

Charlotte U



Imperfection is Beauty
Tiffany Casper

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Book 2

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Dedication

This is dedicated to all the couples that society has frowned upon due to their messed-up beliefs.

You love someone, you love them.

Simple as freaking that.

Acknowledgments

Cover Design – Tiffany Casper

To my Beta's; Tami, Billie, Raylene for helping me in editing this book.

Thank you to Tami, you rock!

I always have a time with picking last names for people.

So, I messaged my Beta Team.

They threw last names out there, but the one Tami threw out there was perfect!!

Also, Marcus needed a name for his Range Rover on the spot... luckily, I have some kickass readers, and they threw out The Black Mamba.

So, here's thanks to Katie & Codie!!!!!!

Blurb

I should have seen it.

Realized it.

Recognized it.

But I didn't.

And that one mistake. That one single mistake is going to
haunt me for all my days.

Perhaps...

Perhaps there is a way to make it right.

And will I do everything in my power to make it right?

To make *HER* believe in me?

You're damn right I will.

Because only a handful of us are lucky enough to claim the
other half of our soul.

Good thing I've always beaten the odds no matter what is
thrown my way.

And this time... this time will be no different.

Because love never discriminates.

Sports Romance. Interracial.

Playlist

Beautiful – Eminem

Up Around The Bend – Creedence Clearwater Revival

Burnin' It Down – Jason Aldean

Lil Bit – Nelly & Florida Georgia Line

Beautiful Crazy – Luke Combs

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Prologue

Scarlett

You know that moment?

That moment when something hits you square in the face, and you know there is nothing you can do about it?

Yeah? Well... welcome to my life.

Welcome to the story of a girl who had her *pulse* moment when she met the one. The one she knew she would spend the rest of her life with.

The *pulse*, according to my dad, Grenade, my uncles, Snake, Tyne, Beast, and Hyde, was a feeling deep in your soul that sends an electrical current shooting through your body when your soul recognizes its other half.

Sounds like a great story, doesn't it?

Yeah, see, that's what I thought.

However, it was a crying shame that he hadn't experienced the *pulse*.

Not when he did what he did and then walked off. It was almost as if he hadn't realized my entire world had stopped spinning.

And then... it started to spin around one person. *Him*.

And I highly doubted he even registered the importance of what he did for me.

And... well... I doubted if he even really saw me.

And this is how the story started.

They all need to start somewhere, right?

Sadly, mine started off shitty.

It was the last day of classes – we had already taken our SATs and our end-of-year exams, and the final bell had rung.

Goodbye, high school.

I'd say it's been great... but it has not.

The girls all wanted to be me.

What was so special about me? The reason for it, well, it was the yin to any teenager's yang. And if they say it's not, well, then they are liars. All the way liars.

The boys called me names you wouldn't believe.

And wasn't it funny to call a girl, a whore, and she is still a virgin... hmmm... do the math. Two plus two does not equal six.

Why do you ask?

Why did the girls want to be me, and the boys make fun of me? Oh, and let's not forget the teachers. They were the worst of them all.

Especially Ms. Mewker. My English Lit teacher.

My dad turned her down cold because she was one of my teachers. And she never, and I mean, she never let me forget it.

Thankfully, the principal, the only sane one in that whole school, listened to what I told him when she gave me a thirty-five on an essay I had written. And then followed that up with a twenty-seven on the next one. Ummm, I know they were good.

I had the treasurer for my dad's club, and one of my pseudo uncles, Hyde, read them over to make sure they were good and they were accurate.

Hyde wasn't just the treasurer because he was good with numbers. Oh no, he was the treasurer because he could have gone to *MIT*, he could have been working for *NASA*, he was that smart.

But... he wanted to be free.

No laws.

No chains.

He never told me why, just that he didn't.

And with the men of the Immoral Saints MC, you learned to listen to them, and not push them.

But, back to my thoughts as I stand here against the brick wall that's almost as tall as I am, and that's saying something since I'm only five feet and three inches on a good day.

The principal had read my essays when I brought them to him and asked Ms. Mewker why she had graded my essays like that. And she tried to lie.

But wouldn't you know, the principal had witnessed my dad turning her down when I was running late after school?

The principal hadn't missed the glare nor the sneer as I had climbed on the back of my dad's bike, and we rode away.

Ouch!

Crapola.

I brought my hand up and rubbed the back of my head.

Yes, I am a klutz.

Let's get that all out there and in the air.

Yes, I just lifted my head, forgetting I was leaning against the brick wall as I had studied the marks on my white high-top Converse when someone had stepped on them in the hall.

Now, back to why they all treated me like that; in case you missed it, let me clarify for you. And that only needs one sentence.

My dad is a part of a motorcycle club.

See! That's the only sentence you need to explain the way they all acted.

And just as I thought that... I heard that oh-so-heavenly rumble of pipes.

My dad was here.

What I didn't know, well, that was because I was still rubbing the back of my head... He had seen it.

He had a smile on his face as he parked in front of me, then yelled out, "You hit your head again, didn't you?"

I snorted, then nodded, "Yep!"

My dad shook his head, jerked his chin up at me, then shouted, "Come on."

Because no way was he going to turn his bike off and disrupt the teachers and students finishing with last-minute stuff when he made his kitten purr. His words. Men...

Once I made it to him, I wanted to snort at what happened next.

I had just thrown my leg over when I heard Cami, the head cheerleader, say, "Hey, Stacy's dad."

My dad looked over his shoulder, then snorted, "Really?"

I giggled, then teased him about his age, "She likes them kissing the dirt. What can I say?"

He narrowed his eyes then and gunned the engine.

I let out a startled squeak, wrapped him tight, and then laughed.

"Serves you right, Pumpkin," he called out.

Then, needing the last word, because hey, I was a biker's daughter after all, I looked over my shoulder at Cami and yelled, "You're too young for him. And he prefers redheads. And no way in heck am I calling you Mommy."

My dad was roaring with laughter out of the parking lot.

I truly lived for the moments when I heard my dad let out with laughter, the kind of laughter that causes everyone to

join in, even if they don't think it's that funny.

Just like he was still doing as we pulled onto the main highway and headed to the clubhouse.

Yes... He was still laughing as we stopped at a red light.

Now, I was laughing at all the women checking my dad out. And then they looked at the hair underneath my helmet, and either sneered at me or jerked their heads away so fast from him so they didn't get caught ogling him.

Now, let me tell you something about my dad.

My dad... he is handsome.

Let me set the stage for you.

Six foot three. Dirty blonde hair that was shorter on the sides and longer on top.

He had a goatee that he had always had, and it matched his hair.

He had full lips that I got from him.

But the best thing about my dad was his eyes.

Or it was his tattoos, as some women said.

But for me, it was his eyes.

He had the kind of eyes that you could see deep into his soul. The kind of eyes that never strayed. The kind of eyes that showed you he always had your back.

And he would never waiver.

And thankfully, he passed them down to me.

Yes, the guys threw me a congratulations party for finishing high school.

And yes, again, they threw me a graduation party.

But why they went with that *I needed* two parties when they used any excuse to party, I'll never know.

We had just finished dinner.

It was on a Sunday, the day after my graduation party, when my dad took a sip of his beer and then said, “Okay, go get ‘em.”

I didn’t have to ask what he was referring to.

We agreed to open my college acceptance letters the day after I graduated.

So, I ran to my room, grabbed the stack, and then ran back down the stairs.

And then I let out a muffled hiss.

At that sound, I could hear my dad chuckling.

Yes, I have lived in this house for eighteen years, and yes, I stubbed my toe coming down the last step. Don’t ask how that happened.

Retaking my seat, I laid them out, then I rubbed my sore toe.

And while I did that, I knew he saw it. His eyes lit up. He should really know me better than that.

But, apparently, he didn’t, not when he tapped the top of that blasted envelope.

Go Dawgs. Not.

I narrowed my eyes, then looked at all of them, and I knew the one I wanted to go to. The one that had one of the best Bachelor of Nursing programs in the country.

It was also the one that had the best master’s program for what I wanted to do with my life.

Just the thought of being the first line of defense had my heart racing.

And since they didn’t allow women on the front lines in active duty, *so they say*, this was my next step.

I wanted to be a neonatal nurse. I wanted to help them and be their strong back when they fought for every breath.

They were the true warriors.

My dad saw my look as I stared at that envelope, and then he sighed, “Okay, run it down for me again.”

I looked up at him and smiled. “First, they have the best program in the country for what I want to do. Second, you know my work ethic, it’s not going to be a waste of money. Third, you can be to me in under five hours, four without traffic. And finally, you always say, *as long as you’re happy and not in trouble, I don’t care what you do. As long as you do it safely.*”

He sighed then, looked up at the ceiling, and muttered, “How the hell did I raise a daughter that hates the *Dawgs?*”

I giggled, “Dad, come on.”

He looked back at me, tried something else, and said, “Well, they do have the third-best program.”

I growled, “But it’s not the number one rated program. And ninety-eight percent of students who graduate with that degree from their program are offered jobs at the top neonatal departments in the country.”

“You would be closer,” he tried.

I shook my head. “You hate traveling for short distances on your bike. The longer the ride, the better.”

He sighed, stared into my icy blue eyes that were identical to his, and muttered, “Go on, made you wait this long, let’s see what they say.”

With nervousness, I slowly opened the envelope, pulled out the letter, unfolded it, took in a deep breath, and stared for long moments at the header on the page.

Charlotte University.

Home of the Lions.

“Dear Ms. Scarlett McKinney, we are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted into the...”

I froze. I really did it.

I freaking did it!

And yep, I almost knocked the table over as I stood up so fast. *Thank you, Dad, for your quick reflexes.*

I was jumping up and down, holding the letter to my chest, when my dad wrapped me in his arms.

Lifted me and then spun me around.

Placing a kiss on my cheek, he looked up at me, and nothing but pride shined from his eyes, “Proud of you, Pumpkin.”

I smiled down at him and said, “Thanks, Dad. I love you.”

He winked, “Love you more than wind on my face.”

And that was how I got onto the site and accepted their offer.

Three months later, thanks to my dad’s club, I was moved in.

“Okay. Alright. Everything is fine. Everything is totally fine. Yes. Yes, it is,” I muttered to myself as I placed my last pillow on my twin-sized bed.

“You going to be alright, Pumpkin?” At my dad’s voice, I jumped, then spun around to face him.

My red hair slapped me in the face as I moved, and then I sighed, “How much of that did you hear?”

“None of it if it will make you feel better,” he told me as he stepped over to me and held out his arms, which I didn’t hesitate to fling myself into his warm embrace.

Then he lowered his voice and whispered in my ear, “Tell me again why you wanted to go here and not at home.”

I felt my face heat. He knew why I didn’t want to go to that school.

Then I pulled my face from his neck and snapped, “Because I will be dead and gone before I ever pull for the *Dawgs.*”

He snorted, then released me and said, “You know that’s sacrilegious, right?”

I shrugged. “I don’t really care. I bleed crimson and white.”

Snake stood near the door, his face, a blank, stoical mask in place, he didn’t speak until I looked at him, “Only a phone call away. And we already got word, we can’t get to you in time, got an allied club that can get to you immediately. You got protection.”

That was when Tyne pulled the little notebook, he kept in his kutte, his pen, and then wrote something on it.

Once he wrote what he needed to, he handed me the notebook. I offered him a smile, then carefully, so as not to touch his skin, took it from him and read what he wrote.

And at his words, I started laughing my bootie off.

‘If anyone messes with you, need their details. I’ll kill ‘em.’

And I knew he would too.

Tyne was an enigma of a man.

I was born after he went to war and didn’t know how he was before he left.

All I knew was that when he returned, everyone gave him a wide berth.

Because he came back different.

Not different in a bad way. Oh no, if anyone said that they would receive the beatdown of their life from the men of the MC.

Just simply... different.

But then again, soldiers should be given the respect they have earned.

And even more so, soldiers that become POWs, well, they definitely should be given the respect they’ve earned.

And if they don’t want to be touched, then respect that.

And if they don't want to talk, then respect that too.

Because if there was one thing I learned, you should never assume a damn thing about a person unless you have literally walked a mile in their shoes.

Shaking my head, I grinned and then tossed him a knowing wink.

The big man jerked his chin up at me, took his notebook back, put it back in his pocket, and then walked out of my dorm.

My dad smiled at that, and then said, "Remember, only a phone call away. I can be here in four hours with traffic."

I smirked right back, "So, in other words, you can be here in three and a half?"

He shrugged, "Probably three for you."

I shook my head, "Got it, Dad. I love you."

"Love you more than the wind on my face, Pumpkin," and coming from a biker, that saying meant the world to me.

Once they all left, I stood in my dorm room and took in a deep breath.

I didn't know how lucky I was that I had a single.

I didn't have to worry about having a picky roommate.

I didn't have to worry about someone disturbing my peace once I made it back to the dorm.

But... if I was being truthful, I kind of wanted a roommate.

See, I'm an only child.

And growing up in a biker clubhouse with a single dad and a bunch of single uncles and no other girls my age, well, it does something to you.

It shapes you.

It also makes you weary of people that only try to befriend you, just so they can get close to your family.

But I shook my head.

So totally not going there. not today.

I had orientation in the morning, and then the next day, my classes would be starting.

I rolled over in my bed, hit my alarm, took in a deep breath, and whispered, "I got this. I so got this."

With those words, I got out of bed, made it, and then headed to my en-suite bathroom, and I knew my father had a hand in making that happen.

No way was his daughter going to use a co-ed shower.

I had just stepped out of the shower and then looked around my bathroom counter while asking no one in particular, "Where is it?"

So, what if I talked to myself?

Tell me of any woman who lives alone and doesn't talk to themselves. Go ahead... I'll wait.

And when I couldn't find my soothing balm, I closed my eyes and remembered I forgot to pack the stuff. After classes, I was taking my happy butt to Target to stock up on it.

With my hair straightened, I sighed, realizing this was as good as it was going to get. At least the forecast I checked out last night let me know the humidity would be low today.

After I got dressed in leggings and a comfortable hoodie, I put my feet into my white high-tops, grabbed what I needed, and headed out of my dorm.

And when I saw my hair in a hallway mirror, I thought, just maybe, my hair would be nice, for once.

However, as I stepped out of the doors of my building, I sighed.

The weatherman got it wrong... just like he always did.

Why? Why me? Why did I think I could try to look cute on my first day?

I swear if you looked up the word *klutz* in Webster's dictionary, you would see me. My name, my picture, and a description of me.

Would you like to know how I managed to step on a small rock at a Putt-Putt place and end up breaking not one, not two, oh no, three bones in my foot?

Or how about the time I was walking out of the clubhouse, tripped over freaking air, and ended up busting my nose wide open?

Yeah, see, klutz, through and through.

As I walked to my first class of the day, I had no way of knowing that in a few short months, my *pulse* moment would be happening.

Chapter 1

Marcus

What was the purpose of an alarm clock?

I didn't know.

Not when I had been woken four hours ago to the sound of Daemon and his woman Aliyah getting hot and heavy in his room.

Ever since that scare with what had taken place, being the placental abruption, Aliyah and Crew had become permanent fixtures in the football house.

And now, since it was closing in on five twenty-nine in the morning, either I couldn't fall back asleep because my mind was running rampant with everything on my plate, or it was the simple fact that I didn't want to roll over and squish Crew.

Granted, Crew was under the covers in his Tonka truck pajamas, and I was atop the covers in nothing but sweatpants and wanted to chuck them off every five seconds because I ran hot.

Thankfully, my alarm went off, and I rolled over to silence it.

Once I was out of bed, ensuring Crew was still sleeping, I got dressed in a t-shirt and gym shorts, grabbed my stuff, and headed to the kitchen.

Finch was there getting things out for all of us.

Braydon and Culpepper met me down there, and Daemon soon followed.

After we drank our protein shakes, I loaded up in Daemon's truck, and then we went to early morning practice.

Yeah, that always woke me up and got me started for the day.

Once I had my shower and got ready to head to class, I stepped out of my room and looked at Aliyah and Daemon.

Needing to tease them a bit, I said, “Before y’all wake me up with your escapades, go buy me some noise-canceling headphones.”

And with that, I smiled a rare smile and headed down the stairs.

All the while, Aliyah let out a startled gasp and called out, “That’s not gentlemanly of you.”

My first class of the day was over and when I grabbed my paper off her desk, I stared at the grade and let out a curse.

I had actually tried with this paper.

Son of a bitch.

Thankfully, the professor allowed us to make corrections, or else I would be fucked with a capital F.

No way was I letting it get out there that I had a problem.

Instead, I tagged my phone and called the one person I knew who understood.

He answered on the second ring, “Yo!”

Damn, but it felt good to be able to call him at any given time. “I need your help.”

Immediately, he asked, “What do you need?”

I was walking out of Thompson Hall when I said, “You got access to the internet?”

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Going to give you my login, can you read my paper and help me?”

He was silent for a beat, then he said, “This is something I missed while I was on the inside.”

We went back and forth on when he thought he would be coming home, but I wasn’t going to push him. He had been locked up in the pen for eleven years.

And that story would be told a little later on because I needed to be in a decent mood to tell it, or else I'd end up breaking something or putting someone in the hospital.

After I hung up, the rest of my classes flew by.

Taking in the crisp autumn air, I headed to the forecourt to wait for Daemon, Aliyah, Crew, Braydon, Finch, Culpepper, and Matthew.

We were all headed to the house to watch Monday night football.

On the way there, we just happened to walk in front of a group of girls, and the moment they saw us coming, no one could miss the way they adjusted their tops, patted down their hair...

Didn't anyone tell them that natural and imperfections are better than anything?

I knew at least one person agreed with me, I knew that because Aliyah snorted.

I looked down at her, and the moment she caught my eyes, I shook my head.

It was halftime, Aliyah sat down beside me, put her head on my shoulder, and said, "Hey, Marcus."

I shook my head, looked at Daemon, and muttered, "Hey, Lil Mama."

"Why don't you date?" Okay, that so wasn't the question I thought she would ever ask me.

But I've always been honest with her, and I wasn't going to stop now. "I'm picky. And I don't date."

She didn't need to know how I really was.

And with her, that conversation would never be brought up.

She sighed, "I wish I knew a woman for you to date. Double dates would be killer."

I shook my head, and seeing that I wasn't going to reply, Daemon called her over. She rolled her eyes but nonetheless got up and went to him.

After we watched the game, I carried Crew on my and then handed him off to Daemon so they could head back to her apartment.

Since tomorrow was the gender reveal party I planned, I made them stay at her place tonight.

Once Daemon grabbed Crew off my shoulders, I slapped his back, then pressed a kiss on Aliyah's cheek, and said, "See you tomorrow."

She narrowed her eyes and asked, "You going to tell me what I'm having early, big, twin brother of mine?"

I shook my head at her, "Hell no. Got something planned, no way in hell am I ruining that."

After they left, I was sitting on the couch, watching the highlights of the game, and waiting to see if they would show which teams were looking at which players, when there was a knock on the front door.

Braydon sat his beer down on the coffee table since it was his turn to get the door this week.

He made it to the door, opened it, and then I heard him ask, "Can I help you?"

"Yeah, you can tell me where I can find my punk-ass little brother." And at those words...

At the sound of that voice, I stood up and barreled through the house.

Seeing my big brother, I didn't slow.

He saw me coming and braced.

My brother and I were the same height, but now, he had more muscles than I did.

I wrapped him in a bone-crushing hug, and to that, he returned the favor.

“It’s damn good to see you, brother,” I told him as I pulled away.

He nodded his now shaved head and then stepped into the room after I stepped to the side.

After I introduced him to the guys, I led him to the couch, grabbed him a beer, and then took a seat beside him.

“Missed you, bro,” he told me after he took a long pull and then sighed.

The events that led my brother to the penitentiary, well, you had to live in our world to really understand everything.

The first event that led to him being charged took place when I was eleven and he was sixteen. During a game of football, I had sacked an offensive lineman.

And when I sacked him, his leg had been braced in the wrong direction.

The audible snap of three different places lit up the area around us.

Apparently, that sack, legal as it was, had ended any hopes for that boy in the NFL.

The father of that boy didn’t like that. Not one bit.

He had been waiting for me a week later and tried to run over me with his car. And a side note right here: it was his police cruiser.

Also, his dashcam footage just so happened to be malfunctioning that day.

What we didn’t know was that the man had a brain aneurysm waiting to be burst open.

So, when my brother saw what had happened, he slammed the man’s face into the steering wheel, and it happened. He had been dead in under five minutes.

Sadly, someone’s parent at the field had captured everything playing out.

And since the man who had died was a cop, they threw the book at Van.

And in a small town, you inadvertently kill a cop, it doesn't matter that he tried to kill your little brother.

He bonded out after that happened and was awaiting his sentencing hearing.

The second event then took place.

He was seeing this girl; her name was Karla. She was sweeter than cherry pie. She had to work late, and Van was supposed to pick her up and take her home.

However, what he never foresaw was a flat tire on the way to pick her up.

He had called her and told her to wait for him.

Sadly, she hadn't listened to him.

And all because she had to mop the floors and her socks got wet, she couldn't stand the feeling of wet socks on her feet.

Ten fucking feet from the diner's front door, she was dragged behind it, and into the alley, and was assaulted.

My brother rolled up to that and then beat the ever-loving shit out of him.

And Van sat there, on his ass, with her beaten and broken body curled up in his arms.

She took her last breath in a dark, rat-infested alley.

All the while, the man who had beaten her, and assaulted her, also took his last breath.

The cops arrested him for that. He told them what happened, and sadly, once they ran his name, they didn't care that the man had pulled the knife on Van first.

The same one he had used on Karla.

He was sentenced to eight years for the first, ten years for the second, and eight years for the third. The third being the murder of Karla.

Six months ago, the owner of the diner had sold it.

And the new owners had done a deep remodel.

The previous owner never told the cops about the camera footage. Nor the backups. That was because he was the cousin of the cop, the cop that Van had killed.

Needless to say, the new owners knew about what had happened all those years ago and they hadn't agreed with what had taken place.

Van was acquitted of killing the man because the footage clearly showed that once Van had rolled up, he had seen it, ran into the alley, grabbed the man by the back of his shirt, and flung him off of Karla.

He had knelt to check her pulse when the man came at him with the same knife, he had used to attack Karla.

Thanks to the footage, Van was acquitted of those charges, and since he already served eight years for the first crime, he was released three weeks ago.

He didn't automatically come home.

He took the time he needed to breathe.

When he got out, he called our mom and dad, and then he called me.

After I took a sip of my beer, I asked, "So, you sticking around for a while?"

He nodded, "Yeah, this is my home."

A sudden thought came to mind, "You got plans tomorrow?"

He shook his head, "Nah. Whatcha got?"

Then I told him about the gender reveal party and that I wanted him to meet Aliyah and Crew. He knew Daemon already, but he hadn't seen him in over a decade.

He squinted his eyes at me, "You planned a party?"

I nodded, "Yeah, for the first woman I've ever met that is unlike anything I've ever seen. And that boy of hers. He's

something else. You're going to love him."

He nodded, and not once did he question my feelings for Aliyah. He got me; besides, she didn't make my heart stutter-step and my knees feel shaky, and I wanted that. Needed that, and I wouldn't settle for less.

"Yeah? So, what can I do to help?"

I grinned, "You can use those muscles you fucking developed and help build shit and move shit."

He smirked at that, "Long as none of it smells like shit, I'm in."

And thanks to my brother and the whole team, their party went off without a hitch.

And the next week at school, I would be doing something I regretted for the rest of my life.

Chapter 2

Scarlett

I was five months into my first year of college, and if I had known what would take place today, I definitely would've worn something altogether different than what I had on.

See, my tired ass self was worn out last night from driving back to the dorms from the clubhouse. And I didn't do the laundry that I really should have done.

Hindsight is twenty-twenty and all that, right? Note to future self. Don't wear white one week before your period is supposed to come and a week after it ends.

Got it burned in the brain? Yes? Fucking great.

As I was walking to my first class of the day, I saw it and stopped.

"Deep breath." I took in a deep breath.

"There are tons of people around." And there were. Tons of students were walking to their classes.

"You're okay." The guys had taught me self-defense.

"You're fine." At my mumbling, other students walked by me with raised brows, but I paid them no mind.

I looked at the group of overly large males. I counted seven of them in total. They were huge.

"Okay. Deep breath, remember, size up the biggest one, and determine a way to go around them," And then, just as I figured that out... I felt it.

No. No. No. No. No.

I felt my heart start to ratchet.

Did the man above hate me? Had I done something to piss him off?

Completely forgetting about the males until I was speed walking to *Thompson Hall*, growling deep in my throat

that I didn't have a backpack to hide it.

No, my silly ass wanted to be cute and have a bag that slung over my shoulder.

And I knew they all saw it when I passed them by. How do you ask? Because they were all pointing and laughing at my behind, well, more accurately, what was going on underneath my butt cheeks.

Umm, we are not in high school anymore. You're an adult. Grow the fuck up.

Damn, but I really wanted to shout that over my shoulder. However, I really needed to get to the bathroom.

What I didn't know was that someone had seen it, hated it, and for once, after meeting Aliyah, he decided to do something about it.

I had just raced into the bathroom and was grateful for what our school did.

Digging into my bag, I breathed a sigh of relief when my fingertips brushed the cold metal.

Inserting two quarters into the machine, I pulled out a tampon and raced to an open stall.

Once I had myself cleaned up, I let out a growl at the red stain on my white jeans. And no, not a small stain either.

That was when a deep voice came from the other side of the stall.

Yes, a deep voice.

A man's deep voice.

A man's deep voice that had a rasp to it. My fucking kryptonite.

A deep voice with a rasp in the girl's bathroom.

"Here. Wear this around your waist. At least 'til you get something else to change into." I heard it, looked up, and then saw a black hoodie being handed over the door.

I tagged it and whispered, "Thank you."

After I got myself situated and tied the hoodie around my waist, I thought that looked stupid, and then I undid it, held it up, and decided to say fuck it.

I pulled it over my head, and nope, I wasn't going to go into how good it smelled.

Nope. No. Nope.

And since I was so short, and the man who wore the hoodie had to be freakishly extra-large, it fell to the tops of my knees. *Score.* And everyone knows you can never go wrong with the colors of black and white.

Smiling, I pulled my bag over my shoulder, unlocked the stall door, opened it, and then froze.

I looked up, and up, and up. So far up that I wondered if I would break my neck.

Did his head touch the ceiling?

My gawd, his arms looked like three of my legs put together, and mind you, I'm short, yes, I have tits, and ass, and chubby legs, and I make no excuses for my size ten ass.

But in other words, I was curvy.

But he really looked like four of me put together.

And as rationality hit me...

A big man.

My small self.

In a closed room.

With nowhere to run.

And then, I waited for that run-for-your-life feeling to invade my every pore.

... it didn't.

What the hell?

And then, as I locked my ice-blue eyes with his hazel ones, I felt something else.

Pulse.

Holy shit. Did I just stumble back?

Apparently not with what followed my brain short-circuiting, he smirked, “Dwarf’s you.”

I was too busy taking in a face that would make the most famous of painter’s weep if he told them they couldn’t paint him to really dive into how sexy his voice was.

Gorgeous? Read my favorite smut book to me?

See if I wasn’t so distracted, I could have come up with a lot more to describe his voice.

He was that gorgeous.

His face was angular, with high cheekbones, a strong jaw from what I could see underneath a glorious beard that I bet would feel heavenly betw... no, Scarlett Layne.

Excuse you. Don’t you dare go there!

But come on?

His eyebrows were perfectly shaped and dark.

His eyelashes were thick, full, and lush. I wanted his eyelashes instead of my light ones.

His eyes, oh my freaking hellfire! They were a beautiful hazel color, and I could have sworn I saw four kids, two dogs, and a big house full of love and laughter in two-point-five seconds.

Pulse.

I was too busy taking in all that was him to realize something. I had just been incredibly, and undeniably rude.

And I knew I had been when he growled, and said, “I got something on my face?”

I realized that I had been staring, so I took a step back, closed my eyes, and took in a breath. Then I opened them, shook my head, and offered him a shy smile, “No. I’m sorry for being extremely rude. And thank you for loaning me your hoodie. I’ll wash it tonight and get it back to you.”

He nodded, and then, just like that, he turned and headed for the door, opened it, and walked out.

Walked. Out.

Needing to keep this gorgeous creature in my sights, I hurriedly flung open the door, located his tall smexy swagger, and then started walking in the direction of my class.

And yeah, I may or may not have been watching him walk away from me and not where I was going.

Yeah, my forehead had a knot on it now from the open door I hadn't seen.

Great. So, freaking great.

Then I froze.

Crap!

I told him I would get it back to him, and I had no clue who he was, where he lived, and since I didn't really have any friends to ask about it, I couldn't find him.

However, I didn't know his name, and to be honest, I didn't want to.

I just wanted to keep the memory of what he did for me at the forefront of my mind when nightmares plagued me.

Because I knew this hoodie, the nice memory of what he did for me, I knew it would beat those nightmares back.

And even though the man who had hurt me years ago was somewhere lying in a shallow grave, those dreams were my reality for fourteen days.

I got through the day, with his hoodie, and then headed to my dorm, changed my clothes, and sadly, had to toss the jeans.

And no, I didn't sleep in the good-smelling hoodie that night, and then every night thereafter, I definitely didn't.

Over the course of the next two months, my eyes had searched for that man everywhere. And that wasn't because

the smell of his cologne had finally come out of the hoodie, and I wanted to beg and plead with him to spray it again.

And when he apparently made a game-winning sack with four seconds left in the game, that was when I found out just who he was.

Yes, once I learned who he was, I thought about finding him and giving him his hoodie back, but something in my gut told me not to do that.

And on the day, I finally did see him, which was yesterday, he was walking away from a girl, and that girl had said something so horribly wrong it wasn't even funny.

Karma really is a bitch.

Thankfully, she was in my class, and wouldn't you know that she gave me the perfect opportunity?

Today, our class was separated into groups out in the forecourt. I was leaning up against one of the cement benches when the girl I had heard talking yesterday, looked at me and asked, "So, what are you exactly?"

I lifted a brow at her in answer, "What do you mean?"

"Your accent. It's so different from ours." She flipped her blonde hair over her shoulder.

That's what she wanted to know? Why the hell would she ask me what I am, who the hell does that? But needing to answer her, I said, "Oh, I'm from Georgia."

Her eyes widened, "Aren't y'all referred to as Georgia Peaches or some shit like that?"

I nodded, "Yeah. We are. But honestly, only two parts about me could be described as a Georgia Peach."

That was when she asked, "And... don't leave me hanging, girl."

Now, I normally wouldn't have opened my mouth and said what I did next, but well, I was my father's daughter after all.

And since he had done something so incredibly nice for me, I felt the need to return the favor.

So that was why I went with what I did next. I smiled serenely at her, fake as it was, and said, “Well, I try to be sweet. Most of the time. But really, it’s the FAFO rule.”

