



# MISTLETOE MOMENTS

AN MM HOLIDAY DUOLOGY

RHYS EVERLY

MISTLETOE MOMENTS  
AN MM HOLIDAY DUOLOGY

RHYS EVERLY

RHYS WRITES  
*Romance*

## **Mistletoe Moments**

Hair and Heart

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The Holiday Experiment

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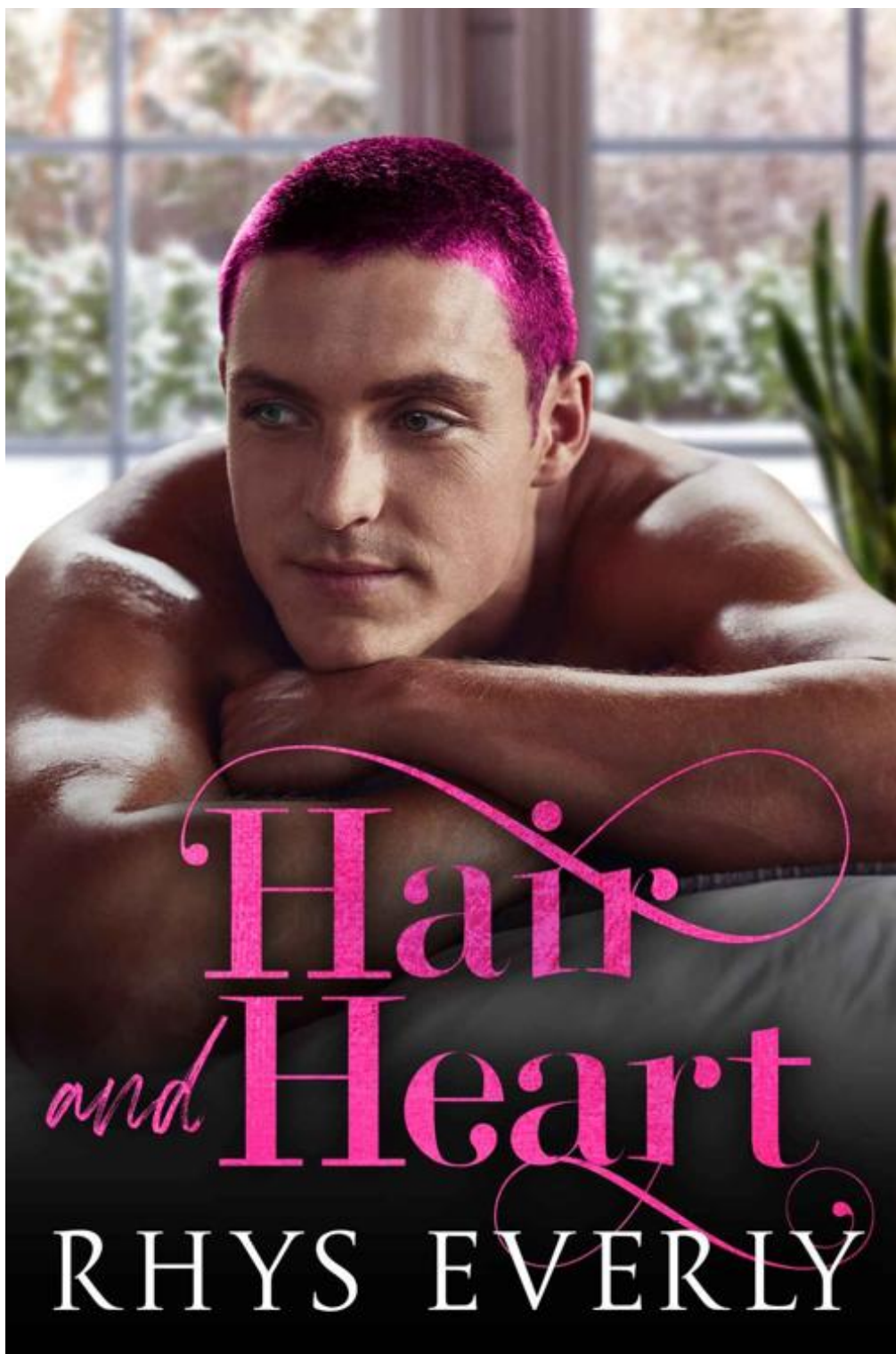
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*Hair*  
*and Heart*  
RHYS EVERLY

*To anyone who needs a little laugh in these strange,  
depressing times.*

*Sometimes we all need some light-hearted fun and not to take  
ourselves too seriously, even when life looks bleak.*

*(But wear a f\*cking mask!)*



## 1. VAL



“Mr. King, do you feel confident in being independent?” the man asks me.

He’s wearing a grey suit. They all do. It’s like their signature color.

Everything around me is grey. The people. The office. The city. The house that’s supposed to be mine. The world.

“I do,” I tell him and wait for his questions.

We’ve done this so many times before that he feels like a friend rather than a government official, but he’s not. We’ve done this over and over, and while I didn’t feel ready in all my previous reviews, this time I am. I’ve spent hours on the internet, researching, practicing, meditating. Doing everything in my power to be myself again.

“Would you like to tell me why?” he asks.

I glance at Fred and a fleeting smile of encouragement appears on his lips. I take a deep breath and look back at the court investigator.

“I haven’t had an episode in the last year. I’ve adjusted almost perfectly to the new prescription, and I feel like myself again. I’ve been on my medication consistently, and my creativity is in full swing. It’s been a long time, but it feels like I’ve found myself.

“I’ve also been taking an online course in finances, and I’m learning how to manage my allowances better. I believe my

uncle can confirm that I've been a responsible adult for a long time, and I haven't put myself or others in any danger.

"In addition to that, may I also add that, despite my increased workload, I haven't had any episodes." I try not to sigh when I finish, but I'm definitely proud of myself.

I've spoken nothing but the truth. I've worked my ass off to gain my independence back, and I'll be damned if I let myself down.

The investigator, Mr. Jones, turns to my uncle and asks him to confirm what I've just stated.

"Val has made tremendous progress, a big part thanks to the new psychiatrist who's been looking after him. I've been praying for this day for a very long time, Mr. Jones, but I think we're finally ready to end his conservatorship," Fred says, and it makes me giddy hearing the words come out of his mouth.

He's always been strict with me. Always careful. Better to err on the side of caution than ruin my life again is what he's always told me, and for a very long time I agreed with him.

To hear the man I trust, the person who looked after me when everyone abandoned me, announce that I'm ready to be my own man brings tears to my eyes.

"That's great to hear. I will, of course, need to see paperwork and evidence to back your claims, and I will be speaking to his doctor to make sure we're on the right track. Now, may I please speak with you alone, Mr. Graves?" Mr. Jones says, and I stare at him. "Mr. King, if you wait outside, I will speak with you straight after."

I nod and get up. As soon as I close the door, I press my ear against it and try to listen to their conversation when someone dry coughs behind me.

Slowly, I turn around and find Mr. Jones's secretary looking at me over the top of her cat-eye framed glasses with pursed lips.

I choke a laugh and take a few steps back to sit on the couch outside the office. To stop myself from staring at the door, I take my phone out and scroll through the comments of my last

video on my SoCo profile. SoCo stands for Social Community and is a social media platform with over two billion users.

It's where all my fans hang out, and it's where I keep them updated about my music and my life. Even if the latter tends to be a heated topic more often than not.

Most comments on my video are positive and praise the teaser of the song we've posted. My new pop ballad hits the digital shelves next week, followed by the release of a holiday album with some pretty hot collaborations.

Tickets to the launch concert, King's Holiday Ball, were limited to a few dozen for my fans—the rest reserved for people in the industry and celebrities—and they sold out within seconds of going live, and none of my fans have even heard a word or tune of my new songs. But those people, my Courtlings as they've named themselves, would literally follow me on a freefall from a cliff. I know they'll love whatever I put out there even when I don't always like my content.

*Sounds just like Party Life. That's what happens when a 30yo man won't get the memo that he's no child popstar anymore. I used to be a fan but Val King needs to fire all his staff and hire new people because this is the kind of recycled garbage we hate. But oh wait. I forgot! He can't fire anyone.*

You'd think after nearly fifteen years of these kinds of comments I'd be used to it, but it still has me seething, making my fingers itchy to type a reply.

Instead of doing that, however, I just open up the thread of comments underneath user GeminiCricket85 and read people's responses.

Most users tell him how wrong he is and that he should take his comment down, no need for the negativity, that he's a troll, but it's one comment in particular that I read and re-read and it brings this wave of... something inside me. Whatever it is, any pride or hope I have washes away with it leaving me feeling numb.

*That's not a joke, douchebag. Val King is a great guy who's trapped under his uncle's claws and can't escape him. We shouldn't be attacking Val, but that monster who keeps taking advantage of his nephew's success and fortune, working him like a dog only so Gotfrid Graves can profit. #FreeKing*

User IStandWithKing21 is wrong, of course, but his words don't fail to remind me of where I am and what's happening today.

My uncle is not a monster even though the news and fans often like to paint him as the bad guy. He's the only person that took me in and put up with me and my mental health since I was fourteen.

But the fact that my freedom is on the line today brings back my nerves, so of course my knee starts jerking and my heart beats faster and I chew my lip even though my stylist would go nuts if she saw me.

It's been a year and three months since my last episode. My doctor's impressed with my progress and how well my meds are at keeping my mood swings regulated. There's absolutely no reason why I should stay under conservatorship. But it's all in Mr. Jones's hands and the justice system.

The door opens and Fred walks out, shoulders stretch back, chest up like the secure and powerful man he is.

I shoot up and try to get something—anything—out of him, but Mr. Jones appears behind him and asks me to follow him inside. And so I do.

“So, Val, if everything is to be believed, you're doing great, and your conservatorship could be coming to an end,” he says when he sits down.

“Really? Do you mean it?” I ask, sounding so much younger than I am that I roll my eyes at myself.

Mr. Jones holds his hands up and pulls the reins on my enthusiasm.

“There's a process. I can neither confirm nor deny anything yet. I will need to conduct my investigation thoroughly before I can answer that question. I do, however, want to make sure

that you're ready for the eventuality of ending your conservatorship."

Before he even finishes his sentence, I cut in with a resounding "yes."

"That's great that you think you're ready, but I need to make sure that you're taking this seriously. You've been under your uncle's care since..."

"Since I killed my parents. Yes, I know," I tell him.

I might sound cold and insensitive when I say it, but I've been called far worse things. And I've come to accept what I've done. I still hate myself, but as Dr. Rahid has told me numerous times, I can't help my episodes and what I do when I have them no more than a man can control his bodily functions.

"Well... I'll pretend you didn't say that and instead I'll go with the official report," Mr. Jones says, and I grimace.

"I'm sorry. I meant when I had a psychotic breakdown and set fire to my house which resulted in my parents' death," I say, but Mr. Jones doesn't look too pleased with me.

*I'm screwing this up. Shut up, Val. Let the man speak.*

"Do you understand what ending the conservatorship means, Val?"

"Yes, sir. It means I will be in charge of my own life and affairs. I'll need to make sure I stay on my medication, report any episodes to my doctor, take charge of my financial affairs, and control my income and expenses."

If it sounds practiced, it's because it is. I'm more than ready to be independent. I've waited a long time for this. I'm not going to let Mr. Jones, or Fred, or anyone else down.

When the review finishes, I go back out and Fred calls the car.

"We'll have to go through the back. Someone has called the media and those vultures are waiting outside," he says, all business.

I follow him and my personal security guy through doors, stairs, and corridors until we're in an enclosed parking garage where my driver is waiting in the black BMW that we took to come to the review.

"Hey, Jorge," I tell my driver when I climb in, and he looks at me through the rearview mirror with a warm, affectionate smile.

Jorge might be pushing sixty but he's the best damn driver there is, and I'm fiercely loyal to him, even when Fred was going through budget cuts and wanted to get rid of him for a younger, cheaper guy.

"Hola, señor. How did it go?" he asks.

I shrug but give him a smile, nonetheless.

"We'll have to wait now." I turn to Fred, and as Jorge drives off, I ask him what kind of questions Mr. Jones had for him.

"The usual stuff, Val. He wants to make sure you're one hundred percent ready for this."

I smile.

"If you had to guess, what do you think his verdict will be?"

Fred sighs. He doesn't like it when I ask a lot of questions. I can't say I blame him; I can be quite annoying.

"I think he's going to end your conservatorship," he says.

I'm so happy to hear the words coming out of his mouth that I pull my long hair with a shriek, which gives cause for a raised eyebrow from Fred. He also hates it when I act like a child.

His phone rings and he turns to it, huffing.

"Almost forgot. It's time for your medication," he says and takes the pill bottles out of his pocket and passes me three. Two blue ones and one white.

I flick his thigh next to me and scold him. "You might have forgotten, but I didn't. I was going to take them when we got home. I told you to let me be in control of taking them. If I'm going to be independent, I can't rely on you to remind me."

Fred just passes me the pills and a bottle of water, anyway, and only murmurs it's his job to do so.

When we get back to my house, I have the lunch prepared by Magda—a delicious Greek moussaka—and then head to the studio to work on the next song on my list. A pop rendition of Jingle Bells.

It's not my favorite, but my label and uncle insist it's what my fans want, so I do what they tell me. I hope when I'm independent I can make the kind of songs I want to be singing.

One moment I'm sitting at the controls and the next I'm in bed and an hour has passed.

Uh-oh. That's not good.

Why today of all days? I haven't had any blackouts in fifteen months and I have to have an episode on the day of my review?

I have to report it to my doctor, and he will have to report it to Mr. Jones, and then I can wave goodbye to my freedom for at least another year.

I look around me and find no one. Not that it's often I have visitors in my bedroom. I *could* tell no one. If nothing happened, what's the point of telling anyone and messing it all up?

I walk out of the room to check if anyone's around, but there's no one in sight.

And then I feel it.

The heat coming from behind me. I turn to find where it's originating, and just as I see the smoke coming out of my closet, the door bursts open and Nina runs out coughing and choking.

I run to her and help her stay up, but the smoke is followed by fire and I pull her as far away as possible.

It's not long before the fire alarms start screeching across the house. Nina and I run outside and watch the top right corner of the house go up in flames.

“What-what happened?” I ask Nina as the fire engines sound in the distance. Jorge joins us from inside the house, followed by Fred.

“What the *hell* is going on?” he shouts and looks up at the raging fire.

“I-I don’t know. One minute I was going through Val’s clothes and the next there was smoke coming from everywhere,” Nina says.

Fred sighs, and even though I’m not looking at him, I can hear the disappointment in it.

“I-I must have blacked-out,” I say as if I only just realized and put my hands in my pockets.

There’s something metallic on the left pocket. I don’t need to take it out to know what it is. It’s a lighter.

I have no idea where it came from or where I found it, but one thing I know for sure.

No freedom for me.



## 2. SANDY



“So then she fired me,” I say, and Isha’s eyes pop open.

“No! The bitch!” she gasps and reaches for my hand over the table, careful not to knock our chai lattes over.

“It was bound to happen.”

I’d been working for Angela Woodbury for a few months, and instead of growing closer with my client, she’d turned into a cold, distant, grade-A twat to go with her A-list celebrity status.

“No. Shut up. She should have given you another chance,” Isha says, always my fierce cheerleader.

“Well, I did send her to the Critic’s Choice Awards looking like ketchup and mustard,” I tell her.

Isha pouts, shutting me right up before reaching for her cup.

“That dress was beautiful, darling. So what if you paired it with a red jacket? She looked gorgeous.”

“Not according to the tabloids,” I remind her.

Isha laughs. “Who gives a shit what the tabloids think?”

“Well, obviously Angela does. And her Twitter warriors. Anyway, what’s done is done. It can’t be helped.”

Isha squeezes my hand in hers and puts her cup down.

“Don’t worry, sweetie. There’s going to be another client. Someone who actually appreciates your talent.”

“What talent? For fucking up color combos? Who’s gonna hire a color-blind stylist that could either dress you like a star or like a Wendy’s reject? Who knows? It’s Russian roulette.”

Isha cracks up at my joke, but then she glances at my sulking face and stops.

“Honey, it’s only happened twice. It’s not your fault,” she says.

“Well, it is. If I hadn’t forgotten my glasses at home, I wouldn’t have dressed her like a hot dog.” Isha cracks up again.

I’m not entirely sure she finds my jokes funny or if she’s just trying to make me feel better. Whichever it is, I appreciate it more than I can put down into words.

“Oh come on. Have you seen how people dress when they’re *not* color-blind? You had what? A couple mishaps? She can fuck off. And you don’t need to feel bad. Everyone will have forgotten by tomorrow.”

“It still leaves me without a job, though, Isha,” I tell her and finally take a sip of my chai.

She brushes me off with her hand—and those long ass nails she colors in bright colors to match her outfits—and I glare at her.

“Just take some time off. Travel. Go home. Enjoy the holidays. You’ve got the money.”

I can’t believe I have to break it down to her considering we work in the same industry, but I remind her that if I take a break, no one will remember who I am by the time I’m ready to get back on the figurative horse again.

This business is so fickle it’ll forget you the moment you leave the scene for five seconds, let alone a few months. And I’ve worked too hard to disappear now.

“I wish I could have a break. I’m so run-down I just need a vacay-cay in Hawaii with Mai Tais and hot men feeding me grapes. What I wouldn’t give to be there right now. Come on,

Sandy. Do it. Go be me in Hawaii,” Isha says with dreamy eyes, and I hate to do so, but I snap her back to reality.

“Okay, first of all, I don’t think anyone feeds anyone grapes anymore unless you’re like a Sheikh or a Prince or something, and second of all, I’m not you, sweetie.”

Isha pouts and raises an eyebrow.

“What? You wouldn’t like hot men tending to your every need? Since when? What kind of a gay example are you setting for the world?”

I chortle and a few people turn to stare. As usual, we ignore them.

“Considering the world doesn’t know I exist, I’d say I’m not setting any examples for anyone,” I tell her.

“Well, that’s not what *Hollywood Daily* and *Star Town* say,” she says with a cheeky smugness that has me gasping.

“Bitch! You didn’t,” I say and snatch her phone out of her hands.

As she struggles to take her phone back, I go on Twitter and type a quick message and post it to her followers.

When Isha takes her phone back, she reads my message and laughs.

“‘I’m a fruit loop?’ Really? Is that the best frape you got?” She rolls her eyes.

“Well, I’m not gonna shame you on social media, am I? You’re still my BFF.” Isha swoons and coos. “Even if you’re a bitch.”

For that, I get a slap on the wrist, but I totally deserve it. Isha then proceeds to tell me her news. Nothing major. She’s still working for one of the best morning shows in the country. She still has the best job in the world. Whereas I have to hop from one client to the next, hoping to find my ideal match or land a job like hers.

When we finish our drinks, we venture out into the busy streets of Manhattan and do some window-shopping to lift my

spirits.

“So, talk to me, Sandy. What’s your ideal client? Who do you want to work for?” she asks as we stop by a Nick Grant store and admire the new Spring Collection. Maybe when I get a new job I can go out on a spending spree.

But until I do...

“I don’t know. Someone who isn’t a wacko would be great,” I tell her.

“Then you probably need to work for a man. You know how women are with their clothes,” she says, and I roll my eyes.

“Can you blame them? They’re the ones constantly criticized and compared to each other. I do like the idea of shaking it up a bit, though. But how many male celebrities do you know that need a stylist on a regular basis.”

Isha drags me away to the next window and takes her phone out.

“Darling, you forget it’s awards season. The busiest time of the year. I’m sure we can find you something,” she says, then turns to her phone. “Hey Lola, it’s your girl Isha... How you been?... I’m good, girl. Busy as use... Listen, Lola girl. I’ve got my friend... no, not Jo, Sandy... Sandy’s a he... well, tell that to his parents. Anyway, he was working for Angela Woodbury, but she had a hissy fit and fired him. Do you have anyone for him?... Uh-huh... uh-huh... Oh, really? She’s amaze-balls. But didn’t she just come out of rehab?... No, we want to tone down the crazy. What do you have in men?”

“If anyone was listening, they’d think you were shopping. Not asking for a job,” I comment, but she bats me away and I shut up, looking at the windows and taking inspiration while I try to fill in the gaps of what Lola’s saying to Isha. It doesn’t take a genius.

The Angela disaster is so fresh I can’t imagine anyone wanting to hire me. Only a whack job or a hermit would trust me with their closet. And my world is full of whack jobs. Not a lot of hermits.

“Oh my goodness. Are you for real? I said tone down the crazy... Really? Jesus... I thought he was getting better... Oh wow!... well, that’s not many options, sweetie... I know. I know. I’ll talk to him and get back to you,” Isha says and hangs up without so much as a bye.

I stare at her as she opens her black, Swarovski studded envelope purse and slips her phone inside very slowly.

“Are you gonna let me stew any longer or are you gonna tell me what she said?” I ask her when she doesn’t speak after the first few seconds.

Isha bites her lip and gives the window display a side-eye.

“Well, she’s got someone who is in desperate need of a stylist, but while it might be a good opportunity, I feel it’s my duty to tell you as your BFF that a) I don’t think you should do it, and b) have you considered going by a different name?”

It’s not the first time she asks me that question. It usually comes up when there’s some bad news involved and she’s trying to lighten the mood by getting me all riled up about my name.

“As you already know, I love my name, thank you very much, and don’t change the subject. Who’s the client?” I ask.

Isha pulls me by the forearm, linking our arms together, and we continue our walk.

“Before I tell you, you should know he’s got a long history of crazy, and working for him might be worse for your career than not.”

“Who is it?”

She ignores me.

“You should also know that his last stylist almost burned to death as he sat there laughing and refuses to ever work with such a sadistic son of a bitch,” she adds.

“Isha, I swear to God, if you don’t tell me...”

“It’s Val King.”

“What?”

Isha repeats his name as if I didn't hear her. But that's not the problem. I heard her all right.

Val King is *The Prince of Pop*. Has been for the last decade. Despite a rocky and dark history, his career is the stuff of dreams.

How could Isha think working for him would be bad for me? I mean, sure, the whole burning to death incident doesn't sound ideal, but when have rumors been entirely accurate, anyway? I'm sure if she almost died there'd be a lawsuit heading his way, and I haven't read anything about it.

Oh, who am I kidding? Whether it's true or not, I'm not going to say no to Val King. It's *Val King*. If he's the kind of person people say he is, I could maybe come out of my partnership with a book or something. Like *The King Wears Hellfire*. Or... I'm sure the publisher can come up with a better title.

This is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

"I'll do it," I tell her.

"What?" She stops and stares at me like I'm the crazy one.

"Call Lola and tell her I'll do it."

"But..."

"No buts. I want to do it. What's life without the fear of death, anyway?"

Isha isn't happy about it, and she's not afraid to show it, but she dials Lola's number again and tells her I want to work for King.

When she hangs up, she breathes a sigh of relief.

"She said she will put your contact through to his agent and they will get in touch if they want to hire you." She's almost jumping for joy when she says it.

"So it's not a done deal?"

"No," she laughs. "His agent is very selective of the people he lets close, especially after what happened. You can imagine. They've had so many paps posing as stylists to get all the dirt."

“Makes sense,” I tell her.

What I want to tell her is that this doesn't solve my problem. And I don't even know when to expect to hear back. I thought her calling Lola was supposed to help, but it's only made me so much more stressed. I'd rather not have known that I have a chance, however thin, of working with such an A-lister than knowing and not getting it.

By the time I get home, there's still no news from Lola or Val King's people, and with every passing minute, I get more and more convinced that there's no chance I'll get the job. When I open my door, Knight trots over and rubs himself around my legs, meowing ferociously to tell me how mad he is I left him all alone.

“Hey, Mister. You get me all to yourself from today. Don't you worry.” I pick him up and rub his neck, making him purr in my arms.

His white fur is soft and fuzzy in my fingers, and his body is warm. I fall backward on my couch and hug my cat tighter since I have no one else to hug and since I love Knight so much, anyway.

“Have you been a busy kitten while Daddy was out? Huh, my little munchkin?”

Knight meows, nuzzling his ears on my chest. He's probably itchy and using me as his own personal scratchboard, but I like to think he's telling me how boring his day has been without me.

But no matter my cat's inner motivation, I find it so comforting I don't even realize I fall asleep until the loud ringtone of my cell booms across the room.

I open my eyes and Knight jumps off my lap looking pissed. Can't say I blame him. I do make a comfortable cat bed.

It's an unknown number, and I pick up the phone ready to launch a verbal attack on whichever cold caller it is.

Instead of being told I was recently in a car accident—I haven't. I don't drive—someone addresses me by my last name. That never happens with cold callers.

“Mr. Thorne, I presume?” the man says.

“Yes. Uhm... speaking, I mean.”

The man dry coughs. “My name is Fred Graves. I’m Val King’s manager.”

My body shoots up as if I’m in the army and my captain has just walked in. I don’t even control it. It just happens out of its own volition.

“You are? Erm... I mean, you are. How-how can I help?”

*Well done, Sandy. Way to sound confident and professional. Get it together, man!*

“I’m told you are interested in a position as a stylist for my nephew,” Graves says.

Before I respond, I make sure to take a deep breath so I at least sound half decent when I do. “I am most *definitely* interested.”

*Really, Sandy? Most definitely?*

“Fantastic. When can you start? Val has a launch in a few days, and we’ll be doing a host of interviews and lives so we need someone ASAP.”

Knight sits by my feet and looks up at me with sad eyes before he meows just as solemnly.

*You promised you’d be home with me*, he’s basically saying to me, and I feel bad. But then again, I need to work. Especially for someone like Val King.

“I can start today,” I say into the phone and look away from Knight. I’ll have to go online and get him a lot more toys to make up for it.

“Fantastic. I’ll email you your NDA. If you can sign it ASAP, I’ll send you all the details straight away,” Graves says and hangs up before I can speak.

It’s fine. I’d probably fuck it up, anyway.

Only seconds after, the NDA is in my mailbox. And within the hour, I’m officially working for Val King.

The Prince of Pop!



### 3. VAL



For some reason, Fred has sat me down in my office but has taken over my chair so I look and feel like a grounded child sitting across from him, my long hair draped over my face, my shoulders slumped.

He's been like this since what I like to refer to as "the incident." I don't know why he's pissed off. I should be the one pissed off with myself. I'm the one that ruined my chance at independence.

Unless he's fed up with me and was hoping that soon he wouldn't have to look after me. That he'd be free of the burden that is me.

"Shouldn't I be getting ready for the show?" I ask him, but he just glares at me.

"Of course," he yells. "Why don't you go dress up. Oh, wait. All your clothes turned to ashes."

I purse my lips and look down at my lap.

Maybe he really does hate me and he's sick and tired of babysitting me. I mean, most days I'm sick of myself, so why wouldn't he be? Or maybe I haven't had an episode in such a long time I forgot how he gets when I do.

It doesn't help matters that Nina not only quit on the spot but also spun her own story to the media. Although, nothing a little crisis management can't fix.

I didn't try to kill her and she came out of the closet before it even went up in flames.

And I never laughed at her.

Out of everything, that was the bit of made up lies that annoyed me. That anyone would believe I'd be laughing like a psychopath after accidentally setting a fire.

But I don't know why I'm so surprised. People usually don't believe I have no recollection of my episodes.

There's a knock on the door, and Fred looks at the person walking in, but I don't turn around. I know Fred is good at his job, but I don't trust that the new stylist isn't a power-hungry social media influencer after a big paycheck.

I trusted Nina and look what happened. She turned out to be a twat.

"You must be Sandy," Fred said standing up.

Jesus. Even their name was a typical white girl socialite.

"Sure. I mean... erm... yes. Sandy Thorne. At your service. Or whatever I'm supposed to say," someone says behind me, and I can't help but laugh.

Which earns me a glare from Fred.

Her voice is soft and barely audible. Is she pretending to be nervous?

"I'm not royalty," I mumble.

"Well, you *are* the Prince of Pop, so..." the voice says.

Oh God. Is she a groupie? What the hell was Fred thinking when he hired her? I mean, yeah, that was funny, but I don't need someone fangirling over me. I just need someone to dress me in half-decent clothes.

Which to be fair, I can do on my own, thank you very much. I don't know why I can't just do that.

*Oh, wait. There's the whole being crazy thing. Or as Dr. Rahid prefers to call it, "dissociative identity disorder."*

Fred is concerned I'll dress up like a clown, so he deems it necessary to have my own stylist.

“That *is* true,” Fred laughs, and now it’s my turn to glare at him. “Have you brought some outfits?”

“Yes, I have. In fact, that’s why I’m a bit late—”

“A bit?” I chortle.

She’s an hour late. I should be on my way to the TV studio instead of sitting in my office making polite, nonsense conversation with an airhead.

“I went all over Manhattan to get some stuff. Thank you for sending his measurements. That really helped,” Sandy says, and I huff.

“I am right here, you know, little missy,” I say and turn around to find myself looking at a man.

He’s young and thin and is wearing a blue shirt, blue jeans, and a pink belt that’s way too flashy. His hair is short and black, and his eyes are hidden behind a pair of aviator glasses with a blue tint.

Sandy is definitely not who I thought they were going to be. A point which is made even stronger when he seems to be taken aback. He narrows his eyes and his body goes all rigid, before putting one hand on his hip and speaking directly to me.

“Oh, you are? I’m sorry. I didn’t notice. Considering you didn’t even turn around to acknowledge me, can you blame me, though?”

I feel my jaw drop before I can help myself, and Fred’s laughter echoes across the room.

“I think I’ll like you around here,” he says. “Right. Let’s get going. You can get changed in the car.”

I get up and follow Fred out of the room while Sandy walks behind me.

“Actually, as a prince, I like people at least ten feet behind me,” I tell him with the most serious face I can make.

“Oh, I’m sorry your excellency,” he says and then walks past me, brushing his shoulder against mine.

Sandy's got a lot of balls to come waltzing into my house, late might I add, and treat me like a second class citizen. This professional relationship is gonna be fun.

When we get outside, Jorge is already there, and Fred and Sandy get in the back of the limousine. Once I'm inside I can see why we've opted for fancy today. The back is full to the brim with clothes.

There's suits, shirts, slacks, jeans, shoes, sneakers, chains, suspenders, scarves, the whole shebang, and then some. It's like a fashion store threw up inside the car.

"That's a lot of shit," I mutter.

Fred coughs and I turn to him.

"What? It is."

