she know I’d walked away from the department after my suspension?*

I’d eventually been completely cleared following the investigation into Talbot’s accidental shooting, but for a while, some very uncomplimentary things had been said about me.

People still mentioned my name around New York. Maybe she’d heard of me in the security circles she ran in. God knows she dealt with plenty of bodyguards, and sec people talked.

I gripped my phone tighter. “If you wanted to know about the shooting, all you had to do was ask.”

A line formed between her brows. “Shooting? What shooting?”

“What the hell are you talking about then?”

“Your books.” She walked forward until she was close enough to press her hand on my chest. I’d gone stone still. “You’re Danny Markham.”

After suspecting she knew what had led me to walk away from the force, my career as a writer was anticlimactic. “So?”

She blinked. “So...we’re more alike than different.”

The bark of laughter tore out of my chest hard enough to hurt. “You have no idea who I am. I’ve fucked up in ways you can’t imagine. I’m definitely not some lily-white pop princess. So don’t tell me how alike we are, when you don’t have the faintest clue who I am other than being the guy who knows how to work you just right.” I couldn’t help touching her cheek, unsurprised when she flinched away. I’d done that too. “That was just blind luck. Sometimes breaking the rules pays off.”

Like the rule that I should’ve never gone near someone like her. As much as she’d seemed to enjoy what we’d done last night, I hadn’t explained much to her, though she was clearly a newbie to the scene.

I’d pushed her into the deep end because I couldn’t control myself.

Again.

Everything always came down to my damn control, and how little I had of it. My reckless behavior always hurt the people who mattered most. People

like Talbot, and Peyton, whom I already cared about way too much.

Anything beyond concern and affection had no place in a one-night-stand, even my bastardized version of it. This was just lust, and that would fade.

I would *make* it fade.

“What rules? I’m not some neophyte. I wanted what happened just as much as you did. Probably more because I’ll never experience it again. But you...you’ll just find someone else to spank.”

I might’ve laughed at that, if the sparkle of tears on her thick lashes hadn’t stopped me dead. Even my breath stalled in my chest. I refused to watch her cry. Or worse, to be the cause of a single one of those tears.

I was responsible for her, to ensure she was comfortable and happy and—  
*And she’s not yours. Get that through your thick skull.*

“Peyton,” I began, gripping her arm when she shoved me away.

“You didn’t break any rules I didn’t dare you to. *I asked you* if you dared to bring me home.” With one shake of her head, her tears dried. “Remember that, Jed.”

She walked away from me, out the door of my bedroom and down the hall.

As tempted as I was to chase after her, to ask her to let me explain some of the muddied thoughts I’d never really voiced to another person—about the shooting and how it changed me, and my writing, and so much else—I knew that was just selfish. I was just prolonging the inevitable. It still stunned me I’d hurt her, even momentarily, but I’d already seen how responsive she was. She was genuine and emotional. *Real.*

That was why her music spoke to so many people. But it didn’t begin to scratch the surface of why she spoke to *me*.

I was still standing in the same spot when the front door slammed.

ELEVEN

## PEYTON

THAT WHOLE THING ABOUT GOING HOME AGAIN BEING AWESOME? COMPLETE and utter crap.

I stood outside the door to my mother's sitting room in our family home in Long Island, shredding my pale pink patent leather purse with my nails. Even knowing I was going to tell my mother to go to hell—metaphorically speaking—I'd still dressed the part of the little lady arriving for tea.

Pink purse, pink pumps, strand of pearls around my neck.

Though, wow, I'd been doing some research over the past week, and I'd learned some interesting stuff.

Pearl necklaces weren't always bought at the Tiffany counter. Who knew?

Well, evidently lots of people did. I had not. Now I was armed with knowledge of many carnal delights, and if I had my way, by God, I was going to live them out.

Maybe I'd even make up a few new sex positions, just for the hell of it. The flexibility of my thighs was the limit.

That and if I could find a willing male to help me. Not a willing male. *The* pigheaded, jackass, hot as hell man who'd saved my bacon by the side of the road then took me home to fry it up.

Or something way sexier than that.

First, I had to deal with my mother. At least I was fully fortified by a raspberry latte. I'd had to get one. It matched the whole pink theme I had going.

I knocked on the door and pushed it open once my mother instructed for me to come in. Sandra, the maid, had let me in and told me that my mother

was indisposed, but that was nothing new. All that meant was that Pauline Pryor had probably been sweetening her coffee with too much Irish already, despite the fact that it was barely eleven a.m. Most likely my father was doing the same, except he'd be drinking down at the club.

"You're out and about early today, Peyton." My mother was already slurring her words. That meant this would be a conversation for the record books.

"Yes, well, I have a—"

"Show tonight. Yes, dear." She pulled at an invisible thread on her pale orange suit. She looked like a creamsicle, all cool and fresh. "Are you excited?"

This was our usual dialogue. Talking about banal, surface things was safe.

"Yes, I am." Which my mother knew. I always enjoyed performing. It was an oasis in the center of my crazy life. No matter what chased me off-stage, onstage I was happy and free. Somehow the approval of all those fans helped smooth over the rough spots inside me.

Funny how I'd discovered one man's approval mattered even more in just a few hours.

