



DARK NIGHTS

JUST ONE SUMMER

A Dirty Dare Series Novella

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CARLY PHILLIPS

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A Dirty Dare Series Novella

By Carly Phillips



1001 DARK NIGHTS
PRESS

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Book Description

Just One Summer

A Dirty Dare Series Novella

By Carly Phillips

From *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author Carly Phillips comes a new story in her Dirty Dare series...

Gabriella Davenport is a gorgeous, twenty-two-year-old virgin with a trust fund, vacationing in the Hamptons for the summer and running from family pressure to marry someone she doesn't like, let alone love.

Maddox James is a sexy bar manager, older than Gabby by a decade. Though he made his fortune on Wall Street, he has returned to his working-class roots with a healthy distrust of wealthy women.

- ✓ Grumpy Sunshine
- ✓ Age Gap
- ✓ Virgin
- ✓ Good Girl/Bad Boy
- ✓ Opposites Attract
- ✓ Close Proximity

The last of the Dirty Dare series is here. Don't miss this sexy standalone novella!

****Every 1001 Dark Nights novella is a standalone story. For new readers, it's an introduction to an author's world. And for fans, it's a bonus book in the author's series. We hope you'll enjoy each one as much as we do.****

About Carly Phillips

Carly Phillips is the *NY Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* bestselling author of over eighty sexy contemporary romances featuring hot men, strong women, and the emotionally compelling stories her readers have come to expect and love. She is happily married to her college sweetheart and lives in Westchester County, NY. She is the mother of two adult daughters and three crazy dogs who star on her Facebook and Instagram pages. She loves social media and is always around to interact with her readers. Way back in 2002, Carly's book, *The Bachelor*, was chosen by Kelly Ripa and was the first romance on a nationally televised book club. For more information on upcoming releases, sign up for her newsletter and receive two free books at: www.carlyphillips.com

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One Thousand and One Dark Nights

Once upon a time, in the future...

I was a student fascinated with stories and learning. I studied philosophy, poetry, history, the occult, and the art and science of love and magic. I had a vast library at my father's home and collected thousands of volumes of fantastic tales.

I learned all about ancient races and bygone times. About myths and legends and dreams of all people through the millennium. And the more I read the stronger my imagination grew until I discovered that I was able to travel into the stories... to actually become part of them.

I wish I could say that I listened to my teacher and respected my gift, as I ought to have. If I had, I would not be telling you this tale now.

But I was foolhardy and confused, showing off with bravery.

One afternoon, curious about the myth of the Arabian Nights, I traveled back to ancient Persia to see for myself if it was true that every day Shahryar (Persian: شهریار, "king") married a new virgin, and then

*sent yesterday's wife to be beheaded. It was written
and I had read that by the time he met Scheherazade,
the vizier's daughter, he'd killed one thousand
women.*

*Something went wrong with my efforts. I arrived
in the midst of the story and somehow exchanged
places with Scheherazade – a phenomena that had
never occurred before and that still to this day, I
cannot explain.*

*Now I am trapped in that ancient past. I have
taken on Scheherazade's life and the only way I can
protect myself and stay alive is to do what she did to
protect herself and stay alive.*

*Every night the King calls for me and listens as I spin tales.
And when the evening ends and dawn breaks, I stop at a
point that leaves him breathless and yearning for more.
And so the King spares my life for one more day, so that
he might hear the rest of my dark tale.*

*As soon as I finish a story... I begin a new
one... like the one that you, dear reader, have before
you now.*

Chapter One

Gabriella Davenport sat in the library of her parents' summer house, hiding out from all the stuffy guests they had invited to their annual dinner party in the Hamptons. These events reeked of superiority, something exhibited by her mother, Madeline, her father, Aaron, and everyone else at this event. Gabby wasn't like her friends in her social circles. Oh, she'd learned early on how to play the game well enough, not wanting to stand out or be lonely growing up. But she'd never been one of them.

She'd escaped the party and pulled up the reading app on her phone. She was in the middle of a steamy romance about a blue-collar guy and a runaway heiress bride who found herself stuck in a small town with a broken-down vehicle.

The author was one of Gabby's favorites, her love scenes catnip to a virgin like herself. At twenty-two, she should have given it up long before now, as had most of the girls at the private Manhattan high school she'd attended. She'd been privy to many locker room conversations she wished she could unhear.

The same talks occurred between her *friends* at Columbia University. She'd graduated a few weeks earlier and wondered if she'd keep any of those friendships, either. The men she'd met in college weren't any better than the adults in the other room. In other words, full of themselves, entitled, and utterly unappealing.

She was saving herself for *the one*. If that made her a romantic, so be it, she thought, turning her attention back to her book, where the sexy hero had pinned the heroine against the wall. He was about to take her hard when the creaking sound of the library door opening interrupted Gabby's reading.

Annoyed, she looked up to find Preston Barrett III standing in the entry. "There you are. Your mother sent me to see where you'd disappeared to."

Of course she had, since her parents were actively trying to pair her off with Preston in an attempt to cement their status with his family, and to curb Gabby's more *common* tendencies. Because for some reason, her enjoying painting and wanting to work instead of giving parties and playing the socialite wife was an embarrassment to them. Her parents acted like they were the Vanderbilts instead of second-generation wealth.

Preston ran a hand over his perfectly styled blond hair. "You're missing the party."

He picked a nonexistent piece of lint off of his light blue Brioni jacket that he'd matched with navy dress pants, and a pale-blue button down shirt. Navy drivers were on his feet. He was a mini-version of his father, Preston Barrett, Jr. And if Gabby just happened to be name-dropping when taking in his outfit, it was because he did it when bragging, which was often.

She lifted one shoulder. "That was the point. It was stuffy with all those people milling around and I was looking for a little privacy." *Why beat around the bush when the truth would do?*

"I *like* the idea of privacy." He closed the door behind him and walked across the room. When he reached her, he braced his hands on the arms of the chair, his face too close to hers. "You're always playing hard to get with me, Gabriella. How can we get to know one another if you're always pushing me away?"

She breathed in and did her best not to gag or scrunch her nose in disgust. She couldn't place the type of alcohol on his breath. Mixed with his expensive cologne, it was a tear-inducing smell.

"Come on," he said. "One kiss. You'll see how much you like it."

She hadn't kissed him and never would. "I need you to step away from me," she said, her heart pounding in her chest because they were completely alone. She doubted her mother would come looking for her when she'd be only too happy Gabby was making time for Preston.

“Stop playing coy,” he said, annoyance in his tone. “You know we’re a done deal, right? Your parents want an intimate connection to my family bank. They won’t take no for an answer, so let’s test our compatibility,” he said and smashed his lips against hers.

Ugh, no. She shoved his shoulders, attempting to push him off but he was stronger and wouldn’t budge. Instead, he shoved his tongue into her mouth.

“Ugh, no.” She shoved his shoulders, attempting to push him off, but he was stronger and wouldn’t budge. Instead he thrust his tongue in her mouth. She immediately bent her knee and jammed it into his groin.

“Dammit!” He stepped back, grabbing his nuts and glaring at her. “You didn’t have to do that!”

“You didn’t hear the word no!” She jumped up from her seat and brushed past him, rushing for the door while he, hopefully, was taking his time, rubbing his balls before returning to the party.

She ran down the hall, bypassing the living area full of guests. Then, not wanting to call attention to herself, she slowed as she approached the front door.

“Gabriella?”

Only one person could have stopped her from fleeing. She turned toward her widowed grandmother Annabelle, who was her father’s mother. Due to her debilitating arthritis, she lived with them and had her own wing in each of the family homes, where she stayed with her full-time caregiver. Her grandmother was Gabby’s main source of affection growing up and understood her in uncanny ways.

“Grandma, I need to get out of here.”

Annabelle narrowed her green-eyed gaze. “I saw that weasel Preston, stumbling out of the library holding his balls. Did he try something?” she asked, raising her cane and waving it in the air. For her age, Annabelle was as insightful as a woman raised in modern times.

A much-needed smile came to Gabby's lips. "Thanks, but I handled him."

"Aah. That was from you," her grandmother said with a wry grin. "I don't know what your parents are thinking, expecting you to marry that spoiled, obnoxious excuse for a man." She shook her head. "Aaron is my son but money changed him. Your mother, too," she said, making a dismayed clucking sound. "I lost the argument when it came to your sister, but she never had your spirit and was willing to do their bidding. You need to fly, my beautiful girl."

A lump rose in Gabby's throat because without her grandmother, Gabby would have been the oddball, lost in her staid family. "I love you, Grandma." Gabby pulled the frail woman into a hug.

"I love you too. Now go before they come looking. I'll cover." With a wave, her grandmother turned back toward the party.

When Gabby got older she wanted to be a badass like Annabelle, she thought, as she let herself outside and asked a valet to bring her car, a gift from Annabelle for her college graduation.

Once settled inside the vehicle, Gabby took off. Away from the house and feeling free, she knew just where she wanted to go. The Back Door was a bar she'd visited last summer when they'd first opened their Hamptons location. The atmosphere was casual, fun and best of all, nobody would come looking for her there.

* * * *

Maddox James walked into The Back Door, the bar he managed, and nodded at the hostess waiting to serve the guests who preferred tables to standing around the bar.

"Everything quiet?" he asked Sheila, who had been with the place since their opening. Maddox had come on a few months after.

“Yes. Nice turnover in the dining area.”

A glance told him every table was full, with more people waiting outside. The owners, Zach Dare and Remy Sterling, would be pleased.

He nodded. “Keep up the good work,” he said, then walked straight through to the bar where Cal, the head bartender, held down the fort. “What’s going on tonight?” Maddox asked.

Cal looked up from the glass he was holding and wiping down the counter with a rag. “The usual,” he said. “And I’ve been keeping an eye on her.” He tilted his head toward the end of the bar.

Following his gaze, Maddox saw a pretty, young blonde stirring her frozen drink with a straw. She wore a halter-top that covered her neck and ended with a soft ruffle beneath her chin. Her arms were tanned, her skin golden, and her soft hair fell over her shoulders, straight and silky.

She mixed the drink, staring into the glass, something obviously weighing heavily on her mind. From her dainty movements to her clearly expensive clothes, and gold Cartier Love bracelet gleaming on her delicate wrist, every instinct he’d honed over the years, and learned from his brief but lucrative career on Wall Street, told him she came from wealth.

So why was she drinking here where the common people gathered and not at daddy’s social club?

As he watched, her pink lips pursed around the straw and his cock twitched in his pants.

Fuck. Seems he’d learned his lesson about spoiled rich girls but his dick hadn’t gotten the message. “Did you card her?” he asked Cal.

“Of course, boss. She’s legal.”

“Barely, I’m sure,” Maddox muttered.

“Excuse me, Cal!” the woman under discussion called out, waving a hand to get his attention.

“On a first name basis already?” Maddox asked.

The bartender turned her way. “What can I get you, princess?”

“Princess?”

Cal shrugged. “What can I say? She’s a drunk-talker and I gave her a nickname.”

She pointed to her glass, indicating she’d like another.

“How many margaritas has she had?”

Cal shrugged. “This would be her fourth. But I was going to cut her off. She’s been going at it since she walked in a little over an hour ago. Rich girl with rich girl problems. I kinda feel sorry for her.”

“Excuse me,” another patron called out, an annoyed tone in his voice. “Can someone get me a refill?”

“Coming,” Cal said.

“And I’ll take care of the princess.” Maddox sighed and strode over to her end of the bar.

She glanced up with glassy eyes that grew wide at the sight of him. “Well, hi there.” Her gaze raked over him, approval obvious from her small smile.

“Hi yourself, princess.”

She perked up at the nickname. “Why can’t my parents want me to marry someone who looks like you?” Glassy emerald-green eyes fringed by long, black lashes, stared up at him longingly.

He shook his head and ignored her comment.

“Can I get another one please?” She pointed to her margarita glass, pursed her lips around the straw and sipped, making a loud slurping sound. “See? It’s empty!” The noise was unattractive but her subsequent giggle wasn’t.

He groaned. “I think you’ve had enough.”

She lifted one delicate shoulder. “I’ll ask Cal. He liked me.” She looked beyond him. “Oh Cal! Woo-hoo!” She waved a hand in the air to get the other man’s attention.

Maddox turned and shook his head at the bartender.

“Sorry,” Cal said loudly.

She sighed. “You’re mean.”

“And you’re drunk.” He picked up her glass, turned and put it in the rack before facing her again.

She sat with both elbows on the bar, a forlorn look on her face.

He sighed. “Okay, what’s the problem?” he asked, knowing if he was behind the bar, he had no choice but to play psychiatrist without a diploma.

First, he poured her a soda from the tap, then he walked over and placed it in front of her with a new straw, prepared to listen.

“My parents are pressuring me to get together with a guy of *their* choosing.” She made a disgusted face, letting him know what she thought of the man.

Maddox shook his head. Typical rich parents with 18th-century expectations. Marry off their beautiful daughter to someone equally wealthy and acceptable in their eyes. He’d seen it so often during his years on Wall Street, watched it up close at dinner parties he’d been invited to. Though he’d been new to their world, he’d also come up quickly, made a name for himself and had been considered a prime catch.

He almost felt sorry for the princess but he had no doubt with the *right* man, she’d be all in to do what her parents asked of her. All the women in her social circle did. And though he’d wanted the money, having grown up solidly lower middle class, it hadn’t been his scene. Something he’d learned pretty quickly.

“They had a party tonight with the typical Hamptons crowd,” she said, bringing him out of his thoughts. “I escaped to the library to get away from everyone and he found me.” She wiped her lips with the back of her hand and he stiffened.

“Did he touch you?”

She nodded. “He planted a big sloppy kiss on me. But I kicked him in the balls and ran out.”

Maddox was unable to stifle a laugh at her actions but the thought of any man putting a hand on her soft skin had his temper rising. Though she was definitely too young for him, he couldn't deny the initial attraction. One he'd ignore.

She let out a loud sigh. “*Now* can I have another drink?”

He shook his head. “Sorry. You're officially cut off for the night.”

“Boss, you're needed in the kitchen,” one of the barbacks called out.

Maddox glanced at the young woman who was checking her phone. “I'll be right back.”

He walked to the kitchen and through the swinging door where he found himself in the middle of an argument between a busboy and waitress who'd been dating. Doing his best not to lose his temper, Maddox reminded them that if they couldn't get along, one of them would have to go. The duo, he wasn't certain if they were still a couple, rushed back to work.