She looked confused, and it was probably due to all the bleach in her hair and the messed-up boob job she had. Hint: one was only supposed to be slightly bigger than the other. “And that is... what exactly?”

Thank you for opening yourself up for this moment right here, you despicable woman, “It’s a shortened version of fuck around and find out. And in case you didn’t know, your voice carries when you’re animated.”

She gasped, “Excuse me?”

Then I raised my voice and said, “Oh, and it’s really despicable to try to trap someone with a pregnancy.”

Her gasp of outrage had me smiling. I might be scared of big guys. Well, guys, I don’t know. But I was my father’s daughter. I’m an MC princess. And if there’s one thing, we don’t tolerate... that’s people trying to use others.

And that was when the man that I wanted to call mine, secretly, walked by, heard the conversation, and for the second time, he locked eyes with me, and gave me a chin lift, letting me know he got it.

Pulse.

For me.

Pulse.

... Not for him.

After our group was done, I headed to the café, got myself a skinny vanilla latte with two pumps of hazelnut, took a seat, and then felt my heart rate start to skyrocket.

There he was.

Sitting with his back to the room, a black ball cap atop his head, a tight-fitted dark green tee, and faded jeans on his

muscular thighs. And yes, his brown cowboy boots that I had remembered from that fateful day.

He was with someone I had learned was his best friend, his woman, her son Crew, and a few guys from the football team.

I hadn't realized I had been staring, not until someone had scooted a chair closer to me, and then I heard, "Hey."

I looked over at who had said that, and smiled, "Hey,"

The girl had a cool-looking blonde bob with hints of violet underneath. High cheekbones, amber eyes, and a nose reminded me of the *Who* in *Whoville*. It was too cute.

"So, I could use a friend here. And anyone that can put that bitch face, Danielle, in her place is alright with me."

I sat there for a moment, trying to figure out what she meant, and then it clicked, "You were in the group exercise."

She laughed, "Yes, I am. I'm Betty. Yes, I know, it's such an old name. But my mom fell in love with the movie *Pearl Harbor*. And she loved Betty's character so much that she named me after her."

I giggled, "Yeah? Does she try to set you up with everyone who's named Red?"

She giggled then nodded, "She totally does, thankfully, I've only met one person."

"Does she expect you to continue the love story and not die?" I asked her as I took a sip of my coffee.

She snorted, "See, I knew I had a feeling about you and yes, she really does."

"Oh, and by the way, I'm Scarlett," I told her. "Okay, to help the love story, because I am a sucker for stuff like that, I'll keep an ear out for anyone named Red."

"Well, thank you. But please, don't let him have red hair. No offense to you, but my skin is already pasty enough. I don't want to cause our children to burn the moment they step out of the front door."

I giggled and then looked back over at the table when I heard that deep chuckle that came from Marcus.

Man, that did something to me.

And his name? Tell me that isn't sexy.

At the sound of Betty's voice, I turned my head back to her, "So, I hope the feeling I had about you is accurate. Do you go to parties here?"

I smiled then shook my head, "Honestly, I attempted one of the parties here. The moment I stepped through the threshold, I turned around and headed back home. The parties here are nothing but orgies. Well, the parties that my dad's club throws are like that, but not until later in the night. Now before that, it really is a party."

She took a sip of her own coffee and asked, "Your dad's club?"

I nodded, "Yeah, my dad is the road captain for a motorcycle club."

She winced, "Sorry, but bikers, yeah, no. Give me a silent cage fighter, I'm all in."

I snickered then asked, "Are you saying that because they are all smelly, hairy, and gross?"

She nodded, then visibly shivered, "Yeah. Just... no."

I grinned then, normally, I wouldn't do this, but something about her told me she wasn't going to try to use me to get close to the guys.

Therefore, I tagged my phone and then went to my pictures and smiled.

I had a rare photo that was taken at my graduation party. All the brothers had circled me and glared, but they were still there, looking handsome as ever.

Then I showed her the picture, "They aren't all hairy, smelly, and gross."

She took the phone from my hand and looked at it and then an appreciative whistle came out of her mouth.

“Yeah, okay, I concede to your group of guys. However,” she nodded her head over at the table and then pointed directly at Daemon, Marcus’s best friend, “If he hadn’t seen that woman, I’d beg and plead to have that man’s babies.”

I snorted and then shook my head.

Yes, Daemon was all kinds of handsome.

But he wasn’t what I would define as a break the mold, stick a fork in me, lose my breath, my world stops spinning, kind of handsome.

In other words... he wasn’t gorgeous.

No, the man that held those titles and then some was his best friend. Marcus.

“And I see that you don’t feel the same, that’s a first, every time I walk by Daemon, and another girl is near I hear her sigh.”

“He’s good-looking, don’t get me wrong. But he’s not the most handsome man I’ve ever seen,” I told her.

Then I bit my lip, “Girl code?”

She looked happy, then nodded, “Girl code.”

“I’ve been around a lot of good-looking guys because of who my dad is. But Marcus, yeah. He takes the cake.”

She looked deep into my eyes, nodded, then tilted her head to the side and asked, “Girl code?”

I nodded, “Girl code.”

“I would totally have Daemon’s babies, but I came here because of her. My lord, what I would do to her.” I looked at where she was tilting her head and then nodded.

She was beautiful, I wanted to know how she kept her black hair that shiny and what products she used, “She’s stunning. But... I think she’s straight.”

Betty sighed then, “She is. But I just love to look at her.”

I giggled, then she asked, “So, do you have plans tonight?”

I shook my head, “Just studying but that’s it. You?”

She grinned, “I really want to go see the new *Transformers* movie that came out a few weeks ago. Between classes, I haven’t been able to go.”

I gasped, which drew attention from the people around us, but not the table where Marcus was sitting, “Wait? Really? I’ve been wanting to see that movie ever since I saw the previews of it.”

And that was what we did. We saw the movie. She found out I would never throw shade at her for her preferences in the likes department, and we exchanged numbers.

And then, over the rest of the year, whenever I saw Marcus DuPointe, I had to remind myself to keep my feet firmly planted. Even though Betty urged me to go talk to him, my view was that he did something nice for me, and then I did something nice for him, so, judging by that, the ball was in his court.

Yeah, I was stupid. I know.

But when I realized he hadn’t felt the *pulse*, my pride, and my heart had taken a beating.

And... I may have also gone to the store and smelled every single cologne they had and finally found the smell, sprayed the hoodie, and cuddled up in it each night.

Over the course of the next three years, every Sunday, Monday, and Thursday night, when I could swing it when it was football season my face was firmly glued to the television to watch him play for the Rams.

As was Betty’s because she watched the cheerleaders, and yes, she had found someone named Red and they were planning a wedding in two months.

Red, well, he didn’t mind her preferences. They had a healthy sex life, according to them, and often, they invited

others to play. But they were both giving that up the day they made their vows.

And I couldn't be happier for Betty.

Sadly, two years ago, my heart had felt like it had split in two. Because one Sunday, they shared pictures... of Marcus's wedding.

Pulse.

Chapter 3

Marcus

Now, here is the moment in time when I should have stopped in my tracks, done an about-face, and walked back to where that woman stood.

Placed my big hand on the back of her head, held her still, and then crushed my mouth down on hers.

What I didn't know was that one single moment, those less than ten minutes in time, would come back around and bite me in the ass every time I closed my eyes, and it was her face I saw before I fell asleep.

For three years.

Hint: it damn sure wasn't my wife's face.

Scrubbing my hands down my face, I sat up in bed and then stared unseeingly at the white-painted walls.

I wanted them to be red. A deep auburn red... *stop it...* nothing you can do about it now.

It's been three years since you've seen her.

You moved to Los Angeles.

You moved back to Charlotte.

There's no telling what she's been up to in those years.

Oh, the moments I wished I would've done something different.

I sighed, got up, headed to the bathroom, took a piss, and took a shower.

Once I was done, I pulled on a t-shirt and sweatpants and headed to the kitchen for some breakfast.

Thankfully, I had the forethought to hire someone to stock the kitchen when we moved back from Los Angeles to Charlotte because my wife damn sure didn't want to do it.

Just as I popped a piece of bacon into my mouth, my wife came strolling into the house in a barely there pink sequined dress. Her black heels were in her hand.

Her blonde hair was piled atop her head.

Her makeup was smeared, and hickeys were all over her neck that I didn't put there.

She was free to be with whomever she wanted.

Just as I was.

Sadly, I made vows, and I wouldn't break them, not like she did. Not while my momma was still sick.

"Have a good time?" I asked her.

She nodded, "Yep. I'm crashing."

And with that, she headed up the stairs to her bedroom.

Yes, you read that correctly, her bedroom.

See, our marriage wasn't what one would call traditional, or hell, even conventional.

And only three people knew about that.

My wife, myself, and my lawyer.

Two years after I got drafted, I had just come off the field after we won our third game that year when I saw five missed calls from my father.

Apparently, my mother missed her annual check-up... four times.

And after she was feeling poorly, my father made her go get checked out. She had a lump on her right breast. And that lump had metastasized to her lymph nodes.

I had flown home immediately following that game and sat with her before she went back to have a double mastectomy.

"Please, Marcus. Do this for me," my momma pleaded with me in her hospital bed.

I shook my head at her, “Momma, I can’t stand the woman.”

“Just make it work, for me. Please.” And I’ll never forget how the usually bright woman looked so dreary and drab, her thin body being swallowed up by the hospital bed.

And if it had been anyone other than my momma asking me to do this, I would have told them they could go fuck themselves.

She wanted to see me happy. She told me she knew of this amazing girl, and if she couldn’t beat the cancer, she at least wanted to go with the knowledge that I would be taken care of.

So, for my mother, I married the woman, and with that marriage came a prenup and a contract of sorts.

She could do whatever she wanted, as long as it never hit the media. And if she did that after five years, she would get two million dollars.

It was five years because the doctors hadn’t expected my mother to make it.

However, they never expected my mother to be a fighter.

Two more years. Two more fucking years.

I shook my head from those thoughts because unless a miracle occurred there wasn’t shit, I could do about it.

With that, I headed to do my workout.

Once I was finished, I took another shower and then caught up on a few shows I liked.

Hours later, I checked the time because knowing my mother, who was now in remission, was hosting the monthly dinner.

After dressing in jeans, boots, and a fitted red wine-colored button-up, I brushed my teeth, rubbed on some deodorant, sprayed on some cologne, and pulled on a black ball cap.

Once I was ready, I tagged my keys and then headed out the door.

As soon as I climbed into my SUV, I knew I shouldn't do it, but fuck, I couldn't help myself.

I sighed, pulled the visor down, and then looked at the picture I had up there.

The picture no one knew about except for me.

See, what I was talking about earlier, about how I should have done an about-face and kissed that woman in the bathroom all those years ago. Because of what happened that caused me to walk away... it never would've fucking happened.

I had just gotten drafted and was home packing up my stuff to move to California.

I was walking to my SUV from meeting up with Braydon when I saw her.

Her long auburn hair was in wild curls, and thankfully, I was close enough to see the smattering of freckles across her nose. She was walking arm in arm with a woman who had a blonde bob.

The two of them were laughing, and I couldn't tell you why I had taken a picture of her. But I did.

And just as I was about to rectify not kissing her, I heard someone call out the name Scarlett. Since my eyes were on her when she let out a squeal, released her friend's arm, ran toward someone's arms, and jumped into them, I felt my heart drop.

Of course.

A woman who looked like she did was definitely taken.

He was one lucky son of a bitch.

After I had seen that, I shook my head and headed to my SUV.

Sighing at that memory, I took one more look at the woman's face that was behind my eyelids at night, closed the visor, and then headed to my mother's house.

I had just opened their front door, walked in, closed it, when my mother looked up from the island, and asked, "Where's Tonya?"

I shook my head. "She had a prior engagement she couldn't get out of."

Walking to her, I pressed a kiss on her cheek and then rubbed the little stubble of hair that was growing back, and then she whispered, "Marcus, honey, I'm so sorry."

I shrugged, "It's okay, Momma. Promise."

She nodded, then sighed, "I just want you to be happy."

I had to bite my tongue that my happiness fled four years ago when I didn't do something I really fucking should have.

Instead, I shrugged.

My dad walked up to my back, and slapped me on the shoulder, "Are you ready for the first preseason game this weekend?"

I nodded, "Yeah, just glad it's at home so I don't have to travel."

He nodded.

Daemon, Aliyah, Crew, and Keeley came walking in then, and I opened my arms for them, they smiled and then raced over to me.

"Hey Mar-Mar," Keeley said as she kissed my cheek.

"Hey sweetheart," I told her and then kissed her cheek right back.

"Hey Uncle Mar," Crew said.

I hugged him. "Hey, little man."

An hour later we were all sitting at the table, my father at the head, and to his right sat my brother Van, Keeley, and

then Aliyah. To my father's left, I sat, followed by Crew, and then Daemon. My mother sat at the opposite end.

We had just given thanks and started passing the platter that held the meatloaf when Aliyah looked at me and asked, "Okay, not to be a you know what, but please tell me why Tonya is never here?"

"She's busy," I said as I got myself two pieces of meatloaf.

"Seems she's always busy when we do family things," Aliyah said again.

Not wanting to get into it, I shrugged, "She's allowed to have her own life. It's not easy being married to a player."

I knew I shouldn't have said that.

I really knew I shouldn't have said that.

Because Aliyah growled, narrowed her eyes, and then started to open her mouth until my mother cleared her throat.

Before she could, I shook my head at her, "Momma, it's okay."

She shook her head, and my body tensed up when I saw tears in her eyes.

She cleared her throat, "I think something needs to be said. When I was diagnosed with cancer, I asked something of Marcus. And seeing everything over the past two years, I'm so sorry that I was wrong. I asked him to marry Tonya because I wanted him to be happy. I wanted at least one of you to be happy and taken care of before I took my last breath."

Van narrowed his eyes at her, then growled, "You didn't."

She wiped a tear away, "I'm sorry. But I wanted him to be happy. She's a good girl, or at the very least I thought she was."

Aliyah growled, "Well, she definitely isn't. Damnit. Okay, so what can we do to get rid of her?"

Before anything else could be done, both Crew and Keeley held out their palms. Aliyah chuckled, shook her head, leaned forward, and pulled some bills from her back pocket.

Then she placed a five in each of their palms.

The swear jar carried on still, and now Keeley had her own jar.

And that was how the contract I had with Tonya came out. I had two more years with her before we would both be free.

If only she'd break the contract and let her shit hit the media.

All around the table, growls erupted.

What I wouldn't know, was that one week, a mere seven days later at our second pre-season home game, everything about my life was going to change, in so many ways.

And then... then a dream came true.

Chapter 4

The Hit

Scarlett

When I first started my rotations at the hospital, I made sure I was always off on nights he played.

Even though I knew he was married, I just couldn't help myself.

I wanted to watch him play.

He was magnificent out there on the field.

I was on the edge of my seat.

Young had thrown an interception.

Yes, this was only the second game of the preseason, but every game mattered.

There was only one minute and four seconds left in the game.

Our defense was up, they couldn't let them gain a single yard. We were up by three points.

They couldn't reach the mark where a field goal would work.

"Come on defense. Bring it fucking home." I said as my eyes moved over the screen.

Their quarterback hiked the ball, and then our defense moved.

And then I saw it.

And I couldn't believe it.

What the fuck?

I was out of my seat, throwing my popcorn at the screen.

“What the fuck! You stupid piece of human trash.” I screamed at the television.

“Where the hell had that bastard come from?” I asked as I watched the camera pan from what I had just seen to the ball where it was down.

And then they went back to Marcus who was lying on the ground still. He wasn't moving.

What had I just seen? Some asshole had targeted him. Sacked him by dropping his helmet and then hitting him with his shoulder, fucking hard.

I rewound to who the player was and noted his name. I was prepared to blast his name all over social media. What a fucking wanker.

Then I fast-forwarded it and locked my eyes on Marcus and the coach, players, and med team that stood around him.

And when I saw him get up and walk to the sidelines, a massive breath was expelled out of my lungs.

“Thank Christ.”

Chapter 5

Divine Intervention

Marcus

If you ever question whether fate always has her hands in your story or not, don't.

Because she definitely does.

After I got hit yesterday, I thought I was fine.

I got up, walked off the field, and got checked out.

I was fine.

However, when I woke up that morning with a blinding pain in my chest, I knew I had fucked up.

I called for Tonya.

No answer.

I bellowed her name again as loud as I could, wincing at the pain in my chest.

Still, no answer.

I knew the pain I was in; it was bad.

There was no way I would be able to drive my ass to the hospital.

Therefore, I called 911 and waited.

I knew my mother would get called since she was my emergency contact; therefore, due to the pain I was in, I didn't worry about calling anyone else.

The medics got to me just in time for my lung to fully collapse.

Eight Hours Later

They say that when you are recovering after surgery, you can still hear things that are going on around you.

And guess what, you really can. That's only if you are about to wake up.

I heard Aliyah ask, "Where's Tonya?"

Why was she asking that? She didn't even know what happened to me, and to be honest, after what happened last night after the game, and the news story that broke... I had every intention of calling my lawyer this morning.

Because she just broke the contract.

That was when I heard my mother's reply, "Probably out letting everything with a swinging dick inside of her."

She had been the one to send me the news article.

Tonya was caught out in public getting nailed from behind and having someone's dick in her mouth.

That was when I heard the one-sided conversation between Aliyah and Tonya.

And yeah, some of what she said was bullshit, but even if I was awake, I wouldn't care.

"Umm, yes, I'm looking for Tonya?" Aliyah said, and I knew someone else had answered the phone.

She was silent, then I heard her snap, "What the fuck?"

Then, "Bitch, don't you dare try to act like I didn't just hear that shit. What the fuck is going on?"

"You're cheating on him, aren't you? That's why you wouldn't let me come in the other day because he was there. Isn't it?" Okay, that was news to me.

"Got it. I'm sending someone over there. You will pack your shit. And get the fuck out of Marcus's house, you trifling hoe. You mess with any of his stuff, and I will ruin you. Furthermore, you will sign the divorce papers. You won't get a single fucking cent from him. I know all about the side

business you have. Oh yes ma'am, I do. I will have it in his lawyer's hands before the end of business today. Marcus was fine with it, by the way, because it made you happy. What he's not okay with is letting another man's dick into his woman's body. You have three hours to get fucking gone. Van is on his way."

Thankfully, it was as she finished that when I opened my eyes and saw her. Then I gritted out, "She was never mine. Taking my last name didn't make her mine."

Aliyah snorted as she pocketed her phone, "All the years I've known you and I don't know a single thing about how you are in relationships."

Daemon scoffed then, "Known him eighteen years, never even seen him with a woman. Heard him? Oh yeah. But seeing him, that's a big fat no."

Aliyah came over to me with a smile on her face and said, "Next time you meet someone, you bring her to me and no one else."

I nodded, then rasped, "You got it, Lil Mama."

"We love you, Mar-Mar," Keeley said with a smile on her face.

Crew and I fist-bumped and then he said, "You better get to feeling better. I'm kicking your butt in a few weeks."

I smirked, "You can try."

I watched them leave followed by my mother and father so they could grab a bite to eat when it happened.

Divine Intervention at its fucking finest.

Chapter 6

Scarlett

Six more months.

Six more months of residency and I would be done.

Finished.

I couldn't wait.

After getting up and taking a quick shower, I pulled one of the cinnamon buns from the freezer I made yesterday after the game. I needed comfort food after watching that hit. I popped it in the microwave and then packed my lunch.

Today's lunch consisted of a cheddar, noodles, chicken, broccoli, and pasta bake I made last night, along with some garlic bread. My mouth watered at the aromas I knew I would be enjoying during lunch.

For a snack, I packed some baby shark gummies, which were on sale. Don't come for me.

Carrot sticks, broccoli, and a small cup of ranch.

Then I threw in two cans of my favorite sparkling water, black cherry flavored, and, of course, a can of Coca-Cola.

I didn't toss in three mini-Snickers and two mini-Musketeers either. No, I definitely didn't.

And the reason for all that food? I was doing my residency which consisted of twelve-hour days each month on a different floor.

And I was week two into the floor that I didn't mind, but I hated the charge nurse.

She played favorites, and I couldn't stand it.

Sighing I muttered, "Two more weeks of her. Only two more. Thank Christ."

After I sat down at my little table in the alcove of my one-bedroom apartment, I inhaled my cinnamon roll and followed that up with a good mouthful of milk.

There was just something about drinking milk when you are eating a cinnamon roll or a donut. It just went together like yin and yang.

That was when I checked my phone.

Daddy – *Hope you have a good day, Pumpkin. Don't kill the bitch. You need Tyne? I'll send him.*

Me – *I'll let you know. Let's see what fun stuff she comes up with. May need you to send in the big guns.*

Betty – *Sorry about your boy. Glad he's okay.*

Me – *My television now has buttery popcorn on it.*

Nurse Bitch – *Be sure to wear the appropriate colored shoes today.*

Really? Your favorite person didn't do that yesterday, but yet, you tell me that? Really?

What a whore.

Unknown – *Have a good day, girl. I really liked getting to you at the clubhouse. Perhaps we could get together and do it again.*

I froze.

There was only one person that could be. What the fuck?

Then I hit my dad's name and called him.

He answered on the third ring, "Hey, Pumpkin."

I growled, "Hey Daddy, got a question. Can you find out who the hell gave Nash my phone number?"

He was silent for a beat and then said, "Umm, judging by your tone, you're not happy about it."

I glared, even though he couldn't see it, but I did it, "It was you. Wasn't it?"

“Pumpkin, you don’t date. And I want you to. I want you to have a great and happy life. The two of you looked like y’all got on together okay.” Was he serious?

“Uh, do you have another daughter you were watching last night? Or do I need to ask the Doc at your next check-up to have your eyes checked?”

He sighed then, “Shit. What did he do?”

I snapped, “What didn’t he do? First, he told me that if I wanted to wear a lower-cut top, it would be appreciated.” Dad growled. “Second, he tried to get me to smoke a blunt with him.” Dad growled a second time. “Third, he asked me if the drapes match the carpet.” I swallowed so I could carry on, but I didn’t get there.

Dad snarled, “What a fucking asshole! I’m headed to the clubhouse.”

“Dad, that’s not all,” I told him.

“Fuck me. Okay, how many more are there?” He asked... right?

Since I was on a roll, I continued, “Fourth, he asked me if I partook in any sorority things and had pillow fights in my underwear. Fifth, he asked me if I thought it was cool that he had *your name* tattooed on his cock. Sixth, he asked me if I wanted to see it. Seventh and this was the part that you obviously missed, I poured my beer on his head. He had the balls to ask me, your daughter, mind you if I would ever be willing to become a club whore. He said, and I quote, he got a hard-on from just looking at me, he figured the sex would be astronomical and if I wouldn’t mind barking like a dog while he did me in the ass.”

I waited.

I waited.

And then, yep, my father roared.

I smiled then; Nash was getting his ass put down.

D.E.A.D.

And on my drive to the hospital, Dad texted me. But I had to wait until I hit a red light to check my phone.

Dad – *You don't have to worry about him ever again.*

To that, I smiled all the way to the hospital. But not before I blocked Nash's number.

Then I texted my dad once I got to the hospital.

Me – *Please don't give my number to anyone else.*

Dad – *Done. Love you, Pumpkin.*

And when I clocked in for my rounds at the hospital, something that took place today... Well, I never could have dreamed it up.

I headed to the break room on the floor, stowed my stuff, and then made a right, then a left, and then another right.

This month I was working on the recovery portion after surgery when someone was brought in via an emergency.

I had just gotten the rooms I would be working with and that was when I heard the nurses talking about how big the man was in one of my rooms.

Once I heard that, I couldn't help the panic attack I started to have as I stood there at the nurse's station.

When I was twelve, I was kidnapped by a man that hated the club.

I was beaten for information since the club had no other weaknesses. I was kept in a dark cellar for fourteen long miserable days. All of which occurred during one of the worst storms we had ever had.

And the man that had beaten me?

He was bigger than Tyne and Marcus.

And that is the cause of my fear of being around big men.

I'd tried everything I could to shake it.

But if I wasn't around my dad and the club, that rational fear was all-consuming.

I was trying to breathe through it when I heard a woman's voice ask, "Hey, are you okay?"

I breathed in.

I breathed out.

And then I answered her while looking at my white sneakers, "I'm not supposed to be working on large men. I was attacked. It was a few years ago, but still. Anyway, the charge nurse knows that, but her favorite nurses are with other patients. She assigned me to him," I said and pointed to the room that I was talking about.

And then at the sound of her voice, and her name, I snapped my head up, "My name is Aliyah. What's your name?"

She was older now, and even though I only saw her from a distance, I knew who this woman was.

So instead of blurting out, I know you, but not know you know you, like some kind of idiot, I smiled, then said, "Oh, that's pretty. My name is Scarlett."

She didn't know me, so she didn't pick up on what was happening to me now.

I saw Daemon.

Aliyah.

Daemon.

Aliyah.

That could only mean one thing.

I grabbed the tablet from the counter to my right and checked the name.

Holy shit.

I knew she missed the way my shoulders relaxed, and the oh shit, are you serious war I was waging inside of me.

Marcus DuPointe.

Marcus. DuPointe.

M.A.R.C.U.S. D.U.P.O.I.N.T.E.

Recovering from surgery.

I looked up from my tablet and then she smiled, “I love that name. I’m going to tell you something, okay?”

Therefore, knowing she was friends with him, I nodded. “I was attacked too. Badly. But it gave me the greatest thing I could’ve ever hoped for.” With that, she nodded at her boy, Crew. “Marcus is that boy’s uncle. He’s my daughter’s uncle. I also claim that he’s my twin.”

I laughed at that because I didn’t know that, “Really?”

She nodded, “If I didn’t trust that man with my whole heart, I never would’ve left my daughter with him when I had her so I could take my finals in college. He almost wrapped her in bubble wrap when he took her out and then growled at anyone who got too close. Oh, and when she was born, he was in the room not even ten minutes later and you should’ve seen it, he pulled bottle after bottle after bottle of hand sanitizer from his pockets and made sure everyone used it before they came into the room.”

“Please don’t be afraid of him. He’s big, yes, and he weighs a fuck ton. But he would rather hurt himself than ever risk hurting a woman. And if he growls at you, raise your eyebrow at him and say excuse me. He will knock that shit off right quick.”

I nodded at her.

It was nice to know a little something more about Marcus.

I watched them leave and then looked at the closed door to that room.

It’s been five years since I was close enough to see his face.

I wanted to pull my phone out, call Betty, and tell her.

But I wouldn’t be telling a soul.

For one, he was a pro athlete.

Two, he deserved his privacy.

Three, I really wanted to see if he still wore the same cologne. But after surgery, I doubted I would smell it.

Taking in a deep breath, I stepped to his door. Giddy with excitement at seeing him again, and then nervous, hoping I didn't do something and then look like a bumbling idiot.

After another deep breath, I knocked on the door and waited.

When I heard that deep, all too familiar rasp, say, "Enter."

I had to close my eyes.

Yeah, he still had it with his voice.

Que the wetness between my legs. Fuck. Me.

Pasting a blinding smile on my face, I opened the door.

All the while chanting.

Married. Married. Married. Fucking married.

Chapter 7

Marcus

Lying there in the hospital, I pulled my phone from the tray it was on and called my lawyer. He answered on the fourth ring.

The slightly older man greeted, “Mr. DuPointe, how are you?”

I sighed, “Not good. Got hit yesterday. Didn’t get checked out like I should have. A piece of rib broke off and nicked my lung. Just got out of surgery for it.”

I heard him suck in a breath, “Dang. I’m sorry to hear that; I hope you are all right now.”

I nodded, “The reason for my call is that Tonya violated the contract last night.”

He sighed, “Yes, I was planning to call you later today after I had the paperwork done. Shall I bring it to the hospital this afternoon?”

I closed my eyes. Thank fuck this farce of a marriage is almost over, “Yeah, that would be great. Will you need her signature as well?”

I could almost see him shaking his head because of his tone, “No. She signed a no-contest agreement. Once I have your signature, I will take it before the judge, and in thirty days you will be legally divorced.”

After we hung up, I put the phone back on the table, closed my eyes, and then crossed my arms over my chest as best I could and tried to catch a nap.

However, even though I wanted to be cussing my big brother’s ass out for his need to fill the silence with mundane topics, I would soon realize I was grateful for it.

Beyond grateful.

Just as I felt that all too familiar little pull into sleep, I heard his rumbling voice ask, “So, who do you think is going to the Super Bowl this year?”

I didn’t even bother opening my eyes when I answered him, “Dude, the season hasn’t even really started. You’re seriously asking me that shit?”

I knew he nodded, just knew it. “Bro, you always know who’s going to win. Not sure how you do it, but you just do.”

I sighed, “Ugh, fine. We are going and we are facing off against the Manta Rays.”

I knew he was going to ask why, any other time, my brother preferred solitude, the quieter, the better, except for when it was just the two of us.

Then the big bastard, yes, I was just as big as he was, but he is my big brother, so it was okay. “Why that team?”

I opened one eye and narrowed it on him, and I swear to Christ, if I had a spare pillow to chuck at his smiling face, I would have. “Because they kept the same players as last year and they were the third-best team overall in the NFL. And at the draft, they got the fourth overall pick in the first round. The kid is a beast on the field. They won’t be able to catch him.”

“That makes sense.” I closed my eye but knew I would be opening it again, along with the next one, and then I’d want to beat the ever-loving shit out of my brother.

To which he proved true when he asked, “Do you think Roc, Griff, and Castian will be able to kick y’all’s asses? Because they are looking like they just might be able to.”

Before I could scoff at his insane thoughts and get up and pound my fist into his face, there was a knock on the door.

Turning my head slightly, I said, “Enter.”

And then, as I watched the light brown door move open ever so slowly, had I not been lying down, I was sure my knees would have given out.

If this wasn't my eye-opener, I didn't know what it fucking was.

Because I promise you, had Tonya not done what she did last night, then for this woman, I would have gone straight to my lawyer and paid out every penny I needed in order to end my marriage. Because. Holy. Fucking. Shit.

Cue an immediate stutter step in my heart, sweaty palms... and hello, fucking hell, please for the love of God please don't get fully hard with the thin blanket unable to do a damn thing to conceal *him*.

Yes, she was older now, but that hair, those eyes, those cute as fuck freckles across the bridge of her nose? Like hell I could ever not remember what she looks like.

Especially because when I close my eyes at night, it's her that I see.

And then... without missing a beat, the moment her eyes skated to mine, I asked, "You still have my hoodie?"

I watched, fucking adorable, as her cheeks heated. Then she said in that husky tone, I only heard that one time in the bathroom, yet heard it all the time in my dreams, and I was right, my memories had nothing on the real thing. Fucking nothing.

She wrinkled her nose, "I might."

And yeah, that was adorable as hell, which caused me to chuckle.

And yes, I held in the wince that immediately followed because I wasn't going to waste a single second of my time with her.

Therefore, I asked, "How have you been?"