"Well, I was told you have no clothes left, so I may have gone a bit overboard," Sandy says and gives me a guilty smile that stirs up something in my stomach and it feels all tingly. It's a pretty smile. I'll give him that.

"So, does that mean you bought me underwear because let me just say in advance that's just weird."

"Val!" Fred yells.

I ignore him.

"No. No underwear. Although I can get that arranged if you want. Are briefs okay, or would you rather thongs?"

"You've got a lot of cheek for someone who's *just* started working for me," I tell him, and he smiles.

"I know. I'm sorry. Here." The motherfucker dares to give me a tissue.

I mean, I do admire his gall, and I think I'd rather have someone who treats me like an equal than someone who worships the ground I walk on, but he's a whole other level.

"Girls, girls. Can we get to work please?" Fred says, and Sandy flinches but nods at my uncle.

Is he scared of Fred?

“What would you like to wear, Mr. King?” Sandy asks.

“None of this bullshit,” I tell him.

“Well, it’s either this bullshit or nothing at all, so it’s up to you whether you want to make gossip rags for your performance or yet another meltdown.”

“I could just wear what I’m wearing.” I stick my tongue at him.

“That’s not happening,” Fred cuts in. “We don’t have an endorsement with Rugged, so you’re not wearing it on TV. I only got you those so you can change into something in the house. Sandy here has gone to all the stores we have partnerships with and hand-picked some of their best new clothes. So get naked so he can dress you.”

“You did not just ask your nephew to get naked, Fred. That’s creepy AF.” I laugh at him and he rolls his eyes.

I take off my track jacket and strip down to my underwear. Sandy takes my clothes and folds them carefully, setting them down next to him, and then he looks at me, his gaze traveling from my eyes to my chest and over the rest of my body.

He’s obviously thinking what to put me in, but the way he watches me, the way his eyes—still hidden behind those glasses, even inside the car—arouses me, and I have no clue why. What’s so hot about a man inspecting your naked body with no facial expressions betraying his emotions?

Well, other than the fact that he’s a man, of course. But I don’t find him attractive. He’s cute and good looking, but I’m not sold on looks unless I see a man’s eyes, and I still haven’t seen his. Besides, he’s a fucking nut who takes way too much pleasure in cracking jokes at my expense. So whatever goosebumps he gives me better calm the fuck down because I’m not interested in him.

“I don’t think we want to go for a suit. It looks too composed. Like he’s trying to hide something. Like he’s preparing to fight in court. So that’s a no.” He picks up the suits and lays them in a corner next to my tracks. “Similarly, we don’t want to go to

caj because then it will look like he dressed himself and he's on heavy drugs."

"Uhm, could you not do that?" I tell him.

"Do what?"

"Talk like I'm not here."

Sandy stops and kneels on the floor in front of me. His chin is so close to my knees that it only takes an inkling of a dirty thought and I can imagine opening my legs to welcome him into my crotch and introducing my dick to his mouth.

Of course in my fucked up fantasy, Fred isn't in the car with us, so I try to shake the thought before I get hard.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Is it a secret that the whole world is talking about you and that we need to be careful how you look on your appearances so that you don't look deranged and on the verge of another breakdown? Silly me. I thought you knew we're in crisis mode," he says, and that about does it. Killing the blowjob fantasy.

"*I* am in crisis mode. Not *we*. You barely work for me," I tell him.

"In that case, shall I ask the driver to stop here so I can get out? 'Cause you obviously don't need me."

Sandy gets off the floor and walks to the front, knocking on the privacy glass between Jorge and us.

The window slides down, and Jorge looks at me through the rearview mirror.

"Mr. Thorne, sit down, please. Val's just being a petulant child. Please do your job and ignore my nephew. *I* decide whether you're under his employ or not, not Val."

*Oh burn! Fred's really pissed at me, isn't he?*

Sandy glances at me briefly and something flashes in his eyes for a moment, but I can't tell what it is. Surely it isn't sadness. Why would it be? This guy barely knows me, and he doesn't even like me if his behavior is anything to go by.

"O-of course," he says and starts passing me articles to try on.

Once he's picked what pants I'm wearing—a pair of skin-tight black denim—he puts me in a white T-shirt and a checkered shirt. Then he comes to sit next to me and starts fixing my collar and my sleeves.

His fingers linger on my skin for moments that feel like minutes and my entire body is on edge. He's so close I can feel his breath and smell his perfume. It's feminine and fruity—apples, I think—but it makes him that much sweeter.

And as he turns his attention to my hands, putting different bracelets on me, my nose tingles and itches.

“I'm gonna sneeze,” I say, and Sandy raises an eyebrow.

“Thank you for the warning. That's so kind—” he starts, and I sneeze. In his face. “Oh my God. Can you not cover your mouth? What's wrong with you?”

Sandy's face is all red, and he takes his glasses off to wipe his face. Finally, I get a view of his eyes. Icy blue and piercing.

But it's only for a moment before another sneeze threatens to come out. This time, I cover my mouth. And once I start. I don't stop.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask.

“I don't know,” Sandy replies and turns to Fred. “Are you—is he allergic to anything?”

“No. Not really,” Fred says.

“Maybe it's my perfume?”

“Nuh-uh,” I say and sneeze again. “The only thing I'm allergic to is cats.”

“Oh,” Sandy says and pulls away.

I lift my head in an effort to stop sneezing and look at him.

“You've got a cat, don't you?”

“I do.” He bites his lower lip and holds his hands in front of his chest as if that's gonna stop my allergies.

“Are you still sure he's the right choice for a stylist, Fred?”

The car slows down, and Jorge announces we've arrived at the studio. Fred gives me an amused grin that I seriously consider punching off his face and tells me, "Yes. As a matter of fact, I do."

I let out a growl and look at Sandy, who's all sheepish now.

"I'm so sorry."

I ignore him.

"What's going on, Mr. King?" Jorge asks, and I tell him what happened. "Well, aren't you lucky? I've got Benadryl on me."

Jorge passes me a bottle of pills and some eye drops.

"Thanks, Jorge. You're a lifesaver. And you"—I turn to Sandy—"better stay away from me."

As if my life couldn't get any worse, I now have to work closely with a guy that makes me want to claw my skin off. Literally.



## 4. SANDY



Well, this didn't go to plan at all.

I didn't plan on being so snarky with Val King, but for some reason, when I walked into the office and he ignored me, it pissed me right off.

So it all went to shit from there.

Which could all be interpreted as playful give and take, and that I could live with.

But him having an allergic reaction? That is not fun. It means I'm probably done for, even if Fred Graves insists that it doesn't matter.

But for the time being, I forget all that and watch Val on the monitors, pouring his heart out into his new song, singing it one hundred percent live, a rarity these days. His voice is heavenly, even if it's wasted on some really trashy songs. Everyone knows Val can sing. He's proven it time and time again during his live concerts or appearances when he does his own renditions of epic songs.

Somehow, though, his own songs still don't reflect the caliber of his voice. It's like he's too afraid to change what he's known for. Which kinda explains why a thirty-year-old man still sings and sounds like a teenager.

I can help him. I know I can. Obviously, I'm no musician or producer, but I can at the very least make him look his age. There's a roughness to him up close that you don't see on pictures or the TV.

The most striking thing about him is his hair. It always looks so perfect and in control, but that's the kind of magic his hairstylist performs when she combs it perfectly back into a man bun that has girls all over the world swooning over him.

But his hair loose? Oh my, when he lets down his hair, he looks like a man. Not a boy. He looks like an adult. A handsome, smoldering adult that I can picture in my bed any time of day.

Val looks straight at the monitor, and it's as if he's gazing right into my eyes, speaking to me like a mythical siren tempting me to the depths of the sea.

I've been listening to this man's music all my life—well, not as much listening as “his songs were everywhere, anywhere, and you can't avoid them even if you try really hard”—but I've never looked at him as a man I may be attracted to.

I may be younger than him, but I always found him too boyish to swoon over. Yet here I am, standing in front of his very green eyes—courtesy of my glasses, of course—thinking how gorgeous he'd look with his lips around my cock and me pulling him by the hair until he chokes on my cum shooting down his throat.

Val belts out the last verse of his song and the lights go out. Then the monitor is back on the show host who thanks Val and jumps onto the next subject of her talk show.

When Val walks backstage, I'm still swooning over him just like his groupies. It doesn't last long, though.

“You're still here?” he says.

“I got nowhere else to be.” I cross my arms in front of my chest.

“Yeah, I'm not surprised,” he replies, and whatever remnants of attraction I had for him, vanish into thin air. Okay, maybe not completely disappear. More like drowning in oceans of distaste. “I need to talk to my manager about this. I can't have you around. You make me all snotty and—”

“Trust me, Mr. King. You don't need me to make you snotty.”

I don't think Val is used to being talked to in that way. I imagine living in conservatorship all his life, and because of his fragile mental health, the people around him treat him like a porcelain doll, afraid to speak to him like an adult for fear of breaking him.

But it's quite apparent from his interaction with me that he's no child. He can take it like a man, and I'm not about to bend over backward for a spoiled brat that has had everything served on a silver platter all his life.

"I believe your uncle has made it clear I'm not going anywhere, so it'd be in our best interest to try and get along," I tell him.

"Can you find a hazmat suit?"

That's the last thing I expect to come out of his mouth, which is why I stand there, a few feet across from him, staring like an idiot.

"A... what?"

"Hazmat suit? You're a stylist right?" I nod. "So you must know what a hazmat suit is."

"I am. I do." I'm still not sure what he wants it for. "And when will you be requiring this hazmat suit?"

Val smiles. "Now." Then he walks past me holding his breath. When he's behind me he turns around and adds, "Oh, and it's not for me. It's for you. If I have to work with you, you'll have to wear it around me."

You know how in cartoons the character's eyes pop out of their sockets and their entire bodies spring off the floor to show they're shocked?

That's exactly what I feel like when my brain processes his words, and I have to literally put my fist in my mouth to stop me from retaliating or choking him with my bare hands in front of so many witnesses.

How dare he? Who does he think he is?

I run after him and step in front of him. He immediately takes two steps back and covers his mouth and nose with the inside

of his elbow.

“Has anyone told you you’re a cunt?”

“No. As a matter of fact, no. You’re the first,” he says, and his eyes harden.

“Well, you are. And maybe if you treated people with a little more respect, others would respect you back and there wouldn’t be so much hating on you online,” I tell him and walk away from him, regretting every word straight away.

I don’t understand what the hell is wrong with me. I’m never like this with my clients. With anyone, really. The only person I can be a bit bitchy with is Isha, and that’s because I know she can take it without insult.

Why the fuck then, can’t I stop myself from having a go at Val King every time I open my mouth?

“Trust me, dude. No one hates me more than I hate myself. Is that all?” Val says and takes me by surprise.

In fact, his admission makes all the words disappear from my head so I’m left there looking like an idiot again not knowing what to say.

Has he just let a part of his true self show? To me, nonetheless? Why would he do that unless he truly is crazy?

“Did someone switch you off? I need to know how they do that so I can do the same.” He waves his hand in front of my face with amusement, but underneath the façade, I can see the sadness now. “Okay, I’ve got more important things than stare at an idiot all day, so I guess I’ll see you around?”

He turns and walks out of the set, and only when the backstage door closes behind him do I snap out of it. And go after him.

When I go outside, he’s just about to get in the limousine but stops midway and looks at me with a raised eyebrow.

“What now?”

I think about walking closer to him, but I don’t. The last thing I need is to set his allergies off again.

“What do you mean see you around?”

Val shrugs.

“I don’t know. That’s what people say when they part ways with someone they’re going to meet again soon. *Does you speak non English?*”

The way he mocks me makes me want to knock his beautiful white teeth out. But that’s the kind of stuff that sends you into community service, and I’m too pretty for litter-picking.

“Shut up, you dickhead. Of course I speak English. I know what *see you around* means. But why would you be seeing me around?”

“Oh crap. Do you have it, too?” he asks, and his face goes all wrinkly with concern.

“Have what?”

“Blackouts. Oh shoot, dude. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize,” he says and shuts the limousine door taking a couple of steps toward me.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“My uncle? Fred Graves? Yeah, he hired you to be my stylist.”

I should have seen the trap coming. But like an actual idiot, I fell right into it.

“Oh, fuck you. I know that. But I thought you were going to ‘have a chat’ with your uncle about me,” I tell him.

“I always ‘have a chat’ with my uncle. What’s that supposed to mean?”

I open my mouth to tell him he’s a dimwitted asshole who needs to take down his narcissism a notch, but he cracks up and laughs with himself.

“Man! You’re too easy to wind up. This should be fun,” he says.

“What should be fun?”

Val shakes his head and rolls his eyes.

“You. Working for me.”

“So... you’re not going to get me fired?”

Val smirks and opens the car door again.

“Nah. I ain’t got time for that shit. Besides, I’ve never had someone talk to me like you do before. It feels good to be treated like an adult for once.”

With that, and without giving much time to respond, he gets into the car. But before I have the time to figure out how I feel about what he just said, the car starts to drive off.

So I have run after it.

And when Jorge stops, I get into the car.

Val looks at me like I’m intruding.

“What? You’re my ride,” I tell him and sit on the opposite end of the limousine trying really hard not to fall in love with Val King.

## 5. VAL



“**C**hallenge, break me, hate me, and abuse me.  
Make me find out what it's like for you to use me.

*Your darkness is nothing like mine.*

*Open me up and see what you find.”*

I tune the guitar a bit sharper and change the tune from C major to G major and go through the verse again.

It's not one of my new songs or an old one. It's just a scatter of lyrics that kept coming back to me since the TV appearance a couple days ago. When I finally wrote them down, I couldn't resist reaching for the guitar in my home studio and giving the lyrics a melody.

It's not often I write songs anymore. In fact, it's been years since I've made my own music. There was a certain Val King brand, and all my songs had to be approved by my uncle first and my label second. My opinion rarely mattered on the songs that would become my repertoire.

My brand is thirsty teenage girls. There's no nice way to put it. So all the songs are full of sexual innuendos with a boyish charm and repetitive drills that made them stick in people's heads no matter how hard they resist me.

It is kind of like magic how my producers had an exact formula for making my songs a hit. Although not the fun kind of magic. The black, evil kind of magic.

“It's good. But a bit dark, don't you think?” Fred says, and I look up in the booth to find him sitting at the mixer leaning

into the microphone.

I shrug.

“I know. I’m just playing,” I told him.

“You might want to practice for tonight’s interview instead of playing, though, don’t you think?”

“Yup. I was... just about to do that.”

That’s a clear lie. But if I don’t say it out loud, it doesn’t matter if it is or not. The songs I’m performing tonight are easy as fuck, and I know them by heart. I don’t even need to do any vocal warm-ups to perform them.

I don’t know why after so many years they still write songs for me that don’t use my entire range.

“Any news?”

I don’t need to clarify. He knows what I’m talking about.

“I’m sorry, Val. We’ll try again next year,” he says and gives me a gentle smile of encouragement.

*Don’t give up*, the smile says.

How could I? I can’t keep on being a burden to those around me. I have to keep trying. Even if it means I’m under conservatorship for another year. If I give up now, I might as well kill myself and do the world a favor.

But as crazy as I am, I’m not suicidal, so that’s not gonna happen.

“Practice for tonight, Val. Sandy should be here in an hour to go over your options,” he says and leaves the studio without further word.

Even though I have no inclination to practice the stupid songs, I do it, anyway. A way to pass time until Sandy’s here.

Sandy...

I run through the songs a couple of times but Sandy’s image keeps flashing in my mind, standing across from me with that smug look, the angry eyes, the sass.



My fingers do the talking for me, taking position for G Major again, and before I can control myself, I come up with a chorus for the song that will never see the light of day.

*“Drink me up, let me in,  
It’s cold and I’m freezing.  
What is wrong, with that heart?  
Why does it keep on squeezing?  
I got none, left to lose.  
But so much more to give you.  
Shatter me with those glass eyes.  
And you, oh you, may be surprised.”*

I have no clue where any of that came from, but I write it down before I can forget.

It might be absolute garbage, tacky and nonsensical, but it’s *my* garbage, tacky and nonsensical. And no one can take it away from me.

I don’t own much.

I don’t own my house, my career, my life.

Maybe on paper. On the same paper that says it’s all controlled by Fred.

But I can own this one song.

“Oh God, it’s you!” someone says behind me. “I thought it was some poor dog screeching.”

Sandy waltzes in a yellow shirt that’s only got two buttons done up right at his stomach, which leaves his hairless chest exposed, and a pair of pink, high-waisted jeans along with the same pair of glasses like the first time. He looks like he’s come right out of Barbie’s dreamhouse, but damn me if I can stop looking at him.

“Fuck you, too,” I tell him in response.

“Classy,” he snorts.

“-ier than you,” I add, but it doesn’t make him laugh.

“Are you done playing musician, because I’ve got three outfits for you to try on for tonight,” he says.

I prop my guitar against the stool and get up.

“Only three, huh? Is that all you could steal off GQ?”

Sandy laughs out loud.

“Please! As if you could make anything *GQ* look good on those skinny legs. I mean, I’m good, but I can’t do miracles.”

I flip him the bird as I walk away from him, and he follows behind me like a lost puppy.

“Apt as usual, I see,” he says.

“Do you ever shut up?” I ask him.

“Do you ever act like a human being?”

“Duh! Obviously not,” I reply. “Haven’t you read the news? I’m a schizo.”

We climb the stairs to the second floor, and I go all the way to my room by instinct, but when I get there, I realize it’s all cordoned off by the builders and under repair.

When we finally get to my temporary room, one of the guestrooms a couple doors down from Fred’s, I open the door, but before Sandy gets in, he crosses his hands and glares.

“Have you taken your Benadryl today?”

“Do you still have a hellspawn as a pet?” I ask him, and his eyes narrow further.

“Knight is not a pet. He’s my owner,” he tells me, and I laugh so hard I fall back on the bed.

“I don’t know what twisted shit you do with your cat, but keep it to yourself, all right?”

Sandy walks in and closes the door behind him.

“And yes. I took some Benadryl an hour ago.” He smiles at that.

I don’t know why. And I don’t know why his smile makes my stomach all fluttery and my chest so achy, but it does.

“I honestly don’t understand what you people see in cats. They’re literal devils. They only give a shit about humans when they need food and even then act like fucking queens about it.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” he says.

“What makes you so sure?” I ask him.

“That you don’t have the capacity to care for more than yourself? Just an inkling.”

He takes the first outfit out of the garment bag with a pout.

“I used to have a dog, you know. I’m not made of ice. Ass,” I tell him, and he gives me a side-eye that makes me angry.

“And how did you get rid of the poor, unfortunate soul?”

“What makes you think I killed it?”

He shrugs, holding the outfit in front of me.

“Vomit,” I say, and he bites his lip. “And I didn’t kill Jono. I know the tabloids write all kinds of bullshit about me, but I’m not a fucking murderer, okay? And how fucking dare you assume? Jono died of old age, and when I asked Fred for another dog, he said my schedule was too busy to handle a pet. So fuck you, jerk.”

Sandy turns his back to me and reaches for the next garment bag.

“I’m sorry,” he mutters.

I don’t respond. I just wait for him to turn around showing me the next outfit he thinks I need to wear.

“I didn’t mean it,” he says and looks me smack right in the eyes. “I was just teasing. I took it too far. I’m sorry.”

“I think I’ll throw up.”

“Oh come on. I mean it,” he yells.

“So do I. That suit looks ridiculous,” I say and climb to the other side of the bed and pretend I’m wrenching my guts.

“For fuck’s sake. You’re such a bastard.”

I lift my head and look at him all sheepish.

“That’s what my dad used to say,” I say. “And then, of course, I killed him.”

Sandy’s eyes go all wide and his face white.

“Is that too far? Oh, and here I thought you suggesting I killed Jono was too far.”

“You’re unbelievable.” Sandy throws the outfit he’s holding at me and gets back to work, trying to get me dressed.

Good fucking luck with that. I may have liked the first outfit, but I’ll be damned if I don’t let him work extra hard for me.

Besides, he looks cute when he’s mad.

## 6. SANDY



“He’s a pig,” I tell Isha, and she laughs over her cup of coffee. “It’s not funny. He is. He’s so fucking up his own ass it’s amazing how he can even walk straight.”

“Well, sweetie, he is Val King. I think it would be a little weird if a guy of his caliber wasn’t a little douchey,” she says.

I’m not sure if that’s supposed to make me feel better. If it is, it doesn’t work. It only makes me angrier.

Thinking of Val and all the hundred ways he infuriates me is how I spend most of my days now. I’ve only been working for him for a week, but it’s a week too many.

“He’s childish, immature, narcissistic, and cocky. I can’t stand him.”

Isha puts her chin between her two hands on the table and gives me puppy eyes as if that’s soothing. It’s a little creepy if anything.

“And he’s allergic to Knight. Like WTF?”

“Sounds like the rumors are true then,” she says.

“Huh?”

“You know. All the things they’re saying about him being a nutjob and a psycho,” she explains.

The words come out tasteless from her mouth although she probably doesn’t mean it as such. I flinch away from her and shake my head.

“He’s not crazy.”

Do I sound a little bit defensive? What the hell do I care what the media says about him?

“You just said he’s a dickhead,” Isha says and also sits back.

“I didn’t say he’s a dickhead.”

“Well, you implied it with all the colorful words you’ve used to describe him.”

Well, I’m allowed to use “colorful” words. He’s been an absolute diva with me. But hearing Isha call him all these things? My stomach can’t take it.

“He’s not crazy. He’s actually very sad. I can see it in his eyes. And sometimes he’ll bring up the shit about his past and you can tell he’s not a freak of nature. He’s just human like us.”

Isha lifts the cup to her lips and grins at me.

“Oh, I see,” she says and takes a sip.

“You see what?” I mimic her and lift my own drink to my lips.

“What’s going on. You have a crush on Val King,” she says, and I spew my drink back out, making it rain coffee everywhere.

“What? I don’t have a crush on Val.” I grimace.

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Isha says and grabs a napkin to wipe my mess.

I watch her clean the table with a smug look. Do I have a crush on him?

Well, duh! Who wouldn’t? He’s a gorgeous man. The real man. Not the picture-perfect puppet the world sees.

But regardless of my crush on the man, the person underneath is an absolute jerk, so even if I like the way he looks, his personality repulses me more than anything in this world.

“Just remember, there’s no smoke without fire.”

“I don’t need to remember that because I don’t have a crush on him!”

“Okay. Okay.” Isha raises her hands in surrender and looks at me all innocently. “They do say angry sex is hot, though.”

I offer her my scowl as an answer, and she eventually backs down for real, so I get a chance to tell what it’s really been like under Val’s employ.

“Are you sure he isn’t crazy? Because he certainly sounds it. I mean, who jokes about killing their parents? And pet?” she says.

“He’s a weirdo, all right, but he’s not crazy. He’s a little broken, but who wouldn’t be after everything he’s been through?”

I realize as I say it that I’m not helping my case on the whole “crush” thing. And I’ve been an absolute, grade-A dick to him since the moment we were introduced.

How could I be treating my employer like that? Talk to him like that? Especially when it’s crystal clear every time we argue he’s not okay. He takes as many digs at himself as he does at me. Who can blame him, though?

When everyone treats you like a nut all your life, you’re bound to treat yourself like a nut, too. And his endless jibes are just a way to protect himself from more harm. Which is just about perfect because I’ve given him a myriad of reasons to make him so defensive. In his own home nonetheless.

I leave Isha at the coffee shop and walk back to my apartment where Knight is waiting for me by the door.

“You must have been a dog in another life. There’s no other explanation,” I tell him as he rushes to rub around my legs and welcome me home with his purring.

I open the fridge, grab a packet of curry and rice, and throw it in the microwave, turning the TV on. Before long, I’m eating while laying down on my couch with Knight sprawled across my legs, zoning out to a real housewife who’s got way too much money and coverage for doing absolutely nothing.

Instead of watching TV, I keep coming back to my conversation with Isha. And to Val. Why do I keep treating him like that? Every time I resolve I'll be professional around him and treat him like any other boss, he comes in and all my resolution goes right out the window.

It's like I have an allergic reaction to him just like the one he has to Knight. An allergic reaction to his bullshit. Because half the shit he says and does is that. Bull. Shit. I don't even need to know him for long to know when he's lying or just plain messing with me.

That's probably why I can't stop insulting him.

And that stupid song, the one he'd been singing when I walked into the studio the other day, won't get out of my head. How can a song and lyrics you've only heard once get so stuck in your brain you remember it all by heart?

I hate him for that. For the fact he can be such an asshole, yet I still have a song of his on a constant loop like it's essential food for my soul.

It's time I make amends, though. I can't keep treating him like that. Reputation is everything in this industry, and while he may have a bad one, I don't want the same kind of crap to follow me wherever I go.

When I'm knocking on his bedroom door the following morning, I've decided to be an exemplary employee. A paragon of *savoir vivre*. To treat my client with the kind of respect he doesn't even know the meaning of.

"Oh, it's you," Val says, lying in bed and covering his head with a pillow.

"Good morning, sir. It's time to get ready for your interview this afternoon."

Val comes out from under his pillow and grimaces.

"What the fuck happened to you?" he asks.

"What do you mean, sir? Is there something wrong with me?" I bite the inside of my cheek knowing I've used the wrong words and fully expecting the remark that follows.



“Something wrong with you? Where do I start? Why are you talking like a pompous ass?” Val sits up in bed and rubs his eyes, his hair a messy halo around his head, some strands sticking to his sweaty forehead.

I laugh his comment off and walk toward the closet. Then push all the clothes to either side so I can hook up the outfits I’m carrying.

“If you’d be so kind as to have a shower so we can try some of these on?”

“Dude, stop talking like that. You’re creeping me out,” he says and gets out of bed.

“Like what, sir?”

“I don’t know. Like... like a Stepford Wife,” he says.

I laugh at his non-joke and take the clothes out of their garments bags. Then I take extra care to make sure nothing has been creased during transport, although it’s nothing a quick ironing can’t fix.

If it happens while Val King is wearing it, it wouldn’t be so bad, would it?

When I turn around, I jump and clasp my chest. The asshole is standing right behind me. When the hell did he sneak up on me?

“Stop it,” he says.

“Stop what, sir?” I ask him when I manage to compose myself.

“This. Calling me sir and acting like a fucking robot.”

I chuckle and brush him off. “I’m just being professional, sir.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why? Because I work for you.”

Val’s face wrinkles in disgust, and he takes a step back.

“I don’t like it. Stop being weird.”

“No. I’m being professional,” I insist.

“Then be *un*professional,” he says.

I walk past him and out of the closet and try to put some space between us before I smack the hell out of him.

“I’m being paid to do a job, so I’m afraid that’s not an option.”

“So why were you a douchebag all the other times?”

It’s a good thing he’s behind me because I’m pursing my lips so hard it hurts my teeth. And I’m probably pink as fire.

“I apologize for that. It was so unbecoming of me,” I grind my teeth.

“You know what’s unbecoming of you? Speaking like a character out of *My Fair Lady*. Did you drink bleach or something?”

Val comes to stand in front of me, and I’m tempted—so tempted—to rub myself all over him to give him an allergic reaction.

But that wouldn’t be professional, would it?

“What’s wrong, Sandy Dee? Cat got your moron tongue?” he coos like the immature dickhead he is, and I’ve tried, I really have, but speaking to me like I’m stupid? That has the tendency to make me mad.

Real mad.

“Oh for fuck’s sake. You’re impossible, aren’t you? I tried. I really tried to be all good and proper but you’re such a fucking child. What’s wrong with you? Just because you got money doesn’t mean you can treat people like—”

I know I’m going on, and I know he’s staring at me. He’s close. So close. Why is he so close?

Before I have a chance to put more of my foot in my mouth he smiles.

“There you are.”

“What do you mean there I am? Are you coaxing me? You fucking basta—”

He leans in, and I flinch away.

Although not so far away that his lips don't touch mine. His hands come up on either side of my face and he pulls me closer to him.

It's an angry smashing of teeth, lips biting lips, noses pressing hard against noses. It's not by any means sweet or sexy.

Or it shouldn't be, by any account, but his kiss is like a vice. A vice I'm already addicted to even if it's the first time I'm tasting it.

His thumbs massage my cheekbones, their delicate surface giving me goosebumps, and his hair brushes my jaw, my forehead, my eyebrows. His hair is everywhere, tickling me as if it has a life of its own, participating in this peculiar exchange of saliva.

And although Val is kissing me with seemingly his entire upper body, my hands hang limp beside me, too confused and terrified of whatever is happening. The one thing that's not confused about what's happening is my dick, that's hard inside my underwear.

"Kiss me back goddamnit. Otherwise it's weird," he mumbles without removing his lips from me, and for some reason, his voice, the voice that can be so angelic when singing but which drives me insane when speaking, wakes me from whatever hypnotic horniness I've gone under.

I push him away from me, but he doesn't fall back. Instead, it's me who stumbles backward.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I shout.

He smiles.

"Oh, come on. You know you want it too. Our chemistry is literally off the roof every time we argue."

"Shut up. Stop talking."

He's not wrong. But this, kissing him, is.

"Tell me I'm wrong and I'll stop."

He tries to close the gap between us.

"You are," I tell him and step back.

“So you didn’t like that kiss?”

I shake my head erratically which urges Val on.

“Imagine what the sex would be like,” he smirks.

“You’re fucking crazy,” I say, and he stops mid-step. He bites his lip and the playfulness disappears from his face.

And what’s worse, I miss it as soon as it’s gone. He turns around and walks to his bed, his hair a curtain in front of his face so that I can’t see it.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

My heart aches. I don’t like him sad like that. Yes, he drives me up the wall, but it’s fun arguing with him.

“You should be, you little shit,” I shout again and before he has the chance to react—or for me to think clearly—I step behind him, turn him around, and kiss him.

And then we fall back into his bed.

Fucking great!

## 7. VAL



I thought it was a mistake.

I thought it was the biggest mistake I could ever make.

But if it had been a mistake, I wouldn't be kissing him right now.

Not just kissing him. Grinding on him. His cock is pressed against mine, his tongue in my mouth, an avid but irritated explorer clinging on to me for dear life.

He wants this—wants me—as much as I want him. But does he? Or is he one of those people that will jump anything moving and interested?

Somehow I have a hard time picturing him as a bed-hopping slut. Sandy might twist my guts with his incessant insults, but he's not like that. He's sweet, even when he's being a douche. He's considerate, even when he's calling me a snotty rich boy.

