



One night
would never be
enough.

Irresistible
ROGUE

JANE DIAMOND

IRRESISTIBLE ROGUE

JAINE DIAMOND



Irresistible Rogue

Jaine Diamond

Copyright © 2023 Jaine Diamond

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, uploaded or distributed in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotation embodied in book reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations or persons is coincidental.

Published by DreamWarp Publishing Ltd.

www.jainediamond.com

Cover Design: DreamWarp Publishing Ltd.

Cover Photo: Wander Aguiar Photography

Cover Model: Lucas Loyola

Join Jaine's [**Diamond Club Newsletter**](#) to get free bonus content, new release info, giveaways and insider updates.

Irresistible Rogue

Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Books by Jaine Diamond](#)

[Note to Readers / Acknowledgments](#)

[Playlist](#)

[About the Author](#)

villain

noun

A mischievous or uncouth person; a rogue.

Prologue

Jolie

“Ugh. Where am I?” I clawed the wet hair from my eyes and peered out between the dripping curls. I’d stumbled out of the rain into the refuge of what appeared to be an upscale restaurant lounge. Dark floors, thick slabs of wood and stone everywhere, massive plants and subdued lighting.

The storm blew the door shut behind me and the Instagram model at the hostess stand actually gasped at the sight of me.

“Uh, welcome to Black Bear Grille,” she said dubiously. She had a pretty Australian accent. A lot of the staff here in Whistler were Aussies; they came for the Canadian mountains during ski season. I was born just over an hour away in West Vancouver but I could’ve been an alien the way this Aussie was eyeing me. “Perhaps you’re looking for Filthy Joe’s?” she provided helpfully.

“And Filthy Joe’s would be...?”

“The burger truck parked in the lot at the end of the block,” she said, straight-faced.

I dabbed under my eyes. Did I look *that* bad? I’d just come from a beauty salon. “My mascara is running down my face, isn’t it.”

“Oh, it’s much worse than that, hon.”

Okay, I was gonna go ahead and believe her. About a minute ago, I was shuffling along the sidewalk in my spa

slippers and the sky had ripped open, a torrential rain crashing down on me out of nowhere, because that was how my day was going. A dead car battery on the highway, an hour in a tow truck with an obnoxious tow truck driver, a soul sucking evening of forced “salon pampering,” *my mother*, and now this.

The door opened, wind and rain gusting in as someone stepped in behind me. The hostess stood up straighter, lifting her boobs in the direction of whoever it was.

“Good evening, sir,” she said breathily. “Welcome to Black Bear Grille.”

“I’ll just take a seat at the bar,” I told her when her eyes remained glued to “sir” behind me. “To wait out the storm. Should I seat myself?”

She almost gasped again as her eyes darted back to me. “Not like that.”

“You have a powder room, I assume? I’ll clean up.”

Her eyes raked down my Prince *When Doves Cry* T-shirt and wide-leg sweatpants. “We have a dress code.”

“But it’s pouring rain out there, and—”

“Darling,” a man rumbled behind me. “Aren’t you going to say hello?” His voice was as sultry and playful as it was rough.

I turned to find this guy looking at me. I made a squelched squeaking sound in my throat as I did a whiplash double take. *Holy fucking hell.*

Was he talking to *me*?

I was never prepared to cross paths with an attractive man, especially without any warning. And this fucker was tall, dark *and* handsome. He wore a sleek but simple black blazer, black T-shirt and jeans, effortlessly beauti-fucking-ful. Everything about him screamed: *expensive*. And also: *will fuck you in every sense of the word*.

That last part was due to his luscious full lips, stunning pale-greenish eyes and thick whorls of dark “please grab on and let’s go for a ride” hair.

And the bruises. He had three of them on his face. Forehead, jaw, and a dark one that followed the curve of his left cheekbone.

He also had what looked like either a doozy of a hickey cluster or strangulation marks on his neck.

He held my eyes for way too long to be an accident.

Yup. He was talking to me.

I laughed nervously and turned hot pink. “Um. Hello?”

As his eyes slid down my body, the hot pink crept down from my face and sizzled across my senses like wildfire. He looked at my mushy, wet, dirty slippers and the bits of Kleenex that were stuffed between my toes to keep them spread apart while the turquoise nail polish dried.

That was what set Mom off at the salon: the nail polish color I chose. After that, it all spiraled downhill.

I turned back to the gaping hostess who was apparently dumbfounded that I might be seen in public with *that* man while looking like *this*. Which made two of us. I gathered my scattered brain cells to speak when his low, sultry voice said, “We’ll take your best table.”

The hostess appeared as speechless as I was, but she recovered quicker. “Of course. Right this way.” She turned and headed into the lounge.

Wow. Somehow this hot Nascar driver or whatever he was had so much currency with her that it totally negated my lack thereof. I wondered, as I shuffled along behind her in my slippers, if it was his looks or his money that had her so agreeable.

Both.

“How is this?” she said sweetly, presenting us with a table in the middle of the lounge and gazing at the man behind me like I wasn’t there.

“We’ll take that one,” said Mr. Gorgeous and Bossy.

“Of course.” She rushed to escort us over to the one he’d pointed out in a dark corner. She pulled out our chairs while avoiding looking at me, left us with a menu and elegantly disappeared.

I glanced at him. He seemed to be waiting for me to sit down before he took his seat. How far was he planning to take this hero thing?

“Uh, thank you. But I’d never expect a hot race car driver like yourself to sit with me. Especially looking like... this.”

“Why not?” He smirked faintly. “I mean, you do have a little something, right here...” He made a little circle in the air in front of his gorgeous face with his finger.

Okay, I was way too flustered to deal with his level of hotness right now. I wouldn’t know how to exchange witty banter with this guy if someone handed me a script. If he asked me to sit on his face instead of the chair, I’d seriously consider it. And something about him said that he might, just to see what I’d do.

Dangerous.

I broke eye contact, because I was way out-matched here. “Thank you. But obviously I need to clean up. Have a nice night. Um, thanks.”

Stop thanking him. You sound desperate.

Then I shuffled off in my soggy slippers in search of the ladies’ room, floored that the last five minutes of my life had actually happened.

Thanks, Mom. Thanks a lot.

I pushed through the door into the beautiful washroom, shuffled to a mirror and exhaled. I’d never been so mad at my mother in my life. We’d made such a stupid scene, arguing in the salon in front of all the staff. I’d stormed out like *I* was the difficult one, and now look at me.

The lashing rain and my hair whipping around me had somehow scribbled mascara and lipstick all over my face. I looked like I’d been graffitied. I was a grown woman, and I’d

let the makeup artist Mom hired slather on way more makeup than I'd ever wear. As I set about peeling off the false eyelashes and washing off as much of it as I could, I tried to ignore the other women who came and went, hoping they'd just ignore me too. I didn't really want to talk to anyone right now.

Shit, I couldn't believe I'd talked to that smoldering hottie looking like this. He had like, dewy, sexy rain drops in his hair and on his sharp blazer. And I looked like I'd been swallowed by a hurricane and spit back out. The hair stylist hadn't even finished curling my hair, so the left side was twisted up in clips that were now falling out. *Jesus*. I looked like a nutcase. Who walked into a nice bar looking like this?

This weirdo.

It was official. My mother had driven me insane.

Congratulations, Margot. You finally did it.

I plucked the clips out, stuffing them into my purse and tussling my hair so maybe the whole thing would look intentionally messy-cute? Nope. Just looked crazy. I hadn't cut my blondish hair in a while, so Mom had paid for the cut that she'd insisted on today. It was too short, cut above my shoulders, shorter in the back and longer in the front. It wasn't me.

I tried to tuck it behind my ears and smooth it down a bit. Sort of helped.

But I still didn't look like I belonged in this upscale bar. More like in my hotel room eating Cheetos out of the bag. *Dare to dream*. Probably what I should've just done tonight.

I sighed and tackled the slipper issue, plucking the soggy wads of tissue from between my toes and trashing them. Then I took off each slipper and dried it with the hand dryer. They were nice and warm when I slipped my feet back into them and I actually felt one percent better.

Then I remembered where I was. And where I was supposed to be.

I pulled out my phone and sent a text to my cousin, Danica. *Where are you guys?? I need backup! Margot is already going bridezilla and they haven't even set a wedding date yet!* I really couldn't handle my mom's mile-high expectations and her snooty fancy engagement party tonight without my wingladies.

And a few stiff drinks.

According to my phone, Mom had already tried calling me twice since I left the salon.

Well, I'd be coming to her party when I was ready, looking however I wanted to look. Maybe I'd make her sweat just a bit.

Served her right for being so goddamn overbearing.

When I headed back out into the bar, I could see through the front windows that the storm was still raging. I saw Mr. Gorgeous at his table in the corner. He was alone, he had a drink in front of him, and he was looking at his phone. He'd taken off his blazer and he did not look worse with less clothes on. His arms in that snug black T-shirt appeared to have been sculpted by horny demons.

I tore my eyes away before he could catch me staring. I'd already embarrassed myself enough.

Most of the seats in the lounge and a few along the bar were taken. The vibe was west coast chill, the music cool and subdued, and the dress code was more lax than the hostess's attitude had suggested.

I went up to the bar, where I sat myself on a stool and waited for the bartender to notice me. He was busy at the other end, lining up drinks at the servers' station for the sleek cocktail waitresses to pick up.

It hit me that I'd never actually sat at a bar all alone before.

I usually had my girls with me in a bar, and I'd really only been going to bars—legally—for a couple of months. While I waited, I decided to snap a few discreet photos of the beautiful wood bar for my aunt Madeleine, an interior designer and my employer. Then a text popped up from Danica. *Epic storm on*

the highway! We had to pull over. Will keep you posted. Love you!

Then a text from her twin sister, Daniella, popped up. *Do not let Margot's bitch factor run rampant. And do not let her cut your hair.*

Yeah; too late.

Shit, I really needed my girls here. Maybe I'd just wait here until they came. Or at least until I ran out of beer money and maybe the rain let up and I could make it back to my hotel without getting washed away.

I texted them back. *Okay, be safe.*

I looked up as the bartender approached; he set a drink on a coaster in front of me. "From the gentleman in the corner." I watched him walk away without taking my order, then my eyes dropped to the drink in front of me.

It stood in a tall, curvy glass that was somehow reminiscent of a woman's figure. The liquid, on ice, was a perfect ombre of deep pink at the bottom fading up to blush, and it had an edible flower perched on top. It looked like a piece of art and probably cost thirty bucks. And while I would've loved to drink it, *what the fuck.*

I looked like shit. Why was this guy hitting on me?

I looked into the corner where he sat. He looked over at that exact second and I looked away.

Damn. I wanted this drink. Did I send it back and order up whatever cheap beer I could afford? Or just drink it and play his game?

Was this guy actually looking for a hookup?

With me?

I wasn't exactly here for a hookup. Plus, I had a party to go to.

I was wearing decent panties, though.

Really could've shaved the bikini line this morning...

“Hello again.”

I startled as he leaned in casually next to me. He’d brought his drink over with him. And his blazer. My mouth drifted open as he joined me at the bar without asking, but two seats down, draping his blazer on the empty stool between us. Confident, but not too pushy.

I stashed my phone away. My brain was already rapidly calculating the odds that I’d let this stranger in my pants tonight. No, because he was a stranger. Yes, because he was insanely hot and I hadn’t had sex since... January?

I wondered if he’d change his mind about wanting in my pants after I started saying weird, nervous shit and he realized that I had no game, and I wasn’t the cutely flustered coed he thought he’d romantically crossed paths with on a stormy night but a total disaster who hadn’t been laid in like six months.

“Hi.” I stared at the pink drink in front of me. Fuck, it looked delicious.

When I made no move to touch it, he said, “Taste it.”

Whoa.

His words gripped me unexpectedly, in a deeply intimate place. Not just the sound of his voice—low, sexy, almost taunting—but the way he said the words. It was a command, and it made my guts twist in an amazing, euphoric way.

Not good.

I looked at him again.

How old was he? The luscious lips made him look young. But the dark stubble combined with his eyes made him look much older. He really could’ve been anything from some college athlete in his early twenties who just upscaled very nicely, to a businessman in his early thirties.

He didn’t seem that much older than me, but he also did.

“Why?” I pushed back. I didn’t want this guy to know how flustered he was making me.

“Because I want you to.”

I looked away. I could not keep contact with those wolfish eyes. They were so light against his tan skin. And so... hungry. Yet he leaned casually on the bar, so relaxed.

I slid the drink closer to myself, leaned in and took a sip through the straw. He watched me do it and my cheeks burned.

I swallowed. It was delicious. I tried to focus on that instead of on the strange sensation of knowing that I'd just done what he told me to do *because he wanted me to* and we were both hyperaware of it. It was unsettling and electric.

What the fuck is happening right now?

I needed to call a friend. Use a lifeline. Something.

But I didn't move.

“You're not a football player,” I said tentatively. I searched for the right words, glancing at him. “You don't look... bulky enough for that. But you definitely play soccer or hockey or baseball. Or lacrosse. I don't know.”

“You're trying to guess my profession, is that it?”

“You're an athlete for sure. Or a very athletic claims adjuster.”

He chuckled softly, and it felt like flower petals dusting my skin. “You think I'm in insurance?” Damn, his voice was sexy. He was so... manly.

“You just seem like someone who's very comfortable handling financial matters. Are you here for a business conference?”

“You seem to enjoy guessing. So, guess.”

I glanced at his clothes again, trying not to ogle his physique. “Maybe not business. A bachelor party? But the party was last night. The bruises are from your vigorous orgy with a cheer squad who was passing through. You met them in the lobby of your hotel.”

I thought that might earn me a chuckle again, amuse him, make him seem less intimidating. It didn't.

He leaned a little more onto the bar, shifting a fraction closer to me. “You don’t pay attention to detail, little dove. These bruises are over a week old.” He ran his finger down his bruised cheekbone, touching himself as his eyes held mine in a way that made my mouth run dry. “So they couldn’t be from last night’s orgy.”

“No? How about the hickies?” My eyes darted to the bruising on his neck. “Those are hickies and not strangulation marks, right?”

“You tell me.”

“Hickies.” *I think*. “See, I pay attention to detail.” I tried to sound nonchalant and took another sip of my delicious drink, which I hadn’t actually thanked him for. Maybe I wouldn’t. “Do you?”

“Only when the details are interesting.” His eyes were still on me, and I tried to read between the lines of that.

I liked flirting. Loved it, actually. I was just usually terrible at it. But this guy was definitely flirting with me. My heart was drumming and my cheeks were burning and I loved having his attention on me. It was intoxicating.

“So... I’m a detail?”

“You’re the most interesting thing in this room.”

Wow. I had not been hit on this hard in... ever? At least not outside of a crowded nightclub near two a.m. when dudes were drunk and desperate not to go home alone. I knew I wasn’t ugly, but I’d never had a man who looked like this one laser locked on me like this.

“The hostess finds *you* very interesting,” I informed him.

“Too bad for her, the feeling isn’t mutual.”

Why, though? She was an eleven out of ten.

“Are you drunk?” I inquired.

“Not even a little bit.”

“Then maybe someone told you the really good prostitutes hang out at this bar, dressed in sweats? If so, you were sadly

misinformed.” I frowned. “I think.”

“You’re suggesting I pay for the company of women?” He took a slow sip of his drink. “Maybe it’s the other way around. Maybe women pay for my company.”

“So you’re the prostitute?”

“You wouldn’t pay for my company?” He was teasing me now, for sure. His eyes glimmered, and somehow he looked even hotter when he was giving me a hard time.

If he actually smiled at me, I’d probably pee my pants.

“I probably couldn’t pay for this cocktail,” I confessed, entranced by that glimmer in his eyes. “So I’m afraid you’re slightly out of my budget.”

He took another sip of his drink, set it on the bar, and said, “How about I give you a freebie?”

I laughed too loudly, nervously, as he seemed to be waiting for a response to that. “I’m sorry, did you confuse me with someone?”

“You seem to be the one who’s confused. About how interesting you are.”

I took a long, fortifying suck from my straw, pondering this mind fuck. “I think *you* need to pay more attention to detail. Your observational powers seem way off.”

“So, then, tell me what’s not interesting about you.”

“Nope. No way.” He wanted the goods on me? I felt much more comfortable awkwardly flirting and cracking jokes than actually divulging any personal bits.

“Just tell me one thing about you,” he pressed. “You can even choose what it is.” For a total stranger, he was very bossy.

I kinda loved it. Which was not great.

“I’m not telling you anything,” I pressed back. “You get three questions that I will answer honestly, and beyond that you’re on your own.”

“Three?”

“Yup.”

“Honestly, huh?”

“Swear to God. Use them wisely.”

He seemed to think about that. “How old are you?”

“Nineteen. That’s seriously what you wanted to know?”

“I didn’t see the bartender check your ID. I just wanted to make sure you’re not too young for the dirty thoughts in my head right now.”

Okay, that didn’t sound like he was teasing.

This is not a drill. He’s definitely trying to pick you up.

I quietly cleared my throat, aiming for non-flustered. “How... responsible of you.”

“Do you like delayed gratification?”

Jesus. I took a long, deep pull of my cocktail, the warm fuzzies making this conversation go down easier. “Um. Yeah. I guess.”

He stared me down with those intense eyes of his. “Not a valid answer. You like or you don’t like.”

“Oh-kay.” I tried to keep my expression neutral as my insides melted down. “I like. I mean, what’s not to like? Gratification is gratification. Why not draw it out?”

“Do you like following orders?”

His fingertip was drawing a slow circle around the mouth of his rocks glass. The guy hadn’t touched me, but his finger running down his bruised cheek and now stroking his glass set my panties on fire. When my eyes lifted to his again, he was still watching me, and he wasn’t smiling.

“Do you like,” he asked me again, “following orders?”

I don’t even know his name.

“Um.” *What does a girl say to that?* “Sometimes.”

“No.” His pale wolf eyes held mine. “You like or you don’t like.”

We stared at each other.

There was noise all around us. Music playing, ice and glass clinking, many voices layered over one another. But all I could really hear was his voice, a low, sultry command.

“Say it.”

“Yes.” I swallowed. “That’s three questions. Now it’s my turn. How old are you?”

“I never said you’d get a turn.” His eyes glimmered again as he lifted his glass, taking a luxurious sip of the golden liquid.

“Well, that’s a dick move.”

He set his drink down and cracked a sudden smile. “You have a dirty mouth for such a little girl.”

“Excuse me?”

Did he just call me a little girl? My brain was absolutely fried from that smile.

The smile faded, replaced by that hungry look in his eyes. “I said. You have a dirty mouth. For a little girl.”

Yeah. That’s what I thought he said.

And now he was looking at my mouth like he wanted to shove the entirety of his hard dick into it.

I had no idea what was happening right now. Because this, whatever this was, had never happened to me before. Not even close. I’d had a one nighter or two. A few casual hookups. But this was something else.

Who knew where it was going, but right now I really had nothing to lose, so damn right, I was getting a turn.

“Swear you’ll be honest. How old are you?”

His eyes drifted back up to mine. “Okay. I swear. I’m twenty-six.”

“Are you married?”

“Do you want me to be?”

“You can’t answer the question with a question. And of course I don’t want you to be.”

He shrugged. “Maybe you’re into that.”

“I’m not!”

“Well, I’m not married.”

“Of course you’d say that. Because I just told you I don’t want you to be.”

“All the same, I’m not married. I swore I’d be honest.”

He did. But still.

I took a hearty suck of my cocktail. I was getting near the bottom and feeling a little buzz. I was also feeling bolder and took a moment to search for signs of a wedding band. He wasn’t wearing one and there didn’t appear to be any dent like he’d just taken one off. He wore only a signet ring on his pinky with some kind of engraved crest or monogram on it that I unfortunately couldn’t read.

I met his beautiful, wolfish eyes again. “I really don’t trust you.”

“You probably shouldn’t.” He took another sip of his drink, and this time he sucked a chip of ice into his mouth and crunched it between his teeth, giving me a dazzling smile. “You just met me in a bar.”

“Same here. Third question under the oath of honesty. Why did you pretend we were together so the snooty hostess would let me in?”

“Because I wanted the story on that outfit. Women don’t usually wear spa slippers around town.”

“Well, you could ask me. But you used up your three questions, so I guess you wanted to know those other things more.” I smiled tentatively. I couldn’t really pull off the level of sass that would probably be required to handle a man like him. He’d realize that soon and get bored, right?

He didn't even blink, his eyes locked on mine when he said, "Yeah, well, once I came over here and saw you without all the makeup, I got distracted."

I laughed a little. Was he for real?

"So. Tell me what you're doing in here in those slippers," he said.

Sneaky. He'd rephrased it so it wasn't a question.

It was more of a command.

I gave in with a small sigh. "I'm just avoiding the storm. And by storm, I mean my mother, actually."

"Then you should probably stay and have another drink with me. I imagine she'd love that."

Oh, she'd love it all right. Sex talk with a stranger at a bar? If Mom could see me right now, she'd be appalled.

I looked him over, eyeing those strong arms propped on the bar, but trying not to be obvious about it. He had some bruises on his hands and I wasn't even sure why that seemed... sexy. "So... what are you, really? If not an athlete or an unaffordable male prostitute?"

"I'm sorry, little dove. You used up all your questions."

Ugh. Seriously? He was using my game against me?

"Okay, fine. I'll figure it out. Drug dealer? Or maybe spy by day, secret porn star by night?"

"We prefer to film during the day. All that natural lighting does wonders for the skin. I do my spy stuff at night."

I shook my head. This was getting perversely fun. Even if he was just messing with me. "There's something clandestine about you. And mercurial. And definitely antiestablishment. No way you work for any government. Actually, I take back the porn star thing, too. You might've gotten your start on screen but now you definitely produce the porn."

"It is nice to step up in your career."

"Tell me which guess was the closest to the truth."

“I’m gonna say drug dealer. Although I’m not a drug dealer.”

“So how close is close?”

“Well, technically I am a criminal.”

“I don’t even know if I believe you.” He was toying with me, for sure.

“So, what am I then?” He leaned in a little closer. We were gradually eliminating the space between us, inch by inch. “Have you figured it out?”

“No.”

His gaze dropped to my mouth. “Then tell me your fantasy.”

Oh. My.

This is hot.

I glanced around. No one was even paying attention to us. Did no one notice that the hottest moment of my life was transpiring here?

Where were my girls to witness this crazy shit?

I tried to keep some semblance of cool as I looked at him. I wasn’t even sure why this was going so well. Chemistry? Or maybe he slipped in the rain and hit his head and could no longer tell how out of my league he was?

“Okay. You’re definitely an athlete, then.”

Athletes had amazing physiques like him, right?

And there was just something about him... athletic and polished, mysterious and commanding... the kind of man who could crush an opponent with his confidence alone. The kind of man I’d never talk to unless he talked to me first.

He’d basically hunted me out across the bar and demanded I talk to him. I still wasn’t sure why.

“And what am I?” I asked him.

“I already told you, little dove.”

“Why do you call me that?”

“It suits you.” His eyes drifted down to my chest. “And you literally have doves on your shirt.”

“Oh.” I glanced down. I did have doves on my shirt. His shirt, however, was blank. “And what should I call you?”

“Whatever you like. Big Daddy has a nice ring to it.”

Hmm. I didn't like the little spark of disappointment I felt when he didn't offer me his name. But I tried to hide it. “Okay. If you're gonna make me guess...”

He sipped his drink and said, “I'm not making you do anything.”

Well, that was cocky as hell. He wasn't making me do anything, true. But he knew I'd probably lick his abs in the men's room right now if he asked me to, right?

“Then I'm guessing your name is Maximus,” I said. “You look like a Maximus. Destroyer of enemies, conqueror of worlds, lover of all women... am I on the right track?”

“Almost.”

“Well, nice to meet you, almost Max.” I sucked back the last of my cocktail and slid off my bar stool, maybe just to see if he'd call my bluff. “I'm almost leaving.”

I stopped short when he extended his hand. “Hunter.”

I shook his hand and he tugged me towards him. I ended up between his spread thighs. I took my hand back, but I didn't back away. Christ, he smelled good.

And he was forward as hell.

I didn't hate it.

“And your name is?” he prompted.

“Julie,” I breathed. I could've told him the truth. Julie was kind of a running joke in my life; so many people just couldn't seem to wrap their heads around Jolie, plus autocorrect was the enemy of a name like mine.

But for some reason, I didn't tell him the truth.

His eyes roamed my face as my heart thudded in my chest. We were so close now. Even though we weren't touching, it felt super intimate.

“So, Julie... do you want me to buy you another drink?” His eyes met mine again. “Or do you want me to take you to my hotel room? Or do you want me to fuck off?”

I struggled to find my voice. “The second thing,” I whispered.

We stared at each other.

“Or would you rather go to your room?” he offered.

Maybe he was considering the awkward who-gets-up-afterward-to-leave thing. But in my experience, it was better to get up and leave than to be left.

“Don't worry,” I told him, “I won't stay the night. I won't ask for your phone number or anything. I know how a one night stand works.” I held his gaze, waiting to see if he said anything crazy like, *This is not a one night stand. I must see you again.*

But he didn't say that.

He got to his feet, reminding me how tall and broad-shouldered and *fucking perfect* he was as he slid his blazer back on. “Come with me.”

And I did, just like that, gripping the hand he'd offered me.

“Is your name really Hunter?” I practically panted as I followed him through the lounge. I knew this was against the rules. If he wanted to slip me a fake name, that was his prerogative.

I'd slipped him a fake name, too.

He didn't answer me.

Maybe I should've known right then that this was way too good to be true.

That Hunter *was* just a fantasy. A fiction.

A lie.

But hey, I'd lied to him too.

And I did stay the night.

Because somehow, having a hot stranger drive me to orgasm over and over that night, for hours on end, became more important to me than my mom's engagement party or any other thing on earth.

When I woke up in the morning, he was gone, and I found a note that he'd left for me on his pillow. It had a phone number written on it. And four little words that effectively ruined the best night of my life.

My name is Shane.

I knew right then that I'd been his fantasy as much as he was mine.

Unfortunately, his fantasy was sick as fuck.

Chapter One

Jolie

Four years later...

“**T**his whole situation is just so... vomitous.”

I stood outside the front door of my mom’s imposing white mansion feeling small. It was her fiancé’s mansion, the home of my soon-to-be-stepdad. I could hear the hum of voices in conversation, laughter, and music playing through the open windows.

As I rang the doorbell, my hand actually trembled.

“You are not going to vomit.” In sharp contrast to me, my cousin stood next to me flawlessly composed. Daniella Vola possessed more than enough confidence for one woman and I was really trying to borrow some of it today. “And why are you ringing the doorbell? You’re living here now.”

“So?! I’m freaking out.” I took a deep, calming breath. “And I’m not living here. I’m staying here, temporarily. There’s a difference.”

Dani raised an eyebrow at me.

“Do I stink? I’m sweating like hell.” I sniffed my armpit and she frowned.

She gave the vicinity of my hair a little sniff. “You smell fine. Like a fresh ocean breeze. And maybe just a whiff of last night’s margarita bender.” She frowned again. “And Nutella, actually.”

“I binged while you were in the shower.”

“I didn’t know I had Nutella.”

“You don’t. I picked it up last night when we were drunk. It’s in your kitchen now. Enjoy.” Why wasn’t anyone answering the damn door?

Dani caught my hand, preventing me from jabbing at the doorbell again. “Breathe.”

“I’m freaking out.”

“You mentioned that. There is nothing to freak out about. So you kissed your future stepbrother when he gave you a fake name and you didn’t know who he was. So he’s gorgeous and evil and you’re about to become relatives—”

“That is not helping!”

“Jolie. Get your shit together. You are not nineteen anymore.”

“Big whoop! I’m twenty-three and if you think I’ve learned a thing or two about men and myself and relationships while I’ve been living down in California flunking my way through design school, you are sadly mistaken, my friend.”

“Is this about that loser you broke up with?” she inquired calmly.

Which one? “No. This is not about that loser.” I took another deep breath, trying not to think about my disaster of a life in California right now. “Why aren’t they answering the damn door?” I managed to give the doorbell a quick jab before Dani could stop me again.

“Don’t you have a key?”

I did. It was in my purse. I forgot about that while I was panicking.

I’d only flown home to Vancouver last night, at basically the eleventh hour; I’d avoided the whole occasion of my mom’s impending nuptials for literally years, until I couldn’t anymore. The wedding was in a month, tomorrow I was supposed to pick out my bridesmaid’s dress, and ever since I’d

missed Mom's engagement party four years ago I'd basically spent my life trapped in a guilt cycle because of the *reason* I'd missed her engagement party.

That being, I was fucking a stranger in his hotel room—unbeknownst to my mom.

A stranger who turned out to be her fiancé's son.

Of course, there was also the added guilt that I'd told my beloved cousins that I'd only "made out" with him, as in kissed him, because I couldn't seem to bring myself to confess that I'd shagged his face off for hours on end. And climaxed for him in every imaginable position. At his command.

I would probably never forgive myself for hurting Mom that night over something so selfish. I was getting laid while she cried at her engagement party because she didn't know where I'd run off to. For what? A man who was nothing but a liar and a fucking snake.

For her part, Mom had spent four years putting off her wedding to the man she loved to try to appease her daughter and his sons, who were all passive-aggressively unsupportive of the wedding for one reason or another. She'd been through enough.

This marriage was happening whether I wanted it to or not.

I really didn't.

But Mom deserved to have her only child by her side on her wedding day.

She'd advised me that as one of her bridesmaids I was also expected to come home for the full month leading up to the wedding, to partake of all the formal pre-wedding festivities. At her expense. She'd even covered my rent for the month I had to take off work.

How could I tell her no?

I'd resigned to digging out the damn key when finally, the door swung open and Mom appeared. She lit up when she saw me, even though she'd seen me just last night. It was like she was shocked I'd actually shown up. "Jolie!" She took my

shoulders and air-kissed my cheeks, Margot Vola's version of a warm hug. "Were you waiting long? The music is so loud in here."

I put on a smile. "Hey, Mom." She looked beautiful and sophisticated in her silk pantsuit, her dark hair cut in a sleek bob and streaked with subtle silver-gray.

"Daniella," she greeted my cousin, air-kissing her cheeks, too.

"Aunt Margot."

"Come in. You're fashionably late, *mes filles!* We'll be eating *tout de suite.*"

Dani subtly rolled her eyes behind Mom's back as we followed her inside. Mom was not bilingual, but she'd stuff in whatever French words she knew any chance she got. Like the pretentious snob she was.

I loved my mom, but she really was a snob. Our relationship was complicated and hard, but I loved her. I wanted the next five weeks and this wedding to be good for her. When I'd finally realized that there was no stopping it, sometime last year, I'd finally given in and tried to accept it. She loved Jacob Ellis, and she was marrying him.

I could see why, really. Jacob was an amazing man. It really wasn't his fault that one of his sons was a fucking viper.

"I'm not ready," I hissed, grabbing onto Dani and stopping her in her tracks when Mom strode ahead, into the living room.

Dani gave me a look, telling me without words that if I didn't stop acting hysterical she'd seriously consider slapping me.

I let her go. She looked me up and down, utterly unflappable in her pastel-print tulle dress, her beautiful face framed by long, silken waves of butterscotch hair. Dani was nine years older than me and, as always, lightyears more pulled together. Right now she was at once lithe, sexy, dewy and on point in every way, and I shuddered to be seen next to her.

“I seriously don’t know if I can do this.”

“You have all you need in you, Jolie,” she said firmly. “Don’t get stuck in your head, and do not let some asshole climb into it. You’re smart, sweet, fun, weird, and cute as a button. You have cool friends and perky tits. Any man should be willing to get down on his knees to grovel for you. ‘I need you, Jolie. I must have you, Jolie. Tell me what I can do to make that happen, otherwise I will die, Jolie.’ That’s what you should be hearing. Otherwise, you walk. It’s as simple as that.”

She sauntered into the living room, not bothering to wait for my response. Because to her, it really was as simple as that.

I tried to tell myself that she was right and took a deep, non-hysterical breath, following her lead.

Luckily, the only people in the living room were my own family, the Volas. A couple of my aunts and my cousins, all female. There weren’t many of them, but they were damn loud. It was a Saturday, and for years now we’d been gathering on Saturdays, as often as we could, for Vola family brunch.

I only realized now, walking into the familiar noise—all of them talking over one another at once—how deeply I’d missed these brunches while I was away.

Of course, when Mom moved in with Jacob three years ago, they’d become Vola-Ellis family brunches. Which was exactly when I’d decided to move away.

Not a coincidence.

I greeted my Aunt Madeleine and Aunt Marie, two of Mom’s sisters, and my teenage cousin, Charlotte. Dani’s twin sister, Danica, got up from the sofa to greet me and I gave her a hug; my twin cousins were still two of my best friends, and I’d missed them the most.

I was kinda glad that Danica’s men weren’t here, though; I didn’t need to get any more nervous or awkward today than I already felt. Danica not only had two husbands now, but they were both hot as fuck rock stars. She looked exactly like Dani, so you could see how such a phenomenon could come about.

The women in my family were invariably strong, successful, and self-possessed. Not to mention posh as hell. I was the sole exception to this rule, and I was feeling every inch my awkward self today, in the worst way.

“Jolie, would you like a drink?” Aunt Marie offered.

“Thank you, but no. I’m hungover as shit.”

Danica patted my arm supportively.

So much for sparing myself one of Mom’s trademark non-frowns, the kind meant to communicate maximum disapproval of yours truly while doing minimum damage to her dermis. She was sending me one right now, scrutinizing, searching for reasons to nitpick me.

Already.

I’d woken up this morning on Dani’s couch, late, panic ate Nutella, whipped my hair into a ponytail and splashed cold water on my face. But that was about the extent of my preparations for this brunch situation. I was wearing jean cutoffs and a retro Eurythmics T-shirt, the same thing I wore out to dinner and drinks with my family last night. And aviator sunglasses that were now on top of my head, in case I needed to hide behind them.

Before Mom could tear into me about showing up hungover to one of her formal brunches, in last night’s clothes, I pressed on to get this over with. I’d already seen my whole family last night. When my plane landed, Aunt Madeleine had picked me up from the airport. We’d dropped my bags off here and then we’d all met up for dinner. After that, Dani, Danica and I split off to go drinking and catch up properly.

Right now, I just needed to make the requisite appearance, check Aunt Mireille and Jacob off my mental list, and get the fuck out of here.

The shower in the bathroom off my guest room upstairs had my name all over it. As did the pillow I was planning to pass out on for most of the day.

I knew Aunt Mireille would be found wherever the food was; she owned a bakery and catering service and she was

always in charge of the food. And since I didn't see it served up in the adjoining dining room, I knew it would be out in the sunroom at the back of the house, where we often gathered to eat in summer.

Unfortunately, I heard male voices, plural, out that way.

Fuck.

Just get it over with. Go say your hellos.

He won't even be here.

According to my cousins, Jacob's reprobate son rarely showed his face at family functions anyway.

I stepped into the glass walled sunroom overlooking the backyard to find that brunch was laid out, buffet style, on long banquet tables against the inner wall. And right in front of me, the all-male Ellis family was sprawled on the sumptuous furniture like kings.

They all looked at me as I walked in.

They were sitting beneath a big banner draped across the windows that said *Welcome Home, Jolie*.

Holy God.

"Mom." I stopped short and my mom, who was following me and chattering away with Aunt Marie, almost stepped on me. "What's with the banner?"

"Well, you can't just come home after three long years without a proper welcome party," Mom said.

"Welcome party?" I blinked in shock at my family, who'd piled up behind her as I stalled in the doorway. "I thought we were just having brunch."

"We are. In my daughter's honor, of course. We've all missed you so much."

Right. My family was all staring at me. And surely they had missed me.

But did they have to make such a big deal about it in front of the guys?

Dani smirked at me.

I turned back to face Jacob and three of his sons. They were all here.

All except Shane, of course.

I was simultaneously relieved and fucking annoyed. Was he still causing friction for Jacob and Mom? About the wedding?

Weren't we all past that by now?

Or at least pretending to be, for our parents' sakes?

I slid my aviators over my eyes. Because *ouch*. There were way too many windows in this room and the daylight was blazing and everyone's attention converging on me made me feel like an insect roasting under a magnifying glass.

"Morning, sunshine," Joss said jovially, and I groaned.

Darcy laughed.

I must've been wearing my hangover like a bad dress.

"Welcome home," Brandon said, looking me over with amusement.

I mumbled a *Thank you* and took a few steps into the room, wondering if I could get away with literally not talking to a single one of them.

It wasn't that I disliked Jacob's sons, exactly. Jacob's oldest son, Joss, was a horse breeder, lived on a veritable ranch right in the city and kind of looked like a thirty-something Matthew McConaughey. He seemed to be the nicest of them. The next one was Brandon, Jacob's business partner, some kind of tech investor/genius and all around hottie-in-a-suit. The girls had gossiped to me that he was stinking rich, like richer than Jacob. The youngest, Darcy, was a hockey player, a rich-boy jock who was barely out of high school.

The level of success, sophistication and hotness exuded by guys like these was sort of my kryptonite. But much, much worse than that was the unanswered, unwelcome question that

had taken up rent in my mind for the last four years: *Did Shane tell any of them about me?*

I'd only met Joss, Brandon and Darcy a few times in that first year of Mom's engagement, before I moved down to California. But we weren't total strangers. I was pretty sure Mom blabbed about me to them all the time, as much as she blabbed about them to me. I was her only child, after all. That's why they all showed up to this little welcome home brunch she'd put together, like dutiful future stepsons, and got up to give me a polite hug.

I took the mimosa Brandon offered me even though I didn't really want it.

Then Jacob welcomed me with a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Jolie," he greeted me, the smile lines at the corners of his blue eyes crinkling. Jacob Ellis was a total silver fox. And he'd always been so kind, generous and supportive of me.

Mom was getting a hot new husband; a wonderful husband. And I was getting a wonderful stepfather out of the deal.

And three hot, successful stepbrothers.

I should've probably been more happy about it.

I would've been, maybe, if the *other* stepbrother didn't happen to be the spawn of Satan. I mean, for all we knew, he might've actually been. Shane wasn't actually Jacob's son, biologically.

"It's so wonderful to have you home," Jacob said. "You look lovely."

"Thank you," I said, though "lovely" was probably a real stretch. "Um, I think I need coffee."

Jacob gave me a sympathetic smile. I was pretty sure the extent of my hangover was obvious. I mean, I was wearing sunglasses indoors. "Help yourself, sweetheart."

I gratefully beelined for the buffet as my stomach sank strangely. I didn't *want* to see Shane today. But I also kind of did, just to get it the fuck over with, right? I knew I'd be

seeing him at the wedding, at the very least. And I didn't want it to be a horrible, uncomfortable scene.

I didn't want to have to dread it for the next five weeks, either.

Damn. It really would've been better if he was here. Just rip the disgusting bandage off all at once and face the ugly hole he'd ripped in my self-respect. *Before* Mom's big day.

Aunt Mireille looked vaguely stricken when I mumbled a scratchy hello and hugged her—mainly because she was blocking my way to the coffee—letting me know exactly how much worse I looked than last time she saw me, like twelve hours ago.

Mom was also giving me looks as she picked up a plate and told everyone to get eating. I worked my way over to the coffee and tried to tell myself that it was for the best that Shane wasn't even here.

No, actually, this was way, way better. Because maybe this meant I wouldn't have to see him *at all*.

Maybe I could totally avoid him all month, same way I had for the last four years. And at the wedding, I'd somehow position myself so that I didn't even have to see him. Like, I could keep him behind me at all times.

Yes. With the help of my cousins working as lookouts for me, I could know where he was at all times and just give him the back of my head. Which was more than he deserved anyway.

The next day, I'd be on a plane back to San Diego, and he never even had to cross my line of sight.

It would be the next best thing to if he didn't even exist.

Problem solved.

I poured myself a coffee and with this new plan of evasion firmly in mind, I actually felt better about this whole situation than I'd felt ever since leaving my apartment yesterday to travel here, physically dreading having to see him. Finding Shane absent from this brunch just made me realize that I

didn't need to worry so much about running into him. He wouldn't be around much anyway. I'd just shore up my defenses, and I didn't have to see him at all.

I'd just managed to convince myself that that actually might be true, when Shane walked in.

Our eyes met across the room as I was stirring sugar and cream into my coffee, and even through my sunglasses, he somehow looked right into my soul.

Remember what we did that night? his eyes seemed to demand, and I spilled the cream all over the place.

Chapter Two

Jolie

I sopped up the spilled cream with a handful of napkins as I felt Shane's eyes burning holes into the side of my face. Inside of a split second, I was teleported back in time four years, to that hotel room and every single thing he did to me that night. Naked.

My face flushed hot.

Was he still looking at me?

My family was talking loudly around me as they filled their plates and music was playing, but I was pretty sure I could hear Shane's brothers greeting him. Brandon's voice sounded clipped and guarded. I wasn't the only one who'd gotten their back up when Shane walked in.

Shane Madrigal was Jacob Ellis's adopted son and the absolute black sheep of his family. A rogue elephant. An inglorious delinquent.

And my arch enemy, through no fault of my own.

I hadn't seen him once since the night I met him. The night when he gave me a fake name and fucked me over. Maybe I'd hoped that he might've forgotten about the whole thing by now. Or at least forgotten how enjoyable he seemed to find fucking me over.

The look in his eyes when I glanced up and found him watching me said that he hadn't forgotten a thing.

I turned away, quick.

“God, I hate that guy,” I grumbled to Aunt Madeleine. I tucked myself in next to her at a buffet table—yes, I was hiding—and slammed a croissant and a scone onto my plate.

“Which one?” Madeleine glanced across the room at my soon-to-be-stepbrothers, clearly amused.

“The asshole.” I tossed a dollop of clotted cream on my plate.

“I didn’t realize you disliked him so much.” Really, no surprise that she knew exactly who *the asshole* was.

“I don’t dislike him. I literally hate him.”

“How can you hate him? Have you even met him?”

“Oh, I met him.” *Once*. “And that was more than enough.”

The man I’d met that night had a gorgeous face, a body to match, charisma for miles and apparently no scruples about anything. Even his family seemed to think he was shady as fuck. I’d gathered a mountain of gossip on him, via my cousins, over the last four years.

But most of all I hated Shane Madrigal because he’d fucked me—in every sense of the word.

“Dani doesn’t like him,” I informed Madeleine. “I’m pretty sure even Danica doesn’t like him, even though she won’t say so. She’s still trying to give him a chance. You know, for my mom’s sake.”

“Which is exactly what you should be doing.”

I snorted grouchily.

“They’re not *our* family,” Madeleine pointed out. “Yet. I’m sure there are nuances that we aren’t all privy to. I can’t imagine it’s easy being the adopted son, when there are three others who get so much more of Daddy’s attention.” She glanced over at them. “Imagine if there were three more of *you* whom Margot preferred.”

I laughed non-humorously. “Are you kidding me? She’d be off my back. Sounds like a dream.”

“Yes. Well, Jacob Ellis is not your mother.”

She was right about that. “No, Jacob is a proud father who seems to live for his sons’ happiness. I was my mother’s great disappointment and as you know, she’s vocal about it.”

Madeleine eyed me. “Maybe Shane was his dad’s disappointment.”

Maybe. Probably. But fuck if I was mustering a shred of sympathy for him.

“If his family is disappointed in him,” I grumbled, “I’m sure he’s earned it.”

“Hmm. Let’s not eat our feelings,” she advised. “Croissant *or* scone. Choose one.”

I tossed the croissant back onto the mountain of them. Aunt Madeleine, my former boss and Mom’s youngest sister, was usually the cool aunt. She hadn’t aged a minute since I’d moved away, her hourglass curves poured into a little black dress that some women half her age couldn’t pull off. Unlike my mom, she didn’t judge and I could talk to her about literally anything. I’d kinda gotten the vibe she didn’t much care for Shane, either. Why was she not validating my position on this?

Clearly, Shane was a bad seed. Even kindhearted Danica knew it.

“He’s coming over,” Madeleine said under her breath. I looked up to find Shane making his way along the food spread, loading his plate, and yes, coming this way. “Be nice. For Margot.”

Fuck that.

I turned to bolt, but he kinda boxed me in when he leaned past me to get a pickle.

“Ladies,” he said neutrally. His rough yet sultry voice was a visceral reminder of the best sex and the worst night I ever had. Like a punch straight to the pussy.

I was already sweating profusely when Aunt Madeleine said, “Hello, Shane,” then gave me a look and walked away.

She left me with him. My mouth hung open in her wake but nothing came out.

Shane shoved a whole dill pickle into his mouth and crunched it, staring at me. I wasn't even sure what I expected, but this was not how I imagined our long-dreaded reunion would one day play out. Sunlight blazing around us as Etta James crooned and he chewed on a pickle and trapped me against a buffet table, staring me down.

Already, he'd fucking rattled me. What the hell did he want?

"Can I help you?" I said, as coolly as I could.

"Unlikely."

I turned back to the table to pick out some fruit, figuring he'd fuck off if I ignored him. I could've squeezed past him, but screw him. I was here first. Plus, squeezing past him would mean acknowledging his body and the fact that he'd blocked me with it like a bully. He was tall and lean and ripped, strong, as we both knew, and now he was looming over me—little me, five-and-a-half feet on my tiptoes!—and all up in my space.

What the hell was his problem? Was he waiting for me to acknowledge him? To say something about that night?

Because that was not happening.

I wanted the blueberries though, and he was blocking my reach.

"Do you have a problem or something?" I finally grit out.

"No problem. Why?"

"It's called personal space. You're in mine."

"You didn't seem to mind last time."

My mouth floated open. He did not just fucking bring it up. In a room filled with our family.

I darted a glance around, but nobody seemed to be eavesdropping. Everyone was absorbed in their own conversations and the music was pretty loud.

“You remember.” He leaned into me a bit so I felt the heat of his body. He wasn’t touching me, wasn’t even looking at me but perusing the food when he said, “That stormy night. Kind of romantic, wasn’t it?” Then his eyes met mine, cold and brutal.

He was rubbing it in. Trying to torture me.

As if what he did that night—and the next morning—wasn’t enough.

“I truly hope you choke on a pickle and die.”

“Good thing you never called me,” he said, unfazed. “This moment might’ve been pretty damn awkward if we kept doing what we did that night... now that we’re about to be forever joined by Jacob and Margot’s holy union.”

I organized strawberries on my plate as my face grew hot.

Next to me, he tossed a couple more pickles onto his plate beside a pile of meat. And he definitely shifted even closer when he said in my ear, “Should I call you *little sister* now?”

My face burned. Like, burst into flame. I could’ve probably lit a candle right now.

“You did seem to enjoy it when I called you *little girl*.”

Ass. Hole. What a raging fucking asshole.

I thought he was a snake. I was wrong.

I forced out between my teeth, “You are an absolute swamp creature.”

He chuckled darkly as he moved behind me, and I felt his hot breath on my neck when he said, “You spread your legs for me.”

I looked up into his pale, evil eyes. He was so good looking it made me want to puke. “No. I spread my legs for a fucking lie.”

He bit into a hunk of ham and chewed, staring me down. Then he spoke to me right through his food. “Weak comeback. Work on those, so we can fight properly.” Then he walked

over to where Joss was sitting and flopped down next to him, ignoring me.

I blinked and tore my eyes away. *Holy fuck.*

He hadn't changed. At all.

From the looks of things, he'd only grown more evil.

I should've known. I should've seen it. He'd picked me up that night while he had another woman's hickies on his neck. That should've been a screaming red flag, if nothing else was.

I must've been fucking blinded by pheromones and desperation.

Well, I was seeing clearly now.

Later, the guys were out by the pool, lounging under the patio umbrellas and day drinking, and my cousins were still chatting in the sunroom. Shane had left, as soon as he'd stuffed his face with free food. Thank God.

Mom had implored me to stick around, to postpone my shower and my nap—and the probable mental spiral over my run-in with Shane—and I'd caved. She'd said we had “wedding business” to discuss.

Truly, I hated weddings.

Especially this one.

But I'd promised Mom—and myself—when I agreed to be in her wedding party that I wouldn't fail her on any wedding business the way I did the night of her engagement party, ever again.

So, my aunts and I gathered around Mom in the beautiful sitting room that Jacob had hired Aunt Madeleine to redesign for Mom when she moved into the house. I was still nibbling carefully on my plate of food, trying to settle my stomach, as Mom launched into an unnecessarily formal speech about our placements in the wedding party.

We already knew we were bridesmaids; she'd asked us long ago. But it started with, "Now that Jolie is home and we're all together in one room, we can make it *officiel*..."

I tuned out as she droned on, instead of listening, solidifying my game plan for avoiding Shane at the wedding. I'd make sure Danica was on one side of me and Dani was on the other, the whole time, to provide lookout and a buffer. If I had to use the ladies' room, I'd have one of them escort me so I didn't run into him unexpectedly—

"Jolie. Here's yours." I snapped to attention as Mom presented me, and each of her sisters, with a gift. It was generous, but I'd never wear that diamond encrusted watch. It would hardly go with my thrift store wardrobe. I thanked Mom anyway and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

As my aunts checked out their new watches, Mom prattled on about our pairings in the wedding party. As in, who we'd be walking down the aisle with.

I already knew I was getting paired up with Mom's favorite uncle, Bernard. He was like a father to her. And it was easy enough to do the math. Sure, I was my mom's only child. But she had three beloved sisters who outranked me for the best placements, those being on the arms of Jacob's three beloved sons.

"Jolie, I wanted to talk to you about your pairing in the wedding party," she said gravely, as if my placement in her wedding party was the event of my life.

"Uh-huh."

"You're paired up with Shane. So—"

"What?" I blurted through my mouthful of finger sandwich, instantly panicked. I wiped mayonnaise off my chin and Madeleine passed me a napkin. "Can't I have Bernard?"

Mom blinked at me. "Pardon me?"

"I meant... isn't Uncle Bernard in the wedding party?" Surely her beloved uncle, the man who'd practically raised her, had higher standing at this event than Jacob's ill behaved adopted son.

“Well, of course, Jolie, but he’s walking me down the aisle.”

“Oh.”

What the fuck. Mom was over fifty and had been married three times already. Did she really need someone to give her away at this thing?

“So, I wanted you to make sure to coordinate with Shane,” she said. “You know, make sure you both have your outfits and all your accessories, and you get your hair done...”

As she spoke, it slowly sank in what was happening here. This was master-level Margot Vola shit. In one fell swoop, with this seemingly innocent request, she was passively-aggressively reminding me that I *would* be getting my hair done and to make sure I had my outfit together, because she was worried I’d somehow fuck it up. *And* she was asking me to babysit Shane. Because she was worried he’d fuck up, too.

My stomach sank as I realized that somehow, in my mother’s eyes, I’d sank to Shane-level disappointment.

She saw us as... similar.

“I... I mean...” I stammered, as my aunts all looked at me. “Isn’t that more of a best man thing? Like can’t Joss wrangle the guys, and make sure they have their stuff?”

“Of course. I just thought maybe you and Shane could help each other out.”

Great. Peachy. Like a buddy system for the wayward.

“Right...”

I looked at my aunts, who said nothing. Aunt Madeleine blinked at me while she sipped her mimosa and I knew what she was thinking. *Just go with it. It’s a small ask. You really want to unravel her over this?*

“Is there a problem?” Mom stared at me. She’d never been a tactful mother when it came to her disappointment in me. It was in her eyes right now. *Are you really going to make this difficult? Why can’t you just be a nice, obedient daughter?*

“Nope. No problem at all.” I took a fresh mimosa from the elegant tray on the coffee table and enjoyed a generous sip. Really, best to just keep drinking.

Mom smiled, warmth flooding her eyes. She reached to smooth my hair, and I forced myself not to brush her hand away. “I’m so happy you’re here, Jolie. Really. I could never do this without you.”

I knew, in her heart, she really meant that.

“Yeah,” I forced out. “Whatever you need, I’m your girl.” I meant that, too.

But there was no way, under any circumstances, that I was ever walking down any wedding aisle with Shane Madrigal.

Chapter Three

Shane

“**W**hy would you take a short notice fight like this? One that’s so close to your dad’s wedding?” My best friend, Dane, sat behind the huge, gleaming desk in his expansive office overlooking Coal Harbour, with his laptop between us and his eyes on the screen. He was typing even as he spoke.

I was pacing. I’d been bouncing off the walls all morning, even after hitting the gym.

“You should be celebrating with your family,” he went on, “and helping your dad out right now, not training around the clock.”

I grunted. “Since when do I celebrate anything with my family anymore?”

He frowned, but didn’t look at me. I’d become accustomed to having conversations with Dane Davenport while he was buried in a device, overseeing his dozens of minions who were overseeing his dozens of companies. Was still annoying as fuck.

“Okay, so, even if you’re not into the wedding stuff,” he said, “you’re gonna be in training camp and totally unavailable to him. Do you think that’s gonna hurt him a little?”

“He’s not gonna be shocked. He knows my priorities.”

“Right. Illegal fighting. Pussy. Fast cars. Getting drunk...”

“I don’t get drunk when I’m training for an important fight.”

“I forgot your motorcycles,” he added. “And whatever you do at that kinky private club you go to.”

“And you are correct. I’d much rather fuck with any of the above than spend another moment of my life playing the well-behaved adopted son at a family function just to keep Jacob Ellis’s image as father of the year intact.” Not to mention that I was not spending the next month of my life running into Jolie Vola’s sour little face at endless family functions leading up to this wedding.

“Since when have you ever played the well-behaved son?” Dane inquired.

“Well, I’ve never really run out of the fast cars and pussy so I’ve never really had to.”

“I’m really not sure how we’ve been friends this long.”

“Because I’m fucking fun.” I flopped onto one of his couches. “Remember high school? You used to be fun, too.”

Dane just leveled me with a cool look over his laptop. “You cannot fight Moe Brampton.”

“Yes, actually, I can.”

“Let me rephrase. You cannot fight Moe Brampton with three weeks’ notice and *win*.”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence.”

“He will demolish you.”

“I disagree.”

He sighed inaudibly and went back to typing. “I really don’t think you should take this fight.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Call it a gut feeling.”

“Tell me that’s really how you make important decisions in business.”

“It is, actually. A lot more than it used to be.”

“I’m taking the fight.”

He shook his head. “How did this even come about?”

“You saw how he called me out online, right? The YouTube video? I sent you the link.”

“Yes, I saw it. Do you wanna tell me why Moe Brampton is suddenly so worked up about you that he publicly challenges you to a fight? He’s a pro MMA fighter.”

“Whatever. He’s past his prime.”

“He doesn’t fight on the underground circuit like you do.”

“So? I guess he’s desperate for some hot press and a big, splashy fight. Courtesy of yours truly.” I gave him a winning smile.

Dane just looked skeptical. “*Why?*”

I sighed. “Okay, so, Johnny and I were at the bar last night, and—”

“Oh, Christ. Whenever you start a story with a line like that, I know it’s not gonna be good.”

Fair enough, considering our buddy, Johnny O’Reilly, was a rock star and he and I had stirred up some legendary shit over the years. But still. “Calm down, Grandma. We didn’t inhale. Johnny’s been a good boy lately. He’s all wrapped up in that Angeline chick. She was there, too. So were Lex and Talia. We just had a few civilized cocktails.”

Hearing his brother Lex’s name, Dane stopped typing and scowled at me. “Why wasn’t I invited?”

“You were invited. You didn’t come, asshole.”

“Hmm.” He seemed to accept that explanation because we both knew it was fucking true. “Proceed.”

“Anyway. Johnny and I are standing at the bar to get another round for the girls while Lex is taking a piss, and this guy bumps into me.”

“Jesus. Are you mentally sixteen?”

“Can I just tell the story? He bumps into me and whadya know, it’s Moe Fucking Brampton, MMA legend. He pretends he doesn’t see me there, but he totally fucking did. I ignore it. Then Johnny says, ‘Hey, isn’t that Moe Brampton and did he just bump into you on purpose?’ Johnny wasn’t trying to stir up shit or anything but I was just in a mood and then I couldn’t get it out of my head and then I turned around and told Brampton that if he wanted to push me around like a bitch, he should do it in a ring.”

Dane sighed.

“He said something about how I could never beat him in a legitimate, sanctioned fight. So I told him he couldn’t beat me if I tied my hands behind my back and fucked his mom first to tire myself out.”

Dane actually choked back a laugh.

“Then he might’ve tried to punch me, Johnny’s bodyguard got into it and Brampton called me a coward, and next thing you know he’s calling me out on the internet, challenging me to a sanctioned fight. Because he thinks I’m not as good as him just because I’ve never had a ‘legit’ fight. But we both know that’s bullshit because if that was the case he wouldn’t even know who I was. He fucking knew who I was. His buddies knew who I was. And the reason they all know who I am is because I’m virtually undefeated.”

“Yes. I know. You’re the reigning middleweight king of the underground.”

“I am. Thank you for noticing.”

“You should be happy with that title. It’s what you wanted, right?” Dane gave me a pointed look. “And now you can step down gracefully before you get killed.”

“I’m not gonna get killed.”

“So you’re gonna go on pay-per-view and fight a seasoned pro fighter with impeccable stats? We’re not talking about some seedy abandoned warehouse with a chalk ring on the floor, Shane.”

“Same shit, different pile.”

“Are you crazy? Is that it?”

“Probably. But we already knew this.”

Dane just shook his head at me.

“Look, his stats aren’t as relevant as you think. He’s getting old. And slow. And sloppy. I pack way more power into my punches. And I’m an all-around better fighter. I know I am. I just don’t have the data to back it up. He thinks I’ll be an easy victory. I need to prove him wrong.”

“Need?” he said dubiously. “Again, *why?*”

I didn’t even know what to tell him.

I got up and started pacing again. I couldn’t really explain why I was so itching to do this. Or why I’d been pacing a hole in the floor all night and day, with all this jagged energy in me. At least, I probably couldn’t explain it any way that Dane would understand.

He was super successful, loved to win in business, sure. For a billionaire, he worked way too hard and way too fucking much, but that was just my opinion. He didn’t understand the way I lived, either.

The man could sit still and focus like a fucking laser. For hours on end.

I was more of a raging bull. I didn’t like sitting still.

But hey, there was a point in my life when I was laid up in a hospital bed. When I’d literally almost died. I’d come this close to losing my life, fucking young, and I’d lost my dream career because of it. I thought I might never walk again or live a normal life, much less skate. And maybe I never got back out on the ice, but I’d fought my way back from the brink of death, literally.

I was still fighting, in every sense of the word.

Maybe it was some kind of addiction or obsession or something, but I would not give up the fight.

And I did not back down from a challenge.

Jolie Vola, of all fucking people, had lit something up in me yesterday and I'd left that brunch at my dad's place itching to fight. And when I went out drinking with the guys last night, Moe Brampton provided me with an opportunity.

I knew it was a mistake to drop into that brunch. To see her. What was the point? It went down pretty much exactly how I expected it to. She was the stuck up snob I'd taken her for and nothing about that had changed.

If anything, seeing her disgust with me in person just added insult to injury.

So, fuck it. I'd be training for a fight that would consume my life for the next four weeks, with no need to run into her again. And by the time I looked up from my victory, the wedding would be over in a blur and she'd be gone the fuck back to California.

"You're turning thirty-one in a couple of weeks, Shane," Dane reminded me, still trying to talk me down when I didn't answer him. "That's plenty ready for retirement from fighting. Especially bare knuckle, concrete floor, serious-injury-prone fighting. It's insanity."

This, again.

I knew he wanted me to retire. He'd never liked that I went into fighting, especially in the way that I did—taking unsanctioned, bare knuckle fights on the underground circuit.

"Plenty of guys fight long into their thirties, Dane."

"Increasing their odds of injury, not to mention brain damage. Did you know your personality can literally change after too many concussions?"

"Aw, that's sweet. You like me just the way I am and you don't want me to change."

"It's really not a joke, Shane."

"There's a risk of concussion in hockey, too," I reminded him.

"So you're really willing to risk your health, your head, brutal injury, over... what? Making some public point on

social media? Winning TikTok likes? Do you really fucking care about Moe Brampton calling you out?”

“Maybe. What choice do I have but to answer the call?”

“All of them. You have all the choices. You could ignore it. You could turn it down. Announce your retirement in that shady little community and move on with your life.”

“That shady little community has been fun for me. I realize it’s not an elegant square box...” I turned in a circle to indicate his office walls. “Where I stare at a screen and click the keyboard and move money around. But hey, we can’t all have the exciting life that you lead.”

He gave me another disapproving look and kept typing.

“I’d like your support,” I told him seriously.

“I can watch you get your ass kicked on pay-per-view,” he muttered, “if it really means that much to you.”

“Yeah. Maybe it does,” I growled. “Or maybe I just want a chance to be seen as something other than some failed hockey player.”

Dane looked up at me, and this time his disapproval was for an entirely different reason. “You never failed at hockey, Shane. If you could’ve gone all the way, you would have.”

“Now there’s the vote of confidence I’ve been looking for.”

He breathed a long sigh and watched me pace. “What is it that’s crawled up your ass today, really? Is it the fight or the wedding? Or something else?”

I kept pacing, not sure how to answer that. Or if I really wanted to.

Fuck it.

“Jolie Vola just got back into town,” I grumbled. “Dad’s soon-to-be-stepdaughter. For the wedding. She’s—”

“Danica’s cousin?”

Yeah. *Shit.* I stopped pacing.

Danica Vola was one of the card-carrying members of the Hot Girl Circus, as Dane liked to call them. His wife, Devi, and Lex's wife, Talia, and Johnny's new girl, Angeline, all had a whole interconnected crew of girls who were always swarming around, having spa days and ladies' nights, swapping secrets and keeping all their men wrapped around their hot little fingers. And if Dane already knew who Jolie was... she was probably just a girls' night out and a line of shooters away from full penetration into the inner circle.

Nope. Not happening. If any guy I knew hooked up with Jolie...

"So?" I growled blackly.

"I think Devi knows her."

"She lives in California."

"Too bad. She's cute."

"No," I corrected him. "She's fucking annoying."

"Then why are you bringing her up?"

"Because she's fucking annoying. I'm bitching. This is a bitch session."

"I thought you brought her up because she's cute."

"Are you listening to me? Or are you in a meeting right now?"

"I can multitask."

"Have you met her?"

"I think I saw her somewhere once. Maybe a picture? Or at a party?"

"I told you, she lives in California."

"Maybe when we were in California."

He was definitely not listening to me.

I flopped onto one of his couches again. "She said she sucked your dick while you were dressed like a rodeo clown and riding on a pony."

Finally, his eyes flicked up to me again over his laptop.

Then he stopped typing.

“How would that ever happen?” he said mildly.

“Now that I have your fucking attention.”

“Rapt.”

I let out an aggravated groan. “Okay, promise you won’t get all judgey and up on your high horse about marriage. And how my sex life depresses you because I’m a depraved slut.”

“I make no such promise.”

“I fucked her.”

“Who, Jolie?”

“Yes, Jolie. That’s who we’re talking about right now.”

“Your... stepsister, Jolie?”

“There is no other Jolie, okay? And she’s not my stepsister. Yet,” I muttered.

He shut the laptop and slid it aside. “This is fascinating.”

I got to my feet. “I’ll go talk to Lex.”

“Sit down.”

I paced around the room, then sat back down.

“Go on,” he said.

“I fucked her. It was like four years ago. The night of my dad’s engagement party. I met her in a bar and I fucked her.”

“Say you fucked her one more time, I don’t think you mentioned that enough.”

I gazed at him solemnly. “I fucked her a lot, bro.”

Dane rolled his eyes. “Continue. Get to the point.”

“You give the best heart to hearts.”

“I try.”

“You’re a billionaire and president of a corporate conglomerate and you’re incompetent. Just fucking listen.”

“I’m listening. Why the hell would you fuck her when you knew your dad was marrying her mom?”

“I didn’t know who she was. She said her name was Julie.”

He put his fist in front of his mouth.

“Are you laughing?”

“No,” he lied. “It’s just so beautiful when things come around full circle. What is it called? Oh, yeah. Poetic justice.”

“Fuck you. I gave her a fake name too.”

He shook his head. “Of course you did.”

“What?”

“Why would you do that?”

I threw up my hands. “Because that’s just how we do sometimes. You know this. It’s not to be an ass.”

“Of course not.”

“It’s anonymity. So they don’t find out who my family is. Don’t tell me when you were single you never picked up a chick at a bar and gave her a fake name, so she wouldn’t know who you were. Or who your family was.”

“I’d prefer to stay out of this.”

Of course he would.

“She said something about it being a one night stand, but that’s just what girls say, right? She was nineteen. Why wouldn’t she want to see me again? I made her come like six times. We did gymnastics. It was like the Olympics in there.”

Dane sighed and looked at his watch.

“I left her my number. And my first name. Then the next day, I found out who she was. I’m sure she found out who I was, too. Because, you know, radio silence. Then she avoided me like the plague, and then she moved to California. Like I’m a fucking leper.”

“That’s offensive to people with leprosy.”

I tossed out my arms. “Are there any in this room right now?”

“You mean besides you?”

I hurled one of the little decorative pillows from his overpriced couch at his head. He ducked.

When he recovered, he smoothed his perfect, dark-blond hair and squinted at me. “Oh. You like her.”

“Did you hear anything I just said?”

“I heard everything you just said.”

“And?”

“And you clearly have problems.”

“That does not help me.”

“Oh, you wanted help? I thought you were bitching.”

I got up. “I’m going. I have training. Tell the guys about the fight. You’d all better be there. And *not* watching it on pay-per-view.”

“Uh-huh. Get laid or something. You get moody when you don’t get it enough.” He was already back on his laptop, typing away. “I keep telling you, you need a girlfriend.”

“Nice talk, bro. So glad I came to you instead of Lex.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“You’re a real peach, Dane Davenport.” I slammed out of the room.

“You’re moody!” he shouted after me. “And you’re not ready for this fight!”

I went back and leaned into his office. “You know what? When you had Devi problems and you came crying to me, I helped you out.”

“Get your ass inside and close the door,” he growled. “I work here.”

I rolled my eyes and stepped back inside.

“Yeah, you helped me out,” he conceded, “for about five minutes. The rest of the time you gave me a hard time and you loved every fucking second of it. Come to think of it,” he mused, sitting comfortably atop his high horse, “it is fun being on this side.”

“There’s no side, Dane. You’re just an asshole, right up the middle.”

He chuckled.

I turned to leave.

“Shane.”

I stopped. “What the fuck now?” He was right. I was moody.

“Tell her you like her,” he said, with exaggerated patience, like he was addressing a kindergarten brat who’d just crammed a handful of paint in a girl’s face, “and you’re sorry for that stupid thing you did.”

“Is that what you did with Devi?”

“Honestly, not nearly as soon as I should have.”

Yeah. That might be solid advice. If I actually liked her.

“You are seriously dense. I don’t like her, okay? I *dislike* her. These are opposites.”

“Whatever you need to tell yourself.”

“And I didn’t do anything stupid. She’s the one who fucked up, not me.”

“Uh-huh.

“Heyyy, what’s up?” Lex strolled in like he owned the place, smelling of motorcycle exhaust. Because Dane was basically a giant fucking hypocrite who disapproved of my dabbling in illegal activities while his own brother was an outlaw biker, for life. Lex went to clap hands with his brother, saw me standing there, glowering by the door, and looked back and forth between us. “Are we doing lunch or what?”

“Why didn’t you just tell me Lex was heading over?” I grit out.

Dane smiled.

“Hey, I’m here now,” Lex said jovially. “No need to fight over me.” He sprawled out on a couch. “What the hell did I just walk into?”

“Shane was just telling me a story,” Dane said, looking way too happy to have company on this. He held up his hand as if to silence me. “Let me see if I can summarize it. You meet a girl and you give her a fake name. She tells you she wants a one night stand, and she gives you a fake name...”

A grin crept across Lex’s face.

I looked up at the ceiling.

“Afterwards,” Dane said, “you leave her your phone number. She doesn’t call you. And you’re mad about it for four years.”

“That is not what I said.”

“That’s what I heard.”

Lex snickered. “What’s this girl’s name?”

“Julie,” I growled, before Dane could say another word. Then I turned and walked out.

Chapter Four

Jolie

“I am so not wearing this.”

I stepped awkwardly out of the fitting room and, at my mother’s urgent gesturing, up onto the platform. To model a dress that I would most definitely not be walking down the aisle in.

The color scheme Mom had chosen for her wedding was white with touches of gold, and classic red accents. And apparently her bridesmaids’ dresses were the bulk of these accents. It wasn’t something I’d normally wear, but I didn’t mind the bold red color on me. I’d seen photos of my aunts in their dresses and they all looked beautiful.

But this dress was a whole problem.

Thank God Mom’s face agreed. She was looking at me sideways and poking at the layers of tulle that puffed out around me. “It really did look better on the hanger...”

It really didn’t.

“Let’s not even pretend, Mom. I look hideous in this.” I was already turning around and heading back into the fitting room.

Mom went back to sipping her champagne while she waited for me to wrestle myself into the next dress. The two of us were alone for a private fitting in some fancy boutique, pop music was playing softly, there was champagne on ice, and

Mom had already made it clear we'd be here all day if we needed to be. There was a whole rack of red dresses in here that she'd had the boutique staff pull for me.

Hopefully, one of these would do the trick. Mom was already annoyed with me that we were buying off the rack. She'd wanted to have a dress custom made for me, but because I was "being difficult"—in other words, living in another country—she said there wasn't enough time for that. So, she wanted to make sure there was ample time to have whatever dress we chose today altered and accessorized properly.

And *I* wanted to make sure that I looked goddamn amazing when Shane saw me at this wedding.

I was definitely *not* walking down the aisle with him. Mom was absolutely delusional about that. I'd find a way to stop that from happening if I had to fake a broken ankle.

But after that little run-in at family brunch yesterday, the gloves had come off. He wanted to be an asshole? Fine. That was his prerogative, and apparently the guy had the manners of a barn animal. But no way was he getting the last word on this.

The last word on this was going to be *me*, absolutely killing it at this wedding in a dress that would ruin his life.

Or, you know, at least make him think, *Huh, she really is cute.*

I'd take what I could get.

Either way, the man was not winning this ugly little battle he'd waged with me.

Weak comeback. Work on those, so we can fight properly.

Oh, I'd work on them, alright.

Get ready for a comeback, asshole.

I plumped up my cleavage in the corset-style bodice of the dress I'd just squeezed into. Then I stepped out of the fitting room in the fifth dress I'd already tried on today and basically hated.

Mom's face brightened a little. She came around to cinch up the back for me, and I could barely breathe. "Well, this one is better," she said, stepping back as I floated onto the platform, trying not to trip on the giant skirt.

I wriggled, trying to get comfortable. "It's digging into me..." I tried to take a deep breath and one of my boobs almost popped out. I slapped a hand over it.

Mom did that non-frowning thing she did. "You might need some tape."

"It's too tight, Mom."

"So, perhaps a larger size."

"But then the skirt will be too puffy. I'm already swimming in it."

Mom started aggressively digging around in the crinoline underskirt. "Then we'll have it altered..."

"This dress is all wrong for me." Could she not see that? It was glamorous but so formal, and I felt awkward as hell in it. "Really, Mom. Am I attending Prince Charming's ball or your fourth wedding?"

"You look like a princess!"

"I know. I'm not the princess type."

"But you're my daughter. I want you in something... *extraordinaire*."

"All the other bridesmaids' dresses are classy and understated. They're grown-woman dresses. Why do I have to look like I'm stepping out at my sweet sixteen or something?"

"Well," Mom said, still fussing with my skirts, "maybe if you'd actually had a sweet sixteen..."

Oh, Christ. The woman was still lamenting the fact that I'd never had the "proper introduction to society" that she'd dreamed of for me. The one where she got to trot me out in front of her wealthy friends and hook me up with one of their sons. "What is this, a Jane Austen novel?" I slapped her hands away lightly. "Not this one."

Mom made a little clucking noise as I stuffed myself back into the fitting room. I wrestled my way out of the dress, then pawed through the others, shoving aside anything with a crinoline, a train, or too many layers.

Finally, I found something. I pulled out a long, satiny sheath with spaghetti straps. Now *that* looked like a grown woman's dress. When I slid into it, it poured over my body like liquid silk. When I stepped out, Mom actually gasped a little.

I stepped up onto the platform and turned to look in the mirrors. "Now, this is a dress I could wear. I feel like a femme fatale." I'd never actually worn anything so glamorous in my life, and I was loving it.

"Hmm. It's very sexy, Jolie. Maybe... too sexy?"

"Are you kidding me? I saw what Aunt Madeleine is wearing. She's a walking drink of wine in that fitted little velvet number."

"But... that's Madeleine. You know how she is," Mom added in a hushed voice, as if her younger sister's overt sex appeal was an affliction we should all speak sensitively about.

"So? Can't I be sexy?"

She pursed her lips a little, and I knew she was fighting back the urge to say *No, you cannot*. "This dress is getting close, Jolie. But let's just try on a few more."

"Sure. Let's." I sighed and marched back into the fitting room. I'd promised myself that I would indulge her today. It was *her* wedding.

I pawed through the dresses some more, until I found another one I liked. The top was sheer lace with cap sleeves and the skirt was long and silky, flowing. I slipped into it and held it when I walked out so Mom could zip up the back for me. Once I'd stepped onto the platform and we both looked at me in the mirror, I was the one who gasped.

The lace of the sheer top covered my nipples but you could definitely see the shape of my breasts. It was so... flattering. I'd never seen my boobs look so good in any dress. I'd

probably have to wear a silk cami under it for the wedding, though, because *yikes*.

I stuck out my leg. The long skirt had a slit all the way up the front of the left leg that was killer. This dress was to die for. Sexy, yet so classy.

“Mom. Please tell me this is the dress.”

“You look... *incroyable*,” she admitted.

“Was that a yes? If you don’t want it for your wedding, I’ll buy it anyway.” I was spinning back-and-forth, examining myself in the dress at every angle, and every angle was super flattering. “I’ll do laundry in it. I’ll freaking sleep in it.”

“It’s four thousand dollars,” Mom said dryly. “Do you have that kind of money to waste on a laundry dress?”

“I don’t care. I’ll sell my car. It’s about to die on me anyway.” Seriously, I’d consider homelessness for this dress. It didn’t even need jewelry or accessories. This dress alone was a total statement.

And the statement was: *Eat your heart out, swamp troll.*

Mom was still gazing at me. “Put on the shoes and do a little turn.”

I slipped into the pumps that the boutique had provided and did a slow turn for Mom, and then another one. “So? What do you think?”

“*C’est magnifique.*” Mom’s eyes met mine. “I think we found the dress.”

I clapped my hands. We’d agreed to pick my dress together, and ultimately Jacob was paying for it. She was right that I couldn’t afford it. “Thank you! I love it.” I’d seriously never been so excited about a dress before. But if I had to go to this wedding and so did Shane, I was going in this dress.

There were actual tears shining in Mom’s eyes as I twirled in front of the mirror, getting used to the high heels. I didn’t wear heels often. She handed me a fake-flower bouquet that the boutique had also provided and I held it for her perusal. I felt amazing. Maroon 5 was playing and everything about this

moment screamed *wedding*. For a split second I almost got carried away and asked if I could try on a bridal dress. I'd never tried one on before. And now that we were done getting my bridesmaid dress sorted, maybe we could just keep having fun?

But then Mom just had to ruin it.

"I'm so glad to see you really embracing this wedding," she said, suddenly pretending to look through a rack of veils, "because my wedding planner just quit and I'm going to need some extra help."

I stopped twirling. "Your wedding planner did what now?"

"She quit," Mom said lightly, avoiding my eyes. "I mean, *they* quit. The whole service. Wedding planner, wedding designer..."

"What are you talking about? What wedding planner quits the wedding this close to the big day?"

"Well, mine did, Jolie."

"*Why?*"

"I don't know. They said something about a difference of opinion."

Oh, God. Mom's wedding planner and her wedding designer quit her wedding a month before the event. Because she was a freaking bridezilla.

"*Mom*. What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything, Jolie," she said defensively. "I was paying them a lot of money to do their jobs. It's not my fault if they don't fulfill their obligations!"

Just then, the owner of the boutique strode in from the back to check on us. "And how are we doing, ladies? Can I get you any..." She drifted off when she saw me broiling and Mom looking perturbed.

"We're doing just wonderfully," I told her.

"Yes," Mom agreed. "We'll let you know when we need anything."

“Of course.” The poor woman turned on her heel and vanished into the back room.

I drew a deep breath. I’d promised myself after the fight we’d had four years ago in a salon in front of the entire staff that I wouldn’t get in public fights with my mom anymore. Granted, it was a lot easier to uphold that promise when I didn’t actually live in the same country as her.

“Have you talked to Madeleine about this?” I asked her.

“Oh, Madeleine is so busy with her interior design clients. She said she’d have a final look over everything for me. But she can’t actually get her hands dirty on this...” She was gazing at me with a certain expectant look that I did not love.

“Uh-huh.”

“So... well, I thought you could do it, Jolie.”

“But, I can’t.”

“You aren’t working while you’re here. You’ll have time.”

“Time isn’t all that’s needed to design a wedding, Mom.”

“Of course not. But you just designed that wedding for your friend, what was her name? In California. You’re so good at it.”

What’s-her-name was the friend of my coworker. But that was just a small wedding and I wasn’t even paid much to do it.

“I’m not really a professional wedding designer, Mom. I’m an interior design school student on the ten year plan who works in a thrift store,” I told her, because apparently she needed reminding.

“I saw the photos of that wedding. You did a beautiful job.”

“Thank you. But I told you I wasn’t going to design *your* wedding. We already talked about this.” She’d fielded the idea with me like a year ago, after I designed a wedding for another friend.

And I’d basically told her *No way in hell*.

“And that made perfect sense when you were down in San Diego,” she said. “But now that you’re here and the wedding is approaching, and once again I need a wedding designer... Why not?”

Right. Why not. I could think of a few reasons why not.

Like for starters, the idea of taking my mom on as a client was the stuff of nightmares.

“I’m assuming you have a generous budget for this,” I said. “Just hire someone.”

“Now, how can I trust just anyone with this when the first someone up and quit? And so close to the big day?”

She had a point.

“I thought you’d done several weddings now,” she pressed.

“Yes. I have. But not really on purpose.” I hadn’t really thought of it as a serious job, either. I’d pretty much fallen into it, mainly because so many people I knew had been getting married and since I was so painfully single all the time, had no real prospects in other design-related jobs and had nothing better to do, in their eyes, I’d somehow gotten roped into designing a friend’s wedding. And word spread from there.

“Well, this one can be on purpose,” she said.

“Mom, I hate weddings.”

“Oh, you say that. It can’t be true.”

“Trust me, it can.” The *always a bridesmaid and never the bride* thing was getting old. And I was only twenty-three. With no boyfriend or decent prospect in sight.

Weddings, at this point in my life, were landing somewhere between mildly annoying and completely depressing.

“Well, this is your mother’s wedding,” she reminded me. “And a lot of the work is already finished. The venue and catering were booked long ago. Invitations have all gone out and RSVPs have come back. Flowers and cake and decor have

all been arranged. Of course... much of the decor is actually owned by the wedding design service..."

"The service that just quit?"

"Exactly. So I really need someone to take over that part. You know, execute the design on the big day. Make sure we have everything we need and that everything looks *immaculé*."

God. Was I actually considering this?

She was gazing at me so hopefully. "This will be an easy job for you, Jolie. And we will pay you, of course."

Ugh. I did not want to be swayed by the lure of a paycheck here, *but*. I wasn't exactly living large on a thrift store cashier's pay. Spoiler alert: it was barely above minimum wage.

I sighed. "How much is there left to do, really?"

"Not much at all," she insisted. "Everything has been organized, right down to the seating plan. I just need you to make sure that everything goes according to plan."

Great. So if anything went wrong, I'd get the blame.

But something she'd just said snagged my interest...

Seating plan.

If I was in charge of the wedding plan and the design... and had access to things like the seating plan... I could make damn sure that I didn't have to sit next to Shane at the head table or some such nightmare. In fact, I could arrange it so that I never had to be anywhere near him at all.

"Okay. You know what? I'll do it."

Mom beamed. "Oh, darling," she gushed. "It's going to be so much fun!"

That, I highly doubted.

But for the first time, standing here in my hot dress with the promise of some control over how this wedding rolled out, I was actually starting to look forward to it just a tiny little bit.

Maybe I wouldn't even hate it.

After parting ways with my mom, I took a cab down to Kitsilano to meet my best friend for lunch, at a little bistro a couple of blocks from the spa she managed. Alyssa was already at a table when I walked in and she sprang to her feet, lighting up when she saw me.

“Take a picture already,” I teased her as I approached.

“I’m just so happy you’re home!”

We collided in a tight hug. “Me, too.” We saw each other every week, at least, on FaceTime. But it really wasn’t the same. I’d missed her company, her vibrance, and the way that being in her presence always made me want to be a better me.

I held her out at arm’s length. “I should be the one taking pictures here. You’re so sophisticated it hurts.”

“What, this old thing?” She smoothed her fitted midi dress as we got seated. It had bold black-and-white stripes. Her long brown hair was in a thick but tidy braid, just a dab of red lipstick on her scrubbed-clean face. Alyssa had always exuded this minimalistic, classic elegance, whereas I was... a patchwork in progress. “You are a sight for sore eyes,” she told me, holding my hands across the table.

“Thank you. You’re way too kind.” She really was. I’d done zero with my hair today, didn’t bother with makeup, and unlike her outfit, the jean skirt and T-shirt I was wearing were hardly worthy of a fashion column. But Alyssa and I had lived on the same street for a while when we were kids and had been like sisters all our lives, right down to our occasionally dramatic arguments and ride-or-die loyalty. “You are gonna love this. My thrift store wardrobe just got a major upgrade. In the form of a four-thousand-dollar dress.”

“You got your bridesmaid dress?”

“Yes, and it is stunning. I feel way more battle ready now.”

Alyssa cringed sympathetically at the mention of said battle and released my hands as the waiter came by to take our

order. When we were alone again she asked me, “How are we feeling about all *that*?”

“Marginally better, now that I’ve agreed to help out with the wedding. I’m taking over as Mom’s wedding planner and designer. *Only* to execute on the plans that are already in place,” I added quickly, before Alyssa could utter *Are you insane?*

“Oh. Wow,” she said instead, with sympathy. Because she’d met the bride. Many times. “And you’re already regretting this agreement?”

“You know me too well.”

She grinned. “Well, you know what? I think this could be an awesome opportunity, actually. You’ll get more experience, beautiful photos for your portfolio. Maybe you’ll want to keep designing weddings.”

“Doubtful,” I said crustily.

She smiled gently. “You’re still hating on weddings?”

“Pretty much.”

“You know Margot and Jacob are going all out on the budget, though. Not easy clients to land, if you weren’t related to them.” That was true. “And I’m sure they’ll pay you generously.”

“They will.”

“I know you’re probably afraid of clashing with Margot, though...”

“Not really,” I admitted. “She just wants everything to go smoothly. This wedding means so much to her. I’ve never seen her this happy, actually.” That was true, too. It was kind of sweet. My uptight mom, glowing like a teenager in love whenever Jacob was near. “She won’t fight with me on this. I think.”

“You can do this,” Alyssa said supportively. “You have the skills, and you have excellent taste...” She batted her eyelashes. “And bright side, you’ll probably make so many

contacts while organizing things for the wedding, boom, you get a job offer and come back to us.”

I smirked. “That’s the plan?”

“Maybe Madeleine will hire you back,” she mused as the waiter dropped off our drinks. Wine for her and my favorite for me: a lime margarita.

I took a sip. “I’m really not looking to take my old job back.” I wasn’t, and she knew that. I’d left my job as a receptionist at Aunt Madeleine’s interior design firm when I moved away three years ago. And she’d replaced me three years ago. With someone who was probably way better at that job than I ever was.

“Well, at least working on the wedding will give you something to do, to keep busy while you’re here,” she said, taking a sip of her wine. “So you don’t just... you know...”

“Spend my time eating Cheetos while plotting my new stepbrother’s murder?”

She practically shivered. “Stop calling him stepbrother. He ate you out. It’s creepy.”

Yeah; Alyssa knew the whole, ugly truth. And she was the only one who ever would.

“That’s literally what he’ll be in five weeks.”

“Okay, technically,” she said. “I guess. But you’re both adults. It’s not the same.”

I took a swig of my margarita and confessed, “I saw him yesterday.”