However, before she could answer me, something moved in the corner of the room. Then I watched as something crossed her beautiful face.

Panic.

Fear.

I was this close to getting out of bed, telling my pain to go fuck itself and putting my body in front of hers to fight off whatever caused that look I saw clear as fucking day when my eyes settled on my brother.

He had simply moved around in his chair.

I looked back at her and saw she had moved her body closer to the bed and away from him.

I looked over at Van and knew he saw what I did.

The fear, the panic, how timid she was, and how she stayed at my side.

My big bro hunched his shoulders and then looked at her, “You don’t have to worry. I will stay over here far away from you.”

I nodded at him gratefully, but what I asked him to do next, I knew I would never be regretting it, “Do me a solid?”

He gave me a chin lift, “Name it.”

I grunted, “Disappear for a bit.”

Van didn’t say a word, he simply nodded, stood, and then said, “Darlin’ see you’re afraid of me. It’s okay. How about you move closer to Marcus, seems you know him, also seems you’re comfortable near him. Promise you, darlin’, never do a thing to hurt you.”

If I could get up and hug my brother, I’d do it.

The look Scarlett gave him, the way her shoulders loosened, the way she nodded, then moved closer to me... I vowed then and there, I would always put my body between hers and any danger.

Neither one of us spoke until the door closed, and then, I heard that husky rasp that was all hers, “You didn’t have to make him leave.”

I shook my head, “Nah, I didn’t. You’re right. But darlin’, no one sees you blushing but me.”

She chuckled at that, “Really? You remember me?”

I nodded, “Yeah, Shortcake. I do.”

She wrinkled her nose again, “Shortcake?”

Smirking, I said, “Make you a deal.”

Her icy blue eyes I had fucking missed narrowed, “Explain.”

“I’ll tell you why I called you Shortcake if you can manage to find me some strawberry jello. Told the other nurse, but all she brought me was orange.”

She tilted her head, “You don’t like oranges?”

“I do, the fruit and the juice, but the jello... fuck no.”

She nodded, “Yeah, I get that. Like, I love grapes. But anything grape flavored, yeah, no thank you.”

I grinned, “Yeah, I get that. So, how have you been?”

She smiled, then started checking the machine and doing her checks, “I’ve been doing okay. Six more months of residency and I’ll be able to work where I really want to.”

“And where is that?”

“In the NICU. I know it’s so common to hear this. About why people want to work in the NICU, but it’s the truth. I want to be the first line of defense to the miracle babies and help them make their gigantic mark on the world.”

“I can understand that. I like it.”

She smiled and then asked, “You still loving football?”

I smiled, “Living the dream, baby.”

She smiled, “Well, seeing as you’re living the dream, and you want to keep doing that, I’m going to remove your catheter. You need to be up and walking.”

I lost the smile I was wearing.

The thought of her seeing my dick, the hardness of it because of her... well... shit.

And I hadn’t realized I had let out a growl, not at her taking the catheter out, but because she was going to have her

hand on *him*.

Something *he* really wanted, and it would be a pleasure.

Hello, blue balls.

“Really?” she asked, and then she did something I totally wasn’t expecting.

She raised her perfectly trimmed eyebrow that matched the color of her deep-toned copper-red hair and said, “Excuse me?”

I wanted to laugh, dear god I wanted to laugh.

She was cute as fuck, feisty, sassy, and... What she didn’t know. And something I just found out, all she would ever have to do was to ask me for something and I’d do it.

No hesitation.

But not wanting her to know the exact amount of power she held over me, instead, I asked, “You spoke to Aliyah, didn’t you?”

At her nod, I smiled, “Let me guess, she told you to raise your brow and say excuse me at my growl?”

She nodded again, and I laughed.

“I’m sorry about growling. I’ve had a few shitty days.” And that was my story, and I was sticking to it.

That was when she grabbed what she needed and then looked at me, sighing. I ran through everything I could that would turn me off, and all I had to do was picture my soon-to-be ex-wife.

Yep, that did it in time for her to lift the sheet and do what she needed to do.

Once that was out, she carefully helped me stand and then helped me to the bathroom.

Once I was finished, she helped me back to the bed, and as I was lowering down to the bed, my hand grazed her hip.

If I could've fist-bumped, I would've.

Fuckin'. A.

I wanted to imprint my hand there on her hip and shout to the rooftops that she was claimed.

But I didn't have that right... Yet.

As soon as I was on my ass and swinging my legs over the bed, she said, "Okay, I've got to make my other rounds. Do you need anything else?"

I shook my head.

Once I was situated and covered back up, she smiled and then headed to the door.

My eyes were on her body as she walked out of my room.

Would it be bad of me to call out to her and beg her to stay?

Probably.

But when less than two minutes went by, my brother walked in with two cups of strawberry jello.

I nodded my thanks and then ate both cups.

And then... my eyes went to the clock, and I started counting the seconds, the minutes, and then the hours until she was back.

"Good Morning, Mr. DuPointe." That wasn't her voice.

I narrowed my eyes at her, "Where's Scarlett?"

The woman with the wrong hair color, eye color, the wrong everything said, "She was given another set of rooms."

I growled and then said, "I want to see the nurse in charge."

"Umm, I'm sorry but she's busy." No, the fuck she wasn't.

After I heard what I did last night when the night nurse forgot to close my door... my temper was bursting at a new level.

Then, Van took in my face, stepped to the door of my room, and cracked it open.

And what I heard had me grinding my fucking teeth.

Before I was discharged, I asked to see the CEO of the hospital as well as the charge nurse.

Sadly, the man in charge didn't light a fire under his own ass until three hours later when it was time for me to leave.

"Well, Mr. DuPointe, how was your stay with us?" the man in an ill-fitting suit asked.

"First of all, I want that bitch to get off Scarlett's back and then I want her to apologize. I want Scarlett moved to the ped's floor or the NICU unit. I don't care what you have to do but make it fucking happen. Then you are going to fire that fucking bitch."

The older man, who had an ill-fitting toupee on his head, started, "Mr. DuPointe, now let's not be hasty."

That was when the nurse in question huffed her way into the room as she had really been busy. My fucking ass.

At the older man's comment, it was then my best friend came in and bumped into the nurse. Really, the big fucker shoulder-checked her, and I loved him for it, even more so when he said, "Oops, I have a bitch detector, and you brought it out of me."

But it was Van who growled, getting right in her face, not giving a flying fuck, "And you damn well owe that sweet girl a fucking apology."

The bitch had the nerve to shake her head and smile coyly, "I did nothing wrong."

I growled then, “You mean to tell me you fucking know that it’s in her file that she doesn’t have to deal with patients that are extremely big and extremely muscular? Oh, and before you try to deny it, my door was cracked last night. Heard every single word you said.”

Gone was the coy smile on her face, and in its place was a glare, bitch, please, I deal with worse shit on the fucking field, “My other nurses were busy.”

I snapped, “Then you should’ve gotten off your ass and stopped flirting with Doctor Pierson and taken care of the other patients your-damn-self. Wait. No. They probably would’ve died if they had you taking care of them.”

The dumbass CEO of the hospital moved his hands, so they were palms up, and then said, “Okay, let’s all take a breath.”

And that was when my door opened a second time, and the moment I heard her voice, “Umm, am I interrupting something?”

I felt something deep inside of me calm down immediately, then my eyes searched for her, and when they found her, and saw they were on me, I gave her a soft smile.

Then, wanting to get this bitch out of here and away from her, I asked, “No, you’re not. You got my discharge papers?”

She chuckled softly, then looked around the room and froze.

Wanting to reassure her, I said, “As soon as all these people get out of here, I’m ready when you are.”

“Before you beat their asses,” Van murmured at my back, and only one of them didn’t hear him because of where she stood near the door, Scarlett. As for the rest... they all got wide-eyed.

That got the old goat moving, thank fuck. “Let’s all let Nurse McKinney deal with her patient. Nurse Cunther, let’s talk outside in the hall.”

After they all cleared out, Aliyah and Daemon went with Van to get the truck and bring it around, and it was just Scarlet and myself.

“Ready to bail?” she asked with a husky laugh as she slowly walked over to where I was sitting on the side of my bed, already dressed and ready.

I nodded, “Yeah, something about hospitals makes my skin crawl.”

She smiled at me and then patted my shoulder; however, it was almost as if she just realized what she had done and pulled away too fast.

Why couldn't she have moved her hand lower right over my heart and felt how fast it was beating for her?

Startled, she said, “Let me get an orderly so he can push you outside.” I tagged her wrist, wanting, no, needing her to realize that I didn't mind her touch.

No.

Quite the opposite.

I fucking craved her touch.

Which was why the first thing out of my mouth was, “If you don't mind, rather you do it.”

Smart DuPointe. Fucking smart. She's what? A buck thirty and you're pushing two hundred and sixty-seven pounds?

She bit her lip, and then nodded, “Okay, but be warned. If I run you into something, I'm sorry. Okay?”

I cocked my head to the side, “Why would you run me into something?”

She grimaced, “Well, I'm kind of a klutz.”

I grinned, “You got the whole way down there to tell me about that.”

She sighed, shook her head, and then grabbed my wheelchair that an orderly had just pushed into the room and

then left once she told him she had it.

But what really had the man beating a hasty retreat was the glare from me when he fucking smiled at her.

He didn't have the right to smile at her. And he got that. Oh yes, he sure as fuck had.

Without realizing anything had taken place, she locked the wheels. Once I was in it, she started pushing me out of the room, down the hall, and we were at the elevator before she spoke.

“This one time, I was waiting for my dad to pick me up after school. We had this brick wall outside where everyone sat and waited or just hung out on it. Anyway, I was leaning up against it and was thinking about something. Then I forgot I was leaning against it, lifted my head, brought it back, then slammed the back of my head into the wall.”

I winced in sympathy. “Ouch.”

The elevator doors opened, I asked, “What else?”

She huffed out a breath as we got in, and the doors closed, “I've walked into five clear glass doors; thankfully, my forehead has broken my fall. And you remember the day we met, right?”

I grinned at the memory of her wide gorgeous eyes staring up at me, and then I bit back a curse at what had occurred before that moment, and needing to calm down from the anger of those fucks laughing at her, I asked, “You never answered me, do you still have my hoodie?”

It was her words and the snicker from her mouth that had me chuckling, “Finders keepers.”

It was then that the doors opened, and I looked over my shoulder at her and grinned, “Guess you're right. Looked better on you anyway.”

Thankfully, I caught the chuckle that wanted to burst forth as the wheelchair froze for a moment.

I grinned.

So, I wasn't the only one who was affected.

Thank fuck.

Then I looked at her as she rolled me to a stop at Van's truck, and then locked the brakes on the wheels.

Carefully, I got up and then climbed into Van's truck.

Needing to let her know she wasn't the only one affected before I pulled the door closed, I said, "You ever want one of my shirts to sleep in... you just say the word."

Then I closed the door, and Van put it in drive and pulled off.

Then... well... that was when I realized I had flirted with a woman while I was technically still married.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

Marcus, don't you dare do that again.

Well... thirty more days and if I got what I wanted, I would never feel the urge to ever flirt with another woman.

Because hopefully, if I busted my ass and luck was on my side, I would have the woman I've wanted since I was twenty-two years old.

And even though it killed me.

I stayed away.

That was until I had nine more days until the divorce was official.

Eight.

Seven.

Six.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

Time's up.

I was rectifying the one regret in my life I've ever had.

Now, just to find her first and put my plan into motion.

Pulse.

Chapter 8

Scarlett

As I walked by his room, I let out a sigh.

Damn me and my shyness.

I should have given him my number.

Why the hell had I not done that?

Then I growled when my pager went off.

Yes, I was assigned a pager, all the nurses were given one to be turned in once we completed our residency.

But then I smiled as I read it.

I wanted to fist-bump the air.

See you, bitch from hell.

I walked back the way I had come, grabbed my stuff, and then reported to the floor I had been reassigned to.

The charge nurse smiled at me and then gave me my set of rooms.

Ped's floor. Nice.

And for the next four weeks, I really liked getting up in the mornings and coming here.

Right after my shift, I found myself sitting at a corner table at *Mickey's Pub* with Betty, and Red, her fiancé.

"I can't believe you're getting married this weekend," I whispered to Betty with giddy excitement.

That was when a waitress came over and sat a glass of red wine down in front of me and said, "Pardon me, but the gentleman at the bar bought this for you."

I smiled at her and shook my head, “Thank you, but I’m not interested.”

“Playing hard to get. I like it,” then she flounced away with the drink.

Yeah, she had it all so wrong.

Betty shook her head, and then looked at me with wide eyes and mocked, “Wow. Clue the fuck in, bitch.”

I snickered at Betty.

That was golden.

The woman needed a major clue the fuck in.

I smiled at Red. “So, she’s been keeping it a secret where you’re taking her for y’all’s honeymoon.”

Red wagged his finger at me, “And it’s going to remain a secret until we get back and she tells you.”

And that was when the waitress returned with that blasted glass of wine. “The gentleman said, how come you didn’t even look over here?”

I sighed, “I’m out with my friends. I’m not here to get picked up. And sending a woman a drink is either a nice way of saying she’s beautiful and you see her, which is sweet. Or it’s the latter part of it and telling her, hey, look, I bought you a drink now I expect sexual favors as payment. I’m good.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I bought that drink for another reason,” I heard a deep rasp say.

A deep. Rasp. An all too familiar deep rasp.

Holy fucking shit.

My eyes had closed. Since when had they closed?

Snapping them open, I looked around the waitress and then looked up, up, and then up, and then... my eyes landed on that perfect face.

“You’re a hard woman to get a hold of.” What? He had tried to get a hold of me.

Am I alive? Or am I dreaming?

He chuckled, “You’re alive, Shortcake.”

I winched, “I said that aloud?”

He nodded.

“You have to forgive her. She does that a lot,” Betty said, and I kicked her underneath the table.

And what did the bitch do? She didn’t say ouch, no, she simply laughed.

Sighing, I gestured over to Betty, “Marcus, this is my best friend Betty and her fiancé Red.”

Betty’s eyes widened. I widened my own eyes in saying, *don’t make me look like a stalker.*

Marcus nodded, then said, “Pleasure to meet y’all.”

I smiled and gestured to the open seat at my side, “Want to sit down?”

He nodded, then took a seat, and I swear I tried not to react when the chair groaned under his weight.

He caught my look, shook his head, and said, “Go ahead, you can say it.”

I pretended to look at him as if I had no clue. “What are you talking about?”

He chuckled, “You want to be nice and not say I’m a big bastard, that’s okay with me.”

Grinning, I winked at him and then leaned closer, dropped my voice to a whisper, and asked, “How are you feeling?”

He nodded, “Better. All fucking healed.”

I nodded right back, “Yeah, that’s great. You’re going to have to be one hundred and ten percent healed when you face off against Palmer in a few weeks.”

I realized I just told him I watched him play football.

Before Marcus or I could do or say anything to that, even though I saw he wanted to, I heard Betty whisper, “This... He looks so much different up close.”

I shook my head and then wanted to bang it on the table.

“You talk about me?” he asked with a small smile teetering on his lips.

I glared at him, “Please take the remote, hit rewind, and then hit the forget button. Can you do that for me?”

He nodded, then said, “Make you a deal.”

I breathed out, sighed, and said, “What is it with you and your deals?”

He winked, “Cause they’re good deals.”

Knowing he was more than likely right, I shook my head and said, “Name it.”

“Give me your phone number,” and then, like the klutz I was, I simply stared.

He waited.

Betty waited.

Red waited.

But I was frozen in my seat.

Did he? Did... did he really just ask me for my phone number?

When I didn’t respond, Betty started laughing her ass off. Holding her stomach, she wiped her tears away and then, once she had herself under control, smiled at Marcus, “Forgive her. Her number is...”

Marcus winked at me and then put my number in his phone.

Then he tapped some buttons.

That was when my phone lit up atop the table.

Unknown – *You’re fucking adorable.*

Grinning like the weirdo I was, I tagged my phone and then typed out a message of my own.

Me – *You say that now. But you haven't seen me on my period. Duck. Run for cover.*

He winked at me, read my text, and then chuckled.

I. Made. Marcus. DuPointe. Chuckle.

Me. I did that. Holy cow.

Marcus – *Tell you what. I'll buy you stock in chocolate. Will that help?*

I snickered.

Me – *It has to be white chocolate. That's my kryptonite. Oh, and chocolate doughnuts and chocolate milk. Oh, and glazed doughnuts and white milk.*

He grinned down at his phone, read it, and then stunned me.

Marcus – *Done.*

Done.

That was it.

No, that's a lot of food for one person.

No, you're insane.

Nothing.

Simply one word. *Done.*

Marcus – *Damn. You really are fucking adorable.*

Betty coughed and cleared her throat, then said, “Umm, guys, not that I mind y'all texting while we are sitting here because we've done that to Scar multiple times. But... my belly is growling. Time for food.”

I snickered, “The greasier, the better. Where do you want to go?”

She looked at me, then winked, “*Denny's.*”

I groaned, “Seriously? That's what you want?”

She pretended to pat her stomach, and she moaned, “Oh yes.”

I sighed, then I looked at Marcus and said, “I would invite you to go, but me and that place, not a good idea.”

He simply shrugged, “Think I’ll take my chances if you’re serious.”

“No, look, I’ve gone to that place five times. Only five times. The first time, my dad got a glass of water spilled on his head because he turned down the waitress. The second time, some woman threw a piece of sausage at me because she thought I was flirting with her husband. The third time, I got hit on by our waitress. I was flattered but I don’t swing that way. The fourth time...”

He held up his hand. “Okay, first of all, I’m not going to give anyone a reason to flirt with me. Second, my body is big, and I can take all the sausage...”

At his words, I groaned when my beer shot out of my nose, and I snorted.

He shook his head with laughter, “Yeah, that came out wrong.”

I was laughing so hard it was hard to breathe.

That was when he leaned down, way down, and then whispered in my ear, “Know you’re a goof, Shortcake. But it’s really fucking adorable.”

I groaned, “Are you sure?”

And he... he simply nodded. “Positive. Nowhere else I’d rather be.”

I sighed, “Come on then, let’s go see what fun times are in store for us tonight.”

And it wouldn’t be until I glanced down at the table that I remembered I had been so enthralled with Marcus that I hadn’t seen the waitress leave.

Then I asked, “Where’s the wine glass?”

Betty chuckled, “Honey, Marcus handed it to her before he sat down.”

And that... well... that caused my cheeks to heat up.

And yeah... I shook my head, then stood up, and didn't realize the force I had used and sent the chair flying backward.

My cheeks heated.

Please. Please. Please tell me that didn't just happen, and this beautiful man saw that.

I looked up at him to see him smiling down at me, then I got a wink from him.

Cue my baby-making factory.

Holy hell.

I didn't watch him bend down and right my chair.

I so didn't.

Yeah, I'm a liar.

I totally did.

Wait.... Married. He's married. He's married.

Then... on the way to *Denny's*, I had to question if he was still married because he had asked for my phone number after all.

And Marcus DuPointe didn't strike me as a man who would cheat.

Not when fifteen minutes later we arrived at *Denny's* and not once had his eyes strayed from either my face, my body, or the path ahead of him as we walked.

And.... thankfully, nothing happened.

Shocker!

Right!

I know!

Well.... that was until we were leaving... apparently, my forehead said, *fuck you* and something else took the beating. Literally.

Chapter 9

Marcus

Any sane man would have nodded when she warned him about going to *Denny's*.

Sadly, or thankfully, I wasn't a sane man.

Sadly, because of where we found ourselves an hour later.

And thankfully because I got to be in her world.

And damn if she didn't capture me this time as well.

She doesn't know it yet, but I have every intention of making her mine.

Only, from the vibes I was getting from her, I needed to take things slow.

Gaining her trust was my first step.

My second step was to reel her in.

My third step was to get her to fall in love with me.

Because damn, if I wasn't already there after seeing her the handful of times I had.

I smiled down at her, and then murmured, "You're still cute as fuck."

She snorted and then winced, and then I winced because I caused tears to hit her eyes.

But before I could apologize, we both heard, "Scarlett McKinney."

Offering her my hand, I helped her stand and then whispered, "Keep your head back, Shortcake, I'll guide you."

All she did was nod as I placed my hands on either side of her hips and guided her in the direction the nurse was taking

us.

Ten minutes later we were in a room and waiting for the doctor.

Twenty minutes later I was waiting outside the x-ray room while they got what they needed to see if her nose was broken before the doctor came into the room.

And while I waited the conversation between her, and the x-ray tech played on repeat in my head.

The nurse in black scrubs and black hair pulled back in a low ponytail asked, "Is there a chance you could be pregnant?"

Scarlett shook her head as best she could, "Definitely not."

That was when the nurse's eyes slid to me, "Birth control is only ninety percent effective. And that's a good-looking man you have there."

I could hear it in her tone, and knew she was getting aggravated, don't ask me how I knew that I just did.

And let me tell you something, the dominance, and Neanderthal tendencies I possess... Well, I had to seriously stop myself from murmuring, good girl, and then pound my chest.

Me Tarzan. You Jane.

"First, he's my friend. Secondly, you have to have sex in order to get pregnant. And since I know for sure my hymen is intact because I haven't trusted anyone with that part of me... Pretty sure I'm not pregnant."

And that was when the door to the room closed in my face.

Fifteen minutes later, Scarlett turned her head on the flimsy hospital pillow, moaned, and then whispered, "I'm so sorry."

I shook my head at her, "It's okay, Shortcake."

“It’s really not,” she moaned.

That was when there was a knock on the door, and a younger man poked his head in, “Hello, I’m Doctor Daniels.”

Doctor? He didn’t look much older than Scarlett and me. What the fuck? Weren’t doctors supposed to be older? Matter of fact, all the ones I’ve seen have been older.

Before I could tell my mouth not to open and voice my thoughts, it did it anyway, “Are you old enough to be a doctor?”

And when I heard her snort, I winced.

Scarlett moaned from her bed, “Stop making me snort.”

The doctor sighed, “Yeah, trust me. I get that a lot. This is what happens when your parents are divorced and ignore you. Luckily, I turned to books and not drugs. Graduated from the private school I was at when I was sixteen, then became a doctor at twenty-two. Now, two years later, I get asked that all the time.”

I nodded, then looked at Scarlett, just in time for the doctor to look at her while putting gloves on, and then asked, “So, care to tell me what happened?”

Scarlett moaned again, “Let’s just say, *Denny’s* and me, yeah, never going there again.”

That was when he tilted his head to the side, “*Denny’s*? You mean the restaurant?”

Scarlett nodded, “I’m not sure what they use on the doors to clean them, but it works wonders.”

That was when the doctor winced himself, “You’re telling me you walked into a door?”

She nodded, “Yep. Right, smack into it. I was glaring at the waitress who had lowered her top to make her breasts more visible when she caught sight of Marcus and Red.”

That was when the doctor nodded, “I would tell you to stop glaring at other women, however, protectiveness and jealousy are healthy facets of any relationship. But just watch out for doors.”

She nodded.

And then he gave us the news that we both suspected, “Your nose is indeed broken. Luckily, it’s a simple fracture, and can be fixed.”

Then he went off to rattle a few things.

That was when they gave her a shot for pain.

And then once it was ready, we all heard Scarlett mutter, “And windows.”

That caused a few snickers.

Two seconds later, “And brick walls.”

Those caused winces.

Two seconds after that, “And standing too fast and knocking my chair backward.”

With that, the doctor instructed what he was about to do, and when he counted to two, he popped her nose back in place.

Ten minutes later the audible sigh from Scarlett was music to my ears.

Then, there was another knock on the door.

It was the charge nurse over Scarlett for the next four weeks. Thankfully, she was given a few days off.

“You ready to go home?” I asked her.

She looked up at me and nodded, “More than ready. And then, once I feel better, after Betty and Red’s wedding, and their honeymoon ends, I’m finding a doll. And having a witch put a curse on it.”

That had me chuckling.

“I’ll help buy the doll,” but what I really wanted to say, was that I owed Betty a fucking bottle of wine, or her favorite drink, maybe even a whole case.

Because had this not happened, I wouldn’t be in her presence right now.

Twenty minutes later we were discharged, I had my arm wrapped around her side helping her out to my SUV with her bag of pain meds in my hand.

And I wasn’t going to think about how good her body felt against mine. Pressed there. Like she had always belonged there.

It wasn’t until we walked out of the double doors, that she called, “Marcus?”

I looked down at her and said, “Yeah, Shortcake?”

She looked side to side, then asked, “How did we get here?”

I looked at her strangely. “You don’t remember how we got here?”

She shook her head. “No, it’s all just a blur.”

Okay, yeah, that made sense, “I ran back to the restaurant and got my SUV. Then I brought you here.”

And that was when I led her to the parking lot, once we made it to the passenger side, I moved to open her door.

That was when she looked up at me and asked, the strangest question, “What are you doing?”

I tilted my head to the side, “Umm... I’m opening your door. What does it look like?”

And that was when I watched her little brow wrinkle, “I thought you were trying to show me that you thought I was an invalid instead of telling me so.”

I didn’t mean to, but the thought of her thinking she was an invalid really set my temper to boiling, and I let out a

growl, “The fuck would make you think that?”

Scarlett being Scarlett, didn’t even seem fazed by my growl, not when she said, “Because I’m such a klutz. And... well... I’ve never had a man open my door for me. Only by my dad.”

And just like that, the temper was now simmering, and it would only calm all the way down once she placed her hand on mine.

Skin to skin.

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m not like most men. And I don’t intend to start.” And with that, I got her door open, all with her staring at me with a soft expression, I vowed to see as much as I could.

And it was when she placed her hand on mine atop the gear shifter and whispered the sweetest words I’d ever heard, “Thank you.” That caused my temper to sizzle, and then die out completely.

“Welcome, Shortcake. Go ahead and put your address in my GPS.”

She nodded, put her address in with her other hand, and then asked, “What kind of SUV is this?”

Did I make a move to tell her that her hand was still resting on mine?

No, no I didn’t.

Instead, I moved my hand with hers still atop it on the gear shifter.

“It’s a twenty-twenty Range Rover all blacked out.”

If her eyes weren’t black and blue, I knew they would be sparkling right now, due to the humor and mischief I could hear in her tone, “Do you have a name for it?”

Then... just like that, my brain said, “Black Mamba.”

What she didn't know, and something I would never tell her, was that I'd never named a vehicle before. Ever.

Not until her.

Oh, the things we do for the ones that capture our hearts, and they don't even know it.

And I wasn't even going to voice aloud why that name in particular slid through my head, especially not when she said, "I like it. The SUV is beautiful."

I called my SUV Black Mamba because just like the powerful snake I want to attack her and then slide deep into her tight body and never fucking leave there.

It wasn't until we were on the road, that I realized she was looking closely at the leather seat, as well as the console, "What are you doing?"

She glanced up at me, and then presumed looking for something, "Looking for blood splatter."

I snorted, "Shortcake, you were very careful earlier. It's totally okay."

That was when she looked at me skeptically, her nose still swollen, dried blood under each nostril, her eyes black and blue, her hair in a messy knot atop her head, and with all that, I've never seen a prettier sight, then softly, she asked, "Are you sure?"

I coughed to clear my throat of all the emotions I was feeling, and then I nodded, "Yeah, do you know how many times I've opened my trunk and wanted to hurl after I've gotten home from practice? Sweat leaves its mark."

She was snorting while chuckling. Honestly, I didn't think that was possible.

With that, she settled in her seat, and the moment a song came through the speakers at a stop light, she shot me a blinding smile and asked, "Can I turn this up?"

I nodded.

And then she did just that and sang to the song.

Luckily, she had some killer vocals even though she was a little hoarse, so I didn't mind. Not at fucking all.

And then... All too soon we were at her apartment building, where I asked her, "Please tell me you don't live on the first floor?"

She shook her head, "Nope. They tried to give me one on the first floor, then my dad and his friends threw a fucking fit over it. See, I toured a fourth-floor apartment. That was the one I wanted. When I came here to get the keys, they tried to shove me into one on the first floor. Thankfully, they saw the error of their ways and gave me the apartment I toured."

"Assholes." I muttered as I climbed out of the SUV.

I missed her throwing her head back and laughing, but I didn't miss her rubbing the back of her head when she slammed it into the headrest.

I was chuckling while opening her door.

"Hush it." She whispered.

Still chuckling, I nodded, "Yes ma'am."

She narrowed her eyes at me, and pointed at my face, "You're still chuckling."

"I'm trying to stop." I told her, then I closed my eyes, counted to three in my head, opened my eyes again, and then offered her my hand to help her out of the SUV.

She didn't move until she saw that I wasn't chuckling anymore.

Once I had the SUV locked up, I had my arm around her waist, her body tight to mine as we walked inside her apartment building.

The moment we reached her door she pulled her keys from her pocketbook, unlocked it, and then started to turn.

I knew she was planning on telling me to leave and to have a good night.

Thankfully, I'd thought about this all the way here, therefore, I opened my mouth before she could and said, "Go, Shortcake, take a shower, get clean. I'll start your clothes for you."

She sighed, "Marcus, you so didn't sign up for any of this. Go ahead and head home."

I shook my head, "Shortcake, I'm right where I want to be, okay? Go get a shower."

She looked at me, then nodded, turned, and said, "Make yourself at home."

I nodded even though she didn't see me, "Put your clothes outside your bathroom door, I'll grab them and then throw them in the washer, wait, you do have one, right?"

Cause if not, that foiled my whole plan.

She giggled, then looked at me over her shoulder, "Right, if I didn't that would defeat the purpose of you being here." then she giggled again for some reason, and yeah, I still found that adorable, "It's a stackable. It's through the kitchen."

And with that, she headed away from me, but I could have sworn I heard her let out a heavy breath and then she muttered, "I'm right where I want to be too."

Yeah, those seven words were going to be on repeat in my head for a long time. Even if she didn't say them, I planned to pretend that she did.

Five minutes later I was collecting her stuff from outside the bathroom door, and no I didn't look at her bed, and I didn't snoop.

I knew, just knew if I did that, my dick would take a hell of a long time to go down, and over the past month, I knew there was no relief for him.

He didn't want my hand.

And fuck was I allowing anyone else to tend to him.

Nope, he wanted the five foot three, dark auburn-haired goddess with freckles on her nose, the prettiest ice blue eyes, a body made for sin, delicious curves, tits, ass, hips.

Yeah, stop.

Right. Fucking. Now.

Luckily, my pocket chose that moment to go off, which took my thoughts away from where they were headed, but just barely.

Once I had her blood-stained shirt and pants in the washing machine, I pulled my phone out, checked the display, and then texted back.

How I had been able to ignore the multiple times it had gone off; I couldn't tell you.

Coach Sanders – Practice time has been moved up thirty minutes. For all you Jackals that means be at the field at 5:30 a.m. Sharp.

Campbell – Got it.

Tanner – 10-4 Good buddy.

Bush – Oh man.

Buscher – Help! I've fallen and I can't get up.

Me – Got it.

Tanner – The fuck you do now @Buscher?