He's passionate. Even when he's glued to me and all I can think is how I don't want this to end.

I've been craving for this, his touch, his lips, his dick since day one. I've jerked off to his memory more times than I dare to admit. Our fights make me horny. Our teasing makes me feel alive. And I haven't felt alive in a very long time.

The frames of his glasses dig into my cheeks, and I put my hand on his chest, pushing him a little off me.

“Why the fuck are you always wearing these ugly shades?” I grumble.

“That’s none of your business, asshole,” he says and tries to kiss me again, but I put both my hands between our faces and push him off.

“Take them off,” I yell.

“No,” he says.

“I’ll take them off for you,” I warn him.

“Don’t you dare touch my glasses,” he warns back.

I pull the frames off his face and throw them on the other side of the bed, and he winces, mouth hanging open.

“You twatface.” He slaps my chest.

I laugh.

“It’s not funny,” he protests.

“It is. Keep talking dirty to me,” I tell him, and his hands travel from my chest to my neck and wrap around it.

“You’re a fucking dickhead,” he says.

“You can do better than that.” I lift my head off the mattress a little so his hand presses harder on my neck.

“You’re a rancid bastard cunt flap,” he says, and my whole body shakes with the giggles.

“Stop. You’re terrible at this,” I tell him.

“Well, it’s kinda hard to insult you when your dick is pressing on mine.”

“I can take my dick away from your dick, if you’d like.”

Sandy takes his hand off my neck and grabs a handful of my locks and pulls my head back on the mattress.

“Sit your ass down, princess. I’m not done with you,” he says, and my dick throbs.

His upper body collapses on me again, his mouth returning to mine, his tongue licking my lips like there’s nectar to be found. His hand stays wrapped around my hair, and every few seconds, he gives it a tug as if to remind me who’s boss.

No complaints from me, though.

He journeys to my neck with wet kisses and pulls my robe open to continue down the middle of my chest.

“I’ve never been more grateful for bathrobes,” he mumbles as his tongue makes intermittent, wet patterns on my stomach.

“Yeah, we should get you one of those,” I tell him.

He glares at me.

“What? You’re still fully dressed and I’m... not.”

He rolls his eyes but he lifts himself off me long enough to take his shirt off and give me an immaculate view of his smooth torso, tiny waist, and beautiful, hard nipples.

“Happy?” he grunts.

“Well, not yet,” I say and open my robe at the hips to show him the next order of business.

“Dear Lord, you need a better underwear partnership. Those boxers—”

“Are you seriously gonna go all stylist on me now?”

He huffs and puffs but dips back down to my stomach and continues where he left off.

“Just suck me off already. Jeez!” I tease him, and I get the reaction I want as he heaves and glares at me.

“Want to do this yourself?” he asks.

“If I could do this myself, I wouldn’t need you, would I?”

He shakes his head, gets up, unbuttons his jeans, and climbs back in bed, turning around so his crotch is in my face.

“What are you doing?” I ask him.

“Shutting you up? If you got a dick in your mouth, then hopefully you won’t talk as much,” he says and lifts his waistband.

His dick drops smack dab on my face and I slurp it, familiarizing his girth and length with the insides of my mouth.

“Finally,” Sandy says, and I bite softly on his head which makes him moan.

He then proceeds to lift my waistband—fucking finally—and takes me all in, making me freeze and tighten my lips around his cock. That has a domino effect on his sucking and so on and so forth.

In short, we’re linked for good and until one of us comes neither one of us can take their mouths off each other’s dick.

Which suits me just fine because his dick is beautiful, just like the rest of his body. It’s long and lean and makes me choke, and his precum tastes like honey on my tongue. He’s leaking enough for both of us, and I think I found the nectar Sandy was looking for in my mouth earlier, because it’s the best thing *I’ve* ever tasted.

I reach with both hands and grasp his asscheeks—the mounds fitting perfectly in my palms—to squeeze them. Is there anything on him that’s not perfect? Even the tongue, the same one he uses to diss me, is so skilled when it’s not talking. I wouldn’t change anything about him.

Oh, who am I kidding? Even when he’s talking I wouldn’t change anything about him.

He treats me like a man. And sucks me like one, too. There’s no holds barred with him, and I think that’s half the reason I like him so much. The other half being how perfect he is.

His head bobs up and down my shaft fast and tight. The harder he sucks, the less I can keep my focus. His hands grip either side of the inside of my thighs, and his index fingers press against my hole.

I follow his example and push a middle finger in his hole. It doesn’t break through the ring of muscle, but it doesn’t fail to make him whimper.

I swallow more of him and rest my nose on his balls, holding on until I can’t anymore and I have to pull up for air. And when I do, I go back down and do it again and again and again until I feel his thick, hot seed burning the back of my throat and my own cock shoots out into his mouth.



But even then I can't stop sucking him. Drinking him up. Licking him clean.

Sandy collapses on my right leg, and I see his back fall and rise as he tries to catch his breath, his icy eyes staring back at me all spent and tired.

"Well, that's never happened before," he says.

"What? Sleeping with your client, or sleeping with anyone in general?" I tease.

"Coming at the same time, you dufus," he says.

"We can try it again if you'd like. I'm a sucker for breaking records," I tell him.

"I don't think I can say no to that."

I smile. He doesn't.

"Don't let that fool you into thinking that I like you. I don't. You're still a son of a bitch," he grunts.

"And you're still an annoying little skunk, but you're a means to an end."

He purses his lips with irritation and asks me what means that is.

"Fucking you senseless, of course," I answer.

"And who told you I want you to fuck me? I might want to fuck you? What? You think because I'm small and sweet I take it up the ass?"

"Don't you?"

He sighs.

"I do. But so do you, so shut your trap. We're fucking each other."

"When?"

"Will it shut you up?" he asks.

"Probably."

"Then, now," he says.

“Or probably not. I’m a loud fucker.”

“Show me.” He raises an eyebrow, and I smirk.

“Don’t we have to get ready for an interview?” I remind him.

“Fuck the interview. Fuck me instead,” he says.

I put my hand under his chin and lift him up to me.

“With pleasure.”

## 8. SANDY



S o... I just *blew* Val King.  
And he wants to do more to me.

What's wrong with me? What floor did my mother drop me off when I was a baby to be so desperately hooked on this spoiled brat? And why, oh why the fuck can't I stop kissing him?

The fact that his dick has gone rock hard again so quickly doesn't help our blood flow back where it's supposed to flow.

Right now I'm sitting with my asscheeks spread open and Val's tongue flicking my hole like it's a jar of peanut butter he can't stop eating.

My shirt is twisted around my face, and I'm biting down on half of it so I don't scream. And it's halfway to cloud nine when I notice a couple of Knight's hairs stuck to a sleeve.

"Wait a minute," I say, taking the wet half of my shirt out of my mouth.

"What? Don't tell me it hurts. Just double down and take it like a man," Val says behind me.

"Oh, shut up. Why would your little tongue hurt me, you big doofus?" I lay down on my side and look at him.

"Then what?"

"I thought you were allergic to cats. How come you're not having an allergic reaction?" I ask.

“Didn’t you say you changed clothes every time you leave the house?” he asks with an innocent grin on his face.

I nod. “Yeah, but I just found out my cat has shed on my shirt. Why aren’t you sneezing?”

Val chortles.

“I can sneeze on you if that turns you on. Although, I do have to say, that’s a bit weird.”

“Stop digressing.”

“I don’t know. Maybe your cat is one of those hypoallergenic assholes.”

“He’s not. And he’s not an asshole either.”

“I beg to differ, but we’ve already been over this,” he says waving his hands mockingly.

“Oh my God, you’re unbearable. Will you answer my motherfucking question?” I yell.

“Fine! I’ve been taking allergy tablets for a few days now,” he says, rolling his eyes like I should have known or guessed it already.

I sit back on my ass and cock my head to the side.

“Why would you do that?”

Val puts his hands on his hips, his dick bouncing as he changes weight from one foot to the other.

I have no idea why I’ve decided to stop and ask him such an unimportant question when I could be having that beautiful, majestic dick inside me, but hey, I never claimed I’m a smart guy.

“Well, for the event that this happened,” Val replies and points between us.

“Why would you think this would happen? Was my shouting at you not loud enough of my dislike for you?”

“Oh come on, Sandy boo, the attraction between us has been palpable since day one. This was bound to happen at some point.”

“Well,” I tell him and start getting off the bed. “Aren’t you a conceited motherfucker!”

Val blocks me by putting one hand on my chest, smirking.

“I didn’t hear you say that while you were eating my cum,” he says.

“Obvs! I had a dick in my mouth,” I tell him.

Val pushes me back on the bed.

“Well, let’s put my dick in other orifices then.” He grabs me by the ankles and brings my legs up over his shoulders. “You know. So you can say you tried the complete King package and didn’t like one inch.”

His cock presses against my hole and my muscle clenches. I wish he would open me up already. But first things first.

“If you think you’re putting that thing in me bare, you got another think coming,” I tell him, and he raises an eyebrow. “What? I don’t know where it’s been.”

“You didn’t have any such concerns when it was rubbing on your uvula,” he says, and I sigh. “I promise you I’m as clean as they come.”

At that, I grab his jaw and glare at him.

“Well, if your Highness may excuse my disbelief, but I’ll take my chances with a rubber,” I tell him, and he rolls his eyes.

“God. Fine! You’re no fun.” He gets up and opens his bedside drawer.

“If I was no fun, you wouldn’t be begging to fuck me.”

“I wasn’t begging. I was asking,” he says, ripping open a packet.

“Sure. Keep telling yourself that.”

Val squirts some lube on his manhood, and before I know it, my legs are strapped on either side of his head and he pushes against my hole.

He only slows down when I hiss, but even then he keeps on going, unable to take his eyes off my face.

This guy likes it rough, and it shows. How many guys has he claimed on this bed before me? Well, not this bed, since this isn't his usual bedroom. But figuratively speaking. How many guys that were so star-struck they just let Val King breed them like a stallion? How many of them questioned him on whether he's safe or not?

When I have his full girth inside me, stretching me in all directions, I think I forget my name, so I can't say I blame all the other guys who never questioned him. Hell, if he wasn't such an annoying twat, I wouldn't be challenging him myself.

And for the hundredth time this past week, I try to understand what the fuck is wrong with me, yet I come up short of an answer.

I hate this man's guts. But I can't resist him, either. I have no willpower to stop him. To get him off me. To get dressed and leave.

Instead, I lie there on my back and take it like a champ. And I am a champ because, let me assure you, Val King's dick is royally big. I don't know where he's been hiding this Godzilla all his life. None of his pictures or music videos ever alluded to it.

But then again, I haven't been paying attention to him for most of my life.

It turns out Val also has royal stamina, because when he gets bored fucking me like that, he pulls me up, pushes my body so my face is pressing against the wall, and fucks me from behind, peppering kisses on my shoulder, his hair sticking to my sweaty back.

And when that gets tiring, he lies down on his rug and pulls me down on his dick so I ride him like a horse.

I feel like I'm in a porn movie with a very high production value. So many positions, so much brawn, so much humping.

Fuck!

Is it a porn movie? Am I being filmed? Those crazy celebrities are... well, crazy. Are there security cameras in the room? Am

I gonna end up plastered on gossip rags with a sex tape pirated on the Cloud?

I glance around but can't find anything. Then again, they make cameras so small these days it'd be impossible to know for sure.

"What?" Val asks.

"Nothing," I shake my head and focus back on the task at hand.

Making King come. And myself.

I'm not gonna let that asshole think he can get away without pleasing me back. I'm not one of his Courtlings. If he wants to come, fine. But he better give me a fucking orgasm, too.

I lean away from him and put my hands on either side of his legs and grind down on his dick faster.

His groans tell me he likes this, and if anything, the way I stretch around his dick feels like it's grown a few inches inside me.

But I keep going, pounding and pounding until he rubs against my prostate and all the air leaves my lungs. It's only when he comes inside me that I grab my dick with one hand and palm myself until I spill all over his naked torso.

"Fu-uck," I groan as he squeezes my butt with both hands, drilling his dick further inside me before it flops out and we both come back to reality.

Val pulls the condom off his dick, ties a knot around it, and throws it in a wastebasket next to the bed. Then he trots off to the en-suite bathroom and grabs a towel, wiping himself off. When he's done, he throws the towel in my face.

I glower at him.

There's a knock on the door.

"Sir. Your car is waiting outside," says a womanly voice, and my eyes almost fall off their sockets.

"Fuck. The interview," I whisper-shout.

Val is already putting on one of the shirts that I brought over for him to choose from.

“Relax. I can be ready in two minutes. Besides, Jorge won’t leave without me.”

I cringe.

“Aren’t you gonna shower first or something?”

“Why? How dirty were you?” he grins.

I turn away from him and shake my head.

“I can’t believe I let you fuck me. You’re such a greasy bastard.”

I pull my underwear and pants up and look around for my shirt. It’s still in a bundle on the bed.

“Hey! Half of my grease is yours,” he says.

I grimace.

“You’re disgusting, you know that?” I say. “Now where the fuck are my glasses.”

He shrugs.

I look everywhere, but they’re not where they were supposed to be.

“What did you do with them?” I ask him when I see him chuckling to himself.

“Nothing. Although I should have smashed them when I had the chance. They’re horrible glasses, and you don’t need them,” he says

“First, shut up. Second, I do need them, and third... there’s no third. Oh, wait. Shut up. Again.”

“Charming,” he says.

“Please! In comparison to you, I’m a prince.”

“Hardly,” he bites back.

I pat the comforter, and I feel a little lump. When I put my hand under the little fold at the top, I find them and check them for scratches or loose screws.



“Thank God.”

“Why are you obsessed with those glasses, anyway?” Val is sitting down on the other side of his Alaskan King size bed and putting on a pair of leather boots I got for him.

“Because I can’t see without them,” I snap.

“You could see my dick just fine without them.”

“Well, who can miss that monstrosity?” I tell him, and he squints.

“I don’t think that’s as much of an insult as you think it is,” he says.

“Anyway. I didn’t say I’m blind. I just can’t see color without them,” I say and put them on.

It always feels weird when everything has a full-color spectrum again that’s anything other than blues and pinks. As if it’s unnatural for light to be yellow and not pastel pink, or for the grass to be anything other than teal.

“Oh, shit. You mean you’re color blind?”

I just stare at him as a response.

“God! They really must hate color-blind people if they’re selling you those glasses to see color.”

Why am I even listening to him? Why haven’t I walked out of here yet?

This man is infuriating.

I give him the middle finger and edge toward the door.

“Come on,” I tell him.

“Again? I’ve only just caught my breath,” he smirks.

I cry out in frustration.

Not because he’s annoying me but because I can’t wait to do what we just did again.

“Later. Now you have an interview to do. You can do me after.”

His smile stretches from ear to ear like he's slept with a coat hanger in his mouth. Not that it would surprise me if that was something celebrities did. They were always making trends out of bullshit after all.

He spritzes some cologne on his neck and walks toward me, plants a kiss on my lips, and opens the door.

I'm fucked, aren't I?

Quite literally.

## 9. VAL



“Do we have to do this now?” I ask Fred.

I’m sitting in my home office behind my desk, and Fred and Sandy are sitting on the other side.

I only invited Sandy in here so I can bend him over my desk and fuck him senseless. Fred was not part of the picture, but if he doesn’t leave soon, he might as well be a peeping Fred because I need Sandy, and I need him now.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mr. King. Do you have more important business to attend to other than your sold-out concert? How rude of me,” Fred snaps at me, then turns to Sandy. “I assume you’ve got some ideas?”

Sandy nods and takes out a huge sketchbook, setting it on my desk. Then he opens it to what seems like the very middle and reveals an array of sketches of different outfits drawn with great detail and shading skills, but all black and white.

“I thought we could discuss the palette together and figure out the best colors for the outfits you’d like to wear, but these are a few of my ideas after looking at the timings and schedule.”

He’s looking and talking to me. It’s a shame he doesn’t realize I don’t really have much choice in the matter.

“Well, you know his brand,” Fred says, “you figure out the best colors for him. Nothing too dark and moody, and nothing too bright and colorful. We don’t want anyone thinking he’s going goth or that he’s coming out of the closet. Also, let’s not forget it’s a Christmas concert. It’ll be good to reflect that.”

Sandy looks at Fred, then turns to me for approval.

“What do you think?” he asks me.

I think we need to be wrapping this up so we can be alone.

But I don't exactly say that.

“That will be all, Mr. Thorne,” Fred says almost immediately.

Sandy turns from me to him and back to me, obviously confused. God bless his soul. He's like every new employee until they realize who's calling the shots in my life. 'Til they all realize I'm a nut job and can't be trusted to make any sane decisions.

“Oh, he can stay,” I tell Fred.

“We're done talking about clothes. We've got other things to go over.” Fred glowers at me.

“But we're still talking about the Christmas Ball, right? Maybe hearing what's on the plan will give him more inspiration for the wardrobe.”

I can tell Fred wants to veto my opinion, but he doesn't. Whether it's because he doesn't want to do it in front of newcomer Sandy or because he cares about my feelings, I don't know.

I know he cares about me—he's shown me by sticking with me all my life—but sometimes, when we're talking business, it's hard to tell that he does.

It's like there are two Freds. One that is my uncle and wants to see me at my best and the other that is my manager who only cares about the profits.

“I'm not needed for that. I can go. It's fine,” Sandy says and makes to leave.

“But I'm not done with you,” I tell him, and it's true.

I still got a fuck session planned. It might be pushed a little forward because of dear Freddy, but it's still very much in the plan.

Fred grimaces while I'm staring at Sandy.

“What I mean is,” I rush to add, “I don’t think you get me yet. You get me? I need you to see who I really am. And maybe if you do, if you learn my brand”—I use the magic keyword that makes Fred’s smile return—“you will be able to dress me appropriately. I mean an interview is not the same as a concert.”

Sandy’s face sags, and it breaks my heart that in order to please one man in the room, I have to disappoint another.

But he takes his seat back, nonetheless, and I turn to Fred, who goes on a tirade while walking around the room about the decorations and how his plan for ice sculptures has been sabotaged by PTE, or People for the Environment, who believe turning an entire concert hall into a frozen wonderland is the kind of thing that’s killing our environment. I can’t say I disagree with them.

“Well, think of the safety regulations,” I tell him to appease him. But I could never tell him we don’t see eye to eye on the subject. “Can you imagine all the groupies slipping and breaking their backs?”

Fred rolls his eyes and stares out the window.

“No one’s gonna slip, Val. It’s all safe. You don’t understand,” he says.

Sandy is staring at me, squinting and pursing his lips. I give him my winner smile before I bite down on my lip and send him a kiss.

“No, I don’t understand,” I agree.

Sandy turns into a beautiful shade of pink and glowers at me. I lick my lips at him, but he doesn’t find it as amusing as I’d hoped.

Fred turns his attention back into the room, and I sit a little straighter while he explains how epic it would look and that it would be talked about for years to come.

“Isn’t it gonna be cold, though, Fred? People don’t want to wear fur coats to a concert ball. They want to wear expensive fancy shit and show it off to the rest of the world.”

“You’re not wrong,” Sandy agrees and looks at Fred.

Fred responds with a frustrated huff, and Sandy lowers his head in embarrassment. I don’t know why. He’s got nothing to be embarrassed about.

“Why don’t we just go with a nice winter wonderland theme that’s safe and approved by PTE,” I say.

“That’s been done to death, Val. You don’t know what you’re talking about. Let me think for a moment. I’ll find the solution as usual,” Fred says, and I don’t miss Sandy’s shock.

Fred looks out the window again in apparent contemplation and Sandy mouths “What the fuck?”

I shake my head and shrug.

It’s not his fault. He doesn’t know me yet. He doesn’t know what my life is like. No one does. He has no clue what kind of crap Fred has had to put up with over the years.

All my blackouts. My destructive nature. My panic attacks. My tantrums. All the things you’d expect from a kid—hell, even a teenager—but not from a full-grown man. Fred may be rough around the edges sometimes and blunt, but it’s only because he’s had to put up with the world’s worst nephew.

He opens his mouth as if he’s about to ask me something, but I gesture for him to stop. Then I tell him—using my hands entirely—to wait until Fred’s done and then I’ll suck his cock.

Fred almost catches me making the sucking motion with my fist near my mouth, but I rush to hide the motion into a cough.

Sandy looks traumatized while Fred stares at me for a moment, then completely ignores me.

“How about a Winter Candyland theme?” Sandy asks a question directed at Fred. “You get all the fake snow, some ice sculptures, and the fairy lights, but you also get human-sized candy canes, chocolate, jelly beans, candy corn. Like winter crashed into Candyland.”

I’ve already stopped coughing and am now staring at Sandy, already picturing the concert hall with all his suggestions and

imagine chasing him around in a Santa suit with my dick out trying to catch him so I can put my dick in his icy ass.

Is something getting hard in my pants or is it time for my meds?

“I love it,” I say and turn to Fred.

Fred’s trying really hard to hide a smile.

“It’s a good idea,” he says.

There’s a lot of things I’ve learned about my uncle over the years. One of them is that if he likes something but I say I like it first, he will pretend he’s not as enthused as he really is.

“Why don’t you think about it for a few days and you can make a decision then?” I suggest.

“We don’t have a few days. This concert is in a month. I’ll go ahead with that.” Fred nods

“Was there anything else?” I ask him.

He’s probably already making a mental list of everything he will need for the Candyland theme, so he barely registers my question.

Instead, he walks out of the office without so much as a word. Again, usual Fred behavior.

“Your uncle is weird,” Sandy says.

“You’re weird,” I tell him.

“Mature,” he snorts.

“I know. I am. You know what else is starting to mature?” I look down at my crotch, and it’s as if I can hear his eyes roll.

“If you want me to suck you off, all you have to do is ask, idiot,” he says.

“Ok, idiot. Will you, pretty please, suck me off?” I tell him.

“I thought you were sucking me first.”

When I look up, Sandy’s grinning from ear to ear. And I can’t resist.

I do what I promised.

## 10. SANDY



“Stay with me. For a while,” Val mumbles as I make to get up from the bed, his hand coming up to hold mine.

I look at him, his hair a hodgepodge of curls, knots, and greasy strands, his face, all soft and mushy, the polar opposite of what he was like in the office only an hour ago. I’m still not entirely sure what happened in there, but until I have a better idea on the dynamic of Fred and Val’s relationship, I’m not going to say anything.

Besides, it’s not my place *to* say anything. I’m just the stylist—and piece of ass on the side.

“I can’t. I’ve got work to do.”

Even as I say the words, they feel heavy on my chest. It’s certainly not what I want to say. Or do. I’d much rather curl up next to him and find out who the real Val truly is underneath all the makeup, and the lies, and the cockiness.

But doing so is dangerous.

I can’t get attached to him. Val’s just using me for sex, and when he’s bored of me, he’ll get rid of and dispose of me like a used condom.

He’s not interested in relationships. He’s got superstars for that. Yeah, I’ve read up on Val King in the last few days. All the affairs and flings with girls so high up the food chain, they’d eat me for breakfast. All about the tumultuous affairs that never lasted because Val was unstable, cuckoo, or plain dangerous.



I'm in no mood to be toyed with. At least not with my heart and feelings. I can do the no strings attached thing all day long. It's the rest I need to be careful with.

"Last time I checked..." he says as I walk away from him, "you worked for me. And I'm not done with you."

Keep going, Val. Make it easier for me to walk out on you. I beg you.

"Nice try, Mr. King, but I really do have to go," I tell him.

"Mr. Thorne, come right back to bed and cuddle your boss. Or I might just have to fire you," he says.

I pause with my glasses on my head and glance at him.

I expected him to order a blow job. To ask me to spread my legs. To get on my knees. And I would have done so quite happily.

But that?

Cuddling up to him? That's like sleeping with the devil. And you know what they say about sleeping with the devil. You can get scorched.

"Val, I can't," I say.

"Sandy, don't you dare—"

I walk away despite the threat he's about to spew.

"Don't go. Please," he whispers in the end.

I turn and see yet another side of Val. Of a vulnerable man who's so lonely, he would do anything to end that loneliness. A desperate man in need of human interaction.

Damn you, Val King, and all those stupid facets of a man you can switch to in an instant.

There's no question what I do next. And when I'm lying next to him, he lays on his side, staring at me, enveloped in a silence that's both petrifying and electrifying at the same time.

Until he reaches up to my face and grabs my glasses.

"Uhm... what are you doing?" I ask.

“What’s it like?” he answers.

“What? Working for you? A pain in the ass. Literally. But I put up with it.”

His lips only slightly draw a smile, and I take a deep breath.

“I don’t know how to describe it,” I tell him. “I’ve lived my whole life with it, learned the colors with it, and then, one day I realized the way I see the world is... completely different.”

I’d like to say that it shaped who I am, but it’s not that big of a deal. Yeah, sure, for the first few weeks, or months even, after I was diagnosed, I questioned everything and everyone. But then again, I was a teenager, so of course I did.

Val lifts the glasses off and puts them on.

“Woah!” he says.

I frown.

“What? What do you see?”

He looks at me through the glasses and shrugs with a grin.

“Nothing. Absolutely fuck-all.”

I laugh.

“Of course you don’t. It’s only meant to work on people with fucked up light receptors,” I tell him and take them off his face.

“So how do you pick outfits when you’re not wearing them? Is it all black and white? Shades of grey?”

I smile. His assumption is something I hear all the time when people find out. So it’s nothing new. But it’s one of the most normal things that’s come out of his mouth.

“That would be complete color-blindness, and it’s actually very rare. When most people say they’re color blind, it just means they can only perceive a certain range of colors, although the level is different for everyone. Like the most common type is red-green where people don’t perceive those shades, so everything is blue and yellow.”

“Is that what you have?” he asks, his lips a little too close for comfort.

Why do they need to be so damn irresistible? How can he be so infuriating and attractive and cute at the same time?

“No. I’ve got tritanopia, which means I cannot distinguish between blue and yellow. So everything is a shade of blue or pink.”

Val puts his fingers to my chin and slides them down to my neck only to rest his palm over my heart.

“Wh-what color are my eyes?” he asks.

I laugh.

“They’re green of course.”

“No. What color are they to you?”

I look into his deep gaze and remind myself not to get lost in them. I can’t afford to.

“They...” I start but stop myself. I can’t say what I’m thinking.

“Tell me. Please,” he begs again but it’s not sarcastic or obnoxious. It’s affectionate.

I sigh. What the hell? What harm can it do?

“They’re the deepest turquoise I have ever seen,” I tell him.

“Really?” He hangs on to my next words like he won’t believe me.

“Really.”

Val dips down and kisses me. But it isn’t dirty like all the times before. His tongue doesn’t invade my mouth and his hands don’t grope me. He simply brushes his lips over mine, a ghost of a kiss but one that sends me down a worse spiral than I could have ever imagined.

“I wish I could see it,” he says. “The world, like you do.”

“You can,” I tell him.

“H-how?”

“There’s an app.”

It’s like I’ve promised a kid to take them to a funfair. He lights up like a Christmas tree. So of course I spend the next few minutes showing him the app, and he glides his phone around the room asking me if it’s all the same color for me as he sees it through his screen.

“It’s different for me. I don’t just see pinks and blues. The pinks are muted unless something really is pink. *That* I can see like a rescue flare in the sky,” I tell him. “That’s why it’s my favorite color.”

Val gives me an earful grin and something inside me beats harder, louder. It’s not my heart. No. It can’t be. Is it?

“That-that was weird, in the office, with your uncle,” I tell him.

I don’t know why. Why do I bring it up? It’s not my place. None of my business. All I know is that Fred talked down to him and Val didn’t even bat an eyelid. Like he really believes he’s stupid.

“Why?”

I don’t tell him exactly how it looked. I sugarcoat it a little. But I *am* honest with him.

“He-it’s not his fault. He’s had to put up with me since I killed my parents,” he says.

The words come out so effortlessly, so bluntly, they upset me. He keeps saying that, and it’s not normal. Or true. It can’t be.

“Why do you think you killed them?” I ask him.

“I don’t think. I did. It’s when my dissociative identity disorder started. I just know we were arguing and fighting and then I went to bed angry at them. The next thing I know, I woke up and the whole house was on fire.”

“That could have been anything, though. A tripwire, or a gas leak—”

“There was alcohol in my room. And a lighter.”

“That doesn’t prove anything, thou—”

Val laughs, but it's only a sound he makes. There's not a trace of amusement on his face.

"I used to be bad, back then. I'd sneak out and go and hang out with my rich, famous friends. I'd drink until I puked my guts out. I'd smoke weed and crack and all the shit you can find at those parties. I was a rebel. Or so I thought. So, yeah, I may not remember breaking into my dad's liquor cabinet or stealing his lighter, but it was me. The investigation proved as much," he says.

But something doesn't sit right with me. I don't know what, and I don't know why, because the whole world knows Val King has some pretty ugly demons.

"And that's when you went into conservatorship?" I asked.

Val shook his head.

"No. No. I spent some time in rehab. I saw a lot of shrinks. I spoke to a lot of lawyers. And Fred took custody of me. He is my only relative. He looked after me. Took care of me. Even when I hated his guts and didn't want anything to do with him. Then almost a year later, I was officially diagnosed with DID. I do crazy shit and then my mind just erases the data to protect me. I only went into conservatorship after my eighteenth birthday. I tried to burn Fred. The poor man. I don't-I don't know how he can even stand to look at me after everything I've done. But he agreed to keep looking after me. It was either conservatorship or a nut house."

His story makes no sense, but I don't tell him that. Who am I to question him, the medical professionals, and the justice system?

"So, yeah. That's why Fred may sound a little rude sometimes. He's had to put up with me forever. I'm a mess. I'm trouble."

Val gazes into the distance, at his bedroom walls instead of at me.

"You've been through a lot. You're not a mess. You're human."

He rolls his eyes.

“Pff. Look at you going all mushy with me. I know I’m human, Sandy.” He laughs.

I’m about to tell him to fuck off and push him off me so I can go.

“I’m just trapped inside my own shit,” he says before I can do so.

Damn.

I know he’s intolerable and so far up his own ass the sun don’t shine in there, but I’m a sucker for a rescue mission.

And retrieving his heart to let it know it’s not crazy sounds right up my alley.

## 11. VAL



“**B**ut so much more to give you.  
*Shatter me with those pink eyes,*” I sing.