Another fifteen to twenty minutes passed, during which Maddox put out a few more fires, reminding him of why he preferred to have things run without him in the kitchen. Problems were typically solved by the staff if they didn't have the manager to run interference.

By the time Maddox made his way back to the bar, the crowd had grown, the crowd was hopping and Cal had been joined by Eddie, the newest summer hire. While Cal was professionally moving between the patrons, removing full drinks and serving fresh ones, Eddie lingered at the far end of the bar.

It was obvious why. The pretty princess had an empty glass in front of her and Maddox watched as the bartender swapped it for a fresh margarita. Then, instead of moving to the next person waiting, he leaned closer and began to chat, while she fluttered her lashes and stirred the second drink she shouldn't have been served.

Maddox strode over and swooped up the glass before she could put those slick, freshly glossed lips around the straw.

“Eddie, get back to work!” Maddox barked, tilting his head toward a point away from the customers. “We’ll talk soon.”

“Yeah, boss.” The man slunk away and Maddox turned to join him for a reprimand.

“Oh, come on, party pooper. Eddie had no issue serving me,” *his* princess complained.

Maddox ignored his automatic use of the pronoun. She was already on a first name basis with both his bartenders, and was now slurring her words, something that wouldn’t have happened if Eddie had been doing his job and not flirting with her instead.

Maddox turned back to find her wrinkling her nose in a pout he found too cute. He needed to get control of this situation, starting with something he should have done earlier but he had trusted Cal. Still did, but Maddox needed to see for himself.

“Are you sure you’re twenty-one?” he asked.

She hiccupped. “Twenty-two.” She held up two fingers. “See?”

“How about a license and not the peace sign?”

She rolled her eyes and leaned down, probably to find her handbag, nearly toppling to the floor. The guy nearest her stepped aside instead of helping.

“Jackass,” Maddox muttered. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” She slid off the chair and knelt this time, her head disappearing beneath the bar before she popped up, purse in hand. “Got it!” She fished inside, retrieved a small, zippered pouch with a familiar logo on the side, and finally handed him her license.

He studied it with interest. “Gabriella Annabelle Davenport.” He said the mouthful out loud.

“My friends call me Gabby,” she said, now leaning both arms on the counter, looking like she needed to be held up.

Something he really wouldn't mind doing, which told him he needed his head examined, both because he recognized her last name—assuming she was Aaron Davenport of Davenport Securities' daughter—and at...yes, twenty-two, he was ten years her senior.

“Okay, Gabby—”

She burst out laughing, interrupting him. “I lied! Nobody calls me Gabby except my sister. And now you. You're my friend, right?”

“Not if that means you think I'm giving you another drink,” he said.

She stuck her little tongue out in response and dammit, his mind went into overdrive, imagining all the things she could do with that soft tongue, like lick the length of his stiff dick.

“How about you give me your address and I'll call an Uber to take you home?”

She shook her head, her blonde waves creating a halo around her head before settling back on her bare shoulders. “No. I do not want to go back there.” Her eyes were glassy but determined.

Recalling what she'd told him happened to her earlier tonight, he couldn't be a bastard and insist she go home. Besides, her license, which he put on the counter in front of her, had a New York City address, and he had no idea where her parents' summer home was located.

“Okay, is there someone else you can call for a ride? Or a friend whose house you can go to?”

She'd replaced her license in the small zipper purse and shoved it back into her bag. “I don't have any friends I trust enough to help me,” she said quietly.

An odd statement, he thought. “Somehow I doubt someone as chatty as you doesn't have girlfriends.” He cocked an eyebrow.

“I’m different,” she said, not meeting his gaze, and something in his chest twisted at the honest admission.

“How about we sober you up and discuss it more after?”

“Boss?” This time it was Sheila who called for him, coming up beside Gabby. “I need you. There’s an obnoxious patron giving Lizzie a hard time,” she said of one of their newer waitresses.

He nodded. “Coming.” He looked to Gabby. “I’ll have Cal get you some coffee and water. Later, I’ll make sure you get home safe.” As the acting bar manager, it was his responsibility.

And that was true but his gut told him his need to look out for her went deeper. Something that made no sense. Not for a woman he’d just met and was too young for him.

He gave her one last glance and her gaze locked with his, definite interest in her expression. Double shit. He didn’t need the unwanted feeling reciprocated.

“I need to go deal with that problem,” he told her in a gruff voice. “But I’ll be back.”

He was about to turn when she spoke. “Wait.”

“What is it?”

She rubbed one finger over her pouty bottom lip in a gesture he didn’t think she meant as seductive. But it was.

“I don’t know your name,” she said.

“It’s Maddox.” He turned to go deal with the problem up front.

“Sexy name for a sexy guy,” Gabby murmured.

He heard the words as he took his first step away and his ego preened at the compliment. His unruly cock liked it too. She was more trouble than he’d originally thought.

Trouble in a sweet yet sultry, innocent yet vixenish package. One he’d have a problem resisting if he didn’t get her home and away from him. Soon. He’d already had one experience with a rich woman slumming with a bar manager.

While he'd been thinking about the future, she'd been using him until summer ended. Lesson learned. Unfortunately, he'd been celibate ever since, which made his attraction to Gabby harder to ignore.

But he would.

A couple of hours later, the bar was still busy. Cal offered to close for Maddox, a job the other man often handled.

Maddox had been keeping an eye on, and his distance from, Gabby as she drank coffee and stared into the cup as if she'd find life's answers inside.

Unable to ignore her any longer, he came up behind her and tapped her bare shoulder, finding her skin soft and welcoming under his calloused fingertips.

She turned in her seat. "Maddox!" she exclaimed like she hadn't seen him in days.

"Okay, princess. Time's up. Where do you live?" With any luck, her parents' party was over by now and she could go home.

"My car is in the back parking lot but don't worry, I know I can't drive."

One battle he didn't have to fight. "Okay, so let's call you an Uber. What's your address?"

She batted those long lashes and treated him to a sweet smile and a lazy shrug. "I don't remember," she said, giving away her lie with an adorable smirk. She slid off the stool and attempted to stand but was wobbly on her heels and they weren't all that high.

Still drunk.

Jesus. He stepped forward and slid an arm around her waist, intending to steady her. The move had her falling against him. He tried to grab her and accidentally brushed the side of her full breast with his hand.

He prayed she wouldn't notice but she stilled at his touch and instead of pulling away, she leaned further into him.

Her strawberry scent reached his nostrils and he breathed in deep, his body too aware of her body heat against him. All night he'd been trying not to react to the strange pull he felt toward her and now she was in his arms.

“What am I going to do with you?” he asked in a rough whisper.

He couldn't leave her here. Couldn't force her to give up her address. Nor did he want to take her somewhere she didn't feel safe, even if that was her home.

The answer nudged at him and he tried to think of any solution other than taking her to his half-finished house and letting her stay over. But damned if he could come up with an alternative.

With a groan, he shifted her so she once again stood on her own two feet. “Okay, princess. Let's go.”

She looked up at him with trusting eyes. Too trusting considering the desire that rode him and insisted he put her to sleep *in his bed*. Beside him. And when she woke up tomorrow, sober, he could settle himself on top of her and slide his now hard-as-nails cock into her soft, wet, willing body.

Which would not be happening.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“My place. I have a guestroom,” he muttered and helped her weave around the crowd.

As he passed the hostess stand, Sheila shot him a questioning look. Not once since he'd taken this job had he left with a customer. He didn't want to think about how bad it looked as he walked out with his arm around Gabby.

When they reached his Wrangler, he helped her into the passenger seat, grabbed the seatbelt and reached over to buckle her in.

“You're such a gentleman,” she said, her slur heavier now that she could relax and let the alcohol inside her system take over.

He shook his head. “And you’re lucky I am. Imagine if someone other than me found you tonight.” His hands curled into fists at the thought. He shut her door and came around the driver’s side.

He drove to his house, a fixer-upper on the beach he’d invested a huge chunk of savings in to buy and renovate himself. After his years working on Wall Street, trying to be someone he wasn’t in order to make money to help his parents and younger brother, he’d found himself miserable despite the wealth. He’d retreated from that life and returned to his roots, working with his hands, managing a bar, and feeling better about the man he wanted to be.

Apparently that man had a savior complex when it came to one particular drunk, rich, pretty, *young* woman. Who knew?

By the time he reached his place, a short ten-minute drive, she’d fallen asleep against the door. He parked in his driveaway and turned off the ignition, climbing out and walking around to the passenger side.

He opened the door, making sure to catch her before she leaned too far outside the car, unbuckled her seatbelt, and lifted her into his arms. Her breasts pressed against his chest, allowing him to feel her curves and imagine those breasts bare, her nipples dusky pink and rigid with need.

Sucking in a sharp breath, he ignored his uncomfortable hard-on and walked the three steps up to the front door. Her eyes opened at the bouncing motion. Emerald-green orbs stared up at him but instead of wariness, he saw more trust, backed up when she didn’t try and wiggle out of his grasp and stand on her own.

Instead, she let out a contented sigh, wrapped her arms around his neck and lay her head against his chest. Desire ramped up inside him, thoughts of peeling off her oh-so appropriate silk top and suckling on her tight nipples rushing through his head.

Fuck.

He was going to hell for the things he wanted to do with the woman in his arms. Even knowing their age difference, he couldn't convince himself it mattered. Not in his daydreams, anyway. Reality was a whole different ballgame. He was a master at self-control.

Even so, he had no doubt he'd jerk off to that vision in the shower, then toss and turn, the scent of strawberries forever embedded in his brain.

Chapter Two

Gabby woke up to the sun streaming through a window and searing into her eyes. She immediately closed them tight. And as last night came back to her in a technicolor movie-like reel, she groaned. She might have been drunk last night and she was definitely hungover this morning, but she remembered every detail.

She'd been mauled by Preston at her parents' party, rushed from the house, and ended up at The Back Door where a nice bartender named Cal served her drinks and then *he* showed up. The man who'd brought her to his house because she'd refused to give him her parents' address. After consoling herself with the fact that at least she hadn't thrown up in his car, she forced her eyelids open and blinked into the sun.

She took stock. The headache was to be expected. No nausea, thank God. And she was still in her dress from last night while her shoes were on the floor by the bed. The hot bartender, Maddox, she remembered, hadn't taken advantage of her. He'd brought her home and taken care of her, making him a decent guy.

There was an old-fashioned shade on the window which hadn't been rolled down, explaining her bright wakeup call. She looked around and saw bare walls with holes where picture hooks had once been, faded rectangles where pictures once stood.

On the nightstand, she was surprised to find a tall glass of water and two ibuprofen. She was touched by the thoughtful gesture from a stranger whose hospitality she was already taking advantage of, and very grateful. She sat up, immediately swallowing the pills and downing the entire glass of water. With a little luck, between this and some food, she'd get rid of the pounding headache. Once she had a clear head, she'd be able to figure out what to do next.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and looked around, noticing her purse on the wooden dresser across from

her. Her phone was inside it and she wasn't ready to see the dozens of messages her mother had probably left. Still, she wasn't a procrastinator and decided it was better to know what awaited her. She retrieved her cell and turned it on, wincing at the text messages, missed calls, and voicemails.

A quick scroll through revealed her mother was furious that she'd *embarrassed the family by leaving*, her grandmother urged her to check in, and Preston informed her she'd had her fun and it was time to *come home and face up to her responsibilities. Asshole.*

She left her phone on the dresser with her purse and walked into the hall, finding a bathroom across from the room where she'd slept. Once she was inside and locked the door, she saw he'd left her a toothbrush, toothpaste, and towels on the counter, along with what looked like one of his t-shirts.

She blew out a long breath, wondering how she'd gotten so lucky to find a good guy in her drunken state. The bathroom was basic. The toilet was a standard and the sink white porcelain with a small two-door wood vanity. She turned on the shower water, adjusted the temperature, undressed and stepped under the warm spray. There was soap along with generic bottles of shampoo and conditioner, and she gratefully used them all. A little while later, she stepped out of the bathroom feeling clean and refreshed and wearing a soft tee-shirt that fell to her knees, and yesterday's underwear she'd turned inside out. She stopped in her room to take a hair tie out of her bag and pull her long hair into a messy bun on top of her head.

She glanced in the mirror. Her cheeks were pink from drinking and her eyes a little glassy but without access to makeup, there wasn't much more she could do. Last night, she'd made a fool of herself, and she had to face the bartender and see whether he was as good looking as she remembered. Or if she'd been viewing him through a drunken lens.

The house didn't appear to be big and it was definitely under renovation. As she made her way to the kitchen, she noticed the walls in the large family room had been primed but only one was painted and there was furniture, a mahogany-

colored leather sofa and matching club chair and a large steamer-trunk as a cocktail table. No knickknacks, nothing giving the place a homey feel. She walked toward what she assumed was the kitchen, glancing out the sliding glass doors as she passed. The patio was also being worked on, the dirt outside having been dug up and most of the old bluestone removed except for a few square stones providing a walking path to the sandy area behind it.

She stopped in the kitchen entry, taking in the obviously new, stainless-steel appliances, a swirled mix of gray, white, and black granite countertops, and a weathered wood tile on the floor in a steel gray. It was masculine and very much like the man she remembered meeting last night.

Speaking of her host, he stood in front of the sink, looking out a window. With no shirt, a pair of black track pants rode low on his hips. Defined muscles were visible in his upper back, tapering down to a lean waist. From behind, he was an extremely hot man and she swallowed hard, and wrong, and began to cough and choke on her own saliva.

He turned at the sound, his gaze landing on her. She blinked and tears dripped down her face as she struggled to catch her breath while taking in the hotness before her. No drunken goggles for her. The man was the perfect male specimen, his dark hair tousled from sleep, his brown eyes warm, and his tanned body a picture of muscled goodness with a tattoo on one shoulder.

His eyes softened in concern. "You okay?"

She nodded and swiped at the wetness on her cheeks. "Swallowed wrong."

Once she stopped coughing, his gaze drifted from her face, traveling down her body. She might not have a ton of experience but his eyes definitely heated and she glanced down to find her nipples poking through her thin cotton tee. *His* T-shirt. Embarrassed, she folded her arms across her chest and he immediately turned away.

He took a few steps to the fridge, pulled out a carton, grabbed a glass from a cabinet and poured orange juice into

the cup. “Here.”

Grateful, she accepted the drink and took a long sip, keeping her body angled away from him. She drank, waiting to be sure she wouldn't choke again before answering. “Thank you. And thanks for...bringing me back here, leaving me water and something for my head. Just...everything.”