"That's good, dear. I'm pleased to hear you don't intend to go off wild-cocked again."

"Halfcocked, you mean? I didn't take off when I was due to perform. My schedule was clear." As clear as it ever was.

"Mmm-hmm," my mother replied, telling me exactly what she thought of *that*.

I forced back a sigh as my mother stared blandly out the window at the manicured grounds while she circled her silver teaspoon in her cup of "coffee". "I have something to talk to you about." I sat on the leather ottoman in front of my mother's wingback chair. "I'm going ahead with some different material. I'm debuting two of the songs tonight. I don't want you to be surprised."

Telling her ahead of time was a courtesy. My parents wouldn't come to tonight's show. They would only grill me about it once the footage and articles surfaced.

There would be all the usual questions about why I was trying something new, and probably speculation that I was doomed to fail. After all, I'd failed on my last aborted attempt to spice it up a little.



The couple of singles off the album that had been more *me* than any other had done abysmally. As soon as I'd gone back to my usual material, my sales had rebounded.

Even increased.

Branching out was a big risk. One I had to take. I couldn't stay locked up in a cell of my own making any longer. I'd loved music once. I wanted to love it again.

Being with Jed for that one solitary night had shown me that I'd repressed so much of myself. And for what? Yes, I wanted to make other people happy, but not at my own expense. It wasn't fair to anyone.

Hopefully, my fans would understand and grow to like my new stuff too. If not, I'd still play the songs that they loved—and I would continue trying to win them over, one listener at a time.

My mother's hand rattled the cup in its saucer. "Not again, Peyton."

"Yes, again. I'm growing older and you can't expect me to still sing songs about first love until I'm middle-aged—" I broke off, realizing how ridiculous that particular argument was.

Unless I was very mistaken, I was experiencing my first love now...at twenty-three. Not at the sixteen of the girls in my songs, but still. There were plenty of parallels.

More than ever, I related to the nerves and thrills I sang about, wondering if he would call—he hadn't—or if he was thinking about me—hard to say—or if what had happened between us mattered as much to him as it had to me—doubtful.

My belly wrenched as it had every few hours over the past week. Walking away from Jed had been beyond difficult, and worse, it had felt as if I was leaving a section of my heart behind. Turning my back on happiness after finally getting my first true glimpse was nuts.

So was falling for a guy in under twelve hours. I still wasn't backing down.

If he didn't love me yet, well, he would. Hopefully. I wanted that man, and we'd had a crazy chemistry that couldn't be denied or shoved aside. As different as our lives were, we could make it work if we were willing to put in the effort.

And I was.

Tonight, after the show, I was going to put it all on the line. After that was anyone's guess, but I wasn't going to consent to being a bystander in my

own life any longer. I'd been given so much, and I wanted to start giving back in ways other than holding charity benefits and donating to worthy causes.

Now I was going to try giving myself. The *real* me.

"Your fans expect a certain standard from you, Peyton." My mother didn't sound agitated, only weary. She probably knew that the easiest way to keep her daughter in line was to act as if she was just so *tedious*. "You tried some of that screaming nonsense on 'Starting Over' and what happened? You alienated the very people who've given you such a comfortable lifestyle. Would you really like it if your elderly parents had to go back to begging for scraps at our age? We've done so much for you. Made sacrifices you don't even know about."

I snorted. *Sure, like not divorcing Daddy but having an affair with your much younger tennis instructor instead? Thanks so much for keeping my happy home intact.*

"I understand that," I said evenly, "and I appreciate them. But I've sacrificed too. I lost a lot of my childhood to talent shows and trying to get that big break. Forget my teenage years. I didn't have a date until I was eighteen."

A *chaperoned* date, with three bodyguards. Because what yelled romance more than guys in dark suits with their hands on the pistols tucked in their waistbands? No wonder the guy had never contacted me again. He wasn't famous, just a regular boy, and he'd been too scared to even kiss me.

I smiled. Unlike another man I knew, who'd gone for a different kind of kiss altogether.

"So your way of making up for lost time is to wreck the career you've spent all these years building?"

My smile faded. The criticism stung. It *always* stung, because that fear of failure and letting people down had kept me rooted in place for far too long. Well, no more. I wasn't the same scared girl I'd been. One night had helped me grow up and see everything I'd been missing.

I'd dared Jed to take that next step. Now it was time to dare myself.

"I don't think I'm going to wreck my career," I said softly, stroking the cool hammered steel bracelet around my wrist until I steadied. "I think I'm going to do just fine. And if I don't, if this attempt goes up in smoke, then at least I'll be able to face myself in the mirror again. I'm tired of being a coward, Mama."

At that, my mother lifted her head. I hadn't called her that since childhood, since long before I'd started getting noticed for my singing.

"I know my success is why you love me." *If you love me.* "Risking it means I'm risking our relationship too. It's a risk I need to take, for me. For the dreams that got me here in the first place. Singing is the most important thing in my life, and I don't want to grow to hate it." I took a shuddering breath and stared hard at my new jewelry, my own unique expression of breaking free. "Or worse, to hate myself."

"You're so talented, baby."

I glanced up, shocked. "What?"