And I sing and sing and keep on singing. All day. For the next two days.

Until I can’t take it anymore, I record the song, mix it, and make it into something raw. Something that’s mine and only mine.

And then I recruit Jorge and Magda and make good use of my smartphone camera. What I’d love is to have another guy doing the shoot with Jorge, but since this is supposed to be a passion project and kinda pretty much on the down low, I can’t afford to be picky.

It takes me only a day to edit the video but takes me almost three days to find a filter that simulates Sandy’s vision.

So a week later, I upload the video on SoCo before going to bed. It’s rough around the edges, but it’s okay, and the blues are not as cyan as I’d like, but the pinks are bright and beautiful and that’s all that matters.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I open my eyes to see Fred has stormed into my room, red as a beet.

“Good morning, Fred. What’s the time? My alarm didn’t go off.” I rub my eyes and a big yawn escapes my mouth.

“There’s nothing good about this morning, Val. Nothing,” he shouts.

I look at the clock and glare at him. I'm not happy.

"Fred. It's six fucking a.m. Why the hell are you up and shouting at six a.m.?"

"What did you do? Why would you do that?"

I guess we're not going to discuss how ridiculously early it is. Fine. I can have my beauty sleep after. Hopefully. I don't remember what's on my schedule for today. Am I screeching Christmas songs anywhere today?

"What did I do, Fred?" I get up and walk to the bathroom, closing the door behind me.

Fred slams it open just as I get into the shower, and I turn my back to him.

"Can't you stand outside the door, Fred? It's a little weird having you in the room while I'm naked, showering."

"Oh, please. I've cleaned shit off your ass," Fred spits.

"What? When?" I look at him full of horror. He never told me I had a blackout where I shat myself.

"When you were a baby, you fucking idiot."

Relief washes over me just as warm and cozy as the water running down my body.

"Well, there's been some significant changes since then, so if you don't mind..."

I gesture with my hands for him to get out, but he doesn't get the memo.

"Why did you post that bullshit?" he asks instead.

"What bullshit?"

I've come to the conclusion Fred is going nowhere, so I reach for the shampoo, bundle my hair in my palms, and massage my scalp.

"You know what I'm talking about. Don't play dumb," he shouts.

So when it's convenient, I'm not dumb, but generally I'm the one who doesn't understand. Sometimes it upsets me how



Fred talks to me. There are times when I think I deserve better than that.

And then I remember what I've done and what I've put him through.

"It was just for fun," I reply.

"Just for fun? Just for fun? You know you got fifty million views?"

I pause, turn, and stare at him.

"Fifty million? I only posted it before I went to bed. It must be some kind of record or something, right?"

"It's not. I checked," Fred says plainly.

"Well, it's still quite the feat though," I say.

"It's a screwup, that's what it is."

"How is a song that gets fifty million views in five hours a screwup, Fred?"

Fred slams his hand on the tiled wall next to him and the only thing missing is the smoke coming out of his ears.

"It's a monumental screwup. You've got an album coming out in less than a month, a launch concert, and a string of interviews. And instead of promoting your holiday songs, you make an out-of-brand, dark piece of shit and share it with your fans? How do you think this is a feat exactly?"

The shampoo has all but washed away with the water, and I'm starting to get cold even though the shower is still hot. I don't feel so great anymore, even though I should be, considering my little imperfect song broke the internet while I was asleep.

Fred being in the bathroom with me while I'm naked and he's angry just makes me feel small and insignificant. Like an ant in his shoe. It's those kinds of moments I tend to blackout and do some crazy-ass shit, so I take deep breaths and do my best to stay sane and calm.

Before I do something I can never come back from.

“It was just a video. A little gift for my SoCo followers. You know how ephemeral all that crap is on there. Someone will post a funny cat video tomorrow and everyone will forget about my stupid little song,” I tell him, but I don’t know if he can hear me. I can barely hear myself.

“The internet may forget certain things, but they won’t forget this. What do you think will happen in your next interview? They’ll ask you about that *stupid little song*,” he mocks, and even though I said it myself only a second ago, it makes me feel even more annoyed with myself, “instead of asking you about your holiday album. And what will you say then? That it was a *stupid little project*?”

“But you always preempt the questions. You can just ask them to skip that one,” I mumble.

“I can do it once. Twice. I can do it with all the interviews. But what do you think the people will think when no one asks you the question? That your evil, ruthless uncle told them to ignore the big elephant in the room, of course. And once again, I’ll be the bad guy.”

“I’ll delete the video,” I say.

There’s got to be a way to fix this. To fix Fred and how upset he is.

“That will only make it worse. You’ve screwed up, Val. You’ve screwed up big time. Now finish up. I’ve gotta go and try and fix this fucking mess you’ve created.”

He storms out of the bathroom without another word, a glance. He doesn’t even hear my apology.

When I finish my shower—I don’t even remember going through the motions. I hope it’s not another blackout—I reach for my phone and go on my SoCo account.

My notification alert is showing an eternity sign instead of the usual numbers, and when I open them up, I’m inundated by the likes, comments, and shares.

*Now this is some real ass music.*

*OMG. Love Pink Eyes. Please Val. Give us more of these.*

*And now I'm dead.*

*Val: Here's a little song called Pink Eyes. Me: Take all my money.*

*Where has this Val King been hiding? Me likey.*

*Producer: How much talent do you want in this song? Val King: Yes!*

*Anyone else wish they could have pink eyes just so Val can sing this song right at them?*

*More. More. More.*

*Where the official music video at?*

*Is Val in love? I really hope he is. He deserves a happy ever after.*

*Lucky girl. I wish Val loved me so he would write a song about me too.*

*This video is part middle finger, part psychedelia and I'm so here for it.*

*The grass is always bluer on Val King's side. Love.*

*Why is the grass blue though?*

There's no end to the comments, and I don't get tired of reading each and every one of them, but there are tears in my eyes and my screen gets wet and blurry.

They love it. My fans love my song. That stupid little song that is so out-of-brand it could have killed my career.

Pink Eyes might be a stupid little song, but I think it just saved me from insanity.

## 12. SANDY



“I want the dirt, and I want it now,” Isha says as soon as I swing my door open, and she walks in like all hell has broken loose.

“Ew. Keep your kinks to yourself, will ya girl?” I tell her.

Knight rushes out of the living room as soon as Isha jumps on the couch and leaves us alone as if the fucker knows shit’s about to go down and doesn’t want to bear witness.

“Shut up. You know what I’m talking about. So spill!”

“I’d love to—”

“Don’t you dare walk away from me,” she threatens me.

“I don’t want to.” Although I do. “But I’m gonna burn my apple pie, so unless you want a charred dessert...”

Isha hums with joy at the sound of dessert, and I make my escape to the kitchen.

I know very well what dirt she thinks I’ve got, and, let’s be honest, I got it. Waking up to find Val King’s video plastered all over the internet was one thing. Finding out it was called Pink Eyes was a little strange, but still, not ground-breaking.

But the video? In its pinks and blues—with or without glasses—was certainly a wake-up call.

Val loves me.

Is there any other explanation?

Val likes me?

No, like isn't a strong enough feeling to justify whatever Pink Eyes is.

Val's falling *in* love with me?

Maybe that's the more accurate thought considering we barely know each other. And that when he's not fucking me in every possible position known to pornstars, he's telling me to fuck off.

My poor little brain can't even begin to comprehend what that means for us. For me.

It's not like he can tell the world he's in love with me. He's a straight pop star, for all anyone knows. And he's, you know, a pop star. The Prince of Pop to be exact, and I'm... well, in royal standards, a pauper. People like me don't date people like him, straight or not.

And I don't even want to think about his unique situation. Is he even allowed to date? Gottfrid Graves controls every aspect of Val's life. For his safety. Or so Val says. Is he even allowed to be fucking me or is it a dirty little secret that Fred is happy to put up with if only to keep Val satiated and contained?

"You better not burn my fucking pie," Isha shouts from the living room, and I come to my senses, only to realize I'm burning my pie.

I pull the oven door open and take the dish out with my mits, then shut the oven before the fire alarm goes off and look at my pie. It's a little crisp and black around the edges, but it still smells heavenly and will be fine once we have sufficient dollops of vanilla ice cream to go with it.

"Here you go, Ms. Any Excuse to Get Free Cake," I tell her when it's all plated up.

Isha holds the spoon up in the air and glares.

"Technically, this isn't cake. So..."

"My point still stands and you know it. Now eat!"

She doesn't waste a second.

“Of course I’ll eat. While you tell me everything,” she says just before a big bite of apples and vanilla.

“I’d love to torture you more, but how can I when you look like you’re in heaven,” I tell her as I watch her close her eyes in sheer enjoyment at the explosion of flavors in her mouth.

“Honey, if you fuck like you cook, I have no idea how you’re still single,” she responds. “But you were talking about telling me everything. Continue.”

“There’s nothing much *to* tell. Val and I slept together. Several times. And when I say slept, I don’t mean *slept* slept.”

She squeals so loud, I think I hear Knight fall off whatever furniture he’s climbed in to escape us.

“O-M-fucking-G!”

“Yup. And then some,” I tell her.

She puts the plate down, half-eaten—a sacrilege if you ask me—and grabs my hand.

“So... how gifted is he?” she asks.

“You know Ben Affleck in *Gone Girl*?”

Isha’s eyes widen as a smile creeps up.

“Now triple it.”

She shrieks so high and loud it’s like a dog whistle. No wonder Knight comes running in and watches us with disdain reserved for petty *hoomans*.

I pick him off the floor, and he settles in my lap for a few moments, which I take full advantage of while it lasts.

“You lucky bastard! So the song *is* for you,” she says.

I shrug.

“I guess. The thing is he hates me. And I hate him. So I don’t know why he would write a song about me.”

Okay, yes. I’m a desperate queen who wants to have his ego stroked by his best friend. Can you blame me?

“We both know if he hated you he wouldn’t write a song about you,” she says.

“But... did you hear it? It’s quite dark.”

“Well,” Isha starts and picks up her plate again, “he’s gone through a lot. He’s a bit cuckoo—”

“He’s not crazy,” I stop her. “He’s a lot of things, but he’s not crazy.”

She stares at me, mouth open and spoon halfway in, with terror in her eyes and nods.

“Okay, honey. You know better. I’m just going by what I read,” she says after a while.

“It’s all bullshit,” I tell her. “He’s not mentally unstable. He’s not a nutcase. He’s not sadistic. He’s insecure and vulnerable, but we would be insecure and vulnerable, too, if we had his uncle in our lives.”

“So some rumors *are* true,” she says softly.

I’d been reading up on Val’s life for a few days now. Going through all the articles that have been written about him, watched interviews, live concerts, music videos, everything I could find to try and understand him better.

What I found instead is a lot of gaps in his stories. Things people who’ve never met him wouldn’t see.

“I think so. Although there’s no proof. It’s just... the vibe Fred gives off. You know?”

“Of course I do. My mom is so superstitious with these things. I spent practically all my childhood with a *tikka* in my forehead to ward off the evil eye” she says, and I’m so glad she doesn’t think I’m crazy. “It’s the auras, I tell you. Some people are more sensitive to these things than others. I bet what you’re feeling is his evil aura.”

“Come on, Isha. He may be a bad man, but he’s not a movie villain.”

She’s not wrong, though. The way he talks to Val and the way he treats him is exactly the kind of shit a movie villain would

pull if he wanted something sinister. Say, his nephew's money. But these things only happen in books and movies, right?

No one in real life would take advantage of their relative's mental health to use their money and wealth.

"Have you ever watched *E!* honey?" Isha asks, and I realize I spoke all my thoughts out loud.

"But come on. Surely the court would investigate whether he's pocketing any money. I've looked into conservatorships and there's meticulous reporting and investigations."

"Everything is possible when you have money, sweetheart," she says. "But enough about the evil-maybe-villainous uncle. Tell me about the nephew. Do you like him?"

I try to bury Fred in the back of my mind, but the bad juju he gives off every time he's in the room stays with me as if he's present right now. It creeps me out. I've never felt anything like this before.

"I-well... I told you I hate him," I tell her.

"Yeah, but you also said he's vulnerable and sweet and has a huge D. I mean, it's a pretty fine line between love and hate, especially when your guy is so well endowed."

"Oh shut up."

"I will only if you tell me how you really feel," she says.

I look down at Knight. However I feel, it's irrelevant. Val and I could never be anything more than fuck buddies.

"He's irritating and acts like a spoiled brat, but..."

Saying those words about him makes me feel like I'm betraying his trust. Which is funny because I can't ever remember promising him my full, blind loyalty.

"But?"

"But he's cute, and he's got a beautiful voice, luscious, silky hair, and a heart that wants to be loved, even when it's masquerading as sexual passion and hunger for touch."

"Sounds to me like Val is not the only one in love," she says.



“Yeah. That’s what I’m afraid of,” I say. “That I’ll fall hard and fast and get my heart broken in a million tiny pieces.”

“Oh, honey.” Isha takes my hand again and gives it a good squeeze. “You’ve already fallen hard and fast. And not everyone is an asshole heartbreaker. Even if their name is Val King.”

“You’re right. I *am* in love with him. Fuck! Why did this have to happen to me of all people?”

“Honey, you wanted that job. Don’t complain if you got more *blow* in your job than you bargained for. You made your bed, now lie in it. With him. And his schlong.”

As if Knight’s heard enough, he makes a run for the bedroom and I wish I could follow him, lie in my own bed, and forget I ever took a job for a pop star. Or that I ever slept with him.

## 13. VAL



Sandy walks into the studio and immediately cocks his head when he looks at me.

“What’s with the hat, King? Bad hair day?” he says.

“No, nothing like that.” I smirk.

Sandy stands across from me, hands on hips, and a sexy gaze that makes my crotch throb with want.

“What?” I ask him.

“What are you scheming?” he asks back.

“I-I’m not scheming,” I say. “Did you watch my video?”

Sandy bites down on his lips as if he’s trying not to smile and nods. The little shit is playing games with me, and I suddenly feel the urge to punish him.

“What did you think?” I ask instead of acting on the thought.

Sandy’s more than a fuck now. In fact, I don’t know if he was ever *just* a fuck, to be honest. I never needed to get myself a fuck before. Fred has provided me with an array of guys to make mine for a night over the years while he’s fabricated relationships for me for the media.

If I wanted someone to fuck, I just needed to ask him. Which, granted, sounds a lot weirder than it actually is. Asking your uncle to book you an escort and all. Yeah, I definitely used to think it was weird until it wasn’t anymore.

Sandy’s more than a hookup. He always has been. Since I laid my eyes on him the first time we met, I knew he was special,

even if it's taken me a while to admit it.

"A bit breathy and flat. Maybe you could try enunciating more," he says.

I gasp and put my guitar down. I close the distance between us and grab his face with both hands.

"Take that back," I say.

He shakes his head.

"Do you-do you really think that?"

I present him with my best puppy eyes, and his smugness disappears.

"Of-of course not," he says. "Did... did you write it for me?"

I let go of his face and shake my head.

"Nah. Another color-blind guy I met that works for me. He's my make-up artist," I tell him.

Sandy slaps my chest and leans on me a little more.

"I know you're joking, but who is he? I'm taking that bitch down," he says.

I laugh and plant a kiss on his lips.

"Did you really write it for me?" he asks when he resurfaces.

"Yes," I tell him. I don't want to play any more games. "I did."

"What does it mean?" he asks.

A hundred one-liners seemingly cross my mind, but I turn them away. No games. For now, anyway.

"It means..." God, what does it mean? How do I put it down to words? "I love you, Sandy Thorne."

Sandy's eyes widen, and his hands drop down to my waist.

"You do?"

"Does that scare you?"

"No. I'm just... how?" he asks.

I laugh. "How? How much I love you? With all my being."

He smiles at that, but then he flinches and shakes his head. “That’s not what I mean. I just mean... we drive each other crazy. I always snap back at you. I tell you when you’re wrong. H-how are you in love with me? Why?”

“Why? Because you drive me crazy, you always snap back at me, and you always tell me when I’m wrong. That’s why. You treat me like an adult. You’re not afraid to be who you are. You’re not fawning all over me just because of who I am. And that hole of yours is...” I bring my fingers to my lips and give them a chef’s kiss. “Delicious!”

Sandy slaps my chest, hard.

“Be serious.”

“I am. It *is* a tasty hole.”

How I keep a straight face is beyond me, but the next slap he gives me makes me insta-hard.

“You’re a pig,” he says.

“And you’re my piglet. If you want to be,” I tell him. “I do mean it, you know. I do love you. Is it too soon? Maybe. Maybe not. I’ve never fallen in love before, so I don’t know how long it takes. And besides, love is not cake. It doesn’t take a certain amount of time before it happens. I guess it just does. And I can play the game of ‘I know I’m in love with you, but I’m not gonna tell you until sufficient time has passed and I’m sure you feel the same way and you’re ready to hear it before I say it’ because... well, that sounds kinda childish. It sounds like a game, and as much fun as *playing* with you is, I don’t want to play games with your or my feelings.”

His left hand clasps his heart as he coos for a second before he brings both hands up to my face and holds me there, gazing into my eyes.

“That’s the most fucking romantic thing I’ve ever heard,” he says.

He stands on his toes and leans in for a kiss that I deepen from the get-go. It’s all out there in the open now, and I feel so much lighter for it.

“You still haven’t told me why you’re wearing that hat.”

“And you haven’t told me how you feel,” I tell him.

“Oh,” Sandy says and looks away. “Well, I’ve been thinking a lot about you since I saw that video—and before—and I’ve come to a conclusion.” He turns his gaze back on me. “And I think we’ve got a problem.” My gut clenches and my throat dries out. “I’m hopelessly in love with you.”

I breathe out a sigh of relief and a load comes off my chest.

“You scared me there for a minute,” I tell him and spank his perky butt.

“Now you,” he says. “What’s with that hat? Are you going through an Eminem phase? Should I buy some earplugs? Are you working on your rap, man?”

He’s so cute when he’s sassing it up and being all snarky with me. It doesn’t just make me hard for him. It also makes my heart skip a beat.

“I asked for help from Cecile yesterday, and while it took a lot of convincing, she agreed to do it,” I say, taking his glasses off.

I take my hat off next, and my hair falls down to my shoulders all vibrant and soft. Sandy’s eyes widen and he blinks several times before he reaches for my hair. He twists a pink lock around his finger, then does the same thing with his other hand.

“Is your hair pink or is your hair pink?”

“Do you like it?”

“You... you did that for me?” He gapes.

“Well... yeah.” I stare into his eyes looking for the answer. Checking to make sure his feelings haven’t changed.

“You’re crazy,” he says, but immediately apologizes. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant... you dyed your hair pink? Isn’t your hair insured for like a couple million dollars or something?”

I shrug. It was Fred's stupid idea just to give the media some crap to talk about.

"I... I'm so hot for you right now," he says. I smile. "You did this for me? I can't believe it. I love you, Val King. And I love your pink hair."

Our bodies press together, our erections equally rubbing against one another as we kiss again, tongues, teeth and all.

But then a buzzing sound breaks into the room, and Sandy pulls back. He reaches for his back pocket and takes his phone out. When he looks at the screen, his eyes go wide and his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows.

"It's Fred. We need to get you ready. We're going to be late for the pre-launch party," he says, grabbing me by the hand and walking toward the door.

When we reach it, he turns and stops, his mouth twisting from one side to the other.

"He's going to be angry, isn't he?" he asks, touching my hair again and making curls of them around his finger.

"Probably, yeah," I reply. "But he's been mad at me since I uploaded the video, so..."

"Oh fuck, really? Why? What did he say?"

"It's fine, Sandy. It doesn't matter. You'll hear all about it, I'm sure."

"Did he h-hurt you?" Sandy asks, his eyes narrowing as he looks deep into my eyes.

I chuckle.

"Of course not. What kind of man do you think he is?"

"Are you sure?"

"He's never laid a hand on me. Where is all this coming from?" I ask him.

Does he believe the rumors about Fred being an abuser? Has he not seen who my uncle really is? Yeah, he might get upset about things, he might work day and night to make sure my

career is picture-perfect, and he might not always sound happy, but he's a good uncle who's stood by me all this time.

"Nothing. Just... checking. So he didn't punish you for posting the video without his approval?"

"Well, he did take back control of my SoCo account."

Sandy gasps.

"He did what?"

"Relax, Sandy, baby," I say and caress his cheek. "He's just trying to protect my career and make sure I don't do something stupid again. Posting that video caused a lot of trouble."

"But it broke all records of most-watched video in twenty-four hours. Everyone loved it. Everyone loves this new side to you. What kind of trouble did it cause?"

He's gone all red and flustered, and I want to get the relaxed lovey-dovey Sandy back. I don't like this side of him. Or what it's suggesting.

"There's a reason why he's in charge of my life, Sandy." I remind him. Maybe he's forgotten I *am* actually crazy. Maybe he's blinded by the love he feels for me.

"Yeah, don't get me started on that," he huffs.

"Let's... let's drop it, please. Can we save this for after Fred has a fit about the hair?"

Sandy shakes his head.

"You do realize how that makes him sound, right?"

Fair point.

"I know. Let's... let's go. Maybe he won't be as mad."

Sandy sighs and reaches up for my hand on his cheek and squeezes it.

"Fine. But you remember why you said you love me?" he asks.

"Your sweet *ass* hole?"

He smiles, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"That I always speak my mind," he says.

I nod.

"That goes for everyone, not just you. And if he dares to insult you, I'm not holding back, whatever you say or think about him."

He turns to open the door, and this time I'm the one to stop him. I put my hand on the door and close it back up, standing in front of it so Sandy has to face me.

"Please-please don't. I love you and everything about you. I-I don't want to change you. But Fred doesn't just control my life, but who's in it, too. And I don't want him to fire you."

Sandy's shoulders sag and his face softens. He grabs the collar of my shirt and pulls down on it gently.

"What you're asking me makes me furious. Furious that you have to live like that. Furious that you have to ask for permission for everything. Furious that you have to walk on eggshells around him. But I'll do my best."

"I know you don't understand, but... it's for my own safety. And to protect others. You haven't seen me when I blackout. I'm... I'm not me," I tell him.

Sandy tugs harder on my collar and pulls me down for a soft kiss on the lips before he says, "Let's agree to disagree."

Then he turns the door handle and I move off the door so we can leave the room.

Let's hope Fred doesn't go ballistic.

Oh, who am I kidding? He definitely *will* go ballistic. I just hope Sandy can keep it in because I don't want to lose him now that I found him.

We walk through the corridors and to the back of the house where Cecile, my hairstylist, Olive, my make-up artist, and Fred are waiting to get to work on me.

Sandy knocks and opens the door to the large space that used to be a dining room, but since house guests are not a thing in



my life, it has been turned into a dressing room.

*Here goes nothing*, I tell myself and walk into the room after him.

## 14. SANDY



I t takes deep breaths. A lot of them.

And a lot of cheek biting. Tongue biting. Lip biting.

It basically takes completely breaking down inside to keep composed on the outside. And to be honest, it's not all Fred's fault, either.

Val just told me he loved me. He just opened up his heart to me, poured his feelings out, and told me how he felt.

How have we gone from boss and employee fucking to professing undying love to each other?

Okay, maybe not undying, but love, nonetheless.

And like fuck am I going to let the guy I love get shit for doing what he wants. For expressing himself. For being his own man.

“What the hell have you done to your hair?” Fred shouts as soon as Val steps into the room, and as much as I want to stand by his side and squeeze his hand, I watch Fred.

“Why. Is your hair. *Pink?*” Fred races across the room like a bull in a china shop and stands in front of Val, demonstrating the full spectrum of pink in my naked eyes.

“Because I-I dyed it,” Val replies.

Gone is the man that stood in front of me and told me he loved me with that cheeky humor that makes me weak at the knees and who gives my eyes reason to roll. He even seems to have

shrunk. Despite being taller than me and a smidge taller than his uncle, he looks smaller than all of us.

Fred glances at Cecile, and so do I. She's sitting on a chair in front of a mirror tidying up her station and tools, but her eyes flutter from the effort it takes to not look at any of us through the mirror.

"Did you help him with this?" he spits.

Cecile jumps, feigning ignorance at the fact he's addressing her, and looks from Val to Fred as if she's just realized they've entered the room.

"I-uhm-no," she stutters.

"Cecile had nothing to do with it," Val says, and Fred glares at him as if daring him to say another word.

"Weren't you here last night? Is that what you were doing? Without asking me?" Cecile freezes, staring at Fred but having little power to say or do anything. "Are you stupid? Don't you know his hair is insured? What the hell would you do that for?"

"Cecile didn't do anything, Fred. I stole a couple of bottles of bleach and did it myself," Val says.

"You expect me to believe you know how to do that shit to your hair?" Fred laughs out loud, and he's never looked more deranged to me.

How does Val not see it? How doesn't anyone else see it?

I mean, sure, the fans and press will write articles about him, but what about the judges and the investigators? How do they not see that Val is fine and Fred... isn't?

Maybe Val is right. Maybe he's not as normal as I think. Maybe I haven't seen the full spectrum of who he is, and that's to be expected. We've only known each other for two weeks, but he hasn't shown any signs of instability. None that would justify a conservatorship, anyway.

Isn't that supposed to be for people who can't make decisions for themselves? If you ask me, Val is perfectly capable of making decisions.

“Do I need to introduce you to a little invention called the internet, Fred? How hard do you think that shit is when you have thousands of tutorials at the touch of your fingertips?”

Fred puts his hands on his hips and huffs.

“And why the hell would you do this to your hair?” he asks.

Val’s fleeting glance at me barely registers with Fred, but it registers with me.

“Because I wanted to,” he says.

Fred goes all whizzy, looking more and more the villain part I was trying to convince Isha doesn’t exist in real life.

“Because you wanted to.” He smiles. But it’s a creepy smile. Like Heath Ledger-Joker kind of creepy smile. “Because you wanted to. How fun.” He claps his hands together. “What else do you *want* to do, Val, sweetie? Do you want to wear a bikini on stage tonight? How about putting on some high heels and dragging it up? Do you want to... I don’t know, get some piercings in weird places? How about we get a sex tape out there with you fucking a bear?”

“Fucking a bear is hardly on the same ground as dying your hair though, is it?” I say. Val glares at me as if he’s shocked I’ve spoken.

I did promise him I wouldn’t say anything. But Val is only concerned with saying anything that can get me fired and out of his life. It doesn’t mean I can’t try a gentler approach.

“You stay out of this, princess,” Fred dismisses me as quickly as he acknowledges me. “You’re not paid to talk.”

I want to say I shut up because I exercise full control over my impulses or something equally fancy, but the truth is, I’m too shocked to speak.

“The point is, Val, you can’t do whatever the fuck you want. Got it? You know this. We’ve been over this,” Fred says.

“But I’m perfectly capable, Fred. Up until a couple weeks ago, I was this close to having my conservatorship terminated,” Val says.

“Exactly. This close.” Fred pinches his fingers in front of Val. In fact, his fingers are so close to Val’s eyes, for a second I think he’s going to try and pull them right out. “Before you fucked it all up and got us back to square one. So I’m sorry, dear nephew, but all decisions have to go through me. I know what’s best for you, your health, and your career.”

“Well, I’m sorry, Fred, but I think it’s a little unfair to hold something I have no control over against me,” Val says, glancing at me again.

I want to think he’s taking strength from my presence. But maybe this is how he’s always been, and Fred has convinced him his opinion doesn’t matter.

“I’m sorry, Val. I don’t know what to say to you. I try not to. I try and treat you like a normal adult,” Fred says. What a big fat lie. “But then you go and do something stupid like setting your clothes on fire or publishing a stupid video without my permission on Social Community. Or... this! And it becomes hard to treat you like an equal.”

“Didn’t the video break the internet?” I ask.

It seems like I’ve found my voice again. Only to get another frustrated glare from Fred.

“Am I paying you to just stand there and offer commentary to my life, or to dress my nephew?” he says.

“Fred!” Val raises his voice.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Graves. I may be out of line, but I just can’t understand how a video that everyone loves and with over a billion views in the past week since it’s been posted is... well, ‘stupid,’ as you put it.”

“Which is why you’re not paid to understand but to pick a bunch of clothes,” he replies. “Cecile, have you got time to dye this mess before the party?”

Cecile nods and springs out of the chair to go digging in her equipment bags, probably looking for dyes.

“I-I don’t want her to do that,” Val says.

I want to smile at his perseverance and strength in the face of the asshole, but at the same time, Fred is a deranged douchebag, and I'd rather he didn't face up to him for such a small matter.

He's shown me he loves me by dying his hair and filming that video. He doesn't need to keep the hair pink anymore, even if he looks completely *adorbs* with it and I can't stop picturing him in bed with it. And me.

"I've got some bad news for you then, Val. It's not up to you," Fred says.

Val's face hardens and his cheeks get hollow as he bites the insides of both sides.

"No," he says.

Fred laughs and turns around taking his phone out.

"Come on people. We're on a tight schedule. Made even tighter now. Let's get to work," he announces to the room.

"I'm not dying my hair back," Val says, but Fred doesn't even register him.

"Come on, Val. Sit down," Cecile tells him gently, holding out a cape to wrap around him.

"No, Cecile. I'm not doing it."

"Come on, Val. Grow up and get a move on," Fred says staring at his phone.

"No means no, Fred. You pretend you care about me and getting me to stand on my own two feet and being independent, yet every single time I make a decision for myself, you stomp it down. Up until the review meeting, you were all sweet and encouraging and asking for my input. You gave me a lot more decisions to make this year than you ever have in the past. And now, after the fire, you've started treating me like a lunatic again."

Fred turns around, frowning, and watching Val with calculating eyes.

"Your point is?"

“Why the change, Fred? Why won’t you let me decide who I am and who I want to be now? Is the media telling the truth? Are you keeping me in conservatorship because you want my money?”

Fred takes a few deep breaths before he speaks. And when he does, he’s more composed than he was before. As if he’s determined to come out the bigger man and let Val sound like a crazy child.

I see you, Fred Graves. I see your mind games, and I don’t like them one single bit.

“I’ve looked after you since you burned my poor brother and his wife into ashes while they were asleep. Stood by you during rehab, during the investigation, the hearings, all of it. I’ve wasted my entire life to look after you. I’ve never been married, I’ve not had a relationship. Hell, I know it’s TMI, but I haven’t even had sex in years because all I care about is you. Making sure you’re the best ‘you’ you can be and that you can stand on your own two feet one day. I’ve put my life on the backburner for what?

