



INTENTION



H A R P E R S E C U R I T Y O P S

A . K . E V A N S


INTENTION

Harper Security Ops: Jake & Brynn

A.K. Evans



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A.K. EVANS

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Cover Artist

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www.okaycreations.com

Editing & Proofreading

Mackenzie Letson, Nice Girl Naughty Edits

www.nicegirlnaughtyedits.com

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PROLOGUE



Jake

“Stop fucking around.”

At the sound of our father’s command, my brother, Max, and I froze to the spot. We might have goofed off a lot, but when our dad’s deep, rumbling voice sounded, we knew he meant business.

Once he had our attention, Dad’s voice returned to a less threatening level, even if it was still just as stern. He pointed behind himself and said, “I’m heading over to start cutting those trees down.” Pointing in front of himself, behind Max and me, he continued, “I want the two of you to make sure you get all of last year’s wood moved out from underneath the awning there and taken down to the house using the tractor and wagon. When you’re done, come over to where I am, so we can start splitting and stacking what we’ll need for next year.”

“Okay, Dad,” Max said.

My dad’s eyes shifted between the two of us, finally settling on me. “You’re in charge. Stay on task, because we’ve got a lot of work to get done today.”

I nodded my understanding. “Got it.”

With that, he turned and walked off to the opposite side of our family’s farm, where he planned to cut down the trees we’d use for firewood for next winter. Max and I were responsible for getting the wood we’d cut, split, and stacked last year over to the main house, where we’d use it in our wood-burning stove this winter. It was the middle of October, and this had sort of

become a tradition for the Burns family.

While my dad, my brother, and I worked outside all day, our mom was inside doing her food prep. She liked to prepare large batches of some of our favorite meals, and then she'd freeze them, so we could eat them throughout the winter. Everyone chipped in, even if Max and I often wanted to be off doing something else.

"It's not fair that you get to be in charge all the time," Max declared.

I rolled my eyes as I turned toward him. "It's only because I'm older."

"It's still not fair."

He had a point. I was fifteen, and Max was going to be thirteen next week. He was just as capable as I was when it came to doing chores around the property. Shrugging my shoulders, I replied, "Okay. Then you be in charge. Where do you want to start?"

My younger brother's brows shot up. "Really? I can be in charge?"

"Why not? You know what we need to do," I reasoned. "The only thing you can't do is drive the tractor."

Max deliberated for a few seconds before he agreed, "It's a deal."

A moment later, Max hopped into the empty wagon that was already hooked to the back of the tractor. "Drive me over to the woodpile."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Listen, there's one other rule. You can't sit back and do nothing while I do all the work."

"It sounds like you're trying to be the one in charge, Jake," Max noted. "Drive me over to the woodpile, so we can both get to work."

My lips twitched as I moved to the tractor, fired it up, and drove over to where we stored our wood each year for it to dry out properly for the next year's use. We immediately got to work on loading the wood from the massive pile into the wagon. With the amount we had, it was easily going to take us several hours to move it all, so we really didn't have any time to waste.

After we'd filled up the wagon for the first trip, Max hopped on top of it and demanded, "Take me to the house."

I rolled my eyes again and let out a laugh.

Max was, without a doubt, my best friend. We'd been inseparable from the moment he was born. I'd never forget when I moved on from elementary school to middle school, and he couldn't go with me.

He'd been devastated, hating I wouldn't be riding the bus to and from school with him every day. But he more than made up for it when he got

home. He'd rattle on and on for what felt like hours about everything that had happened during his day. And after we both finished our homework, he was all about spending every waking second with me.

If it was nice out, we'd be outside doing something—playing catch, running around, or riding the dirt bikes or quads. On the days when the weather wouldn't allow it, Max and I often played video games or board games together.

When it came to days like today, we had no choice but to forget about anything we might have wanted to do, so we could help our dad get the work done outside. That didn't mean Max held himself back from complaining.

Once we got back to the house and started to unload the wood, Max groaned, "I hate doing this. I'd rather be doing anything else besides this."

"You could go inside and spend the day cooking with Mom," I suggested, knowing he'd like that even less.

"Ugh, no thanks."

"So, you'll eat the food, but you refuse to make it?" I asked, picking up a log from the wagon.

"Yep. It's too much work."

I wanted to laugh. While I could understand him not being interested in cooking, his excuse was not a good one. Though I knew how hard my mom worked to take care of us and our home, along with all the cooking, there was no question that the more physically demanding jobs were happening outside.

But that's how it was.

Dad had taught us from a young age what our responsibilities were, and there were certain things he'd never expect Mom to do. While she'd be outside in the spring and summer, planting her flowers and garden, the heavy lifting was a role my father had assumed, and it worked for our family.

"Well, then you have no choice but to do this instead," I told him.

Not the least bit thrilled about it, Max still did what needed to be done. And before I knew it, we were heading back across the field to load up more wood.

We repeated the same actions several more times, taking wood from the pile, moving it to the wagon, and delivering it to the storage spot closer to the house. We hadn't gotten quite halfway through when we'd gone back for another load, and something struck me.

"Hey, look at that," I declared as I turned off the tractor.

I glanced back at my brother to find he'd been laying down in the wagon.

But at my declaration, Max sat up. “Look at what?”

Jerking my chin out to the side, I noted, “The wood pile. Your decision on where to take from each time we’ve come back here has made it look like a level in Super Mario.”

Max studied the pile before his eyes widened with delight. “You’re right. How cool?”

I let out a laugh as I stood up. “If only you were Mario himself, you could hop on each raised stack in an effort to get to the next level. Maybe then we’d be done with this sooner.”

Standing up inside the wagon, Max proudly announced, “I could do it.”

While we both enjoyed playing video games, Max was a fanatic. He loved adventure style games, and if it had Mario, it was guaranteed to be a hit with him.

I made my way over to the pile and started picking up logs for our next run. Max moved slower, his eyes continuing to study what I was sure he thought was a masterpiece of a woodpile, as he carried wood to the wagon.

“I think one more log is all we’re going to fit,” I said, picking one up and pinning my eyes on Max.

“Okay.”

I turned to head back toward the tractor, noted Max wasn’t following, and asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to try it,” he answered.

“Try what?”

I’d made it over to where I loaded the last log into the wagon when Max answered, “I’m going to be Mario.”

“Max, you’re not going to be able to do that. It’s a bad idea,” I warned him, moving to sit on the tractor. “Come on. We still have so much work left to do.”

“Oh, just once. Besides, now I have to prove you wrong.” I stared at him, sending an annoyed look his way. That’s when he reminded me, “You said I was in charge.”

I let out a sigh and shook my head. It didn’t matter what I said now. I’d pointed it out to him, and Max was determined. He’d never be swayed.

Starting on one end, Max climbed up onto the shortest pile. Like it was nothing, he pretended to hop to the next pile, but it was more like he’d reached his leg out and stepped onto it.

The next stack was higher, and there was a bit more space between it and

the one he was standing on. Max sized it up and went for it. He had no choice but to hop to get to that one. And though he wobbled slightly when he was there, Max got it under control and stood proudly. "What did I tell you?"

I threw my hands up and said, "Fine. You proved me wrong. Now, get down so we can finish."

"One more level," he returned.

Max bent slightly at his knees, preparing to launch himself to the next stack, and that's when it happened.

It was the strangest feeling. Because while it happened so fast, everything felt like it was moving in slow motion.

One of the pieces of wood on the front side of the stack he was standing on fell forward, hitting the stack he planned to jump onto. The taller stack of wood fell in his direction, knocking into his already unstable stack. As the wood began falling out from underneath him, Max lost his balance. He fell backward, the base of his skull whacking the edge of the piece of wood on the stack behind him.

In an instant, he was down.

The wood was both beneath his body and on top of it.

"Max!" I screamed, bolting off of the tractor and running in his direction. "Max!"

My brother didn't respond.

I made it to him and immediately began tossing the wood off of his body.

"Max, answer me," I yelled, when I finally had his entire body exposed.

He didn't move.

"Help! Dad!! Help!"

I prayed he could hear me, but I knew it was useless. He was using the chainsaw and had ear protection on.

My hands went to my brother's chest, and I tried to rouse him. Max still didn't budge.

"Max, please wake up," I begged.

Yes, I begged.

I knew it wouldn't matter, though.

I didn't need my parents to confirm what I already knew was the truth.

My brother was dead, and I was to blame.

ONE



Brynn

“I was just getting ready to call you.”

At my best friend’s greeting, I begged, “Please don’t tell me you’re canceling on me tomorrow.”

“No. Not at all. Why would you think that?”

With a smile on my face, I decided it was best to tease her. “I don’t know. Maybe your guy is going to get home from work tonight and decide he has no plans to let you out of his sight for the rest of the weekend.”

Maxie giggled. “He’ll probably want to do that, but he knows I’ll catch hell from you if I cancel on you.”

She wasn’t wrong about that.

Though I might have made it seem like it bothered me, the truth was that I couldn’t have been happier for my best friend. She’d met a guy a few months ago following a very dangerous situation at her job. He wound up acting as a bodyguard for her after she’d been attacked, and with the two of them being in such close proximity to one another for weeks on end, it became impossible for them to avoid falling in love.

I loved that Maxie had found her happy ending with Kit. They might have only been together for a few months now, but there wasn’t a question in my mind that they were going to be together forever. He loved her the way she deserved to be loved.

“At least Kit knows not to mess with me,” I said. “So, what were you planning to call me for then?”

“I just wanted to see if you were interested in taking tomorrow’s workout outdoors.”

“Do my ears deceive me? Is Maxie Oliver actually asking to exercise outdoors?” I questioned her, a smile on my face.

Maxie was my best friend, but in so many ways, she was the opposite of me. She had what I thought was an unnatural aversion to being outdoors when the weather was warm. She didn’t want to be out when it was freezing, either, but she hated sweating in the heat. So, all summer long, she insisted on exercising in an air-conditioned building.

“It’s nearly the end of October, and it is gorgeous outside,” she reasoned.

The reality was that I didn’t need any convincing to do what she was asking. I preferred being outdoors, hot or cold. “It’s fine with me, if that’s what you want to do. Where do you want to go?”

“How about the Steel Ridge Community Center?” she asked.

“That works for me. I’ll bring some dumbbells,” I told her.

I wasn’t surprised when she mumbled, “And here I thought I’d be able to get out of the heavy lifting by heading outdoors.”

I laughed. “You know me better than that.”

Doing what I did for a living, Maxie was well aware of the fact that I wouldn’t take it easy on her. Though I’d started my career many years ago as a personal trainer, it was safe to say things had changed over the last several years.

Health and fitness had been a huge part of my life ever since I was young. I always knew I wanted a career in the fitness industry, so I did what I had to do to make it happen. I wound up working as a personal trainer in the gym, and I’d built a rather successful business.

But then there was a shift. In a world where nearly everything had gone digital, I needed to adapt. So, instead of training one-on-one with clients in the gym, I decided to become an online fitness coach.

It was, by far, the best decision of my life.

Everything changed for the better. Suddenly, I had more free time and a lot more money. Best of all, I was able to impact the lives of hundreds of people from all over the world, and I could feel good about the work I was doing.

Maxie was the exception.

She was one of the few people I continued to train with in person. Most of that was because she was my best friend, and I liked that it gave us time

with one another. Until recently, she'd been with a company that had her working long hours, so we didn't always get to see each other as often as we would have liked. Now that she no longer worked there, it might have seemed like we'd have more time to spend with one another, but she was busy building her own business as well as nurturing her new relationship.

So, I was grateful we'd continued to get together a couple of times a week to exercise and catch up.

"I do know you better than that," she assured me. "So, what are you up to tonight?"

"I'm almost at the grocery store. I'm shopping, so I can go home and meal prep for the next week."

"On a Friday night? Gosh, Brynn. Here I thought I was the introverted one who'd never find a guy. How will you ever meet someone that way?"

I couldn't stop myself from laughing. I could remember saying something similar to her a couple of months ago about how she'd never meet a guy if she always stayed indoors. "I'll find him eventually. He's probably off somewhere, being just as busy as me right now. When the time is right, it'll happen."

If there was one thing I could say about myself, it was that everything I did was done for a reason. I thought, planned, and executed.

Ambition had driven me nearly all my life, and I was a highly motivated individual. It was safe to say I was one of those failure-is-not-an-option people.

"Well, if I hadn't met Kit the way I had, I might have serious doubts about that, but since I now know that anything is possible, I'll hold out hope that you meet a guy in the produce aisle."

I had just pulled into the parking lot at the grocery store when I replied, "If not there, maybe we'll find each other buying some beef, chicken, or fish."

"Right. Can't forget the protein."

"Alright, Maxie, I just got here, and I want to zip through really fast, so I guess I'll see you at the usual time tomorrow at the community center."

"That works. Enjoy your night in, chopping vegetables and cooking meals," she returned.

"I'll do my best. Tell Kit I said hello."

"Will do. Talk to you tomorrow."

With that, Maxie and I said goodbye, and I disconnected the call just as I

pulled into a parking spot. I grabbed my purse, tossed my phone inside, and pulled out my grocery list before locking my car and making my way to the entrance of the store.

Even though my trips to the store were pretty routine, I still made a list. I liked knowing I'd written down everything I'd need and could mark it off as I tossed it into my cart. I guessed it was the part of me that liked feeling that sense of accomplishment.

After grabbing a cart, I made my way to the produce aisle where, sadly, there was no guy waiting for me. I loaded my cart up with tons of fruits and vegetables before moving on to the next section. Sometimes, I'd glance down and laugh, because my cart was always half full of just the lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, apples, bananas, and berries. Toss in a few avocados, a bag of potatoes, a bunch of onions, and a container of mushrooms, and I probably looked like a crazy woman to everyone else in the store. It wasn't uncommon for me to get an odd look or two.

And if anyone who looked at me funny knew I lived alone, they might have believed it was strange. The amount of food I purchased might have seemed like a lot, but I cooked all of my meals.

Everything.

Breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks.

It was healthier and cheaper than going out. And generally, I felt better eating food I'd prepared.

Of course, that didn't mean that I never went out for dinner. I did, but it was rare.

So, I didn't care if people stared at my cart and thought I was strange. I liked what I liked, and if they had an issue with it, that was their problem.

With my produce stacked in the cart, I dashed off to pick up some meats, needing chicken, salmon, beef, and ground turkey. After grabbing what I needed there, I walked to the opposite end of the store to snatch up some eggs and almond milk from the refrigerated section, along with frozen veggies from the freezer section. Finally, I moved to get a few staple ingredients for my pantry that I'd run out of after meal prepping last week, including rice, chicken broth, salsa, and some spices.

Once I'd gotten all of those, I scanned my list one final time and confirmed I still needed to grab a pack of napkins. I made my way to the paper products aisle, got my napkins, and took off to the checkout.

Ten minutes later, I'd paid for my provisions and was on my way back

out the door. Fortunately, there was still daylight, but we were just a few weeks away from shorter days. It was on that thought I couldn't stop myself from smiling and feeling grateful that Maxie had requested we exercise outside. While I didn't necessarily mind being out in the cold weather as the seasons changed, I didn't exactly like that it got so dark so early in the day.

I had just come to a stop at the back of my car when I heard, "Brynn Allen? Is that really you?"

Considering I'd heard both my first and last name, there wasn't a chance I could ignore the person speaking, but I knew immediately that I didn't recognize the masculine voice.

I turned around and saw not one but three men walking in my direction.

"Holy shit, it is her," one of the men said.

My brows shot up in surprise at the same time my body tensed. While they didn't exactly look threatening with big smiles on their faces, I knew I couldn't be too trusting. Hell, Maxie had wound up in an awful situation, and that was at the hands of people she knew. I didn't think it was wrong to proceed with caution.

"Hi. Do I know you?" I asked.

One of the guys, still smiling, shook his head. "No. Not really. But we know you. We follow you on social media."

Right.

So, there was that.

While the change in my career from in-person training to online fitness coaching had happened, it brought with it another new aspect.

Social media.

I'd opened my accounts a few years ago, and within a very short time, they exploded. I spent most of my efforts on Instagram, though I occasionally hopped on Facebook or Twitter.

I didn't like all that came along with social media, but I couldn't deny the many positives. There were some benefits, especially when it came to running a successful business, so I couldn't exactly be angry around it.

This was, however, the second time over the course of the last three weeks that I'd been spotted while out in public.

The first time felt different than this time, though. It was one of my female followers, someone who'd actually subscribed to my fitness channel and was seeing results. She'd even pulled up a couple of photos on her phone to show me some before and after pictures. It was such a heartwarming

encounter that made me feel good.

I couldn't exactly say that these men had bad intentions, but I was definitely feeling a little uneasy and outnumbered.

"Right, social media. Thanks for following me," I said.

"We knew you lived in Pennsylvania, but we never thought we'd ever see you out at the grocery store here in Steel Ridge. This is awesome."

I offered a smile and a nod. "We all have to eat, right?"

"Can we... would you mind taking a photo? We're such big fans," one of the guys said.

From where I was standing, I had two options. Deny them a photo and risk things taking a turn. Take a photo with them, so everyone could move along.

I didn't necessarily want to take the photo, but I thought it was my safer option. Plus, I wanted to believe the best in people. They seemed like genuine fans—even if it was never my intention to have a fan base.

"Sure," I replied.

The guys were respectful, standing beside me to take a photo but never once laying a hand on me. I appreciated that.

After the photos were taken, I said, "Well, it was great meeting you."

"Yeah, definitely. We're just heading in to pick up some beer before heading to a friend's house for a few hours. Do you want to join us?"

Suddenly, I wondered if these guys were genuine fans. While it wasn't at the forefront of every post or story on my social media accounts, I believed anyone who recognized me as easily as these guys had should have known how important nutrition was to me. "I appreciate the invite, but I don't drink alcohol."

"Oh, it's alright. You don't need to drink," another guy assured me. "You can just come to hang out. Our other friends are going to go crazy when they learn that we met you."

"I'm sorry. I already have plans for tonight," I lamented.

The three men nodded at me, but only one spoke. "Right. We understand. Well, we'll let you go. It was really cool to meet you, Brynn. Thanks for the pictures."

"You're welcome."

With that, the guys turned and walked off.

I allowed my eyes to follow them for just a few seconds as they made their way in the opposite direction and into the store.

Then, as quickly as I could, I opened my car, loaded my grocery bags, and returned the cart.

Before I knew it, I'd gotten myself in back behind the wheel and realized just how heavily I was breathing.

That encounter had rattled me, even though the men seemed to respect me enough not to push when I'd turned down joining them at their friend's house for the evening.

Twice in three weeks I'd been noticed.

One meeting had left me feeling positively euphoric, while the other forced me to recognize just how dangerous things were.

As lucky as I might have been today, I understood that it could have gone much differently.

I was strong; there was no question about that.

But no matter how strong my body was, I was also smart enough to know that stacked up against even one relatively fit man—much like the men who'd approached me only minutes ago—who might have meant to cause me harm, wouldn't be so easy.

So, as I turned on my car, backed out of the spot, and started driving away, I decided it was time to do something I'd been thinking about for a while now.

I needed to get some self-defense lessons.

Fortunately, I knew just the place to do it.

TWO



Brynn

“So, I have to tell you what happened at the store yesterday.”

One sentence.

That was all it took for Maxie to completely lose her mind.

Bouncing up and down on her toes beside me, claspings her hands in front of her face, her whole face lit up.

“You met a guy in the produce department, didn’t you?” she guessed. “This is the kind of thing you lead with, Brynn. You don’t wait until the workout is over to share news like this.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

When it came to workouts, I was always very focused on the task at hand. I wasn’t someone who got sidetracked easily, so when I set out to do something, I did it.

This morning, that meant training with Maxie.

Now that we’d done that and had dumped the dumbbells into the trunk of my car, Maxie and I were merely going for a walk on the walking path around the community center.

I shouldn’t have been surprised my best friend had the reaction she did. I couldn’t say I wouldn’t have had a similar one if the roles had been reversed. Sadly, I couldn’t give her the news she was hoping for.

“Not exactly. There was no guy in the produce department,” I informed her.

Refusing to be let down, she asked, “Oh, well, was he in the freezer

section, instead?”

Shaking my head, a smile on my face, I answered, “No. There was no guy at all.”

Glancing in her direction as we continued to walk around the track, I noticed how quickly the light had dimmed in her eyes. “If you didn’t meet a guy, what else could have possibly happened at the store that you need to tell me about?”

“I was approached by three men in the parking lot when I was leaving the store,” I blurted.

She gasped. “What? Oh, God. Did something bad happen?”

“No. No, I’m fine.”

“Who were they? What did they want?” she pressed. There was no missing the panic in her tone.

“Fans.”

“Fans?”

I huffed. “It feels stupid to even say that, but yes, fans. Apparently, they recognized me from social media.”

“Alright. Well, I guess that’s possible. You have, like, what, a hundred thousand followers, right?”

Looking over at her once more, I tried to work out whether she was being serious. The look on her face told me she was. She was likely to lose her mind once I told her the truth. “Try four hundred and sixty thousand followers.”

Wide eyes shot in my direction. “Are you kidding me?”

I shook my head. “No, and what happened last night was the final push that I needed.”

Maxie and I both shifted to one side of the path to make room for a couple walking past us, heading in the opposite direction. Once they’d moved beyond us and she and I went around the bend in the path, she asked, “So, what did the guys want? And your final push for what?”

“They were just overly excited to see me out in public. And it’s strange to me, because a couple of weeks before that, I had a woman who recognized me and had subscribed to my fitness program stop to thank me and show me how much she’s progressed in her fitness journey.”

“That’s sounds wonderful. You were probably thrilled.”

“I was. But last night didn’t feel good,” I explained. “The guys were nice enough, and they really did feel like genuine fans. The entire interaction

didn't last more than five minutes or so, but I was freaking out the whole time."

There was an extended pause as Maxie took the time to process all that I'd just shared. Eventually, she guessed, "You were worried they might have wanted to hurt you."

"It crossed my mind, and I realized they'd have easily been able to accomplish that if it had been their goal, which is why I've decided I'm going to take those self-defense lessons I told you I'd been considering," I returned.

"I think that's a great idea. To be honest, I'm surprised you didn't immediately jump on them when you first told me about your interest in them," she shared.

As it turned out, when Maxie came to me a few months ago to tell me about her concerns with something happening at her job, I believed things were serious enough that she needed to enlist the help of someone else. Always looking to challenge myself and acquire new physical skills, I had already been looking at getting self-defense lessons. Through my research, I'd stumbled upon a place called Harper Security Ops that was located here in Steel Ridge. From what I could gather, they were not only capable of providing self-defense lessons, but they had private investigators and bodyguards and more. I urged Maxie to contact them if she hadn't wanted to go to the police. She did, which was where she ultimately met Kit.

"I know. I was in the middle of trying to finish up filming on a new training segment, and I wanted to keep myself focused on that. I've gotten it done, and now it seems I'm getting recognized far too frequently in this town for me to sit back and do nothing. So, I'll be up early on Monday morning and visiting the Harper Security Ops building."

Maxie's hand reached out, and her fingers curled around my forearm. Squeezing me there, I couldn't miss the sound of utter joy in her voice when she said, "You might meet your guy there. How crazy would it be if we both wound up with guys who not only worked together but were friends?"

I rolled my eyes, a small smile playing at my lips. "I'm going there, so I can learn how to defend myself in the event I ever need to. I'm not planning to meet a guy there. Besides, with my luck, I'll probably wind up with the really sweet old guy of the group or something like that."

Laughter filled the air. "You're crazy, Brynn. That's not going to happen. And to be certain, I'm going to ask Kit about it later today."

"What?"

“I’ll just confirm the age range of the guys in the self-defense and tactical training unit. You know, just so I can ease your concerns about winding up with an old guy.”

“I’m not concerned about that, though.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say. Don’t tell me you wouldn’t like to learn what you want to learn *and* find a great guy in the process.”

I snapped my lips together, because she wasn’t saying anything that was untrue. While I wasn’t exactly out looking for a guy, I couldn’t say I was opposed to meeting a great one. And based on the research I’d done, if he worked at Harper Security, he could very well be a catch.

But I wasn’t going to get caught up in all of that before I even arrived.

The most important thing for me was learning how to defend myself. I wouldn’t push a decent guy away, but that wasn’t the goal.

My silence stretched on for too long, and the next thing I knew, Maxie had declared, “You better call me as soon as you leave there on Monday morning.”

“I promise I will.”

With that, I asked her about her plans for the weekend with her guy, and we shifted our conversation to things other than my plans for self-defense lessons or the possibility of me finding a man at Harper Security Ops for the remainder of our walk.

I hoped my weekend was going to pass in a flash, because I was beyond excited for Monday morning.



The excitement hadn’t died down.

Nerves were nowhere to be found.

I woke up this morning, a woman on a mission, ready to accomplish big things. Hopping out of bed, I immediately threw on some clothes to get my workout in. After making myself a small breakfast of some scrambled eggs and toast and chasing it with two sixteen-ounce glasses of water, I went down into my finished basement, where I got in my workout for the day. I always liked to get my weight training done first thing in the morning. Throughout

the day, I found other ways to continue to move my body, because being sedentary just wasn't my thing.

Following my workout, I grabbed my protein shake, hopped in the shower, and got myself dressed. Though I didn't expect I'd start lessons today—I expected there'd have to be a schedule made up—I still thought it was best to arrive in apparel conducive to training.

It wasn't much later when I was out the door.

And now I'd arrived.

From what I managed to gather from their website, Harper Security Ops had opened for the day four minutes ago. There were quite a few cars in the lot, but I had to believe they belonged to members of the staff.

Either way, I didn't care.

I was ready to get started. Once I put my mind to something, there was no chance of diverting my attention away from it. I was locked in on this, and I intended to see it through.

A minute later, I walked through the front door and was greeted by a woman sitting at the front desk. "Hi, you must be Brynn," she declared.

I blinked my eyes in surprise at the realization I hadn't said a word, and she already knew my name. Did she recognize me from social media, too? Or were they just that good at what they did here?

"Um, yeah, that's right. How did you know that?" I asked.

The woman let out a laugh. "I'm sorry. I should have thought that through better. When Kit walked in this morning, he mentioned Maxie told him you were going to be stopping in today. I'm Avalon, by the way."

"Right. That makes sense. And it's nice to meet you."

"You, too. So, you're interested in self-defense lessons, right?"

Nodding, I confirmed, "Yes. I was hoping to speak with someone about lessons. I don't have any prior instruction, and I wanted to see what you had available."

"Sure. Were you looking to take group classes, or are you interested in private lessons?"

My brows shot up. "Private lessons? I didn't realize that would be an option."

"Yep. We offer both, and we leave it up to each individual to decide which they'd prefer," she said.

I considered my options for a brief moment. If I was the kind of woman who felt worried about my ability to learn what I needed to learn and be

embarrassed by what I didn't know, the group classes sounded like the better option. In that case, it would have likely been easier to hide and practice until I could gain some confidence.

But I was very aware of my body and how to engage muscles and use them. My determination to do well was the kind of thing that wouldn't allow me to not seek out advice if I needed clarification on something, and I believed I was a fast learner. For that reason, I believed private lessons would be the better option. Perhaps I'd be able to progress at a faster pace, ultimately putting me in a position where I could feel confident if I was ever in an uncertain situation with someone I didn't know.

With my mind made up, I finally declared, "I think I'd like to try out some private lessons."

A look of excitement washed over Avalon's face, and I thought it was a rather strange reaction to my decision. "That sounds fantastic. Jake and Kane are up there now, and I'm pretty sure Jake's got some availability for private lessons. Why don't I take you up and introduce you? You can talk to him for a bit, let him know what you're looking for, and see if you think you two will be a good fit. Jake's great, so I think you'll like him, but if not, there're a couple of other guys who work in that unit."

"Perfect. I'd really like that."

Avalon stood from her chair. "Great. Follow me."

For the next few minutes, Avalon and I walked through the Harper Security Ops building, through a few doors, and down a couple of hallways. Ultimately, we ended up coming to a stop outside a room that had a large picture window, where we could see through and into the room.

I didn't quite know what I expected to find once we arrived, but it certainly wasn't what I saw.

Two men who I assumed had to be Jake and Kane were the only ones in the room. But instead of simply standing there and talking to one another, they were fighting. Avalon wasn't the least bit fazed by what she was witnessing, so I had to assume what we were watching was normal for them.

The fight they were having wasn't verbal; though, I guessed it was possible, considering the situation. Judging by Avalon's non-reaction to seeing them how they were, I assumed the men had to be sparring.

And it was clear neither was interested in taking it easy on the other.

Both men were very physically fit, but that's where their similarities ended. One had dark hair, and the other had light brown hair. Though it was

difficult to be absolutely certain, the dark-haired guy seemed to be having a blast. The guy with the light brown hair was all business. He was focused.

Of course, that might have been because, at that very moment, he was in a position that led me to believe he was losing the fight. He was on the ground, and he was in the much more vulnerable position.

I didn't know when the brawl would end, but I had to imagine it was going to happen soon, based on what I was seeing.

But much to my surprise, the guy with the brown hair executed a move with such ease and quickness that put him in the position of power. Seeing it, I was captivated.

I had been so certain he was done for, and as quickly as I could have snapped my fingers, he freed himself. It was incredible.

"Wow," I marveled.

"That's Jake," Avalon said. My eyes left the scene in front of me, so I could turn my attention to her. "All of the guys here are good at this, but Jake lives for it. He's always down for a good fight and sweat session. And just when you think he's going to tap out, he does something like that."

I looked back through the window and saw the men had separated from one another. Apparently, the fight was now over, which was both good and bad.

Good, because now I wouldn't feel bad about Avalon and me walking in there and interrupting what they'd been doing. *Bad*, because it seemed that the end of a fight meant the men were hot, sweaty, and needed to remove their shirts.

I worked in the health and fitness industry; I'd seen my fair share of beautiful bodies. There was no doubt that both Jake and Kane took care of themselves. Both were built, solid, and obviously strong. But for some strange reason, I couldn't manage to tear my gaze away from Jake. Not his torso, the way his chest heaved as he fought to regain control of his breathing, or the sense of accomplishment he wore on his face.

Suddenly, Avalon's voice broke into my thoughts. "You ready?"

It was a chore to tear my eyes away, but I eventually managed it, noted the happy look on Avalon's face, and replied, "Oh, yeah. Sure."

With that, she turned and led me around the corner. And a moment later, we stepped into the room.

THREE



Jake

This was it.

This was exactly what I needed.

Extreme physical exertion.

Pushing to the point of failure.

It was one of the only things that helped, especially at this time of the year. And on a day like today—Max’s birthday—there was even more of a need for it.

Fortunately, Kane knew what I needed, why I needed it, and he didn’t hesitate to step up to the plate to help me with it. Best of all, he never took it easy on me.

Kane was my best friend, and he knew just how heavily I relied on our sparring sessions. He always managed to push me to the very edge, and just when I thought I’d reached my limit, when I thought I had nothing left in my tank, I’d always find a way to squeak out that last little bit of anger and frustration, guilt and devastation.

I’d spent more years living without my brother in my life than I did living with him. Despite the amount of time that had passed, no matter how many years went by, it was just as devastating now as it had been the day it happened.

The marks his death left on my soul would always be there. I knew that. I accepted it. There was no amount of counseling or therapy that would ever ease it. I knew that, because I’d done that work. Even after they had learned I

was responsible for his death, my parents did what they could to make things better for me.

They tried.

Truly, they did.

But talking to people about it never seemed to help me. I hated every minute of therapy, every second I had to sit there and talk about how my brother died and the way it made me feel.

I knew therapy could be beneficial for a lot of people. Unfortunately, I wasn't one of them.

And because I felt like I was suffocating the longer I continued to live at home with my parents, it was no surprise I graduated from high school and enlisted in the Marines.

That's when everything changed. That's when I finally started to feel like I could breathe again, like I didn't have the weight of the world and all of my parents' grief resting on my shoulders.

The grueling physical demands of basic training were the only thing that helped to ease the frequent nightmares. So, I took that lesson and ran with it. I used it every single day of my life moving forward.

And now, some days were better than others. Today, just like the days over the last week and a half, was not one of my better days.

On the bright side, Kane managed to help me work it out with a grueling session. We'd just finished up, and I immediately yanked my T-shirt over my head. Wiping the sweat from my face, I took a minute to try to regain control of my breathing.

"Feeling any better?" Kane asked.

"Loads. Thanks, man."

Kane shook his head and waved his hand in the air as though I were speaking nonsense. "You know it's no problem, Jake. I've got your back."

He had.

For as long as I could remember, I never had to think twice about being able to depend on Kane. Whenever I reached out and told him I needed to spar, he never hesitated. I'd always be grateful for his friendship.

"I do. Still, as much as I might get on your case when we're sparring, you should know how much it means to me," I told him.

He nodded. "I know."

Just as I was about to open my mouth to speak again, the door to the self-defense training room opened. Avalon peeked her head inside, and with just

one look, I knew she was up to something.

The most outspoken—and certainly the most bubbly—member of the Harper Security Ops team, Avalon, wore her feelings on her face. Seeing that look on her face now and the fact that she was keeping her body outside the room told me there was something going on. Given that she was smiling, one of two things could be the case. Either she was genuinely happy about something that necessitated being happy, or she had some mischievous plan up her sleeve.

Knowing Avalon, it was likely the latter.

And that was something I couldn't quite bring myself to feel excited about.

“What’s going on, Avalon?” Kane asked, finally unable to stand the suspense.

Though it seemed impossible, the smile on her face grew bigger. Then she opened the door wider and stepped fully inside the room. Only, she wasn't alone.

Using her hands to point to each of us, Avalon made introductions. “Guys, this is Brynn Allen. Brynn, this is Kane Ramsey and Jake Burns.”

Brynn didn't hesitate to step forward. “It's nice to meet the both of you.”

“Likewise,” Kane replied.

I didn't say anything.

I found myself struggling to formulate a coherent thought. Because there was the part of me that still had Avalon's reaction before she stepped inside the room in my head, and I didn't have to think twice about what had been going through her mind.

Just two years ago, every member of the Harper Security Ops team was single. While there were people dating someone or casually hooking up, nobody had been in a serious relationship. Over the last year and a half, things had changed a lot. It seemed we were dropping like flies. First, it was Royce, the owner. Then it was Nixon, Jagger, Brixton, Damon, Jesse, Kane, Leo, Magnus, Kit, and Jax.

It was safe to say things had been interesting around here, and Avalon was in her glory, loving every single second of it.

If I had to guess, she was going to be doing what she could to get me alone in this room with Brynn.

Well, she could try all she wanted. There wasn't a chance anything was going to happen, and that had nothing to do with Brynn being unattractive.

In fact, she was precisely the opposite. Unbelievably stunning, with what I could only describe as dark blonde hair. It wasn't light enough to just be called blonde, but it wasn't dark enough to make her a brunette. It landed just past her shoulders. She had green eyes, a perfectly shaped nose, and a gorgeous smile. Her lips were exquisite.

But God, she was young. She looked like she couldn't have been more than a day or two over twenty. Legal, but just barely.

If I was right, she was easily ten to twelve years younger than me. As gorgeous as she was, I felt like a creep even checking her out.

"Brynn stopped in today, because she's looking for self-defense lessons," Avalon revealed. "As it turns out, she thinks that private lessons are going to be best for her. And, Jake, I know your schedule probably permits that right now, so I thought I'd bring her up and introduce you two. I figured you could talk, get a feel for what she needs, and as long as you're both comfortable with it, we can get her all set up. Otherwise, I can talk to Greyson or Huck."

I let out a grunt. Greyson or Huck. It shouldn't have come as a surprise to me that Avalon mentioned the other two single guys in the self-defense unit. With Kane and Brixton already spoken for, it was clear what her motives were. More than that, she knew exactly what she was doing by mentioning Greyson and Huck. She knew it was a way to try to get me to stake my claim.

That wasn't going to happen.

But just because I didn't have any intention of taking this to the place where I knew Avalon hoped I would, it didn't mean that I was willing to throw Brynn to the wolves. Not, of course, that I thought Greyson or Huck would ever do anything to harm her. It was just that they might not have a problem with such a large age gap. And if a woman this young was coming here, I hated to think it was because she was trying to get herself out of a bad situation. She wouldn't need anyone trying to hook up with her at the same time.

With the way she looked, there was no question either one of those guys wouldn't want to try to see if they could have a chance with her.

Nope.

I'd put a stop to that.

Smiling right back at Avalon, I said, "Sure. I've got some time. I'm sure Brynn and I can work it out."

Avalon's eyes danced with delight. "That's great. Well, Brynn, I'm going to head back down to the front desk, but whenever you finish up, just come

and see me, and we'll get all of your paperwork completed."

Brynn smiled at Avalon. "That's perfect. Thank you."

"Oh, you're very welcome."

Avalon started moving to the door, but before she walked through, she turned back and called, "Kane?"

"Yeah?"

"I actually needed to talk to you about something. Do you have a minute?" she asked.

Yep.

Just as I had suspected.

Avalon had a motive, and she was too good at doing what she set out to do. Brynn didn't know her, so she probably didn't think twice about it. But I knew. No matter what she hoped was going to happen here, Avalon was going to be seriously disappointed when it didn't work out.

I knew Kane had quickly caught on to Avalon's plan, because he looked over at me and chuckled. His lips twitched, and he replied, "Yeah, Avalon. I have time."

With that, he walked toward the door and followed her out.

Then it was just the two of us.

Brynn and me.

When I turned my attention to her, I had been prepared to take the professional route and go over her concerns with her. But before I had the chance to speak, she said, "Can you show me how to do that thing?"

My brows pulled together. "What thing?"

She shook her head, a small smile playing at her lips. "I'm sorry. You must think I'm crazy. I was standing outside the room and looking through the window with Avalon when you were in here fighting with Kane."

"Sparring," I corrected her.

"Right. Sparring. Anyway, I was convinced you had lost the battle, but then you did that move and came out on top. I'd like to learn how to do that."

I let out a laugh, jerked my head over to a stack of mats we had in the back corner of the room, and suggested, "Why don't we go have a seat and talk for a minute?"

A soft giggle escaped. "Sure."

Jesus.

That sound.

Ignore it, I thought.

I turned around and led us across the room to the stack of mats. Once there, I held my hand out and urged her to sit first.

Instead of immediately grabbing a seat, Brynn unzipped her jacket and pulled it off. And that was the moment I realized this was going to be harder than I thought.

Her body was incredible.

She was wearing a women's tee that landed about a half an inch above the waistband of her leggings. The short-sleeved tee showed off her beautifully sculpted arms. And the minimal skin on display between her pants and the bottom of her shirt revealed a toned midsection. The pants, though?

Fuck.

I was merely grateful she hadn't turned around, because my eyes would have quickly dropped to her ass, which I had no doubt was going to be round and perky.

Once she was seated, I put a bit of distance between us and sat down as well.

Then I asked, "So, you'd like some private self-defense lessons?"

"That's correct."

I nodded. "Is there any reason in particular? Has something happened, or is this purely just a desire to learn?"

Her eyes narrowed slightly as she considered my questions. "I guess it's a bit of both."

Tipping my head to the side, feeling my body grow rigid at the thought of something having happened to this girl, I asked, "Care to explain what that means?"

"Well, technically, nothing bad has happened," she started. I immediately felt my body relax. "But twice over the last three weeks, I've been noticed by people, and after Friday's encounter, I started thinking I should be more proactive in keeping myself safe."

This was becoming more and more confusing. "You've been noticed?"

"Yes. I have a rather large social media following, and apparently, people are starting to recognize me out in public now. The first time, I didn't really think much about it, since it was just a woman who noticed me. But on Friday, I was leaving the grocery store and was approached by a group of three men. They were nice, and fortunately, they didn't try to harm me, but I couldn't ignore the feeling that things could have gone very differently."