My mother smiled gently. "Your father and I don't just love you for your success. We admire you for chasing the life you wanted, no matter the cost."

"But that's just it. This isn't the life I wanted. I want to play my own music. I want..." I blew out a breath and rubbed my cheek against my shoulder, remembering how Jed's hands had felt against my skin. Every night I awakened just before dawn, straining against my nightgown, craving his touch more desperately than the water I gulped down to ease the ache in my throat. "I want so much."

"Then you need to go after it."

For a moment, I didn't move. Didn't breathe. I clutched the delicate bracelet I'd had made, wondering if it had superpowers. It had to be a special talisman, because there was no other way this conversation could be happening. "Mama?"

"You don't want to end up a bitter old woman like me, drinking coffee-flavored whiskey before lunch." With a thin smile, my mother set her saucer down on the table beside her. "I don't want that for you."

"Are you drunk?"

My mother tipped back her head and laughed, though she immediately smoothed each buttery blond strand of hair back into place.

Some things never changed. *Most* didn't. But sometimes when they did, incredible things happened.

"I'm probably more sober than ever right now, but I can't promise you I'll say the same sentiments the next time I see you. It's hard to let go of what you know. I'm comfortable where I am." Her shrewd blue eyes narrowed. "If you're not, figure out how to fix it. And stay the course no matter who tells you to turn around. It'll make winning that much sweeter."

I nodded, swallowing hard. "When was the last time you won?"

My mother smiled. “When I had you.”

I nearly asked if my mother had won simply because I was her daughter, or because I’d been so lucrative. In the end, I decided I didn’t want to know. I’d already received more positive reinforcement from my mother than I’d ever expected. Why push my luck? I had plenty of other luck to push as the day wore on.

“Thank you, Mama.” I rose and leaned over to kiss my mother’s papery cheek. I didn’t know if it was my mother’s makeup or if she’d aged before my eyes, but the feel of her skin made my resolve strengthen even more.

Time spun on, whether you were ready or not. It didn’t wait. Ever.

“Don’t thank me.” My mother squeezed my wrist, her gaze flickering to my bracelet before returning to my eyes. “Make yourself proud.”

A couple minutes later, I got into my car and pulled out my phone. I’d needed that support, even if it was only temporary. Like a kid pushing off on my new training wheels, that brief hand at my back was just enough to get me going.

This would nudge me even farther.

“Hi, Taylor. I need a favor. Could you send a VIP ticket for the show tonight to a Mr. Jed Knight?” I rattled off his address. “It’s important.”

Indirectly, Jed had helped me stop hiding. He should be there when I took the first step to being who I truly am. I hoped I wouldn’t regret inviting him.

Hoped with everything I was that he would show.

TWELVE

## JED

MY LIFE HAD FINALLY COME FULL CIRCLE. I'D GONE FROM BEING A HARD-edged, take no prisoners detective to standing in the front row of a Peyton Pryor concert.

Lord help me.

The noise and crowds in this place were insane. Why hadn't I thought to bring earplugs? Maybe I should've worn a hoodie to discourage the chipper girls who surrounded me. They kept trying to talk to me as if we were old pals, brought together by our love of *the* Peyton Pryor.

Ironically enough, my feelings for the woman on the posters in the lobby of the event center crept uncomfortably close to love, as improbable as it seemed. But not because she sang "Rev Me Up", the song that the teenager beside me had declared her very favorite song ever.

I couldn't help smiling. Peyton had done damn well for herself. Perhaps one day she'd begin to appreciate her talent, rather than feel embarrassed by her success.

*Like you're out so loud and proud. You couldn't even admit to her that you're a writer.*

I hadn't been in denial about it exactly. It was more that so much of me was still wrapped up in being a cop. I'd thought I had let that part of my past go, but after the night I'd spent with Peyton, I'd realized swiftly that I hadn't.

Guilt was still eating me alive, still forcing me to deny my needs as a bizarre form of punishment. Being with her had shown me there was another way to live. I'd become chained by my own inhibitions—not sexual, or not entirely sexual anyway—and the time had come to unlock the damn cuffs.

A writer was who I was now.

I'd made mistakes as a cop, but I refused to let them taint the present. Peyton had reminded me of all I'd missed out on by pretending I didn't have urges beyond so-called vanilla sex. I enjoyed dominance and submission, and I had no reason to shut down that aspect of myself if I found a woman who shared my proclivities.

Strike the *if*. I was pretty sure I had found the right woman, now I just had to convince her that I was worth taking a chance on. Worthy of her.

I fingered the unused ticket in my jeans pocket. She'd sent me a VIP ticket by courier that afternoon, and I'd been both amused and irritated by the gesture. Did she think I couldn't pay my own way? I'd already bought my own damn ticket. Not front row, of course—

*Because you couldn't afford it.*

Whatever, I'd intended to be there anyway. Did she honestly think I would miss her show? Now that I'd heard her music, it seemed to be everywhere. When I walked into the coffee shop I liked to write at some mornings or shopped at the grocery store, she seemed to play on every speaker. Her sultry voice and her playful smile were on billboards all over the place. Those lively blue eyes would haunt me until the end of my days.