“For you to be an ungrateful little bastard who’s now accusing me of manipulation? You think you’re worth that much, Val? You think anyone would put up with your shit all these years just to scam you out of your money? I think you’re underestimating how much hard work you are.

“I... I can’t believe after all this, after all we’ve been through, you throw the crap I have to put up with outside this house, right at me, in this house. You say you feel trapped in here? Well, guess what, sugar. So. Do. I.”

The room is buzzing with tension when Fred stops pacing, puts his hands in his pockets, and stares at Val.

“Then let me be in charge of myself. You say you sacrificed your life for mine. I didn’t ask you to. I never asked you to. No one did. You say you’re tired of me? Then let me take the load off you. What do you think will happen if I decide what I do with my life and my career for a while? You saw my song. Everyone loved it. They’re all saying they’d pay good money to hear more of it. You know why?

“Because it’s *my* song. I made it. I created it. It comes from the heart. If you’re so sick of being my babysitter, don’t be. I get blackouts. I do dangerous things. Unfortunately, that I can’t control. But neither can you. Just because you’re my guardian doesn’t mean the blackouts don’t happen. Does it? So what harm will it do if I make my own adult decisions?” Val says.

He’s also composed himself. He’s not crying, or shouting, or being unreasonable.

“How many times do we have to go through this, Val? Dr. Rahid and all the doctors before him have told you. They’ve told me. Your mind is a fragile thing. The stress can cause even more blackouts. Even more accidents. Even more trouble.”

“But making these decisions doesn’t stress me,” he says.

“You may think it doesn’t because you only have to deal with what I let you deal with. You think it’s going to be the same when you have to respond to the media, producers, arrange recordings, meetings with the label, interviews, promotions, sponsors. It’s a whole other world, Val.”

“But isn’t that what agents are for?” I ask.

“What part of get to work do you people not understand?” Fred snaps at the rest of us. Cecile and Olive jump into action. I can’t even imagine how many times he’s spoken to them like that to make them so scared of him.

“It’s kinda hard to dress someone when they’re having a conversation,” I bite back at Fred. “I think what Val-Mr. King is asking for is to be in charge. Not to take over your job as his agent.”

I know I should shut up and not say a word. I know that by speaking up I’m making Fred dislike me. But I don’t care. Val needs help. And definitely not the same help Fred thinks he needs.

Fred turns to Val and crosses his arms, raising an eyebrow.

“Okay then, Mr. King. Tell me. How does the pink hair relate to your brand? What are you going to tell the press?”



Val hums and looks from Fred to me, to Cecile, to Olive—who's pretty much hiding behind the mirror this whole time.

Fred chuckles. Which makes Val even more nervous, if him biting his lips is anything to go by.

"I'll just tell them..."

Fred sighs.

"Change," I give him a hint. Fred glares at me.

"I thought he wanted to make his own decisions. Not you."

I bite down the urge to roll my eyes and slap some sense into Fred Graves and look at him.

"Give him a break. You've just had an honest... heart to heart." More like a full-blown condescending argument, but I don't think saying that will go down well.

"I wanted a change. To... to try something new."

"Is that it?" Fred asks.

"Oh come on. It's just hair," Val says.

"But it isn't *just hair*, though, is it? It's what you stand for. It's the kind of example you're setting for your teenage fans. You're a pop idol. Not a celebrity."

Val licks his lips and nods.

"I was so overwhelmed by the love my fans showed for Pink Eyes, I wanted to do something to honor and thank them for their support. And who knows, maybe it's related to my next album. Maybe not. They'll just have to wait and see."

He's so clear and concise, it even takes me by surprise. Despite the fact I know he can be like that.

"Okay. Okay," Fred nods with a calculating business look on his face. "I mean, we already said Pink Eyes will be in next year's album, why not leave them hanging? Anticipating our next move? Fine. You can keep the hair. But no more changes. Or I'll have to answer to a lot of people about you having a break-down, and I might just have to agree with them."

Val smiles so wide that I can't not be affected by it.

It's hardly a win. It's barely a success. It's not even basic freedom.

But it's a win for today, nonetheless.

Val sits down with Cecile, and she and Olive get to work while Fred goes back to his phone business. I stand there for a few moments and watch Val through the mirror.

He offers me a wink and mouths an 'I love you,' and I make a promise to myself.

I will always stand by his side. And I will always let him fight his battles until he can't. Because he's a full-grown man, and he knows what he's doing.

"And need I remind you all you've signed NDAs, so if I see what happened here today anywhere on the internet, you'll all be fired and sued for all your worth?" Fred says, turning around while he's on the phone to someone.

Cecile and Olive nod submissively and then turn their attention to Val. I on the other hand watch Fred mumbling into his phone.

Here's another promise to myself.

I'll find out what the hell is going on with him and whatever it is he's hiding.

Because he's hiding something all right.

## 15. VAL



“Are you still feeling a bit loopy?” Sandy asks me as he’s straightening the lapel of my jacket in front of the mirror.

It’s been a few days since the whole blow-out with Fred, and I can barely keep my eyes open for more than a couple of hours. Dr. Rahid says it’s a common side-effect of my prescription and times of high stress can lead to increased fatigue.

But I don’t know. I’m worried that I’ll have another episode and hurt someone else again. Hurt Sandy. And that I couldn’t live with.

“I’m okay,” I tell him.

“Don’t lie to me, Valerio Elijah King,” he replies.

I look at him and smile. I like the sound of my full name on his lips. Makes me feel... I don’t know, married to him. Like he’s my husband and we live together, and he’s telling me off for not doing the dishes again.

“No one has called me Valerio in a very long time,” I tell him and caress his cheek.

Sandy raises an eyebrow.

“Well, get used to it if you keep lying to me.” He stands on his feet and brushes a kiss on my lips before turning to look at me through the mirror.

The Nick Grant royal blue suit is tight in all the right places, and the white Swarovski lining up the seams, the lapel, and the

sleeves make me look regal. The outfit goes perfectly with the pink hair.

Now that the color's faded a little bit, Sandy sees it even better with his naked eyes, and I like that. I love the whole look. He has a way of making me feel like a million bucks, even though I've never felt it, despite what my bank account says.

The only thing that disappoints me is the fact that he can't come with me to the awards show tonight. That I can't show him off to the world. That we can't play dress-up together.

"Fine. Yes, I'm still feeling a bit loopy, but it can't be helped. It is what it is. You'll just have to learn to live with my crazy, sweetheart." I pat his cheek with a smirk, but he doesn't return the sentiment.

Instead, he grimaces and shakes his head.

"Don't say that. You're not crazy," he says.

"My doctor would disagree."

"I'm sure your doctor wouldn't call you crazy, either," he says.

"A-nyway..." I turn him around so his back is leaning on my chest and look at his beautiful eyes through the mirror, draping my arms around him, straightening all the creases the same way he does with me. "I've got a little plan for tonight."

He raises an eyebrow and hangs on to my next words.

"Make sure you slip your address to Jorge when you leave and get your beautiful little butt ready for me tonight," I whisper in his ear.

He licks his lips as I press my semi-hard cock on his ass, and he lets out a breathy gasp.

"What are you gonna do?" he asks.

I lean into the other ear and bite his lobe before I tell him.

"I'll put my dick in your mouth until you choke, and then I'll put it in your hole again. And again. And again until we're *both* screaming my name."

“Fuck you, you cruel, cruel man,” he moans. “I wish we could do that now.”

“Well...” I say.

“No. Your schedule is packed today. In fact,” he pulls away from me and turns to face me, “your uncle could bust in any minute now.”

“Party-pooper,” I tell him.

“I know. He is,” Sandy says, and I laugh.

“I meant you. What’s sex without a little danger, huh?”

Sandy stretches his hand between us and pushes me back as I try to envelop him in my arms.

“Unless you want me fired and out of your life, I’d suggest you keep it in your pants, Mr. King.”

I sigh and surrender.

“See? Party-pooper.”

Sandy sticks his tongue out and walks to the closet, folding and unfolding things. Half the time I think he just does stuff to keep his hands busy. I don’t know why he won’t use my dick for stress relief? My cock can be a great fidget spinner.

“How are you planning on sneaking me in tonight?” he asks, hanging something up.

“What are you talking about? I’m not sneaking you in,” I say, and he comes out of the closet with a confused look.

“But you said to give my address to Jorge and get ready for you,” he says.

“I’m coming to you.”

When he doesn’t return my smirk and instead his eyes pop out, I freeze and bite my lip.

“You don’t want me to come?”

“Of course I do. Many, many times. Inside, outside, on my face, on my chest, until you can’t get it up anymore. But how are you planning on sneaking out without Fred finding out?” he asks.

“Cheeky. Stop teasing me with bareback if you won’t give it to me,” I tell him.

“That’s what you focus on? Jeez, you’re a child,” he says.

I advance toward him slowly, playfully, shamelessly.

“That would make you a pedo,” I tell him.

“No. That would make you dead,” he purses his lips, frowning. “And stop avoiding the subject. How can you do that without Fred—”

“I told you.” I drape my arms around his waist and plant a wet, droopy kiss on his mouth before I pull back. “I’ve got a plan.”

“Does that plan involve you murdering your uncle and burying him in the backyard because I’m all up for that,” he says.

“You really don’t like Fred, do you?”

Sandy just coughs and stares.

“Fine. Magda is going to put some sleeping pills in his food so he falls asleep before I’m back and then I’ll come first thing in the morning wearing my running clothes so he thinks I’ve been up and out before him.”

Sandy’s jaw drops, and I kindly lift it back for him.

“Devious,” he says. “I like it.”

“Can you tell I’ve watched way too many telenovelas with Magda and Jorge?”

“Just a smidge.” Sandy pinches his fingers and smiles.

I kiss him again until a knock on the door interrupts us and we have to be separated for the rest of the day until after the awards.

I wish I could skip the awards altogether. I mean, they didn’t even ask me to sing— How rude! But I can’t. Not only are they the most prestigious awards—which explains why I didn’t get an invite to sing—but also Fred will know if I don’t go. The media will blast it everywhere.

So I’ll just have to wait patiently for the after-party.

And if anyone thinks couch sex isn't an after-party, well, they haven't met my 'sex.'

Jorge drops me off at the back of the building. I've already changed into my running clothes for tomorrow and a cap's hiding my pink locks. Jorge is spending the night in the parking lot so he can take me back at a moment's notice if anything happens and while I've tried to convince him otherwise, he doesn't want to go home or leave me behind.

When I get to his front door, Sandy buzzes me in and then I take the stairs to the fifth floor. There's an elevator in the building, but the last thing I need right now is to get in a box with someone who recognizes me.

When I knock on his door, it slides open, and I let myself in. The lights are dimmed and there are candles lining up a path with rose petals. He's got a small kitchen, a small living room, and a hell a lot of stuff in it. The majority are boxes marked with my name, and while I'm tempted to open them and see what clothes Sandy has got his hands on for me, I'm more interested in following the path and seeing where it takes me.

My dick gets harder with every step, already imagining him waiting for me, and by the time I look through the crack on the door into the bedroom, I've stripped off all my clothes.

Sandy is on all fours on a made-up bed, wearing a red jockstrap, and giving me a full view of his pink, wet hole.

"Well, hello there," I grumble.

Sandy lowers his head and looks at me upside down.

"Hi, Mr. Pink," he says.

I lift my hand to stop him.

"Uhm, excuse me, sir. I was talking to the anus at the end of your body. Can you please give us some privacy?" I say, all serious.

"Fuck you, Mr. Pink. You promised my mouth a good time first," he says.

I step closer to him, and with each step, it's harder to focus on talking and not admiring his naked body.

“How can I keep that promise when the hole is looking at me all sad and needy?”

He snorts. I don't blame him. But whatever. I've never had a man put effort into sleeping with me. The escorts were in and out without much conversation. And it's not exactly like I've been in a relationship before.

Sandy hasn't just cleaned and prepped. He's lit candles, made a path of roses, and put a jockstrap on the best pair of ass cheeks I have ever seen just to have sex with me.

As I take another step to get closer to him, something hisses at my feet and I look down to find a beast staring at me with glimmering eyes and huge teeth.

“Oh my God, what is *that* doing here?” I ask, jumping back.

Sandy sits on the bed and looks down at the beast.

“By *that*, do you mean my cat?”

I nod. He laughs.

“Why-why is it staring at me?” I ask.

“Because you've just intruded his house? Duh,” Sandy says. I can hear the sarcasm in his tone, but I can't tell if it's reflected on his face because all I can look at is the terrifying white beast threatening me with its claws.

“Ma-make it go away,” I say, the tremble in my voice apparent even to me.

“Jesus Christ Superstar, Val. He's a cat. Not a tiger,” Sandy says and uses his hand to shoo the monster away. “Come on, Knight. Go and terrify some school children or some grannies or something.”

The monster finally budes and climbs to the top of the wardrobe where he sits down and watches us from above.

“See? Harmless,” Sandy laughs, reaching for me, but I can't take my eyes off “Knight.” There's nothing knightly about it. “Don't be ridiculous, Val. Come to bed.”

“But... but is he gonna stare at us the whole time?” I ask as he forces my head to turn to him.



“He’s a creep, just like his human, so if he wants to be scarred for life, who are we to judge? Now come and fuck my mouth before I change my mind and fuck yours.”

He wraps his hand around my cock and balls and pulls me to bed with him. I kneel down on it and watch Sandy as he kisses my chest, nipple to nipple, going down to my abs, licking each peck thoroughly before he reaches his final destination.

He takes me in his mouth and looks up as he attempts to take more of my meat in and fails. Which only makes him more tearful.

“Don’t cry, sweet Sandy. It’s okay,” I tell him, stroking his hair.

Sandy takes my cock out of his mouth and pouts, displeased with my joke.

“Can we just fuck without pissing me off for once?” he asks.

“But that’s half the fun,” I tell him.

He sits up, puts his hand behind my neck, and pulls me down on the bed. Then he sits on my mouth with his dick.

“What are you looking at me like that for? You won’t shut up, now you pay the price,” he says and fucks my mouth hard and fast until I’m crying for mercy. “You’re intolerable. How the fuck you made me fall in love with you is beyond me,” he says.

“With my irresistible charm and—”

I don’t get to finish what I was saying. His cock goes back in my mouth. What sweet cruelty I’m being treated with!

“See? That’s so much better. You look so much hotter when you’re submissive. And quiet. I might have to buy you a ball gag to wear at all times.

I try to object, but my current ball gag doesn’t leave much room for speaking. Not that I’m complaining.

“Let’s get this show on the road, shall we,” Sandy says after a few more minutes and dismounts me. “I had different plans for

us tonight, but you've been a very bad boy, so I'm not done punishing you."

He crawls on the bed and reaches the bedside table, opening a drawer and taking a condom out.

But instead of slipping it on me, he wears it himself and then has the audacity to squirt both his dick and my hole with tons of lube.

"What do you say, Mr. Pink? Want to be punished?" He smirks, and while I'd have loved to object and keep up the charade or tell him I'm not that kind of lady, I just nod and watch him insert himself into me to the surprise of my dick and my prostate.

"Ngh... hello there," I moan, and Sandy falls over me for a kiss.

"Baby? Do you want me to bring the cat down again?" he asks me.

My eyes find the beast sitting on top of the wardrobe for a moment—still staring at us, the creepo—and I give my resounding objection to the love of my life.

"Then shut it and take it like a man." He covers my mouth with his hand and drills me, over. And over. And over again. Until I forget my name, my birthday, and where I'm from.

"You like it, baby?" he pants.

"I do. But I'm still fucki—" I start saying when he uncovers my mouth.

But then, the fucker shushes me and keeps his hand over my mouth.

"The night's still young, Mr. Pink. Very, very young."

"Pedo," I blurt, only to be met with the same response. Hand over mouth. Which he keeps there until he comes inside me. And when we're ready for round two, he dresses himself with a fresh condom and lubes my hole again like it's no one's business.

“What? You’ve had your hundred ways with me, I’m gonna have my hundred ways with you too.”

I pout. Although not really because being fucked by Sandy is the best game of peekaboo ever. But I’m not going to give him the satisfaction of knowing that.

## 16. SANDY



My alarm goes off at seven, and I turn it off before it wakes him up. I get out of bed and walk into my kitchen, closing the bedroom door behind me, and get to work making Val a Sandy kind of breakfast wearing my pajama top and just my jockstrap.

Just because he has to get up soon and sneak back into his house doesn't mean I can't spoil him a little. Although he's already spoiled enough and my ass is still sore from last night.

I put the pan on the stove, turn up the heat, and while I'm waiting for the clump of butter to melt, I relive the night we've just had.

It felt so good to be free to make as much noise as we wanted—to the dismay of my neighbors who wouldn't stop banging on the walls—and not having to get dressed in a rush in case someone walked in.

I wish we could have this every night. Would we ever have this every night? Am I just fooling myself? Are we fooling each other?

I don't care that he's famous. I'm used to being around famous people. I'm not used to sleeping with them, but that's another story. The problem is his conservatorship. Or more accurately, Fred. So far, Val has wanted to keep our relationship secret from him so he wouldn't fire me.

But is that how we're gonna be? How long can it realistically last? How long can we keep it a secret? One way or the other, Fred is gonna find out. And then what?

I squeeze some pancake mix in the pan when a yell and a cry comes from the bedroom. I drop everything and run to Val.

Maybe he's woken up from a nightmare. Or maybe he's having one of those episodes he's been talking about that I've never seen.

It's neither of those things.

I open the door to find Knight sitting on Val's chest, bum and tail on his face, head between his paws, and purring. Val is staring at Knight wide-eyed and in shock, rubbing a spot on his shoulder.

"Wh-what happened?"

Val turns to me and grimaces.

"I told you cats are fucking psychopaths. He just came up to me, woke me up, scratched me, and then sat down on me as if nothing ever happened."

I laugh.

"Take it off me," he says. "He's weirding me out."

"Babe, I think he just gave you his seal of approval," I tell him and sit on the bed next to him.

"A scratch is hardly a seal of approval, is it?" he yaps.

"I meant his ass. He won't show his ass to just about anyone, you know," I laugh.

"Unlike his human." Val glares at me, and I glare at him. He's rewarded with a slap on the thigh.

"He's just showing you who's boss. If you respect that, you two will be just fine," I say.

"Well, why don't we start this 'respect' shit by getting him off me—do you smell burning?"

The second he mentions it, I jump out of the bed and dash to the stove where my pancake has turned into charred pieces. I dump it in the sink, wipe the pan with a paper towel, and start again.

“Mmm, that smells better,” Val says when I walk back to him with a plate of fluffy pancakes drizzled with miles and miles of maple syrup and topped with a load of forest fruits.

I give Val the tray and he sits up in bed.

“What is all this?”

“Does it look like rat poison? Because it definitely isn’t,” I smirk.

“No. I just mean... you made these for me?”

“Mainly for Knight, but yeah. Who else?”

“No one’s ever made me pancakes for breakfast before,” he says.

I cock my head to the side and frown.

“Are you yanking my chain?”

“Absolutely not.”

“You’re trying to tell me Magda never made you pancakes the whole time she’s been working for you?”

Val shakes his head. “No. Magda doesn’t believe in pancakes.”

“What do you mean she doesn’t believe in pancakes? They’re not a deity. They’re finger-licking good food. Wait a minute. They *should* be a deity.”

He laughs. “I know. She prefers a full meaty breakfast over pastry or sweets. So... yeah. I’ve never had this for breakfast. In bed.”

He cuts a small piece and puts it in his mouth.

When his lips close around the fork, he moans and rumbles, which makes a little head appear next to him from under the covers. Knight unearths himself and watches Val eat.

“What is he doing there?” I ask.

Val rubs under his chin with a finger, and Knight nuzzles up to him.

“We had a good chat,” Val says.

“I can see that.”

I watch him fawn over Knight, and Knight takes pleasure in all the attention, and my heart does funny things to me. I wish this moment, this feeling, could last forever.

“Eat your pancakes before they go cold,” I tell him. “You’ve got to go soon before Fred realizes you didn’t spend the night there.”

He pouts.

“Do I have to?”

I don’t answer. Instead, I get up and walk away. I’m not gonna tell him how I feel about Fred again. We’ve been through this, and I don’t know, for whatever reason, he can’t see what I see. What pretty much everyone else in the world can see.

“Oh, baby, would you mind getting my meds for me? Might as well take it with the food and get it out of the way,” Val calls out to me, and I turn to ask him where they are. “In my jacket pocket.”

I nod and walk out. His jacket is a pile on the floor next to my dishwasher. I pick it up and fish the med bottles out of the pockets, and I’m about to walk back to him but stop in my tracks.

Shaking the bottles in my hands, I get an idea. He’s been on medication all his life. He’s been under Fred’s thumb just as long. He’s convinced he’s crazy and dangerous, but I haven’t seen proof of that.

What if Fred is more than just lying?

It might not be much, it might be a stretch, but it’s a start. I open the bottles and take a pill out of each one. Then I grab my phone and take a picture of the label. I stuff the two pills in my kitchen drawer and take the bottles to him so he can take his dose.

“That was awesome,” he says when he finishes his meal. “I want pancakes for breakfast for the rest of my life. Pretty please?”

It makes me so warm and fuzzy seeing that almost-childlike smile on his face. That and what his words imply give me

more determination to get to the bottom of things and find out what the fuck is going on with this conservatorship.

“So what? Am I your maid now?” I tell him with fake upset.

He claps his hands excitedly, and Knight jumps away from him.

“Oh my God! Can we get you a maid’s uniform and have you do stuff for me while you’re wearing it?”

I *would* tell him to fuck off. I *would* give him the middle finger. But...

“As it happens...” I say and walk to my closet, unhook the maid’s uniform that’s been gathering dust, and show it to Val.

“Put it on *now!*” he says and practically throws the tray—silverware, plate, and all—on the floor and readjusts his position on the bed, pulling the comforter up to his abdomen and resting his hands on it, watching me.

“I guess I’m cleaning that then,” I say and drop the uniform by his feet, ready to pick up the mess.

“Uhm, nuh-uh. You can’t get to work without your uniform, Sandy Boo. Put it on before I fire your ass,” Val says and makes me raise an eyebrow. “Don’t you look at me like that. You do as I say or there’ll be hell to pay.”

I stand up straight and roll my eyes. “Poetic.”

Taking the pajama top off, I pick up the uniform and slowly put it on, allowing Val to enjoy the full view of my almost naked body.

I pull up the dress over my torso and tie the corset loosely in the front. The leather sticks to my skin tight, and my cock hardens in my jockstrap. I look at myself in the mirror and admire the hourglass figure the uniform gives me. The silky skirt that starts a little under my waist along with the white apron widens around my hips in a frilly seam and gives just enough view of my ass cheeks to tempt Val.

“Good girl,” he says. “Now get on your knees and clean up this mess.”



I smile at him, turn my back on him, and get down on all fours. Val slaps my naked ass.

“Mr. King! Did you just slap me?” I ask.

He puts his hands up and feigns ignorance. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I would never lay a hand on someone under my employ.”

I scoff at the remark, but smile again and turn back to pretending I’m picking up the tray.

“Come on, Sandy Boo. Clean up. I’m not paying you to laze about.”

“Are you serious?” I glare at him.

“You’re my maid, aren’t you, sweetcheeks? How long does it take to pick up a tray and take it to the kitchen?”

Fine. He wants to take this roleplay more seriously than intended. Not a problem with me.

“Yes, Mr. King. I apologize, Mr. King,” I say and collect all the scattered pieces and take them to the sink.

When I return to the room, I stand by the door, cross my hands, and look at Val.

“Would Mr. King like anything else cleaned?”

Val smiles and opens the comforter to reveal his raging boner.

“Yes, Sandy Boo. My dick got really dirty somehow. Would you help me clean it up?”

I barely register the words. I just see cock, I want cock, so I don’t even need an invitation before I’m kneeling on the floor and grabbing his huge asset.

“Is that okay, Mr. King?” I ask, rubbing it.

“Very,” he says, putting his hands behind his head and closing his eyes.

I continue jerking him off, and he continues to keep the pretense. I don’t know how he does it. How does he keep his cool and pretend as if I’m not even touching him?

“Erm, Mr. King?” I say in my most high pitched voice that makes Val open his eyes and look at me. “I keep cleaning, but it’s still quite dirty. Maybe some spit will help clean it up?”

Val shrugs. “Well, let’s try, I guess.”

I spit on his cock and smear it over his length. Then I spit again and again until he’s all sticky.

“Uh-oh. I think I made it worse, Mr. King.”

“I think so, too, Sandy Boo. How about you use that mouth to clean me up?”

I offer him a little curtsy and bend down to take his mammoth in my mouth. I’m so horny I could come without touching myself. There’s just something about a man’s cock filling you up so good and tight that drives me nuts.

“Oh, yeah, Sandy Boo, good job. Keep going. I think it’s working,” he says and rests his hand on my head, guiding me further down his length.

“I think we need something drastic, Mr. King. I don’t think it’s working as well as expected,” I tell him after a while.

“Oh. What did you have in mind?” he asks.

Instead of answering, I climb on him, squirt some lube over my fingers and sit on him until he’s squeaky clean. And so am I. Just watching him palm my dick under all the frills of the dress with his dick inside me, bare and throbbing, I come to my undoing all over his chest.

“My apologies, Mr. King,” I say and trail my tongue along the traces of cum to slurp them up.

Val pulls me up by the chin and guides my mouth to his, kissing me deeply, passionately.

“Gosh, you’re so much fun,” he says when I lie next to him.

“Thank you, Mr. King,” I tell him, still with my higher, more feminine voice.

“I can’t stop thinking about you. I have a constant boner because of you. Do you know how bad that is?”

I laugh. "I have experience with those, yes."

"Trust me. You have no idea."

He hugs me tighter, and I rest my head against his chest, listening to his heartbeat and taking pleasure in knowing it beats for me.

A buzz interrupts the quiet, serene lull in the room, and Val sits up in bed.

"That must be Jorge." He runs to the living room and returns with his phone. "Yup. It's him. I need to go."

I wish he didn't have to, but I know he must.

"I'll see you later?" he asks when he's all dressed in his sportswear.

I admire him looking so casual from the shoulders down. My dick attempts to go hard again, but it's still recovering. But what is it about men in grey fucking sweatpants that makes me so thirsty for D?

"Of course," I tell him.

He pulls his pink hair up and hides it under his cap, and I walk him to the door. Before I open it, he puts on a pair of glasses and turns to me.

"I have no idea who the fuck you are," I reassure him, and he smirks.

"Let's talk about this fantasy another time, shall we?"

He comes down for a kiss and then slips out the door. As I close it, I look over at the other open door on the corridor. An old man is standing back up after picking a newspaper off his doormat but freezes staring at me. Staring at the maid's uniform that I'm still wearing.

"Good morning, Mr. Wexler. Need a hand with that?" I point at his newspaper, which he's conveniently holding in front of his crotch.

Mr. Wexler's eyes pop and he rushes back into his apartment. I do the same. I take my cell phone from the kitchen counter and call Isha.

“How was your special night?” she asks.

“Fun-fucking-tastic. But I’ll tell you all about it later. That’s not why I’m calling.”

“What’s up?”

“Have you got a pharmacist in your little black book?”

## 17. VAL



“Val! Where have you been?” Fred asks as soon as I step in through the door.

He’s sitting in the living room—one of the three—holding a newspaper in his hands, a mug of coffee set on the table in front of him.

“I just went for a little jog. Did you just get up?” I ask him, playing it cool.

Fred sets the newspaper on his lap and nods.

“I must have been really tired. I didn’t even hear you coming back from the award show,” he says.

I run a hand over my hair, which I tied into a ponytail in the car and shrug.

“Oh yeah. I did come in a bit later than expected. Some of the guys wanted to hang out or go to their after-parties and stuff. It was hard to get away from them.”

“Oh, I bet,” Fred says with a plain smile and slitted eyes. “How was your run? Must have been a long one.”

Damn it, I forgot to ask Jorge to ask Magda what time Fred got up. I hope I didn’t get caught in a lie. Although I could always say I got so carried away I lost track of time.

“Not really. Just enough to feel the burn,” I told him and started walking away, trying to escape to my room for a hot shower.

“And did you?” he asks.

I stop and turn around to shrug. “A little.”

I move off again.

“Just a little? I’d have thought running the whole night would give you more than a little burn,” Fred says, and I freeze in my tracks.

Slowly, I look at him. The newspaper is on the coffee table, and his hot drink in his hand, gripping the mug with confidence.

“What? I wasn’t running all night,” I chuckle, trying to cover up the beat of my heart that’s so fast and loud that it’s only a matter of time before Fred hears it.

“Hm,” he sneers. “That’s odd. When I looked at the location of your phone, it showed you were out all night.”

I do a double take at his words, but before I can say anything, he continues.

“In fact, your signal was quite... static. So either you went for a run on a treadmill on the other side of town, or you’re lying.”

“What the actual fuck, Fred? Are you stalking me?” I yell.

Fred isn’t phased by my annoyance. If anything, he takes pride in it.

“Of course I am, Val. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Ar-are you listening to yourself? Why *would you* be stalking me? Why are you tracking me?”

“Because I’m your guardian for all intents and purposes, dear nephew, and I need to know where you are at all times so I can keep you safe. I’m honestly a little surprised you’re so shocked.”

He’s so calm and composed it makes me even angrier.

“Shocked? Try finding out every single move you make is monitored. Then you can talk to me about shock,” I shout.

“It’s for your protection, you silly boy. What happens if someone decides to take a chance at you and your wealth? If

they decide to abduct you and take all your money? Or if they hurt you and leave you for dead?”

I cover my face with my hands, rubbing the skin with so much frustration I'm sure it looks red when I remove them.

“There it is. Again,” I shout. “Money, money, money. Who gives a shit, Fred?”

“I do, obviously,” he says.

“So that's all you care about huh?”

“Of course not, Val. But I've got to protect you somehow.”

“Protection? I don't need protection. I've got a whole team of security guys outside for protection. I just need an uncle. An uncle who, if I was abducted, would give all my money in order to set me free. Not an uncle who would gladly see me suffer if it meant my money stays intact,” I shout.

I'm furious. Absolutely, unequivocally raging. How can he tell me these things and stay so calm, so peaceful? It's like he's trying to convince me I'm wrong and he's right, and there's no way in hell he is.