Her jaw dropped. “You saw him already? And you didn’t tell me?”

“I wanted to tell you face-to-face. It was too depressing to try to put it in a text.”

My best friend looked pained, for me. “That bad?”

“It was... a nightmare, actually. He was revolting. Tried to remind me how much I enjoyed it.”

“Seriously?”

“I hope he rots in hell.”

“What did you do? Please tell me you slapped his stupid, pretty face.”

I laughed bitterly. Alyssa had never met Shane, but I’d described him to her vividly, and anyway she’d Googled him.

So had I, after the night I met him.

As it turned out, there were a few searchable photos of him online, on account of his fifteen seconds of fame back in college. When he was a fucking hockey player.

I’d been right. He was an athlete.

Though his hockey career was over long before I met him.

Too bad I never thought to look him up *before* that night at the bar. I’d met Jacob’s other sons by then, and I knew he had an adopted son; a son he had a strained relationship with. I knew his name was Shane. I even saw a few photos of him as a boy and a young teen in Jacob’s house. But the man I met in that bar did not look like that boy. And anyway, I had no reason to wonder what Jacob’s son, the only son I hadn’t met yet, looked like, or if he was hot or if he would try to fuck me in a bar one night. Because who does that?

“No, I didn’t slap him. I wouldn’t give him the pleasure. He’d probably get off on it or something.”

Alyssa kind of snorted, because we both knew that Shane was an amateur MMA fighter. Mom never said so, but my cousins had heard the rumors—that he was involved in “underground fighting,” whatever that was. And Alyssa also knew almost every detail about my night with him.

All the kinky, yummy shit we did, all instigated by him. The bruises and scars on his body and the way he dominated me. The way he called me *little girl*. The way he bossed me around and I fucking loved it.

The way I cried the next morning because I was so humiliated when I discovered who he was.

I'd cried in her lap, too. As soon as I got home from Whistler and told her the whole story in person.

"You've got to forgive yourself for that night, Jolie," she told me, reading me like a book.

"I know. I just... can't yet."

"You've punished yourself for four years already. Yes, you hurt your mom. Yes, you guys had a painful fight. And yes, she worried about you that night when you disappeared. You devastated her when you didn't come to her engagement party. I know. We all know. But you've worked it out since then. Things aren't as bad as they used to be between you two."

"Yeah. Because I moved to another country to get away from her."

"Did you?" Alyssa asked me meaningfully.

I sighed. "I don't know."

"Or did you move to get away from him? And the memories of that night?"

"Both, okay? You know that. I didn't move away. I ran away. And it didn't fix anything."

She gazed at me hopefully. "Then why don't you move back?"

"Because I have a job and a life down there."

"And family up here."

"Too much family," I said sourly. "And it's only getting bigger. And there is no way I could stand to be around him. Family brunches, dinners, Christmases..."

Alyssa gasped. "You're not coming back for Christmas? Like, ever?"

"You may have to start doing Christmas in California if you ever want to see me again."

"Well, damn." She looked kind of sad and I hated that I was disappointing her on this. But she had to know I wasn't moving back. "I'll confess... I'd really hoped that when you

saw him again it wouldn't be as bad as you feared, and maybe somehow I'd get you back."

"Sorry. Not the case. It was way, way worse than I feared, and he is way bigger of an asshole than we ever imaged."

She sighed. "Well, if you're really only here for five weeks..." She raised her wine in cheers. "Let's make the most of it. I've got my best friend back and I couldn't be happier. At least be happy for me, okay?"

"I am happy to be here. With you." I tapped my drink to hers and sipped.

"And with your mom?" she prompted.

"And with my mom."

"Good. Then maybe you can finally let the guilt about her engagement party go. Wipe the slate clean between the two of you and start fresh. This is an exciting chapter in Margot's life. She finally found a keeper. Because we all know your dad wasn't that."

"Very true."

"And neither were the other losers she married in between."

I groaned. "Don't I know it. Remember husband number three? Lennox? The stuffy antiques dealer? He was *such* a snob."

"The one with the moth collection?"

"That was husband number two."

Alyssa shuddered. "God. He was a snob, too. Can you imagine screwing that guy?"

"No, I cannot."

"Jacob Ellis is a serious upgrade."

"Yeah," I agreed. "He is that."

That evening, after eating dinner with Mom and Jacob, I went into the sunroom with Mom's wedding book and all her notes and spread them around me on the floor.

The house was so much quieter with only the three of us here, but it was cozy as the evening sky darkened outside and lights twinkled in the gardens. The sunroom itself had a warm glow at night.

I felt more comfortable here than I expected to, considering that Shane grew up in this house.

Maybe because Aunt Madeleine had overseen a complete redesign of the interior of the house, which Jacob had paid for, when Mom moved in. And Madeleine was an incredible designer.

I wondered how willing she might be—or not—to let me consult with her on this wedding design. I was sure Madeleine would help me with anything I asked, in general, but the bride *was* her uptight, overbearing older sister. I suspected there was a reason she'd turned down the gig in the first place, besides just being too busy with her interior design clients.

I glanced up as Mom came in. She smiled when she found me poring over her wedding plans. Hiring me on to help with the wedding and seeing me in my dress today really seemed to please her.

I realized I felt a little warm about pleasing her and then got annoyed with myself. I really thought I'd stopped worrying about pleasing Mommy when I moved away.

"Jacob's got a little work to do in his office tonight," she explained, wine glass in hand. "Mind if I join you?"

"Of course not. It's your house." *And if I wanted to avoid you I'd hide in my room or leave.*

Mom kicked back on a chaise in front of the windows with her wine and a book—which had a very muscular, shirtless man on the cover. I tilted my head to get a better look at it. The cover guy had meaty pecs, bulging abs and a beard, and he was holding an ax. There was a forest and a log cabin behind him.

“Uh, Margot?”

“Hmm?”

“What the heck are you reading?”

She met my eyes over her book, then glanced at the cover like she forgot what was on it. “Oh, Jacob bought it for me. One of the ladies at my golf club turned me onto this series.”

“I didn’t know you read romance.” Not that Mom wasn’t a romantic... I just never in a million years would’ve thought she’d find a man with a big beard and an ax up her alley.

“Jacob is very passionate in the bedroom,” she said simply, and my ears started to bleed. “I want to make sure I can keep up with him.”

I stared at her, struggling to unhear what I just heard.

She shrugged. “He enjoys it when I read my steamy books and come to bed feeling a little extra *amoureuse*.”

“TMI, Mom,” I groaned, shaking my head. “TMI.”

I refocused on the wedding plans, leaving her to her steamy book.

Like Mom said, there wasn’t much left to do. But I could’ve easily filled my time from now until the wedding having fun—tweaking the design. If I wanted to.

And I kind of did.

When I’d asked about the design budget at dinner, Jacob had told me that there was no budget. As in, he’d pay whatever it cost to give Mom the wedding she wanted.

And what she wanted was now pretty much whatever I recommended. Unless she vetoed any of my ideas. There was definitely some wiggle room for me to put my own spin on the existing design. Mom even seemed pleased when I’d suggested it to her at dinner.

I’d never had an opportunity like this. The weddings I’d worked on so far had all been pretty tight in the budget.

Mom and Jacob were having a destination wedding up in Whistler because Whistler was special to them; Jacob had proposed there, they'd had their engagement party there, and they went up every year to celebrate their anniversary. So Mom's previous designer had really leaned into the Pacific Northwest vibes, incorporating a lot of wood and local foliage and flowers. It was high end, warm and elegant, but I really thought something a little more glam would suit Mom and Jacob better, not to mention the dress Mom would be wearing. And we could definitely pull in a little more of that classic red that she seemed to love.

"Mom? Are you okay with me changing out the flowers? And switching out some of the decor?"

She looked at me. "Can we do that?"

"We can do anything we want. As long as there's time."

"Well, sure, Jolie. As long as there's time. I don't want any stress about last minute changes, and I don't want Jacob to have to worry about a thing," she said seriously. Which was actually pretty hilarious, because Jacob wasn't gonna worry about anything to do with the wedding unless Mom started melting down or something.

"We'll be fine, Mom. I promise. I won't take any crazy risks. I'll make sure we have backup plans for everything, and I will for sure run everything by you before making any final decisions on purchases."

"Okay, then."

I returned my attention to the piles of paper in front of me and dove into my next task: double checking that all the RSVPs were in so that I could help Mom finalize the seating chart.

"You know, maybe this is actually a blessing," she said happily as she watched me work. "My daughter gets to help plan my wedding after all."

"It is a dream come true," I said sarcastically.

She just *tsked* at me and went back to her mountain man.

I sat back, looking at the pile of RSVP cards and the rough seating chart the wedding planner had put together with Mom. It was printed out in front of me, along with a paper trail of every other detail that had been planned so far. It was all so well organized.

But as I'd pored over the details, it was becoming clear to me that in the middle of all this careful planning there was one large, glaring black hole. In the shape of a swamp troll.

Only three guests had not yet RSVP'd for the wedding. One was a business colleague of Jacob's, and one was an old friend of Mom's.

But the other one was Shane.

No matter how many times I searched through the RSVP cards I'd organized around me, there was no RSVP from him.

"Mom? Are you sure that all the RSVP cards you received are in here?" I knew Mom had sent every one of Jacob's sons a formal invitation. They were all on the list. I was looking at a card from Joss and one from Brandon right now. Darcy, the spoiled jock, had even RSVP'd.

"They are. I kept them all together. Why?"

I stared at Shane's name on the invited guest list. *Shane Madrigal +1*. He was seated at the head table on Mom's seating chart. He was seated right next to me, in fact. (Though not for long.)

He was in the freaking wedding party.

And he hadn't RSVP'd.

"Darling?"

When I looked up, Mom was eyeing me with concern. "Huh?"

"Are you alright? You made that noise."

"What noise?"

"The one you made when you were a little girl, right before you made sick."

Did I? “Oh. Uh... I’m fine.”

Her eyes swept the paperwork spread out before me. “Is there a problem with the plans?”

“Nope. No problem. Everything looks great.” I gave her a smile.

Mom went back to her book and I looked over the printed emails and invoices from the suit place again, and the tailor. Shane also hadn’t gone in for his suit fitting when he was supposed to. He was the only one who hadn’t; the groomsmen’s fittings were supposed to be done last month, but Shane’s was not.

Suddenly, my disgust for the man took an angry turn. Was he seriously trying to mess with the wedding plans?

No fucking way.

Like hell would I let him ruin a single detail of this wedding for Mom or Jacob.

I picked up a pen and drew a line through his name on the seating chart, and wrote *Darcy* above it. Then I stroked out Darcy’s name at the other end of the table and wrote *Shane* above it. There. I’d sit next to cocky jock-boy. Better him than the swamp creature.

“You can try,” I muttered under my breath as I sketched a little swamp troll face next to his name, “but you are not going to ruin this wedding, Shane Madrigal.”

“Hmm? What was that?” Mom glanced up from her book.

“I said, this wedding is going to be so magical.” I forced another smile.

It would be. I would not let him win.

If Shane wanted a fight, he’d get a fight.

But as Mom smiled back at me, a niggling little seed of guilt took root.

Because what if he really did try to ruin the wedding, and it was all because of *me*?

Chapter Five

Shane

I stumbled across my apartment, wondering what time it was and tripping on an inflated fuck doll—male—someone left on my floor. “Fuck.” The doorbell was jangling like whoever was ringing it was taking a nap on it. I unlocked the industrial door, which opened directly into the elevator, and hauled it open. “*What.*”

The ringing stopped and I rubbed my eyes with the heel of my hand, trying to wake up.

Jolie Fucking Vola was at my door.

I blinked, hoping I’d hallucinated her. No such luck. She stood in my elevator staring at me with a sour, snotty little face.

“What the fuck do *you* want.”

Her eyes raked over me briefly before she looked away. “You are a class act, Shane Madrigal.” Other than last night’s underwear, which I’d just pulled on, I was naked and it seemed to be offending her.

Well, this was my fucking home. She was lucky I was wearing anything. “Who let you up here?”

“The guy at the door.”

“You mean, security? The guy I pay to keep losers out?” My eyes scraped over her T-shirt and cutoffs. “What the hell did you do to make that happen?”

She drew back, like I'd just accused her of sucking him off. "Uh, I asked nicely!" She hesitated. "And... I told him you were expecting me."

"So, you lied."

She shifted uncomfortably. "I told him we're... *family*." She shuddered the word like it debased her to utter it. "I figured you wouldn't let me up. And I needed to talk to you."

That last sentence seemed to almost make her vomit.

But that one word... *needed*... kinda piqued my curiosity.

So I decided not to slam the door in her face. For now. "What time is it?"

"Almost noon. Were you sleeping?"

"Fuck, yes." I scratched my balls.

"Put some clothes on," she said irritably.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because we're having a conversation."

"Are we?"

I turned and wandered back toward the bed area, yawning.

"Uh, may I come in?" she said from the elevator, like she was the fucking crown princess and I'd dared to not roll out a red carpet and grovel.

"I don't give a fuck what you do. But I am changing, so." I dropped my underwear and heard her spluttery response. After I'd dug some fresh ones out of a drawer and slid them on, I glanced over my shoulder. She was still standing in the elevator, and she was covering her eyes.

I wandered into the closet and yanked on some sweats, then wandered back out, stretching. She was still covering her eyes.

"Are you dressed yet?!"

"Define dressed."

She peeked through her fingers, then her hands dropped. She gave my shirtless torso a sour look, then stepped inside and slid the door shut as I disappeared into the bathroom to take a piss. When I came back out, she was standing in the middle of my industrial loft, taking it all in. The high ceilings. The pristine gym area. The open, high-end kitchen off to one side.

The walls of windows overlooking downtown Vancouver, which were currently covered in blinds.

I opened the blinds with the remote and daylight poured in.

“Your place is... nice,” she said neutrally, hugging herself as she moved toward the kitchen and away from me.

“You expected me to live in the sewer?”

She gave me that sour little face of hers. “You’d be quite at home, I’m sure.”

I wandered over to her. “How did you find out where I live?”

“Invitation list.”

“Huh?”

“For the wedding. Did you not get your invitation?”

I stared at her. Was she for real right now?

“You want me to believe that you came all the way over here to make sure I got my invitation?”

She bristled. “You didn’t RSVP.” Her arms were angrily crossed, her shoulders were tight, and according to her grim little face, she was serious.

I fucking laughed. “RSVP?”

Her cheeks turned pink. “You have to RSVP. So everyone knows you’re coming.”

“Everyone?” I crossed my arms, kinda mirroring her stance but without the stick up the ass. “The only one who seems concerned about if I’m coming or not is you.”

She sucked in a breath like she was really trying not to lose her shit and said icily, “My mom asked me to help out with the wedding. So, I’m helping.”

Of course. Because she was such a good little girl that she’d do whatever Mommy and Stepdaddy said. “Did she ask you? Or did she *tell* you to help out? There is a difference, you know.”

“This wedding means a lot to her,” she ground out, “and to your dad.”

“So?”

“So, are you going to show up for it?”

“Presumably.”

“Great. Then can you please get your suit fitting like you were supposed to?”

I eyed her. We were in a weird stand off, right here in my apartment. And I was barely awake yet. “And now you’re in my face about a suit?”

What was she doing here, really?

“Yes. Because Jacob and your brothers already got their suits and you’re all supposed to match. Don’t you ever think of anyone but yourself?”

I pretended to consider that. “I do. But they’re usually curvier than my dad and blonder than your mom.”

“Oh, he likes curvy blondes. How unexpected.”

My eyes dragged down her body. I was guessing, from the attitude on that, that she didn’t consider herself curvy or blonde.

She had plenty of curves, though, from where I was looking. And she was sort of blonde. Somewhere between dark blonde and light brown? I wasn’t sure what I’d call her hair color.

Perfect?

She sighed. “Would it help if the suit tailor was curvy and blonde?”

“Not even a little bit.” I reached past her, startling her, as I picked up a large hunting knife that was lying on the bar and pulled the serrated blade from the leather sheath.

Her eyes widened. “What are you doing?”

“Cleaning up from last night.”

I went over to the fuck doll and stabbed it dead. I stomped all the air out of that poor deflated bastard and stuffed him in the kitchen garbage can. I sheathed the knife and stashed it in a drawer.

All the while, Jolie stared. “Is it normal for you to have sex dolls and giant knives lying around?”

“Maybe. It’s called a party.” I swiped all the greasy pizza boxes off the counter and dumped them in a pile on the floor.

“What kind of party is that?”

“Get some fun friends and maybe you’ll find out.”

She blew out a breath.

“Great comeback. I see you’ve been working on those.”

“How’s this. I would’ve thought you’d be more into live humans than inflatable ones. But I guess a swamp troll like yourself takes what he can get, huh?”

She squirmed, looking around as if for an escape route, as I strolled back over to the bar where she stood and got too close. I reached past her to grab a banana from the fruit bowl. I peeled it slowly and said, low and deliberate, “You couldn’t handle what I’m into.” I held out the banana, offering her a bite.

She scowled.

I studied her sweet, roundish face. She had pretty lips. Not a tiny nose, but the bridge of her nose had a little bump that somehow made it endearing. She wasn’t even wearing makeup and she had soft, clear skin, with a blush on her cheeks that was just growing brighter as we bickered. Her hair was just

past her shoulders, in waves that she'd spent a lot of time working to make look natural, or that were actually natural. The big, pink-rimmed glasses were adorable.

She was exactly as cute, effortlessly cute, as I remembered her being.

No, she was definitely perfect.

No wonder Dad adored her. He'd always been a sucker for a pretty woman.

As she stared at me, I took a bite of the banana and dumped the rest into the blender on the bar. "You never answered my question. What do you want?"

She huffed a little. "I want to call a truce, okay?"

I almost laughed. Then I headed into the kitchen, started loading more ingredients into the blender. Frozen berries and powdered greens.

The only reason anyone would call a truce was because they knew they couldn't win.

Take Moe Brampton. Like hours after I agreed to fight him, he'd withdrawn from the fight. Said, on his YouTube video about it, that his team had advised him against it. Whether his team advised him against it because they thought he was too good to fight me or because they thought he couldn't really beat me and didn't want him to disgrace himself by losing to the likes of me, I'd probably never know.

The greasy sleazebag who touted himself lord of the underground fight circuit, a guy I knew only by the goofy alias of Buddy Black, had texted me last night to ask me what I wanted to do about it. Did I want to pick up another fight? He probably knew I'd be hungry for blood.

But I didn't text him back yet.

Decided it was a better idea to have a few dozen people over and get trashed. Might as well, right? Since my training camp was abruptly over about as quickly as it started.

Though maybe I'd just stay in training.

Maybe taking another fight was the only fix for this fucking jagged energy coursing through me.

I glanced at Jolie. She was watching me. Waiting on my reply, like she'd wait all fucking day even if it killed her, literally, to put up with me.

Whatever this was about, it was important to her.

“Now, why would we call a truce?” I goaded her.

“Because our parents are getting married and I don't want to have to worry about you being horrendous and ruining their wedding.”

“So don't worry about it.”

“Jesus. Can't you just act civil?” I was about to answer that honestly when she muttered, “You already ruined their engagement party.”

Right. I chuckled under my breath. “I ruined their engagement party.” From what I'd heard, her mom had cried at the engagement party, because she didn't show up.

She was a grown woman; not my fault she was enjoying my dick too much to bother with that fucking party.

I didn't bother with it myself. But no one exactly cried about it, did they.

“Never mind,” she said, gritting her teeth. “Let's just stick to the present. You were rude at brunch. How do I know you won't behave even worse at the wedding?”

“Actually,” I corrected her, “you were rude.”

“I wasn't.”

“You were rude *first*.”

“That's—”

“And you know what?” I scooped avocado into the blender and licked off the spoon. “I don't like rude little girls.”

I could practically see her skin crawl when I called her a little girl. “Whatever,” she grit out. “I am not here to spar with you, okay?”

“But it’s so much fun,” I said sarcastically. “Relax. I am not gonna spar with you in front of them. I don’t come to family shit anyway.”

“But... you’re coming to the wedding, right?”

I dumped some protein powder into the blender, then a whole whack of powdered supplements, and didn’t bother answering that.

“How am I supposed to arrange the head table when I don’t even know if you’re showing up?”

“That sounds like a you problem.”

When I glanced at her again, her entire face had turned pink. “What is it? Is it weddings in general you have a problem with? Or just this one?” *Or is it me?* her desperation seemed to say. Because for sure, she was wondering if *she* was the reason I was being difficult about this.

She was, really, but I wasn’t gonna let that go to her head.

“I actually like weddings,” I told her. That was true.

Just not this one.

“Then can’t you just cooperate?”

“Let me think about that. Hmm. Nope.” I turned on the blender, letting the noise drown her out. Then I leaned back against the counter and started drinking my smoothie straight out of the blender.

When I finished the smoothie, Jolie was still frowning at me.

I licked my lips. “You’re still here?”

She glowered at me. “You know, everyone thinks you’re a fuck up.”

“I’m hurt.”

“You’re not hurt. Because you’re a slimy swamp creature with no feelings.”

I laughed again.

“But some of us do have feelings. Like your father. Don’t you care about him?”

I gave her a dark look, then rinsed the blender. When I turned around again, she was still standing there. “Aren’t you done yet?”

“Not really,” she said, like she wished she was.

I wandered over to the corner by the windows where my home gym was set up and started taping my hands.

She followed me.

Her eyes roamed over me as I started beating on a punching bag. As strange as it might be for me to have her in my apartment out of nowhere, I was pretty sure it was way more uncomfortable for her. So maybe I’d just let her hang out all day.

If this was a waiting game, I’d wait her out. She thought she was any kind of match for me? She had no idea.

She took a deep breath and said quietly, “Will you please just do the suit fitting?”

Jesus. That didn’t even take long.

It was sweet, actually, that she was so desperate for my cooperation. She must’ve hated herself right now.

I had zero interest in cooperating with her, though. Or pleasing my father. I preferred to subvert shit. Especially people’s expectations of me.

If she expected me to be nice, obviously I’d be a dick.

And if she expected me to be a dick, well, just maybe I’d play nice.

If she didn’t realize she’d just strolled into the wolf’s den, that was her mistake, not mine.

“When’s the fitting?”

That seemed to shock her. She took a moment to scrape herself together. “Uh... I can set it up for you. Sometime this week, probably.”

“Fine. I’ll be there.”

“Really?” She stood there gazing at me, looking annoyingly vulnerable.

I looked away.

Jolie Vola was just another perfect addition to the only family I’d ever had and never really belonged in. My dad had always favored his real sons over me. Joss was Dad’s best friend. Brandon was Dad’s business partner. Darcy was Dad’s pride and joy; the baby of the family, he was destined to go pro in hockey, the way I was supposed to but fucking didn’t.

I was just a tragedy. A regret left on Jacob Ellis’s doorstep after a one night stand—and I wasn’t even his child. My mom was a con artist and my real dad was a ghost.

And Jolie Vola? She was the daughter my dad always wanted.

It pissed me off at brunch the other day when he pulled me aside, told me I’d have the *honor* of walking her down the aisle at his wedding—and warned me to treat her like gold.

She wasn’t even in the fucking family yet, and she was more golden in his eyes than I ever would be.

I stopped beating the hell out of the bag and stood panting, staring her down. I licked my lip, slowly, contemplating.

She kinda shriveled, like the Big Bad Wolf was licking his chops at her.

I looked her up and down. Her little yellow kicks and her jean shorts, her cropped top with Poison *Talk Dirty To Me* on it.

And I wondered how easy, or how hard, she’d be to seduce.

I mean, I did it once, right? We were strangers then, and maybe she hated me now, but I could work around that.

Hell, maybe she’d even *enjoy* that.

Maybe I would, too.

“You ever listen to that band?”

She glanced down at her shirt. “Uh... not really.”

“Then why are you wearing that shirt?”

She squirmed. “I just thought it was cute.”

Of course she did.

“It’s retro. It’s a vibe.”

I wasn’t even sure why it annoyed me, but then I realized. Because it was fake.

“So it’s a fashion statement now, being fake?”

She gaped at me. “I work at a thrift store. Which is where I get all my clothes. Because I work for a living and I’m basically poor. We don’t all live off of Daddy’s money.”

I stared at her and she fidgeted. I wondered why she wasn’t just fleeing the fuck out of here. She got what she wanted, didn’t she?

She couldn’t possibly be lingering for the pleasure of my company.

Unless, of course, she wanted more of my company.

“I’m gonna be working out for like three hours,” I informed her, “and then I’m gonna shower, go for dinner with a couple of my biker friends, then I’m gonna go place an illegal bet on a fight and watch two guys beat the shit out of each other. You coming?”

She looked mildly terrified, revolted and offended all at once. “Uh, no.”

“Then you better leave.”

“I’m going.” She scurried over to the door and I strolled after her, reaching to open it for her. But before I did, when I had her trapped between my body and the door, I looked down into her eyes. Through her big glasses, her blue/green eyes gazed up at me.

“What?” she said.

“Your eyes are different colors.” The right one was blue and the left one was more green.

“Uh, yeah. I know that.”

I hauled the door open and she dodged into the elevator.

I stared at her, holding the door open so she couldn't leave. I'd met her all of twice in my life. At brunch the other day, where she was wearing sunglasses indoors. And that night in the bar, and the hotel room... I thought I'd gotten pretty intimate with every naked inch of her, but somehow I'd never picked up on the fact that her eyes were different. She wasn't wearing glasses that night. Maybe she was wearing contacts?

“Uh, can I go now?”

“Sure thing. Guess I'll see you at the wedding shower this weekend.”

Her eyes went wide. “Wedding shower?”

“Maybe we'll have a drink.”

“We are not drinking together. We are *not* friends, Shane.”

She stared at me, waiting for me to say something. Or to close the door so she could leave. Just waiting for my lead.

And I remembered her, that night...

How she'd been, like sweet, melted caramel, gooey and willing in my hands.

“I never said we were,” I uttered darkly. Then I shut the door and let the elevator sweep her out of my face.

I paced across my apartment, fucking aggravated.

What was I even doing?

Was I training or not?

I didn't like not knowing who my opponent was or if I even had one.

The truth was, Moe Brampton backed out of the fight because he—or his team—thought I was beneath him. Lesser than. Unworthy.

Just like she did.

Jolie didn't call me after she discovered who I was because she was embarrassed that she'd lowered herself by getting in bed with me. And now someone had gotten in Brampton's ear, talked him out of fighting me, so he wouldn't lower himself.

Pissed off, I finally answered the text from Buddy Black.

Me: Moe Brampton is a fucking pussy. Find me someone who will fight me.

Chapter Six

Jolie

“Are you getting drunk?” my date for the evening inquired.

Alyssa appeared both amused and concerned for my health as I sucked on a vodka paralyzer, which I’d been enjoying with a champagne chaser. “Like, on purpose?”

“Nope. Totally not.”

Said the drunk girl.

My best friend smiled wryly at me. She took a ladylike sip of her champagne and returned her attention to my aunt Mireille, who was standing several seats down from us at Mom’s mile-long dining room table, delivering a toast. We’d already finished up dinner and now it was all toasts and cocktails.

“I’d like to thank my sister, Margot,” she said, “and her soon-to-be-husband, Jacob, for allowing us to host this wedding shower in their home. We wanted it to be perfect for you,” she said to Mom, who was seated across from me. “Elegant yet personal, with your closest friends and family gathered to celebrate your upcoming wedding. It has been such a long time coming.”

There was some gentle laughter of agreement, and Mireille raised her glass. “To Margot and Jacob.”

Everyone seated along the table did the same. “To Margot and Jacob,” we chorused. Then we drank; I took a hearty swig of my champagne.

Across from me, Jacob leaned in and kissed my mom.

I could hardly believe this was happening.

When Shane said *Guess I'll see you at the wedding shower this weekend*, I seriously didn't know what the fuck he was playing at. I figured he was just being an ass, trying to mess with me somehow. But as it turned out, everyone in my family, including my mother, had somehow failed to mention to me that the wedding shower her sisters were throwing for her was a *his and hers*.

Meaning Jacob and *his* close friends and family were invited, too.

Including Shane.

Which meant *another* big event I'd have to see him at.

It was hard enough to force myself over to his apartment to request a truce in hopes of ensuring his cooperation and civility at the wedding when I still thought that was the singular event I'd have to endure him at.

And now here I was. *Three times* in one week I had to deal with this guy?

But as Mireille went on with her speech, my eyes wandered along the table. I couldn't exactly help noticing the lone family member who was missing from tonight's lineup.

Shane.

Just like he was missing from the suit fitting I'd set up for him.

It was yesterday. I'd given Mom the appointment info so she could have Jacob's assistant send it on to Shane, so that I wouldn't have to deal with him any more than absolutely necessary. No way was I texting him or calling him, even if I still had his phone number, which I did not. And I definitely wasn't going over to his place again.

According to the suit shop, Shane was MIA at the fitting. I hadn't even told Mom yet.

And now I couldn't even decide which was worse. Having to see him again, or him just going AWOL on everything.

So much for a truce.

I mean, he did agree to get the suit fitting but he never really did agree to give me a truce.

And of course, he lied either way.

What the hell was his problem, really? Was it the wedding? Or was it me?

Or was it just him?

Since I didn't really have any answers, maybe I figured I'd just drink and by the time he rolled in I wouldn't care anymore. About any of it. I really wasn't *intending* to get wasted. But you know what they said about the road to hell? Paved in good intentions and all that?

My intention, if I had one, began and ended with the dress I was wearing tonight.

As I left the house this afternoon to meet up with Alyssa, Mom said, "*Why don't you get yourself something nice,*" then gave me one of her signature loaded looks along with Jacob's credit card. Which had me heavily second guessing the outfit I was planning to wear and ultimately shopping for something else.

Something *else* soon became something *sexier*, and now here I was in a floral pink wrap dress, with a plunging neckline and no bra. I'd drunk way too much already and eaten way too little, in the interest of honoring the unforgiving waistline of this dress, for Shane not to lay eyes on me tonight.

Yup. There it was.

The truth, laid bare by many, many glasses of alcohol.

I looked good tonight. My hair had cooperated and the dress was flattering. I just wanted him to see me like this.

The first time Shane met me, I was wearing sweats and spa slippers. I had zero game. I was nineteen and utterly swept away by his animal magnetism. I had no idea what I was doing

when I followed him up to his hotel room except picking up on whatever he was putting down.

I had no idea what to do when he kissed me except kiss him back.

And follow all his sexy, bossy orders.

Since then, I'd learned approximately zero new moves. I still had no idea what I was doing with men. Maybe because I hadn't stumbled across another man who was halfway as skilled as he was in the bedroom. The other guys I'd hooked up with since that night—and before that night—had been amateurs in that regard.

It was like the blind leading the blind.

With Shane, I'd felt way out of my league and yet perfectly where I belonged.

Which was maybe the part that tortured me the most.

It was like the universe had played a terrible joke on me. Giving me a taste of something so incredible I didn't even know it existed, making me wildly hungry for it... and then pulling the rug. *Just kidding! It may be delicious but it's poisonous! Ha ha!*

It wasn't like I wanted to refuck the guy who was about to technically become my stepbrother.

Not happening.

Maybe there was a time when I'd fantasized about it, in detail, but that was neither here nor there.

Just because I still thought about him on occasion and my stomach turned over every time I asked Mom how Jacob was doing and she felt the need to give me an unsolicited update on all his sons and mention how *intéressante*—translation: overtly sexy, obscenely wealthy, and/or stunningly successful—Shane's latest arm ornament was, didn't mean I had any interest in him whatsoever.

But I still wouldn't mind, at all, if he took a look at me in this dress and wanted to fuck *me* again.

Sad.

I glanced at Mom, and she gave me a look of motherly affection that made my throat close up a little. Her gray eyes sparkled prettily over her flute of champagne, and it struck me, as it often did, how beautiful she was. It also struck me that Mireille had just finished her presumably eloquent toast and I'd missed most of it.

I looked away. It was too hard to keep eye contact with Mom when I had Shane on the brain.

I downed what was left of my champagne, and a waiter appeared to discreetly refill it. I'd been keeping the catering staff busy all evening. That sweat on his brow? All me.

I took a fresh sip of the Ruinart. Mom was so obsessed with everything French, sometimes I could hardly believe she was marrying a man who wasn't.

When I was sure Mom's gaze had moved along to something else, I eyed the empty archway to the front foyer, for at least the one-hundredth time, anticipating the silhouette of a man I both dreaded and was somehow dying to see.

"So, what am I preparing myself for here?" Alyssa whispered, leaning into me, because the girl was like a horny clairvoyant. If I had even a wisp of something sex-related on my mind, she was all over it. "Every time one of the catering staff walks in, I'm like salivating to see if it's him. Am I gonna want to slap him as soon as I meet him or rake my nails down his chest?"

Probably both. "You know those men you see in advertisements for eyeglasses, with the beautiful lips and perfect jawline?" I whispered back. "That. Except this one is also a battered gladiator who just slayed the beast and his prize is that he gets to fuck you. Upside-down."

"Holy shit. You need to write a romance novel or something."

"Trust me. There is zero romance involved here. If he makes eye contact with you, you will insta-hate him."

She gave my knee a reassuring squeeze under the table. “I hate him already for what he did to you. I don’t care how pretty he is. Or how charming he pretends to be.”

I looked at her in alarm. It never even occurred to me before that bringing my bestie to this thing might go sour on me. She was here to support me. But I’d never considered that he might actually try to charm her.

Oh, God. He might.

“Please, do not check him out,” I implored her. “Not when he can see you. I’ll die.”

“Screw that. I would never. Anyone who treats you the way he did is dead ugly to me, babe.”

I exhaled. “And that is why I’m in love with you.”

She tapped her champagne glass to mine and we took a sip in unison.

Then I realized Aunt Marie had just launched into a toast and Mom was looking at me again. So I returned to performing my best impression of “wedding shower guest at rapt attention.”

“Just don’t get all stressed out about it tonight, okay?” Alyssa whispered, when Mom had looked away again. “Whether he shows up or not. Don’t let it ruin your night. Just because of that one night and the way he hurt you afterwards. It was *so* long ago.”

Yup. It really was.

But it was all flooding back tonight, swimming around my head in the champagne-and-paralyzer soup.

Shane was, hands down, the hottest man I’d ever met. But that was only part of the problem. I’d met some hot men. I mean, technically you could’ve argued that one of his adoptive brothers or either of Danica’s rock star husbands were better looking. It really depended on your tastes. But I’d never had my panties flood just having a conversation with any of those men. Or been kissed, licked, sucked and fucked to multiple orgasms by those men.

I could feel it right now—the electric shock of kissing him, the thrill of it skittering over my skin and sparking hotly in my belly. The memory was surprisingly sharp, kept alive by too many furtive pokes at the replay button in my brain.

I applauded Marie’s toast when everyone else did, and then Joss stood up to speak. Joss was all class, like his dad; the toast was probably good. But Alyssa was right. The caterers were distracting.

Wait staff streamed in from the kitchen serving up desserts, courtesy of Aunt Mireille’s bakery, and each time a new body came through the door, I looked over, half-expecting Shane to stride in... the chandelier light glinting off his thick, silken dark hair... the way it looked the first time I ever saw him... glittering with rain droplets... Or maybe he emerged from the pool behind the house, his tall, athletic form glistening wet, the water shimmering on his dripping abs, his swim trunks glued to his—

“*Jolie.*” Dani’s tone snapped me out of my mental derailment. I gathered it was about the fourth time she’d said my name. Seated on my other side, she gestured at the waiter who was offering coffee.

“No, thank you.” I waved him on. I already had three drinks in front of me. A liqueur had been placed next to the other two. I raised the glass at Dani and took a sip, humming in pleasure as the sweet, delicious framboise flooded my tongue.

Dani raised her glass, narrowing her eyes at me over the rim.

When she looked away, I darted another glance at every entrance to the dining room. Couldn’t he have at least had the decency to get here before I passed out?

Of course, he *was* coming, wasn’t he?

I glanced at Mom, just as Jacob leaned in close to murmur something into her pearl adorned ear. And I knew true love when I glimpsed it; I’d seen it often enough in Jacob’s eyes when he looked at my mom. I was seeing it now.

They were so... lucky.

Mom had been married three times, and none of those other marriages had worked out. Jacob had been widowed, married again and divorced, not to mention that a crazy lady had abandoned her child on his doorstep; he'd raised four sons, sometimes on his own, and one of them wasn't even his.

Either of them could've become jaded, given up on love long ago. But here they were, starting over again. With the love of their life.

I watched as Jacob discreetly skimmed a knuckle along Mom's neck. A shiver ran through me and I looked away, feeling like a lame voyeur, but warm and fuzzy, too. At the same moment, I raised my champagne flute to my lips—and spilled it down the front of my dress. It must've been refilled again when I wasn't looking.

Mom gave me a startled look and handed me a linen napkin. But that really wasn't gonna cut it.

A waiter appeared like magic to pour me another and I excused myself to the powder room. It wasn't until I climbed awkwardly out of my chair and took the first step, in the three-inch heels I'd borrowed last minute from Alyssa, that I realized *how* drunk I was.

Like, *whoa*.

Alyssa gave me another concerned look and Dani hooked her eyebrow at me like a question mark. Everything was starting to look a little... off.

I'm okay, I mouthed in their direction as I turned to go. I grasped the back of Alyssa's chair for balance and swallowed hard. *Oh fuck, please don't let me throw up in front of everyone*. I looked at Mom, who smiled prettily, glancing about to make sure no one was noticing the hot mess that was her drunk daughter.

I beelined into the kitchen and swiped a bottled water from the fridge, waving off the offers of assistance from the catering staff and locking my sights on the army of French doors that seemed to be tromping towards me. *Outside*. I needed fresh

air. The very last thing I needed was to leave *eau de vomit* in Mom's elegant toilette.

The next thing I knew I was through those doors, stumbling along the stone path outside, horribly misjudging the distance between said path and my own feet. Luckily there was no one around to see it. With difficulty, I wrestled off Alyssa's size six shoes, which we'd somehow crammed onto my size seven feet, and tucked them under one arm. I stood swaying in the shadows of the backyard, carefully breathing in the sweet scent of freshly cut grass.

I took a tentative swig from the water bottle, and when it didn't come back up I took a few more sips. I rolled the cool bottle on the bare skin between my breasts, took a deep breath and let out a long sigh. I could smell the lovely scent of Mom's flower gardens. The clean, faintly salty air of the saltwater pool. Through the open French doors, I heard the distant, homey clinking of dishes.

Through the trees, I heard the smooth, throaty rumble of a high performance car, one of the happy couple's wealthy friends driving home, hopefully a lot more sober than I was right now.

The shitty thing was, I loved this place. I missed it.

It seemed so incredibly unfair that I had to avoid it. Over the last three years, since she'd moved in, Mom had been working overtime making Jacob's home *theirs*. I'd been living with Mom before she moved in here, and she and Jacob had welcomed me to move in when she did. But I just couldn't be here for it.

I couldn't stand seeing Shane around this place.

For a moment, I felt awful for Jacob. He probably wouldn't let it show if he was hurt, but his son should've been here by now. It was getting crazy late.

When was he gonna show his smug cover model face?

But I knew, I was only partly indignant for Jacob and Mom. The other part was for me; for the nineteen-year-old girl who was fool enough to tumble into bed with a stranger who

had a blinding smile, pale wolfish eyes and no hope of ever returning her misguided affections.

I'd *liked* him that night.

I'd really liked him.

I stumbled along the stone pathway, feeling my way along the low hedge on one side and the stone balustrade on the other. It wasn't totally dark, but I was having a little trouble gauging where the bushes were. And where exactly I was in relation to them. Hundreds of tiny golden lights twinkled like fireflies in the dark, peeking out between the leaves of the tiered gardens. I made my way toward the pool, making a mental note to avoid falling in.

It would really ruin Mom's wedding shower if I drowned.

I caught the scent of automobile on the night air, and suddenly realized I was nowhere near the pool. That car I heard leaving must've been arriving. I looked up at the golden lights along the driveway through the trees, glowing on top of their posts. Somehow, I'd gone the wrong way.

I wobbled in a circle, trying to sort it out. I'd ended up at the edge of the driveway, where it wrapped around the house on one side. I heard a voice—a smothered, female voice. Then a sort of grunt and a giggle, and what sounded like a slap of flesh on flesh.

I stumbled a few more steps.

I could see the car through the trees now. It was a yellow Lamborghini.

And there in the near-dark between the golden lights, someone was standing over it.

Shane.

He was wearing a suit. Dressy-casual, the shirt undone a bit, no tie.

I stared.

He wasn't alone.

There was a woman, a brunette, in front of him. I heard her gasp and moan in a way that couldn't possibly mean anything other than what it clearly did, and heat radiated from my chest in a sudden flush.

Shane had her pinned against the side of the low car.

She was bent over it, her chest pressed to it, her ass in the air. His hands gripped her bare hip, his fingers digging into her softness, and presumably, his dick would soon be inside her.

His pants were still on, but the position he had her in kinda said it all.

I really couldn't tell if she was pretty since her hair was covering most of her face. All I could see was her mouth, wide open in an ecstatic O. Her tiny dress was hiked up, baring pretty much everything south of her waist. Not that it covered much above it.

Her skimpy panties were down around her knees.

I blinked stupidly and angled for a better view, which happened to be spinning slightly. But I saw it.

I saw Shane's hand lift into the air and then slap down, hard, on her ass. And my inner thermostat pretty much exploded. My face boiled. My whole head throbbed like my face was suddenly too tight for my skull.

And the really screwed up thing was: *I couldn't look away.*

Maybe I was a complete masochist—maybe *she* was a masochist—but I kept watching, as the woman kept gasping and purring and Shane slapped her again... as he slid one hand up her back to seize the back of her neck, roughly, slamming her down... and *I just. Kept. Watching.* She didn't seem to mind the killer grip he had on her.

In fact, she seemed to love it.

She squirmed against it, leisurely, like a cat basking contentedly in the sun, and he leaned on her harder, slapping her ass so hard I sank my teeth into my lip.

Then she stiffened.

I realized I'd made a noise. A gasp.

I bit my lip and held my breath, realizing that if they turned their heads, they'd see me standing right here, watching them.

My heart slammed in my chest as I utterly froze.

Shane stilled, too, raising his head to listen, but he didn't let her go. I held my breath until it hurt. But it wasn't me that had interrupted them. Someone was leaving the house by the front door. I heard distant voices calling goodbyes and good-nights and people getting into a car.

The brunette started to get up, but Shane shoved her down by her neck. At the same time she said "Shh!" and giggled, and he laughed, a low, throaty laugh that made my skin tingle all over.

I wavered a bit and grabbed hold of a tree branch so I wouldn't fall right over. I couldn't seem to work my legs.

The unseen car started up, and Shane turned his head toward it, listening as it pulled away down the driveway.

Then he slapped her ass again, squeezing hard, his fingers digging into her ass cheek. She made another one of those ecstatic, helpless noises and he groaned in pleasure.

My stomach turned over, caught between horror, disgust, and uncontrollable arousal.

The golden light skimmed across Shane's profile as he shifted. I saw his face clearly, *that* face, as the light etched the features I'd seen so often in memory: those wolfish eyes under dark eyebrows, the strong jaw and those *lips*.

Those lips I'd once kissed. A lot.

She whispered something; he whispered back. I saw his white teeth as he smiled.

They were both smiling. They were laughing, together. And I didn't know which was worse, the spanking or the smiling or the laughing, but something—everything, this entire night—turned my guts inside out.

I folded and retched into the dark. I was dry heaving, nothing was even coming out, but there was no way I could disguise that sound.

They weren't laughing anymore.

I looked up through my hair and saw Shane.

He was looking right at me.

He was watching me as he held that woman down. Watching me where I stood between the trees, doubled over, terrified that I might actually throw up. I clawed my hair out of my face to try to see him better but I couldn't get a good look at him. My eyes were watering and my hair was all over my face.

Then I saw him releasing her.

He was coming over to me.

I backed up too fast—and fell on my ass, hard. I tumbled back onto my hands, shoes and water bottle flying.

My wrap dress gaped open in front and my boob fell out. Just one boob, naked in the night, popping out to greet him.

He froze.

I died.

I must've died. Because clearly I was in hell right now.

Shane stared at me. The golden light rimmed the side of his face and caught in one pale, greenish eye as he cocked an eyebrow. "You okay?"

I scrambled to cover my boob and get up, but I couldn't seem to find my feet as his gaze raked over me in the near-dark. His eyes snagged on my chest, where the flirtatiously low-cut neckline of my dress had become a slutty gaping V that I was still trying to claw shut.

"Shane!" That was the brunette, practically gasping his name with unsated lust. He hesitated, then turned to look at her, maybe to say something to her, and all I knew was I did not want to hear it.

I wondered if her dress was still up around her waist. If she was still bent over the car, waiting for him to finish what he started, as I scrambled to my feet and ran.

Moments later, as I collapsed on my bed, this one thought kept repeating on a loop in my head: *He gave her his real name.*

Chapter Seven

Jolie

I woke up in a blur of pain to an annoying tapping sound.

My guest room at Ellis mansion faced east, and the slit in the curtains on the balcony doors lined up in exactly the right—or wrong—spot so that a slice of sunlight stabbed me in the brain before I'd even opened my eyes fully. It would not shock me to learn that this was on purpose.

I would never put a thing past Margot Vola, soon-to-be-Ellis.

And there it was again—the jaunty rat-a-tat-tat on my door, something like a cheerful but determined woodpecker trying to drill its way through.

“Jolie, darling!” Mom sang from the far side of the door. “Aren't you ever getting up?”

I realized foggily that it wasn't the first time she'd knocked, and I managed to sit up, my head aching. I was so hungover I was probably still technically drunk. I had no idea if I locked the door last night, but to her credit, Mom didn't rattle the handle or attempt to come in.

“The ladies will be here in half an hour! It's time to get up! Put on your bathing suit, it's a lovely day!”

“Mom!” I yelled back, but instantly regretted it. I clapped my hand to my ringing skull, as if I could force the pain back where it came from. “Ow. Mom. Seriously. I'm up.”

She twittered something and hummed away up the hall, no doubt showered, dressed, and brimming with the day's possibilities.

I fell back onto the pillow with a whump.

I almost fell asleep again before I processed what Mom said. My brain seemed to be short circuiting, a tangle of faulty wires dangling in a pool of liquor.

Guests. Half an hour.

It was Saturday. We were having a mini Vola brunch today. And then I was driving up to Whistler with Mom to check out the wedding venue.

Without opening my eyes, I groaned and rolled onto my side. I groped for the bedside table where I hoped last-night-me, as wasted as she was, was kind enough to leave a glass of water for today-me. *Yes.* Eyes still closed, I found my mouth with the glass and, after spilling most of it down my neck, managed to get a few swallows down my throat.

Then I set the glass down and lay in bed, blinking carefully in the blinding morning light, as I began to visualize my day. One step at a time.

Mop up spilled water with sheet.

Get out of bed.

Take a shower.

Brush teeth.

Brush hair.

Find my less revealing bikini. The one that won't make Mom do that non-frowning thing.

Get dressed.

Fuck makeup. We're talking necessary exertions only.

Go downstairs.

Find a jug of juice and chug the entire thing.

Done.

Ready to greet guests.

That wasn't so hard, was it?

Except I was still lying in bed.

And I'd forgotten something. Something super important.

I just couldn't remember what it was...

Then it all came back to me in a rush.

I sat up so fast, my skull hurt. *Ow*. Last night.

Shane.

The brunette, bent over.

My boob popping out.

"Fuck me." I collapsed back onto the bed again.

Rat-a-tat-tat-tat. "Jolie, my dear! It's time to get up! There's something out here for you! Lady brunch is in an hour!"

The woodpecker was back, persistently delighted with the idea of my rising. I did my best to dismiss the pleasant memory of my tiny, overpriced apartment in San Diego, shared with two roommates but blissfully free of mothers and woodpeckers.

She's just happy that you're here.

And happy to be getting married in four weeks.

"I'll see you downstairs! I'll get the coffee on for you!" she sang as she faded up the hall, and I couldn't help a little smile.

"Yes, Margot." I sighed and mopped off my wet chest with the sheet, feeling a small twinge of satisfaction at completing the first item on my list.

I can do this.

I sat up with a groan.

I really wasn't sure what possessed me to drink so much. Other than, you know, nerves and a general, rising sense of panic, spritzed with a whiff of *eau de desperation*. I mean, did

I really think drinking my body weight in alcohol would make me any sexier? Alyssa was my copilot on this, but she did give me a number of concerned eyeballs, which I chose to ignore—

Wait.

Alyssa.

Shit.

I swiped my phone off the bedside table. Sure enough, I had a few new text messages. The first, from Alyssa, was sent just after midnight. With a photo, obviously taken with flash from the dark above my bed: me, passed out on the pillow, mouth hanging open.

The message said simply: *Had to check.*

I also had texts from my cousins.

Danica: Where did you go? Are you okay?

Daniella: Fun fact: you snore when you're wasted.

Ugh.

There was another text this morning.

Danica: We're heading over. See you soon for lady brunch!

I texted Alyssa back: *Sorry!! I'll call you later. XO.* And tossed the phone aside. I couldn't believe I'd ditched her at my mom's wedding shower. I mean, I didn't mean to.

But after I saw Shane with that woman outside and then my boob fell out—*uggghh*—I'd come straight to my room to collapse.

Anyway, Alyssa knew the whole sordid story with Shane, so once I told her what happened, she'd understand.

I got out of bed and stretched, carefully, aching. There. One more thing done on that list.

It was slightly disturbing, though, to find myself completely naked. Finding yourself unclothed without remembering exactly how you got that way was unnerving. I couldn't remember much past running for the safety of my room after my impromptu one-boob peep show performance, but I was pretty sure the night didn't end with me streaking the wedding shower. My dress and panties, the only clothes I was wearing last night, lay discarded on the floor.

Where the heck were Alyssa's sexy shoes, though?

I frowned, checking under the bed, trying to remember what happened to them. Maybe I'd have to do a quick search of the bushes outside before brunch.

In the meantime, I threw on my plush guest robe—thank you, Hotel Margot—and cracked open the bedroom door to see what Mom meant. Something was out there for me?

The hall was silent, no one in sight. At my feet lay a tray with a modest breakfast, fit for a recovering alcoholic: a piece of plain toast, a peeled kiwi fruit cut into quarters, and a small box of coconut water.

I frowned and bent to pick it up, staring at the other items on the tray: Alyssa's shoes. There was a clump of lawn on the spiked heel of one of them and a yellow sticky note stuck to the tray beneath it.

I poked my head out a little farther and glanced along the hall again, but there was no one around.

Retreating into the room, I closed the door with my heel and placed the tray on the bed. There was something straightforward, minimalist, even indefinably masculine, about the offerings on the tray.

Jacob?

I peeled the note from beneath the shoe and read the handwritten message.

You dropped your shoes, Cinderella.

It was signed simply, *S.*

I stared stupidly at the note in my hand, the imperious yet scratchy male handwriting, and realized Shane left this for me.

Like the royal dick he was.

The words on the page dripped with his smugness. The toast and kiwi fruit mocked me, telling me that seeing me fall on my ass last night—and out of my dress—was yet more proof of who was losing this war.

Out of spite, I ate it all. The toast, the kiwi, in tiny, careful bites, chewing thoroughly before washing it all down with the coconut water. The slightly salty taste of it reminded me of semen.

Gross. Nothing but semen should taste like semen.

I fell back on the bed, wondering for a long moment if I was going to throw up.

Then I wondered if Shane brought that woman into the house last night.

Of course he did. She was his date.

They'd showed up super late, but they still showed up. I thought of him introducing her around to my family and Mom making pleasant conversation with her, and that laugh of hers. I could hear it now. I could see her so clearly in my head...

Bent over that Lamborghini with Shane's hand on her ass.

He was *spanking* her.

So many times over the past four years, I'd driven myself crazy wondering if he did all that dominant stuff to me the night we met just to make it even more humiliating for me when I found out who he was. He couldn't just fuck me. He had to make it dirty.

Kinky.

Holding me by the throat.

Bossing me around.

Talking dirty to me while he made me come.

"Do you like following orders?"

For what had to be the thousandth time, that night started replaying in my mind, whether I wanted it to or not. Like a dirty movie I just couldn't stop watching.

Except I wasn't watching it play out on a screen. I was *in* the fucking movie, and he was the star.

I remembered, so vividly, how he'd told me to come with him, and I did. How he'd taken my hand and walked me through the lounge and the adjoining restaurant, which led into a hotel lobby. Because of course, he was staying in the high-end hotel that housed the beautiful restaurant.

While we'd waited for the elevator, he held my hand lightly, his thumb slowly stroking mine, sending shivers through my body as I tried not to freak out or do anything to ruin whatever was happening between us. I felt hypnotized by him. Magnetized to him.

"Do you want my room number?" he'd asked me. *"You should probably tell someone where you're going in case I'm a psycho."*

And I realized he was right.

Why the fuck didn't I think of that on my own?

He'd given me his room number and I texted it along with the name of the hotel to Dani and Danica. Since I didn't know if his name was really Hunter or what, I just said something like, *I'm in this room with the hottest guy I've ever met. Give me an hour to get some and then I'll touch base.* I tried not to grin when I sent the text. I figured the girls were gonna stuff their faces with popcorn while I told them every delicious detail the next day.

But it didn't turn out that way.

In the end, I told them very little.

A heated kiss in his hotel room. Nothing more.

In the elevator, we stood side by side, watching the numbers on the display slowly counting up to the top floor. That close and all alone, I could feel the heat and energy he

was exuding. It was so intoxicating, I wasn't sure how I'd even deal with him naked, touching me. I felt dizzy about it.

"Is it okay to say that I'm kind of flabbergasted that you invited me to your hotel room?" I'd blurted.

"Why?"

"Because look at you. And look at me right now. I'm wearing spa slippers."

For the first time, he frowned at me. *"You're insulting yourself."*

"I'm really not. I just don't understand how my baggy T-shirt and sweats could interest you this much."

His voice was low and hot when he said, *"Your clothes aren't what I'm interested in."*

I'd pressed a hand to my face, overheating, trying to suppress the giddiness that was bubbling up. *"I can't believe this is happening."* My cool was slipping, badly. But I couldn't help it.

"I'm glad this is happening."

Fuck... He was so confident. So in control.

I just couldn't understand how anyone could be so fucking hot.

"This is the weirdest conversation I've ever had with a stranger," I told him, as calmly as I could.

"Jesus Christ, you are cute," he'd said, rubbing his hand over his face, like he almost couldn't stand it. And I thought in a daze: *I think he actually wants me... as much as I want him?* *"Damn, I wish there wasn't a camera in here."*

I looked up into the corners and saw the security cam. *"Why?"*

"So I could kiss you."

"I mean, you could still kiss me."

"Not where I really want to kiss you."

My brain wires had instantly frayed and melted. Did he really say that?

Did he really mean what I thought he meant?

The heat between us was broiling off the walls and he was still just barely touching my fingers.

“What’s the one thing you want most from a man when you have sex?” he’d suddenly asked me.

I could’ve told him *no more questions*. I could’ve given him a playful, flirtatious, bullshit answer.

But I didn’t.

“His attention.” I wasn’t even sure, at the time, why I’d answered so honestly, but why not? I figured I was probably never gonna see him again. *“In that moment, I just want to feel like I’m everything he needs.”*

And I felt him looking at me.

When the elevator door opened, we stepped into the hallway, but he stopped me with a hand on the back of my neck. Just a light, possessive squeeze that made all the air whoosh out of my body. My nipples pricked and I didn’t breathe as he rasped in my ear, *“You are everything he needs.”* Then his hand slid up into the back of my hair and gripped tight, tugging my head back so he could fit his mouth perfectly to mine and utterly consume me with his kiss.

I felt like I was in a movie.

Because did guys kiss that good in real life?

Yup. Apparently, he did.

Breathless, I’d clung to him.

“Um... what do you want most from a woman when you have sex?” I asked him when he ended the kiss.

His eyes met mine, and something told me he didn’t expect me to ask. Then he leaned in close, his breath on my neck, and I never would’ve guessed in a million years what he was about to whisper in my ear.

“Willing obedience.”

Before I could respond, he kissed me again, deeper still, feeding me his tongue in a way that was so dominant I either had to suck on it or choke on it. I sucked. I’d never actually thought of being “obedient” to a man as a turn-on, but I literally swooned in his arms.

He held me up, his strong body wrapped around mine.

He walked me to his hotel room while we made out until I was seeing stars. No, fuck stars. I was seeing asteroids and planets and entire fucking galaxies. I was practically climbing him. If I could’ve figured out a way to fuck him right through his jeans in that hallway, I would have.

I felt weak and flushed and giddy and happy and nervous and more excited than I’d ever felt with a man in my life.

We were barely inside his hotel room before he had my clothes off. They were soft and stretchy and disappeared like so much smoke in his deft hands. My bra and panties were no match for his sheer force of will, and neither was my modesty. I’d never wanted to be stripped naked by a guy so fucking bad.

When I was naked and he was still fully clothed, the first thing he did, and said, would never, ever leave my gray matter or the darkest caverns of my heart, no matter how much I tried to forget.

He pressed me up against the wall, by the throat, gently. Then he looked in my eyes and said, *“Don’t move, pretty girl. And don’t make a sound. And let’s see how well you follow orders.”*

Chapter Eight

Shane

“Nobody’s here yet?”

“I guess not.”

“Should we wake up Jolie?”

“Maybe not.”

I was lying on the lawn behind my dad’s house enjoying the morning sunshine when I heard women’s voices. I glanced up, over the low hedgerow beside me. The twins had just walked out onto the patio from the sunroom. Danica and Daniella. I could only see their heads, and they didn’t seem to see me.

“Did you see the Lamborghini in the driveway?”

Nope, they definitely didn’t see me.

“It’s yellow, Danica. And it’s a Lamborghini. Of course I saw it.”

“Do you think he left it here last night?”

They were talking about me. How sweet.

“Maybe he crashed in his old room.”

“Don’t mention it to Jolie,” Danica said worriedly. It was easy to tell them apart by their voices alone. Danica was generally sugar where Daniella was acid. “I don’t think she likes him.”

“You think?”

“She gets all flingy and trembly and out of breath whenever he comes up in conversation. Or comes around.”

Interesting.

“I think the word you’re looking for is hysterical.”

“I mean, I can’t blame her after what happened,” Danica said, lowering her voice. They were coming closer.

“Yeah. She’s still embarrassed about kissing him.”

Really... Jolie told them she “kissed” me?

“Did you see her face when he spoke to her at brunch last weekend?” Danica said, her voice hushed. “She was fuchsia. I thought her coffee mug was gonna implode in her hand.”

“Yeah. I saw.”

“I don’t think anyone likes him, though, really.” She sounded like she felt a little sorry for me.

Maybe I didn’t wanna hear this.

But I was pretty comfy here. I’d been thinking about lighting a blunt...

No point standing up now and ruining their chick chat.

They wandered over to some lounge chairs right above where I was sprawled and got comfy. I couldn’t see them but I could hear them clearly. They argued about music, and then U2 started playing softly out of the house speakers that were wired up around the patio.

“Good morning.” I heard Jolie’s voice. It was weirdly scratchy.

She sounded rough.

Which was pretty much how she looked last time I saw her—sprawled out in front of me, drunk and disorderly, with one of her tits out. It was so kind of adorably pathetic, I’d actually wanted to help her out. Scoop her up or something. But she’d scrambled away from me in horror, like the leprosy had grown back.

When I looked up now, I saw her head over the bushes. She'd just come out of the sunroom.

"Hey, bitch," Daniella greeted her.

"Is that U2?"

"They put out a new album," Danica said, "and I am here for it."

"That album was like five years ago, Danica," her sister said, and they started low-key arguing about music again as Jolie joined them, flopping down on a lounge.

I couldn't see any of them through the low hedgerow between us. Now, did I eavesdrop or let them know I was here?

Fuck it. I was here first.

"When's brunch happening?" Jolie said. "Mom said we were having brunch."

"Whenever Mireille gets here with the food," Danica said. "She's late."

"Did you guys see that obnoxious Lamborghini in the driveway?"

"Uh, yeah we saw it," Danica said.

"Did Shane stay over or something?" Daniella asked.

"What? *No*. I mean, how would I know?" Jolie spluttered quickly. "He didn't stay with *me*."

"Wow," Daniella said. "Okay. Calm down. I was just asking. Maybe you saw him this morning or something?"

"Nope. I looked for him, just in case. So I could make sure I *don't* see him. He's not here."

Guess you didn't look hard enough.

"Well, Margot was very clear that it was a ladies only brunch today," Danica said. "Jacob went out somewhere."

"So Ashley and Matt aren't coming?" Jolie asked.

“No, they’re at the studio today,” Danica said. “Matt said he’d swing by to pick me up later. The album is almost done.”

“That’s exciting,” Jolie said, but she sounded like she was really trying to muster the will to be happy about anything.

“Are you okay?” Danica asked her.

Jolie groaned a little. “I’m so hungover, you guys. Never let me drink that many paralyzers ever again.”

“They’re so good, though,” Daniella teased, as a phone rang. “It’s Mom,” she said. “Hey, Marie,” she answered her phone as she got up and wandered off.

“Hey,” Jolie said, “are Ashley and Matt coming to the wedding?”

“Of course,” Danica said.

“Can they commit to it so far in advance?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“I mean, they’re rock stars. How can they be sure they can make it?”

Hmm. Wedding talk. No juicy dick talk or anything.

Disappointing.

I lit up a fresh blunt, but they didn’t seem to hear my lighter over the music.

“Well... my aunt is getting married, and I’m close with my family,” Danica said. “They know that. It’s important to me, so it’s important to them. I RSVP’d for all three of us.”

“Yeah, I saw that.”

“Hey... are you feeling uncomfortable about me bringing both of my partners to the wedding—?”

“No! No, no, no. Nothing like that. That’s not where I was going with this.” Jolie groaned. “I didn’t mean to imply that. I was just wondering... What would make someone *not* RSVP by now? I mean, if rock stars can commit, what would keep someone else from committing?”

“Are there people who haven’t RSVP’d yet?” Danica sounded alarmed.

“Yeah...”

“Like who?”

“Uh... just a few people,” Jolie muttered. There was a pause and some shuffling around. “Hey, do you spell pot?”

I looked up and saw a head pop up over the bushes.

“Oh my god!”

“Morning, ladies,” I said casually.

“There’s a peeping Shane in the bushes!” Jolie shouted.

I rolled my eyes.

Danica’s head popped up next to hers. “Oh. Uh, hi, Shane.”

“Ohmygod he’s naked!”

I wasn’t naked. I was sunbathing in my boxer briefs. I’d crashed here in my suit last night, so that was all I had to wear in the heat. But I was practically as covered up as I’d be in swim trunks. You’d think I was spread-eagle with my dick in my hand and my thumb up my ass, jacking off to their voices, the way Jolie was looking at me.

“What are you doing?!” she freaked. “You’re eavesdropping on us? What is wrong with you?”

“Hey, I’m just enjoying a breakfast blunt in the open air. I don’t own the patio. Come and go as you will.”

“It’s okay, Jolie,” Danica said soothingly as Jolie glared at me.

“You want one?” I offered, taking a pull off the joint. “I have more. You seem a little high-strung this morning.” I sat up. “Rough night last night?” I slid my sunglasses up onto my head and smiled.

Jolie made a grossed out face and Danica winced.

I chuckled.

I knew I had a nasty black eye. Or, what was a black eye a few days ago. It was now mostly a bruise around my eye socket that was turning from purple to yellow. Jolie might've missed it in the dark last night, but it probably looked especially epic in the sunlight.

"That looks... painful," Danica observed. "How does the other guy look?"

"Pristine. I didn't hit him back."

"Oh."

"Training accident. I don't usually spar much during training camp. Don't want to take any unnecessary hits. But I was working with a newer guy who got a little overzealous."

"Well, that sucks," she said.

"Occupational hazard."

"See, he gets hit in the head a lot," Jolie put in. "Really explains a lot, doesn't it?"

Danica looked uneasily at Jolie. "Uh..."

Jolie squinted at me through her pink-rimmed glasses. "I need to talk to you." Then she got to her feet like I was supposed to get to mine and come running. I was surprised she didn't snap her fingers.

"I'm good right here."

"No. I need to speak to you. Privately. It's about wedding business."

"Oh. Wedding business. Why didn't you say so?"

I didn't budge.

Danica's eyes were kind of ping-ponging between us and the palpable tension we were emitting. "Um, if you guys have important wedding stuff to talk about, I can just leave—"

"Nope," Jolie said firmly. "You stay right here enjoying your summer morning. Shane is going to put his pants on and then he and I are going to go have a private conversation in the pool house. Aren't we, Shane?"

Well. Wasn't that adorable. She was trying to boss me around.

However, now that I was sitting up and she'd stood up, I could see that *she* wasn't wearing pants. Which made the situation mildly more interesting.

"I guess we are." I took my time getting to my feet and crushing out my joint.

"Danica," she said, "please turn the music way, way up."

"Okay..." Danica settled onto her lounge chair again and did just that as Jolie marched off to the pool house at the far end of the patio. I pulled on my discarded suit pants and headed up the path to follow her.

She wore a T-shirt with the sleeves cut out over a peach bikini. I could see it through the cut-out arm holes. Plus, the T-shirt wasn't quite long enough to totally cover her ass cheeks. Which I got a nice view of as I followed behind her.

Almost weird to think that I had my hands, my mouth and my dick all over that ass one night. If I touched her ass right now, she'd probably punch me.

She was right handed; I wondered if she'd have a decent right hook or if anyone had ever taught her how to throw a punch.

By the time we stepped into the pool house it sounded like U2 was giving a concert in the backyard. Jolie shut the door behind us, but the music was still fairly loud in here.

"I never really was a U2 fan," I mused.

"What?" Jolie barked irritably, rounding on me as I did up my belt. I got a glimpse of her peach bikini peeking out between her legs before she tugged her shirt down a bit and my eyes drifted up to her face.

"Did anyone ever teach you how to throw a punch?"

"What kind of question is that? Why would I need to throw a punch?"

“If you ask me, all women should get fight training, for self-defense. You really don’t know what it’s gonna be like to get hit until you’re hit.”

She looked at me like I was a woman-beater or something.

“You go around inviting guys into pool houses,” I elaborated, “for private conversations, while your ass is showing, maybe guys get the wrong idea.”

“My ass isn’t ‘showing.’ I’m wearing a bikini by a pool. With a shirt over it. It’s not an invitation.”

“I never said it was. Shit is in the mind of the beholder, right?”

“How the hell did we get onto this?”

“I guess the sight of your ass just made me think about punching things. There really is a fine line between sex and violence, isn’t there?”

“You know, every time your mouth opens and shit pours out, I can’t even figure out which part offends me most.”

“I guess you need to think faster.”

“And why would someone need to ‘teach’ me how to throw a punch? You’re assuming that I need a man to teach me that kind of thing?”

“So now I’m sexist.”

“No, you were probably always sexist. I just pointed it out.”

“I needed a man to teach me how to throw a punch.”

“Maybe I don’t. Maybe I have an innate ability to know exactly how to knock a guy on his ass if he gets out of line.”

I laughed. Looking at her, there was probably a zero percent chance that was true. But the interesting thing about all her spitfire and bravado right now was that this was not the same girl I met four years ago in that bar. Which either meant she’d drastically changed or, more likely, I was drawing something out in her right now that was not typical.

Either way, it was amusing.

“I’m here to tell you,” I informed her, “that there is no way that you could knock a grown man on his ass with one punch, *little girl.*”

I drew out those last two words to make sure she absorbed them fully.

Oh, she was fucking broiling now.

“Do not. Ever. Call me. A little girl. Again.”

Yup. I enjoyed pissing her off.

Why not? She’d pissed me off plenty.

“Why? Does it turn you on?”

She took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. “Look. I realize that you are very possibly the offspring of a rabid wolf and a swamp troll. So it’s difficult for you to have an adult human conversation with actual adult humans without being completely disgusting. All I need to know from you is why you didn’t show up at the suit fitting that I arranged for you this week like you said you were going to.”

Really? That was what was up that sweet ass of hers right now?

“I guess I had something better to do.”

“Oh. I see. Like getting punched in the face and fucking a girl on a Lamborghini. Stuff like that.”

“Yeah. Stuff like that. For starters.”

“And you couldn’t have squeezed in a quick fitting? I made you an appointment.”

I’d started wandering around the room and her eyes followed me, on guard. There were no beds in here, just a bunch of lounge chairs laid out in the sun under the big windows, and a shower, a mini bar. I glanced out the windows where her cousins, the twins, were on their lounge chairs, tossing the occasional look in this direction. But there was no way they could hear us over the music out there. They couldn’t see us, either, with the sun glaring off the windows.

“What was the deal last night anyway?” I asked her. “You were just gonna watch us screw?”

“I was not!” she spluttered.

“I think you were.”

I mean, we didn’t screw. After the interruption, kinda lost momentum. Ended up sending her off in a cab and smoking cigars on the patio with Joss and Darcy for half the night, then passing out in my old room. It was a gift wrapping room for Margot now. Because apparently she needed a whole room for that.

At least there was a decent couch.

“No. I went outside to get some air,” Jolie seethed, “and had my eyeballs assaulted with a public exposure tableau.”

“And stopped to watch.”

“You stopped to watch *me*.”

“I wasn’t watching anything. Except you falling on your ass.”

“Sometimes I’m clumsy!”

“I noticed.”

She pressed her hand to her forehead like she was accessing a reset button. “Do you support this wedding or not?”

“Maybe I haven’t decided yet.”

“You haven’t decided yet?” she parroted back, incredulous.

“That’s what I said.”

“Well, when are you planning on deciding? You’re in the freakin’ wedding party. At least, your dad and my mom seem to think you are. And the big day is four weeks away.”

“Thank you for that math. We swamp trolls don’t run on a calendar system. We just crawl up out of the swamp to eat virgins at the full moon.”

She took another deep breath, then blew it out angrily. “Okay, it’s pretty clear by your attitude that you hate me. In

case you thought you had to be any meaner to get the point across, I promise, you've made your point. This isn't about *me*, though. I'm not personally inviting you to this wedding because I actually want you to be there. I just care about Mom and Jacob. I told Mom I'd help them with this wedding. And you told me that you would get a motherfucking suit fitting."

I shrugged. Her seething anger just made me settle into my cool and calm. "Why bother getting a suit fitting for a wedding I don't know if I'm going to."

"Are you mentally deranged? Is that it?"

"I do get hit in the head a lot."

"How can you not know if you're going? You either support the wedding or you don't. If you don't, then why not just say so? Talk to Jacob. Better yet, why didn't you talk to him long ago? Because it's way too late now. He's marrying my mom. Like, what is the problem you have with her?"

"I never said I had a problem with Margot."

"Well... *good*."

"She is extremely stuck up, though." I wandered around the room again. "Brandon seems to think she's a gold digger."

She made an annoyed sound. "From what I hear, Brandon thought every woman who ever came near your dad over the years was a gold digger."

"That is true."

"I would think after a four year engagement she would've proved to you all that it's your dad she loves, not his bank."

"Maybe."

She gave up an aggravated little huff. "So, are you guys *ever* going to trust her? Accept her? Like at least after the wedding, once everything is official and she's part of the family?"

"You're asking the wrong guy. Why don't you ask Brandon?"

“I’m asking you. Because you’re the only one who hasn’t confirmed that you’re coming to the wedding. Brandon RSVP’d for himself plus one and he had his damn suit fitting. Like a supportive son.”

“It really doesn’t matter if I support the wedding or not. Like you said, it’s happening. And I really don’t care who Jacob marries.”

“So what’s the problem, then?” she demanded, exasperated.

I almost felt sorry for her. She really did look hungover.

“I guess that’s personal, Jolie. You know, family bullshit.”

“You just don’t support your dad, then?”

“Maybe he’s never supported me.” I turned away, pacing around again. I wasn’t even sure why I wouldn’t just put her out of her misery and tell her I was going to the wedding.

Maybe I just liked having something she wanted.

Behind me, she sighed. “Unfortunately, you’re right.”

I turned back to her.

“My mom is stuck up. She’s also very faithful, loyal, and family is really important to her. I’m a grand failure, as you can imagine. So I get it, okay? Parents can be jerks. But I’m sure Jacob wants you at his wedding.”

“Right,” I said dubiously. “Miss Princess is a failure. That’s a good one.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Princess?”

“Yup. Princess.”

“I’m no princess.”

“You are now. The Ellis family princess.”

She hugged herself, looking confused. “How the hell do you figure that?”

“Well, none of the boys are married. None of them have even a prospect of marriage yet, or much interest. Dad hates that. You’re everything he ever wanted.”

She looked uncomfortable with that. “Maybe. But only because he never had a daughter before.”

“You know what, you’re right. Enjoy it while it lasts. As soon as Joss or Brandon or Darcy bring home a daughter-in-law for him, you may become the forgotten stepchild.”

She opened her mouth like she was going to argue that, but then she didn’t.

“Take it from the adopted child,” I told her. “You’re only golden when you make them look good. Someone shinier comes along, you’ll tarnish real fast in their eyes.”

She stared at me.

“Hello!” The door opened, sunlight and music pouring in, and Danica came in carrying two sundae dishes. Instead of ice cream, each one was loaded with berries and slathered with whipped cream, a cherry and a spoon sticking out the top. “Breakfast!” she sing-songed. “Mireille had a catering disaster so she cancelled brunch today! I can’t stand the tension out here so I’m feeding you!” She pressed a dish into my hand and one into Jolie’s with an uncertain smile, then dashed out the door.

When Jolie and I were alone again, her eyes crashed into mine.

“Be nice, okay?” she hissed, as if she thought I was gonna spit on the food and chuck it out the window. “Danica is very kind. She thinks we’re having a normal family-type disagreement about who sits at the head table or something. She doesn’t realize how thick the hatred really is.”

“I’m not complaining. Strawberries are in season right now.” I sat down on one of the lounge chairs and stretched back. “Do you mind if I sit down while you keep yelling at me?”

She lifted her chin. “Maybe I’m done yelling at you.”

“No, you’re not. You haven’t even gotten to the real stuff yet.”

“What real stuff?”

I used my spoon to move the whipped cream over to one side of the dish so I could get at the berries underneath. I tried not to eat dairy when I was in hardcore training. “You, Jolie Vola, are pissed off that once upon a time, we had fantastic, orgasmic sex.”

“I am not! And we did not.”

I laughed. “Oh yes, you are. And yes, we did.”

“You lied,” she semi-shouted. Then she came closer so she could yell at me at close range and no one would overhear. “You pretended you didn’t know who I was!”

I swallowed my mouthful of strawberries and looked up at her calmly. “I didn’t know who you were.”

“And you made up a name!”

“You said your name was Julie.”

“You said your name was Hunter!” She laughed bitterly. “It wasn’t even clever. How stupid was I, right?”

I studied her. She really seemed put out about the whole thing.

She seriously thought I knew who she was that night?

“I wasn’t ‘hunting’ you,” I informed her. “The first second I saw you was in the entrance of that bar. I didn’t know who you were.”

“And then you pursued me,” she said sarcastically, “because I was just *that* desirable, what with my whole face disaster and the fabulous hair wreck and the hotel slippers I had going on.”

“Something like that.”

Her eyes cut into me with bone-deep resentment. “I will never believe you.”

“If it makes you feel better to blame me for what happened, go nuts.”

“I do blame you! Because you made it happen.”

I laughed again.

“You seduced me and lied to me,” she hissed.

“I picked you up,” I corrected her. “And you lied to me, too.”

Her cheeks had turned that screaming pink color that one fair night had meant she was thrilled about me and lately seemed to mean she wanted me dead.

“You never gave me the chance to decide if I wanted to sleep with my stepbrother!” she exploded quietly. “You took away my choice about it!”

Was that what she’d been telling herself for four years?

“Bullshit. You’re mad because you enjoyed it.”

She spun away. “*Ugh.*” She grabbed her hair in fists and squeezed, like it was either that or claw my eyes out.

I studied those fists. Her tight shoulders.

Her delicious, round ass.

Really, I could sympathize. I mean if that was really what she believed about me for four fucking years, then I really was the monster she seemed to have decided that I was.

I’d been accused of many things, and many of those things I’d been guilty of. I was no saint.

But I wasn’t that monster.

“My father’s name was Hunter. That’s what I was told.”

She turned around, but said nothing.

“No one seems to know who he really was. He’s a mystery. I just throw it out there sometimes when I don’t want to give out my real name.”

She stared at me. But she still didn’t say anything.

“So, I guess your rabid wolf and swamp troll theory is shot. Although... he could’ve been a wolf called Hunter. From what I hear, my mom really was a swamp troll.”

She regarded me in silence for a long moment.

“Self-deprecating humor will not win you points here,” she said. But at least she’d calmed down. She wasn’t shouting anymore.

Then she sat down on one of the lounge chairs, two over from me.

“That’s why your last name is different from theirs. Madrigal was her last name, right?” She spoke without looking at me.

“I think it was meant to be respectful. Like an ‘in case his mother ever comes back for him’ scenario.” She didn’t come back. The police could never find her, either, so maybe she changed her name. But by the time I was in high school and standing out in hockey, everyone knew me as Shane Madrigal. It was the name on the back of my jersey. Why change it at that point?

Making me an Ellis wouldn’t magically make me feel any more a part of this family.

Jolie ate a little bite of her berries and whipped cream, then kind of scowled like the idea of eating was making her sick. She stuck her spoon back into it and just sat there, holding it in her lap, perched at the foot of her lounge chair with her back to me.

“Tell me something. Why would I pretend I didn’t know who you were when I did, and then have sex with you just to upset you when you found out?”

“Because you don’t want this wedding to happen! Because you have something against my mom! Or your dad! Or the whole family, for all I know!”

Yeah. So, clearly she wasn’t giving up on her whole monster theory.

I sighed. “So, then... Fuck it. Let’s do it again.”

Her head whipped around to me. “What?”

“The damage is done, right? You’ve already fucked your stepbrother and enjoyed it.”

Her mouth fell open.

“You already have to live with the dirty secret. Your mom would already hate it if she found out, right?”

“What *the fuck* are you saying right now?” she whispered.

“Jacob would hate it, too. He’d hate it even more if we did it again. But either way, we can’t change that it already happened. They’ll already freak if they find out, right? So, why not just do it again?”

Jolie blinked at me, spluttering a little as she searched for words. “You’re not seriously trying to get in my pants right now.”

“Maybe I am.”

“Why?!?”

“Because doing shit that pisses off my family is a beloved pastime of mine,” I told her honestly.

And, honestly, the more I was around her the more I was convinced that fucking her again would be extremely enjoyable.

So why not.

She shook her head in slow-mo, utterly astonished. “You are straight up demented. ”

“You were happy to do something that pissed off your mom the first time I met you. Picking up a guy in a bar when you were supposed to be going to her engagement party...”

“That was before I knew *the guy* was going to be my stepbrother!”

I held her gaze, willing her to remember that night. Before she found out who I was... she had to remember how much she’d enjoyed it, right? It wasn’t easy to forget.

I’d fucking tried.

“Think about it,” I told her.

She stared back at me, a mess of responses fighting over her features. Revulsion. Disbelief.

Curiosity?

Memories...

Maybe she *was* thinking about it. Her cheeks were flaming pink again.

“You could really have a worse offer, Jolie.”

She shook her head in disbelief again. “Let me see. Your offer is to have sex with me to upset our parents?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“No. Straight up no. That’s twisted.”

I gave her a slow, twisted smile. “I don’t see a problem.”

“That’s because, as usual, *you* are the fucking problem, Shane.”

She got up, scooped a spoonful of whipped cream from her dish—and splatted it on my chest. Then she walked out.

Chapter Nine

Jolie

“**Y**ou want me to fuck Shane Madrigal!?!”

My beautiful twin cousins, seated across from me in the limo, gave each other a look. There was Dani, the ruthlessly self-interested, contentedly single one and there was Danica, the kind, caring, happily married and generally much saner one who would hopefully save me right now.

Because the shit that just came out of Dani’s mouth was shocking, even for her.

After I’d decorated Shane with whipped cream and left him in the pool house this morning, I’d left my cousins lounging by the pool, angrily gobbled down my berry breakfast, then got the hell out of that house and went to kill time at a nearby café until Mom came to pick me up in one of Jacob’s many luxury cars with his driver.

We’d picked up Aunt Madeleine and drove up to Whistler for the final walk-through of the wedding venue. Mom had harassed the staff with questions and we’d given them our final guest headcount—which I had to fudge slightly, since I still didn’t have Shane’s RSVP.

We’d then had lunch and headed back to town, mission accomplished.

However, as soon as they’d dropped me off at Dani’s apartment, where I was supposed to meet up with my cousins

to go for dinner, I found out that the guys were throwing a bachelor party for Jacob tonight.

Because apparently after Shane had emerged from the pool house to find my beautiful cousins lounging by the pool, he'd sat his ass down to chat with them and told them so.

And I basically flipped out that the ladies weren't throwing a bachelorette party for my mom, and that I hadn't even thought of organizing one.

According to her maid of honor, Aunt Mireille, whom I'd then gotten on the phone, Mom didn't want one.

So, I promptly hired a limo and rallied my twin cousins into it.

We were now on our way to pick up Mom and her sisters and take them out on the town, because no way was Jacob getting a bachelor party and Mom wasn't getting a bachelorette. What year was this anyway?

Now that Dani and Danica and I were alone for the first time since this morning and they also had champagne in hand, they'd promptly demanded to know what the deal was with me and Shane in the pool house today. And since I didn't want their dirty minds to go all jumping to the wrong conclusions—especially Dani's; hers was extra dirty—I'd told them about the disgusting “offer” Shane had made me.

“You should definitely fuck him,” Dani repeated, confirming that I had actually heard her right.

I gaped in shock and looked to Danica for help.

“Don't listen to her,” Danica said easily. “You should definitely not fuck him. You shouldn't ‘fuck’ anyone. Not until you're in a loving, committed—”

“Oh, stop,” Dani interjected. “She's not seventeen anymore, Danica. Our little baby cousin has grown up. She should fuck whoever she wants to. And Shane Madrigal is dirty and hot and single, and he made the first move. What more do you need? Just go for it.”

“I'm... but...” I stuttered.

“He’s got a hot body,” Dani informed us, as if we hadn’t noticed that this morning, when we saw him in his underwear. “I saw him in a wet swimsuit at Margot and Jacob’s one time and he’s definitely packing some heat.”

“That’s not really helping,” Danica said.

“Are you referring to his dick?!” I demanded.

“Yes, Jolie,” Dani said calmly. “I’m referring to his dick.”

“Our parents are getting married! We’re like... step siblings!”

“Don’t make it sound so pervy. You’re both adults. It’s not wrong.”

“It’s not right, either.”

“Would you or would you not fuck him if he rolled up to you when you were horny and alone one night, and no one saw you together, and he said, ‘Jolie, let’s fuck?’”

I promptly started to sweat. “Pour me a champagne, please.”

Dani started happily pouring me a glass.

After almost hurling and then falling on my ass last night in front of Shane and his “date” and my boob popping out, and then my bed spinning for half the night while I heard their laughter and those ass slapping sounds in my head, I never would’ve thought I’d want to drink again. But go figure. Here I was.

Lady Gaga, “Summerboy,” was playing, because that was literally one of a few musical artists Danica and Dani could actually agree on. And the song was just supporting Dani’s argument for her, as she thrust the champagne at me and I took a tentative sip. Wasn’t that what you were supposed to do when you went away for the summer: just enjoy a summer fling? Screw some hot guy and just leave it at that?

Not when he’s your stepbrother.

And a bonafide swamp troll.

“See,” said Dani, when I still didn’t answer her question. “Told you so. You’re only fighting it because you don’t want to give it up to him.”

“Uh, yeah. That’s exactly why a woman says no.”

“I’m not talking about your pussy. I’m talking about your power. You don’t want to say yes to Shane because you loathe him for embarrassing you—”

“That’s not—”

“You asked for my advice.” *Did I?* “So hear me out. Shane hurt your feelings. You can admit it or not but all three of us sitting here know it.” She gave Danica an accusing look.

Danica just shook her head.

“You think he’s nasty and mean,” Dani pressed on when Danica didn’t jump in to support her argument, “because he kissed you just to try to embarrass you when you found out who he was. He played you. You were kinda feeling him—hence the kiss—so it wounded you a little. And you don’t want to say yes now and let him win.”