Before me, the curtain rose, and the roar turned deafening. And the eyes that haunted me were suddenly connected with mine, as if she'd sought me out the instant she stepped onstage. My heartbeat picked up pace, its beat drowning out the screams and whistles.

This past week without her had been sheer, inescapable misery. I'd tried to tell myself I was overstating things, that I couldn't feel this way after one night.

I'd been wrong. I could've felt this way about her after one hour. She'd blown into my life like a hurricane and blown out again too soon, leaving everything quiet and still. Desolate. It had felt like all the oxygen had been sucked out of my chest with the closing of my front door.

Now that she was in my sights, I could breathe again.

Onstage, she smiled and touched her wrist, a gesture I didn't understand, then offered her smile to all those that surrounded me. "Good evening, Edgewood! Are you ready to party? I said, are you ready to *party*?"

Smiling in spite of myself, I glanced down the front row of yelling, undulating girls, surprised to see two familiar faces. Jared Brooks and Preston Shaw, my old buddies from Syracuse University, along with their women, were standing at the end of the aisle, smiling wide as could be. And lo and

behold, they all seemed to be enjoying the music as Peyton started to sing her latest hit, “In Your Eyes.”

The words pulled at me and I had to face her again, to drink her down like a thirsty man would savor his last glass of water. She bounded across the stage, exuberance personified, her voice soaring to the rafters and beyond. Her face was radiant. This was where she was truly at home.

Hopefully, she would also find home in my bed. Under my hand, and in my arms.

By the end of the concert, the fans were on the verge of total lunacy, and Peyton was dripping with sweat and beaming. She’d changed outfits at least four times, and she’d danced and wiggled her ass until I was exhausted for her. But she showed no signs of slowing down as she announced two more songs to finish the set. They were new ones, stuff she’d written recently, and she hoped the crowd enjoyed them.

“I have someone to thank first.” She stared right at me. “Someone who helped me dare to go as far as I can with my music. And my life.” Again, she touched her wrist, that mystery gesture I had a feeling I was supposed to understand but did not. “He knows who he is to me.”

No, I really didn’t know, not yet. But I would. Soon.

“Rulebreaker,” I mouthed to her.

She nodded, grinning. She was about to break them all, and I intended to encourage her every step of the way.

From the first note, I knew these songs were different. “Caught Under Your Spell” was edgier and more intense, and Peyton played her guitar like a sexy demon throughout it. She bypassed the dancing to focus on dazzling the audience with her skills on guitar and her sexy voice, promising to lead them on a path to darker delights.

And boy, did she deliver.

The second song was just her and her guitar with only the barest of accompaniment from her backup band. Her mesmerizing vocals held everyone captive as she sang about breaking her own heart while her lonely fingerwork emphasized her pain.

Halfway through it, the girls beside me were crying and myriad cell phones had been lifted to reveal their flickering flashlight apps. I would’ve shook my head at the modern take on the old-fashioned lighter at a concert, if I hadn’t been so enthralled by the woman sitting on a stool in the center of the stage. She was weeping softly as she sung, silent tears tracking down her



cheeks.

Yet her vocals never faltered. She was simply breathtaking.

From the crowd's earsplitting applause once she'd finished, everyone in attendance knew it. She was so much more than a pop star or a flavor of the moment. She was the real deal, and I damn well intended to convince her of her talent.

I'd tell her every day if I had to, for as long as it took.

Backstage was complete chaos, but the VIP ticket she'd sent me had included a pass that got me past all the security. Not knowing exactly how these things worked, I tried to give her time to get settled. She probably needed a shower. Or maybe she had some elaborate post-show routine. I had no clue.

I stared down at my empty hands. Flowers. I needed flowers. Isn't that what people brought backstage? She deserved two bouquets of them after that performance. *A dozen* bouquets.

Glancing at my watch, I rushed down the crowded hallway, dodging bodies to get to the exit. Surely there had to be a gas station or something nearby. I didn't want to give her cheap flowers, but I also didn't want to be away from her a moment longer than necessary.

Tonight I was risking everything.

THIRTEEN

## PEYTON

HE WASN'T COMING.

I gazed at my reflection in my dressing room mirror to avoid glancing at my phone one more time. He hadn't called, and he didn't even have the excuse of not having my number because I'd saved it in his phone the morning I left. I knew the hoops people had to go through to try to reach me, and I'd wanted him to have direct access.

So much for that.

At least he'd come to the show. He'd smiled at me, and his approval had gone miles toward quelling the anxious locusts swarming madly through my belly. His quiet, steady presence had helped bolster me to get through the final two songs of my performance.

And I'd nailed them, if I did say so myself.

Even Taylor, my manager, had been abuzz after the show. The fan response was positive. Radio seemed interested. The new songs might end up on the next album.

As incredible as all of that was—beyond my wildest dreams incredible—the victory seemed hollow without Jed. He shouldn't have mattered so much to me in such a short time, but somehow he did. The backstage pass I'd given him had been a sterling sign that I wanted to talk to him.

*Needed* to. But he'd just walked away.

Eventually, I'd asked Taylor and the members of my band and the assorted road crew and friends who'd stopped by to leave. I hated to ruin their fun and my own. The show had taken a lot out of me, both physically and emotionally, and adding the Jed factor to the mix had drained me even further. If I made it home without crying, it would be a miracle.