Young or not, Brynn was obviously a smart woman, and it was admirable

to see her doing what was necessary to keep herself safe.

I'd never really gotten into social media like I knew many people had. It never interested me, and I often believe the negatives outweighed the positives with it. When I heard about something like what Brynn experienced, it only reinforced that notion.

But I also realized that people became influencers and earned decent livings that way, so I couldn't say I didn't understand the allure.

"You're certainly in the right place. Do you have any experience in self-defense?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. None, unfortunately."

"That's not a problem."

"I'm a really fast learner, though, which is part of the reason I opted for the private lessons. I figured I might be able to move at a quicker pace if I had that one-on-one instruction."

I didn't hesitate to confirm, "That is what we see is generally the case with private instruction."

"Great. And Avalon said you had availability and would be able to accommodate that. Is there a recommendation you have as to how frequently I should be getting lessons?"

"We can go as often as you'd like, as long as we can compare schedules and find a time that works. Obviously, the more you train, the more success you'll have. That said, we don't want to overdo it to the point where your body becomes too sore," I reasoned.

"Oh, I'm not worried about that," she insisted. "I work out regularly, and I'm always up for a challenge. I think it'll be great to finally do something new and different to make that happen."

Color me impressed.

The girl was determined to make progress.

"Alright, well, I'll let you set the pace when it comes to that, and I'll do what I can to tweak my schedule to fit with what works for you," I said.

She shot me a brilliant white smile and asked, "How soon could we start?"

"I've got time this morning, if you'd like to dive in right away. We can start off easy with a lot of verbal instruction and basic strikes. It won't be anything too complicated, and it'll be stuff you can practice without a partner after you leave."

"That sounds great. I've got the time now, if you can make that happen."

Standing, I jerked my head toward the side. “Let’s get started then.”

Brynn stood and moved to the center of the mat with me. Before we got started, I asked, “Out of curiosity, can I ask where you heard about us from?”

“Oh, well, actually, I’d considered self-defense classes a few months ago, and I stumbled upon Harper Security Ops in my search. I was in the middle of a work project that I wanted to finish up first, so I didn’t come in right away. But I wound up telling my friend about this place, and she came in this summer.”

“Your friend was here for self-defense lessons?” I asked, wondering if I’d recall who her friend was.

Brynn shook her head. “No. No, my friend is actually Maxie Oliver. She’s dating Kit, the guy who worked as—”

“Her bodyguard,” I declared, cutting her off.

“Yeah. I don’t know if you’ve ever met her, but she’s my best friend.”

My brows pulled together. This was strange. While I realized there was nothing that said people who had that much of an age gap couldn’t be friends, I thought it was odd. “I met Maxie at a wedding just recently. She and Kit were actually sitting at the same table as I was.”

“Yes, I remember they went to a wedding together. I’ll have to tell her I met you.”

Before I could stop myself, I asked, “Could I ask you a question that you might find offensive?”

Brynn looked caught off guard, but ultimately shrugged and answered, “Sure.”

“How old are you?”

There wasn’t an ounce of disgust or hesitation on her part. “I’m twenty-nine.”

“You’re joking.”

“No. Why would you say that?”

My eyes roamed over her face, and I tried to keep them there in an effort not to stare at all the parts of her body I hadn’t permitted myself to look at before when I thought she was just barely legal. “I thought you might have just turned twenty.”

She let out a laugh. “I get that more often than you might imagine, but I promise I’m about to enter my thirties.”

At that, I felt a lot of relief move through me. More than I had expected.

The only problem was that I couldn’t work out whether I felt that way

because I didn't have to feel like a creep being physically attracted to her, or if it was because I wouldn't have to fight so hard not to fall into the plan that Avalon had already put into motion.

FOUR



Brynn

I couldn't avoid it.

I had no choice but to pick up my phone and call Maxie just like I promised I would, because if I didn't, there was no question she was going to get the wrong impression.

Though, to be fair, I couldn't say precisely how wrong my friend would be in whatever assumptions she made.

My first trip to Harper Security Ops wasn't anything like I thought it would be. I had anticipated going in, having some sort of formal sign-up process, and a calendar with a schedule for classes handed to me.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

And to say Jake was the most unexpected but welcome surprise would have been an understatement.

Not only was he kind and friendly, but he was also very knowledgeable and thorough. My first lesson with him this morning had gone exceptionally well. He was professional, taught me some basic hand strikes, and spent a substantial amount of time talking to me about the importance of situational awareness.

Though I'd practiced situational awareness in my everyday life, I hadn't realized it was something that was not only taught in a scenario like this, but also that it had a name. Quite frankly, I always thought I was just being paranoid about stuff, constantly checking my surroundings when I was out in public and always looking for exits when I entered buildings.

It was nice to know I was already one step ahead of the game and making smart choices in an effort to keep myself safe.

Overall, I learned a lot in my lesson with Jake, and to say I was excited for my next one would have been an understatement.

Of course, if I was being completely honest, it wasn't just the self-defense skills Jake was teaching me that I was excited for tomorrow.

It was knowing I'd be able to see him again. I mean, in my defense, the man had gone through our entire session not wearing a shirt.

Jake was nice to look at, with his impressive physique. I did my best and succeeded at not drooling all over myself, but it became clear to me this morning that I certainly had a type.

That type was taller than me by at least six or seven inches, muscular, and defined. Being in the fitness industry, I paid attention to Jake's build. I liked the symmetry of his muscles and that he was proportionate. The size of his biceps matched the size of his shoulders, which matched the size of his pecs. And though he had the amount of muscle that he did, he still managed to keep himself lean enough for those abs of his to pop out.

On top of all of that, he had short, light brown hair, brown eyes that held a bit of something in them I couldn't quite put my finger on, and a hint of a dimple on his right cheek.

From where I'd been standing, Jake was quite the catch.

And it was that thought which had me wondering how I was going to get through my phone call with Maxie without giving it all away.

The phone hadn't even finished ringing one time when Maxie answered. "So, how did it go?"

"Well, hello to you, too," I fired back through my laughter.

"I'm sorry, but I've been sitting here working on some holiday decorations, since you know this is my favorite time of year, and I've had my phone attached to my hip. Did you sign up for classes?"

Wanting to tease her, I revealed, "Actually, I didn't sign up for classes. I decided it wasn't going to be right for me."

She gasped. "What? Really? But you've done so much research. I thought you would have really liked going there for self-defense training."

"Oh, I'm getting self-defense training there, but I'm not taking classes," I informed her.

There was a long stretch of silence as I assumed Maxie was attempting to figure out what the heck was going on. It was obvious she had not a clue

when she replied, “I don’t understand what that means.”

Letting out another laugh, I explained, “I didn’t know it was an option, but when I got there, Avalon told me that I could either take group classes or private lessons. I figured from a scheduling standpoint and knowing the way I’ll push myself to learn whatever is taught, the private lessons would be the better choice for me.”

Maxie groaned, clearly annoyed that I’d been teasing her. “I thought you were telling me you weren’t going to Harper Security Ops at all. Okay, so this is great news. When do you start your lessons?”

“I already had my first one this morning.”

“Really? How did it go?” she questioned me. Maxie’s tone indicated she was just as eager for that information as I was feeling about going back for my next lesson tomorrow.

“It was great. I’ve already learned a lot, which I intended to practice today,” I told her.

“That’s great. So, are you going to be working with whoever is available on the self-defense team, or is there one guy who will be working with you?”

This is where the conversation was going to take a turn. “As far as I know, I’ll be working with the same guy.”

“Who is it? I wonder if I’ve met him yet.”

“You have.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, when he asked me how I found out about Harper Security Ops, I explained that I’d done my research months ago and referred you there,” I started. “Then I told him who you were and that you were dating Kit. He told me he sat at the same table as you and Kit at that wedding a few weeks ago. His name is Jake.”

The silence stretched briefly between us before she murmured, “Jake... Jake. He’s the one without tattoos, right?”

I thought that was a rather strange question, but I had to assume there was someone else who sat with them who had tattoos, so I answered, “I didn’t see any tattoos on him, and I saw enough of him that I can confidently say there weren’t any.”

“What did you just say?”

“I said, I didn’t see any tattoos on him.”

“No, not that. What did you say about seeing enough of him? What does that mean?” she pressed, her tone accusatory.

Crap.

I was so thrown by her question that I hadn't been thinking clearly. "I... well... when I got there, Avalon took me up to one of the self-defense training rooms, and I got to look in through a window on the side. Jake was sparring with another guy who works there named Kane. At the end of their sparring session, both men pulled their shirts off. Avalon led me in afterward, and Jake never put his shirt back on."

I could hear the smile in Maxie's voice. "And what did you think?"

"Jake is very good at what he does. Lessons went well."

"No. No, I don't care about the details of the lessons. I want to know what you think of Jake. Or, should I say, nearly-naked Jake?"

And there it was.

The unavoidable conversation.

The one I knew I was going to have to have with her.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. When the roles had been reversed, I was the exact same way with her as she was being with me now.

"He's nice to look at," I admitted.

"Just nice? Is that it?"

I huffed. "Fine, he's got an incredible body, and he's totally somebody I could see myself being attracted to. But it can't just be physical for me. He has to be more than just a hot body. I need substance."

A short pause followed before Maxie asked, "So, when's your next lesson?"

There was too much confidence in the tone of her voice. It indicated to me that she didn't believe a word that had just come out of my mouth about being attracted to Jake. Perhaps that's the way it would always be with a best friend who knew me the way Maxie knew me. Admitting defeat, realizing I wasn't going to be able to hide the truth, I replied, "Tomorrow morning."

"You aren't wasting any time, are you?"

"It's important I learn what Jake has to teach me," I reasoned.

Maxie started laughing. "Oh, I believe you. I just think it's not only self-defense that you want to learn. And for what it's worth, I know that he's single, because he was one of only two guys at the table the night of the wedding who was. I'm going to be rooting for you."

I rolled my eyes.

There was no point in arguing with her. Part of the reason for that was because it wouldn't make a difference, but the bigger reason was that I

couldn't say I didn't want her rooting for me. If I could get self-defense lessons and find something with Jake like she had found with Kit, why would I turn it down?



When I arrived back at Harper Security Ops first thing the next morning, I barely had a moment to think about anything Maxie and I had discussed the day before. No sooner had I walked into the room and set my things down, Jake said, "Let's see what you remember from yesterday."

We immediately got right into it. Jake and I ran through everything he'd taught me the day before, and he hadn't needed to offer me additional instruction or reminders about what anything was. I'd taken in everything he'd taught me, remembered it, and practiced it.

"I'm impressed," he told me. "You're doing exceptionally well."

I smiled at him. "Thank you. But something tells me you still aren't going to teach me that move you used on Kane yesterday, are you?"

Jake's lips twitched as he shook his head. "I will, but not yet. You still have quite a bit to learn before we get there. That said, I think we'll spend the first part of the lesson today learning about kicks, and depending on how you're doing and feeling, we can move into attacks."

I wasn't exactly sure I knew what he meant by attacks, but I guessed he meant he'd be teaching me how to fend off an attacker. If that was the case, I was excited.

But apparently, I had to learn the basics first.

"That sounds great."

For the next little while, Jake demonstrated several different types of kicks I could use and explained when they'd be most effective. I practiced them for a few minutes, and when he was confident in my understanding and execution, he suggested it was time to move on to the next part of the lesson.

I was more than ready for it.

Or, so I thought.

In theory, what Jake was planning to teach was arguably some of the most important material I needed to understand. Fighting off an attacker and

knowing what to do in that situation to keep myself safe had been the whole point of seeking out lessons.

But the problem was, I hadn't considered precisely what Jake would need to do in order to teach me what I needed to know.

"Do you want to go from the front or the back first?" he asked.

I blinked my eyes in surprise and nearly gasped. "What?"

"The attack. We can work on getting yourself out of a bear hug attack from the back, or we can work on defending yourself from an attack at the front of your body."

Jesus. What was wrong with me?

"Right. How about we start from the front?" I suggested.

He offered a slight nod in return and said, "Okay. To start, we'll assume no weapons are involved. I'm going to come forward and reach for your throat, which is one of the most vulnerable spots on your body in a situation like this. You'll want to get my hand off your throat as quickly as possible, but you'll be doing it in a way you might not expect. In fact, your hands won't even come close to your neck throughout the whole process."

I nodded my understanding and asked, "Got it. So, what do I do?"

At that, Jake reached his right arm straight out and curled his fingers around the front of my throat. Considering this wasn't a real attack, Jake didn't actually choke me. As grateful as I was for that, I couldn't say his firm yet gentle hold was a much better alternative, especially not when he was looking at me with those kind brown eyes of his.

There was a moment of delay before he released his hold and said, "You know what? Let me demonstrate this on you first. Pretend you're attacking me from the front and reach for my throat."

Surprised by the sudden change, but able to focus better without his hand on me, I lifted my right hand and reached for his throat. It wasn't much better than having his hand on me. But on the bright side, it didn't last very long.

Speaking through each move he did next, Jake lifted his left fist, pressed it down into my elbow, forcing it to bend, and lifted his right hand up to hit me in the nose with the palm of his hand. Obviously, Jake didn't use any force when he demonstrated the moves, so he never hurt me.

"Okay, so do you understand what needs to be done?" he asked.

I thought on it for a brief moment and answered, "I think so."

"Great. Let's give it a try."

With that, Jake reached for my throat again. I moved slowly through each

of the moves, wanting to be certain I didn't miss doing anything. "How was that?"

"Perfect. Let's try it again, but let's see if you can make it more fluid this time. Don't think so much about it."

Acknowledging his request, I gave him a nod and tried again. It didn't feel as fluid as I was guessing he probably wanted it to be, but I didn't question myself as I went through each move.

Jake encouraged me to keep trying.

So, that's what we did. Over and over again until it became like second nature to me, I practiced.

"You're really doing excellent, Brynn," Jake praised me after I'd had executed the moves for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Thank you," I replied, feeling much more confident than I had thought was possible this early on in my lessons.

"Alright, so if you're ready, I think we can proceed to the next step in this move," Jake declared.

"The next step?" I repeated. "You mean, I haven't finished it yet."

Tipping his head to one side, Jake shrugged. "It's hard to say. The reality is going to depend on the situation you're in, but in most cases, you will have only done enough to protect your throat to this point. Since that still leaves your attacker free to harm you again, you'll want to try to take him down to the ground."

That made sense.

I didn't know why I had assumed that merely getting myself free was enough. Sure, I could run, but so far, I hadn't learned anything that would give me the advantage over an attacker.

So, I replied, "I'm ready to learn whatever you want to show me."

With that, Jake showed me the next steps I needed to follow to take an attacker down to the ground using my legs and feet.

Starting to get the hang of it all—the moves I was being taught as well as the way Jake taught me—it didn't take me nearly as long to pick up the second half of the move as it had the first part.

Jake and I practiced the move from the initial throat grab all the way through to the end, where I had him down on the ground, several times.

"I'm really impressed by you, Brynn. You've picked everything up very quickly, and your execution of the moves is precise. I hope you're feeling as confident about what you're doing as I am about your progress," Jake said.

Nodding, I confirmed, “I am feeling much more assured than I thought I’d be this early on, so I guess that’s good.”

He smiled at me and suggested, “Great. Why don’t we take a quick break and grab some water?”

“That sounds like an excellent idea.”

Jake and I moved to the side of the room, picked up our water bottles, and drank. After taking a sip, he asked, “So, can I ask how it’s possible for you to be here a couple of times a week in the mornings? Do you work the night shift somewhere?”

I swallowed a gulp of water, wiped a drop of it from my bottom lip, and let out a laugh. “No. No, I actually own my own business.”

“No kidding? What do you do?”

“I’m an online fitness coach,” I told him. When he shot me a curious look, I explained, “I used to work as a personal trainer in gyms before, but ever since we entered this digital era, I’ve had no choice but to adapt. So, I create content, upload it to an app, and people can subscribe monthly or yearly to my channel. While it’s focused heavily on exercise and strength training, I do have other content on there to help with nutrition, lifestyle, and recovery from workouts.”

Jake seemed genuinely surprised. “Wow, that’s interesting. I assume you like what you do?”

“I love it. Health and fitness have been my passion for as long as I can remember.”

“Well, now I understand not only how you manage to make it here during the week when you do, but also why you’re progressing so quickly. You seem to have an awareness about your body that a lot of people don’t have.”

I couldn’t imagine trying to learn what Jake was teaching without having the control over my body that I did. I didn’t think it’d be impossible, but there was no doubt it would delay the whole process.

It felt good to know that Jake recognized my strengths and didn’t hesitate to point them out. I only wished I could continue to focus on those instead of the way he looked or the way his body felt.

But when he opened his mouth again and said it was time to get back to work, I knew I was going to be right back at square one, not only focusing on the moves he wanted me to do, but also ignoring the attraction I felt.

FIVE



Brynn

“So, you just need to make sure you’re here before one o’clock.”

“I can do that,” I promised my mom, a smile on my face. “What do you want me to bring?”

She let out a laugh. “You know I’ll have it all covered, so I don’t expect you to bring anything. But I know you can be picky with what you eat, so if you need some special healthy dessert, feel free to bring it along.”

The Thanksgiving holiday was fast approaching, and my mom gave me a call this morning to discuss the specifics of the day. I always thought it was funny, because she’d do this with every single holiday.

While the menu would change from one special occasion to the next, the timing of it usually never did. And since I’d been celebrating the holidays with my family for my entire life, there was no reason for my mom to feel so compelled to call me up to confirm everything.

But she loved doing this, so I couldn’t fault her for it. Nothing made her happier than having her entire family back under one roof to celebrate whatever occasion it was.

“You tell me this every single time, and I never complain about what you make,” I reminded her.

“Because you know how to be sweet and kind,” she reasoned.

I let out a laugh. “So, why are you complaining then?”

It was no secret to anyone in my family that I was particular about the food I ate on a daily basis. But when it came to the holidays and special

occasions, I didn't have a problem with making an exception.

And Thanksgiving wasn't a holiday I wanted to spend my time worrying about what I ate. It was meant for me to spend time visiting with my family. Given how hard I worked all year long, rarely indulging myself, there was no reason I couldn't enjoy something more extravagant.

Plus, even though I wouldn't waste the opportunity to eat some of my favorite holiday foods, I knew how my body reacted. I'd wind up feeling sluggish if I ate too much of certain things, so I'd have enough to get a small taste, but I wouldn't go overboard. And the best part was, getting those few bites was always just enough for me to feel satisfied.

So, I actually found myself looking forward to a holiday like Thanksgiving. Not only did I get to spend time with the people I loved most in the world, but I also got the opportunity to load up my plate with smaller portions of all of my favorites, too. I wouldn't go overboard, and I'd even spoil myself with some dessert, too.

My mom was trying to make it seem like I visited and never wanted to put anything on my plate.

"I guess because there is one thing I was hoping you'd be able to bring, but I didn't want to have to ask you," my mom shared.

I perked up, suddenly wondering what side dish I could bring to contribute to the feast.

"What? What is it?" I asked. "I didn't realize there was a dish I made that you'd want as part of the Thanksgiving Day spread."

There was a long pause before she finally answered, "It's not food. It's a guy. I was hoping you were going to tell me you needed me to make sure there was an extra setting at the table for a guest this year."

If it hadn't been for the fact that I would have liked nothing more than to be able to give her that, I might have rolled my eyes. The reality was that my love life hadn't exactly been thrilling over the last several years.

Even if I'd made an effort by going on a date with someone, it rarely resulted in going any further than that. I certainly wasn't interested in forcing something with anyone just so I'd be able to bring a guy home for the holidays.

In the same breath, I couldn't say I wasn't feeling left out. Everyone had someone in my family. My parents had each other, my grandparents were still together, and both of my brothers were in serious, committed relationships. Parker, my older brother, was already married, and Jace, my

younger brother, was well on his way there, because he'd just recently gotten engaged.

Then, there was me.

I hadn't managed to land a boyfriend yet.

And as that sad thought made its way to the forefront of my mind, so did a vision of Jake. A half-naked Jake who forced a shiver to run down my spine.

Talk about a side dish.

No.

Not a side dish. He could never be that. Jake was easily the main course. Heck, he was the whole five-course meal.

Damn it. I needed to stop.

I couldn't do this to myself.

"Sorry, Mom. There's no need for an extra place setting this year," I lamented.

Having heard the melancholy in my tone, she made the effort to turn things around. "That's okay. Who knows? Maybe we'll need one by Christmas, right?"

I wasn't going to hold my breath.

"Yeah, maybe we'll get lucky for Christmas," I agreed.

"Just as long as you remember that he'll be the lucky one," she noted.

And just like that, my mom made my heart melt and turned my mood around. It was a good thing, too. Because I'd just arrived at my destination.

"I'll remember," I promised. "Listen, I just got to the store, so I'm going to head in to grab some supplies. I'll talk to you later, but if you think of anything you need, let me know."

"I will, Brynn. Talk to you later."

"Love you, Mom."

"Love you, too."

With that, I disconnected the call and let out a sigh as I shook my head with a smile on my face. One of these days, things would change for me.

I just hoped it would be sooner rather than later.



“Brynn?”

It seemed that getting recognized was slowly becoming the norm. Fortunately, at the sound of my name being called now, I didn’t feel any dread or worry.

Interestingly enough, the lack of fear didn’t have anything to do with the fact that it was Saturday, and I’d already completed my first week of self-defense lessons with Jake. While I was feeling more and more confident with each training session, confidence in what I had learned wasn’t what had me relaxing at the sound of my name being called.

It was the voice.

Because the sound of that voice confirmed I wouldn’t need to attempt to execute any moves Jake had taught me.

By some strange coincidence, the person who’d called my name was him. Jake.

I’d been crouched down with my back to him as I inspected items on the bottom shelf of an aisle in the local hardware store, but when I heard him call my name and make his approach, I stood and turned in his direction.

“Jake,” I declared.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

I glanced down briefly at where I’d been looking only seconds ago before I returned my attention to him. “House project.”

“Painting?” he guessed, after noting the items I already had in the basket hanging off my arm.

Nodding, I confirmed, “Yeah. I’ve decided a few of my walls need to be spruced up, so while I’ve already got the paint, I needed to come into the hardware store today to pick up a drop cloth, paintbrushes, and some painter’s tape. What about you?”

It was then I realized Jake had been holding something in his hands. He held the box up between us and said, “I need to replace a lightbulb in my kitchen.”

“Ah, I see. Well, this is the place to get those things.”

There was a brief awkward silence that passed between us. It was strange, because I’d never really had a moment like that with Jake. Then again, we’d been in a controlled environment before, where both of us knew what our roles were. This was a whole new world. What was I supposed to say to him outside of self-defense lessons?

As I tried to wrack my brain for something to say, Jake saved the day.

“So, is painting your project for this weekend?”

“Part of it,” I told him. “Normally, I’d be with Maxie on a Saturday morning for a personal training session, but she bailed on her workout with me to do something Kit had planned for the two of them.”

Jake tipped his head to the side. “I thought you said you were an online fitness coach.”

“I am. But Maxie’s my best friend, so I make an exception for her,” I explained.

“That’s nice of you to do.”

I started laughing. “You should tell her that. I don’t take it easy on her, and while she generally puts in a good effort, she certainly has those days when she tries to squirm out of doing the hard work.”

A strange look washed over Jake’s face. I wondered what it meant, but before I could ask, the look was gone. It vanished so fast, I started to think I imagined it.

When he made no move to speak, I said, “Anyway, I got my usual workout in early this morning, but I like to do some extra movement a few days a week. Usually, I end up taking a walk with Maxie, but since she’s not up for it today, I decided I’d go on a hike.”

Jake’s eyes narrowed at me. “But you’re here at the hardware store.”

“Right. Well, I’ll need something to do after my hike, since I took care of responding to emails, messages on social media, and questions posted on my app this morning. That’s why I stopped in here first. I wanted to make sure I could head home after my hike and dive right into painting.”

“It sounds like you’ve got a busy day, and you’ve already gotten so much accomplished. Doesn’t it suck to work on the weekend?”

I shrugged. “The work is not so bad, since it’s mostly just needing to respond to people. I don’t generally film content or edit on the weekends. Either way, it’s hard for me to just sit around. What about you?”

He shook his head. “I don’t like sitting around very much, either.”

I let out another laugh and said, “I didn’t mean that. I was asking what you had planned for today.”

“Oh. Yeah, I was hoping I’d figure that out between the time I came here to pick up the bulb and the time I got home and replaced it.”

I didn’t know if it was the smartest thing to do, but I liked Jake. He was a nice guy, and I enjoyed being around him. It seemed he didn’t have any plans, and I wouldn’t have minded the company.

“Assuming you still haven’t figured it out, you’re more than welcome to join me on my hike,” I offered.

Jake seemed a bit surprised by my invitation. “Really?”

Nodding, I reasoned, “I mean, if there’s a chance someone else approaches me while I’m on my hike, I’m not sure how honed my self-defense skills are just yet. Having you there might detract anyone from wanting to bring me harm.”

His chin tipped up slightly as a small smile formed on his face. “You think I’m that intimidating?”

“What? No. I think you’re great,” I blurted. Jake looked amused, and I had no choice but to try to explain myself. “I mean, well, what I meant to say was that I think you’re nice, but it’s less likely I’ll be attacked if you are there with me. You know, strength in numbers and all.”

For the first time since I’d met him, Jake laughed. Genuinely. And the sight of him laughing like that made me feel very new things. Something fluttered in my belly from hearing him. But there was something else I found myself drawn to.

His smile.

Jake’s lips had twitched around me before, and he’d shot a friendly smile in my direction on occasion. But not once had he smiled so big in my presence before now. His smile transformed him. It was only when he was smiling like he was now that I realized I hadn’t imagined the look in his eyes that had made me believe something weighed heavily on him.

Once he settled himself down, he brought his eyes to mine and reasoned, “In that case, I don’t think I have a choice. How could I possibly let you venture out into the wilderness alone?”

Until he’d confirmed he’d go with me, I hadn’t realized how much tension I’d been holding on to. It hit me then that I hadn’t just offered to have him come along because he didn’t have any plans of his own. I asked him to come, because I legitimately wanted him there with me.

“You’d be surprised how long I’ve been doing it on my own,” I mumbled.

Curiosity washed over him. “This sounds like a good story. Why don’t you finish getting the things you need, so we can head out? Then you can tell me all about it.”

Shaking my head, I insisted, “I think you think I’m more interesting than I actually am. There’s really not much to tell.”

Jake took a step in my direction, and his voice dipped low. “And I think you’re seriously underestimating just how fascinating a woman you are.”

If I thought lessons with him had been difficult, they paled in comparison to this. At the close proximity to him in a situation that didn’t warrant it like our lessons did, it became impossible not to react.

My lips parted, forcing his eyes to them, and my fingers squeezed the handle of the paintbrush so tightly in my hand that my nails dug into my palms. As someone who didn’t have long nails, I thought that said a lot about how much Jake was affecting me.

God, the man smelled good.

“Um, I—”

“Get your paintbrushes, Brynn,” Jake instructed, clearly noticing just how much of an effect he was having on me.

Right.

Focus.

I gave him a quick nod, turned, and bent back down to decide on a paintbrush.

Or, I was sure it looked like I was trying to decide on one. The truth was, I already had the one I intended to get grasped firmly in my hand. I just needed to take a minute to gather my bearings and pull myself together.

What kind of idiot was I to invite a man I was attracted to on a hike with me?

I took a moment to consider the answer to that question, and I realized maybe I wasn’t an idiot at all.

I’d always been a woman who was confident in herself. I knew what I wanted, and I went after it.

No man had ever thrown me off balance the way Jake had, and I couldn’t ignore the possibility of there being a good reason for that.

So, I wasn’t going to continue to cower and hide my face from him in the hardware store. I was going to be the confident and determined woman I always was.

Jake hadn’t indicated he had a problem with me up to this point, so why, when I felt like there might be a hint of an attraction or a spark on his end, would I pull back and run away from it?

That wasn’t the woman I was.

I didn’t know who that woman was.

I was Brynn Allen. I was a woman who liked a guy and invited him to go

on a hike with me. Was it a date? I didn't know. But I also didn't care. I just liked knowing that I was going to have the opportunity to spend some time with him outside of training and that perhaps I'd get the chance to know him better.

With my mind made up, I took in a deep breath, stood, and turned around to face him again. Holding up the same brush I'd had in my hand from the start, I said, "I think this is the one."

He still seemed to be amused by me. "Okay. Did you get everything else you needed?"

My eyes dropped to the contents in the basket hanging off my forearm. Drop cloth, painter's tape, and now, a paintbrush.

Lifting my attention to Jake, I smiled. "That's everything."

He returned the smile, jerked his head in the opposite direction, and suggested, "Then let's get out of here."

I gave him a nod.

Then Jake turned his body slightly to the side, waved his arm out in front of him, and allowed me to walk ahead of him.

I wasn't too proud to admit that I secretly hoped he was checking out my ass as I did.

SIX



Brynn

“So, do you really come out here on your own to hike?”

This was really happening.

I was out doing something I loved with a guy I liked, and it was happening because I’d asked him to join me.

Jake and I had driven our cars to one of my favorite spots along the Appalachian Trail to hike. For the first few minutes, we’d been walking in silence, and surprisingly, I was content to do that. My mind happened to be completely occupied with coming to terms with having gotten something I wanted, because I set out to make it happen.

As for Jake, I couldn’t say what had been going through his mind during that time, but it seemed he was no longer interested in being comfortable in the silence. Jake was ready to talk.

“Well, I think I should first clarify that I don’t come out hiking every day or anything like that, but I try to do it once every week or so,” I started. “That said, the answer is yes. I generally do it on my own.”

“Does that bother you?” he wondered.

I shook my head, stepping over a tree root on the particularly difficult terrain. “Not really. I tend to use the time to come up with new, fun, and exciting ways to incorporate fitness into the lives of the people who subscribe to my app.”

Jake’s voice sounded particularly intrigued when he asked, “What do you mean?”

Smiling, liking the way it felt to have him take an interest in what I did for a living, I explained, “There are a lot of online fitness channels that people can subscribe to, so in addition to sharing the traditional workouts that can be accomplished in a gym or even at home, I try to find other things that make me stand out from the others. And if there’s one thing I’ve learned from doing what I’ve done for so long, it’s that people will find any reason not to do their workouts, even when they know just how beneficial they are to their physical and mental health. So, I try to come up with things that people can do that’ll give them the exercise they need without it ever really feeling like it.”

“That’s very admirable of you. This is something that’s important to you,” he noted.

I glanced up at him and insisted, “It really is.”

Jake and I had gotten to a point where the path narrowed, and a young couple was passing us in the opposite direction. In a move I hadn’t anticipated, Jake reached out and tugged on my wrist to pull me toward him. Once I was standing in front of him off to the side of the path, he settled his opposite hand on my hip while the people passed us.

I wasn’t new to having Jake’s hands on me; however, it had always been in the training room. And this was definitely the first time I could recall having him touch me on my hip. I couldn’t miss how perfectly his large hand fit there or the way it felt. My belly trembled at what I thought was a rather intimate touch.

But my excitement for it all was short-lived. The moment the couple passed, Jake released me, and we started walking again, with me in front of him as we moved down the stretch of the path only wide enough for little more than one person.

“So, what else do you like to do?” he asked after we had made it past the narrow path and were walking beside one another again.

I took in a deep breath. Was Jake going to think I was a big weirdo? I didn’t know, but I guessed it was better to know now than to learn that was the case later.

“Anything that requires movement,” I started. “I’ll say that I do spend a good deal of time working on creating fresh, new content for my business and interacting not only with the subscribers to my app, but also with those on my social media. Aside from that, I have to admit that I’m a very habitual person. I get up, have breakfast, get in a workout, have a shake, and then I’ll

take care of any work I have planned for that day. Obviously, I've been doing the self-defense lessons with you recently, so I've just switched my days around and take care of the work stuff after lessons. Beyond that, I consider getting a dog way too frequently, and I spend time on house projects when the urge strikes. Of course, I also spend time with Maxie when it works for the both of us, and I often get the desire to try out some new thing that'll physically challenge my body. That's kind of where the interest in self-defense lessons started a few months ago."

"Wait, wait, wait," Jake started. "Tell me more about this dog you think about getting way too frequently."

"What do you want to know?" I questioned him.

"Well, for starters, how long have you been considering this? And perhaps more importantly, why are you merely thinking about it and not doing it?"

I let out an audible sigh. "Oh, Jake. If you only knew the struggle."

He chuckled. "I can't wait to hear this story."

"I honestly don't know what to say," I started. "I am the most decisive person I know. No joking. I come up with an idea, figure out a plan, and I execute whatever that plan is. Like doing the painting at my house, for example."

"Okay, so what does that have to do with a dog?" he pressed.

While it was clear to me Jake was not only amused by but also invested in this conversation, it really had been a source of contention for me. This was one of the very few areas of my life where I couldn't manage to get things straightened out.

"I don't know what to get," I huffed, glancing up at him and feeling nothing but desperation.

Jake looked down at me, his lips twitching, and asked, "Are you referring to the breed?"

I nodded, returned my attention to the trail, and continued moving forward at a steady pace while I explained, "Yes. Do you have a dog? Do you understand how difficult this decision is?"

"I do not have a dog," he shared.

Tossing my hand out in front of me, I declared, "See? You probably can't decide on one, either. I have days when I think I want a smaller, cuddly dog, because hello, they're smaller, cuddly dogs. And they are so cute. Plus, my neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Rice have a dog named Missy. She's small and cute

and cuddly, and she makes me think I want a small dog. Of course, then I realize I'm not a person who sits around to cuddle all the time. I don't sit around at all, so that seems like a bad idea."

"So, a bigger dog seems like the better choice then, right?" Jake asked.

"In theory, I guess. But then I realized that big dogs want lots of love, and they want to cuddle, too. And I can handle doling out all the love in other ways. I just don't know if I can sit for long periods of time simply scratching behind a dog's ears or rubbing his belly."

Jake started laughing again, and it wasn't merely a small chuckle. Either he thought I was hilarious or crazy. I figured it was best to just come right out with it.

"I know you probably think I'm crazy, but I've really been struggling with this for years now," I informed him.

Then, in another move I hadn't been expecting, Jake continued to walk by my side as he wrapped his arm around my back, so his hand could settle on my opposite shoulder. He gave me a gentle squeeze, and replied, "I don't think you're crazy at all. I think you're adorable."

I had to say something in response to that, but I wasn't sure my voice would work. Jake thought I was adorable. I mean, I would have rather heard him say I was irresistible or sexy or something like that, but I guess adorable was better than crazy.

"Unfortunately, adorable doesn't help in this situation," I muttered.

"Maybe you need practice," he suggested.

We continued to walk with our bodies pressed close together, though our pace had slowed a touch, and I tipped my head back to glance up at Jake. With my brows knit together, I repeated, "Practice?"

Jake's focus had been on the trail, but at that moment, he brought us to a stop, looked down at me, and clarified, "Cuddling. Maybe you need practice doing that before you can consider the kind of dog that'll be best for you."

I wanted to ask him how he thought I might get that practice. The question was right on the tip of my tongue, and for some reason, I couldn't manage to get the words out.

Instead, I decided it was time for a complete change of subject. So, I asked, "How did you come to start working at Harper Security Ops?"

It was at that question when Jake loosened his hold on me, dropped his arm from around my back, and the two of us started walking again. "I enlisted in the Marines right after I graduated from high school. I served my

time, doing it alongside Kane, and the two of us wound up learning about Harper Security Ops. We just decided it was the place the both of us would feel most useful.”

While I knew that Harper Security employed both former and current members of the military, it wasn't as though they had a directory of employees on their website, where anyone would have had the opportunity to learn about them. Learning about Jake, I felt myself smile.

“My dad is a Marine.”

His brows shot up in surprise. “Really?”

I nodded. “Yep. It's something he's very proud of.”

“I think most Marines feel that way.”

“Yeah, well, if there's something that would have made him prouder, it would have been if one of my brothers would have enlisted,” I started.

There was a moment of hesitation before Jake replied, “Oh?”

I didn't know what it was, but somehow the energy around us had shifted.

Thinking I must have been imagining it, I went on. “Yep. I have an older brother and a younger brother. Neither one of them wanted to enlist, despite my dad's best efforts to convince them otherwise. Parker, my older brother, is now married with two kids, and is a professional skateboarder. My younger brother, Jace, just recently got engaged, and he does Amazon automation for a living. Since he can work from anywhere, he's generally road tripping around the country with his fiancée.”

There was another lengthy pause before Jake spoke. But the insight he offered was unexpected. “I get where your dad is coming from, but I also think if your brothers are happy doing whatever it is that they do, your father should still count that as a win.”

“Oh, he does. He's definitely proud of all of us. But I think it's his nostalgic heart that wishes one of them would have followed in his footsteps before winding up where they are now,” I shared.

Jake didn't respond. The two of us continued to walk, and I still hadn't been able to shake the feeling that something had changed. I didn't know why or what it was, and since Jake hadn't come out to indicate otherwise, I figured it was best to ignore it.

So, I decided to learn more about him. “What about you? Do you have any siblings?”

That question did it.

Despite us being outside, I could feel the heaviness in the air surrounding

us. It was as though that single question had tilted the entire world on its axis. Maybe for Jake, it had.

I was so caught up in how everything was feeling around me that I hadn't noticed another tree root sticking up in the ground. I tripped, fell forward, and nearly landed on my face when one of Jake's arms clamped down around my waist while the other hand went to my bicep. He hauled my body up against his. "Are you okay?"

I spun around to face him, my hands flying to his chest. Jake's arm was still firmly wrapped around my waist. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Thank you for catching me."

He offered a slight nod in return. What he didn't do was say anything or let me go, so we could continue our hike. Jake simply looked at me for a long time, his eyes roaming over every feature on my face.

It would have been easy for me to squirm out of his hold and urge us forward, but something about the way he was looking at me told me I needed to wait. I needed to stay right where I was, because something big—something huge—was about to happen.

Though I had at least a half a dozen possible scenarios in my head as to what that thing would be, nothing I had in my mind even came close to what happened next.

Instead of dropping his head forward and touching his lips to mine like I wanted him to, Jake spoke. And his voice was deep and husky when he revealed, "My younger brother died when I was fifteen. He was only twelve, a week away from his thirteenth birthday."

I gasped as one of my hands flew up to cup the side of his face. "Oh my God, Jake. I'm so sorry."

I watched as he struggled to contain his emotions. "His name was Max, and he was my best friend."

My heart.

My poor heart was breaking with each word he spoke. I could feel the tears welling in my eyes, devastation consuming me at the thought of what Jake must have gone through as a teenage boy.

Unsure of what to say, I did the only thing I could think to do. I stroked my thumb along the skin on his cheek, wishing I had some better way to give him the comfort he deserved.

"Do you remember the day you showed up at Harper Security and saw me sparring with Kane?"

I nodded. “Yes.”

“It’s the only thing that helps. My parents sent me to therapy years ago, and I hated every second of it. It didn’t work for me. But now, I have good days and bad days, and the only way I can seem to manage some of the really bad ones is to spar with Kane. The physical exertion, the exhaustion, the sweat—it’s the only thing that helps.”

I’d always been a huge supporter of physical movement, and I wholeheartedly believed in the benefits it provided. Jake’s situation was the utter definition of how movement and exercise could improve mental health. The struggle he faced, living with his younger brother’s death, would be something he’d deal with for the rest of his life. But I loved that he’d found a way to help heal himself.

“I can’t imagine how you must feel, Jake. My heart breaks for your loss.”

His jaw clenched several times, and I knew he was fighting a battle with himself not to break down. I needed to do something.

From the day I met him, I thought I saw something lingering in his eyes, and now that he’d shared this with me, it was suddenly starting to make sense. Jake was living with demons I couldn’t begin to understand.