“So then she shouldn’t say yes,” Danica said firmly.

“Why would I want to give him any power or let him win or let him get *laid*—just to try to upset our parents, by the way—if I don’t even like him?”

“It’s not about him. You need to get that out of your head.” Dani sipped her champagne and stared at me like that was crystal clear.

“Then what the hell is it about?”

“You, obviously.”

“Uh-huh. And him. Doing sex stuff.”

“Exactly. You need to stop waiting on your elusive unicorn to appear in a cloud of glitter and just get some D.”

I gasped. “*How dare you* bring my unicorn into this!”

Dani rolled her eyes. “Yes. An invisible man who may or may not exist. Let’s wait around to fuck him while our pussy

grows cobwebs.”

“Do not. Ridicule. The unicorn,” I warned her, because that shit was sacrosanct with me.

She knew this.

I mean, I was a girl who grew up without a father. My deadbeat dad and his general lack of giving any fucks about me had basically ensured that I’d created a happily-ever-after fantasy for myself about men from a young age. Because I needed it for my own mental well-being.

As a result, I’d devised a sacred ranking system for men.

Swamp trolls were at the bottom, obviously. In fact, that was a new, bottom feeder sub category I’d invented for Shane Madrigal himself. Above that were snakes and pigs. And it went all the way up to much nicer things like sexy wolfish strangers who prowled you at the bar, and up, and up... All the way to the top, where the glorious, rare as hell unicorn reined supreme: that majestic man that any girl, if she was so lucky, might stumble upon at some point in her life. And, you know, live the dream.

“Danica found her unicorn, and you know it,” I reminded her. “And then she found *another* one. She got *two* unicorns. So let’s not diss the perfect system.”

“The ‘perfect system’ that will have you living celibate and alone,” Dani said, “still dreaming of some nonexistent hero, while you pass up all your chances for pleasure and your neglected coochie dries up.”

“That is so sad,” I breathed.

“But true. Here’s the deal. Shane’s an MMA fighter, right? He’s *strong*. Let him fuck that pussy until you see stars. Do it for *you*.”

I looked helplessly at Danica. “I don’t know how she can detach like that. Like, just think of the sexual act in terms of the pleasure you get and not care about the rest. How do you do that?”

“I don’t,” Danica said.

“It would drive me crazy not knowing what he’s thinking.”

“Who cares what he’s thinking?” Dani said. “I told you, it’s not about him.”

“Of course it’s about him. He gets laid. He sees me naked and stuff. And that shit is forever, Dani. After that, he gets to see me naked anytime he wants... in his memory... until the end of time.” I swallowed. This was sounding way too familiar. “He gets to know how I looked and how I sounded, how I tasted and smelled and all the things, and he gets to lord it over me if he wants to...” *Yup. Been there.*

“Oh my god,” Dani said. “I just got it. You’re afraid you *will* see stars and it will be amazing, physically, and he’ll know you love it and you can’t stand that.”

“Uh, yeah!? Like who would want that?”

“You’re focusing on the wrong things.”

I blinked at Danica. “I don’t get her.”

“I know, sweetie. No one does.”

I took a breath, and a sip of my champagne. I wanted out of this conversation. And yet I was grotesquely intrigued by what Dani was saying. I didn’t like lying to my cousins or omitting the truth. But there was no way I was going to admit that I already fucked him. It was embarrassing enough confessing it to my best friend and making her swear to take it to her grave.

I wished Alyssa was here right now. I really needed her to help me out on this. Or maybe change the subject or something. But she was working this evening.

“I’m telling you,” Dani pressed on. “Let him pound that pussy. Make him go down on you first before he gets it. Tell him he has to make you come like five times before he gets to. Bleed him dry for everything you want before he gets his.”

Oh my God. And now she just described it.

That was like, literally what happened that night.

However... it happened because *he* made it happen. Not because I made him do it.

“And how would I do that?!”

Dani looked at Danica. “Is she kidding?”

“She’s not. She wasn’t born a succubus. We don’t all have an innate talent for bleeding men dry.”

Dani shrugged like that was our loss. “Then let me spell it out for you, Jolie. You have power. It’s between your legs. You may not think so and he may not let you know it, but if he thinks he can have it, he’ll do almost anything you want to get it. And the second you two are alone together and it’s on, and he gets hard, you have control. Take what you want. If he’s a good boy, then he gets to come. And he’ll fucking worship you for it.”

“Huh??”

“Men love a woman who knows what she wants in bed. Confidence. It’s more potent than Viagra. Just ask Aunt Madeleine.”

I stared at my gorgeous, highly confident cousin. “Yeah, well, I don’t have that. I’ve had sex with like seven guys and most of them sucked. I’ve literally never had an orgasm on a man’s...” I lowered my voice, as if the driver could hear us through the closed partition, “on his dick.” *Other than Shane’s.* “I have a hard enough time getting off with a guy at all. And usually I only do because I shove my hand down there and take care of it myself.”

Dani looked horrified. “Really?”

“Yes. Really. I have no idea how to inspire a man to the kind of pussy pounding you’re talking about. Like, the kind where he fucks me so good I just can’t help coming. Is that really a thing?” I mean, it was. One night. With one guy.

I’d kinda convinced myself it must’ve been a fluke.

You know, to save my sanity.

“I don’t know,” Dani said dryly, “Danica, is it a thing?”

“Um. It’s a thing.”

“How often do Ash and Matt make you come?” Dani demanded, turning on her. “Like without you doing anything to make it happen? Don’t look at me like that. I’m asking for her.” Dani pointed at me.

Danica looked at me. Normally, she didn’t share much about her love life with Dani. She probably told me more details. But since I was such a pathetic mess right now, she admitted, “Often.”

“Like, are you coming on the regular?” Dani pressed. “Are we talking several times a week at least? Male-partner-prompted orgasms?”

“Yeah,” Danica said slowly, her pity for me evident as Dani turned back to me.

“So there you go. And you don’t need two hot rock stars in bed to get there either, believe me. I’ve had total strangers make me come like a fire hydrant exploding.”

“God,” I rasped.

Me too.

“Listen. You just need to be aroused more. And if a guy’s not doing it right, tell him what you need.”

“What if I don’t know?” I squeaked hysterically. “I mean, I can make myself come but as soon as a man’s in the room, it’s different. I feel his expectations and I just—”

“*Wrong,*” she said. “Nope. Uh-uh. He has no expectations of you. When a guy gets you naked he’s just grateful you’re fucking there so he’s not going home with his hand. The neuroses are all in your head. Just relax and focus on your own arousal. Women usually take longer than guys to get aroused and to reach orgasm. It’s natural. Any guy who doesn’t appreciate that, who isn’t taking the time to make it happen for you, who doesn’t *get off* on making it happen for you, doesn’t deserve your body or your time.”

I looked at Danica. She was eying me with sympathy. “She is right. At least about that last part.”

“But... Shane is just...”

Dani sighed. “He’s a man who happens to have a hot body, not to mention a gorgeous face, and *he wants to fuck you*. And you’re way overthinking this.”

“If he’s so gorgeous then why haven’t you fucked him?”

Dani scowled a little. “I already told you, he’s dirty. He’s not my type.”

“She’s very particular, as you know.” Danica rolled her eyes. She still thought it was insane that Dani had passed over her husband, Ashley, way back before Danica met him.

It was, really. Ashley was a primo hottie. I’d awarded him unicorn status the first time I met him, and never taken it back.

“So maybe Shane’s not my type,” I said carefully.

Dani smirked. “Oh, sweetie. You don’t even know what your type is.”

I thought about that. She wasn’t exactly wrong.

I got tongue tied around any guy I found attractive, for sure. But I hadn’t had nearly enough practice dating—or having sex with—actual men to know what I wanted or what I liked best.

“Take it from me,” she added. “You need to experience some actual dick to figure out what kind you like.”

“I don’t know,” Danica said. “Are we seriously evaluating men based on one body part?”

“No,” Dani said, “we’re evaluating them based on how they *use* said body part, which says basically everything we need to know about a guy. Now, I can tell by looking at a guy if he’s right for me or not. But I’m a more ... advanced dater.”

Danica snorted a laugh. “What a nice way to put it.”

Dani was scrutinizing me. “Jolie, you’re more of a newb to the cock end of the pool. So it might take you a little longer to decide. It’s understandable.”

My cheeks were burning. “So how do I figure out what kind of cock... or guy... I like?”

“Easy. You fuck them.”

Danica sighed.

“I tell you this because I love you, Jolie,” Dani said. “Seven losers who couldn’t make you come is not experience, babe.”

She had a very valid point.

“Are you agreeing with this?” I asked Danica.

“I mean, I hate to say it but she’s not wrong. You can’t know for sure what you like, really, and what you prefer, until you experience it. I never, ever would’ve thought I’d end up with two men until it happened. Now... I don’t know how I could ever go for anything else.”

“So, you’re saying...”

“You’re young. You’d be doing yourself a terrible disservice,” Danica said, “if you didn’t try out a few things.”

“Including screwing my stepbrother?”

“He’s not your stepbrother. Yet. And no, I still wouldn’t advise you to—”

“After you fuck Shane,” Dani mused, “we’ll find you someone else. You should experiment with at least a few. Maybe we can find you a good boyfriend for a while who’ll practice with you. You know, have him tie you up, spank you, role play... we can give him a list.”

“Slow down,” Danica said. “You’re killing her.”

“I’m okay,” I wheezed. “I was just... picturing Shane... doing all those things to me. I’m sick.”

“You’re not sick,” Dani said firmly. “You’re horny. And we just need some men to attend to your needs.”

“You realize men are human beings, right?” Danica said. “They’re not just your personal playthings.”

“You say tomato, I say—”

“Men catch feelings just like we do,” Danica pressed.

Dani rolled her eyes.

“No one’s catching feelings!” I almost shouted. My cousins looked at me. “I am not catching any feelings for—” I lowered my voice like he could feel me talking about him right now, wherever he was, “Shane Madrigal. And he is not catching feelings for me.”

Dani tapped her champagne flute to mine. “That’s my girl.”

“And I am not fucking him!” I hissed.

Dani frowned. Then she sighed. “And I had such hopes for you. You’re really taking after Danica in a disturbing way.”

Danica smirked. “There’s always hope for Charlotte,” she said of our youngest cousin. “Maybe you can corrupt her instead.”

Dani gave a feral smile and sipped her champagne.

I gulped mine. We’d just pulled up in front of Aunt Madeleine’s townhouse, and she slid into the limo, her curves wrapped in a knockout little black dress. It really was kind of depressing when you knew that your hot aunt was probably gonna turn the heads of more young men than you were.

“What are we drinking and what are we talking about, ladies?” she asked, and I held up the champagne bottle.

“How soon we can corrupt Charlotte,” Dani said, holding out a glass as I poured, and the limo got rolling again.

Madeleine frowned. “She’s not coming tonight, is she?”

“Mireille won’t let her come,” Danica said.

“Good,” Madeleine said. “At least wait until she turns nineteen next month and she’s legal in bars before you debauch her.”

Dani smirked at me. “We’ll see.”

Chapter Ten

Jolie

That night, my twin cousins and I took my mom, their mom, and our other two aunts out for the night of their middle-aged lives. “I haven’t had that much fun since I screwed the healer at an ayahuasca retreat!” exclaimed Dani and Danica’s mom, Marie, as we dropped her off back at home.

Okay, so Marie had been a bit wild in her younger days.

And Madeleine *was* a secret Dominatrix. (At least, that was what I’d been told by my cousins.)

But still. I was pretty sure Aunt Mireille had never had a male bartender do a “hooter shooter” out of her cleavage before. And Mom was actually pretty chill about the whole thing. She’d smiled all night and even drank shooters with us. We’d taken her out to a hot bar and she’d had fun seeing all of us have fun, even if the conversation was a bit raunchy for her tastes.

After we’d dropped them all safely back at home, Dani insisted the night wasn’t over yet. “It’s only twelve-thirty. We can still make last call at like, so many bars!”

So, we headed to this hot Mexican cantina place called the Burner Room. We texted our girlfriends to tell anyone who was out prowling to meet us there.

And we arrived in plenty of time. The bar would still be pouring for a while. We snagged a great group of tables and I

ordered a frosty lime margarita. Alyssa, who lived nearby, had arrived at our table almost as fast as my drink had.

Everything was going just wonderfully, when a wisp of men's cologne drifted up my nose, a dark voice slithered into my ear and a stubbled jaw brushed my neck. "That looks tasty."

I screamed and jumped a mile, slopping my margarita in my lap.

I spun on my stool and grabbed at the table, clinging on so I didn't hit the floor. I righted myself awkwardly, so close to laughing uncontrollably that I snorted instead.

"Who does that?!" I shouted at Shane, who was standing over me with a gorgeous, evil smile. "Just say hello and respect my personal space like a normal person!"

He picked up my margarita glass and downed what remained of my drink, like the barn animal he was.

"Seriously, who raised you?" I'd had many encounters with his dad, meals included, and the man was the epitome of class. It was stunning how far the adopted apple had rolled away from that tree. "That was my drink."

"So? We'll get more." And with that, he was off to the bar.

I turned, my jaw hanging open, to find Dani smiling at me and Danica giving me sympathy eyes.

"What is he even doing here??"

Next to me, Alyssa sipped her mojito while checking out Shane over my shoulder. "He appears to be stalking you." She looked around. "Also... I see, like, all of his brothers over there."

I glanced over, and there they were. The Ellis brothers. Plus a bunch of other guys. They'd just come in and were rallying up at the bar to get drinks.

They'd brought the bachelor party here?!

Jacob wasn't with them. They must've dropped him at home.

I looked at my cousins, then narrowed my eyes at Danica, who looked guilty. “Did you tell them where we were?”

“I didn’t tell them anything. Your mom was texting Jacob in the limo, though. She might’ve gleaned that we were planning to come here and you know, mentioned it? It is a good bar...”

I made an aggravated sound no one could probably hear and glanced at Dani. She was chatting with a group of her girlfriends, who’d just arrived. Danica went back to agonizing over the menu, trying to decide if she really wanted to keep drinking or not.

I turned to Alyssa, blocking the guys out of my peripheral vision and my mental space, and forcibly changed the subject. This was ladies’ night. *Screw those guys*. “I don’t remember Dani being such a sexual mercenary. Did I miss that?”

“Uh, yeah,” Alyssa said. “She hasn’t changed. Except to get more mercenary.”

“God, I’ve missed you all. So, so much.”

“Good. Then never leave us again.” My best friend raised an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry. You know I have to.”

“Is California really that much better?”

“No. It’s hot. And beautiful and exciting. And so expensive. I practically weep every month when I just barely make rent. And I’m pretty sure I’m never moving back, even if it means my dad gets to win the silent battle with my mom over who’s the better parent. Mom is, obviously. But Dad’s gonna live in his delusions as long as I stay down there. It’s a sad side effect.”

Alyssa frowned. “It’ll be better for you here. Your whole family is here. *I’m* here. And he’s not.”

“I know. I went down there because I thought I’d find something I was missing, you know? Discover something about myself that magically told me who I was supposed to be or something. But all I discovered were reasons why my dad

abandoned me, and none of them are my fault. And that I'm the same person no matter where I go. I'm just... me."

"Being you is not so bad, Jolie."

"True. I think I wanted to throw a pity party for myself growing up because my daddy left me. But my daddy was a self-centered jerk so, really, he did me a favor. At least I'm getting a great stepdad now. It's just..."

"Too late?" Alyssa filled in.

"Yeah. Pretty much. Like, where was Jacob Ellis when I was nine and really needed a father figure?"

"Well, think of it this way. If your mom met him back then, this crush you have on his son really would be super gross."

"What?" I leaned toward her. We were half-shouting to hear each other over the crowd and the music. "Wait. I thought you said crush."

"Yes. Crush. That's what I said." She blinked at me not-innocently.

"Alyssa! It's not a crush. I haven't even *thought* about Shane Madrigal in *years*." A slight exaggeration, but still. What the hell was she saying?

"Uh-huh. But then you came back. And saw him. And flipped out. And then last night you saw him with another woman. And today he asked you to screw him, and I heard you over the phone..."

"So?" Yeah, I'd called her from the café this morning while I was waiting for Mom to pick me up, and told her the whole story. But she didn't say this then.

"So... I know you," she concluded.

"You know *what*?"

"I could hear it in your voice. You're considering it."

"Considering what?"

"Having sex with him."

“What?! No. *No*. Just the idea of screwing Shane is—”

I stiffened as the awareness that a man was standing right the fuck beside me and probably heard every word I just said crept over me. I turned. Make that two men. Two handsome rock star men.

Unicorns.

Danica’s husbands had just arrived.

Ashley smirked at me while Matt dragged another table next to ours. “How’s your brother doing, Jolie?” Ashley asked me.

I instantly turned magenta. “He’s not my brother!!” Did anyone else hear me say Shane’s name just now?

“I heard you kissed him,” he said bluntly. “Didn’t know you also wanted to screw him.”

“Danica!” I whirled to her.

“Sorry! You know I tell my men everything.”

“Not *that*!”

“They don’t judge.”

“We judge a little,” Matt said. “But only to make you squirm.”

Cocktails. I needed more cocktails, right now.

“I guess the official term is stepbrother,” Ashley added, as they settled in.

“No, the official term is divorce. As in, I’ll be petitioning Danica to divorce you if you don’t shut up right now.”

“If you guys had babies,” Matt mused, “what would that make them?”

“Nothing!! Because we are not having babies!!” I knew my face was hot pink, rivers of sweat were pouring down my underarms, and I hated my entire extended family so much right now.

Danica welcomed Ashley, who’d sat down next to her, with a kiss.

“Where are all these men coming from?” I cried, as Joss Ellis and a friend of his came to say hi to Dani’s friends at the far end of our table cluster. *They were all coming over here and sitting down.* “Do you all not know what ‘ladies night’ means? Or perhaps ‘bachelorette’ party?”

“Chill,” Dani said coolly, like I was hyperventilating for no good reason. “Oh look, he bought you a drink.”

I bit my lip, hard, trying to look normal as Shane walked up and put a fresh margarita in front of me.

I said not one thing.

Unfazed, he sauntered around the table to say hi to Matt and Ashley. I wasn’t even sure if they’d officially met yet. For all I knew, Danica’s husbands had been partying and bro-ing with Shane while I was out of town, you know, since their beloved Danica was about to become related to him.

I needed to die, right now.

Shane wore a dark gray T-shirt that clung to all his lean muscles, jeans with shredded thighs and Converse high-tops, and looked like he fit in far too fucking well with Danica’s men. I did not like it.

But Dani was right. I needed to chill. No one was even paying attention to me right now.

Everyone at our table was talking and when I looked around, it was disturbing how many people in this place were groping each other or making out. It was almost closing time and the vibe was way, way too hot in here, the music thudding through the bar like we were all shuddering on the brink of a collective orgasm. Somehow the night had devolved from ladies’ night with Lady Gaga into a full-on penis invasion as Doja Cat basically fucked some guy with her lyrics.

I needed a cold drink. One that Shane Madrigal didn’t buy for me.

I hopped off my stool and beelined for the bar, where I leaned in between a couple of people. When the bartender came over, I ordered a white wine spritzer. I figured I should

switch to something that was literally watered down if I was going to make it through this night.

“Add a soda water to that.” A warm body slid in next to mine and I recoiled. “With a wedge of lime.”

“Wait,” I said, before the bartender could start making the drinks. “I’m not buying you a drink, Shane.”

“I didn’t ask you to.” He pulled out a credit card. “It’s on me.”

I already had my credit card in my hand. “I’ve got my own.”

His wolfish eyes held mine. “A lady should never pay for her own drinks.”

“It’s the twenty-first century and yes I fucking will.”

“Take mine. I’ll start a tab.” He offered the bartender his card and the sexist jerk took it.

“Sorry,” the bartender said to me, then he started making our drinks.

“I guess the women’s movement never happened,” I huffed. “I must’ve hallucinated that day in history class.”

“You have the right to buy alcohol, sweetheart. And I have the right to buy it for you.”

“That’s literally nonsense.”

“You’re sweating, darling. Why don’t you take off that sweater.”

I was wearing a cute cropped cardigan over my tube top and hugged it tight around me. “Because I don’t want to. Stop calling me sweetheart and darling.”

“You’re so pretty when you’re disgusted with me.”

“You’re gross when you lie to me.”

“You know, it kinda turns me on when you pretend you can’t stand me.”

“Stop lying. And I am not pretending.”

“You’re like a cute little cactus. I just want to take you home and pluck out all your thorns.”

“Stop hitting on me.”

“Look. Drinks.” Shane gave the bartender a bro-y nod as he placed the drinks in front of us.

“Thank God.” I buried my face in my refreshing spritzer.

“You know, you really have terrible manners.”

“I have terrible manners?”

“God didn’t buy you the drink. I did.”

“I see what you did there. More important than God, huh? I knew you had an ego, but shit.”

“A simple *Thank you, Shane* would suffice. You never did thank me for that first drink I bought you, either.” His eyes held mine, glimmering with what I’d thought that night, years ago, was a genuine interest in me but I now knew was pure, high octane evil.

As if the exuberant fuck I’d given him that night wasn’t thanks enough.

Well, I definitely didn’t want him thinking I owed him anything. I’d just clear up that tab right now to avoid any confusion.

“Thank you, Shane,” I said sweetly. “Now suck it, Shane.”

I turned to depart, but his hand slid around my waist and pressed flat to my belly, and he tugged me back, right against him. Gently yet forcefully. His warm breath was in my ear again, that dark, sinful voice. “What, exactly, would you like me to suck?”

Shit. *Backfire.*

I whipped around to face him and his hand fell away. We stared at each other.

I wanted to tell him he had no right to touch me. But the words got stuck in my throat. I silently fumed and a confusion of responses tumbled through me. Was I mad? Outraged?

Embarrassed? Was I melting just a little bit from his warmth?
Yes. All of the above.

“I don’t like you.”

“That’s okay. I want to apologize.”

“What?”

“For missing the suit fitting. I’m sorry things got out of control and I gave you so much attitude, and I didn’t go to the appointment you made for me. You’re very cute. It’s hard not to want to please you, but I try.”

I stammered a little, unprepared for this. He was... apologizing?

No. *It’s not sincere.*

“I mean... don’t do me any favors,” I said carefully. “The suit isn’t for me, it’s for the wedding.”

“Right.”

“You don’t like me.”

He took a swig of his drink and stared me down.

I knew what he was doing. He was still trying to get in my pants.

Not because he liked me. Because of his whole warped *I love doing shit to piss off my family* thing. That beloved, fucked-up pastime of his.

“And you definitely don’t think I’m cute,” I said.

“Don’t I?”

“I’m not your type.”

“That may be true.”

“You like curvy blondes.”

“I do. I also like other things.”

We stared at each other for another long minute, during which I decided I was too frazzled to react to him rationally and should get as far away from him as possible before I did something stupid like lick his smug, gorgeous face. The man

had beautiful, lush lips. And for just a moment, I wanted to suck on his bottom lip so hard I left a bruise.

A terrible, knowing smile crept across his lips.

And all at once, I was under his spell again. The way I was that night.

I knew I didn't imagine it in my memory; that hold he'd had over me.

I couldn't even seem to walk away.

"You remember," he said darkly.

Then I backed away, bumped into someone, turned and fled.

Chapter Eleven

Jolie

It was past last call. For the last half hour, I'd carefully nursed my wine spritzer as I tried to keep an eye on Shane across the bar. He was standing with some guys, talking. I was pretty sure he wasn't looking at me at all.

I watched as he made his way across the room, through the crowd... and suddenly it hit me. He was leaving.

I jumped up without even think about it. Alyssa looked at me as I startled her. "Where are you going?"

"Uh, I'm... I'll be back!" I grabbed my purse and hurried through the crowd toward the front door. When I got there, I couldn't see Shane anywhere. I pushed my way outside, and I spotted him, walking away along the sidewalk.

He was alone.

And I was following him without even knowing what I was doing or why I was doing it.

He kept walking, crossing the street and continuing on the other side, and I just kept following him. As I hurried along, my eyes dragged down his body. The broad shoulders and the taper of his waist. His tight butt in his jeans and his strong legs. The way he walked...

Fuck, he was sexy.

How could I find someone so sexy when I couldn't stand him as a human?

I couldn't deny that I had dirty thoughts about the man. At least, about his body. And about that night, in my memories.

And tonight, when he came on to me... it fucking floored me. I tried to act snarky and cool, not let it get to me, but it fucking did.

I wasn't sure I'd heard a single word anyone else had said to me for the rest of the night. I'd basically faked my way through a conversation with my best friend, which meant that I owed her an actual conversation sometime soon. But tonight, with Shane in the room, I just couldn't do it.

Not after he sought me out in public and drank my drink, then bought me a new one and said all that shit to me.

I kept hearing it in my head...

What, exactly, would you like me to suck?

It was an offer. Another invitation to sex. Just like earlier today, in the pool house.

What was his game, really? He seriously wanted to have sex with me just because it would bother his family?

Who does that?

And also, who offered to fuck someone they didn't even like?

Someone who they were about to become related to?

Maybe Dani was right that it wasn't actually creepy. There was no blood relation; he wasn't even blood related to Jacob. There were degrees of separation. But still. We had family members in common. If I ever did move back up here, there would be potentially endless family functions where we could run into each other for the rest of our lives. If we both married someone else one day and had children, our kids would be like... step cousins.

Shudder.

Good thing I wasn't moving back.

As I tailed him, I wondered how long I'd keep this up. Was he walking all the way to his place? It was several more

blocks, and I was starting to feel foolish. Like what was I hoping to see?

A woman. I was hoping to see him with a woman, maybe.

Just maybe, outside the bar, I was hoping he was gonna hook up with some woman he'd been texting or something. She'd pull up to the curb and he'd slide into her car. Or she'd strut up to him and he'd flag down a cab, and take her home to do vile things to her.

Maybe I just wanted a reminder of the other night. Of Lamborghini woman.

A reminder that I wasn't exactly the only woman he'd wanted to fuck in recent times. A reminder that he was just a sleazy player who picked up girls and lied to them to get in their pants.

He didn't lie to her, though. He gave her his real name.

I heard her call him Shane.

Why did that bother me so fucking much?

Because he told you in the pool house when you confronted him that he didn't know who you were when he met you.

If that was true... then he really was picking up a stranger that night. It was just a hookup. Which meant he liked me enough to take me up to his hotel room and do very dirty things to me, but not enough to tell me his real name.

He did give you his real name. On that note.

God, I wished I'd kept that thing.

So I could look at it right now, analyze it and obsess over it, like maybe if I stared at it long enough I could figure out if he was telling me the truth or not. I'd thought, for four years, that that note was a terrible taunt. A little *fuck you* left on his pillow for me to wake up to. He was rubbing it in my face.

That note was a dare, not a request for future contact.

If I'd actually called him, he'd just rub it in my face over the phone.

But what if I was wrong about that?

No.

He didn't mean anything he said that night. All the flirting and chemistry...

He was full of shit.

He was playing me.

Maybe. *Ugh.* I just didn't know.

Whether he knew who I was that night or not, maybe I'd never know. But he'd admitted right to my face that he would screw me just to upset his dad.

I didn't need any more proof than that to reassure myself that the man was a raging asshole.

And here I was, following him. It had been at least five blocks now, and I wasn't stopping. Up ahead on the sidewalk, he was still walking... somewhere. Somewhere that seemed to be in the direction of his apartment.

He was still alone.

Was he really going home alone, from a bar, on a Saturday night?

My phone jingled, muffled in my purse. I pulled it out and checked the text I'd just received.

Alyssa: Are you OK? It's been like eight minutes. Where did you go?

Me: I'm following Shane up the street!

Alyssa: Why?

Me: I need to know!

I hurried to run across the street before the light turned red. Shane was already on the other side. As I made it across, my phone jingled again and I looked down at it.

Alyssa: Know what?

I started typing her a reply while my eyes worked back-and-forth between the sidewalk and my phone. It was taking me forever to type it out, and there was no time to check for typos or punctuate beyond whatever my phone filled in. God, it was hard to type while walking.

Me: Where he's going what he's doing and who he's doing it with and what he does on a Saturday thigh and

Shit. I walked right into someone. I heard the little bloop of my text sending as I looked up.

Shane.

He looked over his shoulder. And turned right around when he saw me.

I recoiled. I'd plowed right into him when he stopped at the curb to wait for another crossing light.

"Jolie." He looked surprised to see me, of course. He didn't know he'd picked up a stalker.

"Uh, sorry. I was just texting..." I glanced down at my screen as Alyssa's response came in.

Alyssa: Saturday thigh what?

Crap. I'd typed *Saturday thigh* instead of *Saturday night*. Autocorrect had probably fucked me. No time to fix it now. I shoved my phone into my purse.

Shane was staring at me like he was waiting on some explanation.

"What?" I snapped. "It's a public sidewalk."

"And you just happened to walk into me on it."

"Yeah. So?" Thank God it was nighttime because I was turning pink as I floundered for some excuse.

"And you're right behind me because...?"

“Hey, I was just meeting up with a friend. Is there a coffee shop around here?” I looked around and thank God there was. “Oh, there it is. Well, have a nice night.” I started walking but went nowhere because he’d closed his hand around my arm like an iron shackle.

“Stay right there.”

Tingles ran up the back of my neck at the sound of his low voice. He was bossing me around. Again.

I turned on him. “Excuse me?”

“Meeting a friend, huh.”

“Yep.”

“At a coffee shop a block away from my place.”

“Is that a crime or something?” I tugged and he released my arm. But I didn’t leave.

“Which friend are you meeting?”

“None of your business.”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

Okay, so I was busted. “Well, I guess I’m not as practiced with it as some people,” I bit out.

“It’s easy. Like this. I don’t want to fuck you right now. You should go home.” His eyes were locked on mine.

I stared back at him.

And all the stuff he said to me at the bar tonight crept through my mind.

You’re very cute.

It’s hard not to want to please you, but I try.

No. He didn’t mean any of it. He wasn’t attracted to me.

He was just fucking with me.

So why was I heating up at that look in his eyes?

I broke eye contact. “I don’t want to talk about this in the street.”

I could feel him looking at me. And maybe I should've just walked away, but I didn't.

I was sure that by not walking away I was giving him all the information he needed.

"Come with me," he said.

It was the exact same thing he said to me that night. But this time he didn't take my hand. He just turned and started walking.

And I followed him, wrapping my arms around my waist. By the time we crossed the street we'd fallen into pace with one another, walking side-by-side. When we arrived at his building, I didn't look at him as he opened the door. He held it open for me and I stepped in first.

I didn't recognize the guy at the security desk. It wasn't the same man who was here when I came the other day. But I avoided eye contact with him while I followed Shane to his elevator.

As we rode the elevator up, he looked at me. But when our eyes met, mine skipped away.

He slid open the door and I followed him into his apartment. He flicked on a light and rolled the heavy door closed. We were alone in his dark loft. With just one little light on in the entrance area.

I walked deeper into the apartment, my arms still wrapped around myself, seeking out the safety of the shadows. I heard him dump off his shoes behind me and when I turned, I watched him walk across to the kitchen.

He peeled off his T-shirt along the way, like he was too hot to keep it on. I was a little sweaty myself from that walk. And now, from the sight of his body... as he tossed the shirt aside and my eyes went straight to his bare skin.

Oh God, *his body*.

He was lean but ripped as fuck, his arms sculpted, his skin a warm tan tone. I wasn't wrong when I was here the other day and saw him without a shirt on, or this morning, in my mom's

backyard: he was hotter than I remembered. Or maybe my taste in what I found attractive had just matured over time from “member of boy band” to “battered, real life man,” because he was all man and he was goddamn glorious.

Physically. Just physically.

And now there was the possibility, niggling at the back of my mind: *You could have that. He offered it to you.*

I drifted closer without even realizing I was doing it, joining him in the kitchen, where he flicked on the little pendant lights over the bar. I watched as he poured both of us a glass of something from his fridge. Then he turned to find me watching him. He put a glass on the bar for me. “Water. Do you want something stronger?”

“No.” I set my purse down and took a sip, letting my eyes move over his skin. The faded bruises. The scars. Maybe some of them were from fighting, but most of them were probably from the car accident he was in. The one that ruined his hockey career.

But they didn’t ruin his beauty or anything. They just made him look more like a man. A man who’d been through some shit.

I wanted it to turn me off, but it really didn’t.

“So?” he said. “Talk.”

“Um.” My eyes met his. It felt intimate, here in the near-dark, in the quiet of his apartment... just the two of us, alone at night... “About what?”

“You said you didn’t want to talk in the street. Well, no one here but you and me.”

My face heated at those words. He was right. And no one had to know. Whatever we said here, whatever we did...

Unless one of us told anyone.

“How about this,” he said. “I’ll go first. You came here because you want to fuck me. And that’s okay.”

“That’s... that’s not true.”

His eyebrow rose. He seemed to be waiting for me to go on. But I wasn't sure what to say.

I didn't come here because I wanted to fuck him. Not exactly.

I did want answers, though.

I was freaking dying to know if it was a fluke; that night, all the things I felt, the connection between us.

Was there anything about it that was real?

If it was just a hookup and it was super fucking hot... it wasn't just hot for *me*, right?

The attraction, the chemistry between us... it was *real*.

Superficial, maybe. Purely physical.

But it was powerful.

And maybe I wanted to feel it again.

To know.

Was it a fluke? A moment in time?

Or would it be like that if we did it again?

"Okay," I admitted. "I was thinking about it. And... maybe we should."

Chapter Twelve

Jolie

I braced myself for Shane's self-satisfied smile. Maybe a little gloating.

But he did neither.

Instead, he said, "Is that what you want?"

"Uh... yes. I think so. I mean... if you do." I chewed the inside of my mouth. Why was this so hard? He already said he wanted to. And we'd already done it before. There was nothing new here, really.

Except that now I knew who he really was.

I knew the truth.

"But I don't want you to think this means I like you or anything," I added quickly.

"Heaven forbid."

"I'm serious. I'm not crushing on you. We can still hate each other."

"Apparently."

"So, then there's no reason we can't. But... I have some ground rules."

He wandered toward his bed area. It was on a raised area of the floor, off to one side, under a wall of windows. "Do you."

“I need to make this clear that I’m choosing this.” I left my water on the bar and followed him at a distance. “I know who you are and you know who I am and we’re both... mostly sober. And we’re both choosing this.”

“I’m completely sober,” he corrected me. “Other than half of your margarita, I didn’t have anything to drink tonight.”

“I mean, I only had a few drinks,” I said defensively.

I watched as he shut the blinds on his windows with a remote. I swallowed thickly as that deliberate move rendered us even *more* alone. No chance of anyone glimpsing this now.

“So, I know what I’m doing,” I asserted.

“Which is?”

“Sex.” My cheeks flamed. “It’s just sex.”

He didn’t say anything.

Why was that so unnerving?

“This is just one time,” I pressed as he wandered back towards me. “And it doesn’t mean anything.”

“Right.”

Was he agreeing? Or was he mocking me?

“It’s just a one night stand,” I repeated as he stopped in front of me and stared me down.

“I thought we already had one of those.”

“Okay, so we’re having another one. But this one is it.”

“Uh-huh. One plus one.”

If he was trying to get me to say the word *two*, admit that this was something more, it wasn’t happening. This was a one nighter and that was it.

“Anyway. It’s just sex, okay? There’s no emotional involvement here.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Why do you keep saying *uh-huh*?”

“You’re very tense,” he said in a low, soothing tone. “You probably want to sit down.”

I’d sat down before it really sank in that he wasn’t asking.

He’d literally told me to sit down and I did. On the nearest object—the foot of his bed.

I blinked up at him. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Make me do your bidding.”

He laughed, a low chuckle that made goosebumps rise on my skin. My nipples hardened. “Bidding?” He leaned in close to my ear and said seductively, “I bid you to rob a bank for me.”

I pulled away, shooting him an unimpressed look as he drew back. “Very funny. I’m not saying you’re brainwashing me or anything. It’s just, you know... that commanding thing you do.”

He stood over me, contemplating me, it seemed. Again, it was unnerving. “You’re not gonna do anything here you don’t want to, are you?”

“No.”

“Then what does it matter if I give you commands? You follow them or you don’t.”

I stared at him. He knew I was dying to follow them, though, didn’t he?

Do you like following orders?

My heart was drumming, already. My fingers felt shaky as I pressed them to my knees.

He was so damn confident. It unraveled me.

It wasn’t cockiness. It was confidence.

I fucking loved how self-assured he was. How in control.

I just basically told him I hated him. And he didn’t care. It didn’t rattle him at all.

Maybe I admired his self-confidence, his self-control, his seemingly effortless command of the entire situation, because I'd never felt that in command of anything in my life, even myself, let alone anyone else.

Whatever it was, it was a turn on.

So, okay. He turned me on. In a physical sense.

I just had to make sure I didn't get hurt here.

I was choosing this, just once, and nothing more. Sex. One night. And he didn't get to lord it over me afterwards, because we both went into it with open eyes this time. I came here of my own free will. It was my doing. I didn't just give it up to him because he asked for it in a bar.

"So, we're agreed?" I prompted. "It's just one night."

"Right."

"And you won't tell anyone about this?"

"Why would I?"

"That thing you said about upsetting our parents."

"I'm not gonna tell our parents."

"You know I don't trust you. I don't even like you. At all. You're rude and arrogant and a total jerk."

"You really know how to seduce a guy. You've got the sweet talk down."

"I don't want to seduce you. I'm just being honest with you. The only thing I ever told you that was untrue was my name. Which is more than I can say for you."

And there I went, bringing it up again. Like a wounded puppy.

"You said you were meeting a friend tonight," he reminded me.

"You said you'd sleep with me because our families would disapprove!"

"Yeah, I did say that."

“So was that a lie?”

“No.”

“But you won’t really tell them, right?” I pressed.

“Why would I tell them?” He wandered away. “I never said I’d tell them. I don’t like them in my business.”

Yeah. That was what I thought.

I watched him pace in a slow circle around the room, like a wild animal trapped in an enclosed habitat, restless.

“Then what was all that stuff you said about ‘doing shit that pisses off my family is a beloved pastime’?”

“It is. That doesn’t mean they need to know about it. Doing shit behind their backs that I know would piss them off is just as much fun.” He smiled, a dark, shit-disturber smile that didn’t even reach his eyes.

“You are seriously gross.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

I studied him, wondering if I truly trusted him enough to do this. I must have, or why would I be here? I really wasn’t that drunk or anything. I knew what I was doing.

I watched him move in a slow circle all the way around the bed, around me, like a wolf sizing up its prey. I tried to keep my eyes on him the whole time. I couldn’t quite. When he disappeared behind me, into the shadows, I couldn’t really see his face and I didn’t like it.

“What are you doing?”

“Circling.”

“Why?”

“I don’t like sitting still.”

“You’re trying to make me nervous.”

“Are you nervous?”

I looked at him as he circled in front of me, but he didn’t stop. He looked menacing, somehow, even though he looked

relaxed.

Maybe this was how he looked before a fight. Before he attacked an opponent.

The thought made me shiver.

He's not stalking you. You're not prey.

Just relax.

I knew he wasn't really evil or anything. That was just shit I told myself when I was mad and humiliated. If he was evil, Mom would've said something. She would've warned me to stay away from him, Jacob's son or not. So would my aunts. They'd never said anything negative about Shane. They didn't gossip about him behind his back.

It was my cousins who did those things.

They were the ones who told me he was an amateur MMA fighter. Mom never talked about that or what he was into—other than all the arm candy—or what he did for a living at all.

“So why would you tell me that stuff at all?” I asked him. “You really thought I'd want to screw you to hurt my mom or something?”

He didn't answer that for several slow paces, around into the shadows behind his bed.

“Did it ever occur to you, little Jolie, that I said that stuff for you?”

“For me?”

“Figured you might like that it's... forbidden.”

I swallowed as he circled around in front of me again. It was making me dizzy, trying to keep track of his movements in the shadows. “Why would I like that?”

“I don't know. You like bad boys, don't you?”

“Where would you get that from?”

“How about from Hunter, the guy you met in a bar one night.” He paused in front of me. “He seemed to get the idea

that you liked bad boys. What was it... athletes and male prostitutes...?"

"I never wanted you to be a prostitute," I protested. "We were just flirting."

"We were. It was fun."

Ugh. "Stop talking about it, okay? I don't want to reminisce about that night."

"Don't you?"

"*No.*"

Shane studied me for a moment, then started circling again. "Look, if you're gonna come to a guy's apartment and have sex with him, you should feel safe. You have my word, I'm not fucking with you. I'm not gonna tell anyone anything. This isn't about our parents." His eyes roamed over me and met mine again, hooded. "Like you said. We're just doing it for the pleasure."

"I... I didn't say it was for the pleasure."

"Then what's it for, Jolie?"

Seriously? What "bad boy" got a girl in his apartment, agreeing to fuck him, and then asked her *why*?

"I asked you a question," he said evenly, as if that demanded an answer.

As if I owed him anything.

But for some reason, I wanted to answer his demands. Just like I did that night.

I sighed, aggravated. Then I blurted, "I just want to know if you can make me come like that again, okay?"

His eyes met mine. For a split second, I thought maybe he was gonna laugh.

I couldn't believe I just blurted that out, but it was the truth. Ask for what you want and ye shall receive, right?

If I didn't tell him why I was really here, I was half-scared that he'd just fuck the shit out of me and then tell me to leave.

I wasn't sure I could come if he did that.

And if I couldn't come... what was the point? I'd risked humiliating myself, getting naked and vulnerable with him, for what?

Shane didn't say anything to that. And I wondered, were we gonna get this over with or what? I didn't like how he was dragging this out, making me wait here in my discomfort.

I was way too nervous to make the first move, though.

That seemed more like a him thing.

The first time, he'd not only made basically every move, he'd been downright bossy about it. As I swallowed now, I could feel his grip on my throat as he held me up against the hotel room wall, and I practically shivered.

Would it be like that again?

Let's see how well you follow orders.

That night, as soon as I'd nodded in flustered surrender at those words, he'd sank down to his knees and went down on me.

And from there... I'd been his.

Willing.

Obedient.

Enraptured with his every move.

I was starting to tremble with anticipation as I waited for his command now. But he still didn't say anything.

Instead, he walked over to me. I looked up at him and he reached toward my face—and slid off my glasses. Slowly. The arms of the glasses grazed my cheekbones and a shiver ran down my body, straight into my core.

I watched him set the glasses carefully aside.

I had no idea why that felt so fucking intimate. Worse than if he'd ripped off my skirt or something.

He looked into my eyes and said, in that low, seductive tone of his, "Lie back."

That voice.

I hadn't heard it since that night at the bar, and in his hotel room... and it set me on fire. I'd forgotten how potent it was. The memory had faded, maybe.

That feeling.

The power he had over me that night. The power that I'd succumbed to with *willing obedience*.

I lay back on the bed.

My panties were already wet.

I couldn't believe I was doing this, and yet, I wanted it.

Badly.

Please God, let this not be a huge, horrible mistake.

Shane stood over me. His bed was high, up to his thighs, so he barely had to bend to lay his hands on my hips. He fisted my skirt and yanked it up to expose my panties. Then he took hold of my panties.

I held my breath as he pulled them down my legs and tossed them aside.

Well. We were definitely doing this.

His eyes met mine. "Breathe," he commanded.

I blew out the breath I'd been holding and tried to just breathe normally.

Impossible.

Then he slid his hands underneath me, gripped my ass and yanked me towards him. My butt was now at the edge of the bed and my legs fell open around him. He stepped in close, so that his thighs in his jeans brushed my inner thighs.

I tried not to think about how vulnerable I was right now. How open to him. How exposed.

Heat flashed through my body as his hands gently squeezed my ass cheeks. He was looking down, between my legs.

Then his eyes dragged up my body to meet mine. I tried to hold his gaze, watching him... as he got down on his knees.

Oh, God. He was gonna eat me out.

Just like he did that night...

His face had spent a lot of time between my legs that night.

As soon as his lips touched my clit, I melted. He sucking on me, semi-gently, and then stroked with his tongue. And if I had any doubts in my mind, any worries that this was just some trick, they vanished in the ensuing waves of pleasure that started in my core and spread out through my body as he worked me with his mouth.

He slid his big, warm hands out from under me and pressed them to my soft inner thighs, spreading me open.

Okay. This was good. This was very, very good.

He was giving me pleasure.

I had no idea, from his point of view, why he'd start with this instead of just fucking me, but I was goddamn relieved.

I tried to relax into it, as he teased my pussy with his finger, and then pushed slowly into me. Felt so good, I cried out softly. I realized, he didn't tell me to be still this time. He didn't tell me to be quiet.

So I didn't even try to.

He sucked on me harder, an incredible, wonderful rhythm that had arousal flooding my body, gathering fast in my core. I thought for sure he was going to make me come. Make me come and then fuck me.

And then toss me out into the night.

I wondered idly if he'd call me a cab...

But then he sucked on me, hard, and everything else fell away. It was like he knew I was wandering, stressing about things, and he'd demanded my attention. And just as I was trembling toward the edge, getting so fucking close... he slowed right down.

The finger he'd been gently fucking me with as he sucked was joined by a second finger. He teased me with his fingers, stroking me inside, and slowed his tongue as I panted. And I generally calmed the fuck down a bit.

Then he ramped it up again, screwing me with his fingers while he sucked hard on my clit.

Then he stopped altogether.

He ran his hands down my thighs.

"Relax," he said. And I fucking sighed. I looked up at the ceiling, trying not to think about the fact that Shane's face was right up my pussy. And he wasn't touching me.

Was he looking at me? What was he doing?

I started squirming with impatience as my heart pounded in my chest. I was so freaking aroused. I was fucking dangling here.

He chuckled softly, and I swore.

"You're an asshole, Shane Madrigal."

"Now, why would you say that, little dove?"

I melted inside when he called me that... *little dove*.

Dangerous.

But before I could sweat it, his thumb brushed over my clit and I moaned.

"I'm being very nice to you right now," he teased, "am I not?"

I panted as he slipped his fingers into me again.

"Answer me," he demanded.

"It's... alright," I lied.

The truth was, I was in goddamn heaven. I could've just laid here all night while he did whatever he wanted to me. His touch was fucking exquisite.

I vaguely wondered how many women's legs he'd had his face between to get that good at it, but shoved that thought

aside.

Don't think about it.

As if he sensed my sudden discomfort, he ordered, "Tell me how you feel right now."

"I feel like you're an asshole who's trying to ruin this for me." Did we really have to talk at all?

He laughed darkly, under his breath. "Am I?" Then he sucked on my clit, and my eyes rolled back in my head. I groaned like a woman possessed by some kind of sex demon.

And then he really got started. Whatever had happened up until now was clearly just a tease.

What unfolded from there was an absolute master class in finger fucking and cunnilingus that every woman should get a free pass to upon coming of age, as a sort of reference point to know for sure when a dude was just plain getting it wrong.

I should know. I'd been wronged before.

Right now, Shane Madrigal was getting it done right. Except he wasn't getting it *done*.

He was purposefully not finishing me off.

There was no way he could miss how fucking close I was every time he stopped. I wasn't being quiet and I wasn't being still. He could barely hold onto my bucking hips.

He finally had to lay his hand on my pelvis and just hold me down.

And the rest... he took his damn time about it. Starting and stopping again.

Fucking repeatedly.

It was like he was enjoying himself, a fuck of a lot.

Maybe that was part of what made it so hot.

The rest was pure, heavenly technique.

I was settling gradually into my new reality. *This is me now*. A pleasure sponge. Just lying here, flung open at the

gates of heaven. While some ravenous angel welcomed me to paradise—with his mouth.

Did I die or something?

He just kept lavishing me with pleasure... bringing me there, over and over, coaxing me to the very edge... a mere practiced stroke away from orgasm... before stopping dead. And just letting me hang.

Torture.

Beautiful, blissful torture.

And the thought crossed my mind suddenly, in the haze of desperate arousal... What if this was his game? Just work me up as high as he possibly could, and then not let me come?

Not fuck me at all?

Cruel.

But possible, considering what I knew about the man.

“Shane?” I took a deep, ragged breath as he breathed on my pussy. He’d stopped again, and my heart was beating so hard I figured he could hear it.

“Yes, Jolie?” Smug. So fucking smug.

I was beyond caring about shit like that. He could lord this over me for eternity for all I cared right now. I just needed to fucking come.

“Can you please make me come?” I whispered.

“Well.” He teased his fingertip lightly over my clit and my whole body convulsed. “You asked so nicely...” His voice was low and hungry.

Then he shoved several fingers into me. I wasn’t even sure how many were in there now. Three? I threw my head back, crying out. It was such a tease. I wanted his cock in there.

I wasn’t gonna tell him that, though.

If he didn’t choose to fuck me, I wasn’t gonna beg him for it.

“You’re gonna come for me, little dove,” he said darkly, his breath caressing my wet flesh. “I’m gonna watch this pussy go off.”

Holy fuck.

Then he wrapped his warm lips around my clit and sucked, so fucking gently. I was so wound up, it wouldn’t take much, and maybe he knew it. I panted, digging my fingers into the bed on either side of me. My body ready... aching, throbbing, dying for more.

But he took his damn time about it. Again. While I waited on the brink of bliss, breathless, for that next suck. The one that would throw me right over.

Instead, he lashed his tongue against my clit, and my body jerked, hard. It was a sudden, violent rush of all-consuming ecstasy. *Fire.*

I didn’t think my body would be able to handle the molten pleasure as it erupted... bursting higher, harder. I came so fucking hard, it felt like I split right open somehow. A full system crash. I writhed like a mad woman and screamed.

I legit *screamed.*

I’d never heard myself scream like that before. It was disturbing, and yet the only way I could release the ecstasy that exploded from my core like some kind of nuclear reaction. I couldn’t contain it. It would’ve killed me or something.

“Yeah, baby,” I heard him purr. “That’s a good girl...”

I bucked against him and whimpered words that made no sense, but I was pretty sure there were a lot of swears in there. My eyes closed, and I just rolled in it.

“How does it feel to come for me?”

It was a wicked question, but I figured it was rhetorical. He didn’t order me to answer him this time.

I didn’t answer.

I opened my eyes. I blinked at the ceiling, kind of scared to actually look at him right now.

Shane Madrigal just gave me a screaming orgasm and it was official. The universe was a fucked-up place.

Just as I was finally catching my breath, he started working me again. His fingers, still inside me, caressing my insides, his tongue worshipping my flesh, his lips sucking on my clit. It was a perfect, holy trifecta of kindness that had me shuddering towards another release.

I felt like I was quivering toward the edge of a cliff, about to free fall into madness.

I almost told him to stop. I felt panicked with the force of the pleasure. But when my mouth stretched open, nothing came out.

And then another little flicker of his tongue sent me flying. My whole core spasmed, my body bearing down on his fingers, and I screamed again.

Then he did it again. He brought me to the brink of orgasm, teased me while I dangled there until I was sobbing with frustration and strung-out ecstasy, and then he made me come.

Then he did it again.

And again...

Until I didn't think it would be physically possible for me to come again... And I did. I was sobbing and moaning, an utter fucking wet mess, when he rose up above me and seized me by the throat.

I blinked, trying to see him. I was vaguely aware of his bicep flexing, his cock in his hand. He was stroking his cock, standing above me. I wasn't even sure how or when he'd undid his jeans and taken it out.

"My turn," he said in a gruff, hungry voice. "I can't wait anymore."

Wait? Wait for what?

Was he seriously thinking about making me come again?

He'd break me.

No, scratch that. He'd already broken me.

That thing we did four years ago? It wasn't a fluke.

It was *him*.

What he did to me that night, he just did it to me all over again. Last time, it happened in several different positions.

This time, he just put me on my back and dominated me. Maybe because he hated me now. He wanted to get it over with.

But if that was true, why did he make me come so much?

Confusing...

And he'd definitely broken me.

How could I get off on another man, ever again? For just a moment of total hysteria, I almost laughed maniacally as it hit me that my pussy was going to want for this now, for the rest of time. He'd ruined me.

Shane, one.

Jolie, zero.

I spread my legs around him as he settled his hips between my thighs.

"Please tell me I'm not gonna regret this," I gushed, looking at his naked dick. We'd used condoms that night at the hotel. But for some reason, neither of us was reaching for one now.

I didn't have one, anyway.

"There's no reason to regret this," he said, as my eyes locked with his. Then he shoved into me with a deep groan, and I cried out.

Yes. This feeling. Being filled, stretched, taken.

I really hadn't had this feeling enough in my life, and I'd never had it quite like this. No other sex had ever been like it was with *him*.

Maybe as an afterthought, he said softly, "Are you on birth control?"

“Yes.”

I could barely lift my knees to wrap my legs around him as he started pumping into me. I was limp and dazed, broken down with pleasure.

He didn't seem to mind. He just fucked me, deep and fast, as he held me down by the throat.

How much time had just gone by? The very concept of a world outside of this place where we were connected was just a blur, as our bodies slapped together. I couldn't pull together a coherent thought about anything else.

Had we been here for hours? Or thirty minutes?

I blinked back the tears of ecstasy in my eyes, trying to get my bearings. Everything felt surreal. I was floating. Suddenly, all that was keeping me from spinning away into some out-of-body experience was his cock pummeling my body and his hand around my throat.

I watched his gorgeous body, poised above me, all his toned muscles flexing in a beautiful, erotic rhythm as he drove into me, again and again. His hips battered against my thighs... his skin so hot and so smooth.

Why didn't other guys feel like this?

When I met his eyes, they were locked on mine. He looked dazed. Absolutely possessed with desire. Focused, hot and tight, on what he was doing to me.

Aroused.

Holy God, he was gorgeous.

He made this hungry, almost desperate sound as his rhythm faltered. And I knew he was going to come. Heat spread through my body in a shock wave... and I came again. I cried out, my body jerking, my core pulsing around his cock.

I couldn't believe how much this man turned me on.

Physically, he was a fucking fantasy come to life.

I looked down at the place where he entered me, fucking panting. I saw the shaft of his cock, thick and flushed, red and

angry, before he thrust into me one last time and let go. He made a strained, animal sound, somewhere between a growl and a kind of wounded groan as he came, pumping into me. I felt him jerk as he filled me.

I'd never felt anything so fucking erotic.

So much more intense than that first time... Maybe because we were enemies now?

Maybe because I had four years to fantasize about it happening again, when I never really thought it would.

He was still holding me down by the throat, and his hand pulsed as his hips rocked into me. Then he seated himself inside me, going still.

He was panting. I was panting.

My head was spinning.

Fucking magical.

That was utter fucking magic.

When I looked up at his face again, his light, wolfish eyes locked with mine. The lights gleaming in his high industrial ceilings, twirling all around his dark head of hair, without my glasses on, looked like... glitter. He was all sweaty and beautiful above me, all his muscles straining as he held me down.

Did I just get fucked by a unicorn?

No.

I pushed the unwanted thought away.

Shane Madrigal was no unicorn.

He was a sly, ravenous wolf, at best. A rogue alpha.

And no matter how I just let him devour me, I would not be his prey.

Chapter Thirteen

Jolie

“Well, well, what happened to *you* last night?”

I was sitting on my mom’s front step in cutoffs and flip flops, sunglasses and no makeup, when Aunt Mireille rolled up in her convertible with my cousin Charlotte. Mireille was eying me. “I take it you girls had fun after dropping the old ladies off at home, hmm?”

Charlotte frowned at me like I was a traitor, since she’d missed out on all this “fun.” Ever since I’d reached adulthood before her, she seemed to feel I’d abandoned her in childhood.

If only she knew how much simpler it was there.

But she was eighteen now. Next month, she’d be legal in Vancouver bars, one day she’d move out of Aunt Mireille’s house, maybe she’d meet some super hot jerk she wanted to screw even though she knew she shouldn’t, and she’d learn how much adulting sucked.

“Ugh.” I dragged myself to my feet as Charlotte hopped out to hug me. “I figured it was obvious. I’m hungover.”

I was. Desperately. But not from alcohol.

This morning, I was suffering a guilt hangover from the fuck of my life.

But I’d much, much rather my entire family assume an ungodly amount of alcohol did this to me. Because the truth

was I'd let my stepbrother smash that for like, hours. And I loved every fucking second of it.

Something was wrong with me.

“*Bonjour!*” Mom came flitting out of the house, but there was no sign of Jacob, thank God. I'd crept home in the middle of the night like a thief, and I could not face Jacob right now. I felt worse than a freeloader in his house this morning.

He took care of me like I was one of his own, and I'd helped myself to his cereal cupboard, his dark roast coffee and a gluttonous helping of his son's dick.

We piled into Mireille's convertible to head into Vancouver, and between the sun blazing down and the three of them singing along—badly—to Taylor Swift, I had a mild headache by the time we arrived at Alyssa's spa.

I would've loved to have planned the perfect pre-wedding “dry run” spa day for my mom and her maid of honor, but Alyssa had approximately a thousand ideas better than mine, so I'd given her free rein to go nuts.

Nestled among the boutiques and cafés just blocks up from the beach in Kitsilano, Decadence Spa was a lavender scented oasis of glass and ultra chic reclaimed wood furnishings just off bustling West Fourth Avenue. Alyssa had opened up early today, just for us. She greeted us herself, ushering us inside with a welcoming smile—for everyone else—and a *What the hell, bitch?* look for me.

Of course, I had kind of ditched her last night and avoided her texts this morning.

Oops.

Mireille and Charlotte, who'd never been here before, *oohed* and *ahhed* at the spa, which Aunt Madeleine had designed, as Mom started giving them a tour like she owned the place. The moment we were alone-ish, Alyssa nudged me aside, where I did my best to preemptively distract her by telling her how pretty she looked. Which normally might work.

Like if I hadn't abandoned her in a bar last night after following Shane out of said bar, and never returned.

"Did you talk to him?" she demanded.

"Oh, we talked." I sipped my coffee, as if last night was no big deal. An everyday event. Though, while I assumed Shane had probably been trailed out of bars by many salivating women over the years, I'd personally never followed a guy out of a bar like a horny puppy before.

Well, except Shane.

Alyssa frowned at my lack of elaboration. "Take off those sunglasses. It's a spa, the lights are dim."

I removed my sunglasses and allowed her a moment of horror at the sight of my no doubt bloodshot and bagged-out eyes. "Christ," she muttered.

"Thanks. I didn't get much sleep."

"So, um, like what happened?" She was searching my face for clues and I could tell she was trying, hard, to pull back on her morbid curiosity.

"Well, let's see. What happened..." I took another sip and tried to gather my thoughts, as the sudden and unwelcome recollection of details such as Shane's thick, flushed, angry-looking cock right before he came, and that sound, that fucking animal sound he made *when* he came—while holding me down by the throat—almost made me gush in my panties. Right here. In front of my best friend.

I was sick or something. I needed help.

"*Jolie.*"

"Um." I tried to focus on her face and find words. "We did talk. But then the sex kind of took over. There were some dirty words in the middle..." I drifted off.

Alyssa blinked at me, staring. "What *happened?*"

"I mean, do you really want details? It was just like last time."

I told her about last time, in detail, the day after it happened.

I blew out a breath. “Okay, I just lied. It was even better than last time. Like, he got even better at it.”

“Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes. He did some kind of sex magic on my pussy for like hours on end, with his face, while I gradually melded from Jolie into his willing sex slave and he made us both come so hard I was about twenty percent scared I was actually gonna die. And then he did it again. A couple of times. Well... I came a bunch of times. He came twice.” I frowned. “Kind of seems unfair, doesn’t it? I mean, he did do all the work...”

Alyssa couldn’t even pull herself together to respond to that before Mom and the others were back.

“Well, where do we start?” Mom asked delightedly.

Alyssa studied me with a frown. “Massages. Definitely.” She took my chin in her fingers and squinted at my skin. “This one needs a facial. Hmm. Maybe a mask, a deep pore treatment—”

“Just give her the works.” Mom fluttered a hand in front of me, indicating that nothing less than a top-to-bottom overhaul was required. “It’s on me.”

I gave her a dirty look.

“Unless you want to look like *that* in our wedding photos for all of eternity,” she said.

Right. Wedding photos. With Shane. And if I was really lucky, his modelesque fuck buddy *du jour*, immortalized next to me in the wedding album.

“The works it is,” Alyssa concluded, and a flock of white-robed spa attendants descended upon us with the efficiency of a pit crew at the Indy 500.

Once we were thoroughly scrubbed down, massaged and steamed, Aunt Mireille and Charlotte were whisked away to the manicure station, and Mom and I were shown to the pedicure lounge. As soon as we were seated, sparkling mimosas were placed in our hands.

Mom made a *tsk* sound and removed the mimosa from my grasp. I was actually considering drinking it for the orange juice content alone, but it was probably best that it was gone. “She’ll have water,” she announced curtly.

“And coffee,” I croaked, tapping my empty travel mug.

I stuck my feet in the little foot bath, my mind and body still throbbing dully with recollections of last night’s fuck fest. Even the massage hadn’t fully erased it. I didn’t dare shut my eyes, since an image of Shane’s naked body poised over mine and flexing, over and over as he drove his magical cock into me, seemed to have been permanently etched into the backs of my eyelids.

I really did try to relax, though. Canapés were served, and I decided that gourmet goodies, a mani-pedi and a massage might not erase last night from existence, but it couldn’t make things any worse.

I had Mom for that.

While our feet were pampered and prepped for polish, she got started on me by pointing out Alyssa’s many admirable features and achievements, as if I were unaware.

“Imagine, twenty-three and managing *this*.” She waved her mimosa about to indicate the spa. “In a few years, who knows? She could own it. She could *own* her own *business*.”

“Are they letting women do that nowadays?” I asked mildly, chugging coffee.

“I suspect David will propose soon.”

This was probably true, since David—Alyssa’s longtime boyfriend—was ass over teakettle in love with her and, as Mom loved to point out ad nauseam, none of us were getting any younger. “Great!” I manufactured a smile. “Another wedding!”

One of the staff had rolled over a display with an array of nail polish colors to choose from and I busied myself poking through the bottles.

“And her sense of style!” Mom went on, unfazed by my sarcasm. “*Très chic!*” She gave my messy ponytail a pointed glance, along with my white tank top, through which my black bra could be seen, and my faded boyfriend jean cutoffs.

“Margot.” I selected an electric turquoise color for my toes, mainly because it reminded me of *that* color—the one I chose the last time I had a pedicure with my Mom. “I know what you’re thinking when you give me that look.”

“Hmm?” she hummed, feigning distraction as she perused the color selection. Then she spared the bottle in my hand the briefest of glances. “Oh, is that the color you’re choosing? Well, it’s blue, darling.”

“I see that.”

“You’ll be wearing open-toed shoes.”

“I’m aware.” Today, we were supposed to be picking the colors we’d wear at the wedding, for a test run.

“And you want blue nails? You’ll look like a corpse!”

And here we go again. I turned the bottle over to check the label on the bottom. “*Incroyable!* That’s just what it says here. ‘Corpse Blue.’”

Mom pursed her lips in an expression of severe perturbedness.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a corpse with turquoise nails, Mom.” I gave the polish a shake.

“You think turquoise goes with the red dress?”

“I don’t care. It’s just nails. You get a say in the dress and the shoes and the flowers, I pick everything else that goes on my body.”

“Hmm. Is that how it works?”

“Absolutely.” I passed the polish down to my pedicurist.

Mom handed her pedicurist the classic red polish she'd chosen.

I sighed. "It's your wedding, Mom. Everyone will be looking at you." And Shane would be looking at the girl he brought and probably screwed in the parking lot, so really, the nail polish was for no one but myself.

Mom eyed the turquoise polish as I wiggled the first painted toe. Then she turned her negotiating face on me. "Toes only."

"Fine."

She lifted an eyebrow at me. "French manicure."

"Alright. But while we're on it, kind of, we are not French."

She looked scandalized. "Of course we are!"

"No, we're not. Grandma and Granddad were, but we are not. We are *Canadienne*. Well, you are. I suppose I'm *Américaine* now, more than anything."

She made a horrified sound to go with the look. "Jolie Aurélie Vola. You are half French, young lady, and half English-Scottish-German-whatever. And yes, you are both American and Canadian. But don't think for one second that you don't belong here anymore. With me." Her gray eyes glittered with sudden tears. She grabbed my hand on the arm of my chair and squeezed. "Sweetheart, I know we all talk a lot about Jacob's sons..."

"So?" I retrieved my hand to take up my coffee for a nervous sip, and tried to arrange my voice into an even tone. "What do they have to do with anything?"

"Well, Jolie, they're all very... accomplished..."

"Oh, Margot," I groaned. "And this day was going so well."

Mom settled back in her chair. "What has gotten into you?" she asked softly, without looking at me. It was one of those questions mothers asked without really wanting the truth for an answer.

Shane's gotten into me.

And it was really ruining my mood.

I reminded myself that it wasn't her fault that I made very bad choices and had abysmal luck when it came to men. I needed to stop bickering with her. Over fucking nail polish.

Obviously, last night's attempt at "hot girl you get to have once and then she's gonna walk away and never think of you again, hahaha to you" completely backfired, because I was thinking about him. Right now. And I had been all morning.

And somehow I just couldn't resist poking at it.

"Hey, Mom... what's with the Lamborghini in the driveway?" It was still there this morning, as it had been all weekend, parked under my bedroom window like a creepy souvenir of one of the worst nights of my life. And she hadn't said a word about it.

Maybe it belonged to the mystery brunette who liked getting spanked on it, and she hadn't returned to pick it up because she didn't need it. Maybe her husband had three more at home. Maybe her and Shane stole it on some fuck-fueled joyride crime spree.

Either that or it was Jacob's, though it seemed unlikely that Mom would fail to mention that her husband-to-be had a sudden midlife crisis of "just had to buy a bright yellow Lamborghini" proportions.

"Oh, that's Shane's," Mom said breezily, as if that explained everything.

"And who the hell paid for it?"

"Really, Jolie," she said, sounding disinterested to the point of boredom. "Talking about money is so... *très gauche*."

"And that's why no one talks about what he does for a living?"

"I know what he does for a living."

Well, that makes one of us.

She added quickly, “Shane’s business is none of my business. He’s a grown man.”

“Too bad you don’t take that approach with other grownups...”

She looked at me, surprised. “Jolie. Jealousy does not become you.”

“I’m not jealous of Shane.”

“Darling. I know you don’t like him—”

“I never said that.”

She pursed her lips again.

Whatever. Let her think jealousy was the issue.

And maybe it was, if I was being totally honest.

Just not in the way she thought.

“Well,” she proclaimed, like she was delivering the final word on the subject, “it’s natural to have rivalry between siblings.”

I choked on my coffee. Mom stared at me as I noisily cleared my throat and rallied my composure.

Okay, let me be clear about this.

Crystal. Fucking. Clear.

“Shane Madrigal and I are *not* siblings.”

And no matter how many times my mother married his father, we never would be.

After the super enjoyable pedicure, Mom headed off for her manicure and I decided to skip it, opting instead to crash out on one of the lounge chairs on the little rooftop patio. No one was up there, so I had the place to myself.

Until Alyssa came striding out and loomed over me.

“You’re blocking my sun, yo.”

She was absolutely gaping at me. “Girl. I need details.”

“Sun. Please. I’m wasting away here.”

She sat down on the chair next to me with a sigh. “So sorry. We wouldn’t want you to lose your California tan.”

“Thank you.”

“You slept with him?”

“Yup. Well, minus the sleeping part.”

She frowned.

“It’s okay though,” I assured her. “It’s all good. Because this time I chose to have sex with him, you know, *him*, knowing his whole name and everything, and he’s not a stranger, right? We agreed, upfront, not to get emotionally involved. We were both very clear about it.”

“Jolie.” My best friend shook her head at me. “Are you fucking kidding? You’re already emotionally involved.”

“What? No I’m not.”

“You’ve been emotionally involved with that man for four years. Or at least with the memory of him and that night. Now that he’s in your life... in your bed... you don’t think that’s gonna get worse? If you start sleeping with him all the time?”

“First of all, he’s not in my life. I’m only here for four more weeks.”

She frowned at me because she hated it when I reminded her of that.

“Second, he’s not in my bed. He was never in my bed and he’s never going to be. We did it at his place.”

“Great argument.”

“Third, it’s not happening ‘all the time.’ It’s not happening again at all. It was a one nighter.”

Why was she looking at me like she didn’t even believe me? My best friend was supposed to believe me, right?

“And I was *never* emotionally involved with him.”

“Jolie, I love you. But yes, you fucking were. You still are.”

“No. I still hate him.”

“Hate is an emotion. And in this case it is an all-consuming, life-altering head fuck and heart fuck of an emotion, because you are still obsessed with him.”

I drew back. “I am not obsessed with Shane Madrigal.”

“Okay, other than your mom’s wedding, he is the only thing you’ve talked about since you came back.”

“Because seeing him again was hard! He hurt me that night.”

Alyssa softened. She said nothing as what I’d just admitted sank in.

“I know he hurt you, babe,” she said gently. “That’s the point. And whether it’s truly hatred or whatever else, it’s a feeling.”

“No, it’s not,” I insisted. “I don’t have any feelings for him.”

“Negative feelings are still feelings. And they come from somewhere. If you didn’t feel anything, you wouldn’t care. You would’ve walked away after that night in Whistler and never looked back.”

“I would’ve loved to! But my mom is marrying his dad, so unfortunately, I will have to see his face a time or two over the years whether I like it or not.”

“So fucking him again was a great way to deal with that?”

“I don’t know,” I said, frustrated. “I just... needed to, okay?”

“*Why?*”

“Do we really need to get into this? I can’t right now.”

Mostly because I did not want to think about why. I’d been asking myself why all night and I didn’t like the answers I was coming up with.

Fuck. Who was I kidding?

Not my best friend, clearly.

“You’re right, okay?” I admitted. “I have feelings. And they are definitely of the hatred variety. As in I kind of hate myself for not being able to stop thinking about him. Maybe I thought last night would be some fucked-up kind of closure. Or it would be a victory for me. Or something.” I groaned. “But can we just move forward right now? I just need to get through the next month.”

Alyssa was giving me that look that said I would not get away with not talking to her about this. But luckily for me, it was hard for her to be mad at me when I was so clearly at a disadvantage.

“Okay.” She eyed me skeptically. “Moving forward. You want lunch? I was going to order in. Margot’s buying, and you look like you need it.”

“Yes. Please. And can we hang tonight? Go somewhere for margaritas? And talk about something else? Bring David. I haven’t seen him in so long.”

She frowned, but softened. “Yes. We can do that. He’d love that.”

Great. Because a night with my bestie and her boyfriend was probably what I needed most right now. You know, to be reminded that there were good guys out there and loving relationships that worked and made sense.

There was no need to fret about screwing Shane Madrigal on any level. Because it was now in the past.

I just needed to keep my mind occupied so I didn’t get completely lost in my head about it. It was a loopy place in there, and I wasn’t going round and round on this. All the spiraling that would normally follow a hookup with a guy I liked was out the window here. Did he like it? Did he like me? Was I gonna see him again?

Big nope.

I couldn't start letting any of those questions run rampant in my head, because I *wasn't* going to see him again.

Not like *that*.

And it did not matter one bit what he thought of last night or of me.

I was taking a page from Dani's playbook on this. It wasn't about him. Last night was about me.

It was *for* me, and it was over.

Chapter Fourteen

Jolie

The next morning as I was brushing my teeth, the ongoing mental spiral about the best sex I'd ever had—which really hadn't stopped, even when I'd tried to drown it out with margaritas—was interrupted by the sound of a high performance car revving in the driveway just outside my windows.

Foaming at the mouth, I raced to a window and looked down at the yellow ghost that had haunted me all weekend. The scissor doors on the Lamborghini were up and it was running.

And there was Shane. He walked to the garage beneath my room and disappeared from view, leaving the car running.

I dashed back into the bathroom to spit, took the stairs two by two as I raced downstairs, through the kitchen and the back hallway, and into the attached garage. Too late. Shane wasn't in there. Three cars were parked in the four-car garage, because Jacob had taken one to work; the garage was all closed up, and from beyond I heard the Lambo's engine rev.

Like it was about to pull away.

I did the only sensible thing possible and raced back into the house, flew upstairs, grabbed my purse, raced back downstairs, shouted at my Mom, who'd wandered into the kitchen, "Borrowing your car!" as I dashed into the back hallway, grabbed my shoes, grabbed the spare key to her Benz

off the hook on my way back into the garage, then peeled out in her car in my bare feet. The gate at the bottom of the drive had just closed, and I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel as my heart drummed in time and I waited for the gate to reopen for me. Then I pulled out into the street, figuring I could catch up with him.

How hard could it be to tail a bright yellow Lamborghini through a winding residential neighborhood?

As it turned out, tailing a Lamborghini was incredibly difficult, when said Lamborghini was driven by a testosterone fueled adrenaline junkie who sped at every opportunity. There weren't exactly a ton of cop cars cruising around Margot and Jacob's upscale neighborhood looking for troublemakers on a Monday morning. But I preferred to stick to the speed limit rather than risk a ticket I couldn't afford or an accident in Mom's beloved Benz.

What are you even doing right now?

I really didn't know. I didn't know what I was doing, and I definitely didn't know what he was doing. Just that he'd come to pick up the Lamborghini without coming in to say hi to me or anything, and I desperately wanted to know where he was going right now and what he did with his days.

Because discovering the answers to questions like those will be just great for your mental health.

Whatever.

I couldn't stop.

Maybe Alyssa was right. I was obsessed or something.

Luckily, since the Lamborghini in question *was* bright yellow and pretty loud, I managed to find him again whenever he had to slow down for a stop sign. He finally slowed to an almost-stop in front of a gated estate that was less than five minutes from Mom and Jacob's place.

I rolled up to the curb a couple houses down and watched. Like the legit stalker I'd apparently become.

The Lambo turned into the drive and rolled slowly up to the broad iron gate. The car and the gate were partially blocked from my view by beautiful trees that stood like green waterfalls along the grass in front of the estate fence. I saw the top of the iron gate as it slowly opened inward. The Lamborghini rolled on through.

I put on my shoes and got out of the car. I could see the gate slowly closing.

I strolled along the quiet residential street all casual like, and then ducked into the trees along the edge of the estate grounds when I was sure there was no one around to see me. Past the trees was a tall iron fence with big stone pillars all along it. The fence itself, which would've been see-through, had a thick, well-trimmed hedge basically embedded with it, making an impenetrable wall. It was beautifully maintained, and obviously meant to keep randoms out.

But the trees provided cover from the street, and if I found the right tree... I could get myself over that fence.

I started walking along the fence, away from the front gate, looking for just the right tree.

Then I stopped, realizing that I was weirdly undisturbed about doing this, and that I probably needed to bounce this—whatever *this* was—off a reliable sounding board. So I called Alyssa.

“Hey, you,” she answered cheerily. “I just picked up my dress for the wedding—”

“Alyssa. I am just about to do something potentially ridiculous and I need a sanity check.”

“Okay. Where are you?”

“I don't know. Somewhere in West Van where the insanely wealthy live.”

“Uh, you mean your mom's neighborhood?”

“No. Like if Oprah lived here. That kind of wealthy.”

“Oh.”

“I followed Shane here.”

“I see. And why would you do that?”

“You know why. To find out whatever it is he does to afford a Lamborghini, among other things. Did I tell you about the Lamborghini?”

“No. I think I would remember that.”

“Right. Well, I guess I forgot since it was overshadowed by the fact that he was spanking that girl on it.” I was feeling up tree branches as we spoke, searching for a strong one. “You know, the brunette from the wedding shower? By the way, did he actually bring her in the house and was she pretty?”

“Do you want to know?”

“No. Anyway, listen. I just parked outside some estate Shane drove into and I figure I can slip over the fence or something. I’m kinda hidden under some trees right now. Tell me if I should get back in the car and go home and act like a sane person.”

“What? No!”

“No, like don’t do it? Or no, like, don’t go home?”

“*No!* You’re there, aren’t you? I say jump the fence and see what he’s up to.”

“See? This is why you’re my best friend.”

“I mean, just get a peek. It can’t hurt. Oh. Except...”

“Except what?”

“Well, think about it. Is whatever he’s doing in there going to change your opinion of him?”

“What do you mean?” I grabbed onto a sturdy tree with smooth bark, wondering if I could climb it.

“I mean, say you find him baking empanadas for starving children—”

“Empanadas?” I shoved the phone between my shoulder and my ear and tried to get a foot hold.

“Whatever. I had leftover Mexican for breakfast. Say you find him working his fingers to the bone for some starving children’s charity, are you going to let go of this view you have of him that he’s swamp scum, or are you going to go ahead and fall in love with him?”

This stopped me short. I quit trying to climb the tree. “I never really thought of it that way.”

“Well, you know, since you don’t know what he’s up to, there’s always a chance he’s doing something, you know, innocent. Good, even.”

“Not likely.” I jumped up, trying to peek over, but the fence was too high. All I could see was the massive roof of the house. If you could actually call a building that big a “house.” “It’s far more likely he’s filming high-end porn in there.”

“Is there such a thing as high-end porn?”

“I don’t know. The point is... whatever. I don’t know what the point is. I’m going in.” My eyes had locked on the perfect tree and I beelined for it.

“Wait! What if the place is actually the headquarters of some drug cartel, and the grounds are patrolled by guards with machine guns?”

“Alyssa. We don’t have drug cartels in Canada. And you know I don’t actually think Shane is a drug lord.”

“Sure you do. You say it often enough.”

“I’m being facetious. More than likely I’m just gonna catch him banging some chick with an I.Q. smaller than her cup size, and I’ll be on my way.” I got a foot hold and got ready to climb. “I swear, if that happens, I’ll let it go.”

“Right.”

What was it with her not believing me lately??

“Okay, I need to hang up. I’ll call you with an update asap.”

“You’d better.”

“Stay by your phone.”

I hung up. Then I stashed my phone in my purse, slung it around my neck, and started climbing the tree, which arched pretty close to one of the stone pillars along the wall. It took me a while, and if anyone looked out a window in this direction they'd probably think some incredibly frisky squirrels were fucking in this tree or something, because the bough I was on was flopping onto the fence in a weird rhythm as I inched my butt along. But the property was huge and the house was set pretty far away.

No one can see you. You've got this.

On some level, I knew this was a bad idea. But the grounds looked so big and there were so many trees... As I worked my way toward the fence, I could see over it. I'd just sneak around a bit and see if I could see anything.

Like what?

I just couldn't get it out of my head that he came to this place to see that brunette woman. The one he'd bent over the Lamborghini.

I just needed to see if he had her bent over by the pool right now or something.

Why?

Shane could fuck whoever he wanted to. *And you know he's going to.*

It was like I was some crazed, jealous girlfriend, stalking my boyfriend to find out if he was cheating on me.

Shane was not my boyfriend. I didn't *want* him to be my boyfriend.

But here I was, up a tree.

I managed to climb from the tree onto the top of the fence, clinging to the stone pillar. I got my leg over, then caught my shoelace on the top of the fence. I got all distracted, trying to untie my shoelace and mildly panicking that somebody might see me clinging here—and fell to my ass on the ground. I let out an undignified squeal, and froze.

I listened, but didn't hear anyone coming.

I slowly, quietly rolled onto my stomach and pushed myself up on all fours, trying to catch my breath. I found my glasses in the grass; they'd fallen off. When I looked up through my hair, someone was looming over me.

I would've screamed if I didn't just have the wind knocked out of me.

I swiped my hair out of my face. Black shiny shoes. Pressed black pants... There was a uniformed security guard standing over me.

"Uh..." I scrambled to my feet, shoving on my glasses. I brushed myself off and smoothing my hair like if I just appeared normal, he wouldn't notice that I'd just fallen off the fence.

Oh, shit. *He's handsome.*

I did not do my best work in front of handsome men. And this guy looked more like a stripper wearing a Velcro tearaway security guy uniform than an actual security guy. He was all bulging, rock-hard muscles, squared jaw and aviators glinting in the sun.

"What are you doing?" he said impassively.

I swallowed and glanced toward the driveway. There were about a hundred sculpted bushes and gardens between here and the front of the house, and I couldn't see the Lamborghini.

"Um, I just fell."

Brilliant.

"You should really get that fixed," I added, like it was the fence's fault I fell or something.

Holy shit, you're leading with a joke?

Unfortunately, my audience was not receptive to humor.

"Can I see some ID?"

"Uh, no. Can I see yours?"

Smooth, Jolie. Sass will get you everywhere.

He stared at me. I couldn't see his eyes, just my disheveled self in his mirrored lenses. I probably wouldn't be real impressed with me right now if I was him, either.

"You're trespassing on private property, ma'am."

"So, I'll leave."

"Please sit down." He indicated a stone garden bench nearby.

Uh-oh. If this guy wasn't a stripper, I was seriously in trouble.

"I'm not sitting down." My voice wobbled a little. I had very little pushback in me for hot, authoritative men and I'd almost run out already. "I'm leaving."

"I'll need your name." He stood in front of me with his hands on his belt, making his already wide body as wide as possible, basically blocking me in between the fence, the bench, and some sculpted bushes. I wondered if anyone else could see us right now.

And if that would be a good thing or not.

"I'm not giving you my name. You can't keep me here. This is kidnapping!"

His impassive face said I was being hysterical and he wasn't having it.

There was a long, creepy silence, and then he said, "Do you even know where you are?"

I refused to notice how ominous that sounded. Maybe he just thought I'd hit my head or something.

Good. Just tell him you're lost.

"I... I think I'm lost."

He crooked an eyebrow.

"I thought I was... somewhere else. I thought I'd been here before, or something..." I dared a glance up at the imposing house across the landscaped yard behind him.

“All visitors need to check in and show ID. And use the gate,” he added dryly.

I looked him over nervously. He still wasn't budging.

What the hell was this place?

This is beyond weird. You need to leave.

“I... I didn't mean to come in here.”

“So you climbed the fence by accident?”

“Technically, I climbed a tree.”

“This is private property,” he repeated.

“I didn't know where I was going.”

“I'll need to see your ID, ma'am.”

Shit, did this guy not know how to take no for an answer? I was starting to get creeped out.

A fuzzy voice emitted from the radio clipped to his shoulder. I couldn't tell what the man on the other end was saying, but I panicked.

“I was just following a guy,” I rambled, “the guy in the yellow Lamborghini. I...”

He touched the radio and muttered something into it about *Section five*, and *I'll get back to you*. Then he slid his aviators onto his head and pinned me with a stare that was much worse than looking at my disheveled self in those mirrored lenses.

“I... I just saw him driving,” I stammered, “and... I thought I knew him...”

“I'm afraid I'm going to have to report this to the police, ma'am.”

“But he's... He's my brother!” I blurted out.

Oh my god. Did you actually just say that?

What the actual fuck, Jolie!!!

Alyssa flashed through my mind. Alyssa would know what to do here. Her cousin was a lawyer. Or Madeleine. I could

call Aunt Madeleine for help. Someone who had their shit together. “I... I need to call a friend,” I stuttered.

Then I started to cry.

This guy looked at me like he wasn't sure whether to feel sorry for me or back away slowly from the escaped mental patient.

“Please sit down right there, ma'am,” he repeated calmly, indicating the stone bench again. “And I'll see what I can do.”

So, that happened.

I got caught trespassing on some gated estate by a smoking hot security guy, told him Shane was my brother, and then burst into tears. Then I got formally escorted off the property.

I mean, it could've been worse. He could've had me arrested.

But other than the moment when I realized I'd unknowingly fucked my future stepbrother, that was the most humiliating experience of my life.

When the stripper-looking security guy, who definitely turned out to be an actual security guy, got back on his radio, he called two of his buddies in for backup. Because dealing with the tiny hysterical trespassing girl required *backup*. Or maybe just witnesses.

Three giant dudes walked me over to the driveway and out the security gate, and up the street to my mom's car, where they wrote down the license plate and sent me on my way.

At least they didn't go get my “brother.”

Did they tell Shane I was there? That I'd followed him there and climbed over the fence?

I'd hid in my bedroom for the rest of the day, pacing a hole in the carpet while I harassed Alyssa at work, calling to tell her what happened and then calling her back repeatedly to make

her talk me down from rushing straight to the airport to get on the next plane to San Diego, never to be seen in these parts again.

Then I'd Google mapped that estate, satellite viewed the grounds, Google searched the address that came up, and generally tried to figure out what the hell that place was. With zero results.

It didn't feel like a home where some regular family lived, or even some wealthy celebrity. It didn't feel like a home at all. But there was no sign at the gate stating otherwise.