“Wasn't like you gave me a choice,” he said in a wry tone and her cheeks heated with more embarrassment.

She hadn't given him her parents' address but she couldn't say she was sorry. “Well, I appreciate it.”

He studied her intently, as if trying to figure her out. She was aware of him now firmly keeping his eyes on her face and she relaxed. If he found her attractive, she definitely returned the sentiment but she'd rather have more coverage while talking to him.

“Hungry?” he asked. “I have bagels.” He gestured to the counter where a bag of varied flavors sat. “Butter and cream cheese are in the fridge.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

She walked past him and set about choosing her bagel, a cinnamon raisin, and taking a tub of cream cheese from the refrigerator. “Want one?”

“I already ate.”

She shrugged. Making herself at home wasn't easy but she did her best, toasting and making her bagel, pouring a cup of coffee from the pot that he'd already made, and sitting down at the small kitchen table with him leaning against the counter, watching her the entire time. He was respectful, keeping his gaze off her chest but she noticed him taking in her tanned legs and she thought she heard a hum of approval before he cleared his throat and glanced out the window.

“So your house is being renovated?” she asked as she took a bite of her bagel.

He cocked an eyebrow at her interest. “Yeah.”

“I like it here. It’s cozy. I mean, except for the lack of pictures and...feminine touches.” Yes, she was hinting for an answer as to whether he had a girlfriend.

He frowned in confusion. “Why the hell would I have feminine touches?”

She shrugged. “Your girlfriend likes the sparse décor?” Yes, she was curious and digging for information. He might be a touch grumpy, but she couldn’t deny the hotness factor. Nobody in her world looked like him.

“I don’t have a girlfriend.”

She grinned. “Interesting.” And good to know.

He exhaled an exasperated breath and ran a hand through his sexy, somewhat long hair. “Look, can you just finish up so I can take you to the bar to get your car and you can go home?”

She was obviously irritating him, but for some reason she liked getting under his skin. He might not want her here but from the way he’d looked at her, he wasn’t immune.

“I’m not going home. Not while my parents are giving the asshole access to the house and by default, to me.”

His sigh told her he understood but his next words were, “Well you can’t stay here,” he said gruffly.

She slowly put the bagel onto the plate, considering her options. All the hotels, motels, and rentals would be booked for the summer. Her friends’ parents wouldn’t take her in out of loyalty to her mother and father, who would never believe her if she’d told them what Preston had done. People in their circle closed ranks. She knew she’d find herself on the outside, with their friends helping her parents to push her to return home.

She truly had no other options, which meant she would have to play on his sympathy and hope his kindness and hospitality continued. Okay, kindness might be stretching how he’d treated her but he had brought her here, given her a room, clean clothing and breakfast. He might be grumpy but he hadn’t turned her away. Until now.

“Look, I realize we don’t know each other but you do have an extra room. The one I slept in last night.” She’d never been so pushy but she really needed more time to figure out her life.

He shook his head. “It’s about to become a study.”

“But for now there’s still a bed.” She batted her eyelashes in a futile attempt to flirt but she’d never been any good at it.

He studied her, those chocolate brown eyes taking her in. He was good at hiding his emotions. She’d just have to be better at breaking through his walls.

* * * *

Maddox stared at his too-innocent looking guest and groaned. She gave off a guileless appearance but Gabby knew just how to work him to get what she wanted. He doubted she was evil or manipulative like many women he’d been unlucky enough to meet. Just young and desperate, which had her chipping holes in his defenses. Not that he’d show her as much.

She was adorably cute and extremely sexy in his overly long T-shirt. He wasn’t used to women wearing his clothing and seeing her in his thin tee did something for him. Her legs were lean, tanned, and he could imagine them wrapped around his waist as he backed her into a wall, kissed her hard and slid his hand beneath the hem of that shirt, stroking her wet sex to make her come. *Those* were the reasons he fought so hard against her staying. He could not allow himself to get involved with her. She was too young, which could mean too flighty.

But there was something about the innocence he sensed that called to him. No other woman he’d been with, especially not Felicia, who he’d dated for six months and thought he’d been falling for, had this appealing, wholesome side to her.

Felicia had been elegant and looked perfect on his arm at any event they attended, but she lacked the genuine warmth Gabby possessed. And at the very mention of him possibly resigning his job at the investment firm, she’d lost her mind,

yelling, shouting, and threatening to break up with him, and that was before he'd revealed his intention to leave the rat race and move here.

No sooner had she reacted, than he'd known he had to end things. Learning she wasn't in love with him but with his status had been a blow, but at least he'd walked away with his dignity intact. Only with hindsight had he realized he'd liked similar things about her, how they fit together for business and yes, the sex had been good. As shallow as he'd discovered the relationship had been, the road to getting over her still hadn't been easy.

His temporary houseguest already evoked protective emotions and those feelings made him weak. If she stayed, he might give in and he refused to fall for the poor little rich girl. One who could decide to run back to her rich family and leave him alone to pick up the pieces. Been there, done that. He didn't care for a repeat.

"Maddox?" Gabby waved a hand in front of his face. "Are you listening?"

He groaned, aware he'd been lost in thought for way too long. "Look, you don't have to go home but you can't stay here." It had been hard enough to sleep knowing she was a short distance away in his study, on the bed his brother had used while he'd lived here. Maddox's shower had consisted of jerking off to thoughts of Gabby and being too pissed off at himself to fall asleep after. "How about we get dressed, drive over to the bar and you can figure something out?"

She shook her head. "I already thought things through. Everything around here is booked in the summer, rentals included. I'm not going back to the city. My parents will follow. And I am not going to their summer home so my mother can push her agenda, forcing me to hang around with that rich, handsy loser, *Preston Barrett, III*, thinking I'll agree to marry him."

"You said Preston Barrett?" Maddox knew that name.

"The third." She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

He agreed with her assessment of the prick her parents wanted her to marry. He knew him too well.

“You know him?” she asked, her eyes wide in surprise.

He couldn't prevent the half smile from lifting his lips. He hadn't planned on revealing anything personal but with this common connection, he couldn't hold back. “If I told you before I managed The Back Door I was a money manager in the city, would you believe me?”

“Why wouldn't I?” she asked without hesitation. “It just makes me want to know what made you move here and change your whole life.”

He blinked, surprised at her nonjudgmental reaction. Even his parents, who loved him with everything in them, wondered if he'd lost his mind when he'd made the choice. In the end, they'd supported him and were grateful that he was happy again.

He didn't reply to her question. “So I know the Barretts because I worked at Barrett Senior's financial firm.”

“Aah. So you know the slime is inherited?” She grinned and he wanted nothing more than to kiss those lips.

He nodded. “Preston came in thinking he was above the existing partners because of his family name. He cornered more than one receptionist, sending them running to HR only to find nobody would write up the owner's son.” It was just one of the many reasons that world wasn't for him.

“That's awful,” Gabby whispered, obviously putting herself in the place of those women.

“You defended yourself against him. As for me, I saw him in action, then backed up my assistant's accusation. I put it in writing, but I assume Senior buried the claims. She left the firm when I did. You're doing the right thing, getting away from him.”

And shame on her parents for thinking the entitled young bastard with the wandering hands was good enough for their daughter. And there were those possessive instincts firing up

again. Ones he'd never felt for a female in his life, except for his mother.

"Thank you for saying that." Gabby smiled. "So you see why I'm not going home to deal with my family or Preston." She squared her shoulders, obviously preparing for an argument.

Oh, she was good. Using his disgust with Barrett as a way to change his mind about her staying. He ground his teeth so hard he was surprised he didn't chip a molar. Because there was no way Maddox would send her back to the pit of vipers she came from.

"Fine. You can stay here." He'd just have to take an extra cold shower a day.

Her eyes opened wide, a big smile pulling at her mouth. "Really?"

He held up a hand. "For a little while. Just until you figure out your next move."

"Thank you!" Ignoring the last bite of her breakfast, she jumped up from her seat. Next thing he knew, she'd wrapped herself around him, hugging him tight. "I'm so grateful. You've been a life saver from the moment we met."

He found himself surrounded by her warm body, soft curves and the fragrance of the generic shampoo and soap in the shower. Her bland scent did nothing to calm his desire or arousal because he'd already inhaled her strawberry scent when he'd carried her to bed last night. The sweet smell lingered in his memory and his body reacted to everything about her, his cock growing harder.

She didn't let go and he reached up, gripping her wrists with every intention of unwinding her limbs from around his neck. Anything to create distance between them before he did something he would regret.

Taking his cue, her arms drifted to her sides, but she didn't step back. Oh, no. Not the woman who had trouble written all over her. Instead, she tilted her head and met his gaze. Her emerald eyes glittered like precious jewels, a combination of

desire and naughtiness in her expression. “You try really hard to hide it but you’re a nice guy, Maddox. Thank you.”

His name on her lips was his undoing. He took in her half-lidded gaze and natural, pink puckered mouth and when she rose on to her tiptoes, he shoved all rational thought aside and dipped his head to steal a taste. She was all in, her kiss eager but inexperienced, solidifying the innocence he’d sensed from the minute he’d laid eyes on her. Instead of being a turn-off, it only made him want her more.

He slid his tongue further into her mouth and she met him with a greedy passion he wouldn’t have thought her capable of. And fuck, she tasted good, like strawberry cream cheese and coffee, and everything sweet. He wasn’t used to sweet and wanted more. Gripping the back of her neck, he held her in place, devouring her mouth.

Her little moans were hot and when she began to press her body into his, he was shocked he didn’t come in his pants. He’d never had such an explosive first kiss. On that thought, reality came back with a jarring thud.

He lifted his head and took a step back, needing the distance. He ended things before he said screw it, laid her out on the kitchen table and made a feast of her sweet body. She blinked up at him, her dark lashes fluttering over her eyes and he held onto her forearms, making certain she was steady on her feet.

“This was a bad idea,” he said, releasing her.

“What was?” Her tongue swiped over her damp lower lip and he stifled a groan.

“Us. This. You and me.” He gestured back and forth between them. “If you’re going to stay here, it’s hands off.”

“Lips too?” she asked.

There was no need for a reply, so he pinned her with his gaze until she looked away, then folded her arms across her chest in a protective measure. She still pulled in deep inhales, attempting to catch her breath from their kiss. And the flush in

her cheeks could have been from arousal but he had a feeling she was also embarrassed he'd pushed her away.

Dammit. He felt bad but even if she wasn't going to be his houseguest, they couldn't get involved.

“Why does it have to be hands off?” she asked, surprising him.

She was pushy. Brave. And he admired those qualities. “For many reasons, not the least of which is I'm ten years older than you.”

For another, she could grow bored of him and his minimalistic lifestyle compared to the wealth she'd grown up with. And though she might not want Preston the douche, he had no doubt she would want marriage, kids, and everything he'd decided against after his relationship with Felicia went up in flames. Gabby didn't need someone who had a decade of life experience on her, and who'd walked away from the wealth she'd grown up with and no doubt would go back to. Eventually.

She pursed her lips and stopped arguing or asking questions.

Both things put him on edge. One thing he'd already learned, she didn't give up easily. “So we're on the same page? This...we...aren't happening?” He needed her to agree.

“Fine.” Her lips pursed but she remained silent.

He narrowed his gaze, waiting for another argument. When he didn't get one, he let out a relieved breath. “Good. Get ready. We'll go to the bar and you can drive your car back here.”

She treated him to a salute.

Smart ass, he thought, unable to hold back a grin.

She paused by the table and began to clean up her breakfast, putting the food back in the fridge, and washing her dish and coffee mug in the sink. He had no doubt she'd grown up with help so this display impressed him. Felicia had always left hers in the sink for him to clean.

Without a word, Gabby strode out of the kitchen, leaving him to watch her hips sway as she made her exit and causing him to wonder how that ass would fit in in his palms.

“Not happening,” he reminded himself and stormed out of the room, heading to his bedroom to change.

* * * *

They were so happening, Gabby thought. No matter what Maddox said. That kiss was the most incredible thing she'd ever felt. If he thought his silly words would deter her, he didn't know her very well. Which he didn't. Something she hoped to correct during her stay with him.

And though she might be a little innocent...okay, *very* innocent, she knew he'd been as into it as she was. Her panties were soaked and she'd felt the hard ridge of his erection pulsing against her lower body, evidence of his desire. She hadn't asked to stay because she was fascinated by the sexy bartender, but she wouldn't lie and say it wasn't an added bonus to avoiding her family until she'd made some life decisions.

Once back in the bedroom, she put on her dress from last night, doing her best to smooth out the wrinkles and knowing she failed. Looks like she'd be experiencing the walk of shame without the benefit of any orgasms the night before. Based on how her body responded to Maddox, she wondered how easily he could be persuaded to change his mind about them.

Not that she planned to give him her virginity, but there were other things they could do and she was pretty certain a man who looked like him was talented. She wanted to be one of the recipients of what he could surely offer her. His hard muscles tempted her, and she wanted to run her hands over his tanned skin and lick every available inch of his tattoo.

Her phone rang, causing her to jump at the unexpected sound. She glanced at the screen. She squealed, grateful for the

distraction from thinking of Maddox naked and took the call.
“Hi, P!”

“Hi, yourself,” her sister, Penelope said. “Grandma tells me you had quite the night. Can I ask where you are?” The concern in her tone was obvious and Gabby sighed.

“I think it’s better if I don’t tell you. Plausible deniability, you know?”

“Then tell me you’re safe.”

“Very,” Gabby assured her. Penelope was the only other person that Gabby knew supported her. “I’m staying with a... friend.”

“You don’t have any real friends in the Hamptons, Gabby. Who are you with?”

She bit down on the inside of her cheek. “A good man. I swear. You need to trust me. I know what I’m doing. I refuse to marry or even date that asshole who won’t take no for an answer.”

“What?” her sister yelled. “Did he—”

“No! I kneed him in the balls and left the house but nobody cares. Nobody but Grandma, anyway. It’s time I take a stand, P. I have goals and things I want out of life. Not only don’t our parents approve, they actively blackballed me.”

Penelope sighed. “I’m know and I’m sorry. Their reach is far. But you have your painting, and you are so talented. Your canvases are natural and evoke so many emotions. Why not try to sell your work? I have everything you’ve done stored in the basement. Nobody can take that away from you.”

Closing her eyes, Gabby agreed. “Yeah.” She needed to believe in herself to take that step.