But that didn’t mean I didn’t want to try. It didn’t mean I didn’t want to help him.

I didn’t know if it was the right thing to do, but I thought it might be best to distract him from the tense moment. So, I tipped my head to the side and asked, “How good are you at painting?”

In an instant, the look on his face changed. His features softened, and he suddenly appeared lighter. “I’m not bad.”

“Would you like to come to my place and help me paint?”

“I don’t have any other plans,” he said.

I jerked my head in the direction we came from and urged, “We should head back.”

He stared at me a moment longer, nodded, and replied, “Okay.”

With that, I removed my hand from the side of his face as Jake released his hold on me. And after we’d taken four or five steps in the opposite direction to head back toward our cars, I reached for his hand. Squeezing it, I called, “Jake?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for telling me about Max.”

Jake didn’t respond with words, but he did squeeze my hand in return.

And throughout our entire return trip to our cars, Jake never let go.

SEVEN



Jake

Surprised.

That was the best way I could describe how I felt.

I wasn't quite sure how I wound up here, but there was no denying just how much I liked the way it felt to be right where I was at this very moment.

Refreshing.

God, being around Brynn was like taking in a deep breath of fresh air on a gorgeous day. So much about her was making me lose my hold on my control. There was the week of lessons with her, which had done enough to get me all riled up, considering I needed to be in such close proximity to her. Feeling her body close, and having the scent of her around me, it was almost too much to take.

But then there was her.

Just Brynn and her determined nature and the way she smiled at me or talked so freely about everything.

There was running into her at the hardware store, and the way she just invited me to tag along with her on her hike.

Best of all, there was the way she made me feel when she touched my face after she learned about Max. She looked at me like she wanted to fix everything wrong in my world, and there was this crazy part of me that believed, even if only for a few seconds, that she just might be able to make it happen.

So, there was no question about it. Brynn was, slowly but surely, making

me lose my control.

The thing about it was that I wasn't so sure it bothered me, either. The more I got to know her—what she did and how she lived her life—the more I wanted to learn. Because it was becoming clear to me just how much we had in common, one of the most important of those things being our desire for a physical challenge.

And as I spent more time with her, I was growing more and more attracted to her in ways that had nothing to do with her beauty. Though I couldn't deny just how desperately I wanted to fuck her, I could honestly say that it wasn't the only thing I was interested in when it came to Brynn Allen.

Part of that terrified me, because I didn't do this with women. All too often, it had always been about casual hookups and purely physical relationships. I wasn't sure I could handle something beyond that.

But there was the other part of me, a much bigger part, that didn't care about anything or anyone that came before her. That part of me wanted more and wanted to do this right. To try.

Because there was something about Brynn that was different. There was the way she made me feel with just the simplest of conversations. I was completely captivated listening to her ramble on and on about how stressed she was feeling over wanting a dog and not being able to choose which breed she thought would be best for her.

After that conversation, there was nothing I wanted more in the world than to help Brynn learn how to cuddle, even if I wasn't someone who liked doing it, either. I thought maybe I'd enjoy cuddling if I was doing it with the right person.

And from where I was standing at the moment, Brynn was looking more and more like she could be that person.

"This was supposed to be a weekend project," she declared, stepping back from the wall to admire the work we'd done.

Brynn and I were in her finished basement, where she told me she spent every morning getting her workout in before doing just about anything else. Since she spent so much time in the space, it wasn't unbelievable that she'd reached a point where she felt the need to change it up.

We'd come back here after the hike, and I'd helped her get the walls painted. It took a couple of hours, but we finished it.

Judging by the look on her face right now, she seemed to be happy, and her tone indicated that was the case. But her words implied something else.

“It is the weekend,” I noted, not caring to look at the wall and keeping my focus on her instead.

Brynn twisted her neck and looked in my direction. “I know that. I just meant that I had anticipated this taking me the *entire* weekend. I don’t know how to thank you for helping me with this.”

There were some very specific things I would have liked for her to do to show her appreciation, but I didn’t think those were wise to mention. Instead, I asked, “Do you like it?”

She looked away from me, turned her attention to the wall, and spun in a circle to scan the entire space. After a full three hundred and sixty degree turn, her gaze settled on me, and her eyes were dancing. “I love it.”

Seeing her like that, I felt something squeeze in my chest. It was such a foreign feeling, but I liked it all the same. “That’s all the thanks I need.”

“You have to at least let me make you dinner.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I insisted.

“Are you afraid I’m a bad cook?” she asked, lifting a brow.

I jerked my head back as my brows pulled together. “What? No.”

“Okay, so then join me for dinner tonight. Please. I really want to do something nice for you after you took your time today to do this with me.”

I didn’t know why I had hesitated. There was nothing I wanted more than to spend more time with her. Hell, I’d have stayed here all night long, if it would make her look at me the way she had only a few seconds ago.

Apparently, I’d taken too long thinking about why I responded the way that I did, and Brynn got the wrong idea.

“Unless, I’m sorry, do you already have plans? What is wrong with me? It’s a Saturday night, you probably already—”

“Brynn,” I called, cutting her off.

“Yeah?”

Shaking my head, I insisted, “I don’t have plans tonight. I just didn’t want you to go out of your way to cook for me.”

Brynn tipped her head to the side and burst out laughing.

I didn’t know what she found so funny, but it really didn’t matter to me. I would have stood there for hours watching her laugh like that. Just hearing it made me feel better than I had in a long time.

Eventually, I asked, “What’s so funny?”

She started to settle herself down as she brought her shining eyes to me. “I cook all of my meals, Jake. And since I’m a meal prepper, I’m accustomed

to cooking large batches. I'm more than capable of making us both something fresh tonight, though. In fact, it'd really make me happy if you'd allow me to cook something for us."

Us.

Us.

I liked the way that sounded a whole lot. Maybe even more than I liked the sound of her laughter.

So, there was nothing I could do other than to agree. "Okay, Brynn. I'd love to join you for dinner."

She practically jumped for joy as she clapped her hands in front of her face. "Perfect. I want to get these paint supplies all picked up and put away, and if it's okay with you, I'm going to hop in the shower to get the sweat and paint off of me, but I promise I'll be fast. Trust me, I get very crabby if I wait too long to eat."

Now, it was my turn to laugh. Brynn was not only a determined and capable woman, but she was so energetic and fun. "That's completely fine. I'll be happy to help you get this cleaned up."

"Thank you. And if you want, you're more than welcome to help yourself to my guest bathroom. I'm not saying you smell or anything, but if you'd like to grab a shower before we eat, please feel free."

Since I often sparred with Kane in the morning before we had classes, I usually kept spare clothes in my car. Fortunately, I had some with me now, too. And since I liked where everything seemed to be heading with us, I thought it might be best for me to not be covered in sweat and dirt from a day out. "That sounds like a plan. I've got some spare clothes out in my car."

Brynn beamed at me and bubbled, "Perfect."

For the next few minutes, the two of us worked together to get the paint and supplies picked up, cleaned off, and put away. With the two of us working, it didn't take long at all.

And before I knew it, I was standing in Brynn's guest bathroom, waiting for the shower to warm up. The feeling of disbelief moved through me once more.

This day had gone nothing like I'd planned.

Light bulbs.

A quick trip to the hardware store to pick up a light bulb had resulted in me having the opportunity to spend the day with Brynn. It had been one of the best days of my life, and if I wasn't wrong about what all of her insistence

on me staying meant, it was only going to get better.

After taking a shower, I got myself dressed and was surprised to see Brynn had beaten me downstairs. She hadn't been kidding when she said she was going to be fast.

"Hey. How was your shower?"

"Great. Thanks for letting me grab one here."

She shook her head and smiled. "It's no problem at all. But now that you're back, I have a question. When you went outside to get your clothes earlier, I popped the rice into the rice cooker. Do you have any allergies or foods you don't like?"

"Nope. I'll eat just about anything."

"So, salmon rice bowls would be okay with you?" she pressed.

I chuckled. "I'm not sure I've ever had a salmon rice bowl, but it sounds like something I'd enjoy."

Truthfully, Brynn could have ordered takeout and I would have been happy, as long as I was getting the opportunity to eat with her.

As she worked on thinly slicing cucumbers, she said, "My salmon rice bowls are merely a bowl of layered ingredients. I fill a bowl with jasmine rice and top it with salmon bites, Asian cabbage slaw, avocado, and cucumber. I cook the salmon in a teriyaki-style sauce, and we'll sprinkle some sesame seeds on top along with a drizzle of a spicy sriracha mayo. It's really good."

It sounded incredible. Far better than the pizza I might have ordered for myself if I'd been home instead of here with her.

"I can't wait to try it. Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Nope. I've got the food covered, but I'd love it if you'd talk to me while I'm working."

"You said earlier when we were downstairs that you meal prep. Is that something you do all the time?"

Brynn had finished slicing the cucumbers and was working on the cabbage. She lifted her gaze briefly to mine and nodded. "Absolutely. I'm not ashamed to admit I'm a bit of a food snob. I'm super picky about the things that I eat, and I prefer to cook all my meals."

"All of them?" I pressed, thinking she had to stop and grab the occasional meal out.

"All of them," she confirmed. "I feel better when I make my own food, so I always plan in advance."

For a few seconds, I sat there and watched as she worked to chop up the

rest of the cabbage. “It’s starting to make sense.”

“What is?”

“Now I understand why you look so young. Exercise and fitness aren’t the only areas you focus on. Nutrition is a big part of it, too.”

She smiled at me as she opened her bag of matchstick carrots and combined them with the cabbage in a bowl. “It is. In fact, it’s probably the bigger part of it. I stick to water only, and I’m very mindful of the foods I put in my body. Some people think I’m weird or that I’m not living, but I think it’s just the opposite. I feel great.”

“You look great, too,” I blurted.

Brynn’s eyes snapped up and locked on mine, but she didn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry if that was too forward,” I apologized. “I have no doubt you already know just how gorgeous your body is.”

She looked down, focused on the food again, and smiled. “I’ve worked really hard, but it’s still nice to hear that, Jake. Thank you.”

I’d heard her say my name several times throughout the day today and over the course of the last week, and I still hadn’t gotten used to it.

Ten minutes later, the food was ready, and the two of us sat down to eat together. The meal was delicious. If I had Brynn’s cooking skills, I wouldn’t have ever eaten out either, and I told her as much.

After we finished, I helped her to clean everything up, and then I asked, “So, I completely understand that you’re strict with what you put in your body, but I’m curious if you’re also strict when it comes to sleep. Do you have a super early bedtime?”

She giggled. “I try not to stay up too late, but I don’t go to bed this early. Why do you ask?”

I was going to do it.

I had nothing to lose.

“It’s fine if you don’t want to. I promise there will be no hard feelings, but I was thinking I’d like to help you out with that thing we were talking about earlier,” I said.

Her head dropped to one side as her eyes roamed curiously over my face. “What thing?” she asked when she clearly didn’t get the answers she’d been seeking.

I hesitated briefly before I reached for her hand, gave it a squeeze, and replied quietly, “Cuddling.”

The heat instantly hit her cheeks. “Cuddling?”

“If you really want a dog, you need to learn how to slow down, relax, and cuddle,” I reasoned. “Start small. It’s not like you’re making a lifelong decision here. You can kick me out afterward.”

She licked her lips and let out a soft laugh. “Okay. I guess we can try cuddling, but I make no promises about my ability. So, you can’t be disappointed when I’m bad at it.”

“I promise not to hold it against you.”

For the next few seconds, we stared at one another. Then, with my hand still holding hers, Brynn turned and led us both out of the kitchen.

I was definitely looking forward to where the night was heading, and I was determined not to screw it up.

EIGHT



Brynn

“Am I doing it right?”

I never thought I’d be saying those words to Jake for any reason other than to ask him about self-defense moves. I certainly didn’t think I’d be on my couch, feeling slightly tense about what I was doing, but loving it at the same time.

Truthfully, I didn’t care if Jake thought I was crazy.

I’d made up my mind when we were on that hike together, and I was sticking to my plan. Whatever it took, I was going to follow through.

And if he was sitting here with me thinking I was crazy, it meant that at least his mind was distracted and focused on my silliness instead of the pain he felt in his heart and soul.

That was all that mattered to me.

“You’re doing a fantastic job,” Jake replied, his voice soft but filled with pride.

He thought I was doing a fantastic job. I liked that. More, I was surprised by how much I liked being precisely where I was.

Jake was sitting on one end of the couch, and no sooner had he sat down when he reached out for my hand. I gave it to him, and he offered a gentle tug in return. Or, it was gentle in the sense he hadn’t hurt me, but forceful enough that my body had no choice but to go toward him. With complete ease, he positioned my body. My back was against the arm of the couch, my legs draped over his thighs, and my head was resting in the crook of his shoulder.

Jake had taken one of my hands, lifted it to his chest, and flattened my palm against the solid surface there.

Then I was cuddling, and I couldn't say I hated it. With anyone else, I was certain I'd have been itching to get up, but with Jake, I felt differently. It could have simply been the result of my determination to distract him from the pain in his heart, or it might have been the mere fact that it was Jake.

And because I was enjoying myself so much, I gave the both of us some time to sit in the silence and appreciate this moment for what it was. But eventually, especially because I wanted him to know I wasn't uncomfortable, I murmured, "This isn't so bad."

There was a brief second of silence before Jake returned, "That's not good enough. We can make it better, if you'd like."

I was convinced it was impossible to make this any better without us actually shifting our bodies to the point we were both laying down on the couch and crossing a line I wasn't sure he wanted to. Feeling surprised and maybe a little confused by his declaration, I tipped my head back to look up at him. "Really? Do I need to move?"

He brought his eyes to mine, something dark and intense in them, and shook his head. "No, angel, you don't need to move. You just need to let me kiss you."

Jake wanted to kiss me.

If I thought I'd been surprised by liking how it felt to cuddle with him, it didn't hold a candle to the shock I felt at his admission.

And that he called me angel? I had no words. What was that? Where had that come from? And why did I have to like it so much?

My lips parted slightly, and my heart began pounding in my chest. I could feel the change in my breathing as my fingertips on the hand flattened against his torso, pressed in deeper with anticipation.

Jake didn't lean in. He didn't attempt to touch his mouth to mine.

Nope.

He stayed just like he was, one of his arms wrapped around my back and the other draped over my thighs. The only physical change I felt with him was the hand on the arm resting on my thighs. That hand was no longer just hanging there. Jake had twisted his wrist and angled his hand in a way he could grip my outer thigh.

I liked that a lot.

He hadn't really done anything yet, and I was a bundle of nerves and

excitement.

“Can I?” Jake asked.

“What?”

I was so breathless; I barely got that single word out.

His lips, which were the only thing I seemed capable of focusing my attention on, formed a smile. “Can I kiss you?”

Not trusting myself to speak, I did the only thing I could to give us both what we wanted.

I nodded slowly.

Then I felt Jake’s grip on my thigh grow firmer as he leaned his head forward and gently brushed his lips back and forth against mine.

I didn’t know why, but I had anticipated him diving right in. I never imagined Jake, with all of his size and strength, could be so sweet and tender. Beyond that, I couldn’t believe how much that tenderness affected me.

The sweet caress of his soft lips against mine was better than anything I could have ever imagined, and I had a feeling Jake was just getting started.

I learned that was the case when I could no longer seem to control my body’s response to what he was doing and let out a whimper.

Jake heard it, froze for about two seconds, and growled. Then he gave me no time to think. He captured my mouth in a bruising kiss, his lips claiming every inch of mine.

And me?

It seemed I had no problem being claimed. I submitted to Jake’s kiss, giving him back as good as he gave, and melting into the feelings inside me.

When I felt the tip of his tongue run across the seam of my lips, I immediately gave in to his silent demand and parted them. And that was the moment that spelled victory for me.

Because as soon as Jake’s tongue swept into my mouth to taste me, he groaned. His hand began moving along my thigh, and I quickly found myself no longer feeling nervous. Instead, I was turned on.

Recalling how he reacted when I whimpered, I decided not to hold myself back. Loving the taste of him against my tongue, I moaned.

That earned me another reward. Jake’s hand traveled up the back of my thigh and drifted higher than before, ultimately grabbing a handful of my ass.

Wanting more, I used the strength in my body to shift my position and settle myself fully on his lap. Chest to chest, my thighs straddling his, I kept my mouth pressed against Jake’s.

Both of his hands went to my ass, and I got a bit more than I'd bargained for. I learned that Jake was just as turned on by this as I was. I could feel him hard beneath me, and it was in that moment I decided I wanted more with this man.

So, I let go.

I melted deeper into the kiss, my tongue dueling with his, as my moans filled the air around us, and my hips began to roll over his hardened length.

It was incredible.

It was consuming.

It was passion and heat and desire.

And I wanted more of it.

Jake's hands drifted away from my ass and up my sides, and I was convinced he was going to touch me in other places.

I was wrong.

Before I realized what was happening, he'd captured my face in his hands and pulled back just a touch, breaking the connection between our mouths. He'd done that before I could urge him to take things to the next level.

"Jesus, Brynn, you're unbelievable," he said, out of breath and breathing heavily.

"Jake," I whispered, my voice coming out like a plea.

He groaned and begged, "Please don't do that to me."

"What? I—"

"You're amazing. Fuck, you're amazing, but I think this is where we need to call it a night," he said.

In a flash, the wind was out of my sails. "Oh."

I knew he could hear the disappointment in my tone. "This was nice, Brynn. I enjoyed it. All of it. It's killing me to hear you feeling so let down."

Oh, God.

What was I doing?

He liked this. He enjoyed it. And I was sitting here pouting.

Nope. I had to turn it around.

Dropping my forehead to his, I closed my eyes and insisted, "I enjoyed all of this, too."

Jake touched his lips to mine in a chaste kiss. "I should probably get going."

I didn't want him to go, but I wouldn't beg him to stay. "Okay."

Without giving me a chance to move, Jake stood from the couch. He had

one arm wrapped firmly around my waist, holding me tight to his body. My legs drifted down his sides until he lowered me to the ground. Once I was steady on my feet, he released me.

And long before I was ready for it to happen, Jake and I were standing at my front door.

He had such a look of contentment on his face that I couldn't bring myself to truly be upset things hadn't gone where I'd wanted them to go.

"This day certainly took a turn I hadn't been expecting," he said, his lips twitching.

Smiling back at him, I asked, "Who would have thought going to a hardware store for paint supplies or light bulbs would have ever led to the day we had?"

"I had fun with you, Brynn."

"Yeah, me too."

Jake opened the door, stepped out, and turned back to look at me. Pinching my chin gently between his thumb and forefinger, he touched his lips to mine in a soft, sweet kiss. When he pulled back a fraction of an inch, he said, "I'll see you for lessons on Monday."

"Okay," I whispered.

He kissed me once more, released my chin, and stepped back. "Lock up after I leave."

"I will," I promised.

A moment later, he was gone. And by the time I locked up, shut everything down, and crawled into my bed, I decided I was no longer disappointed. I'd had the best day ever in such a long time, and it was all thanks to Jake. So, it came as no surprise that I managed to fall asleep wearing a smile on my face.



It was impossible to contain my excitement.

Not even the promise of a sweaty workout could help me rein it in. Since it was still early, and I didn't want to be rude, I decided the best thing to do would be to see if the workout might help.

So, I hopped out of bed, with a big bounce in my step and a smile on my face, and got myself dressed.

For the next forty minutes of a more active yoga session—yoga being something I tended to stick to on Sundays—I found it difficult to think about anyone or anything else other than Jake and the day we had together yesterday.

I woke up feeling refreshed and invigorated, something that typically only happened after a rather strenuous workout. I didn't have to think twice about what the reason for that was.

I'd gone to sleep thinking about Jake, and I woke up thinking about him. I felt excited, and if I was being honest, I couldn't wait until I'd be able to see him again tomorrow.

Until then, I was going to have to find a way to keep myself busy.

I made it through my yoga session, and even though it was still early, I realized I couldn't hold myself back any longer.

I needed to get this out, and there was only one person I knew who wouldn't be angry at me for reaching out this early.

That's why I snatched my phone off the counter, pulled up my text string with Maxie, and sent one off to her.

BRYNN

I think you might be right.

Being vague felt like the better option. If I was hoping for a response sooner, it was likely I'd get it if she had to pry the information out of me.

Much to my surprise, Maxie was awake, because my phone buzzed in my hand.

MAXIE

About what?

BRYNN

We both might wind up dating guys from Harper Security Ops.

MAXIE

WHAT?!?!

I was in the middle of tapping out a response when Maxie's face flashed up on the screen. Apparently, this wasn't a conversation meant to be had through text messages.

“Hey,” I answered.

“Tell me what that means right now,” she demanded.

I smiled, loving the sound of the bossy edge to her tone. As much as I could hear that, I also couldn’t miss the giddiness. It was obvious she already had ideas forming in her brain.

“I spent nearly my entire day with Jake yesterday,” I confessed.

“Did you have self-defense lessons?” she asked.

“No.”

There was a brief pause before she pressed, “So, did the two of you plan to get together?”

I didn’t hesitate to give her a response. “Nope. It was completely by coincidence.”

“What happened?”

I sighed, just thinking about the whole day, but I hadn’t realized I’d done it loud enough for Maxie to hear. “Oh my God. What does that mean? Did you two already—”

“No!” I declared, cutting her off. I might have sounded shocked that she could have even assumed Jake and I had taken things there, but I didn’t understand why. The truth was that if he hadn’t stopped us last night, I’m not convinced I would have.

“So, tell me what happened, then,” Maxie urged me.

“Well, I went to the hardware store to get some paint supplies, so I could paint my basement,” I started. Then, Maxie listened intently while I went on to tell her about how Jake and I ran into each other while we were there. Of course, I told her how I suggested he join me for a hike when I learned he didn’t have any other plans. And I went on to share how he wound up coming back to my place to help me paint before we ate together and made out on my couch after he convinced me to cuddle with him.

When I finished, nothing came through the line.

I started to think the call was dropped, but when I pulled my phone from my ear, I could see we were still connected.

“Maxie?” I called.

“I can’t believe it,” she bubbled. “This is so exciting. How did you two leave things?”

“He told me he’d see me at lessons on Monday,” I replied.

“That’s it?” she gasped.

My lips twitched. “I mean, that was after he told me how great the day

had been, how much he enjoyed himself, and how he thought I was amazing and incredible. I'm thinking he's just looking to take things slow. And even if I was a little disappointed by that initially, the more I think about it, the more I'm grateful. We had the chance to spend some time with each other yesterday, that had nothing to do with self-defense lessons, and it was nice to get to know him better. I'm looking forward to more of that with him, and now I can't wait until tomorrow."

Maxie's tone indicated she was feeling just as excited about all of this when she replied, "I'm so happy for you, Brynn. I knew it. How crazy is it that you were convinced you were going to wind up training with a sweet old man instead of the guy you got?"

It was funny to think it hadn't been that long ago when I'd made that statement, part of me secretly hoping I was wrong about it. Jake was the opposite of what I expected, and he was far better than I could have hoped for. The fact that he seemed interested in me now was just icing on the cake.

"I really like him," I admitted.

"It sounds like he feels the same about you," she noted.

"Yeah. It's kind of strange."

"You think it's strange that he likes you?" she asked incredulously.

I started laughing. "No. I meant that it feels strange to have all these feelings. It's been a very long time since I've been interested in someone like this. And the way my body shudders or butterflies dance in my belly when he says something sweet or touches me softly. I'm not sure I've ever felt anything like that with someone else."

More silence came through the line. I had a feeling Maxie was taking that in and processing it. "It's the best feeling, isn't it?" she asked. "To find someone who makes you feel that way."

I didn't want to get ahead of myself, but I also didn't think I needed to hide from what I was experiencing, either. "It is. I mean, there's nothing official happening between us, but the promise of Jake is enough for me right now."

My best friend didn't hold herself back. "I don't think you have anything to worry about. Now that he's had some time with you outside of training, and he's going to see you again after the two of you have kissed, there's no way he's not going to want that to eventually become something official. You're too special for him to easily give up."

A smile formed on my face. "And you're the world's greatest best friend

for saying that. I hope you're right."

"I am."

"Alright, enough about me. Did you have just as great of a day with Kit yesterday as I did with Jake?"

"I did."

"Tell me all about the reason you stood me up for our workout yesterday morning," I demanded.

Maxie didn't hesitate. She told me all about her day with her man, and knowing she was just as happy as I was only served to make my day even better than it had started.

NINE



Jake

“Hey, man. Are you alright?”

My brows pulled together at Kane’s question, and I stepped farther into the room. “Yeah. Why do you ask?”

Kane shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s just that I’m surprised. You didn’t ask all week last week about sparring, and I didn’t hear from you this weekend. I thought, especially after taking nearly a week off from it, you’d want me to meet you here early this morning.”

I’d just walked in to work and found Kane had made it here before me. While that wasn’t necessarily uncommon, it was unusual for me to have not called and asked him to spar, especially around this time of year.

Kane was my best friend, so he knew me well enough to know that me going this long without needing to spar was out of the ordinary. So, I figured there was no time like the present to just come right out with it.

I glanced up at the clock, realized I had enough time before Brynn was going to arrive for her private lessons for me to be able to share what I wanted to with Kane.

“I told Brynn about Max,” I blurted.

He shook his head, his body jerking back slightly, as he blinked his eyes rapidly. “I’m sorry. What?”

“I told Brynn about Max,” I repeated.

“Okay, let me rephrase that,” Kane replied. “When did this happen? And why?”

“Saturday. And I told her about him, because she asked if I had any siblings,” I answered honestly.

Kane’s eyes narrowed on me. He assessed me a long time before he noted, “You didn’t have lessons scheduled with her on Saturday.”

I shook my head, not offering any additional information. He’d figure it out without me needing to spell it out for him.

Cocking an eyebrow, he asked, “Did something happen during your lessons on Friday? Did you ask her for her number or to go on a date with you?”

I shook my head again. “Nope.”

Kane considered my answers, and I watched as his mind started working, attempting to put it all together. “So, you happened to run into her somewhere,” he surmised. “Where was it?”

“The hardware store.”

“That’s a new one. Why were you at the hardware store?”

“I needed to replace a lightbulb in the kitchen, and Brynn was there looking for some supplies she needed to paint her basement, where her home gym is.”

“You know her home gym is in her basement because she told you, or because you saw it?” he pressed.

My lips twitched. “Both.”

Kane crossed his arms over his chest, leaned his back against the wall, and crossed one ankle over the other. “Alright. Fill me in on what happened.”

“We ran into each other at the hardware store and talked for a few minutes before she asked me if I had any plans for the day,” I started. “I told her I hadn’t quite figured them out, so she asked me to join her on her hike.”

He nodded his understanding. “How does Max fit into this? And how did you end up at her house?”

I didn’t hesitate to answer him. “Brynn had started telling me about her family, and she mentioned her two brothers. Then she asked me if I had any siblings. I just came right out and told her about him. I didn’t share every last detail, but she knew how much it impacted me. The next thing I knew, she was asking me if I was any good at painting, and if I’d come back to her place to help her.”

Kane took some time to process all that I’d just shared, doing it in silence, his body still locked in the same position against the wall. When he’d taken enough time to do that, he asked, “Did you fuck her?”

I shook my head.

Both of his brows shot up in surprise. “Wow. I don’t know how it’s possible for everything to suddenly make sense while still making me feel completely confused.”

“What would make you say that?” I questioned him.

He threw one of his arms out in front of his body. “Well, I mean, I can understand being preoccupied with spending time with a new girl that you don’t remember to call your friends. But considering this is you we’re talking about, I don’t understand how you didn’t fuck her and still didn’t feel the need to spar like usual.”

His guess was as good as mine.

“I wish I had an explanation for that, but sadly, I don’t,” I returned.

And I did find it sad.

Because I wanted to know. I wanted to understand it better. I’d never had an experience with a woman like I’d had with Brynn on Saturday. Stumbling into her at the hardware store had been the start of an incredible day. I didn’t typically go out of my way to spend time doing things like hiking or helping a woman paint her basement, but I was eager to do it with her.

The way I’d spent my time with her after we’d had dinner together was generally how things went for me, and I could admit that I typically took things to the next level.

The strangest thing for me was that Brynn had made it clear she was willing to take that next step, and for some reason, I put a stop to it.

It made no sense.

I wanted it.

Of course, I wanted it.

But I guess there was a part of me that could recognize things were different. As much as I hated hearing the disappointment in her tone when I told her I was prepared to call it a night, I couldn’t seem to bring myself to change our course.

I felt a greater need to hold myself back.

When Kane made no move to speak, I reasoned, “I guess I want it to be different with her.”

“You’re looking to get serious with her?” he asked.

I honestly didn’t have the slightest idea what I was doing. This was all so new to me. I just knew I couldn’t stop thinking about her.

My mind wasn’t consumed with grief or frustration or even work. It was

her.

From the moment I left her place on Saturday, all day yesterday, and first thing this morning, Brynn was the only thing on my mind.

Well, Brynn and all the things I wanted to do with her. Like getting to know her better and wanting to listen to her talk. Definitely wanting to kiss her more. And eventually, assuming she still wanted it to go there, I really did want to take her up on what she'd clearly offered me on Saturday night.

I shrugged my shoulders and admitted, "I don't want to just have this professional relationship with her. I can't say how serious things are going to get, but I really like her, Kane. Enough that I want to try to do it right."

He grinned at me. "It's going to be the best thing you ever do for yourself. And you know I'm saying that from experience. Being patient when it came to Ellery paid off in a big way for me. I think it can be the same for you with Brynn, assuming she's interested."

My lips twitched. She was interested. There was no question about that. And that knowledge didn't exactly make my job easy. I still had to be professional when I was here, so I could teach her what she needed to know. I just hoped I'd be able to keep myself composed long enough to get through the lesson.

"Yeah, I already believe that. I'm just curious, considering you had to deal with even more self-control when Ellery was coming here for self-defense lessons, if you've got any pointers on how to show some restraint when trying to teach."

Kane burst out laughing. "Good luck with that, because it isn't easy at all."

I rolled my eyes. That didn't help.

It seemed like I was going to have to figure it out on my own, too, because Brynn was going to be here at any minute.

I couldn't wait to see her again.



Brynn

It had been the best weekend ever.

Not just Saturday, either. Sunday had been exceptional as well.

Jake and I only spent time together on Saturday, but when I walked outside late Sunday morning to get some fresh air and sunshine, I got the note Jake left for me.

Yes, a note.

My heart melted at the sight of the words he'd written on the tiny square of paper that was slid beneath the windshield wiper on my car.

Looking forward to spending more time with you.

Those were the words he'd written on the note, and they sent my heart soaring. No matter what I did on Sunday, I was swooning.

Now, it was Monday morning, I'd already been up for a few hours, and I had just pulled into the Harper Security Ops parking lot, so I could head in for lessons with Jake. I'd been looking forward to it from the moment he left my place on Saturday evening.

So, I didn't waste a single second.

The moment I parked, I was out of my car and on my way inside. I stopped for a moment to greet Avalon when I walked in, but she quickly ushered me along, telling me that Jake had already arrived and was waiting for me.

With butterflies fluttering madly in my belly, I went straight for the self-defense training room. When I walked in, I found Avalon hadn't been joking. Jake was already there, but Kane was there, too.

Unsure of what, if anything, Jake had shared with his friend, I decided to play it cool. "Good morning," I said to the both of them.

"Morning," Kane replied.

I offered a nod in return as Kane moved toward the door I just walked through. Jake was across the room, and he still hadn't spoken, and as Kane passed, he shot me a mischievous smile and said, "Have a good lesson."

I ignored the look and replied, "Thanks."

Once he was gone, I put all of my focus on the man in front of me. "Hi."

"Hey. Ready to get started?"

I nearly jerked backward at the change in him. Granted, he hadn't said anything rude or nasty, but he certainly wasn't acting like the same guy who'd left my house on Saturday night.

Caught off guard but refusing to make a scene, I nodded and said, "Yeah."

“Great. Drop your things, and we’ll get started.”

I turned away from him and moved to set my things off to the side. And as I did that, I inhaled several deep breaths in an attempt to settle myself.

For some stupid reason, I’d convinced myself that Jake would walk right up to me, slide his arms around my waist, and greet me with a delicious kiss this morning. I couldn’t have been more wrong, and it was safe to say it hurt.

I took a quick sip of my water, hoping to ease the pain in my throat, and well before I’d sufficiently pulled myself together, I turned and moved back toward him.

He didn’t even blink twice before he dove right in and started up with the lessons. I did my best to pay attention, but it wasn’t easy. Whenever he had to touch me, all I could remember was the feel of his body beneath mine and the way it felt to have his lips kissing me.

Maybe I’d gotten it all wrong.

Maybe I’d allowed myself to start feeling something for a guy who wasn’t feeling anywhere near the same for me. Or, maybe he thought he had and suddenly decided he didn’t like the way I kissed.

Oh, God.

That would have been humiliating.

But it didn’t make sense.

Why? Why, if Jake didn’t like me, would he have kissed me multiple times at my front door? And why would he have left that note on my windshield?

By some miracle, I managed to get through lessons not only not breaking down, but I also learned a few things.

Jake had been the same as he always had when I was there for lessons. He was patient, thorough, and even encouraging.

Once we finished, I said, “Well, I guess I’ll see you for lessons on Wednesday.”

“Yep. Let me walk you out.”

That’s when I knew.

Jake hadn’t ever walked me out. I didn’t know how far he planned to take me, but it didn’t matter. He was doing something he’d never done, and I had a feeling he was going to take this moment to tell me he’d made a mistake.

My belly was a mess of nerves. I was grateful for the fact Jake couldn’t see just how badly I was trembling.

Worst of all, Jake and I had to pass Avalon on our way out the door, and I

couldn't miss the way she grinned at the both of us. Whatever idea she had in her head about what was happening here was all wrong. No doubt she'd be disappointed, even if she'd never feel as disheartened as I was feeling.

I couldn't do this.

There was no way I could allow him to tell me what had barely started was already over. I had to be the one to say it.

The second we made it to my car, I stopped, started to turn, and said, "Jake, listen, I—"

That was all I got out before Jake's mouth came crashing down on mine. I was frozen to the spot, unable to move, for several seconds as I tried to come to terms with what was happening.

But since Jake was kissing me, it didn't take long for me to succumb. I moaned as my hands flew to his shoulders and slid up and back into his hair. He was such a good kisser; I could have stayed there like that all day with him.

Eventually, he tore his mouth away and rested his forehead against mine. "I don't know how I got through your lessons without doing that."

"I thought you didn't like me anymore."

His head shot back, so he could stare at me dead in the eyes. "What? Are you crazy?"

I shrugged and reasoned, "I thought you would have kissed me when I walked in there this morning."

Jake's lips twitched. "We never would have gotten to your lessons if that had happened."

So that's what it was all about.

Jake's reason for keeping things completely professional wasn't because he didn't like me or want to kiss me. It was because he liked me too much.

As heat and desire moved through me, my body was buzzing with several new sensations. Relief and happiness.

"Do you have your phone?" he asked, following several beats of silence.

"Yeah."

"Take it out." I pulled my phone out of my purse, unlocked it, and held it out to him. Jake took it from me, tapped on the screen, and handed it back to me. "I'll see you on Wednesday, Brynn, but I'd definitely like to hear from you before then."

He winked at me as I took it from him and promised, "You'll hear from me before then."

With that, he gave me another kiss, opened my car door, and urged me to get inside. Then I drove off, him watching me leave, and freaked out the entire way home about when would be the best time to call him.

TEN



Brynn

Today was the day.

It was relatively early on Saturday morning, and I was eagerly anticipating Jake's arrival.

My self-defense lessons on Wednesday had been the last time I'd seen Jake. Ever since then, we'd only managed to communicate with each other over the phone. But for the last two days, that communication had been limited to text messages because Thursday had been Thanksgiving.

I woke up Thursday morning, and after making myself a quick breakfast and getting in my workout, I sent him a text while I made my post-workout protein shake, so I could wish him a Happy Thanksgiving. He sent one back to me, but I didn't get the chance to do much beyond that, since I got myself ready and left to spend the day with my family at my parents' house.

On Friday, the celebration had continued with extended family members, so today was the soonest Jake and I were able to get together.

Harper Security Ops closed early on Wednesday and wouldn't open again until Monday, so the employees could spend time with their family, friends, and loved ones. Jake had decided I was part of that equation for him and wanted to spend time with me.

I'd been looking forward to it since we'd made the plans on Wednesday after my lessons.

And now, I had about an hour before he was scheduled to arrive. I'd woken up at my usual time, had my breakfast, and gotten my workout in. A

few minutes ago, I'd stepped out of the shower, wrapped a satin robe around my body, and went about drying my hair, applying lotion to my legs and arms, and moisturizing my face.

Just as I stepped out of the bathroom and into my bedroom to get dressed, someone rang my doorbell. I ran across the room, looked out the window, and saw Jake had arrived early.

I gave myself two seconds to consider the options. I could either throw some clothes on my body haphazardly and run downstairs, completely frazzled, to let him in, or I could go like this.

I didn't have to think twice about it.

Jake showed up early, so this was what he was going to get.

I made my way downstairs, swallowed down the lingering nerves, and unlocked the door. When I pulled it open and revealed myself, Jake did not even attempt to hide his reaction. He scanned my body from top to toe and back again. Then, without taking his eyes off of me, he stepped inside, slammed the door shut behind him, and pulled me close.

He drove his fingers into my hair, angled my head back, and brought his mouth to within an inch of mine. "I missed you."

That was all he said before he dropped his lips to mine and kissed me.

Relief.

Such sweet relief to have our bodies pressed close and our tongues tasting each other.

The sounds of my moans mixed with his groans, and my hands slid up from his chest into his hair.

Jake hoisted me off the ground, my legs instinctively wrapping around his waist. I had nothing on beneath my robe, and I was hoping he intended to make that discovery, because I couldn't wait any longer.

I wanted him.

I didn't want to just kiss Jake.

I wanted to feel every part of him pressed close and touching me.

I wanted him moving inside me.

With his mouth still connected to mine, Jake took a few steps forward, turned, and pressed my back against the wall. He leaned his weight into me, and I took it, loving the size of him cocooning my body.

But the sweet feelings that had been moving through me were short-lived. Because the next thing I knew, Jake broke the connection between our mouths and started kissing down along my jaw. I dropped my head back,

allowing my skull to connect with the wall.

“Jake,” I moaned.

He groaned again, brought his mouth to my ear, and demanded to know, “What’s underneath this robe, Brynn?”

I dropped my chin, shifted my eyes in his direction, and offered a seductive smile. “Nothing.”

Jake’s hand in my hair had dropped to my thigh when he lifted me up, but at my admission, that hand left my thigh and came up to where the robe crossed at my chest.

He gave it a harsh yank, exposing my small B-cups. If Jake was a boob man, I didn’t know it, because his reaction gave no indication that he was disappointed with what he saw.

His hand cupped my breast gently before he gave it a firm squeeze. Then he shifted slightly, so he could bend and capture it in his mouth. My lower back was no longer against the wall, but my upper back was pressing firmly into it while my legs remained clamped around his waist.

As he massaged and kneaded one of my breasts, flicking his thumb over my nipple, he lavished the other with his mouth. Then he switched sides and did the same.

All I could manage were continuous moans and whimpers as I relentlessly rolled my hips, seeking friction for the ache that was rapidly building between my legs.

When he’d had his fill of my breasts, Jake stepped away from the wall, taking me with him, and deposited me on the couch in my living room.

The tie around my robe was no longer doing its job, most of my upper body now exposed and on display. Jake didn’t take the time to fuss with the tie. He brought his hands to the bottom of the robe, pulled it apart, and dropped his face between my legs.

The moment his mouth touched my pussy, I was a mess. A shivering, quaking mess of trembling limbs. My fingers threaded through his hair as he expertly and feverishly feasted on me.