What was Shane doing there?

Not feeding starving kids, I was pretty sure.

What private residence had three huge security dudes at the ready? And who knew how many others were just waiting to repel from the trees or whatever if I caused much more of a scene?

I couldn't stop sweating that they were going to tell Shane about me. I didn't give them my name or show them my ID, as much as they wanted it. They didn't tell me who they were, so why would I tell them who I was?

They didn't call the police. But who knew if they alerted Shane.

They had Mom's license plate. And a description of me. I was quite helpfully wearing my *Talk Dirty To Me* shirt, which Shane had seen me in like a week ago.

So stupid.

For all I knew, they'd caught images or video of me on some hidden security cams. The more I thought about it, they probably had the whole thing recorded.

I died of humiliation so many times that afternoon as I agonized over it, I knew I had to come clean with Shane or it was gonna torture me.

What a loser.

You just stalked him and he probably already knows it.

I'd already lost an entire day of my life to this madness. By the time ten o'clock rolled around I was urging myself to just go the hell to bed. But instead, I messaged someone I deeply trusted for help.

Me: Do you happen to have Shane's number? Please, please don't ask me why I need it.

Within a few minutes, as I was staring at my phone awaiting a reply, it came.

Danica: Hey, sweetie. Sorry, I don't have it.

Me: Can you please do something for me? Can you get it? But NOT from anyone in the fam. It has to be from someone who doesn't know me. And you can't tell them it's for me.

I didn't want her to worry about me, but I was paranoid about my family gleaning that there was anything going on between me and Shane. It was bad enough that he railed me the other night because I went to him for sex. Now I was legit stalking him. The situation was getting pathetic.

Me. I was getting pathetic.

Danica: Okay. Let me think...

Danica: Talia works for the band. We're friendly. I can ask her.

When she said "the band," I knew she meant Ashley and Matt's band, the Players. The three dots appeared as she typed another message.

Danica: Her husband Lex is buds with Shane. Let me just reach out to her.

Me: She won't know it's for me?

Danica: I'll tell her it's for top secret lady business. She's cool.

While I waited for Danica to come through like I knew she would, I wrote up a questionnaire for Shane. Because that was the level of my ability to communicate with men.

A fucking *questionnaire*.

I knew it was fucking ridiculous but I was a mess over here.

I used the template from the one I'd sent my mom earlier this week with questions about her wedding design preferences. I just wiped it clean and populated it with questions for *him*.

Then Danica messaged me back, sending me Shane's phone number, like the heroine she was.

Danica: Use it wisely.

Me: Thank you. You are the absolute best.

Danica: Women are magic. Are you okay? That's all I'm gonna ask.

Me: I'm fine. (big smile emoji)

That smile was a lie, but hey, I was spiraling. I couldn't be expected to behave rationally during a spiral. Danica would understand.

I carefully saved the number to my phone and labelled it *Wolfman* because I didn't even have the guts to save his name in my contacts lest someone see it. Then I texted him a link to the questionnaire I'd made for him. You know, like a totally normal person would do.

At the top of the questionnaire, I'd written a note.

I followed you today. To that fancy estate in the British Properties. I'm really, really sorry. No matter how much we may hate each other, that's not cool. I embarrassed myself enough, so please don't feel like you need to be a jerk about it. I know you don't owe me anything and it was a one night stand, but you were inside my body less than twenty-four hours ago and there are just a few small things that I need to know so that I can sleep at night. If there is a decent human in you please answer honestly.

Sincerely, Julie.

P.S. I'm also sorry I called you a swamp creature. That was extreme.

I figured it didn't hurt to be humble. If he was a jerk after receiving that note, there really wasn't anything I could do about it. I'd know he was inhuman, and I'd just have to take it to my grave that I'd truly had a one night stand with a swamp creature.

Twice.

He sent me back the questionnaire, filled out, within ten minutes.

Do you have any STIs?

No.

What do you do for a living?

Work.

Did you actually know who I was when you met me in that bar, or not?

No.

If you said “no” to the question above: pretend you did know who I was, would you have told me?

I don't pretend.

If you really didn't know who I was: now that you do know, would you still have wanted to have sex with me that night?

You may be living too much in the past.

What is the deal with that estate?

I could tell you, but then we'd have another dirty secret between us.

At the bottom of the questionnaire, there was a space for any additional comments. He'd added a note; once again, fucking with my head with just four little words.

Come to my place.

Chapter Fifteen

Shane

I'd just gotten home from the gym when I got a text from an unknown number with a link in it and a message. *This is Julie. Please open this.*

When I clicked on the link, it opened a questionnaire. I read the note she wrote at the top, answered her questions, and told her to come over. Had no idea if she would, but when I got out of the shower, my doorbell was already ringing.

I answered the door with a towel around my hips to find Jolie staring at me. She looked... irritated. That sour little face of hers was back.

Was nice to have a reprieve from it the other night. I'd enjoyed the face she made a lot more when I had her in ecstasy. The one that said she thought I was some kind of sex god.

This one said she was still halfway convinced I was a monster.

"Please, come in," I said semi-sarcastically.

She stepped inside, eyeing me. I shut the door behind her and eyed her back. She was wearing a Katy Perry *California Gurls* T-shirt in her continued dedication to living in the past. With jean cutoffs.

"You took a shower for me?" she said, like she found that strange or something. Maybe she thought it oozed

presumption.

“I just got back from the gym.”

She frowned, like I was making that up or something.
“You have a gym right here.”

“I have a few gyms. I’m training for a fight. It’s a full-time gig.”

She eyed my gym area with suspicion.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her. “Seemed like you wanted to talk to me about something.”

“What?” she looked at me, distracted. She’d been looking around my apartment like she was searching for something.

Other women lounging around in lingerie?

Gnawed-on bones?

Evidence of the swamp troll she’d accused me of being?

“Your little questionnaire,” I reminded her. “You had a lot of questions for me. Seems like you’ve been thinking about things.”

“I’m not thinking,” she said stubbornly.

My eyebrow rose and she blushed.

“I meant... We’re still enemies,” she said, guarded.
“Nothing has changed.”

I stood staring her down, in my towel, getting hard for no damn reason. Other than the fact that she was standing so close to me. We were arguing, about nothing, in my apartment. And she came over here, right?

“So then why did you come over here?” I asked her.

“Because maybe I just want to know what’s going on.”

“What’s going on is you’re stalking me now, I guess?”

“I’m not.”

“First you follow me home from the bar, then you follow me to the estate...”

“I said I was sorry about that.”

She did. And I wasn't here to make her feel bad about it. I was curious why she did it, though. “What is it you want to know, Jolie?”

“I guess... It's just that... What we did the other night was...”

“Fantastic?” I filled in for her when she seemed short on words.

“I just don't understand how it can be like that when we don't like each other,” she said in a frustrated burst.

I almost laughed, but stopped myself. Because she was obviously serious. Which was maybe one of the things I *did* like about her.

Strange.

She truly didn't seem to understand a fucking thing about what was going on between us, did she.

It was sweet.

“So... you want to do it again.”

“It's not that I *want* to,” she protested. “I just want to *know*, you know?”

“So... The sex was great, so now you're back to do it again, to see if the sex will be bad?”

She seemed baffled. “I just want to know how it happens. You know, how you did it.”

“Did what?”

“You know. That... spell you put over me.”

“Is this about you doing my ‘bidding’ again?”

“Don't make fun of me, okay? Clearly you have way more experience here than I do. Just... can you teach me how to make that happen? You know, in the future?”

“Future?”

“I mean... with other guys.”

Any amusement I might've been feeling over this whole conversation disappeared.

"Teach you. How to make *what* happen, exactly?"

"All that stuff you do when you're so focused on me. I've never had a guy... focus on me like that. I just want to know... How do I turn a guy on like that?"

She was seriously asking me this?

I studied her blue/green eyes. Yeah. She was serious.

"It's not really a mystery, Jolie."

"Maybe not to you. But to me it is."

I stared at her, pondering this. We were inches apart, and she was gazing at me like I had something she needed, badly, right now.

My kryptonite.

My dick was already so hard, I wasn't even sure why I was fucking arguing with her.

"Okay. Let me spell it out for you," I growled. "There is nothing for you to learn. A man should be trying to please you, not the other way around."

She stared at me for a long, breathless beat.

Then she grabbed me by my towel and slammed herself against me. "Can we do it again?"

I answered her by kissing her, hard.

I heard her purse drop to the floor with a thud.

I didn't kiss her last time. But my lips met hers before I totally knew I was going to, and then I was feasting on her, hungrily and deep, and she was kissing me back. I glugged myself on her, mouth first, as I drove her towards my couch.

Then I grabbed her behind her knees and flipped her onto the couch, on her back.

She squealed in surprise.

I tore open her cutoffs. I yanked them off, tore off her panties, and buried my face between her legs.

She exploded in soft, hungry cries as I ate her out, hungry and fast. Because I'd been replaying the other night in my head, in detail, and fucking right, I was hungry for it again.

Hungry for *her*.

She tasted like musky-sweet paradise as I lapped her little clit with my tongue, making her groan. I speared her with my tongue, licking her insides and making her quiver. Then I tore off my towel and grabbed my dick.

I pushed her knees up high, spreading her wide open, and pushed the tip of my cock into her.

She squirmed and moaned.

I fed it in, just a bit, teasing her as I fucked her shallow.

She bucked like she wanted more, groaning.

I shoved up her shirt. Then her bra, baring her tits so I could watch them bounce and quiver. She still had her glasses on.

It was driving me crazy.

I was so fucking hard, I was aching like I hadn't come in weeks.

I'd come two nights ago, inside her. Twice.

I pressed my thumb to her clit, trying not to think about it, and rubbed in slow circles as I teased her with my dick. Digging in a little deeper, applying pressure to her clitoris, inside and out.

She bore down on me, her hips wriggling as she tried to work herself deeper down my shaft.

But I didn't let her.

I just rubbed and teased and fucked her with the head of my cock until she was panting.

"Look at me," I demanded.

Jolie's eyes locked with mine, dazed and glassy. She was already getting there and weirdly uncharacteristic of me, I was having trouble holding back. I wanted to make her come. Fucking now.

"Yeah?" I read that look in her eyes. "Are you gonna come for Daddy?"

She mewled, her body shaking.

"Mmm. I can feel your hungry cunt."

I fucked into her, a little deeper, a little faster, massaging her clit with my thumb. With my other hand, I plucked at her nipple, then squeezed. She arched her back, gasping.

"That's it. Good girl..."

She bore down again, her pussy quivering around my cockhead.

"*Yeah.* Give Daddy a nice, big come..."

My voice was drowned out as she screamed, a beautiful, ragged scream.

Fuck.

Yes.

I punched my hips forward, sliding through all that ecstasy. Filling her pussy as she exploded. Her cunt milked me, squeezing tight.

"Good, baby," I soothed, trying not to lose control myself. "Come on me."

I did not want to come yet.

Not nearly so soon.

I leaned down and kissed her, smothering her cries. Devouring them, like they were sweet, precious life itself.

I fucked Jolie through orgasm after orgasm, my fingers teasing her clit, until I was fucking sweating. My cock dipping into

her, shallow... then rewarding her with deep thrusts as she climaxed.

When I couldn't really take any more, I hiked her ankles up onto my shoulders, pumped into her, and fucking exploded. Buried deep in her tight little cunt, my cock jerked hot come into her. My eyes rolled back.

God, yeah.

"Fuck," I grunted, pounding into her a couple more times as I spurt.

I never lost my shit like that.

This girl had me coming like nothing else. I was impatient for it.

I needed to get my shit together if we were gonna keep doing this.

Because her cunt was fucking magic or something. I'd been dreaming about it, ever since I ate her out the other night. I could fucking taste her all the next day.

When I was finished, I withdrew, panting. She stared up at me in a daze.

"Wow," she breathed, still panting herself. She watched me as I flopped onto the couch next to her. "I don't get it."

"Get what?"

"It's just never been like that before."

I stared at her. "Before?"

"Yeah."

She was talking about other guys again, right?

Other guys she'd fucked.

"So?"

"With anyone. Even someone I liked. A lot."

"Uh-huh. And you want it to be. Is that it?"

"I mean... that would be nice."

Yeah. Real nice.

“I’m still not sure how to make that happen, though,” she added, looking puzzled. “You should maybe write a how-to manual for regular dudes.”

I was pretty sure she meant that as some kind of twisted compliment. I didn’t take it as one.

She was still trying to gather tips on how to fuck other guys? Really?

And why did that piss me off so much?

I got up and stalked over to her purse. I dug out her phone and took it over to her. She was still lying on my couch, destroyed. Before she even registered what I was doing, I held it in front of her face to make it unlock.

“Hey, what are you—?”

“I’m putting my number in your Favorites so it’s easy to find,” I told her as her mouth hung open. “Anytime you want to get fucked by a real man, you know who to call.”

I dropped the phone on the couch next to her and went to take another shower. If she was smart, I figured she’d join me.

She did not.

And by the time I got out of the shower, she was gone.

Chapter Sixteen

Jolie

When I woke up in the morning in my own bed, my first instinct was to call Alyssa. I already had Shane's voice in my head.

Anytime you want to get fucked by a real man, you know who to call.

I'd slipped out of his apartment last night while he was in the shower and took a cab home. And no, I had no intention of calling him. But yes, I did want to get fucked by a real man. So there was a bit of a conundrum there.

I groped for my phone on the bedside table. And squinted at the contact that had been newly added to my Favorites list. Shane's number. He'd changed his name, though; it no longer said *Wolfman*. Now it said: *Daddy*.

I flushed hot as his other words last night rushed back to me. *Are you gonna come for Daddy?*

Hitting Alyssa's number, I sank back into bed as it rang, praying that she picked up.

"Good morning," she said, "are you okay?" Because of course, the last several times she spoke to me on the phone, yesterday, I was far from okay.

"Oh, you know. I'm great. Just about to drag my ass up and shower off last night."

There was a silent pause. “Last night? Don’t tell me you were with Shane last night.”

“Oh, but I was.”

“Oh, Jolie. What are you doing?”

“Why do you sound like you disapprove of this so much?”

“Because. Yesterday you were losing your mind because you stalked him and got caught. You talk about him like he’s your mortal enemy. What am I supposed to think?”

“He is my mortal enemy.”

“Well, who lets their enemy in past their defenses like this?”

“I mean, maybe it’s a super smart tactical move. Keep your enemies close...?”

“Okay, but we don’t usually give our enemies orgasms. Please tell me there were orgasms.”

“Oh, there were orgasms.”

She groaned. “How are you gonna blow him off when he keeps doing you so good?”

“This is the million dollar question. But maybe I don’t have to blow him off?” I thought about what he’d said. *Anytime you want to get fucked by a real man...* “Maybe we can just, you know, be enemies... with benefits?” That was what he was offering, right?

“Who does that?”

“I don’t know. Us?”

“Now you’re an us?”

“We are not an us. But maybe just for a few weeks we could be secret, dirty lovers. Without the love part, of course.”

“Or you could just admit that you like him.”

What?

“I don’t like him. I like his sex. These are two different things.”

“Since when?”

“I don’t know. I’m learning here. I’ve never experienced this before, but I’m telling you. I don’t like him but the sex still works. Actually...” Hmm. This was interesting. “It might be making it better...”

Maybe that was *why* the sex was so incredible?

Although... the sex was also incredible when he was a complete stranger, and I liked him well enough that night...

“Okay, I may have to tap out on this at some point,” she said.

“On what? This conversation?”

“On this Shane thing. I’m not sure I have much else to add except uh-huh.”

“Why? I’m just saying I don’t like him and that hasn’t changed. We’re just having sex.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I just thought I should update you. You’re my check-in. I want you to know the whole deal. And the deal is I don’t like him.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Not funny.”

“I’m not laughing.”

I sighed. “So you think I’m crazy or what?”

“I think you’re at risk of getting hurt by him again. And I hate it.”

I took that in. I knew she really meant that.

“Okay. I hear you. I’ll keep you posted so you can keep telling me ‘uh-huh.’ And if he does hurt me... you can say ‘I told you so.’”

“I don’t want to say I told you so. I just want you to be okay.”

I heard her. Loud and clear.

“I don’t want to get hurt. I’ll be careful. I promise.”

“Good.” She sighed. “I have a few more minutes here. So, tell me all about the delicious sex and I’ll try to forget it was with him.”

Yeah. I’d tried to forget it was with him, too. So I could just enjoy the memories without guilt or regret.

But unfortunately, it was impossible to do.

No one had ever made me come like my enemy did.

I had to give him credit for that, at least, even if I didn’t like him.

“Something wrong, Jolie?”

I startled as Mom slipped into the kitchen behind me. I was making myself a coffee and trying to do it quietly so I could just slink back up to my room without talking to anyone.

Didn’t work. Mom smelled the coffee and the debauchery on me, probably.

She plucked a mug from the cupboard as she eyed me. “Late night last night?”

“Just went out with friends for a bit.”

“Alyssa?”

“No. Just other friends.”

“Hmm. Something’s bothering you. A mother can tell.”

Fuck. She wasn’t gonna let this go. I had to give her something, or she’d just start looking to fill in the blanks herself. “It’s nothing. Just boy drama.”

She watched as I got out the cream and dumped a generous dose into my coffee. “That boy in San Diego? What was his name?”

“No. Not him. I don’t want to talk about it, okay?”

I could feel her disapproval. But I ignored it as I stirred my coffee and slid the cream her way.

“You remember why I named you Jolie?” she asked me as I was about to slip away.

I tried not to roll my eyes. “Yes.”

“Because it means ‘pretty’ in French. You are so much prettier than I was at your age. You always were.”

I looked at her, surprised. She never said stuff like that.

“You’re also so resilient.”

“Mom, are you feeling okay?”

“Jolie. Don’t look at me like I never tell you how *incroyable* you are.”

“Uh, you don’t, really.”

She looked shocked. “Well, then maybe I should.”

I hesitated, stuck on what she said. “Resilient?”

“Very. When you moved yourself down to California, you wouldn’t even take any help from me or Jacob. And when things didn’t work out at your father’s place... well, you picked yourself up and took care of it. You’ve taken care of yourself down there all on your own for three years. I never did anything like that.” She settled back against the counter, gazing at me. “I moved straight from my parent’s house to your father’s. And after that first divorce, I moved us in with Uncle Bernard. Then it was marriage after marriage, and in between, we stayed with my sisters. Even after the last divorce... I still lived with you. Then I moved straight from our shared home into this one. I’ve never been on my own. But you...” She gave me a soft smile. “You’re so independent. Such an intrepid, resourceful young woman. Just like your aunts have always been. And just like your cousins.”

Oh, Christ. It was kind of her to say, but my life was a disaster. I was nowhere near as established, successful or ‘resourceful’ as my aunts or my cousins. I could only dream of having my shit together like Dani or Danica already did at this age.

But Mom came over to me and cupped my face in her hand, and I didn't have the heart or the will to argue with her right now. "So," she said. "Whatever this 'boy drama' is about, remember your worth. You are a fine young woman who deserves love and respect and a grand life filled with happiness and adventure. Don't ever settle for less."

I drew back a little bit, awash with guilt and subtle heebie-jeebies that my mom was touching the same face that Shane had made out with last night.

I could smell him on me.

And her words were making me feel mushy.

"Thanks, Mom," I mumbled. "I've gotta go shower. I have work to do."

"Sure. I know you've been working hard on the wedding. I really appreciate it."

"No worries." I picked up my coffee to head back upstairs. The fact was, I hadn't been working on the wedding enough, what with all the spiraling and the stalking. If I didn't get working today, I'd just end up obsessing about what happened last night.

Interestingly, Shane's RSVP had arrived this morning, by courier. He'd finally confirmed his attendance at the wedding. I didn't want to think that had anything to do with me, but I had to wonder...

"Let's have dinner together later, okay?" Mom said, just as I was leaving the room.

"Okay."

"And Jacob is having the boys over tomorrow," she said behind me. "I hoped you could be around."

I stopped in my tracks.

"We'll all have dinner. Won't that be... nice?"

I turned to her. She was studying me.

Boys? Did that mean Shane?

No. He avoided family stuff, right?

“You can get to know them a little better,” she prompted. “After all, you’re all family now.”

I knew she was still waiting for the moment when I welcomed my expanding family with open arms and started calling Jacob’s sons my “brothers.”

Never happening.

“Right. Nice.” I tried to force a smile that probably looked weirdly grim, before bolting out of there. Was I gonna have to see Shane tomorrow night, with my mom in the room?

Upstairs, as I pounded coffee while my shower got running hot, Alyssa’s words played in my head.

How are you gonna blow him off when he keeps doing you so good?

I think you’re at risk of getting hurt by him again.

Unfortunately, she was right. Even if I wouldn’t admit it to her.

I was at risk, for sure, if I let myself keep having sex with him.

I stripped down and stepped into the shower. And as I started washing off last night, if I was being honest with myself... I knew I wasn’t just into the sex in the moment, when he was doing those delicious things to me. I woke up excited, thinking about it. Not just the sex, but... him.

I liked the sex *with him*.

I liked his body and the way he used it.

I liked the way he touched me. The way he felt. The way he looked and the way he smelled and the way he sounded when he was telling me what to do.

I liked the way he looked at me when we were having sex and the way he made me feel.

It wasn’t completely physical, either.

It was also the overwhelming release I felt, the relief, when I climaxed with him. In those moments, when he made me come, I had all his attention. He was totally focused on me. On my pleasure. And it felt fucking amazing. Like a high.

No one had ever done that for me before, taken such total care of me in bed.

Just like I'd told Dani and Danica, most guys I'd been with didn't even make me come at all.

I'd just never been with someone who was so good at sex. I'd never enjoyed sex so much before. I'd always found sex a little bit of a letdown. Kind of disappointing, compared to the build up beforehand.

With Shane... it was the opposite of disappointing.

It was better than I could've imagined.

It was better than when I masturbated and got myself off. How was that possible?

How could he know my body and what I needed better than I did?

It was muddling everything up in my brain.

Where did the good sex end and where did he begin?

Sex.

Shane.

One I liked and wanted more of—if it wouldn't hurt me.

The other one... I still couldn't bring myself to like.

I needed to keep these two things separate in my mind. Or else I needed to stop having sex with him.

Before I let myself enjoy it so much that my feelings of sexual ecstasy overflowed into warm but misguided feelings for him.

The next night, I found myself hiding out in the kitchen, trying to eavesdrop on Mom, Jacob and Jacob's sons, who were gathered in the living room, chatting. Jacob's *three* sons. Dinner was already over, and Shane had not appeared.

There was no place set for him at the table. Which meant that either he wasn't invited or he was invited but told Jacob, or Mom, that he wasn't coming.

I'd sat through dinner trying to be polite and friendly with Jacob's sons, and act just like a girl whose mom was marrying their dad. You know, like, totally normal. And not like I'd secretly screwed their other brother.

Multiple times.

I was pretty sure I pulled it off.

I mean, I was as normal as I got. Which was slightly shy, awkward, and mildly annoyed with my mom for trying to sing my praises too hard to try to impress a bunch of men who were miles more successful than I was. Joss and Brandon were both businessmen, plus Joss was almost forty and Brandon was stinking rich. And Darcy was a hockey player who was going pro and would have panties flying at him every time he came off the ice. If Margot Vola seriously thought they were gonna be impressed with the likes of me, the girl who worked in a thrift store and whose job highlight was getting to style the window display, she was sadly mistaken.

They were really kind, though, and treated me like a member of the family.

Which would've been nice, but actually just made it weirder for me. I couldn't believe how guilty I felt about the whole secret sex thing.

If any of them ever found out... I'd be mortified.

Especially if these guys knew the kind of stuff their brother was into.

As I sat across from Brandon eating dinner, him in his dress clothes with the designer watch and expensive haircut, I couldn't help morbidly wondering: *Do they know Shane likes to boss girls around and make them call him Daddy?*

Guys didn't talk to their brothers about stuff like that. Did they??

The questions in my head had eventually driven me so crazy that I'd stuffed my face with dessert as quickly as possible and excused myself, under the pretense of wanting to contribute to the dinner that Mom had made by clearing the table and washing the dishes. Jacob had a housekeeper coming in the morning to take care of that, but I'd insisted, and Mom had given me a proud look like, *There goes my independent daughter again.*

Which gave me the opportunity to graciously duck out of there.

I was now elbows deep in sudsy dishwater as I tried to listen in on their conversation—about hockey, it seemed—just in case my name came up. Because I was paranoid like that.

And suddenly something touched me. I yelped, and a hand closed over my mouth. I screamed into it as a hot, heavy body pressed me to the kitchen counter. “Is that how you greet Daddy?” murmured a familiar voice. Hot breath touched my neck, and then his hot lips.

Heat washed through me and I started to soften into him.

Then his teeth sank into my neck and I stiffened. I wrenched my face away from his hand. “Shane!” I whispered. “When did you get here?”

“Just now.”

My heart was thumping in my chest. He came to see me first? “Do they know you're here?”

“Not yet.” He ran a fingertip down the side of my bare neck. I'd worn my hair up for dinner. “You didn't call me, Jolie.” He still had me trapped against the counter, and reached to pull my hands from the sudsy water. He pressed them flat to the counter on either side of the sink.

My head spun as he ran his hands up my arms to my shoulders, massaged my shoulder muscles with a few warm squeezes, and then ran his hands down my back to my waist. Did he want me to call him?

I didn't call him. Not yesterday or today. I had no idea if I would.

Yes, I wanted more of the incredible sex.

But I didn't want more of the guilt that was coming with it. Or the unease of worrying about whether this was all going to hurt me somehow. But all of that worry flushed right out of my head as my brain followed his hands down to my ass.

“Uh... you changed your name in my phone. Why did you do that?”

He'd started pulling up my short dress, and worked it up to my waist as he spoke. “What's the matter, little dove? You don't want to call me Daddy?”

“I don't know...” It was hard to think about anything when he was tugging my panties down. I could hear the voices in the living room, a little muffled but not so far away.

“The other night it made you come,” he reminded me.

It did. I wasn't even sure *why*. “You're only seven years older than me, though.”

He touched my chin, turning my face toward him so he could look into my eyes. “I don't have to be old to be your daddy.” His gaze drifted down to my lips as his thumb brushed my jaw. “Daddy's someone who takes care of you.”

I gazed up at him, entranced.

“Are you going to let me take care of you, Jolie?”

I had no idea what he meant by that, exactly. Like, right here? Right now?

Or in general?

But I nodded, utterly desperate to find out. My panties were halfway down my thighs. My hands were still pressed to the counter. And he held my gaze while he unzipped his jeans.

I braced myself as he slipped his fingers between my legs and started rubbing. “You're so wet,” he murmured against my neck. “Have you been thinking about me today?”

I swallowed. No way was I answering that.

He rubbed my clit and I tipped my hips towards him, wanting more. “Answer me, Jolie,” he commanded.

“No,” I breathed.

“No, you haven’t been thinking about me? Or no, you’re not gonna be a good girl and answer me?”

“It’s none... of your... business,” I whispered, starting to pant as his fingers sped up.

He licked my neck, bit my ear, and said in my ear, “Oh, you’re gonna tell me. If you want this dick.” He grabbed his dick and shoved it between my legs, so that the swollen head nudged my clit. So *warm*. I clamped my thighs around him automatically, reveling in his heat.

He groaned and grabbed the back of my neck, squeezing. “Have you been thinking about me today, little dove?”

God, he wasn’t seriously gonna tease me, then take it away, was he? He was so hard. But he gave the back of my neck a warning squeeze, and I gasped, “*Yes*.”

The word was barely out of my mouth when he suddenly positioned himself at my entrance and shoved into me. I cried out, trying to swallow the sound, and he clamped a hand over my mouth. His other hand slid to my hip and held on as he started fucking me, fast and deep.

The rush spread through my body, fast. All my senses snapping to attention at the sudden flood of sensations, my body taking his, as he completely took over. I was just washing dishes. And now, this...

I was so lost in the pleasure of it, I almost didn’t hear the footsteps. By the time I registered the sound, Shane had pulled out and yanked up my panties. “Upstairs,” he breathed in my ear. Then he smoothed down my skirt and was gone, seconds before Mom walked into the kitchen.

She glanced at me, still leaning on the counter, my hands flat on either side of the sink. I stiffened, plunging my hands back into the sink as she said, “Jacob and Joss want coffee.”

She went to put on a pot as I blindly washed dishes, wondering how the hell Shane had vanished so quick. I could barely feel my legs.

Upstairs? Like, in my room?

“Why don’t you come join us for a drink?” Mom asked. “Joss said Shane’s on his way over. We can all relax. Leave the dishes for tomorrow.”

I cleared my throat, finding my voice. “Yeah, maybe I will. I’ll just do a few more. It’s so nice to go to bed with a clean kitchen...”

“*Mais oui,*” she agreed. “Suit yourself. We’ll be waiting.” Mom sauntered out of the kitchen and I dried off my hands. Then I raced out the other side of the kitchen and up the hall, around to the foyer, then up the stairs. At the top of the stairs I almost smashed right into Shane in the dark.

He grabbed me and before I could make a sound, he crushed his mouth down on mine. We kissed like we were in a battle for our lives. And what followed was a grabby, hungry, desperate peeling of clothes and a frenzied fucking on the floor right next to the railing that overlooked the foyer.

I could hear our family chatting in the living room the whole time.

Shane shoved his fingers in my mouth and willed me to keep silent with the force of his eyes as he drove into me, mercilessly... and the sheer power of his body overtaking mine drove me there, making me come. I climaxed around him as he sealed his hand over my mouth and I quietly hyperventilated.

Then he did it again, slowing right down so I could catch my breath before ramping it up again, driving into me with insistence, his hips swiveling into mine as he battered into me, and I came apart.

Again... And then again.

I couldn’t believe I came like that. His cock thrusting into my core just sent me flying.

He was so damn dominant. So commanding, every time.

Even if he wasn't saying a thing.

Since I came up the stairs, he hadn't said anything to me. Not with words.

It was his body that was commanding me now.

His eyes were locked with mine as I came shuddering down and started shaking my head. *Please, no more*, I tried to tell him with my eyes. His hand was still sealed over my mouth.

I didn't think I could survive another of those scorching, helpless orgasms while he pummeled me right through it. I'd die right here on his dick.

His hand slid away and he took my mouth with his, delving his tongue into me. Then he came, fucking hard, driving into me as he released with a smothered groan. I felt him climaxing inside me.

And all at once it really hit me that we were on the floor. Half-dressed. Fucking. That we'd just fucked hard and fast, and it made me come. A lot.

The voices of our family faded back in. They were still talking as if nothing was amiss. They didn't know what just happened, so close, in the dark.

But we did.

And when Shane kissed me again, slowly and deeply, before even pulling out, I didn't feel the least bit guilty about any of it.

For a moment, floating here in the warmth of his attention, kissing him as he lapped his tongue against mine... as he demanded that I kiss him back... I just felt good.

I felt like his good little dove.

I felt like a girl who'd do anything he told me to, and I wasn't sorry about it.

I wasn't even the least bit scared.

But the warm, wonderful feeling didn't last long.

Chapter Seventeen

Shane

I came home from my training gym for lunch, and found Jolie sitting on the concrete step in front of the unmarked glass door to my building. She got to her feet as I walked toward her.

“Sorry,” was the first word out of her mouth. “I hope it’s okay that I just showed up.”

“You were planning to wait here all day? You could’ve called. Or texted.”

“Yeah. But then you could’ve told me not to come.”

“Why would I tell you not to come?”

She stared at me with that skeptical/confused look I’d gotten so used to seeing on her face whenever I said anything remotely nice to her. “You got your suit fitting yesterday.”

“I did. That’s what you wanted, right?”

She looked away, then met my eyes again. “I just wanted to say, face-to-face... If you’re just doing all this to screw with my head, I’d like you to please stop.” She said it so damn earnestly, without animosity, I knew she was serious.

I reached past her to unlock the door and pulled it open. “Come inside.”

She hesitated, but then stepped into the concrete entranceway of my building. The security guard on duty

nodded at us and I led her to my elevator at the end of the hall. I had the penthouse, so. Private elevator. I opened the door for her and as soon as we were alone in the elevator, she looked at me uneasily.

“I am not trying to screw with your head,” I told her.

“But you don’t like me.”

I selected my words carefully. “I don’t like who I thought you were for four years.”

“Which was?”

“A woman who didn’t call me because when she found out who I was she decided I was beneath her.” We’d reached my loft and when the elevator opened, I slid open my door, waiting for her to step through. She did.

Then she followed me towards the kitchen. “The only reason I would’ve thought you were beneath me,” she said carefully, “was because you played me.”

I dropped my keys on the bar and turned to face her. “So, you hate me because you think I played you when I met you in a bar and pretended I didn’t know who you were.”

“Did you?”

“How many times are you really gonna ask me that?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Maybe until I start believing your answer.”

I picked up a metal cocktail shaker and went over to the fridge to start pulling together ingredients for a lime margarita. “I did not know who you were, Jolie. You told me your name was Julie. I believed you. Or at the very least, if the name was fake, I figured the rest of you was legit. I had no idea you were Margot Vola’s daughter. I had no reason to think that, and I definitely didn’t stalk you into that bar.” I carried a lime, a bottle of lime mix, and the shaker full of ice over to the bar and set it down in front of her.

“So...” She watched me pull out a bottle of tequila and set it on the bar. “You were actually interested in me?”

“Why else would I buy you a drink and come talk to you?”

She watched as I went digging under the bar, looking for the bottle of Triple Sec. “And... all the stuff we did that night in your hotel room... You did it because you actually wanted to?”

I put the Triple Sec on the bar and looked her in the eye. “I guess you haven’t figured out by now that I don’t do anything unless I want to.”

She watched as I dumped salt onto a small plate.

“It’s just... I’ve been looking at it through a certain lens for four years,” she said. “And it’s colored all my memories of that night. All the things you did, and said... I thought you did them to humiliate me.” While she spoke, I cut the lime into wedges, then swiped one of them around the rim of a glass.

“You think I’m a terrible person, is that it?”

She hesitated. “Sometimes your own family seems to think that.”

True enough. I tapped the rim of the glass, sticky with lime juice, into the salt, then sat the glass on the bar.

“That’s a very nice salt rim,” she said uneasily.

“What do *you* think?” I asked her. “Surely you do think for yourself.” She watched me dump tequila and Triple sec into the shaker with the ice.

“I don’t know what I think anymore. Sometimes I feel like... I still haven’t met you yet.”

I met her eyes. “You’ve met me.” I let my gaze drift down and linger on her lips. “Several times now.”

“But I still don’t know who you are.” She added with obvious frustration, “And *why* are you so different from every guy I’ve ever met?”

I laughed a little. “I don’t know. Maybe you’re meeting the wrong guys.”

She watched me pour lime mix into the shaker. “That very first night, and every time we’ve been together since... I think

you could tell that you had control of the situation.”

“Is that what it feels like to you? That I have control?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Because that’s how it’s supposed to feel.” I held her gaze. “But you have way more control than you realize, Jolie.”

“Do I?”

“Do you know what a Dominant/submissive relationship is?”

From the look on her face, I could tell that she had at least an inkling. “Is that... what this is to you?”

“It could be. If you’re willing.”

“Because... you’re...”

“Sexually dominant.”

I picked up the shaker, swishing it around a bit, and met her eyes again. She was staring at me.

“And what does that mean to you?” she said.

“It means I prefer to be the dominant partner in my sexual encounters. And for my partners to be submissive.”

“I... I never thought of myself as... *submissive*.” She seemed to be turning it over in her head, though. “That is a weird word.”

I stopped swishing. “It’s just a word, Jolie. And maybe it’s what you already are. You can dismiss the label if it bothers you. But it doesn’t make it any less true.” I poured the contents of the shaker, ice and all, into the glass with the salt rim.

“I think you’re blowing my mind a little bit.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing.” I took another lime wedge and cut a little slit into it. She’d gone really quiet. “You okay?”

“Uh... it is weirdly uncomfortable when someone you don’t know all that well tells you something deeply intimate

about yourself that you never realized before. Something that might be...”

“True?”

“What does that even mean? If I am... submissive?”

“You’re just you, Jolie. If you want a definition of what a sexual submissive is, you could Google it. You could also just look in a mirror.” I speared the lime wedge onto the rim of the glass.

“This is weird.”

I didn’t respond to that. I just slid the drink in front of her.

“Thank you.” She took a sip, eying the bar like she was confused about why I didn’t make one for myself. “Why did you make me a lime margarita?”

“Because I know you like them.”

She looked up at me with big eyes. “Wait. If you’re the dominant one, why are you making me a drink? Shouldn’t it be the other way around?”

“A submissive is not a servant. At least, not in my world. As a submissive, you come to me with a need and I fulfill it.”

“That’s... all?”

“No. That is not *all*. That is *everything*. It’s the ultimate pleasure, if you’re me.”

She blinked at me. “So... what I just did... that was a submissive thing? You gave me a drink without me asking for it and I just drank it?”

“Honestly, pretty much everything you do when the two of us are alone is a submissive thing.”

Jolie stared at me, the drink clutched in her hand, and I knew I’d just blown her mind again. She took another sip, a little shakily. Then she placed the glass carefully on the bar. “I have to go.”

“I think you should stay.”

“No. I really have to go right now.” She looked at me uncertainly and I could see she was drowning in sexual awakening overload.

If she was mine, if she was *my* submissive, I’d tell her she needed to stay. And she would stay.

But she wasn’t mine.

So I walked her over to the elevator. “Come back when you want more,” I told her, then I let her go.

Chapter Eighteen

Shane

I really didn't have to wait long for Jolie to come back around.

Although this time, she wanted me to come to her. Mid-afternoon, she texted me to ask me to come over to my dad's place. She even said please.

So, after I'd finished my afternoon training session, I got in one of my cars and headed over to West Van. Jacob would probably be at work for a few hours yet. I had no idea about Margot.

When I arrived, no one answered the front door, so I went around back. I found Jolie in the pool house, lying on a lounge chair, sunbathing in her peach bikini.

"Hey," I said, looking her over as I walked in. She'd already started to sit up. "Don't get up on my account. That looks comfy."

I peeled off my T-shirt and lounged back on a chair facing hers. I sighed and stretched out. I'd gone full tilt at the gym today.

Jolie rolled onto her back and settled back, slipping off her sunglasses. Her eyes traveled over my bare chest. "Training?"

"Yup."

"Do you go back to the gym later?"

I supposed she'd already figured out that I pretty much lived at the gym when I was in training. I liked that. She was paying attention.

"Yeah. I'll probably spend the evening there. You?"

She looked uneasy, or maybe just floored that I'd asked her what she was doing tonight. "I'm not sure yet."

"Margot around?"

"She was running errands this afternoon. You know, wedding stuff. She's obsessed." She played with the string on her bikini, nervously. "She might be back in a while. So... thanks for coming over. I thought we should talk."

"No problem."

I watched her slowly sit up and sit cross-legged, facing me. "Um... the thing is... we both know this isn't going anywhere. For many reasons. One of the most obvious ones is that I live in San Diego. I'm flying back right after the wedding."

She seemed to be waiting for me to say something to that. But really, what did she expect me to say? She didn't need to drag my ass all the way over here to tell me she didn't want to see me anymore. I really didn't need a bunch of excuses why.

"Yeah. I get it."

"And I know you're busy with training for your fight. And I'm busy helping out with the wedding."

"Uh-huh."

"So, I guess I just wanted to see if we could make an arrangement, you know, to keep having sex."

Oh. Did not see that coming.

"With... parameters," she added. "I mean, I know it was just supposed to be one time. And then it became three times. But we didn't talk about more times, exactly. I... I guess I want more times."

"Uh, yeah. We can arrange that."

She took a breath, like she was relieved to get through that. “Okay. But only until the wedding,” she clarified. “That first time, four years ago, there seemed to be some... misunderstandings between us. So I just thought we should make that clear.”

“Right.”

“So... if this isn’t just a one nighter, or... a three nighter...” She was turning a little pink. “And we’re going to keep doing this... I want to explore that thing you said. If that’s okay with you. You know, the Dominant/submissive thing?”

“Okay.”

“But I have... questions.”

“Okay.”

“I just spent a couple of hours Googling the shit out of it. But... I’m not sure how much it helped. I mean, reading about men being sexually dominant... Some of the descriptions didn’t even sound like you.”

“Yeah, well... I’m sure there are all kinds of male Dominants. Just like anything else. I probably couldn’t tell you the differences between us, though. It’s not like I’ve slept with a bunch myself.”

She turned pinker. “Oh. Right. Never thought of that...”

“Also. Speaking as a man who enjoys dominating you and just agreed to keep doing it, I don’t give a fuck what other men want, and I’d prefer from this moment in that you don’t give a fuck either.”

“Right. Okay...”

“For me, it’s more of a sexual preference. I enjoy it. For some people it’s a way of life, hardcore twenty-four-seven, three-hundred-and-sixty-five. I do know that much. Because I rub shoulders with some of those guys at parties. At Bliss. You know, that estate you followed me to?”

“Oh...”

“You asked me what it is and I never told you. But since we’re talking about this now, I’ll tell you. It’s a sex club.”

Yup. I’d definitely just floored her.

“Oh. Boy. Okay... uh...”

“It’s a private club,” I filled in for her, “and I have a membership.”

“Wow. Um...”

“I know you have more questions, Jolie. You can ask them.”

“Okay... Why do you have a membership at a sex club? I mean, I wouldn’t think you’d need to pay for something like that.” Her eyes trailed over my torso. “Because... look at you. How hard can it be for you to find a sexual partner?”

“It’s not hard, Jolie.”

I could see her mentally scrambling to make sense of this. “So, then... how does it work? They just call you up when they have someone for you to meet?”

“Sometimes. I also meet women there myself, at parties. Or I just meet women out in the world who are into the same thing I’m into.”

She looked intrigued. “How do you know a woman is into that?”

“Usually, it just starts out as a vibe.”

“So... when did you know about me?”

“The first night. In the bar.”

She looked shocked now. She took a moment to sit with that one.

“How could you know about me when I didn’t even know about me?”

“Call it experience. There was just something about you.”

“Great. So I give off ‘good little submissive girl’ vibes or something?”

I smiled a little. Christ, she was cute. “Or something. It’s not a bad thing, Jolie. And don’t feel like you’re waving a freak flag for all the world to see or anything. It’s not something that everyone sees or that everyone is looking for. I pick up on it because... I’m looking for it.”

“And... how do you know when you’ve found it?”

“I guess it’s just like anytime you meet someone, and you take an interest in them, and you pick up on their interest in you. After that, usually I ask.”

“You didn’t ask me.”

“I did, actually. I seem to remember asking you if you liked following orders when we were sitting at the bar. You said yes.”

Her jaw dropped a bit. “And I was supposed to get from that that you’re a sex Dom? If Dani never made me watch the *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie, I probably wouldn’t have even known what the hell that was. I definitely wasn’t looking for it.”

“You’re right. I could’ve been more upfront. I was a little newer to it back then. Nowadays, I’m a lot clearer when I meet a woman, if I want to go there.”

“So, you start talking to a woman, you get a vibe, and then you tell her you’re a Dom and ask her if she wants to be submissive for you tonight?”

“More or less. Or, she might ask me first.”

“Really?”

“Sometimes. Usually submissives don’t come on that strong unless they’re totally sure of what you are. Like maybe at the club.”

“They can tell you’re a Dom?”

“Sometimes. Because of that thing I said. Maybe they’re looking for it. Plus, there’s the ring.” I wore a few rings, including the pinky ring I’d worn for years, the one I was wearing the night I met her. I held it up to her. “This insignia is the club’s symbol. Anyone with membership can have one if

they want to. This particular style of engraving, black on black, means I'm a Dom."

Jolie's wide eyes met mine. "You just wear that around? In public?"

"Well, you have to be pretty close to me to see what it is, right? And if you're not affiliated with the club, you probably don't know what it is. It's just a piece of jewelry. But if you know what it is... maybe you're someone I want to meet."

"Oh. Right." She bit her lip a bit, literally chewing on this. "But, if you can find submissive women yourself, why do you even need the club?"

I considered how to put it. How best to explain it.

God knew Dane and Lex never seemed to totally get it. But then I didn't usually feel the need to totally explain myself or what I did at the club, to anyone. Besides that, it was a private club; I didn't usually get too detailed with non-members. I wasn't supposed to.

"This part might make you uncomfortable, but I'm gonna be honest with you. A lot of women enjoy being submissive with a man during sex. And a lot of men naturally like to be dominant. You can probably pick up whatever random jerk at the bar who'll happily boss you around. But finding a great Dom, one who actually knows what he's doing, someone you can feel safe with? That's a whole other thing. And if you're a great Dom... you don't want just any submissive."

She considered that. I had to give her credit for even sitting through this conversation, being open to it. If this was entirely new to her, which it seemed to be... could be a lot to ingest for some people.

Too much, maybe.

I didn't have to tell her all this. But for some reason, I wanted to.

Maybe it was because of what she said. We had some serious misunderstandings last time that cost us four years. Maybe I didn't want anything like that to cost us the few weeks we might have now.

“So... you meet women who are really good at being submissive at the club?”

“Not necessarily. What makes a great submissive to me might not make a great submissive to another Dom. It’s more like, I meet women there who are dedicated to being submissive. And who appreciate a great Dom. So much so that they’re willing to pay a lot of money for it. It’s like... a vetting process. It’s also safe, in many ways. Club members undergo regular blood testing. So when I told you I have no STIs, I can back that up—”

“Oh my god.” Her eyes had gone wide. “That thing you just said about money. That stuff you said when we met. You joked about being a male prostitute...”

“I am not a prostitute, Jolie. I pay the club and women pay the club. We don’t pay each other, and the club doesn’t pay us.”

“Oh.” Her relief on that was palpable.

“Although... some women do try to tip me.” If I was being honest, had to be fully honest.

“Tip?”

“Yeah. Like give me gifts and stuff. Like the woman you saw me with the night of the wedding shower. She gave me that Lamborghini.”

Jolie’s jaw dropped right open. “You’re telling me... she was so pleased with your... performance... that she gave you a Lamborghini?”

“Pretty much.”

“Um. What did you do to her?”

“I didn’t fuck her, if that’s what you’re assuming.” I didn’t. Yet. Though I might’ve, that night, if Jolie hadn’t interrupted.

I let her chew on that, maybe recalling what she’d seen that night.

“You... spanked her?”

“Among other things. But I didn’t keep the Lamborghini. That’s why I drove it back to the estate. So they could have it returned to her.”

“Why?”

“Because, if you ask me, a Dom doesn’t accept gifts from a submissive.”

Jolie gazed at me, shaking her head a little. “I just... don’t get it.”

“Don’t get what?”

“If you’ve got access to all these women who are totally your type, like that woman with the Lamborghini... She was sexy. And she was into what you’re into... I mean, if I were you...” She was blushing, deeply. “I’d probably be at that club all the time.”

Adorable.

The girl was fucking adorable.

And brave, really, to be having this conversation.

“So what is it you’re really asking me, Jolie?”

“Why are you here right now?” she said.

She was actually serious, which was probably one of the things that made her the most attractive. That lack of ego. She seemed weirdly unaware of her own desirability.

It was endearing and sweet, and if I could’ve put it in my pocket and kept it, I probably would’ve.

Strange thoughts.

Maybe don’t go there.

“Because, Jolie,” I told her. “You’re special.”

“In what way?”

“In every way.”

She looked utterly confused.

I could tell from her frank questions that she was curious. And she already told me she wanted to explore...

I was more than willing to talk about it. But I was definitely hungry for the rest.

She'd noticed. My cock was hard in my jeans, and her eyes flirted with it.

“Any more questions?”

“I have about a million. But is it okay to say that I'm afraid of ruining this by talking too much? I mean... we don't have all that much time together.”

That was true. “That's okay. For now”

She looked relieved.

“Do you want me to leave before Margot gets home?” I asked her.

“No.”

“No?” I let my eyes roam over her body in her bikini. “Then... do you want to show me what a good girl you can be?”

She swallowed. “Yes.”

Good. Because I'd had this conversation with her at the risk of scaring her off. I didn't want to scare her off, and I was glad that this talk didn't. Clear communication was important with the kind of power-play involved in a Dom/sub interaction. We *would* have to talk about it.

But that was enough for now.

Especially if she was game to play before her mom came home.

I hadn't made her blow me yet, and I was about dying for that to happen. To see how she liked it. To slide myself into her sweet mouth right here, in the daylight, where I could watch her. Her every reaction to everything I said, everything I told her to do.

“Come here.”

She started to get up.

“On the floor.”

She froze. I didn't usually make girls crawl for me. But I wanted her looking up at me and I was sitting pretty low on this lounge chair.

Slowly, she sank to the floor on her knees and crawled over toward me. Beautiful.

Perfect.

Something about her on her knees, looking up at me... she wasn't wearing glasses, and her blue/green eyes looked otherworldly, fucking gorgeous in the sunlight as she gazed at me.

I sat back, flexing my hips a bit to get comfy. She looked at my obvious erection with hunger.

"That's a good girl," I encouraged her, in a soft, low voice. I could hear my own hunger in the rasp of my words.

Her eyes softened, as those words poured over her like warm honey. I could see the effect they had on her. Her skin looked flushed and hot. I could see all the signs, so clearly, when she was turned on.

She was exceptional that way.

Flawless. When she submitted to me, she was flawless.

And when I said the right things, did the right things, I knew she'd submit.

She really wasn't that hard to figure out.

And she didn't hold anything back. She tried sometimes, but she failed.

It was something I considered myself exceptionally good at: figuring out what turned a particular sub to willing putty in my hands. Some girls liked shame. Some got off on feeling naughty, getting in trouble. Being bad.

I hadn't seen that side of Jolie, if it was there.

There were so many facets of her submissive nature that were still to be explored, and she was right. We didn't have a lot of time. But I already knew that she was an ideal sub for me. Because she responded to adoration. Appreciation. Praise.

Attention.

And orders. When she was aroused, she fucking loved taking her orders like a good girl and doing exactly what I said. There was no need for her to think about it. I knew exactly what she needed. That was the beauty of a strong Dom/sub connection. And we had that.

We'd had that every time.

From the moment playtime started until it ended, we were in flawless sync. Her needs were fulfilled as she fulfilled mine, and vice versa. It was a perfect, potentially endless cycle.

“Take out my cock.”

I'd made her wait a good, long moment on her knees before I gave her the next order, so when I did, she moved quickly. She reached to unzip my jeans, and as soon as she peeled them open my cock sprang out, hard as fuck.

“Good. Touch me.”

She ran her fingers and her palms all over it, making me swell. My balls were still crammed in my jeans, just my cock was out, but I didn't mind the pressure. Borderline pain turned me on. Endorphins and the dopamine release that followed were a rush and, in her hands, probably a pleasure. I was comfortable in that place.

But her soft touch was a high all its own.

“Take it in your mouth.”

She opened her mouth and sucked my cock into her wet warmth. I groaned. She flickered her tongue all over me. No hesitation.

“Take the whole thing, little girl. I know you can.”

I watched her try, and it was hotter than fuck that she couldn't. But she took as much as she could and that was all I could ask for.

Willingness.

Obedience.

“Good... suck me off.”

She sucked, sliding her mouth up and down, feeding me into her mouth with her hands. She was really trying, her pretty mouth stretched around my shaft. She looked so pretty, sucking on my cock, on her knees in her little bikini.

I tugged at the string on her top, loosening it to get her tits naked. I fondled them, playing with her nipples as she wriggled with arousal.

She kept feasting on me, gradually picking up speed as I teased her.

“Take your time. I want to watch you get me off. Slow.”

She slowed her pace to half speed.

“Use your tongue. Like that. Yeah. Suck on the head.”

She did as she was told as the pressure built in my balls. My hand drifted from her tits up to the back of her neck. I gripped her hair in a fistful, feeling my climax creeping up. I slowed her pace even more with a squeeze of her hair.

“Nice and slow. I’m gonna come in that sweet little mouth of yours—”

“Jolie!”

She stiffened as her mom’s voice drifted in from the back patio.

I squeezed her hair gently, holding her in place. Her eyes met mine, her mouth stretched around my cock. It was distant, up near the house, but that was definitely Margot’s voice.

Our eyes remained locked. “You’re gonna make me come,” I told her, my voice gravelly.

“Jolie? Are you out here?” her mom called.

“You’re gonna swallow all my come like the good girl you are.”

Jolie stirred. I knew her mom couldn’t see us in here, no matter where she was in the yard. The sun on the windows

made that impossible. But she could come out here and open the door.

I glanced up, finally, through the windows. I could see Margot's head as she went back into the house. But Jolie had no idea where she was, the whole time.

Because I had control of it. Not her.

It wasn't for her to worry about.

I locked onto her eyes. I loosened my grip in her hair, massaging the back of her neck a bit with my hand. She could've pulled away. But she didn't.

"Keep going."

We both knew, it would take her trusting me to keep going.

She gazed at me, and I could feel the urgent heat she was giving off. Her desire to finish what she started. She was too far gone to stop now.

She wanted to make me come.

Fucking badly.

Tentatively, she swallowed a little more of my cock.

"You just can't stop sucking that cock, can you, pretty girl..." Her eyes held mine as she resumed her rhythm, sucking in slow pulls. My balls were hot, squeezed in my jeans, and the rush resumed, hot and fast. "That's a good girl. Swallow Daddy's come..." I barely rasped the words out before my cock leapt and I watched myself pulse into her mouth, with a deep groan. I released in a long, shuddering spasm.

She sucked hungrily as I came, her eyes rolling closed. Her hands squeezed and pulled greedily at my shaft, her fingers clawing at me.

Ideally, I'd make her ask for my come before I gave it to her. I'd make her keep her eyes open. Better yet, I'd make her keep her eyes on mine. We'd have to work on her manners, but fuck.

I slammed my head back on the chair as the spasms of release reverberated deep through my body.

When I looked down at her again she was still sucking; every pulse and twitch of my cock was answered with an almost desperate, hungry suck.

So, yeah. She enjoyed giving head.

Bonus.

When I'd stopped pulsing, she slid my cock out of her mouth and licked it with long, careful strokes, like she didn't want to risk missing a drop and disappointing me. Her stunning blue/green eyes met mine again, glazed with lust.

I touched my finger to her chin and held her eyes. "You..." I said softly, stroking my thumb over her flushed cheek, "are a very good girl, Jolie."

Her eyes darkened as her pupils dilated, turning to liquid pools of warmth as she gazed up at me.

She didn't smile. But for the first time in my presence, ever since she'd come back home, she looked happy.

"And you know what good girls get?" I asked her.

"What?" she breathed, when she realized I was waiting for an answer.

"They get rewarded."

With that, I scooped her up off the floor and tossed her on a lounge chair. She gasped. I ripped open the bottom of her string bikini and buried my face in her pussy.

Chapter Nineteen

Jolie

When I arrived at the office of Voilà Interiors, my aunt Madeleine's interior design firm and my old workplace, it was exactly how I remembered it, right down to the fresh flowers and the smell of coffee when I walked in the front door. In a historic building on the edge of Chinatown, the interior offices were modern white and minimalist, which suited Madeleine, with pops of pastels and antiques that suited Danica, who still worked here as an interior decorator from time to time.

The receptionist greeted me with a warm smile.

"You must be Jolie! I've heard so much about you." She popped up from her desk to shake my hand. "Madeleine asked that I set you up in the meeting room. She'll be right in to join you."

As I followed her toward the meeting room at the far end of the hall, I glimpsed my aunt through the window into her office, talking on her phone. It was quiet, most of the staff gone home for the day.

"Thank you," I said as she opened the meeting room for me. "But doesn't she ever let you go home?" It was already past six o'clock.

She laughed pleasantly. "I usually stay late on Fridays to make sure we have everything wrapped up. Make yourself comfortable. WiFi password is on this card for you." She

handed me a Voilà business card with neat handwriting on the back. “There’s wine and water, and if you need anything else I’ll be at my desk.”

Wow. She was *way* better at this job than I was. I watched her walk away, then set my things down on the table. I was always so awkward and anxious greeting people when they walked in these doors. Madeleine’s wealthy clients had made me nervous. Even the delivery guys made me nervous, especially if they were cute.

Well, at least you’ve come a little way since then.

I almost laughed out loud when I thought about how awkward-receptionist Jolie would react if she could glimpse future Jolie, the one who got down on her knees to blow a gorgeous, self-professed Dom yesterday.

I mean, awkward-receptionist Jolie would’ve loved to do such a thing. But she would never have had the confidence to do it.

I wondered... Was it confidence? Or did he just make me that comfortable? So comfortable... there wasn’t really a choice to be made. I just wanted to do it, so I did.

In the moment, with him... I just stopped questioning myself. And doubting myself.

He made that happen.

With his damn sex magic.

“Hello, darling.” Aunt Madeleine breezed in. As always, she looked impeccable. Today, she did it in a little black dress with a boat neck, a red skinny belt and heels.

“Hi.” I gave her a hug. “Thank you for meeting with me.”

“Of course. I’m pleased to score *any* time with you while you’re in town,” she teased. As if my social calendar was that full.

She kissed my cheek and we got seated at the table. I had Mom’s wedding book, heavily bookmarked and annotated, and a binder of my own that I’d started gathering things in, along with some things to show her on my laptop; I was here to go

over the wedding design with her. She'd agreed to look over everything with me, which was generous. I knew she was busy.

But now that we were here, alone... maybe there was another reason I wanted to talk to her. If I had the courage.

Yes. You have the courage.

You screwed Shane in Mom's kitchen and blew him in the pool house and barely cared, in the moment, if you got caught. That was way more risky than this.

As I got connected to WiFi and set up, I said casually, "So, hey. Do you remember when I turned sixteen and you took me out for lunch, just the two of us?"

I glanced at my aunt, and by the way she was looking at me, she definitely remembered.

"You said to me, 'Jolie, there are things about me that you may have already started to hear, whispered among the adults.' You told me that whatever I heard, I could come talk to you about it."

"Yes. I recall."

"And then one day, Dani blurted out to me that you were a Dominatrix. And when I asked you about it, you said Mom somehow gleaned what we'd talked about when you took me for lunch that time and even though we didn't really talk about anything, Mom flipped out. And then she barely spoke to you for two years."

"I see this conversation calls for alcohol."

"It may," I agreed.

Aunt Madeleine got up and strolled over to the bar cart in the corner. I watched as she poured us each a glass of red wine.

"When I was eighteen," I forged on tentatively, "and I came to work at Voilà, the two of you seemed to patch things up. And when I asked you about it, you told me, 'We came to an agreement that I would never talk to you about my sex life.' Something like that."

“Yes. I recall that, too.” Madeleine strolled back over and handed me a glass of wine.

“Well, I’m twenty-three years old. I think we can probably talk about our sex lives now. Or whatever we want to talk about.”

She sat back down, next to me. “What is it you’d like to know, Jolie?”

“Well... that Dominatrix thing, for starters. Is it true?”

Madeleine took a sip of her wine and set the glass down. “I’m not a Dominatrix. That is a misconception. No one in the family wants to talk about it, though. Other than Marie and your cousin Daniella.” She gave me a wry look.

Yeah, that didn’t surprise me. Dani and her mom, my Aunt Marie, weren’t exactly shy to talk about anyone’s sex life.

“So,” she added, “I don’t bother correcting the rest of you when you whisper behind my back.”

“I’m sorry. I never meant to whisper—”

“It’s fine, Jolie. I’m very comfortable with who and what I am. And what I am is a Domme. There is a difference to some. And there is certainly a difference to me.”

“What is the difference?”

“As a Domme, I’m sexually dominant with my partners. I considered myself a Dominatrix many years ago, though, when it was a profession.”

Oh. *Wow*.

I’d definitely never heard *that* before, even behind her back.

“You mean, you made money, to...”

“It was a job,” she said simply. “A job I enjoyed.”

“So, men paid you for...?”

“No. Believe it or not, there was no actual sex involved. Men paid me to do other things to them. Of a sexually arousing nature. But I did not have sex with my clients.”

“But you don’t do that... um, job... anymore?” I never knew she had any job, honestly, besides interior design.

“No. I stopped doing that long ago.”

“May I ask why?”

She held my gaze, unflinchingly, when she said, “Because I enjoyed it so much, I realized I *wanted* to fuck some of them. So I stopped taking money for it.”

I gaped at her. I couldn’t help it. “Oh. Well... um. Thank you for being so honest with me. I guess this is pretty personal stuff.”

“Try that wine, hon.”

I took a sip, and tried to fortify myself. Because I was not nearly done with prying into her personal life. “Have you ever heard of a club called Bliss?”

A smile flickered over my aunt’s lips. “I may have.”

“I heard it’s a sex club.”

“It is. Quite a good one. I’ve been a member for years.”

“Oh.” God. “I’m sorry if this is too personal. Or private. And I won’t tell Mom about any of this conversation, I swear.”

“I don’t mind you asking, Jolie. You’re right, you’re an adult. I’ll be open with you about anything I can. Margot doesn’t get a say in that anymore. But I am curious. Why are you asking about this out of the blue?”

I took another sip of wine. Did I really want to go there?

“I met a man who says he’s a Dom.”

Yup. I went there.

“I see.”

“Will you promise not to freak out and judge me if I tell you who it is?”

What are you doing?

“Jolie,” she said mildly, “have you ever known me to freak out? Or judge?”

No. I had not.

Even all the time she was my boss and I'd seen her in high pressure situations, dealing with difficult, demanding clients, she'd never been one to freak out. Madeleine was always calm and collected, always in control of any situation. As much as I'd floundered in my job as a receptionist here, and it really wasn't the right job for me, I'd always found comfort in her company. She'd always made me feel safe. Protected.

She was the reason I decided to study interior design in school in the first place. Because I looked up to her. Honestly, my relationship with her was one of the hardest things to leave behind when I moved away.

Maybe I just didn't want her to be disappointed in me or something? To disapprove.

"I know you won't freak out. Which I guess is why I want to tell you." I took a breath and just said it. "It's Shane." I gazed at her, waiting for her reaction.

"And?" Madeleine regarded me calmly and sipped her wine. "I'm sorry, was that it? I thought there was going to be more."

"*Shane*," I stressed. "Shane Madrigal. Son of Jacob Ellis, who is marrying my mother, your sister. That Shane."

"Yes. I understand."

"But..."

"If you think I'm going to sit in judgement of what two consenting adults do in private, Jolie, you're dead wrong."

I released a breath I didn't know I'd been holding. "Okay. Maybe this goes without saying... but please, do not say a thing about this to anyone."

"Of course I won't. Whatever relationship you have with Shane, or any other man, is no one's business but yours."

"Really? Even with the wedding...?"

"You're both adults, Jolie. Your relationship with Shane is not up to Margot or Jacob. And the Dominant thing... If I can

offer a safe place for you to talk about it, as a Domme myself, that's one of the best things I can do."

"But... the last time I talked to you about him I called him an asshole. I told you I hated him. You're not shocked?"

"Darling. I don't really need an explanation of how 'hate' turned to desire. He's very attractive. I get it. Let's move along."

"Oh. Right. Um... so, apparently he's not only a Dom. Apparently he has a membership at Bliss, too. I kind of, uh, followed him there, actually."

At this, Madeleine actually laughed a little, surprised. "Followed him?"

I sighed heavily. "I climbed the fence, got caught by security and escorted off the property. Side note, that place has *hot* security."

"Oh, my." She seemed amused, at least. "And this was your idea of a good time?"

"I didn't know it was an idea, of anyone's. I mean, I didn't exactly know this is something people do. Not, you know, on that... scale."

"I see. So you're new."

"You could say that."

"A virgin, if you will. In the scene, at least."

"You could say that, too."

"And did Shane... take your virginity?"

"It wasn't like that," I said quickly. I wasn't sure why.

Her tone was just so... suggestive. So *knowing*.

Maybe I didn't want her to think that Shane had preyed on me. That he'd taken advantage of me.

"Do you want it to be?" she asked me.

"What?"

“You said ‘it wasn’t like that.’ But do you want it to be?” Her tone, again, was suggestive. Knowing. “Do you want him to be dominant with you?”

“Oh,” I said. “Uh... Yes. I kind of... asked him to.”

“Well, that takes a certain courage. To ask for it. And to admit it, to me.”

I wasn’t sure if it was courage. I didn’t plan to tell her about Shane when I came here tonight. But somehow, Madeleine made it feel okay.

“Did you know about him?” I asked her.

“I saw him once, at a party at Bliss. I’m not supposed to tell you that. Membership is private. But since you already know...”

“And... he told you he was a Dom?”

“He didn’t have to. I knew what he was doing there.”

Uh... that was tantalizing. I almost drooled. “What was he doing?”

“He was there with a sub.”

I swallowed, caught between curiosity and discomfort. “How did you know?”

“Because she was on her knees when I saw them together. And he was standing.”

“Were they...?”

“Naked?” she filled in for me. “Having sex? No. Not every Dom/sub encounter involves sex.”

Well, that kinda fit with what Shane told me. About Lamborghini woman. He said he didn’t have sex with her. Now, I was more inclined to believe it.

“I wouldn’t know...” I told her. “I mean, I’m pretty new to this whole concept. Shane says I’m... submissive.” I could feel my cheeks turning pink.

“And what do you say?”

“I say... it felt good when he dominated me.” God, that was uncomfortable to admit. Even to Madeleine.

“Do you feel ashamed about that?” Her lips quirked a little. “In a bad way?”

“No. It’s just a little surreal discussing these things with my aunt in my old office. Even the coolest aunt ever.”

Madeleine smiled softly. “Isn’t it better that you have someone to talk to?” She raised an eyebrow. “Someone other than the man who wants to dominate you?”

“Good point.” I swallowed some more of my wine. I gazed at her, my mind racing in so many directions at once. Then I blurted, “I want to know everything.”

She laughed softly again. “I understand. But sweetheart, that would take years. I came to this life very young, and I don’t have the time to relive it all over again for your benefit, right this minute. It’s been a long day. Ask me what you really want to know.”

I thought about that.

Since Shane told me about his “sexual preference” yesterday, and about the sex club, it was all I could think about. I was desperately curious about all of it. Did I feel uncomfortable thinking about him with other women? Like Lamborghini woman? His attention so focused on them, as it had been on me when we’d been together... making them feel everything I felt with him?

Yes. It made me uncomfortable.

Jealous, even.

But more than that... it made me want to know more. Much, much more.

“I guess... I just want to know that it’s normal. Shane said that it’s not that unusual, what I am. Being a female submissive.”

“It’s not. A lot of women are sexually submissive. And a lot of those women are curious to take their natural inclinations further.”

“And how does one do that?”

“Good question. You need a skilled partner, but more than that, a partner you can trust. It can be a very vulnerable thing, being a submissive. I would imagine, even more so, a female submissive with a dominant male partner. It’s not hard for a dominant man to find a submissive woman. What’s hard is finding one who’s exceptionally... to his taste. And if you’re a submissive woman, what’s hard is finding a great Dom.”

“Shane said something just like that.”

“Well, he’s right. As many women out there who might be willing to play submissive tonight, there are easily as many men who are willing to take control. But how many of them could handle *you* without harming you?” For the first time since my aunt had started talking, so frankly, so openly, so very lightly about the subject, I could feel her concern for me. Her protectiveness was kicking in. “How many of them could you trust, to get that vulnerable with?” she asked me seriously. “I’ve talked to women who’ve ended up in a bad situation with some creep who claimed to be a Dom, but really didn’t know the difference between dominating a woman and abusing her. It happens more than you’d like to think.”

“So... submissive women come to the club, to Bliss, because the Doms are vetted and safe?”

“Basically, yes. If you’re a wealthy woman who’s willing to pay for the luxury of an enjoyable encounter, why not? You know you’ll get what you pay for. You’ll be safe and you won’t waste your time. Wealthy women don’t like their time wasted.” She spoke like one of those women, and I knew she was.

“So, wealthy subs pay Bliss to hook them up with Doms like Shane, or... you?”

“Yes. If we’re available.”

“And when are you available?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Whenever we want to be. We are dominant, after all. We like to call the shots.” Then she smiled,

a sly smile, and I was pretty sure I got a glimpse of the Domme my aunt was in that private part of her life.

“Shane explained it a lot like you do,” I told her. “I guess I wanted to hear it from you, too. Because I trust you. He did mention that a woman he met at Bliss gave him a Lamborghini. You know, the yellow one in Mom’s driveway the night of the wedding shower?”

“Yes. I saw that. And the woman he showed up with.”

Yeah. I saw her, too. Sort of. Her hair over her face, most of her body exposed... The image was permanently imprinted on my brain, waiting in the darkness when I shut my eyes, the yellow car burned into the blackness like a flame.

“He said she was a submissive. He said he gave the car back. And he claims he didn’t fuck her.”

“I’m not surprised he gave it back,” Madeleine said. “It’s an unusual move for a female sub, I think.” She seemed to be considering it. “It is possible she might have bought a gift like that for him because she was trying, very hard, to win him over.”

“Win him over?”

“Yes. It sounds like she was hoping he’d claim her. Be her Dom, exclusively, I mean.”

Claim?

Ugh. I didn’t like that. That there were women like that one, so comfortable with the submissive thing, so practiced at it, even; women who wanted him and what he could give them, *that* badly.

Exclusively.

“You’re worried about the woman with the Lamborghini, is that it?” Madeleine asked gently. “Because I wouldn’t be worried. Not if he gave the car back.”

“I guess... I want to know if everything he told me is true. And that’s probably not a question you can answer.”

“You’re having trouble trusting him.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” I couldn’t bring myself to tell her about that night, four years ago. Partly because it still felt humiliating. Partly because... maybe I didn’t want her to hate Shane for it.

Oh, God. I feel protective of him.

This is not good.

“Listen to your instincts, Jolie,” my aunt told me. “Trust yourself. If something feels wrong to you, you have every right to walk away, at any time. Have you talked to him about limits? About *your* hard limits? And using a safeword?”

“No. We haven’t talked about that.”

“Well. You need to. As soon as possible.”

Shit. She was probably right.

“Okay,” I promised her. “I will.”

Was I really ready for this?

It wasn’t that talk of setting hard limits and a safeword with Shane was too much for me or freaking me out or anything. Just the opposite.

It was turning me on.

“Good. Now. Shall we go over this wedding design?” Madeleine set her wine aside. “I do have a date tonight, and I don’t want to be late for my handsome sub. The poor thing. He gets so anxious when I make him wait.”

Something in her tone told me that she absolutely would make him wait.

I stared at her as she began flipping through the pages I’d bookmarked in Mom’s wedding book. My amazing aunt, who was somehow normalizing all this kinky shit for me.

And I wondered what I looked like to her, an experienced Domme.

She didn't exactly reel in shock when I told her that Shane said I was submissive.

Did she see it, when she looked at me, too?

"Are you alright, Jolie?" she asked me lightly.

"I... I've just never experienced anything like this before," I stammered. "I didn't even know I had... you know... *kinks*. Shane just... I don't know... brings it out in me or something."

"Well, darling," she said easily, "maybe *he's* your kink."

Chapter Twenty

Jolie

“Welcome to Sex Island!” Danica’s best friend, Taylor, called out to me as she walked down the private dock toward me with a big smile on her face. She wore a flannel shirt and jean cutoffs with UGGs.

It was cool here at night, cooler than in the city, and I’d worn cozy sweats. If there was one thing I missed about California, it was the warm nights.

“Hey!” I greeted her as I stepped carefully off the boat. “It’s so good to see you!”

Taylor swept me up in a hug, almost lifting me off my feet. “You too!” When she released me, I watched her pick up a cardboard box from a pile of them on the dock that said *Sinner’s Choice* all over them in red letters. “You’re just in time. You can help me load these party favors onto the ATV.”

“Party favors?”

“Sex toys.”

So, I dutifully helped her load boxes of sex toys onto the trailer behind the ATV that was parked at the end of the small dock.

My life was getting weirder by the hour.

“Sex Island?” I asked. Last I heard, it was called Isabella Island. A short boat ride across the water from downtown Vancouver, this small island was where Danica lived a lot of

the time with her husbands, when they weren't all away on tour. Ashley's best friend, Dylan, another rock star, also lived here.

"Oh, it's all sex over here," Taylor said happily. I was pretty sure she'd been drinking already. I'd arrived pretty late. The sun was starting to go down.

"Let's go, ladies. I've got a dick to suck." Danica's husband, Ashley, came down the path between the trees.

"See what I mean?" Taylor said, but she threw him a look. "Ash, can you please with the manners? Jolie is here. We don't need to scare her back to California just yet."

"Hey. 'Sup, Jolie." Ashley gave me a hug and started loading boxes himself.

"I thought this was girls only," I complained, casting a glance at Ashley's bodyguard, Haz, who'd picked me up on the boat and was now securing it to the dock. I was in the middle of a major, secret sexual awakening here. How was I supposed to casually probe my girls about sex when there were nosy men about?

"Oh, it is," Taylor assured me. "The guys are doing guy stuff at Dylan's. But I have all these boxes, so I asked Ash to drive the ATV for us."

"Taylor drives it into a tree, every fucking time," Ashley explained, hefting a box into the trailer. "Jesus. How many dildos do four women need?" He started poking around in the open box and Taylor smacked his hand away.

"Get out of there. Your wife will get plenty, don't worry."

"Why *do* we need all these sex toys?" I inquired.

"Oh, Talia had a friend host one of those sex toy parties for a bunch of us," Taylor explained. "Instead of having her come all the way out here for our party tonight, I just bought out a bunch of her stock."

"Generous," I remarked, poking in one of the boxes myself. There really was an incredible amount of sex toys here for a "party" of only four women.

“She doesn’t get out much,” Ashley put in, to explain Taylor’s exuberance.

“Hey!” Taylor said. “*You* have a pregnancy, and then a baby, and breastfeed, all while managing your rock star husband’s career and jetting all over the world, and see how much free time and energy you have anymore for wild nights out with your friends.”

Ashley gave her a serious look. “I say this with love. You need to get plowed. Get Cary on that.”

Taylor rolled her eyes at me. “I get plowed plenty, thanks,” she muttered, and I was sure she meant it. Her husband, Cary, another rock star and a member of Ashley and Matt’s band, was fucking smoking, and he and Taylor were adorable together. “*Men*,” she said to me. “More dick is the answer to everything.”

“It really is,” Ashley said solemnly. “Now get the fuck on.” He was already on the ATV, and waved his thumb at us to get our asses on the back. “Haz, meet me at Dylan’s.”

“Yup,” Haz said as he carried a case of beer up the path.

“And start getting Matt drunk!” Ashley called after him. “He’s had a hard day.”

“Oh, Matt is getting some tonight,” Taylor said, and I snickered. She grabbed my hand and helped me onto the back of the ATV with her. “How about you, Jolie? Any plowing in the works?” She waggled her eyebrows at me. For sure, the girls had been into the booze already.

“Uh, maybe we’ll get into that.” I glanced at Ashley. “Later.”

“Hang on,” he ordered, and startled, grabbing onto his waist and digging my fingers into his hard abs. “Yo. There’s a handle, Jolie.”

I looked down. There was indeed a handle, a whole giant bar, and Taylor was holding onto it. “Oh.” I grabbed on and met her eyes.

Taylor laughed, and we took off up the path into the woods.

“I love it here,” I gushed. “Can I move in?”

I was standing in the middle of the massive cedar cabin-style house that belonged to Danica, Ashley and Matt. They’d had it built because they’d decided that Ashley’s bachelor house on the island, which they still owned, wasn’t really big enough for the three of them plus whatever guests they’d like to have out.

Aunt Madeleine and her team had designed it, and Danica had just given Dani, Taylor and I our first official tour. No one had seen it fully furnished and decorated until now.

It was beautiful, comfortable, a bit woodsy, a bit glam, and perfect for Danica and her husbands. I loved the feel of it, and seeing all their things tangled up together. Danica’s design and fashion magazines and Ashley’s guitars and Matt’s bass guitars. The art on the walls. Travel pictures. Family photos.

An AC/DC T-shirt that belonged to one of the guys discarded on the couch with a little basket of nail polishes that belonged to Danica.

“Well,” Danica replied, as she cracked open her favorite drink, a Strongbow cider, and poured it into a glass for me, “you’d have to move back from San Diego for that to happen. So, I’m going to say yes.” She handed me my drink and held hers aloft so we could tap them together. “You move back, you can move into this house.”

“I’ll seriously consider it,” I joked.

“But...” she added thoughtfully, “you would have to put up with Ash walking around naked.”

“He does that?”

“All the time.”

Taylor gave me a wide-eyed look over her beer, telling me that she'd witnessed this phenomenon herself. Ashley was gorgeous and all, but I really didn't need to see that. Danica had let slip, long ago, that he was pierced, and if I caught a glimpse of that, I'd definitely be staring.

"Uh, are they coming back tonight?" I asked.

"Nope. I made them swear to stay at Dylan's until the morning."

Good. The only people in the house right now were the four of us girls and that suited me just fine. When Danica messaged me today to say that she wanted to have us out for a girls' night at the new house, I was all in. It didn't hurt to get away from Mom's house for a night anyway. All day today she'd been buzzing around, annoying me with questions about the wedding.

Had I confirmed the new flowers yet? Had I talked to the venue about the revised table arrangement?

Her micromanaging was getting out of control. I was trying to let it slide because I knew she was just excited. But some breathing space would do me good.

That, and it was very hard to obsess over everything I'd talked to Madeleine about last night, and talked to Shane about the day before, as thoroughly as I wanted to with Mom interrupting me every ten minutes. It was like she expected me to be eating, sleeping and breathing her wedding details.

It was Saturday night. I needed a freaking night with my girls.

I mean, I would've gone for a night with Shane, but even though I'd checked my phone a thousand times all day, yesterday and today, there was, sadly, no message from Daddy.

Last time I saw him was in the pool house, when he made me come with his mouth as "reward" for blowing him—a record eight freaking times, at least; the ability to count got a bit blurry there at a certain point.

And since then... nothing.

Not a word.

I glanced at the girls like they could somehow read my dirty thoughts. But they were still talking about Danica's men.

"Do you think they'll actually behave?" Dani inquired.

It was totally Ashley's style to crash girls' night.

"They've got video games, Netflix and a hot tub," Danica said, "plus a fridge full of beer. They'll be fine."

"Also. I'm pretty sure Ashley was planning something special for Matthew," Taylor said innocently. "Involving dicks."

"Whose dicks?" Dani smirked.

"Their own, obviously," Taylor said. "It will never not feel slightly strange for me to say this to you, Danica, but your husbands are so adorably in love."

Danica was smiling ear to ear. "They are, aren't they?"

Taylor had dumped the contents of every *Sinner's Choice* box into a mountain on the dining room table, and I watched the girls descend upon it to look through the goodies. By the time I wandered over to join them, they'd started sorting things into piles for each of us.

"Those ones are yours, Jolie," Taylor told me. "You want to make sure you get your fair share. Dani's getting grabby."

"Here," Danica said. "Take these." She dumped several dildos onto my pile.

I stared at the growing pile as the girls tossed more toys onto it. Vibrators and what had to be butt plugs and stuff I'd never seen in my life. I started picking through them a bit, reading the packages with curiosity.

"Take this, too," Dani said, and tossed a double-ended pink dildo onto my pile.

"Hell, no." I tossed it back on her pile.

"Why not?" she demanded.

I shook my head, laughing as they all tossed stuff on my pile. “I will take one rubber dick, you guys. *One*. You realize I have to fly home with this? I have to clear U.S. Customs. Those guys have no sense of humor and they are scary as shit in their uniforms. I am not flying over the border with a suitcase full of dicks.”

For some reason, the girls thought that was fucking hilarious. Because, alcohol. Danica and Taylor were practically crying at whatever mental image they’d conjured.

“You guys clearly need to drink more,” I said dryly, and they both went to get another drink.

“How do *you* need more dicks?” Dani demanded, snooping through Danica’s pile. “Don’t you have enough at home? You’re so spoiled.”

Danica grinned. “Hey, maybe my men need more dicks, too.”

“I really didn’t need to hear that,” Taylor said, but she was grinning.

“I do,” Dani said. “Please. Tell me all your kinky shit. I want to hear about Cary.” She fired Taylor a look. “You never come out anymore.”

Taylor said diplomatically, “I respect my husband too much to blab to you all about his preferences in the bedroom.”

“Fuck off. You’ve already told us how kinky he is,” Dani said. “He likes to hold you down, squeeze your throat, slap your ass, and boss you around. Last time I saw you good and drunk, you let slip that you’d started calling him Big Boss Daddy while he fucked you.”

Oh, God. I had so many questions. I was chewing on my lip, trying not to blurt them all out.

Taylor just rolled her eyes at Dani, but turned slightly pink.

“Being kinky is fun,” Danica said easily. “Creative play in the bedroom is one of the best ways to stay close in your relationship.”

I looked at her, surprised. She didn't usually talk so openly about her sex life. She was protective of Ashley and Matt and their privacy, because they were famous. And because they were bisexual. And because she knew not everyone approved of her relationship with the two of them.

She especially didn't usually get so open in front of her twin.

But maybe their sisterly relationship had evolved? Matured. Softened. Changed, like so many other things that had moved on when I moved away.

I suddenly felt kinda depressed that I'd missed out on so much of it. All the girls' nights and growing together.

"Creative play?" I asked, hoping she'd elaborate. "What do you mean?"

"Sex, Jolie," Danica said bluntly. "I mean sex. If you're in a committed relationship, over time... Think about it. You're promising your partner, or partners, that you'll be faithful to them alone. They promised you the same thing. So now you're the only outlet they have for their entire range of sexual desires, and vice versa. And some people have... a broader range than others."

"That's a nice way to put it," Taylor said thoughtfully.

"So, how do you keep your intimate relationship tight, without getting stale?" Danica prompted.

"Uh..." Was she expecting me to answer that? Dani didn't really do boyfriends, but even she had more experience with relationships than I did.

"You try whatever kinky shit your man requests?" Taylor put in playfully.

"Well, yes, I suppose," Danica said. "But more importantly, you cherish and respect that special truth: that you're the only one who gets to do what you're doing together. You're it. So, make it great. Make it safe. Make it comfortable. Make it fun. And above all else... make it whatever you want it to be together. And don't worry about what other people think."

“Sure. That,” Dani said. “Plus, fuck them sideways. Men need to be fucked regularly. You’re in a relationship and you’re not fucking regularly? You’ll lose him.”

“Harsh,” Taylor said.

“Yet true,” Dani replied. “And if he’s into kinky shit... you’d better be ready to do some kinky shit. Or walk.” She was eyeing me speculatively.

Did I have a weird expression on my face or something? I was really trying to breathe normally over here and not explode all over the place with questions. I was trying to look casually interested.

Did I not look casual right now?

I sipped my drink and looked at Danica. She shrugged.

“That’s fair,” Danica said. “You can’t expect somebody to be what they’re not for you. If you’re not kinky, don’t be kinky just for someone else, right? But also... don’t expect someone who is to change that for you.”

Interesting. Hearing Danica talk about sex and kink so casually, so... comfortably... It was incredibly interesting.

Had I somehow missed what a freak she was?

Somehow, I’d expected Danica to be the voice of reason when it came to kinky sex and stuff like that. But now I asked myself... Why? She was in a freaking three-way relationship with two bisexual rock stars.

“So... how much kinky stuff have you done with your husbands?” I asked her, as casually as I possibly could.

“I think you have to define kinky,” Taylor suggested.

“Yeah,” Danica said, thoughtfully, “like, kinkier than taking it from two men at once?”

I stared at my cousin. I’d really never heard words like those out of her mouth. And the mental image that ignited in my mind...

Kind of brought it all home. I mean, I knew she was with two men and that they all fucked each other.

But I'd never actually heard it from her mouth like that before.

"Well. I think that about answers my questions," I said. I knew I was hot pink right now.

"Oh, sweetie," Danica said, "it's not a big deal. They take it from me, too." To punctuate that juicy statement, she held up one of the dildos. A particularly large one.

Taylor's eyes met mine and went wide. Then she snorted and started coughing a little as Strongbow went up her nose. "Oh my god, I missed this. We need more girls' nights. I adore my son, but I can't let being his mommy take over to the point that I miss conversations like this."

Yeah. Me too. I couldn't believe I'd been missing out on conversations like this for so damn long while I was living down in San Diego.

I was pretty sure, though, that if Danica wasn't drinking so much tonight, none of this would be falling out of her mouth. Dani must've been on the same wavelength, because she promptly handed her sister another cider.