Buscher – @Tanner Your Mama.

Campbell - @Buscher, you can deal with me tomorrow.

Buscher –

Me – Nah. I got this.

Buscher – Fuck. No. Coach?? I'm taking a personal day.

Coach Sanders – Boy, you never learn.

Coach Sanders – *You will be DuPointe’s personal all-day tackle.*

Tanner – *My Mama said nah. You’re nothing but a walking talking STD.*

I was shaking my head at the idiot as I walked through Scarlett’s apartment once I silenced the rest of the replies and pocketed my phone.

It was tidy. Clean. Well kept. And thankfully, not too girly.

But... I knew that if I got us to where I wanted us to be then I would never complain if she did our room in every single color of pink imaginable.

As long as I lay beside her every night, I wouldn’t care. Not one single bit.

I was headed towards a bookcase that had a lot of pictures on it when something happened.

I heard her let out a yelp, followed by, “Crap!”

After seeing her klutz self in action, it had me walking in her direction to only come to a sudden stop when she slammed into my chest.

Catching her against my body when she let out an “Oomph.”

“Just what is it with you walking right into stuff?” I asked her as I chuckled.

She shook her head in a huff, but giggled, “I wouldn’t have if you hadn’t come out of nowhere.”

I snorted, “Okay, Shortcake. Why the hurry?”

She smiled and then lost that smile and huffed out a breath, “My car.”

I nodded, “Betty drove it here. Then Red picked her up. You missed it in the parking lot. I parked right next to it.”

That was when her shoulders dropped, “Oh.”

And no, she didn't have time to hide her embarrassment from me before she looked to the side and at a picture she had hung up in her hallway.

Releasing my grip from her hip I moved my hand up until I had one finger underneath her chin, and carefully, I lifted, and moved it until I had her eyes.

I didn't care if her neck hurt from looking up at me or not, "Let's make something crystal fucking clear here, okay? First of all, you're a klutz, and it's cute as fuck. Second, you just broke your nose because some bitch needed to learn how to tell if a man is taken or not. That's on her. And Third, you were singing to a song, and having a good time. You didn't see your car? So, fucking what? You were smiling, and I saw it. So that's all that matters."

She nodded, and then I stood there, transfixed as she gave me that soft smile of hers.

And I wanted nothing more than to pick her up, bring her up to my height, and then slam my mouth down on hers.

Just as those thoughts ran rampant in my head, she asked, "Umm, Marcus?"

Not meaning to, I rasped out, "Yeah?"

She still held that small smile, "Are you going to let me go?"

"For now. But just saying, as soon as you're ready to fall, I'll catch you." With that, I released her and then headed to her front door.

Because if I didn't get out of there with the vision of what she had on, I wouldn't be leaving, and I would be taking us to a place that I figured she wasn't ready for.

Because damn if she didn't have on the smallest little white shorts that showed off her creamy thighs and that perfect ass of hers, and yeah... she had that hoodie on.

It still looked a little like a dress.

Stopping at the door, I looked over my shoulder at her and said, “Pain meds are on the counter, Shortcake.”

And that was when she whispered, “Thank you, Marcus. For everything.”

“You need me, all you gotta do is call. Okay?” At her nod, I nodded then walked down the hall, but not before I chanced a look back.

And yeah, I definitely caught her eyes on my ass.

I was chuckling all the way down the steps at the way her cheeks heated, fucking adorable.

Chapter 10

Scarlett

Last night's conversation before I went to bed once Marcus left.

"Hey, Pumpkin," my dad said immediately when he took my call.

Inhaling a breath, I whispered, "Hey Daddy, you owe me a hundred dollars."

I could hear the humor already in his tone, "Fuckin' A. You're getting better. Am I going to have to shell out another hundred next month?"

I sighed, "Nope."

That caused my dad to cackle with laughter.

I just sat there.

Like I always did when this happened.

And then because of the hyena fit, he had going on; I couldn't help but giggle.

But it wasn't really because he was giggling, no it was because of the events that had occurred just after it happened.

The ride to the hospital might have been a blur, but what wasn't a blur?

Well, that was when for the first time ever, I felt myself up in his arms. Yes, he carried me to his SUV. I think because that happened, that's why I couldn't remember a single thing earlier.

Just as I was remembering what it felt like to be in his arms, my dad calmed down with his laughter.

His deep voice came through the speaker, "Okay, first things first, I love you."

I sighed, "I know, I love you too."

"Now, second, what do you want that's going to cost me a hundred bucks?"

See, we had this running joke, each month if I had a klutzy moment my dad spent a hundred dollars on me. And the count for this year, I've already made a thousand dollars... and it's the tenth month of the year. Yeah.

And since the day before yesterday ended the last month, he hadn't paid up yet.

"I need a new Kate Spade bag. The one I have is ripped and falling apart."

My dad chuckled, "You've had that thing for seven years, it's high time you replaced it."

I sighed then, "Yeah, I know. I'll send you a link to the one I want."

My dad chuckled and then said, "Okay, now, what caused you to lose this month's hundred dollars?"

I took in a breath and asked, "Where are you?"

He grunted, "Why?"

And I've never said this, nor asked him for privacy. Ever. "Because I've never told a single soul about this moment other than Betty. And I really want to keep it personal."

My dad didn't say a word, I simply heard him moving.

And moving.

And moving.

Long moments later, I heard a door shut, "Okay, Pumpkin. I'm in my room at the clubhouse. Lay it on me."

"Okay so, do you remember that hoodie I wore on breaks back home?" I was still wearing it, as I fingered the bottom hem that was getting a little loose.

He chuckled, "You mean the one I've threatened you with and you still never told me who gave it to you?"

“Yeah. Okay, well, I got that hoodie one day because my period came early, and I was in a pair of white jeans. The boys were laughing at me, but one of them. He followed me into the girl’s bathroom, and then gave me his hoodie to cover up until I could get home.”

“Okay, owe this boy a handshake. But, Pumpkin, you’ve had that hoodie for fucking years. What’s that got to do with your klutz moment?”

“Well, I haven’t seen him in person in almost five years. That was until a little over a month ago. He was a patient at my hospital. He saw me enter his room and asked if I still had his hoodie.”

“Okay, thinking this klutz moment isn’t as important as this boy you’re telling me about.”

I closed my eyes, and then ever so softly, I whispered, “Pulse.”

I heard my dad take in an audible deep breath, “When did you feel this pulse moment?”

“In the restroom that day when he gave me his hoodie.”

“And him?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think so... but... well... he wouldn’t have remembered some random chick he gave a hoodie to. Right?”

“Right. So, this boy is important.” I could hear the curiousness in his tone, but also something else I couldn’t make out. It was something I’d never heard before. And no, I didn’t miss the way he said that it wasn’t a question. But a statement.

Needing to make sure he understood, it was crazy the impact that one single word can have... it’s either magical or it’s ripping the floor right from under your feet, “Yes.”

At that one single word, he sighed, then... “Permission to run a light background check on him?”

“Daddy, please. I want to learn about him, from him. He has the right to keep whatever secrets he wants to.”

“Okay, Pumpkin. Make you a deal. Whenever you’re ready for me to meet this boy, I’ll decide on running a background check on him, okay?”

I smiled, “Okay, Daddy. Thank you.”

“But I’m just throwing this out there, I’m only doing this because you’ve never mentioned a boy that you liked. Never. But... one red flag comes up or I get a feeling about him, I’m running that check.”

I giggled, “Okay daddy. Thank you, again.”

I could hear his smile through the phone, “You’re welcome, Pumpkin. Now, get to the rest of the story.”

“Right, so I was out to grab a few drinks with Betty and Red before their wedding this weekend. And a waitress brought a glass of wine over, I sent it back of course.”

I knew he just nodded, when he said, “Of course.”

“It was him. He walked over when she brought it back, and one thing led to another, and Betty, the bitch who I want to curse said she was hungry. So...” I trailed off.

He started chuckling, “Lord, please tell me she said Denny’s. Shit’s fucking hilarious.”

If I could poke my tongue at him right now, I’d be doing it, but since I couldn’t do that, and he wouldn’t see it, I did the next best thing, “I’m not telling you now.”

And I didn’t expect him to say what he did next, “You don’t want me to run that check, you’ll tell me.”

I gasped, “That’s so messed up.”

He scoffed, “Hey, you were a great kid. Turned into an amazing young woman. Never had a fucking thing to use against you til now. I’m soaking it up.”

I snorted, “Har. Har. Har.”

Then I heard, "Continue please."

So, I nodded, "Okay, so I invited him to... Denny's."

He started to cackle again.

So, I raised my voice, "Everything went fine. Great even. There were no food fights. Nothing got thrown at me. I didn't trip on anything. I didn't spill any of my drinks on anyone," Yes, all that has happened at Denny's. "That was until I noticed a waitress lowering her top as we were leaving to flirt with Red and Marcus."

"I was glaring at her as I was walking..." I stopped talking.

He snickered, "Oh shit."

I closed my eyes, dropped my head, and then muttered, "And didn't see the door. The closed glass door."

That was when he started howling with laughter, once he was able to speak a few words, I made out, "Your forehead, okay?"

I bit my lip, "Umm, you might get a bill from the hospital."

That stopped him from laughing immediately. "The fuck do you mean? Hospital? What do you mean?"

"Well, it wasn't my forehead this time that took the damage, it was my nose... and... it kind of got broken."

He was silent.

Ever so silent.

And then... I had to jerk the phone from my ear from his cackling.

No, cackling was the wrong term, he was howling with laughter.

Then I heard, "Brother, what the fuck is going on up here?"

That was the Pres of the club, Snake.

I heard my dad say, "My daughter."

Snake then, "Fuck. Is she okay?"

My dad, "Yeah, she's fine."

Snake chuckled, "You going to tell us the story?"

My dad, the faithful man that he was, "Nah, she asked to keep this private."

"Thanks, Daddy," I whispered.

Tiredly, I rolled over in bed and checked the time.

Holy shit. I was going to be late.

That was when I remembered, Lydia told me to take the next couple of days off.

And with that, I tagged the bottle of water sitting on my nightstand and then popped a pain pill.

Just as I covered myself up to go back to sleep, my phone pinged with a text.

Marcus – *How are you feeling?*

So not me doing a happy dance in the middle of my bed. Definitely not me.

Me – *In pain, but thankfully, feeling okay.*

Nor was I smiling from ear to ear.

Yeah, I was a freaking liar. Through and through.

Marcus – *Good. Felt like shit that you were there with no help.*

Me – *Nope, then you would have seen me snorting just now.*

Me – *I'm okay. Not the first time I've done something so stupid and suffered through it.*

Marcus – *Still. You need anything?*

Me – *No. That's very sweet. But I think I'm going back to bed. I didn't sleep that great.*

Marcus – *Okay Shortcake. You get some rest. If you need me, just let me know.*

Me – *Thank you.*

Marcus – *Welcome.*

Me – *Are you always this nice?*

Marcus – *Thought you were going to sleep?*

Me – *Just answer the question, please.*

Marcus – *No.*

Me – *No, you don't want to answer. Or no, you're not this nice?*

Marcus – *I'm this nice when it's with someone important to me.*

I totally just left him hanging, but what the hell did that even mean?

He's married. Freaking married. Right?

I mean, he did say that when I was ready to fall, he would catch me... did he mean... fall in love with him?

And then his text message?

Grr. I really need to ask him.

Too bad I'm a chicken shit, and don't bother with it, well, that is until it's way too late.

Unable to go back to sleep, I tossed the covers aside and then went to the bathroom.

Once I was done in there, I headed to the kitchen.

And the moment I opened the fridge, I wanted to groan.

Of course, today of all days, I had planned to go grocery shopping, so I had cleaned my fridge out yesterday morning in lieu of my restock today.

And there was way in hell I felt up to going to the grocery store and having everyone and their brother looking at me all funny-like.

Then a thought occurred to me, I can have food delivered, but it costs to do all that, and if I want to be able to afford the house I want, then I have to watch my budget.

I thought about asking Betty to run to the store, but she was at work.

Dad was too far away.

And then... He did say if I needed his help that he would be there.

Heading back to my room, I tagged my phone, then made my bed, and of course, sat on it once I was done.

Pulling up the message thread, I started typing.

Me – *How are you feeling? All healed up?*

Almost as if he was staring at his phone, he texted me back instantly.

Marcus – *One more week of rehab and doc said I was good to go.*

Me – *That's awesome! I know you have to miss it.*

Marcus – *Not tired?*

Me – *Not really. Hungry. Umm, what are you doing right now?*

Marcus – *Looking at my ceiling fan and thinking of firing my cleaning lady.*

Me – *Why's that?*

Marcus – *I can see dust bunnies flying off the blades.*

Me – *Oh no, what will you do when they attack?*

Marcus – *LOL.*

Marcus – *Probably join them and then go irritate people.*

I snorted.

Me – *So, you're free?*

Marcus – *Yeah, what do you need?*

Me – *Any chance I could text you a grocery list and you could grab the stuff and bring it over?*

I thought I made him mad. And yes, I ended up chewing on my thumbnail, until my phone pinged with another text.

Marcus – *Okay, I'm back. Had to get dressed first. Text me your list, Shortcake.*

Smiling, I texted him my list.

And then an hour later there was a knock on my door.

Getting off my couch, I headed to the door, checked the peephole, and at the backward hat on his head, I felt my heart catch.

Once I unlocked the door, opened it, and smiled, I said, "Well, hello there."

He snorted, then gave me an up-and-down look and winked.

That was when he stepped inside and placed the seven bags on my island.

Then I watched as his face morphed, and at first, I didn't understand why he looked upset until he spoke.

"I'm so fucking sorry. I had intended to help you put them up and hang with you if you'll let me. But the rehab center called and said they had a cancellation and could fit me in. If I get in right now, I just might get cleared. I may be able to fly and meet up with the team."

"Then what the hell are you still standing here for? Go!"

He nodded, then saluted me with two fingers.

I walked him out of my apartment, and there, in my doorway, I watched him walk away. Damn, there was just something about a man in jeans, cowboy boots, a fitted tee, and a backward ball cap.

I had put the groceries up and ate me a sandwich and that was when Betty called.

Knowing she would do the same thing for me, I changed my clothes and then headed out to my SUV.

As soon as I pulled up into her driveway and got out of my SUV and got started putting the doors and roof on her Jeep, that was when the rain started.

The rain that wasn't supposed to start until tonight.

The same rain that I was over here trying to beat.

And... judging by the temperature it was right now. I would more than likely end up getting sick from this. Shit.

But... They just got this Jeep.

So, I'd rather deal with a cold or the flu than have all their hard-earned money go to waste.

As the rain pelted me in the face, I got everything tightened down, and then, I raced to my SUV.

The first thing I did was start the heat.

Once I was warm enough and my hands weren't shaking, I checked my phone.

When I saw I had two missed calls from Marcus and a text, I panicked, didn't even bother to read the text then called him.

He answered on the second ring, "Hey, you get my text?"

Hurriedly, I said, "No, I saw you called twice and didn't want to take any chances. Is everything okay?"

I heard how excited he was through the phone, "Yeah, just wanted to tell you that I'm cleared and I'm en route to the

airport to meet the team.”

“What? That’s awesome! I’ll be cheering for you. I’m so happy. Wait, will you get there in time?” He better. They needed to win; they didn’t win their last game because he wasn’t able to play.

And when his tone got soft, I melted, oh yes, I melted, “Yeah, I will. Thankfully. And thanks, Shortcake. Wait, is that rain I hear?”

And that was how I told him about everything I just did.

And then, he mimicked my exact thoughts, “I hope you don’t get sick from this.”

I sighed, “Knowing my luck... I will.”

He chuckled then he cursed, “Fuck. I gotta go through security, Shortcake.”

Smiling, I said, “Okay, text me later.”

I knew I shouldn’t have done it. I freaking knew it.

But I would do anything for Betty.

And after I fell asleep on the couch

And now, as I lay on my couch after waking up, my body burning up, I slightly regretted helping her.

Slightly.

But... It was worth it as I sat curled up on the couch and watched Marcus dominate the field.

And then just as I thought that my phone rang.

Chapter 11

Marcus

Was this what it finally felt like?

Wanting to blink your eyes and then immediately be home and be in the person's arms you never wanted to leave?

Finally, fucking finally, the wheels touched down on the tarmac, and I didn't hesitate to take my phone off airplane mode, and check my messages, mainly ignoring everyone else's but hers.

And I can't even begin to explain how many times I wanted to say fuck it, leave the field, and race to the locker room to get my phone.

See, I had this regimen of sorts.

On the day of the game, I turned my phone to *Do Not Disturb* so I could get my head right.

And today, it had been no different.

Except for the fact that for the first time in my professional career, I wanted to be on my phone until the coach started with the pep talk and we walked out of the tunnel.

And, since we were all hustling to get on the plane, I went ahead and slipped it into airplane mode.

Now.... I smiled at the number of messages from her.

Shortcake – *Good Luck today. Not that you need it, but still.*

Shortcake – *I got my phone set up for alerts.*

Shortcake – *You're shitting me with that call? That wasn't targeting... they just changed it, fucking right they*

better change it.

Shortcake – *You tell number sixty-two that I have his name on my size six-in-a-half shoe, and it's ready to kick him in the ass.*

Shortcake – *Yes! Good job.*

Shortcake – *W!!!!!! Winner's win. Losers get stitches.*

Laughing, I tapped the picture I had of her and then brought the phone to my ear.

And when she answered it, and I heard her voice? All the hair on the back of my neck stood up.

She sounded hoarse and congested, “Hey you. Great game.”

My chest got tight at her voice, the fuck was wrong? “Thanks. What's wrong?”

She sighed, “I'll text it to you. It's hard to talk.”

I nodded, “Okay, Shortcake. Text me your symptoms. You got medicine?”

I heard her sigh then, “No, I was hoping it wouldn't hit this fast and I would have time in the morning to get meds.”

Nodding, making sure she understood I meant it, I said, “Okay, text me your symptoms, the plane just landed, be a bit. But I'll bring you something.”

She was silent for a beat and then I heard, “Marcus, you don't have to do that.”

Grinning, I said, “Know I don't. But I'm going to.”

After I got off the phone with her, got off the plane with my duffle, and made it to my SUV, I checked her text and read her symptoms.

“Hi there, can I help you?” Really? My god.

I shook my head, now wasn't the time to rip into her ass for pulling her top down before coming over here to ask me that, and it most definitely wasn't the time to growl at her when I saw from the corner of my eye as she stopped at a mirrored case and checked her makeup.

Lady, less is more. Really.

Sighing, because I really did need help, I asked, "You got any other medicine for a cold in the back that's not grape flavored?"

"Let's look," she said as she walked over to me, trying to sway her non-existent hips.

And then she did it.

I knew she was going to.

Fucking hell.

I looked up at the ceiling and knew that as soon as she dropped to her ass, and then slowly worked her body by throwing her ass out and standing up slowly.

I looked back down, and yep, sure enough, that was exactly what she was doing.

"What are the person's symptoms?" Did she really have to get her voice all husky?

Snorting, I said, "Runny nose. Stuffy. Coughing."

"Sounds like a cold. Is this for your mom or dad?"

Really? Really? She's really trying to inquire about who it's for.

But that wasn't what really had my temper starting to sizzle. No, it was the fact that I had somewhere to be, and this woman was asking all the wrong questions.

"Look, my girl can't have medicine that's grape flavored." I told the woman.

"Oh, well, we are in the wrong section. I just love when grown men care about their children." As she started to

stand and offer me a smile, I shook my head.

And that was when the woman stopped flirting with me immediately.

Because she just took in the area, I was standing it, and it wasn't the kid's section. "Yeah, the kids' section is over there on the other side of the aisle. Like I said, my girl, or I should have said my woman can't have anything grape flavored."

No, she wasn't my girl, but in my heart, I already belonged to her, I just needed her to know that she belonged to me.

She shook her head, and sighed, "I'm sorry, but I don't see anything."

I grunted, then without a word, turned on my boot and walked out of the store.

And then... I went to every store I could find until I got the medicine that would help her and that wasn't grape. And a few other things.

As soon as I was back in my SUV with my little haul, I shot her a text.

Me – *OMW, Shortcake. Got it.*

Shortcake – *Text me when you get here, and I'll unlock the door.*

Me – *Text you when I'm outside your door.*

Shortcake – *But then you'll have to wait so I can get up.*

Me – *Don't give a fuck. Someone could hear your lock go, and then walk in and hurt you Not fucking happening.*

Shortcake – *Caveman.*

Me – *Every day that ends with y.*

What I didn't include in that text message was that it would be every day that ends in y where you're concerned.

But I didn't say that.

She wasn't ready.

And we really needed to get to know each other on another level.

Pocketing my phone when she didn't say anything back, I drove to her apartment.

Once I parked beside her cute two-door SUV, I climbed out, tagged the bags, and then walked into her building, and ignored the elevator.

Taking the steps two at a time, the moment I was outside her door, I shot her a text.

It took a few minutes, but I heard the locks go, and then... there she was.

Her auburn hair was up in a messy bun that was hanging half up and half down on the side of her head. Her gorgeous eyes were bloodshot. Her nose looked like Rudolph and her voice, I winced.

"Hey you," she croaked.

Wincing, I looked down at her and smiled, "Hey shortcake. You. Couch. Now."

I knew she was really feeling bad when she didn't say a word but did as I said.

Or... perhaps it was something else entirely... maybe... no... she's sick. Don't go there.

At least... not yet anyway.

Once I made sure she had her perfect ass on the couch, I locked the door and then headed into the kitchen.

She smiled, "So, what did you get me?"

I looked at her then nodded, then I reached into the bag and grabbed the first thing I found, "First, I got you two boxes of Kleenex. One has lotion on it, and the other has Vic's. Which would you like first?"

“Honestly, I’m so stuffy, I’ll take the Vic’s.” Nodding, I set it to the side to take to her.

“Now, would you rather have cherry-flavored cough drops or lemon with honey?” I showed her the two bags.

“Cherry. Please.” I nodded then put the bag with the Vicks Kleenex.

“Tea or Hot Chocolate?”

“I would say the hot chocolate but I’m afraid of throwing up because of the milk. So, I’ll take the tea.” Nodding, I set it aside as well.

Then, I got the medicine, “Okay, do you want pills or liquid?”

She tilted her head to the side and asked, “Will they make me sleepy?”

I looked down at the bottle, then nodded, “The pills won’t. but the liquid will.”

“Pills, please. I’d rather be awake while you’re here.” she said softly.

And then, had I not been paying attention to her every word, I would have missed what she said next, and even softer, “I don’t want to miss a single second of you.”

So as to not let on that I had heard her, I sat the pills with her yes, pile.

Then pulled out the cans of soup. “Okay, now for the tough question. Do you want chicken noodle soup? Chicken noodle soup with stars? Hearty beef burger? Or beef burger and mixed vegetables?”

She grinned, “You got chicken noodle soup with stars?”

I nodded, “Yeah, figured it would be easier for you to swallow. You told me you had a cough. It’s going to make your throat sore.”

Had I not been looking at her, I would have missed the way her eyes glistened with unshed tears, “That sounds great. Thank you.”

I nodded, then grabbed her pile, and carried it over to her, setting it all onto the coffee table.

Seeing she had a glass of water with ice in it, I opened the package of pills and read the directions, then handed her two of them. “Take these.”

She didn’t hesitate to nod, “K.”

Once she took them, and drank some water, I opened her Kleenex, and the bag of cough drops.

Once I had my trash in my hand, I straightened, and then stopped when she asked, “Marcus?”

I lifted a brow at her, “Yeah, Shortcake?”

“You really didn’t have to get all of this.” She said as she gestured to the stuff in front of her.

I shrugged, “You were sick. Yeah, I did.”

She smiled then and I knew that she was tired, but she still said, “Well, thank you. What do I owe you.”

I grinned, because no way in hell was she paying me back, honestly, I was the one who owed her, I just didn’t tell her that, “Tell you what, I’ll think about it.”

And before I could see the retort on her lips, I knew was coming, I winked at her and then I headed into the kitchen to make her tea and her soup.

While I was doing that, we talked about my game.

And yeah, I fucking got a hard-on for how animated she was about the game.

And she really did mean to hurt the bastard that got me with a late hit.

Once everything was ready, I carried it all to her, sat down on the couch, and then asked, “Can you eat this

yourself?”

She smiled, “Yeah, I think so. Want to watch a movie with me?” She tilted her head to the screen on her television.

I nodded, then grabbed her remote and scrolled through what she had on her Netflix.

As soon as she started eating her soup, I tilted my head and looked at her, “Sorry it took me so long to get to you.”

She winced, “Marcus, you don’t have to apologize. You didn’t even have to do all this.”

I shrugged, “It wouldn’t have taken me so long, but I had to go to three different stores.”

She froze with the spoon halfway to her perfect lips. Lips I wanted to be wrapped around my cock, then tilted her head, “Why’d you have to go to three different stores?”

I gave her my eyes then so she could really see deep inside of me, down to the deepest part of me, and pick up on what I was saying, and I turned my body, so I was facing her, “Because they didn’t have medicine that wasn’t grape-flavored.”

At that, she leaned forward, placed her bowl on the table, then sat back up and looked at me.

More importantly, she stared into my eyes.

Chapter 12

Scarlett

I felt my breath catch in my throat. Just who was this man? “You remembered?”

And that was when he placed his hands on either side of my shoulders and braced his weight, and there, mere inches from my face, he said, “I remember every fucking thing about you, Shortcake. Everything.”

The warmth I was now feeling wasn't from me being sick, either I was deliriously happy because of everything he had done for me, or my give-a-shit filter left the station when I whispered, “If I wasn't sick, I'd kiss you right now.”

His eyes flared, “Shortcake, I'd fucking let you. You being sick or not.”

“You're married still,” I told him, wanting desperately to have the right to reach up and smooth the wrinkle between his perfectly shaped black brows.

He didn't say a word, just stared into my eyes, and then with one hand still keeping himself right where he was, he removed his other hand, reached into his back pocket, and pulled out his cell.

He punched some numbers into it, and then placed it to his ear, and then... he gave me his eyes again.

Damn, but a woman could drown in them and never want to resurface.

“Yeah, do me a favor?” I stared into his eyes as he listened to what the other caller said.

Then he said, “Okay, need you to tell someone who's important to me about my divorce.”

I watched, fascinated as his eyes flared, and then he said into the phone, “Hang on one sec.”

And then, he pulled the phone from his ear, did something, and then said, “Okay, you’re on speaker. State your name and who you are. And then repeat what you just told me. Word for fucking word.”

“Hello, I’m Lance Davidson and I am a lawyer with Davidson Law. Mr. DuPointe’s divorce to Tonya Jessup was made official two weeks ago.”

“Thanks, Mike. Talk to you later.” And then he hit some buttons, then let his phone drop from his hand, and I didn’t pay attention to where it went.

My body and my brain were focused on something else entirely.

“Does that mean...” I trailed off when I watched something in his eyes soften.

They softened so much to a point that I never saw in anyone else, and something told me, I never would see that in anyone else.

Softly, he whispered, “Does that mean what, Shortcake?”

I swallowed, and then decided it was time I rectified being a chicken, “That... that you’re legally free and I can kiss you.”

He shook his head, “No, Shortcake. Because it’ll be me, kissing you.”

Then, he moved his hand and cupped the side of my face, and then ever so slowly he lowered his mouth down onto mine.

And yeah.... Being a klutz, fucking sucks.

Because I just sneezed into this beautiful man’s face.

I closed my eyes tightly, and whispered, “Please. Please tell me that didn’t just happen?”

He chuckled, and then I felt him move.

But not away from me. Oh no. Just down to one knee.

And then... carefully I felt his hands pulling my hands from my face, and the big man that he was didn't say a word until I cracked one eye open, saw his smiling face, and then cracked the other one open.

“Raincheck on the kiss, Shortcake. You can bank on it.”

And then before I could reply, I hurriedly grabbed another tissue and then caught my sneeze in it.

“Okay, time for more soup, and then in four hours, some of the liquid, and then you're going to rest.”

I nodded, then continued to eat my soup and sip on my tea, and in that whole time, Marcus now sat back on the couch with his feet up on my coffee table.

Once we had watched two movies, and I had some of the liquid medicine, I sighed and laid my head down on the pillow.

As my eyes started to close from the medicine already working, and without conscious thought, I asked, “Will you stay?”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

I nodded, my eyes closing, softly, I whispered, “Yeah. I really don't want to be alone tonight.”

And when he didn't reply, I fought my eyes and opened them, tilted my head so I could see him.

The look he gave me pierced my heart, and then he looked at the dark television, he seemed to be waging a war inside of his head.

Then, he nodded, looked at me, and muttered, “Okay.”

Something else occurred in the middle of the night.

Something I didn't know and wished I had been awake for.

I woke up, realizing I wasn't asleep on the couch.

No, I was lying on my bed.

And the vision before me, my god.

The warmth he put out, I snuggled deeper into my bed.

Lying next to him on my side, I stared at his sleeping form.

My god, he was freaking breathtaking.

I wanted eyelashes like his. Thick and curly. Long. Black. Magnificent.

And that was when a thought popped into my head, a little girl, one that looked just like her daddy, with my eyes, and his hair color, his eyelashes, his... stop!

Don't go there.

He's your friend.

Lie!

They were all lies.

My god, but I wanted him.

And just as I began to have another thought, his phone started ringing in his pocket.

Sleepily, I watched as he opened his eyes, blinked them, looked at me, and saw that my eyes were open, then sleepily, he whispered something that had my heart beating so fast I feared for it, "Good Morning Gorgeous."

And then... taking his lead, I whispered, "Morning Handsome."

I watched as he closed his eyes, sighed, and then opened them, and by that time, his phone had stopped ringing.

Only for it to start again.

He growled then cursed, “Fucking hell.”

He moved his hand from behind his head, dug in his jeans pocket, and pulled his cell out, checking the caller, he sighed, then brought the phone to his ear, “Yo.”

I watched as he listened to the caller, and then he growled. “Fucking seriously? I’m busy.”

He growled again as he listened to the call.

Then he sighed, looked at me, and gave me a soft smile. “Alright, yeah, be there in thirty. You so fucking owe me.”

“You okay if I use your shower?”

I nodded, “Yeah, I just have girly stuff in there.”

He shook his head, “Don’t matter to me. If it keeps women away from me, I’ll be fucking grateful.”

I giggled as he climbed out of bed, “Gotta run down to my SUV and get my bag. Be right back.”

As he was doing that, I lay in bed, sighing, and then I rolled over and smiled at what was on my nightstand.

It was my medicine, the Kleenexes, and the cough drops. Smiling, I tagged a Kleenex and blew my nose, and yes, just in freaking time for Marcus to walk back into my bedroom and hear it.

He chuckled then whispered, “Fucking adorable. While I’m in the shower, take another dose, and then go back to sleep. Okay?”

I nodded. Then asked, “What time is it?”

“It’s fucking three in the morning.” I winced at his tone.

After he sighed, he headed to the bathroom.