He licked and sucked and ate like he was starved, like he believed he might not ever get another taste.

I lifted my head, looked down at him, and watched as he pressed my thighs open wider. His gaze met mine, his head pulled back slightly, and he used the tip of his tongue to flick back and forth rapidly over my clit.

There were no words to describe the sound that left my body through my

mouth. It couldn't be described as a moan or a whimper. It was the sound of something else entirely.

My toes curled as the muscles in my legs flexed, and I swore I could see the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Or, I had been able to do that until he decided he wanted to suck on my clit instead.

"Jake." It was meant to be a warning call, but I wasn't sure it came out the way I intended. He kept at me, taking everything he could get. "Oh, God, please," I begged.

He groaned against my pussy, continuing to devour me, and sending shock waves through my body.

"Baby, I'm going to come," I warned him.

Then it hit. One pulsing wave after another moved through me, and I was powerless to stop it or do anything other than enjoy the ride Jake had just taken me on.

My orgasm had barely left me when Jake was up, ripping his shirt over his head forcefully, and dropping his pants down his legs. He pulled out a condom, rolled it over his impressive erection, and asked, "Are you ready?"

I nodded. "Yes."

Though I said I was ready, I hadn't actually prepared myself. Before I knew it, Jake's body was positioned over mine, and he was driving inside. But the gentle brushes of his lips the first time he kissed me were a distant memory and a stark contrast to the brutal strokes of his cock inside my body.

I hadn't expected him to be like this, and maybe that was because he'd been so gentle and kind with me from the start. But I loved it.

I loved that he was wild and out of control and totally lost in what he was doing, but not in a way that he hurt me.

With each forceful thrust into me, I experienced pleasure like never before. And though it took me a moment to adjust to the surprise of it, there was nothing stopping me from seeking out more.

"Fuck, your pussy feels so good."

Hearing that, another wave of determination rolled through me, and it had nothing to do with taking more of what I could get. It was about giving him all that I could, making him feel the best he ever had.

With the strength and power I knew I was going to need, I dropped one leg off the side of the couch while I pressed the bottom of the other into the cushion in an attempt to roll us.

Jake seemed surprised, but quickly caught on, falling to his back on the floor beside the couch. I sank down on top of him, my hands pressed to his chest and my hips working overtime. As I rode his cock, I looked down, saw something unexplainable in his eyes, and asked, “What about this? Does my pussy feel just as good like this, when I’m the one doing the work?”

He stared at me with a look of awe on his face for mere seconds before he fired back, “Oh, baby, you have no fucking idea how perfect you are.”

Jake propped himself up on one of his elbows, his opposite hand reaching up to grab my breast while his mouth sought out my other nipple. I was the one who was supposed to be giving him all the pleasure, but it seemed he wasn’t going to allow that to happen.

So, while I gave him everything I had, Jake gave back what he could. Eventually, he dropped back and took the opportunity to roam his eyes over my body. His gaze lingered in certain areas, and I loved the look on his face.

“Fuck, Brynn, you don’t quit.” I couldn’t miss the sound of utter amazement in his voice.

Did he actually think I was going to stop?

I leaned forward, my breasts brushing up against his chest, and brought my lips to his. Continuing to ride him hard, I said, “I thought you’d know by now that I’m not the kind of girl who gives up easily. I want you to come, Jake. And I want to be the one who makes you lose control.”

He smiled against my lips, his head moving ever so slightly from one side to the other. “It’s too late, baby, that’s already happened.”

In a flash, he knifed up, his arm coming around me as he took me to my back. Then, with his hands on the backs of my thighs, he kept his eyes locked on mine and drove in deep.

“Oh, fuck,” I moaned.

“I know you wanted to make me come, Brynn, but with my cock in you for the first time, I’m the one who’s making this happen,” he grunted.

“I’m doing it next time,” I told him.

“We’ll see.”

I had a feeling he intended to keep me from making that happen, but I couldn’t do anything about it at the moment. I was too consumed by how good this felt, by how good he felt.

“Harder, baby,” I begged. “Fuck me harder.”

Jake did not disappoint. He fucked me harder.

Seeing the way he sought to please me, being filled so full of him, I

wasn't surprised to feel that pull deep in my lower belly. It twisted, it grew, and it was going to hit me hard.

"Jake."

"Come for me, angel."

I didn't need the command, because it was going to happen anyway. I came apart, my moans filling the air, as Jake thrust inside and drew out every last ounce of pleasure he could.

And when I had just made it to the other side, he did what seemed like the impossible task of picking up his pace. "Fuck, Brynn, fuck, I'm going to come."

When he buried himself deep inside me, groaning through his release, I watched and allowed my hands to stay planted on his body. I loved listening to the sound of his grunts and groans as he climaxed, and when he collapsed on top of me, burying his face in my neck, I twisted my head to the side and whispered, "That was nice, wasn't it?"

His body vibrated against mine with the force of his laughter before he rolled to his back and took me with him.

Then his mouth found mine, and he kissed me for a long time.

I couldn't be certain, but I had a feeling we were in for a wonderful weekend.



Jake

The disbelief I felt was unmatched.

Nothing about what had just happened had managed to sink in yet. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought I was dreaming.

Because she was perfect, and she didn't even know it.

I'd just returned to the living room to locate my clothes after the both of us had gone to clean ourselves up. But no sooner had I gotten there and turned around in front of the couch, when Brynn strode toward me, completely naked, with a determined look on her face.

Something told me I hadn't come close to understanding just how much there was to like about this woman.

Brynn stopped inches in front of me and flattened her palms against my chest. "Have a seat, big guy. It's my turn now."

My brows shot up in surprise. "Your turn? For what?"

She licked her gorgeous lips. "To use my mouth on you."

Just watching her walk naked across the room toward me with that look on her face, I'd felt my cock stiffen. At the mention of her using her mouth on me, I didn't stand a chance in appearing unaffected.

So, I dropped my pants to the ground and fell to my ass on the couch. Brynn stepped forward, bent to rest her hands on my thighs, and lowered herself to her knees in front of me.

I barely had a moment to let the reality of what was about to happen penetrate when I felt Brynn's fingers curl around me. The next thing I knew, she took my cock in her mouth.

Unprepared for just how good it felt, my head dropped back as a groan escaped me. I gave myself a few seconds to adjust to the feel of her warm, wet mouth before I decided I wasn't interested in just feeling it.

I wanted to watch.

So, I dropped my head forward, and gathered her hair in my hands, pulling it back from her face. Grasping her hair firmly in one hand, my other clamped down on her forearm that was draped over my thigh.

Then I watched.

I watched as my dick disappeared past her lips and into her mouth, the tip grazing the back of her throat and forcing the muscles in my body to clench.

"Jesus, angel, you're unbelievable."

She hummed against my cock, continuing to go at me with unabashed fervor. And when she lifted her gaze to mine, it became clear she was enjoying this nearly as much as I was.

Brynn's mouth worked me for a long time, licking, sucking, and teasing. No matter how much I might have wanted to come down her throat, I wanted to be inside her even more.

Using the grip I had on her hair, I tugged back gently and demanded, "Climb up here, Brynn. I want to come in your pussy."

She released me from her mouth and moved to stand up. I grabbed a condom and rolled it on faster than I thought was humanly possible. And a moment later, she positioned herself over me and sank down.

My fingers dug into the flesh on her hips and ass, loving the feel of being inside her again.

Brynn must have been feeling the same, because her fingertips pressed in hard at my shoulders as she let out a moan.

Keeping one hand on her ass, I lifted the other to her tits. I squeezed each of them several times, alternating back and forth, ultimately capturing one in my mouth while she rode me.

I licked and sucked and swirled my tongue around her pert nipple, determined to please her just as much as she was with me.

“Jake,” she panted.

Eventually, she dropped back, her palms resting on top of my thighs, giving me the perfect view of her body taking my cock.

And what I saw next blew me away.

Brynn was not only not lazy; she was beyond energetic.

For so long, I believed it would be impossible to find someone who could ever come close to matching my energy level. Brynn didn’t come close to it; I was willing to go out on a limb and say she might have exceeded it.

She didn’t fatigue. She didn’t slow down.

She rode me hard and with a determination I hadn’t ever experienced before in my life. “Is it good, Jake?”

I loved it.

“The best, Brynn.”

“Your cock feels so good.”

Not only did she have the stamina, but she also had confidence. She had no qualms about communicating what she liked and carrying out whatever she believed I’d enjoy.

My eyes were grateful for the show, seeing my dick slide into her pussy with each movement of her hips. And when they dared to wander from that glorious view, I was rewarded with the sight of the rest of her body, a body she’d trained hard to keep in shape.

Damn, she was beautiful.

And I felt like one lucky guy to be here with her.

Unable to resist, I brought my thumb to her clit, applied pressure, and began circling.

She moaned. “Oh, God.”

Despite the sensations she was feeling, Brynn did not relent. If anything, she worked her hips harder, faster. I wasn’t going to last much longer, so I

kept my thumb moving.

And when her moans became more frequent, and her breathing grew shallow, I knew she was nearly there.

Several thrusts later, our orgasms hit. It didn't matter that she was experiencing her own. Brynn powered through, working me hard and draining me of everything I had. Only after it left the both of us did she lean forward and drop her cheek to my shoulder.

While the both of us worked to regain control of our breathing—she was the one who had more work to do to get there—I felt something move through me.

Not in my whole life had I ever expected Brynn.

And I didn't care if it made me seem crazy, considering how new this was between us. When the time was right, I was going to marry this girl.

ELEVEN



Brynn

“Can I let you in on a little secret?”

Jake’s chest rumbled with the sound of his laughter. “Brynn, you just rode my dick so hard and made me come twice even harder. You can tell me whatever you want.”

Heat spread through my body. I had done that.

“This cuddling thing we’re doing is growing on me, especially if we’re naked when we’re doing it.”

After I’d imparted that news on him, Jake burst into a fit of laughter while he kept his arm wrapped firmly around my back.

It was after both rounds of sex in my living room. Jake and I had made it to my bedroom and were currently curled up together in my bed. As I’d just noted, we were both naked, and it was safe to say I was thoroughly enjoying being like this with him.

“Maybe you like it so much right now because we got in a really good workout,” he reasoned.

I lifted my head from his chest to look at him and smiled. “I don’t think that’s it,” I shared.

He cocked an eyebrow and asked, “Oh? What do you think it is?”

“You.”

“Me?”

Nodding, I explained, “I think I only like cuddling simply because it’s you I’m cuddling with. Besides, neither one of us was naked last weekend

when you were here, and I didn't think it was so bad then, either."

He grinned at me. "Can I let you in on a little secret?"

I was instantly feeling intrigued. "Um, yeah," I answered, my tone indicating I thought that was a ridiculous question.

"I kind of wished we were naked last weekend," he revealed.

"You're the one who stopped us," I noted.

"Yeah, don't remind me," he huffed. "What a bad decision."

"Hey, on the bright side, we're here now," I pointed out, not wanting him to feel bad about something neither one of us could change. "That's all that matters, right?"

Jake lifted his hand to the side of my head and tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear as his eyes roamed over my face. "Of course."

And now he was back to being sweet with me. I loved it. I loved how he could be so very different depending on the situation, and yet, it was exactly what I wanted from him in each instance.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask me anything you want, angel."

Like that right there. Him calling me angel. Sweet. So very sweet.

But no matter how much tenderness he was showing me, I started to clam up. I knew I needed to ask him the question that was lingering on the tip of my tongue, but I was still nervous about it.

Jake must have realized I was struggling because his hand drifted down toward my ass and gave me a squeeze. "What's going on, Brynn?"

I licked my lips, my eyes darting back and forth several times before finally settling on him. Then I said, "I know this might be crazy to be asking you already, but I kind of can't stop thinking about it."

"Thinking about what? Just ask me."

I gestured my hand between the two of us. "After what's been going on for the last week and especially after what happened here today, I guess I'm just curious if this is a shot at the real deal between us, or are we just hooking up and having fun for now?"

Now that I'd said it out loud, I realized just how ridiculous it all was. In fact, it pained me to even consider the possibility of this just being a casual hookup for Jake. I didn't want that. I wanted us to be more than that, and it was hitting me now that I probably should have taken the time to discuss this with Jake before we'd taken the step we just did and had gotten to this point.

Much to my surprise, there was no hesitation on Jake's part. "We're

seeing each other. Exclusively.” I blinked my eyes in surprise. “Are you okay with that?”

“It’s not like there’s a line of men banging down the door trying to get me, Jake,” I noted. “But even if there was a line or a whole crowd of them, I’m pretty sure I’d only be able to see you.”

“That’s a good answer, angel. I don’t know where we’re heading just yet, but I know I’m more than ready to take this ride with only you.”

I smiled at him, feeling relieved. I loved that he felt the same as I did and wanted to try this out between us.

It was at that moment, his stomach growled.

“I think it’s lunchtime,” I declared.

“If I didn’t think we’d need the sustenance for what I’ve got planned for you for the rest of the day, I’d put my foot down and demand we stay here. But I also know you get crabby if you’re hungry, so maybe we should put some clothes on and grab some food,” he suggested.

With that, Jake sat up, taking me with him, and gave me a heck of a kiss. Then we got up, got ourselves dressed, and went downstairs.

By the time we sat down to eat, more thoughts and ideas popped into my head.

“Hey, I know we’re planning to spend the day together today, but I was wondering what the chances were of us spending the rest of the weekend together?”

“You don’t have plans?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Not really. I was kind of thinking I might head out to get myself a Christmas tree tomorrow.”

Tipping his head to the side, he swallowed a bite of his food before he spoke. “You’re planning to get a real tree?”

“Yeah.”

Nodding slowly, he asked, “Are you super picky about it, where it’d be an entire day affair?”

After taking a huge gulp of my water, I answered, “I want a nice tree, but I don’t think I’m picky. I figure it’s going to take an hour or so. Two, tops.”

Jake’s features softened, and his lips twitched. “Then we should have plenty of time to do that and other things.”

“Other things?”

He dipped his chin. “Other things.”

Based on the tone of his voice and the look in his eyes, I could easily

assume what those other things were, and I'd likely be correct.

"Okay. So, today we practice cuddling more, maybe watch a movie together, have more fun while being naked, eat, and you can stay the night. Tomorrow, Christmas tree shopping and whatever other things you have planned," I declared.

"I like the way you compromise," Jake noted.

I cocked an eyebrow. "I know how to be accommodating."

Jake laughed, and the two of us finished up our lunch. After we cleaned up our mess, Jake and I decided it was the perfect time to watch a movie and cuddle on the couch.

So, we got ourselves there, and we got comfortable. Even though it wasn't normally my thing to just sit around doing nothing, I really didn't mind it in this case.

In fact, I preferred to be doing it. Not only was I loving the quality time with him, but I'd been bouncing around with all of my family members for the last two days, so it was nice to not have anywhere to go or anything to do. Plus, Jake and I really did give ourselves quite the workout when he first arrived. We could certainly take some time to relax and recharge, because Jake had already made it clear we weren't going to be done doing that today.

At the thought of how my last couple of days had gone, though, it dawned on me that I hadn't asked Jake about his holiday break. Before I turned on the movie, I turned my head in his direction and asked, "Hey, so, how was your Thanksgiving?"

There was an extended pause before he shared, "I didn't celebrate."

My entire body tensed. "What? Your family doesn't celebrate? Are you... is there a religious—"

"It's nothing like that," he said, cutting me off. "My parents live about three hours west of here."

I tipped my head to the side. "Oh. And they didn't ask you to come back?"

"They did."

My brows pulled together, my confusion growing with each second that passed. "I don't understand. Why wouldn't you go home to see them and spend the holidays with them?"

Jake looked away from me, and I could see the devastation take over. His features were haunted.

"Jake?" I called softly.

He closed his eyes briefly. Then he lifted his head and brought his attention to me. The grief was etched into every line on his face. Before he even said a word, I knew this had to be about his brother. “Yeah?”

Keeping my voice as gentle as possible, I asked, “Will you tell me why you didn’t go home to see your family?”

“I can’t.”

“You can’t?”

He shook his head. “I left after I graduated, and I haven’t been back. The three years after he died, I had to live there, seeing the grief, knowing I was responsible for what happened to him, and I hated knowing I did that to them.”

My heart was breaking for him. “Are you telling me your parents haven’t seen you in all these years?”

“They came down to Parris Island when I finished basic training, and they drove out here to Steel Ridge two years after I ended my service in the Marines. But yes, it’s been years since I last saw them.”

“But they want to see you?”

He shrugged. “I guess.”

Blinking my eyes, trying to decide if he was being serious, I repeated, “You guess? Jake, you’re their son. Of course, they want to see you.”

“You don’t understand,” he insisted. “It’s not that simple.”

“So, help me to understand,” I begged him.

“They lost their son.”

“And from everything I’m hearing, it seems like you took their only other one away from them,” I pointed out.

His eyes cut harshly to mine, and I instantly felt regret. I didn’t think I was saying anything that was wrong, but Jake and I had decided not even an hour ago that we were trying this thing out between us. Maybe it wasn’t quite yet my place to be sticking my nose into this.

“I’m sorry,” I lamented. “It’s none of my business, I know. I just... I care about you, and I can see the pain you’re in. It seems to me like you lost your brother, they lost their son, and now neither one of you has anything that connects you to the boy you’re all grieving for.”

Jake’s jaw clenched. The demons were swirling in his eyes, weighing him down. God, I didn’t want this for him.

Part of me regretted having brought up the holiday to begin with, but the other part of me was glad to know what he was dealing with. If my intention

was to help him heal, there was no way I'd be able to do it without knowing just how bad things were for him.

When he didn't say anything, I tried once more. "Baby, this is obviously weighing heavily on your heart. I don't want to presume to know what it must feel like for you, but if I had to guess, the way things are now is not good for anyone. I mean, think about it. You and your parents lost Max. You all had to grieve that loss. It's devastating, and there's nothing anybody can do to change it. But your parents are now grieving the loss of their other son, and he's alive. Jake, you're alive, and you can end that pain for them. Maybe even yourself."

He looked away again.

I brought both of my hands to either side of his face and urged him to look at me. He was being tormented. "Do you want to see them?"

He didn't answer.

"Do you miss them?"

He nodded.

My eyes filled with tears. "I'll go with you. Whenever you're ready, I'll make the trip there with you. We'll do it together. This way, you don't have to feel like you're doing it alone."

He gritted his teeth together repeatedly in an attempt to ward off the emotions threatening to consume him. Not wanting him to feel like he had to try so hard to be strong, I released his face from my hands and wrapped my arms around him. I kissed his cheek and hugged him as tightly as I could. It took him some time, but eventually Jake engulfed me in his strong arms, wrapping me up in them and holding on like he never wanted to let go.

If that was what he wanted, I'd stay there forever.



Jake

This wasn't supposed to happen like this.

Nothing about it felt right, and yet, it was all so perfect.

It wasn't supposed to be this fast, but Brynn just came swooping in with her determination.

Everything about her was irresistible, making it impossible to not want everything she had to offer, everything she wanted to give.

If anyone else had spoken to me about Max and my parents the way she just had, there wasn't a question in my mind that I'd have gotten up and walked out the door.

I couldn't do that with her. All I could do was stare at her in disbelief, wondering if everything she seemed intent on doing was actually going to be possible.

There might have been a movie on the television now, but I couldn't begin to pay attention to it. My eyes were focused on my lap, where Brynn's head was resting as she watched the movie.

It was a week ago when I'd told myself this woman was somebody spectacular, somebody I wanted to marry. After what she'd just done and the way I'd allowed it to happen, things were only becoming more and more clear.

This woman was going to be the woman who fixed it. She was going to be the one who made me want more out of life than I'd been giving myself.

Get up and walk away because she dared to challenge my way of thinking? I couldn't have done it if someone paid me to go. Brynn was already burrowing herself deep inside me, and I knew if I tried to walk away when she was giving me what could only be described as tough love, I'd walk around for the rest of my life feeling like I'd lost a limb.

One week, and Brynn was already that deep.

I didn't know how she'd done it. There was so much about her I was drawn to, but I think it had to be the determination that did me in. Something told me that even if I'd decided to leave, Brynn wouldn't have allowed it. She'd have called me out on it, making me see what I'd refused to see for so long.

I closed my eyes briefly, thinking about my parents.

For so long, I'd been thinking about it all wrong. I hadn't wanted to be a reminder to them of what they'd lost. I didn't want to see the sorrow in their expressions and the worry etched into every crease or line on their faces.

I thought I'd been doing it for them, to give them the chance to find some peace in their lives. Even though they'd invited me home for every holiday, I always found an excuse, believing they'd done it out of obligation. And when

they never pushed for me to reconsider, I had assumed it was because they simply felt relieved.

Now, I wasn't so sure.

Brynn had forced me to open my eyes and see what I'd been missing all along. My parents had to grieve for the loss of Max, and there was nothing they could do to change it or bring him back. But then they had to grieve for the loss of me, too. I was still alive, and only I could take that pain away from them.

It had been so long since I'd seen them, and though I'd missed them tremendously, I didn't know if I could do it.

At least, I hadn't once considered being able to do it before her.

But just like that, Brynn seemed to know what I needed without me ever needing to say it. She offered herself up and promised to go with me if and when I decided to go. She didn't pressure me; she didn't make demands. She merely offered to be there for me when I needed her.

If that wasn't all the proof I needed to know my instincts weren't wrong about her, I didn't know what else would do it.

In such a short time, she'd already shown me that she had this innate ability to just know what I needed, and she never hesitated to give it to me.

It was in that moment when it all became crystal clear to me. If I didn't do everything in my power to hold on to her, there'd be no amount of sparring that would ever come close to alleviating the pain.

On that thought, I lifted her hand in mine and brought the back of it to my mouth to kiss her. She twisted her head in my lap and looked up at me. "Is everything okay?"

Lowering our hands back down, I stroked my thumb over the skin I'd just kissed and smiled at her. "Everything is perfect."

She held my gaze for a beat, smiling back at me.

Then she returned her attention to the movie, and I struggled not to focus on her for the rest of it. I wasn't very successful.

TWELVE



Jake

Internal battles were something I'd grown accustomed to experiencing throughout the course of my life. For so many years, those battles left me feeling nothing but despair and devastation. And I always knew which part of me needed to win in order to make sure things didn't wind up being worse. It was the reason I often found myself needing to spar, needing that physical exertion, to help clear my head of all the racing thoughts.

Now, it was the opposite.

I was fighting another battle, but I was feeling torn about which side I wanted to see win in the end.

Because my eyes were closed, I'd spent the night in Brynn's bed, and she was currently pressing her naked body close to mine while her lips peppered kisses on my chest and shoulders.

And that was the reason there was a battle I was waging with myself right now.

Since I liked what Brynn was doing so much, I didn't want to do anything to disturb her and stop her from continuing with it. But there was the other part of me that couldn't ignore the physical reaction I was having to what she was doing, and that part wanted me to open my eyes and take over.

It would have been easy to do that.

God, it would have been easy. Enjoyable, too.

Something stopped me, though.

Feeling her lips on me first thing in the morning, I couldn't stop myself

from thinking about how much I liked it, how easy it would be to get used to having that every morning.

Thinking about her in that way, about a future that went beyond just the next few days, something peaceful settled over me. It was the first time in a very long time I'd felt that way without having to work my body into exhaustion to get it.

It was difficult to ignore what that might have meant when it came to Brynn, considering she was the one responsible for it.

No matter what war I was waging inside my mind, there was no question the feeling she was giving me now was the one that was always going to win.

So, I didn't go the easy route and flip her to her back, so I could slide inside of her. I decided to try something new, something different, and see if I'd get the same result.

Brynn's hand roamed over my body, moving from my abdomen up toward my chest. Her mouth was covering more and more ground as time passed. That alone made it difficult to continue pretending to be asleep, but feeling her naked body squirming in the bed beside me made it virtually impossible.

All I wanted to do was wrap my arms firmly around her and hold her close. I wanted my hand to drop down over her ass to squeeze the flesh there.

Eventually, I knew that part of me was going to win, but I wanted to challenge myself and see how long I could let this go on before I couldn't hold myself back any longer.

That's when it happened.

Brynn's mouth traveled up from my shoulder, along the side of my throat, and toward my ear. Once there, she whispered, "I know you're awake. Is there a reason you're pretending to be asleep?"

Instantly, I wrapped my arm around her body and held her close to me. "I was trying to take some time to enjoy what you were doing while you wriggled and squirmed beside me."

"I'm surprised you didn't just take advantage of the situation and try to do something else," she returned.

That statement forced me to open my eyes. "Are you disappointed I didn't?"

Brynn pressed one more kiss to my cheek, pulled back, and looked down at me. All it took was that single look to feel more peace settle over me. She was so beautiful, and I was convinced she didn't have the slightest clue how

just one look or a single touch from her could calm any tension I felt in my body.

She smiled at me, the look on her face unbelievably sweet. “No. I mean, you know how much I enjoy what we have together, but if you got something different out of what I was doing, then I’m happy to have given it to you. Anyway, I was mostly just wanting to rouse you to ask you something.”

I lifted my opposite hand up to the side of her head and tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. “What’s going on?”

“Today’s Sunday,” she declared.

“What does that mean?”

“Well, aside from the fact that this Sunday happens to be the day we’re going shopping for my Christmas tree, there’s something I normally do every Sunday morning.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Which is?”

“Yoga.”

I didn’t know what I’d thought she was going to tell me, but it certainly wasn’t that. “Yoga?” I repeated.

Nodding slowly, she smiled. “Yeah. It’s okay if you want to stay in bed, but I wanted you to know that I’m going to head down into the basement to practice yoga for an hour, and I didn’t want you to wake up, wondering where I slunk off to without an explanation.”

“I didn’t realize you did yoga,” I replied.

“I do. It’s very good for your body. It helps with flexibility, mobility, and body awareness, if you ask me. Plus, after a week of grueling workouts with weight training, it’s really nice to find a way to get the movement my body craves while taking a minute to slow down at the same time.”

Suddenly, all I could think about was watching Brynn in her yoga poses, and it gave me an idea.

“Would it be okay if I joined you in the basement for a workout?” I asked.

Brynn seemed surprised. “You want to do yoga with me?”

I shook my head and let out a laugh. “No. I want to watch you do yoga while I try to do what would normally be my Sunday workout.”

“What do you normally do?”

“Arms,” I revealed. “I only train biceps and triceps once a week, because they grow quickly for me.”

Smiling, Brynn’s hand drifted over to my shoulder and down my arm. “I

like them. From the first day I met you, when you took your shirt off after sparring with Kane, I was immediately impressed by your physique. I love that you enjoy exercising as much as I do.”

I returned the smile, recalling that first day I met her. “When you walked in with Avalon that day, all I could think was that she was going to be disappointed.”

“What?”

“Avalon has the most outgoing personality at Harper Security Ops,” I started. “She always has a penchant for gossip, even if it’s never been about being vindictive. One look at her face when she poked her head in the room that day, and I knew she was up to something. There was no doubt in my mind that she was hoping I’d wind up right where I am right now with you.”

Brynn’s eyes widened. “Is that why she was always giving me those knowing glances when I walked in?”

I nodded. “That’s exactly why.”

“Wait. So, why are you saying all you could think was that she was going to be disappointed?” Brynn questioned me.

“Because I thought you were a baby. You looked far too young to be twenty-nine, and I wasn’t interested in touching a girl who was just barely legal.”

“That’s noble of you. If that’s what you thought and you knew Avalon was pushing for that, why didn’t you just tell her or me that it wasn’t going to work?” she pressed.

“Avalon would have had you work with Greyson or Huck instead, and both of those guys are single.”

She tipped her head to the side, curiosity washing over her expression. “And that would have bothered you?”

“Let’s just say that I don’t think they’d have been as noble as I was at the start. Besides, before we even started our first lesson that day, I learned the truth about your age, and if I’d have pawned you off on one of them from the beginning, I might not be here in this bed with the best thing that’s ever happened to me in a very long time.”

Brynn’s lips parted in shock, tears filling her eyes. “What?”

Maybe this wasn’t a smart move, but I didn’t think I had anything to lose. I didn’t think honesty was going to be a bad thing in this scenario. “I’ve had my fair share of fun before you came along, but never, not once in all these years, has any woman held me captive the way you have. I like who you are,

the energy you exude. I don't know. You're the first woman I've wanted to have a real relationship with, and the time I've spent with you over these last couple of weeks has been some of the best of my life."

"I'm going to cry, Jake."

My thumb came up to swipe at the tear that had just barely escaped. "Don't cry. I didn't share that to upset you."

She shook her head furiously. "I'm not upset at all. I'm happy. I'm happy, because I feel the same about the time I've been spending with you."

God, that felt good to hear. "Kiss me, Brynn."

Without hesitating, she shifted her body slightly, leaned down, and kissed me. And it was no surprise that kiss, following the conversation we'd just had, was what finally led to me giving into the physical desire I'd had from the moment she'd woken me up this morning.



The day had been going exceptionally well.

From the moment Brynn woke me up with her kisses, everything had been great.

The conversation followed by the fun we'd had in the bed this morning was evidence of that.

Then we'd gone downstairs to get our workouts in, and it was safe to say that I enjoyed having a show while I got in an arm workout.

It was no secret that Brynn was unbelievably fit. But I'd suspected her fitness was all about her strength and stamina. I couldn't have been more wrong.

She had a level of flexibility I'd never dream of acquiring, and her control over her body was something I didn't think a lot of people had. Brynn understood how to engage her muscles and activate areas needed for whatever it was that she was doing.

There was no question that everything she'd done to take care of her body had helped her tremendously when it came to the self-defense lessons. She had the strength to power through those lessons, the stamina to keep going, and the flexibility and mobility to prevent herself from being injured in the

process. Plus, her determination was unparalleled.

The more I was around her, the more she impressed me.

And when she wound up in several delicious poses throughout her yoga practice this morning, I wasn't the least bit upset by how badly she'd distracted me. My workout took twice as long as it normally would have.

Now that we'd both finished our workouts, Brynn was excited to grab a protein shake, so we could carry on with our day. That involved the Christmas tree shopping before we came back here to do some things I had in mind for us this afternoon.

"I have a few different flavors of protein here, so help yourself to whichever sounds best," she said when we'd entered the kitchen. "I also like to mix in my supplements like glycogen and collagen at the same time. You're welcome to have those as well. I've also got some creatine if you use that."

"Thanks," I said, lifting the canisters of protein to inspect the flavors.

"Hey, would you mind grabbing the almond milk from the fridge?" Brynn asked, carrying the shaker cups over to the counter.

"Sure."

I moved to the refrigerator, opened it up, and something caught my eye. I'd been in her kitchen several times yesterday, and I hadn't noticed it until just now. Seeing it, I felt something cold move through my body.

"Did you find it?" Brynn asked, breaking into my thoughts.

I quickly shifted my attention to the milk inside, pulled it out, and closed the door. "Yeah, here you go," I said, my mind completely distracted.

Brynn must have realized something was wrong, because she immediately asked, "Is everything okay?"

Not liking the way I felt, I forced my eyes in her direction. They roamed over her face and studied her. What was I missing?

Clearly distressed by the whole situation, Brynn pressed, "Jake, are you alright?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "What is that?"

"What is what?"

I lifted my hand, pointed to the refrigerator, and clarified, "That. What is that about?"

Brynn's concerned eyes went in that direction, but I kept my focus on her face. The minute she saw what I was referring to, her features softened. A smile formed on her face as she looked at me again and replied, "Good one."

I cocked an eyebrow, silently questioning her.

She saw it and grew visibly tense. “Why are you acting like you’ve never seen that before?”

“Because I haven’t.”

Confusion immediately washed over her, a crease forming between her brows. “You’re joking. You put that on my car, Jake.”

“No, I didn’t. When did you get that?”

“It was on my windshield the day after you and I went hiking together,” she explained. “I assumed you put it there before you left here that night.”

I suddenly didn’t have a very good feeling about this. Brynn had placed a note on her refrigerator beneath a magnet that she believed was from me.

Looking forward to spending more time with you.

Those were the only words on the note, which is why it started to make sense that Brynn believed I’d left it on her car.

Shaking my head, I promised, “I didn’t put that note there, Brynn.”

“You had to have done it,” she insisted. “I haven’t spent time with anyone else. I mean, other than Maxie or family, I’ve been with you, or I’ve been working.”

“Do you have any new clients you’ve been training in person?” I asked.

She shook her head and walked over to pull the note off the refrigerator. “No. Are you honestly telling me the truth? You really didn’t write this and leave it for me to find the next morning?”

“I promise. I didn’t do it.”

Her eyes darted all over the kitchen, trying to make sense of it all. I wasn’t quite sure she’d gotten anywhere with that when she took the paper and tossed it onto the counter like it had been contaminated by something. “If it’s not from you, then where is it from?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Is it possible someone put it on the wrong car? I mean, maybe my car looked like someone else’s car, and the person just assumed...” she trailed off, her voice sounding hopeful.

It was clear Brynn wanted me to say something that was going to ease the very valid concern she was beginning to feel over the note. I wanted to tell her what she wanted to hear, but I wasn’t going to lie to her.

If her car had been parked somewhere out in public, I might have been able to go along with her reasoning. That would have been a justifiable explanation.

Her car was parked in her driveway. That wasn't merely coincidental.

"There's nothing I want more than to be able to ease your fears by telling you you're right, but I won't lie to you," I started, noticing how rigid her body became with each word I spoke. "I don't think this was random, Brynn."

"But I haven't spent any time with anyone but you, Jake," she said, her voice shaky. "I swear. You have to believe me. I haven't been with anyone else."

"I believe you."

Shock and surprise washed over her as her body jerked backward. "You do?"

"Yes."

"But then, you have to believe this was random," she reasoned. "How else would it have gotten here?"

My eyes roamed over her face as something tightened in my chest. Brynn was a tough woman, and I believed she could handle the truth of this situation. Even still, I wanted nothing more than to protect her from all of it. Knowing the best way to do that was to be sure she understood the seriousness of the situation, I asked, "What prompted you to finally come in for lessons?"

"I was being recognized in public," she answered.

"And when those three men approached you, it was in the parking lot next to your car, wasn't it?"

Realization dawned. "Are you saying... do you think it was one of them?"

I shrugged. "I can't say. But I know that you're too important to me to pretend this isn't a big deal. I'd rather be extra cautious."

"What am I... I don't know what I'm supposed to do," she stammered.

Wanting to calm her down and ease her fears as much as I could, I stepped close, wrapped her in my arms, and promised, "I'm not going to let anything happen to you. Brynn, you've been taking self-defense lessons. I'm feeling better and better about your capabilities with each class we have. We're going to continue those, and we're going to kick them up a notch this week. I'll make sure you know what you need to know if anyone tries to mess with you."

With her cheek pressed against my chest, Brynn nodded. "Okay. I'm going to do whatever you tell me to do and hope this was just random."

“That’s exactly what I want you to do. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst. And be mindful of what’s happening around you, no matter where you go,” I advised.

She pulled her face back from my chest, tipped her chin up, and declared, “I can do that.”

Smiling, even though I felt a bit of uneasiness about the whole situation moving through me, I replied, “I know you can.” Then I pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose and said, “Let’s not worry about this right now. We’ve got shakes to make and a Christmas tree to find.”

She returned the smile, but I could see she was still feeling unsettled. Brynn had done a lot to ease some of the things I’d been feeling for years. I made a promise to myself right then and there that I’d do anything it took to make sure she felt safe and carefree again.

THIRTEEN



Brynn

“Why does this feel so much harder now?”

My arms were wrapped around Jake’s waist, hugging him tightly, while both of his arms were draped over my shoulders, squeezing me.

It was late Monday morning, and we were standing beside my car, which was parked in the lot outside the Harper Security Ops building.

I’d just finished my lessons with him, and now I had to say goodbye. It was going to be the first time I was going to be apart from him since he showed up at my place on Saturday morning and the two of us took things to the next level in our relationship.

Jake and I had spent the entire weekend together—he spent both Saturday night and Sunday night at my place.

But now that the holiday and the weekend were both over, it was time for the two of us to get back to work. I knew we needed to, but I was really hating the idea of needing to leave him.

At my question, Jake loosened his hold on me and leaned back just a touch to look down at me. “What feels harder?”

“Having to go home while you stay here,” I answered.

“We have to work,” he reasoned.

“I know, and since I didn’t touch it all weekend, there’s plenty for me to do. But that doesn’t mean I won’t miss you,” I shared.

Jake smiled brightly at me before he leaned forward and touched his lips to mine. After he kissed me, he pulled back and insisted, “I’m going to miss

you, too.”

I let out a sigh.

Giving me a gentle squeeze, Jake said, “I’m proud of you.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “For going home to work?”

He laughed. “No. I’m proud of you for how hard you worked today. You really impressed me, even if that’s something I’m beginning to get used to.”

“You’re getting used to being impressed by me?” I questioned him.

Nodding, Jake confirmed, “I know it seems strange. Being impressed would lead you to believe that the outcome of a situation is unexpected. I guess in this case, I don’t always know how you’ll manage it, but you never fail at exceeding my expectations. And that’s been the case in many areas that have nothing to do with self-defense.”

Instantly, I realized what at least one of the things he’d been referring to was, so I shot him a seductive look. “Well, I mean, you make it easy to want to outdo myself in certain situations.”

His lips twitched. “And you should know just how much it’s appreciated. That said, and in all seriousness, I’m so proud of your determination and skill when it comes to your self-defense lessons. You really are doing an excellent job.”

While it was nice to hear Jake’s words of praise when it came to my training, he made it seem as though I was the only one responsible for where I was right now with it.

The reality was really much different.

Because when it came to the skills, I only had them now, because he’d taught them to me. Maybe I was able to learn them quickly, but if it hadn’t been for his knowledge and willingness to teach me, those skills wouldn’t exist.

As for my determination, I guess I could agree that was something I’d always had. From the beginning, I’d been a very motivated woman. But I’d have been lying if I said that my fortitude had been at this level from the start of my lessons when I first walked into Harper Security Ops.

Sadly, what happened yesterday morning only served to increase my desire to push myself harder than ever before.

For a week, I’d assumed Jake had left a sweet note on my car, and as it turned out, I was wrong. I’d had a note hanging on my refrigerator the entire time that I believed was from him.

Part of me still wanted to think it was just random, and someone had

accidentally placed it on the wrong car. I mean, nothing had happened ever since then, so it was possible, wasn't it?

Even if I kept trying to convince myself of that, Jake made it impossible to not be at least a little bit concerned. He might not have come right out with the words, but I could tell. For some reason, I'd gotten good at reading him, and he didn't exactly hide how much me getting that note bothered him.

So, I knew it was necessary to come in to have my lessons this week and to make every effort to get the most out of them.

"Thank you, Jake. I appreciate you saying that, but you have to know I wouldn't have these skills if you weren't teaching me everything you know."

He smiled at me and returned, "You don't know all my moves just yet."

"I guess it's good then that I've got a few of my own in my back pocket, too," I teased, completely turning the direction of the conversation.

The look in Jake's eyes intensified, and it was clear he was trying to imagine what tricks I might have up my sleeve. Whether or not he came up with anything remained to be seen.

"Alright, angel, I've got to get back inside. Drive safe on the way home, and have a good day getting caught up on your work. I'll call you when I get home tonight," he promised.

"Okay. You have a good day, too," I replied.

At that, Jake kissed me once more, gave me another squeeze, and closed my car door for me after I folded in behind the wheel.

It wasn't much later when I walked through my front door and made a beeline for the shower. Since I had a lot of work to catch up on, I didn't waste any time just standing there under the hot water while I daydreamed about my new guy. But it was hard not to, considering how special and important Jake was quickly becoming in my life.

I finished up, got myself dressed, and immediately dove in with my work. With all of the questions posted on the content on my app, my emails, and my messages through social media, it was no surprise it took me a couple of hours to really put a dent in all that needed to get done.