“Five minutes and I’m leaving,” Maddox called out, his voice deep through her closed bedroom door.

“I have to go but I’ll be in touch,” Gabby told her sister.

“Okay. I’m proud of you, holding out for true love and the life *you* want,” Penelope said, and in her words, Gabby heard

her older sister's regrets for marrying a man her parents had chosen. "I never had your passion or courage. I am happy, I have my baby and Stu is a good man. The guy they chose for you isn't. Stand firm, Gabby. Love you."

Gabby swallowed over the lump in her throat. "Love you, too. Can I ask one favor?"

"Anything. You know that."

"Call Grandma. Tell her you heard from me and I'm safe, and I'll get in touch when I'm ready. I'm sure mom or dad is monitoring her and her phone."

Penelope sighed. "I will if you promise to keep in touch so I know you're safe with your new *friend*."

"Promise. Talk soon." Gabby disconnected the call. After gathering her purse and taking a quick look in the mirror, she walked out to meet Maddox.

She found him standing by the front door, jingling his keys in one hand. "Ready!"

His gaze locked on hers and he frowned as he took in her outfit.

"Yes, I'm in yesterday's clothes," she said, reading his mind. "I can't go out in your shirt, so I don't have much of a choice. But once I stop at an ATM, I can fix that. I need to pull out some cash before my father either cuts me off or empties the account."

Though she had a trust fund given to her by her grandparents, she couldn't access the money until she turned thirty. She could withdraw the interest that was deposited, but she couldn't access the account in the Hamptons. Her checking account had been funded by her parents during college and until she got a job, she was stuck relying on them. Annabelle would give her money but she hated to ask, wanting to figure out a way to stand on her own two feet.

"If I remember correctly, there's an ATM near the bar, right?" she asked.

“There is. Come on.” He opened the door and tipped his head, indicating she should walk through.

Passing him, she inhaled and was treated to his masculine scent, one she recognized as sandalwood. A warm, exotic fragrance with hints of vanilla, it was her favorite smell. Her interest in the arts and sciences were varied and she’d taken courses in fragrance making at the Fashion Institute of Technology, using trust fund money her parents couldn’t track. No way did she want to hear them complain about wasting time and money. She’d eventually settled into art history, but her memory of different scents remained clear.

And Maddox’s scent, especially when they were enclosed in his Jeep, made her want to crawl into his lap, bury her face in his neck and breathe him in for as long as he’d let her.

He remained quiet on the trip into town and she respected his obvious need for silence. She’d invaded his life enough already.

He parked behind the bar near her convertible and they both got out of Jeep. “I take it that’s yours?” He gestured to the BMW.

She nodded. “But I’ll be in town for a while. I want to do some shopping after the bank.”

He worked the house key off the holder and handed it to her. “There’s a hardware store on the corner of Main. Make yourself a copy and bring me the original when you’re through.”

Surprised, she curled her fingers around the key in his hand, sliding over the roughened callouses on his skin, so different from the smooth touch of the typical men in her life. Men who wouldn’t know a hammer from a wrench. She found a guy who worked with his hands surprisingly sexy.

Especially this man. “Thank you,” she said, clasping his hand in hers. “I know I pushed you into letting me stay and I’m truly grateful.” Before she lost her nerve, she rose to her toes and pressed a lingering kiss to his cheek before spinning on her heels and walking away.

Chapter Three

Maddox spent the next few hours at the bar, catching up on paperwork and doing his best not to think about his new houseguest and those kisses. The one in his kitchen nearly had him throwing his common sense out the window and hauling her into his bed, and the sweet brush against his cheek shouldn't have impacted him the way it did. Both left him rock hard and wanting her, and appreciating her ability to be gracious even if she was right. She had pushed him into the decision.

A knock sounded on the door, and he looked up, grateful for the distraction. "Hey," he said, leaning back in his seat.

Zach walked into the room followed by Remy. Zach had been the first man to start an investigative agency as well as the first Back Door in New York City. Once Remy left the police force, he'd bought into both businesses, and they'd opened the bar in the Hamptons.

What few people knew, because he didn't announce it, was that Remy, full name Remington Sterling, was one of *The Sterlings*, a family who owned a financial equity firm going back two generations. The man was incredibly wealthy but never acted like he came from money. He had ghosts in his past he never spoke of and Maddox wouldn't push. A man was entitled to his secrets. First a New York City detective, now a bar owner and P.I., Remy resided in Manhattan and kept a low profile.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Maddox asked his bosses.

It wasn't unusual for the men to come to the bar but Zach usually left him to run things unless there were issues, like when Maddox's younger brother had been stealing from the liquor supply. He still cringed at the memory. Luckily, neither man held it against Maddox, and thanks in part to Zach's woman, Hadley, Maddox's brother had gotten his life back on track. Remy and Zach went back and forth between the city

and the Hamptons for business meetings with the Hamptons being the summer site of choice.

Zach settled into the chair in front of Maddox's desk. "Hadley wanted to go shopping and I figured I'd come see how you're doing. Ran into *him* as I was walking in." He gestured to Remy, who was leaning against the wall beside him.

"Everything at the bar is quiet, as in no issues," Maddox assured them.

"Not here to check on you," Zach said. "We're both killing time until lunch."

Though Maddox nodded as if he understood his boss's life, he'd given up on having a woman to share things with. While working in the city, making bank and mingling with the wealthy, women threw themselves at him. Even having a girlfriend didn't deter the more determined female. But Maddox learned fast. He never knew if a woman was interested in him as a person or his money in the bank. His ex had merely put the last nail in the coffin of relationships.

Once he'd returned to his working-class roots, he'd discovered the same kind of woman in the Hamptons wanted to slum with a hot bar manager—not his words—but would never consider a man like him as a life partner. He was jaded and didn't want any woman for more than a night. Not everyone could have what his parents shared.

Maddox jolted with a start, realizing he'd drifted off in thought while Remy and Zach were discussing the New York Yankees and soon, all three of them segued into how football pre-season was starting soon.

"Knock knock," a familiar voice said, as Hadley strode in, her hair in a casual ponytail. No makeup, like Gabby. Apparently he and Zach had the same type. *Wait. Fuck.* He shouldn't be thinking of Gabby as his type.

"Look who I found at the gallery."

As if Maddox's thoughts had conjured her, Gabby strode in behind Hadley, holding a handful of shopping bags. She'd

mentioned going shopping and he'd assumed she'd pick up a few things to get by while she stayed with him. Apparently figuring out her life included spending lots of daddy's money.

Maddox narrowed his gaze. "How do you know each other?" He stared at his houseguest, whose face was flushed and her eyes bright. Something had her excited and he was curious.

"We don't. I was in the gallery to apply for a job and Rhonda, the owner, went into the back to get an application—" Gabby began, taking him off guard.

A job? Maybe he'd underestimated her determination to make choices and be on her own.

"And..." Hadley grinned, happy to pick up the story. "I walked in to ask about a painting in the window. Gabby started telling me about the artist I was interested in. Then Rhonda returned—"

"And I had no idea she'd been listening, but she walked out and offered me a job on the spot!" Gabby dropped her bags on the floor in front of her, walked up to where Maddox sat behind his desk and threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tight. "*I got a job!*"

Her excitement was infectious, her squeal adorable, and her desire to share the news with him caused a surprising rush of happiness for her. Over her shoulder, he met Zach's shocked stare. *Shit*. The last thing he wanted to do was answer questions about his relationship with Gabby. Hell, they didn't have a relationship and he'd only known her for a day. Before he could peel her off him, she stepped back.

"Congratulations," Remy said.

"Thank you!"

Hadley walked over to Zach who had risen from his seat. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her in for a kiss that was awkward for everyone watching. Those two were in love. After almost a decade apart and a lot of drama not long ago that brought Hadley back into his life, Maddox understood their need to be close now.

After they ended the kiss, Hadley glanced from Gabby to Zach. “Gabby, this is my husband Zach, co-owner of this bar. And this is his partner, Remy Sterling.”

Gabby laughed, her cheeks still flushed pink. “I assumed he was your...something after that kiss.”

Hadley ducked her head. “We’re still in the honeymoon phase of our relationship.”

Gabby smiled and raised a hand in greeting. “Nice to meet you both.”

They both nodded, acknowledging her.

“That doesn’t explain how you two ended up here together.” Maddox said, an eyebrow raised in curiosity.

Hadley shrugged. “When we walked out, we headed in the same direction. Again, we started talking and...here we are.” She shot him a concerned look. “Something wrong?”

Maddox shook his head. He was just overwhelmed by the whirlwind that was Gabrielle Davenport.

“Ready to go grab a bite?” Zach asked Hadley.

She nodded. “Ready. Remy?”

He walked towards them. Like Maddox, Remy was single but the three of them were a tight group. “Let’s go get a table,” Remy said, then turned, glancing at Maddox. “How do you two know each other?” He glanced between Maddox and Gabby, with a smirk on his lips.

As Maddox tried to find the best explanation, Gabby answered for him. “I had some...personal issues, came to the bar, got a little too drunk and Maddox was nice enough to let me sleep at his place. I can’t go home yet, so again, he’s being such a gentleman letting me stay longer.”

Both Zach and Remy’s eyebrows shot upward.

Maddox wasn’t sure if it was her calling him a gentleman or the fact that he had this young spitfire living with him. Temporarily, he reminded himself. “It isn’t for long and she’s in Joe’s old room,” he said of his brother.

“Isn’t that what they all say?” Zach snickered and Remy chuckled, enjoying putting him on the spot.

Hadley rolled her eyes. “I’m sorry they’re behaving like adolescents,” she said and turned her gaze to Gabby. “Congratulations again. You have my cell phone now. Call me and we’ll have lunch or drinks.”

“I’d love to!” Gabby smiled as the trio walked out the door, then she turned to Maddox.

“Making friends, I see.”

She braced her hands on her hips, tipping her head to one side. “Do you have an issue with that?”

Did he have an issue with her making friends with his people? Becoming even more a part of his world? Getting a job around the corner?

He had no fucking clue. “Congratulations on the job,” he said instead of answering her.

“Thank you.” She blew out a long, obviously relieved breath. “I didn’t expect it but I’m so excited. It’s something I got on my own. I wanted to be a docent at a museum but that didn’t happen.”

“Why not?” He couldn’t help but be curious about her.

She lifted her shoulders in a little shrug. “My parents, of course. I majored in art history and applied to the museums in Manhattan.” Her eyes sparkled as she spoke, the idea obviously a passion of hers.

“What did they do?” he asked of her parents, already angry on Gabby’s behalf.

“They interfered, what else? Both called their friends and contacts who are on the boards of the larger institutions. Everyone turned me down. One woman on the board of a smaller museum admitted she was afraid to lose my father’s yearly donation.”

Her dejected look didn’t sit well with him. Nobody deserved to have their dreams undermined by people who were supposed to love them.

“I didn’t get one interview.” Her normally sweet disposition gave way to a frown and she curled her hands into fists at her side. “I had straight A’s in my major. I paint and have taken classes for years, but do they care? Acknowledge my ability? No, they do not,” she said, clearly on a roll and not waiting for a reply. “They want me to be a stay-at-home wife, be active on charity boards, and host dinners for my *hardworking* husband.” She treated him to that cute wrinkle of her nose again. “As if I’d marry Mr. Grabby-hands.” Her face flushed, this time not from anything good.

The reminder of how Preston had cornered her had Maddox’s own hands curling into fists. He wasn’t frustrated, he was furious. Given the chance, he’d introduce the man’s face to a wall and remind him what happened when he touched someone without consent.

Maddox stepped forward and braced his hands on her shoulders. “Breathe, Gabby.” He’d unintentionally hit a nerve with his question and he wanted to calm her. “Hey. Be proud of what you *did* accomplish, okay. Forget about the past and concentrate on the present and the good things happening for you.”

She nodded and when she glanced up, he noticed her eyes were wet. *Shit*. He hated when women cried. He’d grown up with a mom who never showed her sadness, she kept it hidden. He had a brother, not a sister. And the women he’d dated had specialized more in fake tears than real ones.

Something about Gabby got to him though. Her genuine personality and the vulnerability she didn’t hide shone through. He sensed she was *real*.

And to a jaded guy like him, that trait was extremely appealing.

* * * *

A week after he told Gabby she could stay, Maddox sat at his desk, staring at an inventory sheet. It was late and numbers

blurred before his eyes so he rubbed them with his palms. He didn't have to wonder what was on his mind. It was the same thing always in his head. His houseguest, who continued to surprise him and not in a bad way.

Last week, after Gabby left the bar, Maddox spent a couple of hours overseeing things at work and taking the time to convince himself he was prepared to have her living under his roof. The house wasn't large and he knew they'd be in close quarters so he had needed to remind himself of all the reasons he should keep his hands to himself.

Maddox thought he'd prepared himself to have Gabby in his home. At least that's what he told himself by the time he left work a few hours after she took her car home. *His* home, *not* hers. Unfortunately, it hadn't been as easy as he'd convinced himself it would be.

Gabby was everywhere. Not only had she purchased new towels for her bathroom, she bought some for his, too. Not that she'd been in his bedroom or the primary bath but she said she assumed his were as old as hers. Which was true. He hadn't updated them for years. He never even thought about it. Now he had plush, comfortable towels when he came out of the shower. It might be a small thing to someone else, but to him it showed a thoughtful side even if she had used the money she'd taken from the bank and refused his offer to pay her back.

A part of him wanted to fault the rich girl for using her money to give herself more luxury than Maddox had in his fixer-upper home, but she didn't seem to be all about indulgence. She just seemed to want to contribute in some way while she stayed here. Her hours were shorter than his and when he came home, often between the day and night shift, there was dinner on the table or in the fridge waiting for him. Good meals she'd cooked herself, not ordered in or picked up. With groceries she'd purchased despite him leaving cash on the counter with a note to use it for house necessities.

Felicia hadn't cooked. She didn't know how and she gave him a hard time over not hiring a chef when, at the time, he made the money to afford it. But Gabby was different and he wasn't enough of an asshole not to admit the difference. So

Maddox wouldn't allow himself to fall back on the rich girl cliché. He had to give credit where it was due.

Gabby cooked, she cleaned, she did laundry...and she painted. In the family room where he hadn't finished priming the walls, she'd set up an easel and canvas she apparently kept in her car. And when she wasn't working at the gallery, which she said she loved, he often found her with AirPods in her ears and a paint brush in her hand. From the little he saw of her work, because she often covered her paintings with a sheet, she worked with acrylics.