I took another dose while he used the bathroom, and by the time he was done, the medicine was already in full effect.

But I wasn't too far gone to miss the feel of his soft lips on my forehead when he whispered, "Get some good sleep, Shortcake. I know I did. Sweet dreams, text me when you wake up."

Sleepily, I whispered, "Okay, Handsome."

And then... then I felt the softest brush of his lips on my forehead as he pressed a soft kiss there.

And then, like that, he was gone.

And I was once again dead to the freaking world.

I wasn't sure how long I slept, but I awoke to the sound of my phone ringing.

Sleepily, I rolled over and tagged my phone, then swiped the screen, well, I hoped I swiped it correctly, and put it to my ear, "Ello?"

That was when I heard that deep rasp of his, "Good morning, beautiful."

I sighed when I heard his voice, this man was quickly becoming an important part of my life, "Good morning, handsome."

He was silent for a beat, and I thought about asking him if he was okay, but before I could do that, his deep voice came through the phone, "Thanks for answering."

I was fully awake at his tone, "Why wouldn't I?"

I heard his sigh, "I don't know."

Something about his voice didn't sound right, "Marcus, are you all right?"

He was silent again, and this was really starting to worry me.

"Yeah, just... well... found that my day was better if I heard your voice." I swooned.

And since he was free, and ever since we reconnected of sorts, I lowered my voice and said, “I love that. And... truth?”

I could have sworn he nodded, “Always.”

Smiling, I whispered, “I feel the same way.”

He chuckled, and then I could hear his grin through the phone, “Now, I won’t sound like a pussy when I say, I want to start and end my day with your voice.”

“What will the women think of that?” I teased.

He chuckled, “Well, all she has to do is look in the mirror and ask herself. But... seeing as it’s just you, that’s up to you.”

Immediately, I pulled the phone from my ear and did my best to cover the speaker with my comforter, and then, I let it out. “Squee.”

I knew I hadn’t muffled the speaker, not when I put the phone back to my ear and heard his laughter.

“Shut it.” I scolded him.

He was still laughing when he said, “No fucking way.”

Smiling, I looked at the clock on my wall and then gasped, “I slept until noon?”

I heard him chuckling again, “Yeah, I guess so. Are you feeling any better?”

I nodded, “Much. The wonders of good company, medicine, soup, and a good night’s rest.”

Immediately, he asked, “Good company. Huh?”

“It’s a proven fact,” I said all businesslike. Then softly, because I was concerned... and maybe a bit nosey, I asked, “So, do you want to talk about the call you got this morning?”

He sighed, “Honestly? Not really. I want you to meet my friends, I want them to help you feel comfortable with me.

What I don't want you to do is throw in the towel and not want anything to do with me."

"And you think whatever happened would cause that?"

He sighed again, "Got a feeling it would."

"Well, I can't promise you that I won't throw in the towel, but I'll only do that over your actions. Not someone else." I hoped that eased his fear a little.

And I knew it did when he started explaining what happened.

"Okay, fucking dumbass Culpepper. He was headed home, saw a woman walking the street, stopped to ask her if she needed a ride home because that's the type of man he is."

My brain immediately comprehended what he was saying, and all I could say was, "Oh shit."

He snorted, "Yeah. Turns out, all she was doing was looking for someone so she could make some cash and then go see her dealer."

I took a moment to take in what he said, and then I asked, "So that was him on the phone? Where was he calling from?"

Marcus was silent for a bit, and then he said, "Jail."

I winched, "How much was his bail?"

"Thankfully, by the time I got there, the woman had felt so bad about how it all went down that she told the truth about what happened. He was released and no charges are pending."

"I bet if they were, the league would have a field day with it."

"Yeah, not the kind of attention we need, or he needs."

I nodded, "Yeah, I can only imagine. But... you called him a dumbass? Why? I think it's sweet that if he sees a

woman walking alone in the middle of the night, he's going to stop and offer his assistance.”

Marcus snorted, “The reason he's a dumbass is because he actually exchanged numbers with the woman. Said that she showed great character when she walked in, knowing the ramifications for herself.”

My mouth dropped open, “You're shitting me.”

“Nope. I can't make this shit up. And get this. I woke up to a text from him. He's taking her out to dinner tonight.”

It was my turn to be silent for a beat, and then, well, I couldn't help it. I started laughing.

And then... yeah, my klutzy self decided to make an appearance. An unwanted appearance and I snorted like a freaking pig.

Immediately, I rolled over and then buried my face in my pillow but didn't lay there long when I heard him whisper, “You're fucking adorable.”

I lifted my face off my pillow so he could hear me correctly, and then I asked, “You really think so?”

“Yeah, one thing, you're honest. You don't hide who you truly are. And you're down to earth. It's sexy as hell.”

Looking down at the ratty pajamas I had on, knowing my hair was more than likely looking like a rat's nest, I changed the subject, “So, what are your plans today?”

“So, we're going to pretend that I didn't say you're sexy, got it.” Then he chuckled, “Last minute practice. And then resting before the game. You?”

Lifting up fully so I could really see the time, I said, “About to get up and head to Betty's to pick her up. We are having her rehearsal tonight. Betty and Red are getting married tomorrow. But wait a minute, you played yesterday.”

Yeah, it's not really a game, it's a small scrimmage for charity. Jude's for Children is putting it on.”

“Dang. Had I known they were doing that, I would have talked Betty into going to that for her pre-rehearsal party.”

He was silent for a beat, and then he asked, “You got a date?”

I shook my head, “Nope. No one I wanted to ask to be my date.”

He was quiet for a beat and then he asked, “Would you have asked me if I didn’t have my head up my ass and tried harder to find you and talk to you?”

I giggled, “Yeah, I would. But you have a game this weekend.”

He sighed, “First time in my life I thought about not playing in a game.”

Had I not spent time with him, I would have thought he was absolutely crazy for thinking that.

But now that I’ve spent time with him... well... I got it.

Chapter 13

Marcus

As soon as the ref blew the whistle, I really thought about telling everyone they could fuck right off.

But I wasn't that type of man, and I wouldn't start being that type of man for her, even though it killed me.

An hour later I was showered, hand cramped from signing stuff for the kids, and in a black suit with a black shirt and tie hustling out of the small locker room we had used.

"Brother, where the fuck are you off to in such a hurry?" I didn't even slow my walk for Daemon.

Instead, I called out over my shoulder, "Got plans."

I heard the incredulity in his tone, "What plans? You never have plans."

Normally, I would have stopped to talk to him about that statement and how lame he apparently thought I was.

But glancing at my watch, I didn't stop.

Betty had stolen my number from my Shortcake's phone last night and told me the time of the wedding, and if I would be done in time, she gave me the address.

I was in my SUV and headed to the venue. Hopefully, with the time of day, traffic wouldn't be a bitch.

When I was about ten minutes away from the venue, at a red light, I texted Betty.

Me – *Where should I sit?*

She responded quickly.

Betty – *Front row, bride side. Got you a seat reserved.*

Me – *Got it. On the way.*

The place where they were getting married was cool as heck.

It was at a little place off the beaten path, a lodge of sorts it seemed, and it screamed rustic picturesque destination wedding.

Nodding at the guy opening the door, he asked, “Are you here for the McCauffle wedding?”

I nodded at him.

Okay, right through the double doors, bride’s party to the left, groom’s party to the right.” Nodding my thanks, I headed to the double doors and then looked around.

Seeing an open seat, I headed that way.

Needing to distract the women I could see ogling me, I pulled my phone out of my pocket.

And seeing I had messages, I frowned.

That was odd, I hadn’t felt my pocket vibrate, pulling my phone, I realized why. Stupid.

I left it on *Do Not Disturb*. The way I could have texted Betty was if I texted her first. That was the only way her messages would have gotten back to me.

Turning it off *Do Not Disturb*, I checked my messages and had to catch a snort.

Shortcake – *If I ever get married, I will not, and I repeat I will not buy a damn dress with a million buttons.*

Daemon – *Bro. What the fuck? What’s going on?*

Culpepper – *Do me a solid? Go to the pharmacy. I think that bitch gave me crabs.*

Hearing someone say, softly, “Yo.” I looked up.

And saw that Red, Betty’s soon-to-be husband was looking right at me, I gave him a chin lift.

He smiled then in a louder tone, he said, “You’re going to make her day.”

All the women's eyes I could feel on me... disappeared.

Chuckling, I gave him another chin lift and then went back to my phone.

Smiling at Scarlett's message, I texted her back.

Me – *You don't want your future husband to undo each button slowly?*

I ignored Daemon's message; I'd text him back later.

Then to Culpepper, I messaged him back.

Me – *Dude. She was a hooker. What the fuck did you expect?*

Culpepper – *For the fucking condom to do its job.*

Me – *You didn't fucking double-wrap that bitch. The fuck is wrong with you?*

Shortcake – *Well... ummmm.... If it's you doing the unbuttoning, then I'm okay with it.*

I snorted.

Me – *Hey Betty.*

Shortcake – *Dang it. How did you know?*

Me – *Cause I told her she was sexy the other day and she changed the subject immediately.*

Shortcake – *Okay, she just ran to the bathroom, deleting our messages.*

I shook my head and then pocketed my phone.

The moment they started to music, I was turned in my chair watching those double doors, impatiently waiting for them to open.

And... holy fucking shit. If she was already mine and we had the conversation, the one where the words were all but forcing themselves out of my brain and into my mouth, I wouldn't have let her out of the house in that dress.

I had a feeling Betty, and I would be having a talk later if she was the one to put my Shortcake in that dress.

Yes, it looked great on her, the deep sage green fabric did wonders with her coloring and made her deep auburn hair that was down and in loose curls pop.

But... the way the fabric clung to her. Showing off every single perfect fucking curve, mainly, where her stomach tapered out to her hips. Small enough to turn a gay man straight, wide enough just so, so that my hands could rest comfortably there.

And seeing the smile on my Shortcakes face, the stutter step she did, yeah, it was fucking worth hurrying through my shower and putting on wet fucking boxer briefs.

So fucking worth it.

When she made it to her spot, she looked at me and mouthed, "What are you doing here?"

And without reservation, I mouthed back, "You're here."

I watched, breathtakingly slow as her face turned a beautiful shade of red.

Then she shook her head, stood up straight, and looked at the doors.

But not before letting her eyes stray to come back to mine.

And yes, I was still looking at her and mouthed, "*You're fucking adorable.*"

And when she mouthed back, "*You're fucking handsome.*" I grinned.

Then, the bride's wedding march started, I stood then looked to where Betty was walking on the arm of an older man.

Glancing at Red, seeing the emotion on his face, I looked at Scarlett, and seeing the same, a thought occurred to

me.

I wanted a fucking do-over.

When I get married again, you bet your ass we are having a ceremony.

Not the getting married in Vegas kind of wedding.

That was when I locked eyes with Scarlett.

... As long as it's her that's walking down the aisle to me.

The ceremony went off without a hitch, and then it was time for the maid of honor to be walked down the aisle by the best man, it took all I had to keep my ass planted in the seat.

And as they walked by me, I lost the fury I was feeling, because instead of looking at him, she was looking at me, and then... then she fucking winked, and I knew I had never seen anything sexier than that.

The reception wasn't what you would call traditional. Not at all. The bride and groom didn't walk into the room to be announced. No, they were too busy making out in the middle of the dance floor to be bothered.

I had a beer in my hand and was leaning up against a pillar waiting for Scarlett and whatever things she had to do.

And then... well... I really wished I was doing it with her.

Because then I wouldn't have a woman sauntering over to me right now.

"Hello, don't believe we've met. I'm Mecole."

"Nice to meet you," I muttered while silently wondering why anyone wanted to name their daughter Mecole. You know, Nicole, but... Mecole? Yeah, it was fucking weird.

And the woman who really should have gotten her hair done so her blonde roots weren't showing to match her dark hair, asked, "You can't give me your name? Oh, I get it, you like the anonymity of the night." She was way off base with that one, "There's just something about weddings. Bringing people together and all that. And... well... I don't see a ring on your finger so..."

I didn't have to say a word because I felt a tiny hand wrap around my forearm and a familiar head of perfect auburn hair met my view, "He doesn't need a ring on his finger for him to be taken. And would you like me to let your husband know that you're flirting with another man? Oh... wait... I can't do that. I just passed him and Cecily in the bathroom. Handicap stall. Clothes were flying everywhere."

That was when the woman gasped, and then crocodile tears hit her cheeks and then she was running off.

I wasn't sure how much Betty had seen but when she broke apart from Red and then called out to the woman's back, "Drama Queen."

I snorted, then I looked down at Scarlett, who tilted her head back and gave me a blinding smile, then she asked, "So.... Care to do a first with me?"

I smiled back and simply said, "Name it."

"I've never danced at a wedding," she said.

I didn't hesitate to drain the last of my beer, sat the empty on a table near me, and then... I offered her my hand.

Her smile, so fucking worth it.

Because I don't dance in public.

Oh, I might have moves in the bedroom, but I don't have moves on the dance floor.

But... for her? I would fake it. I would fake it all night long just to see that smile on her face.

With her hand in mine, my arm wrapped around her back and her other hand on my shoulder, I started to sway us to the music.

And because I was nosy as fuck, I asked, “Was her husband really cheating on her?”

She nodded, “Oh yeah. There’s a whole story to that.”

I lied, I had a few moves, well, honestly, they were moves I had seen take place, and for her, I tried them, her smile as I spun her around and then brought her back to my chest, fucking perfect, I winked down at her, “Got all night. And I’m curious.”

She grinned, “Okay, you asked for it. Remember that.”

I nodded and continued to sway to the music.

She winked up at me and then started, “So, Mecole met her husband, Jeremy in high school. She was a bitch to the extreme and thought all drama should revolve around her, Betty’s words. And she was telling the truth. So, one day, this new kid shows up. And with him apparently looking like a Ken Doll meets James Bond, Mecole was all over that. Until he told her in the middle of a class change that he wanted nothing to do with her until she pulled that stick that was shoved so far up her ass out.”

I nodded, letting her know I was following.

“In the meantime, while he was saying that he was eyeing up all the talent.” She tilted her head, and I got it.

“Player,” I said.

Scarlett nodded, “Yeah, and to this she was apparently oblivious to it. So, to get the boy that everyone wanted, she did as he said. And it worked. It also worked on the other girls who acted like her. Within two months he had fucked the cheerleading squad. Varsity. A month after that he fucked half the JV squad.”

I growled just imagining someone doing that to Scarlett, “Bastard.”

She nodded, “Yeah, and they all told her they had been with him, but she either didn’t believe them, or she wanted to keep him tethered to her so no one else could have him.

“Wait... so, why’d she marry him if she knew he wouldn’t be faithful to her?”

“Money. So, the grandparents died and didn’t leave their children anything but left it to him. And somehow Mecole found out they were doing that. So, she got pregnant, and his grandparents before they died, told him he better make things right.”

I nodded, understanding it all, “So, they got married.”

She nodded, “Yeah, and supposedly she had a miscarriage. She does all of it, and puts up with all of it, just so she can get half the money in another five years. All the while she’s fucking their pool boy.”

I didn’t hesitate to let my thoughts fly, not with her, “Well, then she needs to stop being a cuntwaffle, then maybe, just maybe, she will earn her right to be called a woman.”

It wasn’t that funny, I didn’t think so, but Scarlett thought it was hilarious, and she showed it when she started laughing, and then that laughing turned into snorting.

She was drawing attention to herself, but I’d never thought she looked more beautiful.

And when she snorted again, it was so fucking adorable, that I couldn’t help myself.

Letting go of her waist, I brought my hand up to curl around the side of her face, and then I whispered, “Raincheck time?”

I noticed the rapid rise and fall of her chest.

Noticed how her eyes strayed down to my lips, noticed how the flecks of even lighter blue around her pupil started to sparkle.

And the moment, and I mean the very moment she nodded subtly, I made my move.

I crashed my lips into hers.

Teasing them.

Softly.

Breathily.

And when I carefully coaxed her lips open and moved in with my tongue, I lost all sense of where I was.

Her taste was intoxicating.

Then... When she gathered up the courage, her tongue moved with mine and I felt a little mewl escape her throat, my cock immediately got hard.

He was already fighting me, wanting to slip inside of her when I saw her in her dress, but this... yeah, there was no battling the monster now.

And I didn't even care.

Betty chose that moment to speak right in our ears, "There's something about weddings."

At that, I reluctantly pulled away from my Shortcake's mouth and waited for her to open her eyes, and the moment she gave me those mesmerizing ice-blue eyes, she whispered, "I need that doll."

I laughed, and then lowered my mouth to her ear and whispered, "You need that doll."

"You know, when I kiss Red like that, I don't hear a thing for a while. True love and all that. And if y'all don't know, someone accidentally let off a firework too soon and neither one of you jumped. I'm just saying."

Scarlett's eyes, nor mine, moved from one another.

That was until I heard my stomach growl, and then hers followed suit, she started chuckling, hearing the same

thing, “Come on. Let’s go get some of this food I had to taste test with her.”

Yes, I followed her like a lost puppy but had the time of my life.

But not before I made sure that her body was blocking my hard-on until I could get him somewhat calmed down.

After we ate, we were standing there talking to a few of the men and women there, and I was grateful that no one recognized me.

“Okay, it’s time for the wedding bouquet. Will all the single lady’s step into the middle of the floor?”

I stood there, my arm wrapped around Scarlett’s waist, the other arm, hanging loosely at my side, my fist clenched at the thought of her actually catching that bouquet and some other mother fucker thinking it was his time to make his move.

Kind of like half the men here were thinking.

And you could have knocked me over with a fucking feather when Scarlett didn’t move to the dance floor.

“Okay ladies, I’ll toss it on the count of...” Betty trailed off.

I could see over all the females and right to Betty, she looked at the women who were assembled for her, and then she shot her eyes to where Scarlett was standing still, curled into my side.

She smiled, huge, then looked up at me and tossed me a wink, One. Two. Three.”

And that was how the EMTs were called, and four women had busted noses.

And a few sprained ankles, and a few sprained wrists.

After the drama calmed down, we set off fireworks as Red and Betty climbed into their car for their honeymoon.

After the wedding, I followed Scarlett home ensuring she made it there safely.

And the moment we stepped in front of her apartment door, her hands were on my face, she went up on her tiptoes, and right before she could press her mouth to mine, which I desperately wanted, my phone started to ring.

Knowing that ringtone, I let out a curse and then carefully, removed her hands from my face, and then grabbed my phone.

And before I could say a word, Scarlett unlocked her door, opened it, slid in, and then I heard the locks go.

Fucking hell.

One step forward, two steps back.

But I couldn't ignore his calls.

He would never ignore mine.

Bringing it up, I hit answer and closed my eyes as I leaned my back against the wall outside her apartment, "Yeah?"

"I need you, brother."

I looked at Scarlett's door and sighed.

I would make this right.

One way or another.

But Van was my brother and he needed me.

Yet had I known what would have happened after I left... I would've climbed back in her bed, wrapped my big body around her much smaller one, and used my body to shield hers.

Because a massive storm was headed this way.... And I didn't know.

Chapter 14

Scarlett

It's crazy how only a few seconds in time can change your whole life.

Sometimes when it happens, you don't even realize it.

Then other times it happens, and it changes your whole outlook on life.

I've had a few of those.

And a few of the prior.

And tonight, it was going to happen again.... I just didn't know it.

But not only was it going to happen tonight... a night into the future, into the very near future, everything as I thought I knew, was going to change.

Stupid.

So.

Freaking.

Stupid.

What the hell was I thinking, trying to make the first move?

And when I do decide to make that move, doing something I've never done in my entire life, his freaking phone decides to ring.

And... he freaking stopped what I was doing to answer it.

He. Freaking. Pulled. My. Hands. Away. From. His. Body.

Angry at myself for even thinking he wanted another kiss.

Angry at the fact that he had gotten married.

And then I pulled the dress in the wrong direction and heard the material rip.

Damnit. I would have liked to wear this dress again.

Sighing, I tossed it to the side and then headed to the bathroom to take a hot shower.

Something had occurred while I was in the shower, my phone had gone off with a text but didn't show it on my screen.

Once I was done and combing through my long-wet strands, my heart started to beat, double-timed.

Why? Because I don't think thunderstorms are soothing.

That was when the first boom of thunder sounded.

Daddy – *An unexpected storm is rolling in. You need me. I'm there.*

I raced to my front door, made sure it was securely locked, and then I raced to my bedroom, threw myself underneath my covers, started my music, put in my earbuds, and then covered my whole body underneath my covers.

I didn't realize I was rocking back and forth, which caused the covers to lower from my eyes, and I opened them, realizing my bedroom door was standing open, I vaulted from it, and tripped over the dress on the floor but didn't slow.

Throwing my bedroom door shut, I flipped the lock which was why I wanted this apartment. The doors had locks in all the rooms.

As soon as I was done, I raced back to my bed, climbed under the covers, and tried to let Metallica blast in my ears so I didn't hear anything going on outside.

And that... well.... That was when as soon as the song ended, I started to hum, waiting for another song, but not in time to hear another boom of thunder, a crack of lightning, and then.... The power went out.

I had my eyes closed, the song now playing in my ears.

And because the room was so dark the brightness of something actually had me opening my eyes.

That was when I saw the screen on my phone was lit up.

Grabbing it, I tried to breathe as normally as I could.

Marcus – *I'm outside your door. Come let me in. I want my kiss.*

Chapter 15

Marcus

Forty-five minutes earlier.

I growled at him, “Your fucking shitting me with this shit. Right?”

Van looked at me like I was acting crazy, “Bro, what the fuck?”

I bit out, “You told me you needed me because you wanted to make sure this mirror was level?”

Van, “Umm yeah, you know how I am with straight lines and shit.”

Sadly, I did know. Which sucked.

But I hurried through it and helped him hang the fucking mirror up in the hall.

As soon as he sighed, which told me it was straight and his OCD was calmed back down, I laid down the tools I had in my hand and then headed for the front door.

He called out to me, “Bro, why are you racing out of my house?”

I growled at him, “Because I left a woman. A woman I so didn’t want to leave who was in the process of kissing me for the first time when you called. I’m getting my fucking kiss.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me that I would have dealt with it until tomorrow.” I didn’t slow in my pace as I walked to the door.

I wasn’t sharing anything more about Scarlett with him, he had already seen too much of it while I was in the hospital.

And the bastard had indeed checked her ass out.
Fucker.

He was lucky she was there and had seemed terrified or else I would have grabbed the closest thing to me and chucked it at him.

Van's voice at my back called out to me, "Dude, a bad storm just rolled in. It's not safe out there."

I couldn't explain it. This need to get to her.

This need to get my kiss.

This need to just be in her presence.

Just as I had my hand on the doorknob, it felt like my body was tied to a tether and I was being pulled out the door and straight back to Scarlett.

A quiet voice in my head whispered. *You need to get to her. You need to get to her now.*

"Nothing is keeping me from her, not even mother nature," I told him, and then I opened the door to thunder, lightning, and heavy ass fucking rain.

And then... I raced to her apartment.

Thankfully, I was able to reach my spare duffel with clothes in it, hopefully, she'd let me use her shower again when the power in this area came back on, and then I was out of my car, locking my doors, and vaulting for the foyer.

As soon as I was inside, I shook off some of the water and headed for the steps.

Seeing the lights on the outside were all out, I knew the power in this area was out, which meant the elevator was also out.

So, I climbed the five sets of steps and then headed to her door.

Pulling my phone out, thankfully, I had it in this case so water couldn't get to it, I shot off a text.

Smirking at imagining her face when she read it.

Me – *I'm outside your door. Come let me in. I want my kiss.*

I stood there as I waited.

And then... I stood there again.

And again.

And again.

A few minutes passed, and I started to wonder if this was a mistake in coming here.

Was she really that mad at me that I had left her right before she kissed me?

Or... no... she wasn't like that; she wouldn't dare kiss me back at her friend's wedding and then have another man over here.

She just didn't put off those kinds of vibes.... That was when I heard the locks go.

And then... I had one hundred and thirty pounds of a woman jumping up, wrapping her legs around my back, her arms going around my neck, her face pressing into the crook of my neck.

Shaking.

Her whole body was trembling.

Softly, I whispered, "What's wrong, Shortcake."

It was a few minutes and then I felt gutted when I could hear how scared she was in her tone as she whispered shakily into my neck, "It's too dark."

She clung to me harder after that. Like a fucking monkey.

I knew my Scarlett.

But I didn't know about this.

And knowing her, I did the only thing I could.

I tightened my hold on her, stepped into her apartment, and flipped the locks.

And then I carried her through her apartment and to her bedroom.

“Need to put you down, Shortcake. I’m fucking soaked.”

That only caused her to cling to me harder.

So, I did the only thing I could. I dropped my duffle bag to the floor, turned around, then sat down on the bed, tagging a blanket I saw, I tagged that, and then I covered her up with it.

We sat just like that, her face still buried in my neck, her bottom nestled deliciously in my lap, my arms around her.

And then... When I felt her body start to lighten from the tremble, I carefully moved my arm and then moved her face back from mine.

I looked at her face and felt the pit in my stomach drop out. I didn’t like the look on her face, she was scared. What the fuck?

“Talk to me,” I whispered softly.

Her voice was so small that it made me want to find the next person and beat them to an inch of their life, “I was abducted. Beaten. Kept in a basement when I was sixteen to get back at my dad. I’m terrified of the dark. And... During all of that, we had the worst storm in five decades that week, it did nothing but storm. The cellar had two small windows, and every time lightning struck it seemed to hit the panes of glass, and the thunder made the pipes rattle.”

I would be talking about that to her, later, right now, wasn’t the time. Not when she was scared out of her mind.

Nodding, I thought about what I could do.

And since the wind was picking up, I knew the power wouldn’t be coming back on any time soon.

Therefore, I did the only thing that would hopefully make her feel safer.

I stood up, her body still clinging to mine, I made sure the blanket was wrapped around her, and then I tagged her comforter, and headed to the bathroom.

And yes, I had to walk in there sideways. But seeing how she was, no way in hell was I letting her go.

And honestly... I lived for the moments I had her in my arms.

Setting the comforter in the tub, I looked around and spotted a lighter and candles.

Once I had the candles lit with one hand, I kicked the door closed, climbed in the tub with her settled her atop my body.

I was so fucking uncomfortable it wasn't even funny, however, when her body lost its tension into mine and her soft whisper of, "Thank you," along with the kiss on my cheek?

And you want to know something else, I would have lived in the tub forever as long as she was right there with me.

Then... almost as if this was all she needed, I felt her body relax completely into mine and then after I placed a kiss on the top of her head, I made sure she was covered with her blanket so she wouldn't get cold.

I too fell asleep in the tub, her in some sweats and a t-shirt, and me still in my suit pants, and black shirt.

We didn't speak of that night again.

At least, we didn't speak about it for another week.

Not when we hung out a few times, and not when I spent a few nights researching, and implanting my plan.

It was Friday after practice that I found myself driving six hours to Clearwater, North Carolina.

And all because of a business page, top reviews on Google, and a stellar recommendation from a buddy of mine.

The woman who met me from the side of her yard once I climbed out of my car, walked over to me with a smile on her face, and then asked, “So, what kind of protection dog does your woman need?”

I needed to correct her, I couldn't be claiming her until she and I had a talk, had a real talk that I've never had with another woman, “She's not my woman.”

“Uh-huh, that's what they all say. But if a man is any man at all, he's definitely spending thousands of dollars for a dog to protect someone if she's not his woman. Okay.”

I shook my head at her.

And that was when a man, a man almost as big as I was came walking up behind her, wrapped his arm around her waist, and pulled her into his side, letting me know he was there and that I better not try a single fucking thing.

He really didn't need to worry.

Sure, Fiona was beautiful, but she wasn't drop-dead gorgeous, not like my Shortcake.

Needing to let the man know that I had no intention of making any moves on his woman, I locked eyes with the man and nodded.

He got it. I knew he did when he let her go and then didn't hover for the remainder of the meeting.

“I'm on the road a good bit of the year for work, I need a dog that will protect her, and be by her side when the power goes out during storms. She's terrified of the dark.”

And that was how three weeks later I was walking up the stairs to my Shortcake's apartment with a dog at my heels, Fiona, and Knox behind him.

Taking in a deep breath, I knocked three times on her door, and then I growled when I heard, "It's open."

Slowly, I pushed the door open and then I asked in a low tone, "What do you mean, it's open?"

From the kitchen, she called out, "Marcus? I didn't know you were coming by today. Sorry, honey, but I thought you were Marissa, she needs cookies for her daughter's bake sale tonight and she had to work overtime."

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I had been holding at the news.

Over the past three weeks, she and I had really gotten to know one another.

We had been to a few group outings with her friends, and she had met mine when she came to one of my home games last week.

And it was at that game that she had started calling me honey. And I fucking loved it.

Then as I walked toward her kitchen, the dog at my back along with Fiona and Knox, she poked her head around the kitchen wall, looked at me, and asked, "Why? What did you think?"

She looked fucking adorable with her hair in a bun, flour on her cheek, "Oh, hello, I didn't realize he had company."

"Sorry, Shortcake, but this is Fiona and Knox." She looked at me, then around me, and saw the two people at my back, and color me surprised she didn't react to the kutte that was on Knox's back.

"Not your woman my fucking ass," Knox mumbled at my back.

I didn't bother with a response.

But it was her face that ripped my heart out, over the past three weeks we had gotten so freaking close that I could

literally finish her thoughts, and we really needed to have that talk, and when she asked Knox, “He told you I wasn’t his woman?”

And then... I wanted to kick my own ass for forgetting the kind of woman she was.

Deciding that I needed to tell her that, I said, “I told them you weren’t mine because we have a lot we need to talk about.”

“Funny, here I thought we were already a couple and things we needed to talk about would come when the time was right, and we already had that level of trust. My bad.”

Fuck.

“If you’ll please excuse me, I need to use the bathroom.” And with that, she stepped away from me and headed out of her little kitchen.

That was when I heard Fiona mutter, “I need some popcorn.”

I watched, helpless as Scarlett shook her head and then headed to her bathroom, then I asked Fiona, “Why?”

“Because this is great. I can handle Knox like she’s handling you, but you’re bigger than Knox and she’s a little bit smaller than I am. And that’s saying something.”

“Just make yourselves comfortable, okay? I’ll be back.”

“You going to grovel?” Knox asked.

I nodded, “Yeah, she makes my days better. And it’s for her that I breathe.”

They didn’t say anything more, and then I headed to the bathroom, saw the door was cracked, and heard her quiet snuffles.

Knowing she wanted alone time, but deciding against it, I opened the door and then slipped inside.

Scarlett

Was I being stupid again?

I mean, the way we were with each other, the way he was either always touching me or I was touching him, the kisses we shared.

I don't do that with anyone but him. Never even thought of doing that with anyone but him.

But before I could really get into my thoughts, luckily, I still had my phone in my pocket and knew I needed to make a call.

Pulling up his contact, I called my daddy, and he answered on the third ring, "Hey Pumpkin, what's up?"