Before I knew it, my stomach was rumbling, and I could feel myself at the onset of a headache. Wanting to ward that off as quickly as I could, I quit working for a bit and made my way to the kitchen to grab something to eat.

Fortunately, I still had some leftovers from the food I'd cooked when Jake was over, so all I needed to do was heat it up. And once I sat down and took a few bites, I started to feel better.

Since my mind was still caught up in my work, I found myself thinking throughout lunch about new content for my app. As I always did, I tried to come up with unique ways to draw in subscribers to my channel. The reality was there were a lot of online fitness apps for people to join, so I needed to find ways to make mine be the one they wanted to consume.

Unfortunately, as much as I was trying to focus on my work, thoughts of Jake kept randomly popping into my head. But it was one thought that had me freezing on the spot. We worked out together the past two mornings. Granted, my Sunday workout was quite different than his, but I was right back to the weight training today.

It felt like what had to be a million thoughts were racing through my mind. For the first time ever, I could potentially offer the subscribers to my app something I'd never been able to offer them before.

Partner workouts.

Of course, I'd have to talk to Jake and see if he'd be on board with it, but since he was just as much of a fitness buff as I was, I didn't think it'd be hard to convince him.

Unless he was shy about being on camera.

Wanting to believe the best, I quickly finished up my lunch and went right back to my laptop. I opened a blank document and started jotting down all of my ideas for how I could make a series of partner workouts happen.

The more I worked, the more excited I got about it. Not just for me, though. I was excited, thinking about all of the people who struggled to get motivated to exercise, and I believed that having a partner to work with, if done differently than traditional workouts, might make it more fun and exciting. Since accountability would factor in, it was likely that many individuals would be unwilling to blow off their commitment to exercise with someone else depending on them.

Somewhere in the middle of it all, my doorbell rang.

I took a few extra seconds to finish typing the thought I had in my mind, so I didn't lose it, and made my way to the door.

But I must have taken too long jotting down those last couple of words, because by the time I opened the door, nobody was there. At least, nobody was standing in front of me. There was a blue car driving down the road, but surely, that couldn't have been the person who'd been at my door. I leaned my head out, looked toward the driveway, and didn't see a single soul.

Was I going crazy?

I knew I heard someone ring the bell. There was no way I'd made that up in my head.

That's when I looked down and saw it.

Right in front of my door was a bouquet of flowers.

Okay, so I wasn't losing my mind. Those flowers hadn't been there when I left my house with Jake this morning, and they certainly weren't there when I had returned.

It was clear whoever left these was the person who'd just rang the bell, but where was the flower truck? Granted, I'd taken a little more time to finish what I was in the middle of typing when the doorbell rang, but I didn't think it was so much that a delivery driver would have been able to make it back to their truck, out of my driveway, and completely out of sight by the time I opened the door.

Was the person driving that blue car the one who'd left them, or was that someone who'd just happened to be passing by at that exact moment?

Feeling uneasy, I bent down, picked up the flowers, and stepped back into the house. I locked the door, took in the sight of the bouquet, and I just knew they weren't from the person I was hoping they were from.

I wasn't someone who needed flowers, so it wasn't disappointment I was feeling about believing Jake hadn't gotten these for me. It was what the alternative was. Knowing I was going to pull out the card and not see his name on it, everything I'd been telling myself since yesterday was no longer a possibility.

That note left on my car wasn't just a coincidence.

I took in a deep breath, set the flowers down, and plucked the envelope out. I slid my finger beneath the flap, pulled out the card, and felt the cold settle into my stomach.

There were eight words on the card, and none of them left me with a good feeling.

You mean everything to me. We belong together.

Just as I suspected, the flowers weren't from Jake. We were already together. Whoever had left this bouquet here believed I belonged with him.

There were no words to describe how unsettled I felt.

Even though I just came from there, I didn't have any choice. This was the second time someone had approached my house and left something I wasn't expecting or wanted. The first time, I was wrong about who left it. Now, I didn't have a single doubt.

This was the work of a stalker, and I wasn't leaving my fate up to chance. So, I did what I always did best.

I dove into action.

Maybe I didn't know what the right course of it was going to be in the long run, but I knew what was best to do now.

I needed to go to Jake.

I threw on my shoes, grabbed my keys and my bag, picked up the flowers and the card, and I was out the door in a flash.

The drive back to Harper Security Ops felt like it took an eternity.

With my pulse pounding in my chest, I couldn't stop myself from glancing in my rearview mirror.

Was anyone following me?

Every time I saw a car behind me, my hands gripped the steering wheel tighter, and I held my breath. It was only when the car would turn off and head in a different direction that I was able to settle just a touch.

And when I was just a couple of blocks away from my ultimate destination and saw a blue car following me that looked just like the one I'd seen driving outside my house only minutes before, I started to panic.

All I had to do was get there.

I was nearly there, and I didn't doubt Jake would know precisely what to do.

The blue car followed me all the way there, and it wasn't until I turned into the parking lot that the car disappeared. It continued heading in the direction we'd been driving, moving slowly past the building, as I got myself closer and closer to safety.

Once I parked, I turned around and checked my surroundings. I didn't see the blue car any longer, but I did see someone else.

Kane.

He'd just gotten out of his own car and was heading toward the front door. I immediately gathered up my things and exited my vehicle.

Kane easily spotted me, and a smile formed on his face as he took in the sight of me.

"Bringing some flowers to Jake at work?" he asked from the distance.

I didn't respond, but I came to a stop just outside the door. When Kane was only a few feet away, his eyes searched my face, and his expression turned serious. "Are you okay? What's going on?"

I didn't trust myself to tell him. I didn't know if I'd be able to get all the

words out to explain the entire situation to him.

So, I said the only thing I could think to say in that moment.

“I need Jake,” I rasped.

Kane stared at me for a beat longer, recognizing the seriousness of the situation, and immediately took action.

He opened the door, ushered me inside ahead of him, and placed his hand at the small of my back to guide me forward once we were inside. Avalon must have still been on her lunch break, because she wasn't there to greet us when we walked in. I figured that was a good thing, considering what I knew about her and that I didn't want to be rude by not saying anything to her.

Though I knew I was safe now that I was in the building, I couldn't say my nerves weren't shot. With each step I took with Kane guiding me to where I knew we'd both find Jake, the uncontrollable trembling I'd initially felt in my belly spread throughout my entire body. It moved through my torso, into my arms, and down my legs. It was only by some miracle that I hadn't collapsed.

When we made it to the picture window looking into the self-defense training room, I saw Jake was working with another instructor and had a full class.

“Shit,” I hissed, my body tensing. “Kane, I can't go in there.”

“It's okay, Brynn. You don't have to,” he assured me, his voice calm and composed.

“I'll just wait until he's done,” I told him, my body remaining stuck to the spot.

“Listen to me,” Kane ordered.

My eyes snapped in his direction.

When he knew he had my full attention, Kane instructed, “Stay right here. I'm going to go and get him.”

“But he's working,” I noted.

“And I'll take over for him. Don't worry about it.”

I slowly nodded, offering him my silent agreement.

The next thing I knew, Kane disappeared around the corner. My eyes were back on Jake.

And within a few seconds, Jake turned away from his class, because Kane had interrupted. Jake moved in that direction, leaned in to listen to whatever Kane was saying to him, and I couldn't miss the way his body tensed.

Jake lifted his gaze to the window, and his eyes locked on mine. Even

from the distance, I could see the mix of fury and concern in his expression.
And it was only then when I finally let out a sigh of relief.

FOURTEEN



Jake

“Great effort. Just make sure you swing that foot around before you attempt the take down next time.”

“Got it.”

I was in the middle of teaching a women’s self-defense group class with Huck, and everyone had paired up with someone else in the class to practice their moves. Huck and I moved around the class to observe, offer suggestions and corrections, as well as answer any questions.

Just as I was about to approach the next pair, I heard Kane’s voice at the entrance to the room. “Yo, Jake,” he called.

I spun around, saw him standing in the open doorway, and watched as he jerked his head backward. It was an indication he wanted me to come to him. Without hesitation, I moved in that direction.

“What’s up, man?” I asked when I came to a stop in front of him.

“Sorry to interrupt, but you’re going to want to step out of class right now,” he answered.

Confused, my brows pulled together. “Why?”

“I just got back from lunch and was walking toward the building when I met someone in the parking lot,” he started. “Your girl is here, and she’s not doing well.”

My body instantly tensed as my eyes flew to the picture window to see her standing there. Without even asking Kane for an explanation, I already knew what this was about. A bout of rage moved through me at the same

time I felt nothing but worry.

“Did she tell you what’s going on?” I asked Kane.

“No. All she said was that she needed you.”

I dipped my chin in acknowledgement. “Do you mind covering this class for me?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Thanks, Kane.”

At that, I stepped outside the room as Kane moved deeper into it. I didn’t give the class a second thought, because I knew everything and everyone would be more than fine having Kane in my place.

My priority was Brynn.

I came around the corner, saw she hadn’t moved from the spot she’d been in when I looked out the window, and tears instantly welled in her eyes. She held out a bouquet of flowers to me, flowers I knew I hadn’t sent to her.

Seeing them and mixing that with the look on her face, I confirmed what I already knew to be the case.

I took the flowers from her, inspected the bouquet, and asked, “Was this all?”

She shook her head and held up her other hand. I took the small white rectangle from her grasp and read it.

You mean everything to me. We belong together.

A chill ran down my spine.

In my line of work, it wasn’t uncommon to hear about, witness, or have first-hand knowledge of creepy and unsettling things that individuals—many of them being women—experienced. No matter how much I hated it for them, I had gotten to a point where it didn’t affect me the way it obviously affected them.

But this time was different.

This time, it took every ounce of self-control I had not to completely lose my mind. And there was only one thing that managed to keep me on an even keel.

It was the look on Brynn’s face.

Knowing she was just barely hanging on, I wrapped my arms around her and tugged her body close to mine. I hated that I could feel the fear in her trembling body and the way in which she gripped my shirt at my sides.

Brynn was so tough, so strong, and at that moment, she was scared. I didn’t like seeing it. I certainly didn’t like feeling it. And because she was

mine, I had every intention of making sure she knew I was going to do what I could to keep her safe.

I gave her some time to settle down in my arms, and once she did, I loosened my hold on her, took her by the hand, and said, “Come with me.”

“What are we going to do?” she asked, her voice unsteady.

“We’re going to take care of this,” I promised her. “You just need to trust me.”

“That’s why I came here.”

I offered a small smile in return, loving that she knew this was where she needed to go the second she received the flowers.

With her hand held firmly in mine, I led Brynn back down the corridor, through the building, and toward the main offices.

Once there, I went right to Jax’s office. I’d recently helped him on a case he’d been working on that put his girl’s life in very serious danger, so I knew he wouldn’t hesitate to help me with this situation now. And considering he worked in our private investigation unit, he was the perfect man for the job.

Brynn and I made it to his office, and I knocked on the door.

“Yeah. Come in,” he called out.

When I opened the door and he saw us both standing there—me with a bouquet of flowers in one of my hands—he knew something was up.

“I need your help,” I told him.

“Of course. What’s going on?” he asked.

Stepping forward, I tugged Brynn into the room. Jerking my head to her, I made quick work of introductions. “Jax, this is my girl, Brynn. Brynn, this is Jax. He’s one of the private investigators here at Harper Security Ops.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Brynn,” Jax said.

“You, too,” she replied quietly.

God, the small sound of her voice had me wanting to rip someone’s face off. She was always so confident and strong-minded. I hated to think about what this was doing to her.

Not wanting to waste any time, I tossed the bouquet down on Jax’s desk along with the card and started from the beginning.

“Brynn came here several weeks ago in search of self-defense lessons. Long story short, she’s got quite the online following, and people were beginning to notice her when she was out in public. Her reason for coming here initially was all about being proactive. Just over a week ago, Brynn and I spent the day together. She woke up the next morning, and at some point, she

went outside to find a note on her car. Because of what was written on that note, she believed I was the one who left it there. Needless to say, I didn't leave a note. I only learned about that note yesterday, and today, she just received those with that card."

Jax looked down at the flowers, picked up the card, and read it. I watched as his jaw clenched while his mind was probably attempting to sort through all that I'd just shared. While I gave him some time to do that, I urged Brynn to grab a seat in one of the chairs on the opposite side of Jax's desk.

She did.

And once I sat down in the chair beside her, I asked, "What do you need?"

"Well, based on the very little information I have here, I'm going to assume this is a stalker situation," he started. "What did the note say?"

"Looking forward to spending more time with you," I answered.

Jax nodded his understanding, narrowing his eyes as his brain sifted through all the information and added this new piece to it. Then he shifted his attention to Brynn. "Have you recently gone on any dates or broken up with anyone?"

She shook her head. "No. No, I've been spending my time either working or with Jake."

Jax nodded. "What about before you met Jake and started coming here for lessons? Is there anyone you've maybe gone on a casual date with?"

"No. Jake's the first guy I've dated in a very long time."

It was at this juncture when I decided to cut in. "Is there a reason you're asking about potential boyfriends and dates?"

Jax let out a frustrated sigh. "Jake, there's no easy way to put this. Based on the information you've given me, and the things written in these notes, while I can't say it with absolute certainty, I'm willing to bet we're dealing with not just any stalker."

"What do you mean?" I pressed, feeling Brynn's fingers squeeze my hand tighter.

"Well, you said Brynn was getting noticed out in public," he started. Looking at Brynn, he asked, "What is it you do for a living?"

"I'm an online fitness coach," she answered.

Jax's brows pulled together. "And people were noticing you here in Steel Ridge?"

Brynn's shoulders slowly lifted toward her ears. "I have a rather large

social media following.”

“How large are we talking?” Jax pressed.

She swallowed hard. “There are several different accounts, but my Instagram is the one I’m most active on. I’ve got just over four hundred and sixty thousand followers there.”

“Jesus Christ. Are you serious?” I asked her.

Her worried eyes came to mine. “Yes, but it’s not like I went looking for followers, Jake. It kind of came with running my business.”

Shit.

The number of people she was exposed to was beyond what I had imagined. While I realized the vast majority would be people who were genuinely interested in her content and would never wish any harm on her, there was no question with that many people she was vulnerable.

“Okay, so this is sounding more and more like what I was thinking,” Jax chimed in.

“Which is?”

He opened and closed his mouth several times, clearly struggling with how to put this. Finally, he settled his gaze on Brynn and revealed, “While I understand you might not view yourself as a celebrity, and you aren’t in the traditional sense of the word, the truth is that with a following like that, you’re a noticeable public figure. And I don’t know if you’re aware, but there have been instances where celebrities have dealt with love obsessional stalkers.”

“I’m sorry. Love obsessional?” I asked.

Jax’s eyes came to mine. “Yeah.”

“What does that mean?”

“Basically, at this point, Brynn’s stalker can be either someone who is a casual acquaintance or a complete stranger. In either case, he’s become obsessed with her and is going to start exhibiting a pattern of behavior to make her aware that he exists.”

“And then what?”

He shrugged. “Well, we don’t know. There are multiple ways it could play out, but what concerns me the most is that it started after the two of you began spending time with one another.”

Before I had the chance to speak, Brynn squeezed my hand. “Are you telling me that someone has been following me for longer than just these few weeks?”

Jax shook his head. "I can't say for sure, but it's very likely."

"And how does Jake fit into this? Why would me spending time with Jake make this person leave the note and the flowers?"

"If it gets as bad as it could, your stalker could have an idea twisted in his mind that you're actually in love with him. In that case, he believes that if it weren't for Jake, you two would be together. In that scenario, Jake is interfering with the romantic relationship you would be having with your stalker. Essentially, the stalker sees it as Jake being in the way."

Brynn gasped. "So, you're saying that Jake's in danger?"

"Brynn, angel, calm down," I urged gently. "Nobody is going to hurt me."

"This is delusional, Jake," she fired back.

Nodding, I insisted, "Of course it is. Jax just said this is all made up in this guy's head. I'm only slightly more relieved to know I'm the one this guy sees as the obstacle."

"Are you crazy?"

"No. Because if I'm the focus, that means that you're safe," I explained.

"Not entirely," Jax interrupted. Brynn and I both returned our focus to him. Realizing we wanted an explanation, he shared, "There's no evidence yet, Jake, that he views you the way I'm thinking he might. Until we have that, until he makes it clear that you're in his way, the focus needs to remain on Brynn's safety. And even if that happens, I still think you need to be extra cautious about where you go and what you do."

I hadn't really needed that recommendation, because my only concern was Brynn to begin with. Whether it became clear that I was the target or not, making sure she was safe would be the top priority.

And I knew it was wishful thinking that this would take the turn Jax had said it could. If I was the one who became the focus for him, I didn't worry about my ability to protect myself. Sure, Brynn had been taking self-defense lessons, but that didn't mean I wanted her to ever have to execute them in a real-life situation.

As I took the time considering this, Jax apparently had some additional questions. "Brynn, who delivered these flowers to you?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I was working when my doorbell rang, and I took a few extra seconds to finish typing the thought I had in my head. And by the time I made it to the door, nobody was there. The flowers were right in front of the door at my feet. The only thing I did notice was a

car driving down the road, but I don't know if it was this person's or not. It was a blue car. And on my way here, I noticed a blue car that may or may not have been the same one following me. Obviously, when I got here, they kept driving straight past the lot, but it could have just been a coincidence."

"Do you have cameras or security at your house?" he asked.

"I just have a standard alarm," Brynn informed him.

Jax slid his eyes to mine. "Say no more. Is there anything else you need from her?"

"No. Not yet. I'll do some brainstorming and try to come up with something, but there's not much here yet for me to work with. If anything else comes to mind or something new happens, don't hesitate to let me know."

"Will do. Thanks, Jax," I said as I stood.

Her hand still in mine, Brynn did the same, allowing me to lead her out of Jax's office. No sooner had we closed his door when we were stopped.

"Hey, guys. What's going on? Is everything okay?"

That came from Kit.

"Actually, it's not. Are you free?" I asked him.

"Sure. What do you need?"

I glanced at Brynn briefly before returning my attention to him. "Brynn's got a stalker, and I need to set up surveillance cameras and a new security system outside her place. If you've got time, I could use a hand."

"Damn it. Are you joking?"

"I wish."

He held my stare a moment, and I had a feeling he knew what was running through my mind. He'd been there. He knew what it was like to have the woman in his life in danger. There wasn't a doubt in my mind he was recalling the situation he'd experienced with Maxie and wishing I wasn't going to go through it with Brynn.

But it was what it was, and we couldn't do nothing because we wanted to pretend it wasn't real. That's why I wasn't surprised when he finally declared, "I will help in any way I can."

"Great. Thanks. I'm going to grab some supplies before we head out. Give me ten minutes, and we'll leave."

"I'll be ready whenever you are."

At that, continuing to keep a firm hold on Brynn's hand, I tugged her in the opposite direction and went to load up on the supplies we were going to

need.

Then we met Kit at the front door and took off to Brynn's place.

Hours later, long after Kit and I had gotten everything installed, and he'd gone home to Maxie for the night, Brynn and I were finally alone again.

She'd rolled with the punches all day long, allowing me to do what I needed to do to ensure her safety the best I knew how. But just because she managed to keep it together when everyone else was around didn't mean that she wasn't struggling.

I might have seen it as my job to keep her safe, but I also saw it as my job to make sure she knew I was a safe place for her to land.

So, before she went about making dinner for the both of us, I reached for her wrist and pulled her close.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

For a long time, I didn't respond. I simply allowed my eyes to roam over every feature on her face.

Growing impatient, she pressed, "What is it, Jake?"

"Are you okay?"

She took a moment to consider her answer. "I think I'm the best I can be given the circumstances."

"You need to know I'm going to do everything in my power to keep you safe. I'm not going to let anything happen to you," I promised.

Smiling at me, she replied, "I know. You're a lot like me."

"What?"

"Whenever a situation calls for it, I like to think, plan, and execute. In this case, I didn't know what to do, but I knew you would. And you did exactly what I would have done if there was a situation I was meant to handle. You took charge of it, and you came up with a plan. You didn't waste time, and you didn't slack on it. If two people were ever meant for each other, Jake, I think it's us."

I hadn't considered that, but she was right.

We were very similar when it came to doing anything. We both took charge whenever a situation called for it.

"Moving forward, we're going to keep doing what we've been doing," I told her. "You'll keep taking your self-defense lessons, and we're going to go about our days the same as we always would. You just need to be more cautious."

"You know, there is one thing I think we do need to do now," she

declared.

“What’s that?”

Her lips twitched. Much to my relief, it was a sign she wasn’t being burdened by what happened and was feeling playful. “I think you’re going to have to teach me that move you used on Kane the first day I met you.”

“On Wednesday, I promise,” I replied, letting out a laugh.

“Good. Now, can I make us dinner?”

“Only after you kiss me.”

I didn’t know if it was because she was hungry or she wanted to do it anyway, but Brynn didn’t hesitate. She lifted up on her toes, drove one hand into my hair, and kissed me.

Then, I released her, so she could make us dinner.

FIFTEEN



Jake

Sweating profusely, breathing heavily, and completely gassed out.

I couldn't remember a sparring session that ever left me feeling like this before in my life.

It wasn't the sweat, the labored breathing, or the feeling of being ready to tap out that was foreign to me. It was everything happening inside my head throughout it.

Less than a day.

It hadn't even been twenty-four hours since Brynn showed up at Harper Security Ops with a bouquet of flowers from a stalker, and I had desperately needed this sparring session with Kane.

Knowing I didn't have anything left in me, I tapped out, and Kane released me.

When he moved, I fell to my back on the mat and stared up at the ceiling while I attempted to regain control of my breathing. And as I lay there, my mind was assaulted by so many thoughts.

After Brynn showed up here yesterday afternoon with those flowers, I'd gone into work mode. It was all about business and doing what needed to be done. Everything from pulling Jax in on this case to having Kit help me with the installation of the security system and surveillance cameras had all been about taking the necessary steps to try to locate this guy and give Brynn that added layer of protection.

By some miracle, I kept it together throughout the day, taking each part of

the process one step at a time. But as the night wore on, I could feel things changing for me.

Once I'd confirmed that Brynn was doing okay and that she understood I was going to do everything in my power to keep her safe and teach her what she needed to know to defend herself, we both settled in for the night.

We'd decided to just watch some television after dinner last night, and it wasn't long before I noticed her starting to drift. Even if she hadn't been able to admit it to me, there was no question in my mind that the day's events had taken their toll on her.

As much as I hated what it had done to her, I was grateful it wasn't the kind of thing that was going to keep her awake at night.

So, I let her sleep.

And for a long time, I simply sat there and watched her.

That was when my defenses crumbled, and I allowed all I was feeling to consume me.

When I was face-to-face with her, I did my best to play it cool. I didn't want to lie to her about anything, obviously, but I also didn't want her to see just how concerned I was about everything.

I'd already been attempting to deal with my emotions when I'd learned about the note left on her car. I hadn't even come to grips with that when the flowers arrived.

Granted, I knew there had been time in between her receiving the note and the flowers, but it was a lot coming at me all at once. And as I sat there, thinking about it all while she seemed to be sleeping peacefully, one thing became clear to me.

This wasn't going to just stop.

I knew it was only going to be a matter of time before there was another attempt to contact her, and it drove me crazy to question how that might happen.

Eventually, I turned off the television and carried her up to bed, climbing in beside her. And for the first time since things had taken that turn in our relationship, I started to feel uneasy.

A mix of emotions bubbled up inside of me, making it impossible to find sleep. As I held her in my arms last night, the feeling only grew. Sparring was the only thing I believed would help me.

Kane knew the minute he got my call early this morning. I hadn't even needed to say a single word. He merely answered the phone and said, "I'll

meet you on the mat in thirty minutes.”

I couldn't have been more grateful for his friendship.

And now I was here, having spent more time on the mat attempting to get out all of my frustrations than I could ever remember.

It had been a few minutes since I'd tapped out when Kane broke the silence. “This session felt different than the others. You want to talk about it?”

Of course, it was different.

He knew that, because he already knew when I called him this morning that I was going to need it.

And though I'd gotten a lot out through the physical exertion I'd just put my body through, I didn't think it would be unwise to try to unload more of it by talking to my best bud about it.

“It felt different, because it is different,” I started, still laying on my back, my knees bent, and my forearm draped over my forehead. “It's not the same thing.”

“Because it's about her,” he guessed.

That was exactly it.

“Yeah.”

“Tell me what's going on. I talked to Jax yesterday, but nothing new has happened since then, right?” Kane pressed.

“There's nothing new yet,” I confirmed. “But I know it's only a matter of time before it happens.”

“She's safe right now, though,” he reasoned.

I pulled my arm away from my face, rolled my head in his direction, and stared. “Tell me you were relaxed when you knew precisely what kind of trouble Ellery was in, even if you knew she was safe with you.”

Kane held his hands up in surrender. “I'm not suggesting you're wrong for feeling the way you do. I just want you to remember that she's safe right now and you're taking measures to see that she stays that way.”

Placing my hands behind my thighs, I rolled along my spine until I was sitting up, one knee bent with my arm resting on it. “I know, but I can't shake this awful feeling that something bad is going to happen. You know, Kane. You know I've never needed to spar with you over anything that didn't have to do with Max. It's always been about him.”

I paused for a moment, noted the look on his face, and added, “Max didn't factor into the sparring session today. It was all about her.”

“I know. I already knew that.”

The silence stretched between us before I shared, “I think it felt different today because with Max I know there’s nothing I can do. I can’t go back and fix it. I can’t change it. He’s gone, and that’s the way it’s always going to be. But with her, that’s not the case. And I can’t tell you how fucking terrified I am that this asshole, whoever is stalking her, is going to do something to try to harm her and take her away from me, too.”

Kane didn’t hesitate to respond. “You’re not going to let that happen. You know what’s going on, and she’s such a strong woman. This guy is eventually going to get caught, and you’ll both come out of this on the other side, happier than ever.”

Something constricted painfully in my chest. I wanted to believe what he was saying. There was nothing I needed more than for his words to be the truth. But I knew there was a possibility they might not be. I knew there was a chance for things to take the wrong turn.

“I hope you’re right, Kane. If something happens to her, I’ll never survive it. Sparring won’t touch that pain. Not at all,” I revealed.

Kane nodded his understanding. “I hear you. I wish there was something more I could say, but you know there’s nothing you can do other than everything you’re already doing to protect her.”

That was the unfortunate truth.

I considered myself to be a man of action, and sadly, in a case like this, there wasn’t anything anyone could do other than to prepare. I couldn’t go out and hunt someone down when I didn’t know who I was looking for.

And with Brynn being the kind of woman she was, I knew she wouldn’t tolerate me never leaving her side until this asshole was caught. It wasn’t that I believed she wouldn’t want me around her. It was that she’d know why I was doing it, and she’d hate feeling as though I didn’t trust in her ability to keep herself safe, especially when she spent the majority of her time working from home.

“Can I give you a word of advice?” Kane asked.

“I’ll take anything I can get,” I answered.

“As hard as it is, try to find a way not to focus on this when you’re with her,” he suggested. “I’ll be here whenever you need to work out your frustrations over it, but don’t put this burden on her. Keep building what you were building with her before this stalker became a problem, because I’ve got to tell you, I think this one is the one for you.”

I already knew that was the case, but I was curious about what made him say that. “Why is that?”

“You haven’t needed to spar ever since she started coming here for self-defense lessons,” he noted. “And at this time of year, I think that’s saying a lot.”

He was right.

Until this stalker situation with her presented itself, I hadn’t needed to spar with him since I met Brynn. There was no question she was healing something inside of me.

“She wants to go with me to visit my parents,” I revealed.

Kane’s brows shot up. He knew I hadn’t gone home or seen them in years. “And you’re considering this?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. But if there’s anyone I’d do it for, it’s her.”

“Fuck, man. If you don’t marry this woman, you’re a fool.”

I let out a laugh and noted, “I don’t think it’s even been a month that I’ve known her.”

“So what? You know what you feel. It’s been just a matter of weeks, and she has you considering doing something you haven’t done in years. That should tell you everything you need to know.”

It did.

Then again, I knew Brynn was the woman for me long before she even mentioned going with me to visit my parents.

“Well, let’s hope we make it through this stalker situation before we start talking about engagement rings. Until then, I’m going to need to probably kick your ass every morning,” I joked.

Kane threw his head back with his laughter. “I believe it was you who was tapping out this morning.”

My lips twitched as I shook my head and stood. “A rare occurrence. Don’t get used to it.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

At that, I let out a sigh of relief. Things weren’t perfect yet, but at least I felt better about having been able to unload all that was consuming my mind. And for now, that was going to have to be enough.



Brynn

The moment the knock came at the door, I closed my laptop and ran to it.

It was Tuesday, just over a week since I'd received that bouquet of flowers and realized I had a stalker.

Maxie was coming over for a visit and to get a workout in.

With everything she had going on in her new business, doing all of the decorating she was for the holiday season, and my new situation, we'd only managed to talk to one another over the phone last week.

She called me on Monday morning, telling me she wanted to see me and get a workout in since she'd indulged over the Thanksgiving holiday and hadn't done much to exercise since.

Since I had my self-defense lessons with Jake yesterday, we decided today would be the better day to get together. And because I didn't think it was wise to go gallivanting all over town, Maxie and I both decided to just have her come to my place to work out instead of going to the local gym.

Now, she was finally here.

I flung the door open, and Maxie didn't hesitate to engulf me in her arms. "Oh my God, are you okay?"

I squeezed her back and promised, "I'm okay. Really."

She loosened her hold on me, allowing me to take a step back, so she could come inside. When I closed the door behind her, Maxie's eyes roamed over my face. "I've been so worried ever since Kit told me what was going on. And I know I talked to you about it last week, but I knew it wasn't going to be until I came here and saw you with my own eyes that I would believe it."

Smiling at her, I teased, "What? Are you telling me that after everything you've been through, you suddenly don't have faith in the men at Harper Security Ops? What would Kit say about that?"

"Of course, I have faith in them, but that doesn't mean I don't want to see you in person to be sure you're okay," she reasoned.

We made our way deeper into the house, so she could take off her jacket and set her things down. Then we made our way down to the basement.

“So, how’s Jake handling all of this?” she asked.

In an instant, the good vibes I’d been feeling were gone. “I don’t know. On the surface, everything seems fine. But deep down, I know he’s having a hard time.”

“How do you know?”

“He’s up early and heading into work to spar with Kane every morning,” I told her.

“Okay. What does that mean?”

I let out a sigh. “It’s something he used to do before we got together to help him deal with some painful stuff in his past. It wasn’t something that happened every day, though. But after things changed between us, he never mentioned needing to go in, so he could spar with Kane. The only thing that’s changed is that I now have this stalker, and I think it’s really messing with him.”

Concern littered Maxie’s features. “Have you tried talking to him about it?”

I nodded. “Yeah. And he insists I don’t need to worry.”

“How is he when you two are spending time together?” she pressed.

“That’s just it. While we haven’t seen each other every day over the last week, the time we have spent together is mostly the way I’ve come to expect.”

Her brows pulled together as her head tipped to the side. “Well, how is it different?”

I groaned my frustration. “We’ve been keeping ourselves inside.”

“And Jake hasn’t made that fun or interesting?” she asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“He has. He really has made it so I don’t completely lose my mind, but I think I’m beginning to go stir crazy. I’ve had days when I’ve gone down for a second workout, because I feel like I’m about to flip out if I don’t move.”

Maxie started laughing. “Your nightmare is like my dream come true. If I never had to go out again, I’d be so happy.”

“Yeah, well, you’re here now, and with all this time you’ve had off, don’t think I’m going to take it easy on you for this workout,” I told her.

“I expected that much, but I’m not that upset about it,” she replied.

This was new.

Maxie worked out because she knew it was something she should do. It was never because she actually wanted to do it.

“What’s with the sudden change of heart? Are you now telling me that you’re interested in grueling workout sessions with me?” I questioned her.

“Maybe I am.”

Now it was my turn to shoot her the curious look. “Do explain.”

Maxie took in a deep breath, blew it out, and bit her bottom lip. Then she held her left hand up in front of her face.

That’s when I saw it.

A gorgeous diamond ring.

“Holy crap, are you engaged?” I asked her.

She nodded, tears filling her eyes. “Kit asked me this weekend, and I said yes.”

My heart exploded in my chest as I threw my arms around her. “Congratulations. Oh my God, I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks, Brynn. I’m the happiest I’ve ever been in my life.”

I released her from the hug, placed my hands on her shoulders, and squeezed them. “Nobody deserves this more than you.”

“Except for maybe you,” she replied.

I rolled my eyes, the smile on my face growing by the second. “Well, Jake and I are still very new, so I think we have some time before he’s going to be considering sliding a ring on my finger. Plus, the whole stalker situation just puts a damper on things. Anyway, I want to hear the whole engagement story, but first, have you set a date? Are you wanting this grueling workout, because you’re planning to walk down the aisle in a month?”

She giggled. “We haven’t set anything in stone. But I do know that we want something small. But just because it’s not going to be big and extravagant doesn’t mean I don’t want to look good for my guy.”

“You’re already so beautiful. Why do I always need to tell you that?”

“I never thought I’d be the one to say this, but it’s time to get to work,” Maxie demanded. “I brought fresh clothes, so after we finish, I’ll shower and tell you all about the proposal.”

That sounded like the best plan, so I didn’t hesitate.

I got to work on Maxie’s training session with her, and spending that time together was just what my heart needed.

SIXTEEN



Brynn

Any minute now.

I was bouncing up and down, on the verge of flying out of my shoes, as my eyes kept darting to the clock. This was far too exciting to remain calm.

It was Friday evening, the workday was over, and Jake was going to be arriving at any moment.

I'd seen him throughout the week during my self-defense lessons, and he'd spent the night with me on Tuesday. Beyond that, we'd only communicated with one another over the phone.

Last night, Jake had all but begged to let him take me out for dinner before he took me somewhere else as a surprise. While I would have normally preferred to cook for the both of us, I was making an exception in this case.

We needed this.

I needed this.

Other than a trip I'd taken last weekend to the grocery store to grab a few items for the week, I hadn't been out. Maybe it was crazy, but I didn't like the idea of going anywhere on my own when I knew that someone was stalking me.

I hated it.

I hated that I'd allowed someone to take control of my life like this, but it creped me out.

Fortunately, Jake must have realized I was going stir crazy and decided it

was best to get me out for the night. I couldn't take being inside all day much longer, so when Jake asked me over the phone last night if I'd let him take me out, I immediately agreed.

If he had been here with me when he asked me, I might have tackled him to the ground and showed him just how excited I was.

I couldn't wait.

It didn't matter that I had not a single clue about what we were doing after dinner. The only thing that was important to me was being with Jake and doing something fun, which was the only hint he'd given in addition to telling me how to dress.

He'd indicated we were going to be doing something fun, that I needed to dress warm, and that I should not wear a dress. So, I dressed accordingly.

And I'd been that way, ready to go, for the last ten minutes, doing nothing but watching the seconds tick by on the clock. Every minute that passed felt like an hour. I just wanted him to get here already.

The second I thought I was going to completely lose my marbles, the doorbell rang. I couldn't make it to the door and open it fast enough.

I might have seen him that morning for my self-defense lessons, but seeing Jake now was different. This wasn't going to be about work for him or self-defense for me. It was going to be about the two of us being together and having some real fun.

I instantly threw my arms over his shoulders, stepped close, and didn't wait to steal a kiss. Jake's arms had wrapped around my waist, but when he felt my lips on his, his hand quickly drifted down and squeezed my jean-clad ass.

I moaned into his mouth.

"I feel like I haven't seen you in ages," I declared when I tore my mouth from his.

He chuckled. "You just saw me this morning."

I cocked an eyebrow. "And you're telling me that this morning doesn't feel like ages ago?"

He laughed again, squeezed my ass once more, and replied quietly, "Fair point."

"I'm so excited for tonight."

"Me, too. Are you all ready to go?" Jake asked.

"Oh, I'm ready. I feel like I've been bouncing off the walls for more than ten minutes now," I shared.

“That is precisely the reason I wanted to do this. I noticed how much staying indoors was affecting you. Grab what you need, so we can lock up and get you out of here for a while.”

He didn't need to ask me twice.

I walked away from him, grabbed my purse and keys, and locked up the house with him. The minute I stepped outside, I took in a deep breath. “I already feel so much better.”

Jake took me by the hand and led me to the car. “I'm happy to hear that.”

Throughout our entire drive to the restaurant, there wasn't anything that could wipe the smile off my face. I didn't care that Jake and I were taking the time to simply talk about our days after I'd left lessons with him.

Being with him and being out of the house had made my night. In fact, I was so happy, I'd have been content to just have him drive me around town all night long.

Fortunately, Jake had bigger and better plans, and before I knew it, we had arrived at the restaurant.

Jake met me on my side of the car and held my hand all the way inside until we were seated at a table in the corner of the dining room. Instead of sitting in the seat directly across from his, I sat in the chair off to Jake's left side. I wanted to be closer to him, to be able to touch him or lean in for a kiss if I wanted to.

For the first few minutes after we were seated, we both perused the menu to decide on our meals. I made my decision, set my menu down, and waited patiently for Jake to finish. When our server arrived, I'd been worried Jake might not have been ready, but he urged me to place my order.

I did, then he did.

And a moment later, our server was gone, and Jake and I were alone again.

Smiling, feeling happier than I had all week long, I reached for his hand. He gave mine a squeeze in return, but it was at that moment when I noticed something lingering in his gaze.

In a heartbeat, I started to think that perhaps Jake hadn't filled me in on everything about his day. He was clearly distracted by something, and I hated to think it had to do with my situation.

What if my stalker had decided to go after him? To leave Jake some kind of note or message.

“Jake?” I called hesitantly.

“Yeah?”

I paused, wondering if this was a smart idea. I'd been looking forward to having a good time with him tonight. If I brought this up and learned something bad had happened, there was no question it would ruin the whole evening.

But I realized it wasn't fair for me to be selfish. Why should Jake have to bear the burden of this situation on his own?

So, I sucked it up and braced myself. “I can tell you've got something on your mind. Will you tell me what's going on?”

His features softened, his eyes roaming over my face. As much as I liked the look, I worried it was merely his way of trying to silently communicate something to me, to tell me he didn't want to weigh me down with whatever was bothering him.

Finally, after far too much time than I was comfortable with had passed, Jake shared, “I've been doing a lot of thinking about what you said to me.”

I had no idea what he was talking about and was suddenly trying to recall everything I'd ever said to him to figure it out. “What did I say?” I asked when I came up with nothing that made any sense.

He hesitated briefly. “I've been thinking a lot about my family, about my parents.”

Yep. I didn't see that one coming.

Of all the things I thought he might have said to me, that hadn't been one of them.

“Okay. What about them?”

“I'm considering making the trip home to see them,” he revealed.

My eyes widened in surprise as warmth moved through me. “Jake, I think that's wonderful. Why does it seem like you're distressed about this?”

I watched as his throat moved with his deep swallow. “I just... it's been a very long time, and I'm not sure how it's going to go. And well, I was thinking I'd like to see them for Christmas, and I was hoping you'd still be willing to go with me.”

He wanted to take me.

Jake wanted to take me home to meet his parents at Christmas, which was going to be the first time he'd be seeing them in years.

I couldn't believe it.

I didn't know what to say.

And not saying anything was my first problem, because Jake took that as

an indication of how I was feeling about his request. “I understand there’s not much time left before the holiday, and I realize you might already have plans with your own family, so I don’t want you to feel bad about not being able to go. Or, you know, if you just aren’t interested at all, I can understand, too. I, myself, have no idea how this will all play out, and I can understand if you don’t want to be in that kind of situation.”

My thumb stroked over his knuckles as my eyes searched his face. What could possibly make him think I’d turn him down?