Maybe I was just fucking naïve. But even after Danica told me, two-and-a-half years ago, that her and Ashley had brought another man into their marriage, and they'd given him a ring, that they now considered Matt their husband, I still didn't think of Danica as kinky. Other than the whisperings I'd heard about Madeleine, I hadn't thought of any of the women in my family as kinky.

But right now... I thought of Mom and her steamy mountain man book. And how she said Jacob was so "passionate" in the bedroom.

And how Aunt Mireille had let that bartender suck the hooter shooter out of her cleavage like a champ.

And how Aunt Marie so casually mentioned smashing that shaman or whatever at her hippie retreat.

And it hit me, that maybe being kinky or just plain open-minded about sex was normal. And that I might actually be the *least* kinky woman in my family.

“I think I need another drink,” I said, to no one.

Taylor happily handed me another.

“It’s all good, Jolie,” drunk Danica said. “You just need to meet your unicorn. Once that happens... it’ll all work itself out.”

Yeah. Maybe she was right about that.

That was basically how it happened for her and for Taylor.

Maybe someday it would even happen for Dani, too.

Or me.

But... what if Shane *was* my unicorn?

I buried myself in my drink as that sank in. That he very well could be.

Because if that wasn’t unicorn sex we’d been having, I didn’t know what was.

But the thought that Shane might be my unicorn... It was just kind of depressing. Because obviously, there was no happy ending there to be had. I wasn’t going to end up with him. He was about to become my stepbrother. We lived in two different countries. And other than sex, we were incompatible. We had nothing in common.

And what if, unlike Danica, I only got one unicorn?

For the first time in my life, I actually asked myself: What if I met my unicorn, and then he got away?

As the girls kept rummaging through the sex toys and divvying them up, I slipped away to check my phone. I thought I’d heard it jingle in my purse. And sure enough, I’d received a text.

From him.

Daddy: Come over.

Seeing that word, *Daddy*, pop up on my phone, reached straight between my legs. I instantly felt my whole body

fucking smile.

He wanted to see me.

Me: I can't. I'm on Sex Island and I don't have a boat.

I took a discreet photo of the girls poring over their goodies and sent it to him. Then I went to get myself a glass of water to try to balance out the alcohol, and by the time I did that, he'd replied.

Daddy: That does look wet. When are you back on dry land?

I tried not to grin too hard in case anyone glanced over at me.

Me: Tomorrow. It's a pajama party.

Daddy: Send more photos.

Me: You wish.

Daddy: How about a pajama party at my place tomorrow night?

Oh my god.

I drank some water, trying to keep cool and hide my stupid grin from the girls.

He wanted me to spend the night with him?

Me: I imagine pajamas are optional at this sleepover?

Daddy: There will be very little sleeping. But don't worry...

The three dots appeared as he typed, and I flushed with heat. I glanced at the girls, but they were laughing over a pair of fuzzy handcuffs, trying to work the key in the lock.

I glanced down to find a new message.

Daddy: Daddy's going to take good care of you.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jolie

The text I woke up to the next morning was like air.

Daddy: I look forward to seeing you tonight.

I kept looking at it, again and again, like if I didn't I wouldn't be able to breathe right. I wouldn't be able to survive without this precious thing that he'd just given me. A thing that I didn't even know I needed so bad, and now that I had it, I could no longer live without it.

Desire.

His desire to see me. To touch me.

Was this obsession? Because if Alyssa thought I was obsessed with him before...

Since he showed up at Mom's place to fuck me in the kitchen and on the floor, and the next day told me he was a Dom, I hadn't told Alyssa anything. She'd warned me not to get hurt, and as far as she knew, I hadn't seen him since she gave me that warning. There was no way I could tell her what was happening right now.

How I couldn't stop looking at that text, sneaking hits of it like it was shots of pure oxygen.

I couldn't tell her about the Daddy thing.

Or the Dom thing.

I wasn't sure why. It felt... private. A him-and-me only thing.

Aunt Madeleine was the only one I'd talked to about any of it.

A little after that morning text, he sent me a link to a recipe for a "hangover cure smoothie." I only had a couple of drinks last night and I wasn't hungover, but I made the smoothie for me and the girls and drank it anyway.

He also sent me instructions. Orders.

Daddy: If you drank last night, drink lots of water today. Eat well. Bring whatever you need to be comfortable spending the night at my place. I'll send a cab to pick you up at 7:00. You'll be eating dinner with me.

I was beginning to realize that seeing a Dom would involve him bossing me around in more areas than just the bedroom. Maybe I should've been offended by that? But I really had no objections to anything he said.

Quite the opposite.

I was flying. Floating off the ground all day, fucking high on his attention. Just a few texts from him and it felt like I'd slipped into a warm bath.

The feeling stayed with me all day.

And I kept thinking of that thing he said to me: *Daddy's someone who takes care of you.*

I'd never really thought of myself as someone who needed to be taken care of before. Yes, I'd lived with my mom until I was twenty. I'd struggled with money, making rent, jobs, school, figuring out who the hell I was in life. And relationships; I'd struggled with those, too. I'd never had a boyfriend or a lover who said he wanted to take care of me, though. I'd never had one who expressed, verbally or physically, that he wanted to take care of my sexual needs, either.

But every time I thought of Shane taking care of me, taking care of those needs, it had me low-key vibrating with arousal and anticipation. Which was inconvenient as hell when I was living in my mom's house.

As soon as I got back from the island, midafternoon, I got packed up and ready for my night at Shane's place and did my best to avoid her. I made an excuse to skip dinner with her and Jacob, telling her that I was too busy working on wedding stuff and I'd grab a bite later. Just before seven o'clock, I left her a vague note on the kitchen counter that I'd gone out with the girls and I might not be back tonight, out of courtesy.

I was waiting out on the street by the time the cab rolled up.

I'd brought a tote bag with overnight stuff, like he told me to. I didn't bother bringing anything to sleep in because if I got any sleep at all tonight, I was pretty sure I'd be doing it naked.

Or maybe wearing something of his?

Wearing a guy's clothes was a major hot spot for me. Like, fantasy level shit. Especially if the guy smelled as good as Shane did. Wearing *his* clothes was really not something I probably should've been fantasizing about, though.

But here I was.

In the cab, I was so excited I had to consciously slow down my breathing to calm my pounding heart. I'd never been so excited going on a date, and we weren't even going on a date, really. Sure, he invited me over for dinner and to spend the night, but I knew what he'd really invited me over for.

Sex.

Kinky, Dominant/submissive sex.

The kind of sex I'd told him I wanted to explore with him.

I could hardly wait until I got there to see him, feel his hands on me, and I sent him a text from the cab to scratch the undeniable itch.

Me: I'm on my way over in the cab.

He replied a moment later.

Daddy: Good girl.

Warmth. Nothing but liquid warmth flowed through me at his words.

I stared at those two words on my phone, mesmerized. Why did I love it so much when he called me a good girl, even when we weren't having sex?

You just do.

Go with it.

The reality was, I didn't have much time to question it. I wanted to soak up every moment of this sexual experience for what it was. It was Sunday, and I hadn't seen him since Thursday in the pool house. Friday he didn't contact me and Saturday I was on the island. That was two whole days wasted, and I was leaving in exactly three weeks from today.

Suddenly, it didn't feel like nearly enough time.

By the time the cab dropped me off at his place I was buzzing with anticipation. The doorman seemed to be expecting me and let me up, and when the elevator arrived on Shane's floor, he opened the door for me.

There he was, waiting for me, in black sweatpants and nothing else. My eyes dragged greedily over his body. The man wore sweats better than most men wore suits.

He wasn't smiling, but gazing at me hungrily.

"Hi," I breathed. I stepped carefully into the apartment. And I wondered, was I supposed to get down on my knees again? Crawl? Was I supposed to call him *Sir*?

Would he ask me for things like that? Or just order me to do them?

I didn't really want to call him Sir. Or crawl, as much as I didn't mind it in the pool house. It felt right in the moment; we were seated so low to the floor anyway. But now, it seemed

like an uncomfortable thing to do. Literally. The floor in here was polished concrete.

But was it a hard limit? No.

Ever since Madeleine mentioned the hard limit thing, I'd thought about it, and I wasn't even sure what my hard limits were. Other than anything super gross, though "super gross" was probably subjective...

"Breathe," he commanded. Our eyes had locked as I mentally mini-spiraled, and maybe he saw it. He took a slow, deep breath in. I did the same, mirroring him as he held the breath and then breathed slowly out.

All the while, my mind kept spinning. *He knows you're excited. You're breathing too fast. Just calm down.*

I glanced past him, buzzing with curiosity, at the dining table that was lit with candles. The rest of the apartment was dark, no other lights on. "Am I dressed right?" I wore a T-shirt and jeans. I wasn't sure if I should dress up or what. I didn't want to look too damn eager or wear something too sexy or wildly different than I usually did. What if I got it wrong?

Anyway, he didn't dress up. He'd barely dressed at all.

He didn't answer me. His eyes roamed hungrily over my body, reminding me of his words in the elevator that first night we met. *Your clothes aren't what I'm interested in.* "Did you bring what I told you to?"

"Yes." I set my tote bag on the floor.

"Take off your clothes. Leave on your bra and panties."

"Oh... kay." I glanced around, wondering where I was supposed to strip. Like, right here?

"Right now, Jolie."

It was a command, and I had no intention of not following it. He watched as I removed my shoes and socks, then my T-shirt and finally my jeans, his eyes on me the whole time.

"Put them in the box." He pointed at a metal box, a small trunk, on the floor inside the door.

I set my shoes and my clothes neatly inside it.

“Turn off your phone and put that in, too.”

I did as I was told. I watched him lean down to shut the box, and when I saw that it had a lock, and he locked it, I got nervous. “Uh, Shane? Where’s the key for that?”

He stood up to his full height in front of me and studied me. “Do you want the key?”

“I don’t know. Why did you lock it up?”

“Because for the next twelve hours, I don’t want you to think about anything else. You’re here with me. No distractions.”

I glanced into the room again, at the candlelit table.

“Is this a scene?” I whispered.

“Sounds like you’ve been hitting up Google again.”

“Maybe.”

“I don’t like that word.”

“Google?”

“*Scene*. It sounds too much like a place where actors perform. Are we acting?”

That intense, focused look in his eyes was not an act. I knew that now. I could feel it, and I wanted to trust this feeling. That when he’d given me that look the first night I met him, in the bar, it wasn’t a scam. He wasn’t pretending. He wasn’t trying to manipulate me, to seduce then humiliate me.

He just wanted me.

He wanted that disheveled girl who ducked in out of the rain with spa slippers on her feet and no idea where she was going. He wanted to take control of her night... and take her to fucking paradise.

“No,” I said. “We’re not acting.”

“Sit down at the table.”

I went over to the dining table, and I felt him following me. There were several covered dishes laid out and two place settings with candles and a bottle of wine. I glanced at Shane, and he pointed out where I should sit. He was at the head of the table and I was at his left side. We sat down, and only then did I notice the black satin blindfold next to my plate.

He said nothing about it, but I knew he saw me looking at it. There was nothing else unusual on the table, and I couldn't help staring at it.

Then I watched as he took the lids off the covered dishes and filled my plate with food. Some kind of buttery looking roast chicken with herbs, and salad. It looked healthy.

I'd never had a meal with him before. I felt nervous and too excited to eat, but I was hungry.

"Did you cook this?"

"No. I ordered in."

"It smells good."

"Eat."

As I started to eat, he poured me a glass of white wine. He didn't pour any for himself. He didn't even have a wine glass at his place setting. We both had a glass of water next to our plate, and he sipped his.

"You don't want any wine?" I asked him.

"Training. I try not to drink much."

Right. His fight.

"So, this is how you eat during training? I don't see a carb in sight."

"I can order some, if you want something."

"No," I said quickly. "Thank you. Um, this is perfect." I wasn't sure if I'd just been rude. The meal looked great.

I was just so fucking nervous.

He was so quiet.

I could feel his restrained energy, restless, like a wild animal, struggling to be tame. A wolf indoors.

“It’s really good,” I told him, though he didn’t ask. Something told me he already knew, or he wouldn’t have spent his money on it.

I watched him as he watched me. He’d started eating, and he looked regal in the candlelight; his beautiful cheekbones and full lips. His sculpted body. The faded bruises.

He looked like a gladiator who’d suddenly become emperor and hadn’t yet decided how he was going to rule.

I wondered if he knew exactly what he was going to do with me tonight, or if he was still figuring it out. Figuring me out, like I was struggling to figure him out.

Or if he was just taking his time. Enjoying this; the anticipation, knowing things I didn’t know.

There was definitely a lot going on behind those wolfish eyes. And I had no idea what the protocol was here. Or what his rules were. I was pretty sure that whatever his rules were, I was supposed to follow them, if we *were* in a “scene.” But he hadn’t told me his rules yet, and I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to ask.

Probably not.

We are dominant, after all. We like to call the shots.

I heard Aunt Madeleine’s voice in my head and bit my tongue.

“When I messaged you last night,” he said, breaking the silence, “and discovered that you weren’t available, I didn’t like it.”

“Oh.” I swallowed, washing my food down quickly with some wine. Was he mad? It wasn’t like he’d given me advance notice that he wanted to see me or asked me to stay in town last night. But somehow, I didn’t want to disappoint him. “I’m... sorry?”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. I was busy on Friday or I would’ve messaged you sooner. It just reminded me that

you're leaving and I shouldn't take you for granted."

I stared at him.

Was he for real?

He wanted to see more of me? Was that what he was saying?

"I've become aware of how little time we have," he went on. "But I don't want to ramp things up too much for you, too fast."

I took another sip of my wine, my mind racing in several directions. "What does that mean?"

"It means there are a lot of things I want to do with you. But I don't know exactly what's okay with you and what's not. And I realize that you might not know what's okay with you and what's not. Because you haven't done this before."

My entire body had flushed hot at his words. "Done... what, exactly?"

"Given yourself over to the care of a Dom."

My core absolutely tingled with anticipation. Because there was that word again. *Care*.

Daddy's someone who takes care of you.

I wasn't even sure what he meant by the rest of it. *Given yourself over...* But my throat closed up. Because I liked the sound of it. A lot.

"So, we need to talk about limits," he said.

I cleared my throat. "You mean, like, hard limits?"

"Yes. Those. Setting limits, in general, means communicating things to me that you won't do or don't want done to you. A soft limit is something that you might not want to do, but you might be open to trying if we talk about it beforehand. Have you ever discussed limits before?"

"Um, with a lover? No. I did talk to... someone... about this whole situation, a little..." I faltered, embarrassed. And a

little worried that he might be angry or something. “Someone I trust. She mentioned limits.”

“Let me guess,” he said. “Madeleine?”

I tried to be cool, but that took me by surprise. And I instantly didn’t love that *he knew...?*

I felt... weirdly envious.

Maybe because men always noticed Madeleine. Of course, he’d noticed her, too. “You know about her?”

“And so do you, I take it?”

“She told me. She also told me... we should use a safeword.”

“Because she wants you to be safe. And to have a way to tell me to stop.”

I stared at him. I couldn’t believe how hot this conversation was making me. He seemed so comfortable with it. It felt like we were two people just on a dinner date. Except that I was in my underwear and there was a blindfold next to my plate that we were both pretending wasn’t there.

“You don’t think it’s important?” I asked him.

“It is important. Especially if we’re going to explore your limits. But what you should understand... if we’re going to explore, there may be times when you can’t speak.”

Oh, God. I was so turned on already, I could barely taste my food. “Like, if you gagged me or something?”

“I meant, times when you’re so blissed out that it’s kind of like you’re high. You might be temporarily unresponsive. At least verbally.”

“Really?”

“There’s a reason they call the club *Bliss*. Eat your food, Jolie.”

I tried to keep eating. “Uh... I think I read about that. You’re talking about subspace?”

“Yes.”

My heart was thudding. A mixture of excitement and fear. “I thought that only came with pain.”

“Not true. It could happen to you in a submissive state at any time, if it’s intense enough for you. At that point, a safeword or a signal is useless because you might not be able to use it. That’s why it’s important we communicate clearly beforehand, not just during, so that even if you can’t speak or give me a signal, I know how to care for you.”

“Oh. Madeleine didn’t get into that.”

“You can ask her. But like I told you before, not all Dominants are the same. We might not all play the same. And maybe not all subs experience subspace the same, or experience it at all.” He studied me. “You’re wondering now if you’ll experience it.”

“Yes.” Was it that obvious? “I thought it was like... an endorphin high from pain.”

“BDSM isn’t about pain. At least, it doesn’t have to be. To me, it’s about control. You know what BDSM stands for?”

“Yes.”

“Bondage and Discipline,” he said, slowly, letting the words pour over me like warm water. “Dominance and Submission. Sadism and Masochism.” His eyes drifted over my face, and I was pretty sure he was observing my reactions to each of those words. “I probably should’ve told you by now that I’m not interested in the Sadism and Masochism part. Not in a sexual sense.” His eyes met mine, and there was that glimmer in them that always made me gooey inside. “You look relieved.”

“I am. I kind of thought...” I looked over his body, the bruises and scars.

“You thought I was into some deeply freaky pain shit.”

“Maybe.”

“I usually save that part for fighting.” A dark smile crept over his lips, and my heart thudded.

“Uh...”

“I like inflicting pain on other men in the ring, and sometimes even receiving it. It can be a high. But I don’t get sexual pleasure from it. It’s not arousing. It’s very different from how I feel with you.”

“Oh.” I listened raptly, unable to come up with any more words.

Jesus. I was already having trouble speaking.

“I am interested in the other parts of BDSM,” he went on. “Bondage. Discipline. Dominance. Submission.” Again, he spoke each word slowly, savoring it and maybe savoring my reaction to it. “And... I’m interested in anything that interests you.”

Oh, fuck. This man was so hot.

I didn’t know sex could be so hot, and we weren’t even having it yet. It made me almost want to weep. I was sitting at his table eating dinner, and I was already so fucking hot I could barely think straight.

I was absolutely mesmerized by him. By every word he said.

“When I say it’s about control,” he went on, “it’s not just physical control. Bondage is a part of it. But it’s a lot more of a mental play than you might think. Your mental space is what interests me most. Your submissive head space.”

That, I did not expect him to say. I didn’t even know what to say back. I just wanted him to keep talking.

“Because that is where I play with your pleasure,” he said.

I dangled on his words, entranced.

“I’m comfortable playing in someone else’s mental space, and I’m always in control of my own. That discipline comes from being an athlete. Training. Fighting is a mental game. I’m very controlled in a fight. It’s what gives me my best edge over my competition, most of the time.”

He laid his hand over mine on the table.

“But I’m not here to fight you, Jolie. In the ring, I’m looking to submit my opponent. I’m going for a knock out or a submission every time. With you...” His thumb stroked slowly over mine. “I expect submission from the moment you walk in the door.”

When I realized he was waiting, patiently, for me to respond to everything he just said, I found my voice. “I’m not sure I know how to do that. Or... what exactly you want.”

“You do it naturally. Every time you walk in my door.”

I tried to wrap my head around that. He’d said something similar to me before...

Pretty much everything you do when the two of us are alone is a submissive thing.

“What you don’t seem to understand yet, Jolie,” he said, “is that you’re perfect.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jolie

I blinked at Shane, repeating his words in my head as I tried to make sense of them. “I’m... perfect?”

Did he really just say that? *No one’s perfect.*

“Yes.”

“But how can I be perfect if I don’t even know what rules I’m supposed to be following?”

“Just do what I say,” he said in that low, soothing voice of his. “I’ll tell you what my rules are as I see fit. You just need to stop working so hard. Stop trying. When you stop trying to figure out what I want and just do what I say... you’ll know bliss.”

Holy hell.

His words were like a warm bath. I just stared at him until I realized that he hadn’t said anything in a long moment. It was like he was giving me a minute to process, waiting, again, for me to respond.

“So... that’s how it works? You control everything, the entire time?”

“That’s how it works. But it only works with established limits. Without limits, I could make a mistake. Do something you don’t want me to do. And I don’t want that to happen. If you don’t enjoy the experience, I don’t enjoy the experience.”

I nodded, taking that in.

“How do you feel about everything I just said?” he asked me.

I stared at him, feeling utterly obsessed. *You're perfect.*

But all I said was, “I like it.”

“Tell me your safeword.”

“Um. I don't know...”

“Make it something you wouldn't otherwise say during sex. If you say *no* or *stop*, I am going to stop, at least pause, and check in with you. I promise you that. But your safeword gets you immediate relief from whatever's happening. I can give you a safeword, if you prefer.”

“California,” I said suddenly.

He stared at me. Maybe he didn't like that? A reminder that I was leaving. That this was ending, soon.

Almost as soon as it was getting started.

I didn't totally love it, either. But it just popped into my head.

“Fine,” he said. “California it is. If you say it, everything stops. Use it only if you want a full stop.”

“Okay. I understand.”

“When we play, we're going to use a hot and cold scale. Very simple. Hot means you love it or want to try it. Warm means you like it or you're open to trying it. Cold means no. You know what a hard limit is?”

“Yes. It means it's off-limits. I don't want to do it.”

“Good. Cold is your hard limit.”

“Okay,” I said.

“When I ask you if you want something or if you like something, I expect honest answers, Jolie. That's the only way this works.”

“Okay. Yes.”

“Don’t worry about hurting my feelings, or getting it wrong, if you say cold.”

“Okay.” Shit. How did he know I was already thinking about that? It crossed my mind, as soon as he explained the hot/warm/cold thing.

He got up and moved to stand behind me, laying his warm, strong hands on my shoulders. I relaxed at the contact. Then he started massaging my shoulders. I was finished eating and utterly melted at his touch, his deft fingers.

Could he tell how tense I was? How nervous?

Yes, he can fucking tell.

You’re not his first submissive.

His hands on me were an immediate healing balm, soothing me through tissue and bone. I felt, almost instantly, like I could breathe better. I felt lighter.

He had some serious magic in his touch.

And somehow his nearness made me feel safe, and comfortable to just be my inexperienced self. Without judgment.

“Shane? Can I call you Shane right now?”

“Yes.”

“What if I’m not sure if something is a hard limit for me or not because I haven’t tried it?”

“Just answer to the best of your ability. Your desires are as valid as experience.”

“But what if I get it wrong?”

“You can’t. This isn’t a test. And I won’t push you on anything that’s cold for you. Not without asking your permission to play with those limits. Even if it’s hot for me, in theory. And I will never make you do something you don’t want to do, regardless of how I feel about it.”

“But... what if it’s cold for me, but the fact that it’s hot for you brings it up a notch for me?”

“That’s what warm is for. Warm gives us room to play. And your answers can always change in the future if you get curious about something and change your mind. I can figure out what’s hot for you over time. I’d enjoy that. But we don’t have the luxury of time. And I need to know, right now, what’s cold for you. So I can respect those boundaries. Also... I don’t want to miss something that might be hot for you just because I didn’t pick up on it yet.”

“Right. Okay.”

He paused the massage to top up my wine glass.

“But... what if it’s hot for me,” I asked him, “and it’s not hot for you?”

“If it’s hot for you, it’s hot for me.”

Really? “How does that work? That can’t be true.”

“Try me.”

“You’re saying anything I want to do, you’ll do?”

“No. That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying if it turns you on, that’s hot for me. Whether I’ll indulge you on it or not... that’s up to me.” He gave me that delicious, wolfish look of his, the one that said he was boss here.

He held the wine glass for me and I took a sip, gazing at him over the rim. I licked my lip. “Well, it’s pretty obvious that being bossy is hot for you.”

His eyes dropped to my lips, his expression darkening. It was the first hint of sass I’d given him tonight, and it just sort of slipped out. Was that against the rules?

“Is it hot for you?” he demanded.

“Yes.”

“Then don’t complain.” He set the glass down in front of me and resumed the massage.

“What if it’s not just a no,” I mused dreamily, melting again, “but like, off the scale? Like, ‘Not in a million years, don’t even bother bringing it up again, buddy.’”

“Then I guess we could call that ice,” he said dryly.

“What if it’s off the scale in the other direction, like, ‘Please, please do that to me or I’m gonna die right now?’”

“I don’t know. Inferno?” He sounded slightly exasperated with me. “By the way, your sass right now is bordering on punishable. Do you like punishment, Jolie?”

“I don’t know...” Was he serious? “So I guess... that’s warm?”

He didn’t say anything, and his silence, I quickly realized, was worse than punishment. I mean, I’d never been punished sexually by a Dom, but his silence was truly torturous. Especially when I couldn’t see his face.

I tipped my head back to glance up at him.

“Sit still.”

I sat straight in my chair and didn’t look at him. As he massaged my shoulders, melting my tension away, he worked my bra straps over my shoulders and let them fall down my arms. I wanted them to keep falling, for my bra to fall down, baring my breasts so he could grab them.

Why wouldn’t he touch my aching parts? He had to know by now that I was aching. I’d been sitting here in my underwear for like half an hour while we chatted about sexual limits.

I finally got brave and interrupted the silence. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“Would that be hot for you? Punishing me?”

“Very.”

My whole body flushed hot again.

“But I’d consider it discipline. Correction. Not punishment.”

Oh, wow. That word. Discipline.

I was growing to like it.

“I want to know what else is hot for you,” I whispered excitedly.

“It’s gonna be obvious what’s hot for me,” he said softly. “I’ll be instigating. I’m not gonna instigate anything that I don’t want.” He leaned down close to my ear and said, “And here’s a rule for you. No more questions.”

He reached to pick up the black satin blindfold that had been lying on the table, taunting me the entire time. “I’m gonna put this on you.”

I looked up into his eyes.

“Hot?” he asked me.

“Yes. Hot.”

“Good girl. Take off your glasses.” I did, and he slipped the blindfold over my head. It was silky and stretchy and he slid it down gently over my eyes. “Comfy?”

“Yes.”

“Dark?”

“Yes. I can’t see anything.”

“Good.” He ran his fingers down the back of my neck and leaned in close to my ear again. His touch, his body so near mine, his heat, his smell, all these sensations sharpened with the blindfold on. His breath caressed my neck as he spoke. “If there’s something new I want to instigate, I’ll tell you. If you say cold, we’ll move on.” His voice, in the dark, was even more mesmerizing. Hypnotic.

“Okay.”

He took his hands away and I felt him stand back. Every breath, every second that he made me wait, alone in the dark, I was just growing hungrier. Hungrier for his hands. His mouth.

Anything.

“So... what is it you want to do?” I asked, breathless. I couldn’t stand the waiting. I didn’t even know where he was right now, and I couldn’t handle it.

“I said no more questions. And right now...” he said, suddenly close in my ear again, “I want to spank you.” He sat down on the chair next to me, leaning in close. I could feel him, even though he wasn’t touching me.

“Why?” I breathed. Was that the punishment/discipline he had in mind?

“Because it’s a very quick way to command your attention.”

“Uh... you have my attention.”

“No. You’re still talking and asking me questions. You’re not face down, gasping for air without a thought in your mind except the feeling of my hand on your ass.”

“Oh...” I breathed.

I felt something press gently to my lips. Something cool and wet. I could smell it. Strawberry.

“Take a bite.”

I took a bite.

“Also,” he said, “I want to spank you so I can see how much pain you enjoy.”

Oh my god.

He fed me the rest of the strawberry, then said, “Did you get enough to eat? Or do you want some more?”

“No. No more food. Thank you.”

“Stand up, Jolie.”

But I didn’t stand up. “I... I don’t think I’m into that.”

“Which part?”

“Pain. You said you weren’t into inflicting pain on me.”

“No, I said I’m not into sadism. Pain is a very broad concept.”

“It’s a hard no. Arctic glacier.”

Silence.

A finger drifted down the back of my neck. “You like it when I squeeze your neck or throat.”

“Yeah... but that doesn’t really hurt.”

“What about choking?”

“Cold.” It was an automatic response. I wasn’t sure why. The word just sounded... violent.

“How about choking on my cock?”

“Um... warm?” I was turning pink now, for sure, growing hotter.

“Anal?”

“Can I please ask a question?”

“That was a question.”

“Please? Just one?”

“One.”

“Are you asking me all these things because these are things that you want to instigate?”

“I’m asking you all these things because I want your answer. And I want your reaction.”

“My reaction,” I repeated. I had so many more questions, but I bit my tongue on asking them.

“Yes. Your reaction. You tell me much more with your reaction when I speak to you than with your verbal answer.”

“Oh.” Great. Was I that transparent?

“Anal.”

“Uh... cold.”

“What about with my tongue?”

“Warm.”

“My finger?”

“Warm.”

“Fisting.”

“I’m not sure I truly understand what that is. And which hole are we talking about now?”

“Bondage.”

I squirmed a little, feeling utterly naked, with the knowledge that he was reading me like a gasping, sweating open book. While I couldn’t see a damn thing here in the dark.

“Um... depends what kind?”

“The kind where you’re my prisoner until I say otherwise.”

“Can we... circle back to that later?”

“I told you. No more questions. That’s three questions in a row. I will give you some room to make mistakes because you’re new. But I don’t like repeating myself, Jolie.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just behave. Flogging.”

“Maybe. As long as it doesn’t hurt.”

“I told you to use hot, warm or cold.”

“Then I guess those last few are all warm, because right now they’re pretty much just a giant question mark.”

He drifted a fingertip down my spine. “You’re shaking.”

“Yeah.” I giggled nervously and took a shaky breath.

“You’re happy.”

My smile faded. “I feel... vulnerable.”

“I didn’t ask.”

He didn’t have to ask. My happiness and my vulnerability right now were probably glaringly obvious to someone like him. I swallowed, my pulse pounding at my throat.

“Exhibitionism.”

“Warm.”

“Voyeurism.”

“Warm.”

“Group sex.”

Oh, fuck.

He’s not asking because he wants to. Maybe.

He’s asking because he’s gauging your reaction.

“You didn’t answer me, Jolie. Group sex.”

“No. I mean, cold.”

“Why?”

Really? *Why?* He was going to make me explain myself and *why* I wanted what I wanted or didn’t?

“I’m waiting, Jolie.”

“Because I don’t want to share you.”

This. I should’ve said *this*.

I don’t want to share this.

But the naked truth was out.

My face burned. If I wasn’t honest, though... something told me he’d know. And after the way our whole relationship started out... I really never wanted to lie to him again. It didn’t feel good, having lies between us.

This... this felt good.

His hand landed gently on the back of my neck and squeezed, just barely. “Spanking,” he said softly.

“Spanking is... I don’t know. So I guess, warm.”

“You’ve never had a man spank you?”

“No.”

“Stand up, little dove.”

This time, I got to my feet.

I felt his hands brush my sides, and then he was unfastening my bra and slipping it off. He took my hand and guided me slowly across the room in the dark.

“Feel that? Against your shins?” He’d brought me to a stop and I felt something in front of my legs.

“Yes.”

“Put your hands on it.”

I reached forward and down, my hands spread out, until they touched something.

“Bend over. So you can press your hands flat to it.”

I pressed my hands flat against it. A padded surface. And I felt his hands on my hips. His fingers slipping under the edge of my panties, then sliding them down. All the way to my ankles.

“Step out of these.”

I stepped out of the panties as he pulled them off.

“Kneel down on the floor, on either side of it.”

I felt the padded surface to its edges. It wasn’t very wide. I realized, it was one of his weight benches, set low to the floor. I did as I was told, kneeling on either side of it on the mat on the floor, with the bench between my legs.

“Lean forward, until you’re lying on your chest.”

I lay forward, trying to relax against the bench. Hyperaware in the darkness that my ass was bare, my knees were spread, and I was bent over, right in front of him. And he could see everything. By candlelight, but still.

I felt him move away a little bit, and then return. He touched my hip lightly, applying pressure like he wanted me to lift my hips.

“Lift up, pretty girl. I’ve got a pillow for you.”

I lifted my hips and he slid the pillow underneath as my heart thumped its hungry, desperate rhythm. I settled onto the pillow. Comfortable, but now my ass was tipped up toward him even more, my thighs forced open a little wider so my knees could reach the floor.

“Perfect,” he murmured, and that low, sultry voice of his ran through me like a warm current. “You’re going to be here for a while. I want you to relax into it. You’re going to orgasm here. A lot.”

I swallowed the saliva that was filling my mouth.

His voice. The darkness.

The anticipation.

My body, hot all over.

“The blinds are closed,” he told me. “It’s just you and me.” Only then did I realize I’d never even noticed if the blinds all along his giant windows were open or not. “But you’ll be keeping that blindfold on.”

He was hovering above me. He wasn’t touching me, but I could feel how close he was. His hungry energy. His heat.

“The only one who gets to watch this,” he said softly, “is me.”

The way he said that, so... possessively...

It made me gush. I was so wet, already, and I didn’t even know if he was planning to fuck me or what.

I was sure he was aware of that. As much information as he was giving me, he was leaving me with even more questions. Leaving me guessing.

“Are you ready for my hands?”

“No,” I said nervously.

He chuckled under his breath. “I think you’re going to like it, Jolie.”

I almost giggled. The euphoria was hitting me so hard, already. “I meant yes.”

Then he slapped me; my right ass cheek. Not super hard, but hard enough to sting a little. I gasped, tensing. His hand lingered, large and hot... squeezing slowly, making me melt as the shock and the warmth lapped through me.

Then he did it again.

And he was right. I did like it.

I liked it a lot.

“Warm, Jolie?” he asked me, after the third time his hand slapped my ass and he squeezed, hard.

“No, Daddy,” I gasped, melting into the utter ecstasy of his touch. “*Hot.*”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Shane

“*O rgasm denial.*”

I spoke those two words, softly, as I nudged my cock into Jolie’s soaking wet pussy. I hadn’t said another word to her while I spanked her raw, slowly, and she squirmed and moaned. On and off, interspersed with other stimulation.

Massaging every part of her body that I could access while she lay over the bench.

Eating her out, slowly. Licking her clit and teasing her cunt with my tongue and fingers.

Coaxing her to the edge of orgasm, again and again and again... but not letting her climax.

For a long damn time.

As long as I could stand it. Until I was aching so badly myself, I had to take her.

“Hot,” she whispered back, shaking.

I sank into her, deep, and she cried out. Her round ass, bright pink, was tipped up in front of me as I fed my cock into her pussy, slowly... over and over again. Taking my time.

“Do. Not. Come,” I ordered her, and she shuddered.

I fucked her as I spanked her until she was red and sobbing with pleasure, and I knew she was dying to get off... until all it took was one more slow slide of my cock through her wet,

swollen pussy and my fingers brushing her clit to set her off. “Come, baby,” I murmured, finally.

She exploded on my cock while I kept spanking her, her body quivering. And I savored every desperate contraction around my shaft. Her orgasm was deep and went on long, and warmth crashed through me. My body was covered in a sheen of sweat and all my senses were heightened. Everything felt vivid and bright.

It was a fucking high, putting her in this state.

And keeping her in it for as long as I could.

Mutual ecstasy.

And when she’d stopped pulsing and gasping, I started it all over again. Slowly feeding her cock. Spanking her. Until she came again.

I did it again and again until she was crying, the release so intense she asked me to stop. She didn’t beg, though. She didn’t say *cold*, and she definitely didn’t say *California*.

She didn’t really want me to stop. Not before we were both finished.

She could take much more than she thought she could.

And she knew that I wouldn’t stop. Not unless she said *cold*.

“You want me to pull out right now?” I teased her.

“No!”

“You want me to fill that hungry pussy with my come?”

“Yes!”

“You want Daddy to come? You ask nicely.”

“Yes... please, Shane—”

I would’ve teased her some more but it was too late. I was fucking coming. My control had gradually unraveled, the feeling of her tight little cunt squeezing me again and again finally yanking me over.

I let go with a growl, squeezed her ass in my hands as I poured myself into her. I shoved in deep, losing myself in the pleasure, her pussy milking me with hungry little pangs as another helpless orgasm made her convulse.

When I'd finished, I squeezed her ass again, my cock still buried deep. She was panting.

"Hot, warm, or cold, Jolie?" I asked her.

"Hot," she sobbed. "Hot..."

Afterwards, I gave her a bath. Then I dressed her in one of my T-shirts and tucked her into bed. I massaged her feet and her legs and her hips with lotion. She'd been kneeling a long time for me. Even with the support of the bench, it wasn't effortless.

Then I slid in with her and massaged her neck, her shoulders.

She fell asleep, limp against my chest. And my cock got hard, just watching her sleep.

She was perfect.

Perfect.

Except for that one word.

California.

I didn't love her choice of a safeword, or what it implied. That maybe that was her safe place; away from me and all of this.

But she needed to have that choice.

It was her full stop. It was the wall she'd put up between us, if she ever felt like she needed to.

And regardless, it was our end date.

California was the place where whatever was between us went to die.

One of Dane's vehicles was parked at the curb in front of my building when I rolled up, my bike and even more so Lex's Harley behind me roaring, obnoxiously amplified by the row of tall, close-set buildings along either side of the street. Obviously, Dane heard us coming. His driver/bodyguard was opening his door for him and he was already climbing out of the SUV.

I slowed and pulled off the street, rolling up to my parking gate on my brand new Harley-Davidson Sportster-S. Lex pulled in beside me as Dane strolled up.

"The fuck is this?" Dane shouted over the noise. But he was sort of smiling.

"My birthday present." I opened the parking gate with my remote.

"From who?"

"Me."

I rolled into the lot with Lex. Dane followed on foot. I parked next to my other bike and Lex backed into one of the guest spots. As I shut down the Sportster and got off, I heard Dane's voice again; he was somewhere behind me as I took off my helmet. "Jesus Christ."

"I know, right?"

He was crouching down, checking out the bike. It was black and bronze, stylish as hell. And I'd already had it customized. Including adding a passenger seat over the tail and modifying the exhaust; now it had a nice growl to it that sounded kinda like my Mustang Shelby.

"Hate to say it. This bike looks like it was made for you."

"Yup."

He got to his feet. "So. Broke down and bought a sport Harley, huh?"

"About time," Lex said, because he was a Harley snob. He sauntered over. "He can't exactly go cruising with me on his crotch rocket."

“How about the BMW or the Royal Enfield?” Dane’s gaze swept my lineup of cars—all four of them—and the two bikes. “What happened to those?”

“Please.” Lex was circling around my Harley, taking a closer look. “I wouldn’t want to embarrass him.”

“I sold the BMW and gave the Royal En to Joss,” I told Dane. “It was getting old. Kept my racing baby, though.”

“You hardly need it anymore, with this thing.”

“You wish.” I almost rolled my eyes. “This thing tops out at like two-hundred-and-thirty kilometers per hour.”

“Which is fucking fast,” Lex marveled.

“And why do you need to drive two hundred kilometers per hour?” Dane inquired.

“I just do. My Ninja gets over three-hundred, though.” I grinned as Dane shook his head. “Lex can’t keep up with that in his dreams on that beast of his. But we can hit the highway together now, go for picnics.”

“You two seriously have a death wish,” Dane said, looking at his phone.

“Romantic,” Lex quipped.

I wasn’t sure if he was talking about the picnic or the death wish.

“You guys finished with the biker foreplay?” Dane asked us. “Johnny’s meeting us at Champagne.”

“Are we walking or driving?” Lex asked.

“My driver’s outside.”

“It’s seven blocks,” I pointed out, already heading for the exit. “Don’t get lazy.”

Dane frowned and stuffed his phone away. Honestly, if I didn’t keep this asshole grounded, he’d be having someone wipe his ass for him.

We walked to Champagne nightclub with Dane's bodyguard trailing behind us while I smoked a blunt, Lex smoked a blunt, and Lex and Dane debated the dangers of motorcycle riding. Seriously, the older and the richer Dane Davenport got, the more he turned pussy.

"You need to take some fucking risks," I told him. "You used to race cars. You're too comfortable. Too—"

"Safe?" he finished for me. "Alive? All in one piece? Yeah, call me crazy. I have a wife I adore and she's about to give birth to our first baby. How silly of me to value my own life, not to mention the life of that baby's father." He hooked an eyebrow at us. "And the lives of my brother and my best friend."

"Not cool," Lex said. "Hitting us with the uncle guilt. Baby's not even born yet."

"And I just want you to be alive next month so you can meet the baby," Dane said innocently.

"We'll do our best," I muttered. It came out way more grouchy than I meant it to be.

"And why are you such a bitch lately?" he asked me lightly. "Don't think we aren't noticing."

"I'm not," I said, like a bitch. I'd been grouchy for days, though.

Ever since the supreme let-down of general living followed on the heels of the entire night I'd spent with Jolie, as my sub, the both of us in utter ecstasy... It was called *Dom drop*, and I'd read about it once. I'd definitely never experienced it before, though.

It was fucking depressing.

"It's your birthday," Dane reminded me. "If I know you at all, this is your jam."

"What is?" I groused.

“Uh, you just bought yourself a shiny new toy that you can kill yourself on. And now you’re going out to a great bar to celebrate with your friends, get smashed?”

“And smash some hot, willing freak,” Lex added.

I said nothing.

“Oh. You know what, we forgot,” Dane said, sidelong to Lex. “He doesn’t go for hot freaks anymore.”

Lex looked amused. “He doesn’t?”

“No. Now he goes for nice, cute, shy girls he’s awkwardly, distantly related to.”

The smile spread across Lex’s face. “That’s right. I forgot.”

I looked away, taking a deep breath. “Please refrain from using any more adjectives to describe her. Or I will have to punch you.”

They didn’t say anything else about her.

It was almost worse. They were way too quiet.

“Told you,” I heard Dane mutter to Lex.

I ignored them for the rest of the walk.

It was getting busy along the sidewalks anyway as we entered the bar crowd. I led the way up to the club and gave the bouncer at the door Lex’s name. I didn’t know this bouncer personally, but we were on the list for tonight and had a booth reserved. Champagne was owned by three local rock stars, members of Dirty and the Players; Lex worked on Dirty’s security crew and his wife, Talia, worked on the Players’ management team, so perks like this just came with the territory.

It was already loud in the club, getting crowded when we walked in. We were just getting seated when Dane said, “I’ll be back.” He already had his phone in his hand.

Lex gave him a look.

“I promise. Just one phone call,” he said, which meant it was business, not Devi.

“I’ll order you something,” Lex told him. Dane took off, and when the waitress came by like two seconds later, we ordered drinks. A beer for Lex and a soda water for me. “Something pink and frilly for him,” Lex said, tapping Dane’s spot at the table.

When we were alone, he asked me, “What’s up with you, really? Is it the girl?”

“Training. I’m fucking bagged.”

Not training. Training was going fine. Other than the fact that I was still training for a fight that so far didn’t exist.

“Yeah? You know who you’re fighting?”

“Nope. Black hasn’t come through. But I’ll be fighting someone, and since I don’t know who it is, I need to lay off the alcohol. No getting drunk for me tonight.”

“That Buddy Black guy is a dirtbag. The Kings should take over that racket.”

Right. I knew he was being charitable. There was no way his motorcycle club, the illustrious West Coast Kings, would ever consider taking over that racket, because the underground fight circuit was way too sketch for the Kings. For a criminal organization, the Kings were methodical, clean and tight. They were also secretive as hell, but I knew that much about them. They’d never take on the chaos or the risk.

“Hate to break it to you,” I told him, “but literally like a quarter of my fights last year got raided by police. You guys don’t want that headache.”

“True. I asked the club about it, once. Everyone said it wouldn’t be worth the money.”

Yeah, that was saying something. There was a ridiculous amount of money in that scene. Buddy Black, dirtbag that he was, had connections with some wealthy yet fucking seedy people. The amounts he dumped into my Bitcoin wallet after some fights were fucking stunning.

But I didn't do it just for the money.

Just like I didn't go to Bliss for the gifts those rich, hungry women rained down on me.

I fought and I fucked for the pleasure.

Call me a hedonist.

And I'd never had a pleasure as sweet as Jolie Vola.

Every time that realization hit me, it kinda knocked the wind out of me. And it was happening every time I thought about her. Like right now.

I was craving it, fucking jonesing for her sweetness.

It was becoming a bit of a problem. Especially since I couldn't seem to get my hands on her.

The waitress delivered our drinks, and Dane returned, frowning at his. It was tall, in an oversized cocktail bowl, and it was pink. Decorated with a pineapple slice and a twirly straw. "What's this?"

"That's your punishment for taking a business call at Shane's birthday party," Lex said, taking a nice swig of his beer.

Dane kinda rolled this eyes. He took a sip through the straw. "Tastes like..." He took another sip. "Pomegranate and perfume."

"Haven't you heard?" I told him, "Real men don't use straws."

"Drink it or it gets worse next time," Lex said pleasantly.

Dane plucked out the straw and tossed it aside, and when he picked up the glass to take a sip out of it, he looked even more ridiculous. Lex whipped out his phone and took a picture.

"While you enjoy your entertainment at my expense," Dane said dryly, "I have gossip. Of the business variety."

"Don't even try to be taken seriously while you sip that thing," his brother said.

Dane set his drink down. “Your big brother is about to enter billionaire territory.” He was looking at me.

I knew exactly who he was talking about. Joss was wealthy but not nearly that wealthy.

“Brandon?” Lex said.

“That’s the word on the street.”

“I didn’t know bespoke-suit-wearing billionaires hung out on the street,” I said coolly.

“Okay, so, that’s the word I got around the poker table at the yacht club last night.”

Lex chuckled. “For real?”

“Yup,” Dane said. “I get invited to such things. Anyway, rumor is he just bought another tech company, this time for upper nine figures. I mean, I don’t have his bank statements or anything. But Brandon Ellis is obviously well on his way to becoming a billionaire. If he’s not there already. That’s the buzz.”

“Good for him,” I said flatly. “He can be as boring as you.”

“That guy annoys me,” he said.

“Why? ’Cause he’s made his own money instead of inheriting it from Grandma?” Lex teased his brother.

It was true, the Ellis family had money. But Dad and Brandon had made most of it themselves. I had no idea Brandon was inching toward billionaire bank, though. But they’d always been so protective of their privacy around outsiders. Even me. Brandon could become a billionaire and I’d probably never even know it unless someone told me.

“He’s worked hard,” I said neutrally. “And he’s always wanted to be a big man in business and make those billions, just like you, Dane. You have a shit-ton in common. You should really be friends.”

“Yeah, but then you’d disown me.”

“I don’t mind Brandon,” I said.

“Since when?”

“Since who cares. He’s the one who has a problem with me, not the other way around.”

Dane exchanged a look with Lex that I didn’t like. I knew I was still being bitchy, but I was in a mood. They’d get used to it.

“We should go to Toronto, race cars or something,” I changed the subject. “Don’t you still have a fleet out there?”

“Why would you want to go to Toronto?” Dane inquired. “You never came to visit me when I lived there.”

“I did.”

“What, like twice in twelve years?”

“I’m just getting fucking restless, waiting for this fight. Maybe you got me thinking. Where am I going with this? I either fight ’til I can’t win anymore and/or ’til my nose and my ears are destroyed and I’m plagued with injuries. I leave now, I keep the glory and fade out gracefully. With my pretty face intact.” I gave him what I hoped was an obnoxious smile.

Dane kinda chuckled. “Yeah. That really is the important part.”

“Hey, it is to the ladies.”

“I thought what the ladies you date found important was the part where you chain them to the bed in your sex shack in the woods, and do gothic shit to them.”

“What kind of fucked-up romance novel have you been reading?” Lex said.

“I’m not a vampire, Dane,” I said dryly. “And I wouldn’t say I really date them.”

“You ever think about going down to California?” he asked. Out of fucking nowhere.

“Why would I do that?”

“I don’t know. You’re restless. San Diego’s nice. I always liked it there.”

“Since when have you been to San Diego?”

“I’ve been there. Business.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve got no business. Let alone any business there.”

Dane stared at me. “No? How about pleasure?”

I sipped my non-alcoholic drink, trying not to be fazed by anything they said. They didn’t know.

They didn’t know what a pleasure she was.

“How’s Devi?” I asked, changing the subject again. “I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“She’s great.” Dane instantly softened and started talking about pregnancy stuff. He pulled out a strip of photos from his wallet. Ultrasound images of his baby.

I tried to pay attention as him and Lex looked at the images. I could make out a tiny, skeleton-looking hand but the rest of it was pretty much a blob.

And my mind wandered.

I’d tried to figure it out, what it was about Jolie that had me so hungry for her. Was it the pressure of knowing that she was leaving so soon?

No.

Because that didn’t explain why, when we were together, I was so enraptured by her. Every move she made, every word she said, every reaction to everything I did... it was like a new drug invented just to fuck me up.

And when we weren’t together... I was thinking about her, fucking endlessly, at this point.

I was *this* far away from snapping and storming my dad’s house in the middle of the night to climb into her bed. And tie her to it so she’d stay put like a good girl and let me fuck her already. Because at this rate, I didn’t know how else I’d get through to her without breaking down and begging like a pussy.

After she came to my place and asked me for that *second* one nighter, I'd told her to call me when she wanted to get fucked, and she didn't. So, I showed up at my dad's place and fucked her again.

The next day, I told her I was a Dom and nicely explained what that meant to her, and she said she wanted to explore this thing... and then proceeded to drive me crazy over the next couple of days when she still didn't call me.

When I texted her and found out she'd left town, to go over to one of the islands without telling me, I kinda lost it.

So then I brought her over to my place so I could try to explain things to her a little better, push things way forward, take control of her for hours and make her come until she basically passed out from pleased exhaustion.

And now here I was. Wanting to see her, again, and going crazy with it because she was too busy.

And just trying to keep my shit together so I didn't scare her away.

She was new.

It was intense between us the other night.

That was what I kept telling myself.

Give her space.

She was overwhelmed, maybe. I thought I'd taken care of her, afterwards. But I was still a little worried about scaring her off.

She had a lot of colds. A lot of warmers. For now.

But everything we did together... she seemed to love it. She fell apart. I was pretty sure I could make her fall apart over all of her warmers and even some of her colds, if we had enough time.

Yeah; I'd love to know how some of her responses might be different, a year from now.

For the first time, I wondered if she'd find a Dom to play with down in California after she left here. And how many of

those colds and warms he'd make hot for her.

I didn't like that thought, so I shoved it aside.

I knew she'd never had an experience like the one we had the other night. I'd sent her home in a cab the next morning, assuming I'd see her again soon. But after a hard day of training, when I texted her, she said she couldn't come over. She'd promised her mom they'd have dinner and hang out. That was two nights ago.

Last night, she said she was going to a movie with her best friend, then staying over at her place.

Tonight, she said she had a girls' night with her cousins that was already planned.

Clearly, she had lots of people in her life who loved her, wanted to spend precious time with her now that she was back in town for just a few weeks. I couldn't blame them.

But I fucking resented them.

And the Dom drop fog wasn't lifting.

I was fucking low.

Now, I felt torn between just ordering her to see me and seeing if that would take or being a gentleman and respecting that she had a life outside following my orders. So far, I was trying to be a gentleman about it, and it sucked. I'd wanted to see her tonight.

It was my thirty-first birthday, but I didn't tell her it was my birthday. I had no idea if she knew.

Margot had invited me over for dinner, but I didn't reply to her text or answer her call.

I was avoiding my family, non-prioritizing them, like I usually did.

Eventually, around my birthday, I'd usually let one of them guilt me into coming down to Dad's for dinner. But right now, that wasn't happening. Because Jolie would be there and I'd no doubt stalk her into a bathroom to fuck her or drag her into a hallway to cram my cock down her throat.

No way I wanted to get carried away and instigate something like that until I was sure she was right about what happened the other night. And every time she had some excuse not to see me, I had to wonder if she was avoiding me.

Would she tell me if she didn't like something that happened between us? If it scared her or something?

She'd stood up to me when she thought I was a monster, for sure. But she was also sweet and kinda shy.

Submissive.

Would she stand up to me now, if I got it wrong? If I pushed her too far?

Would she tell me if she didn't really want me to dominate her like that again? Or if she wanted to slow things down?

Or would she just ghost me?

What if she doesn't want me to dominate her again?

That thought fucking itched at me.

I knew what I wanted and what I liked.

And what I liked best, apparently, was her, submitting to me.

Not just any woman.

I liked Jolie.

That was the fucking truth of it.

I especially liked that part of her that only I got to see.

But I knew, for her, it was different. She was just discovering what she liked. It was good for her, what we did the other night. She liked it, for sure.

She said it was hot.

And you couldn't fake physical responses like that.

But what if it wasn't as good for her as it was for me?

What if she just didn't need it, like I did?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Shane

“Well, what the fuck do you know,” Lex said, looking at something over my shoulder. Johnny had just joined us and the club was packed now, loud. “There she is.”

“Who?” I said, at the same moment Johnny did.

“Your little California girl,” Dane told me.

Sadly, I looked. Like, immediately.

And there was Jolie. With the hot girl circus. The twins, a bunch of other girls... I recognized some of Lex’s wife Talia’s crew. I didn’t see Talia, though.

They’d obviously just arrived and were working their way toward the bar.

My eyes dragged down Jolie as I got glimpses of her through the crowd, in her T-shirt and denim skirt. She wasn’t wearing her glasses. Contacts tonight, then. I didn’t like how Dane called her ‘California girl,’ even though she was literally wearing that Katy Perry T-shirt again, the one that said *California Gurl* on it. Could he see that from here?

I turned back to the guys and sipped my soda water. “She’s not from California. She’s from here.”

“But she lives there now.”

“Who are we talking about?” Johnny inquired.

“What is it, you just want to be an asshole?” I asked Dane. “That’s your gift for my birthday? You’re thinking, ‘How can I be an asshole to Shane today?’”

Dane grinned.

“Aw, buddy,” Lex said, squeezing my shoulder and rubbing on it. “It’s your birthday. We haven’t even gotten started.”

Yeah. That’s what I was afraid of.

“She just noticed us,” Dane informed me. They could all see her behind me. “That’s the girl I was telling you about,” he filled Johnny in, his eyes glowing with joy. “She’s gonna be Shane’s stepsister in like two weeks.”

“Two and a half weeks,” I grumbled.

“Ah,” Johnny said, amused. “That girl.”

Fucking great. They’d been fucking talking about her behind my back.

“I have never seen you so happy,” I told Dane.

“Oh, she definitely noticed you,” he announced.

“Stop staring at her.”

“She’s coming over here...”

I turned, getting up to block her before she could get too close to these clowns.

Jolie stopped short, her eyes going wide as she gazed up at me.

“Hi,” she said.

I took her by the arm and steered her away from the table. Through the crowd, to an unoccupied table along the far wall.

“Uh, what’s going on?” she asked me along the way.

“I’m saving you.”

“From... your friends?”

I parked her at the table and sat down with her. “It’s my birthday. And they will be assholes about it. You’ll stay away

from them.”

“Uh... well, happy birthday.” She looked confused. “Why didn’t I know it was your birthday?”

“Because I never told you. Did you know we were coming here?”

“No. I told you, we’re having a girls’ night. We’ve been coming to this club forever, like long before it was Champagne. How about you?”

“Yeah. We like it here.”

Her eyes moved over me, like she was trying to read my mood. Though it was marginally warmer now that I had better company. “Can I buy you a birthday drink?”

“I’m not drinking. I’m in training.”

“Oh. Right.”

“You want a drink?”

“Danica was getting me one.” She looked back through the crowd; her cousins were at the bar. She turned back to me. “I, uh, didn’t expect to run into you tonight. But, I guess this is... fun.”

“Yeah. Fun.”

She studied me. “You’re not enjoying your birthday?”

“Not particularly. Birthdays are fine. I’m just not into it right now.”

“Oh. Last time I saw you, you seemed... happier.”

Maybe that was because last time she saw me, she was waking up in my arms. I’d fed her breakfast and then walked her out to a cab with a strict set of orders for self-care, already fantasizing about the next time I was gonna see her.

I’d been worried about her suffering sub drop.

I didn’t expect to crash so fucking hard myself.

I studied her eyes. Even in the chaotic lighting in this place, I could tell, they didn’t look right. They didn’t look like *her*. “Were you wearing colored contacts when we met?”

“What?”

“The night we met, in that bar. I didn’t notice your eyes were different colors. You were wearing colored contacts, right?”

“Um, yeah, I was.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “I wear them sometimes.”

“You’re wearing them right now.” I could see that. Both of her eyes were the same color. Blue. “Why?”

“Well... when I don’t wear them, I get a lot of unsolicited comments about my eyes from random people. Like especially from guys.”

“So you’re here to meet random guys.”

Her eyebrows pinched together a little. “No. I just find, in a place like this, when people are drinking, they lose a filter. And people tend to make a big deal about my eyes.”

“And you don’t like that?”

“People fixating on one small physical detail about me and feeling the need to comment on it? No.”

“Why?”

“Because... it makes me feel like a freak.”

I stared at her. “Your eyes are pretty.” *Understatement.* “You shouldn’t cover them up because random dicks don’t have manners.”

“Thank you.” She looked over at her friends. “I can go hang out with my girlfriends...” she offered, probably confused as hell about my grouchiness.

“Later,” I said. “If you want to. Right now, you’re here with me.”

“Okay...”

I decided to soften that. “You wouldn’t want to make me sad on my birthday, would you?”

She gave me a half-smile, like she was unsure if I was playing with her or what. “No. I wouldn’t want you to be sad. I’d want you to be having fun, celebrating.” She leaned on the table, getting closer to me. “How do you like to celebrate your birthday?”

“Usually? Get drunk with the boys. Get laid. Maybe... go to Bliss.” I decided to throw that in because it was honest.

No reason to censor myself now.

If it upset her, I’d deal with it.

She held my gaze and asked me, “Are you going there tonight?”

“Of course not.” Why would she even think that?

What the fuck would I want at Bliss when there was even a chance I could have her?

She blinked at me, taking that in. “I confess... I’m so curious about Bliss.” Her eyes shone, and I should’ve been happy, maybe, that she was so damn keen. So curious. So interested in everything I’d told her so far.

That she was my own little sub for the taking.

That she’d never had any man dominate her but me.

But she wasn’t mine.

“Will you take me there sometime?” she prompted, when I didn’t say a thing.

“Maybe. If you want to go.”

“Do I have to be a member?”

No fucking way was she becoming a member.

“Members can bring guests,” I told her. “But only at certain times, like when there’s a party.”

“Party? Like a sex party?”

“Just a party. We don’t have to have sex.”

She smiled a little. “I noticed you said ‘have to.’”

“The only thing you have to do is follow the rules.”

“And what are the rules?”

“That’s up to me.”

“Really?”

“In that club, I’m a Dom. That means you have to be a good girl and follow my rules, Jolie. Or you’ll make me look bad in front of the other Doms.”

Another little smile crept over her face. “Are you serious? It’s so hard to tell if you’re serious right now.” And maybe because I loved that smile, I loved her face and every fucking thing I’d gotten to know about this girl and it was hitting me so hard right now, I wanted to make her stop smiling.

Because I wasn’t going to get to keep those smiles.

They weren’t mine. Not to keep.

“I’m sure there will be sex clubs down in San Diego for you to explore,” I said. “In L.A., for sure. Maybe someone will take you there.”

Her smile faded until it was gone. “That wasn’t nice,” she said softly.

It wasn’t. She didn’t have to tell me I was an asshole.

“I didn’t like that, Shane.” She stared at me. “Do I need to tell you that was cold for me?”

That was the first time she told me something I did was cold. If I felt like an asshole before, now I felt like that swamp creature she’d said I was.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you being a jerk right now?”

“I’m angry. About things that have nothing to do with you.”

She didn’t seem to know what to make of that. Ask me more questions and risk me being more of a dick? Or just let it go?

“If you want to go to Bliss,” I told her, “I’ll take you.”

What are you doing?

“Really?” I was a fucking sucker for that sweet, excited look on her face. “You’d take me? Like... a date?”

“Yeah. Why not.”

I would, probably.

I tried to tell myself it was because it would be hot. Fun. Twisted as hell, taking my dad’s sweet stepdaughter to a sex club and defiling her.

But the lie didn’t even work anymore.

Maybe I’d always been lying to myself.

Maybe I’d never wanted to fuck her to fuck with my family at all.

Maybe I just wanted her.

I wanted her to want me. Like she did that night, when we were strangers in a bar, and she looked at me that way she did.

Like I was fucking magic.

Because I’d never felt anything so fucking pure and so fucking good. It was like pure liquid ecstasy in my veins when she looked at me like that.

And now... I wanted to make her happy. I had zero reason to take her to Bliss. I went to Bliss to fuck women. The only woman I wanted to fuck right now was right here, right in front of me.

But at this point I’d probably do anything she asked.

As a submissive, you come to me with a need and I fulfill it.

It’s the ultimate pleasure, if you’re me.

I wasn’t lying to her about that. I hadn’t lied to her about a thing.

My name, that night I met her. That was literally it.

I had no reason to lie to her.

I had something she wanted. Maybe even needed.

She had something I needed, too. Desperately.

It had never been this way with other subs. This wanting, needing beyond the *scene*.

But yeah, I wanted to make her happy.

And maybe most of all I just wanted every fucking second with her I could get, before she up and left.

“There’s a party at Bliss this Friday night,” I told her, because maybe I just needed to know I had another date with her locked down. “That work for you?” It was the second Friday of the month, and that meant an open party. I could bring a guest. She could have a look around, see if she saw anything she liked. Any more warm or hots we could discover.

And I’d get what I liked.

Her: Submitting to me as soon as I got her home.

“Yes,” she said, her eyes gleaming with excitement. “That works for me.”

“You sure you can handle putting up with me in a place like that?”

“What do you mean?”

“My bossy ways.” I gave her a heated look. “Everyone in that room is gonna know I’m your Daddy.”

“I trust you won’t take advantage of it,” she said cautiously.

“You sure about that?” I teased her. “Because you look nervous.”

She held my gaze. “There’s no need to be nervous, right? I’ll just tell you if we hit a glacier. And you’ll behave like a gentleman. Correct?”

“I’ve never really been known to behave myself.”

“I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

“Must be.”

She bit her lip a little. “What did I do to bring this gentleman out in you?”

“Maybe I just like fucking you.”

Her eyes drifted over my face. We’d leaned closer to each other across the table until we were almost touching. “You’re moody tonight,” she said gently. “I don’t know what to make of you. One minute you’re flirting and the next you’re borderline mean.” She leaned in a little more, so she could speak in my ear. “The thing is, you can pretend to be mean all you want. It doesn’t change anything. I know who you are now, Daddy Dom.”

And now my dick was up. “I told you when you sent me that little questionnaire,” I said in her ear, then met her eyes. “I don’t pretend.”

“Just determined to be the villain, huh?”

“I’m an asshole, Jolie,” I warned her. “Ask anyone. You should probably run the fuck away, right now. Right back to California.”

There it was. I’d flaunted her safeword right in her face.

She didn’t even flinch. She didn’t look away. “I’m not running.”

No. She wasn’t, was she. She was diving right in, deeper and deeper. Into everything I offered her.

Maybe she really wasn’t gonna run. Not until she had to leave.

Unless, of course, I pushed her away.

Walked away myself.

But there was no way I was doing that.

That’s what a good guy would do. A gentleman.

I wasn’t a good guy.

I wasn’t a gentleman.

I was a junkie. And my addiction was her. *This*. More, more, more. I couldn’t get enough.

“Sex in public,” I said.

“Um...” She bit her lip again. “Warm...?”

“Good. Let’s make it hot.”

She looked around a bit, like anyone could hear us. They couldn’t. It was too loud in here. “Right now?”

“Yes. I want to fuck you. Right now.”

“How?” she said. “Where?”

“Anywhere.”

“Okay,” she breathed, her eyes gleaming with arousal. “Yes.”

Not five minutes later, I was walking her into a busy restaurant around the corner. Past the crowd at the front, waiting for tables. Right through the small, bustling restaurant to the hall in the back where the washrooms were.

I needed her right now.

I needed to feel her.

I needed to know she was mine. Even though she wasn’t... When I was inside her, when I was in control of her, making her respond to my every touch, I could fool myself into believing, just for a moment, that she belonged to me.

I needed that feeling again.

I was chasing the high.

I pushed open the door to the women’s washroom. Two stalls, and someone was in one. I heard a toilet flush.

I stepped back into the hallway, taking Jolie with me. “Oops,” I said, and she giggled nervously. I kissed her, pushing her back against the wall.

A moment later, I heard the washroom door open and someone walked out. As soon as they were gone, I pulled Jolie into the washroom with me. There was a latch on the door, but no lock.

I leaned back against the door, taking her with me. We made out as I worked my way under her skirt and peeled her panties down. When I pushed them to her ankles, she stepped out of them like the good girl she was. She watched me stuff them in my pocket, her eyes wide.

“Um... am I getting those back?”

I switched our positions, pushing her back against the door, hiked her leg up around my hip and took out my dick.

“Oh, God,” she gasped, but then I swallowed the rest of her cries as I sank into her, hiking her other leg up around my hip. I drove her against the door as I fucked her and she clung to me. It was loud in here. Music, crowd noise outside, and whatever noise we were making against the door, no one could hear it.

Probably.

I slipped a hand in between us and started rubbing her clit as I fucked her. Her legs went weak, and she locked her ankles around my back. I hiked her up a little higher and kept driving into her.

“Oh my god, Shane,” she gasped against my mouth as I felt her cunt bearing down on me. “I can’t. What if someone...”

“Good girl,” I soothed her, rubbing her clit as I thrust into her, over and again. “You can.”

I met her eyes. Watching as they softened, a haze of pleasure, just before she went over.

I closed my other hand over her mouth. “That’s it. Come on Daddy’s cock...”

She came with a muffled scream, her thighs squeezing my hips as her pussy rippled around me.

“Good, baby,” I murmured into her ear as she shuddered on my dick and I stroked her clit. “That’s my sweet, sweet girl.”

I became dimly aware that someone was knocking on the door.

As soon as Jolie's cunt had stopped spasming, I pulled out and pushed her down to her knees, sank my dick into her mouth as I leaned on the door above her. She clung to my jeans, sucking desperately. Deep, impatient sucks. A few seconds of her hot mouth working me and I blew my load into the back of her throat with a groan.

She gagged a little but still clung to me. Then she kept sucking.

When I was done, I pulled out and did up my jeans. She wiped her mouth and looked up at me, her eyes big and soft. She looked adrenaline drunk. High.

Probably how I looked right now.

I helped her to her feet as someone banged on the door. I was still leaning on it.

"Just a fucking minute!" I called out as Jolie hastily fixed her dress.

"We should go," she said quickly. "Can I have my panties?"

"No." I dug my hands into her hair, pressing her against the door and looking into her eyes. "Almost getting caught."

"So hot," she said softly, melting in my hands.

Then I kissed her again, savoring her, as I sank into the heat of her mouth.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Jolie

I watched Aunt Madeleine stroll up the sidewalk toward me in her curve-hugging black dress. She kissed my cheek in greeting, then slid off her sunglasses and eyed the sex store I'd asked—no, implored—her to meet me at.

This store had an array of sex toys and such, but also, according to the internet, one of the best selections of “party gear” in town. It was also conveniently located about a five minute drive from Madeleine's office.

“I need to know what to wear to a sex party,” I blurted, before Madeleine could ask me why we were here.

She eyed me and said cheekily, “Why don't you ask your Dom?”

I sighed. “I just want to come up with something myself. You know...”

“Impress him?” she finished for me.

“I could use a little help. I've never really done this kind of thing before.”

“You don't say,” my aunt teased lightly. “Well, let's go on in, then.” She opened the door and I scooted inside.

“I love you so much,” I gushed at her. We both knew my mom would highly disapprove of this, in every way. And yet Madeleine was cool enough to do it anyway. And not tell her about it.

“Don’t I know it,” she said, following me in.

A woman at the front counter greeted us and asked if we wanted any assistance as Madeleine got browsing. I just told her, “Thank you, we’re good. I’ve got my personal stylist with me.”

Then I ducked behind some racks of clothes, following Madeleine deeper into the shop. She clearly had zero qualms about perusing the sex-ready outfits on display.

I mean, I didn’t expect her to.

“So,” she asked me, “what’s the deal with this party?” She tossed me a look. “Should I be worried?”

“I don’t think so. It’s at Bliss.”

She stopped browsing through a rack of feather trimmed lingerie to raise an eyebrow at me. “Oh?”

“Wait,” I said, as it occurred to me... “*You* aren’t going to a party at Bliss tonight, are you?”

“No.”

I sighed with relief and she looked amused, returning to her task.

I followed along as she browsed. “But you’ve been to parties there before.”

“I have.”

“So what would someone, you know, *like me*, even wear to such an event?” I still felt weird about calling myself *submissive* out loud. “Like, do I wear something BDSM-ish?” I poked through a couple of black vinyl dresses uncomfortably. “Or just a sexy party dress? Or actual lingerie? I know I can’t just roll up in jeans. I’ve seen the mansion, from the outside. I’m just not sure how ‘sex party’ I should go with this.”

“First of all, you’ll want to stop calling it a sex party,” she said lightly. “That implies that the focus is on sex.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Is it, for you?”

I wasn't even sure how to answer that. How could I know when I'd never done anything remotely like this before?

My aunt was eying me. “You have a choice, Jolie. In everything you do.”

“I know. I won't do anything I don't want to. And Shane wouldn't ask me to.” *I think*. “I just need a second opinion and I don't think I could ask anyone else to see me like this. Even Alyssa.”

“What are you thinking you'd like to wear?”

“I don't know.”

“Well, when you picture yourself walking into that mansion with him, what do you see yourself in? How do you feel?” My aunt's eyes traveled over me and I swallowed, really not comfortable answering that last bit.

“Maybe... something sexy, but not *too* revealing. And nothing little girlie or frilly or white or pink or anything. I don't want everyone to know I'm... you know. *Submissive*.” I whispered it like it was a dirty word.

“Is that how you think female submissives dress?” she asked me, amused.

“I don't know.” I thought about how Shane liked to call me *little girl*. But I had no idea what clothes he'd like on me, other than what he'd already seen me in. I just wanted to look amazing. “How do they dress?”

“That really depends. Usually, on what their Dom likes to see them in. If they have an exclusive Dom, of course.” She eyed me, an unspoken question behind that.

Shane and I hadn't talked about exclusivity.

I hadn't stopped wondering, though, ever since he'd invited me to come to this party with him, what it would be like. All he'd really said about it was that he expected me to follow his rules. He was a Dom, and people we encountered at Bliss would know it. That ring he wore said so.

And I'd be with him. His guest.

I shifted closer to Madeleine, lowering my voice. "Will they be able to tell?"

"No one will judge you for it, in that room. In fact, many would thank you for it."

"Would?"

She gave me a wry smile. "If they could get past your Dom to talk to you." She continued browsing through a rack of lacy lingerie. "If he's smart, he'll be keeping you on a tight leash, though."

I stared at her, stricken. "Um... *leash*?"

"He won't want the other Doms thinking they can have a taste," she clarified. "Unless of course *that* is to his taste..."

"You mean..." I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry. "Sharing me?"

"You're getting squeaky, darling." Madeleine pulled a black knit dress adorned with buckles from a rack. "Have you asked him?"

"Asked him what?"

She held the dress up to me, sizing me up. "What will be happening at this party. What he expects of you." She put the dress back and looked me in the eye. "What he desires."

I swallowed again. Thinking about Shane's desires while chatting with my aunt over sex clothes was weird. I'd asked her to come here, though. I wanted her help.

But yeah, my life was getting a little too weird. Even for me.

"He just said..." I scratched out, "I'm to follow his rules."

"Hmm. Spoken like a Dom." She kept browsing.

I tried to focus on my task here, but everything on the racks seemed so risqué. Skimpy and overtly sexual.

"How about this?"

I looked over to find my aunt, the Domme, holding up a red vinyl catsuit with cutouts for the breasts and an attached collar with sharp-looking silver studs.

She laughed softly at my reaction.

I groaned. “Maybe I should just wear jeans.”

“Nonsense.” She put the catsuit back. “We are not leaving this store until we find you the *perfect* outfit. This is your first party of this kind, right?” She eyed me. “You’ll want to be yourself, while looking and feeling your best. Above all else, I imagine you’ll want to feel comfortable. And have a full range of motion.”

“Motion? Like, for dancing?”

Madeleine looked at me. Yeah, she did not mean dancing.

“For getting on your knees,” she said casually and continued her perusal through a rack of leather goods. “Or whatever else Shane instructs you to do. You wouldn’t want a poorly thought-out outfit to ruin his plans, now would you?”

I blinked at her. Thank God I had her here right now.

“Plans?”

“Trust me. He will have plans. Whatever you’ve thought about this night, he’s thought about it more. He wouldn’t take you to the club without knowing what he wants to have happen.”

“Right,” I said faintly.

“It’s your first time. Any Dom worth a damn will make it good for you. You really don’t need to worry about a thing. If he knows what he’s doing...” She eyed me again.

“Um, I’m pretty sure he does,” I forced out.

“Good. Then you must have some inkling of what to expect at this party, hmm? What is it he usually does when you’re together...?”

“Well... He usually...” I hesitated.

“Yes?”

“Mostly, he does things to make me... you know...”

Madeleine turned to me, studying me in my silence. “He pleasures you.”

“Uh. Yeah.”

She seemed to be considering that. “This is the focus of your interactions?”

“So far.” I didn’t really want to get into the details with her, but yeah. That was the focus. Like, I came way more than he did. He got off, but I got off *a lot*.

“Hmm.” She continued browsing. “He may be a pleasure Dom.”

“A... what?” I hurried to stick close to her. “What’s a pleasure Dom?” I whispered.

“A pleasure Dom is a Dominant who derives his satisfaction from lavishing pleasure on you. He’ll likely want to make you climax as many times as he can. This is how he submits you.”

“Say that again?”

“He’ll seek your submission through pleasure.”

Okay. Yeah. That sounded like him.

Daddy’s someone who takes care of you...

“He’ll be utterly focused on your experience,” she added, “on your needs. On your total pleasure. In fact... He’ll get off on it.” She glanced at me. “Sound about right?”

I blinked at her. My aunt. Advising me about my kinky sex partner.

Was this my life now? For real?

Only for the next two weeks, I told myself.

But somehow, that just made me feel more anxious.

And more desperate not to screw this up.

“Well, let’s find you that perfect outfit,” Madeleine said breezily, reading my unease when I didn’t even answer her.

“When he lays eyes on you tonight... your Dom won’t know what hit him.”

This time, I almost corrected her.

He’s not my Dom.

But for some reason, I didn’t want to.

By eight o’clock that night, I was semi-hyperventilating. I had Shane pick me up at Madeleine’s place because there was no way anyone else who knew me was going to see me dressed like this.

‘This’ being in a tight little black dress so short it ended up above my black stockings, showing a slice of bare thigh. Girls wore shorter skirts than this to the bar all the time, sure, but I’d just never been one of those girls. Not only was I showing off my thigh-highs, but the hot pink garters that were holding them up were clearly visible. I’d conceded to that one shot of pink.

Oh, and the matching panties. And my pink-rimmed glasses. I could’ve put in contacts, but the glasses with the outfit just seemed kinkier somehow.

Besides, Shane said he liked my eyes, right?

I had a gut feeling he’d like it.

I would’ve bought the matching pink bra, but this dress didn’t really need one. It had built-in supportive cups and gave me a great pop of cleavage. I’d never rocked so much cleavage in public in my life, actually.

When Shane pulled up, I was watching out Madeleine’s front window, and I immediately waved her off. “Don’t watch!” I shouted, grabbing my purse as I hurried out to meet him. She said something about *Be safe*, and *Call if you need anything*, but I just slammed the door in her face.

“Um, thank you!” I called out to her, too late. She probably didn’t hear me.

I'd just have to thank her later. When my panties weren't already getting wet because I was on my way to a sex party with Shane Madrigal.

Then I bolted down the path towards the curb where he'd pulled up, just a little too fast for the heels I was wearing. My eyes were locked on him as he got out of the car, a black Mustang. He came around to meet me, and it was like he was walking in slow-mo.

Unicorn.

The man was a freaking unicorn, for sure.

Shit.

He wore tight black dress slacks and a black button-up shirt, unbuttoned a bit. Simple. Elegant. Manly.

Sexy as all hell.

Tan skin, luscious full lips, thick dark hair.

Pale wolfish eyes, eating me alive.

I just about bit my own tongue when I spoke. "Hello."

I stumbled a little, lost in his eyes, and he caught me.

"I'm not great in heels," I gushed. "I'll try to calm down."

You literally just threw yourself at him.

Please chill.

"It's just a party, Jolie." He smirked at me a little. "Just relax and be yourself." Then his eyes roamed over my outfit. Hungrily.

"I'm excited."

"I see that." His eyes lingered on my cleavage. "That dress is..."

"Different?"

"Yes. Different." His eyes moved slowly over me, then met mine. "You look... fucking beautiful."

Thank you, Aunt Madeleine.

He'd never said that to me before. *Beautiful*. And coming from him, it felt especially... special.

"I know how much you like me in sweats and an oversized T-shirt," I teased, actually feeling a bit squirmy when he stared at me like that. I wasn't so used to being the *beautiful* girl. "I figured I'd give this a whirl." I did a slow, slightly clumsy turn so he could check me out.

He was studying my thigh area very seriously. "Are you wearing panties?"

"Yes." Was he kidding? If I wasn't wearing panties I'd be dripping down my legs already.

He kinda frowned. "Garters are impractical."

I almost laughed. "What?"

His eyes met mine. "They make it hard to get the panties off."

"Oh. Well, I guess you'll just have to work for it, then."

His eyes darkened, and in that look was a promise that my panties were in no way safe from him tonight, garters in the way or no. "Naughty," he warned.

"I don't know what's gotten into me." I felt giddy. "I think it's the garters."

Or maybe it's the fact that you're a "pleasure Dom" and I can't believe I won this lottery.

He drew open the passenger door for me. "Get your adorable ass in the car before you cause an accident."

I slid in, and once he was behind the wheel and we were on our way, he kept looking at me, checking me out as I positively glowed. He seemed particularly interested in the hint of bare flesh above my stockings. "How do you feel?" he asked me.

Besides turned on? "Nervous."

"Why?"

“I don’t know how this works or what I’m supposed to do.”

“I told you, little dove. Stop trying so hard. You don’t need to work at it so much.”

I wondered if Madeleine was right. Did he really just want to please *me*, sexually? That was all I had to do—receive the pleasure he gave—to please him?

“Easy for you to say, Mr. Hot Daddy Dom,” I said, striving for casual. “You know what you’re doing.” I took a calming breath. “I don’t want to disappoint you. Or embarrass myself.”

“You won’t disappoint me.”

“I’m not sure what’s expected of me at this place, though,” I probed.

“Nothing is expected of you from anyone but me.”

I stared at him. “And what is it, exactly, that you want from me tonight?”

“I want to rip off those garters with my teeth. Other than that... I’ll tell you if there’s something I want.”

I sat back and tried to just calm down, relax. You know, enjoy my lottery winnings.

He’ll seek your submission through pleasure.

If that was true, then this really wouldn’t be hard.

Pleasure is good, I tried to tell my anxious, keyed-up self. *Just submit to it.*

Chapter Twenty-Six

Jolie

When we pulled up to the Bliss estate, it was a total thrill rolling through the gate in Shane's car. One of the guards at the gate—there were several of them tonight—checked his ID with a flashlight, while another one looked something up on a tablet, and then we were in.

When we took our turn pulling around the big driveway loop and up to the front steps of the mansion, a valet took the car.

Then Shane escorted me up the steps with a hand on the small of my back.

If I felt nervous and excited on the way here, that was nothing. The mansion was way more grand up close. Big, but also the French chateau vibe of the architecture was detailed, authentic and so glamorous. Whoever owned this place was seriously rich.

I could totally see Aunt Madeleine hanging out in a place like this.

Shane, though? It seemed a bit... ostentatious for him.

But then again, so did the Lamborghini and that woman he'd draped over it.

As we walked in through the open front doors, there was marble everywhere. The expansive foyer featured a welcome

desk along one wall, like in a grand hotel, where staff were working to greet guests and process them in.

A woman there greeted us, and Shane spoke to her while I looked around. Mostly, I looked at the other guests.

Many of the women wore revealing dresses or straight-up lingerie. I saw women and men in kinky-looking leather getups. And a lot of men in suits. There were women in beautiful, classy evening wear, too.

We surrendered our ID and our phones when the woman behind the desk asked for them, and as I handed my ID over, I started sweating a little. Because I'd forgotten what that security guard told me when he caught me scaling the fence: that everyone had to show ID. Would she scan my ID or something, and somehow discover that I'd been here before—as a trespasser? Because they could match some security footage of my face with the image on my ID?

Would she deny me entry in front of Shane? Would she call security and have me removed?

But all she did was glance at it, checking my age, probably. Then she put the IDs and the phones into a secure box, and gave Shane a key in exchange.

“The party's in the ballroom,” he told me, steering me along with a gentle hand on my back. We fell in behind other partygoers who were heading through to the back of the foyer. There, several sets of doors stood open and music flowed out. Sexy dance music, like something you'd hear in a good nightclub.

“Why did we have to give up our ID and phones?” I asked him. “I wasn't going to take pictures and post them on the Gram or anything.”

“Anonymity. They know who you are, but you don't know who they are. Or who anyone else is. That's how it works here.”

“They?”

“They.” He pointed up a long, curving staircase at one side of the foyer, as we passed under it on our way to the ballroom.

Up at the top was a dark passageway, with a railing overlooking the foyer and the ballroom beyond. A few men stood up there. Definitely security, and they all seemed to be gathered around one man in a sharp, dark suit whose face I couldn't see in the shadows. "That's the owner of the club," Shane told me when he caught me staring.

"Who is he?"

"No one you'll ever know. If he asks to meet you, we're leaving."

I looked at him in alarm. "Why?"

"Because if he asks to meet you, he wants to fuck you. Ask me how I know."

"Uh... he tried to fuck you?"

"No. A woman I was with."

"But... you're a paying member. I wouldn't think he'd want to piss off a client like that."

"He probably doesn't. But sometimes a dominant man wants what he wants."

When I looked at Shane, he was gazing down at me under lowered eyelids. "We're all just wolves, little dove. And alphas don't always play nice together. Most Doms are territorial, and greedy as fuck." He wrapped his fingers between mine and held my hand as we stepped through the doors into the ballroom. "And while we're on it, from here on in, don't give anyone your name."

"Oh-kay."

In the ballroom, it felt a lot like an upscale nightclub. Dark, with moody lighting and lots of tables for seating, with room in between for mingling. There was a huge, circular bar in the middle, and beyond that, a dance floor. There were some people dancing already. There were also small platforms along the edges of the dance floor where women, obviously professional dancers, were dancing up above everyone else. They were wearing clothes, but not much.

My eyes were already zooming all over the place just trying to take it all in, but with the darkness and the throbbing lights over the dance floor, it was hard to lock onto all the details. I saw flashes of skin and leather and powerful-looking men in suits everywhere. My head was gonna explode.

“Let’s take a little walk around,” Shane said, guiding me along. “So you can get comfortable.”

Yeah, that didn’t seem likely anytime soon.

These people were *all* into kink stuff? So into it, they came out to a sex club to get their freak on?

As I looked around, a lot of people just looked like regular partygoers. Like they were just hanging out at any party or bar. But the other ones...

There were women and men down on their knees on the floor. There were people wearing collars, *leashes*, that other people were holding. There was no full nudity, not that I could see, but I did see both women and men who were almost naked. Nothing but a g-string, and little pasties for the women.

There seemed to be a dress code for sure, but the theme was everything from black tie to kink dungeon. And the partygoers came in all body types. They weren’t all gorgeous and built like Shane.

There were obvious couples and groups, including LGBT ones.

I didn’t anticipate that. That the whole vibe here would feel so much more inclusive than a regular nightclub.

“Um, Shane? Is it always like this?”

“Like what?”

“Well, I wouldn’t think straight guys, especially Dominant alphas, would necessarily want to mingle at a sex party with, like, gay guys and transgender people.”

“You’d be surprised. People in this community are generally pretty open minded. Even us homophobic alphas,” he added dryly.

I kinda rolled my eyes.

“But no, it isn’t always like this,” he said. “There are plenty of parties limited to certain types of members or certain kinks. This is what we call an open party. All members are welcome and outside guests are, too.” He leaned in a little closer. “And don’t think for one second that I missed you rolling your eyes at me.”

“Sorry,” I said innocently. *Not sorry*. Not if it would get him to look at me like that. Like he was planning to put me over his knee later and spank me to the moon and back.

He touched a knuckle to my chin, holding my gaze. “I told you. Don’t be sorry. Just behave.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

His eyes darkened, because maybe he’d heard the slight sass I put on that.