Softly, so as to not be overheard, I asked, "Quick, do you have any beef with a member of Wrath MC?"

He was silent for a beat, then I heard, "No, they are actually an allied club of ours. Well of sorts. Why?"

"Marcus is here, and two people are with him, a woman, and a man. His name is Knox, and her name is Fiona."

He was silent for a moment, then I heard, "Marcus brought Knox and Fiona to you?"

Hoping and praying they didn't have any conflict with them, I said softly, "Yes, he did."

My dad's tone told me I shouldn't have worried, "Know both of them, they're good people."

Once I heard his tone and his words, I felt the tension in my body drain away, "Okay, thank you, Daddy. I didn't want them in my home if they would cause trouble."

After we talked for another second, we hung up.

And there, I stared at my reflection in the mirror.

Then that was when the door to the bathroom opened.

My body was spun around, his face within inches from mine, a startled yap escaped my lips. Right where his lips were close. Oh, so close.

“Tell me to stop,” he whispered against my lips.

Not his woman, my ass.

I was panting now, my god.

I whispered back, my voice craggy, “And if I don’t?”

He stared into my eyes, and there, he said, “Because if I don’t stop, I’ll make you mine.”

Yes! God. Yes, please. I wanted him to make me his. I wanted everything with this man. And since my father raised a straight shooter, I offered him a knowing smile, “What if I’m ready to be yours?”

He stared into my eyes, “I’m domineering. Controlling. I want to know where you are at all times. I won’t ever let you open your door. You’ll never open your own drink. What I say, goes, that means in and out of the bedroom

I tilted my head, “How’s that any different than the way it is now?”

And that wasn’t a lie. He liked to know where I was at all times. To some, that wouldn’t fly, but knowing the reason behind it, so he could get to me any time I needed him, was refreshing.

And yes, I never poured my own drink when he was with me, and I never opened my own bottle, or can.

I felt his shoulders tense even harder underneath my hands, how the hell was that possible?

But what I was sure of, was that he didn’t speak until he had my eyes locked with his, “Shortcake, the other women, haven’t been many, they got maybe a fourth of me. But gave you half of me already. We do this, you’ll get all of me. It’s going to get worse.”

I shrugged, “Marcus, if I get to have all of you, then I don’t care.”

He smiled down at me, and then, he nodded, “Okay, we’re a couple. But I’m not cementing this and making love to you for the first time when there are people outside in the apartment. I’m damn sure not letting anyone hear the sounds you make when I make you come. That’s for me and me alone.”

And then, he had his lips on mine, kissing me, ravaging me.

I was all here for the dominance.

The control.

Matter of fact, I finally got to experience that wetness that women talk about when they’re turned on.

Oh, the magic of his kiss.

Marcus

I knew she was breathy from the kiss I laid on her, and her lips were puffy as I led her out of her bathroom and into her living room.

“So, you’re his woman now?” Knox asked Scarlett.

She looked up at me, and then smiled, then looked at Knox and nodded, “Yes. And he’s mine. Only mine. I’ll cut a bitch.”

Knox and Fiona both smiled, showing they got it.

Leaning down, I pressed my nose in her hair and whispered, “Noted.”

Thirty minutes later the bond between the dog, whose name is Kalani was cemented.

It was almost as if it was kismet.

Scarlett moved, and Kalani moved.

Best fucking four grand I ever fucking spent.

We were sitting there, Scarlett was rubbing between Kalani's ears, who was a Lycan Shephard, when Knox tilted his head at Scarlett, and asked, "You're not scared of me?"

I was so proud of her when she shook her head, "No. Because of three things. One, I think your woman could drop you if you made a move, it's in the way you look at her. You wouldn't do a thing if she told you not to."

Fiona smiled and nodded.

"Second, with Marcus here, I don't have to be afraid. He would never bring anyone near me that could hurt me." She figured that out at the game.

A zealous fan had skirted the security guards and crowded into her. I dropped him so fast and then threatened him with bodily harm if he ever came near her again.

And third, this dog keeps growling at you every time you move closer to me."

"Good. That's what she's supposed to do." Fiona smiled and then clapped her hands.

Ten minutes later we were walking the two of them out of her apartment when Knox stopped, looked at Scarlett, and asked, "Know a man hurt you? Want his name."

She smiled at him, then said something that I never saw coming, never in my fucking life, "My dad took care of it. You might know him."

I watched as Knox's body went tense, and then he moved in front of Fiona, "Yeah?"

She smiled, "My dad knows Fiona too. He said the two of you were good people."

Knox relaxed but barely then asked, "Who's your dad?"

"He's the road captain of Soulless Outlaw's MC. Grenade."

Then, Knox's body relaxed, "Know your dad. Didn't know he had a daught..."

Fiona whipped around him and then asked, "Wait... are you the one who set her hair on fire because you thought it would be cool to light the bonfire with your hair hanging down on the side of her face?"

Scarlett didn't say a word, she simply moved and then buried her face in my chest.

I wrapped her in my arms, and then smiled, then whispered in her hair, "You're fucking adorable."

And neither one of us saw them leave because the moment she lifted her head from my chest, neither one of us could stop ourselves. My hands were on her, grabbing her ass, lifting her up, and pressing her mouth to mine. Her hands were trailing over every inch of my skin she could touch.

Walking her to the wall, and kissing her lips, it was a wonder my muscles never protested, almost as if they were soothed because she was in my arms.

Thirty minutes later, I bit off a curse when my alarm went off telling me it was time to head home so I could rest up before the game.

Once I set her down on her feet, I made sure she was stable enough, she started snorting.

Shaking my head, I said, "Before I go, here," I told her as I pulled out the paperwork from my back pocket I already had filed, "What's this?"

"I cleared it with the administration. You take her everywhere. You suffer from PTSD. And I want you always protected. She can do that."

I got a goodbye kiss all rolled up into a thank you kiss.

So, what if that made me over an hour late to my place?

I had just placed my bags in my SUV to head to the tarmac to get on the plane when I looked up at the sound of a man's voice.

"Your name Marcus DuPointe?" I looked at the man who was leaning up against a motorcycle.

I snorted, "Yeah. What fucking of it?"

He stood up then and walked closer to me, then when he was about twenty feet from me, he stopped, "You've been dating Scarlett."

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at the man. I didn't know who this fucker was, but no way in hell was I setting her up for a damn thing.

"Know Knox and Fiona. Know what she does. Know there's only one reason you reached out to them."

I nodded. Just nodded.

"Thank you. You ever need me, I'm there."

"Still ain't told me who the fuck you are," I told him.

He smirked, "Name's Grenade. But she told you my name when she told Knox that I know him and Fiona."

And that one statement caused me to uncross my arms, and then I stepped forward and offered him my hand.

He looked down at it, then at me, and shook it. "Honor to meet you. Scarlett really is one of a kind."

He dropped my hand, nodded, then turned and started walking away but not before he tossed over his shoulder, "Glad you recognize that, had you not, I'd hate to have to kill you."

I took the threat for what it was, a promise.

Luckily, I wasn't some scared pussy motherfucker.

Shaking my head I turned and headed back to my car, but stopped when Grenade called out from his bike, "Marcus?"

I stopped, then turned back to look at him, “Know who you are, know what your brother was accused of. Don’t think I need to say, but I’m going to anyway. You hurt her; they’ll never find the body after I have every cell of your skin burnt off by a blow torch. Then, I’ll go after your whole family. We clear?”

I nodded, “Know you should have found her sooner. You ever not come when she needs you, I got friends in low places. I know who to call.”

Unbeknownst to me, that was how I got her father’s permission to ask her to marry me when the time was right.

Chapter 16

Scarlett

The past five weeks have felt like something written out of a freaking *Danielle Steele* novel meets *Nicholas Sparks*, meets *Kristen Ashley*, a few of my favorite authors.

And what I mean by that, well, it all started right after the storm scared me, and he came over.

Honestly, if I hadn't lived it. If I hadn't experienced it. I never would have believed any of it was possible.

How did he know?

How did he know exactly what to do to calm me down?

And when I asked him that morning after we woke up still in the tub, me laying atop his big body, his monster erection pressed into my thigh, my comforter still lying atop our bodies.

“Because, with you, I just go with my gut. Seems like I was made for you. Don't it?”

And that was when he pressed a kiss on my forehead, then walked out of the bathroom and closed the door.

After I had done what I needed to do, I opened the door, stepped out of the bathroom, teeth brushed, and hair wrangled.

Then he used it.

But not before he got up from my bed, walked over to me, his duffle bag in one hand, his other hand spanned my hip, and I knew he was referring to me trying to let him use the bathroom first earlier.

“You matter to me. I'll be damned I take care of myself before I take care of you. And Shortcake, that's in all things,” and with that, the big lumbering giant, closed the bathroom

door, his duffle making a resounding smack when I heard it hit the tile.

All that week, we spent time together.

And the week that followed that, and that week... Well, that was when I thought we had become an us.

He had asked me to go to his home game, I never told him I was planning to go anyway but he surprised me after work with a ticket to sit in the box. In the family box.

The game had been scheduled to come on at four in the afternoon. However, due to a massive thunderstorm, the game was postponed, and the players were free to either sit in the locker room or go to the family box.

Apparently, Daemon had been shocked when Marcus followed him and Braydon out.

And he made it known just how shocked he was when I overheard their entire conversation from where I sat next to Aliyah, who had remembered me from the hospital, on that fateful day.

Marcus

The past five weeks... hell, they really have been the time of my life.

And that was all thanks to one person.

However, there was one person that I was seriously willing to end my eighteen-year-long friendship with.

Daemon, my asshole of a best friend.

It all happened when there was a game delay due to a massive thunderstorm that had rolled in. The weather had forecasted that it would be over our area by three in the afternoon.

However, they had been wrong. They hadn't foreseen a different front pushing in, making it last longer, and making it worse.

And not only did the weather mess with my mood, but for the first time, I was grateful. Because she was up in the family box.

And as I followed Daemon and Braydon out, much to their amazement, I wanted them to walk faster so I could get to her sooner.

All it took was one conversation for me to about cave in to the urge to pound my fist into my best friend's face for the way he had treated her.

See, it all started when we entered the family box, my eyes immediately scanned for her, and when I found her talking to Aliyah, I smiled and then headed that way.

Bypassing Aliyah who was getting the explanation from Daemon, I dropped to my haunches in front of Scarlett.

“Hey honey,” she said with a wide smile on her face.

I winked at her and then took her in wearing my jersey.

My god, I was right, I really would have given anything to see her in my jersey.

“It looks good on you.” I told her.

She winked, “Yeah? Well, the name on the back of this jersey sure does something to me.”

“Okay, just who is this woman? Never seen her before. She better not be another fucking Tonya.” Ignoring the asshole, I simply smiled at her.

“You need another hoodie of mine?” I asked her as I ran my fingers through the frays on the cuffs of the sleeves.

“If you have one you can part with, then yeah?”

“Doesn't she know he can run to the souvenir shop and get her one? Or better yet, she can run there and get one herself?”

Scarlett's eyes widened at that, and then when I lost her eyes, I growled.

Leaning forward, I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck, pulled her mouth to mine, and pressed a kiss to her lips.

“Be right back,” I told her softly. Using a tone so that she would know I would never hurt her, no matter how mad I was.

Then I released her, stood up, placed my hand on the back of Daemon’s neck, and squeezed. Hard.

“Let’s you and I go over there and have a little talk.” And then, I didn’t wait for a response. No, I led him, forcefully, over to an area that was unoccupied.

Once we made it to where we wouldn’t be overheard, or at least I thought, I didn’t realize how good a woman’s hearing was.

Narrowing my eyes at him I asked, “Want to tell me what your fucking problem is?”

He knocked my hand off the back of his neck, got in my face, and asked, “Brother, the fuck is your problem?”

“My problem is that no brother of mine would ever talk that way about my woman. That’s my fucking problem.”

He narrowed his eyes, “Come again?”

“You fucking heard me. Brother. Not once, not fucking once did I question Aliyah or your motives with her. No, I had her back. Any time she fucking needed it. And what do you do? Huh? You aim at the person you think she is. So, fucking what if you never met her. I fucking have. Five fucking years ago.” I bit out.

He growled, “Brother, never seen you with a woman. Not even Tonya. So, excuse the fuck out of me for being protective of you.”

I shook my head, “I get it. I do. But that protectiveness should have kicked in after you spoke to her and asked me about her. But fucking before.”

He sighed, realized he was still in my face, then stepped back, “Okay. I’m sorry. you’re right. Now, tell me about her.”

I scoffed, “Fuck you. Not telling you a goddamn thing about her. Not with the way you acted. Here’s a hint. I’m not the one you need to be apologizing to.” And with that, I walked away from him and headed back to my Shortcake.

Kneeling down in front of her, I smiled, and before I could open my mouth, she looked up from my eyes, narrowed hers, and looked over my shoulder, “You ever get in his face like that again, I might be smaller than you, but I got big friends. And they don’t mind having blood on their hands. You understand me?”

Aliyah chimed in then, “I had to hold her down, Daemon. Don’t ever do that again.”

Then I heard Daemon, “Promise. I won’t do it again. And I’m sorry. Never seen him with another woman. It was uncalled for. Even more so when I don’t know you. It was wrong.”

Scarlett shook her head, “You don’t know me, no. But we have met before.”

Daemon seemed puzzled, “Nah, don’t think so.”

She leaned forward, wrapped her arms around my shoulders, and said, “Once, we met when Crew had a cold. His nose was running, and I had a pack of tissues on me. The second time we met, you were out getting milk and bananas and some woman bumped into you which caused a pile of green peppers to fall onto the floor. I helped you pick them up, and you said thanks for not hitting on me. Do you remember what I said?”

I looked over my shoulder and saw Daemon’s mouth dropping open, then looking at me, then back at her and he smiled, wide, “You told me my skin was too light. My eyes weren’t the right shade of hazel, and I didn’t have a beard that could make a woman scream.”

I snorted then looked at Scarlett, and lifted my brow, but she missed it, all of it. She was still looking at Daemon, smirked, then said, “The third time we met was right outside of Marcus’s hospital room once he woke up from surgery.”

I heard Daemon chuckle, “Gotcha. Remember you now. You were talking about my boy here, weren’t you?”

Scarlett didn’t even bother to look ashamed, “Yeah, you even commented about my hoodie that day in the grocery store.”

“Well, I’ll be. Forgive me, my lady. I’m Daemon Campbell, you are?” That was when he held out his hand for her to shake.

She let go of my shoulder, and offered her hand to him, “I’m Scarlett McKinney. And even though we haven’t broached the Tonya subject yet, I would never be after him for his money. I make a good living, and I’ll be making a better one in just a few short months. I even tried to pay him back for a few things and got growled at.”

“Did you do the thing I told you to do?” Aliyah asked her. I knew what she was asking her.

Scarlett smiled, looked at me then winked, “Nope, didn’t have to.”

I grinned.

An hour later we were finally out on the field.

Four hours later we were in the showers and even though the conditions we played in were terrible, we came away with the win.

Scarlett

Seeing him walking out of the locker room, after the conversation I had with Aliyah, I couldn’t help myself.

I let go of her hand and ran.

Marcus luckily saw me coming, braced his feet, opened his arms, smiled freaking wide, and then I was

jumping into them. Wrapping my legs around his waist, my arms going around his shoulders.

He winked at me, and looked down at my lips, silently asking for what he wanted.

Smiling wide, I gave my lips to his. Softly at first, but my Marcus... he just didn't do soft. No. Not at all.

"Holy shit," I jumped in Marcus's arms when I heard Daemon say that.

"You weren't kidding." Another voice sounded but I paid them no mind.

"How'd you get here?" He asked me as he ignored them as well and started walking out of the tunnel ignoring everyone with me still wrapped up in his arms.

I grinned, "Uber."

He winked, "Good. Love having you as my shotgun rider."

I smiled, "One condition?"

He stopped, gave me his eyes, and said, "Name it."

I smiled even wider, "We stop and get some burgers. That finger food crap they have wasn't enough."

He chuckled, "Really are the owner of my heart."

Taking in a deep breath, I whispered, "Takes one to know one."

That was how we stood there until someone called out, "Get a room!"

We were in his car not even five minutes later.

Ten minutes after that we stopped for burgers.

Fifteen minutes after that, seeing we were about to get off the highway, I looked over at Marcus, the bag of food in my lap, taking in a deep breath, I said, "Marcus?"

He looked from the road to me, winked, then back to the road, “Yeah, Shortcake.”

It was now or never, sure, five weeks of being around him wasn't a lot of time, but when you've waited. When you found the one, time really didn't matter. Did it?

Looking at his handsome face, taking in all that was him, knowing that he was all mine, so... I took the plunge, “I want you to take me home, and fuck the ever-loving hell out of me.”

He didn't reply.

He didn't say a word.

I watched as his chest rose and fell...

Chapter 17

Scarlett

He still didn't say a word, no, he simply kept one hand on the steering wheel, and the other was resting atop my thigh.

We drove on, him not saying a word.

And for some reason, that didn't cause my nerves to go all haywire.

So, there I sat, in the seat beside the man of my dreams, and waited.

He still didn't speak until we were getting off the highway, then turning right.

And not left.

Left would have taken us to my apartment.

And right... well... right will take us to his house.

As soon as we pulled into his driveway, he removed his hand from my thigh, and then put the SUV in park, and cut off the ignition.

I watched as his chest rose and fell again, and that was when I heard his deep rasp, "You gotta promise me one thing, then I'll give you everything your heart desires."

Oh, this big man of mine, "And... if I just want you?"

"Then you'll have me." That was when he turned in his seat and locked his hazel-colored eyes with mine, "I will be damned happy, fucking deliriously so to take you home and fuck the ever-loving shit out of you. But two conditions, I'll fuck you anytime you want me to, but first, I want to make love to you."

I was panting now.

I knew he saw it.

And when I simply nodded, he said, “Words, Shortcake. Gotta have the words.”

“Take me inside. Make me lose all sense of reason. Make me yours. Take what’s been yours. Something I’ve never given to anybody.”

There was something working behind his hazel eyes.

Something I couldn’t see, and then as he climbed out of the car, his mumbled words had me smiling from ear to fucking ear, “If I’d known that, never would’ve stuck my dick into another woman’s body.”

I was still smiling from ear to ear when he rounded the SUV, opened my door, stepped in close, undid my seatbelt, gripped my hips, and moved them.

Automatically I opened my legs for him, but he didn’t come closer, no, he stared into my eyes, brought one of his large hands to the side of my face, his thumb rubbing over the apple of my cheek, “Would’ve waited had I known what reward I’d be getting.”

“Reward?” I asked him softly, hoping I heard him right.

“Yeah, always believed in a few things. One, my brother has my back in all things. Two, I was put on this earth to play football. Three, got great parents. And fourth, I’m amending number two, I was put on this earth to be your man. Now, knowing that, waited for you, sliding my untouched dick into your wet pussy, the man above could call me home right after. Cause I promise you, Shortcake. I’d have already seen what heaven feels like.”

“You know, normally when a woman asks a man to fuck the living hell out of her, she doesn’t expect him to give her words that make her want to burn the whole world to a crisp just to have his touch branded on her skin.”

“That right?”

Biting my lip, I waited.

And oh boy, I didn't have to wait for long.

No, he grinned devilishly, and then, without bracing myself, he had my whole body flipped over his shoulder, kicking his door shut and striding to his house.

Two steps at a time, he vaulted up them with my body thrown over his shoulder.

And once he finally stopped, nothing but light hardwood floors graced my eyes.

I was placed on my feet, his fingertips going underneath my chin, lifting my head until he had my eyes, and then he whispered, "You sure, Shortcake?"

I nodded.

"You accept all of me?"

I nodded.

"Words, Shortcake."

Therefore, I didn't hesitate to give him the words, "I understand, Marcus. Give me all of you. Don't hold nothing back." And once he had my words, words I would forever mean.

He was so close I could see those amazing flecks of amber in his eyes.

Slowly, carefully, he started to lift my shirt over my head, all the while whispering, "God, if you have to take me now, just wait until I've fully claimed my woman."

I smiled softly up at him once he had my shirt over my head.

Then he did something I wasn't fucking expecting, he knelt on the ground at my feet. That was something I never thought I would ever see a man do. Ever.

Carefully he placed one of my hands on his shoulder and then proceeded to remove one shoe, and then the other, followed my socks.

Then he unbuttoned my jeans and lowered them off my hips, his hands grazing over my ass cheeks. Slowly as the fabric moved down my legs, his hands trailed with it.

Once I stepped out of my jeans, I grinned.

And then, I did something I've always wanted to do, I pounced.

Before he knew what was happening, I grabbed the sides of his shirt and pulled.

Buttons went flying, his gorgeous tatted-up mocha skin stared back at me.

His smile, fucking breathtaking, then he winked.

Oh my....

I was sailing through the air in my lacey black bra and panties.

“You wanted all of me, warned you. I'm dominant in the bedroom. Sexy as fuck you ripping my shirt off. Might let you do it again. But only if I say so.”

He waited for me to give him the words, therefore, I didn't delay, “Know all of that. Want you. Only you.”

“Say stop, and I'll stop. Might kill me, but I will.”

Giving him the words, I said, “I know Marcus. I trust you.”

“Hands, either side of you, flat on the bed. Don't move them for nothing. No matter fucking what.”

I nodded, “Got you, Marcus.”

Then, I placed my hands flat atop his grey duvet, and then my back rose off the bed... he had lowered one of the cups from my bra to expose my nipple.

I was already seeing stars and knew that most women would have said, if I'd known this was waiting for me, I never would have waited like I did. But I wasn't them. And they weren't Marcus.

You're damn right I would have waited for him, no matter how long it took for him to get to me, and even more so when he showed the same attention to my other nipple.

And then... as his mouth worked, I felt his hand sliding down my belly, slipping into my panties... and then... well... I forgot how to breathe as his finger rolled over the most hidden part of me.

He let go of my nipple, looked up at me, grinned, and then slowly worked his way down my body, all the while I fought control over my hands that wanted nothing more than to run them all over his body.

How did my underwear come off?

He removed them with his teeth, pulling them down my legs, his finger circling my clit now, and then I let out a mew.

“Don't you dare come until my mouth is on you Shortcake. Only place that goes is in my mouth or on my cock. Nowhere fucking else.” And then before I could say a word, his mouth was there instead of his finger.

One, two, three, four flicks of his tongue, and my back arched.

Yes.

Delicious.

Heaven.

“Marcus,” I gasped as I felt one thick finger entering me his head was no longer where it was supposed to be. Instead, he was looking up at me, watching, taking in everything about me.

As his eyes devoured all that was his, his finger moved in and out of me, slowly.

Causing my entire body to start to heat.

Wonderful.

Miraculous.

Then... that one finger became two, and then... well... I couldn't help myself.

My hands moved of their own accord, I needed his mouth back, his tongue back. Do close. Before they could get to his skin, he whispered dangerously, "Hands, either side of you. Don't fucking move them."

I didn't hear a single word he said, I wanted more. I wanted his face pressed even further into my pussy, and my hands showed that they were of the same accord.

Just as my fingers brushed his skin, he whispered, "Oh, my girl wants to be bad? Is that right?"

I knew I heard the words he said, but the way my body was burning up with need, everything went right over my head.

His tongue was back.

Yes.

One. Two. The... He suddenly stopped. Jackknifed off the bed and then disappeared into the closet.

What the hell?

"Marcus?" I called out, needing more. So much more.

He came back moments later with a red crimson tie, and then without a word he grabbed my hands, bound them, and then raised them atop my head and whispered, "Move them again, I'll tan your ass."

Oh my.

He wasn't kidding about being dominant.

I didn't move.

I didn't say a word.

Hell, I didn't even breathe, so when his mouth returned back to my clit, three fingers going in simultaneously, I tried. I tried so hard to hold it in.

But the way his dominant side excited me.

Elicited me.

I couldn't.

He knew it.

He felt it.

Not even seconds later he whispered, "Come for me, Shortcake."

And then... I came.

My very first orgasm was given to me by a man... a man that I planned on being in the pew every Sunday and giving thanks to the man above for making him.

He lifted from my legs, I watched enraptured as he brought his fingers to his mouth and licked them clean. I was so turned on by that, that I missed everything else that was happening.

And once he was satisfied, he stood up.

And... holy shit.

My man wasn't endowed.

No, we was fucking gifted.

It stood tall, thick, and proud.

The head of his cock looked angry and swollen.

I tilted my head to the side, "Marcus?"

He smirked, "Yeah, it'll fit."

I smiled, "Good thing. Know I'm wet enough from your wicked mouth. But when did you take off your pants?"

He grinned, then moved up my body, his warm skin brushing over mine, "While you were watching my mouth. You're not too sore later, I'll eat you for my midnight snack."

Just as the last word left his mouth, he had his lips on mine, his cock trailing between my legs, and I didn't hesitate

to kiss him back.

My tongue moved with his, tasting myself on his lips.

When he pulled away, he rested his forehead atop mine, and there he whispered, “You ready.”

“Made for you, Marcus,” I said softly as I smiled up at his handsome face.

His eyes heated, “You were made for me, yeah, but I was born for you.”

“Where are you going?” I moaned as he moved to the side of my body.

“Condom. When you’re...” Bringing my bound wrists to his face I placed two fingertips to his mouth.

“You said you were giving me all of you, right?”

He froze, and then he slowly nodded.

I swallowed, “Do you trust me?”

He swallowed in return, “Trust you more than another person on this planet.”

“Even Van?” I asked.

He nodded while staring into my eyes, allowing me to see every ounce of truth in those words, “Yeah, Shortcake. Fuck yeah.”

“I want all of you. Bare. I take my birth control pills religiously. I want nothing coming in between us.”

His voice was even more raspy when he whispered, “Do that, get inside of you, feel you, I’ll never let you go.”

“Even if you do, who says I’ll let you? Been in love with you for almost five years Marcus Winston DuPointe. You’re my pulse.”

His eyes softened as he moved his big body back atop mine, “If I’m your pulse, then my every breath is yours.”

I smiled and then placed my hands back behind my head, and just as I did that, I felt his cock move through my lips.

And then, he pressed a hot kiss on my lips, there against them, he whispered, “Eyes, Shortcake. On me. The whole time. I want you to know just who is inside your perfect fucking body I’ll never complain about dropping to my knees for.”

“Marcus, please,” I moaned against his mouth and then forgot what I was saying please for as I felt the lightest brush from his fingertips down my side.

Then I felt the head of his cock at my entrance, slowly, he started to push in, and I swear my eyes almost crossed. So did his.

He pulled out slowly, then back in.

Getting in there inch by fucking inch.

“Oh Marcus,” I moaned as he pulled out of me and then back inside of me.

“Eyes. Shortcake. Whole fucking time.” I nodded. “You ready?”

I nodded again.

“Sorry,” he whispered, just like that, he pushed past my barrier and then settled himself deeply inside of me.

His eyes were on mine, and I could tell it was taking everything not to close them. “Oh. Holy. fuck. Me. Jesus. Fucking. Christ.”

Stretching me.

Filling me, I moaned, “Too fucking right.”

His skin was coating a light sheen of sweat, “Scarlett, if I’m dreaming, don’t wake me up.

“I won’t because I wouldn’t want to leave this dream. Ever.”

At my words, he winked, “You okay?”

I nodded.

“You sure?”

I grinned, “You made love to me, Marcus. Now, I want you to fuck the ever-loving shit out of me.”

He nodded, but first, “Never cause you harm ever again. Rather lose a nut than hurt you.”

I smiled, “Thank you, Marcus. Now. Fuck me.”

He winked, pulled out, his eyes never left mine, and then, he slammed inside my body so forcefully I heard the headboard hit against the wall.

Again.

And again.

And again.

“Marcus.” I moaned.

His eyes bore down into mine as he pulled out and slammed inside of me, all the while gritting out each word with a powerful thrust. “Don’t. Wake. Me. Fucking. Up.”

That was when I felt it, he had tilted his hips, his hand going underneath my ass when I felt it, the heat, the searing fire, I moaned, “Marcus... please... I need... I need to... to come.”

“Won’t make you wait. Cause I don’t see how the hell I’ve been able to hold it back. But next time, I’ll make you hold onto that orgasm. And when I tell you to come, I want to feel the very essence of you coating my dick. Making me yours. Claiming me. In every way that matters.

He just buried himself fully inside of me and had this experience not been as emotional as it was now, well, when he whispered what he did next, tears trailed out of my eyes.

His dark hazel-colored eyes looked down into mine, and there he whispered, “You color my fucking world.”

He pulled out of me and then moved back in, and once he was seated fully inside of me, I whispered, “You’re my pulse.”

His eyes widened.

He knew what that meant.

I had told him the story about my grandmother and my grandfather.

They met while he was overseas. She was a nurse.

He knew the moment he saw her; she would be his.

And she was, for one year, and then... cancer took her.

He always said that he wouldn’t trade that one year for anything, because he had everything when he had her in his arms.

And then... as those steel arms of his tightened even further around me, I blew out a blissful sigh.

I didn’t know how he did it, but he shifted us, all the while still being inside of me.

Inhaling deeply after he made love to me, I asked, “Do me a favor?”

His body was wrapped tightly around mine, his cock still inside of me, his face was buried in my hair, but I heard him nonetheless, “Name it, Shortcake.”

Turning my head so I could see his face, he lifted his own, and the moment I had his eyes I demanded, “Never shave your beard and you can have access to me anytime.”

He winked, “That’s a condition I don’t have to hesitate to agree to.”

“Now I love you being inside of me, but I need a shower, and then... if you want a midnight snack, my body will be ready.”

Before I knew what was happening, his cock was out of my pussy, his arms were around my body, hauling me to the

shower at a fast clip.

I was laughing so hard all the way into the shower that had it not been for him keeping his eyes on me, I would have walked into the glass shower door.

What did he do, he chuckled.

That was it. He just chuckled.

And then he pressed a kiss on the tip of my nose, then whispered, “Wouldn’t change a single fucking thing about you, Shortcake.”

Chapter 18

Marcus

As I lay there, Scarlett curled up to my side, her long red hair still somewhat damp from the shower we had taken together, the scent of her shampoo drifting up to my nostrils.

I inhaled deeply, wanting that smell to remain with me for all time.

Honey. Lavender. Cinnamon.

And then, it happened.

She rolled over.

Carefully, and quietly, I got up, moved through the apartment and to the thermostat, and turned it down.

Then, after I made sure a second time that the place was safe and secure, I headed back to my room, got back under the covers, and wrapped my body around hers.

All the while ensuring she was covered so she wouldn't be cold.

Thankfully, she didn't make me feel like an asshole, not like my ex-wife did any time she felt the chill in her bedroom when she did come home... no... don't you dare go there. That fucking woman has no place in this bed with her, or in my head at all for that matter. And no way is her kind of stink touching this woman.

Over my cold, dead, body.

Closing my eyes, I buried my face in her neck as she moved backward, further into my body.

The feel of her.

The smell of her.

It all wrapped around me like a warm embrace.