Some of those tears would be happy. A lot of them, actually. Some would not.

I'd really believed he cared. Oh, I wasn't sure if he cared at the level I did. That would be asking a lot even for an optimist. I'd just hoped that he felt something beyond the usual feelings engendered from a one-night-stand. Whatever those were. I had no idea, never having had one before. All I'd had were failed short-term relationships.

Now I could add a failed one-night-stand to the list.

Somehow I managed to smile at my makeup-less reflection. Well, the sex part had been no kind of fail whatsoever. Hell to the no. That had been hallelujah chorus-worthy.

Maybe my mistake was in expecting more.

My eyes prickled, and I shut them to stave off the inevitable. Everything was going to be okay. I'd get through this, one hour at a time.

A knock on the door made me whisk my fingers over my cheeks, just in case. "Sorry, no visitors right now, please."

The only one who mattered hadn't shown.

The long pause made me wonder if they'd left. "I have a backstage pass. Surely that gives me certain rights."

His voice hit me at a visceral level, where I didn't have to think to react. Letting out a squeal, I bolted off the stool. I ran to the door and threw it open, ready to launch myself at him.

I was stopped by a forest of flowers. What the hell?

With a mouthful of petals, I drew back and tried to speak. "Jed?" I asked, peering over the profusion of red blooms. There were so many I couldn't even see him. "Thank you for the flowers. They're gorgeous."

They smelled heavenly too, but somehow his scent overrode all the rest. I swayed toward it, and him, like a bee seeking nectar.

He was *here*. Finally.

"You're more so." He stepped into the room, and it was a freaking miracle my boneless arms didn't drop the bouquet of roses altogether. He simply dominated the space. Filled it up until I backed against the door I'd just closed to try to get room to breathe.

But he didn't give me that room. Shoving the roses out of the way, he gripped my chin and lifted my face to his. "You were incredible."

Those three words were my undoing.

I barreled into his arms, trapping the roses between us as I pressed my

face into his neck. The spicy scent of his soap and the ever-present aroma of coffee mashed together in my mind, smoothing away all the stress of the last week. He was here, and he was holding me, and nothing had ever been better.

Then he tipped back my chin and took my mouth, proving me a liar. *This* was as good as it got. His firm lips caressing mine, warming them before his tongue slid between them to explore. He flicked it over mine and the movement reverberated between my legs, causing my clit to pound furiously. I'd changed out of my stage costume and just wore a robe and panties, and God, I wouldn't mind making use of the couch to assuage the ache deep in my core.

The ache labeled *Jed*. He already owned that part of me just like all the rest.

But before I could guide him toward that oh so handy sofa, he shifted back and rubbed his thumb over my damp lower lip. "You always gotta look so sexy on stage?" he asked gruffly.

The light in his eyes made me grin. "Sorry. Kinda. It's my job."

He grabbed my ass and hauled me against him, kissing me one more time. Leaving me breathless when he pulled back just far enough to whisper, "And you're a damn pro."

Feeling his hardness against me, I pressed even closer, wanting it to brand my belly even through our clothes. That hot, heavy weight made me pulse and dampen, and I lifted my eyes to his, hoping he'd get the message. "If, um, it displeased you, you could always—" He was laughing before I finished the statement, and then I was laughing too.

Damn, that felt good.

"I see you haven't changed in a week."

"Oh, I have."

His eyebrow lifted. "That so?"

I pointed my thumb over my shoulder. "I couldn't have played those last couple of songs a few weeks ago. I couldn't have put myself on the line like that, knowing I might fail. That I probably would."

"You didn't fail. You were magnificent."

The pride glowing on his face and vibrating in his words caused my eyes to fill again. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"Like hell you couldn't. You've got everything you need, right here." He pushed his hand through the cluster of flowers until he finally reached my chest. He covered my rapidly beating heart with his palm, his gaze colliding

with mine.

“No,” I whispered, lacing my fingers with his. “Now I have everything I need.”

Emotion moved over his face, and he cleared his throat. “Let’s get out of here.” Then he glanced around. “If you can. You probably have...stuff to do.”

I had to smile. He was clearly out of his depth, but he was trying. For me. “Nope, all the stuff is done.”

“Good. So, let’s split.”

An idea popped into my head. A *brilliant* one. If we were going to do this, I wanted to take him somewhere special to me. The first place I’d started dreaming.

“Sure.” My smile grew. “I know just where we should go.”

His gaze returned to mine, one corner of his mouth rising. “Does it happen to include a horizontal surface?” He glanced down at his visible erection, showcased by his snug jeans. “Pryor, we have a situation.”

Laughing, I tugged on his hand. “Just let me get dressed.” I winked over my shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll be sure to accommodate your request.”

Under an hour later, we were staring up at the back of my childhood home in Jersey while I cursed my decision to wear low heels to the venue tonight. I knew better. My feet were always on fire after a show, but I’d been hoping to seduce Jed.

Damn vanity always screwed me over.

I gripped the trunk of the tree nearest to the house and shot him a look. His jaw was set and he kept glaring at the house—when he wasn’t glaring at me. “C’mon. It’s an easy climb up, I swear.”