“When have you ever known me not to do something I say I’ll do?” I questioned him.

He shook his head. “Never. But I realize this is different.”

I nodded. “Yeah. You’re right. It’s arguably far more important than anything else I think I could say that I’m going to do. Jake, I’d never say no to you, especially not about this. I’m honored that you asked me, and I’m thrilled that you’re willing to try to go back to see them. There’s no other place I’d rather be.”

Something in the look in his eyes intensified as he curled his fingers tighter around mine. “You don’t have plans with your family already? They won’t be upset with you for missing Christmas with them?”

I smiled at him. “My family will understand. I’ll just tell them that I’m going to be going with you to visit your family on Christmas Day, but that I’d like to celebrate with them on Christmas Eve. They’ll make it happen.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “Absolutely. The question is, are you sure?”

“About going back to visit my parents?”

“Well, yes, I guess about that, but I was referring to you meeting my family,” I explained. “If I’m doing Christmas with your family, I’d really love it if you’d do Christmas Eve with my family.”

“I don’t want to intrude,” he replied. “It’s already my fault that it’s going to be all screwed up for you and your family.”

My brows pulled together. “Jake, do you understand that you’re important to me?”

His body tensed, but he didn’t respond.

I continued, “You mean something to me, and I want to do whatever I can to nurture this relationship between us. I have to assume that I mean something to you, too, especially when I see the way you’re looking after me right now. If I wasn’t important to you, there’s no doubt in my mind we

wouldn't be sitting at this table right now. So, no, you're not intruding. You're part of my life in a very big way, and I absolutely want you to be there with me. My family will want you there, too."

Jake still didn't respond with words, but that didn't mean he didn't react in a way that communicated something to me. Jake let go of my hand, reached out to thread his fingers through my hair, and leaned toward me as he urged my head in his direction.

Then, right there in the restaurant, not caring who might have been watching, Jake kissed me. It was no simple peck on the lips. It was passionate, fiery, and unbelievably sexy the way he claimed my mouth, like he was telling everyone else in the restaurant who he was to me, who I was to him.

We only separated our mouths when someone cleared their throat.

Our server had returned with our salads, and while Jake wore a proud smile, I offered a sheepish one.

"Can I get you anything else?" our server asked.

Jake shook his head and answered, "We're good for now. Thank you."

Once he walked away, Jake's shining eyes came to mine. Even though I was slightly embarrassed by the situation, I had to admit that it was worth seeing him with that look instead of the one he'd had not long before.

"Are you happy?" I asked him.

"I'm very happy, Brynn. Probably happier than I could ever really explain," he returned.

"Well, we've got all of dinner now for you to try, but before you do that, I think it might be smart to tell each other what to expect when it comes to meeting the family," I said.

"Right. That's not a bad idea. Unfortunately, I can only tell you what I know about my parents from when I was a kid. I'm not sure if things are the same."

"Let's assume the people they are deep down haven't changed," I suggested. "Who will I be meeting?"

"My dad is Bruce Burns, and my mom is Wendy Burns. Dad's a no-nonsense kind of guy, but that doesn't mean he's a dick. He's just a very hard worker, and he was always focused on what needed to get done. Only then would he kick back to relax," he shared.

Nodding, I replied, "It sounds like I'd get along with him. What about your mom?"

“The sweetest woman you’ll ever meet,” Jake declared. “She stayed home, took care of Max and me, and was the only reason our house was a home. That was her thing, taking care of her family. And she loved every second of it, even when Max and I goofed off and got ourselves into trouble.”

I wanted more, but I hesitated to ask for it. The last thing I wanted to do was force Jake to talk about things he wasn’t prepared to share. For that reason, I returned, “They both sound wonderful, and I’m excited to meet them.”

“I get the feeling they’ll be just as excited about meeting you.”

Something told me that it wasn’t necessarily me who Jake’s parents were going to be excited about having there. If I had to guess, it was having him home for the first time in years that was going to make the holiday extra special for them.

“Are you planning to tell them you’re coming? How do you think they’ll react to the news?”

“I do plan to tell them ahead of time that I’d like to come home to see them. If I had to guess, they’ll be over the moon, because they’ve extended the invitation to me so many times over the years, and I’ve consistently turned them down. I think they’re going to be very happy when I share the news with them.”

I smiled at him. “I’m proud of you for taking this step, Jake. I don’t know them to be able to say for sure, but I really do believe this will be great for both you and them.”

He nodded his agreement.

At that point, Jake asked me to tell him about what to expect with my family, and I did that while we enjoyed the rest of our dinner. For someone who wasn’t big on going out to eat, I had such a wonderful time with Jake.

Following dinner, I had to admit I was excited about what was coming next. Even though I had no clue where he was going to take me, I liked that Jake had built the suspense for me. I couldn’t wait to see what he had planned.

When we finally pulled up at the place he’d decided to take me, it became impossible not to fall just a little bit harder for him. Glancing over at him with a huge smile on my face, I said, “You know exactly what I like.”

His lips twitching, he cocked an eyebrow. “Yes, I do, but it’s safe to say it’s the same for you with me.”

I loved that he believed that, because I liked to think I was doing things

that made him just as happy as he made me. “This is perfect, Jake.”

“Have you ever done it before?” he asked.

Shaking my head, still smiling, I answered, “No. And I think that makes it even more perfect. What about you?”

“This will be my first time, too,” he confessed.

“Are you ready? Can we go?” I asked, unable to contain my excitement any longer.

Jake reached out and placed his hand on the back of my head. He urged me toward him, kissed my mouth, and replied, “Yeah, angel, we can go.”

At that, Jake exited the car, met me on my side, and held my hand as we walked through the parking lot. We were both going ice skating for the first time ever, and it made me so happy to know Jake had taken the time to not only take me out today, but to find a way to do something he knew would speak to me.

The two of us got our skates on and dove in. There was a learning curve, but I didn’t think we did too bad. Within ten minutes of being on the ice, we were both doing very well.

We had such a blast. Laughing, holding hands, and even being a little silly.

Having felt like I’d been stuck inside for so long, this night out with Jake was precisely what I needed, and I thought he should know how I felt.

“Thank you for doing this tonight,” I told him as we made our way around the rink.

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you’re having fun.”

“And I’m going to make sure you have some fun later,” I promised.

He grinned at me, tugged on my hand, and spun me around, so I faced him, our bodies pressed close together. We’d stopped moving, and I couldn’t miss the intensity in his eyes. “I’m looking forward to that.”

Without waiting for me to respond, right there on the ice, surrounded by a crowd of people, Jake touched his mouth to mine and kissed me.

SEVENTEEN



Brynn

Before I even opened my eyes, I knew I was alone in Jake's bed.

Though I would have preferred to wake with him by my side, it didn't upset me.

How could it?

After all that he'd done for me yesterday between dinner and ice skating and all that he'd done to my body last night when he brought me back to his place for the first time ever, I didn't have anything to complain about.

With a smile on my face, I peeled my eyes open. Looking around the room, I confirmed my suspicions.

Jake was not here.

I took a moment to just listen, and that's when I heard noise coming from what had to be the kitchen. I could only assume Jake had gone down to make breakfast for us.

The thought brought a smile to my face.

As much as I wasn't bothered by him leaving the bed to go down to make breakfast for us, I still missed him.

So, I tossed the blanket back from my body and swung my legs over to the side as I sat up in the bed. With nothing but a pair of underwear on and no interest in getting fancy, I decided to borrow a T-shirt from Jake. I didn't think he'd mind.

I crossed the room, pulled open a dresser drawer, and yanked out a tee. But after I pulled it over my head, something caught my attention.

With the way Jake and I went at each other last night, starting about point two seconds after we made it through his front door, it was no surprise I hadn't really taken much time to take in his place.

I'd been distracted with him and all that he was doing to me. And if I was being entirely honest, I'd been making my own effort to communicate to him just how much it meant to me that he wanted me to go with him to see his parents for Christmas in a couple of weeks.

But now, in the early morning light, without a handsome guy to distract me, I couldn't miss it.

Something that made my heart squeeze in my chest.

I reached out, picked up the frame, and inspected the photo it held. This had to be them.

Jake and Max.

Two young boys sitting outside at the top of the stairs at what had to be their childhood home.

They were adorable. Happy.

I wanted to cry at the thought of what Jake went through as a young teenager. He lost his brother. I couldn't imagine the pain he'd gone through, or how he felt. I couldn't begin to understand how he was still standing.

I was so caught up in my examination of the beautiful photo, I stopped paying attention to what was happening around me.

So, when I heard Jake's voice behind me, it was no surprise I was startled. "You're awake," he declared.

I gasped and spun around, my hands clutching the frame tightly against my chest. Jake's eyes immediately dropped to it, and I saw something move through his expression.

"I... I'm sorry," I lamented. "I wasn't snooping. I saw the picture, and I thought it was beautiful."

Jake stood in the doorway, leaning against the jamb. If it hadn't been for the tension filling the air or the anxiety I felt about what he was thinking, I might have been able to focus on just how sexy he looked, and the way he made my heart beat a little faster, standing there like that.

"That's Max," he finally revealed after a long stretch of silence.

The tension started to leave my body, and I began lowering the frame from in front of my chest. Jake moved toward me.

"That's the two of us sitting outside our childhood home, the farmhouse where my parents still live," Jake shared.

“You both look incredibly happy,” I noted.

He nodded his head slightly. “That’s because we were.”

Jake and I had made big strides in our relationship, and it was clear to me after what he’d asked me last night that something was changing for him. I didn’t want to overstep or do something that might cause him to clam up, but I thought it was important to talk about Max.

I wanted to know about Jake’s brother and what made him so special. My belly trembled as I attempted to work up the courage to ask about Max. Because even if I wanted to understand more about the relationship Jake had with his brother, I didn’t want to learn it at the expense of Jake and the progress he’d made.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it, but I’d love it if you’d tell me about him,” I said softly.

Jake’s eyes held my gaze as the silence stretched between us for a few seconds. Then he dipped his chin and said, “Let’s go downstairs. I’ll tell you anything you want to know about him while we eat.”

Relief and hope surged through me. Not wanting to dwell on him being willing to take such a huge step, I noted, “You cooked breakfast.”

“I did. The last time you ate was at dinner last night, and between the ice skating and the two rounds of sex, I figured you probably worked up an appetite. I didn’t want to risk having you wake up hangry,” he explained.

A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. “You’re a smart man.”

Jake gently took the frame from my hands, set it back down, and gave me a soft kiss on the lips. Then he took me by the hand, led me out of the room, and down the stairs to the kitchen.

Only after we were both seated and had taken a few bites of the delicious breakfast Jake had whipped up did he finally speak.

“Max was the life of the party,” he began. “No matter what we were doing or where we were going, he was all about having a good time. In his mind, something wasn’t worth doing if you weren’t going to have fun while doing it. And talking? He never stopped.”

“I assume you were the quieter one?”

Jake let out a laugh. “Yeah. Yeah, I generally sat back and observed while he did whatever he was going to do. Or I just listened while he went on and on about whatever was on his mind or happened during his day at school.”

Smiling, I said, “He sounds wonderful.”

Jake nodded. “He was. He had this zest for life and always wanted to be doing something fun. And because we lived on the property that we did, there were always chores to do. I had to be the one to try to convince him to work with me to get things done, so we could get around to doing the things he wanted to do sooner.”

“Did it work?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Not usually. Everything we did seemed to always take twice as long as it needed to simply because he complained so much about the things we needed to get done.”

“I remember you said he was your best friend, so you two were obviously very close. It had to be fun growing up together,” I reasoned.

Jake set his fork down, took a sip of his drink, and remained quiet for a long time. I wondered if I’d said something that brought back a horrible memory, and now Jake was trying to figure out how to break the news to me that I’d gotten it all wrong.

Eventually, he shared, “Max always wanted to be around me. He was so bummed when I left elementary school and he was still there. And if I ever went somewhere with a friend, he was always upset about it. Max had friends from school, but he always preferred to be with me. I can’t say it wasn’t the same for me with him. When I take the time to think back on my childhood, especially the time I spent with him, I really do have the best memories.”

Jake stopped speaking, but with just one look at his face, I knew he wasn’t finished. He was pausing to collect himself, so he could share whatever he was going to say next. I patiently waited, giving him the time he needed while bracing myself for the heartbreak I knew was coming my way.

“Over the years, I’ve often recalled those memories,” he began again. “I’ll be feeling good about it all until I remember that one day. One single day changed everything, and ever since, it has been impossible for me to feel genuine happiness. It was all my fault.”

There was no way.

I realized Jake probably viewed the whole situation from a skewed perspective, but listening to him talk about his brother and having seen the torment in his eyes, there was not a question in my mind. Jake wasn’t responsible for his brother’s death. He was going to have a hell of a time trying to convince me that was the case, too.

Unsure if he’d be willing to share, but wanting him to know I was prepared to listen, I asked, “Will you tell me what happened to him?”

Jake's eyes got wet, and he started clenching his jaw in an attempt to rein in his emotions. It took him some time, and though I wasn't sure he'd gotten it fully under wraps, after he took a deep swallow, he spoke. "It was October, and we were preparing for winter. My dad, Max, and me were doing what we did every year by cutting, splitting, and hauling wood for our wood-burning stove. While our dad had moved to one edge of the property to start cutting down some trees that we'd eventually split and stack up, so we could allow it to weather before we'd use it the following year, Max and I were responsible for hauling."

"Hauling?"

Nodding, he clarified, "We had to move the wood that had been stacked and weather the previous fall from where we kept it stored over to the house. Max and I would load up the wood into the wagon attached to our tractor, and once it was full, I'd drive us over to the house, where we'd unload and stack it. We made a bunch of trips back and forth, and as usual, Max didn't do it without complaining. He had no less than a dozen other things he would have rather been doing. One of those things was playing video games. We both enjoyed playing them, but Max was a fiend."

"I think that's typical for boys that age, though," I reasoned.

"It is. But I was the idiot who pointed something out to him," Jake replied.

"What?"

There was another pause, though this one was much shorter. "We'd just finished unloading a haul, and we'd returned to get our next load. I pointed out how with the way we'd been taking wood haphazardly from the pile, it started to look like a course in one of his video games. Max thought it was the greatest thing in the world, and he'd decided he was going to be Mario."

Oh, God.

Oh, no.

My heart started hammering wildly in my chest, knowing this wasn't going to be easy to hear. I gripped the fork tighter in my hand.

"What happened?" I rasped.

Jake's eyes roamed over my face for a beat before he answered, "Max climbed on the first stack and stood proudly on the top. He easily stepped out in front of that one and made his way onto the next one. It got more challenging as he went on, and I finally told him in so many words that he'd proven his point and could do it, but that we had to get back to work. He

insisted he needed to go up just one more level.”

Jake stopped speaking and shook his head back and forth as he dropped his gaze from mine.

“He didn’t make it, did he?” I guessed.

“No. He didn’t even really stand a chance, because before his feet even left the stack he was on, a piece of wood fell out and hit the stack in front of him, which ultimately made that stack come crashing down. He lost his balance, wood was flying everywhere, and he whacked his head on a piece of wood behind him as he fell. They said he was gone instantly, so he didn’t suffer, but still. It never should have happened, and if I hadn’t said anything about the piles of wood, he never would have done it.”

I dropped my fork to the plate, pushed back in my seat, and immediately rounded the table. As I moved toward Jake, he sat up straighter and turned his body slightly in my direction. By the time I made it to him, he’d created space between his body and the table, enough for me to be able to climb into his lap and wrap my arms around him.

“I’m sorry, big guy,” I whispered in his ear. “I’m so sorry for the loss you suffered, especially at such a young age.”

Jake’s arms wrapped around me, but he didn’t speak.

I didn’t mind, though, because I had more I wanted to say to him anyway. “I know there’s probably little I can do to convince you of this, but this wasn’t your fault. If it was his time, it was his time. Of course, it’s not fair, and it doesn’t make any sense, but you need to know it’s not your fault.”

Jake remained silent, and I hoped he was using that time to allow my words to sink in. I hoped he was starting to accept that perhaps this wasn’t something he needed to carry on his shoulders for the rest of his life.

I was ready to jump for joy when he finally replied, “You’re right.”

My body tensed, and I loosened my hold on him slightly, so I could pull back to look him in the eyes. “What?”

“You’re right,” he repeated. “There’s little you can do to convince me this wasn’t my fault.”

The wind was instantly out of my sails, and my shoulders fell. “Jake…” I trailed off, unsure of what to say.

“I don’t think I’ll ever believe Max’s death wasn’t preventable, but that doesn’t mean I can’t see that the way I was living is unsustainable. While I might sometimes question if I really deserve this level of happiness I’ve felt since you’ve walked into my life, there’s not a chance I’m willing to let you

go.”

It wasn't everything I had hoped to hear, but there was a lot in all that he'd just said that was wonderful. So, I decided to drop my need to make him believe in his innocence for the time being. Maybe I'd find other ways to change his mind later down the road, especially considering it seemed I'd have the time, since he didn't want to let me go.

“I'm not in your shoes, so I can't say how I'd feel if the roles were reversed. I want to change your mind about it, but I realize there's something there I can't begin to understand. So, for now, I'll resolve myself to being the woman I want to be for you and making you believe every day in the happiness you have always deserved to have.”

Jake lifted his hand to my head and ran his fingers through the strands of my hair, his eyes watching as he did. When he made it to the end of one lock, he asked, “Do you know what helps me?”

“What?”

“Walking into my bedroom and seeing you standing there, wearing my T-shirt.”

I glanced down at the shirt before lifting my gaze to his and smiling. “I was hoping you wouldn't mind.”

He shook his head, his lips forming a smile of their own. “Not at all.”

Considering the heaviness of the conversation we'd just had, I was thrilled to see him smiling.

“Are there other things I can do that'll help?” I asked, leaning forward and bringing my mouth close to his.

“Lots.”

“Mmm, like what?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Are you done with your breakfast?”

“For now,” I returned without hesitation.

“I'm still hungry,” he declared.

“Do you want to eat me?”

He grinned. “You're perfect, Brynn. Absolutely perfect for me.”

“I feel the same way about you, big guy,” I said, bringing my hands up to frame his face. Then I pressed my mouth to his and kissed him.

A moment later, I heard the sound of plates being moved on the table behind me. And the next thing I knew, I was hoisted onto the table, right in front of Jake. He ripped his shirt over my head, yanked off my panties, and urged me to lay back before he separated my knees, bit down gently on my

inner thigh, and eventually showed me just how hungry he was.

He hadn't even finished eating before he'd managed to convince me I was the best meal he'd had in ages.

And fortunately for him, by the time he'd gotten his fill, I was feeling particularly famished.

EIGHTEEN



Jake

“My family loves you, just like I knew they would.”

When Brynn walked into Harper Security Ops roughly two months ago, I never expected any of what was in store for me. I never thought this would ever amount to even half of what it became.

And now?

Now, it was everything.

Though Brynn and I had only officially been together for about a month now, what I felt for her was indescribable. I couldn't comprehend how I lived before she came into my life.

Maybe that was just it, though.

Maybe I hadn't actually been living.

Maybe I was only surviving. Going through the motions. Existing.

Having her now, being with her, I knew what I'd been doing before she came along didn't equate to living.

Today, I got to meet her family, a family that changed up their holiday plans to accommodate me. And when I walked into her parents' house earlier this morning, they welcomed me into their home like it was a place I'd been visiting all my life.

I should have expected as much, considering the way Brynn was.

I was in disbelief over it all. I'd been feeling that way for quite some time, and it was crazy to me, considering I'd believed for far too long that I'd never feel this full, this happy.

It was all thanks to her. To Brynn.

She'd done this. She'd given this to me. And the craziest part of it all was that I knew she wasn't even close to being finished yet.

I might have fooled myself into thinking she'd already handed me everything she could, but that wasn't the case.

Brynn gave all the time, even when she wasn't trying. That was the best thing about her. She knew what I needed without giving it a second thought. She was made for me.

Every gorgeous part of her—mind, body, and soul—was mine. I'd be damned if I was ever going to allow something to come between us, to take her away from me.

It was for all of these things and more that I decided I couldn't do it. I couldn't allow another day to go by without letting her know how much she impacted my life and how much she meant to me.

But before I could do that, I needed to respond to her declaration about her family loving me.

On our sides, facing each other in her bed, the lights still on in the room, I allowed my fingertips to trace over the soft skin of her thigh hooked over my body. She had her hands flattened against my chest, and there was a look of excitement written all over her face.

So, I smiled and said, "I'm glad, Brynn, because I liked them, too."

One of her hands slid up my chest toward my neck, where she stopped and began stroking her thumb along the front column of my throat. "How are you feeling about tomorrow?"

That was a loaded question—something I hadn't quite given myself the opportunity to process just yet.

Tomorrow was Christmas Day, and we were going to be spending it with my parents. "I don't know," I confessed. "I guess I'm feeling a mix of emotions. On the one hand, I'm excited to see them. I really have missed them. But on the other hand, I'm a little nervous."

Genuine concern marred her expression as her thumb stopped moving. "What makes you feel nervous? How did they seem when you called them to tell them you were coming?"

I took a moment to recall the conversation. I hadn't exactly cut my parents out of my life completely. Sure, I didn't go back to visit them, and I hadn't exactly made them coming here an ideal situation. But I did talk to them over the phone on occasion. I reached out on holidays and checked in

with them every so often.

“They were a little shell-shocked, at first. I guess I expected that, considering they hadn’t anticipated getting the call from me they did. When I thought it might have been too much and started to backtrack, they stopped me. They insisted they wanted me there, and I could hear the twinge of excitement in their voices. I guess my nerves are just stemming from the uncertainty of the whole situation. They’re my parents, and I know they love me, but the more I think about it, the more I don’t want things to be awkward, especially not with you there.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “They do know I’m coming with you, right?”

My hand drifted up higher on her thigh as I let out a laugh. “Yes, I told them.”

“Good. Then you should know I’m okay to deal with a bit of awkwardness. I recognize what the situation is, and I understand it might be a little challenging. I just hope, in the end and before the day is over, your parents like me,” Brynn murmured.

“It would be impossible for them not to.”

“What makes you say that?” she asked, her hand gliding up into my hair.

This was the moment. This was the point at which I was going to direct the conversation where I knew it needed to go, especially before we walked into tomorrow together.

“You’re the reason I’m going back, Brynn,” I started. “My parents might not have met you yet, but I don’t doubt they already know you’re the reason they got that call from me.”

“Yeah, but Jake, I only offered to go with you when you were ready. This was your decision to go,” she reasoned.

I smiled at her, my hand moving to her ass. “I never would have considered it if you hadn’t spoken to me the way you had that day. I don’t know what tomorrow will bring, but I have a lot of hope about what it’ll mean for the future of my relationship with my parents. Do you know how much you’ve changed my life over these last two months I’ve known you?”

Her lips parted in shock, her eyes roaming over my face. “Jake,” she whispered.

Sliding my hand over her ass, I wrapped my arm around her waist and hauled her body against mine, leaving not even an inch of space between us. “I don’t think I can go another day without letting you know how important you are to me, how much you mean to me.”

There was a look of wonder and amazement in her eyes as her chest began to rise and fall rapidly with the change in her breathing. Hearing my words was having a profound effect on her, but I didn't think it could compare to the feeling it gave me to say them to her.

"I don't care that it's only been a short time we've known each other and an even shorter time that we've been together, Brynn," I began again, my opposite hand threading through the soft strands of her hair. "I know the way I feel. I know the way you've made me feel. And I can't begin to tell you just how lucky I feel to have you in my life. You've changed everything. You've made it possible to believe that there's something better out there for me, a better life than I was living before you came along."

Tears filled her eyes. "I could see the pain you were in the very first day I met you," she croaked. "But I didn't understand it then. It wasn't until we took that hike and you told me about Max that I began to understand the agony you were in. I made a promise to myself that day. I was going to stick by your side, and I was going to do whatever I could to battle those demons with you. All I wanted to do was heal your heart by any means necessary."

"You have," I assured her.

"What?"

I pulled my hand from her hair, brought my thumb to her cheek, and swiped at the tear that had fallen.

"I can't say I won't ever have another bad day or that I'm never going to feel myself consumed by my emotions over what happened to my brother, but you've healed that part of me, angel. I can't explain it. I'm not even sure I completely understand it myself, but I know I don't feel that crushing weight of grief and sorrow anymore. And it feels good, Brynn. It feels so good to be happy again."

Brynn rapidly blinked her eyes in an attempt to stave off the tears while her bottom lip trembled. It was obvious she wasn't going to be able to respond to me, but that didn't matter.

Because there was only one thing left to say.

"I love you," I told her.

Brynn's body tensed, her lips parting in shock once again.

"I love you so much. More than I ever thought was possible. And I can't let another night go by without telling you how much you mean to me, how important you are in my life."

Long moments of silence passed, and I held my breath as I waited for her

to respond, to say something. Anything.

“Jake,” she rasped. “I... I love you, too.”

A rush of air left my lungs as the relief swept through me. I rolled to my back, taking Brynn with me. With my hand back in her hair, I angled her head, got her mouth where I wanted it, and kissed her.

No more words needed to be said.

We’d both verbally communicated the most important things that needed to be shared. Now, all I wanted to do was show her.

Continuing to kiss her mouth, my arm around her waist loosened, and my hand came to rest on the middle of her back, just above her ass. It slipped beneath the waistband of her underwear, and my fingers slowly drifted down the cleft of her ass.

By the time I reached her pussy and touched one finger there, she was already wet.

Brynn moaned, and I took that, swallowing it down while I continued to kiss her.

Using one finger, I circled, applied pressure, and relished in the feel of her squirming on top of me.

At the point when I plunged a finger inside, Brynn tore her mouth from mine and threw her head back on a moan. “Jake.”

I closed my eyes briefly, continuing to finger her while giving myself a moment to bottle up that sound of her saying my name. I never wanted to forget it.

But I couldn’t keep my mouth off her for too long, so I lifted my head from the pillow and began kissing her neck. I peppered kisses against the delicate skin there, occasionally nibbling and feeling her body shudder against mine.

I added a second finger but kept the pace of them slow. Over and over, I slid them into her, delighted at the sounds of her being so turned on.

And I kept going, until I decided I wanted more.

I rolled us again, taking Brynn to her back. She lost my fingers in the process, and she whimpered in protest.

“Don’t worry, angel. I’m going to take care of you tonight. Just like always. But tonight’s going to be different,” I warned her.

Brynn’s body tensed slightly, which was the exact opposite of what I wanted in a moment like this. “Different?” she questioned me. “What do you mean?”

I brought my hands to the hem of her cotton camisole and lifted it up her torso. Her arms went over her head, allowing me to remove it. When it was gone, I hooked my fingers into the waistband of her underwear at her hips and dragged her panties down her legs.

Only after she was naked and I'd made myself the same, did I give her an answer. "I'm not going to fuck you, Brynn. Tonight, for the first time in my life, I want to make love to a woman. That woman is going to be you."

Her body trembled, and the look in her eyes grew seductive. "I want that, Jake. I want it in the worst way. I want you to be mine."

The corners of my mouth tipped up in a smile. "I already am."

I placed one hand on the mattress beside her body as the other reached out to give her hip a gentle and reassuring squeeze. Then it drifted up her body and explored, going right for her breasts.

With half of my body covering hers, I lowered down onto my forearm, captured her other tit in my mouth, and flicked my tongue over her nipple before sucking it in deep.

My opposite hand wandered back down her abdomen and right between her legs. Brynn didn't hesitate to separate her thighs and give me the unhindered access to her pussy.

Two fingers dipped inside, and I'd started the slow strokes once more. When I pressed my thumb to her clit, her fingers dug into the skin on my shoulder.

Even with the languid pace, it seemed I was still capable of building Brynn up in record time. And I took her there, right to the edge. I allowed her to teeter there, never sending her over.

I did it over and over, wanting her body burning up for me. But eventually, her moans mixed with the feel of her fingertips on my skin made it impossible to hold back. I had to give her what she wanted.

So, I sent her over the edge, watching her beautiful face as my fingers worked her through it.

After she came down, I remained motionless, simply taking her in, completely awestruck by her and the way she made me feel.

She had changed my whole life.

She made me want to live again, to look forward to the future. To *want* a future.

She was the only reason I felt this happy.

With the love I felt for her consuming me, I dropped my mouth to hers. I

couldn't get enough. I needed to claim her, to possess her. To touch and taste and tease every inch of her body.

But it was different than it had ever been before.

I wanted to go slow.

To savor her.

For far too long, sex had been a means of working out emotions and rarely ever taking the edge off.

With her, it had been different. From the start, she'd had the stamina. She could match my energy, and she gave back as good as she got.

She could fuck.

And there was no question it helped me tremendously to have that with her.

But with the way she changed my life and made me feel for her, I didn't need that now. What I needed was to drown in her, in the love and adoration I had for her.

Reluctantly, I tore my mouth from hers, my eyes roaming over her gorgeous, flushed face.

"I hope you know how much I love you," I said softly.

Something warmed in her features. "If it's anything like I feel for you, then I think I understand."

There was that, too.

Having her love. Knowing she cared about me the way she did, that she wanted to do what she could to help heal my heart. She'd done it, and it had taken her almost no time.

That's how I knew it was her. That was the reason I knew she was the one for me.

I touched my lips to hers again and rolled onto my back, taking her with me. As my hands roamed, she rolled her hips over me, building the heat and friction.

Eventually, she reached down between our bodies, curled her fingers around my cock, and positioned me. My fingers dug into the flesh of her ass.

"Fuck, you feel beautiful," I groaned at the same time a moan escaped her. "I love your pussy, Brynn."

Brynn moved her body over mine, and I had expected she might try to go fast, but it seemed she was just as content to take things slowly. Either that, or she knew it was what I wanted, and she wanted to make sure I got it.

Brynn stayed on top for a bit, and I used that opportunity to look and to

caress. It was different. The visual aspect had always been part of it for me before, but the caressing was new. I was accustomed to squeezing and sinking my fingers deeply into flesh. Tenderly stroking my hands along her body not only forced me to memorize the lines of her body in a different way, but it also showed me something else Brynn enjoyed.

Because as my hands roamed over certain parts of her, she'd shudder or moan or dig her nails in deeper.

A sudden and desperate urge to lead us where I wanted us to go fueled me, and I sat up. Brynn remained in my lap, and keeping one arm wrapped firmly around her waist to hold her close, my other hand went into her hair to angle her head back. I buried my face in her neck, nipping and kissing along the skin there.

With each touch of my lips against her throat, Brynn moaned or tightened her limbs around me.

My hand on the arm around her waist dropped down to her ass, as the other left her hair and wrapped around her upper back. Without losing the connection between our bodies, I rolled us, Brynn's back going to the bed.

In an effort not to crush her with all of my weight, I shifted onto my forearm, released her ass, and slowly trailed that hand up the side of her body while I thrust gently.

One of Brynn's legs wrapped around my back, the other running the length of and tangling with my leg. My mouth found hers as my hand crawled up along her ribs and under her arm.

She allowed me to urge her arm back to the pillow, so my fingertips could continue to trace along the skin until my fingers linked with hers above her head.

Then my eyes were on hers, my hand held hers firmly in my grasp, and my hips thrust my cock forward at an angle and pace which built the both of us up.

There was no rush.

Though we were sharing our bodies and communicating how we felt about one another, what we were experiencing went well beyond physical pleasure.

That existed, but there was so much more.

It was about the connection that had developed between us. It was about the way my heart beat faster and something constricted in my chest at the mere sight of her.

Seeing the look in her eyes, knowing we were both headed to the same place, I couldn't hold myself back.

"I love you, angel."

"Big guy," she breathed, as I thrust into her. "I love you, too."

At that, I dropped my mouth to hers and kissed her, my tongue driving inside. Brynn kissed me back, giving me everything she had.

The sound of her moans as I filled her mixed with my groans of pleasure I experienced from the warmth and wetness of her.

And the taste of her was addictive. I was certain I'd never get enough.

Brynn's free hand had been at my lower back, but as I drove deeper inside, she allowed it to drift down to my ass and squeeze.

Chest to chest, fingers linked, mouths tasting, and bodies connected, there was nothing in this world more perfect. And the weight of just how tremendous this moment was settled on top of me in the best way possible. I took it, wanting to shoulder it.

Leaning in to all that I felt for her, feeling myself on the verge and knowing she was close, too, I increased my pace just a touch. The next thing I knew, it hit us both.

Pleasure seared through my body, and it was better than it had ever been before. It was sublime, but it paled in comparison to the fullness I felt in the center of my chest.

I separated my mouth from hers, pulled back to look at her, and I knew.

One look said it all.

"You're just as lost in me as I am in you," I said.

A smile playing at her lips, she offered a slight nod and returned, "I don't ever want to be found."

"You're going to be mine forever, Brynn."

Her fingers tightened in mine. "I'm glad you feel that way, because I have no intention of letting you get away from me, either."

I smiled at her, loving how beautiful she looked. "We didn't use a condom."

She shook her head. "No. But we're okay from a pregnancy standpoint. I took my temperature this morning."

"What?"

Giggling, Brynn explained, "I've always been mindful of what I put in my body, Jake. I don't want hormonal birth control, so I use a different method that tracks my cycle and requires taking my temperature. There will

be days every month we'll need to use condoms if we want to have sex and avoid pregnancy, but for all the other days, I'd love to have you the way I just did."

Whatever she was using for birth control was new to me, but I trusted she knew what she was doing. "That works for me, angel. Do you want to go clean up, or do you want me to do it for you?"

"I love that you're willing to do it for me, but I'll take care of it this time."

With that, I gave her another kiss, let go of her hand, and pulled out. "Go get cleaned up, and hurry back. I want to cuddle with you."

Her face lit up. "Okay."

A moment later, she went to clean up. When she came back, I cuddled close to her and slept the best I had in years.

NINETEEN



Brynn

Nerves did not factor into the equation today.

It wasn't that I didn't have any nerves; it was that I wasn't going to allow them to play a role in my day.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, was going to wipe the smile off my face.

It was Christmas morning. Jake and I woke up wrapped in one another in my bed, and now we were five minutes away from his parents' place.

I was having a hard time believing we were actually this close. Truth be told, I wondered if Jake would change his mind at the last minute, but he surprised me. Not only that, but he seemed to be taking it all in stride, too.

If I thought I wasn't going to allow nerves to get to me today, it was apparent Jake was feeling the same.

And it made me wonder if our reasons for that were the same too.

In my case, Jake had told me last night he was in love with me. Not only that, but he'd said I had changed his whole life. Everything he said to me while we were curled up in bed together had made my heart melt, but knowing that he loved me filled me with something else. Something warm and sweet and comforting.

And considering I'd fallen in love with him, I was relieved to know we were on the same page with one another.

So, there really wasn't anything for me to be unhappy about. I was the happiest I'd ever been, and I was spending the entire day with the man I loved. I didn't think it could get any better than that.

Though, I did have to be honest with myself.

There might have been one small thing that had the power to put a damper on my mood.

The fate of my mood for the rest of the day was all going to come down to Jake's parents.

I wanted this day to be everything Jake hoped it would be. I wanted him to get the comfort, security, and reassurance he needed from his parents about the future of their relationship. And if they weren't loving or welcoming of him in the way I believed he deserved and needed, I didn't think I'd be able to just pretend it didn't happen.

Because even if the demons in his eyes were fading, I knew how much he needed this. It would absolutely break my heart if this day didn't turn out to be everything Jake wanted it to be.

We finally made the turn onto the private lane that led to his parents' farm. Jake hadn't said anything, but I knew where we were, because he'd told me all about it on the three-hour drive here.

There were a couple of buildings on the property, lots of trees, and what I could only describe as a serene and gorgeous view. Even with all of the leaves gone and the grass turning brown, there was no question how much beauty this place held. I tried to imagine what it would look like if everything was covered in snow. I'm not sure my imagination did it justice, but I didn't doubt it'd be breathtaking.

We came to a stop in front of a farmhouse, where Jake turned off his vehicle. I sat and waited for him to give me an indication that he was ready. This wasn't the time or my place to rush things.

When he didn't immediately move to get out of the car and merely stared straight ahead, I started to worry he might be having second thoughts. Though I knew it might not have been more than a minute, it felt like an hour had passed before Jake finally tore his gaze away from the house and looked over at me.

Throughout the entire drive here, Jake had held my hand. And it was at that moment when he lifted the back of it up to his mouth and pressed his lips against it. He kissed me there several times. "Thank you, Brynn."

"For what?"

His fingers tightened around mine, and he smiled. "For being here. It means everything to me."

While it was clear from his words that Jake was appreciative, it was the

edge of emotion in his voice that moved me. This really did mean everything to him.

I returned the smile and insisted, “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be today, big guy.”

“Stay there. I’ll come around to get you out.”

“Okay.”

A moment later, he’d exited the car and met me on my side. And no sooner had he closed my door and the two of us started walking up toward the house, the front door opened.

Two individuals stepped outside, and I could only assume they were Jake’s parents.

Jake and I had slowed to a stop at the bottom of the steps that led to the porch, and his parents did the same just a few paces from the front door.

Several long, tense moments passed, and the air was thick with tension. I wasn’t sure if he realized it, but Jake’s hand was growing tighter and tighter around mine. God, my heart was breaking, and not because I believed this was going to be bad. It was clear to me that everyone involved, these three people, were all carrying so much heaviness in their hearts.

Jake’s dad finally broke the silence, and his voice didn’t sound much different than Jake’s had a few minutes earlier. Thick with emotion. “Merry Christmas, son.”

Something—I assumed it was relief—swept through Jake, and after giving me a tug on the hand, we climbed the stairs.

Only when we made it to the top did he release my hand, so he could wrap his arms around his father in an embrace that was clearly needed for the both of them.

My throat became clogged with my emotions, but I did my best to remain strong. As it was, Jake’s mom was outwardly emotional enough for all of us. The tears hadn’t stopped falling. I wondered if she’d been this way ever since Jake had given his parents a call to tell them he wanted to come out.

Jake and his father held on to one another for a long time, and though I couldn’t be certain, I had to believe it was something they both needed. Eventually, they loosened their hold on one another, and Jake turned toward his mom.

“Merry Christmas, Mom.”

She burst into a fit of full-fledged sobs.

Once Jake wrapped his arms around her, I didn’t stand a chance. Any

attempt I'd made to remain strong was gone, and tears pooled in my eyes. I did my best to take in some deep, settling breaths as I rapidly blinked my eyes, but my efforts were futile.

Seeing him get this, knowing it had to be healing his heart, it was impossible to remain unaffected.

It took longer than it did with his dad for Jake to release the hold he had on his mom, and when he did, he immediately turned toward me. Though he hadn't broken down the way his mom had, it was clear to me how much this moment had affected him.

With a smile on his face that sent my heart soaring, he reached for my hand and tugged me close. "Mom, Dad, this is my girlfriend, Brynn. Brynn, these are my parents, Bruce and Wendy."

I offered a wave. "It's so lovely to meet the both of you. Merry Christmas."

Jake's dad offered a nod and a smile. "Likewise, Brynn. Merry Christmas to you as well."

I didn't quite know what to expect from his mom, but it certainly wasn't what I'd gotten. She reached her arms out and wrapped me inside them, squeezing me tight. I had no choice but to hug her back, and the moment I did, she rasped, "Thank you for bringing my boy home to me."

God, my heart couldn't take it. This woman, this *family*, was so broken. I only wished I'd met Jake sooner, so I could have urged him to do something that would help them all heal.

Though I didn't think I'd done anything extraordinary, I whispered, "You're welcome."

When she loosened her arms and stepped back, she urged, "Let's get inside. It's cold out here."

That's when I realized we'd forgotten something. I touched my hand to Jake's arm and said, "I need to grab the stuff from the car."

Jake shook his head. "No. Go inside where it's warm, and I'll get it."