I bit my lip. He released my chin and I looked away.

Punishment. Discipline. Correction. Whatever he wanted to call it... the idea of it had been getting warmer for me ever since he’d spanked me the other night. And every time he gave me that warning look, undeniable excitement sparkled between my legs.

We’d come to a stop at the edge of the dance floor and as he slid an arm around my waist, turning me towards the dancers. My eyes bounced all over the place, trying to take it all in.

Beyond the dance floor, the ballroom ended in a wall with large booths all along it. And between those booths were dark alcoves. In each alcove there was a door in the shadows, with a security guard standing by it. Some were open and some were closed, but I couldn’t see whatever lay beyond.

“What happens in those rooms?” I asked Shane, watching one of the security guys open a door for a couple who disappeared into the dark.

“Sex,” he said bluntly. My back was to his front, and his breath was warm on my neck.

“What kind of sex?”

“Any kind you want.”

I swallowed. I was salivating and my heart was drumming and I was blushing in the dark for no reason. No one else seemed concerned with what was going on here. Or the least bit uncomfortable with it.

“I can’t believe I’m here right now. I can’t believe this place exists...”

“Don’t be afraid,” Shane said gently. His hand flattened against my belly as he held me close against him. “You’re safe. No one’s touching you. Not without my permission,” he added, and I knew he was teasing me when I looked up and saw the glimmer in his eyes.

“That’s reassuring,” I said dryly.

“You’re with me.”

“I’m glad.” Honestly, looking around, I knew Shane could probably take any man here. He was a fighter, after all. Well, except maybe those beefy security guys outside... “You still didn’t tell me your rules for tonight, though.”

When he didn’t respond right away, I met his eyes again.

“The rule is,” he said, looking deep into my eyes, “you’re mine.”

My heart absolutely raced at that word on his lips.

Mine.

What could he possibly mean by that?

We didn’t belong to each other. We never would. Like a million extraneous circumstances ensured that was so.

“So... I’m with you. But no list of rules for tonight? Really? You just want me to... be myself?”

“Of course.”

“But I’m awkward and weird.”

He laughed. It was a pleasant laugh. I’d never really heard him laugh like that before.

A happy laugh.

My blush deepened, and he just smiled at me. “I want to ask questions.”

“Go ahead.”

Hmm. He seemed much more laid back than he did the other night when he was all quiet, controlled intensity. When he told me to choose a safeword and to rate a bunch of sexual acts hot, warm or cold. And then spanked me and teased me, denying me an orgasm until I was an absolute puddle of aching, dripping need, while he fucked me. The release was so total, so intense, I’d fucking cried.

Being dominated by him like that... *ecstasy* was the only word for it.

I loved it.

But I liked this, too. It felt like we were just on a date. But in a very strange place.

I looked around again, trying to relax into it. Like he said, I was safe here, with him. And this place was kind of incredible. The vibe was elegant, luxurious and sensual. And so cool. I wondered what the girls would think of it.

Dani would love it. Especially if some powerful man got down on his knees for her.

But I wondered... would I ever tell them about this?

Maybe it would just have to remain a secret. All of it. My brief affair with Shane and the time he took me to a sex club.

“So, how do I get my membership here again?” I inquired innocently. I was teasing, but maybe I just wanted to know what he’d say to that.

“Trust me, it’s out of your budget.”

Well. I wasn’t sure I liked how quickly he shut that down. “Are you sure you don’t mind questions?” I asked him. “Because I have a lot of them.”

He touched my chin, turning my face to meet his eyes. “As long as you won’t be upset by the answers.”

“Because... you’ll be honest with me?”

“I will.”

I looked around, perusing the people around us. Including a woman, not far away, who was holding a drink for a man on his knees, while he took a sip. It reminded me of how Shane had held my wine glass for me the night we talked about limits, while I took a sip.

“Hmm,” I mused. “I wonder if I could be dominant. You know, just for fun.”

His smoldering voice in my ear taunted me, “I don’t think you’re cut out for that, little girl.”

I gave him what I hoped was a sassy look. “You don’t know.”

But instead of reprimanding my sass, he smirked.

“So, how does it work? All these people just showed up at the door with a fistful of money and said ‘Hey, I’m kinky, let me in?’”

“Not quite. Money isn’t all it takes. You’ll need it if you want to stick around, but that’s not how you get through the door.”

Tantalizing. Suddenly, I was dying to know how he’d gotten into this place. “How did you first get in?”

“I met a woman who was one of the trainers here.”

“Trainers?”

“The people who train the slaves.”

“Slaves?!”

“Yes, Jolie. Slaves.”

“Like sex slaves?”

“Yes, that.”

“Isn’t that... I don’t know, illegal?”

“*Willing* sex slaves, Jolie.”

“Oh.” Heat coursed through me at the thought... “Is that... Is that what I’m supposed to be?”

I looked at a young woman on her knees, not far from us. She was wearing green lingerie and a leash, which was held by a man in a suit who stood next to her, talking with some other men like this was all perfectly normal.

Shane touched his knuckle to my chin and lifted my eyes to his again. “Slaves and submissives are not the same thing. A slave exists solely to serve.”

I swallowed. “To... obey?”

He ran his thumb over my lips. “Little dove. Don’t stress. It’s my responsibility to take care of you. And I will. Now just enjoy yourself. Look around, and see what you like.”

I looked around and my eyes landed on the beautiful bar. “I think I’d like a drink.”

“Then we’ll get you one.” He took my hand and led me toward the bar. But I just couldn’t let it go.

“Um, Shane? What did you do to get this ‘trainer’ to bring you in as her guest?”

“What do you think, little dove?” he said gently. “I fucked her.”

Okay... I’d asked the question.

And he’d given me an honest answer.

I’d anticipated that answer.

I didn’t love it, but I was going to go ahead and try not to be jealous about it.

Because really, was there any room for jealousy, or any reason for it, in a relationship that would only last for a few weeks?

After we got a drink, Shane had me choose where I wanted to sit or stand. I chose a hightop table against the wall, where we could set our drinks down but still stand. I figured we'd have a better view of... well, everything, if we stayed on our feet.

Shane stood with his back to the wall and tucked me in against him, his arms around me.

There was something to see in every direction. I'd never imagined so many people could be so comfortable with putting their sexuality on full display. And yet everything just rolled along around us like we were standing in a regular bar. Music played, drinks flowed, some people danced, others mingled.

A man drifted by on the end of a leash, wearing a ball gag. He was otherwise normally dressed, in a suit. The woman leading him along looked like she could've been a Kindergarten teacher.

Maybe she was.

"This isn't what I thought it would be like," I told Shane.

"No? What did you expect?"

"I don't know. It's all very... civilized."

I felt his grin against my neck. "You expected something uncivilized?"

"I think I expected... more whips and chains, you know?"

"Oh, there's plenty of that here. You just have to know where to look for it."

I looked up at him over my shoulder. "Really?"

"We can check it out if you want to."

"We can?"

"Does that surprise you?"

"I don't know. Ever since we walked in the door, you've been way more reserved than I expected you to be."

"And what did you expect me to be doing right now?"

"Um, maybe... doing me?"

He looked amused. “What, right here?”

I considered that. I didn’t see any explicit sexual acts, but people were definitely touching, making out. And there were dark corners and booths everywhere. There could’ve been actual sex going on around us right now, and maybe I wouldn’t even know.

“Well, I thought you liked doing it in public. You know, almost getting caught?”

“I do.”

“Are people actually allowed to have sex right here?”

“Not right here.”

“That doesn’t feel like something that would stop Shane Madrigal.” I glanced at him.

His pale eyes were moving across the crowd. “I’m not sure I like the audience.”

I laughed a little. “Excuse me? You brought me here. You’re a member.”

“Yeah. That means this room is filled with people like me.” He looked at me, his gaze drifting down to my cleavage. “People who look at you the way I do.”

“Okay... but I’m with you.”

“Yes, you are.” His eyes tangled with mine. It was a heated, hungry look. A possessive kind of look, really, that sizzled right down to my toes.

I liked it.

“So... you don’t want to show me off?”

Was I fishing for compliments? Yes.

He seemed surprised, though. “You want me to do that?”

“I just got the feeling you might be that kind of Dom,” I said quickly. I didn’t want to outright tell him what Madeleine said. About seeing him here with a woman on her knees.

“Sometimes I am.” He was holding my gaze, and it was getting really hot in here.

So interesting.

I could've just stood here and flirted with him all night. This was hotter, to me, than anything going on around us.

“And what would that kind of Dom do with a submissive at a party like this?” I asked him. “If he felt like showing her off?”

“Something to display his dominance over her, probably. Take her into one of the viewing rooms or the group rooms, so she could suck him off in front of people. Something like that.”

Oh, Jesus. Had he done that?

“Viewing rooms?”

“You're not doing that, though.” His wolfish eyes had sharpened. “Even if you wanted to... You're not doing that.”

“Is that your final word on the subject?” I sipped my drink nonchalantly. There was no way I wanted to blow him right now in front of whoever cared to watch. But talking about it was hot.

“Yes. That is my final word.”

“And you make the rules tonight, right?”

He said in my ear, “Baby, I always make the rules.” Then he kissed my neck. I melted a little at the warmth of his lips on my skin.

I tried to relax into his embrace, just lean into him. He literally had my back here. But I realized, I felt a little on guard in this room. I saw the way people looked at us. Maybe it was the same way I looked at them. With curiosity.

And he was right. It felt different than sneaking sex in the next room when our family or even totally strangers could catch us, but didn't.

Here, for the first time, people could see us together.

People who knew, or could easily guess, what we were to each other. People who looked at me, maybe, like he did.

I liked his answers to my questions tonight, though. It didn't feel like they were answers he'd toss out to just any girl he was here with. It felt like he was considering each question in the context of our current situation, and answering me honestly.

Maybe this situation was new for him too, in some ways.

"Is this different?" I asked him. "From what you're used to?"

"In what way?"

"I mean... you're used to being here with women who know what they want and why they're here and probably don't have a million questions about it. Women who are ready and willing to play your way."

He smirked a little. "And you're not?"

"No. I mean, yes—I am." And now I was blushing, again. "It's just... Is it different being here with me? Because I'm not... used to this?"

"It is different."

"Do you like it? Or is it weird?"

He looked deep into my eyes for a hot, lingering moment. Then he said: "Touch me."

I turned in his arms to face him, pressing my body against his. I slid my hand between us. My fingertips found the rock-hard ridge straining his pants, and I drifted my hand down the length of it, giving him a little squeeze.

He spoke low in my ear. "What do you think? Do I like it?"

"I think so."

"Not only do I like it... I want to hike you up onto the bar and fuck you in front of all these people, so every one of them knows exactly who you belong to right now. But I'm not sure I like any of them looking at you. Because I'm *not* inside you." He gazed at me from under hooded eyes as my heart thudded.

Who you belong to...

The overspill of the lights from the dance floor shimmered in his hair, and I was struck by the memory of that first time I'd ever seen him, standing in the entrance of that lounge in Whistler, with rain drops glistening in his hair.

That memory used to upset me.

It didn't now.

As we stared at each other, it struck me that seeing him, looking at him, being close to him, no longer made me feel shitty and regretful. Meeting him, being attracted to him, wasn't some terrible joke from the universe, fucking with me.

He was just straight-up amazing, maybe. And maybe I was really letting myself see it.

And I was here with him.

How?

“Do you want that, Jolie?” he asked me. “Do you want me to slide up your little skirt and fuck you right here in front of all these people?”

“Um... talking about it is sexy. But no.”

“Cold?”

“Definitely cold.”

“Then let's find something that gets you hot.”

He did. He got me hot.

Shane Madrigal. Holding my hand as he guided me through the club.

We left our emptied drink glasses on the table and went for another walk, and I realized I kind of liked the way people looked at him.

I felt a whole mix of things when some of the women looked at him. Including a little possessiveness. And pride. He was holding *my* hand, and they saw it. Not the ones on their knees; those women didn't seem to look at anything but the floor or the person holding their leash. But other women... I

could see others looking at him with open longing. Appreciation. Lust.

Submissives? Or not?

I saw men looking at me like that, too. Men who noticed how Shane held my hand and guided me through the crowd.

They know what you are to him. And they like it.

That, also, was getting me hot. The idea that other men might want me like this—but I was only with *him*.

He asked me if I wanted to dance. I told him, “Only if you dance with me.”

He asked me if I wanted another drink. I told him, “Only if you drink with me.”

He wasn't drinking alcohol tonight, yet again, but that was okay. He seemed to choose the bar over the dance floor. And as he led me that way, I suddenly saw someone I recognized.

Lamborghini woman.

I stopped short, and Shane stopped with me.

She stood on the other side of the bar, across from us, but she wasn't looking our way. I wouldn't have thought I'd recognize her. I didn't think I really got that good a look at her that night. But it was her. I knew it instantly.

I wondered if they'd noticed each other yet. If he knew she was here.

“Something wrong?” he asked me.

“Your friend. She's right over there.”

He looked. “She's not my friend, Jolie.” He was still holding my hand and I was terrified he was going to drag me over there. That he was going to say hello and I'd have to meet her. Or worse, stand there while he talked to her and she flirted with him, right in front of me.

I was paralyzed.

And man, was I stupid.

In all my excited curiosity about coming to this place with him, it hadn't even occurred to me—until the moment he mentioned that “trainer” woman he'd had sex with—that I should probably prepare myself for the fact that we might cross paths with women he'd been with in this place.

So stupid.

And now that I was looking right at one of them... I wasn't prepared for it.

He said he didn't have sex with her. But I still felt grossly uncomfortable, and she wasn't even looking at us. I was looking at her, and it was all too real now. That he'd met other women in this place. Maybe a lot.

“I hate her.”

Well *shit*, that just slipped right out.

“Why?”

“Uh...” Crap. Did I really just say that? I didn't even know much about the woman.

But all I could think about right now was that awful night, and that moment when I'd fallen on my ass and humiliated myself. I had no idea if she'd actually seen my boob pop out or what, but it didn't matter.

I met Shane's eyes. “She made you laugh.”

Christ. I was really not trying to sound like a pouty jealous baby, but come on. He was totally on to me.

His thumb drifted over mine, back and forth, as he studied me. “There's no need to be jealous, little dove.”

“Why?” I forced myself to hold his gaze. “I'll leave here in two weeks and maybe you'll be back with her, spanking her on her Lamborghini.”

We stared at each other.

I had no idea what he made of that, but I instantly felt gross for saying it. For so many reasons.

But it was the truth, wasn't it?

And sometimes the truth just plain sucked.

Sometimes, the truth hurt, in a way you didn't even see coming.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jolie

Shane studied me for a long, breathless moment. He didn't say anything more about my jealous outburst, though.

He just slid his hand around my throat and tugged me to him for a kiss.

“Hello, Shane.”

Someone walked right up to us and interrupted, just before our lips could meet. Someone curvy and blonde.

Very curvy.

I blinked at this husky voiced woman with the luscious hair and expensive jewelry, who clearly knew the man who was holding me right now. She wore a strapless black leather catsuit—and she was spilling out of it. Her cleavage was not meant for those demi cups. If she inhaled too sharply, her nipples would probably pop right out.

It was like my petty jealousy had conjured her right out of the ether or something.

She had to be ten years older than Shane. She looked regal and sensuous, and like she'd crush a man's balls beneath her stiletto heel for talking back to her the way I talked back to Shane all the time.

I was pretty sure I was in the presence of a world class Domme.

“Hello, Jess,” Shane said casually. He barely glanced at her. His hand didn’t even leave my throat. “This is Jessica,” he told me.

Don’t give anyone your name, he’d instructed me.

“Hi,” I said. I would’ve said *Nice to meet you* or something, but this situation was way too weird for that. At least, it was for me. Maybe other people were slightly more comfortable.

As Jessica looked me over from head to toe, she said easily, “A pleasure to meet you.” Then her eyes landed on Shane and stayed there. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“I’ve been busy.”

A while? What did a while mean? The last two weeks while he’d been fucking me? Or like, a long while?

I desperately wanted to know what the deal was between them, but Shane was still holding my throat and I barely dared move.

“Are you coming to play?” she asked him. “I’ll be giving a little demonstration in one of the rooms later. You can bring your guest.” Her eyes grazed over me again.

Guest. She knew I was new. That I didn’t belong here.

That I was an outsider.

“I can always use some assistance with my demonstrations,” she added.

“No,” Shane said. “We’ve got plans later.”

She smiled knowingly. “I’m sure you do. Well, enjoy your night. And your... plans.” Her gaze drifted over me again, then settled on him for a long, breathless beat before she turned on her heel and sauntered away.

I met Shane’s eyes. “She knows you’re a Dom?”

“Yes. She does.”

“Then she knows... I’m submissive?”

“I’m sure she assumes.”

“But I’m not wearing a collar or anything.”

“What do you need a collar for when you’re wearing me?” His thumb drifted along my jaw. He was still holding me by the throat.

I swallowed in his grasp. “I need to know who Jessica is right now, please.”

He smirked slightly. “Then ask me. But do it much nicer.”

“Shane, who is that Jessica woman?”

“She’s a trainer here at Bliss.”

My heart was thumping in my chest. I couldn’t even figure out why a small part of me was slightly turned on by the idea that Shane had possibly fucked that woman—in the past—when most of me was fucking flaming with jealousy. “You mean... *the* trainer? The one you had sex with?”

“Yes. That one.”

I stared at him.

He stared at me.

“Did you really come here just to stare at me?” he asked me. “I thought you were curious.”

“I am.”

“But...?”

I took a breath and said, “But you’re the most interesting thing in this room.”

It was the same thing he said to me that night in the bar when he picked me up.

He squeezed my throat in a hungry pulse. “Say things like that, little dove, and you’re gonna get the fuck of your life tonight.”

“Do you still fuck her?” I blurted.

He eyed me and I wasn’t sure if he was thinking that that was none of my business or if he was seeing right through my pathetic jealousy.

He's not your boyfriend. Stop pretending like he is.

You're just gonna get crushed if you start playing that game.

“No. I don't still fuck her.”

“Why not?”

“Because, Jolie, at the end of the day, I'm really not her flavor. And she's not mine.”

“And what is your flavor?”

He tipped my face closer to his, his lips brushing mine as he spoke. “Apparently... little submissive girls with sassy mouths who need to learn their manners.”

“I need to use the ladies' room.”

I did, kind of, but I was also embarrassed about how ridiculously transparent my jealousy was. I needed to get ahold of myself.

Shane looked into my eyes for a long moment, but then he finally released my throat. “It's right there.” He nodded toward it, the glowing pink sign on the far wall above the entrance to a dark hallway. “Come right back,” he ordered. “I'll wait for you here, at the bar.”

“Okay.” I had to forcibly pull myself away from him, from the power in his wolfish eyes, and went straight there. But before I stepped into the dark hallway, I glanced back.

Shane was standing at the bar, alone, still watching me.

Unfortunately, when I emerged from the ladies' room a few minutes later, I didn't feel any less jealous, even after a moment to catch my breath and ground myself in the fact that Shane had brought me here tonight. *Me*, not anyone else.

Because Shane was still standing at the bar, in the exact same spot. But he wasn't alone.

And he wasn't looking over at me.

Maybe because he was too busy looking at Lamborghini woman.

I stopped dead.

There she was, with two other women, all three of them gathered around Shane. They were fawning all over him. I could tell from here. He was smiling a little, sipping his drink, not touching any of them, but Lamborghini woman had her hand on his arm and she was talking, laughing away with her friends.

The way she was touching him, standing so close to him... she looked like she was his girlfriend. Like they were here together and she was blathering to her girls about how amazing he was.

And he was just standing there, letting them drool all over him.

They were well-dressed, wealthy-looking women who were probably in their thirties, and they all had great hair and nice figures. He had beautiful women literally lining up to screw him in this place.

And suddenly, without him at my back... without his attention and his calm command of the situation, I felt... lost.

Out of place.

What was I even doing here?

Did I really need this voyeuristic, probably masochistic glimpse into his sex life?

I blinked, staring, as my face grew hot. I didn't even know what to do.

"Hey. *You.*"

A woman's friendly voice snagged my attention and I glanced to my left. She was leaning on the wall in the alcove closest to me. She smiled at me and waved me over.

The door behind her stood open, but I couldn't see what was inside. There was no guard at the door.

I glanced at Shane, but he was still at the bar with those women.

I turned and went over to her.

“Hi,” she said, her eyes widening as I approached. She looked about my age. She was thin, with a pixie haircut, light blue, and a couple of piercings in her lips. She wore a little black dress, not that different from mine, and extreme platform heels. “I love your outfit.”

“Thank you. Those shoes are... pretty amazing.”

“Here, check this out.” Before I could react, she took my hand and placed something in it. I looked at it. I was pretty sure I was holding a riding crop. Like the kind that was supposed to be for horses. But I definitely didn’t see any horses here.

“Feel it,” she said, running her fingers along it. “It’s so soft.”

I ran my fingers along it, hesitantly. It was soft. Either buttery leather or imitation leather, I couldn’t tell. It was black, with a red tongue at the end.

She was staring at me with big, hopeful eyes like she wanted me to love it.

“Did you make it or something?”

“Not me. He did.” She turned, and I followed her gaze through the open door behind her. A man stood in the center of the room; it was fairly dark in there, except for the display shelves and racks all along the walls around him, which glowed red. The whole room was lined with crops and other leather-looking goods. Hundreds of them.

Kinky sex stuff.

I stared.

Then I floated into the room, propelled by this girl as she looped her arm through mine. I was still holding the crop as I looked all around, wide-eyed. “This is the love shop,” she said easily. “That’s what I call it. In here, you can find everything you need to enjoy yourself at the party... and beyond.”

She brought us to a stop in front of the man, who was watching us.

“Hello,” I said, since he was staring. There was no one else in the room, except for a couple looking at some items in a corner and talking quietly to one another. The man in front of me wore an expensive suit. He was tall, with a groomed beard, a stylish haircut and black plug earrings.

“Hello,” he said. Then he glanced at the girl who still had her arm looped through mine. “Who’s this?” he asked her.

She looked at me.

“Uh, Julie,” I said.

“I’m Raven,” she said sweetly.

“Welcome, Julie. I’m Chris.” He offered me his hand.

He looked so... regular. Kind of clean cut. Other than the earrings. There was something commanding about him, though. He was pretty built. I could tell, even in the suit. But it was more than that. It was the way he stood. The way he spoke.

The way he looked at me.

I shook his hand politely. “Chris... There was a boy I went to school with when I was little named Chris. He was really cute.”

Oh my god, I am so awkward.

His lips curled in a slow smile. “Well, you’re pretty cute yourself.”

He was flirting with me. Definitely.

I looked at Raven. And I wondered, were they a Dom/sub couple? I mean, how would I know? But I thought they had that vibe. The way she looked at him...

My gaze drifted to the black choker she wore. Which I now noticed was a collar, with an actual buckle on it. Exactly like a pet collar.

My eyes dropped. I took a closer look at the crop in my hand. I was curious about it, but mostly I was uncomfortable with these people. They seemed very... friendly. But I wasn't sure if that was a good thing.

"Would you like to try it?" Raven asked, and before I could respond, she nudged me toward a piece of furniture.

I blinked at the curvy, sumptuous chaise. The shape was slightly reminiscent of a curvaceous woman. "Um, I'm supposed to strike it?"

She laughed softly. "If you like. You should really try it on a human, though. I can show you what it feels like," she offered. But maybe she could read my discomfort with that because she added quickly, "Or you can try it on me."

"Uh..."

"Allow me." Chris stepped in and took the crop from my hand, his fingers brushing mine. "Have a seat." He indicated the end of the chaise and I sat down carefully on it.

My heart was thumping. But for some reason, I wasn't leaving.

I wanted to see what he was going to do.

Maybe because Raven had bent over the other end of the curvy chaise and was now stretching like a contented cat, reminding me of that woman bending over the Lamborghini for Shane.

I stared as Chris stroked the soft, leathery tongue at the tip of the crop up the back of Raven's bare thigh, flirted with the hem of her skirt... and then whacked her ass lightly with it. Her whole body pulsed and she gasped.

Clearly, she loved it.

My nails bit into my hands as I squeezed them into fists, my whole body warming.

Oh my god. I am a voyeur.

Why am I enjoying this?

“It’s such a diverse tool,” Chris said in a low, soothing voice. I stared, as he stroked the tip of the crop up Raven’s thigh again, whacked her harder on the ass... and then dipped the tip of the crop between her legs. “Stroke...” he said in that soothing tone. “Smack... Tease.” She shuddered a little as he teased the tip of the crop between her legs, then withdrew it. “Which do you prefer?”

I jolted from my dazed staring. Oh, shit. Was he talking to me?

“Um... I don’t know.”

“Would you like to try next?” he offered.

“No.” My eyes went wide. There was no way I was letting some stranger whack me with a crop.

“With the crop,” he said, holding it handle-out to me with a small smirk.

Oh. He was asking me if I wanted to try out the crop. On *her*.

I glanced at Raven. She was waiting, bent contentedly over the chaise.

I got to my feet, taking the crop from his hand. My heart was pounding now. There was a light sheen of sweat all over me.

Was I really doing this?

How could I politely back out of this?

Except... I wasn’t sure I really wanted to back out of this.

“Here.” Chris wrapped his big hand around mine on the crop and lifted it into the air. Then together, we teased it up Raven’s thigh. Then we smacked her on the ass. “There, you see?” His voice rumbled in my ear. “She likes that.” His hot breath slithered down my neck, making me shiver.

Okay, I needed to get out of here.

I drew back, tugging my hand from his.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Shane.

I heard the growl of his voice, and whirled to find him stalking towards us. My mouth fell open, but he wasn't looking at me. He was looking at Chris, standing over me.

"She's yours?" Chris said, seeming undaunted as he looked Shane up and down.

We're all just wolves, little dove.

Most Doms are territorial, and greedy as fuck.

Oh, no.

Shane shoved Chris's chest, hard, and Chris stumbled a bit, not expecting it.

"*Shane,*" I cried.

"Answer me," Shane growled, ignoring me. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"She was just trying it out," Raven said sweetly next to me. She'd hopped to her feet. "You can keep it," she told me.

I was still gripping the crop.

Shane was still in Chris's face. "Hey," Chris said mildly, straightening his tie, "don't take it out on me because your little pussy wanders off leash."

Shane's fist smashed his face, fast and hard.

Blood sprayed into the air and Raven screamed.

Once I'd sank into Shane's car, still clutching the stupid crop, he shut my door and went around to his side. He got into the driver's seat, but didn't say a thing. I could feel his anger coming off him in hot, jagged waves.

I didn't even know what he was the most angry about. That guy? The crop? Me?

The total spectacle we'd just made?

Or that he'd just been banned from the club for life?

He'd gotten into an actual fist fight with that Chris guy, turned his face into a bloody mess. Clearly, he wasn't expecting Shane to attack him, but he'd fought back.

Security had dragged Shane off of him, fast as hell, and escorted us out. They probably didn't have brawls break out in that place too often.

The owner of the club watched the whole thing from his perch atop the curved staircase, and so did everyone else within eyesight. The nerdy accountant type who came out of a back office with even more security guys and gave us back our ID and phones told us in no uncertain terms, very politely, that we were never to come back.

Maybe they'd run my ID through their system after all.

They also made Shane surrender his signet ring.

It was humiliating.

And Shane still hadn't said a single fucking word to me.

He didn't even start up the car right away. He was breathing heavily and staring at the steering wheel like he just needed a minute to scrape his shit together, while security lingered outside, making sure we were actually leaving.

I tossed the crop in the backseat, feeling angry and terrible about everything that just happened, all at once. "I'm sorry I got you kicked out," I told him. "And I'm sorry they took your membership away. Can they do that?"

"Yeah," he said in a low, dark voice, "of course they can do that."

Shit. Was he really mad at me?

I felt like I had to defend myself somehow.

"I was just trying out one of the products. It was like a shop in there or something."

He didn't say anything.

“I didn’t do anything wrong.” I wasn’t really sure, though, if I did or didn’t. Maybe that was the worst part. “I’m in way over my head here, okay? That was too much for me, Shane.”

“Which part?”

“All of it! That place. Those people.” *Those women you abandoned me to talk to.* “And you attacking that guy. You probably broke his nose.”

“I did break his nose,” he said darkly.

“What if he charges you with assault or something?”

“They probably won’t let him.”

I just stared at him.

“He works for the club,” he said. “They like to keep a low profile. He’ll just have to be satisfied with never seeing me in there again.”

He hadn’t even looked at me. And I was so upset, maybe about that the most. This whole night started out so fun, in theory, and then just spiraled out of control.

“Well. I guess our first date went well.”

He started up the car. “You asked me to bring you here.”

“So it’s all my fault?” I was so hurt by that, I didn’t even know what to do. “Take me home. Please. I don’t want to be here anymore.”

“No. It’s not your fault.” He raked a hand over his face. His knuckles were bloody. “I shouldn’t have said that. You’re in my care and I lost control of myself. That was all my fault. I screwed up. I’m sorry.”

“Yes, I asked you to bring me here. Because I was curious,” I said, frustrated. “But I didn’t ask you to ditch me to talk to a bunch of other women instead, Shane.”

Finally, he looked at me. And yeah, he looked pissed. He did also look sorry. “I didn’t ditch you. How do you think I found you? I was looking for you.”

“What was I supposed to do? Just stand there by myself while you talked to them?”

“And what was *I* supposed to do? They came over to me. Short of telling them to fuck right off, I can’t really keep people from talking to me at a bar.”

“Are you kidding me? You’re a Dom, right? You’re the one in control. You could’ve walked away. But you didn’t because you liked their attention. Or maybe you just liked *them*.”

His jaw flexed as he ground his teeth. “*Jolie*,” he warned. But I wasn’t in the mood to play good little girl for him right now. I was way too mad and upset for that.

“You sure didn’t hesitate for a second to tell that guy whose face you attacked to fuck right off,” I pressed.

“He was touching you,” he growled. “He had a visible hard-on.”

Did he? *Ugh*.

“So that’s my fault, too?”

“It’s not your fault.”

“So let’s review. Women who pay attention to you get your attention, and guys who pay attention to me get their face broken.”

The muscle along his jaw danced angrily. “You shouldn’t have gone in that room without me.”

“I didn’t know.”

“I told you to come right back.”

“Maybe I would have if you weren’t so busy entertaining three other women.”

“So you thought it was okay to play Little Miss Riding Crop with that guy?”

“That girl, Raven, invited me in and gave me the crop!”

“Well, she isn’t me.”

“I didn’t know it was against your rules. Maybe if you told me what they were.”

“I told you, Jolie.” He leveled me with his wolf eyes. “There’s only one rule you need to know tonight. *You’re mine.*”

“No. I’m not.”

He shifted the car aggressively into gear. “In there, you are.”

As we rolled down the drive, I gestured at the road ahead. “Yeah, and what am I out there? Your obedient little girl, whenever you want me to be.” I sounded like I was fucking pouting again, and I hated it. “And what are you to me? *Nothing.*”

I meant that he wasn’t *mine*. For all I knew, every time we were apart he was fucking women from that club.

But the way his jaw clenched and his hands strangled the steering wheel, I knew it was harsh.

He didn’t say anything, though, not another word as we rolled through the gate and into the street.

It wasn’t harsh. He is nothing to you.

You are nothing to each other.

Nothing but a couple of idiots who are about to be related to each other, and crossed a line you never should’ve crossed.

If only I could’ve made myself believe it.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jolie

On the drive home from Bliss, my anger faded, a little.

Mostly, I felt hurt. Because Shane seemed to think I was actually *doing* something with that guy. Something I shouldn't be.

I wasn't that kind of girl, though.

I mean, I wasn't his girlfriend or anything. I wasn't *his*.

But I was there with him. It was a sort of date, wasn't it? He took me to that party as his guest, and I'd never mess around with some other guy in a situation like that. Even at a sex club where they were basically offering up the sex like party favors.

It wasn't far from the Bliss estate to Mom's house, but it seemed to take forever in the strained silence. Every moment he didn't speak to me it just hurt more. And as soon as we'd rolled to a stop in the driveway, I jumped out of his car and ran for the front door.

Maybe I didn't want to hear whatever he might say.

"Jolie." I heard him get out of the car behind me, the biting way he said my name, but I didn't stop. I had no idea if he had keys to his dad's house anymore, or how he'd gotten in that night when he surprised me in the kitchen. But I locked the front door behind myself and ran up to my bedroom, locking that door, too.

Jacob and Mom were probably asleep in bed. It was late. He wouldn't wake the whole house to pick an argument with me, would he?

I dug in my little purse for my phone, spilling the contents on my bedside table. I texted Alyssa before I could calm down and change my mind.

Me: You were right. I feel stuff for Shane. It's definitely hatred and it's growing.

Me: Tomorrow please remind me that I'm leaving in 2 weeks and I need to STOP FUCKING HIM.

I tossed the phone down and stripped off my sexy outfit. As I stormed past the doors to the balcony on my way to the bathroom, I saw him outside.

I scrambled to put my glasses back on and stared.

Shane was standing below my window, in the moonlight, like some freaking werewolf or something, looking right at me.

A shiver zigzagged down my spine.

I couldn't see his facial expression well, or his eyes in the dark, but he was definitely staring right at me.

He was holding a phone to his ear.

I glanced at my phone, which was lighting up on the bedside table.

I knew he could see me, standing here in nothing but my panties.

So, I peeled them off, slowly, then took my time making sure the balcony door was locked, even though there was no way to reach it from down there.

Then I selected a pair of fresh panties and a lace cami to sleep in. I lingered in the window again to make sure he got an eyeful. Then I ditched my glasses, closed myself into the bathroom and got in the shower. Too bad he couldn't see me in

here, too. He'd had a hard-on at the club all night. Every time I pressed up against him, I'd felt it.

The idea of torturing him right now felt oh so sweet.

My pulse quickened at the thought. My heart had been pounding, all over again, from the moment I glimpsed him outside.

Was he seriously mad at me?

If he was, hopefully that little strip show he just witnessed through the window gave him a massive, aching hard-on and blue balls to go with it.

I finished my shower and towel dried my hair, brushed my teeth and dressed in the panties and cami. My heart was still hammering. I was halfway terrified of making him mad, for some reason, and halfway excited as hell that I'd defied him.

I'd run away when he called to me from the car, and he went around under my window to phone me. He knew I saw him through the window. But I'd ignored his call.

And now he'd probably gone home, pissed off.

When I stepped back into the bedroom, a shiver ran down my back again like I expected him to be sitting on the bed, waiting for me. He wasn't there.

He's not Batman, I tried to tell myself. He's just a regular man and you're letting him get all up in your head.

He doesn't own you.

He'd tried to stake a claim tonight—with violence, no less—that he really hadn't earned, hadn't even asked me for.

I couldn't talk to other people at that club? Couldn't flirt? We were nothing to each other but a few weeks of hot sex, but God forbid another man flirts with me while multiple women drool all over him.

It was bullshit.

Maybe I was “submissive” but I wasn't a fucking pushover.

I picked up my phone and found I'd missed three calls from him. No reply from Alyssa yet, though.

I was trying to decide if I should text Alyssa again when a knock on the window made me jump out of my skin.

Fear quickly dissolved into a broiling excitement. Shane was standing on the balcony, staring me down through the window.

I dropped the phone. How the hell did he get up here? And damn him for sneaking up on me. I really should've whacked *him* with that crop.

He stared me down through the glass, like he could read my thoughts.

I strode to the window. How long had he been standing there? I slid open the glass door, but not the screen door. "What?" Suddenly self-conscious, I crossed my arms over my chest.

He glared at me through the screen. "Open it."

Every hair on my body pricked to attention at his command, as did my nipples. "No."

"I'm not having this conversation with you through a screen."

"What conversation?"

"Don't test me, Jolie. I've respected your boundaries, but I don't have a lot of patience for little girls who play games."

"I'm not playing games." My voice, even to me, sounded unsure, and my shoulders tightened. "This is Jacob and Margot's property and you're trespassing on it." My fingers dug into my arms as I braced myself for his anger.

But he surprised me by smiling. A slow, devastating smile that spread across his face and made his eyes glimmer. "I know you don't want me to leave, little dove." His gaze roamed to my clawed fingers, my shoulders. "If I left, what would you do with all that lovely tension?"

I didn't answer, just stared at him stubbornly as my traitorous body warmed.

“Lower your arms.”

My arms dropped against my will. He glanced over the thin cami, the lace stretched over my hard nipples. Only the bathroom light was still on, but it was pretty dark out there. I wondered how much he could see in the dimly lit room, hyperaware of just how little stood between my aching center and his touch: the screen door and my thin panties.

“Open the door, sweetheart.”

When he called me sweetheart, it did something to me. I felt like a kitten must feel when it's been stroked very nicely on the head. I probably would've involuntarily purred if I could.

I unlocked the screen door and slid it open, then backed up to accommodate him as he stepped into my room. I almost expected him to grab me right away, but he didn't.

He shut the screen door behind himself, and the glass one. Then he stood in front of me, looking down at me for a long, aching minute.

That was when I noticed there was something in his hand.

The crop.

“I would've thought you'd received enough attention tonight, little Domme,” he said as I blinked at it. Then he touched the tip of the crop to my chin and tipped my face up, his gaze seizing mine. “But maybe you haven't had enough.”

Then the crop moved away, and he stepped past me, walking deeper into the room. I turned to watch him. “I'm no Domme,” I said softly. “I was just... playing.”

He laid the crop on top of the dresser.

Then he went into the bathroom. I could see him through the open door. He was washing his hands.

Washing the blood off his hands.

My eyes strayed back to the crop, lying ominously on the dresser. Maybe it was just incidental; he didn't bring it in here intentionally. He wasn't planning to *use* it or anything. He just happened to have it in his hand. *You know, when he got it out of the backseat and brought it with him.*

And then stood in the yard with it while I showered.

And climbed the house with it.

I stared at it, then at him, as he emerged from the bathroom.

He doesn't do anything unintentionally, a little voice inside me said.

Finally, he spoke again. "You know I could see you from out there. Anyone could see you."

"No one's in the yard."

"I was."

"And then you just casually climbed the wall?"

"Maybe you forget, I grew up here. I know every way in and out of this house. If there's a naughty little girl up here trying to hide from me..." His eyes raked over me. "Walls and locks won't keep me out."

I swallowed fiercely. "I wasn't really... flirting with that guy. That couple. I mean, it didn't mean anything."

"I know it didn't. Not for you."

"Then what's the problem?"

"The problem is I gave you an order and you seemed determined not to follow it, even when it put you at risk."

"At risk of what? You took me there. You said it's safe."

"It is. When you obey my orders. Now, how do you think I should handle your misbehavior?"

"My *misbehavior*?"

"Your insubordination." His eyes flashed with that glimmer I now knew well.

Right now, it made me nervous and excited at once.

“That’s a pretty serious word to go throwing around between two people who barely know each other.”

“So, we’re strangers now?”

“Maybe we are,” I said stubbornly.

“If you prefer, my hand can do the talking.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I can put you over my knee and spank you good.”

I laughed, but my arousal was undeniable. The mere thought of him doing that to me, right now... “You think you can just come in here and... discipline me?”

“Clearly, you need it.”

As if the threat wasn’t enough, he then did something that completely floored me: he rolled up his sleeves. Slowly and deliberately.

While I watched, my breathing growing heavier.

When he finished and looked up, his pale eyes narrowed at me. He didn’t say anything more, but it was clear I’d been caught lusting over his strong arms. The way he’d just rolled up his sleeves in preparation for whatever he was thinking of doing to me left me desperate to experience it.

I couldn’t move. I just stood there, staring at him. Waiting for his command.

But he didn’t give me one.

He walked around my room, taking up too much space. He was so very male, so animal as he stalked around, studying my things. Even in the near-dark, I felt exposed.

But I was letting him do it. I’d let him in. I wasn’t stopping him as his fingers drifted over my clothes, laying out on the chaise. And the spines of my dad’s old CD’s on a shelf. Nirvana, Radiohead, Cake... a nostalgic collection of the

poetry of my youth, and all he'd really left behind when he walked out of my life.

"They keep a room for you," he said.

"Yes."

When Mom moved in here, she'd moved what stuff I left behind at our place into this guest room. For me. So I always had a place to land, if and when I came home. Clothes, books, mementos from my childhood. Random crap my dad had left behind that Mom didn't want but I sort of did.

It was all here, waiting for me.

Shane looked at me, and when our eyes met, I thought I heard what he wasn't saying.

They didn't keep a room for him. They didn't keep a room for any of Jacob's sons, except Darcy, who'd moved out only recently. But they kept a room for me.

"They want you to come back."

"Well... I'm not."

He stared at me, like he was waiting for me to say more. But I didn't.

What was there to say about it?

He wandered over to my bedside table, where the contents of my purse lay. He drifted his fingers over my things. Lipgloss. My pink-rimmed glasses. After a moment, his hand dropped to the handle of my bedside drawer.

Before I could react, he had it open and his fingers were wandering through my private things. Already he was drawing something out—the dildo. My gift from the party on the island. Still in its satin satchel, it had so far gone unloved.

He didn't even glance at me as my cheeks burned, and he set it on the table. Then he drew out the bottle of lube, which he set next to the dildo. Then a little jar with condoms of various colors and flavors, which he fingered idly through. Taylor had insisted I take all this shit home with me from the party.

He gave me a sidelong look before replacing the condoms in the drawer and sliding it shut.

“Um... are you finished snooping through my things?”

“Just about.” He paced slowly closer to me. “You need something, Jolie,” he informed me. “And I’m not leaving here until you get it.”

“Need... what?”

He stared down at me. “A lesson in why disobedience doesn’t work.”

A warm shiver ran through me.

“You need to be corrected for your behavior tonight.”

I swallowed hard. “You mean... punished?”

“You can look at it however you want. I can bind your hands if you want to feel like you don’t have a choice about it.”

“Bind me?” I tried to laugh again but the sound was strangled in the most desperate lust I’d ever felt. “With what?”

“I’m sure I can make do.” With that, he strolled over to the chaise again.

I remained where I was, by the bed, heart thumping. Was I going to let him “bind” me?

When he turned to face me again, he’d picked up the stockings I wore to the party tonight. He had them wrapped loosely around his knuckles, and I had no idea why that was so sexy. “Maybe you see me as a stranger, still. I wouldn’t say the same about you. I know a good deal about you. I’m not the least uncomfortable in your bedroom, but I know you’re not comfortable with me here. I know I haven’t earned your trust. So we’ll start easy.” He raised his hands, showing me the stockings. “I’m going to bind your hands with these so you feel restrained, but you could pull free if you really wanted to.”

“What do you mean, you know a good deal about me?”

He raised an eyebrow and I got that feeling I sometimes did, like I was being sized up by a predatory beast; a hungry wolf. “Do you really want to pull at that thread?”

“What thread?”

“You know I have experience in this. You don’t. I know you got jealous tonight.”

“So did you.”

His jaw flexed. “Just tell me,” he said. “Hot, warm or cold?”

I knew what he was asking. He was asking for my consent.

And I didn’t even have to think about it, unless I was going to lie.

I didn’t want to lie.

I didn’t want this to stop.

“Hot.”

He walked over to me, slowly, and leaned in until we were almost mouth to mouth, until I could smell his skin, the male animal smell of him. I tried not to breathe it in too greedily. “I know you, little dove,” he said hotly. “And I don’t forget. I’ve never forgotten a thing about you.” He straightened and looked down his nose at me. “And when I give you an order, you’ll say *Yes, Shane* or *Yes, Daddy*. Do it now.”

“Yes, Shane,” I breathed. It was a submissive response and we both knew it. I was obeying his command. Again.

“Good girl.” He touched his knuckle briefly to my chin. “Now keep still.”

I did.

He took hold of my hands and brought them together in front of me, tying my wrists with the stockings. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and said, “Come here.”

When I came close, he forced me over his knee. I wasn’t even sure how he did it, it happened so fast. Somehow he had me stretched across his lap, my knees and my chest resting on

the bed on either side of him, my bound hands up above my head.

He pressed me down, one large hand on my back, and smoothed his other hand over my ass. Then he dragged my panties down to mid-thigh and pushed my knees slightly apart. It made me feel extra naked, knowing I was exposed to him.

I felt him breathe and knew he was looking at nothing but me. I knew I was pleasing him right now, and it flooded me with warmth.

I knew I'd misbehaved, in his eyes, that he was maybe irritated with me, that he intended to discipline me for it—and I'd never wanted anything more as I held my breath, waiting for it.

He gripped my damp hair at the nape of my neck, fisting it hard enough that it pulled a little. I felt goosebumps break out all over my body and wondered if he could tell.

Of course he could tell. He was completely focused on me.

By now, I knew how this felt; to be the recipient of his total focus. It was like a delicious drug coursing through my veins, making me float above the ground. I was panting already, and barely able to keep still.

When he started to spank me, his firm, warm hand on my ass felt amazing, exciting and chastising, and I just surrendered to it, gasping for breath against the bedspread. My whole body was warm and alive with pleasure. The intensity of it was almost... suffocating.

He paused once and ordered, "Breathe, Jolie." Then he kept spanking me.

It hurt a bit, and I couldn't understand why I didn't mind. I didn't have much ability to think it over, either, because the intensity of my reaction was sweeping me away.

Shane seemed to understand it intuitively. Because just like the other night when he spanked me, he always slapped my ass... just... *right*.

He smacked me hard, sometimes, like he was honing my attention, the sound of his hand whacking my exposed skin turning me on as much as anything else. Sometimes, between the smacks, he gripped my flesh in his hand and squeezed, or smoothed his palm over a burning cheek, or dragged his fingernails across it.

“You like to misbehave, don’t you, Jolie.”

I wasn’t sure about that. But if he’d discipline me, put me over his knee and spank me so well anytime I misbehaved, I’d do it way more often. *Tell me all your rules, I thought desperately, so I can break them.*

“Have you ever let someone correct you before?”

I shook my head, *no*.

“It feels good, doesn’t it.”

I nodded. *You feel good.*

You.

You.

You.

I shuddered as he spanked me, over and over, until the sweet burn spread through my body and everything became warm honey and need. I felt like a cat stretched blissfully across a sun-bathed windowsill. All I needed was something to dig my claws into.

I dug my fingers into the bedspread and imagined it was his ass, that I could squeeze him the way he was squeezing me: until it hurt.

“Answer me. Does it feel good?”

Yes. I couldn’t even tell if I really said it or if I’d just shuddered in agreement, melting into his lap.

But I must’ve done something to please him because he murmured, “That’s a good girl. Keep still.”

Then he shifted a bit and I heard him doing something with the items on the bedside table.

A moment later, I felt the slick touch of something firm and smooth press at the opening of my pussy. “You’re going to take this cock for me, Jolie.”

Oh, God.

Yes. He was gonna do me with the dildo.

I’d never done that before. Not *with* a guy.

I felt pressure as the lubricated dildo started to fill me. I squirmed and bucked a little, and he stopped the penetration, taking it away.

He spanked me again, several times, the stings blending together into one hot, humming pleasure.

“Keep still,” he warned.

He slipped the dildo into me again, pushing it all the way in, and my body stretched to accept it. I gasped, clenching on it involuntarily, as I struggled to remain still on his lap.

He released the dildo and I clenched on its weight. My pussy fluttered around it. I let out a low groan, unable to stop myself, and he spanked me some more. The firm, punishing smacks on my ass made my pussy spasm in response, bearing down on the dildo, and I wondered, *Could I come like this?*

Would he want me to?

He grabbed the base of the dildo and drew it partway out, then he fucked it back in. He did it over and over, and I knew this was part of my punishment. He was punishing me with pleasure, and he was probably going to torture me by not allowing me to come.

Suddenly, he pulled the dildo out.

“Get on your knees,” he said.

I struggled to pull myself together enough to move, my pussy aching, yearning. I crawled farther onto the bed as he stood up behind me. I knelt on all fours and he pushed my shoulders down until I lay my head on the mattress. He shoved up the cami, above my chest. My breasts hung naked toward

the bed but he didn't touch them. My panties were still down around my thighs.

He pushed the dildo back in, then worked it in and out, so slowly, my eyes rolled back in my head. My heavy breaths matched the rhythm, or maybe it was him who was matching the rhythm of my breaths with his slow thrusts.

"I want you to relax," he instructed me. And automatically I unclenched the muscles deep inside. "I know you need this. It's alright." His gentle words soothed me as what he was doing to me with the toy coiled my arousal tighter, even as I fought to keep my body relaxed. "Good girl. Open up for me." He fucked me a little faster, and I shuddered all over, accepting his rhythm, his pace. "Good. You're taking it so good. That's my good girl, Jolie."

I shivered at the sound of my name. His words warmed me all over. He made me feel safe, my desires, my arousal, my appetite, all so perfectly acceptable. And combined with the thrill of giving up my trust to him so completely, it only drove me higher.

He shifted the angle of the dildo, so the head rubbed against what had to be my g-spot, and I shook. I swallowed the cry that emitted from my throat.

"Relax, beautiful," he coaxed, and I did. I managed to keep still, melting into that word again—*beautiful*—as he fucked me, sometimes pausing to tease my opening and make me whimper, sometimes digging mercilessly against my g-spot until I almost screamed in my mouth.

When I moaned through my clenched teeth, he groaned.

When I bucked my hips a little, restlessly, he growled with restrained lust.

Then he buried the cock deep inside me and let go. The weight of it made me spasm with pleasure again.

"Oh, God..." I rasped.

Shane reached beneath me and captured my nipples, stroking with practiced fingers. "Don't you dare come until I tell you to," he ordered gruffly.

I could tell he was turned on. I could hear the strain in his voice, and it drove me higher still.

When he didn't resume fucking me, I groaned in frustration, and he pinched my nipples, making me gasp. The dildo jerked as my pussy squeezed it, setting off answering ripples of pleasure. "Oh... please," I groaned. I wasn't sure how much more I could take of this.

"That's a good girl," he said softly. "Beg for it."

And suddenly... everything turned ice cold.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Jolie

I shivered as the chill of goosebumps rippled across my body. And not good goosebumps.

“I told you to relax, little dove,” Shane said above me.

I realized my entire body had tensed.

He tugged on my nipples, making me whimper. “So sensitive,” he murmured.

His fingers disappeared from my breasts and I sobbed in desperation. He chuckled, almost a groan. He spread my knees wide apart with his knee and said, “I don’t want to hear another sound out of you. Not one sound. And you’re going to relax.”

I tried. I tried so hard.

He fucked me some more with the dildo, and I bit my lip to keep silent. It still felt good, but it wasn’t the same. I was too tense.

He reached beneath me and tugged on my nipple, twisting it as he fucked me. I gasped and he smacked my ass so hard I squeezed my eyes shut and saw stars.

When I’d calmed down a bit, my breathing slowing, he gentled his touch. He spanked me until my ass cheeks tingled, burned, my entire body screaming for release. I was so hot now, I was sweating and shaking.

The chill was gone.

I remained as still as I could, silent, as he lavished me with his discipline, with his patience.

Suddenly, he laid his warm hand on my pussy and I knew he could probably feel how close I was...

I fought to keep control even as my clit tightened and I felt myself spinning towards release.

“Look at me, Jolie,” he ordered.

I opened my eyes and tilted my head until I could see him, where he hovered over me. His ferocious, pale eyes locked with mine.

I panted, the climax slipping away, out of reach.

It's him, I told myself. It's just Shane.

You're safe here.

“Tell me. Have you learned to follow my orders yet, little dove?”

“Yes, Shane.” That wasn't totally true, and I knew he must know it. That I wanted nothing more than to arouse his animal hunger right now, to make him want to punish me again and again.

If this was his punishment, I'd take it.

“You want to come?”

“Yes.”

“Ask me to allow it.”

“I... Can I come?”

He reached around me, wrapped his hand around my throat and somehow lifted me to a sitting position. “You know, for someone who wants to be told what to do, you don't follow orders very well.” In one fluid movement he flipped me over onto my back on the bed. His hands pressed my bound wrists into the mattress as he knelt over me, pinning my arms above my head. “I know you can do better.”

I tried to relax beneath him as he let my arms go.

“Leave them there,” he ordered. “Don’t move.”

Then he leaned down over my breast, where I could feel his hot breath, then his tongue, skimming my taut nipple. His tongue felt so good I cried out, arching toward him, and he pulled back.

“I told you to keep still.” He ran his hand down my body and slipped a warm finger over my clit. I quivered, struggling to keep still. “If I have to say it one more time, this ends.” There was a warning in his eyes and I knew he meant it. He was so in control, it drove me crazy. Stern and gentle and rough and focused, but always in control.

I relaxed my body as he massaged my clit in slow circles. I tried my best to breathe normally through the agony of the strung-out ecstasy he was dragging me through. The sensations ripped through me. My inner muscles fluttered against the dildo that was still buried deep, and I felt myself drifting towards orgasm again... like a whirlpool that waited just beyond the edge of a waterfall, I could sink right into it and just let myself be swept away...

A tear rolled from the corner of my eye into my hair. I didn’t think he’d see it. But he slapped my pussy, just a light, warning slap, shocking me to attention. Then he leaned in and nuzzled my temple, brushing his lips where the tear had gone. When I imagined him tasting my salt on his lips, my pussy convulsed and I jerked—and he took his hand away.

“Are you trying to come?” he whispered it into my ear. “Are you going to come on your toy while I spank you?” He squeezed my breast, punctuating the question. “I can’t hear you, Jolie.”

“I—”

“I want you to ask me for it again.”

“Can I...” I swallowed. “Can I come?”

“You didn’t say please.” His eyes met mine in challenge. “I don’t hear you begging.”

I stared at him. I couldn’t.

I just... couldn't.

I panted, all at once feeling emotionally exhausted.

And that cold feeling was creeping in again.

“No?” he said, studying my face. “You don't like to beg?”

I panted but didn't answer. Tears were actually flooding my eyes and I blinked them back.

No. I did not like to beg.

Hard limit. He'd just hit a hard limit.

I didn't even know it until it happened.

And I didn't know what to say.

“Hot, warm, or cold, Jolie?” he demanded.

“Cold.”

His jaw flexed. “Do you want to come?”

“I... I can't,” I gasped.

He slid the dildo out of me. “Too much?” He kissed my bottom lip, sucking a little, teasing. I whimpered and squirmed beneath him, desperate for more.

More of this.

More of *him*.

Just not... that.

“Not enough,” I breathed, my voice barely a whisper.

Shane's eyes moved over my face. Then he got up, standing above me. “Pull up those little panties and lie back on the bed.”

I did as I was told, shaking a little as he walked away. This was over? He was leaving or something...?

But he returned to stand over me—with the crop in his hand.

I'd forgotten about the crop.

“Hot,” he said gently, as he held it up, “warm, or cold?”

“Warm,” I breathed, my heart racing.

He held it out, hovering it over my pussy just long enough for me to register what was about to happen. Then he smacked my pussy lightly through my panties with the tongue of the crop.

I gasped, tensing. Shock. A little pain. Lots of pleasure. They were all bleeding into one.

I tried to just relax, give in to it.

He did it again... and I started crying for real. Just like I did when he spanked me the other night. Not from fear or pain or anything so simple. I was crying for so many reasons, and it was an incredible, overwhelming release.

He flicked the tip of the crop against my nipples, smacked my breasts, smacked my pussy again and again, sweet, stinging little smacks, as I writhed and sobbed and panted.

He didn't stop. He was undaunted by my tears.

Maybe he understood them for what they were; that I was struggling to get lost in this. To surrender.

To submit.

Because I wanted to, so bad.

“Hot yet?” he demanded.

“Yes,” I sobbed. “Hot.”

“Tell me why you're fighting it, Jolie.” It was a command, and I tried to find my voice to obey. I whimpered and moaned softly into the bedspread, which was soaked with my ecstatic tears.

“I—I'm not.”

“You are.”

“I don't mean to. It's just... I can't.”

“What do you mean when you say you can't?”

“I just can't.”

“You can't what? Reach orgasm?”

My face heated as I blushed. Though why this would have the power to embarrass me after all he'd done to me, all he'd seen—my naked body flung out before him, panting at his caresses—made no sense. “I can. Maybe. It's just... sometimes it's hard.”

He flickered the tip of the crop gently against my nipple. “Why is it hard?”

I bit my lip. “Just... when I get all up in my head.”

He teased the other nipple, taking his time. “Are you up in your head right now?”

“Y-yes.”

He ran the tip of the crop down my belly to the edge of my panties, where he teased at the edge of the lace. “About what?”

God. I couldn't tell him.

I couldn't tell him about that one time I got brave and asked my boyfriend to tie me up. How he said no and made me beg him for it.

And then he still said no.

It was humiliating and gross, and brought about a dead stop to the relationship.

But I couldn't tell him I was thinking about another man right now. Could I?

“Tell me,” he commanded.

“My ex-boyfriend.” I blurted it out and instantly felt hot with shame.

Shane paused. His eyes flashed at me, and I could see his response. Much like at the club tonight. In my raw, open state right now, maybe I saw it for what it was.

Not anger, but an intensely primal sort of possessiveness.

But he asked me, so calmly, “Did you climax with him?”

“It never...” I swallowed hard, my throat growing dry. “It never lasted long enough.”

He took that in, the seething tension seeming to dissipate as his control took over again.

“He never... tried?” He slipped the crop between my legs, nudging it against my clit. I writhed in response, struggling to keep still, squeezing the bedspread in fistfuls. “He never tried with his hand or used any toys?”

“He... he didn’t really touch me that way.” Did we really have to talk about this? Right now?

“How did he touch you, Jolie?” He rubbed the crop up and down against my pussy.

“Ah... not like that.”

“No? Never gently? Never with patience?”

I panted as he teased me and I fought for my voice. “Oh, God...”

“Answer me.”

“No. Never gently.”

“Never with dominance, the way you like it?”

“No. Never.”

“Never with his tongue?”

“N-no.”

The crop withdrew and disappeared. He moved around the bed, behind me, and spoke close to my ear. “Did you want him to?” I felt the soft heat of his lips brush against my ear, and I was glad I couldn’t see the intensity in his eyes right now.

“Yes.”

“Did other men make you come?”

“Sometimes.”

“Tell me why they didn’t make you come *every* time.”

“I... I don’t know. I guess that’s not always on the menu in a one night stand.”

His reaction to that was a low, guttural growl. “What about in a relationship?”

“Before him... I didn’t have many.”

Shane stood again and I resisted the urge to look up at him. I wasn’t sure I could stand the force of his eyes right now.

He teased the hard peak of my nipple with the crop again. Slow circles around my breast, little flicks across the taut peak. The crop hovered in the air a moment before resuming the torture on the other breast. “Did you ever ask him to?”

“Ask him... what?”

“To go down on you and eat that sweet little pussy, Jolie.”

“No.”

“Why?”

Because he didn’t care about my pleasure.

Because he didn’t care about me at all.

Not like you do.

“Because why should I have to ask a man something like that?” I said, frustrated.

He seemed to consider this a long time as he slid the tip of the crop downward, meandering over my quivering body towards my pussy.

“So you’re telling me... you’ve rarely climaxed in the presence of a man?”

The shame of it seared me deeply, the fear, the frustration and the resignation that had settled into me long ago, impossible to shake loose: the belief that I was a failure in bed. A bad lover. “Y-yes.”

I trembled as he slipped the crop between my thighs again, caressing me lightly, stroking the tip over the damp curve of my panties. Then he slapped me with the crop, sending a sting of pain and pleasure through my core.

“Ah!” I gasped and fought to keep still.

“Mmm,” was all he said. He tossed the crop aside on the bed. Then, “Stand up, Jolie.”

I struggled to my feet and he caught me as I wavered.

Everything ached and throbbed and felt so, so good.

He led me into the bathroom where he stood me in front of the big mirror over the sink. He stood behind me, wrapped his arm around me and gripped my throat, forcing my head up, and made me look at him in the mirror.

At those hungry, beautiful, wolfish eyes.

“You’re going to come, Jolie.”

I couldn’t look away. My gaze was locked with his in the mirror.

“I’m going to give you an orgasm, you understand? You don’t need to do anything. There’s nothing wrong with your body or your mind. Any man who gets off on you and doesn’t try to move heaven and earth to make you come is a fucking monster.”

He held me there with his hand on my throat. With the heat of his body pressed against me. With his fierce, focused gaze. And I shook with arousal. I could feel his erection through his pants, pressed against the base of my spine, telling me how much he wanted me.

But he wasn’t fucking me.

He reached down, into my panties, and pinched my clit between his fingers. He tugged gently and the sharp pleasure tore right through me. I started to moan helplessly. I started to rear up, to buck against him, and he held me, his eyelids lowering as he fondled my clit—and I climaxed.

He smothered my scream with his other hand.

I lost sight of his face, his beautiful face, as I jerked and shuddered in his grasp.

When I came crashing back down and went limp, he was massaging little circles between my legs. I was crying again, the tears sliding soundlessly down my face, and gasping for breath.

“Breathe, beautiful,” he whispered, and I felt him bite-almost-kiss my shoulder. As he did, he pinched my clit between his fingers again, sending another spike of pleasure-

almost-pain through me and I tossed my head back, groaning. “Come for me again, baby. I need you to.”

Need...

The sound of his voice, the raw need is in his voice, spun me over and I went shuddering off the edge, climaxing in his arms as he held me, his warm hand massaging between my legs. I shuddered through the orgasm to the very end, where consciousness seemed to teeter on some shaky brink and then snap back to me.

I didn't know if I'd had my eyes closed, but I could see him again. I blinked and blinked but he was still there, his hard body holding me against the counter, his heat seeping into me.

He was still watching me, in the mirror.

Then all at once he was lifting me up in his arms. He carried me to the bed and tucked me in. He lay next to me, fully clothed, and pulled me snugly into his arms as my heart thudded.

“The next time you come for me...” He whispered the words into my ear, his lips grazing my skin, sending a shiver through me. “... I'm going to lock you down.” He smoothed my hair back from my face as he spoke. “And I'm going to gag that pretty mouth. And we'll see how hard you can come for me.”

I lay limp in his arms, destroyed.

I could feel his cock, still hard, pressed against me. Pulsing with need.

I was spinning with the realization that *he didn't come*. He didn't get to climax. He didn't fuck me.

He didn't make me touch him at all.

And floating in my bliss, I thought of something Aunt Madeleine said.

He'll be utterly focused on your experience, on your needs. On your total pleasure.

He'll get off on it.

He kissed my temple and whispered, “You don’t ever have to beg me, Jolie.”

Chapter Thirty

Shane

I couldn't stand to let Jolie out of my sight tonight.

But I couldn't exactly stay over here, at my dad's place. My car was in the driveway. Too good a chance, even if I tried to slip out in the morning, I might get caught. And I knew that would upset Jolie.

So after I'd let her rest for a while in my arms, I slipped out of her bed.

"Where are you going?" she asked me softly, stirring.

"I'm just packing some things for you and taking you home." I walked into her closet and turned on the light. I found her tote bag, the one she brought to my place when she spent the night, and I tucked some clothes into it.

When I stepped out of the closet, she watched me as I opened her dresser, looking for her underwear. "Snooping again?" she teased.

"Taking care of you," I corrected her, as I packed her a couple of panties and a bra. "I really hope you don't have plans for the rest of the weekend, because I'm keeping you for a while."

She watched me as I tucked her phone and her wallet into the bag. "As your prisoner, until you say otherwise, right?" she said softly.

I smiled at her a little. “Something like that. That okay with you?”

“Yes, that’s okay with me. Just don’t forget my glasses, please. And my contacts are in the bathroom.”

“I’ll take care of it, little dove. Just rest.”

I went in the bathroom, got her contacts, her toothbrush, her hairbrush and a few other things I thought she might need.

Then I got her out of bed and helped her get dressed. “I’m so sleepy,” she said dreamily as I pulled a soft sweatshirt over her head.

Then I checked that the coast was clear, the hallway outside her room dark and empty, before I took her out to my car. I packed her up and drove her out of town, to my secret house in the woods.

In the morning, I was up before Jolie. I left her sleeping in bed as I got up and quietly got dressed.

Then I wrote a note for her and left it on my pillow.

I stepped outside, into the fresh morning air that smelled of evergreen trees. The house was surrounded by woods. There was a narrow path off to one side that wound through the trees, and all the way to a park where there was a decent running trail. I jogged the entire loop, and when I got back to the house, it was quiet.

I figured Jolie was still in bed, so I got the coffee on for her before I went to wake her up. Possibly with my face between her legs.

But as soon as I got the coffee brewing, she slipped into the kitchen. She leaned on the wall, watching me. She wore a T-shirt and jean cutoffs that I’d packed for her, her pink glasses and a soft smile on her face.

“Clever,” she said, holding up the little piece of paper I’d left for her. “A note? Really?”

“Hey, this time you stayed.”

“This time your note was a little more clear.” She held it up and read it aloud. ““Going for a jog. I’ll be back. Don’t go anywhere.”” She gave me a dry look.

“What? Clear is good, right?”

“Did you really think I was going somewhere?” She glanced out the kitchen window, where nothing could be seen but trees across the side yard. “Where even are we? Coquitlam?”

It was dark last night when we drove out here, and fair enough, she’d been half-asleep, fighting to keep her eyes open.

“Yup.”

“This is home?” she asked me, confused.

“I like to think of it as my home away from home.” I leaned back against the counter, looking across the small room at her. “No one knows about it. I’d appreciate it if you don’t tell them.”

That clearly surprised her. “No one knows about this place?”

“Well, my close friends do. My family doesn’t.”

She cocked her head, interested. “Why?”

I considered that. “Well... There was a long period in my life when I really wanted separation from my family. I guess I just wanted a place of my own, somewhere they couldn’t find me. Where I could just get away from it all. And then, as time went on... I just never really had a reason to get rid of it. It’s still nice sometimes, to get away. Just leave the city behind. Be no one for a while.”

“You mean, not be an Ellis?”

“Yeah. That.”

“I understand that, I think.” She crossed her arms. “I love my family. We’re super close. But sometimes... I have to say, it’s been nice, living down in San Diego. Getting out from

under my mother's expectations for a while. They do get heavy."

Yeah. I knew all about those heavy expectations.

But I didn't love the reminder about her life in California.

More and more, it was just making me uneasy.

I was trying not to think about it, but it wasn't going away. With each passing hour, it just drew closer.

I watched Jolie look around the house; what she could see of it from where she was standing. The main living space. It was smaller than my loft downtown. Just a kitchen and an adjoining living room, the nicest feature of which was the wood-burning fireplace. It was a simple rancher, built in the seventies. I'd had the bathrooms and the kitchen updated a bit, but not much else. It was low on the frills and I liked it that way.

She eyed me sidelong. "You're like... a mountain man. I've never seen this side of you. Did you chop all that firewood I saw stacked outside when we pulled in last night?"

"Of course."

"Hmmm. Sexy." Her gaze drifted over to the fireplace.

"We don't call it the love shack for nothing."

She looked at me curiously. Then her eyes landed on the coffee maker, which was making that comforting babbling brook sound. "You're making me coffee?"

"How do you know it's for you?" I teased.

"I've never seen you drink coffee."

"I don't usually, when I'm training for a big fight."

"So it is for me."

"If you want it." I hesitated, then told her, "You know, I was going for coffee that morning, after the night we met."

She stared at me.

"That's why I left you a note. I was afraid you'd wake up and think I was gone. So I left you my number. So even if you

had to run or something, you could call me and we'd get to see each other again."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"You left the hotel room that morning... to get coffee?"

"Sad but true."

"Why?"

"In case you wanted one."

"I love coffee!"

"The irony."

"So, basically... you lost me over a cup of coffee?"

"Yeah. You could say that."

She gazed at me in wide eyed wonder.

Then her phone jingled somewhere around her ass, and she dug it out of her back pocket. "Sorry," she said, texting someone. "It's my best friend, Alyssa. I was texting her a minute ago. She's just checking in on me."

When her eyes met mine, I was pretty sure I could read that look.

"You told her about me."

"I told her... a few things." She stashed her phone away.

"She's worried about you."

"She is." She fidgeted a little, avoiding my eyes. "Mainly because she knows I'm leaving and she doesn't want me to get attached."

Attached to what, exactly, she didn't say.

I stared at her, my heart thumping weirdly in my chest. "Are you getting attached?"

Her eyes met mine. "Of course not," she said softly. "What's the point of that?"

The coffee had finished brewing. I poured her a cup, and got out the honey and sugar for her. “Sorry I don’t have any milk. We can go pick up some food after you have your coffee.”

“Thank you.” I watched her stir sugar into it, looking like she was deep in some troubling thought. Then she looked at me again. “I like you, Shane,” she said seriously, like she was worried she’d hurt my feelings.

“I know,” I assured her, and she kind of laughed.

I like you, too.

While Jolie had her coffee, we went outside and she poked around the yard, marveling over how many different birds were singing in the trees. Honestly, I didn’t really notice the birds until she pointed it out. Maybe because I was too fixated on her.

Her soft hair around her shoulders. Her bare feet in the grass.

Her face lighting up as she looked up into the tall trees, the dappled sunlight and shadow on her face.

Then I took her grocery shopping. And I confessed to her that I didn’t really cook.

She confessed to me that she didn’t really cook much either. But she said she wanted to make something easy for us that I’d actually eat. And something that would give us leftovers. It took us a while to figure out what that might be, but finally we settled on chicken soup.

We bought a pre-roasted chicken, some vegetables and broth, which I told her was barely cooking. She told me to shut up. I paid for everything. Then, in the parking lot, I kissed her—and informed her that talking to me like that had earned her some especially prolonged “punishment” tonight while locked to my bed.

She kissed me back, breathless with the possibility of what that might mean. “What does that mean?” she asked me, her eyes wide and bright.

“Tell me to shut up again.” I gave her a hungry smile. “You’ll find out sooner than you think.”

She didn’t.

From that point on, she was polite as fuck.

When we got back to the shack, we washed the vegetables and then she got me dicing them while she started shredding up the chicken for the soup. “So why do you call it the love shack?” she asked me. “Because... you bring women here?”

“Yeah,” I admitted, “pretty much.” I wondered if that would bother her. “The truth is I don’t let women stay the night at my loft. Sometimes I bring them here. It’s simpler this way.”

Jolie seemed to be considering that. And maybe the fact that I’d let her stay the night at my loft. “Because... when they see this place, they don’t really know how wealthy you are, is that it?”

“That’s part of it. They also just don’t know who I am, period. I get to be a regular guy in this place, I guess.”

“But you brought that woman, the one who gave you the Lamborghini, to a family event.”

“Yeah, sometimes I do that. Just really depends on the situation. And the woman. Sometimes I just prefer to be anonymous.”

She took a sip of the wine I’d poured for her. “May I ask why she got to know your real name?”

“Because she was grossly wealthy. I didn’t have to worry about her using me for my money,” I said bluntly.

“Yeah, I guess that would be weird. Wondering if women are only hanging around because your family is rich.”

There was something she wasn't saying. I could tell.

“Is something bothering you? You can tell me if it is.”

“I guess, I've just always wondered why you didn't give me your real name the night we met.”

“I guess I could have.” I thought about it, taking myself back to that night. I wasn't really in a good mood that night. Not until I met her. “Why didn't you give me your real name?”

“Because I was torn. Between not trusting you and wanting to jump your bones. And I was ninety-nine percent sure that you must be tricking me somehow. Because, frankly... you seemed way too good to be true.”

I stared at her. She meant that.

So now maybe I could see why she'd so easily believed that I'd been playing her. Because maybe from the start, she'd expected me to play her.

“I wasn't tricking you,” I told her, looking in her eyes.

“I know that now.”

“I'd had an argument with Brandon. That's why I took off and walked into that bar in the first place. I skipped out on the engagement party because I was pissed at Brandon and Dad. So really, I probably just wanted to disappear that night. I probably wouldn't have given any woman I met my name. I didn't think about it that much.” I studied her face. She was listening closely to everything I said. “I left you my real name in the morning, though. I wanted to see you again.”

She nodded like she understood.

“Do you believe me about that?”

“Yes. I do now.”

“Good.” Maybe she was finally learning to trust me. And not just with her body. “What else is there?” I asked her. “I know there are things about me that make you not want to trust me, still.”

“I guess... I’d like to know how you make all your money. You don’t seem to have a job. Mom alludes to the fact that you make your own money somehow. But I’ve always wondered... if she’s just covering up the fact that Jacob pays for everything.”

“My dad doesn’t pay for everything. He never believed in just paying our way. He made us work for it from a young age, all four of us. I worked hard at hockey, and at school, to get scholarships. Dad always told me that he’d match whatever I made, but it wouldn’t just be a given that he paid for everything. I think he handled that part really well, actually.” I hesitated. “But then... the accident happened.”

I really didn’t know how much she knew about the car accident. But for sure, she must’ve heard about it.

“How old were you when it happened?” she asked me gently.

“Twenty. I’d already been drafted, but I wasn’t making any money as a hockey player yet. I was still in college, still hoping to get my chance to play for Vancouver. But then the accident happened and everything derailed. I was really fucked up for a long time. I had years of rehab. And things got really... dark... before they got any better.” I stopped there, wondering how much I should tell her. Wondering how much she already knew. “What did your mom tell you about it?”

“She just said you had a car accident that ended your hockey career. That’s pretty much what the internet said about it, too.” She bit her lip, like maybe she was wondering if it would bug me that she’d read about it online. But I pretty much assumed she would’ve, at some point. “Mom said you were in the hospital and in rehab for a long time and that it was really hard on Jacob. That’s all.”

“Yeah. It was.” I tried not to think about that part, but I’d have to be dead to not have noticed how hard on him it was. How hard on him *I* was. “The physical rehab wasn’t even the worst of it. I got addicted to prescription pills for a while. Painkillers. And had a huge falling out with my family over it.

Well, over my attitude, I guess. I've been told, by many, that I had the personality of a rabid wolverine at that point."

"I never heard that," she said softly.

"Dad sent me to rehab. And lucky for me, that seemed to take. I never went back to the pills, but rebuilding my life at that point... I'd done a lot of damage to my relationships with my family. And I was determined to rebuild my life my own way. But I was messed up for a long time, not just physically, but mentally. Dad tried to help me out as much as he could. He bought me the loft. He owns it. But I own everything else. This place. My cars."

I hesitated again. I wasn't used to talking about all this.

But I wanted to be honest with her.

"When I started making money fighting," I went on, "I went to Brandon to invest it for me. A lot of it is in cryptocurrency, and he has a lot of experience with that. But he told me no. So Dad started investing for me, his own money. My inheritance. He amassed a small fortune for me over the years. I used to see it as guilt money. But now I'm not so sure. He gets a lot of flack from Brandon for supporting me so much. I'm not even sure why he does it anymore."

"Maybe he just loves you and wants to help take care of you."

Yeah. Maybe. "I haven't touched much of that fortune, though. It just sits in the bank. Some of it gets reinvested. I mostly live off the money I make fighting."

"Really?"

"There's a lot of money to be made doing what I do. As long as you're at the top. I win a lot of fights, I make a lot of money."

"And this fight you have coming up... It'll make you a lot of money?"

"As long as I win."

"Do you think you will win?"

“Of course.”

She laughed softly at my cockiness. It wasn't just cockiness, though. It was a mindset thing.

“If I didn't think I was gonna win,” I explained, “I wouldn't bother taking the fight. I go into every fight believing I'll win. I just found out yesterday who I'll be fighting, and I've already done the mental walk-through. I find out everything I can about my opponent. I picture myself fighting him and winning. I'll do it constantly until the actual fight.”

“And that's how you win?” Jolie smiled. “Sorry, I don't know anything about fighting.”

“It's not how you win, exactly. But it's a part of it, for sure.”

“Does Jacob go to your fights?”

I kinda laughed. “Yeah, that'd be the day. Joss came once.”

“Only once?”

“It wasn't really his thing. Brandon won't come, out of spite. He's not supportive about it. And Darcy... I never tell him where the fights are. I don't really want him there.”

“Why?”

“Hard to explain. I guess I figure I'm already a bad enough role model.”

She looked at me with compassion. “Why?”

Was she serious?

“Well, he's my baby brother, and he's always looked up to me. I think he got into hockey because when he was a little kid, that's when I was playing. He came to all my games. And Jacob wanted me to go pro, badly. He put so much into it. Darcy grew up in that. He grew up playing hockey. And when I shit the bed, Jacob pinned all his hopes on Darcy. Dad wanted a hockey player son, and he got two. It's pretty fucking incredible, really, that two guys in the same family got that good, and we're not even blood related. But I don't go to

Darcy's games. I don't think I can watch. Too depressing or something."

Jolie was gazing at me thoughtfully.

And I realized... I'd barely talked to anyone about all this stuff before. Definitely not to a woman.

"Do you ever watch hockey anymore?" she asked me.

"Not if I can help it."

"Okay, real talk," she said softly. "Can I give you shit about something?"

I raised an eyebrow at her. "If you must."

"You just said that you 'shit the bed.' I can't believe you'd say that. You think you failed somehow at hockey because you got in a car accident and couldn't play anymore?"

"I guess that's how it felt at the time."

She considered that. "Is that how your family made you feel?" she asked gently.

"Sometimes. But to be fair, I don't know if I was thinking straight back then anyway."

She gazed at me, like I was some puzzle to solve, and maybe she was finally starting to put it all together. "You think, since you lost your ability to play hockey, your family doesn't love you."

That one didn't sound like a question.

"Maybe they don't."

"That really sucks that you feel that way," she said softly. "But I don't think it's true."

Chapter Thirty-One

Shane

Conversation turned to lighter things for a while, as Jolie put the soup together and we let it simmer. Music. Movies. Our favorite foods and restaurants we liked in town.

But later, as we sat down to eat lunch, I asked her about her family, and her life. “I don’t really know anything about your dad. Or your life down in San Diego.”

I thought she looked uncomfortable. Like she didn’t want to talk about it. But she said, “He lives there. He grew up in California. I have dual citizenship because he’s American.”

“I heard that.”

“When Mom was moving in with Jacob, I spoke to my dad over the phone, and he mentioned that I could come see him. Stay with him, even. I don’t even know why, exactly. He never said things like that. But maybe he was just competing with Mom. He didn’t like being the bad guy. And here she was moving in with this great guy. Maybe, for once, he was trying to prove what a good dad he was. But... he really wasn’t.”

I wondered what that meant, exactly.

“You see him down there much?” I knew she wasn’t living with him. Margot had mentioned, at some point, that she had roommates.

“No.” She seemed to think about it. “It’s sad, actually. That one little wisp of interest from him, and I just dropped

everything to run down there. I thought I'd go live with my dad in California, finish college, live this cool beachside life... I had such fantasies of what my life could be. But as it turned out, well, he didn't have the same fantasies." Her eyes met mine briefly, and she shrugged. "I stayed with him for a couple of weeks, until it became glaringly obvious that I wasn't really welcome. Then I found roommates and moved out of there." She paused like she was remembering it, not fondly. "The silly thing is, Mom tried to warn me about him. I didn't want to believe her. I guess no matter how absent he is, every girl just wants to know her dad, you know?"

"That's fair."

"I still try to see him, sometimes. I'll call him at the holidays but he's never really interested in getting together. I invite him for dinner, and even when he says he'll show up, he doesn't always. And if he does, he's tuned out. The man has left me sitting in restaurants by myself so many times." She added softly, "You'd really think I'd learn."

I studied her, my chest tightening as I listened to her descriptions of her father, a man who clearly didn't deserve the lovely daughter he had.

"Some lessons are harder to learn than others," I said gently.

"Yeah. Amen to that. So anyway... I told you I work in a thrift store. It's obviously nothing special. They have this really great window display, and every month I get to redesign it. That part is fun. I take a few classes at college each year, kind of whittling away at it. I've been doing that for so many years, it's embarrassing. I guess I just haven't figured out what I really want to do with my life yet."

Yeah. *Me too.*

"But at least my roommates are in the same boat," she went on. "One of them is in college and the other one is just floating. They're annoying as hell, probably because our apartment is so damn small and we're always on top of each other, but they're good people. I have a few good girlfriends down there. It's been fun, but I still don't really know what

I'm doing there. The thing about that is I never knew what I was doing here, either. So, why not be lost in California? The weather is better." Then she mused, "Lost in California. Has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

She gave me a wry smile, but I couldn't even return it.

"I'm a cliché, I know." She sighed. "How many thousands of girls have been lost in California?"

I didn't answer. Too many things she just said were gnawing at me.

"So, you're used to your dad shitting on you, is that it?"

She blinked at me.

"Is that the reason you let other guys shit on you, too?"

"What guys? I don't let guys..."

"Last night. The guy you told me about," I ground out.

"Oh. Him."

"It seemed like, for a moment there, things got really cold for you. But you didn't say so. Not until I asked." I held her gaze. "I want you to tell me if anything I did was too much for you. If you didn't like it."

It had been eating at me ever since. I knew we had to talk about it. I just wanted to make sure I could talk about it without wanting to murder her ex and having that come across.

I wasn't sure I was succeeding.

"You didn't do anything wrong," she said quietly.

"I need you to tell me." I tried not to get too intense about it, but this shit was weighing on me. "If I harmed you... I don't think I could forgive myself."

She didn't look away, her cheeks turning pink as she said, "I didn't like how my ex-boyfriend treated me. That's what I didn't like. But I liked everything you did last night. Just... No begging."

"I understand."

We ate our chicken soup in silence for a moment. She took a sip of her wine.

I was raging hot with jealousy right now, possessiveness, the same feeling that had gripped me, torn me right open and dumped my guts all over the floor, at Bliss. When I saw that guy hovering over her. Touching her. The same feeling that gripped me when she mentioned her ex-boyfriend last night.

I wanted to tell her that I was never gonna let any guy touch her, ever again. But I couldn't exactly back that up.

"You should never let anyone treat you that way," I told her.

"Ya think?" she said softly.

I would've taken her over my knee right there, but she was still eating. I wanted her well-fed before I locked her down to my bed.

That was no empty threat. It was happening.

Very soon.

"Please tell me you ended it," I growled instead.

"I did."

"And what about other guys?"

"Well... I've only had two actual boyfriends, I guess. Him and another real winner. And... a handful of flings. Including some one nighters. So... that's kinda the extent of my experience with guys."

"Why would you have a one nighter with some guy?" I demanded.

"Uh... *you* had a one nighter with me. Several times."

But I never intended for those to be only one night.

"They weren't one nighters, Jolie."

"I guess it didn't turn out that way, no."

"You wanted to see me again, each time," I challenged.

She looked away. “Yes,” she admitted. “So did you, I think.”

“I did. And what about these other guys?” I asked her, my blood broiling as I tried to stay cool at the thought of some jerk screwing her and then never calling her. Maybe never even asking for her number. Never even pretending that he wanted to see her again.

It made me feel kinda sick.

She was sweet. Why would anyone...

And why would she?

“I asked you a question.”

She chewed her lip a bit and asked me softly, “What was the question?”

“These other guys,” I growled, “who you slept with once and never saw again. Did you want to see any of them again?”

“Maybe. One or two of them.”

“And they gave you a one night stand?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would you let some guy use you like that? Some idiot who couldn’t even see your worth. Some asshole who couldn’t be bothered to want to know you.”

“I don’t know. It seemed like a good idea at the time?”

“You’re pissing me off right now.”

“Why?”

“You think if you don’t please men they’ll leave you, just like your dad did. You think if you don’t come it’s your failure. You think you haven’t learned how to please a man, so it’s your fault when they do leave.”

She didn’t say anything, just stared at me.

“You are never having a one nighter again,” I growled, as if I had every right to. Like the bullheaded alpha I was.

It was a ridiculous thing to say, maybe, when two weeks from now she'd be in another country. She had a whole life to live without me in it. I'd have no control over what she did or with what epic douche, and it was grating at me.

"I mean... you don't really get a say in that, do you," she said carefully. "Not if I'm not yours."

We stared at each other.

"Who says you're not mine?" I was getting really growly tonight.

Which meant we were about seconds away from me locking her down to my bed and using my tongue to worship-torture her for the rest of the night.

"Well," she said, "I guess at Bliss, it hit me... that maybe you were still seeing other people."

I stared at her. "We went to that party because you asked me to take you there. You were curious, so I took you. It was for you. I didn't need to be there last night. I needed to be with you."

She stared at me like she was kinda shocked I'd said that. "Are you upset about what happened? About losing your membership?"

"No. I'm not upset about that. And like I said, it wasn't your fault. It was my fault." I sighed. "And it's not like that was the first time I ever used my fists to deal with a problem instead of my head."

"Why did you do it?" she asked me.