In essence, over the last week, she'd taken over his house. And though he ought to mind and be annoyed by her presence, he liked having her around. None of which convinced him seducing a twenty-two-year-old woman was in his best interest. He still had plenty of reservations, which included not just her age and their life experience differences, but his uncertainty of where she'd live when the summer ended. He was still guarding his emotions but with every day that passed, Gabby made that more difficult.

Shouting sounded from outside his office. Pushing back his chair, he rose to his feet. He wasn't in the mood for a fight but he was grateful for the distraction from his thoughts. He walked out and strode down the hall, following the loud voices.

As he stepped foot in the bar, his gaze came to rest on Cal who was in an argument with a familiar looking man. Maddox strode over to the douche in the pressed pants and a sport jacket, looking out of place in The Back Door where guys wore cargo shorts or jeans and T-shirts.

“Okay, Preston, what's the problem?” Maddox shoved his hands into his front pockets and glared.

The other man met his gaze, clearly not surprised to see him. “James. I heard you were managing this dump.” He scowled as he looked around the bar, which appeared new and in great shape as far as Maddox was concerned. It just wasn't the country club bar.

Maddox ignored the dig. He didn't give a shit what Preston the Third thought of him or his occupation. "Why are you hassling my bartenders?"

He glanced at Cal and tipped his head toward the bar, indicating he could go back to work.

"Seems he's looking for his girlfriend." Cal shot Maddox a pointed look, one he accepted with a nod.

After Cal returned to his place behind the bar and began helping customers, Maddox turned to Preston. "I wasn't aware you had a *girlfriend*. Women you touch without permission, on the other hand, I could count those, but it would take me all night."

"I'm not here to verbally spar with you. Where is she?"

"Where is who?" He deliberately played dumb. No way would he reveal Gabby's whereabouts. She was safely tucked away at his house and this prick wouldn't find her.

Preston let out a prolonged sigh, as if Maddox was wasting his time. "Gabriella, my girlfriend. Soon to be fiancée."

"No idea who you're talking about." Though it was interesting to see how certain Preston appeared that Gabby was his girlfriend and would bow to her family's demands.

"Gabriella has been missing for a week. Her parents and I were willing to give her time to get this little rebellion out of her system, but they've had enough. And so have I." He straightened his shoulders, posturing as if he had a leg to stand on.

Holding back a snort of amusement wasn't easy but Maddox did it and remained silent.

"Do not make me call the police," Preston said, stepping closer. "My father has pull with the Chief and we both know who he'll believe. He'll come search your home and no doubt he'll find my wayward fiancée."

Maddox raised his eyebrows but still didn't give the other man the satisfaction of a reply.

A growl of frustration escaped Preston's throat. "Gabriella's friends were here a few nights ago and saw her helping out behind the bar, talking to you and your workers. Or should I say slumming? You couldn't hack it in the world of finance so you tucked tail and came here."

Nothing the man said fazed Maddox. Gabby's so-called friends had betrayed her. Then again, on the first night they'd met she'd told him she didn't have any friends she trusted. This just proved her instincts were solid.

And Preston was deluded in thinking she was his fiancée... or anything else. "You just said she was your girlfriend. Now you're claiming she's your fiancée. Even if you got your lies straight, we both know she's neither."

Preston's lips lifted in a smug smile. "So you admit you know where she is?"

Maddox folded his arms across his chest and glared at the man, barely holding onto his anger. "I know no such thing. Now get out of my bar or I'll call for the bouncer and have *him* show you the door."

"And I'll call the police."

This asshole's posturing was getting old. "*Gabby*," Maddox emphasized her preferred name, "is an adult, asshole. You can't make her do anything she doesn't want to do. Which brings me to another point." Stepping into Preston's personal space, Maddox walked forward until he backed the man against the bar, bracing his arm at his throat. Not to hurt but to make his point about the way he'd attacked Gabby. "If you ever put your hand on her or any other woman again and I find out about it, I'll put your pretty face through the nearest wall."

Preston's complexion grew pale. "You can't prove a damn thing."

"I don't need to. I've seen you in action and I'd trust the word of any woman over a piece of shit like you." Maddox dropped his arm and stepped back. "I take it we have an understanding."

Preston shrugged and fixed his collared dress shirt. “Her parents will never allow her to walk away.”

Maddox snorted. “You clearly don’t know her very well. Now get the hell out of my bar before *I* call the cops.”

Preston’s cheeks turned red and he spun on his dress shoes and walked away.

“What a dick,” Cal said, coming up behind him.

Maddox nodded. “I’m leaving.” He wanted to make sure Barrett didn’t figure out where Gabby was staying and make a stop on the way home.

He might have spent the last week avoiding the combination of minx, flirt, and innocent that was Gabby, but things had changed. Preston’s appearance, trying to stake his claim, had Maddox reevaluating what he wanted from his houseguest.

Chapter Four

Gabby yawned. She'd stayed up watching a movie on television in the family room. The couch was comfortable and once the walls were painted the warm cream, based on the samples already on the walls, combined with the with wood trim, the room would have a homier feel.

She rose to her feet and walked into the kitchen where she poured a glass of water and finished the drink just as she heard the front door open and close again. Her stomach flipped at the sound.

Knowing Maddox was home, she couldn't deny the anticipation that coursed through her veins. The week here had flown by. Staying at his house had worked out. He accepted her presence and though he kept his distance, she felt him watching her when he thought she wasn't looking. She understood, because she was always aware of him, sensing his presence before she knew for sure that he was nearby.

More than once, she'd caught his heavy-lidded gaze and hoped he was suffering with the same suppressed desire she was, knowing he was in his bedroom, a short walk across the house. Eventually, she'd given in. She'd slipped her fingers into her shorts and stroked her wet sex. She'd pretended it was *his* fingers arousing her and sliding inside her. That it was *his* tongue on her clit as she came. And afterwards, as she caught her breath, her body pulsing but still somehow empty, she wondered if he was in his bedroom, masturbating while thinking of her.

“Gabby?”

His voice startled her despite hearing him come in. She placed her glass in the sink before heading out of the kitchen and meeting up with him as he locked the front door.

“Hi,” she said.

He turned, his gaze darkening as he took in her bedtime outfit, a camisole and matching shorts. They were her favorite

pair, decorated with pastel-colored stars on a white background. She thought she'd be in her room when he returned. Hadn't planned for him to see her in the barely-there pajama set, but she couldn't deny she liked knowing her skimpy outfit affected him.

"Hey," he said in a gruff voice that caused goosebumps to pop out on her skin.

She cleared her throat. "How was work?"

"Interesting. Had a customer asking Cal questions about you."

Her eyes opened wide and her heart began racing. "Who?" She couldn't imagine either of her parents showing up at The Back Door which left just one person and the thought made her nauseous.

"Preston Barrett III. He came in making threats, posturing and claiming you were his girlfriend and then fiancée." Maddox's voice sounded low, pissed, and if she wasn't mistaken, possessive.

"What did you do?" Worry tinged her voice, and her throat grew dry, making her wish for the water she'd left in the kitchen.

His expression softened as he met her gaze. "I made sure he knew what would happen if he didn't learn that *no means no*. I also reminded him you weren't his girlfriend or his fiancée and he'd better leave you alone."

"Thank you." She breathed out the words, grateful for Maddox and his protection. "Does Preston know I'm staying here?"

He shook his head. "But he knows you hang out at the bar."

He hesitated, obviously wanting to say more but holding back, and she narrowed her gaze. "What is it?" she asked.

He placed one hand on her shoulder. "Apparently your *friends* were in the bar one night when you were there helping.

They saw you and that's how Preston knew where to come looking."

She nodded and though she ought to feel betrayed, she'd never believed any of the girls in her social circles were her real friends. "Thanks for telling me but I can't say I'm surprised."

He settled his free hand on her other shoulder and she leaned into his protective grasp. "You deserve better," he said in a husky voice. "You should have people in your life you can trust."

She swallowed hard at the sincerity in his voice, pushing back the lump in her throat. It wasn't often she let herself think about what she was missing in her life. It wouldn't do her any good. Her focus had always been on looking ahead and making sure she held tight to whatever convictions she could. Like standing firm against her parents' desire for her to date and marry Preston.

"I have my grandmother. She knows where I am and she'd never say a word," she murmured. "I have my sister. And now I have you."

His eyes opened wide, his surprise evident. She understood. She wasn't sure what had possessed her to include him in her tiny circle, but her gut told her it was true. He'd given her a place to stay, allowed her to help at the bar he managed, let her paint in his house, and most importantly, he'd kept Preston away. Not to mention, he'd threatened him on her behalf.

Yes, she could trust Maddox James.

She also wanted him. Wanted him to kiss her without reservation this time. Wanted to see his muscled, sexy body naked and aroused for her, and to feel his warmth on her skin.

She wanted him to take her virginity.

There was so much he could show her, teach her, and make her feel. Though she knew, even if she convinced Maddox to let himself go, this thing between them could only be

temporary. He'd already listed his reasons he wasn't right for her.

Even if she knew he was wrong.

Despite the obstacles, Gabby wouldn't be deterred. She met his hooded gaze and saw the desire in his eyes. He was feeling the same need.

"Maddox? Are you going to push me away again?" she asked in a whisper.

A long moment passed, and she waited, anxious and nervous. She couldn't handle another rejection, but she'd never regret putting herself out there. She sensed he'd be worth it.

A low growl sounded from inside him and he finally caved, lowering his head, his mouth inches from hers. "I want you, Gabby."

Her heart exploded with happiness, and with the feeling of déjà vu inside her, she rose onto her toes and pressed her lips against his, sliding her tongue inside his mouth. The hands on her shoulders moved to her hips and then he was lifting her without breaking the kiss. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and somehow he walked them through the house and toward his bedroom, stopping only to lay her down on the bed.

He leaned over her and braced his arms on either side of her head. "And you're right. You *can* trust me."

She glanced up at him and knew she had to be honest. "Then you should know something before we go any further."

He pressed his lips to hers, ignoring her words for a long kiss, one that almost had her forgetting what she needed to say.

"What is it?" he asked as he rose and lifted the hem of his shirt, pulling it over his head, revealing the gorgeous, tanned chest she'd dreamed about touching.

She hoped her next words didn't put an end to her daydreams. "I'm a virgin."

* * * *

Gabby's words echoed in his ears. "You're... what?" Maddox shook his head. "Never mind. Stupid question. I heard you." He just couldn't believe it. He'd noticed her innocence in some things, but didn't most women have sex in college?

"Surprise! I was waiting for the right man." Her cheeks flushed pink in embarrassment, and she rolled to her side in an attempt to scramble off the bed.

He stopped her, flipping her onto her back again. "Hold up. You didn't give me a chance to respond."

"Maybe I don't want to hear you tell me, *you're sorry but it's too much responsibility.*"

He blew out a rough breath. A smarter man would let her go. A man who wasn't feeling so protective of her would do the same. But he couldn't. Despite how fast it had happened, she'd gotten under his skin. If anyone was going to be her first, it would be him. His age, experience, and their socio-economic differences be damned.

"You aren't too much responsibility. You're exactly the woman I want."

She blinked, her pretty green eyes and her expression holding a mix of surprise and pleasure. "That's quite a change from the man who said, *this kiss was a mistake.*"

"Because it wasn't." And he couldn't contain his grin because the other thing he enjoyed was her mix of sweetness and sass.

"Good to know—" she started to say.

He cut her off with a kiss. He slid his tongue between her lips and positioned himself on top of her once more, taking his time to devour her and learn every sweet inch of her mouth. With a moan, she slid her fingers through his hair and held him in place, the kiss going on longer than he'd ever spent just making out. And not just because he wanted to make tonight

good for her, which he did, but this moment meant something to him too.

Taking his time, he moved away from her mouth and pressed slow kisses down her neck, along her collarbone, her body trembling with desire.

“I didn’t know,” she murmured, her fingers still threading through his hair.

“What?”

She kissed his jaw and his cock grew harder. “That my body had so many erogenous zones.”

“It does. And I bet I can find more.” Sliding his hands up her sides, he caressed her soft skin, then grabbed the hem of the flimsy camisole, lifted it over her head and tossed the garment onto the floor.

He leaned back and took in her body, the curves of her breasts fuller than he’d realized, her nipples a dusky pink and hard, just begging for him to suck. That’s what he did. At the first lick, Gabby sighed and when he pulled one into his mouth, she moaned, her entire body writhing beneath him. With his other hand, he plumped and caressed her other breast, rolling her nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

She arched her hips and he knew if he slipped his hand beneath those loose shorts he’d find she was wet. Ready for him? Not yet, and he wanted to make this as easy for her as possible. He also needed to find a way to keep himself under control because everything about her turned him on. Reigning himself in wouldn’t be easy but for her, he’d do it.

* * * *

Maddox seemed to know all the right spots to lick, suck, and yes, bite, she thought, as her body hummed in ways she’d never felt before. Had she made out with boys? Yes. And that’s what they’d been. Boys. Maddox was all man, and the

attention he gave to her body proved he wasn't a selfish one, either.

He rose to his feet and stripped off his pants. She took in his thick, heavy cock, obviously aroused and her eyes opened wide. She might be wet but she didn't know how he'd fit.

“Relax, princess. I'll make it good for you.”

At his gruff words, warmth spread like liquid through her veins. She believed him, and reached down, wriggling off her shorts, taking her skimpy bikini underwear off with her.

Though inexperienced with sex, she didn't want to make him feel like he was with a young girl, not when he'd already made her age an issue. So, she bared herself to him, doing her best not to blush or attempt to cover herself. Instead, she lay down, as ready as she'd ever be. No matter how nervous she was, her sex throbbed and felt empty. For the first time she knew what it was like to want. She wanted to be filled by him, even if it hurt.

“Fucking beautiful,” he said, his hot gaze raking over her skin.

She swallowed hard, aware of her nipples puckering even more under his approving stare. “Do you know what I've been thinking about since the first time I saw you without a shirt?” she asked, looking up into his handsome face.

“Tell me.” He braced his hands on either side of her shoulders again, but this time, when he lowered himself, his hot erection pulsed against her belly and her sex.

“I wanted to lick that tattoo on your shoulder,” she admitted, pushing herself to her elbows and doing just that, her tongue swiping across his hot skin. “Salty,” she said. “And you smell good.”

A light coating of precome smeared across her stomach. Obviously he liked that so she continued, trailing a path along the tribal band.