Without waiting for a response, Jake turned, descended the stairs, and jogged over to the car.

"I'm glad to see some of my talks from when he was a kid sank in," Bruce declared proudly.

Wanting him to have even more reassurance, I shared, "Jake is such a gentleman, and he's the kindest, most caring, and protective man I've ever met in my life."

Something warm washed over both of their expressions, and I knew I'd said the right thing.

"Come on, Brynn. Let's get inside," his mom urged.

We hadn't been inside for even a full minute when Jake and his father followed in behind us. I took the dish from Jake and turned toward his mom. "I didn't want to come empty-handed. This is my grandma's apple cake recipe."

Wendy took the covered dish from me and replied, "You didn't come empty-handed. You brought Jake with you. But thank you. This sounds lovely."

It was becoming evident to me that Jake's parents really didn't need anything other than to have their son there with them. I loved that for him.

And while I didn't typically indulge in the sweet treats, it was Christmas, and this was an occasion worth celebrating. So, I intended to do precisely what I did during Thanksgiving. I'd enjoy myself, celebrate with my man and his family, and I'd savor every bite of sweetness I could get today.

It was a couple of hours later, well after we'd had lunch together. We'd gotten the pleasantries out of the way, and Jake's parents had asked and learned about what I did for a living.

Jake and his parents also talked freely and openly without any tension lingering. Their conversation hadn't gone to anything particularly heavy, though. He shared some things with them regarding how work had been, and he told them about how we met each other. Bruce and Wendy had discussed some things that were going on in their lives, and overall, the conversation had been wonderful and easy among us.

As the day progressed, I was finding myself settling in more and more with this family. And I was overjoyed to know they were all getting this time with one another. It was obvious they all needed it, not just Jake.

We'd moved into the family room and grabbed a seat, Jake and I sitting on one couch, his parents on another. The Christmas tree was off to the side, lit up and decorated. The feel of the holiday was captured in the decorations, but there was a heaviness in the room that I hadn't felt since the moment we arrived.

It was obvious things were about to head to a place that was going to be difficult for all of them. At the same time, I had a feeling it was precisely where it needed to go in order for them to truly heal.

"It's been so good to have you home today, Jake," his mom declared.

Jake nodded. "Yeah, it's really been nice to visit with you and Dad and to introduce you to Brynn."

"We didn't think we were ever going to see you again," Bruce said.

The pain and anguish in his voice matched the despair I could feel weighing on their shoulders.

Jake's parents were looking at him expectantly, needing something. Answers, maybe?

I could see how much he was struggling, but Jake managed to push through it and lamented, "I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?" Wendy asked.

Jake shook his head. "I thought I was doing what was best for all of us," he started. "Staying away, I believed it'd be easier to get through the days. You wouldn't have to be reminded of why Max isn't here."

A strange look washed over both of their faces, and as his mom tipped her head to the side, Jake's dad asked, "Do you think we blame you?"

"I put the idea in his head about that woodpile."

"But it was Max," his mom stated as though that was all the explanation that was needed. I didn't know Max, so I couldn't say if that was the case, but it was clear it wasn't enough for Jake, because she added, "You know how your brother was. He was the life of the party. He always had to find a way to liven things up."

"I might have told you both to settle down that day, but it was always Max who was instigating," his dad added. "Obviously, it was never with ill intent. That kid was just a bundle of energy."

The emotions had taken over. Jake's eyes had gotten wet, and he was clenching his jaw.

"You're not to blame for what happened to him, Jake," Wendy insisted. "Your father and I have discussed this so many times over the years, and if there's one thing we're grateful for, it's that we're relieved Max was with you and laughing before it happened. He was always so happy, and it was being with you that made him happiest."

Jake instantly leaned forward, his elbows landing on his thighs, his hands clasping together in front of his head, which had dropped forward, his gaze to the ground. Unable to stop myself, I scooted closer and placed one of my hands on his back, sliding up to the top of his shoulder, while my other hand went around his bicep.

"I miss him so much," Jake croaked.

My heart shattered. No matter how hard I tried, I'd never be able to fix that for him. I'd never be able to make that better.

"We do, too, son," Bruce said quietly. Following a beat, he added, "And we miss you just as much."

Jake took a few seconds to pull himself together. Keeping his hands clasped, he dropped them from in front of his face, and he lifted his gaze to look at his parents. "I know you do. Brynn made me see that I forced you to not only have to grieve the loss of one son, but two of them instead. I'm so sorry."

Bruce and Wendy both shot their eyes in my direction. I anxiously bit my lip, feeling those nerves filter in through my body for the first time all day.

"If it hadn't been for her, I know I never would have come back here. And that would have been tragic, because I can't tell you how good it feels to be back here with you both, where the memory of Max feels differently than it does anywhere else."

Tears had started to fall down Wendy's cheeks, and Bruce's emotions were certainly bubbling to the surface, even if he was doing his best to remain strong by holding them back.

"I want to come back," Jake revealed. "I want to come back here after today, and I want to spend more time with the both of you. I can't make up for all the time we lost, but I want to try to make things better moving forward."

That did it.

Wendy completely broke down, her relief at knowing she was going to get her son back consuming her. Bruce might have reacted similarly to how Jake had moments earlier, but he couldn't. Because just as I had suspected Jake would have done with me if the roles were reversed, Bruce wrapped his wife up in his arms and did what he had to do to console and comfort her.

Though the heaviness I felt in the room had dissipated substantially, I could see that everyone was struggling. Their emotions had taken over them, and they all looked a little weary.

Unsure if it was the right thing to do, but knowing I had to do something, I said, "Hey, how about presents? Jake and I brought something for the both of you."

"Oh, you didn't need to bring us anything."

Standing up from the couch, I crossed the room to grab the bag with one of the gifts we'd gotten them. "Of course, we did. It's Christmas."

I pulled out the largest box and held it out to them. Seemingly in awe, Wendy took it from me and began untying the bow. She removed the lid, pushed the tissue paper out of the way, and revealed the wreath.

“This is gorgeous, Brynn. Did you make this?”

Shaking my head, I answered, “No. My best friend did, though. I asked Jake if he thought you’d like it, and well, of course, he told me you’d both just be happy we were here. But he ultimately said you like this kind of stuff.”

Wendy nodded and said, “I do. I love it. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome.”

I reached into the bag, pulled out the second gift, and handed it to Bruce. Then I stepped back and moved back to the couch to sit beside Jake. He immediately curled his arm around me and kissed my temple, his lips lingering there for longer than I thought was appropriate being around his parents for the first time.

Bruce unwrapped the second gift box, opened the lid, and separated the halves of the tissue paper. When he revealed what was inside, he finally lost his hold on his emotions and had to look away.

Wendy gasped at what she saw, her hand flying up to cover her mouth. “This is... how did you...” she stammered and trailed off, her disbelief apparent.

“I saw the original picture at Jake’s place, and when he told me he wanted to come out for Christmas to see the both of you, I just wanted to do something nice. I hope I didn’t overstep.”

Jake obviously already knew what the gift was and had agreed it would be a wonderful gift for his parents. But until I heard it from them, I didn’t want to assume anything. It had been a long time since they’d seen one another, and throwing an oil painted canvas of the photo of their two young sons sitting at the top of the stairs outside their farmhouse may or may not have been a good idea.

Bruce was the first to pull himself together, but when he spoke, I hadn’t expected for him to say what he did.

“I think you’re the best thing that’s happened to this family in a very long time, Brynn, and I hope my son intends to keep you around.”

It was with those words I finally joined in with everyone else. I gave into all that I was feeling and burst into tears.

TWENTY



Brynn

A shiver ran down my spine.

That always happened when Jake had his face buried in my neck and his lips pressed against my skin.

Normally, I didn't mind, because Jake would often follow up with stripping me out of my clothes and making my body tremble in other ways.

Today, that wasn't going to happen.

It was Tuesday morning, and he was leaving my place to head to work. This was just the way he'd decided to say goodbye this morning.

I squeezed my legs together and squirmed in his hold.

"Where are you trying to go?" he asked through his laughter.

"You can't do that to me before you leave," I scolded him. "I'll be a mess all day."

"All day?" he asked, pulling his face back from my neck while keeping a firm hold on me.

I nodded. "Until you come back here and can do something about it, yes."

Shooting me a sympathetic look, he said, "So, you're technically going to be a mess all day and all night, since I have that late class tonight and won't see you until tomorrow morning when you come in for your self-defense lessons."

My body tensed. "Oh my God, you're right. I completely forgot. What am I going to do?"

Jake's lips twitched. "I don't know, angel. Tell me what you're going to

do.”

I sighed. It wasn't like I had many options.

Shrugging my shoulders, I replied, “I'll probably spend the entire day trying to finalize some filming I need to do for my new series I'm releasing. January is usually a big month for me, since so many people are starting their fitness journeys at the beginning of the year. I guess I'll just be preparing for that.”

Jake's laughter filled the air around us, and I watched, mesmerized by the sound and sight of it.

“What's so funny?”

“I wasn't necessarily asking what your plan for the day was, even if I'm happy to know it,” he started. “I was asking specifically what you were going to do about being a mess all day long and not being able to see me until tomorrow morning.”

I sent a pensive look his way. “I don't know. I'm not sure I'll survive. Maybe you should stay here with me all day.”

He pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “I'd love nothing more, but I've got a full day of classes today.”

I closed my eyes and nodded my head. “I know. I wasn't expecting you'd be able to do that. It was mostly wishful thinking.”

Jake lifted his hand to the side of my face and stroked his thumb along my cheek. “I promise I'll make it up to you tomorrow.”

“I'm holding you to that,” I warned him.

He grinned.

“Don't look so happy. With me being back to not being able to go anywhere, you're going to have your work cut out for you,” I advised.

Jake's eyes roamed over my face, a mix of determination and frustration in them. “First, I have no problem fulfilling any of your needs, Brynn. I'm always up for that challenge. But I'm thinking you might want to talk to me about you not being able to go anywhere?”

This was really not the best time to be bringing this up.

It was a few days after Christmas, and things were getting back to normal. Or the new normal as I knew it.

Jake and I had a lovely Christmas break together, and I believed we'd taken a very big step in our relationship. Not only had we met each other's families, but we also had the verbal admissions of love. I was still riding the high of all of that, and I really didn't want to be dragging the both of us

down.

But I'd have been lying if I said I wasn't already feeling myself grow frustrated with the situation. If it hadn't been for the stalker situation that was lingering in the back of my mind, I really wouldn't have had a single thing to complain about in my life.

I loved it.

I loved my job, my family, my friends, and my man.

The problem was that this stalker situation was hindering me from doing everything I wanted to do, everything my whole being called me to do every day.

Unless Jake was with me, I no longer went out in public. I knew it wasn't smart to risk my safety and intentionally put myself in a position to be harmed, but this was going to get old fast.

Unfortunately, now that I'd said something, I couldn't just pretend nothing was bothering me.

Shaking my head, I returned, "Not really. I mean, what is there to say? I don't think you're going to tell me that I can resume life as though there's nothing to be worried about."

Understanding and compassion washed over him. "I'm sorry. I know this is frustrating for you. I don't want to tell you that you have to stay home and not do anything, but I also can't tell you that I'm thrilled with the idea of you going out alone. We've got guys who work as bodyguards, obviously. If you want to go out to do something, I can see if I can get one of the guys to tag along."

"No. No, it's okay. There's nowhere I absolutely *need* to go. I just don't like being stuck inside all day. I guess there was a small part of me that was hoping you'd agree that the bright side to this was a good sign," I explained.

"The bright side? What bright side?"

"It's been a long time since the note and the flowers," I reasoned. "Maybe he's done with me and has moved on. I mean, do I just have to sit around waiting until he makes his next move?"

Jake shook his head. "No. That's why I'm telling you I can have one of the guys in the bodyguard unit following you wherever you want to go. Doing nothing that makes you happy all day isn't living. You've learned a lot in the last couple of months, and it'd be different if you needed to use it to fend off a random attacker. Your situation has changed. There's an active threat, and I can't pretend it's not there."

I knew what he was saying was the truth.

It was one thing for me to be out and about and have the skills necessary to protect myself if someone randomly decided to approach and attack me. It was something else entirely to be oblivious to someone who was actively stalking me. There was no telling when or where that person would pop up next, and I'd be a fool to risk my safety.

"I understand," I assured him.

"If you want me to get you one of the guys, you just need to say the word."

"It's okay," I murmured with a slight shake of my head. "Besides, I've got enough to keep my mind busy here today. I'll just get in an extra workout later if I feel the need to move."

"Alright. If you change your mind, let me know. You could always try relaxing for a bit. You know, give yourself some practice for that puppy you want."

I let out a laugh and rolled my eyes. "That's not going to happen without you or an actual puppy here."

"I'm sorry."

Offering a smile, I insisted, "It's not your fault. I know you'll make it up to me tomorrow."

Jake's grin was back. "You know it."

At that, he gave me another kiss. This one was not nearly as soft and innocent as the previous one. This one held more promise and a peek at what I had to look forward to tomorrow.

When he pulled back, he said, "I'll call you when I take my break for lunch."

"Okay. I love you. Have a good day."

"I love you, too."

Minutes later, Jake was gone, and I was back to being alone. With nothing else to distract me from it, I got myself to work.

I started on my emails, messages on social media, and questions posted through my fitness app. Once I completed those, I moved on to filming. I had started filming this series prior to the Christmas break, so all I had left was the final third of it. I was hoping to finish up the majority of the filming on it today with the intent that I'd edit everything tomorrow. The entire series covered a ninety-day time span, which had blocks of three weeklong intense sessions followed by a single week of recovery workouts.

I'd managed to finish filming the final workouts just in time for lunch, so I took a break to make something to eat. I figured after I ate, I'd film the introductions for each video and start importing the footage onto my desktop computer, where I did all of my editing.

Just as I sat down to eat, my phone rang.

Immediately, a smile formed on my face, because I already knew it was going to be Jake.

I made it across the room to the phone and answered on the third ring. "Hey, big guy," I greeted him.

"Hi, angel," he returned.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Good. I just reheated some of that food you sent me to work with, and I sat down to eat. I wanted to call and check in with you, make sure you turned your day around," Jake replied.

Not only did he do whatever he said he was going to do, but he did it with meaning and purpose. Just those few words let me know I'd been on his mind all morning. It made my heart melt.

"Well, you know I still miss you. There's very little I'll ever be able to do about that, but I have kept myself busy since you left. In fact, except for the intros I need to film, all of the content has been recorded. The only thing after I get the intros done will be to import the footage and edit it. But I stopped to have some lunch myself. How is your day going?"

"Surprisingly, it feels like it's passing by in a flash, so that's been good. But I miss you, too."

"Hey, I was thinking about New Year's Eve, and I was wondering if you had any plans."

"Not exactly. I think there's been some talk about heading to Sawyer's bar," he returned.

Considering I didn't drink, I wasn't privy to all the hot spots in Steel Ridge for people to grab drinks.

"What's Sawyer's bar?" I asked.

He laughed. "That's not the name of the place. Sawyer is Jesse's girl, and she works as a bartender at The Steel Pub. Honestly, I don't know. The girls are planning it. In fact, Avalon mentioned it to me this morning and said the rest of the girls want to meet you, Sophie, and Maxie. Though, a few of them did have the opportunity to meet Maxie at the wedding."

"The rest of the girls?"

Jake started laughing. “There’s too many to name, but basically, all the women who are with Harper Security Ops men.”

This was exciting news. I wondered if Maxie was aware of it, and if she planned on going. She was as introverted as they came, so I didn’t know how she’d feel about a night out. I thought it sounded like a lot of fun, and I definitely wanted to be able to meet more of the people Jake worked with, but there was one thing that concerned me.

“I don’t drink alcohol,” I blurted.

“I know.”

“Well, isn’t the point of going to a bar so you can drink?” I asked.

I loved hearing the amusement in Jake’s tone when he replied, “I guess that’s the case for some people, but I can tell you right now that a lot of the girls don’t drink or aren’t big drinkers. They aren’t going to care. They just want to meet you and welcome you to the family.”

Something squeezed in my chest. These women, nearly all who hadn’t ever met me before, wanted to welcome me to the family. “Are you being serious?”

“Why would I make that up?”

I shrugged, even though he couldn’t see me. “I don’t mean to imply that I think you’re lying or anything like that. It just seems strange to me. I don’t know who Sophie is, so I can’t speak about her, but at least with Maxie, she’s engaged to Kit. It makes sense they’d want to welcome her to the Harper Security Ops team family. You and I haven’t been together that long, and our relationship isn’t—”

“Stop,” Jake ordered, cutting me off.

“What?”

“You and I are not just some passing fling. You should know that, Brynn. Especially after what happened over the holiday. These women are going to welcome you to this family, because if I have my way, you’re going to be part of it forever. You’re all I’m ever going to want.”

Tears filled my eyes. “You can’t say things like that over the phone,” I rasped.

“I can, and I will, if you need me to clarify precisely what you mean to me.”

“I love you, Jake.”

“I know you do. I love you, too.”

Just then, my doorbell rang.

Jake must have heard, because he asked, “Who’s that?”

Dropping my fork and standing from the table, I replied, “I have no idea. Let me go see.” I made it to the window, looked out, and saw one of my delivery drivers waiting there. “It’s my UPS guy. Hang on one second.”

With the phone to my ear, I opened the door. “Do I need to sign?”

He shook his head and held out the envelope. “No. I just figured since it wasn’t a large package, you might miss it. I’m glad I caught you.”

I took it from him and smiled. “Thank you.”

“No problem. Have a good day.”

“You, too.”

I made it back to the table, inspecting the label on the envelope. The return address was to a UPS store, so that didn’t help at all.

“I don’t know what this is,” I told Jake. “I can’t remember ordering anything. And it’s in one of those mailers that you’d find documents sent in that you don’t want folded.”

“Open it up,” he urged me, a touch of trepidation in his tone.

I pulled the tab on the envelope, reached inside, and extracted the sturdy folder that was inside. When I opened it up, my blood ran cold. “Oh, God.”

“What? What is it?”

My eyes roamed over the sight, an awful churning in my belly.

“Brynn, talk to me,” Jake demanded.

“It’s a picture.”

“Of what?”

“Us.”

“Us? What do you mean?”

I took in a deep breath, pulled the photo completely out of the folder, and saw the note attached to the back of it.

“Jake,” I whispered.

“I’m already up and moving,” he revealed. “Tell me what I’m going to find when I get there.”

I swallowed hard. “It’s a photo of us from the day we went ice skating, and there’s a note attached to the back.”

“What does it say?”

I couldn’t repeat it. I didn’t want to say it.

Jake realized I was struggling. His voice dropped a few octaves and was so gentle when he urged, “Tell me what it says, my angel.”

“He won’t love you the way I love you.”

There was an extended silence. “Is that it?”

“That’s it,” I confirmed on a whisper.

“I’m coming there, and I’m bringing Jax with me. You keep your doors locked. Stay inside until I get there. Do you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there in less than ten minutes.”

“Okay.”

Jake and I disconnected, and I stared at the photo.

He won’t love you the way I love you.

Things had just taken a turn. Because even though I wasn’t quite sure what to do from here, there was one thing I knew for sure.

This guy, whoever he was, fully believed Jake was a threat to whatever idea he had in his head about me. And though I knew Jake didn’t believe it, I knew this was the worst-case scenario. Because this guy was going to try to take Jake away from me, and I had no intention of allowing that to happen.

Jake had just told me that I was all he was ever going to want. If this guy thought he was going to stop Jake from getting what he wanted, he couldn’t have been more wrong.

TWENTY-ONE



Jake

In a scenario where we would have wanted it and even requested it, I might have been able to appreciate what I saw.

That photo.

It was a great shot. Brynn looked stunning, radiant.

And I could remember exactly how I felt being there with her that day we went ice skating together.

Unfortunately, no matter how beautiful she looked in the picture or how happy I knew we both were, none of that was anyone else's to capture. That belonged to us.

As I told her I would, I raced back to Brynn's place, and now that I was here, I seemed unable to keep my hands off of her. Part of me was attempting to convince myself I was doing it for her comfort and reassurance, but the other part of me knew better. I was doing it for me.

This woman meant everything to me, and the thought that someone might have tried to get to her and succeeded in hurting her before I could make it back really did a number on me.

Even when I pulled into her driveway, I hadn't been able to relax. It wasn't until she opened her front door to me, and I could see that she hadn't been harmed, that I was finally able to let out a sigh of relief. Of course, that feeling was short-lived, because it took me only a matter of seconds to note the terror and uneasiness in Brynn's face. That alone would have been enough to throw me off balance again, but then I saw the photo.

From that point forward, it had been a balancing act for me. I was torn between wanting to storm out of her house and finding the guy responsible for doing this to her, so I could rip his head off, and needing to stay right where I was, calm and collected, so Brynn wouldn't feel any more fear than she likely already did.

It was anyone's guess as to which side was going to win that battle.

For now, I was staying put.

Before I left the Harper Security Ops office, I ran into Jax's office and told him I needed him to follow me to Brynn's place, since she'd gotten something new. And on my way out the door, I told Avalon to talk to the guys in the self-defense and tactical training unit about having one of them cover for me.

"He's been following us," Brynn declared, her voice trembling.

I nodded and urged her over to the living room, so she could sit down on the couch. "Yeah, I can see that."

For the first time since we entered her house, Jax chimed in. "So, this looks like it's becoming what I feared it might. We're looking at a love obsessional stalker."

"What are we going to do? How do you think he'll respond next? Can we find this guy before he can do anything to hurt Jake?" Brynn asked. Her questions were coming out in rapid-fire succession.

It was becoming more and more clear just how much this was beginning to impact her.

With my arm wrapped around her back and my hand settled on her opposite shoulder, I gave her a squeeze. "Relax, angel. Remember what I said about it being better if he comes after me."

Tears filled her eyes as she shook her head. "No. No, that note doesn't make me feel good, Jake. It's just like Jax said. This guy thinks you're in the way. He believes I'd be with him if it weren't for you."

"If I may," Jax interrupted. When Brynn and I both looked in his direction, he smiled and said, "Trust me when I say I understand how you're both feeling right now. I get it, because it's exactly how I felt when everything was happening with Sophie not that long ago."

"Sophie? You mean, the Sophie all the girls want to meet on New Year's Eve at The Steel Pub?" Brynn asked.

Jax let out a laugh and nodded. "That's her."

Understanding dawned in Brynn's expression, and I could see her mind

starting to work as the questions formed in her mind. Even if there was something she wanted to ask, she didn't.

Then again, considering Jax started speaking again, she couldn't. "Anyway, we've got something we can use now," Jax revealed. "This picture was delivered using a shipping company. I don't want to get my hopes up, but there's a very strong chance we'll be able to track this guy. He's left a paper trail, so it's going to come down to how sloppy he was about this. And in a best-case scenario, this UPS Store will be in a place that has not only cameras inside the building, but also on the outside."

Brynn's hand, which had been resting on my thigh just above my knee, tightened. "Oh, you're right. I didn't even think about that being an option. After seeing the picture and the note, I just assumed it'd be a lost cause, since it didn't have an address that would lead to someone's house. I'm glad to know there's still reason to hope this guy can be found."

"He'll be found, Brynn. Make no mistake about that. Unfortunately, these things can take some time, and sadly, there are times when it comes down to the person making a mistake. But one way or another, we will find him."

In an instant, I could feel the tension leave her body, and I was relieved to know she was feeling at least more reassured.

"There was nothing other than the mailer with the folder and picture inside of it, right?" Jax pressed.

Brynn shook her head. "That was all that came."

Holding the photo up in his hand, Jax said, "I assume it's okay with you if I take these with me back to the office. I want to get started on this right away, now that I've got something I can actually work with to help me figure out who this guy is."

"Please take it," she begged him. Filled with tears, Brynn's eyes came to mine, and she rasped, "It's a beautiful photo, so it pains me to say this, but I don't ever want to see it again."

I wasn't surprised by her words, considering I'd had the same thoughts myself. "We've got a lifetime to capture our own memories, Brynn. We don't need this one."

She offered a half-hearted smile in return.

At that moment, Jax stood and announced, "I'm going to head back now, so I can get to work on this right away."

Keeping a firm hold on Brynn, I rose to my feet and brought her with me. "That sounds good. Thanks for coming here, Jax. We both appreciate it."

“You didn’t hesitate to help when Sophie was in trouble, so even though it sucks your girl is dealing with this, I’m happy I can return the favor and do my part,” Jax replied.

That right there was one of the things I loved the most about the work that I did. Aside from knowing I spent my days teaching people how to defend themselves from an attacker, it was equally rewarding to be able to do it alongside men who wouldn’t hesitate to step up to the plate when they were needed.

A look of mutual respect passed between us before I released my hold on Brynn and followed Jax to the door.

Once he was gone, I returned to see Brynn standing where I left her, and though she didn’t look as defeated as she had when I first arrived, there was no doubt this was weighing heavily on her mind.

I crossed the room, made it to her, and wrapped my arms around her. “We’re going to find him,” I promised her.

“I know. I’m just a little worried,” she confessed.

I squeezed her tighter in my arms. “I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure he can’t hurt you.”

Tears filled her eyes. “It’s not that. I mean, I guess part of it is, but I can’t stop thinking about you. I am not prepared to lose you, Jake. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Nothing is going to happen to me. You need to trust me.”

Nodding her head, she insisted, “I do. But I’m scared. I’m scared something is going to happen before Jax can figure this out, and you won’t get what you want.”

Confused, my brows pulled together. “What do you mean?”

“You said if you had your way, I was going to be part of your Harper Security Ops family forever. You said all you were ever going to want is me,” she clarified. “I want you to get what you want. I want you to get your way, because nothing would make me happier than to be yours forever.”

I closed my eyes, sighing with relief and letting go of tension I hadn’t realized I’d been holding on to. When I opened them again and focused them on her, I promised, “You will be, angel. You will always be mine.”

At that, Brynn’s body sagged with relief against mine. Apparently, we’d both been feeling rather tense. “Are you going to go back to work now?”

“No. No, I’ll stay here with you.”

Brynn pulled her face from my chest, tipped her head back, and looked up

at me. “I’ll be okay,” she assured me.

“I know, because I’m going to stay with you,” I returned.

Shaking her head, she argued, “No. No, we can’t let this consume our lives like this. I appreciate you coming back here like you did, and I won’t kick you out immediately if you want to spend another half an hour with me. But you should go back to work. I’ve got a lot I need to get done here, anyway.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “You’re giving me thirty minutes, then kicking me out?”

The corners of her mouth tipped up. “What are you going to do with all that time?”

She didn’t need an answer.

She knew precisely how I intended to spend the next thirty minutes.

Feeling grateful she wasn’t allowing the situation with her stalker to consume her completely, I didn’t waste even thirty seconds.

I dropped my mouth to hers and started making excellent use of my time.



Brynn

Jake’s tongue swept into my mouth.

His kiss communicated so much more than just how much he loved me.

It told me he was torn between wanting me to stay and needing to let me go. Sadly, we both knew which side was going to win.

Because I had to go.

We both had to continue to live our lives as normally as we could.

It was Wednesday morning, and I’d just finished my self-defense lessons with Jake. We were standing inside the training room, and he’d decided to kiss me. I had a feeling he planned to do it again when we made it to the car, but since he’d demanded I allow Kit to follow me home, our parking lot kiss probably wasn’t going to be this steamy.

I didn’t mind.

I'd take this, and I'd take that.
Because I loved it all.

And considering everything else I had swirling around me right now, attempting to destroy the peace and steal the joy I'd had in my life, I was going to take the things that brought me happiness and relish in them.

I was kissing Jake.

It didn't get much better than that.

Well, other than when he said sweet things to me or asked me to join him at Christmas to meet his parents or when he made love to me.

Everything he did for me made me feel like I was the most treasured woman in the world. Nobody, not even this crazy psycho that was stalking me, was going to take Jake and what he gave me away from me. And I certainly wasn't going to allow myself to be taken away from Jake, either.

Though I could admit I'd had some time, particularly yesterday, when I'd felt defeated, I was glad to wake up this morning with a renewed sense of determination. I was who I was, and I'd always worked hard for what I wanted.

I wanted a future with Jake.

And I was going to make sure I got it.

Tearing his mouth from mine like it pained him to do it, Jake gripped my hair tighter in his hand. "Kit will follow you home and make sure you get inside safely. For my own peace of mind, would you please just shoot me a text once you get there?"

"I can do that."

He pressed a chaste kiss to my lips. "Thank you. Let's get downstairs, so we can grab Kit, and you can get home."

At that, Jake released the hold he had on my hair, took my hand in his, and led me through the Harper Security Ops building, back down to the main office area. We found Kit, told him I was ready to leave, and exited the building.

Well before I was ready for it to happen, I was kissing Jake goodbye in the parking lot while standing beside my open car door. And I couldn't say I wasn't sad when I had to drive away.

At the very least, I had some good thoughts running through my mind on my way back. Aside from the thoughts I had about Jake and where our relationship was heading, I had another thing I could add to the list.

When I arrived at Harper Security Ops this morning, I had the

opportunity to speak with Avalon. She told me all about the plans for New Year's Eve, and after hearing all she had to say about it, I had to admit, I was excited. It seemed Avalon was the organizer of it all. Being in her position at Harper Security Ops, she had met each of the women at least once, and with her bubbly personality and outgoing nature, she never held herself back from reaching out to anyone, even Maxie, who I planned to call later this afternoon to talk to her about it.

So, even if I was disappointed to be heading home without Jake, I still had plenty to keep me distracted and happy.

Before I knew it, I'd made it home and waved at Kit before I walked inside. I needed to run upstairs and grab a shower, but before I did that, I wanted to send a text to Jake, to let him know I made it home safely.

Standing in the middle of my living room, I reached into my purse and pulled out my phone. Just as I was tapping out a message to him, I heard a scream and froze. My eyes were directed outside, where I saw what was happening.

There was smoke pouring out the window on the back side of Mr. and Mrs. Rice's house. I dropped my phone and ran.

I raced out the front door and across the lawn. Normally, I'd have wanted us to have had a snowy Christmas, but at that moment, I was grateful winter had decided not to come early. Making it to Mr. and Mrs. Rice's house would have been a task if we'd gotten significant snow.

By the time I made it there, Mr. and Mrs. Rice were stumbling out the front door, coughing as they shouted.

"Mrs. Rice," I called out, climbing the stairs to her porch. "Are you okay?"

"Missy is still in there somewhere in the kitchen," she answered, the fear laced in her tone. "Hank wouldn't let me get her. He said we needed to get outside."

I looked at her husband and demanded, "You two get down there and away from the house. I'll get Missy."

"Brynn, no. You can't. It's not safe."

"Just go," I ordered, immediately turning on my foot before he had a chance to stop me or waste any more time.

I ran inside and was immediately assaulted by the smoke. I crouched down and did my best to navigate through the house, calling out for Missy as I moved along.

My throat and my eyes were burning, and I could start to feel the heat from the fire that was deeper inside the house, even if I hadn't yet seen any flames.

"Missy!" I called out again.

The next thing I knew, I tripped on something. That's when I realized why Missy hadn't come running.

I picked her up in my arms, stood up entirely too fast, and felt myself get dizzy. This wasn't good. I needed air. I needed oxygen.

Knowing I'd pushed my body beyond what my mind believed it could do before, I spun around and charged forward toward the door. I moved slowly, noticing myself becoming more and more disoriented.

But I could just barely see the light at the front door and knew I was nearly there. So, I kept pushing myself.

By some miracle, I stepped outside and stumbled forward a few steps.

Then, with Missy still in my arms, I collapsed on the porch, the world around me fading into darkness.

TWENTY-TWO



Brynn

I started to come to in the hospital bed before my eyes even opened. The first feeling I had was that of relief.

I had survived.

Granted, I hadn't exactly gone running into Mr. and Mrs. Rice's house believing I might not survive, but once I was in there, I knew I couldn't run out without their dog.

God, that would have been devastating.

Of course, at that moment I thought about Missy. I wondered if she was okay, if she survived.

Hopefully, someone here at the hospital would know the answer to that and could tell me I hadn't risked my life for nothing.

I gave myself a moment to take stock of the situation, and I realized I was going to need to have a nurse or a doctor come into my room immediately, because the IV stuck in my arm was causing me a bit of pain.

On that thought, I blinked my eyes open and moved to sit up.

That's when the panic set in.

Because I couldn't sit up. I was stuck in the bed.

And when I looked around the room, I realized I wasn't even in a hospital. There wasn't even an IV in my arm.

I was in a bedroom, though. A bedroom I didn't recognize.

Chills ran down my spine as an unwelcome feeling of dread washed over me. I wasn't a genius, but I knew this wasn't right.

When I took in the sight of the room, that feeling of dread turned to something else.

There was no way to quantify the horror and uneasiness I felt at the hundreds upon hundreds of images of me plastered all over the walls and in picture frames around the room. With the exception of the bed I was currently strapped to, every surface of the room was covered with pictures of me.

“Oh, God,” I whispered, feeling my insides start to tremble.

The majority of the pictures were ones I recognized. They were photos I’d posted on my social media accounts or on my personal website. There were others that had clearly been photoshopped, because I was in places I didn’t recognize and knew I hadn’t ever been to before. Some of them even had a man I didn’t know standing beside me.

And I thought all of that was bad.

Very bad.

But I wasn’t sure it compared to the feeling it gave me to see hundreds of photos of me that were taken without my knowledge. Photos just like the one that had been sent to me of Jake and me ice skating. Photos that indicated I had been actively stalked not just for months, but for more than a year.

I was creeped out by it—by knowing someone was watching me, following me, and invading my privacy without me having the slightest clue it was happening.

To say I was feeling unsettled would have been an understatement.

How did I even wind up here? How had I gone from attempting to rescue Missy from Mr. and Mrs. Rice’s burning home to being strapped to the bed of a crazed lunatic?

If I wanted answers, if I was willing to ask the questions, it seemed I was about to get my chance.

Because the door to the bedroom opened, and a man I didn’t know walked inside.

His eyes immediately came to mine, and he grinned at me in a way that made me feel dirty.

“Brynn,” he said, his voice filled with delight. “You’re awake. Do you feel okay?”

“Who are you?” I asked, cutting to the chase.

He tipped his head to the side. “I’m the man who rescued you.”

“What’s your name? What do you want?” I pressed, feeling my body

tense as he moved closer and closer to the bed.

Jake had taught me so much in my self-defense lessons, but there was one thing we hadn't prepared for. It was always assumed that I'd be randomly attacked on the street or at my house. There was this notion that I'd at least be conscious when someone who meant to bring me harm approached me.

That wasn't the case here, and with the exception of wiggling my wrists and ankles back and forth within the straps, I didn't understand how I'd ever manage to free myself. The straps were a belt style, and they weren't loose on my joints. Moving was virtually impossible.

So, no matter what wisdom Jake had imparted on me when it came to defending myself, it wasn't going to matter much if I couldn't get myself free first.

The man looked around the room, his gaze lingering on certain photos for longer than I thought was reasonable. Seeing the way his lips formed into a smile at the sight of some of them was unbelievably creepy.

He eventually brought his attention to me. "Do you like it? Do you like what I've done for you here, Brynn?"

"Will you please let me go?" I asked.

"No!" he shouted, his mood suddenly changing. "No, you're not leaving. You can't leave. Nobody will take care of you the way I will."

God, this was unnerving.

"I don't even know who you are," I pointed out.

"My name is Justin, and I'm all yours, Brynn. We're meant to be together."

I didn't exactly know how to handle a situation like this. I had anticipated needing to fend off an attacker physically. This was a whole new ball game. "You've kidnapped me. If we're meant to be together, don't you think I should have known your name and been able to come here on my own?"

"You couldn't."

"What do you mean?"

He sat down on the edge of the bed and rested his hand on my shin. I swallowed hard, hating that he was touching me, but grateful I was wearing pants. At least he wasn't touching my skin, and when I got myself out of this mess, I could easily burn the pants.

Justin's thumb started to stroke back and forth on my leg when he explained, "He was in our way. He was trying to stop us."

Jake.

Justin was referring to the man I loved as being the one in the way.

“He didn’t know,” I said, wanting to defend Jake. “I didn’t even know.”

Continuing to smile at me in a way that made my skin crawl, he asked, “Did you like the flowers? I thought they were as beautiful as you. And I meant what I said, Brynn. We belong together, because you mean everything to me.”

I needed to figure out a way out of this. Whatever idea this guy had in his head probably wasn’t going to be changed by anything I had to say, but I figured I’d try to reason with him.

“That can’t be true, because I don’t know you,” I told him. “If two people are meant to be together, it will happen on its own. It doesn’t happen because one person kidnaps the other.”

His thumb stopped moving, and he squeezed my leg. “That guy can’t have you. You’re not his. You’re mine.”

“Why are you hurting me, then? Is this how you’ll treat me?”

I figured if the guy claimed to love me, maybe I could use that to my advantage.

Justin loosened his hold on my leg, brought his hand up to the side of my face, and brushed my hair back. “I would never hurt you.”

“These restraints are hurting me,” I said softly, thinking I might be making some kind of progress.

He started shaking his head. “No. No, I can’t take them off. You’ll leave. You’ll go back to him, and I can’t live without you. You have to stay here.”

“I’m not yours, Justin. I don’t want to be with you.”

In a flash, he stood up and shouted, “He can’t have you. You don’t want to be with me, because he’s in the way. I’ll just have to get rid of him first.”

Shit.

Shit, this was not the place I needed this to go.

If it came to blows, I didn’t think for one second Jake would struggle with this guy. But I didn’t know how long it was going to take for Justin to make his approach to Jake. And I couldn’t begin to think what the man I loved would do once he realized something bad had happened to me.

God, he’d be devastated. He’d be distraught.

And if the worst happened to me, I didn’t know if Jake could survive it. Not after his brother, and not now that he’d finally gotten some peace in his life.

No.

No. I needed to stop the worst from happening, because Jake and I deserved to be happy together.

“Stop! Stop! Where are you going?” I asked him, my voice raised and panicked.

Justin stopped just a few feet in front of the door and turned back to look at me. “I have to go make plans to get rid of him. We’ll never be able to be happy as long as he’s around.”

I seemed to have been having the best luck when I was stroking his ego about how much he cared for me. As much as I didn’t want to do it, I had no choice. I was going to have to go back down that path again.

“So, you claim to love me, and you’re going to leave me here like this?”

“What else can I do?” he asked. “I don’t have a choice.”

My throat was incredibly dry, so I figured I’d start there. Allow him to show me how he’d take care of me. “I went into a burning house to rescue a dog, and there was so much smoke. My throat really hurts. Can I have some water?”

“You need water?” he asked.

I nodded. “Please.”

Justin didn’t hesitate, and he didn’t slack. It seemed that no sooner did he rush out of the room, he was proudly walking back inside. And he had a bottle of water with him.

He unscrewed the cap, sat down next to me on the bed, and held his hand behind my head, so I could drink. I hated that he was touching me or that I could smell him near me, but as long as he believed he was doing something to help me, I believed I could outsmart him.

The water did wonders for me, and I felt a renewed sense of determination.

I could do this.

There was nobody in this world as strong-minded as I was. I’d do this, and I’d save myself.

“Thank you,” I said after drinking nearly half the bottle.

“Of course. Anything. I’ll do anything for you,” Justin returned.

This was it.

Game time.

I looked around the room at all of the pictures and forced a smile on my face. “You really did this all for me?”

Justin’s eyes roamed over the pictures for several seconds before he

returned his attention to me and nodded. “I did. You’re the most beautiful woman in the world, and when I knew you lived so close, it was the sign I needed.”

“How long have you felt this way about me?” I asked.

“A year and a half.”

“You should have told me sooner.”

He sighed, despondency taking over. “I didn’t know how to approach you, and I wanted it to be perfect. But once I saw that guy spending time with you, I knew I couldn’t wait. I didn’t want to lose you.”