I thought about that, trying to put it into words that wouldn't make me a total asshole. But I had to be honest with her. Always.

I wasn't always this honest with women.

But with her, I couldn't stand not to be.

"You were mine. That's how I saw it. He was touching what was mine. And you don't fucking do that."

She shook her head a little. “You haven’t claimed me. That’s what it’s called, right? You haven’t asked me to be exclusive.”

“Maybe it’s not fair of me to claim you,” I said gruffly. “When it’s ending in two weeks.”

She gazed at me, gently imploring with her pretty eyes. “Can’t we pretend that it’s not?”

My heart thudded, growing heavier in my chest, as it filled with all kinds of dangerous notions.

“I told you, little dove,” I growled. “I don’t pretend.”

“Maybe I want to pretend.”

I shook my head. She just didn’t get it.

Maybe we only had two weeks, but she was mine for every second we had left. Didn’t matter if she was leaving or not. I wanted every bit of her time I could get.

“I’m not seeing other people, Jolie. Until we say goodbye... You belong to me.” I pushed aside her almost-empty soup bowl and got to my feet. She dropped her spoon on the table with a clatter. “Consider yourself claimed.”

With that, I picked her up in my arms and kissed her. Then I hauled her down the hall to my bedroom at the back of the house.

It was nothing fancy. A bed with a wrought iron headboard, mismatched wood furniture, wood paneled walls with nothing on them. It was plain, clean, and said nothing at all about me. Except for the things in the drawers.

Those spoke volumes.

I lay her down on the bed and started opening drawers, looking through the items inside. I had a shit ton of bondage gear in here. So much of it, I hadn’t even tried it all yet.

“What are you doing?” she asked as she gazed at me.

“Exactly what I told you I was going to do.” I selected a pair of handcuffs and shut the drawer. “I’m locking you down.”

She hitched in a breath as I approached her, her eyes moving from the handcuffs to my face. I kneeled over her on the bed and kissed her softly on the lips.

“Hot, Jolie?”

“Yes. Hot,” she breathed.

I set the handcuffs aside as I got her undressed down to her underwear. Then I took off her bra, her breasts bouncing free. I peeled off her panties, baring her pussy.

I was rock hard, already.

“Lie back and relax,” I told her, and she did.

I kissed her breasts, trying to take my time. We had all damn night. I needed to calm down.

Slow down.

My hand slipped down between her legs, my fingers stroking her lightly. She was so slick and wet. I told her how sweet she was as I kissed her skin. How good.

Then I handcuffed her to the headboard. Both hands, spread above her.

Then I went to get the gag. Not a ball gag or anything, just a band of silky black fabric that I slid over her head and into her mouth.

“You’re not going to move,” I told her, stroking the side of her face and down her neck. “You’re not going to make a sound. You’re going to be still and quiet and good for me,” I instructed her, staring in her eyes.

She nodded, *Yes*.

Then I proceeded to make love to her, denying her her orgasm for as long as I could.

Because I didn’t want her to think about anything else.

I didn’t want to think about anything else. I didn’t want to think about her leaving.

I didn’t want her to leave.

I didn’t want to say goodbye.

I didn't want to let her out of this bed, drive her home in the morning, because that just got us one day closer to the end of this.

Maybe I shouldn't have brought her here. I shouldn't have caressed and massaged and kissed her body, making her come again and again, fucked her long and slow, then hard and fast, slept next to her afterwards.

Because all this was going to do was make it harder to say goodbye, and watch her walk away.

But I couldn't stop myself.

For as long as I could control it... I just wanted her to be mine.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Jolie

One week before the wedding, Mom gathered her sisters in her sunroom and asked me if I'd show them all the plans for the wedding design. She'd seen everything already, in bits and pieces, but she wanted the others to see it, too, while we went over it all one last time.

Mostly, she wanted them here because of the photo.

I brought it into the sunroom with me, along with Mom's wedding book and my binder of samples and notes.

"Okay, so, when I first looked over the wedding design," I told them, "it was beautiful, but it just felt a little off. Like it wasn't the ideal vibe for Mom and Jacob. It was a very Canadian Pacific, mountain vibe. Cool, but kind of... woodsy. Like, maybe too much? I just thought we should bring in a little touch of like, old Hollywood glam, you know?"

Right away, Aunt Marie smiled. She got it. Because anyone who really knew Mom knew that she exuded classic elegance, with a generous helping of glamor when she was feeling festive.

"And then, I saw this."

I pulled out the framed photo I'd taken down off the wall in mom's sitting room. They all knew it well. Every one of them had the same photo at home. It was a photo of their beloved grandparents, Percy and Rita.

Mireille put her hand to her throat, like she was choking back some emotion. I was pretty sure she understood where I was going with this before I even had to explain.

The photo was that strong. Beautiful and romantic, and very old Hollywood vibes.

Madeleine smiled at me.

“I’ve always loved this photo. Great Grandma Rita looks so beautiful and elegant, right? Like a screen siren. And Great Grandpa Percy looks so dashing.”

The photo was a copy from an old print. Black and white. Simple. But it was taken in the day when apparently it was a thing to color the black and white photo afterwards. So, they’d both been given a slight touch of color to their cheeks. Rita’s lips were red. And so was the bundle of classic roses she was holding.

“I don’t know exactly what it is. There’s just something so timeless and magical about this image,” I said. “The classic red of the roses. The simple elegance. I wanted to bring this feel to Mom and Jacob’s wedding. Here’s what I came up with.”

I started pulling out pictures and samples to show them each detail, so they could see and touch. From the white and gold place settings to the red roses on each table, the lighting, the wedding party bouquets, it was all here, in pieces.

My aunts *oohed* and *aahed* as they started picking through.

“It’s hard to envision it all together, I’m sure,” I went on. “But when it all comes together... I can see it, so clearly in my mind. I can feel how it will feel walking through the room. The colors, the textures, the lighting. I’ve pulled together everything that’s needed for a cohesive design, and all the necessary vendors and supplies are confirmed.” I blew out a breath, a little excited, still a little daunted. This was, by far, the biggest wedding I’d ever done. “Now I just have to execute the design on the big day.”

“This is beautiful, Jolie,” Mireille said.

“Stunning,” Marie chimed in.

“And we will all be there, to help you,” Madeleine assured me.

“Yes,” my aunts agreed.

“Thank you.” I was feeling pretty confident about it, especially with their support. The wedding was going to be absolutely gorgeous and, bonus, make a great portfolio piece. Just in case I actually enjoyed it so much that I thought about doing more weddings.

And, I hoped, it would make Mom happy.

By the time I was done with my presentation, she had tears in her eyes. The first thing out of her mouth was, “I am so proud of you, my girl.”

I wasn't really used to those particular words out of Margot Vola's mouth, but she wasn't drinking, so... the emotion seemed genuine.

“Uh... does that mean you really like it?” I was looking for a slam dunk here. A home run. Knocking it out of the park. All that stuff.

“No, Jolie,” Mom said. “*Je l'adore*. I love it.”

“It's fabulous, Jolie,” Madeleine said. “For the size of the wedding, it's still going to feel cozy and intimate. You've brought a hint of glitz to it in the classiest way possible, while still honoring the setting.” She looked at her sisters and told them, with confidence, “This is going to be an entirely sumptuous experience, from the food and drinks to the flowers and everything in between.” She took my mom's hand and gave it a squeeze. “You couldn't have hired a better designer, Margot. Jolie worked hard on this. You *should* be proud.”

Mom absolutely beamed at me.

Of course, she'd been dreaming about a moment like this ever since I decided to go to college and actually picked a vocation. The fact that I hadn't followed through on that vocation had silently killed her.

And sometimes not so silently.

Really, I didn't think I'd ever made her this proud before. It was kind of making me itchy.

My aunts all congratulated me, and while Marie flipped through my big binder and made impressed noises over everything, Mireille went to mix us mojitos with fresh mint from the garden.

“What is that rumbling sound?” Mom said, a few minutes later, as we all helped ourselves to a mojito off the cocktail tray Mireille brought around.

“Sounds like a sports car,” Marie said easily. “Or a motorcycle.”

We all heard it, faintly.

Mom frowned and checked her phone. “It's Shane.” She turned the screen toward us so we could all see the live feed from her doorbell cam, where Shane sat outside the front door—astride a motorcycle.

Instant lady boner.

What the fuck. I tried not to gape.

He revved it loudly. Marie was already on her way to the front door. Mom and Mireille followed. Madeleine glanced at me where I was fussing with my binder, trying not to sprint to the front door. When the others were safely out of earshot she said, “Well, let's not keep your Dom waiting.”

I was maybe gonna live to regret the day I told her about all that.

She sauntered along and I drifted behind her. The others were already out the front door. I followed Madeleine and we all gathered around to check out the bike. It was all black and bronze and kinda retro-looking but obviously brand new. It said *Harley-Davidson* on the gas tank.

“What a beauty!” Marie shouted over the throaty rumble. “Is it yours?”

It was loud. And somehow... just as sexy as it was loud.

Maybe it was the man straddling it.

Shane turned it off. “Yup. I just bought it.” He didn’t look at me, and I hugged myself nervously. This was the first time I’d seen him alongside my family since he’d “claimed” me.

“What do you think, Mom?” he said—to *my mom*.

“Oh my god,” I muttered and pinched the bridge of my nose. He was calling her *Mom* now. To fuck with me.

“You wanna go for a little spin around the neighborhood?” he asked her, still ignoring me.

Mom looked scandalized. “Oh no, I couldn’t possibly.”

“I could,” said Marie. “What fun!”

“Yeah?” Shane scanned Marie’s ankle-length hippie tent dress with surprise. “You wanna hop on?”

“Oh, not *now*,” Marie said. “I used to love riding on the back of a bike in my younger days, with a powerful man cradled between my thighs.” Shane’s eyebrows crept up as she spoke, and I slid a hand over my face. “But the moon entered Gemini this morning and my horoscope says I am not to participate in any thrill seeking activities. I’m not even having sex this week.”

The thing about Marie was that she was serious.

When I peeked between my fingers, Shane was glancing at my remaining aunts.

“Don’t ask me,” Mireille said preemptively. “It’s a very nice-looking bike, Shane. But motorcycles scare me.”

“I would love to, but in this skirt, it really wouldn’t work,” Madeleine put in, smoothing her pencil skirt. Then she looked helpfully at my jeans.

They *all* looked at me.

Shane finally looked at me, like he’d just noticed me standing there.

“What do you say, Jolie?” His voice lowered a little when he added, “You wanna go for a ride?”

My eyes widened. I glanced quickly at my mom and my aunts. Did no one catch the innuendo on that?

Yup. Madeleine did. Of course.

“Hop on,” he said. When I met his wolfish eyes, it felt like a command.

Mom was already shaking her head at me like *Don't even think about it*.

I struggled. Shane was watching me and I could feel heat collecting at the back of my neck. It was like he had his hand wrapped around it... the way he liked to hold my neck and slightly squeeze to command my attention—and bend every cell of my body to his will.

How the hell did he do that, right in front of my family? He wasn't even touching me.

Was he my Dom right now?

Or just Mom's fiancé's son? A guy I'd never shown any friendliness towards in front of my family? If so, I should really say *No, thanks* and just walk away.

But if he was my Dom... I was probably earning myself a spanking right now. And for every moment I hesitated to follow his order, probably a couple of hours of sweet torment in handcuffs.

Madeleine gazed at me, obviously trying to keep a straight face.

“Um, sure,” I said quickly. “I've always wanted to go for a ride on a motorcycle.”

Mom's mouth fell open but only one word came out. “Jolie!”

I had never wanted to go for a ride on a motorcycle. I'd actually never even thought about it before. Was I scared? Yes. Was I turned on by Shane and his leather jacket and that dark, dangerous machine between his thighs? Also, yes.

He lifted up a spare helmet. “I have a helmet,” he told my mom.

“He has a helmet, Mom,” I said lightly. “It’s fine.”

I put the helmet on, and he helped me do it up.

“Put your feet there,” he said, pointing. “Hold onto me.”

I did as I was told.

“Bye! Have so much fun!” Marie shouted as he started up the bike, and she waved happily, as my mother frowned and we roared away.

I didn’t wave. I was too afraid to let go of Shane. I wrapped my arms around his strong chest and held on for dear life.



We sped down through West Vancouver, across the Lions Gate Bridge, then cruised through Stanley Park. Shane parked us near Second Beach and I felt giddy as we left the bike, walking through the trees and along the Seawall.

We made our way toward where the park gave way to the bustle of the West End. Then we cut down to English Bay Beach. We took off our shoes and left them on a log.

We walked, side by side, through the edge of the surf with our jeans rolled up. Not touching. Not talking. Just walking.

I wasn’t even sure why Shane brought me here. He didn’t really say. We’d just ended up here.

He picked up something, plucked it off the sand and gave it to me. A little white seashell, like a tiny ice cream cone, smaller than the diamond in my mom’s engagement ring, in a perfect spiral.

I studied him. The thick waves of his dark hair blowing in the breeze as he gazed off over the water, the glare of the sun off the waves reflected in his pale eyes, as he pretended not to notice that I was staring.

He glanced at me.

And I suddenly got a funny picture in my head. Shane on some dating app, with a goofy little profile. *Likes bondage and walks on the beach.*

I spluttered, swallowing a laugh.

His eyebrow went up. “What’s so funny, little dove?”

“Nothing. My toes are getting numb.” I wiggled them in the sand as we walked and the water lapped over my feet. It was August, the peak of summer, but the water was pretty cold. “It’s not California up here, is it.”

“No,” he said, his smile fading. “It’s not.”

At the end of our beach walk, when I confessed to Shane that I sucked because I’d accidentally dropped the little seashell he gave me somewhere—“It was so tiny!”—he kinda rolled his eyes. I pouted when he gave me another one because it wasn’t the same. “This one isn’t as perfect. It has a crack through it. The other one was like a flawless ice cream cone. It made me hungry.”

So, he bought me a real ice cream cone from a food truck —“To shut you up,” he said.

I ate it, happily. “You need to get one of these. Hedgehog is my favorite.”

“What is hedgehog, anyway?”

“Are you kidding?” This man hadn’t lived. “It’s hazelnut and chocolate and it’s the best thing I’ve ever had on my tongue.”

“The best thing, huh?”

“Okay, second best.” Why was I blushing? How could he do that to me out of nowhere, with just a few words? “You seriously don’t want one?” We were already wandering back down toward the Seawall as I devoured my cone.

“I can’t,” he said. “The fight.”

“Oh. Right. *Training.*” I forced myself not to roll my eyes. “In other words, starving and depravation.”

“Don’t worry. It’s just another twenty-four hours. Then the fight is done and we can both get fat together on all the ice cream you want.”

I smiled at him and then we just kind of stared at each other.

Together.

He’d just said that word.

Was he thinking what I was thinking? That we weren’t going to get to do much together at all because I was leaving in a week?

Don’t think about it.

“Well, that’s good,” I said lightly. “Because ice cream is amazing. I could not give up ice cream for anything.”

“You could, if it was important enough to you.”

I eyed him with curiosity. “What food do you give up in training that you miss the most?”

“Hands down, pizza.”

“Oh, God. I could totally go for a pizza.”

“Ice cream first, then pizza?”

“Hey, it’s almost dinner time.”

And that was how we ended up turning around and heading up Denman Street so I could eat pizza. Unfortunately, we didn’t find a pizza place that looked all that great, but we did find a Mexican place that was very inviting. So, I ate juicy, sloppy, amazing tacos and drank two margaritas, while Shane ate some sad-ass tacos with like nothing on them. Meat and lettuce, that was it. There wasn’t even a taco shell.

“Your life is really sad, my friend,” I told him, when I saw the plate with his order laid out in front of him.

He just kind of smiled at me.

Maybe because I’d just called him *friend*.

God, were we getting mushy?

After spending the weekend handcuffed to the bed in his love shack while he made love to me for hours on end, things were getting blurrier by the second. I was getting some very soft feelings for him that I did not want to acknowledge.

Especially not right here, right now.

I avoided his eyes and dug in. Then I casually peppered him with questions about his training regimen to distract myself, and maybe him, from the very weird fact that we weren't dating. Not at all. We were just two people fucking each other for a month before my mom married his dad and then one of us split town.

And eating tacos after a companionable stroll on the beach.

No big deal.

When we were finished our dinner, we walked back to his bike. And once again, I held on to him for dear life as we sped through downtown, to his loft. He parked us in the underground parking lot next to his cars. After he shut down the bike, I swung off and we ditched our helmets. Then he took my hand and without saying a word, he walked me to his elevator.

I felt giddy again. And happy to have my feet back on solid ground.

What a *rush*.

"I like your new bike," I told him, breathless.

"Do you?"

I nodded, and he smiled at me halfway.

Riding up in the elevator, holding Shane's hand, was a rush of its own. A much more potent and specific rush. He didn't hold my hand when we were in public, at the restaurant and on the street.

As soon as we stepped into his apartment, I pushed him up against the wall, surprising him, maybe. Kinda surprised

myself. But we weren't in public anymore. We didn't have to behave now, right?

I mean, I was probably supposed to, but oh well.

His eyes flashed a warning at me, but I really couldn't help myself.

"I wanna go for another ride," I gushed.

"There goes that dirty mouth of yours again..."

"I didn't even say any dirty words," I protested.

He gripped my jaw lightly and smeared his thumb over my bottom lip. "It was the way you said it, little dove."

"Must I ask permission to speak now?" I knew that came out waaay too sassy from the way he looked at me.

"I'll seriously consider it," he said, in a silken voice that told me I was in trouble. "And you better watch your tone with me, little girl."

I rolled my eyes just a bit. The little girl thing still made me equal parts hot and annoyed with him. "Permission to kiss you? Please?"

He'd stilled. "Did you just roll your eyes at me?"

"Um, no. I mean... no, Daddy."

His eyes flared. I knew he loved it when I called him Daddy.

He took my chin in his fingers and made me hold his gaze.

"And now you're lying," he said softly. Too softly.

I scraped my teeth over my bottom lip, squirming under the dark threat in his gaze. I wanted to please him and I wanted to be naughty right now just to see what he'd do, in equal measure. Well, nearly equal.

"Please, can I kiss you? I'm a terrible sub, I know." I really was. "Did I mention yet today that you're the best Dom in the whole entire universe and you make me feel so good?" I whispered, giving him my most obedient eyes.

Ever since that night when he'd "corrected" me for the whole thing at the club, and the following day I'd spent at his mercy, in his house in the woods, I'd wavered back and forth between obeying his commands and gently breaking his rules just to see what he'd do. And either way, I got what I wanted.

His attention.

Every day this week we'd seen each other and we'd had sex.

When I told him I had plans with my cousins, he stalked us to Alyssa's spa and scooped me up outside as soon as we were done, and took me home with him.

When I tried to put him off because my period came, he just ripped out the tampon and went to town.

When I complained that his giant, ravenous dick was gonna make my pussy sore, he gave me a bath and a massage and fucked my mouth instead, then made me come with his mouth. Over and over again.

Apparently, claiming me meant I was at his mercy, daily. And he never seemed satisfied unless I came until I either cried or purred sweet things at him... like that he was the best Dom in the world and no one ever made me feel like he did... which I'd learned made him melt into mush and give me extra massage time.

"Hmmm," he grumble-growled. But he relented. His hand dropped away and he eyed me like I was a naughty pet who couldn't quite be trusted. "One kiss."

"Thank you," I said sweetly. Then I dropped to my knees and undid his jeans.

"You said a kiss," he growled, as I ripped his jeans open.

"Yes. A kiss." I gazed up at him with my biggest, most innocent eyes. He could've stopped me if he wanted to, but he did no such thing. I knew I was being extra naughty right now. But I yanked down his underwear. His hard cock sprang out—and I swallowed as much of it as I could in one go. Before he could change his mind about stopping me.

He groaned.

I started sucking him off, slowly, the way he liked it, while at the same time tearing off my clothes. It wasn't easy. Probably wasn't the best blowjob ever, as I shuffled around. Especially when I wrestled off my jeans while still on my knees and still sucking. Anyway, I was naked pretty damn fast, and his cock was still in my mouth.

Mission accomplished.

I absolutely craved being naked with him while he was fully dressed. Made me feel soft and open to him while he was restrained and powerful. Also made me feel like I was his sexy plaything. And at this point, there was not one thing I was enjoying more in life than being the object of Shane Madrigal's sexual affections.

Hmm. Maybe I should've been a little more concerned about that?

Whatever. Right now, I had his hard cock in my mouth and he was making delicious pleasure sounds above me. I wrapped my hands around his shaft and focused my attention on suckling the head of his cock. I peered up at him.

He was watching me under hooded eyes. "You're being very disobedient right now," he said gruffly.

I knew I was. But he still wasn't stopping me. I figured at this point he was either mentally tallying up each naughty deed for later payback or maybe he was just enjoying this too much to stop it. What guy turned down a blowjob?

I squirmed with anticipation. I really wanted my spanking, but first I wanted something else.

I slipped his cock out of my mouth as I gazed up at him. "I'm aching."

His eyes darkened as he watched me.

I held his gaze as I lapped my tongue around his crown. I knew by now that he got off on the eye contact. "I need this. Inside me." Then I decided to try a little more dirty talk that I

thought he might like. It came out in a hungry half whisper. "Please... Can I sit on it, Daddy?"

He knew I was being pretend-submissive right now, more than anything, and for sure it was annoying him, but I did still have my tongue on his cock, so...

He made one of those agitated, turned on growling sounds that made my insides quiver. He shrugged off his leather jacket and strode over to the couch, hauling me with him. He shoved his jeans down past his knees, sat back on the couch with his thighs spread and his glorious cock up. He pressed at the base, tipping it straight up. "Sit down," he ordered.

I straddled him on my knees and drove down on him. He groaned but didn't move to help me or meet my thrusts. He just lounged back, gazing up at me as I started riding him, pushing down a little farther with each thrust until I'd taken all of him.

"Yeah, sweetheart," he groaned as I bounced up and down. "Show me what you want..."

I was making hungry, helpless, greedy sounds as I glutted myself on the pleasure. He watched, hungrily, but still didn't move except to put his hands on me. He skimmed them over my curves, stroking my neck and squeezing my breasts. He smoothed his hands up and down my back as I fucked him desperately, each thrust just making me hungrier for the next, and the next and the next...

He lay his hands on my ass and squeezed as I bobbed up and down. "So hungry," he muttered, as his eyes ravaged the view.

Then he spanked me. One firm slap on my ass cheek.

I gasped. And kept fucking him as he spanked me again. And again. Every time he spanked me it sent little shockwaves through my core, cranking up the sensitivity inside.

"You better come hard on that dick, little girl," he practically purred.

I met his wolfish eyes. His words crept through me, a hot/cold fire, because I suddenly couldn't tell if he was pleased

or not.

I slowed my pace, taking a breath, and he squeezed my ass again, harder this time. It felt like a warning.

My clit was humming. My whole core was throbbing. I was gonna come way too fast. And now my wires were crossed.

Did he want me to come, or not? I didn't want to earn myself any *extra* hours in handcuffs, dangling on the brink as he teased me.

“Am I in trouble?” I asked tentatively. I licked my lip, liking the thought of that. But I also didn't want him to stop this or take his dick away. He felt utterly perfect inside me right now.

I needed to come on him, so bad.

He didn't answer me. He just watched me with those pale, hungry eyes and my pussy squeezed around him involuntarily, desperate to finish this. I couldn't hold back. I started bouncing up and down on him again, while he lounged there like the boss of me.

Which we both knew he was.

“That's my good girl.” His low voice was soothing now, coaxing.

I had no idea how he had so much control. But it was such a turn on. *Hot.*

Infernal.

“Look at that pretty pussy...” he muttered, his eyes devouring me.

I knew this was turning him on, too. He was so hard. And I was so swollen as I bore down around his hard length, again and again.

“I said, look,” he ordered.

I looked, watching his thick, flushed shaft disappear into my body as I fucked him.

“So hungry for my cock...”

I whimpered, clutching his chest for stability. “I need... I need to come.”

“Is that how you talk to Daddy?”

I flushed hot.

I met his eyes. It was low-level embarrassing to have to ask him for permission to come.

He knew it got me stupid hot.

But he'd stayed true to his promise. He'd never told me, ever again, to beg. He did, however, expect me to ask for it, nicely, when he was in control.

Which was, you know, always.

“Can I... can I come?”

“That's my good, sweet girl,” he coaxed, as my body started to shudder with each thrust. I was going over soon, permission or not. “Come for me, Jolie.”

Oh, God. When he said my name in a moment like this...

I was undone.

He still hadn't moved an inch. Except for his hand on my ass. He spanked me again, and the buildup of pleasure in my core climaxed in a deep spasm.

“Shhh,” he warned, before I could cry out.

He spanked me over and over, and the answering spasms gripped me, again and again. I gasped brokenly, trying so hard not to scream. “I can feel you squeezing my cock,” he muttered, tormenting me. “Such a good little pussy, gushing for me...”

I bit my lip, my eyes watering with the intensity as I struggled not to make a sound, as the ecstasy crashed through me in stunning waves.

His hand slapping my ass...

His cock stretching me as I shuddered around him...

His eyes on mine as he watched me come for him. As he drank in my pleasure like it was some kind of rare fine wine.

I'd never felt so much all-consuming pleasure as I did fucking this man. I could hardly contain it. I shook and gasped for breath and bit my lip to keep quiet.

“That’s it, little dove. Take your pleasure.” He promised me darkly, “I’ll get mine, soon enough.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Shane

Okay, so, tying Jolie down with her ass in the air, intermittently eating her out and fucking her for hours on end until I had blue balls and then we both came, together, within what felt like an inch of death, the night before my fight, was probably a bad idea.

Probably shouldn't have let her blow me in the middle of the night, either. I'd almost cried when she sucked that orgasm out of me. I was fucking spent, but who was I to stop her in her quest?

The girl had fucking drained me.

I'd dragged myself out of bed later than I should've in the morning, sent her home in a cab, and spent the rest of the day with my crew at the gym, prepping for the fight. And just before it was time to leave, to go pick up Jolie, I got a call from Dane.

"This is my final attempt to try to talk you out of this fight," he said, no preamble.

"And this is my final attempt to tell you what a dick you are."

"Look, I can't make it tonight."

"Of course you can't."

"Really. Some work shit came up."

I sighed. “And you hate watching my fights anyway, so...”

“I would say I’m sorry, but you know I’m not really a fan.”

“Of me, or of the fights?”

“Ha ha. Bright side, I’m sending you a limo. It’s outside your gym right now.”

I went over to the front window and looked out, and sure enough, there was a black stretch limo parked outside.

“Forgiven. At least you blow me off in style.”

Dane chuckled. “I figured Jolie would enjoy riding with the champ in luxury.”

Son of a bitch.

He knew.

He fucking knew I was getting serious about her in ways that I really shouldn’t be.

“I haven’t won yet,” I grumbled.

“Well, let me know how it goes.”

“Sure. I’ve gotta go. I’ve got a guy waiting to fight me.”

“By all means, don’t keep him waiting.”

“Later.” I hung up, probably not as annoyed as I should’ve been. My best friend usually had some excuse to miss my fights.

I couldn’t really blame him. It wasn’t really his crowd.

Would’ve been nice if he’d just be there for me, though.

At least Lex would come. I could usually count on him to show up.

I told my crew I’d meet them there, then headed out to the limo to go pick up Jolie.

“What did you tell your Mom?” I asked her, once we were on our way. She was cuddled up next to me in the back of the limo, in jeans and a hoodie. It was cool out tonight. Kinda felt like it might rain.

“Nothing.” She shrugged. “I just said I was going out with the girls. If her or Jacob happened to look out a window and saw me getting into the limo, I’ll just tell them we got one for girls’ night.”

“So sneaky.”

She smiled at me. “I really am. I got you this.” She handed me a small box. It looked suspiciously like a jewelry box. A ring box. “For good luck,” she said softly. “For your fight.”

“Jolie...”

“Please, open it.”

I opened it. Inside was a men’s signet pinky ring. A lot like the one I used to have from the club. But this one didn’t have a black stone or an insignia for Bliss on it. It was all gold, and it had a D engraved into it.

My throat instantly closed up.

What the hell was she doing to me?

“For Daddy,” she said softly.

I blinked at the ring, trying to process.

“Or Dom. Or... dick? Big D? I mean, you can really take your pick,” she teased.

I looked into her eyes. “You can’t give this to me, Jolie. I know where you work. You can’t afford to be buying me a ring—”

“Okay, before you lecture me on this and refuse to take it, I got it for a steal. Danica makes custom jewelry out of vintage pieces. She travels a lot and she’s always combing through antique shops and thrift shops and wherever, to find treasures like this. She let me look through her stuff and she gave me a ridiculous deal on it. It’s an old ring. It was already engraved

with the D. When I saw it, I thought of you. It was like, meant to be.”

I cleared my throat. “You don’t need to give this to me.”

“Yes, I do. It was because of me that you lost your membership at Bliss and your ring.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Jolie. I told you that.”

She gazed into my eyes. “I feel like it was, though. If it wasn’t for me—”

“I don’t care that I lost that ring.”

“But I do. I want you to have this one. I know you said it’s more of a Dominant move, giving gifts, so maybe I’m not supposed to. But I wanted to. I want you to wear it for me.” She swallowed, gazing up at me. “It’s for my Dom.”

We stared at each other and something heavy passed between us. Something that weighted me down. Like guilt or shame, but way more visceral. More terrible. More final, like the weight of something dying.

Why the fuck was she giving me a ring when she was leaving in a week?

But because I was a fucking sucker for her, I couldn’t say no.

“Okay,” I said, my voice gravelly. “But I can’t wear it in the fight.”

She took the box gently from my hand and closed it. “Then I’ll just hold onto it for you, until after.”



The fight was in an empty, out-of-use parking garage that was blocked off with chains. The limo parked on the street outside and we walked in. Lex had met us outside, where we parked, with his buddy, Maddox, and I asked them to walk in with Jolie, keep an eye on her.

I walked in with some of the guys in my training crew, because I didn't want to be distracted. And Jolie Vola was, at the best of times, an absolute distraction.

When we reached the second level, where the fight was happening, the usual swarm of people greeted me. The rest of my training crew. Some friends, mostly from the gyms I went to. Buddy Black and his crew of dirtbags. And a couple of girls who sold drinks out of coolers for him at inflated prices.

While Buddy's guys collected bets, both cash and crypto, someone had music playing, loud enough to get the energy going, but not so loud it would be heard from the street.

Obviously, we weren't supposed to be here.

Anything goes sideways, I'd instructed Lex, get Jolie the fuck out of here.

I dumped off my hoodie and stepped into the ring. My opponent was already there, waiting for me. Tattooed dude with a shaved head and biblical scripture all over his chest and arms.

I'd never fought him before. Buddy Black had scraped him up out of some gym down in Surrey.

As people shouted around us, my guys and his, egging each other on, talking smack, people joking and shoving, adrenalin thumped through me. I felt calm and controlled, but my body was warmed up and I was ready to go.

"Ten seconds," one of Buddy's guys, our "referee" for the night, announced.

My opponent crossed himself, pacing on the other side of the small ring, which was nothing but tape stuck to the concrete floor. I sized him up. He wore loose shorts. Stupid.

I wore black grappling spats, compression leggings, thick ones, because fighting on a concrete floor with bare legs was a bad idea and how you got ripped the fuck open. No shirt, though, because I didn't want to give my opponent anything more than necessary to grab onto.

Officially, we followed the Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts, same as the UFC. Unofficially, there wasn't much to ensure those rules were upheld. Some guys fought dirty, but at least it got harder for those guys to get fights, once their reputation got around.

The guy I was facing down tonight had a decent record. He was bigger than me, but not much. Had a slightly longer reach. Younger than me by three years. Had less fights under his belt. He had decent kickboxing, better than mine.

I'd beat him, for sure.

I just had to establish who was controlling the fight right away. Take him to the ground as fast as I could. His ground game would be no match for mine.

I just had to watch out for his legs. His kicks would be dangerous if they caught me.

As the crowd noise built around us, I stared him down. You had to be comfortable in this space; he was already sweating, way more than he should be. I could see it from here.

Some guys got nervous or angry when you got in their face. But you had to keep control. Where others were uncomfortable, I was comfortable. This was my secret weapon. The more they unravelled, the more I enjoyed. Being angry or nervous or too anxious would just affect your ability to perform.

My opponent was nervous right now.

I could see it.

I could feel it.

When the horn blew and the fight started, we felt each other out for a good half minute before I landed the first blow. I hit him in the face, then once in the temple, maybe a dozen times to the body, before he landed a direct hit to my jaw that snapped my head to the side.

I went back in with a flurry of punches. I wanted to get in tight, take him right off his feet, as fast as I could. I'd take him

down, submit him, probably choke him out. Make him tap.

I'd pictured it in my mind, so many times.

But there was always a chance that he'd kick me in the head, and it would suddenly be over.

Or, maybe I'd knock him out first.

Hard to do when you weren't wearing gloves. Hard, because the risk of breaking your hand was more likely than doing enough damage to his head.

I landed a couple of kicks, took a nasty one to the left leg myself that had me limping just a bit. I landed a few more blows, including one that made a satisfying squish, a nasty crack of bone against cartilage. I barely noticed the blood pouring down his face, except that it was making everything slippery as it coated us both and dripped to the floor beneath our feet.

I hit him again, a couple of quick shots to the body that had him grunting. I tried to catch him in the liver, the kidney, drop him on his ass, but I couldn't quite hit the spot.

So I hit him high again—uppercut to the jaw. He reeled back, caught himself before I could kick him right off his feet. And suddenly, I met her eye.

Jolie, standing in the crowd, watching me as men shouted at us, all around her.

She looked stunned. Horrified, actually.

Sick.

I was on the floor before I knew what happened. He'd caught me off-guard, sweeping my legs right out from under me and taking me down. The full force of his body landed on top of me, his shoulder to my sternum.

The wind coughed out of me.

Blood poured from his nose, dripping down his face and all over me.

His blood was on my face.

We probably looked like something out of a horror movie right now.

Lucky for me, though, this dude had shit for jiu-jitsu. He was a fucking purple belt. There was no way he could finish what he'd just started.

I basically bucked him off like an annoying fly and flipped him onto his stomach. I pressed his head to the concrete and when he naturally pushed against me, shoving his body off the ground, he pushed right into my trap. I was on him, my arm around his throat in a rear naked choke... and fifteen seconds of patient squeezing while he scrambled to mount some defense, and failed...

He slapped a hand on the ground. He tapped the fuck out and the fight was over.

We didn't even go a full round.

And that was it. Four weeks of training culminating in a fight that lasted less than three minutes.

Another victory for me, and very possibly, a broken hand. The ref would announce my win, money would rain down on me, my guys would celebrate.

But I met Jolie's eyes, and somehow, the victory felt weirdly hollow.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Shane

My head was ringing slightly, my whole system flooded with endorphins, adrenaline. In the post-fight chaos, the first thing I did when my crew surrounded me was ask Lex to bring Jolie. It was fucking loud in here, crowded, and I'd lost sight of her.

Buddy Sleazebag was already having people corralled the fuck out as his guys paid out on bets.

One of my guys dumped bottled water over my hands, washing away the blood. Another one patted them off with a dry towel and then they started wrapping my fingers, my split knuckles. I could barely feel them as guys jostled around me, slapping my back, squeezing my shoulders and reveling in the fact that I'd just kicked ass.

And of course, they'd cleaned up on it. Most of my guys put money on me, every fight.

"You need to get these looked at," one of them told me. "You might have some breaks."

But my attention was on Jolie. She was standing close now, next to Lex and Maddox. She met my eyes, and she had that same look on her face; that disturbed look she wore as the fight got bloody. She tried to smile a little. She waited, watching the whole time, as I got my hands attended to.

Which meant she definitely saw it when Buddy pushed in and tried to hand me a whack of cash. Since my hands were

still being bandaged, Lex took it for me.

As the crowd cleared out, I saw my opponent sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall with his guys around him.

“He okay?” I asked Lex.

“Yeah, just checked on him,” Maddox said. “He’s good.”

When my hands were done, I mopped off the sweat and blood with a towel. Someone handed me my hoodie and I pulled it on, threw the hood up, and Lex shoved the money into my pocket. I went over to thank my opponent, tell him it was a good fight. Because that’s what you did when you respected your opponent. And if they gave me a good clean fight, I did respect them.

Fact was, most of the guys coming out here did it for the money. Some did it for ego. But the one thing most of them had in common was that they really tried their best. And they had balls to come out here and fight me. Not only was I the reigning champ, but most of these guys couldn’t afford the kind of training that I could; the quality of my trainers, my gym, even my diet and the supplements I took were far superior to theirs, and even if they were ignorant to that fact, I wasn’t.

Outside of winning some underground fight, they’d never make any money as fighters and they’d never get much farther than this: getting their ass handed to them by me in some parking garage or abandoned warehouse.

Then I said goodbye to my crew, thanked them for coming.

I collected Jolie. When I took her by the hand, she held my hand gently, like she was afraid of hurting me. Lex and Maddox escorted us out of the building and over to the waiting limo. The driver came to open the door for us and we said goodbye to the guys.

I released Jolie’s hand so she could climb into the limo first. But she paused, watching Lex and Maddox walk over to their Harleys, parked nearby. “Are we heading to the hospital?” she asked me.

“No. Why would we?”

“I heard what that guy said. You need x-rays.” She glanced at my hands, practically cringing. They were all bandaged up, though. It wasn’t like I was bleeding all over the place and sobbing in pain. Honestly, I didn’t feel a lot of pain yet. I’d be feeling it tomorrow, though, for sure.

“I’ll get x-rayed tomorrow.”

“At the hospital?”

“Lex has a guy.”

Jolie just stared at me for a weirdly long moment. Then she turned to the driver and gave him her address; my dad’s address. I followed her into the limo and he shut the door for us.

“You’re heading straight home?” I asked her.

She didn’t cuddle into me like she did on the way here. She left space between us, her hands pressed between her knees.

“It’s late. I have a lot of work to do this week, a lot of prep for the wedding.”

“Right.” I sprawled back and as we got rolling, I watched her. She wasn’t really looking at me. “You don’t have to worry about me,” I told her. “I’m fine. I’ll heal. The other guy got the worst of it, believe me.”

“So... that makes it better or something? You both got hurt in there, Shane. Willingly.”

“Hey, I don’t actually want to take damage in a fight or anything. I don’t want to damage the other guy, either.” I eyed her, wondering what she was so upset about. “Fighting is an ancient sport and it’s not going anywhere.”

“I’m not knocking fighting. I understand that it’s a sport. But, Shane...” Finally, she looked me right in the eye. “It didn’t feel very sporting in there.”

“Have you ever seen a live fight before?”

“No,” she admitted.

“I remember the first time I ever saw a fight in person. It’s pretty fucking intense, right? All the adrenaline and testosterone flying all over the place.” I considered that; tried to consider it from her point of view. “I guess for a woman, as a spectator, it might feel even more crazy.”

“Yeah. It did.”

“Well, like I said. I’m okay. The other guy’s okay too. He’ll heal. And if he’s smart, maybe he’ll take something from this fight, learn from it, and do better next time.”

She just stared at me and I wondered if she was thinking about the next time. About my next fight.

And the fact that she wouldn’t be there.

It felt impossible, somehow, that she wouldn’t be, so I just didn’t even let myself picture it.

“So...” she said, “Lex has some kind of illicit doctor guy, like, through his biker club, that you’re going to see tomorrow?”

“Pretty much.”

“You can’t see a real doctor because the fight was illegal, right?”

“He’s a real doctor.”

“I hope so. Because your hands don’t look too good right now.”

I held up my bandaged right hand and gently flexed my swollen fingers. “Yeah, they are pretty wrecked,” I said casually.

“Are they always this wrecked after a fight?”

“No. Not always. Really depends how many times I have to hit him. And how hard. If I just hit a guy in the skull as hard as I can, I’m gonna break my hand. When you’re fighting without gloves, you have to learn how to control your punches. And go for the soft spots.”

She looked pretty disgusted, so I figured maybe I should lay off on the details.

“I’m pretty sure nothing’s broken.” I said it with confidence, though I’d definitely had breaks before and didn’t know it. All the adrenaline, the chaos of chemicals flooding through my system, and the come down after a fight... I couldn’t really feel everything that was going on in my body until hours, even days after. “On the bright side, the rest of me is pretty okay, though.”

She just stared at me.

“You wanna climb on?” I raised an eyebrow at her. “You sit on Daddy’s lap and peel off that top, he might have something real nice for you.” I eyed her little yellow tube top. She didn’t appear to be wearing a bra underneath.

“Uh... I don’t think I’m in the mood,” she said softly.

Yeah, I could see that. She still looked halfway sick.

“You okay, little dove?”

“I’ve been better, you know?”

“So, you didn’t enjoy the fight? Or you just didn’t like watching some guy hit me?”

“Honestly... I didn’t really like any of it, Shane.”

Okay, I did not actually expect her to say that.

“I’m glad you won,” she added quickly. “Obviously. I just don’t think I was prepared for... that.”

“For what?”

“It just... wasn’t what I expected, I guess.”

That was the same thing she said about Bliss. And we both knew how that night turned out. So, this didn’t seem like a good thing.

“What did you expect?”

“I just didn’t know it would be so... raw.”

“Yeah, I guess there’s nothing more raw than two men in a bloody fistfight.”

She eyed me carefully. “You were really good. I’m no fight expert, but it was pretty intense. And you made him tap out.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Did you know that would happen?”

“I would’ve loved to knock him out. But once he took it to the floor, I knew I’d make him submit. I’ve seen him fight before. I have better jiu-jitsu and better wrestling.”

“Then... don’t you want to fight in the UFC or something? Be a professional fighter?”

“No. I don’t want to go pro.”

“Why not?”

“Because, Jolie. You go that route, at any time someone else has the power to say *No, not this guy*, and drop you, shut the door in your face. Everything you’ve worked for, devoted your life to, gets taken away from you.”

She held my gaze. “And this route, at any time, you have the opportunity to get killed.”

Man, she sounded like Dane.

“I don’t like someone else having control over what I can and can’t do.”

“So, you don’t want to have to meet a standard?” she challenged, gently. “Be a professional?”

“There is a standard. And I set it.”

She said nothing.

“I’ve lost four fights in five years,” I explained, “and every guy who’s beaten me, I’ve gone on to fight him again and beaten him. I’ve beat every guy I’ve ever fought.”

“Could you beat those same guys in a professional fight?”

“I guess we’ll never know.”

“You just need to be so in control of everything in your life you’d rather do it the hard way?”

“If you don’t think going pro is the hard way, then you have no idea.”

“Is this about hockey?” she asked me, gently. “Because you lost your place, after the accident?”

I didn't answer that.

I wasn't really prepared for this inquisition. I was much more used to women who came out to the fights hopping right into my lap afterwards, congratulating me on my win. Or kissing my wounds better if I lost.

Wasn't really loving all this opposition.

“I just finished a fight. I don't need another one.”

“We're not fighting,” she said softly. She hadn't raised her voice or hardened her tone the whole time. But I could tell she was still upset. “There's no shame in being injured, Shane. It wasn't your fault. The fact that you can be an athlete again in any capacity after going through that, that's a miracle.”

“No, it's a miracle that I didn't die in that crash. But this? Beating that guy tonight? This is no miracle. This is hard work.” Yeah, I was being a prick. Borderline condescending.

Maybe I *was* looking for a fight.

But if I was trying to turn this into a fight, clearly, she wasn't having it.

She just watched me, her eyes soft. “Can't you work on something a little less dangerous?”

“Maybe you're asking me to be something I'm not.”

“I'm asking you to be someone who values you as much as I do.”

What? The fuck. “You think I don't value myself? Because I fight?”

“No, I question how much you value yourself because you put yourself in that position. In that kind of place, with that kind of people. It felt like... an illegal dog fight in there or something. It was gross. Those people betting on you... They probably would've been thrilled if you guys fought to the death.”

“Maybe I'll save that for my final fight.”

“This is not funny. Not at all.”

“It was just a fight, Jolie. Between two willing participants. And now it’s over.” *And you’re gone, to fucking California, in a week.*

What do you even care?

I almost said it, but bit it back. I couldn’t even say that poisonous fucking word right now.

California.

“I’m not that naïve, Shane,” she said calmly. “I know what was going on in that room. And maybe I was naïve to it before, but now that I’ve been there, seen it myself... That was all illegal, right?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m fine.”

“How can you say that? There’s no safety there. The referee wasn’t a professional. Even I could see that. And I’ve seen bits of UFC fights. They have medical people there and stuff. You had nothing.”

“I get a medical check before every fight. I take my health seriously. And my team collects blood tests from every opponent. I don’t fight guys who can’t provide a clean test. I don’t take unnecessary risks.”

“What about the risk of getting hurt? Or getting arrested?”

“It’s not a big deal. I’ve been arrested at a fight. The charges were dropped.”

“It’s not just the fighting, though. The betting is illegal, and it’s definitely illegal for you and whoever organized that fight to take a cut of it. And I have a feeling that would come with some pretty stiff penalties if you got caught.”

“Well, I’ve never been caught.”

“So, you’re just gonna keep doing it for the money, until you get caught one day and lose it all anyway?”

“I don’t do it for the money.”

“Then, why? You’re just an adrenaline junkie? Do you *like* the risk? The danger? ‘Am I gonna get arrested? Am I gonna get injured? Am I gonna get killed?’ That’s your idea of a good time?”

“Maybe I just like to win.”

“That’s weird, because you didn’t look all that happy when you won that fight.”

What was I gonna tell her, I wasn’t happy because she didn’t look happy? That when I saw the look on her face, it crushed me?

“So what do you want me to do? Quit fighting?”

“I mean, it’s not my call, obviously. But if you’re asking me, I’d like you to do something that makes you happy. And something where you don’t get punched in the head all the time would be really nice. Especially in a place like that, with no real safety measures in place. Concrete floors and bare fists... it’s brutal.”

“You sound like Dane. He’s been talking like this for years.”

“Well, maybe Dane loves you.”

What she didn’t say was *Maybe I love you*.

I looked out the window as we rolled through the dark. We were passing through Stanley Park now, surrounded by forest on our way to West Vancouver. Then we were crossing the Lions Gate Bridge, high above the water. Merging into traffic, flowing into West Van. Climbing the base of a mountain, winding up through the quiet residential streets.

So close now to where I grew up. So close to where I learned to play hockey. So close to where the accident happened.

So close to where my mother abandoned me.

So much had happened to me on this damn mountain, for good and bad.

Maybe I could've even fallen in love with the woman of my dreams here.

Jolie could've been living here. She could've been, but she wasn't.

She chose California instead.

She chose a life that didn't include me.

We'd reach my dad's place soon, and she hadn't said another thing.

"Look, I get it if it's too much for you," I told her. "You might've noticed not many women come out to the fights. So, you're not alone. And it's not like you have to endure another one. We're done anyway, right?"

When she didn't answer, I looked over at her.

She was looking at me like I'd slapped her or something.

"So, what? You don't want to see me anymore?" she said, for the first time, her voice taking on an edge. "We said we'd explore this thing between us until the wedding and you don't even want to do that now?"

I held her gaze. "I mean, if we see each other a few more times before the wedding or not at all, what's the difference?"

She stared at me. Her eyes shone, but she didn't cry. "Is that the way you want it?"

"Sounds like that's the way you want it."

She took a breath and said calmly, "You're the dominant one. You make the rules, right? If we fall apart, it's because you want it to happen."

"So it's all on me?"

"You *peeled me open*," she whisper-shouted at me. "If you don't like what you found inside... what am I supposed to do with that?"

"I like you, Jolie," I said quickly.

What I really should've said was: *I love you*.

I realized that afterwards.

But I didn't say that.

She swallowed and looked away, out the window, so I couldn't see her face.

And I sat there like a fucking asshole and didn't say another thing. I didn't know what to say. I'd just won a fight. I should've been happy as fuck. Instead, it felt like everything was broken.

Like everything shattered around me when I looked up from my victory and saw her face.

I couldn't get that look on her face out of my head.

Too soon, the limo was pulling up to the gate of my dad's house. Jolie still wouldn't look at me. The driver came around and opened the door for her, and she got out.

"Jolie." I didn't even have anything else to say. I just didn't want her to go. Not like this.

She turned to look at me. Her eyes were wet. She looked like *she* lost a fight tonight. That devastation... I'd seen guys with that look on their face, when they'd gotten themselves so pumped up for a fight they were sure they were gonna win, but then they lost.

But those men usually cried.

Jolie wasn't crying. "It's okay," she said softly. "This is my fault. I should've known better."

"What does that mean?"

"I've just never been good with goodbyes." She held my gaze, and I didn't know what to say. Inside I was fucking freaking out. I was already crashing hard from the chemical high, and nothing felt quite real. I didn't even have the energy or the clarity of mind to argue with her or convince her of anything.

How did this happen?

Why did it feel like goodbye?

She didn't exactly say goodbye. Or even good night. But she could've screamed *California* in my face and I wouldn't

have felt any worse about it.

“I’ll see you at the wedding, okay?” she said gently, and then she was gone.

When the door shut and I was alone, only then, I noticed the ring box she’d left on the seat for me.

It was for the best.

That was what I kept trying to tell myself the next day, when I didn’t hear from Jolie. The wedding was six days away. She said she’d see me at the wedding, and now I knew she really meant it.

I just kept trying to tell myself that it was for the best that we didn’t see each other until then. Because that was the *last* time we’d be seeing each other anyway, right?

Why get any more wrapped up in someone who was just gonna fucking leave?

She’d already told me that she had her flight booked back to California. She wasn’t wasting any time; the day after the wedding, Dad and Margot were on their honeymoon, and Jolie was finished with daughter duty. She was gone.

Back to her life.

As the day stretched out, a strange dump of post-fight depression hit me. Had me wallowing pretty damn deep, even through the post-fight care. I took a long bath loaded with Epsom salt. I got my x-rays. I ate, a lot. Met Dane for lunch and had a pizza for the first time in fucking weeks. Went to Johnny’s place to take a steam, use his sauna, float in his pool and stare at the sky.

And all the while, in the back of my head, I tried to picture Jolie in that California life of hers.

Walking along the sun drenched streets under the palm trees. With her aviators on. And her little jean cutoffs. She probably lived in those things down there, year round.

Aviators, cutoffs, and retro T-shirts for bands she'd never listened to. Or if it was really hot out, one of those little tube tops she liked.

Just walking down the street with no fucking clue how special she was.

Working in the thrift store. Contemplating the classes she was going to take at college next year and kind of dreading them. Wondering when she was going to figure out what she wanted to do with her life. Going home to her little apartment with her annoying roommates. And at night, sipping margaritas at some bar with her girlfriends.

And every time I pictured her in that life so vividly, I felt sick inside. Not in my stomach. In my fucking heart.

Because every time I thought of that life for her, her deadbeat dad was in it, ghosting her calls and failing to show up when he was supposed to meet her for dinner.

And there were other guys, too. Guys trying to pick her up at the bar. Guys flirting with her at the thrift store.

And worse... *The guy.*

The one who was going to find her, soon enough.

That dominant guy who was going to cross her path and see her for what she was, scoop her up, like a little diamond in the rough, and take her home. And maybe she was going to look at him the way she looked at me.

Should I just tell her to toss away that life?

Would she do it? Walk away from it, for me? Move back up here?

And what? Move in with me?

She didn't want that, right? To give up her whole life to move in with the guy who got punched in the head all the time. Who didn't value himself. Who'd be making her worry about him all the time just by being who he was.

Just like you make them worry about you.

Dad and my brothers... they didn't approve of how I made my living any more than Jolie seemed to. But for the first time, I actually let myself wonder, was it because they disapproved, or because they worried about me?

Maybe, in truth, it was both.

Maybe they weren't looking down on me for my choices as much as they were actually concerned about me.

Like Dane was.

Like even Lex was.

And like Jolie clearly was.

And if that was true... then maybe I'd been looking at a whole lot of things wrong where my family was concerned.

You're always fucking things up.

For all of them.

I knew that was true.

Maybe I'd never been the golden child in my family, but that was because I chose to be the black sheep. They'd wanted me to be something great. They'd had high hopes for me.

They'd believed in me, once.

But over the years I'd deteriorated that belief. I'd worn away their faith in me, their hopes for me, and in Brandon's case, even their trust.

I'd caused stress and worry for Joss, easygoing Joss, who was always trying to look out for me and for Dad at the same time, trying to mediate between us.

I'd hurt Darcy, for sure. Little Darcy, the baby of the family, who looked up to me. He still looked up to me. And I'd hurt him by being absent, staying away from his hockey games, never being around to actually see his talent and career play out. Because I was jealous of the hockey star he was becoming when I couldn't play anymore.

And I'd basically turned Brandon into my enemy because he was the only one who wouldn't put up with it. Who actually

challenged me on my shit when things were at their worst. Who told me point blank that I couldn't keep hurting Dad or Darcy, that he wouldn't stand for it. And because of it, I'd almost come to blows with him.

And then there was Margot. She'd always been kind and welcoming to me, probably because she knew I was important to Jacob, even if I didn't really want to see it. And I'd never been that kind or welcoming back. The few times I'd actually come around for family events over the past few years, I'd gone out of my way to try to make her feel unwelcome in her own damn home. As if I had a right to be there anymore, more than she did.

And Jacob, the only real parent I'd ever had, who'd given me an incredible life instead of the shit hand I probably would've been dealt if my own parents had kept me, or if he didn't adopt me and I'd been dumped into the system instead... I'd disappointed him, again and again. Attacked him for wanting more for me.

I'd accused him of wanting me to be something that I wasn't, someone more like him and his other sons, when all he really wanted me to be, probably, was a good man.

Even I could see that, sometimes, but I'd been so unwilling to let down my guard with them—with anyone, maybe—since the car accident. To believe that they actually loved me. Just me, how I was.

No matter how fucking deficient I was.

Because maybe for a long time, I didn't actually fucking love me.

Because after the accident, laid up in that hospital bed, unable to play hockey or be the person I thought I was, the person I thought had earned my family's approval... I really didn't know what was left of me.

And when I finally recovered and started to rebuild my life, I'd made damn sure it was a life they wouldn't approve of anymore. Or the very least, that they wouldn't understand.

It would be *my* life. Not the one they expected me to live.

I'd built a life that they wouldn't be a part of. That was on me, though. Not them. I'd been the one who excluded them from my life, not the other way around.

You've hurt every member of your family. Repeatedly.

Don't do that to her.

I didn't want to. I didn't want to hurt her.

But I was, wasn't I?

I wasn't even sure I knew how to stop. I'd never had a lasting relationship before or one that was deep. I'd never actually devoted myself to a woman in a way that mattered. I'd never actually cared to before.

I'd told myself I didn't want any woman tying me down.

But maybe the truth was I'd never really been man enough to take on a woman. To allow myself to let her into my heart. To love her. No matter if she loved me back or what.

I'd never taken that kind of risk. Not even close.

I didn't take on any challenge at all unless I believed I could win. And so far, any relationship I'd had, I'd looked at it the same way. Like something I could win, walk away from victorious.

And I'd never looked back to see if the woman was okay with how I left her. I didn't even treat the women I'd dated with as much respect as I treated an opponent I'd crushed in a fight.

It was like I'd never really grown up in that regard or something.

Like there was a part of me that was still twenty years old. A part of me that had actually died in that car. And then just remained stuck. Like a ghost.

Hanging around and causing mischief, whispering dark shit in my ears. Keeping me trapped in a terrible part of my past that I'd rather just forget.

But I couldn't forget it, could I?

Not with that spoiled brat ghost lingering, trying to remind me of who I was... when maybe that just wasn't who I was supposed to be anymore.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Jolie

“Here they are,” Danica said. “What do you think? You want to try them on?”

I was dimly aware that she was holding up a pair of earrings that she’d made and I was supposed to be paying attention. I heard her, sort of, but I was too enamored with a perfect spiral. The tiny, white, ice cream cone shaped seashell in my palm was an absolutely flawless design, except for one thing. The little crack running right through it.

“Hello?” Danica waved in my peripheral vision and I blinked up at her. God, it was bright in here. The late afternoon sun was sloping through the window behind her and I squinted. I’d slept in the car on the drive up to Whistler today, because I’d been up so much last night, unable to sleep.

We were supposed to be getting ready for the wedding. Tomorrow was the welcome party for all the out of town guests who were arriving tonight and tomorrow. The next day was the rehearsal dinner. And the next day was the big day.

The last full day I’d spend in Canada until who knew when.

Mom and her sisters and my cousins were already here. Jacob was here, too, with his sons.

Except Shane.

Madeleine had run recon for my sad ass and informed me that he wasn't here.

Danica sighed, putting down whatever she was holding. I'd already forgotten what we were supposed to be doing right now. Because every time Shane popped into my head, everything else just fell away. "Is that a seashell?" she said.

I blinked at the tiny, perfect thing in my hand. "Yeah. Isn't it perfect?"

"That's the one you were telling me about?" She leaned in to look at it in my palm.

"Yes. Please tell me you can make it into a necklace or something."

"It's really small, Jolie. I don't know how I'd make that happen." She poked it gently. "It looks like it would crumble if I tried to drill through it."

"It won't," I said, almost feverishly. "It's strong."

She looked at me like I was Gollum, clutching the One Ring.

"I hate to tell you," she said, "but it isn't perfect."

"It is!"

"It's cracked right through."

"That's what makes it perfect." I held it up to examine the crack. "The way it holds together, against all odds. It's... magical."

Now she was looking at me like she was seriously worried about me. "Are you okay, sweetie? You seem a little... distracted."

"I'm fine. I just want this in a necklace. It's important. I want to keep it, okay?" And now she was looking at me like I was getting hysterical. Was I? "It's just... I got it on the beach in Vancouver and I want to take it back to California with me. You know... for the memories."

Danica's face softened with compassion. "I see. Well, I'm sure we can do something..."

“Can’t we like, mount it or encase it in something? So it lasts forever?”

The worried look was back. “Sure. I’m sure we can do that.”

I sighed. “I’m just emotional. I’m sorry. The wedding... and being here and then leaving again... it’s all very emotional.”

“Of course it is.” She sat down on the couch with me. “We’re gonna miss you, too. You have no idea how much. It feels like there’s a big hole in the family when you’re gone.”

I almost started crying right there.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “We try not to tell you that stuff so you don’t feel bad. But we miss you, badly.”

“I know,” I sighed.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” she asked me with concern. “Is it just missing your life here? Or is it more than that? Are things with your dad...?”

“Things with my dad are as bad as usual,” I told her honestly. “Which means they’re basically nonexistent.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I have Jacob now, right?”

I tried not to visibly cringe, but I couldn’t help it. I was still dreading being in the same room as Jacob and Shane, at the wedding. And at the rehearsal, if Shane actually showed up for it.

It still felt wrong. Like I’d betrayed Jacob by doing the nasty with his son behind his back. Over and fucking over.

Yet I wouldn’t change a thing. Not a moment we’d spent together.

Except maybe that stupid non-fight or whatever it was in the limo the other night.

“Okay, I need to get this off my chest,” I told her. “If I don’t tell one of you, I’m gonna lose my mind. I mean,

Madeleine knows, but that's it."

Danica looked both concerned and intrigued now. "Oh?"

"I did something you might think is crazy. I guess I've been... kind of afraid to tell you."

"Okay," she said carefully. Then she rubbed my knee. "Lay it on me, Jolie. Don't be afraid. I love you."

I sighed again. "I think I'm falling in love with Shane."

She blinked at me. "You're... falling... for Shane? Madrigal?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Uh..." She looked unsure of which way to go with this information. And from the look of awkward concern on her face, I realized she figured this was some unfortunate puppy love thing, on my part.

"Oh. Wait," I added. "I didn't mention that I had sex with him. We screwed. A lot. I probably should've led with that. It would've made more sense."

Her eyes went wide. "You had sex with him?"

"Yes."

And that's when Dani walked in. Because the woman could probably smell sex talk in the air.

"Hey. What am I missing?" she demanded, instantly sensing gossip as she put down her bag from the liquor store.

Danica looked at me like *Are we telling her?*

There was no reason not to tell her. Dani was the one who told me to screw him in the first place.

"I was just telling Danica," I confessed. "Remember that night when you told me to have sex with Shane? Well, you kind of got into my head, and..."

Dani's face absolutely lit up. "You had sex with him."

"Like, lots of sex."

"That night??"

“Yeah, that night. And... many nights since then. And, um... days, too.”

“Well.” Dani blinked at me. “Good for you.”

“It’s not good. It’s very not good.”

“Why?” She narrowed her eyes at me. “How was it? Did he not make it rain for you?”

“Oh, don’t do that,” Danica said.

“Why the hell not?” Dani demanded.

Danica kind of chewed her lip for a moment. “Okay, fine. How was it?”

“There are no words for how it was,” I told them. “That’s how *good* it was.”

“*That’s* the problem,” Danica surmised.

“Yeah. It’s a huge fucking problem. Because I’m getting all attached to him and I’m leaving soon.”

“So, then, maybe you don’t have to leave?” Danica said hopefully, shooting her sister a look.

“Ugh. It’s so not like that. He doesn’t want me to stay or anything.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because the feelings I’m having here are not mutual. If they were, he’d say so.”

“How do you know that?” Danica asked.

“Because. He tells me all the things.”

“What things?”

“Like, everything. Everything he wants from me.”

Dani looked skeptical. “Men don’t always say what they want, Jolie. They’re like, world famous for their shitty communication skills.”

“This one does say. Believe me.” I groaned. “He’s dominant, okay?”

They both stared at me, like, *Huh?*

“You know that stuff you guys are always whispering that Madeleine is into?” I said. “Well, she is. She told me so. And... Shane’s into that stuff, too.”

“With Madeleine?” Danica gasped.

“No. No, no, no. Not with Madeleine. Just with women. With... me.”

They were both way too silent now and I couldn’t stand it. I finally dragged myself vertical, and I noticed the boxes Danica had laid out on the table, opened, to display the jewelry she’d made. For the wedding party.

“Shit, Danica. We’re supposed to be looking at your jewelry.”

“It’s okay. We’ll get to that.”

“But you did all this work. Does everyone else have their pieces already?”

“No, just my mom. Your mom, Mireille and Madeleine still need theirs. And I’ve got your earrings here.”

She held them out to me, and I went to try them on in front of the mirror. They were gorgeous. Gold tear drops with rubies in them. Gifts from Mom and Jacob, simplified versions of what she’d be wearing when she walked up the aisle.

“Wow. They’re beautiful, Danica.”

“I’m so glad you like them.”

They looked killer with my outfit. A simple white tube top and nice jeans. My hair looked pretty good, too. I’d wanted to look nice if Shane showed up today and we ran into each other.

Which he didn’t.

A surge of emotion flooded me and I pressed my face into my hands. “What if I never see him again?!”

“It doesn’t have to be like that,” Danica said quickly, soothingly.

“Relationships are supposed to have time! To see if they’re going to work or not!” I exploded. “That’s the normal flow of things! But we have all this pressure! It’s gotta be a secret so no one freaks out. And I might not see him until the wedding, and then at the wedding we have to pretend like we’re nothing to each other. And I’m leaving, so soon. We didn’t even have any time...” I made myself stop ranting. Because there was no point.

I got myself into this mess. It wasn’t their fault I was in this situation. My cousins didn’t need to be yelled at because I was falling apart.

I sucked back a deep, calming breath, and when I finally peeled my hands from my face, Danica was standing in front of me.

“Jolie. If you want to stay and see if it could work with him, then do that.”

“I can’t. Even if I wanted to... even if I was brave enough to do that, I can’t. My whole life is down in San Diego now.”

“Your whole life?” Dani challenged.

“You know what I mean, you guys. I miss you. I really do. But I have a job and school and my apartment...”

“All of which you can have up here,” Dani said simply. “Plus, you get us and Alyssa.”

“I know, but... I just can’t.”

“Maybe you can,” Danica said gently. “Have you even let yourself think about that?”

I hadn’t, really. But it all just seemed too... hard.

“Think it through,” she said. “You could still take classes up here if you want to. You could get a job. Even if it takes a while to get settled, make some money, you have places you can stay. You know your mom would let you stay with her, as long as you need to.”

“I can’t live with my mom. I love her, but I can’t.”

“Then you could stay in our condo,” Danica said. Which was incredibly generous and kind.

But I couldn’t.

She meant Ashley’s condo, downtown, which they now just kept empty so they could use it when they came into the city. And it only had one bedroom.

“I’d be in the way,” I told her. “Ashley and Matt need to use it all the time when they’re in and out of the city.”

“You could stay with Dani.”

“I have a very nice couch,” Dani said seriously.

“I appreciate it. I really do, but—”

“It wouldn’t be that hard to get a job,” Danica pressed. “Madeleine would hire you back. As a junior decorator. You could work on one of her teams, keep learning as you go.”

“It’s not like that. I can’t just waltz in and out of her design firm whenever I want and expect her to hire me back.”

“Why not?” she said. “I do it all the time. I have quit that place so many times, and every time I come back from touring she’s offering me a contract to work for some client. She needs good people and she trusts us. We’re family.”

“I don’t know...”

“So, your life is so much better down in San Diego?” Dani pressed. “Is that it?”

“No.”

“You’re being stubborn right now, Jolie,” she informed me. “You’re making excuses. Because we all know you could damn sure get hired in some thrift shop and sleep on my couch until you get on your feet and then get a roommate here, just like you did in San Diego. Everything you’re doing there you could do here. The question is, do you want to?”

“You know what I want?” I kinda snapped. “I just want things to get better. I don’t want to make my life any worse. Because no, it’s not great. And I don’t want to make the wrong move and just make things worse for myself.”

“So, you’re paralyzed.”

Maybe I was. But I breathed, “I don’t know. What do you guys think I should do, really?”

“I think you should move your ass back here, like, yesterday,” Dani said bluntly. “Unless you can give me one good reason why your life should continue on in San Diego. And I’m not hearing it. Danica?”

We both looked at Danica. “I don’t want to pile up on you here, but I agree,” she told me. “I know Madeleine would be thrilled to have you back. She wants to keep Voilà in the family. She doesn’t have children. Who do you think she wants to leave her business to in the future?”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“Well, if you’re Madeleine,” she said, “we’re it. Her only hope of passing along the business she poured her heart and soul into, keeping it in the family, instead of selling it off when she wants to retire one day.”

Great. Now I felt guilty that I’d left Voilà in the first place.

“I never knew it was that important to her...”

“It is. It’s worth a conversation with Madeleine, anyway,” Danica said gently. “Isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Maybe. I know it probably seems like a no brainer to you. But moving across distances is hard. Even with support. I upended and relocated my whole life just three years ago and started fresh down there. What if I do it all again and it’s a mistake? If I cancel my life down there to come back up here, and Shane doesn’t even want what I want... It’s humiliating.”

“Why?” Danica said. “It’s very human to take a chance on love, Jolie. We should all do it once in a while.” She gave her sister a pointed look, which Dani ignored.

“*Because* he’s my stepbrother in a few days,” I groaned. “That’s why. If he doesn’t want me, *me*, for more than just a few weeks of dirty, forbidden sex... I’ll be fucking crushed.”

“No. You will not be crushed,” Dani said firmly. “If he doesn’t want you? His loss.”

“Dani...” I pressed my face in my hands again. “Not now, okay?”

She was right, of course. I knew that, because I’d say the exact same thing to her or anyone else I loved if they were going through this right now. But I did not want to hear it.

Because thinking about how I was going to suck it up and deal with it if he truly didn’t want any more time with me was not something I was ready to do.

“What can we do, babe?” Danica asked me.

“Nothing. Just have my back.” I peered up at them. “And if I cry like a baby at the wedding, just tell everyone it’s happy tears.”

“It will be happy tears,” Dani insisted. “Over his grave, if he’s not careful,” she muttered.

Danica frowned at her. “We have your back,” she told me.

“Always,” Dani agreed.

“I just... can’t even believe I’m in this mess.” I flopped onto the couch again. “It was just supposed to be one night. *One fucking night.*”

“One night, huh?” Dani mused.

“Yes.”

“So how did it become more than that?”

I stared at her, feeling helpless. Because that was the question, wasn’t it. “How do you think?”

They both seemed to be considering that, and I couldn’t even stand it. “He calls me his little dove,” I lamented quietly.

Holy God, I was gonna miss him so much.

It was visceral, this pain. My organs felt like they were revolting against me. It wasn’t a sick feeling. Or an empty feeling. It was like everything just didn’t fit together anymore and my whole system was trying to tell me I’d screwed up. My

body and my mind and my fucking soul were all angry with me.

Without another word, Danica pulled a bottle of white wine from the fridge and started pouring. Dani took two full glasses and sat down next to me, trying to look like she wasn't as curious as she was. "So, dominant, huh?" She handed me a glass

"Totally dominant."

"What are we talking? Satin sheets and handcuffs? Or whips and chains and hot candle wax?"

I didn't indulge her with an answer to that.

"I don't need satin sheets and handcuffs," I told her instead. "I just need that man."

She exchanged a look with her sister.

I figured they were both finally realizing how serious this was, because they both went silent. For once in her life, even Dani didn't have an opinion to share.

Or maybe she just felt too sorry for me to lay it on me right now.

That night, I lay on the couch in my mom's hotel room, flat on my back, while she tried on her wedding dress. I'd gone from staring at the seashell to straight-up staring at the ceiling. As if it might have answers for me.

But all it had for me, like most everything else, were memories of Shane's face.

When Mom walked out of the bathroom in her wedding dress, I snapped to attention. My jaw actually dropped.

She gasped a little at my reaction. "Oh." Then she sobbed, like she might burst into tears, but caught herself.

"*Mom.*" I jumped to my feet. "You. Look. *Stunning.*"

“Please, help me with this.” She was clutching at the ivory silk bodice. “The whole thing is about to fall down.”

I went and fastened all the silk-covered buttons up the back. When she turned to face me, I just shook my head. “You’re a vision, Margot Vola. Jacob is so lucky.”

She laughed softly. “I never thought I’d be a bride this late in life. But I think I can still pull it off?”

“Of course you can. And maybe sometimes, this is just how long it takes to find your unicorn.” I tried to hold onto my smile for her, to be happy for my mom.

But the thought of that... of waiting for another almost thirty years from now to meet my own Jacob... was fucking depressing as hell.

“Yes,” she agreed, and she laughed softly. Because Mom knew all about my unicorn theory. “It really did.”

“Oh. I have the jewelry for you.” I went to get the boxes Danica had given me. She’d designed a special set for Mom. Gold adorned with rubies that probably cost a small fortune; I’d actually felt nervous walking around with them. They were a gift from Jacob. He’d wanted Danica to make Mom something really special.

I took out the necklace and the earrings and helped Mom put them on.

“Danica wanted to have a look, before you wear them up the aisle. To make sure everything is perfect. But I asked her if I could give them to you tonight. You know, so we could just... have this moment.”

Mom gazed at me as I stood back to look at her.

“You look like a queen, Mom.” I nodded at the full-length mirror across the room. “Go. Have a look.”

She lifted her dress a little and made her way over to it, and I helped arrange the silk skirts around her.

“*Fantastique*,” she gushed. “Does this mean... I’m ready?”

She was. She was literally wearing her entire bridal outfit right now, down to the lingerie and jewelry. And everything was perfect.

“I think so. Unless you forget your panties or something.”

“Oh, Jolie. They’re on. It’s my groom’s job to take them off,” she added playfully.

I groaned. “I don’t need that imagery, Mom.”

She just smiled at me. “I can’t wait for the honeymoon! I feel like a virgin,” she whispered.

Ugh. My mother, in love.

It was amazing, really. I just didn’t want to encourage her to keep... sharing.

“Are you ready for that, too?” I asked carefully. “Like, packed? Or do you need any help?” They were staying here in Whistler for a few days after the wedding, but then they were flying down to St. Barts for a week.

“Oh, yes. We’re all packed.”

“Good.”

I’d packed up my bags to travel back to California, too. Everything was here with me. I’d leave here the day after the wedding to drive straight to the airport and fly home.

Home.

It really didn’t feel much like home anymore, if I was honest with myself. Not since coming back here and reconnecting with my family and Alyssa. And realizing how nothing had really changed here except, in a way, everything had. It had moved forward. And I’d missed out on all of it.

Going back to San Diego meant missing out on all of it in the future, too.

They’d all be here and I’d be missing out on them.

And on Shane.

“That’s it, then,” I reassured her. “Checklist complete. Everything you need to be a bride.”

“Thank you, so much, for all your help.” Mom took another look at herself in the mirror. “Are you sure this is it, though? We’ve remembered everything?”

I slid my arms around her waist from behind and rested my chin on her shoulder, meeting her eyes in the mirror.

“Everything is perfect, Mom.”

She sighed. “I don’t know why I’m so nervous. It’s silly.”

“You’ve had four years to prepare for this one. You’re more than ready.” I sighed, too. “And I’m sorry. If I was ever really a part of the reason you put off marrying Jacob for so long, then I owe you a huge apology.”

Mom slid her hands over mine and her eyes got glassy. “This one’s going to last, Jolie. I promise you.”

“You don’t owe me any promises like that, Mom. We’re both adults.”

“I know. But I’m your mother. I should provide stability in your life, no matter how old you are. And I haven’t done that very well.”

“Mom, you tried. Every time you got married, I knew you wanted it to last. You wanted me to have a dad who was... you know, better than him.”

She turned to me and cupped my face in her hand. “I really did. He’s your father. I’ll always be grateful that he gave me you. But he wasn’t a good dad and I never forgave him for that. Not until I met Jacob.” She lowered her forehead to mine, like she did when I was a little girl and we shared a secret. “You know what I learned?”

“What, Mom?”

“I couldn’t actually have a happy life, a true love, until I let my bitterness and anger towards him go. Until I forgave him for being a rotten husband and a terrible father. And until I accepted that it wasn’t my fault.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Mom. Dad is who he is. You couldn’t have changed him.” I took a breath and admitted, “I couldn’t, either.” Sadly, I’d found that out the hard way when I tried to

inspire some change in him and failed. That first year in California was damn hard.

It was a hard life lesson that I sorely needed to learn, apparently.

Mom studied me. “I’m so sorry for that. That you didn’t get a good father figure growing up.”

“I have one now. Thanks to you.”

She smiled. “You do have one now. And Jacob is so very fond of you, Jolie.”

“Yeah. I know. I can feel that. I like him, too.” I hesitated. “I think... I love him. Am I allowed to say that? It feels weird.”

Mom got all choked up about it, though. “Of course you’re allowed.”

“Don’t cry, Mom. Save that for the wedding, at least.”

She took my face and kissed my cheeks. “I love him, too. And even though you don’t want my promises, I promise you, like I’ll promise him when I walk down the aisle... this one is forever. *Amour éternel*.” She smiled at me, a dazzling, happy smile, and I believed her.

I watched her as she spun in front of the mirror, looking at her dress again.

“It’s beautiful, Mom. You should take it off and get some rest.”

“You should, too,” she said, eyeing me.

“Just try to relax,” I told her, ignoring that probing look. She was probably wondering why *I* looked so damn tired. “And if you want, tonight would be a good time to write Jacob a note.”

“A note?”

“Yeah. Like a love note. Some brides like to do that. Something to give him, privately. The morning of the wedding, or whenever you like. A gift from you to him.”

“I thought you hated weddings,” she said wryly. “How did you become such an expert?”

“Well, I’ve been to enough of them,” I muttered.

Mom just smiled softly. And I hoped she wasn’t feeling too sorry for me.

“I’ll be fine, Mom,” I said dryly, heading for the door. “One day, I’ll meet my Jacob, okay?”

“Oh, darling,” she said. “I hope so.”

I left her alone to relax and write her note.

I headed down to the hotel lobby, then outside for a walk in the village, alone. Just breathing in the fresh evening air.

Summer in the Canadian mountains.

Maybe the last one I’d ever have.

I walked by the salon where I’d had that big fight with Mom and ran out in slippers, only to get caught in a rain storm, and it actually made me smile. *So ridiculous.*

Why did we always hurt the ones we loved the most?

I loved Mom, hard. If I’d learned anything in my time down in California, getting to know my dad—the little he’d actually let me know him—I’d learned that.

I never even fought with Dad. Because there was no point.

The reason I fought with Mom was *because* I loved her. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t bother.

There would be nothing to fight *for*.

I wandered toward Black Bear Grille and stopped. I looked at the building with its stone face, the heavy glass doors, the wood and black iron of the sign over the door.

Then before I could talk myself out of it, I walked in.

“Hello. Welcome to Black Bear Grille. Have you dined with us before?” The hostess, another beautiful Aussie, greeted me.

“Uh, no, actually. Not really. Just a drink.”

“Would you like a seat at the bar?”

“Could I have a table?”

“Of course. Right this way.”

Well, she was a lot nicer than the last one. But hey, I didn't look like something a tornado had coughed up tonight.

I must've looked lonely or sad or something, though, because after she'd seated me at a nice table in the middle of the lounge, she leaned into me and said gently, “I'll check on you in a bit, hon.”

I watched her walk away.

Then I looked around. The lounge looked exactly the same as I remembered it, and I was suddenly hit with such a wave of conflicting emotions, I had to bite down on my tongue to keep from crying.

There was no gorgeous, mysterious stranger sitting in the corner, though. And somehow that just felt terribly wrong. Like this beautiful, magical moment in time had passed me by. I'd let it slip through my fingers.

Four years ago.

He left me his number and I didn't call him.

At the time, I just couldn't see past the fact that who he was meant that he was wrong for me.

Because it was easier for me to believe that he wanted to hurt me than that he actually just wanted me.

A cocktail waitress came and took my order. Just a simple, local beer. I would've ordered one of those fancy pink cocktails that he bought for me that night, if they still had them on the menu, but I was afraid it would just make me too sad.

Then I pulled out the little pad of hotel stationery I'd brought with me, and I wrote a note to him.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Shane

I was at Johnny's place again, and this time Johnny actually tore himself away from his music studio. He said he was working on a bunch of new songs, which was great, considering the shit he'd been through recently with losing his band and his record deal, and basically having to start over. But he joined me in his gym.

He didn't work out, though. Him and Lex just sat at the bar while I did my leg workout. My hands were so fucked from the fight, they needed to heal before I could put them to work in the gym again.

I didn't even have a reason to be working out, really. I didn't have a new fight scheduled, and I wasn't sure when I would. I just knew that if I sat around and didn't work myself out of this slump I was in, I'd go crazy. It was early evening and I'd already spent most of the day in and out of the gym, restless and struggling to focus.

All I could seem to think about was Jolie.

I knew she was in Whistler now, with the rest of the family, and it was murdering me slowly, this monumental effort to stay away from her. To just leave her the fuck alone.

Let her go.

"How are your hands doing?" Johnny asked me, as he watched me do seated calf raises. He'd been pretty quiet.

So had Lex, which was usually not a good thing.

“Nothing broken,” I muttered. “They’ll heal.”

I saw them exchange a look.

Usually, they’d join me in a workout. You know, like if I gave them a heads up. But apparently Johnny had already worked out first thing in the morning, while I was still moping in bed. And Lex said he was “saving his energy for the bedroom,” whatever that meant. He must’ve had a date planned with his wife tonight.

He didn’t bring her to the fight, and Maddox didn’t bring his girl, either. None of my friends who came out to my fights ever brought their wives or girlfriends. Except Dane; he’d brought Devi to a fight, just once, shortly after they were married, and only because I basically goaded them both into it.

Fuck, I really was an asshole sometimes.

Johnny didn’t even come to this fight. I’d noticed that he only came out to my fights when he was in a bad mood, drinking a lot and looking for trouble. He hadn’t been in that kind of mood for a long while. Now that he’d found peace with Angeline...

Peace.

That’s what it was I saw in him now, right?

I knew what that felt like, maybe. There were moments, with Jolie, when it felt so damn right, peace was definitely the word for it. In those fleeting moments, there was nothing to fight. Everything just fit.

And they *were* fleeting.

Maybe because I found them so unnerving that I didn’t let myself hold onto them. Instead, I stirred the pot, creating conflict, when there didn’t have to be any.

Maybe that was what disturbed me the most. I didn’t know how to just sink into it. Whatever I felt for her... Surrender to it. Just be at peace with it, for however long it lasted.

I just did not like losing control. I couldn't control her life. It was out of my hands that she was leaving, and I fucking hated it.

She was in control of that, but it was affecting my life, too.

You love her, idiot.

Just call it what it is.

At least be man enough to be honest with yourself if you can't be honest with her.

Fuck, did I love her.

It was glaringly obvious to me by now.

Was it obvious to her? And to everyone around me?

Because it was obvious to me when Dane fell for Devi, like long before he fucking admitted it.

I glanced at my friends, sitting at the bar, sipping their drinks and watching me like I was the night's fucking entertainment.

Who put a bar in a gym anyway?

"What?" I barked.

Johnny's eyebrows rose. He cast a glance at Lex. "Do you want to tell him or should I?"

Lex looked amused. "I'm wondering if we should just leave it to Dane..."

"Dane isn't here. I don't think this can wait."

"*What* can't wait?"

"Well, Shane. It's Wednesday," Lex informed me.

"Uh-huh."

"She flies home on Sunday," Johnny said.

I stopped doing calf raises and looked at them again. *She*. They were talking about Jolie, obviously. How the hell did Johnny know that she was leaving on Sunday?

Or that it mattered to me at all?

Just then, Dane, accompanied by Johnny's girlfriend, Angeline, walked into the gym. "Dane's here," she announced brightly. She stopped short when she caught the vibe in the room, and the sight of my scowling face.

Dane didn't stop. He just strolled in take a seat at the bar next to Lex.

I glared at him when he smiled at me. Fucker was all privacy and discretion, his life walled in security and secrecy—until it was someone else's life, *my* life, that was up for discussion.

"What did I miss?" he asked lightly. He knew exactly what he'd just walked into.

Had they been planning this?

"Uh, do you guys need anything?" Angeline offered, slipping over to Johnny.

He reached for her, sliding a hand around her waist and the other into her hair. Then he kissed her. "No, Angel. We're good. I'll take you for dinner in a bit." They gazed into each other's eyes a generous beat longer than was comfortable for the rest of us, and there it was.

Peace.

"Okay... see you later, guys," she said happily and drifted back out, like the very air she breathed had been infused with serotonin.

Johnny looked about the same.

Dane just looked smug.

"Like we were saying," Lex said, "she leaves on Sunday. That means—"

"You've got less than four days to get your shit together," Dane finished for him.

They were all watching me. And clearly, they were all on the same page with this shit.

"Is this funny for you?" I asked them. "Is that it? You're all a bunch of pigs in shit, reveling in your happily-ever-after

bullshit, and I'm the punchline now?"

"You're calling my relationship bullshit?" Johnny said lightly.

"And mine?" Lex said.

"And mine," Dane said.

"Maybe I just don't subscribe to the belief in fairytales. Happily-ever-afters included."

"And you think I do?" Johnny said. "Do you think I ever thought there was an Angeline out there for me? I never believed that, until it happened. I never would've even believed you if you told me so."

"So?"

"So, why don't you tell us how not in love with her you are," Dane said, "and how you don't see any kind of future with her because you've never even thought about it. And how you don't care she's leaving in four days. Say that to my face. I want to hear it."

"And while you're at it," Lex put in, "maybe you can tell us that you didn't almost get your ass destroyed in that fight because you saw her in the crowd."

"I did not."

"He dropped you on your ass. You didn't even know what happened for like five seconds there."

"I saw her," I said. "So what?"

"Yeah, I did too," he said. "She looked fucking horrified."

"Well, maybe I need a woman who isn't fucking horrified watching me do what I do for a living."

"She wasn't horrified by you," Lex amended. "She was horrified *for* you. She was like, heartbroken, watching you do that shit to yourself."

"What shit?" I bit out.

My friends went silent.

I got up and toweled the sweat off my chest, fucking waiting. I did not like this feeling. That my friends were all fucking judging me or something. Collectively.

Then Johnny said, “Fighting, Shane. Fighting like *that*. Lax security, lax rules, lax safety precautions...”

“Is it so wrong that she doesn’t like seeing you get hurt?” Dane asked me.

“Why are you all ganging up on me here?” I asked them irritably.

“Because we’re your friends,” Johnny said. “And you’ve helped every one of us figure out shit in our own lives. You’ve been a great friend, Shane. We’re just trying to pay it back.”

“How? By fucking interventioning me on my relationship with a woman who’s leaving me in four days?”