“And that is why, my dear nephew, the government has put *me* in charge of you and your assets,” Fred says and takes a sip of his coffee as if he's won the argument.

“Well, you can kiss my assets with that attitude,” I shout.

He tuts and shakes his head with dismay, which only makes me angrier.

“Now, are you going to tell me where you spent the night?” he asks.

Crap. He's circled back into the subject. And I usually wouldn't give a shit about telling him, but I'd like to keep Sandy a secret for a little while longer because I want to do this again. Only next time, I'll make sure to leave my phone behind.

“Here. I didn't spend the night out. I told you,” I shout.

“I think your phone—” he starts, but I cut in.

“I didn’t have my fucking phone, Fred. I dropped it last night on the way back to the house. Jorge just gave it to me this morning when he started his shift. For fuck’s sake.”

“Interesting,” is all he says.

How can he rile me up so much by doing so little? Just by breathing and smiling and being civil? It’s so infuriating. I get so angry I start seeing red spots and I go all hazy.

“The signal doesn’t show like it’s been anywhere near the house since you left. I’m sure if Jorge brought you back and you dropped your phone in the car it would show, don’t you think?”

“I don’t fucking know, Fred. How the fuck would I know how this shit works? You’re the fucking spy in this family apparently.”

I walk away from him, trying to put as much distance between him and I as possible before I explode even more or before I realize I’m being a drama queen and Fred is right.

He *is* my legal conservator after all. I *am* a famous person with a lot of money to lose.

“Oh, I spoke to the label,” he shouts from across the room. “They want you to go in and record Pink Eyes in the next few weeks.”

I’m walking so fast that I almost topple over when he speaks, and once I’m steady on my feet again, I rush back to Fred.

“What are you talking about?”

“Well... what part of my sentence didn’t make sense?” he asks, getting off his chair.

“How about any of it? The song already exists. I produced it. What does the label have to do with it?”

“Please! You produced it in your home studio with no help from the pros, slapped together an amateur video, and put it on your little SoCo account. That’s hardly a professional recording,” Fred chuckles.



“Really? Then why the fuck did it get a billion views? If it’s that bad—”

“Gosh, Val. You’re exhausting today. It was the novelty of it all. It doesn’t mean it’s any good. They’ve got Summer Lloyd reworking some of the lyrics and giving it more of a beat, and then, straight after the concert, we’ll do an official music video and release it all in the new year,” he says.

“No.”

“What do you mean no?”

“N-O. No. You’re not doing any of that. Pink Eyes is *my* song. It’s mine. The lyrics are fine, the beat is fine. I don’t need some fancy-ass award-winning producer putting their own spin on it. You aren’t going to ruin my song,” I yell.

I’m practically in tears. And even though I want to keep my cool just like Fred so I don’t get accused of being deranged, I can’t.

“I’m sorry, Val, but you know very well the label owns all your music. I don’t understand the hysterics,” he says, and I hate every word coming out of his mouth.

“They own all my songs produced by them. Not the songs *I* write.”

“They do.”

“I never signed any of that shit,” I say.

“Well, you haven’t signed anything, ever, Val.”

My mouth hangs down in shock, and I realize I can’t bear to look at this man anymore.

“Why would you do that? Why the *fuck* would you do that?”

“Because both the label and I care about you and look out for your best interests,” Fred says, and I’ve had enough. I’ve heard enough.

“If you care about my interests, you will go back and tell them they can’t have this song,” I tell him and turn my back on him.

“I can’t, Val. It’s in the contract. There are no loopholes.”

“Then find one. Or I promise you, I’m never speaking to you ever again,” I say and run up the stairs.

When I get into my room, I close the door behind me, walk into the shower, and cry myself clean.

Maybe... maybe all my fans have been right all this time. Maybe Fred is only looking out for himself. But if that’s true, how the fuck do I get myself out of his ruthless hands?

Pink Eyes is my song. My song for Sandy. I can’t believe he wants to profit from it when he didn’t even like it in the first place. When he told me what a mess and fuck-up it is.

I can’t let him have it.

## 18. SANDY



The tension in the room could literally burn my skin. There's just too much bad juju in the air, and I can see it also affects Cecile and Olive, but they still go about business as normal.

Val is standing in the middle of the room, actively avoiding looking at Fred. Fred is pacing at the corner with a phone on each hand touch-typing like a mad man.

I bet they're used to this. Working on tiptoes around Val and Fred. Hearing too much, but also too little. Bound by their contracts and Fred's immense power.

The more I work for Val, the more I see the walls Fred's built around his nephew to "protect" him and "support" him. What I don't know is how he's convinced doctors, judges—and everyone in between—that Val is a danger to himself and to others.

And that fire he supposedly set almost burning his last stylist? Yeah, that sounds awfully suspicious when Val has been episode free for more than a year.

But he's smart. I'll give him that. I don't know how he does it, but he picks his moments almost to perfection.

That fire that killed Val's parents? It happened a couple months before Val's contract with his first label was up. His parents were considering pulling him away from the limelight and helping him have a normal adolescence not hounded by the paps and the secret and illegal after-parties.

The fire that supposedly almost killed Fred? It happened a whole six months before Val turned eighteen when he would be an adult and responsible for himself. And his wealth.

And the last fire? That one broke the pattern, but if I were Fred, I'd have probably picked that day, too, to cause an accident. The stress of the review meeting. The prospect of being free once and for all. It would make even a healthy adult reach a breaking point.

Don't even get me started on the episodes over the years. Nothing was as big as what happened to his parents, or Fred. But sparse over the next decade of Val's adult life, there had been little fires everywhere. If it wasn't Val's own room while he was sleeping in it, it was setting the kitchen on fire by forgetting the gas on—and despite the fact Val never cooks.

Nothing dangerous enough to put any real lives at risk, but enough to convince the judges—and Val—that he's not well.

Paired with the constant put-downs and mind wars, you've got yourself a perfect little puppet to control and his entire wealth to play with.

Of course, it's all fiction. Conspiracy theories pulled from the pits of the internet until I have evidence of even a smidge of that.

The good thing is Val is starting to see who his uncle really is. The tracking on his phone has made him question everything. The fact that we couldn't be together without Fred knowing about it, or sneaking around behind his back, scheming like we were undercover agents and not a couple in love.

It's the final countdown until the Christmas Ball concert, and since Fred went for my idea of Winter Candyland, Val's entire wardrobe is full of color. But nothing too haute couture. We wouldn't want anyone thinking Val is gay, after all.

“Val, come on. Walk with me,” Fred says out of the blue and in the middle of Olive brushing his still pink, still glorious hair.

“What?” Val says, heavy eyes barely turning to his direction.

“The label needs to speak to you about the choice of directors for the song,” Fred answers.

Val glances at me and sighs.

“I told you I’m not doing it,” Val replies to Fred without looking away from me.

“If you refuse to work with them, they’ll just do whatever they want, anyway. Isn’t it better to be involved with the process so you can keep some control of *your* song?” I hate how Fred says “your” as if it’s a mockery. As if Val didn’t write a song that went viral.

“Some control is not good enough, Fred. And since when do I have control of anything?”

Fred takes a deep breath and straightens his suit jacket, tucking both his phones away.

“Val, I don’t know what’s wrong with you, but you’re acting like a child. You know what’s going on with your career. You’ve known since the start. I didn’t change the rules half-way through without telling you. It’s always been this way. We talk, I advise you, and then I make an informed decision based on your best interest. Now come on. The label needs to talk to you. Are you an adult that can have a normal conversation, or are you a child?”

I hate this. I can see Val questioning himself. The way he stretches his mouth from one side to the other, pondering Fred’s words. The way his thumbs battle with one another nervously in his lap. The way his eyes dart around the room, looking at inanimate objects.

A moment later, he gets off his chair and follows Fred out into the backyard.

It’s risky, but fuck knows when I’ll have another opportunity. If I’m gonna get Val out of this prison called Fred. I need something solid.

“I’m just going to the bathroom. I’ll be right back,” I tell the girls and leave before they even acknowledge me.

I close the door of the room and walk down the corridor to find Fred's office, which is two doors down. I try my luck with the handle, and to my surprise—and relief—it swings open.

His office is in pristine condition. It's quite bare, more than I'd expect from someone with a busy life and schedule, but I guess that could make my search easier.

"Let's hope so," I mumble to myself and rush to his desk and open all the drawers, shuffling through the contents, skim reading documents in an effort to find something, anything incriminating.

I don't have much time. I don't know how long they're going to be busy with the label, but if the way Fred makes decisions is any indication, they're not going to be long. He will do whatever he wants, anyway. He just likes to pretend to give Val a voice so he doesn't see the manipulation.

A small black book is resting on top of a file on the top drawer. I pick it up, not expecting much. When I open it, I realize it's a checkbook. I flip through the pages but they're all empty.

When I finish brushing through the pages, my thumb rests on the first page, and the way it's tilted, I catch a glimpse of etches. The ghost of a signature that isn't really there.

I try to get a better look in the sunlight coming through the window, but there's a click from outside the room and then some tapping of heels, and I know I'm running out of time.

I tear at the page and crumble it hastily in my pocket, dumping the checkbook back in the drawer just as the door opens and Fred walks right through.

He stops and his eyebrows disappear into his hairline as his nostrils start flaring.

"What the *hell* are you doing in here?" he yells.

My heart stops—or it feels like it does, anyway—and my whole body stills. He doesn't scare me. Gottfrid Graves doesn't intimidate me. So I don't care that he's caught me snooping. What does scare me is that he has the power to fire me before I discover what the hell is going on.

“Erm, I’m sorry. I was looking for pen and paper but I couldn’t find any,” I tell him, closing the drawer I’d opened with my thigh. “I didn’t mean to—”

“And yet you did.” Fred put his hands in his pockets, and any shock or horror in his face vanishes behind the superior frown he puts on.

“Once again, I apologize. I-I better get back to work.”

He nods and watches me cross the room and walk past him. When I turn to close the door, he’s still standing there, his back to me, his neck craned to the side, watching me from the corner of his eyes.

Before I go back to Val, I slip into the bathroom and unearth the check I hid in my pocket, holding it up in front of the light and squinting to read the carvings of the writing from the previous check Fred Graves had signed.

There was the signature, of course, big and almost taking up the entire page. And then the number. A five with a lot of zeros. Half a million. And the recipient? Dr. Girish Rahid.

Why was Fred signing a check to Val’s doctor for such an extortionate amount?

## 19. VAL



“Good morning, sunshine,” Sandy says, walking into my room carrying yet another garment bag.

He walks over to the window and pulls the curtains open, which makes opening my eyes painstakingly harder.

“Make it stop. No. Close the damn curtains,” I cry.

“All right, Dracula. Get your ass up. You’ve got rehearsals in an hour, and we’ve got work to do,” he says.

“No,” I continue. “It burns. It burns.”

The comforter is pulled away from me, and I manage to open my eyes again just so I can glower at him.

“We need to talk. So come on. Get up. Get moving,” he says all serious, hands on hips.

“Fine,” I submit and sit up in bed.

As Sandy walks into my closet and starts arranging stuff inside, I reach for my phone and open my SoCo app.

I’ve got thousands of notifications as usual. I could never get through them all, but I can damn well try.

“What do we need to talk about?” I ask just as I click on the first notification.

“About your uncle,” he says, and I wince.

“What did Fred do now?” I ask. “He’s really starting to—” I don’t get to finish my sentence because the notification has



loaded and it's showing an article with my picture on it in a compromising position with all the naughty bits blurred out.

I click on the article, and the headline strikes me like a stone in the head.

"My illicit gay affair with Val King," it reads. "Written by Sandy Thorne."

"No," I mumble, scrolling through. "No, no, no."

There's picture after picture after picture of Sandy and I kissing, having sex, showering together. Candid pictures no one has any right of posting online.

I try and read the article, but the tears make my sleepy eyes even more stinging, and I end up skim reading.

"It was just a job... he hit on me... inappropriate behavior... sexual favors... spoiled brat."

The words, the meaning, the gall.

"It was all a lie," I mutter.

"What was that, Val?" he asks, coming out of the closet. Quite literally, it seems. "What happened? Are you okay?"

I look into his eyes searching for the truth, but all I see is deception. All I see is someone who was after a fucking headline. Is he even a real stylist or is he an undercover journalist in search of a sensational story?

"You lied to me," I tell him.

He winces as if he's done nothing wrong. Like he has no idea what happened.

"What are you talking about?" He takes a step forward. I lift my hand in the air to tell him to stop.

"Don't come any closer."

"Val? What's going on? Why are you acting like this?"

I bite my lip before I shout at him. I *can't* shout at him. He's the man I'm in love with.

"Was it all a lie? Was there even any truth to anything you ever said to me?" I ask him, and despite my raised hand, he still

walks closer to me.

“What lies? I’ve never lied to you, Val. Why would you think that?” he asks, forehead creasing over his arching eyebrows.

“Why? Why?” I ask. “Did you forget the article you wrote?”

“Val. What article?”

I throw my phone at him, and he catches it clumsily. But when he looks into the screen he gasps.

“What the fuck?”

The door opens and Fred walks in with one of my security guys. They don’t look happy. I can’t say I blame them.

“Val, I don’t know what the hell this is. I didn’t write this. I swear.”

“So why is your name on there, huh? And what about the pictures? Is that why you always fiddle with the clothes in the closet? Is that where you hide your cameras so you can take your pictures?”

It hurts. I don’t want it to, but it hurts. Despite what he’s done, I still love him. I can’t *unlove* him.

“Mr. Thorne—” Fred speaks up, but I stop him.

“I thought you loved me, Sandy. Why? Why would you do that?”

Sandy drops to his knees by my bedside and tries to take my hands in his. I try to avoid his touch, to get away from him, but I still gravitate toward him. It’s like I can’t control my body around him.

“Listen to me, Val. I didn’t write this. It wasn’t me. That’s why I needed to talk to you. He’s lying to you,” he says pointing at Fred. “He’s manipulating you. All he wants is your money. Nothing else.”

“I think we’ve heard enough from you,” Fred says.

“Did you know he’s paid your doctor half a million dollars? Did you?” Sandy says, and I look up at Fred.

Fred shakes his head all furious.

“How much do you think a doctor costs, Mr. Thorne? Do you think *the* Val King would use a back alley doctor? Come on, Val. Are you really going to believe this punk you’ve known for a month? The same person who sold you out to the press?”

Fred has a point. Admittedly, I have no clue how much doctors charge, but I’m sure the courts would know if Fred had paid him anything over his fees.

“Is that it?” I turn to Sandy. “Is that all you’ve got to justify yourself? How would you even know about the payment?”

“I didn’t want to tell you and upset you, but I found him snooping around my office yesterday,” Fred says.

“Is that true?” I ask Sandy, who’s looking at Fred like he could murder him.

“It is,” he says when he finally turns to me. “I was looking for proof he’s taking advantage of you. And look, Val. Look at this.”

He fishes a piece of paper out of his pocket and passes it to me. It’s a blank check, all crumpled.

“Point it up into the light. You can see the etchings from the pen. I know you’re rich Val. I know you are. But doctors don’t charge half a million dollars.”

Fred laughs, but he’s not amused. “How would you know? Seriously, Val. Do we have to listen to this trash of a man spew lies about everything?”

“He’s not trash,” I say almost instinctively. Then turn to Sandy who’s smiling at me, hopeful, hanging on to my words. “I thought you loved me. Why would you expose me in this way?”

“Val? Baby? I didn’t write this article. I don’t even have a normal camera let alone one I can hide anywhere. He’s the one lying to you. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had cameras everywhere spying on you. He’s got a tracker on your phone, remember? Do you really think he’d be beyond spying on everything you do?”

I pull my hands away from him and rub my face. Pull my hair. Rub my eyes. I can't deal with this. I can't process everything going on. And I'm terrified I'll have another episode and hurt someone, anyone, and make everything far, far worse.

"I need my meds. I need some water," I mutter under my breath.

"I-I'll get it for you," Sandy gets up and walks toward the bathroom.

"You're not going anywhere, Mr. Thorne," Fred says and nods at the security guy. Marty, I think his name is. "I'm sorry to say, Mr. Thorne, but you're dismissed from your duties. And do expect to be served with a lawsuit as big as your nerve."

Marty approaches Sandy, but Sandy steps back, putting his hands up.

"No. I'm not going anywhere. You can't fire me."

"Oh, I can. I just have," Fred says.

Marty takes one more step and grapples Sandy's hands, putting them behind his back.

"You're not Val's boss. You shouldn't be. So you can't fire me. If Val wants to, he can do it himself. He's perfectly capable of making—"

"Go!" I shout at Sandy.

He pauses and stares at me, but I've heard enough. I want him to go. I want everyone to go away and leave me alone. I want to be able to cry without anyone seeing me. I just want to be alone.

"You don't mean that," he says.

I open my mouth but the words don't come out.

"Come on, Val. This kid sold you out. Are you going to listen to his bullshit?" Fred asks, glaring at me.

I shake my head, but my mouth still won't co-operate.

"Val? Baby? Come on—"

"Marty, please," Fred gestures and Marty pushes Sandy away.

“I said I’m not going anywhere unless he tells me to,” Sandy shouts and stands his ground. I admire his courage even though I still can’t believe what he’s done.

“Val?” Fred turns to look at me again. And so does Marty. Three pairs of eyes waiting on an answer when I don’t even understand what’s going on and why. When my whole world is collapsing from under my very feet.

“Go, Sandy. Just... go.” My words come out cold and lifeless, but it’s the only way I can say anything without completely breaking down.

I look away, and Marty finds that as his cue to remove Sandy from the room. He closes the door behind him and the room is filled with sadness. And silence.

And Fred.

“Fred, can-can you go please?” I ask him.

Fred doesn’t respond. He just digs his hands in his pockets and stares at me.

“Want to talk about it?”

“Not with you,” I tell him straight away. Then think better of upsetting him and add, “Not now.”

“I thought you were acting different lately. I didn’t realize *this* has been going on. I thought you were having one of your “moments.” I mean, I even spoke to Dr. Rahid about changing your medication. You know how it can be with antipsychotics. Maybe what you’re currently on isn’t working out for you. But *this*? This I didn’t see coming.”

I lie back in bed, turning my back on Fred and trying really hard to keep the tears in.

“Please go,” I beg him.

I just need to be on my own. To think. To mourn. To vent. I can’t do any of these with Fred in the room. I just need to be alone.

I hear his shoes tapping on the floor and then the door opening.

“I get it now,” he gasps. “The song, the hair. You did it for him, didn’t you? To impress him?”

I sit up in bed and turn to Fred. Why won’t he leave?

Isn’t it enough that I lost everything yet again. Does he have to rub it in?

“Fred, I’m not in the mood.”

He closes the door again and watches me.

“What I don’t understand is... why pink? Was it... some sort of kink? Or did he tell you to?”

“Fred—”

“I’m just curious. I promise I’ll leave you alone. Just answer me this.”

I sigh.

“He’s color blind. And everything he sees is pink and blue,” I say. It sounds almost mechanical. Like it’s not me talking but a robot.

Fred purses his lips, nodding. “Which I guess explains the absurd video you uploaded. Interesting.”

“Can you—”

“Why not just wear something pink? Why dye your entire head? Surely it would be easier to do.”

Fred walks over and stops by the feet of the bed, wrapping his hands around the iron bed frame.

“Because he liked my hair. And because... why not?”

“Bold statement,” Fred hums.

“I guess,” I say. “I just hate that I’ve been so stupid. So blind.”

“Oh, dear boy. We’re all blinded by a sexy little thing every once in a while. It was bound to happen at some point,” Fred says.

“It was more than just sex, Fred.”

Yes, Sandy had turned out to be a liar, but I still loved him. I loved him more than anything.

My phone rings and I lift it to read the caller ID. No one ever calls me. Very few, select people have my number. Sandy is one of them.

“That’s him, isn’t it?” I nod. “You know he won’t stop.”

“Why not. He’s got his story now.”

Fred smiles.

“How naive, little nephew. He’ll want another story. Money. A bribe. Anything to get more money out of you. You’ve got to put a stop to it before it gets out of hand,” he says.

I look at Fred, then at my phone, which is still ringing.

“Fine.”

I hang up and block his number. Then show Fred.

“Sure. That will work.” He shrugs. “But he needs to get the message.”

“I’m sure he will when he calls me again and the line won’t connect.”

Fred shakes his head.

“Then he’ll find another way. You need...” Fred pauses and looks around the room. “A *bold* statement.”

“What do you mean?”

Fred points at my hair and his gaze narrows.

“Fine. I’ll dye it back to black,” I say.

“How about something ever bolder?”

I run my fingers through my hair and their color makes me even sadder. It reminds me of him. Everything reminds me of him. Of the man who betrayed my trust. Who betrayed my love.

“What do you have in mind?”

Fred walks into the bathroom and walks back out with my beard trimmer.

“A new era in Val King’s career. And life,” he says turning the clippers on.

I squeeze my hand around a lock as if by instinct and lean away from him.

“Isn’t that a bit drastic? I thought it’s insured.”

Fred shrugs and comes closer.

“Who cares about money when your heart is breaking?”

I guess he’s got a point.



## 20. SANDY



**M**y phone hasn't stopped firing up.

And yet the one person I want to call me, hasn't.

It should make me mad. It should piss me off that Val didn't believe me. That he turned on me like that. That he wouldn't believe me.

But being angry at Val won't help me. Or him.

He's been under Fred's control for so long he doesn't know what's real and what isn't anymore. He doesn't see what his uncle is capable of. Fred's played him so well over the years, chipping away at his insecurities and reinforcing them with more insecurities that Val is just the victim in this. Like I am.

"For the last time, I didn't write that article," I shout on the phone, and just as a reporter asks me about my relationship with Val, I add a "no comment" and hang up.

*Shit's going down. I'm turning my phone off. I'll be at home if you need me.*

I shoot the message to Isha and do exactly as I told her. When I get home, Knight races to me as if he knows what's happened and climbs all over me to nuzzle on my neck.

"Awww, Knight. What a disaster." I pet him and walk with him to the couch.

He meows and I nod.

"Tell me about it."

He meows again.

“Yeah, I miss him, too. But I’m not giving up Knight. We’re not,” I reassure him.

Knight’s nails dig into my skin, and before I even have a chance to yelp, Knight climbs off me and trots into the bedroom as if nothing happened.

“Fuck you, too, kind sir. You know I miss him, too, right?” I shout at him and go to the bathroom to look at the scratch in the mirror and dab the red marks with a tissue.

“Sheesh, Knight,” I mumble. “Val was right. You *are* an asshole.”

The blood dries fast, but the skin is still red and sensitive. Basically, it stings. And it stings even more when I rub some antiseptic on it, which feels like someone’s tearing my skin apart. So, all in all... great stuff.

It is fitting, I guess, that he’d attack me the same day Fred has shown his true colors and dug his own nails even deeper.

“You know what, Sandy?” I tell myself in the mirror. “If he’s gonna play dirty, so will I.”

I don’t have time to laugh out a villainous laugh like they do in the movies because the doorbell rings and interrupts my soliloquy.

Jeez. Maybe I’m going crazy like Fred.

“I came as soon as I heard.” Isha walks in like a storm as soon as I answer the door. “You look like shit,” she says when she pauses to look at me.

“Thanks.”

“What happened?” she asks, closing the door behind her and taking me to the couch.

Sitting next to my friend, telling her how everything unraveled in an instant, you’d think I’d cry or break down. Yet the more I go on, the angrier I get and the more determined to get to the truth. And get back into Val’s heart and life.

“I mean...” Isha starts. “It’s glaringly obvious he leaked that article to the press. Slapping *your* name on it to destroy your

credibility. And the fact that it happened so quickly after he caught you in his office tells me he's probably been sitting on the information a while."

"You think?" I ask.

"Honey. Have you watched movies before? If this guy is as crazy as you think he is, he's probably known about you since day one. He wants to keep Val isolated, so when you started to become more than just a sex toy, he took you out of the picture. This has master manipulator written all over it," she says.

"What am I going to do, Isha? I can't abandon him. I need to save him."

"Can't you go to the judge with that check you found?"

I huff and look away from her.

"I gave it to Val when all the shit went down. And I can't exactly accuse Fred without evidence. The media does it all the time, and yet Val's still in that stupid prison of a deal."

"Then, you'll want some hard proof," Isha says and takes her phone out.

"Well, duh," I say, but she only raises her eyebrow.

"How is this for hard proof?"

She passes me her phone, and I read the content of the text message.

"That-that will work. Now I just need a way to get close to Val."

Isha nods.

"Hey, do you think Lola can help us?" I ask, remembering the woman that got me the job for Val in the first place.

Isha stretches her lips from one side to the other in uncertainty.

"I don't know. She's been ghosting me since we hooked up the other day."

"Wait," I pause. "You two hooked up?"

Isha rolls her eyes and snatches her phone out of my hands.

“One problem at a time, sweetie. The gossip can wait,” she says and thumbs through her contacts.

“Really? Since when?” I laugh.

Things are suddenly looking up. So who can blame me for feeling positive and confident again?

I’ve got him. I’ve got Fred.

Val and I will be together again.

It took a little more effort than we’d have wanted, but Lola not only answered her phone but also came through.

Which is why I’m wearing a freaking penguin red striped suit looking like an idiot Oompa Loompa straight out of the candy factory.

All the guests are looking nice and elegant: the creme de la creme of the music industry, the media, and a select few fans. Of course I wouldn’t expect any less from the Prince of Pop.

Val. My Val.

I’ve been worried sick about him since everything went pear-shaped two days ago. I can’t get him off my mind.

Even though Isha has reassured me he’s safe, I can’t help but feel like a terrible boyfriend that I haven’t been able to be there for him.

I go around the room, tray in hand, face hidden under copious amounts of white make-up, and I do the job I was hired to do. Serve champagne to the rich and famous and stay well away from Gottfrid Graves and his team.

Thankfully, Fred is one of the very few men who doesn’t partake in the party theme and is wearing a plain old and boring black tuxedo, so he’s super easy to keep track of. And the security team are pretty much stationed at the edges of the room and not mingling with the guests.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I unearth it as discreetly as possible to read the message.

*It’s a go*, it reads.

I make my way to the back of the ballroom and dump all but one glass of champagne on the table. A quick look around and I spot Fred at the far end, talking to a group of men with similar disrespect for the theme of the party, and take a deep breath.

At least he's out of the way. Not that the same can be said about the security guy stationed in front of the corridor I need to go through.

Collecting all the courage I can get, I walk over toward him, confidently ignoring him, and try to get past, but he puts his hand up and stops me.

"This area is restricted," he says.

I look up at him pretending to look scared. Well, I am a little, so there's only half pretense there.

"I was told Mr. King ordered a drink," I said.

"Mr. King has access to his own staff. You were misinformed," he says.

"But—" I say, taking a step only for the guard to take one backward step, as well.

"Unless you want to be removed by force, I'd suggest you speak to your supervisor."

Crap. That certainly didn't go to plan.

I nod and look at the corridor hoping to spot him, but it's empty. I turn my back and walk away when I hear her voice.

"Oh my God. You're here. Wait. Wait," she says.

I spin around and look at Isha standing behind the security guard and staring at me with frustration.

"Where the hell are you going?" she asks me.

"He-he wouldn't let me through," I answer her.

She looks at the guard and then back at me.

"Come on." She gestures for me to follow her, and I do.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I can't let him through. He needs to have clearance," the guy says.

Isha grimaces and places her hands on her hips.

“First of all, I’m not your mom, so don’t call me ma’am. Second of all, Mr. King has asked for a glass of champagne,” she says, pointing a finger up in his face.

“Mr. King has a fully stocked bar in his dressing room,” the guy says.

“He drank it,” she says, and I can see she’s getting pissed off.

“He drank the whole bar?”

“You know how those famous people are,” she says. Then turns to me. “Come on.”

“Why can’t you take the glass to him?” he asks her just as I’m about to step into the corridor and out of sight from Fred.

“Because…” Isha mutters. “Because…”

It’s going to shit. I can see it all unraveling. Fred is looking around the room and soon he’s going to notice the security guy holding up two people from accessing Val. He will come over, recognize me, and have me removed for good. And I need to see Val. I need to tell him what’s happening. What I’m going to do to save him from that asshole uncle.

“Because it’s not my job,” she finally says. “Now will you let him through, or do you want to explain to Fred Graves why his nephew still hasn’t got any champagne?”

The security guy looks around the room, and with some hesitation, steps aside. Isha runs down the corridor, and I chase after her. She goes past several doors until she stops outside one the says Val King on a sticky label.

She opens the door and lets me through. Olive and Cecile are busy around a man. A man that looks at me through the mirror and I barely recognize.

He’s got a shaved head with only a shadow of hair on his skull and the saddest face I’ve ever seen.

“Val?” I ask. “Is that—what did you do to your hair?”

“Girls, can you give us five?” Isha tells Olive and Cecile, but they don’t move. Instead, they look at Val.

“What are you doing here?” he asks me.

“I came for you. To explain. To tell you the truth,” I croak, although I’m still in shock from the sight of his empty head.

“I think we all know the truth. I don’t have anything to say to you,” he says.

“Is that so? Are you telling me you feel nothing for me? Was that a lie?” I ask and walk toward him, every step another knife in the gut.

Val doesn’t respond.

“Girls, these two need to talk. Can you please go out?” Isha asks again, standing by the door.

“I-we don’t want to get in trouble with Fred,” Olive says.

Cecile nods.

“Trust me, Fred is the last person you should be worried about if you don’t step out of the room.” Isha rolls up her sleeves and takes her earrings off.

Cecile and Olive look at Val who turns around in his chair.

“I knew the name sounded familiar. She’s your best friend, isn’t she?” he asks me.

I glance at her and smile, then turn back to Val.

“Damn fucking right. And we’ve gone into great lengths to get you the truth, you ungrateful little bastard,” I tell him.

I want to hug him. I want to kiss him. I want to touch his head and mourn the loss of his beautiful locks. But he’s being a pig-headed dickhead, and he needs to hear it.

“What truth?” he asks.

I take two more steps and pass the tray and the champagne flute to the girls.

“You know I like you girls, but this is between him and me. Even if he’s being a stubborn shit.”

Cecile and Olive glance at Val, and he waves at them. They leave the room straight away. And so does Isha.

“What do you want?”

“You,” I tell him. “You stupid idiot.”