“Enough.” His gruff voice didn't put her off, not when he was so hard and his hips arching against her body.

He drew a long breath. “I need to see if I have condoms,” he muttered.

She asked herself if she trusted him enough and decided yes, she did. “I’m on birth control and you already know I’ve never done this before. How about you? Are you safe?”

“You’re asking me if I can take you bare?” His gaze darkened at the rhetorical question. “I was tested after I left New York. I wasn’t sure I trusted the woman I’d been with. Then did it again after...well, we can talk about it another time. I don’t want anyone else between us right now.”

She nodded in understanding. “Then let’s do this.”

He shook his head and chuckled. “You always surprise me. We’re not just going to do this. I’m going to make sure you’re so ready for me, nothing else matters.”

He then slid down her body and sat between her thighs, his body resting on his knees. Gripping her thighs, he pulled her legs apart. “Put them on my shoulders.”

No one had ever gone down on her either but she didn’t think this was the time to mention it. All too aware of his sizzling gaze on her nearly bare sex, she did as he instructed. But she couldn’t watch any longer and as his face drew closer, she shut her eyes in time for the first swipe of his tongue on her clit.

Her hips bucked and she moaned, the sound escaping because she’d never imagined how good this could feel.

“You taste delicious,” he muttered and began to suck and nibble, pulling her outer lips into his mouth, teasing her by licking her everywhere but where she needed him most. He slid that talented tongue over the seam between her thigh and her sex, showing her yet another erogenous zone.

Her pussy throbbed with desire and she began to rock her hips, grinding herself against his mouth but not getting the friction she needed. Suddenly he sucked her clit between his lips and a flash fire ripped through her.

“Maddox, please, more. Right there.” She arched into him.

He grasped onto her hips, holding tight as he ate her like he couldn't get enough. She began to spiral, rocking against his face until her climax hit and she screamed his name, stars flashing in front of her closed eyes as he took her through the orgasm with continued licks and nibbles until she couldn't take it any longer.

"Enough, please." She lowered her legs off his shoulders and opened her eyes in time to see him lift his head and wipe his mouth on her thigh.

"I think you're ready," he said in a husky voice that aroused her again.

And here she thought she was finished.

He crawled up her body until the head of his cock settled at her entrance. "I've got you," he promised slowly pushing his way inside her.

He was right, she was ready as he easily slipped inside her a little bit, then another inch more. "Okay?" he asked.

She managed a nod though she felt stretched to the limit and unsure she could take any more of him. He captured her lips with his and kissed her, devouring her mouth until she couldn't think of anything but him. Her hips rocked against him and without warning, he arched his hips and thrust in deep, causing her to cry out in pain.

He lifted his head. "Shh. It'll get better. I promise."

Despite the tear that fell from her eye, she nodded, trusting him.

Dipping his head, he licked her nipple, pulling it into his mouth and teasing with his teeth. Desire rushed through her and he began to move, rocking his hips against her before he slid out slowly, then pushed back in. He moved back up and kissed her again, picking up rhythm as he began to pump into her.

"You're tight and feel so good."

His words swept over her and suddenly, she was wet and taking all of him, arousal and pleasure combing into a heady

mix.

“Okay?” he asked, looking deep into her eyes.

God, he was gorgeous and sexy, and so concerned about her it brought more tears to her eyes as she nodded. “Better than okay. Amazing.”

His lips lifted and satisfaction gleamed in his eyes. He pulled his hips back and thrust in, repeating the action, his gaze never leaving hers. She had the sense he was making sure he didn't hurt her.

He couldn't. Not anymore. “Harder, Maddox. And don't stop.” He complied, pounding into her and her body responded, waves of pleasure rocking through her, rising with each successive thrust.

“I'm not going to last,” he said, shifting positions and suddenly hitting a spot inside her that felt incredible.

“There. Again.” He repeated the motion and a rush of arousal swept her up and over the edge. “Maddox, oh God, I'm coming.” Nothing had ever felt as good.

He lost that control he'd been holding onto, and his thrusts became harder, rougher, less coordinated. “Fuck, princess, yes.” He followed her over with a long groan that she felt down to her soul.

Chapter Five

Maddox woke up, a warm, soft body lying in the crook of his arm and cuddling against his body. It took a few seconds for him to remember what was going on and once he did, he let out a long breath and talked to himself. He'd known what he was getting into with Gabby. She'd been honest before they'd had sex and everything in him wanted to be her first. It wasn't sex with a virgin that was throwing him off balance nor was it her age.

No, it was the intensity of their connection that had his head spinning. For a man who'd decided he was finished with relationships, he wanted more with Gabby. And no one else. Closing his eyes, he turned his head and breathed in the strawberry scent clinging to her hair and his dick perked up. It was way more than morning wood where even his hand would do. He wanted to feel her tight walls around him again. He wanted to come, knowing they were in sync.

Since he knew she'd be sore, he carefully moved his shoulder, letting her head come to rest on a pillow. He turned and looked at her peaceful expression. She was so damned pretty, her makeup free face and creamy complexion another thing he found appealing about her. The women he used to sleep with woke up before him to fix themselves before he got a glimpse of the real person beneath the heavy coverage. Until Gabby, he never realized how much he preferred the natural look, or how hard it could make him.

Her eyelids opened, her long lashes fluttering as awareness hit her and she looked at him with trepidation in her gaze. She was silent, assessing him. He had no doubt she wondered where his head was after last night.

"Morning, beautiful." He had no intention of leaving her hanging. He was in this, willing to see where this relationship took them, though he was well aware she could still end up changing her mind and going home to her reality at any point in time.

A happy smile lifted her lips. “Good morning.”

“How did you sleep?” he asked.

“Fantastic.” She lifted her arms over her head and stretched, causing the covers to fall and her bare breasts to reveal themselves. “Oops!” She reached for the top sheet and he stopped her.

“Nope. I like looking at you.”

“You do?” Her cheeks flushed pink.

He propped himself up on one elbow, leaned over and pressed his mouth to hers, taking his time and enjoying, his tongue sliding against hers. She moaned, hooking her arm around his neck.

“No regrets?” she asked, breaking the kiss.

He cocked an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t I be asking you that?” He leaned back against the pillows and she curled up against him.

“I wasn’t the one who had issues with *us* to begin with.”

Aah. She didn’t want to face him, still worried he’d change his mind. “Look at me.”

She sighed and pushed herself to a sitting position. “Yes?”

Reaching out, he slid a piece of hair off her forehead and tucked it behind her ear. “One, we discussed that last night. Two, once I make up my mind I don’t change it without good reason, and three? You waited for the right man to give your virginity to.” He cupped her chin in his hand. “Am I still that right man?”

She nodded. “No regrets.”

“Good. Me neither. Now, give me another kiss, we’ll shower, and I’ll take you out for breakfast.”

She leaned forward on her knees and crawled toward him, arching her back and kissing him with everything in her. He groaned and pulled her against him, her curvy body coming to rest on top of him.

“What happened to the shower?” she asked, wriggling her hips and grinding her sex into his hard cock.

He cupped her ass cheeks in his hands and squeezed. “Are you feeling up for a second round or are you sore? I can draw a bath—”

Her eyes softened. “Look at this new side of you. I had no idea you could be...sweet.”

“What can I say? You bring out that dormant side of me.”

Her eyes opened wide and she scrambled to a sitting position, her wet sex covering his lower abdomen and he thought he'd explode.

“Dormant means you were softer at one point and then you changed. What did Wall Street do to you?” she asked, obviously determined to talk.

Having a conversation was the last thing he wanted to do but he resigned himself to being horny and uncomfortable while they talked. “More like what did the women in that world do to me?”

Gabby wrinkled her nose. “What was her name?”

“Felicia. But it started before her. My parents are good people. Dad's an electrician and Mom stayed home with me and my younger brother. We didn't have a lot but we had enough. And we were happy. But I got a scholarship to Columbia and then got my MBA. Before I knew it, I was on Wall Street and mingling with people I never thought I'd meet. Not given how I'd grown up.” And that was a mouthful more than he'd ever planned to reveal.

“People like me? My family? Preston?” she asked.

He sighed. “You're nothing like them.”

“But you thought I was. When you met me at the bar, right? Tell me. I won't be angry.”

He nodded. “I did, at first. Then you showed up the next day with a job and towels for the guest bathroom and for mine. Next thing I knew, you were working in the mornings, painting in the afternoons, coming to the bar at night and

helping out by clearing dirty glasses.” He shook his head and grinned. “Blew my initial perception of you out of the water.”

“I live to shock you,” she said wryly. “I take it you *liked* what you saw?”

He nodded. “More than liked. I admired you. In one short week, you changed what I thought of you and I stopped fighting my desire.”

“Lucky me,” she whispered.

Finally, he thought, they could move on from talking. He reached for her breast and she arched backward. “Tell me about Felicia.”

He groaned. “Seriously? We’re both naked and you want to hear about my ex?”

She shook her head. “I want to learn more about *you*.” She placed a hand on his chest, over his heart.

He couldn’t deny her. And once he told her everything, they could move on to better things. “Okay. I met a woman at one of the fundraising events I went to on behalf of the firm. We dated and pretty much lived together. She looked good as my date and I convinced myself I cared for her but I know better now.”

“What changed?” Gabby asked, her gaze soft on his.

“I hated the people I worked with, disliked the pretentiousness surrounding me. I’d already made enough money to put it in savings and do what would make me happy.” He lifted his shoulders in a shrug. “I didn’t know what that was at the time but I saw this house advertised. It was rundown and needed renovations and it called to me. So I bought it and moved here.”

She looked around the bedroom that still needed massive painting and work. “I like it, too. I can envision the entire house when it’s finished. It’ll be a *home*.” Her lips curled up in a smile and he wanted nothing more than to kiss her.

She patted his chest. “Go on. I want to hear it all.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re a bossy thing. Okay, fine. I began the reno process. One night I met Zach and Remy at The Back Door and offered up my bartending services. I worked evenings for a couple of months and enjoyed it. Eventually, Remy had to go back to the city to the Manhattan bar, and they promoted me to manager.” He shrugged. “The casual, easy lifestyle works for me.”

“Thank you. I know you weren’t in the mood to revisit the past.”

“I don’t mind telling you.” And he didn’t. She listened and understood him on a level that shocked him, given she came from the world he’d been so disillusioned with.

“How about that shower?”

She climbed off him and a cool chill rushed over his skin.

“You go first. If we shower together, I’ll forget you need some time to recuperate before we go again.”

“Tonight,” she said, and his cock hardened at the promise in her words.

He nodded. “Tonight,” he agreed.

“I’m going to use the other bathroom. All my stuff is in there.” She walked out of the room naked, more comfortable with her nudity around him than he’d expected.

She’d be at least twenty minutes in the shower and he didn’t want to tempt fate by them both using the hot water at the same time. He could use a cup of coffee. He rose to his feet and pulled on his track pants, walking to the kitchen.

No sooner had he pulled out a K-cup than his doorbell rang. He wasn’t expecting company.

He strode to his door and looked through the glass. An older woman stood outside, leaning on a brightly decorated cane. Her hair was blonde with light streaks of gray and she wore long sleeves in ninety-degree weather, a pair of pressed slacks and sneakers, no doubt for better balance. On the street behind her, a black Lincoln Town Car with a driver appeared to idle.

Maddox glanced at her face. The moment he took in her emerald-green eyes, he knew who she was and opened the door. “You must be Gabby’s grandmother.”

“What gave me away?” she asked. “My good looks?”

He grinned, liking this woman already. “Your eyes. Come in.” He had no doubt Gabby would want to see her grandmother. She’d been the first person mentioned when she listed who she could trust.

But what if she wanted Gabby to return home? Would she be swayed by the woman she adored? A pang gnawed at his gut but he pushed it aside. Gabby had the right to make her own choices and he had to respect them. Even if somehow, he’d done a one-eighty and wanted her to stay.

He grasped the older woman’s free arm and led her to the kitchen. “Have a seat. Can I make you a cup of coffee?”

She lowered herself into a chair, leaning her cane against the table. “No, thank you. The doctors are worried about my blood pressure and have me cutting back on caffeine. I’d sneak it but I can’t risk dying and leaving Gabriella alone with her parents. It’s a pity my son turned into such a social climber.” She tsked. “I see those wide eyes. You’re shocked. Gabriella didn’t tell you about me? I say what I think. To anyone.”

He tried his damndest not to grin but lost the battle. “She told me you’re one of the only people she trusts. That alone made me like you but now I see where Gabby gets her easy-going personality. She’s lucky to have you, Mrs. Davenport.”

“Annabelle. Don’t make me look over my shoulder to see if my mother-in-law came back from the grave.”

He bit the inside of his cheek. “Annabelle. Gabby’s in the shower. I’m sure she’ll be out soon, and she’ll be happy you’re here.” He paused. “Why *are* you here? Just to see your granddaughter?” He couldn’t hold back the question plaguing him.

“I’m here to see if you’re good enough for my Gabriella.”

She’d caught him mid-swallow and he coughed. “Excuse me?”

She grinned and he saw glimpses of Gabby in her expression. “My other granddaughter, Penelope, who I love dearly but could never convince to be her own person, keeps in touch with her sister. I’m well aware Gabriella has feelings for you. So tell me, why should I approve of you?”

“Grandmother!” Gabby walked into the kitchen and strode over to Annabelle. “What are you doing here and why are you grilling the man nice enough to give me a place to stay?”

Annabelle used the table to push herself up until she stood. “I’m here because I missed seeing your face.” She hugged Gabby and Gabby squeezed her tight.

Maddox was glad she had this woman in her life.

“Besides, someone has to judge this man before you two really start living in sin.”

Before Maddox could worry she was serious, she let out a laugh and winked at him. Then she sat back down.

“Good job, Gabriella. He’s good looking and I can tell he’s got muscles.” She turned his way. “Now tell me about yourself, Maddox.”

He shot Gabby an amused look and with a resigned sigh, Gabby seated herself into the chair next to her grandmother. “Just give her the highlights,” she whispered.

“No, I want all the dirty details.” She propped her chin in her hand and smiled at him.

And at that moment, Maddox knew he already had the older woman’s approval. For reasons he’d yet to fathom, that meant something to him.