I finally allowed the sleep that had been tugging at my tired body after the game to come calling.

I always thought that Aliyah was the standard I needed to hold women to.

But I couldn't have been more wrong.

Then... Before I fell asleep, she muttered the sweetest words I'd ever heard.

And I knew that they would forever be embedded deep inside my brain.

And... if the unthinkable happened, and I lost my memory, I further buried this moment, and those words, down to the bottom of my brain, so I would never lose it.

"Love me some of you, Marcus."

Smiling, I curled her further into my body, and then the moment she really went lax I gave her the words right back, "Love me some of you too, Shortcake."

And then... just like that, I closed my eyes in utter bliss and then fell straight to sleep.

Anytime while I was on the road, I loved getting pictures from Scarlett.

Like this one picture that was now my screensaver, no, not my lock screen. I would be the one in orange if anyone ever saw it. She had taken it as a good morning picture for me. Her hair was splayed out all around her. The sleep shirt she was in was lowered off of one shoulder, her eyes looked sleepy, and her full lips looked plump.

She was my favorite vision.

One thing I was absolutely certain of if the unthinkable happened and my sight was lost to me, her image was one

thing I would use to tether me when everything got extremely hard.

Shaking my head on the plane as the wheels touched down on the tarmac, the photo she had sent me was of her kneeling next to Kalani in an office outside of the Neonatal department.

And yes, I never thought dogs could smile.

But Kalani sure did.

If you've never looked on Google and searched for a dog smiling, where they show all their teeth, then you are truly missing out.

Me – *I can't get over that she does that. I just chuckled and got looked at.*

Shortcake – *Oh, you poor baby.*

I should have known.

Fucking should have known.

Once we won our game, sitting in front of the locker I had used, I tagged my phone and smiled, because I didn't turn it to Do Not Disturb

Shortcake – *You kicked ass. Hell yes.*

Shortcake – *But what the fuck with that call! That wasn't an incomplete pass, he had both feet down on the field before he fell out of bounds. don't they know his toes are indeed attached to his feet? And... he kept control of the ball.*

Shortcake – *Will Culpepper get a fine for shoulder-checking the ref that made that bullshit call? ROTFLMAO.*

Shortcake – *Okay, so I know I can trust you, and we have that level of trust, but can you please never get a tattoo on your stomach like number sixty-eight has? Just... ew.*

Grinning, I texted her back and knocked out the shit that needed to be addressed so I could really focus on what we needed to discuss.

Me – *Nah. The ref went back over the footage and apologized to Culpepper.*

Me – *Want to tell me why you were looking at another man?*

Shortcake – *You telling me that while you're on the road you don't check out the talent that's being shoved in your face?*

Me – *Okay, Shortcake. You asked for it. Here's my address, the code for the gate, and the code for the alarm.*

Me – *Your ass in my bed. Naked. Spread eagle. You're not there, you won't like it.*

Then... the moment the plane touched down, knowing how naughty she could be, I unlocked my phone and praised the man above for the screen protector I got a few weeks ago.

It made it so the person beside, in front, or behind me couldn't see a damn thing.

And I was glad they couldn't.

Because of the picture, I just clicked on... yeah... I might be getting a few speeding tickets today.

Thankfully, the way I went home, I didn't get any tickets.

I do know that Daemon, Culpepper, and Braydon did.

But that was neither here nor there as I pounded into her from behind.

We had started off with her on her back, but wanting to punish her a little more, I had pulled out of her, gripped her by her hips, and flipped her over to her knees.

Her bound wrists with my crimson tie looked wonderful against her pale skin and my crisp white sheets.

Growling as I plunged inside of her, “Don’t come.”

Sweat was trickling down her back, leaning forward as I plunged into her yet again. I licked the trail of sweat and saw the goosebumps on her skin, she moaned, “Marcus...”

Pulling out of her and plunging even harder into tight wet heat I growled, “Don’t. Come.”

She pushed her ass back and into me, and cried, “Whhyyyy?”

“Because you were a naughty girl. don’t. You. Dare. Fucking. Come.”

As soon as I felt her start to shake, I pulled out of her, flipped her onto her back again, and then plunged back into her, she locked her eyes with mine.

Lust. Confusion. Want. Need. Desire.

Those were the five emotions staring up at me in those ice-blue eyes of hers.

“You ready to come Shortcake?”

She writhed on the bed under me, “Yes, Marcus. Please.”

“You knew I wasn’t going to let you come on your hands and knees, right?”

She nodded, bit her lip as her back bowed off the bed, “Yeah, I knew that.”

I growled as I pulled out of her and then slammed inside, “Why?”

She moaned and then smiled, “Because you want to be looking into my eyes when you come. You want me to see who brings my entire world to a standstill and gives me stars.”

Winking down at her, I kissed her and pulled back, felt that tingle, then bit down on my cheek. No way in hell would I dare come before my woman did.

Over my cold dead body.

Once I had it somewhat backed off, I pulled out of her, then gritted out, “Come, Scarlett. Come for me.”

And then I plunged deep into her body, feeling that first ripple of her pussy, I pulled out and then slammed deep.

That was when I felt it and stilled.

Almost as if it was choreographed, or it was the universe really showing she was my soul mate, we both said in unison, “Couples who come together, fucking stay together.”

Chuckling, I breathed out, pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose, and then said in a low tone so she couldn’t mistake any words coming out of my mouth, “And in response to your stupid ass text message. One, yes, I’m glad you know you can

trust me, and I can trust you. Two, why the fuck would I ever check out the talent that's out there when I have everything I could ever want and more waiting for me at home. Three, in case you didn't know where you are, that's my home. Four, in case all of that didn't enlighten you. I won't be putting anything on my body that you're not okay with."

Tears trailed out of her eyes and down her cheeks... then... well... she showed me in exacting detail how much my words touched her.

"You will be doing that again. I'm thinking daily." She grinned from where she was between my legs and then gave my cock one last lick from base to tip.

Arriving at my house after taking her to work on Tuesday morning because I had picked her up yesterday from work, I walked into the master bedroom to check out the improvements I had made.

The contractor I chose to work with had designed an amazing closet for Aliyah in their home and I wanted almost the same exact thing. Almost.

Turns out that money can buy happiness.

The house I purchased when we moved back was a five-bedroom with four-and-a-half baths.

And needing to cleanse the whole house I had them move the top floor around.

Since the bedrooms were decent-sized on the eastern side of the house, they made one of the bedrooms into two rooms.

That meant that on the western side of the house, they took out the closet, and moved it to the room beside the

master. And they made another improvement, one I couldn't wait to show Scarlett.

Now, as I stand here, staring at the closet, his side, and her side. Her side had a display case for her jewelry, and shelves for her shoes, handbags, and anything she wanted to put in here.

Now, we just needed to talk about moving her from her apartment and into my home.

Walking down the steps I really thought about going ahead and moving her in while she was at work. But... knowing that with my career, she would need to feel that she was contributing to everything. So... once we had that talk, she would be moved in here.

And I may have overstepped in buying four dog beds that were strategically placed around the house. Slightly.

Making myself a sandwich, when my phone pinged, I tagged my phone from my sweats and looked at the screen.

I almost choked when I read her text.

Me – *You're telling me that a woman thought she was in labor because she had gas pains?*

Shortcake – *Yep. I can't make this shit up. And then... when she was being wheeled out, she saw a woman in active labor and heard the screams. She shook her head and apologized.*

Daemon – *Yo! Are you coming over to watch the film with the coach and the guys tonight?*

Me – *Yeah. As soon as I finish my sandwich.*

Culpepper – *Thank fuck for the antibiotics. You know what I'm saying.*

Instead of replying to him, I decided on slapping him upside his stupid ass head when I saw him.

Taking the last bite of my sandwich I tossed the paper towel in the trash can, headed to my room, and pulled on a

long-sleeved t-shirt, then went out the door after locking my house.

On my way to my SUV, I texted Scarlett.

Me – Headed to Daemon’s house to watch some film for next week’s game with the team. Let me know when you get off. Be careful driving home.

Yeah, the moment I walked into their house and saw Culpepper, I slapped him upside the back of his head.

“Ow. What the fuck was that for?” I didn’t bother responding as I got my hugs from Crew, and a hug as well as a kiss on the cheek from Keeley.

Four hours later, I was commenting on a player we needed to look out for. He played right, but he did it dirty.

Shortcake - Damn but that was a long shift. Everyone and their mother decided it was time to have babies today. I’m home and in my pajamas.

I snorted and texted her back.

Me – Sorry, Shortcake.

When she didn’t reply, I tucked my phone back into my pocket.

Daemon had just come from outside after he tossed a bag of trash when he said, “Shit, storms getting bad outside a-fucking-gain, it wasn’t supposed to hit until later tonight.”

As I started to reach for my drink, I froze.

But not for long.

I jumped out of the recliner, ran to the front door, and was out of it, and in my SUV, as I raced the normal forty-five minutes it took to get to her place and cursed at all the people with their hazard lights flashing, going fifteen miles an hour in a forty-five.

I had my SUV rocking to a stop outside of her apartment. Slamming it in the park, I killed the engine and then raced up to her place.

I pulled my phone out and called her because I knew if I banged on her door, she would get even more scared.

Thankfully, she answered on the second ring, “He... hello?”

Sighing in relief, I said, “It’s me, I’m outside.”

It didn’t take nearly as long as the first time when she needed me during a storm.

Before I could even blink a second time, she opened the door and was in my arms before I could ask if she was all right.

And just as I stepped through her doorway, the growling started.

Best damn money, ever.

“Kalani, heel.” She whispered.

Fuck, but I missed this, and wasn’t that crazy, I just saw her this morning as I dropped her off at work, “Want me to take your mind off the storm outside?”

When she nodded her head, that’s just what I did.

“Marcus, come on. What is all this?” She asked me as I led her up the stairs on my back with a red tie around her eyes so she couldn’t see a damn thing.

“It’s a surprise, Shortcake,” I told her as I led her to the bedroom.

“Marcus, you big goober. I don’t need anything else.” I knew she would be retracting those words.

“Okay, sitting you down on your feet, don’t you dare remove that tie.” When she nodded, I placed my hands on either side of her hips and then walked her into the closet.

Once I had her where I wanted her, I leaned down and then whispered in her ear, “You ready?”

As soon as she nodded, I undid the tie and then said, “Check it out.”

She gasped as she saw the improvements to the closet.

As she checked out the drawers in the closet and the jewelry display case, she asked, “What is all this?”

I leaned a shoulder against the wall, “Well, all this is me using a bargaining chip of sorts.

She laughed, turned to face me, and asked, “And that is?”

I shrugged, not showing how fast my heart was beating, “You get all this, but you have to agree to move in with me.”

She sighed, “Marcus, didn’t you know? Home is wherever you are.”

She almost made tears form in my eyes, almost. Damn, but my woman was good.

I grinned then moved to her, “So, is that a, yes?”

She nodded, “Yeah, because I’ve been wanting to experience shower sex, and my shower is too small for your big body.”

I chuckled, “Ah, I see, you’re only with me and my house because of my shower?”

She grinned, “Yep! But not really. I’m with you because you are the kindest man I have ever known, and you go above and beyond if only to see me smile. And... because of that soft look you give me, and only me.”

I was about to grab the ring I had sitting in my nightstand and dropping to one knee right there, however, I had to ask someone for their permission first.

Instead, I said, “Now, open that door,” I tilted my head to the red-painted door.

She opened it and then gasped. I smiled and then followed her inside the room.

Where the old closet used to be was now her very own reading nook.

Complete with a purple chaise lounge chair, a side table with a lamp, and the walls were lined with bookshelves.

Leaning a shoulder against the jamb she ran her fingers over the chaise lounge and then over the books I already had up on the shelves.

She grinned, and then started laughing when she looked at the ladder, I had ready for her to use so she could reach the top shelf.

I shook my head, “You were saying?”

She smiled, then turned to me and said, “Okay, yeah, I need this.”

But it wasn't her words that had my breath catching, no, it was the fire in her eyes, and then, not even three breaths later, she was throwing herself at me.

Ten minutes later I had her back pressed to the wall, my finger rubbing her clit as I pounded into her.

Needless to say, her little reading nook was broken in. Thoroughly.

Chapter 19

Scarlett

“Damn, I really should have worn a smaller, more revealing shirt.” Some woman behind me said.

Another voice asked who sounded like she was majorly congested, but something told me, she wasn’t, “Why?”

That same first voice scoffed, “Because, how else am I going to be a Pro-Athlete’s wife if he can’t see the entire package.”

I chanced a look in the glass in front of me and smiled when I saw what she was wearing, she really was trying to show off all of her assets.

The men in Dad’s MC always say less is more, well, unless you’re a club bunny.

I snorted and then looked down at the screen on my phone when it buzzed with a text.

And I was shocked when I saw who it was, he never had his phone on during game time. Ever.

Marcus – *You here yet?*

Knowing the reason right there for his phone being on, making sure I made it here okay, that had me smiling.

Me – *Yep. Waiting in line now to hand them my ticket.*

Marcus – *I hate that. Why didn’t you use the express lane?*

Smiling, I thought about how to respond and knew just the thing to say.

He never hid his intentions.

Right from the beginning of us becoming an us.

Me – I'll use the express lane when I'm big as a house and have your son or daughter on my hip.

He was silent for a beat, but I didn't worry.

It was an amazing feeling to know that you can tell your significant other anything, and you know, you freaking trust in them that they understand. That no matter how crazy or outlandish you might be, they still love you. And I knew that Marcus loved me.

I might not have the words. But it's in his eyes every time he looks at me.

Marcus - You have no clue how happy you made me.

And just then, my phone rang in my hand, seeing the picture of the two of us smiling over a slice of pizza, I hit accept and then brought the phone to my ear.

Smiling, I looked at my blue Converse to match my jersey and said, "Hey, Honey."

He was silent for a second, and then I heard, "You'd really have my babies?"

Smiling, I nodded, "Yeah. I really would. And if that day does come, I'll welcome our son or daughter into this world with the widest smile on my face."

Again, he was silent for a beat, "Do me a favor?"

“Name it.” I said with a giggle as I heard the men in the locker room ribbing each other and talking about the other team’s players.

His deep rasp came over the line then, “Don’t give our babies my smile.”

I chuckled, “You are so bad.”

Immediately, he responded with, “Yeah, but you love it anyway.”

Grinning, I said, “Yeah, I really do.”

That same first voice said, “Do you think they have lower-cut tops at the souvenir shop?”

“What the fuck?” Marcus asked.

I giggled, “The girl behind me thinks that wearing a low-cut top is the way to become a pro athlete’s wife.”

He snorted, “Yeah, if she’s only after him for the money that is. Okay, gotta go, Shortcake.” I checked the time on my watch, yeah, he had to finish getting ready after warm-ups.

Chuckling, I whispered, “Kick ass, Marcus.”

“Always.” I smiled, lowered the phone, and saw that he already hung up.

Smiling, I stepped up to the window and handed the lady my ticket, she grinned and then said, “A Lot of people wearing his jersey.”

Before I could say a word to her as she scanned my ticket, that same first voice said, “Shit, maybe I should have worn his jersey, he’s the one I want to land anyway.”

I snorted, then wanted to smack the girl behind me and her friend, “Stacy, I know you want to marry a football player, but one, if everyone is wearing his jersey, you won’t stand out. And two, that top is really cute. You don’t need to spend rent money here.”

I rolled my eyes instead of slapping them, *you can’t fix stupid.*

The older woman looked at me as she handed me my ticket stub, “I see you know something those girls behind you don’t.”

Smiling, I simply shrugged my shoulders, “You are a smart woman. What I know is that I’m the only one who goes to sleep in his arms and wakes up in them, you have a nice day.”

The gasp and outrage landed squarely at my back as I walked to the steps that would lead me to my seat.

Following a rowdy group of guys, I smiled when I saw my section and then breathed in a sigh of relief.

Taking my seat, I took a picture of where I was sitting and sent it to Aliyah.

She and I had become friends, and I adored her son and daughter.

And seeing the way Marcus was with the two of them... well... that had my ovaries in high drive, and maybe they slipped into an even higher drive when I thought about how much extra he would be with his own kids.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, I smiled, and then... the moment the seats around me got taken, I looked

around and felt my jaw drop, “That’s why you said you had my ticket as an early birthday present.”

My dad looked down at me, winked, and then kicked his motorcycle boots up on the railing in front of us.

“My baby has the best, always. The best seats. The best dad in the world. And so far, an amazing man.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, feeling my temper start to flare, “How do you know that? You better not have run a check on him.”

He winked at me, “I didn’t have to, Pumpkin. The minute you called me about Knox and Fiona, I reached out to them a few days later. Then I met the man. Gotta say, anyone who takes my threat in stride and has the balls to threaten me right back, he’s fucking okay in my book.”

I snorted, “Really? Is that all it takes? For him to threaten you?”

And at his words, I immediately got all warm and fuzzy, “Yeah, ‘cause it shows he cares. He really fucking cares about you.”

Smiling, I leaned over the armrest and pressed a kiss on his cheek, “Love you, Daddy.”

He winked down at me, “Love you too, Pumpkin.”

I smiled and then looked at Snake, Scythe, Tyne, Jackal, Beast, and Hyde. I didn’t bother looking for the other brothers, Slayer, Magnum, Phantom, and Vulcan.

Slayer wouldn’t be caught dead at a place like this. Not because he hated football, no, because he doesn’t do well in

large crowds. If I was being honest, he didn't do well in any crowd. Actually, he didn't do well when the crowd was more than two people.

Magnum because the stadium wasn't really wheelchair friendly.

Phantom... well... he has a thing for not being touched. Ever. And nobody wanted to be in reaching vicinity to him when someone's skin slightly brushed against his. Ever.

Vulcan is the Vice President. Therefore, if Snake hadn't come today then Vulcan would have.

I looked back at Snake with a smile on my face, "Y'all all came?"

Snake winked at me, "Sure did. Gotta meet this man. And any man that pays for one of Fiona's dogs because he wants his woman safe, he's got my vote."

Just then, there was a piece of paper shoved in my periphery, *'Grenade didn't do a background check on him. He promised he wouldn't. But I didn't. He's okay. But he hurts you, I got land no one knows about.'*

Grinning, I looked at Tyne and nodded, and then over his shoulder, I saw those two same girls, and I couldn't believe that they both had seats right behind the guys.

And then the one in the low-cut top and blonde hair that was straightened to an inch of its life growled, literally growled, "Do you think we can switch seats with them?" she asked her friend who actually was dressed correctly for a game in a t-shirt, and shorts, then talked over her friend and said, "Besides it's not like she really sleeps with him. Did you see

her body? No one of his caliber could ever be interested in that.”

I narrowed my eyes on them, and then turned back in my seat, pulled up my phone, and then sent off a text.

Me – Know you only have a couple more minutes, but you’re not going to believe who’s sitting behind me.

Just then, Hyde leaned forward in his seat and asked, “We don’t like those two girls, do we?”

I shook my head, “No, the one dressed like a whore wants to be a football player’s wife.”

Jackal leaned in then and asked, “Your player?”

I nodded.

Jackal looked over his shoulder at the whore lookalike and said with zero emotion, “Not today, Karen.”

We were all silent for a beat and then, we all busted out laughing.

I also knew the friend was a good person even though she was friends with the whore lookalike when she whispered, but loud enough for us to hear, “I’ve heard about them. You don’t mess with them.”

The whore lookalike snorted, “What? Weekend warriors?”

The other saner friend, scoffed, “No. A one-percenter motorcycle club.”

Whore lookalike, gasped, “They let a gang in here?”

Growling, I'd had enough. I stood up, turned, and felt my dad's hand on the back of my thigh, squeezing it, telling me to calm down, and then my phone was shoved in my face.

Jerking back from it, I read the message.

Marcus – *The woman who wants to take your future job? I'll fix it.*

Reading that, I immediately calmed down and then took my seat.

Ten minutes later the band started, and then, the players were running on the field.

I was up in my seat clapping and cheering, my eyes scanning for number seventy-two.

And when my eyes landed on his jersey, I looked up at his helmet which I knew covered his handsome face.

He immediately came to the sideline, walked through a few of the guys, jumped up on something, pulled his helmet off, and then crooked his finger at me.

Grinning, huge, I moved to where he was then leaned down, placed my hand on the side of his face, his hand fisting in the back of my hair, and then... I gave him my mouth.

And then, yes, you guessed it, in a stadium that was jam-packed with around seventy thousand people, I let out a breathy moan as his tongue swept inside my mouth.

Once he swept his tongue a second time, then a third, he pulled away and then smirked when I made a pout.

Then I remembered who was behind me, and there against his lips, I whispered, "My dad and his brothers are

right behind me.”

He winked at me, looked around me, then locked eyes with someone and gave them a chin lift, then back to me, “Okay, I gotta go to work.”

Grinning, I leaned forward, pressed another kiss on his lips, then whispered, “Okay, go kick ass and take names. Try not to get hurt this time, I don’t like having to watch what I do when you’re a patient.”

With that, he started to lower himself back down.

And then, he stopped, lifted back up, and really loudly he said, “You can be my naughty nurse tonight in our bedroom. I’ll have a few bruises for you to kiss and soothe.”

Then, with another wink at me, he dropped down, put his helmet on, and headed to the sidelines to make the other team bleed.

And when I turned around, I knew exactly why he said what he did and with the loudness of it, because whose lookalike was glaring at me.

Practically glaring at me.

Smiling, I tossed her a wink, then took my seat beside my daddy.

That was when the brothers leaned forward and all at once said, “Yeah, he’s got my vote.”

Well.... there you have it.

But.... well... I am my father’s daughter. I stood up and, seriously wanting to get the last word, I looked at her and smiled, “You can see, my man is happily taken. But if you’re

inquiring about a new job, my dad's club is taking applications for club bunnies.”

The whore lookalike snapped, “I’m not a whore.”

“Really? That’s funny.” Then I retook my seat.

It wasn’t until I took my seat that security walked over to us and then said to the two women, “Either stay seated in your seat and act like a decent human being or you will be forced to leave.”

Nasal voice, aka, whore look-alike said, “She started it,” Oh come on, what are we? Back in high school?

“Ma’am, when a player tells us that we need to keep an eye on a fan, we tend to be proactive.” The other security guard said.

“Whatever. Fine. But since your security, I don’t feel safe with those gang members sitting there. Please see them out.” My god. She just didn’t know when to stop.

That was when one of them looked at my dad and the guys then looked at the whore, “I’d like to stay breathing. Besides, they did a charity run for Saint Jude’s a few weeks back. Great group of guys. Now, are you going to behave or would you like to sit somewhere else.”

“We’ll behave. Promise.” The friend said.

The whore lookalike mumbled, “This place is getting a one-star review from me on Yelp.”

And the only reason I heard her was because our entire section was watching the play-by-play reaction.

And at her words, almost half of them started laughing.

The other security guard looked down at her and what she was wearing, then said, “Woman, a man isn’t going to buy the cow when it’s apparent he can have the milk for free.” And with that, the two of them walked away.

Grinning, I turned back in my seat and watched the game.

Cheered for my man.

Got hoarse after threatening bodily harm to some idiot who thought it was a good idea to do the whole, I’ll end you move by running his finger underneath his neck to my man.

But I shouldn’t have worried.

Marcus came off the line and body-slammed the guy, getting a penalty flag for it, but getting high fives from his team and a helmet slap from his coach.

And then, one hour later, with a huge win over the Stars, the entire stadium was rumbling with cheer.

Because once Daemon, Marcus, Culpepper, and yes, Finch got on the team, they’ve done nothing but win... they were a slated favorite to win the Super Bowl this year.

“Your boy plays good,” Snake told me as he chucked me on the chin.

Hyde shivered, “Remind me never to piss him off.”

Jackal raised a brow at him, “You scared of him?”

Hyde threw his hand out and pointed to the field, “Did you see the way the guy’s head bounced off the turf with how hard he hit him?”

Tyne wrote something down, then handed it to me,
'I'm not scared.'

Grinning, I looked up at Tyne and winked.

He was by far my favorite out of all the guys.

Because he was the one to show me how to properly kick someone in the balls and rupture a testicle. And... he was the one who offered the killing blow to the sick man who had abducted me.

“Come on, let’s go to the tunnel, it’s probably my favorite part,” They all nodded and then followed me out of the stadium and to the entrance for the tunnel.

And since the guys who guard the tunnel knew me, thanks to Marcus, they let us all pass, and there, against the tunnel, we waited.

Thankfully, we didn’t have to wait long because the players started to trickle out and that was when Aliyah came over to me with Crew and Keeley, smiling. I hugged her and then introduced her to the guys.

They immediately welcomed her into the fold and then Daemon came out, made a beeline for his family, and was also introduced to the guys.

I was laughing at something Jackal had said and missed Marcus, but I shouldn’t have worried.

Two strong arms banded around my waist and pulled me to a large chest.

Smiling, I tilted my head back, my hair trailing down his chest, looking up into those eyes of his that I still saw four

kids, and two dogs in.

He winked then pressed a soft kiss to my lips.

Once he pulled back, I turned around in his arms, wrapped my hands around his massive biceps, and said, “Great job today, honey. You got any boobos?”

He wiggled his eyebrows at me, “A few, yeah.”

Standing there, seeing everything I’ve ever wanted in those mocha-colored eyes I often found myself drowning in, throwing caution to the wind because I was tired of holding it in, I whispered, “Love me some of you, Marcus.”

And at my words, my big behemoth of a man bent forward lowered his head, pressed his forehead to mine, and whispered, “Love you more than air, Shortcake.”

My spine straightened, “What?”

He lifted a brow, “What do you mean, what?”

I glared, “Just like that? You didn’t have to say it because I said it.”

He grinned then, “I didn’t.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, “Don’t you dare ask me if I’m on my rag or some nasty shit like that either.”

He grinned, “First of all, I would never ask you that. Second, I was raised better. Third, I know you can kick my ass. Fourth, because I would never do anything to hurt you. And fifth, because I’d let you beat on me all you want to. It just means for some hot as fuck makeup sex.”

I snorted, “I love all that, honey, but you really didn’t have to say it because I said it.”

“Actually, it’s the second time you told me, and it’s the second time I said it back. So, I didn’t say it because you said it. I said it because I never met a woman, I wanted to have my babies with. Until you.”

Everything else he said went way over my head, “What do you mean the second time?”

“You said it in your sleep one night, and right before I followed you to dreamland, I said it back.”

“Okay, before she gets on a tear, how about we all go get a bite to eat? I’m starving.”

“Place a few blocks from here that only lets players in, after game day. No overzealous fans will be allowed in.”

And that was how Daemon, Aliyah, Crew, Keeley, Culpepper, Braydon, his wife, Finch, Van, Marcus, my dad, and the brothers all moved five tables together and ate dinner.

And yes... that night in his four-poster bed, I kissed away all his booboos and then grinned when he brought out my favorite tie of his.

If I had known all the joy and bliss, I had experienced last night was all going to come crashing down around me the next day... I would have told the world to go fuck itself.

Literally.

And because of one single mistake neither one of us would ever repeat.

Chapter 20

Scarlett

Rolling over in bed, I let out a blissful sigh, and apparently, I got too far away, because in the next second, he had his arms around my body, pulling me deep into his chest.

His face automatically buried itself in my hair and inhaled deeply.

Sleepily, he asked, “What time is it?”

Lifting my head to look at the clock, I said, “It’s...”

And that was when we both heard one of the floorboards outside our bedroom door, squeak.

Kalani was at the door, growling.

But apparently, that didn’t stop someone.

The moment before either of us could move, the door to our bedroom was opening, in a split second, I recognized the woman.

And then... my eyes trailed to the gun that was coming up and pointed directly at Marcus.

She wasn’t taking him from me.

Not when I finally got the honor to call him mine.

Then, I didn’t even think.

I just moved.

And just in time to take the bullet that was meant for Marcus into my body.

Everything around me went quiet.

All I could hear was the blood rushing to my ears.

All I could feel was the blood that was pouring out of my back.

I didn't hear Marcus screaming.

I didn't hear the woman's gasp of outrage as Kalani attacked.

I missed when Kalani ripped the woman's throat out.

I didn't feel the pressure Marcus had used with our sheet to try and slow the blood flow.

Or how he rolled me to my back hoping to use the mattress to help put pressure on the wound.

Feeling sleepy, I whispered into his skin, "I love me some of you, Marcus."

I smiled up at him, not realizing that I had blood trailing from the corner of my mouth, and then I felt something hit my face.

Looking up into his eyes, I was shocked at what I saw there, his eyes were wet.

Quietly, from far away, I heard his ravaged voice say, "You don't get to do that."

"I... don't... get... to do... what?" I asked him. It was getting hard to breathe.

"Tell me goodbye."

"Even if this is goodbye, I could never leave this world without you knowing how I feel about you." and then... everything went black.

Marcus

The next twenty-five minutes flew by like a whirlwind.

The call to 911 was nothing but a fucking joke. They couldn't be there until thirty minutes from now as the other units were responding to calls.

Kalani was on my heels, the dead woman with blood leaking from her throat was left behind in our wake as I carried my entire world out to the SUV.

Laying her carefully in the back seat, I jumped in the driver's seat and kept my fingers on her pulse at her wrist, as I drove with one hand to the hospital.

I had six police cruisers behind me as I drove like a bat out of hell with my hazard lights flashing.

I didn't remember the words I used.

I didn't remember when Kalani jumped into the vehicle.

The only thing I remembered was driving to the emergency room entrance in the hospital, slamming on my brakes, and rounding the vehicle while the cops yelled at me too, "Freeze."

Opening her door, I carefully gathered her in my arms and wanted to scream at the world when I felt the blood that was still coming out of her body.

Running into the emergency room I yelled out, "Help! My woman's been shot. I need help." My voice didn't sound right at all.

A nurse ran to me with a gurney, and a man in a white lab coat came running, I ran down what happened, and then as I grabbed her hand, and ran with them, I growled at another nurse who was on the opposite of me who said, "Sir, you can't go in there."

I kept my eyes locked on Scarlett's pale face, "Promised her I would never leave her."

"Sir, I understand but if you want us to save her, you must remain out here." As soon as she said the words save her, I stopped and then watched as they wheeled my woman away from me.

That was when I heard a sound that I never wanted to hear again in my entire life, my woman, my Scarlett, sounding scared, "Marcus!"

I didn't even hesitate as I barreled through the nurse, and then through the double doors, and when I heard her call

my name again, I moved.

A nurse had his hand on her shoulder, “Ma’am please, we are trying to save your life.”

But my woman didn’t hear me, “Marcus!”

“Sir! You cannot come in here.” I ignored that too.

Nothing and no one was going to keep me from her.

I’d better have no breath left in my body before I ever allowed that to happen.

Getting to her, I wrapped my hands around her smaller hand, ignoring the blood that was on them, and whispered, “I’m right here Shortcake.”

“We need to move; she’s lost too much blood already.” A doctor said as they attached wires and tubes to her body.