This was sickening. If it weren’t for my unwavering determination to find a way to get back to Jake, I might have vomited up all the water I’d just swallowed.

I’d been followed for a year and a half.

I allowed the silence to stretch between us for a few moments before I said, “You must really care about me. Look at all you’ve done. I mean, there were the flowers and the note on my car. And this? This room is more than anyone has ever done for me before.”

Nodding his head furiously, Justin added, “And I even set the fire for you. I did it, because I knew you’d come out to help.”

Oh, God. He’d set the fire on Mr. and Mrs. Rice’s house on purpose. I couldn’t react the way I wanted to. “Of course, you did,” I said softly. “You took a huge risk, just for me.”

“I told you, Brynn. I’d do anything for you.”

“So, what now?”

“What do you mean?”

I looked around the room again, and I said, “Well, you have me here now. What are you going to do with me?”

He brought his hand to my hip and stroked up and down along my side. It took a massive effort not to tense up or pull away. I had to keep feeding into this. I had to get him to trust me.

“We’re going to be together forever.”

“And are you going to keep me restrained in this bed for the rest of my life?”

His hand stopped moving as a frustrated look washed over his face. “I don’t want to do that, but I’m scared.”

My brows pulled together. “What are you afraid of?”

Justin stood, crossed the room, and picked up a frame. With the pictures

around, I hadn't managed to take in all of them. He came back to the bed, showed me the picture in the frame, and said, "I'm afraid that if I let you out of the restraints before you have the chance to fall in love with me, we'll never be able to have this."

I swallowed hard as I stared at the photoshopped picture. It was one of the two of us, and I was wearing a wedding gown.

"You want us to get married?" I asked him.

His chin jerked down slightly. "I even bought you a ring."

Fuck.

Fuck, this was twisted.

"You bought me a ring?"

"I did. I love you."

Nodding my head, feeling nothing but disbelief at just how crazy this whole thing was, I replied, "Yeah. I guess you really do love me. I think it only makes sense that since you've done so much for me, things I didn't even know about, we should give this a shot. We should try to be happy."

He eyed me curiously. "How?"

My stomach rumbled. I didn't know how the timing could have been more perfect or how it was even possible given the situation, but I used it to my advantage. "Well, we should try to date each other first. I'm hungry. Maybe we can have our first date, right here. We could have lunch together."

Justin's brows shot up in surprise. "Do you really mean that?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"I think you're lying to me. I think you're trying to trick me. You're going to want to go back to the other guy," he said, his words coming out rapidly.

"Why would I do that? You were the one who was there to rescue me today. Not him. I need someone I can depend on to always take care of me," I insisted.

Justin took a long time to consider my words. Ultimately, he said, "Prove it to me. Prove you don't care about him."

"How would you like me to do that?" I asked, dreading what he was going to make me do. God, if he made me call Jake and tell him something, I didn't know if I'd be able to do it.

Justin's hand drifted down toward my thigh. He stroked his hand over it several times before he demanded, "Kiss me."

Okay, so maybe I wished he would have had me call Jake.

“K... Kiss you?”

“Yes. A real kiss. Not a peck on the cheek. A kiss that lovers would share.”

I couldn't do it. No way could I willingly kiss this monster.

“I can't.”

He stood, started moving to the door, and declared, “I knew it. I knew you were lying to me. I've got to get rid of him.”

“No. No, you misunderstood me, Justin. Please, come back.” I was repulsed by the fact that I was saying his name and begging him not to leave. He cautiously made his way back to me. “Sit down again. Let me explain.”

He sat down, and I instantly regretted making that request, because his hand was back on my body again.

“Explain what you meant,” he urged me.

“What I meant to say was that I can't kiss you like this,” I started. “I can't be strapped to this bed. That's not romantic.”

“You'll run.”

I shook my head. “No, Justin. I won't. But you have to think about this. If we're going to eventually get married, you have to start trusting me at some point. I'm sorry. As much as I want to show you how much it means to me that you did all of this for me, I can't do it if you don't give me the use of my hands.”

He thought for a moment and asked, “Why? Why do you need your hands? You only need your mouth. Your lips and your tongue are all you need to kiss me, to show me that you really want to be with me.”

“Justin, this is going to be our first kiss. It's supposed to be special, and it won't be that if I can't touch you,” I reasoned.

Something changed in his expression, and he sat up a little taller. “You... you want to touch me?”

I hesitated partly because I didn't want to say the words I was about to say, but mostly for dramatic effect. “You did so much for me already,” I reminded him. “Of course, I want to touch you.”

He was eager.

Too eager.

“Just the hands?”

I really wanted him to release me completely, but I was going to take what I could get and make every move count. “Sure. All good relationships are based on compromise, and I think that's fair. You release my hands, and

you can keep my ankles restrained.”

Justin gobbled that up, clearly believing I was trustworthy.

He brought his hands to my wrist farthest from him. He opened the restraint and freed my hand. I clenched my hand into a fist and rolled my wrist around to get the blood flowing, while Justin watched to make sure I didn't make any sudden moves.

The next part of this was going to be the hardest, because I had to make sure he let his guard down.

Hating that I was going to have to do it, but knowing it was critical to my survival, I turned my body slightly and placed my hand on his thigh, smiling up at him.

His eyes danced with delight, and I wanted nothing more than to poke my fingers into his eye sockets.

Needing to take it a step further, I lifted my hand from his thigh and raised it to the side of his face.

“Your hand is soft,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

“Imagine what it'll feel like when I've got both of them on you. And if you think my hands are soft, wait until my lips touch yours,” I said, wanting to offer more temptation.

“Yes. Yeah, I can tell they'll be really soft,” he replied, his hands moving to the other strap.

A moment later, my second hand was free. I sat up slowly as I clenched my hand into a fist and rolled my wrist.

“Did I hurt you?” Justin asked.

“It's a little sore,” I confessed.

“I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you. I just... I love you so much, and I didn't want to risk having you leave me.”

I nodded slowly. “I know. I understand. I'll be alright.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” As soon as I got the word out, Justin looked at me expectantly. “You're ready for our kiss.”

“I've been waiting more than a year to kiss you, Brynn.”

Smiling, feeling utterly repulsed, I said, “Let me make it even more special. Close your eyes, and let me tease you.”

“What?”

Not wanting to, but knowing it was necessary, I lifted my hand to the side of his face. I stroked my fingertips gently over his skin on his cheek. “I want

to make it special. I want you to have just what you deserve for all that you've done for me." My fingers floated down to his jaw, and Justin's eyes drifted shut. Just to be certain he was going to keep them closed, I allowed my fingers to linger a little longer. Then I brought my left hand across my body to grab ahold of his bicep, before I dropped my right hand from his face.

Keeping my eyes on him, knowing I had a matter of seconds to make this happen, I twisted my upper body away from him, positioned my arm, and flung my elbow right at his head with as much force as I could muster up.

He dropped to the ground, groaning as he fell.

I wasted no time in reaching down to free one of my ankles. Justin had started to get up off the floor, and while I worked to get my second ankle free, I used my leg that was already released from the restraint to kick him as hard as I could.

In an instant, I was free and jumping off the bed.

I made a dash for the door, but Justin reached out and tripped me.

He regained some of his composure, and I knew I was in for a fight.

But I wasn't afraid. I'd learned from Jake. And if I could spar with him, I believed I could handle this guy.

It was a shame he didn't know what he'd signed up for.

TWENTY-THREE



Jake

Something wasn't right.

Though I realized it was possible for Brynn to get home and get caught up in doing something without remembering to text me, it was that she hadn't answered when I called her, which had me starting to question things.

Granted, it was possible she'd hopped in the shower, but since I didn't want to make assumptions, I did the next best thing.

I called Kit.

"Hey, Jake. Are you calling about Brynn?" he asked.

"Yeah. I asked her to text me when she got home, but she didn't, and when I tried to call, she didn't answer," I told him.

"She's there, and I waited until she was safely inside before leaving. We got there about fifteen minutes ago," he shared.

"Alright. Thanks for letting me know."

"No problem."

I disconnected the call, still felt uneasy about the situation, and decided to check the camera footage from outside her house. I went back to about fifteen minutes ago, since that was when Kit said he'd left there, and I saw that he was right.

Brynn had gotten home and made her way inside. Wanting to be sure nobody showed up at the house after Kit left, I continued moving through the footage. I hadn't even gotten through five more minutes of it when I saw Brynn racing out of the house. The sight of that made my stomach drop.

Keeping my eyes on the footage, I started moving toward the exit.

“Hey, Jake. Where are you going?” Brixton asked.

“I’ve got to go check on Brynn. Something’s not right. Kit followed her home, and minutes later, she ran out of her house. Now, she’s not answering her phone,” I answered.

“Go. I’ll handle things here.”

I was out the door in a flash and running through the building.

Since I was in a rush, I was grateful nobody stopped me, and Avalon wasn’t at her desk. If she saw me leaving like this, there was no doubt she would have asked what was going on. I didn’t want to risk delaying myself.

I had at least half a dozen scenarios in my head about what I might find when I arrived at Brynn’s place, but by the time I turned on to her street, it was safe to say what I saw hadn’t crossed my mind.

Police, fire trucks, and an ambulance were there. And the house next to Brynn’s had extensive fire damage.

Everything was falling into place, and Brynn racing out of the house suddenly made sense.

I drove as close as I could, parked, and got out. Since I was already here, I figured I’d better make sure everyone was okay.

But the closer I got, the worse I was beginning to feel.

Because I didn’t see Brynn anywhere. Since it was the middle of the day, it wasn’t as though I had a lot of faces to sort through, either. Most of Brynn’s neighbors were at work.

Fortunately, I spotted her neighbors whose house had caught on fire. They were both sitting in the back of the ambulance, so I moved in their direction.

Something clicked when they saw me, and I had a feeling they recognized me. “She saved her,” Mr. Rice declared.

My body immediately tensed. “What? Saved who?”

“Brynn. She saved our dog, Missy.”

“I don’t understand,” I replied.

Shaking her head, Mrs. Rice explained, “My husband wouldn’t let me go back to find Missy, but when Brynn came running over and learned that Missy was still inside, she ran in to find her.”

I wanted to feel proud of her for heroic efforts, but since I didn’t know where she was right now, I was too focused on that instead. “Where is she now?”

“She got Missy out, and they were able to revive our dog after Brynn collapsed with him in her arms. That EMT happened to be here, and he picked her up, put her in his car, and rushed her to the hospital. I hope she’s okay.”

Brynn collapsed coming out of the house. Pain hit the center of my chest. “What EMT?”

Mr. and Mrs. Rice both shook their heads. “We don’t know him. We never saw him before.”

“Did you see what kind of car he took her in?” I pressed, feeling my stomach clench painfully.

“I don’t recall the make and model, but it was a compact car. A blue one,” Mr. Rice revealed.

Fuck.

Fuck, that fit the description of the car Brynn said had followed her to Harper Security Ops the day she received the flowers.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I said, “I’ve got to go.”

“If you’re going to see Brynn at the hospital, please tell her we’re so thankful for what she did to save Missy.”

Not wanting these elderly people who had probably narrowly escaped death themselves to be alarmed by anything else, I gave them a nod, held my phone to my ear, and turned to walk away. I only took about three or four steps in the opposite direction when I heard Jax’s voice coming through the line. “This is Jax.”

“It’s Jake.”

“Hey, I’m glad you called,” he returned.

“Please tell me you have something for me,” I begged him.

“Is everything okay?”

My walk had turned into a jog back toward my vehicle. “Not exactly. I just got to Brynn’s place, because she never contacted me when she made it home. Kit had followed her here, and he confirmed she’d made it safely inside. I checked the footage from her cameras, and I learned that while she had made it inside, she ran out the door minutes later. When I got here, I realized why she left her place. Her neighbors’ house caught on fire, and when I had a chance to speak to them just minutes ago, they told me she ran in to rescue their dog. While she succeeded in doing that, apparently, she passed out. Someone claiming to be an EMT picked her up and said he was going to be taking her to the hospital. He was driving a blue compact car.”

“Fuck.”

“What? What did you find?” I asked as I opened my car door and folded in behind the wheel.

“Well, I dug into the UPS Store situation, and I think I found the guy you’re describing now,” he started. “I reached out, explained the situation, and learned that the package that had been sent to Brynn yesterday was paid for using cash, and for some reason, there was no record of a name for the customer. There are cameras outside the property, though, and since it’s in a shopping center, I decided to go there next. Long story short, I recalled the blue car Brynn had mentioned, and I saw one had pulled in shortly before the label had been created for the package.”

“Please tell me you have plate numbers,” I begged him.

“I can do even better. I already found out who the car was registered to, and I’ve got an address,” he revealed.

“Send it to me,” I demanded.

“Got it. I’ll have someone meet you there, just so you have some backup. Banks is available.”

“Banks?” I repeated, my tone questioning.

“He feels like he’s ready to get back into things, so I figure this might be a good place to start, especially if we’re dealing with just a single guy,” he reasoned.

Banks had recently suffered the unexpected loss of his wife, just months after the birth of their son. He’d taken some time off to grieve and focus on his son, but this was the first I was hearing about him being ready to come back to work.

He’d never want to put someone at risk, and considering he worked in the kidnap and ransom unit, if he didn’t believe he could handle it, he wouldn’t have said so.

“I’ll meet him there. Send me the address.”

Fifteen minutes later, I had pulled up and parked two houses down from the address Jax had sent to me. Sure enough, there was a blue car parked in the driveway.

And as I took in the sight of it, I had to admit it was so unsettling. It was often easy to assume that the worst crimes were committed in bad areas. This was a middle-class neighborhood, and a criminal was living among them.

Banks pulled up less than a minute after I did. He met me at my car and asked, “What’s the plan?”

“I’ve got word from Brynn’s neighbors that she was taken from their house in a blue compact car. This car is the one that was parked in the lot outside of the UPS Store, where the picture was sent to her from, and it fits the description of a car that followed her to Harper Security Ops after a bouquet of flowers was delivered to her. I don’t have proof she’s in there, but I’m not willing to wait for that, either.”

“I’m with you on it. Do you want to go to the front door and knock, or do you want to see what we can find scoping it out from all angles first?”

“If this is him and he’s got her, he’ll recognize me,” I noted.

“I can do it,” Banks declared.

I gave him a nod, and we both turned to move in that direction. We couldn’t waste any additional time. But we hadn’t gotten more than a few feet away when the front door to the house opened, and Brynn came running out.

“Jesus,” I hissed before sprinting after her. “Brynn.”

She twisted her head in my direction, and her eyes locked on mine. Her movements slowed, but I didn’t.

Within seconds, she was in my arms. “Brynn, angel, are you okay?”

“Jake,” she rasped, tears filling her eyes.

“What happened? Where is he?”

“Inside. It’s just him.”

“Weapons?” I asked.

She shook her head. “None that I saw.”

I looked at Banks.

“I’ve got it,” he assured me.

Continuing to hold Brynn in my arms, I made a call to the police. Once units were on the way, I asked, “Were you hurt? What happened?”

“I wound up getting into a scuffle with him. I’m sure I might feel a little achy tomorrow, but I get the feeling he’s going to be feeling worse for quite some time,” she answered.

“Did you do some damage?” I pressed.

“I wasn’t going to let him take me away from you,” she returned. “And this guy had every intention of making that happen. I don’t know what your plan is, but I don’t recommend going inside that place, especially up to one of the bedrooms. It’s not nice.”

Suddenly, my body tensed. “Bedrooms? Brynn, did he—”

“I’m completely fine, Jake. I promise. I’m creeped out, but I’m okay. He didn’t have the chance to hurt me.”

Relief swept through me. “I’m proud of you.”

“I couldn’t have done it if it hadn’t been for your willingness to teach me,” she reasoned.

Smiling at her, I declared, “It was the best decision of my life.”

Within minutes, the police arrived. And shortly afterward, an ambulance had shown up. From there, it was a flurry of activity all around us. While Brynn had already done a hell of a job in defending herself, Banks had her stalker ready to go for the police when they arrived.

I stayed beside Brynn, listening to her recount the story of what happened, and though I was creeped out by all that I’d learned, the truth was that I couldn’t have been prouder of her.

She was, by far, the strongest woman I’d ever met.

She was determined to keep herself safe and alive, so she could come back to me. I knew just how short life could be, and I had no intention of wasting any more time. I’d give Brynn some time to cope with all of this and allow us to have some peace in our lives, but it wasn’t going to be much longer before I did what I had to do and asked this woman to marry me.



Brynn

“So, you actually beat the crap out of that guy?”

I always thought I was a confident woman, but with nearly a dozen sets of eyes pointed in my direction following Sophie’s question, heat hit my cheeks. “I mean, I wouldn’t say I beat the crap out of him. I just did enough to be able to get away.”

“She’s just being modest,” Avalon declared. “It’s been a topic of discussion around the office for a few days now. She totally kicked his ass, and that was after she ran into her neighbor’s house that was on fire to rescue their dog.”

“I can attest to that,” Liv added.

It had happened.

Jake and I had joined the rest of the Harper Security Ops couples for a night out at The Steel Pub. It was New Year's Eve, and the girls had all found themselves huddled together in an effort to get to know one another better. I'd just learned about Sophie's whole ordeal and got a refresher on what happened to Maxie when everyone asked about that, but now it was my turn.

I didn't necessarily mind. The rest of the girls had chimed in with snippets of things they'd all been through, and there was no question I was in the presence of some truly remarkable women.

"I just did what anyone else in my situation would have done," I insisted.

"That's not true, because I was in a situation, and I didn't know the first thing about how to defend myself," Sophie said. "I'm just glad Jax and the other guys knew what to do and found me when they did."

I tipped my head to the side and offered a sympathetic look. Thinking about what could have happened to her if Jax and the rest of the guys hadn't gotten to her on time made me shudder.

Then I slid my gaze through the group of women, and that's when it hit me. "It's the guys in every situation," I declared.

"What do you mean?" Maren asked.

Shaking my head, I reasoned, "Think about your own personal predicaments. It doesn't matter if it was a situation like mine, or Maxie's, or even one like Lily's or Hanna's." Lifting my hand and pointing to the men, who were congregated a few feet away from us, I noted, "In every case, we survived and made it to the other side because of those men. Whether they came to our rescue or taught us what we needed to know to defend ourselves, it all boils down to them. They built that confidence in us. They put that trust there. I don't know the details of each of your stories, but I don't doubt that the love you have with the man in your life gave you the strength to hold on, to trust that everything was going to be okay, because they wouldn't have it any other way."

A collective silence fell over the group for several long moments. It was Ellery who eventually broke it. "You're right."

The rest of the women nodded their agreement, but it was Tarryn who spoke. "We're all badass women, but they're the real heroes."

"You know what this makes me wonder?" Mallory asked.

"What?" Lily pressed.

Before Mallory could respond, Hanna guessed, "Who's next?"

Mallory nodded, and Sawyer bubbled, "Oh, I can't wait. I love being on

this side of it, getting bits and pieces of what's happening from Jesse, and somewhere, in the back of my mind, knowing it's all going to work itself out in the end."

"We should take a more active role next time, though," Liv declared. "I mean, Avalon and I were terrified at the time when your whole thing went down Sawyer, but looking back now, it was such a thrill to be in the thick of it."

"Hey, guys, I think we need to break this up. There are too many mischievous looks over here," Magnus declared as he walked up behind Maren.

My lips twitched, and I saw a hint of a smile or full-blown grin on the faces of the women. We exchanged looks of understanding.

"What's happening over here?" Jagger asked, coming to stand beside Lily.

"There's nothing going on," Avalon insisted when Damon walked up and threw his arm around her shoulders.

He smiled at her, shook his head, and insisted, "I don't believe that for one second."

"You ladies better not be corrupting my sweet Maxie," Kit advised.

While I'd only just met the rest of the women, there was no question Maxie was the most reserved one of the group. But I had a feeling that once she had more time around everyone, she'd open up a bit more. Whether that would be to Kit's dismay or not remained to be seen.

As the rest of the men joined us, the conversation I'd been having with the women fell by the wayside. But that was okay with me, because I got Jake's arms wrapped around me as a consolation prize.

"Are you having fun?" he whispered in my ear.

I turned in his arms and nodded. "Way more than I thought I would."

His lips touched mine. "You like being part of this family?"

I pressed my body tighter to his. "I do."

Jake gave me a squeeze. "I'd like to hear those words again."

"What?"

"I do. I want to hear you say those words to me again, and I'd like for us to have our families around when you say them."

I blinked my eyes in surprise. "Are you... was that—"

"That wasn't a proposal, Brynn. But I want you to know it's coming, and it's going to happen very soon," he warned me.

Jake wanted to marry me.

He hadn't proposed yet, but he was going to do it soon.

I wanted to jump up and down to celebrate. I didn't.

Instead, I cocked an eyebrow and smiled at him. "Why do you say that like it's something you need to warn me about?"

"I just want you to have some time to prepare yourself," he answered.

Gliding my palms up his chest and over his shoulders until I slid them into his hair, I brought my mouth to his ear and revealed, "I've been preparing since the day you ran into me in the hardware store. That's when everything changed for me, Jake, and I've loved every minute of it ever since."

He smiled against my lips, but he didn't respond with words. Jake merely captured my mouth with his and delivered a possessive kiss.

When he pulled back, he said, "I hope you're ready, my angel."

"For what?"

"To start the first best year of our lives."

I bit down on my bottom lip and pressed up on my toes. "I can't wait. But I have an idea."

"What's that?"

"Can we make sure this one goes out with a bang?"

Jake started laughing and promised, "Oh, don't you worry. That's absolutely going to happen."

With that promise, I decided I was done talking and ready to get my night started. So, I gave Jake a kiss, and just as I had suspected he would, he took over and gave me the best night of my life.

I couldn't wait to see what the next year had in store for us.

EPILOGUE



Jake
One Month Later

“I promise you’re going to love it.”

I stared into the eyes of the woman who had my whole heart, and I wondered if I was making the right decision.

I knew this wasn’t the wrong thing to do, but there was no question there were plenty of other things I could have been doing instead. One of them being something I desperately wanted to do.

But I thought it’d be too obvious and maybe even a little cliché to propose to Brynn on a day like today. Though I’d indicated to her that I intended to propose and didn’t plan to wait very long to make that happen, I still wanted it to be a surprise. I figured a day like her birthday might be a day she’d be anticipating something special.

And though I didn’t want to disappoint her, I certainly didn’t want her to know when to expect it.

So, I had to do something else I believed would help lessen any disappointment she might have felt over me not getting down on one knee with a ring for her.

Given that I’d just taken her by the hand and promised her she was going to love it, I prayed this gift was going to do the trick.

We stepped into the living room, where a large box sat wrapped in the middle of the floor. As soon as Brynn saw it, her shoulders fell, and curiosity washed over her face.

Yep.

She'd been anticipating something else.

God, I hoped I hadn't screwed this up.

Turning her attention to me, she asked, "What is it?"

"What fun would it be if I told you?" I countered. "Go and open it."

Cautiously, Brynn crossed the room and moved toward the box. Kneeling beside it, she brought her hands to the lid. The second they were there, she heard it.

Her eyes widened, and she didn't waste a second. The lid was yanked off, and she gasped at what she saw inside. Bringing her hands up to cover her mouth as tears filled her eyes, she exclaimed, "You didn't!"

I wanted to believe this was a good reaction, but I couldn't be certain. I mean, on the one hand, I knew Brynn had wanted a dog for a very long time. There was no doubt she'd be ecstatic about having one. But on the other hand, I could admit it might have been a bad idea to just select one I believed would be the best for her.

"I did," I returned as I moved toward her and crouched down beside her. "What do you think of her?"

Right there on the spot, every feature on Brynn's face melted. "She's a girl?"

I nodded.

Brynn reached into the box, lifted the puppy out, and cuddled her close to her chest. The pup cuddled Brynn right back, and I immediately fell in love with the sight of the both of them.

These two girls were my responsibility now, my family.

"She's so beautiful. Look at her eyes," Brynn rasped as she cuddled and scratched and pet her new dog.

"I hope you love her," I started. "I remembered how badly you said you wanted a dog, but struggled with making the decision. I didn't want you to have to wrestle with the decision any longer, so I did my best to find the perfect fit for you. She's an Australian shepherd. When she's fully grown, she'll be a medium-sized dog. Not too big, and not too small. And she's part of a breed that's known for being perfect for those with active lifestyles. You can take her out on long walks, go on hikes with her, or even run around and play frisbee or catch."

Holding firmly on to the pup with one hand, Brynn reached out to me with her other hand, so she could curl it around the back of my head. After

giving me a kiss on the lips, Brynn declared, “She’s perfect, big guy. This is the best birthday gift in the world. I already love her so much.”

Relief swept through me. “What are you going to name her?”

Brynn’s gaze dropped back to her dog, and she smiled at her. “She’s so beautiful. I want her to have the perfect name, but I’m not sure what yet. Can we take her for a walk, so we can talk about our favorite options?”

“We can walk anywhere you want, angel, but she’s yours,” I noted. “You should pick her name.”

“Aren’t you mine, too?” she asked.

“You know I am.”

“So, if we’re together and it is your intention for things to stay that way permanently, that means she’s going to be yours, too. I’ll make the final decision on the name, but I’d love your input.”

The last thing I wanted was for Brynn to think I was attempting to pull back from her in some way, so I smiled and said, “Let me get her collar and her leash.”

Before I had the chance to stand up, Brynn curled her fingers around my wrist. “Jake?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

The look on Brynn’s face mixed with her words was it. That was all I’d need for the rest of my life. To have her look at me like I’d just handed her the world. “Happy birthday, angel.”

I gave her another kiss, scratched our little girl on her head, and stood. Twenty minutes later, bundled up and out for a walk together, Brynn decided on a name.

And Brynn had been right.

Because in the same way that Brynn was mine, so was Roxie.

Of course, our new pup had to make her own statement, so when I was finally ready three weeks later to make it happen, Roxie helped me ask her mom to marry me.



One year, ten months later

“Do you think this was a smart idea?”

The trepidation was written all over my wife’s face, and I had to admit, it caught me by surprise.

Brynn rarely questioned any decision she ever made. She was even more confident about decisions we’d made together.

This had been one of them, so it caught me off guard to see her so worried.

“I think it’s perfect. I think it’s going to be perfect for everyone.”

“But maybe we should have told them all about it sooner,” she reasoned. “What if they feel as though they’ve been left out?”

Shaking my head, I moved toward the couch, where Brynn was sitting, nursing our newborn son. He’d arrived just a week ago, and nobody knew.

When we learned Brynn was pregnant, the two of us decided we wanted to keep the news a secret. We learned that he would be arriving just before the Thanksgiving holiday, and we thought it would be the perfect way to celebrate with our families.

In a move that might not have been the wisest, we decided to host, so we could make sure both Brynn and our little guy wouldn’t need to be out and away from home. And though they weren’t aware why we were so willing to accept their offers to bring something to our Thanksgiving feast, they’d soon learn the truth.

I couldn’t wait.

I knew my parents were going to be ecstatic, and I didn’t doubt Brynn’s family would feel the same.

“This was your decision, Brynn. Our decision. And if I’m honest, I don’t think anyone is going to take one look at him and decide it’s worth it to feel angry. He’s here, he’s perfect, he’s healthy, and we’re happy.”

She dropped her gaze to our son, brushed her finger gently down his cheek, and smiled. “He really is perfect, isn’t he?”

“I didn’t think I could love anyone more than you,” I confessed. “Then we got Roxie, and it was impossible not to fall in love with her, too. But this little man changed it all.”

Brynn’s soft laughter filled the air before she replied, “And I didn’t think I could ever find myself feeling eager to slow down and relax.”

That was the truth.

There was no question Brynn had been active and on the go from the first day I met her. As time went on, that hadn't changed. Even throughout her pregnancy, Brynn was constantly doing something, always moving.

But from the moment she delivered our son, everything changed.

While part of that was related to her body needing time to recover from childbirth, there was something else there.

Brynn adored our son, and there was no question she wanted to give him every ounce of her time and attention. I didn't think she'd never get up and move again, but she was certainly taking some time to enjoy these moments of our lives, moments she'd only ever have as memories as years passed by.

I leaned close, pressed a kiss to the side of her head, and insisted, "There's nothing wrong with taking this time now. Before you know it, he's going to be up, running around, and you won't have a moment to sit. Get the cuddles while you can."

Brynn's head dropped back on the couch cushion, and she let out a sigh. "I love cuddles."

I couldn't stop myself from letting out a laugh. "I'm glad about that."

"I think this guy is done eating," she shared.

"Do you want me to burp him?" I asked.

"You can if you'd like, but I don't mind doing it," she answered.

In an instant, I reached out for my son and brought him up against my chest. While Brynn fixed her clothes, I gently patted his back. Brynn had just gotten herself situated when he let out a burp.

Keeping one hand firm on his tiny body, I looked over at my wife, wrapped my free arm around her shoulders, and curled her into my side.

No sooner did I get her there when the doorbell rang.

Brynn's neck twisted, her eyes wide as they met mine. "Someone's here."

The excitement was bubbling out of her as I scooted to the edge of the cushion. "Here. You hold him, and I'll get the door."

With him safely in her arms, I stood and moved to the door, Roxie right on my heels. I couldn't say I didn't understand Brynn's excitement. We'd had our son all to ourselves for a week now, and it was finally time to share him with our families.

I opened the door and found my parents standing on the opposite side.

This was perfect.

My mom was smiling brightly at me. Then again, she'd been doing that every time Brynn and I had visited with her and my dad over the last two

years.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Jake,” my mom declared, stepping inside, dropping the bags she had in her hands, and wrapping her arms around me.

I hugged her back. “Happy Thanksgiving, Mom.”

When she loosened her hold on me and moved to show Roxie some love, my eyes went to my dad. He was still holding on to a large box, carrying whatever items they’d decided to bring.

“Happy Thanksgiving, son.”

“You too, Dad.”

After closing the door behind them, I took the bags my mom had carried in, and she asked, “Where’s Brynn? I hope she’s not going crazy in the kitchen. She promised me everyone in the family was bringing something.”

I shook my head, a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. “No, Mom. She’s got her hands full right now, but she stuck to her word and only did the turkey this year. Everyone else is chipping in on the side dishes.”

“I thought it was such a great idea to make sure everyone was included, and at least this way, it wouldn’t all fall on her shoulders.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “She’s busy in the living room right now.”

“Hopefully she’s not worried about cleaning. It’s the holiday,” my mom went on as she and my dad followed behind me toward the living room.

A moment later, Brynn came into view, and my mother gasped.

“What’s going on?” my dad asked.

“That’s a baby!” my mom announced.

Brynn stood from the couch and moved toward my parents with a huge smile on her face. When she came to a stop in front of them, she said, “Bruce, Wendy, Jake and I would like you to meet your grandson.”

“Grandson?”

“Since when?”

My parents were in complete shock, their eyes darting back and forth between the baby and me. “Brynn and I wanted to surprise everyone,” I started. “He was born exactly a week ago, and you two are the first to meet him.”

Tears filled my mom’s eyes as they went to her first grandchild again. She placed a hand on his back and looked at his precious face.

“Oh, he’s so sweet,” she cried.

“Would you like to hold him?” Brynn asked.

“Can I? Please?”

“Of course.”

Then I watched as my wife placed my son in my mother’s arms. The looks on both of their faces were something I’d never forget as long as I lived.

My father had set the box down on the floor and huddled closer to get a better look. “So, he was born on November twentieth? What’s his name?”

“Yes, he was born at 12:12pm on the twentieth. He weighed seven pounds, twelve ounces, and his name is Max.”

Tears formed in my father’s eyes, matching my mom’s, as they both looked in my direction again.

“Max?” my mom rasped.

I nodded.

They returned their gazes to him and smiled. My mom brushed her finger gently along his cheek. “Hi, Max. I’m your grandma. And Grandpa is here, too.”

Max continued to sleep.

I wrapped my arm around Brynn’s back, my hand landing on her opposite shoulder. My mom turned her attention to Brynn and asked, “How are you doing? Did everything go okay?”

Brynn nodded. “Yes. I had a home birth, and other than being a little tired, I feel fantastic.”

“I’m still in shock,” my dad declared. “I have a grandson.”

“Nobody else knows?”

“Nobody else knows,” I confirmed.

“This is... this is... he’s perfect,” my mom said.

My parents began marveling over their grandson once again, and I dropped my gaze to my wife. Our eyes locked as we smiled at one another.

This was what it was all about.

After so many years of living a life filled with grief and sadness, I never thought I’d see genuine happiness. I’d only ever experienced a good day here and there over the years.

But it wasn’t like that any longer.

Giving myself the opportunity to become the most important man in Brynn’s life had changed everything in my own.

I had a woman who made me happy, who made me laugh. I woke up every day with a smile on my face, because I had her.

When she’d given me her love, she’d given me the greatest gift of all.

Because she'd done just as she set out to do from the start and healed my heart. But she'd done far more than that. Brynn gave me back my parents and healed their hearts, too.

Now, we were building a family of our own, and I knew I'd spend the rest of my life determined to give Brynn the world, grateful for every moment I had with her, and looking forward to the next.

PREVIEW OF UNHARMED

Prologue

Lamise

“If you’re watching this video, it’s likely I’m already dead.”

I tapped on the screen to pause the video.

If I thought I’d been living in a nightmare for the past six months, I couldn’t have been more wrong.

This was the third time I’d heard that phrase, having watched the video in its entirety twice already, and I’d decided to torture myself further by starting it again.

I was completely dumbfounded.

Part of me wondered if I’d actually woken up this morning. Had I dreamt this whole thing up?

What the heck happened? What had I missed?

Sadly, none of the questions I asked myself came with any answers, and the worst part about it all was that the words I’d just heard were the truth.

He was dead.

Graham was dead.

My fiancé.

It was barely over six months ago, with just under a year left until our wedding, when it happened.

Devastation.

God, I didn’t know devastation like that existed. Or maybe I knew it did, but I never understood the magnitude of it. I didn’t fully grasp how it could feel like your entire world had stopped spinning.

Everything, absolutely everything, I had planned for my future, went

down the drain in the blink of an eye. So fast. So quick. One day, everything made sense. The next, heartbreak and despair.

I'd never forget that day.

It was a Saturday. Graham and I always had a lunch date on Saturday afternoons. But before we did that, Graham went out in the morning for his run, and he took our Boxer, Henry, with him. They'd go for a run before heading to the dog park for a bit.

I'd gone about my morning just like I always did—cleaning the bathrooms, vacuuming the upstairs, and throwing in two loads of laundry in the home we shared together. It was always about fifteen minutes after I'd finished all of those tasks and showered when Graham and Henry returned.

Henry would always climb into his bed after his morning out and take an afternoon nap. Graham would grab a quick shower before the two of us would leave for our lunch date. Sometimes, especially in the spring and fall, we would plan an afternoon out, doing something fun. Recently, we'd been spending time together while taking care of different tasks related to wedding planning.

That day, we'd had an appointment to meet with one of the potential caterers. Unfortunately, things took a devastating and unexpected turn.

Twenty minutes after the time passed when I would have expected Graham to be home, I decided to call him.

He didn't answer.

So, I sent him a text.

No response.

Ten minutes after that, the doorbell rang.

I opened the door, saw two police officers there, and instantly knew something bad had happened.

Part of me—the naïve part—expected the officers to tell me that I needed to go with them, because Graham had been in an accident and was on his way to the hospital. Or maybe it wasn't an expectation so much as it was a wish.

I didn't get my wish.

The officers had informed me my fiancé died. I learned he'd been out running through the wooded trail five miles from the dog park like he always did, and somewhere along that trail, he died.

Graham was bitten by a poisonous snake. He succumbed before anyone found him.

It was the worst day of my life.

And on top of losing Graham, I lost Henry, too. He'd gone missing, which was so out of character for him. He adored Graham, and for a long time, I kept telling myself Henry must have taken off in hopes of finding help for Graham.

Utterly devastated, I made finding Henry my focus. He was all I had left of Graham. Sadly, after weeks of no luck, I gave up my search. It was the hardest thing I'd ever done.

From that point forward, it was all a blur. I didn't get out of bed for days. No, weeks. I didn't want to do anything or go anywhere.

And everyone else just kept going about their business like nothing happened. How was that possible? Why hadn't time stopped? Why hadn't the world slowed down just a bit to give me the time I needed to wrap my head around the fact I'd lost it all?

That was one of the tough lessons.

Death was a part of life, and no matter how much I wanted to rewind, go back, and get more time, I didn't have any say in the matter.

Nobody knew how much time they had left.

By the time I found the strength to try to join the land of the living again, weeks after Graham's funeral service, it was right at the beginning of fall. And with the season change, a whole slew of new problems arose with Graham's family. They'd never liked me, so I should have expected as much.

And in another situation, I might have responded differently than I did. But I was in the very worst time of my life, so I wasn't prepared to fight them. I did what I had to do to get away from them.

I suffered through the holiday season, feeling alone and absolutely miserable. I'd lost everything. My fiancé, my home, and my dog.

But today, just a few weeks into the new year, something came over me. I realized I needed to find a way to pick up the pieces of my life.

So, I started to unpack the boxes inside my apartment, and that's when I stumbled on Graham's phone. I didn't know what prompted me to do it—nostalgia, perhaps—but I plugged it in and charged it, so I could open it up and go through the pictures. I figured he'd have photos or videos of the two of us I didn't have on my phone, and I wanted them.

I never expected I'd turn on the phone, go to the camera roll, and find a video of Graham by himself, especially not one like this.

Slowly, I took a deep breath and tried to prepare myself to watch the video in its entirety once more. But there was no amount of preparation that

would help. Nothing was going to ease my trembling hands, churning stomach, and racing heart. Not when I knew what I was going to hear.

Though I probably shouldn't have, I slid my finger across the screen and dragged the video back to the start. Then I pushed play.

"If you're watching this video, it's likely I'm already dead. And I need you to know the truth." Graham paused and swallowed. There was such an edge of nervousness in his tone. "There was a mix-up at the dog park. Something completely unintentional happened, and by the time I realized my mistake, I panicked, and it was too late." There was another extended silence, and this one was the one that set my emotions running wild, because Graham got emotional. "I did something I'm not proud of, but I did it to keep you safe, Lamise. I never would have done it if I thought I had a choice. I didn't have a choice, not if I wanted to protect you. But now, things are spiraling, and I might have done it all for nothing. Anyway, I wanted—" Graham stopped speaking and grew visibly and chillingly alert as he looked away from the phone and off to his side, terror in his eyes. Something washed over his expression, something that indicated he'd accepted what was coming. He turned to face the camera again, dropped his voice lower, and said, "I don't think I have much time. I'm so sorry, Lamise. Please know how much I love you. I hope things don't go south, but if they do, please take care of yourself, be safe, and find happiness again."

That's where the video ended.

For several long moments, I stared at his handsome face. Handsome and terrified. The worst part about it was that I didn't know if he was terrified for himself or for me. Maybe it was both. Clearly, he believed I was in danger.

I spent months believing the man I'd fallen in love with had tragically and unexpectedly passed away. Now, I knew that wasn't the truth at all.

My fiancé had been murdered, and someone made it look like an accident.

[Continue reading Unharmmed here.](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.K. Evans is a contemporary romance author of over forty published novels. While she enjoys writing a good romantic suspense novel, Andrea's favorite books to write have been her extreme sports romances. That might have something to do with the fact that she, along with her husband and two sons, can't get enough of extreme sports.

Before becoming a writer, Andrea did a brief stint in the insurance and financial services industry and managed her husband's performance automotive business. That love of extreme sports? She used to drive race cars!

When Andrea isn't writing, she can be found homeschooling her two sons, doing yoga, snowboarding, reading, or traveling with her family. She and her husband are currently taking road trips throughout the country to visit all 50 states with their boys.

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