“You think climbing the tree is the part I have a problem with, Peyton?”

*Uh oh.* Already I’d picked up that when he used my name and not Rulebreaker or vixen or baby—I really liked that one—that he was annoyed.

My ass grew warmer. Not that his being annoyed was necessarily a bad thing.

“We won’t stay long,” I promised. “We aren’t going inside either. Just on the roof over the back porch. See, it’s flat.” I couldn’t keep the triumph out of my tone. “You wanted a horizontal surface, right?”

“Not on someone’s roof. And I don’t care if we’re not going in. It’s still trespassing.”

“The house is for sale. No one will ever know or care.” I flashed him a

smile I knew my backside would pay for later. I couldn't wait. "If we get caught, I'll get us out of trouble."

"The hell you will." His hand came down on my bottom just as I boosted myself up the tree.

I laughed and just climbed higher, using the many branches for leverage. My natural athleticism came in handy, as did my muscle memory of climbing this very tree dozens of times years ago, but whoa, this was a lot harder than it had been when I was eight.

Sticking out my foot, I balanced on the edge of the roof, gathering my nerve for the final leap. I screeched a little as I jumped, but I made it without falling to my knees.

*Score.*

Turning back, I realized Jed was still on the ground.

"Chicken," I taunted.

"You are so getting it later."

That only made me laugh harder. "Promise?"

When he didn't respond, I fanned herself. "Whew, it's warm tonight." Actually it was quite chilly, but he would keep me warm. "Think I'll just get rid of a few layers." I tugged off my top, revealing my lacy red demi-cup bra. I sent my shirt sailing, laughing in delight as it got caught on a branch. "Damn, I'm good."

"Woman, you're on my last nerve."

"Is that the one in your cock or somewhere else?"

Growling, he ascended the tree at a speed that got me warm all on its own. He was freaking *hot*. Those muscled arms and legs made quick work of it, and he even snagged my top on the way. He planted his boot on the roof and then he was up there with me, stalking toward me with my shirt in his fist.

I nearly came on the spot.

Just before he reached me, I held up my hand. "Let me explain before you spank me into six orgasms."

His brow winged up. "Only six?"

I laughed and gave up on keeping my distance. I belonged in his arms, even when I'd pissed him off.

Much to my relief, he drew me into a tight embrace and brushed a kiss over my forehead. "You're going to be the death of me."

"At least we'll really live first." I didn't argue when he tugged my shirt

back over my head. It really was too cold to be sitting around half naked.

Dammit.

Pulling on his hand, I led him to the other end of the roof. I sat down, letting my legs dangle over the edge, waiting to speak until he sat beside me.

“This was my bedroom.” I tapped the window beside us and chanced a glance inside at the darkened, empty room. Back in the old days, there had been talk in the neighborhood that my house was haunted. I’d always kind of hoped to see a ghost. “We lived here until I was ten and started getting some nibbles on the music scene. My parents said we outgrew this place, but the truth was our money had.”

Not to my mind, it hadn’t. I would’ve been happy living there throughout my childhood. My days there were the last ones it had felt like my parents and I were a real family.

Jed didn’t say anything, just stroked his thumb over my knuckles. Back and forth, gently reassuring.

“I used to come out here and sing. Quietly at first, so I didn’t wake up my parents or the neighbors. Eventually I’d lose myself in my music and I’d forget to be quiet. Then my dad would come outside and shush me.” I smiled at the memory. “After that, I’d just make wishes on stars.” I looked up and sucked in a breath at the view, as I always did. Pinprick stars studded the navy sky as if someone had tossed up a fistful of diamonds. “See how clear they are up here?”

He shifted behind me, sliding his legs along mine until they were caged in. His arms wrapped around my waist and I rested my head against his chest, more content than I’d ever been. “What did you wish for?” he asked against my temple.

“This.” I gripped his strong forearm, digging in because I had to. I needed to believe he was real. “I wanted to matter to someone. I didn’t really understand adult love yet, but I was already into boys.” I bit my lip. “I was sorta boy crazy actually.”

“No kidding.”

I pushed my elbow into his gut, but he only laughed.

“I didn’t actually *do* anything about it. But yeah, I was dreaming by then. I dreamed about being a famous singer too. I was already going to talent shows, and music was what I loved the most. School bored me, but music was my favorite class.” I grimaced. Some of my memories weren’t so sweet. “I used to sing the loudest so people would tell me I was good.”



“Did they?”

“No. Most of them ignored me. Some tried to kick my ass.”

“Jealous,” he murmured, kissing my ear.

“No, I was a conceited little twit and they called me on it.” I sighed. “In retrospect, I wish I’d held onto some of that, because I’m definitely not that confident now. I struggle constantly. Everything I do for validation threatens to destroy my confidence completely. That’s melodramatic, but you understand.” I twisted around to face him, unsurprised to see he’d clenched his jaw once again. “Don’t you?”

“Yeah. It’s different, but yeah. Anytime you put parts of yourself out there to be judged, it’s hard.”

“Who judged you?” I asked quietly, hoping he would tell me.