“So, that’s it,” Dane said. “You feel like she’s leaving you, so you’re not gonna bother telling her you don’t want her to.”

I really wanted to tell him to shut the fuck up.

But he was right. And when he said it like that... it sounded pretty fucking pathetic.

Because I wasn’t gonna bother. Officially, as of this morning, I pretty much decided that I wasn’t gonna bother.

But then every time I thought of her in her life down in California, it made me feel sick all over again.

And every time I thought of her face at the fight, and afterwards, in the limo... It killed me a little more. She *was* horrified.

Was that really the memory of me I wanted to leave her with?

She cared about me. I knew she did.

But not enough to tell me she wasn’t going back to San Diego.

She wasn’t staying.

“Maybe there’s no reason for me to tell her not to go,” I said bitterly. “You ever think about that?”

My friends all just stared at me, looking unimpressed as shit, and I wondered what ridiculous crap they were about to say. Some bullshit at the end of a rom com. *We’ve never seen you like this. No one makes you happy like she does. Quit moping around and just go get her!*

But they didn’t say any of that shit.

“You keep fighting,” Dane said evenly, “eventually, you have no one left to fight. And then what happens? Who do you fight? The guy in the mirror? That sounds like a pretty sad way to grow old, if you ask me.”

I scowled at him. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the car accident.”

I went and pulled my shirt on. “Why the fuck are you bringing that up?” My voice was rising. I needed to get out of here.

“Because, Shane. You’ve never been the same since that accident. And someone should fucking tell you.”

I looked at him.

“What happened to that guy?” he asked me.

“What guy?” I spat.

“The guy you were in high school,” he said calmly. “The guy I met in sophomore year, when I moved out here. That kid had charisma just falling out of his pockets and so much talent. Not just talent for hockey. Talent for *life*. And you know what? He was fucking happy. He was gonna play pro hockey—”

“Yeah,” I growled. “Well, that kid fucking died.”

Dane just stared at me. They all stared at me.

“What are you talking about?” he said.

“He died, Dane. That car went off a fucking cliff and smashed. They had to pry me out. And you know what, that

kid never came with me. I woke up in a hospital bed to find out..." I stopped talking. I couldn't get the words out.

"What?" Dane pressed.

"I woke up to find out that my whole life was over," I said through the lump in my throat. "That kid was fucking dead."

The room had gone scarily silent.

My pulse was pounding in my head, like I'd just been sucker punched or something. And the weirdest thing in the middle of it all was the way Johnny looked at Lex.

Dane didn't even see it. He was still staring at me. But Johnny had turned to Lex, and Lex had gone fucking pale. I watched his knuckles turn white as he gripped his beer.

"Lex, man," Johnny said in a low voice. "I think you need to tell him."

Lex looked like he was staring at a ghost. He was staring at me, but he didn't look right. I'd never seen that look on his face.

"What?" I demanded. "Tell me what?"

Lex set his beer carefully on the bar.

"What's going on?" Dane said when he saw Lex's face.

"Dane." Johnny got to his feet. "Let's go upstairs." He took Dane's arm and tugged him to his feet.

"What...?" Dane said.

Lex still looked pale. "I don't think I—"

"Yes. You really do," Johnny said firmly but gently, cutting Lex off. "Let's go." He nudged Dane toward the door, and Dane went with him, throwing me a look. *What the hell?* that look said.

I had no idea what the hell.

Then Johnny and Dane were gone, and I was alone with Lex in that weirdly silent room, with my heartbeat pounding in my head.

And Lex still had that look on his face.

“Maybe we should sit down,” he told me. But he was already sitting on a bar stool.

I went behind the bar and poured myself a vodka. I leaned on the bar and stared him down. “What’s going on?”

“You know I love you and everything, right?”

I took that in. “Okay, that was an ominous way to start a conversation, bro. Yeah. Sure, I know you love me. We’ve been brothers a long time.”

“And I’d never do anything to hurt you.”

I just stared at him. Why was I getting creeped out?

I took a sip of my vodka, studying him. Lex wasn’t exactly a guy to get rattled easily. Most of the time he was calm and collected. Easy going. He had a good heart. Cared about his friends, loved the hell out of his wife. But he was a biker, too. He was tough.

I just couldn’t make sense of the vibe he was giving off right now. I could see it all over his face. Like... guilt or something. He looked sick, actually.

“What happened, Lex? What does Johnny want you to tell me?”

He cleared his throat. “You know that thing Johnny told you about, last month? That thing from his childhood?”

Yeah. I knew that thing.

It wasn’t something I’d ever forget. It wasn’t something I liked to think about, either. Johnny had told me, in confidence, about a terrible incident from his childhood that had pretty much fucked him up for life. And I’d promised him that I wouldn’t talk to anyone about it. I promised myself that I wouldn’t bring it up, ever, unless Johnny wanted to talk about it again.

Obviously, he must’ve told Lex the same story. And I was sure that Lex would’ve promised to keep it to himself, too. I really wasn’t sure why he’d bring it up to me.

“Yeah...” I said carefully.

“When he told me,” Lex said, “I knew it was really fucking hard for him. Obviously. And I guess I felt compelled to share, too. So he wasn’t the only one being, you know, vulnerable. I told him some shit from my past that I wasn’t proud of. He thinks I should tell you, too. And he’s right.”

“So... tell me.”

“Just... tell me something first. Are you actually thinking of letting Jolie go?”

This, again. Why the fuck was he bringing her up?

“What if I am?”

“Shane, she’s all you’ve thought about since she showed up in town. It’s brutally obvious. I’ve never seen you so obsessed about anything, even training, winning a fight... and I’ve definitely never seen you half as wrapped up in any other woman. You barely mention their names as they come and go. This girl... you say *Jolie* like she’s life. Don’t you know that you’re in love with her?”

Everything he said was true.

And everything he said just fucking hurt.

“If I let her go, it’s not because I don’t love her.”

“Yeah, you made that pretty clear just now. You’re giving her up because you think you don’t deserve her.”

“That’s not true.”

Maybe there was some truth in that, though.

“Well, it’s either that or you think you’ve got nothing to offer her. Because, why? That guy you were in high school is dead?”

“Maybe he really is.”

“You think you deserve to be dead instead, is that it? The right part of you died, and the wrong part of you survived that crash?”

A dark shiver ran right through me.

Yeah. So. There it was.

The ugly truth. Just hanging out for all to see.

Kind of felt like Lex had just peeled me open. And he hadn't even fucked me.

Very weird feeling.

"I mean, I get that you care," I told him. "But why are you so upset about this? Do you really care if I hook up with Jolie or not? If it's not her, it'll be someone else soon enough, right?"

Damn, that was cynical. Even for me. It was a terrible fucking thing to say about Jolie. But really, was it any of his business?

"Is that how you really feel?" he asked me. "You're gonna toss away any hope you have of real happiness, over and over again, because of a fucking car accident eleven years ago that you just won't let yourself recover from?"

"I'm fucking recovered."

"Physically, maybe." He dragged his hand over his face. "I know it was hard for you, Shane. I was there, through your recovery. And I probably should've told you enough times that you'd actually listen, that it wasn't your fault. I can see now, you really thought it was your fault. You still think it's your fault... But Shane, that car accident was not your fault."

"I mean, how do you know? You weren't there."

"But I know what happened."

Yeah. We all knew what happened. That someone cut his brake line.

And I was the unfortunate bastard driving his car.

"Is this something to do with the Kings?" I asked him.

"No. Not the Kings." He swallowed, then forced out, "My dad."

Okay, that did not sound good. Lex's dad was a notorious gangster.

I'd never met the guy. Lex hated him. Had nothing to do with him. He lived on the other side of the country, in Toronto or somewhere around there. I didn't really know much about him except that he was a member of the Italian Mafia and Lex basically told me, years ago, never to ask about it. So, I didn't.

"Whatever it is," I told him quickly, "we can figure it out. I've got your back."

Lex shook his head. "Not on this. On this, Johnny was right when he told me, the moment I told him, that I should've told you the whole truth. I should've told you long ago, but I was afraid. I was fucking afraid you'd blame me. That you'd hate me. Because it was my fault."

"What was your fault?"

"The car accident."

My mind was turning it over, and fucking over, trying to understand. What the fuck was he talking about?

The brakes caused the accident. The icy road.

The brake line that was cut.

"My dad caused the car accident, Shane. It was him."

Blood rushed to my head. Weirdly, my ears rang, like I'd just been hit. I was consumed with rage and jarring shock, all at once.

"He cut the brakes on your car... *your own fucking father*... to hurt you? That accident was meant for you?"

"No, actually..." I could see the tears glimmering in Lex's eyes now. "I'm pretty sure it was meant for you."

I stared at him.

"But Shane," he said, "it's not your fault. It's my fault."

I went home that night feeling like I'd had the snot beaten out of me. As soon as I stepped into my apartment I started crying.

I knew it was the release of pent-up emotion, the come down from the fight finally bottoming out... and the let down of losing her... all of it, hitting me fucking hard.

And everything Lex said to me.

My friend. Who'd fucking lied to me, for years.

Or at the very least, didn't tell me the whole fucking truth.

I stood myself in a hot shower for a long time, just letting the tears get washed away so I couldn't feel them, until they finally stopped. Then I lay flat out on my bed, as everything I'd ever told myself about that car accident, and the massive chip it left on my shoulder, the wall I'd built up about it, all my beliefs, my hangups, my fears, seemed to come crashing down around me.

All because of this one terrible truth.

My dad caused the car accident, Shane.

Lex had finally told me this secret that had probably haunted him for years, carrying the burden of all that guilt, all that blame, because he was afraid I'd turn my back on him?

Which was a strange fucking conundrum. He'd done something that ultimately hurt me, because he loved me that much. Because he didn't want to lose me.

Tonight, he'd seemed to think that all my problems were because of that accident. That I was pushing Jolie away now, or letting her go, because I thought I deserved that shit.

And I did.

Yes, the brake line was cut. I found that out while I was in the hospital. Lex said someone probably had it out for him. Biker war stuff.

I'd never believed it.

He was fronting, and I could tell.

The accident was my fault. I knew that as soon as I woke up in the hospital and remembered what happened. The brakes not working. Losing control of the car on that icy mountain road...

I'd always had a talent for making enemies. I'd always been a fighter, even before I was officially a fighter.

I'm pretty sure it was meant for you.

It was Lex's car, but I knew someone cut that brake line for *me*. Deep down, I always fucking knew it.

It was on me.

In that hospital, I was lying in the bed I'd made.

And maybe he was right. I'd gone on blaming myself for the accident, for losing my hockey career, from that day on. I'd had it all. An amazing life. And I'd fucked it all away.

Don't let her go because of that shit.

Don't lose her, if she's what you really want.

That's what he said to me tonight.

That accident was not your fault. My dad did it to hurt me. To punish me for leaving him and walking away from the Mafia. It's what they do.

I believed him.

But I still didn't blame him.

I shouldn't have been there that night at all, driving up the mountain to visit some buddies at a bar on the ski hill. I shouldn't have taken Lex's car without asking. I shouldn't have been drinking. There were so many *shouldn't*s in my life, somewhere over the years I'd started to thrive on them.

Being an asshole was all gonna come down on me someday, and it did. It caught up with me young. Before I'd had the chance to mature and wise up, grow up. That night, it came down on me with the force of a one-and-a-half-ton car crushing in on me.

Don't let it ruin your life, Shane.

You didn't die that night.

You're still here. You're still fighting.

He was right. They were all right.

I was still fighting. Always.

I'd never realized before, though, that it was such a fucking problem.

Late in the night, I remembered something I'd said to Dane, after he'd married Devi and they were having some issues.

He'd accused me of messing with him, back in high school; messing with Devi, to mess with him. Since I was guilty of exactly what he'd accused me of, I admitted it to him. He'd asked me why. Why I would do that to him?

I was pissed that you always got everything you wanted, just handed to you, I'd told him. For once, I wanted to see you fight for something you wanted.

I'd pushed Dane hard on the fact that he'd let Devi go, back in high school, just let her slip through his fingers. And that he was doing it all over again.

That he hadn't fought for her all along.

Because I was a fighter; that was how I saw myself. Never mind that I'd never fought for any woman in my life.

I fought for everything else.

I created the fight, almost everywhere I went, even when there wasn't one there.

And I did it with Jolie, seeing her as an opponent when she wasn't one. When she didn't call me after that night we spent together, four years ago... I just assumed the worst.

That she thought I wasn't good enough for her.

That she was humiliated when she realized who I was, because I was so far beneath her.

She *was* humiliated. But for an entirely different reason. Because she thought I played her. That my name and number on that note were a taunt.

Ever since she'd told me so, I should've been fighting to prove to her that she was wrong. That I'd never set out to hurt her that way.

But my pride wouldn't let me. I couldn't let the chip on my shoulder towards her go that easily. Not until she came around first.

I'd come on strong, yes.

But I'd never fought for her.

If anything, I made her fight for me. I'd orchestrated everything. Had her playing the game my way. Taking advantage of her submissive nature to keep control.

I'd screwed her at my dad's place, within an inch of getting caught, to make her prove to us both how much she wanted me, how much she'd be willing to do for me. And how much control I had over her.

It was bullshit.

She had all the control. If she called me right now, in the dead of night, I'd be there like a salivating dog.

All she had to do was say *cold* to stop me cold. If she uttered *California*, my whole world would've stopped.

But she didn't even have to say California, did she.

California was the iceberg looming in the dark and my heart was the Titanic. I could see it coming, but it didn't matter.

I was about to sink.

My whole life had felt like a battle to survive. It was engrained in me. Because all my life, it felt like the life I'd been given could be taken away again. I hadn't really earned it. I hadn't even been born into it. It wasn't mine.

It was given to me, with love, by a man who didn't have to love me. A man who still loved me, despite all the ways I'd fucked up, let him down.

Maybe I felt like I'd finally earned that life when I got so good at hockey. When I got drafted, had my chance to go pro.

But then I'd lost it.

So, I just kept fighting. Fighting everyone and everything around me.

Maybe I was afraid that if I ever gave up the fight, it would all be over. I'd have nothing left. I wasn't a hockey player. What would I be now if I wasn't a fighter, either?

The problem was, when you kept looking for a fight, no matter how long it took, you'd always get a fight. If you threw up your fists enough, eventually someone would fight you back.

And Dane was right. When you realized that it was just a mirror you were looking into, that you were only fighting yourself, how could you ever win?

You couldn't outfight the perfect opponent. You couldn't submit him. You couldn't possibly knock him out.

And so you just kept swinging, round after round, year after year... Until maybe you finally got wise to the fact that the fight really should've been over long ago. And mercifully, graciously... you finally tapped the fuck out.

Maybe it was just time for me to give up the fight.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Jolie

It was the evening of my mom's wedding.

And Shane still wasn't here.

I was standing at the back of the big banquet room, where the wedding ceremony was about to get started, followed by the reception.

It was an absolute dreamscape.

The venue staff and my aunts and cousins had worked tirelessly yesterday to help me get it all ready. And here we were, transported back in time to some old-Hollywood soirée, complete with red carpet, decorated in white and gold, with lush red roses everywhere. There was subdued chandelier lighting and glitter and happy faces. The bridal party in our classic red dresses, handsome men on our arms decked out in suit and tie, black and white, with red rose boutonnieres.

There was no one on my arm, though.

I'd gone with Mom's preference, in the end. Of course. Shane was to escort me down the aisle, because at this point, I couldn't imagine anyone else doing such a thing.

Trouble.

"If he doesn't show up," Aunt Madeleine had told me, "let's have Ashley and Matt escort you down the aisle. Danica is the only one of us who's married, so it makes sense that her

husbands do it.” Maybe she could sense that I did not want to walk down the aisle alone.

Especially if I had to do it because Shane just didn’t show up.

“Okay,” I told her, because it was a good backup plan. And I didn’t want her to worry.

But I just kept telling myself we wouldn’t need it.

He’ll be here.

The wedding guests were all in their seats, waiting. And I was trying to convince myself that this wasn’t happening. It was like I was in some altered reality, my body and mind unwilling to accept the truth.

He’s not here.

Two days ago, all the members of the wedding party and the out-of-town guests had gathered for the welcome party. But Shane wasn’t among us. Last night, we had the wedding rehearsal and dinner, and apparently, Shane had said he wouldn’t make it. Madeleine told me. He’d spoken to Jacob about it.

He was still supposed to show up for the wedding, though.

But we were like minutes from walking down the aisle here.

According to Madeleine, Dani and Danica, who were all on lookout for me now, every time I asked them, he still hadn’t arrived in Whistler.

I wouldn’t believe that he’d actually skip out on his dad’s wedding. He wouldn’t be that cold, that cruel to Jacob, no matter how he felt about things between him and me right now... He wouldn’t do that. I knew he wouldn’t.

He cared about people, including his dad. I heard it in his voice when he spoke about them. He loved his family, despite the fact that he struggled with believing that they loved him back.

And as it turned out... I was right.

Because just before the ceremony started, he walked in.

The wedding party had slipped into the corridor outside the big banquet hall to get into place, and I felt him at the same moment I turned to see him. Like a moon quietly ascending to draw the oceans to it, he took his place in my line of sight and I couldn't look away.

And right then, as I stood watching him, his dad greeting him with tears in his eyes and giving him a hug... I knew that I loved him.

Because the thought of having to say goodbye to him and get on a plane tomorrow, and fly away into a future without him, just plain hurt.

Terribly.

He looked stunning in his black suit. I'd never actually seen Shane in a full-on formal suit and tie. He was also wearing the ring I gave him, on his right pinky finger. I saw it as he stood talking with Brandon and he smoothed his tie. He looked guarded, not relaxed, but calm and in control.

I wondered what he was feeling.

I wondered if he'd missed me like I'd missed him. If this week had been even half the torture for him as it had been for me.

I knew it, so clearly, as I looked at him...

I didn't need space.

I didn't need time.

I didn't need to think about it. I had no unanswered questions about him in my heart.

I love him.

It was that simple.

I wondered if he was dying to look around, to look for me, as his family gathered around, greeting him. He was the last Ellis to arrive, by far, and he definitely got a warm welcome. I wondered if any of them had truly worried that he wouldn't show up.

I watched them all greet him, one by one, as Jacob disappeared into the banquet hall to take his place at the altar. Then Mom appeared, on the arm of her uncle Bernard, seizing everyone's attention. And when Mom saw Shane, she moved in to give him a hug and a cheek kiss.

His gaze skipped over to me. Our eyes locked. He either felt me staring at him or he knew I was standing here the whole time.

I sucked in a breath.

Then his eyes moved back to my mom. He spoke to her for a moment, and then he started towards me.

I stood paralyzed, just waiting for him, clutching my bouquet of roses. And when he reached me, he looked straight into my eyes. He didn't smile.

"Hello, Jolie," he said softly, and I utterly melted.

"Hello, Shane." My voice shook.

"You look so beautiful." He didn't even look at my knockout dress. He just stared into my eyes.

He offered me his elbow, but didn't say another word as Aunt Mireille got us reorganized. Shane's arrival had stirred us all up. My heart thudded, faster than normal, in my chest. He smelled so good. He felt so good standing next to me.

We'd do our walk down the aisle, we'd stand quietly through the ceremony, and then we'd have dinner. And at some point, I'd get a chance to talk to him. Alone.

As we all took our places in the order of things, with Shane among us, it felt *right*. I felt better. I felt closer to whole, in a weird way. I didn't want to need a man in order to feel whole.

But there was no denying that when Shane and I were apart this week, he held onto a piece of me.

The ceremony was lovely.

But dinner was excruciating. Four courses, with many interruptions for toasts, jokes and stories. I'd seated Shane next to me at the head table, but unfortunately Uncle Bernard was on my other side and the man could talk. To be fair, he hadn't seen me in years and he was very keen to keep up with the younger generation of the family.

I tried to give him my attention and answer all his friendly questions about my life in California, feeling sick about it the whole time.

I really wanted to talk to Shane, but he spent most of dinner talking to Aunt Marie on his other side. That woman could talk, too.

Damn.

Poor planning, Jolie.

I valued my family, so much. The idea of leaving them again was kinda heartbreaking. But I was struggling to take it all in, absorb and appreciate this moment, when my focus was so split.

Tonight, I was too fixated on the man I stood to lose.

His eyes met mine a few times, but then he always looked away. He never said anything to me except, "Do you want some more wine?" Then he refilled my glass for me from the bottle on the table.

When our dessert plates were finally being cleared away and after dinner drinks were rolling out, people started getting up to mingle. The lighting dimmed down and Mom and Jacob went up to have their first dance, to Etta James, "At Last."

Shane didn't move from his seat, so neither did I. Uncle Bernard had gone to mingle, but Aunt Marie was still talking Shane's ear off.

Then the party really got started. The DJ dropped Justin Timberlake and JAY-Z, "Suit & Tie," and guests of all ages headed to the dance floor. It was one of those perfect songs you could dance fast or slow to, and people did both, couples swaying or bumping and grinding. Danica's husbands were

chatting with Charlotte and Aunt Mireille at their table, and Dani and Danica ran to the dance floor, twirling each other.

I laughed softly, watching them.

Then Shane's eyes collided with mine, as we both looked at each other at the exact same second. Aunt Marie had disappeared.

"Do you want to dance?" he asked me.

Dear God, yes.

"Okay—"

I barely got the word out before a hand landed on Shane's shoulder and squeezed. "Shane. How's it going, brother?" Joss. He held out his hand and they did a casual handshake, and my stomach sank as Joss settled into Marie's vacated seat and they got talking.

Darcy was right behind Joss and they clearly wanted to chat with their brother.

I slipped out of my chair. "Here, have my seat," I offered Darcy. Then I dashed off to the ladies' room to freshen up and get my shit together.

He asked me to dance. Once his brothers had a chance to chat with him, we'd dance.

When I emerged from the ladies room, I went over to the table where Mireille and Charlotte were still sitting. Ashley and Matt were now dancing with Danica and Dani. I visited with my aunt and cousin for a while, keeping an eye on Shane and his brothers. All four of them were sitting together at one end of the head table now.

It was nice to see that, really. I didn't want to interrupt.

But in the back of my mind was this terrible doomsday clock ticking down, and it was just getting louder and louder.

My plane was leaving in less than twenty-four hours.

Shane's eyes met mine a few times, briefly, and I wondered if I should go over there. If he was ever going to

break away so we could dance. If there was anything I could do that would get him to come over here.

Something good.

Something bad.

Did I want to be a bad girl? Misbehave in order to earn punishment, to get his attention?

No. And yes.

I'd take his attention any way I could get it.

When he looked at me, it felt like entire galaxies were spinning inside me, like I was basking in the glow of a secret moon that was all my own, and a thousand dark stars were bursting apart, burning only for me.

I'd never felt like that when any other man looked at me.

How could I walk away from that?

All he had to do was say one word.

Stay.

Or another word; I'd take many. *Want. Need. Love.*

If he wanted me, if he needed me, if he told me he loved me... I knew now, I'd stop everything. My entire life, halted in its tracks for that man. Time and distance would mean nothing. I'd live wherever he wanted me to. The world would stop spinning and I would just stay put, waiting on the next word from him.

I'd follow his orders.

I'd do his bidding.

I'd service his every desire.

I'd even get down on my knees and beg, if he wanted me to.

I'd do anything he wanted me to if he just said the fucking word.

But he still wasn't coming over here and I couldn't just sit here anymore, pretending that I was okay with it. I was not

okay with it. I could barely breathe with missing him, and I hadn't even left the country yet.

I had to see him, up close. I had to talk to him tonight.

I got up and excused myself from the table, and made my way toward him. I could drift right past him and out into the hallway beyond the head table, and maybe he'd pick up on my vibe and follow me.

But as I drifted closer, I got nervous. He was holding my gaze. And the closer I got, the more I could see him clearly.

The strain behind his eyes. The dark things that weighed on him, that he usually carried so well. They were heavy on him now, and he wasn't smiling at me. He wasn't undressing me with his eyes.

He was just staring at me like I was his universe, and the whole damn thing was about to split right open.

My heart was slamming in my chest and my hands were shaking. I was desperate to touch him, to hear what he was thinking.

Was he feeling what I was feeling right now? This terrible dread about saying goodbye tomorrow?

He'd removed his suit jacket during dinner and draped it on the back of his chair. As I passed behind him, I dared to drift my finger across his back, just lightly, between his shoulder blades. Where I knew he'd feel it through his shirt, but no one would likely see.

"Jolie."

I startled as someone spoke my name, and when I looked up, Joss smiled at me. I stopped, and Shane's brothers all looked at me. But he didn't.

"Hi," I said.

"I hope you're enjoying yourself tonight," Joss said. "You've worked hard on the wedding. Dad and Margot are so happy, thanks to you."

“Oh. Uh, I didn’t do that much. Just kind of dove in at the eleventh hour to make sure it didn’t all fall apart.”

“You’re being modest,” Joss said easily. “Which seems to be usual for you. I hope I’m not embarrassing you. We just wanted to say thanks.”

“Yeah,” Darcy put in, “you stepping up meant way less wedding shit for me to think about, so thank you.”

My cheeks were burning. I didn’t really need the thanks or the attention. It was nice of them, though.

“You really don’t—”

“We do. Seriously,” Darcy said. “Any time anything wedding related came up this month, Dad and Margot were all, ‘Don’t worry, Jolie’s on it.’”

“Oh. Well, it was my pleasure.”

“From us,” Brandon said, and he pulled an envelope from inside his suit jacket and handed it to me.

“Uh, should I open this?” I darted a glance at Shane. I was standing kinda behind him, and he still wasn’t looking at me.

“Please do,” Brandon said.

I opened the envelope and found a small thank you card signed by all four of Jacob’s sons. And a small stack of gift cards.

“We know you like coffee, so...” Brandon said casually.

Uh, yeah... there were a couple of gift cards to cafés in here. There were also several for women’s clothing boutiques, one for a shoe store and one for a bookstore. “You guys, this is so generous. You really don’t owe me any gift—”

“Take it,” Joss said. “What’s a sister for, if her brothers can’t spoil her?”

I tried to smile.

For obvious reasons, I would never see Shane as my brother.

But the rest of them were turning out to be pretty great stepbrothers, actually. As I pushed the cards back into the envelope, it registered that a few of the cards were for shops in my neighborhood down in San Diego. They'd done their research.

And Shane was in on it; helping pick out gifts I could use when I got back home...?

Maybe his brothers had picked them out, and he had no idea, just signed the card?

But the fact that he'd given me something to use when I got back to San Diego weighed me down with dread. It felt like another big step in the direction of *goodbye*.

I tucked the envelope into my purse. "Thank you. I would hug you all right now but then I'll probably cry and ruin my makeup, so... Maybe another time, okay?" I blinked back the tears that were forming in my eyes and starting to burn, partly because I was touched, and partly because Shane still wasn't looking at me and I had no idea how to take that.

"Anytime," Joss said.

Before I walked away, I gave Shane a last look. His shoulders were tight. He looked so guarded.

He was mad about the other day, maybe. The conversation we had after his fight. The way I left things.

And now... he was letting me go.

He was tapping out.

He'd given up on me. On us.

It's over.

I could feel it.

I forced myself to walk away. I made my way out of the banquet room and into the hallway, just seeking relief. Seeking somewhere I could be alone. I pushed through a set of doors and forced myself up the stairs, heading for my hotel room, maybe. I reached my floor and pushed blindly through another door. I almost burst into tears.

But in the silent hallway, I wasn't alone. I heard footsteps.

When I turned, I found Shane following me. I hitched in a breath, shocked. It almost knocked me over.

"You followed me," I breathed, my heart thumping. Joy and surprise and that awful dread all mingling together.

"You wanted me to," he said softly.

Yes, I did. "Thank you for the gift. That was very thoughtful."

"That was all Joss and Brandon."

I didn't know what he wanted me to say. What he wanted me to do.

I stared up into his eyes, waiting for his lead. His command.

Just tell me what to do and I'll do it.

But he didn't tell me to do anything.

He gazed at me, still looking guarded and like the universe was crumbling apart around him, as he suddenly cupped my face and pressed his thumb to my bottom lip. "You are so fucking beautiful," he murmured.

Then he drifted his hands gently down my dress, kind of skimming my curves, almost reverently...

And then he knelt down in front of me.

I stood there, stunned and fucking elated at once, as he pushed up my dress, the long slit falling open to reveal my panties. Then he peeled my panties down.

He kissed me, once, above my clit, and I fell back against the wall behind me.

Then he groaned and dove right in, eating me out with such adoration... I pressed myself against the wall so I wouldn't just fall right into him. As he lavished me with his mouth, his amazing tongue, every touch was only intensified by the fact that it was happening in a hotel hallway where anyone could discover us.

I wasn't about to stop him, though.

This was pure heaven.

He kept worshipping me with his mouth and I knew he wouldn't stop, either. Not until he got what he wanted. *My pleasure*. That knowledge just drove me higher, and as he sucked on my clit, I went off, fast, my core contracting with deep pulses. Pleasure. Ecstasy.

Agony.

Because God, I'd missed him.

How could I live without this?

Not just the sex. The connection. The feeling of being everything he needed, in moments like these. When he wanted nothing else but to make me feel good.

If that wasn't love, I did not know what the fuck was.

This selfless giving and caring...

And just as I was rolling in it, a door opened somewhere up the hallway. I heard it, heard voices, and froze. But I was still coming, and he was still lavishing me, groaning softly with his mouth between my legs.

The door shut again. Whoever it was didn't actually step out into the hall. But they might, any fucking second.

He heard that, right?

But he didn't stop.

"I... I can't," I stuttered as I finished falling apart.

He met my eyes as he came up for air, swiping his tongue over his lip.

"Your body says you can," he growled, and he dove right in again, making out with my pussy.

I tensed as the door up the hall opened again, and this time, someone stepped out. I held my breath. I grabbed onto Shane's head, sinking my fingers into his hair and squeezing. He went still, as I watched a couple emerge from their room down at the other end of the hallway. Mercifully, their backs were to

me, and they walked in the other direction, disappearing around a corner.

I smacked Shane's shoulder as soon as they were gone. "Oh my god!" I whispered. "They could've seen!"

"But they didn't, right?" He was fucking guessing. Because he didn't know. He didn't even look.

"Only because they didn't look over here! If they did, they would've seen me standing here with your face between my legs!"

He smirked a little. "So?"

"Get up!"

He got to his feet, taking his time. Then he grabbed me by the throat and pressed me against the wall, looking deep in my eyes. Just like that first night in the hotel room. And a moan slipped out of me.

Because I was desperate for him, for his every touch, every command, anything he wanted from me.

And he wanted me, too.

His other hand went straight to his belt. He snapped open the buckle and unzipped, grasped his hard length in his hand.

Because he wasn't done yet.

And I didn't want him to be.

This is insane.

My panties were already around my ankles, though, so really, all I had to do was yank one foot free. I did that, wrapping my leg around his hip, wanting him—hard and fast, before anyone discovered us—and he angled to enter me. Balancing on one high heel, I clung to him as he shoved into me with a groan.

I moaned shamelessly as he filled me for the first time in days.

Maybe the last time, ever?

I almost sobbed against his shoulder with that crushing thought, but bit my lip.

As he started pumping into me, his loosened suit pants fell down. And holy fuck, if anyone stepped into this hallway right now... they'd get an eyeful of Shane with his pants down, fucking me. And I still didn't want it to stop.

It felt so wrong and so damn right...

I'd missed his body.

I'd missed his possession.

I'd missed being his little dove.

"Please, Shane... *fuck*," I begged, not even sure what I was begging for.

Holy. Christ.

He had me begging.

And I didn't even care.

More than that... I felt warm about it. Very, very warm.

He didn't miss it.

He still had me by the throat, pinning me to the wall as he fucked me slow, and his other hand slipped between us. His fingertips found my clit and circled mercilessly, urging me to the edge again... as I whimpered and clung to him... begging for mercy, for more, for everything.

"Shhh," he soothed, and I met his eyes. "That's my good girl."

I bit my lip.

"Give it up again for Daddy," he murmured, gazing into my eyes. And I did as I was told. I couldn't help it when he took control, talked to me like that, touched me like that... I climaxed helplessly as he rubbed me, his cock still pumping slowly into me, his hand tight on my throat.

Then he looked down, so I looked, too. He pulled out partway and slid his hand around his shaft, started stroking

himself with the tip still notched into me. I moaned, so turned on, my heart pumping as I watched.

He groaned loudly, and I could see him come, the way his shaft pulsed and jerked in his hand. He jerked himself into me.

It was so fucking hot, my legs were shaking.

When he pulled out, he released my throat. He blew out a breath and struggled to do up his pants. He looked as savaged as I felt, his pupils big and dark as he gazed at me.

“I’m dripping,” I said in a daze as I regained my footing, clamping my legs together. “Holy shit. My room is right there.” I pointed at the door to my room. We were so close to it, but it never even crossed my mind to duck into it. “Are we animals or something?”

Shane started calmly removing his tie. With a small smirk he said, “Yes. We literally are.” Then he handed the tie to me, and I realized what he wanted me to do with it.

I used it to sop up his come between my legs. And I wondered if I could slip away for a quick shower and panty change without anyone noticing. “How long have we been gone?”

He’d pressed into me and was kissing my neck. “Not long enough...”

I pushed him back a bit so I could breathe. “Someone will see us.”

“There’s no one here.”

“I... I’m done, okay? Just... no more.”

I was still clutching his ruined tie as I tried to catch my breath, no idea what to do with it. There was nowhere to put it.

“Here, let me help you with that.” He took it and shoved it in the pocket of his shirt.

I smoothed my hair, trying to regain my composure. “I don’t understand you. You’re all over the place. One day you’re taking me for a walk on the beach and buying me dinner and screwing my brains out all night and literally the

next you're telling me you don't care if you even see me again before the wedding."

"I never said I didn't care."

"And the next time I see you, you're ignoring me in front of your family like I'm not even there."

"I thought that's how you wanted it."

"And then you're eating me out in a hallway and coming in me..."

"I thought you enjoyed that part."

What could I say to that? Of course I enjoyed it. The lightning-quick orgasms were pretty definitive proof. "I... I'd enjoy it a lot more if I knew I'd get to see you again."

There. I'd said it.

I'd fucking waited, because he was the Dominant, right? I'd waited for him to take control on this part. The most important part.

Our future.

But he hadn't said anything like that to me.

"You will see me again," he said.

"When?"

"Tomorrow, at the newlywed brunch. You don't leave until after that, right?"

We kept staring at each other, and it felt like there was a whole fucking universe of things that neither one of us was saying.

Or maybe it was just me.

I finally broke the silence. "How do I know you're not going to just ignore me in front of everyone again? Are you even going to say goodbye?"

For a moment, that guarded look in his eyes seemed to soften. "Stay with me tonight. Come back to my room with me. We can disappear. Right now."

“I can’t.” God, I wished I could. “Mom is expecting me to stay to the end of the reception. The dancing just started. I can’t just take off.”

He drew back a little. It was subtle, but I could feel his guard going up again. “Okay. Then I guess I’ll see you at brunch.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out before he’d turned his back to me and started walking away. Was he not coming back to the reception?

“Shane...”

He paused at the corner of the hallway, to look back at me. “Fix your dress, little dove.”

I looked down. I still had my freaking pussy out and I didn’t even notice.

What did this man do to me?

I hurried to shove my dress down as my heart hammered in my chest and my brain scrambled to figure out what to do here. Why wasn’t he asking me to stay?

When I looked up, he was already gone.

Did I just hurt his feelings or something? Because I couldn’t come back to his room with him, right now?

God, he was so confusing.

I did not understand him. But it didn’t even matter, did it.

Because I fucking loved him, and there was nothing either of us could do to change that.

He could let me go.

Hell, he could even tell me to go... and I’d still love him.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Shane

I stood on the balcony outside my hotel room in the dark, smoking a blunt. Looking out at the dark shapes of the mountains above the village, against the darker sky.

Today, I'd had a long conversation with my dad over the phone. I'd called him from the city. And instead of arguing with him about things I couldn't change, I actually just tried to listen to him. I listened when he told me how much he wanted me to be here tonight, and I believed him.

I told him I was sorry that I hadn't been around this week, or much at all. I told him I had a lot going on, things that I was dealing with. I told him that I was thinking about giving up fighting, and he didn't even lecture me about it, one way or the other.

Maybe in truth, he'd stopped lecturing me long ago, but I just failed to notice it. We didn't talk much about my fighting anymore. He didn't approve of it, because it was illegal. And maybe because he didn't want me getting hurt.

But today he didn't press me on any of it.

He was understanding. Supportive.

When I didn't come at him with that chip on my shoulder, that shield I'd thrown up between us, so long ago... I could feel my dad's love for me.

I didn't tell him about Jolie. I wouldn't do that without talking to her about it first. I would never want to make her the reason, if I didn't come to his wedding. Because that would be on me. I wouldn't confess to my Dad that I loved her before I even told her, either. And I definitely wouldn't tell my dad about any of it right before his wedding.

That would've been terrible timing. Selfish timing.

I'd come within an inch of not coming to the wedding at all, though. I'd considered just taking the whole possibility of seeing her again out of the equation, because I didn't know how I was gonna do it.

I was tired of fighting. At least, I was tired of fighting the wrong things.

I was tired of fighting with myself.

I promised myself, after Lex came clean with me about the car accident the other night, and I had time to think on it, that I'd stop fighting with myself. And fighting with everyone I loved, too.

Unless it was really something worth fighting about.

Because I was tired of trying to convince myself of things that didn't have to be true. And if that car accident really wasn't my fault... then a lot of the way I'd been looking at my life was untrue, too.

I didn't have to be a fighter.

I didn't have to be such a lone wolf.

I didn't have to be alone.

I didn't have to protect myself, so damn hard from everyone and everything.

But I couldn't be the boss of her, either.

Not on this.

The drive up to Whistler today, alone, just gave me more of what I didn't need, which was time alone to think about it. Because I'd already made up my mind, by the time I got in the car, knowing I'd be seeing her tonight.

I couldn't try to force Jolie to stay with me. I had to let her choose the life she wanted.

But I wanted more time with her. Whatever time I could get.

On that, I was still being selfish, maybe. Especially when I saw her tonight, in that red dress, looking like my heart come to life, beating right in front of me. And all I wanted to do was touch her. Take her in my arms and make her surrender in pleasure.

Make her want me.

But she was right. Ignoring her at the wedding reception fucking sucked for us both. But I couldn't look at her, not in front of our family. Because they'd know, wouldn't they? They'd know, just like my friends did, that I was fucking crazy about her.

I wanted her alone. But she didn't want to come back to my room with me. Because of her family. She had a right to want to spend this night with them. With her mom.

She's leaving them, too.

Don't be fucking selfish.

So I waited.

The reception was over at midnight, so just before midnight, I went down there. The banquet room was pretty cleared out. The DJ was playing some slow song and the staff were already starting to clean up.

Jolie was gone. And when I didn't see her there, my heart started pounding, fast and hard.

I went up to her room; she'd pointed it out to me after we had sex in the hallway. I knocked on her door. Twice. And I waited.

But she didn't answer.

Fuck.

I wondered where she was. If she was with her cousins. If I should call her, or text. I turned to leave—and there she was,

in the hall, right behind me.

I fucking sighed. “You’re here.”

She had to have heard the relief in my voice.

“I just tried to go to your room,” she said. “But I don’t know what room you’re in. The front desk wouldn’t tell me ___”

I grabbed her and kissed her. We kissed and kissed, for long minutes, just clinging to each other as the rest of the world disappeared. Nothing mattered but her mouth against mine, her body against mine, our hearts slamming together.

Then I remembered where we were.

“Open the door,” I told her. “I want to take you inside.”

She did.

“You look gorgeous in this dress,” I told her, and as soon as the door was shut, I unzipped the back and tore it off her. She wore a silky lingerie set, and I tore that off, too. I gripped her face and looked into her eyes. “You’re wearing colored contacts.”

“Yes.”

“For Margot.”

She shrugged. “For the wedding photos.”

I shook my head at her slowly. *My little dove*. “How many times am I gonna have to tell you that your eyes are fucking gorgeous, for you to believe it?”

Her lips opened and she sucked in a breath. “Keep saying stuff like that to me,” she whispered. “It’s like air.”

“You’re beautiful and perfect,” I told her, kissing her face. Then I walked her into the washroom, kissing her soft skin all the way. “Take out your contacts. And wash off your makeup. I want you naked.”

I stripped off my clothes as I got the shower running. And when her face was clean, I pulled her in under the warm water with me.

The sides of her hair were up and the rest was down. She gazed at me, her beautiful blue/green eyes wide, as I dug gently through her hair and plucked out the pins that were holding it up. Then I tipped her head back under the water. I soaked her hair and got her body all steaming and warm, and then I kissed her again. I kissed her and kissed her as the warm water ran over us.

I just wanted to feel her, naked against me.

I wanted to feel her coming for me.

I slipped my fingers between her legs, massaging her clit, and wrapped my other hand around her throat when she sighed.

“Come for me, Jolie.”

Her hands grabbed my biceps and gripped tight. “My legs will give out. I’ll fall.” Her body quivered as I rubbed her.

“You won’t fall. I’ve got you, and you’re strong. Come for me.”

I worked her wet clit with my fingers, gently, until I could see that look in her eyes I knew so well. I could hear it in her excited breaths. I could feel her body shaking.

I could feel the pleasure, when it snapped right through her.

I lapped my tongue through her mouth, kissing her slow and deep through her orgasm. When she finished, she was panting softly, still gripping my arms.

And I couldn’t take anymore.

I turned off the shower and dried us off, quickly. Then I picked her up, hiking her legs around my hips. She held on tight as I carried her out to the bed. I tossed her on it, falling on top of her.

Then I shoved my cock into her warmth and kissed her again, screwing my tongue into her soft mouth.

We fucked, deep and slow, kissing each other like every kiss was our next breath. Like we were each other’s air. Until

she came again, and the feel of her body convulsing in ecstasy beneath me took me over. I came, jerking into her, burying myself in her tight heat as the rush sent me spinning—head over heels.

I was fucking head over heels in love with Jolie Vola.

If this was love, I was just gonna take everything I could get tonight. I was going to give her everything I could. So I kissed her like a man who was afraid I might never get to kiss her again. Because I fucking loved her.

It didn't even matter if she didn't love me. If she couldn't ever love me because of who I was, who my father was.

For once, I was going to be fearless and just love her anyway.

And true love was selfless, right?

Letting her go would be the hardest thing I ever did.

I knew that now, here in her arms.

Harder than putting my life back together after it all crashed apart on that mountain road. Because without her...

I wasn't even sure if I'd be able to put myself back together, after breaking like that. The way I knew I was gonna break when she left.

Afterwards, I tucked her body tight against mine under the covers. She didn't say a word, except for when she sighed my name. *Shane*. She clung to me, breathing softly as I stroked her back, and after a bit, she fell asleep.

It always seemed easy for her to sleep in my arms. I liked to think it was because she was so satisfied, but maybe it was better than that. Maybe she felt safe with me.

I hoped she did. I hoped she'd learned that I would never hurt her on purpose.

And I'd never force her to do anything, including love me.

As I held her, I couldn't sleep. I couldn't bear to let her go, but I knew I had to. For once, I had to do the selfless thing. My life wasn't just about me. It was about the people who cared about me, too.

If I really cared about them, I had to know when to put them first.

I had to give her what she needed, which was her freedom. Her life down in California; the life she chose.

But it didn't mean we couldn't see each other again. I could fly down to see her. We could still work things out, if she actually wanted to keep seeing me. I knew it would be hard. I knew she felt like it had to be a secret, like our families wouldn't understand or support it.

She wasn't used to her family's disapproval the way I was.

But maybe, over time, we could figure all that out. I just didn't want to put any pressure on her.

She'd been pressured by her mom enough, all her life.

So I got up and I wrote her a note. I left it on my pillow for her to find when she woke up.

I'll miss you. This time, please call me.

Then I went for a long walk in the night. Just trying to decide what to do with myself. I knew I loved her. I knew she couldn't stay.

But I didn't know how to do this. It hurt too fucking much.

I went back to the hotel, to my room, planning to pack my bag, maybe. Maybe I just had to get out of here, or I was gonna fuck up and ruin this for her, her last day with her family. Make some stupid scene at the brunch, or when she got up to leave.

I knew now, after lying in that bed and holding her, I couldn't just watch her leave.

And I couldn't sit there at brunch and pretend I didn't love her.

I just couldn't do that anymore.

But when I walked into my hotel room, I found an envelope with my name on it, tucked under the door. I knew, as I opened it, that it was from her. There was a note inside.

With just four words written on it.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Jolie

I woke up in the night to find myself alone in bed. Shane was gone. The bed was empty and cold next to me when I reached out.

And there was a note on the pillow.

I turned on the lamp by the bed, fast, and picked it up, my heart beating in my throat.

I'll miss you. This time, please call me.

He left. Because I was leaving tomorrow.

This note was his goodbye.

My eyes flooded with tears. He wanted me to call him—from San Diego? And what, stay in touch? Exchange smoothie recipes? Like each other's Instagram posts and slowly die inside as we watched each other go on with our separate lives, miles apart, while our parents kept us apprised of one another's life highlights?

*Have you heard? Shane has a beautiful new girlfriend!
She's tres fantastique!*

Fuck that.

I swiped the tears from my eyes so I could see straight enough to call down to the front desk. When they wouldn't help me, I got dressed and went down to speak to them in person, again.

“Please. All I need is his room number.”

But they wouldn't give it to me. Apparently, it was against hotel policy to give out the room numbers of handsome clientele who were being stalked by bedraggled, crying women in the middle of the night. Or to tell said women whether or not said handsome clientele had in fact already checked out or not.

“Could you please just call up to him, then?”

They called up to his room, but he didn't answer. But at least that confirmed for me that he hadn't checked out and taken off back to the city.

I'd see him at the newlywed brunch tomorrow, right?

But I couldn't wait that long. And I couldn't risk that he wouldn't show.

He was the Dom. He'd chosen to up and leave my bed in the middle of the night. To leave me with a note. He could've stayed. Woken up with me.

But he didn't.

Why?

Terrified that I'd just be ignored because he'd already made his choice and that was it, I sent him a text anyway. And I didn't play sweet submissive. I just told him what I wanted him to do, praying that he'd just fucking do it.

Me: I'm at the bar, come find me.

I went straight to Black Bear Grille, which was in the hotel next door, and sat at the bar. I ordered a glass of wine, drank half of it, and freaked out.

After the wedding reception, when I tried to get his room number from the front desk the first time, I'd given them the note I wrote to him the other day, right here. I asked them to deliver it to his room; to leave it for him in an envelope with his name written on it. So that no matter what happened for the

rest of the night or tomorrow, I couldn't chicken out. I couldn't back out of giving it to him.

That was stupid.

It was probably delivered to his room while he was screwing me in mine. And what if he didn't even notice it when he went back to his room? Or what if he didn't open it? What if he figured it was some standard thank you note from the bride and groom and just tossed it in his suitcase, only to open it days from now when I was long gone?

What if he opens it and he doesn't even know what it means?

It was weird, as far as notes went.

What if he got the note *and* my text and he still didn't come?

What if the note he left on the pillow was his last word on the subject?

Goodbye, little dove.

Stay in touch so I know you're alive. But, goodbye.

"From the gentleman at the back."

I looked up with a start as one of the bartenders placed a drink in front of me. A tall, curvy, pink drink. And my heart stopped.

It looked exactly like the one I drank right here, four years ago. While a beautiful, mysterious stranger flirted with me. I looked at the bartender and he tipped his chin at something over my left shoulder.

I turned to scan the lounge for the dozenth time since I'd sat down... and there he was at the back of the bar. Standing just inside the entrance off the hotel lobby and staring at me like I was some vision from his most beautiful dreams.

He looked so much like that man I met right here four years ago, and so much like a man I could no longer live without, all at once, it made my heart ache.

He was holding his phone in his hand like he'd rushed straight here. He'd gotten my text.

He walked over to me, winding his way through the tables toward the bar, and stood in front of me. "I don't want to ruin your life," was the first thing he said to me.

I kind of sob-laughed. "I don't want to ruin my life, either." I swiped the tears from my eyes. "And if I walk away from you... I think that's what I'd be doing."

Shane's shoulders softened. "I just went to your room, and you didn't answer the door. And I had a fucking heart attack. I thought I was too late."

"You're not."

His face softened, too. But he didn't touch me.

He sat down carefully on the bar stool next to mine. He was holding the note I wrote him and I sighed with relief.

"You found my note."

"I did. I'm not sure I know what it means." He took it out of the envelope and read it aloud. "'You are my unicorn.'" He looked at me. "I'm assuming that's meant to be a good thing."

"Are unicorns ever bad?"

"Uh, I wouldn't think so."

I gazed at him. "It's not just a good thing, Shane. It's a magical thing." I sighed again. "I'm sorry the way I chose to tell you was weird."

"It's okay. I already knew you were weird. This is not a shock."

I tried to smile. "I guess you like weird."

"I do." He gazed at me affectionately. "Anyway, I think I've got you beat."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I've just always felt like the weird one."

"Why?"

“Well...” He tucked the note away and settled in, leaning on the bar right next to me. “Here’s the thing. I was abandoned as a kid and adopted by a family I never really fit into. I think my family loves me, but most of the time it’s like we’re on two different planets. I will never be what they want me to be. My friends don’t understand me. I take fights in the underground for criminals because it’s fucking fun. I went to a sex club to get my freak on with women I didn’t even know. And I don’t care about any of that anymore if I can’t have you. It means nothing to me. I lost my membership at the club and I don’t care. I could lose my next fight, my title, and I honestly don’t care. You did something so beautiful for your mom and my dad this week, made them so happy helping out with their wedding. You made them proud. I just make trouble. For everyone around me.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is, Jolie. It was like, after the car accident, I decided life was short, so I should just live each day on a razor’s edge. Chase those adrenalin highs until I burn out, because who cares? But I was wrong.” His pale eyes held mine, and I saw the emotion in them. “I just needed to find something to really care about again. Something that makes me feel alive, the way I used to feel. And here I am with you, and I found something even better.”

“Better?”

“Yeah. I found you.”

I leaned in closer to him, wishing we were having this conversation in private. But it wasn’t like anyone was paying attention to us. “The unicorn thing... you know it means I love you, right?”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “I’m an asshole.”

“Why would you say that?”

He looked at me. “Because I should’ve told you I loved you already. I should’ve told you first. I felt it. I should’ve just said it.” He touched his hand to my face. “I never wanted you to leave, Jolie. And I definitely never hated you. I know I let

you think I did. The only thing I ever hated about this whole situation was that you weren't mine and you weren't staying."

"You're wrong. No matter where I go... I am yours."

"Yeah. Well, I'm yours."

"Then why would you let me leave?" I asked him, slightly exasperated. Confused.

"I told you. I didn't want to ruin your life. I could've easily hunted you down, tried to command you to be with me. But I could never do that to you. You had to choose this if you wanted it. Just like I had to. I've been struggling to make peace with myself, and with my past. And struggling with knowing what to fight for and what to let go of. But when I found that note from you... I just knew it was your way of telling me how you feel about me. And I knew I had to fight for this. Maybe... we both had to fight for this."

"Yes. Please don't stop fighting for the things that matter. I love that you're a fighter."

"Yeah. If only I'd done that the first time we met." He shook his head. "I thought I was being so smart, going to get you a coffee and leaving you that fucking note with my number. Covering my bases. It felt foolproof. Man, did that bite me in the ass."

I smiled a little. "I guess your heart was in the right place. It was stupid, though. You really should've just said, 'Hey, I went to get you a coffee, be right back'."

"You're calling me stupid?"

"In this instance, yes."

He slid his hand into my hair and held my face close to his, looking into my eyes. And I could've stayed right there, forever.

"Let me ask you something," he murmured. "Do you like following orders?"

"Yes! I would literally do almost anything you told me to do."

“Then stay.”

I grinned right through the tears that were flooding my eyes. “Really?”

“What did you think I was gonna say? ‘Go back to San Diego and forget about me’? That’s what the good guy would say. I’m not the good guy. I just told you, I love you. I want you to be mine and I’ll do anything to make that happen.”

I sniffled. “Anything?”

“Anything.” His thumb stroked over my jaw, sending rivers of warmth through my body. “Move in with me, Jolie, and stay. If it doesn’t work out, I’ll help you move, get settled anywhere else you want. With your family or friends here, or back in California. Just stay and give it a chance. Give us some time to let this thing be what it should be.”

“Which is?”

“You and me. Together.”

I took a deep, shuddery breath. “And what if it *does* work out?”

“It will. I won’t let us fail. I’m a fighter, and I’ll fight for you. I just said all that stuff so you feel like you have an out. But I’m not really letting you go.”

I laughed with joy. “Well, thank you for your honesty.”

“I told you. I’ll do anything.”

“Even... stop taking illegal fights?”

He looked into my eyes; a sincere look, searching. “Are you asking me to stop?”

“No. But I can’t say that I won’t in the future. I love you and I want you to be safe. I also want you to be you. And I want you to be happy.”

“Then just move in with me. And we’ll figure out the rest.”

I took a steadying breath. “Okay.”

He kissed me, softly, on the lips. Right there, in the bar.

I darted a glance around, looking for familiar faces, but didn't see any. "What if someone sees?"

"Then they'll see. You okay with that?"

I cringed. "Well... I guess they'll find out we're moving in together, soon enough..."

"Not soon. Tomorrow."

"Really?"

"After the brunch, we drive home together and I move you into my loft. Tomorrow night, my home is yours. Both of my homes."

"Oh, God."

Shane smirked. "Getting real now?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Nervous?"

"About telling Mom and Jacob, yes."

"They'll just have to accept it, Jolie. We're adults. It's our life, not theirs. And one day... Maybe we'll get married, too. Make it official."

My heart was thudding now, adrenalin and excitement. "Are you serious? You've actually thought about... marrying me?"

"Little dove..." His pale eyes drifted over my face, with hunger and affection. "Before you, I didn't even bring women home to my apartment to spend the night. I'm asking you to move in with me. To be my partner. And my sub, when you want to be. In my books, that means potentially forever. So yes, I've thought about marrying you."

"Wow," I breathed.

He raised an eyebrow. "You haven't thought about marrying me?"

"Well... yeah. I thought about everything. From the very worst scenario to the very best."

"And the best would be...?"

I shrugged, hoping it didn't sound too sappy. "You know. Happily ever after."

But he didn't smile or roll his eyes or make fun of me at all. Instead, he said seriously, "If you want to, we could probably use the officiant from Margot and Jacob's wedding and do it first thing in the morning, before we go home to Vancouver."

I grabbed onto his arms, feeling weirdly faint.

Was he for real right now?

"Shane."

He looked amused. "You okay?"

"You just said you'd marry me. Right now."

"Because I would."

"You would?"

"I would seriously consider it if you would."

"That's ridiculous!" I sighed. "And ridiculously romantic. But we can't get married."

He still looked amused. "We can't?"

"I know I pretend that I hate weddings. But... I want to be a bride one day," I admitted, "and have a real wedding of my own."

"Then just stay. And one day, we can get married. If I'm your husband and you're my wife, they'll all have to shut up with their judgement."

"So... you'd have sex with me just to upset them," I teased, "and you'd marry me just to shut them up."

"No. I had sex with you because I fucking wanted to," he growled. "And I'll marry you because I love you."

Then he kissed me again. Dominantly.

"Did you just propose to me?" I gushed when he let me up for air.

He smiled. "I guess I did."

“Hmm. Did I say yes?”

“Not really.”

I took a deep breath. “Yes.”

Shane’s eyes warmed as he gazed at me. “Good answer.”

“Did we just get engaged?”

“Yup.”

“Is it wrong that I want a ring?”

“It’s not wrong. But I don’t have one right now, so...”

He seemed to have the same thought as I did, at the exact same second, because we both looked down. At the one ring he was wearing that would actually fit me.

His pinky ring.

He pulled it off and raised an eyebrow at me. “Do you wanna wear my Dom ring? You’ve earned it.”

“Have I?”

“Oh, you’ve submitted me for sure.”

“Then I’ll take it,” I said with glee, offering him my left hand. The only finger it fit without falling off was my middle finger. It would just have to do for now.

“That’s just a placeholder, though. I’ll get you a real ring. And get down on one knee.”

“Really?” I gazed at him. He’d gotten down on his knees to do sex stuff to me. But picturing my dominant man getting down on one knee, to propose to me? I almost couldn’t handle it. “You’d do that? For me?”

“Little dove.” He cupped my face in his hands and gazed into my eyes like he didn’t care if the whole world was looking. “I told you. For you... I’d do anything.”

Chapter Forty

Jolie

The moment I woke up in the morning, before my eyes were even open, I reached for Shane. And there he was, lying next to me in bed. My hand roamed over the wonderful smooth skin of his back.

“You’re still here,” I sighed.

“*You’re* still here.” He kissed my shoulder.

“I am. I can’t believe you almost let me go.”

“I can’t believe you almost left.”

“You’re lucky I didn’t, after you left me alone in bed to wake up to a note again like that.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t wake up to a note this time,” he teased.

“If I woke up to a note again,” I told him, “I would’ve punched you in the face next time I saw you, Shane Madrigal.”

He grinned. “Even if I was just picking you up a coffee?”

“Yup.” I rolled on top of him. “No more notes, please. For the rest of our lives. You have something to say, say it to my damn face.”

“Okay, my little sub. You’re so feisty in the morning.” He drifted his hands down to my ass and squeezed. “And no more questionnaires, either. You have questions, you ask Daddy nicely.”

I rolled my eyes.

“And don’t roll your eyes at me unless you want a cock in the mouth, like immediately.”

“Maybe I do,” I said smartly.

He rolled me over on my back and I squealed. He straddled my chest, so he could put his hard dick right in my face.

“I will beat you with this thing,” he said, and smacked my cheek with it.

I gasped and laughed at the same time.

“Now be a good girl and suck,” he muttered, stroking himself.

I tried, but as he slid into my mouth, I laughed again. I was too happy.

“Quit laughing,” he warned, his voice gruff with lust. “Or I will come without you.”

Liar.

His eyes glimmered.

I stopped laughing and started sucking in long, heavenly pulls that made his eyes roll back. Just a few of those, and he ripped his cock out of my mouth.

“Spread for me,” he ordered, as he moved to cover me with his body. Then he drove into me. He lay his weight on me, fucking me deep and slow as I clutched at his back. He kissed my face all over, my lips, my neck, one luscious kiss after another. “Fuck, I love you, Jolie,” he groaned. “I just need to be inside you. I fucking missed you...”

I melted at his words, reveling in the feel of his body crushing mine to the bed. I couldn’t get enough.

“I missed you too,” I panted.

“Well, then,” he muttered between kisses, “let’s never miss each other again.”

We gathered for the newlywed brunch in a much smaller banquet room, seated at a long table; just the wedding party and close family of the bride and groom. Seating for this event was not pre-assigned. When Shane and I walked into the room, no one even seemed to notice that we walked in together. Because I immediately got swept up in the Vola family chaos.

Somehow, I'd ended up seated between my twin cousins and Aunt Madeleine, while Shane had ended up on the other side of the table and several seats down, with his brothers.

Maybe because I was a chicken shit.

I smiled at him across the way, and he gave me a wolfish *Don't worry, I'll spank you for this later* kind of look.

The meal was lovely, but I spent most of it sweating over Shane's promise to me in the bar last night.

After the brunch, we drive home together and I move you into my place.

We hadn't circled back to that, what with all the ensuing sex kinda taking over.

Now, I couldn't stop wondering how this whole "we drive home together" thing was gonna roll out. Like, I could tell Dani that I wasn't driving home with her because I was going with Shane. But at what point was I telling Mom?

Turned out, I really didn't need to sweat such a decision, though. Because my dominant man had it all figured out.

As soon as brunch was finishing up, and everyone was relaxing over coffee, Shane stood up and asked if he could make a toast.

His eyes met mine, and I just fucking knew.

He was going to tell them, right?

Right now.

I grabbed Danica's hand under the table. She was sitting next to me and gave me a startled look, but when she saw the look on my face, she just held onto my hand.

"Of course you can make a toast, Shane," Jacob said, and I could tell he was touched. Shane was the only one of his sons who didn't make any kind of toast at the wedding. He didn't even show up for the toasts at the wedding shower, and he didn't come to the wedding rehearsal.

So everyone quieted down and looked at Shane.

He was dressed very respectably, in a black button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, black dress pants and a nice belt. Much like he looked the night he took me to Bliss. There were the remnants of bruises on his face from last weekend's fight. And I could see both parts of him so clearly. The boy who was raised in a wealthy family amid expectations of greatness, and the man who lived his life by his own rules.

And I loved every part of him.

"I just wanted to raise a glass to you, Dad," he told Jacob. "You did an amazing job raising four sons, mostly on your own. You looked a long time for the right person to share your life with, and we're all glad you found Margot. Everyone can see that you're perfect for each other. Because you bring out the best in one another. I truly hope that lasts for a lifetime. Because you deserve it, Dad."

It was sweet and eloquent, and I could tell just by looking at him that Jacob was totally touched. Shane probably didn't say stuff like that to him very often.

Or at all.

"Thank you, son," Jacob said, sounding a little choked up.

"Yes, thank you, Shane," Mom said, and she raised her glass. We all raised a glass and everyone drank to that, as I gripped Danica's hand and braced myself for whatever else Shane was about to say.

Because I knew, he wasn't done yet.

“Also,” he went on, “now that all the wedding festivities have come to an end, I hope this is okay...”

As he spoke, I squeezed Danica’s hand and she squeezed me back.

“I didn’t want to take anything away from this wedding. I didn’t want to make this about me. But at the risk of doing just that, I want to take the opportunity while we’re all here together to share some news with you. This will be a surprise to most of you, I think. But Jolie isn’t going back to California today.”

Absolutely everyone looked at me.

And my face lit on fire.

Then Dani started clapping and shouted, “Yes!”

Shane smiled a bit. “She’s staying in Vancouver,” he said. “And she’s moving into my place.”

Oh, God.

Now everyone was looking at Shane again, which was only marginally better.

“What, like, crashing on your couch?” Darcy said, as maybe he voiced what everyone was thinking.

I could see them all straining to understand. You could hear a hair split right now.

But it was almost like the moment it came out of Darcy’s mouth, he realized what Shane actually meant. And maybe so did everyone else.

“No. Not on my couch. We’re a couple. I asked her last night, and she agreed to move in with me today.”

People were staring at him. People were staring at me.

But all I felt was my mom, looking at me.

I met her eyes. Jacob leaned into her a bit, taking her hand, like he was making sure she was okay before he reacted to this.

I couldn’t read either of their reactions, other than surprise.

“And before you get upset,” Shane went on, “neither of us are doing this to upset you. We didn’t mean to fall in love. But we did. And I asked her to stay, because I couldn’t bear for her to go back to San Diego. I know all of you love Jolie. Many of you would’ve welcomed her to stay with you. But I asked her to move in with me because...” I looked at him and he gazed back at me. “We belong together.”

“Shane...” Jacob said gently.

“Before you say anything, Dad... I respect you, Margot.” Shane turned to my mom. “Which is why I’m telling you this. I think your daughter is the most lovely, amazing human I’ve ever met and I want only good things for her. I hope you’ll come to accept that she’s chosen to be with me. And support our marriage.”

Mom’s mouth floated open.

“Because she also agreed to marry me. So, I thought I should make it official. Here, in front of all of you as witness.”

Then he walked around the table, toward me. Aunt Madeleine got right the hell up, ditching out of her chair next to me, and he pushed in the chair, moving it out of his way. And as our entire family watched, some with mouths still hanging open, he got down on one knee.

In front of fucking everyone.

I let go of Danica and turned to him. He took my hands in his as tears filled my eyes.

“I’m sorry that you ever had to doubt that I liked you from the first moment I met you,” he told me solemnly. “I’m sorry that I ever let you slip away. I’m sorry that I hurt you. I’m sorry that you felt the need to avoid me for four years because you didn’t trust me. I’m sorry for every moment that I wasted when I should’ve been fighting for you” —I was sobbing now — “and I could’ve been getting to know you. I’m sorry that I took so long to admit what I felt for you. I’m sorry it took me so long to fight for you.”

“It’s... okay...” I sobbed.

“And I’m sorry for everything I ever did that made you question what we were to each other. Because you are my little dove, and you have my heart. I want nothing but to be good to you. To be good *for* you. I told you that I would take care of you and I meant it.”

“I love you,” I sobbed brokenly and grabbed onto his face. I didn’t even care who was listening anymore or who was staring or what they were thinking because he just said all those beautiful things to me and really, what else mattered?

He looked choked up, and when he didn’t respond right away, Dani stage-whispered, “Tell her you love her!”

And a couple of people, definitely my aunts, laughed softly.

Shane cleared his throat. “I love you, Jolie.”

“And you need her!” Dani stage-whispered.

“And I need you.”

“You must have her! You’ll do anything to make that happen, otherwise you’ll die!”

“Yes,” he said dryly. “Everything your cousin just said.”

“Dani, shush!” Danica whispered.

“You know it’s all true,” he said solemnly, getting serious again as he gazed into my eyes. “And I want you to be my wife.”

“Yes. I’ll marry you. You know that.”

He smiled, and I fell into his arms. I gave him a shaky kiss, and I was dimly aware that a few people were clapping. There were murmurs around us, and I definitely heard Aunt Marie say, “Well, this is exciting!”

Shane took my face in his hands. Then he said, so everyone could hear, “And if my dad and your mom are pissed about this and it takes a four year engagement to convince them we’re right for each other, then we’ll do it.”

I definitely heard a bit of laughter at that. No one seemed to be freaking out, at least not in a bad way. I was kind of

afraid to look up at any of them, though.

“Or, I’ll marry you tomorrow,” Shane promised me. “Whatever you want. Every day that I’m around you, I wake up the next day and I just want more. And that’s always been true. I told you I’d fulfill your every need. I told you I’d do anything for you. And I told you, I don’t pretend. I never lied. I meant every word of it. I love you, Jolie.”

He kissed me again, a soft, devout kiss, and I could practically feel the ladies around me swoon. “Damn,” Dani muttered, “that was even better than what I said.”

“Oh, and I have this. Sorry.” Shane dug in his pocket and pulled out a ring box.

“What...?” I gasped as he opened it, presenting me with a ring.

And not just any ring. An absolutely gorgeous, obviously expensive diamond engagement ring. I felt Danica leaning in, looking over my shoulder. “Oh, wow,” she whispered.

“Where did you get this...?” I breathed as he slid the ring onto my ring finger.

“Dane had it helicoptered in for me this morning. No big deal.” He shrugged. “It pays to know a billionaire.”

I laughed, feeling giddy and fucking amazing. Was this really my life?

My man?

I wrapped my arms around him, hugging him close, and he wrapped his arms around me, lifting me to my feet.

Over his shoulder, my eyes met Mom’s. She was crying, and Jacob had his arm around her. Jacob was gazing at us, with a look of wonder on his face. And those tears in my mom’s eyes? Shock, for sure. But also... happiness.

Maybe because she could see how happy I was, too.

Maybe because she could see that I’d found my unicorn.

Epilogue

Jolie

Two years later...

“**T**hat’s my good girl. Come for me.”

The man of my dreams hovered over me, giving me gruff orders, his masterful fingers thrusting into my pussy, deep and slow, as I came for him.

My core pulsed around his fingers. I cried out, but he smothered the sound with his hand, pressing his thumb into my mouth.

“Shh,” he soothed, as I sucked on his thumb, wishing it was his cock so I could make him come. But he hadn’t touched me with his cock yet. “That’s it, baby. Nice and quiet for Daddy. Or I’m gonna have to gag you and deny you this cock.”

I swallowed my cries and gasps and finally he removed his thumb, sliding his hand around my throat instead. He squeezed, tight, not cutting off my breath but just reminding me who was boss. “Now, keep still. I’m gonna make you come again.”

I tried to catch my breath, but he was already driving into me with his fingers again, working me, deep.

Our wedding was today, and tonight my husband had me bound to the bed in our honeymoon suite.

I was lying on my back, my ass at the very foot of the bed, with my legs up in the air and spread wide, each ankle tied with silken rope to the high posts of the four-poster. My arms were spread high and wide above me, tied to the head of the bed. I was in my bridal lingerie, what was left of it. The white lace garter belt, the garters unsnapped from the white thigh-highs, which were still on. My panties and bra were long gone.

Shane stood over me, shirtless, orchestrating my pleasure to his satisfaction. As usual.

“It’s a good thing you married me,” I sobbed in a drunken-sounding daze. I was not drunk. I was utterly high on my husband. “Because I will never get enough of you...”

“I told you to be quiet, sweet wife,” he murmured adoringly. “One more word and I untie you, flip you over and spank you into tomorrow.”

I pressed my lips together.

His fingers worked me for another moment, until my orgasm high had completely faded. Then he withdrew them. I heard his belt open, and then I felt his cock brush against my pussy as he fisted it. “Don’t move. Daddy’s got a nice, big cock for this tight little cunt.”

My heart pounded as I struggled to remain still. I felt his cockhead nudge into me, and then he shoved into me, seating himself deep. I gasped, and he squeezed my throat in warning.

“That’s a good girl,” he muttered, as he pumped into me, slow, and I remained still. He stared at the place where he possessed me, transfixed as he fucked me. “Relax... and just take my cock...”

Then he leaned over me, wrapped his lips around a swollen nipple and sucked, making me swallow the cry that almost slipped from my lips.

He suckled my aching nipple as he pushed his cock into me, slow, again and again, my pussy twitching with aftershocks. He’d just made me come and I was already panting quietly again, struggling to keep still and silent as my senses coiled towards another orgasm. My core tightened as

his cock plunged into me, his lips pulled at my nipple, and I climaxed again. As the release flung me apart, I bit down on my lip.

Shane stood up over me, pumping into me faster as he watched me come under hooded eyes. “Good. Gush on that cock, sweet girl.”

I was soaking wet.

It was my fifth orgasm in a row. My legs were starting to go numb.

I didn’t care.

I could barely move anyway. He’d warned me not to make a sound. All I could do was lie here and take the pleasure he gave.

As I floated back down from my orgasm, his fingers suddenly played with my swollen, sensitive clit and I sealed my lips shut, groaning inside my mouth.

“Good girl. Hush for Daddy.” He drew devilish circles around my clit with his thumb, urging me there again. “You’re gonna come again, baby,” he ordered, his voice strained with arousal.

I panted, struggling not to move. Could I even handle coming again?

Yes.

There was no point fighting it, trying to wriggle away or beg for mercy. My husband was a man who knew what he wanted—especially from me. And what he wanted was to dominate me on our wedding night and have me coming for him. As many times as possible.

Submission by all-consuming pleasure.

He knew, this was the ultimate pleasure for me.

And he wouldn’t stop until I utterly fell apart.

“Your tight little cunt is gonna milk my cock,” he told me, “and make me come.”

Oh, God. My hips twitched. I sucked back a breath.

“That’s it...” he coaxed. His voice was getting huskier.

I could tell he was getting close and it did me in. Inside, it felt like everything broke apart in the euphoric pulse. I thrashed uncontrollably as his slow thrusts and his warm, massaging thumb sent me flying again.

“Good girl,” he rasped. “Make Daddy come...” His voice broke on a groan.

My core contracted and my hips bucked hard. He thrust into me with a grunt, forcing me down, and he went still, his weight pinning me. I squeezed him as hard as I could as the pleasure washed through my body.

I felt his cock jerk inside my tight core as he released into me with a growl.

So hot.

He squeezed my throat, reminding me to keep quiet as he came. Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes, dripping down my temples as I trembled with the effort of holding back my sobs.

His eyes met mine, hazy and bright. “*Jolie.*” He breathed my name like it was pure, sweet air.

I shuddered in bliss and fucking died of happiness.

“You’ve killed me with happiness,” I told him, as we lay in the giant bathtub with the jets bubbling. Shane shut them off, and the ensuing silence was heavenly.

Just the two of us, alone, after the week of wedding chaos we’d just survived.

Our very large extended family had been here with us to celebrate the heck out of our love, and it was amazing.

But now I felt like I was getting my reward for all that wedding planning. Not just a beautiful wedding and a fantastic

reception party, followed by fabulous wedding night sex, but a moment of silence and peace, pure bliss, in my husband's strong arms. I lay wrapped in his legs, my head on his chest.

“You killed me long ago,” he murmured, kissing the top of my head. Then he sighed. “When you almost left me. But that's okay. We ended up in heaven, either way.”

“We did,” I agreed. I felt like I was floating on his love.

I'd felt this way for the last two years.

I'd settled into my life in Vancouver as if I'd never left. Madeleine had hired me back to Voilà Interiors, and within a year, we'd rebranded as Voilà Design House. She referred any of her clients her were getting married over to me. I helmed our wedding design service, and I was loving my job.

Especially when I got to design my own wedding, and Alyssa's, too. My best friend had gotten married last spring.

Shane had retired from fighting shortly after we got engaged, and I was happy to see he'd never looked back. I never wanted him to give something up, especially for me, if it truly made him happy, and I didn't want him to have any regrets. But he'd found a much more rewarding—and safe—fit for himself when he opened his own professional gym to support fighters and other athletes in the community.

He still trained hard because he loved it, and now he helped train other fighters, too. And he discovered something that he didn't even know would be so important to him until he did it: giving back, supporting young fighters who didn't have the means to afford great training, by sponsoring them into his gym.

His brothers worked out there, too.

He was happy with the work he was doing, and I knew, even if he wouldn't say it out loud, that he felt good doing work that made both me and his family proud.

In the end, it didn't take four years to convince our families that what we had between us was true love, and that it was lasting. It only took two. And mostly that had nothing to

do with our families anyway. That time was for us. For our relationship.

Time for us to just be, together.

And for me to plan the wedding of our dreams.

We'd gotten married in Whistler because, well, memories. Both good and bad, but mostly... magical.

And every member of our family had been here, to support us.

It was beautiful to see Shane getting closer to his family over time. It wasn't always a smooth ride, but he and Brandon had really bonded. He spent time with his Dad and all of his brothers pretty regularly.

I was closer to my family than ever, too.

Every other weekend, it seemed we were attending some formal family brunch or dinner with the whole Vola-Ellis clan.

And every *other* weekend, it seemed we were heading out of town on some adventure, hitting the road to drive in one direction or another. Up or down the coast to one of the ferries to head over to an island, or down to Washington state. Or up into the mountains. Or east, into the interior. My man loved to drive. He had several cars, and he now had a Harley Road Glide so we could go cruising in comfort, long distance, with his biker friends.

Shane still didn't watch many hockey games, but he went to some of Darcy's.

Sometimes, when Danica was on tour with her men and they were playing Cali, Shane and I would fly or drive down for a concert, and then we'd just disappear in San Diego for a while. We'd visit my friends there. And sometimes, Shane would rent a motorcycle and take me for a ride, along the beaches or out into the desert.

Other times we'd just walk on the beach. He kept giving me seashells; I had a whole collection of them now. Some of them, like that very first one, Danica had made into jewelry for me.

I'd given him back his D ring as soon as he gave me my engagement ring, and he wore it every day. When anyone asked him what the D was for, he'd just look at me with that glimmer in his eyes and tell them it was a secret.

As I lay against him now, listening to his heart beat under my ear, I whispered, "I want to have your babies."

It just came out.

But I felt it, so deep.

To be mother to his children... it would be the ultimate act of love. For a guy who never quite felt he belonged in the family he got, I knew it was the most loving thing I could ever do for him, to give him a family.

One that would never abandon him.

One that would be his own, related to him by blood.

Maybe it was a given, in a way, since we'd just gotten married, but I'd never exactly told him that before. We'd talked about having a family, casually, as a sort of vague future concept. Neither of us seemed to be in any rush about it.

But his arms tightened around me now. I heard the emotion in his voice when he said, softly, "I want that more than anything, Jolie."

"Really?" I whispered.

"Really. I was abandoned by my parents. Your dad abandoned you, too, really. I want us to have our own family, and do it right. Which means... forever."

My thoughts, exactly.

"I love you," I breathed.

"And I am spoiling the shit out of our kids," he said.

"Was that a warning?"

"It was a promise."

"Great. Just what I need. A bunch of spoiled brat little Shanes running around."

“And how do you know they won’t be spoiled little Jolies?” he inquired, his tone telling me I was being a brat right now.

Oh, God. If we had girls, he was gonna spoil them for sure. I could see it now. They’d be little nightmares.

“We’ll discuss that,” I said.

He took me by the throat and turned my face to him. “Not yet, though.” He kissed me deep, lapping his tongue through my mouth.

“No?”

“You’re only twenty-five. We have time. And I need to spoil you first.”

“Okay, that, I like.”

“I need to fuck you for a few more years before we even think about getting you pregnant,” he informed me. “And when you’re fat with my baby, I’m gonna take care of you.”

I laughed abruptly. “Let’s not call it ‘fat.’”

“I’m gonna keep you off your feet and feed you, massage you, and I’m gonna make you come all day. Pregnant women are horny, right? Hormones and stuff.”

“Mmm. I guess we’ll see.”

His hand cupped my breast and squeezed. “Those fat breasts you’re gonna have, full of milk...”

“There’s that word again.”

“I’m horny already.”

“The milk is for the baby, you know.” I laid my head on his chest again.

“Mmm. We’ll see.” He shifted, and his cock, hard as hell, jabbed into me rudely. I was trying to relax here.

I looked up, into his pale, wolfish eyes, gleaming with hunger. “Does my Dom need to come again?” I said dryly.

“Yes.”

I drifted my fingers to his shaft and teased him with my fingertips. He was so hard and thick, again. “Hmm. I guess weddings and pregnancy talk turn you on. Who knew.”

His eyes devoured my breasts as I sat up. “You were a hot bride. You’re gonna be hot when you’re pregnant. Pregnant women are fucking sexy.” His cock flexed in my hand as he spoke, so I was pretty sure he was serious about that.

I started sliding my hands up and down his shaft underwater, making him groan. “I suppose I should take care of this for you. I mean, I am your wife,” I flirted.

“Yeah? You want some more D, little girl?”

“Ah, yes, my favorite letter. The three D’s. Dominance. Discipline. Dick.”

“Don’t forget Daddy,” he growled, obviously not loving my sass.

“How could I, when he’s so damn bossy?”

“Call me Daddy while you jerk me off,” he ordered.

“Yeah? Big Daddy have another come for me?” I said sweetly.

“If you’re lucky.”

“Maybe if you’re lucky, you’ll get to come in my mouth.”

He growled, low in his throat. “Don’t get sassy, sweetheart. You know what happens to sassy girls.”

“They get some D?”

He nudged me off of him and stood up, the hot water sluicing off his gorgeous body. “Open your mouth, little dove.”

I did, but to speak, instead of to do what he wanted me to. “I love you,” I said seriously, gazing up at him. “You’re the best lover. You’re my best friend. And you’re gonna be the best daddy in the whole word, for real.”

He groaned softly, with pleasure. “Hurry up and make me come, so I can give you a massage.”

I grinned.

“I love you, Jolie,” he said seriously.

“I know,” I whispered. Then I sucked him into my mouth, and I took my dominant man to paradise.

THE END

Thank you for reading!

The next spinoff series in the Dirtyverse is coming SOON!

Enjoy *Irresistible Rogue*? Have you read all the other books yet? Vancity Villains is a spinoff from my Dirty/Players series.

[See all my books on Amazon.](#)

Books by Jaine Diamond

For the most up-to-date list of Jaine Diamond's published books and reading order please go to <https://jainediamond.com/books/>

Dirty Series

[Dirty Like Me](#)

[Dirty Like Us](#)

[Dirty Like Brody](#)

[A Dirty Wedding Night](#)

[Dirty Like Seth](#)

[Dirty Like Dylan](#)

[Dirty Like Jude](#)

[Dirty Like Zane](#)

Players Series

[Hot Mess](#)

[Filthy Beautiful](#)

[Sweet Temptation](#)

[Lovely Madness](#)

[Flames and Flowers](#)

Vancity Villains Series

[Handsome Devil](#)

[Rebel Heir](#)

[Wicked Angel](#)

[Irresistible Rogue](#)

DEEP Duet

[DEEP \(DEEP #1\)](#)

[DEEPER \(DEEP #2\)](#)

Never miss a book—join Jaine's **[Diamond Club Newsletter](#)** to get new release info, insider updates, giveaways and free bonus content.

Note to Readers / Acknowledgments

Well, this brings another series to a close. *Tears*

The Vancity Villains books were so much fun to write with their antiheroes and enemies-to-lovers vibes. The moment Shane appeared in the opening pages of *Handsome Devil*, popping up as *Pure Fuckery* in Dane's phone, I knew he was going to be a delicious troublemaker and the star of his own book. I was similarly attached to Jolie from the moment she graced the pages of *Hot Mess*, when she met Ashley Player and dubbed him a unicorn. Shane and Jolie, to me, were tantalizing opposites who came together in a beautiful synergy.

Thank you to my wonderful PA and Queen of Fandom, Alyssa Giselbach, for running my readers' groups and making them such a fun place to be. To my ravenously supportive readers' groups, Jaine Diamond's VIPs and Jaine Diamond's Spoiler Room, thank you all for being such a fabulous community of engaged readers.

To my ARC Team and all the bloggers and influencers who shout from the mountaintops about my books, thank you for so passionately supporting my work.

To my wonderfully talented narrators and the team at Brick Shop Audio, thank you for the always top notch audiobooks.

To my author friends and other colleagues in the book community who support me and my work, you know who you are; I appreciate you so much.

To Mr. Diamond, thank you for picking up every little thing I had to drop in order to complete this book. We made it work, thanks to YOU and your endless support of my dreams, as always. You are a true unicorn.

To my lovely, passionate, enthusiastic readers: THANK YOU for reading this book! I'm so honored that you chose to read this love story; my intent as a romance author is to spread

love. As an independent author, I could not do what I do without you. If you've enjoyed Shane and Jolie's story, please consider [leaving a review](#) and telling your friends about this book; your support means the world to me.

With love and gratitude,

Jaine

Playlist

The final Vancity Villains playlist! *More tears!* I had a ton of fun creating this playlist for your listening pleasure. Shane and Jolie have such a steamy connection and their playlist is fire!

As always, some of the songs on this playlist are mentioned in this book; others are songs that captured the feel of a certain scene or that I listened to while writing the book.

You'll find the links to the full playlists on Spotify and Apple Music [here](#).

Motion — Emotional Oranges

Who's Gonna Fix It — Daniel Farrant & Nick Kingsley

Creep Back — Max Frost

Wait — Maroon 5

Lies (feat. H. Kenneth) — Syence

Bad Liar — Selena Gomez

I Don't Want to See You Anymore — XYLØ

Red Flag Day — U2

Summerboy — Lady Gaga

Need To Know — Doja Cat

Dirty Thoughts — Chloe Adams
Beautiful Mistakes — Maroon 5 & Megan Thee Stallion
Drove Me Wild — Tegan and Sara
Baby Came Home — The Neighbourhood
WOW — Zara Larsson
Live Without Your Love — Love Regenerator, Steve Lacy, Calvin Harris
How Long Has This Been Going On? (MJ Cole Remix) — Carmen McRae
Lonely Heart — Dragonette
What I Need — Avi Snow, LVAN & Sif Saga
Heartless — The Weeknd
Where Have You Been — Rihanna
Like That (feat. Gucci Mane) — Doja Cat
Stranger — Keanu Silva, Jhn McFly & Marissa
Spoil My Night (feat. Swae Lee) — Post Malone
Seen it Coming — Bob Moses
Afraid To Love — Vandelux
Freak — Lana Del Rey
Wrapped Around Your Finger — Post Malone
S.W.A.G. (feat. Devlin Love) — The Qemists
Lights On — The Blue Stones
Don't Forget About Me — CLOVES
burn down my house — Architects
At Last — Etta James
Suit & Tie (feat. JAY-Z) — Justin Timberlake
Rider — Thirty Seconds to Mars
Round & Round — Bob Moses
American Money — BØRNS

About the Author

Jaine Diamond is a Top 50 Amazon bestselling author of contemporary romance. She writes badass, swoon-worthy heroes endowed with massive hearts, strong heroines armed with sweetness and sass, and explosive, page-turning chemistry.

She lives on the beautiful west coast of Canada with her real-life romantic hero and daughter, where she reads, writes and makes extensive playlists for her books while binge drinking tea.

www.jainediamond.com

Join the readers' group [Jaine Diamond's VIPs](#) on Facebook to chat with Jaine and other readers.