That was when I felt arms wrap around my body as she was wheeled from me and into another set of double doors, I growled, “No.”

I pulled whoever had their body wrapped around mine and into the room, “Jesus Christ, are you on something?”

The man was using all his strength to keep me back, but he was no match for me, that was until a woman, a smaller woman ran over to me, and placed her hand on my chest.

I growled down at her, “Get your hands off me. Only one woman has the right to touch me and she’s lying in that bed.”

The woman complied immediately, “Sir, I know you want to be with her, but we cannot do what we need to do to make sure she comes back to you. Please. Wait in the waiting room.”

I nodded, “Someone better keep me updated. That’s my world.”

The woman smiled, “I will make sure of it.”

Sighing, I turned around and headed down the hall, the security guard stayed at my side, “Bro, I think we need to get you checked out.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, “I’m not your brother. And I’m fine.”

He scoffed, “Look, I’m the biggest security guard we have here, and you pulled me along like I was a rag doll. You’re on something. And you won’t be any good to her if you are drugged up.”

Shaking my head at his dumbass ego, I said, “I’m headed to wait in the waiting room. Take a good look at my face, and search for the name Marcus DuPointe. There’s a reason I was able to pull you like you were a rag doll.”

I knew the man had done that as I walked to the waiting room when I heard him say, “Well, fuck me.”

Making it to the waiting room, I ignored the cops that were making their way to me and pulled out my phone, I called Van first, “Yo! Bro you should have seen the shit I got into last night. You wou...”

Not caring about whatever he was about to say I whispered, “I need you.”

His tone changed like lightning, “Where are you?”

“Saint Charlotte. Emergency room.”

I heard him moving, “On my way.”

I knew some people recognized me, they were whispering, pulling out their phones, and taking pictures.

So, what if I was on the cover of sports magazines and had the paparazzi following my every move on any given day?

Didn’t they know?

I’d walk away from all of it if the woman lying on the operating table asked it of me.

Knowing I was going to fall over at any second, I ignored the cops who were talking to me. Once my ass finally fell into a chair, I had to take care of something more important than them.

I made a phone call that I dreaded.

He answered on the fourth ring, “Yeah?”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I said, “Grenade? It’s Marcus.”

He chuckled, “Know that boy, been waiting on this call. Figured you’d ask me for her hand in person. But I know how...”

I didn’t let him finish. “Grenade. Something happened. Be best you and the boys get on up here.”

He was on alert immediately, “What?”

“My bitch of an ex-wife pulled a gun on me, and your stubborn fucking daughter took the bullet that was meant for me. She’s on the operating table now.”

I heard him moving, “Leaving now.”

Then I hung up and called Daemon, he said he would get his mother to watch the kids and then he and Aliyah would be on their way.

Seeing the time, I sighed, my mother and father were supposed to meet Scarlett that day. We were going to their house for a barbeque.

Therefore, I called my mom, and she answered on the second ring, “Hey sweetheart. If y’all want to pick some extra bottles of wine, I won’t complain.”

I stared at the wall, unseeing anything, “Mom, we’re not gonna make it. Tonya pulled a gun on us, my woman... she took the bullet that was meant for me.”

My mother whimpered, “Me and your father are on the way.”

As soon as I hung up the phone, that was when apparently the cops got fed up with me ignoring their asses, and one of them got in front of me and said, “Sir, we need you to come with us.”

I snarled at him, “Why?”

The white cop narrowed his eyes at me, “Sir, please. Let’s not escalate things.”

“I want to know why I have to go anywhere. I’ll answer any fucking questions you have, but my ass isn’t leaving this hospital until I know my woman is okay and breathing on her own after surgery.”

Some motherfucker placed his hand on his gun and then got in front of me, “Sir, if you don’t calm down and go with us, things are not going to go well for you.”

Taking that as a threat, I stood up and braced my legs, crossed my arms over my chest and I snarled, “There’s not enough people on this fucking planet that could tear me away from her. You want to try it? Bring everything you fucking got.”

“We don’t take well to threats from people of your kind.” the mother fucker had the balls to say to me.

That was when my brother showed up, growled, and got in front of me, chest bumping the cop out of my face, “What the fuck are you saying pig?”

“Look it’s the narrative. We are trying to do our jobs. This man ran through traffic breaking laws left and right and he has blood on his hands. This needs to be settled down at the station.”

“The way I see it, my brother wouldn’t be getting defensive if y’all had only asked him what happened,” Van growled.

Then he looked at me and smirked, “Think you need to call your lawyer. Bet when they realize who you are, they’re going to lose their jobs.”

I sighed, “Look, I’ll pay the fine for the laws I broke. But first of all, I needed to make those calls I made. It’s why I ignored you. The first was to my brother who you see before you. The second was to my woman’s father. The third was to my mother. I’ll be happy to tell you what happened, but I’m not leaving here.”

Just then there was a commotion at the front door, we all turned our heads to see what was going on. I recognized Knox, Fiona, and Novalie immediately.

Fiona smiled sadly at me, “Grenade called Cotton. We all got here as soon as we could. The brothers will be posted up outside her room to keep her safe.”

Novalie walked up to me, “Hi, Marcus. I’m so sorry about Scarlett. I’m going to go get some updates and text Cotton, so you’ll know, okay?”

I nodded, “Would hug you but had another woman’s hands on me outside the OR, don’t feel right.”

She smiled, “I got it. I’ll update you as soon as I can.”

I looked at the asshole cop who threw the racial slur, “I’d like to see a supervisor here. Immediately.”

Van piped up then, “Your lawyer is on his way.”

Daemon and Aliyah came in and apparently, upon hearing Van’s words he said, “Coach as well as the team owner is on the way.”

The other little bastard who got in my face first asked, “Team? Coach?”

Van chuckled darkly, “Yeah. Y’all are about to lose your jobs. That woman has been recording this whole thing. I can’t wait to see what your supervisor thinks once he realizes that you were racist to the number one Defensive Lineman in the National Football League. Oh, and that none of you wanted to hear the story. Y’all just wanted to arrest him and call it good.”

That was when a man in a different uniform walked over to our group, “Think I’d like to hear the story.”

The little bastard backed away immediately. His hand moved off his gun.

Smart move motherfucker.

I looked at the man who said, “My name is Alan Jones, I’m the Captain. If you can please tell us what happened, we will be out of your hair immediately.”

“Yo! Marcus!” I turned to look at Cotton, a man I met one day who was picking up Novalie as I was picking up Scarlett. “There’s a dog, looks like Kalani lying outside the OR.”

I shook my head, that dog. Yeah. Best four grand I ever fucking spent.

I nodded, “Police will want to check her for blood and inside her mouth.”

Then I looked at the Captain and sat down then braced my arms on my legs, “My woman, Scarlett McKinney, and I were at home in our bed. I’m not sure what woke us up initially but just as I asked her what time it was, we heard a squeak from the floorboard outside our bedroom. Before either of us could move, the door was opening, a woman holding a gun was lifting it up and then she pulled the trigger. My woman rolled over my body and took the bullet to her back.”

I took a sip of coffee that Van had just handed me from Fiona, “Her dog, is a protection and PTSD dog. She launched at the woman, got her down, and ripped her throat out. You can find the gun lying near her body. it’s up the stairs and to the right. You can’t miss it.”

The captain nodded and wrote stuff in his book, “And this woman. Did either of you recognize her?”

I nodded, “Yeah, it was my ex-wife, Tonya Gibbons.”

Cotton looked at me, “Got word, she coded twice on the table, and they got her back both times. She’s breathing

and they are fixing her up.”

I nodded.

The captain spoke then, “We will go check out your house and take samples from the dog.

Fiona piped up then, “If you have a kit on you, I should be able to assist. I’m the prior owner of Kalani.”

My mother and father had come in while hearing the story, and right now, my mother was using wipes on my hands to clean them.

Once the cops left and the lawyer got the call that our house was a crime scene the rest of us settled in to wait.

Another commotion sounded at the doors and then I saw Grenade.

Carefully, I removed my mother’s hand from my forearm and then headed for him.

He saw me coming and then wrapped me in a hug, “How’s our girl doing?”

Patting him on the back I pulled away and then said, “She coded twice on the table. She’s being worked on now.”

Tyne had a piece of paper and then showed it to me. I read the words, ‘*Who do I need to kill?*’

I locked eyes with Tyne and said, “She’s already resting in hell. Kalani ripped her throat out.”

“Who did it?” Snake asked.

He was someone I feared. The man never showed fucking emotion, I didn’t know how he did it either.

“My ex-wife.” Was all I said.

Van sat down next to me and asked, “How’d she get in?”

I buried my face in my hands and said, “I forgot to lock the door and set the alarm. Won’t ever make that fucking mistake again.”

Just as I said that we all heard, “Family for Scarlett McKinney?”

Everyone who was there made their way over to the nurse. It was the woman who put her hand on my chest and stopped me.

“Hi, I don’t believe I need to ask who’s her closest relative. This man almost got thrown out of the hospital for refusing to leave her.” Then she looked at Grenade and said, “There’s no mistaking y’all’s characteristics.”

At my back, Snake growled, “Get the fuck on with it.”

The nurse paled, swallowed, and then nodded; Ms. McKinney made it through surgery. Unfortunately, she coded twice, but we were able to get her back both times. The bullet nicked her spine and lodged itself in her right kidney. Unfortunately, the kidney couldn’t be saved. As for her spine, we won’t know if there is any lasting damage and if she will need more surgery. She is in recovery now, and then she will be moved to the ICU. The next twenty-four hours are critical. Once she is moved to the ICU you can see her.”

I nodded, “Thank you.”

An hour later, thankfully, the owner of the hospital happened to be a huge fan and she was moved to the VIP floor. Thankfully the room was big enough to hold everyone that showed up.

Sure, they were shoulder to shoulder, wall to wall, but it was enough.

My ass was planted in a chair at her bedside, my hand wrapped around hers, and as Grenade leaned back in his chair, I locked eyes with his, then I growled, “Don’t ever doubt the man I am again.”

He looked at me with a confused look, “The fuck you mean?”

“I was raised right. No way in hell would I ever ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage over the fucking phone.”

My dad chuckled, “That’s my boy.”

“You already had it. You didn’t need to ask for it. And I know you’re about to ask how you earned it. Takes a man with a hell of a lot of balls to threaten me. No one in this room has ever gotten away with it but two. Snake, and my heart that’s lying in this bed.”

That was when I heard the best thing I’ve ever heard, “Marcus?”

I shot out of my chair and locked my eyes with hers.

Thank fuck. I didn’t realize how much breath I was holding in, and when I smiled at her, I let out a heavy breath, “You’re awake.”

“My finger feels lonely.” I smiled down at her and then pressed a kiss to her lips.

That was when Van handed me a little black box, he had gone to pick up with my lawyer to make sure the cops did a thorough job and didn’t fuck shit up.

Chuckling, I flipped the lid and then showed it to her, “Will this make it not seem lonely?”

“It will, when you put it on my finger,” I didn’t miss the fact that she didn’t even bother looking at the ring. No, she kept her eyes locked with mine.

Smiling, I took the ring out of the box, gathered her hand, and then slid the rock on her finger, then I pressed a kiss to it, “Forever.”

That was when Grenade stood, got in her face as soon as I sat back down, and asked with so much emotion in his tone, it broke apart, “What the fuck were you thinking Pumpkin?”

Scarlett didn’t even wince, nor did she cower, tiredly but forcefully she said, “That bitch took him from me over five years ago. I wasn’t letting her take him from me again. Besides, I’d do it again in a heartbeat. There is no me without him.”

After everyone hugged her, Van also handed me some clothes to change into since I had blood on mine.

While everyone was watching over her, I slipped out and got changed.

As I was about to step into the room, I heard my momma ask, "You're the woman that threw yourself in front of him?" I

Then I heard my Shortcake's reply, "Yes."

"Honey, what were you thinking? You're the mother of my future grandchildren. Don't you ever do that again?"

I imagined that Scarlett wrinkled her nose when she murmured, "Umm."

I saw my momma shake her head as I rounded the corner into the room.

Looking at Scarlett, seeing that she was still breathing, I sent my thanks to the man above for not taking her away from me.

My momma looked up and said, "Now that I see the way you look at her and she looks at you, I realize me asking you to marry Tonya was stupid. I'm glad that bitch is dead."

Then rocking our world, she said, Y'all better get started on making me grandbabies. I love Crew, and Keeley, don't get me wrong. But they aren't mine."

Chapter 21

Marcus

The past six months have been some of the best of my life, yet they've also been some of the most tiring of my life.

Everybody and their brother were over at the house after it got released and cleaned up.

I didn't even want to know who Cotton called in to make the blood go away.

And I wouldn't ever ask.

I had offered to buy us a new place, but Scarlett wouldn't hear of it.

This was our home, and no crazy ass bitch was going to take that away from us. Scarlett's words.

Apparently, we found out why she tried to kill me.

Unbeknownst to me, she had taken a life insurance policy out. She thought I wouldn't care about the stuff hitting the papers. So, when she lost the money, she planned to use her backup plan. Claiming the insurance money.

But she never expected Kalani to rip her apart. Literally.

Kalani had a lifetime supply of the best dog bones around and once a month a box of ribeye steaks was delivered for her.

Yes, she was spoiled. But it was so worth it.

Over the past six months, Scarlett had healed up nicely. She would be on medicine for the rest of her life after losing a kidney. But all in all, we would take that. Gladly.

“Yoo-hoo!” Please. Fucking hell please tell me I didn't just hear what I think I did.

Scarlett looked up at me with wide eyes, and then in a whisper, “Please tell me my ears are playing tricks on me?”

“Marcus, boy, you better answer me. I know your home. And I know that sweet girl is here too.”

I growled.

I loved my Mama. I really did.

But no one was seeing my woman like this. Over my cold dead body.

Ever so carefully I pulled out of her, lowered my head, and pressed a kiss on the top of her nose. And there, I managed to soften my tone, to not let the temper I was known for come through and attack her. “Be back.”

Just as I lifted off of her delectable body, she grabbed my bicep, and with that one look from her ice-blue eyes, I took in a deep breath and tried to keep my temper in check.

Tugging on a pair of sweatpants, I headed out of our bedroom.

I met my Mama as she was walking up my fucking stairs, “Mama, what are you doing here?”

See, I didn’t curse at her. Barely.

“There’s something I wanted to talk to Scarlett about and then I remembered I promised you I would bring that cookbook so you can cook her that dinner. I figured she would be here, so I figured why not kill two birds with one stone?”

“And you couldn’t have called first? Or better yet, knocked, or hey, I don’t know, use the freaking doorbell?”

She waved my words away as only a southern mama could do.

“You’re my son. Boy, I carried you for nine months and had twenty-nine hours of labor to get your big ass body out of my little one. If I want to walk up into your house without announcing myself, I’ve earned that right.”

She was right, and any other day any other time while I wasn't buried in my woman I would have understood. But not right now, I growled, "And let me ask you something?"

She sighed, "You're wastin' my time. I want to see my girl."

"What did Dad do the last time I walked into the house without announcing myself and he was pounding into you at the sink?"

"He beat your ass. Why? What does it..." Then her eyes went wide.

And then, she snapped, "Why the hell did you stop? I told you I wanted grandbabies. Go back up there and get on that."

And that was when I heard my woman's tinkling laughter at the top of the stairs.

Turning my head to look over my shoulder, the feeling of pride swelled in my chest, her in one of my tee's. Sure, it looked like a dress on her but what a sight it was.

In fact, it was such a sight that I turned my back on my Mama and prowled up the stairs, my eyes locked on Scarlett's when I said, "See your freaking self out."

"Okay baby boy, the cookbook will be on the counter. Scarlett dear, call me once he gets done planting my grandbaby inside of you. Tootles."

"Now, where were we?" I asked her as I nipped at the delicate skin on her neck.

"Marcus, the mood is gone." She whimpered.

"Bet I can bring it back. What do you think?" She simply smiled and nodded, that was my woman.

And yes. I definitely brought the mood back.

Once I thoroughly made love to my woman I went to clean up and get a washcloth, and when I saw her birth control

package in the trash, I walked back to the room and asked, “How dirty do you like to be?”

Then I tossed the package on the bed,

She smiled, winked, and said, “Happy early birthday, hot stuff. Now come here and plant a baby in me.”

Apparently, I did that. And then some.

Scarlett

After everything had calmed down and I had completely healed, I returned to work. yes. work. I finished my residency two months ago.

I was wrapping a baby in a blanket before I finished my shift in five minutes.

And then... just like that I was off.

Once I made it to my locker, I saw that Marcus was calling.

Tagging my phone, I answered, “Hey Honey.”

I heard him smiling through the phone, “Hey Shortcake, you’re off?”

I smiled wide as I grabbed my bag, slung it over my shoulder, and then whistled for Kalani, “Finally. Gah, that was a long shift. I can’t believe I got a four-day weekend.”

Marcus

I smiled at knowing the favor I called in actually paid off, “That’s great honey, I’m parked out front.”

“I love it when you pick me up from work. Okay, honey, be down in five minutes or less.”

I lifted my chin at my brother who was in Scarlett’s car pulling out of the parking lot.

Once he had her car parked at our house, he too was headed to our destination.

Once I saw her coming out of the double doors, I climbed out of the SUV and then rounded the hood.

She smiled at me and then picked up her pace.

As soon as she was close enough, I opened my arms and then laughed as she vaulted into them.

Pressing a kiss to her lips, I winked at her, sat her down on her feet, then opened her door for her.

She climbed in and then buckled her seat belt.

Once I was in and buckled as well, I turned the car on, and then, we were off.

She looked back into the back seat and asked, “Wait? Why are there bags packed in the back seat?”

I winked at her, “Surprise. We’re going on a little trip.”

“Marcus, I can’t believe you did all this. Why?”

I simply shrugged as I pulled onto the highway and headed for the airstrip, “Because I’m fucking tired of your last name being McKinney.”

She was quiet for a beat and then she asked, “Wait. Really?”

I grinned, “Really? How about it?”

She looked at me, smiled, wide, those pearly white teeth of hers gleaming against her skin and then she was bouncing in her seat, “This is awesome. Let’s fucking do it.

Two hours later we were in first class waiting to board the plane that would take us to Las Vegas. Or so she thought.

Once we were settled in our seats and they called out our destination, she turned to look at me and narrowed her eyes, “Wait, the only place you can get married without having documentation is Vegas. So... why are we headed to Washington?”

“How awesome am I?” I asked her.

She narrowed her eyes at me, “Pretty fucking awesome. But what’s going on?”

I winked, “I have to love you to put up with your quirks, right?”

She nodded, narrowing her eyes even further, even though I didn’t think that was possible, “Right... so... what’s going on?”

“How many times have you read aloud the wedding scene between Edward and Bella? And how many times have you made me watch the movies with you and then sighed and mentioned you would love to get married at something like it?”

That was when she looked at me, and then, her eyes got wide, “You tell me right now Marcus Winston DuPointe.”

“I contacted the new owners, and it turns out they are big fans of me. It turns out they had followed the story of us, and they graciously offered to let us get married there.”

She ignored the flight attendant who was telling her to get back in her seat and then was climbing in my lap and peppering kisses all over my face.

Six hours later, she was *ooing* and *ahhing* over everything.

Two hours later she was up in the same room where Bella got ready with her dad, and Betty.

Thankfully, Betty had come through for me, with a friend of hers and had recreated the dress that Bella had worn.

And seeing her in it as she walked down the aisle with her father beside her, I didn’t mind the tears that trailed down my cheeks.

The dress didn’t make her.

No, she made the dress.

Her auburn hair was curled in ringlets that fell down her back.

And I really couldn't wait to get to our hotel room in the Bahamas and undo every button with my teeth.

As soon as she reached me, I winked at her and mouthed, *'You're fucking adorable.'*

She mouthed back, *'You in that suit. I want to jump you.'*

Then, uncaring because it was our day, I winked, and then said aloud, "You can jump me anytime."

Her father as well as the men in the MC, Van, Braydon, and his wife, Daemon, Aliyah, Red, Knox, Fiona, my Mama, and Dad, started chuckling.

Then he sobered, and offered me his hand, "Know I don't have to warn you."

I shook my head, and shook his hand, "You definitely don't."

As soon as she took my hand and handed her bouquet to Betty, she whispered, "I love me some of you, Marcus."

I winked, "I love me some of you too, Shortcake."

And just like that, twenty minutes later, we were pronounced as Mr. and Mrs. Marcus Winston DuPointe.

Scarlett

Seeing my big man with tears in his eyes as he saw me in my dress, I would have married him anywhere if only he asked.

I knew that no matter how many moments we shared together as one, I would never forget it. Ever.

After I saw the dress that Betty revealed I had wanted to shout to the rooftops about the buttons, but I realized something.

It was almost identical to the one Bella had worn.

And now... after Marcus had divested me of my dress buttons with his teeth and then made love to every inch of my

body I smiled.

Cuddled up in his arms with the doors to our private villa open, allowing the cool air from the salty sea to blow in, my head resting over his heart, I heard him say, “Now, I’ll tell you why I call you, Shortcake.”

I smiled, then tilted my head so I could see his face, “So you wait until I say my vows to give me that, huh?”

He chuckled, “Yeah, but also, I wanted you to know just how much of me is tangled up in you. You’re my breath Shortcake. There is no me, without you.”

I grinned, titled my head, and placed a kiss over his new tattoo.

The one he surprised me with once I divested him of his suit, it was my name in bold script right over his heart, “That first day, when I walked into the bathroom and stepped to the stall, two scents hit me at once, and what they reminded me of, I found myself changing my favorite dessert to that.”

I was confused. “What scents?”

“Strawberry, and vanilla. That reminded me of Strawberry Shortcake.”

I pulled back for a beat and tried to recall what I had used back then.

And that was when it hit me, “They stopped making that shampoo and conditioner a few years ago.”

Immediately he asked, “What’s the name of the brand?”

I lifted a brow, “Why?”

He shrugged one shoulder, “Because that’s you. That scent is all you.”

Low and behold, thirty days later, sitting in a spa kit was a bottle of the shampoo and conditioner, as well as a lifetime supply of both.

I simply shook my head, grabbed the bottles from the cute dark brown wicker basket, and then took a shower.

And yes... I remembered what he said, I even put on vanilla lotion once I was out of the shower.

Needless to say, we were way late to Keeley's birthday party.

Two weeks later, I tried, I really did try to keep the laughter at bay, but I didn't manage it when he bent his body, buried his face in my neck, and muttered, "What the fuck is up with people interrupting us?"

I giggled, "I don't know, honey."

"Oh, my eyes. What the fuck bro?" Van cried out.

Marcus lifted his head and then growled at his brother, "Does this house have your name on it?"

"Fuck no. But damn. Just... damn. I don't want to see your fucking ass this early in the fucking morning."

Then he turned and started walking out of the kitchen, but not before he called out, "Scarlett honey, it's a crying fucking shame you met my brother before you met me."

Marcus growled, pulled out of me, and then chased after Van, his perfect cock swinging without abandonment.

I had my hands on my knees laughing my ass off.

Epilogue

Scarlett

I thought seeing tears in Marcus's eyes when he saw me walking down the aisle to him was a perfect vision. But I couldn't have been more wrong.

No, seeing him as he held our twin set of boys, now that, that was a perfect vision.

And well... since Marcus and I couldn't keep our hands off each other, not only did I give birth to twin boys, but their Irish twin, a girl this time was born exactly eleven months after they were.

And... well... we got yelled at by the doctor because all of our kids were exactly eleven months apart as we welcomed our baby girl into the world.

I was standing in the middle of the Neonatal room as the sports commentator went over the game yesterday. And every time they showed the sack that Marcus had delivered that earned him Most Valuable Player, I felt my ovaries go haywire.

Marcus and I had talked. We both agreed that four kids were enough. It was perfect, so not only did I get my tubes tied, but he had a vasectomy.

And I swear, had Marcus not been knocked up with drugs when Culpepper showed up with some meals for us, he would have been eating through a straw.

The dumbass thought it would have been funny to say that now if he cheated on me, no woman could claim that she had gotten pregnant by Marcus.

Thankfully, Van had no drugs in his system and didn't hesitate to lay Culpepper out. Cold.

I had just looked away from the screen and to one of the other nurses when she asked, “How in the world do you stand it?”

I looked over at Emily and felt my brow raise, “What do you mean?”

“You look like you do, and they look like that? All that temptation, how do you stand it?” I knew she was referring to the women who were at the tunnel throwing themselves at Marcus.

I felt my spine snap straight, and like all women who feel as though they are being pushed into a corner, hand on hip, leg cocked to the side, I said, “Well, I can stand it because he loves me. I can stand it because time and time again if you look closely, he never makes eye contact with any of them, and he never, and I mean he never checks them out. I will pay you a million dollars right now to find a clip or proof of him doing it in the past ten years.”

“You too haven’t been together that long,” she said as she tilted her head to the side.

I smirked, “Shows you don’t know everything. Doesn’t it?”

That was when Novalie poked her head out of her office and then said in that tone that brooked no room for argument, “I think it would be best if you finish the rest of your shift with your mouth firmly shut.”

Emily huffed, “Exc...”

“Emily, what you said was so disrespectful it’s not even funny. She is stunning. Breathtakingly so. And I know Marcus. I know that if he heard you talking about his woman like that, honey, you’d find out just how hard he can knock someone out. I’m just saying. Now, get shut the fuck up and take care of the babies you were assigned to.”

I looked at Novalie and smiled, she winked.

Marcus

Eighteen years later, I pulled my two sons and two daughters to the side and asked them to sit down.

Sebastian was the first to ask, “Is everything okay Dad?”

Shalayah sighed, “I didn’t mean to punch the little asshole, but he wouldn’t stop.”

Shane sighed, “I know. Okay, I know I got a B on my exam, but my professor hates you because you defeated his team in our last game before you retired.”

“We will talk about you punching someone, and the reason why, later,” I told Shalayah.

Even though I already knew the answer why. Some little brat at her school said I was hot and asked if I was looking for any members to make a Mile High Club.

Scarlett and I were so proud of her.

But now wasn’t the case, “I pulled you four out here because I want to tell you a story.”

They loved it when I did this.

And I only did this when Scarlett took her diva power naps, and since they were so rare, they didn’t get this from me often.

“When the time comes, the four of you are going to meet the owner of your other soul. Please, promise me, that if you have that feeling in the deepest parts of you, don’t fucking ignore it. Because there will come a time when you will regret it.” I never wanted our kids to have to go five years without their other half.

“Are you talking about the *pulse*, Pops and Uncle Snake talk to us about?” Sebastian asked,

I nodded, “What y’all don’t know is that I also ignored that feeling, and I wasted five fucking years of my life with the

wrong person. I have no regrets in this life. Except for that one.”

That was when I heard my woman say, “If I could do it all over again, I would. In a fucking nano-second.”

Shakira turned her head to look at her mama, and asked, “Even getting shot?”

My Shortcake nodded then walked into the room and sat down in my lap, and then looked at our kids, “Even that. Do you know why?”

They shook their heads because they didn’t.

“After I woke up in the hospital, that was when your father slid this ring on my finger.” I smiled and then took her hand and placed a kiss on it.

All four of our kids found their soulmates. They experienced their *Pulse* moments.

And because of us always being honest with our kids, they never had to live life with that one regret.

They all realized something else... Anyone’s imperfections are always going to be beautiful in the right person’s eyes.

The End...

(Keep reading for a sneak peek into the next book in the Charlotte U series...

Beauty is Scarred.)

And... the identity of Scarlett’s mom will be made known in Grenade’s book.

Immoral Saint’s MC

Beauty is Scarred

Charlotte U

Book 3

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Sometime in the future...

Crew

But it wasn't my parents, my sister and her boyfriend, my uncle Marcus, his wife, and their four kids that had all of my attention.

No, it was the red-headed beauty with a wealth of curls atop her head that had every bead of my attention.

And when I saw the man that she was sitting beside bring his finger up and shove it in her face, I turned my body to watch.

I knew I had my family's attention; they all turned their heads to see what I was looking at.

And then I watched as the man brought his hand up as if he was going to hit her, and my dad was there to stop him.

My mom was there on her side, gesturing for her to sit with them.

I raced to the sidelines, jumped up on the bench, and then looked at her, "You okay?"

She stared at me with wide eyes.

And hand to god, I fell in love right then and there with her. *Pulse.*

It was her eyes.

Fucking gorgeous.

Stunning.

The most vivid shade of green I've ever fucking seen.

"Yo, Campbell, let's go." I heard James shout at my back.

She crooked her brow, "Don't you have a game to get ready for?"

“You haven’t answered me yet,” I told her. “Are you okay?”

She sighed and then, closed her eyes, and I wanted to scream at her to give them back to me, but I didn’t have that right... at least... not yet.

Then I watched as she opened her eyes, sighed, and then whispered, “And if I’m not.”

I didn’t hesitate to lift myself with my arms, and then swing myself over the railing, “Then I’ll sit beside you the whole game and make sure you’re okay. And if you don’t want to be here, then I’ll take you somewhere.”

She narrowed those stunning green eyes at me, and then I whispered, “It’s just a game. My dad taught me that.”

“Campbell, get your ass down here. Now.” Coach B called out.

I looked at Coach B and shook my head, “My girl isn’t okay. You’re going to have to win this game without me.

A Note From The Author

From the bottom of my heart, thank you so much for reading
Marcus and Scarlett's story.

I hope that if you're having a bad day, this book will make you
smile.

I hope that you're having an awesome day, and this book just
made it that much more awesome.

And I hope that if you haven't found the other half of your
soul... that you are able to find it. Pulse.

I also hope that if you've found it, rejoice in it.

Because you definitely know that any imperfection in your
other half is nothing but beautiful. (Sometimes.)

Xoxo,

Tiffany Casper

Other Works

Wrath MC

Mountain of Clearwater

Series Complete

Clearwater's Savior

Clearwater's Hope

Clearwater's Fire

(Hotter Than Sin)

Clearwater's Miracle

Clearwater's Treasure

Clearwater's Luck

Clearwater's Redemption

Christmas in Clearwater

Dogwood's Treasure

Series Complete

Dove's Life

Phoenix's Plight

(Wrath Ink)

Raven's Climb

Wren's Salvation

Lo's Wraith

Falcon's Rise

Sparrow's Grace

Lark's Precious

(Hollow Dreams) (TBD)

DeLuca Empire

The Devil & The Siren

The Cleaner & The Princess

The Soldier & The Dancer

The Shadow & The Mafia Princess (TBD)

Willow Creek

Where Hearts Align

Where Hearts Connect (TBD)

Where Hearts Grow (TBD)

Where Hearts Mend (TBD)

Pinewood Lake

Rise

Empower (TBD)

Strength (TBD)

Armor (TBD)

Calm (TBD)

As If...

Cold As Ice

Dark As Coal (TBD)

Smooth As Whiskey (TBD)

Charlotte U

Perfectly Imperfect

Imperfection is Beauty

Beauty is Scarred (TBD)

Beautiful & Crooked (TBD)

Novella's

Silver Treasure

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