For a moment, he didn’t reply. He finally began to speak in a low, emotionless voice. He told me about growing up in a family with several generations of cops and rising through the ranks in the city police department where he’d started his career. He didn’t specifically tell me that he felt he’d been given promotions he didn’t deserve due to his family connections but I surmised it.

“It caused some tension with me and the other guys, my partner especially. Then one day we were on an undercover mission, and we were at this tenement in the Bronx.”

I fought not to shudder as he described the creepy feel of the nearly abandoned place. Dark, broken-down, decrepit. His voice dropped lower and lower as he spoke.

“There was some movement around a corner, and I reacted, thinking I’d finally spotted the perp. I was so eager to prove that I deserved my spot on the force.” His Adam’s apple bobbed. “I shot my partner instead. He could’ve died.”

My first tendency was to comfort, but I sensed he didn’t want that. So much of what we were together was based on instinct, on gut-level knowing, and that connection between us wouldn’t fail now. “He didn’t die.”

“No. He spent some time in the hospital. He’s okay now. Actually, he got married a few months after that.” Jed smiled faintly. “Said he’d seen the light.”

“Like in the tunnel or metaphorically?”

Jed laughed, shaking his head. “No clue. But they’re happy together. He’s got a baby on the way. Two babies. Freaking twins. Can you imagine?”

“Wow, that light must’ve been bright.”

Jed laughed again and tightened his hold on me. It was hard to say which of us needed the connection more. “I saw the light too. A different one. I wasn’t cut out to be a cop, not deep down, so I resigned.”

“And started writing.”

“And started writing,” he agreed. “You pegged me right. I guess I just hadn’t fully accepted I still wasn’t a cop. I mean, I had enough to cash the checks from my publisher.” He chuckled. “But beyond that? Denial fucking city.”

“You’re too amazing to deny it for long.”

“You read something of mine?” he asked, pride filling his question.

“Uh, try two of your books already and working on the third. They’re incredibly addictive. I’ve been sneaking in bits of them in between interviews and rehearsals.” I grinned up at him. “You’re awfully prolific, Mr. Not-A-Writer.”

“Keeps me off the streets.” He swatted my thigh. “Maybe you should try it, Rulebreaker.”

“Nah, I have my own artistic outlet to pull out my hair over. You like writing?”

“I love it,” he said quietly. “In a way I never loved being a cop. One more thing I felt guilty about over the years.”

“So you found your way to where you needed to be.” I reached up to stroke his chin, loving the way his scruff felt under my fingers. “You were —”

He caught my wrist, cutting her off. “What’s this?” He stroked my bracelet. “I saw you playing with it during the show.”

“Oh. Hmm. I guess we’re to this part of the program already.” When he only raised a brow, I plowed ahead. “I, ah, did some research on BDSM once I left you.”

“Did you?”

“I did.”

“And didn’t run screaming,” he said dryly.

“I almost ran back to you and begged you to make me scream more, but away? No.” I grinned. “Anyway, I read about collars, and how they prove you’re, you know, taken.”

“They signify much more than that.”

“Well, I didn’t have you to inform me beyond the sites I found. I’m

assuming you'll rectify that oversight now."

He nodded silently.

So much for no longer being a cop. The guy was downright inscrutable when he wanted to be.

"I'm not saying we're at that stage. Or even that we necessarily want to be at that stage. I don't know if you're a strict practitioner. Or if—"

"Peyton."

"The point. Right." I blew out a breath. "I heard of this up and coming designer, Presley Warren, and she does customized pieces. I asked her if she could make me a bracelet."

Turning my arm over, I showed him the clasp—two little handcuffs, locked together. The intricacy of the piece, not to mention the speed with which Presley had put it together, still awed me. I would've paid twice as much for it.

"This is your version of a collar. A pre-collar." His throat worked as he caressed the hammered steel. The simplicity and strength of the bracelet had drawn me too. It was built to last. Steel couldn't be damaged easily once it was forged.

Just like us, if the fates were kind.

"Yes. It's my way of saying I belong to you. If you want me." I tried to stop my arm from shaking, but it was impossible.

"You must realize from your research that it's the Dom who's supposed to pick out the collar for the sub. That by making this move on your own, you're stepping out of line."

"In the bad way or the good way? Because I'm never really sure."

He shook his head, smiling. "Yep, I'm a dead man."

"That was a serious question."

"And this is my serious answer. You asked me if I want you." He lifted my wrist to his mouth and kissed the bracelet's tiny clasp, his breath warm against my skin. "Baby, I can't remember ever wanting anything or anyone more."

## EPILOGUE

Jed

AN ANGEL WAS SINGING IN MY EAR.

I groaned and pulled a pillow over my head to drown out the sound. Even angels were annoying at the crack of dawn after I'd been up almost all night to meet a deadline. My next book was launching in hardback, a big step up for me, and I'd been burning lots of midnight oil to get it finished. I'd also been pushing so hard to get the book done so I could join Peyton the next time she had to travel.

But now she was here, seducing me with her silky voice. Strumming the guitar, she crooned about last loves, which made me open an eye and stare at the zigzag pattern of my pillowcase. Peyton's doing.