## 21. VAL



Why is he here? What does he want? It's not like I need an excuse to fall back into his arms.

I haven't stopped thinking about him since shit hit the fan, and even though he betrayed me, I still want him, need him, more than ever.

How is this possible? Why *is it* possible? I've lived all my life without someone to love, and now I can't even go a few days without a person who never even wanted me?

And now he's here, in my dressing room. Why?

Fred warned me about this. That he might try to contact me again. That he would lie to get me to believe him. That he'd try to manipulate me.

And yet all I see when I look into the mirror is the guy I want to kiss desperately.

"Why? You got your story."

Sandy shakes his head and takes a deep breath before walking up to me. He turns my chair around so I can face him and grabs my hands.

"Do you really believe I would do this to you? That I'd sell you out?"

"I don't know what to believe anymore," I tell him.

"Val, I didn't write that article. I would never do anything to hurt you. I love you. I've never, ever, lied to you," he says, and

I want to believe him. I want to grab him by the face and make out with him until we're both gasping for air.

"Well, the pictures didn't leak themselves," I say.

Sandy bites his lip and sighs.

"You're such a thick meathead. Honest to frigging God! Why? Why would I share those pictures and not blur my face out? Huh? Why would I even be here if I wrote that stupid article?"

"I don't know," I reply.

"Take it easy, Jon Snow. You don't know. You do know. You know the truth, but you don't want to admit it," he says.

"And what would that truth be?"

"That your uncle is a conniving bastard that only wants your money," he says, just as Fred described. It's quite funny, in a not-so-funny kind of way, actually. How accurate Fred is with everything. "But don't take my word for it. Even though you should, and I should be smacking you in the head for not believing me. I've got proof."

That Fred didn't predict. He never said Sandy would pull out the proof card. But then again, he'd given me proof that day with that check, but it was all a bluff. Wasn't it?

"What? You've got another blank check to show me?" I ask.

Sandy huffs and takes a step back, putting his hands on his hips.

"Listen to me, you idiot. I don't care what lies Fred's told you, but that check isn't for services rendered. I had Isha look into it. Your doctor charges by the hour. And as many hours as he's seen you, he doesn't charge half a million for a visit. It's a bribe. I don't know how the court has never seen it, but it's a clear bribe."

"Why would Fred bribe Dr. Rahid?" I ask him.

"Because he wants Dr. Rahid to report you as incompetent so Fred can keep this stupid conservatorship that you should never have been on in the first place," he says.

There it goes. Another accusation with no substance. Yes, Fred is unconventional and the way he does certain things make me angry, but he's not a bad guy. Does he expect me to believe him over the guy that took me under his wing since I lost my parents?

"You don't believe me, huh? After everything Fred's said and done you don't believe me? Well, would you believe me if I said those pills he and your doctor have convinced you you need are nothing but sugar?"

Sandy is tapping his foot now, looking all kinds of angry, and while I'm trying to stay sane and listen to reason, I'm overwhelmed with the need to attack his mouth, to take him. To have him fuck me while he's like that. He's so hot when he's pissed.

"Sugar? Okay. If you say so," I say.

Sandy lets out a growl and gets a piece of paper out.

"Here. I took some of your pills when you slept at mine and sent them to a pharmacist to test. You know what he said? They're sugar pills. Completely harmless. You don't need them, Val, because you're not sick. You're not crazy. Fred is. And all he wants is your money."

I unfold the piece of paper and read a chemical report from a pharmacy lab. He's... not lying. But...

"How do I know this is real?"

Sandy drops to his knees and holds them, looking up at me with tearful eyes.

"Baby? Val? Come on. I can take you to him and we can test all the pills you've got. You can stay there while he does it. We can go to someone else. And another one. They'll find the same thing. Fred is manipulating you. He's been lying to you. What other proof do you need?"

I pause and look at the piece of paper again. What... what if he's telling the truth? Why would he be here to lie? What would he gain from it? And if he's telling the truth, that must mean Fred is lying.

The door bursts open and Fred walks in with my new stylist—and as it turns out Sandy’s best friend—is chasing after him, trying to stop him.

“What in heaven’s sake is going on here? You have the audacity to come back after everything you’ve done?”

Sandy gets back on his feet and steps in front of me, protectively.

“I’m here to save him from your scammy hands,” he says, and even though I’m so confused and I’ve got so many questions, I’m proud of the way he talks and stands. Like a real-life prince charming.

“Oh really? And how are you planning on doing that?” he asks Sandy with an amused smile before he turns to me, “The security is on its way, Val. Don’t worry.”

“Is it true?” I ask him just as a bunch of men gather at the door, only to be stopped by Isha, who seems to be filming us.

“Hold on boys. We’re just having a chat,” she tells them and closes the door, locking it behind her.

How she manages to do that with a bunch of muscles is beyond me, so I peg it down to their shock being stopped by such a petite woman.

“What?” Fred asks, ignoring what’s happening behind him.

“Are my pills just sugar? Is that why you signed a half a million-dollar check to Dr. Rahid?” I raise my voice.

Fred laughs, blowing raspberries.

“You’re listening to him? After everything he’s done?” He laughs even louder.

“You didn’t answer my question. My pills. Are they, or are they not, just sugar?”

“Of course not. You’ll believe this money-chasing worthless piece of shit over me after everything we’ve been through?”

“Oh shut the fuck up. I didn’t publish those photos and you know it,” Sandy says.

“Yeah. Right. And I’m the king of England,” Fred replies.  
“Val, come on. Let’s get him out of here.”

Fred turns around, and Isha lowers her phone, holding it in front of her stomach as if it’s just idle. When Fred walks toward her, she steps back, away from him, and he unlocks the door.

The security team gets in the room, and one of them goes straight for Isha while the rest are all walking toward me. Toward Sandy.

“Stop,” I tell them, and now it’s my turn to step in front of Sandy.

They don’t listen to me, so I shout louder.

“I’m the one paying you, so you listen to me.”

That makes me pause.

“Now get out and stay outside until I tell you otherwise,” I say, and they do as I say while Fred is trying to convince them otherwise.

“Fred!” I call him. “Answer my question.”

Fred looks from me to Sandy and back to me with wide eyes, disbelief obvious on his face. “Seriously?” he shakes his head, then seems to compose himself and stares into my eyes. “No. Of course not.”

“So if I take those pills to a lab right now, they will tell me they’re antipsychotics and antidepressants?”

“Yes!” he insists.

“Sandy, get my phone,” I ask him and lift a hand over my shoulder as Sandy passes it to me. “Let’s see.” I open up my browser and type.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

I look up at him. “What does it look like I’m doing? I’m getting a legitimate lab to come over and test those for me.”

Fred rolls his eyes and laughs.

“Good luck getting anyone this late, this last minute.”

He has a point.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought he was Val fucking King. I’m sure if you can pay a psychiatrist half a million bucks, Val can pay someone to run a simple test,” Sandy says behind me.

“You can shut up. You’ve done enough damage,” Fred says.

“Oh yeah? To what? Your manipulation?” Sandy yells.

“Don’t talk to him like that,” I say to Fred. “You’ve got two options, Fred. Either you tell me the truth of your own accord, or I get a lab technician right here to tell me the truth, concert be damned.”

Fred purses his lips and grimaces, taking deep breaths as if he’s hyperventilating but he’s trying to hide it.

“I think you forget who’s in charge, Val. Whether you bring anyone here or not, I can tell them to go away. I’m the one paying, not you. And those men outside? They’re my men, not yours.”

“No, Fred. You are paying *for* me. On my behalf. They’re not yours. And if you had nothing to hide, you wouldn’t be saying this crap,” I tell him.

It’s true, isn’t it? What Sandy said. The pills. The bribe. The manipulation. And Fred is resisting me every step of the way. As if that’s not even more incriminating.

Fred laughs out loud. It’s not just a normal laugh. It’s almost... evil.

“You... you think you own anything? Oh... my God. This is hilarious,” he says in between fits. “You’ve got nothing, Val. Nada. It’s all mine. Everything. You’ve got nothing in your name unless I say you do.”

“I’m sorry. Excuse me,” Sandy says with so much innocence everyone turns to look at him as he steps to my side. “Is that your way to convince him you’re *not* corrupt?”

“Listen to me, you ungrateful little shit. I looked after you. I took care of you. I made you who you are today. Without me, you and your stupid career would have died a fast and painful death. *I* made you the Prince of Pop. *I* made you Val King.

And now you want to believe this stupid boy just because he bent over and let you fuck him? Wow. Just... wow.”

Before I can think twice about it, I close the distance between Fred and me, forcing him to look me in the eye.

“It’s true, then. They *are* sugar pills, aren’t they? Why Fred? Why?”

I pierce him with my gaze, and I feel my face is hard as stone, but I’m trembling every time I take a breath.

“So what if they are?” Fred says all composed like he didn’t just admit to deceiving me.

I open my mouth. I want to say things. Too many things. So many questions. But I can’t find which one to start with. Something Fred takes to his advantage.

“You think you know everything, Val? You think you know what you’re doing and who you are. You don’t. You think you’re somebody special? That you’re god’s gift?” He laughs out loud, snot coming out of his nose from the intensity. “If it weren’t for me, you’d be nothing. You’d have ruined everything. I didn’t just protect your career. I protected you from yourself, too.”

“How is giving me sugar helping me? What is it supposed to be? Placebo? To make me think I’m safe to be around people? You know what happens when I’m not well and I’m around people,” I spit in his face.

“We tried antidepressants, Val. We tried everything, remember? But they turned you into a zombie. They weren’t good enough. Not if you were going to keep your career.”

He’s still talking. Why’s he still talking? And why isn’t he telling me the truth?

“He’s been trying to control you, Val. Make you reliant on the medication to make you think that you’re not healthy. That you’re sick. Deluded,” Sandy says behind me, Fred’s face wrinkling even more.

“No,” I say. “It can’t be. I... I’m not healthy. I blackout. I do things. Bad things. I’m not healthy. Am I?”

“You are, Val. Don’t you think it’s weird you only have blackouts when something big is going on? Your contract was about to go up when you were fourteen. Turning eighteen and being independent. Ending the conservatorship just last month,” Sandy says.

But it doesn’t make sense. Nothing does. The blackouts aren’t a coincidence. It’s what happens when I get stressed. When I get angry. Or nervous. It doesn’t always happen, but...

“You can shut your mouth now. No one asked you what you think,” Fred yells at him.

“Truth hurts, doesn’t it?” Sandy says, unwilling to stop.

“What’s going on, Fred? What else are you hiding?” I ask him.

I take one more step toward him and has he... has he always been shorter than me? Because I tower over him and he looks like a shadow of himself.

“Talk.” I wrap both hands around his collar and lift it so high he has to stand on his toes.

“I... I gave you e-everything,” he croaks. “You’d have nothing without me.”

I walk forward with Fred still in my grasp, and he backtracks until he hits the door with his back and I hold him there.

“What. Have. You. Done?” I’m losing my patience. And my faith in him. Little by little. Minute by minute.

“What had to-to be done,” he says.

Those words hit me so hard, it feels like I’ve been kicked in the gut. The realization. That those feelings of being imprisoned weren’t just in my head. It wasn’t because I wasn’t well and I had to be a prisoner of myself so as not to hurt anyone.

“You ki-killed them?” I ask.

Fred doesn’t answer. He simply stares at me with wide eyes and a red face, and I know the truth.

I’ve been in an actual prison.



I don't know how he's done it. I don't know what strings he's pulled and who else is in on it, but I've been a prisoner all my life.

It just wasn't because of my mental health. It was because of him.

I want him to tell me more. To tell me everything. How it worked. How he manipulated the system and me. I want him to try to explain himself, but is there really an explanation? I want all those things, but I can't stand the sight of him anymore. I need to go.

I push Fred to the side and unlock the door.

The security guards are all standing there, all on their phones, and when I open the door, they look up at me in awe.

I have no idea what they're doing, and at the moment, I don't care.

Pushing through them, I run down the hall. Away from that man and everything he's done to me.

I'm an idiot.

I'm such an idiot.

How could I have fallen for this crap?

How can I face anyone ever again?

I storm through to the main hall where all the guests are, and I freeze. There's an entire room full of weird-looking people in candy stripes and extravagant dresses, all looking at a big screen. A big screen with my back on it.

I turn around and find Isha holding her phone up.

She puts her hand down when she sees me looking.

"I-I'm sorry," she mouths.

It's not her fault. It's no one's fault but mine. If anything, she's probably done me a favor, although I don't have the brainpower to figure out how at the moment.

All I have the brainpower for is to leave this place. But where do I go?

“Val, stop,” Sandy calls behind me.

## 22. SANDY



**M**y heart can't take the look on his face. I can't even begin to imagine how he must be feeling. All the emotions going through him.

But just because I can't imagine or share their load doesn't mean I can't be there for him.

Isha raises her phone again and aims the camera at me. We'd agreed beforehand that if everything went pear-shaped, she'd try to live stream what's going on. And that way no one would be able to stop the truth from going out into the world.

Which means the whole world knows what happened in that dressing room and everything Fred said with his eyes as much as with his mouth.

What we didn't agree on was when she'd stop. But I didn't care to tell her off or point out that she could stop now.

All I cared about was being there for Val.

"Where are you going?" I ask him.

"Just..." Val starts and glances at the guests staring at him. "Anywhere but here."

"Ok. Then let me come with you."

Val seems to ponder on my offer, running his hand over his head, which makes the hole in my heart even bigger. That bastard got rid of his hair, and now my Val feels empty without it.

"Why?"

“What do you mean ‘why?’”

“Why would you want to come with me?” he asks.

“Because I love you, you son of a bitch,” I tell him as the guests coo.

“Why?” Val asks, and now I’m feeling the urge to slap him again. He really is a stubborn little shit. And I love him all the more for it.

“‘Why’ again? Jeez, Val. Did someone steal your brain?”

“Possibly. Who knows what else has been taken from me,” he says and turns his back on me.

“I’m not done talking to you,” I shout. “Don’t you turn your back to me. That’s rude.”

“What?” Val stops and asks, but I’m still talking to his back.

“Let me be there for you,” I tell him. “And don’t you fucking dare ask why again.”

The crowd murmurs again as if they’re watching an unconventional romantic film. Val’s shoulders sag and inflate as he takes deep breaths. This really would be easier without all these people watching us.

“Let’s get out of here,” I tell him. “You’re free from that waffletart now. You can do whatever the hell you want. He can’t touch you anymore.”

I hear a quiet snigger, but I ignore it. I walk closer to Val instead and reach for his arm. Val turns to face me again. His eyes are red and tired.

“I’m toxic, Sandy. Look what’s happened to anyone that’s come around me,” he exhales.

My hand finds shelter on his cheek, and I take another step closer to him so that our bodies are touching.

“You are not toxic, Val. Fred is. You... you are the sweetest, most talented person I know. You’re also ridiculously annoying, but I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

More cheers from the crowd. They really *should* get a life and Isha *should* really stop broadcasting this.

“You mean it?” he asks with the saddest smile I’ve ever seen on him.

I shrug. “Nah. I was just kidding. What do you think, you idiot?”

My lips find his before I even think about it, and I hold him closer to me. I never want to let him go. Not even when he’s going to be a dick—because I know very well that he is going to be one. Lots of times.

“What are you all doing standing around like fucking idiots. Get that son of a bitch,” someone shouts, and I break away from the kiss—a fucking capital offense if you ask me.

And when I see who is the one doing all the shouting, I’m thinking he seriously should be put to the chair.

Fred is glancing around at all the security guys standing with their hands behind their backs watching the events unfold.

“I’m not paying you to fuck about. Get that fuckturd out of here. Have him removed immediately. He should be arrested,” he shouts.

“Oh look, babe. The busted pot called the charming kettle black,” I laugh.

“Obnoxious much?” Val asks, elbowing my ribs with a smirk.

“You’ll pay for that later,” I warn him.

“What the hell? Why is everyone staring? Why are you all standing around like a bunch of imbeciles? Do something,” Fred continues.

I really do wish he would shut up. His voice, his face, his words are so taxing. They’re making my fists itchy.

“Guess what, Gottfrid, sweetie,” I tell him walking toward him.

Fred looks at me with a bitter face that makes me even prouder of everything I’ve done. That bastard is done for.

“You’re on candid camera,” I tell him and point at Isha, who’s still filming, and she waves at us. And just as Fred starts to rotate his head back to me, his jaw gets introduced to the aforementioned fist. “That’s for putting my naked pictures on the internet.” Another punch, this one finds its target on his cheek, “And this one is for putting your nephew’s pictures on the internet.”

Fred stumbles back, his hands stretch from his sides looking for a grip somewhere, but instead, he falls to the floor. Which gives me the great pleasure of kicking his nuts back where they came from.

“And this is for taking advantage of your nephew all these years.”

Fred groans, grasping his not-so-precious jewels and trying to catch his breath. I often get sympathy ball pain whenever I see someone getting kicked down there, but not this time. He deserves it. And everything else that’s coming to him.

“Having all the fun without me?” Val asks and comes to stand next to me.

“You... ‘re... in... so... much... trouble,” Fred squeals, glaring at me. “You... got... no proof.”

I crouch down and stare at Fred. The villain struggling to deliver the final blow when all is lost for him. He really is like a bad caricature of an antagonist in a blockbuster. The ones that get cocky and confident until the superhero whoops their fucking ass and serves it to them on a silver platter.

“My sweet Gottfrid. The entire world has seen you admit those pills were nothing but sugar. Even without any further proof, you can wave goodbye to the conservatorship and Val’s money. Actually, you can probably wave goodbye to *your* freedom,” I tell him, then look up into the distance and wave. “Buh-bye Fred’s freedom. See you... never.”

“Dear Lord, you’re a weirdo,” Val mumbles behind me, and I offer him my middle finger. “Mini masturbator,” he says, pinching his fingers around my middle finger and stroking it suggestively.

“Now who’s the weirdo? On a live broadcast?” I tell him.

Val’s eyes go wide and he blushes, looking at Isha.

“And will you turn that fucking thing off? It’s over. We’re done,” I tell her.

Isha shakes her head and takes a step back.

“Hell to the fucking no, sweetie. This is gold, and I’ve got six million people who want more... so...” she says.

“God, I hate you,” I tell her and make a face at the camera.

“Love you, too,” she replies.

“You... you’re a bunch of freaks. What’s wrong with you all?” Fred says, still lying on the floor. But he does look like he’s in less pain, which isn’t a very good look on him.

One moment I’m looking down on him, the next I’m lying on the floor and his arm is around my throat.

The fucker tackled me. Seriously? What the actual living hell?

I flail like a dying fish trying to get free, and I catch a glimpse of Val coming to my aid. But that motherfucker is choking me, and as much as I’m up for a good choking, now is not the time and neither is he the partner for it.

“A little help here,” Val yells.

The security guards jump to action and surround us all, and just as quickly as I found myself trapped under Fred’s grip, I find myself back up and coughing my rectum off.

“You’re gonna pay for this,” Fred shouts. “Let me go. Let me go, you idiots. I’m the one paying you.”

I’m about to open my mouth and spout more insults to this little shit that isn’t worth my time, but the men in blue bust in just in time. Which is just as well because I’ve run out of any good names to call him and I’d rather not repeat myself. On air, nonetheless.

“Gottfrid Graves, you need to come with us,” says a dashing blonde woman who looks like she ain’t here to play.

“You can fuck right off,” Fred tells her, still trying to escape the security team’s clutches.

He pushes them off him and makes a run for the corridor that leads back to the dressing room. The police officer laughs.

“Okay. The hard way it is, then,” she smirks and goes after Fred. A security guy knocks him out, which gives the officer the chance to cuff him. “Gottfrid Graves, you’re under arrest for suspicion of fraud and domestic abuse. You have the right to remain silent...” she says.

She and the rest of her squad take him away to an eruption of cheers from the crowd.

“It’s not over yet,” Val whispers next to me.

“Well,” I say. “Almost. And it’s more than you had before.”

“We,” Val says. “There’s no I. If you want, of course.”

I roll my eyes at him and open my mouth to tell him for the hundredth time what an idiot he is, but he attacks my mouth and kisses me like there’s no tomorrow.

Just as well, because fuck knows what’s gonna happen from now on. I’ve opened a door and all hell will break loose. But it’s the good kind of hell.

The kind where Val is free, and we can be together and not hide who we are. Works for me.

Works for us.

“Mr. King,” someone says, committing yet another capital offense. What *is* it with people interrupting perfection tonight?

We break away from the kiss, begrudgingly, and find a guy with a headset and a clipboard looking sheepishly at Val.

“I know it’s probably the last thing on your mind and you probably have to go into the station, but... would you please sing a song before you go?”

“Are you kidding me?” I tell the guy, but Val lifts his hand to stop me. “And don’t you dare raise your hand at me. I’m not your subject. I’m your Prince fucking Charming.”



Val blows raspberries and I feign upset. I'm gonna love being with him again. I get all giddy already, with all the kinds of insults I can come up with. And all the hate sex we can have.

"Just one. My choice," he tells the guy.

"Pink Eyes? I thought so," the man says. "The band has been learning it in hopes you were going to sing it tonight."

"No. Not Pink Eyes," Val says. "I've got another song. I'll play it."

He looks at me, and my heart skips a beat.

## 23. VAL



“Come on, baby, it’s cute,” I tell Sandy, who’s currently got his arms locked in front of his chest and pouting.

“You did *not* just sing a song to the entire universe called ‘Sandy Dee.’ Oh wait!” he replies, and I laugh.

“It’s funny.”

“Is not.”

“What are you? Five?” I ask him, only to get a grimace and a tongue out of him. “You do realize you shouldn’t be mad at me. I’m vulnerable. I’m fragile. My uncle just admitted to—”

Well, my joke is cut short when I almost say he killed my parents. My voice breaks and breathing becomes extra hard.

And no sooner than that, tears run down my eyes and Sandy’s arms are around me, taking me into his embrace while Jorge is driving us through the wintry streets of New York.

“I’m sorry. I was just-just trying to make you forget,” he says.

“It’s not your fault.” I shake my head and lift my head to sit back on the chair. “I’m fine.”

I wipe my eyes and smile at him, but Sandy just squints and raises his eyebrow.

“Obviously you’re not,” he says.

A deep breath becomes two, and two become three. I’m trying to put everything inside my mind in order. To reconcile the lies from the truth. And what it comes down to is that I’m fine.

“There’s a whole ass mess I can’t really understand. But surprisingly? I’m okay.”

“You’re not,” he insists.

I look out on the road, all the people walking with bags and bags of shopping, mittens, and hats to protect themselves from the cold. Children and dogs in tow, or couples holding hands. The kind of thing I’ve never done. The kind of thing that has become as alien as actual aliens.

“Jorge, stop the car,” I tell him through the intercom, and he pulls over on the street.

I open the door and give my hand to Sandy who’s watching me from inside the car like I’m a madman.

“What are we doing?” he asks.

“Walking,” I tell him. “What does it look like?”

Sandy screws up his eyes but takes my hand and comes out of the car. I walk over to the front with Sandy, and Jorge rolls down the window.

“We’ll just walk for a bit. I’ll let you know if we need you.”

“Of course, sir. Just give me a call and I’ll find you,” Jorge replies and starts to roll up the window, but I put my hand on it.

“And Jorge, thanks for sticking around. I know I have to figure out how to pay you over the next few days, but I really appreciate it.”

Jorge shakes his head and taps my hand affectionately, a way he’s never done so before.

“My child, I wouldn’t go anywhere. I’m here if you need me, anytime you need me. And I hope that jerk pays for everything he’s done. But... if he finds a loophole... I know some people. Just so you know.” Jorge winks, and I laugh out loud as he rolls up the window again and drives off to find some proper parking spot most likely.

“We should take him up on his offer. Think how much money we’ll save in legal fees,” Sandy says and then we both break

out into a laughing fit that becomes quite the spectacle for passers-by.

“Do you want my hat?” Sandy asks me when he sees the crowd around us, staring.

I refuse his offer and take a good look at him.

“What you’re wearing is ridiculous, you know that?” I tell him.

Striped red suits shouldn’t be a thing. And neither should the sailor hat he’s wearing.

“Excuse me,” he gasps. “This is designer shit, I’ll have you know.”

“You look like the Nutcracker and the Queen of Hearts had a bastard. And what’s with the white make-up?”

He punches my shoulder, and I try to shield myself from him to no avail.

“I’ll crack your nuts if you don’t stop being an asshole,” he says.

“I’m just saying. I’m not sure people are staring at me or your hallucinogenic suit.”

Sandy turns around to the people that have stopped to watch us, some of them filming or taking pictures on their phones.

“For the record, Val King is a grade-A douchebag,” he tells them, and they all laugh.

“But that’s why he loves me,” I add and then swing him around for a mindblowing kiss. You know. The kind that makes one leg lift in the air and everyone go wild with applause. That kind. Which I guess would explain the actual applause and whooting.

“No, I love you in spite of that,” he says when he comes up for air.

“But you do? Love me?” I ask him.

“One hundred percent.” Sandy smiles and he gives me another light kiss. “Now, you said you wanted to walk. Let’s go before

all the groupies start getting here.”

He pulls me away from the crowd and we run away from them, even though some try to chase after us.

New York City looks just like it does in the movies when it's Christmas and nighttime. Festive lights everywhere. Christmas songs playing at every corner. Hell, even the mist of our breaths is romantic.

Now I know what it feels like when prisoners walk back on the street, free to be themselves again. The kind of mundane things you don't know you miss until you're deprived of them.

“Thank you,” I tell Sandy. “For giving me this.” I stretch my hands out pointing at the city I've lived in my entire life but which I don't know at all.

As I do, I almost poke someone's eye out, and I remember to apologize even though they give me their meanest scowl.

“Uhm, not to ruin your fun, babe, but my balls have retracted all the way up to my throat, so... would you mind if we go now? I'm not dressed for this weather, and neither are you,” he says, warming his hands with his breath.

I smile at him and cover his hands with mine.

“Sure. I'll call Jorge. And then we can replace your balls with mine down your throat.”

Sandy rolls his eyes and sighs.

“It's obvious I didn't think this whole relationship through, did I?” he chuckles. “Is this what I should expect for the rest of our lives?”

I nudge his shoulders and give him a kiss on the cheek.

“Wouldn't want to ruin the fun, would I?”

Jorge arrives two minutes later and drives off as soon as Sandy closes the door behind him.

“There's some traffic up ahead, sir, but we should be back home within the hour,” Jorge says.

I roll down the privacy divider and look at Jorge through his rearview mirror.

“Please, Jorge. No more sirs. Call me Val,” I tell him and he winks at me. “Also... can you drop us off at Sandy’s instead?”

I turn to Sandy to check he’s okay with that, and he pats my thigh with a wide grin.

“Of course, silly. But... why?”

Because I don’t want to walk down the same corridors where Fred used to live with me. I don’t want to succumb to the impulse to look through his stuff. I’m sure the police will do that for me. And I don’t want to be in an empty house that’s haunted me for years without me even realizing.

But it all comes down to wanting to be with Sandy. In a place that felt like home instead of a business.

Because that’s what it was, wasn’t it? When Fred bought the house and turned all these rooms into studios, dressing rooms, and home offices, that’s what he was doing. Turning me into a twenty-four-seven money-making machine. A trapped money-making machine.

“I missed your cat,” I tell him. We’ve got plenty of time to unravel the shitstorm in my head *and* in my life.

“I know you’re joking, but Knight hasn’t been the same since he met you,” he says.

“What? Why?”

“I don’t know. He just avoids me like the plague.”

The car pulls over in front of Sandy’s building, and we jump out.

“That would be because he’s a herald of Lucifer like every other cat on the planet.”

I tell—no, order—Jorge to drive home and not wait up for me. I don’t have to sneak back in the house, and he needs a break. He’s not a slave. He’s my driver.

Sandy ignores me and opens the front door. We take the stairs up to his apartment, and when he lets me in, we find Knight

with his face stuffed in his food bowl. He freezes and then runs over to me, rubbing against my legs over and over and over again.

“See? How can you say he’s a monster when you look at him?” Sandy asks.

I shrug.

“He’s not that bad.”

Sandy laughs and picks him up, shoving him in front of me.

“Tell that to his face,” he says.

The cat looks less beastly now that we’ve become acquainted, for sure, but his eyes still look sinister as fuck. As if he’s gonna come when I sleep and tear my face out.

“Do you renounce Satan?” I ask the cat. Sandy rolls his eyes behind Knight. Knight, to my surprise, begs me with a meow. “I guess that’s as good as it’s gonna get.” I take the little devil in my arms and pet his neck. “And don’t you dare scratch me again or I’ll get an exorcist to banish you to the pits of hell.”

Sandy cackles and walks over to his fridge. “Beer? Wine? Milk?” he asks me looking into his fridge. “I also have a really questionable smoothie.”

“Just water is good,” I reply, and he offers me a glass. Knight jumps off me but stays by my feet.

After a quick trip to the bathroom to get rid of the white make-up, Sandy walks back into the room and sits down, patting the space next to him. I join him, taking my shoes off, and he cuddles me, offering me his glass for clinking.

I can get used to this. As strange and abnormal as it feels not to have someone over my head dictating what I can or can’t do, it also feels... cozy.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

I nod and take another sip.

“Just... thinking. Are you? Okay, I mean?”

Sandy kisses my forehead and rubs my temple.

“I’m fine. But then again, I’m not the one who found out his whole life was a lie.”

I grab the glass with both hands and flick the rim with my nail again and again and again.

“How did I not see it? He’s always been weird and robotic at times, but a liar? A murderer? Why? Why would he kill his own brother?”

“People will do crazy shit for money, baby. Even to their own family,” he says.

“I can’t believe I never saw it before. The manipulation.”

“That’s because he conditioned you not to trust your own judgment. God knows how many doctors he paid off to misdiagnose you. And how much sugar you’ve consumed thinking it was your cure. He’s a fucked up human being, and he deserves to be locked up for all eternity.”

I nod. Just thinking about it gives me a migraine. I need to not be thinking about how my life is going to change drastically from now on. Even if it’s for the better.

“But enough about Fred,” I say and look up at his beautiful blue eyes, the ones that never lied to me, that rescued me. The ones that love me.

Sandy kisses me, and I kiss him back. Tongue and all, and so rough you’d think we’re fighting. But I can’t help it. I’ve missed him. It may have only been three days since I last saw him, but it’s more than enough for my body to start going through withdrawal symptoms.