* * * *

An hour later, Gabby decided that Maddox was her grandmother’s newest best friend. Annabelle grilled him like the professional busybody she was and to Gabby’s surprise, Maddox filled her in on his entire life. No matter how many

times Gabby insisted he did not have to answer, he and her grandmother ignored her, chatting like old friends. She'd even filled him in about the love story between Annabelle and Maximillian, her husband and Gabby's grandfather.

Unlike her parents, who'd married each other for wealth and status, Annabelle and Max had been deeply in love before he died about ten years ago. Which was the reason her grandmother wanted the same for Gabby, who Annabelle thought was very much like her younger self. Watching the two people she cared about getting to know one another warmed Gabby's heart. It told her that her instincts about Maddox were spot on. He was a good man who had patience for an older woman...because she was Gabby's grandmother.

A honk sounded from outside and Annabelle frowned. "That's my cue. Harold is getting impatient," she said of her long-time driver.

Maddox rose and lifted Annabelle's cane, then helped her to stand.

"A gentleman." She nodded in approval and stepped over to him. "I like you, Mr. James."

She patted his cheek and when she lowered her arm, he clasped her weathered hand in his. "I don't know what the future holds, Annabelle, but you can trust your granddaughter with me."

Gabby's stomach did a flip as he mentioned the future. Although the romance novel reader in her wanted to believe in happily-ever-after, Gabby knew she had to be pragmatic. They'd only known one another for a week. Despite her rapidly beating heart, she couldn't assume forever was in the cards. But she wanted to get to know him better and stick around while they built...*something* together.

"Gabiella." Her grandmother crooked her finger and Gabby stepped closer. Annabelle had pulled an envelope out of her purse. "Use this for anything you need while you get yourself settled. And call me if you need *anything*."

Gabby's eyes filled with tears at the sweet gesture. "Thank you but I can't take your money."

She felt the heat of Maddox's stare as she and her grandma talked. He'd already told her how he viewed wealthy women but that wasn't why she was turning down the gift. "I need to stand on my own and not rely on my trust fund or you. But I love you for the offer."

"Keep it as your safety net," Annabelle insisted. "Your father has cut you off." She frowned at that fact.

Though Gabby knew she'd been all but disinherited for her rebellion, hearing it hurt just the same.

To her surprise, Maddox stepped up behind her, wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed the top of her head. As if he was in tune to her emotions... and he probably was. She stepped back, her body leaning against his. She didn't need his strength, she could handle things on her own but she appreciated it anyway. He cared and her heart fluttered in her chest.

"Have my parents been pressuring you about asking me to come home?" she asked. No doubt they assumed Gabby would keep in touch with her grandmother.

Annabelle shook her head. "I've heard them talking though. They assume you'll tire of this independent stand you're taking and come home."

Behind her, Maddox stiffened. He probably worried about the same thing. Only time would prove she was here to stay. With or without Maddox, Gabby was building a life of her own.

"Listen," her grandmother said. "You have the car because I bought it for you and the title is in your name. Your father can't take the vehicle from you. When you come back to the city, for whatever reason, call me. We'll meet with the lawyers and move your trust fund somewhere you father won't know about it. I think we'll both feel better."

Eyes stinging, Gabby nodded.

“Now keep the money. Open an account here. And we’ll talk. I love you, dear girl.”

“I love you, too,” Gabby whispered, hugging her tight.

The car horn blared again.

“Come on. I’ll walk you out,” Maddox said, hooking an arm through Annabelle’s.

Gabby waited in the kitchen, watching through the window, her thoughts on Maddox and the night they’d spent together. She’d never had sex before. Never slept in the same bed with a guy overnight. And she’d never felt cared for, safe or protected by a man, either.

Until Maddox.

She’d given him her virginity with no strings but she, with everything inside her, wanted to hold on tight and create more lasting bonds with this special man.

Chapter Six

Gabby's phone rang, startling her. She'd been lost in her painting world, splattering glorious bold colors onto the paper. With her hands a mess and her brush in hand, she ignored the call but when the cell rang again, she wiped her dirty fingers on a rag and carefully lifted the phone.

Rhonda's name flashed on the screen. Gabby had left the gallery when her shift ended earlier and came home to paint.

"Hello? Rhonda? Is everything okay? Do you need me to come back in?" Gabby asked.

"Nothing's wrong. I have the most exciting news. Your first painting sold!"

Gabby screamed. "Oh my God! That's amazing!"

Rhonda chuckled. "Wait until you hear for how much." She told Gabby a number that blew her mind. "Now go celebrate!"

Gabby disconnected, her heart pounding in excitement. In the two weeks during which Gabby had worked there, she'd found herself confiding in her boss. They'd discussed everything. She'd admitted why she'd left her parents' home and her need to apply for a job to make money of her own. They'd talked about her degree, museums and the fact that Gabby was a closet painter, hiding her work from her parents. The first time her mother had caught her with dirty fingernails, she'd forbidden Gabby to indulge in her *frivolous hobby*.

Rhonda had convinced her to bring some pieces by the gallery for her to see, and Gabby's sister took a day trip from her Long Island home to drop off canvases Gabby had already painted and stored in Penelope's basement. Rhonda had fallen in love with Gabby's work. She would have thought her boss was being kind, except Rhonda never hung anything in her place of business she didn't believe in. The next day, Gabby's modern contemporary art was framed and hanging in a small corner.

And today it had sold.

She ran for the bathroom and took a quick shower, aware she couldn't get rid of all the paint on her hands but knowing Maddox wouldn't mind. Smiling at the thought, she dressed in a pair of fitted black running shorts, a purple sport bra and a light weight jacket. Casual clothes she liked wearing when not working or painting.

After grabbing her keys, she rushed to her car, turned on the engine and drove toward town. Although she would share her news with her grandmother and Penelope later, Maddox was the first person she wanted to celebrate with.

She'd been staying with him for a total of three weeks and things between them had been...almost perfect. From the routine they'd fallen into as a couple to how in sync they were when it came to music, action-adventure movies, and documentaries on television. Neither of them was overly attached to social media, Gabby because she didn't have friends she wanted to check up on, and Maddox only looked out for his younger brother and the business page for the bar.

If only she hadn't caught him deep in thought on a few occasions. Sometimes she'd walk into the kitchen and find him staring out the window or on the terrace, looking out at the horizon. She had to call his name a few times before it registered she was speaking to him. Those moments made her wonder what was bothering him. Was she suffocating him by living in his house...and now sharing his bed?

Yet, it was hard to imagine he felt smothered when he couldn't get enough of her. He often woke her with his mouth on her sex, his tongue almost bringing her to orgasm before she registered it wasn't an erotic dream. Once she was awake, he'd finish the job, making her scream his name as glorious bliss overcame her.

At night she was only too happy to return the favor, and she tried, but he always pulled his cock out of her mouth, refusing to come down her throat when, *he needed to be inside her when he came*. His words, ones that she took to heart.

Maddox had also taught her new positions and she had to admit she had two favorites. Sitting over his face while he devoured her pussy and made her come with his tongue licking her clit. And after, he'd position her on her hands and knees and slam into her from behind, hitting that elusive G-spot and causing her to see stars as her orgasm shook her world.

But her ultimate favorite sexual thing between them had happened this morning. And it was what convinced her Maddox was as invested in their relationship as she was. Instead of waking her with his mouth, she came to with his warm body on top of hers and his cock poised at her entrance. Once she was awake, he slid into her ever so slowly, gliding in and out, his chocolate-brown gaze never leaving hers. In his eyes, she saw warmth and caring mixing together as their bodies connected.

Then, he pulled her to a sitting position, his legs bent beneath him and positioned her legs on either side of his body. Still joined, he was as deep as possible inside her, filling her so there was no way to tell where he ended, and she began. They were one as he began to lift his hips and she rocked in unison to his movements.

He held her stare, refusing to let her look away as they built higher and higher, climaxing at the same time. She had no doubt he'd made love to her and had felt the emotions rushing through her. His awed expression revealed his raw emotions, too.

But she was still young, still naïve when it came to men and she was trusting him not to hurt her and believing in what she saw.

Which was why she wondered if those off moments were about something else. He'd mentioned their many differences but she thought living together proved how compatible they were. Besides, his lost-in-thought moments had begun after her grandmother left.

After Gabby had asked Annabelle about her parents and her grandmother had replied, *they assume you'll tire of this*

independent stand you're taking and come home. That comment had caused Maddox to stiffen and pull into himself before he'd walked Anabelle to her car.

She didn't know and hadn't pushed him for answers but maybe she should. Holding things in couldn't be healthy for a relationship. Penelope had told her as much when Gabby had confided in her older sister.

She pulled into the lot for The Back Door. It was nearing cocktail hour and both the dinner area and the bar tables were full.

Gabby paused by the hostess stand. "Hi, Sheila."

"Hi, Gabby." The hostess, menus in hand, smiled at her, then led a couple to one of the only empty tables and Gabby proceeded to walk to the bar.

A heavy crowd filled up the space. Cal, Eddie and Vanna, another bartender she'd met in the last few weeks were all working. Before she checked out the office, looking for Maddox, she stopped at the bar entrance.

"Vanna, have you seen Maddox?" she called out.

"He's sitting over there." The bartender, a cute woman with short spikey hair topped with pink, tipped her head toward a cocktail table where Maddox was, along with the owners, Zach and Remy.

Gabby nodded. "Thanks." She started through the crowd, making her way to the table where they all sat.

Maddox caught sight of her first, a genuine grin lifted his lips, relieving her earlier anxiety.

With that worry out of the way for now, her excitement returned and she quickened her step. "Guess what?" she asked before she even reached him, unable to wait.

"Tell me." He rose to greet her.

Her gaze swept over him, once again knocked on her butt by how well-built and sexy he was. And from the way he stared at her approvingly, she knew he was all hers and she pushed her worries aside.

“The gallery sold one of my paintings!” Without waiting, she threw her arms around his neck and he returned her hug, lifting her off the ground as he embraced her.

“I’m so damn proud of you,” he said, his voice husky and gruff in her ear. “I knew you could do it.”

At his words, her heart slammed hard inside her chest. It wasn’t that she needed his approval but receiving it from anyone was rare. Sure, her grandmother always gave her blessing. Annabelle loved Gabby and would do anything to compensate for her parents’ lack of caring and support. But coming from Maddox, as with Rhonda, Gabby *knew* the sentiment was genuine.

Rhonda thought she had talent.

Maddox believed in her and that meant *everything*.

“When I heard we could find you here, I didn’t believe it,” a familiar and unwelcome voice said.

Gabby jerked in surprise and her stomach twisted with dread. “My mother,” Gabby whispered in Maddox’s ear.

He didn’t release her or react, didn’t allow her to jump back and put distance between them, not that she’d tried. He slid her down his body, letting her feel his strength, keeping one arm firmly around her waist.

She drew a deep breath and turned to see her parents, along with Preston and her grandmother standing in front of them.

Maddox drew her more firmly to his side, staking his claim and being in her corner. It was all she’d ever wanted from someone important in her life, and here he was, sensing her need and stepping up to provide it.

This was it. Time to stand up for herself or her life would never be her own.

Since Preston’s visit to the bar, her parents had turned suspiciously silent. No more voicemails or texts. Gabby had a feeling they were biding their time until ready to strike. She’d tried to convince herself she was ready for any upcoming confrontation. After all, what more could they do to hurt her?

They'd already cut her off financially and there'd been no emotional connection in any of her childhood memories.

Gabby pulled her shoulders back, facing her mother. Her father stood by his wife's side while her grandmother leaned on her colorful cane, no doubt waiting for the fireworks. Annabelle winked at Gabby, confirming her suspicions.

"Who told you where I was?" she asked her parents, then turned her gaze to Preston. "Was it you?"

"It doesn't matter." Her father let out a huff of annoyance. "What does matter is that the entire country club is talking about you slumming at this bar, cleaning dirty glasses and serving alcohol." The disgust in his tone was evident.

Maddox gripped her tighter but remained silent. He was trusting her to handle things and she was grateful.

"The only thing *that* tells me is someone in your crowd was here too, which makes any comment about this establishment hypocritical," Gabby said.

Her father took one step forward, but Maddox put a hand out, stopping him from moving closer. Her father clenched his jaw but didn't say a word to him. Yet. No doubt his judgment was coming.

"What are you wearing in public?" her mother asked, her eyes wide, lips parted, her expression horrified.

Gabby glanced down and shrugged. "Clothes."

"Workout clothes," Annabelle added. "Don't you keep up with trends, Madeline?"

"Mother!" Aaron snapped. "Stay out of this. Now, Gabriella, we're leaving tonight and you're coming with us."

Gabby blinked in surprise. "You usually stay for the season. Why are you leaving when your summer isn't over?"

"Preston isn't leaving, we are. But he wanted to be here. We are all tired of this rebellious phase. It's gone on long enough. Playing house with this...this..." her father stumbled over his words to describe Maddox.

“Bar manager and independent contractor?” Gabby deliberately needled her parents with words they’d find cringeworthy. “Oh, and I wonder if Preston mentioned that Maddox used to work on Wall Street? I believe you know of my father, Aaron Davenport, right, Maddox?”

Preston narrowed his gaze but smartly remained silent.

She glanced up at Maddox, hoping he knew she was doing this performance for herself, yes but also for *them*. After this, her parents would leave her alone and that was exactly what she wanted.

“Yes.” Maddox nodded. “I used to work at Preston Barrett Jr.’s firm.” He didn’t elaborate further, nor did she need him to.

Her father stared, assessing Maddox. “It doesn’t matter what he does for a living. You are not going to continue living with him.” He turned his angry gaze on Gabby. “Yes, I heard that too. And I won’t have it. I’m not funding this vacation.” Aaron’s voice rose and people around them turned to watch.

Gabby’s face burned with embarrassment, but she was determined to see this through. “I don’t need your money. You cut me off weeks ago and I’ve done just fine.”

“You cannot make enough money cleaning up at this bar to live in the Hamptons,” her mother said, her blue eyes staring at her, daring her to disagree.

Madeline was in for a shock. “Then it’s a good thing I have a job at the gallery since my work here is for free. I help out when things are busy.”

Maddox squeezed her waist. Tipping his head, he whispered, “We’ll need to get you on the books.”

Gabby stifled a laugh at his timing.

“But...” Her mother paused, caught off guard, then seemed to collect herself. “Even gallery work won’t keep you in the lifestyle you’re accustomed to, Gabriella.”

“Then it’s a good thing I don’t want that life.”

Her mother waved a dismissive hand. “That’s easy to say now.”

Preston turned to Madeline. “Don’t worry. Give her more time and she’ll change her mind when she gets tired of living like a peasant.”