*Everything* was Peyton's doing, including the fact that I'd been up so late last night. She'd just returned from a brief European tour. She was doing so well with the new songs she'd integrated into her show that she'd rushed home to head right into the studio. The plan was to get them added to her upcoming album, her dream come true. Her excitement had magnified my usual desire for her until I'd had to take her in the front hall.

Again.

Being away from her sucked. Now that she was back home for a few weeks, I planned to spoil her rotten.

Once I finished spanking her for waking me up so damn early with her sexy singing.

I rolled over and tossed aside the pillow. "You are in so much trouble—" I broke off, realizing she wasn't only singing and playing the guitar beside

me in bed.

She was doing it naked, wearing only her handcuff bracelet and a smile.

“Get over here,” I demanded, hooking a hand around one shapely ankle.

“Mind the guitar!” After depositing her instrument safely on the floor, she wriggled on top of me, her face lowering for her customary morning kiss.

I hadn’t been much of a kisser before her, but she hadn’t given me much choice except to learn to love it.

Eh, who was I kidding? I loved every chance I got to have her lips on me. Or my lips on her, wherever they might land.

“About time you wake up, old man.” She poked my shoulder, giggling at the rumble in my chest. “Sleeping half the day away. We have things to do. Important things. Like—”

I flipped her over on her belly, holding her down with the press of my body into hers and my hand gently clamped on the back of her neck. “Like me paddling this sweet little ass then fucking you raw?” I grated into her ear.

Instantly, she went limp. “That’s also a good plan.”

I couldn’t help laughing. Instead of spanking her, I eased down her body to kiss the line of her spine. She arched upward to get more of my mouth, and I dipped his hand between her legs to rub her swollen slit. “Already wet for me.”

“Always,” she whispered.

That was sterling truth.

As much as I wanted to continue on this path, I had something else in mind for this morning. Or afternoon. Whenever she’d so cruelly chosen to wake me up.

Moving back, I lightly tapped her perfect ass. It was still slightly flushed from the fun they’d had last night. “Stay right here.”

“But—”

“Peyton.”

As always, that stilled her. Her murmured, “Yes, Sir,” made me smile as I rose to walk over to my dresser.

We really didn’t follow most BDSM protocol, inside the bedroom or out. We’d come up with our own version of things that worked for us. Understatement. The woman left me walking around with a dopey smile half the time and a painful hard-on the rest. It had been that way for the six months we’d been together. Everything was still as chaotic and passionate between us as it had been the night we’d met, and I thanked God for it.

By far, she was the brightest part of my life.

I removed the jewelry box from the dresser and walked back to the bed. I kneeled beside her hip and opened it, then drew the intricate piece of jewelry out of its case. The handcuff charms in the center glinted in the morning sun, and my erection only thickened as I imagined her wearing her matching set.

And *only* her matching set.

“Eyes closed,” I commanded, knowing she would oblige me. She always knew when to push me and when to acquiesce. Well, most of the time. Her fire was one of the things I adored most about her, and there was a long list. “Lift your head.”

She did as I asked and I slipped the necklace around her neck. “Jed?” she gasped.

Her hair presented a problem. “Do something about your hair. I can’t do the clasp.” With a little wiggling, she managed to get it out of my way enough for me to lock it. “Sit up now, baby.”

With tears in her eyes, she kneeled and turned toward me. She didn’t even glance down because she understood what it signified. Our version of a ring, though one day soon she’d have that too. “This is the best gift I’ve ever gotten.”

“It’s a gift for me too.” Looking at her in my jewelry was a present I’d never hoped to wish for. I ran my fingertip over the hammered steel. “Presley changed the look this time because I wanted the handcuffs in the front. They’re small, and I’m sure you can hide them under your—”

“Are you kidding? I’m showing this off everywhere.” She launched herself into my arms, nearly knocking me off the bed.

Freddy whined and pawed at the door. Forget breakfast, he probably wanted to be part of the fun too. But we usually shut him out on nights we were having sex because he tended to stare.

Laughing, I brushed her hair out of her eyes. “You know what this means, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Her face was glowing. “It means I’m yours, forever.”

“You got that right. But you already were. It also means—”

“I love you,” she blurted, biting her lip once the words were out. “Whoops. I guess I should’ve let you finish.”

“Nah, in this case, I think interruptions are perfectly acceptable.” I leaned up to nibble her full lower lip. “I love you too, by the way.”

“Well, duh.” She grinned at my stern expression. “I mean, duh, Sir.”

Turn the page for a sneak peek of another standalone romance in our Kensington Square series, *Desperately Seeking Kitty*.



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Katherine



DESPERATELY SEEKING KITTY

A KENSINGTON SQUARE STANDALONE

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 TARYN QUINN

*USA Today* bestselling author, **TARYN QUINN**, is the sexy and funny alter ego of bestselling authors Taryn Elliott & Cari Quinn. We've been writing together for years, but we have decided to pull the trigger on a combo name just for fun.

And so...Taryn Quinn was born!

Do you like ultra sexy small town romance full of shenanigans? Quirky office romances full of steam? Okay, look...we pretty much just love writing steamy stories. If you're all about that, we're your girls!

*For more information about us...*

[tarynquinn.com](http://tarynquinn.com)

[tq@tarynquinn.com](mailto:tq@tarynquinn.com)