Gabby shook her head. “You are such an ass. And I won’t grow tired of anything.” None of them had ever understood her at all. “*I’m happy here*. I love living with Maddox in his house.” She pretty much loved the man but didn’t think he was ready to hear those words after not quite one month.

But she reached back and squeezed his hand before continuing. “For once, I have the freedom to paint, to wear whatever I want...” She shrugged off the cardigan, leaving herself in her shorts and sports bra, to the utter horror of her mother, whose mouth gaped open. “And it feels good to help at the bar and work at the gallery.” This next part wasn’t as easy but it was true. “And even if Maddox and I aren’t together for the long term, though I hope we are, *I’m not leaving* the Hamptons.” Or the man unless he insisted, but that discussion was for them, alone. “In other words, mother, father, you can all go home without me.”

Madeline gasped, probably more for effect. “I raised you better than to talk to us in that tone.” She sniffled but again, it wasn’t real. “Mark my words, you will come back eventually, and you’ll be lucky if someone in our social circle is willing to have you.”

Gabby sighed. “I’m not changing my mind but only time will prove that to you.” She pulled in a deep breath. “Oh. And the best news of the night? My paintings are hanging in the gallery in town. In fact, I sold my first one today. So I’m more than certain I’ll survive on my own.”

Her grandmother started to clap and though Gabby grinned, she shook her head. “One more thing. You are my parents, and though I may not like your views or beliefs you *are* my family. You know where I am if you ever want a *normal*, parent-child relationship. One where you accept me

for who I am.” She slid her hand into Maddox’s and he grasped her tight. “And who I choose to be with.”

She ignored Preston. He wasn’t worth another breath.

The little girl who had always wanted her parents to just *be her parents* and not wardens with rules and expectations, hoped they would come around. But Gabby, the adult, wasn’t counting on them to change. She’d always have her grandmother and Penelope. With a little luck, she and Maddox would have a future.

Her grandmother clapped in earnest and her father huffed, his shoulders stiff.

“Let’s go, Aaron.” Her mother’s cheeks were flushed with anger.

“Have a good trip back to the city.” Maddox spoke. “And don’t worry about your daughter.” Without warning, he bent his knees and picked Gabby up, tossing her over his shoulder in a fireman’s hold. “She’s in good hands.”

Gabby let out a shriek but she really didn’t mind. And in case he was worried, she squeezed his ass hard.

“Aaron!” Gabby’s mother yelled. “Get me out of here.”

“You always were a prude, Madeline,” Annabelle said.

Gabby let out a laugh at her grandmother’s antics and the entire bar broke out in applause that could have been in reaction to Maddox’s caveman routine or her grandmother’s comment. No matter, her family was in for a long ride home, she thought, suddenly feeling the jolt of Maddox moving.

She grabbed onto a belt loop in his jeans, trying to ignore her stomach digging into his shoulder as he walked through the room. Though she couldn’t see more than his delectable ass, a glance to the side revealed they were headed to his office.

And since he was carrying her away for the whole bar to see... Gabby was holding out hope whatever he had to say would bode well for her future.

* * * *

Gabby's parents were pieces of work, Maddox thought, ignoring the clapping, as he strode through the crowd that had parted for him. It was a wonder Gabby had turned out as sweet and caring as she had. He supposed he had Annabelle to thank. That and some innate combination of sweetness and a core of steel inside his girl. One that made her willing to defy expectations and grow into her own person.

He hadn't meant to make a scene. That wasn't his style. But after listening to Gabby stand up to the people who'd raised her, Maddox wanted one thing. To get her alone and assure her that yes, he was in it for the long term too. And he wasn't letting her go.

He stepped into the office behind the bar and kicked the door closed behind him, shutting out the noise. He had one hand around the back of her knees and the other on her ass which he couldn't not squeeze. Especially since she wore a skimpy Lycra outfit that outlined her curves and had him drooling.

"Hey! Are you going to put me down?" she asked. He still felt her finger curled into his belt loop.

"Do I have to?"

They hadn't been together long but he'd spent most of their time together telling himself he could handle it if she decided to leave, but knowing he was lying to himself. Now that she'd announced her decision to stay, Maddox wanted to keep her close.

But he lowered her to her feet, holding onto her shoulders, steadying her.

She tipped her head up to meet his gaze. And when he looked into those gorgeous green eyes, he finally felt like he could breathe. "Do you have any idea how amazing you are?" he asked.

Her eyes opened wide, and her lips parted in surprise. "Seriously? Why would you say that?"

How could she not know? “You stood up to your parents and that took courage. You took control of your life and that makes you brave. All in all, you’re amazing.”

Her smile lit up the room *and* his heart. “Now, I have a confession,” he said.

Her grin slipped. “What is it? Because after that caveman display, I kind of hoped you had more in mind for us back here than talking.” She looped her arms around his neck and rubbed her breasts against his chest.

He groaned at the feel of her nipples digging into his skin beneath the cotton shirt. “We’ll get to that. Soon,” he promised, dipping his head and running his nose along hers.

Her eyes darkened, growing hazy with a desire that matched his. But it had to wait.

“I have to admit, I kept waiting for you to get bored,” he admitted. “I thought you’d resent having to work for a living and decide to go back home.” He cleared his throat. “I knew Preston was an issue, as were your parents’ demands. But I didn’t want to have my hopes up and my heart broken. Turns out, I underestimated you.” He hated to admit he hadn’t trusted her.

“I know.”

“What?” How could she have caught onto his feelings? He’d kept them well-hidden or so he’d thought.

She laughed for a second, but her expression quickly sobered. “I knew something was bothering you, but I wasn’t sure if you thought I was overstaying my welcome, or you were worried about...me leaving.” She shrugged. “Based on the things you said when we first met, I knew you didn’t trust easily.”

“Which things?” he asked warily. He’d confessed to a few hang-ups about them, but not all.

“Oh, me being too young, our experiences being worlds apart...” She waved a dismissive hand through the air.

“You being a virgin,” he went on to add, giving her the rest of what he’d held back. “And the fact that you’d probably want marriage and kids one day whereas I’d sworn off both.”

The color drained from her face. “You don’t want marriage or a family?”

“I didn’t.” He kept his hand on her jaw, his thumb brushing her soft skin. “Then I met you. Pretty soon I wanted *everything*. But you do have a lot of life to live before we dive into a family.”

“And we should still take time to get to learn more and enjoy each other, but I need to know you’re in this just like I am,” she said, staring into his eyes, her expression hopeful.

His heart squeezed tight in his chest. “If *being in this* means I love you and I’m not going anywhere, then yeah, I’m in this.”

“You love me?” The hesitation in her voice pulled at him and he pressed his lips over hers, taking his time to show her his feelings without using words.

He’d rather taste her. Her tongue slid against his and her fingers thread through his hair, hanging on to him tight. The kiss went on and he never wanted to let her go.

But he forced himself to break their connection.

Drawing a deep breath, he inhaled the strawberry scent he did not want to live without and met her gaze. “Yeah, princess. I love you.”

Tears filled her eyes. “I love you, too.”

“Then why are you crying?” He brushed away the moisture on her face.

“Because other than my grandmother and sister, no one’s ever said that to me before. And knowing you feel the same way? That’s everything.”

No, *she* was everything.

“You deserve to be loved. And I’m going to spend every day proving that to you. Because this isn’t just a one summer

thing. You and me? We're in this for the long term and that includes marriage and kids..."

"And a dog?"

He laughed. "A dog, a cat, a house...anything you want," he said, and then he went about sealing the deal with their mouths and their bodies. Because she was his. And if he had his way, it would be for a lifetime.

* * * *

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Just One Wish: A Kingston Family Novella

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He was her first love. She was his.

They broke up to follow their dreams.

Axel Forrester became a world famous drummer.

Tara Stillman became a veterinarian.

Years later, he's scrolling social media and sees they're both in East Hampton, NY.

Fate? Or Coincidence?

What's a rockstar to do other than borrow his friend's dog as an excuse to see the good doctor.

And—show up at her office after all this time.

Axel wants a second chance with the one who got away. He's not going to let Tara go this time.

* * * *

Dare to Tease: A Dare Nation Novella

Click [here](#) to purchase.

She handles cocky jocks for a living, but her love life isn't as successful.

Brianne Prescott, publicist for Dare Nation Sports Agency, grew up the only girl with four brothers, three of whom are sports royalty. She's a pro not just at work but at being used by men who want access to her famous family. She's learned the hard way that everyone wants something from her, always.

He's her brother's best friend and the first man who sees her for who she really is.

When Dr. Hudson Northfield rescues Bri from a homeless man outside the clinic where he works, he really notices her for the first time. Soon she's accompanying him to New York for a family wedding, and despite her siblings' overprotective protests, they're falling in love.

But Hudson has a secret he can't reveal. If he wants access to a trust fund in his name, his father demands something in return. Hudson has to marry and provide an heir or his dream of opening a state-of-the-art health center will be destroyed. Suddenly the man who didn't need anything from her appears to be the biggest user of them all. Unless Hudson can convince her he can live without money but he can't live without her.

* * * *

Sexy Love: A Sexy Series Novella

Click [here](#) to purchase.

Learning curves have never been so off-limits.

Professor Shane Warden is on the verge of getting tenure. He never thought he'd see the day, after a false accusation from a student years ago that nearly destroyed his career, and decimated his ability to trust. But the moment he walks into class and lays eyes on the seductive blonde with legs that go on forever and lips he immediately wants to kiss, he knows he's in trouble.

This time for real.

Single mom Amber Davis is finally living her dream of going back to college. In the ten years since she dropped out to have a baby—and recover from his father’s death—it’s been the goal that always felt just out of reach. Until now. But one look at her hot, sexy professor, and Amber is head over heels in lust. It doesn’t take long before their attraction blazes out of control.

Neither of them can afford a forbidden affair.

Yet it’s the one thing they are powerless to stop.

It will only take one hint of a rumor to destroy everything they’ve worked so hard to achieve... and in this case the rumors are true.

* * * *

Take the Bride: A Knight Brothers Novella

Click [here](#) to purchase.

She used to be his. Now she’s about to marry another man.

Will he let her go ... or will he stand up and take the bride?

Ryder Hammond and Sierra Knight were high school sweethearts. Despite him being her brother’s best friend, their relationship burned hot and fast...and ended with heartbreak and regrets.

Years later, she’s at the altar, about to marry another man.

He’s only there for closure, to finally put the past behind him.

But when the preacher asks if anyone has a reason the couple shouldn’t wed, she turns around and her gaze locks on his.

Suddenly he's out of his seat.

Objecting.

Claiming.

And ultimately stealing the very pissed off bride and takes her to a secluded cabin.

He wants one week to convince her they're meant to be, to remind her of the fiery passion still burning between them.

When their time together is up, will she walk away and break *his* heart this time, or will he finally have the woman he's wanted all along?

* * * *

His to Protect: A Bodyguard Bad Boys/Masters and Mercenaries Novella

Click [here](#) to purchase.

Talia Shaw has spent her adult life working as a scientist for a big pharmaceutical company. She's focused on saving lives, not living life. When her lab is broken into and it's clear someone is after the top secret formula she's working on, she turns to the one man she can trust. The same irresistible man she turned away years earlier because she was too young and naive to believe a sexy guy like Shane Landon could want *her*.

Shane Landon's bodyguard work for McKay-Taggart is the one thing that brings him satisfaction in his life. Relationships come in second to the job. Always. Then little brainiac Talia Shaw shows up in his backyard, frightened and on the run, and his world is turned upside down. And not just because she's found him naked in his outdoor shower, either.

With Talia's life in danger, Shane has to get her out of town and to her eccentric, hermit mentor who has the final piece of the formula she's been working on, while keeping her safe from the men who are after her. Guarding Talia's body

certainly isn't any hardship, but he never expects to fall hard and fast for his best friend's little sister and the only woman who's ever really gotten under his skin.

[Just One Tease](#)

Kingston Family ~ Dirty Dares Book 10

By Carly Phillips

Click [here](#) to purchase.

He's the last single Dare sibling standing.

She's his lost love who disappeared.

Now she's back, bringing secrets and danger.

Hadley Stevens is on the run with her younger sister—*again*—but this time, she's in control. Zach Dare might hate her, but she knows he'd never turn away someone in need. He's the only man she trusts. The man she's never gotten over. Even if she left him without a word.

Zach never expected the girl he once loved to walk into his bar. The last time he saw her, he'd dropped her off after school and promised to pick her up for prom. Except she disappeared.

Now, she's back with a new name, but the same doe eyes and pouty lips, and she's asking for the help he would have gladly given her all those years ago.

Zach agrees to protect them, but he refuses to fall for Hadley again. But late nights working side by side give them a tempting glimpse at the life they could have had...and all the reasons he loved her come flooding back.

He'll have to keep her safe.

Before he can convince her to stay.

* * * *

Zach attempted to give his friend advice on his love life but other than his siblings' recent relationships and marriages,

Zach had little of his own adult experiences to draw from.

One night stands? Yeah, those he could do. Relationships meant exposing too much of himself and he wouldn't go there again.

Remy ran a hand through his too-long hair. Once he'd left the force, he'd gone overboard in growing out his hair and beard. A fuck you to the rules he'd been subjected to as a cop. "I'll think about it," he muttered.

Zach decided a subject change was in order. "Okay so ... since you've mentioned it twice, just what *is* my type?" He was curious what his friend thought considering Remy had never seen Zach with a woman more than once or twice.

Remy smirked at the question. "If I had to describe her, I would say she's understated but beautiful, has ample curves but isn't but overly voluptuous." He drummed his fingers on the counter as he continued to think.

Meanwhile, Zach couldn't believe Remy had nailed Zach's ideal woman. The one perfect female who'd had his heart back when he'd believed settling down was in his future. God, he'd been young. And stupid.

The sound of Remy slurping the end of his drink pulled Zach out of his musings.

"In other words," Remy said, "She's the opposite of anyone I've ever seen you with. Someone like ... *her*." He pointed towards the bar's entrance before turning back to Zach – who spun to face the door.

He took one look at the woman standing with her hand on a teenager's shoulder and felt the blood drain from his face. He blinked, certain he was mistaken. He must be imagining her because Remy had been spot-on in his description and Zach had been trying not to remember too much about her.

Remy stood up beside him. "What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

He slammed a hand down and curled a spare napkin into a wrinkled ball. "That's because I fucking have."

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