I lie down, Sandy under me, his legs wrapped around my hips, and I don’t stop until we both have to come up for air. When he does, Sandy runs both hands over my head, slowly, massaging the fuzz that used to be my hair.

“I can’t believe what he did to you. I should have punched him up his colon for what he did to your hair,” he says.

“I let him do it. I was stupid.”

“You’re not. He used you. He used both of us. It’s his fault. Not yours,” he says.



“Do you-do you still like me without the hair?” I ask him.

His face softens and his smile radiates through every inch of my skin.

“Of course I do. With hair or without, with all my heart,” he says.

“Good,” I tell him. “Because it will take a while to grow back.”

Sandy’s smile turns into a smirk, and it makes me shiver.

“I’m sure I can find other parts to grip when I’m riding you,” he says, and that’s all it takes for my cock to go from soft and tickly to a fully erect penis ready for his service. “Oh, Mr. King. Is that your hand, sir, or are you just happy to see me?”

I lean down and kiss his nose.

“That’s my cock, Sandy Boo. Is your hole going to be happy to see it?”

“Always,” he replies, and I push harder on him, rubbing my cock against his balls over *all* the clothing that we shouldn’t be wearing anymore.

“Get naked,” I tell him. “Get that stupid suit off.”

“Make me,” he whispers, touching his finger to my face.

Well, I certainly don’t need to be told twice. I grab the shirt by the buttons and pull it apart. Buttons fly everywhere, the tearing sound combusting in the air and making my cock hungry for more.

Next, I unbuckle his belt and use both hands to pull it out of its loops, before ripping the suit pants open and taking them off him.

“Mr. King! Oh-la-la,” he says.

I cover his mouth with my palm and use my free hand to shush him.

“No talking until we get rid of this monstrosity,” I tell him.

He nods, my palm moving with his head as he does, and only then do I release him. I get work on getting both his suit jacket

and shirt off him. He sits up on his elbows and we juggle him out of them.

“You’re ridiculously overdressed. And also, that suit cost me a thousand bucks, so you’re paying for it,” he says.

“Oh, I’m burning it next. Trust me,” I say undoing the fly of my jeans, lifting the elastic band of my briefs to release my Kraken.

“Ha. Fucking. Ha. No way, sugar. Lube. Now,” Sandy says, putting his hand on my lower stomach to stop me.

“Agh. You really are no fun,” I groan and get up. With my cock bouncing out the fly, I run to the bedroom, rummage through his drawers and come out with the bottle of lube. “Gentlemen, start your anuses.”

Sandy bursts into laughter. He laughs so hard he has to roll to his side so he doesn’t choke.

“Where the fuck did that come from?” he manages to ask in between gasps.

I point to my lips. “Right here. My mouth.”

He grabs his stomach in stitches, and while I love seeing him so happy, I don’t think my cock likes being laughed at.

“God, I love you so much. Please don’t ever stop. Even when I tell you to.” He takes deep breath after deep breath, trying to compose himself, and my lungs follow his lead, filling me up with more joy than I know what to do with.

“I’ll try not to,” I reassure him.

“Pinky swear?” he asks and gives me his pinky.

I’m tempted to put my cock on it just to prove I mean it, but I don’t. I’m not twelve. Current mood aside. So I hook my pinky to his.

“Now give it to me, my King. Breed me like a royal,” he growls, and I obey.

I kneel on the sofa and open his legs. I rub my hands on his cock, still tucked into his briefs, and massage his balls gently

before pushing my fingers against his hole, the fabric stretching from the pressure.

I pinch the cotton with two hands and pull at it until I hear the crack of the seams. I pull more away to make a bigger hole, giving me access to... well, his hole. Squirting copious amounts of lube on my fingers, I spread it around his rim until he's wet and slippery, then palm some on my cock and press against him.

My gaze never leaves Sandy and his beautiful icy blue eyes, his face scrunching up the deeper I go until I hit his P-spot, and his eyes flutter over his lids and he lets out a big moan.

Someone bangs on the wall, making me jump, and Sandy opens his eyes, ruining the ambiance of the fucking.

"Oh for crying out loud," Sandy yells. He reaches over his head and slaps the wall with the heel of his palm. "Mr. Wexler. Get a wife. Or a doll. Jesus!"

"How do you know he wants a wife and not you?" I ask him, laughing.

"Good point," he says and bangs on the wall some more. "Shut up or come join us for fuck's sake."

I raise an eyebrow.

"What? It's a figure of speech."

I laugh. "Are you sure?"

"Listen, babe, we can discuss threesomes, foursomes, fivesomes, and then some all you want. But we're not inviting Mr. Wexler, and we're definitely not discussing this with your dick in my ass."

"True. Let me give you a good fucking and then we can discuss all your kinks. You seem to have a few."

I push myself all the way in, and whatever he was about to say becomes extinct in bouts of pleasure.

Holy mother of fucks, this is my life now, isn't it? With him, bickering like an old, obscene couple. If this is my life with him, I want to live forever.

## 24. SANDY



As promised, I get a good fucking. And another one. And another one. And... another one. Until my ass is as sore as Mount Everest is cold. Man, this guy can go on forever. What the fuck did his parents feed him when he was born? He's like Superman, but with the stamina for fucking instead of all those lame-ass superpowers.

"So you get to have all the fun?" I complain after he takes a water and bathroom break and sits back down on the sofa, revving his engine for round five.

"What are you talking about? You've had, like, seven orgasms already. How am I the only one having fun?" he says.

He's got a point. Val not only knows how to give a good fucking, but he knows how to make a man whimper with pleasure.

Before I met Val, the only man that could give me prostate orgasms was Bob. And Bob doesn't even have a body. He just has a six-inch dick and batteries and sleeps in my drawer like the good boy he is. But I'm guessing I'll have to say goodbye to Bob. I hope he takes it well.

"So? Ready for some more of my King Kong?" Val asks, and I cross my arms in front of my chest.

"Isn't your King Kong dead yet? Jeez. Just for reference, how many times can you go before you gotta sleep? Asking for a friend."

Val smiles the cheeky grin I know him for, and I fight the urge to kiss it off him.

“You’re calling a friend? When? Where?” he says.

“Well, trust me. I may need to if I’m gonna walk ever again. Can we, like, have a break? Watch a film? Have a Kit-Kat?”

Val shrugs, and his turquoise eyes sparkle. He’s just so goddamn gorgeous. Goddamn gorgeous even without his precious locks that frame his face so perfectly.

I can’t wait until his hair grows again.

“I can do a film. Nothing schmoopy, though. I want to laugh. Maybe I can look at your dick?”

I give him the middle finger and get up. Yup. Definitely gonna have difficulty walking straight tomorrow morning. Or later today, as it’s already five a.m.

I take the torn briefs off and throw them in the trash and find my pajama bottoms to put on. When I come back to the living room, I turn the TV on and find a stand-up show on Netflix and sit down next to Val.

He inches closer and leans his head on my shoulder. I put my arm around him and lean my head on his. The show is funny, but Val makes better jokes, to be honest. At least Val is laughing so that’s good.

When my arm goes numb, I lie down on the couch and pull Val on top of me, lying on my chest. I make snakes on his shaved skull with my finger. It will grow again. I know that. But I can’t stop mourning for it. Val may be free, but he’s not the same without his hair. I can tell by the sadness in his eyes every time he goes to brush it and realizes it’s not there anymore. This man has had long hair since he was a teen. I don’t think he knows how to be himself without it.

Fucking Fred! As if it wasn’t enough he took everything from him, he had to take his hair, too.

The snoring starts only a few minutes later, and while it is loud, I find it soothing. The tremble of it all, his rhythmic breathing. Knowing he feels safe enough to completely pass out and let all the crap from tonight disappear.

Eventually, I pass out, too.

And wake up to Val's lips wrapped around my cock and going to town on my erection.

"Uhm... good morning?" I rub my eyes and look at the windows. The curtains are drawn, so I can't tell what time it is.

Val startles and pauses when I speak like a dog caught with a bone. Well...

"And what would we be doing here, Mr. King?" I ask him, tapping the side of his head.

His mouth pops when he pulls out my dick, and his eyes bounce from left to right as if he's looking for help from the audience.

"I have no idea. I-I just woke up and it was there. In my mouth," he says.

I try to remain composed and not betray any emotions, but he's too damn cute for it.

"Well, don't let me interrupt you," I tell him, and Val smiles, getting back to polishing my morning wood.

"What is the time?" I ask myself, reaching for my phone.

The screen informs me it's only nine. It feels like I've been sleeping for hours and hours.

As I get busy checking all my notifications, Val is still stroking me in his mouth, thirsty like he hasn't seen a dick in years. But no complaints from me. One moment my cock feels cold, the next, he's sitting on me like I'm a motherfucking chair and rides me like there's no tomorrow.

When I put my phone down at the coffee table, he stops and looks at me.

"Don't mind me," he says.

Instead of answering, I grab his hands and pull him down to me so I can kiss that beautiful mouth.

"No, don't," he grumbles, avoiding my lips and squinting. "I've got morning breath."

“That makes two of us. Come here,” I tell him and try to kiss him, but gag. “Nevermind,” I cough. “Did you sleep with rotten fish in your mouth?”

He glances down at our connected... parts and sneers.

“Oh, fuck off. No kissing from me,” I tell him.

“Fine,” Val huffs and lifts himself off me and hops harder on my dick like I’m his personal jumping stick.

Since I don’t wanna go anywhere near his face—or risk a floppy dick—I run my hands along his thighs, up to his hips and his ass cheeks. I fist both cheeks and pull them apart, driving my cock deeper inside him, and Val looks at me through slitted eyes, his finger between his teeth, and a guttural sound comes from within him.

My stomach clenches and my balls tingle, and I know I’m close. I free his ass cheeks from my hands and grab his wrists, lifting them in front of me so I can lock hands with him. Our fingers lace together, and his beautiful turquoise eyes pierce me with their intensity. Dear Lord, I love that I don’t have to wear my glasses around him. That he loves and accepts everything about me.

I shoot inside him, and my breath catches as his fingers tighten around my hand until I can take another breath, and when I do, he leans down and nuzzles at my neck, peppering me with soft kisses.

“I love you,” he whispers beneath my ear, giving me goosebumps all over.

“I love you, too, my gorgeous King.”

We stay there, breathing in unison, for moments that feel like hours. I’d gladly stay like this for the rest of the day. Every day.

But, today is a new day for Val. A day of new beginnings. A new life.

“We need a shower,” I tell him.

He raises his head and wiggles his eyebrows at me.

“No. No funny business. No joint shower. We need to get a move on.”

He pouts a sad face.

“Pwease,” he whimpers.

How can I say no to that?

So, we have a shower. Which takes half an hour and we’ve probably drained the entire Atlantic of its water just so we can take turns blowing each other, but eventually we emerge from the bathroom with clean bodies, fresh breaths, sagging dicks, and empty ball sacks. Good start to the day as any.

“So, Mr. King. What would you like to do today?” I ask him when we’re both dressed. I give Val some of my looser outfits so he doesn’t have to wear last night’s clothes, and he looks gorgeous in my oversized pink sweatshirt and my blue jeans.

He shrugs.

“I don’t know. What’s on the schedule?” he asks.

I smile.

“Whatever you want, babe. Whatever the fuck you want,” I say.

Val’s lips quiver as he also smiles shyly and then bites his lower lip in deep thinking.

“Can we go... Christmas shopping? Like for trees and ornaments and Christmas sweaters and stuff?” he asks.

I laugh. I usually leave my Christmas shopping for the last week of December, if I even bother decorating, but why the hell not? Val deserves to be normal for a change.

“Sure. Let me make you unrecognizable first,” I tell him and find a pink matching hat for his head and a pair of black aviator glasses.

Just as we’re about to go, Knight emerges from wherever he hid to shield away from the trauma of watching his dad getting bred like a bitch and meows at Val.



Val crouches down and strokes Knight's neck with his index finger.

"Don't worry, little one. I'll be back," he says, and Knight rubs against his legs as a response.

I'm gonna kill this traitor cat one of these days.

"Come on, babe. Let's go," I say, and we leave the apartment.

When I open the front door, I have to shield my eyes as flashes start going off in every direction. What the fuck is happening?

I look around my front steps and the sidewalk, and it's full of cameramen, reporters, and paparazzi.

"How the hell did they find us?" I ask Val, and he shrugs as he takes me in his arms and covers me as if to protect me from them, not the other way round.

"They're vultures," he says and tries to get us through but finds it impossible with everyone mounting on us for an exclusive.

It might take me several moments, but I do get a fucking grip and brush Val's hand off me. He doesn't need to protect me. I'm supposed to be protecting him.

"People, people, can you clear the fuck away. This is private property," I shout at them, and they all pause.

For a second. Before they start firing again.

I look at Val and shake my head with a heavy sigh.

"I'm sorry," he mouths.

"It's not your fault."

I turn to look at the vultures again when something cold brushes my nose. I touch it, but it's already gone.

Val asks me what's wrong. Another cold brush against my cheek, but again, it's already gone by the time I reach for it.

And then I see it. We all see it. Little flakes of snow floating toward us, little white fairies raining on us.

I look at Val, who's also looking up with a huge, child-like smile, and I take his hand in mine.

“Let’s get out of here,” I tell him and pull him down the steps with me, pushing past all of them—who are also momentarily distracted by the snow—and breaking into a run until they stop following us.

“I’m sorry about them,” he says.

“You have nothing to apologize for.”

Val stops, and since we’re still holding hands, I stop with him and turn around to face him.

“I-I just... They will write crap about you, they will dig into your past. They will find your exes and make exposés. I’m just not worth it.”

My heart beats faster in my chest from all the things I want to tell him. All the stuff I want to reassure him with.

But I take a breath and start from the beginning.

“I love you. No matter what.”

His face remains sad, but he does give me one of those beautiful smiles, and I kiss it.

“Now, don’t be a party-poop. Let’s enjoy the snow while it lasts.”

“Enjoy how?” he smirks, and is it a good or a bad sign that I already know what he’s suggesting and it involves his tongue glued on my dick in a back alley?

“You dirty slut. Do you want your picture slapped across the papers with my dick in your mouth?”

He shrugs. “Nothing they haven’t seen before.”

“I like the way you think,” I laugh. “But come on. First shopping. Then we can discuss public BJs.”

“Deal.” Val raises his hand between us, and I shake it.

“Deal.”

We start walking again with joined hands, and just as we let the comfortable quiet take over and make this moment a sweet and mellow memory, Val opens his mouth.

“You never told me why you have a maid costume in your closet.”

I give him the side-eye and tame the smile that’s threatening to show.

“It’s a long story,” I tell him.

“I’m all ears.”

## 25. VAL



1 Year Later

There definitely was an adjustment period to life without Fred and to life with Sandy. There's no question which one I preferred.

Although Fred never admitted to killing my parents, the fraud he'd committed over a decade and a half was enough to put him behind bars for a long time. And even if he was able to get out on parole after half his sentence, he would be a disgraced manager and human being.

When the FBI searched my house, they found all kinds of medication in Fred's locked cabinets. Cabinets I didn't even know were there. Cabinets he'd built in secret with secret rooms. So Fred not only was a bad movie villain, he also had a lair. The bastard.

The majority of their findings were sugar pills, but there were also antipsychotics and lots of sleeping pills. Which would explain my "blackouts". It turns out it wasn't my brain deleting the data. I was really just asleep. Free for Fred to wreak his havoc as he saw fit.

They also investigated Dr. Rahid and all my previous doctors and medical experts. They'd all been bought off with money siphoned from my accounts into Fred's offshore.

Which pretty much left me with nothing in the bank. Even the house didn't belong to me anymore. Which was a blow I

didn't expect to hurt that much.

And as for my contract with the label? Well, that became void as soon as Fred was charged, which meant that my song, Sandy's song, Pink Eyes, returned to me.

The rest of the songs I'd sung over the years weren't really mine and not really my style anymore, so I couldn't care less for them.

Besides, after all the crap that went down, I turned my back on the pop career and I'm doing my own thing now. Sometimes it's rock, sometimes it's avant-garde, sometimes it's just plain old shit. But it's my shit, and that's all that matters.

"Val, your four o'clock is ready," Sandy says walking into my studio and interrupting the flow of a new song I'm working on.

It's still quite a mess. Something about Christmas, and white fluffy cats, and eating ass—but stylized because we need the day-time airplays. I haven't decided yet.

I owe a lot to him. And Isha. Without their scheming and intervention, I'd still be trapped in Fred's bullshit.

"Come on, sweetie. It's Christmas. Who the fuck am I meeting on Christmas Eve?" I whine.

It's not real, you know. I actually enjoy having him as my manager a million times more than I ever enjoyed Fred's control over everything. I trust Sandy with all my being. He takes no bullshit from anyone. Even me. He's got my best interest at heart, and the best part? I get to veto the shit I don't like. Not that there's many. He gets me. Fred just got what he wanted, and I had to play along.

"Well, it's your last appointment before our winter vacation, so get your butt in that office," he says.

"Who am I even meeting? I don't remember you telling me I have an appointment," I ask him.

Sandy rolls his eyes.

"If you paid attention when you're sucking me off, you'd know," he says and leaves the studio. As he passes the booth

to go back out, he presses the microphone. “Don’t be late. Five minutes.”

“Yes, boss,” I say and salute him, which serves me with another eye roll.

“*Meow*,” I hear by my feet, and when I look down, I find Knight rubbing around my stool, trying to get to me.

“How did you sneak in here, you silly thing?” I ask him and pick him up.

That’s another thing I didn’t see in my life—other than Sandy. A cat as a pet. Or, don’t they say the cats are the masters and we’re their pets? It sounds about right with Knight around. He thinks he controls the house, but I’ll tell you, if we forget to feed him, he goes batshit crazy. If he really was the owner, though, wouldn’t he know to feed himself?

I go out of the studio and walk through the corridors of the new house I bought with all the money Pink Eyes made me. Turns out, releasing your own music can be lucrative. Especially for someone with my history. The media still talk about Fred’s abuse and my entrapment. I doubt they’ll ever stop writing articles about it. Or dissertations, as Sandy discovered one day when he was doing his research.

The house’s much smaller, but I don’t care much about it. That old house was full of crap memories, anyway. This new house is filled with love and creativity and good people.

Like Jorge, who’s still my driver, and Magda who’s still my cook. And of course, I wouldn’t be the pink-haired punk without Cecile. And Isha who’s my official stylist. When she’s not bickering with Sandy about the clothes she picks.

“Let’s see who the hell can’t wait to meet me in January, Knight, shall we?” I ask the cat when I reach the office.

I open the door and find Sandy sitting on my desk, on all fours, wearing a maid costume. Not the same one he used to have. We used that one, one time too many, and it didn’t survive. It’s resting in peace in a landfill now.

But the new one is probably going to meet its predecessor in landfill heaven soon. Because not only is Sandy sitting on my

desk on all fours, but his bare ass is also staring at me from underneath the worn skirt of the costume. His hole smiling, inviting me in.

“You’re late, Mr. King. Come and fuck me now before I decide to punish you for your lack of punctuality.”

My dick goes hard, and Knight jumps off my hands with a hiss and meow and trots off into another room. Probably to protect himself from whatever’s about to go down. Not that he hasn’t witnessed enough, the little perv.

“If I must,” I sigh and close the door behind me. “But I’m not going to enjoy it. I was hoping for some eggnog and a Christmas movie.”

Sandy slits his eyes and bites his lower lip.

“We’ve got an entire four weeks of vacation to do just that.”

“Okay. If we’re going to use logic. I guess you’re right. Were you hoping I’d climb on the desk, because, you know, my knees are a bit fucked.”

“All right, grandpa,” Sandy says and steps down to the floor, still bent over the desk. “You’ve five seconds for entry, or you’re bottoming.”

“Fine,” I laugh and go down to eat his ass.

Life’s good with Sandy. It’s fun. And intoxicating. And creative. And full of lube. And cum. And kisses. And love. And so much snark.

It’s what all happy ever afters should look like.

Thank you for reading my Rapunzel retelling.

[Do you want a bigger slice of Val’s and Sandy’s happy-ever-after life? Well, you can get it by clicking right here, and enjoy more of this naughty couple and their scandalous Christmas.](#)

If the link isn’t working, you can copy-paste the below link on your browser:

[rhyswritesromance.com/download-hairheart-bonus](http://rhyswritesromance.com/download-hairheart-bonus)

## A LETTER FROM RHYS

So... Rapunzel.

I wish I could tell you how or why I decided to retell this fairy tale other than the fact that I love Rapunzel and I've had a Rapunzel-esque plot bunny for years (after a dream).

But the plot bunny was paranormal, and I think the contemporary version was kind of born out of that.

Nothing to say I'll never write that paranormal version (under my Rhys Lawless pen name, of course), but I'm so happy with how this book came out.

If you follow pop culture in the slightest, you may know a big female pop star is under conservatorship and there are lots of questions on the need for it. Reading about it gave me the perfect excuse for the way to trap Val, the same way Rapunzel was trapped by Gothel.

And I was afraid that because of it, it might come out a bit darker and angsty.

Well, was I proven wrong!

Val and Sandy decided to take over conversation and basically flipped the table on me.

“Why should we be depressed and suicidal when we can be fun and snarky?” they asked. And I listened.

Well, okay, they didn't *say* it. But you get what I mean.

I think it came out of Val's need to feel normal, human almost. He's been trapped for so long, he doesn't know what normal



is. But he knows arguing with someone who doesn't treat him like he's made of china, is the most adult he's ever felt.

And of course, because he's been denied his adolescence, in and out of rehab and being on the spotlight all the time, he may be a bit childish for his age.

Those were all things that came naturally, as if Val was telling me his story and I was just the conduit through whom he delivers it to you.

So I just tagged along for the ride. And boy what a ride it was.

It taught me a lot. And it showed me I haven't lost my humor (which I thought I'd lost years ago). Now I get, my humor might be a bit weird, dark and bitchy for your taste. You might not have laughed your ass off. That's fine. I did. And I did at a time when I really needed it. So I'm super proud of myself and this book.

It's different. It's weird. It doesn't take itself too seriously. And it gave me a little bit of light in a very dark time in my life. I hope it did the same for you.

If you'd like more fairy tale retellings, by me, and the rest of the authors in this series, then make sure you tell us.

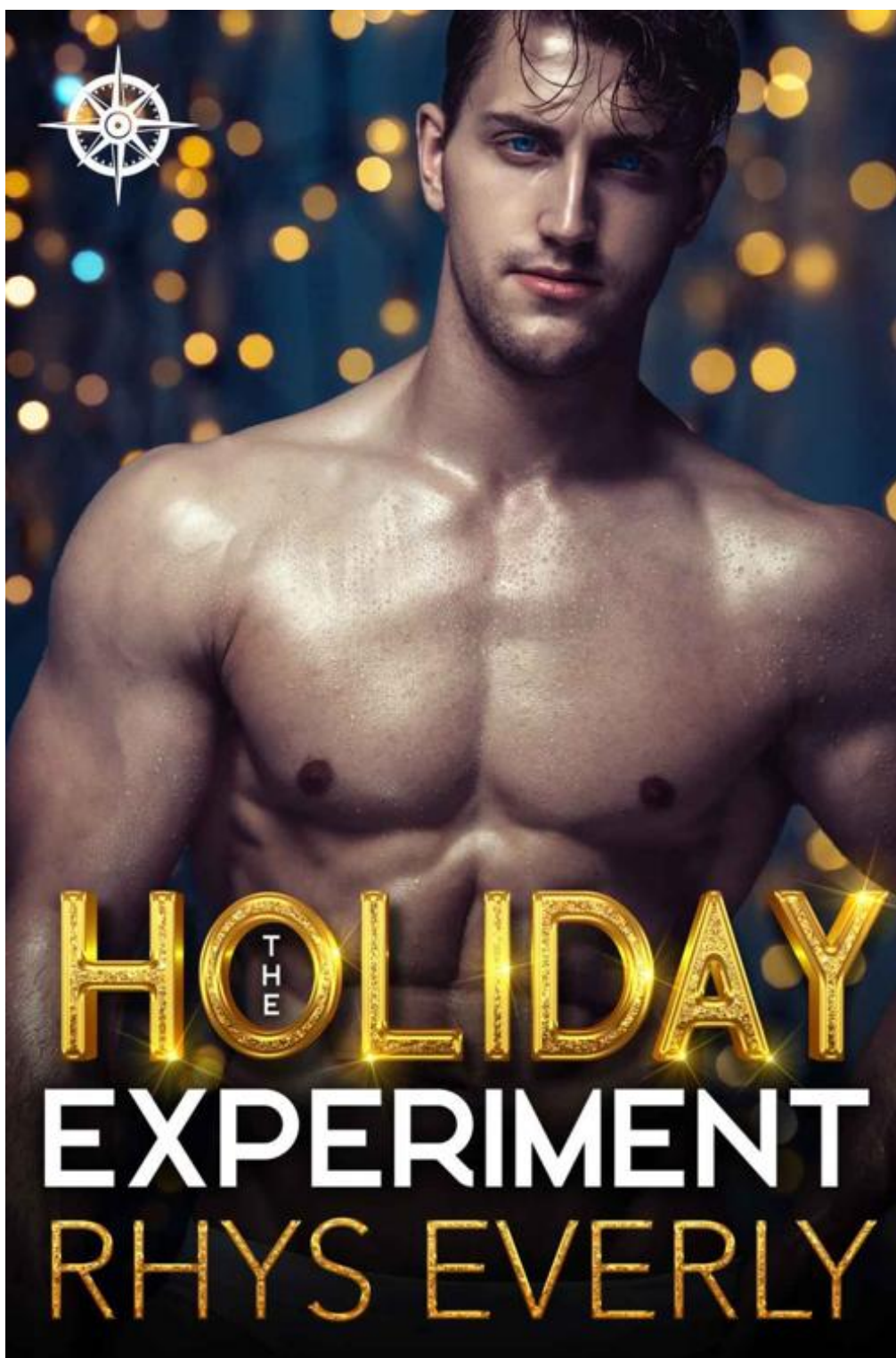
By reviewing, emailing us, posting online, in any way or any form you want. Because there are lots of ideas and an endless supply of inspiration by us all.

And as for surviving in these messed up times, keep strong, carry on, and read all the books you can.

Love and hugs,

Rhys Everly

November 2020



**THE HOLIDAY  
EXPERIMENT**  
RHYS EVERLY

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN?



So you picked up the book and you're wondering what the compass on the cover means?

The answer is quite simple.

The compass represents the Mayberry Holm universe and signifies that the book is part of it.

All that means is that the books are set in the same island (Mayberry Holm) and contain some interconnected characters, however as a standalone you don't need to have read all the other books to enjoy this one.

For more information on the Mayberry Holm universe, you can visit my website at [rhyswritesromance.com/mayberry-holm](http://rhyswritesromance.com/mayberry-holm)

# 1. ENZO



“M m, this is so fucking good,” I said, stuffing my mouth with the pasta and ground beef dressed in tomato sauce and Italian herbs.

I may be back home with my tail between my legs, but I was certainly content with having Mom’s cooking back in my life.

“Yeah, I make a mean fucking ziti, don’t I?” Mom said with a huge smile as she pinched a mountain of flour, sprinkled it over the pastry, and then rolled it some more.

That was my mom for you. Always cooking, always baking, always casting her little kitchen spells.

Even though I wasn’t exactly hungry—I was so used to eating at odd times with college and the crazy rhythms of Boston—only a whiff of my mom’s cooking was enough to open the floodgates.

*Weight gain, here we go, I suppose.*

“Stop fishing for compliments, woman. You know you’re good. The whole island tells you daily, so let me enjoy this dish,” I told her with a grin.

She gave me the stink eye but decided not to say anything for a change. Instead, she focused on her pastry and preparing the croissants for her bakery. Even though she had the employees to do the job every morning, she still couldn’t stop working, not even at home.

But she was quiet, unusual for an American-Italian mama, especially mine, so I recognized it for what it was.

Happiness that her wayward son was back home.

I loved giving her that joy, but frankly, I wished I wasn't back home. I wished the circumstances were different.

I'd spent all my life in Mayberry Holm, always dreaming of escaping this little island off the coast of the Atlantic. This wasn't the place to have a life and build a career. It wasn't Boston.

But then again, Boston took me for a fool, took everything I had, and left me high and dry like a bad lay.

So here I was, back home at twenty-three, feeling like a failure.

"Something on your mind?" she asked without looking away from her task.

I looked at the back of her head, trying for the millionth time to figure out how she did it. How she could read me like an open book. Although, to be fair to her, she could read everyone like an open book.

You'd think I'd be used to it by now, but I wasn't. There was nothing I could hide from my mother. Hell, she even came out for me by dressing the house in all the rainbows she could find.

But that was my life in the D'Agostino household. Always an adventure. Always unconventional. Always happy. Until it wasn't anymore.

"No. Erm...just stressing about this interview," I replied.

"You've grown up in a café. That job's yours, even if you take your penis out and wave it at them. There's something else eating at you," she said, still focusing on her pastry.

"Um...if I took my penis out and waved it at my interviewer, they'd arrest me for indecent exposure, mother. You're a businesswoman. You should know this," I said.

"Don't change the subject."

"Well, if you don't want me to change the subject, don't make the subject so wild," I said with an added eyeroll.

Mom put a spoonful of butter in the pastry and folded it before she turned around to look me in the eyes.

“I know what happened must hurt, sweetheart, but don’t see this as a failure. See it as an opportunity to regroup. I know you don’t like being home, but try not to let it get you down,” she said.

There was no hurt in her expression, but it still pained me to have her speak the words aloud.

“You know I love you—”

“Oh, shut up, Enzo. I know you do. Who wouldn’t? I’m a fabulous human and an even more fabulous mother. I know I’ve got nothing to do with what’s going on in that pretty little head of yours,” she said.

I must have gotten used to not living with her because her directness surprised me. How could I have forgotten what an amazing, intuitive mom I had?

“You know you can leave any time you want. If not Boston, maybe New York? I won’t be offended. I know there’s more life out there for you than here—”

I dropped my fork—quite a sin in this household—and pushed back my chair to take hold of Mom’s hands.

“I wouldn’t ask that of you after everything you’ve done for me. I don’t want to put more burdens on you. I’m an adult. And like the adult I am, I’m gonna live with my mommy until I can figure out what to do with my life and how,” I said in the best baby voice I could conjure. “Even if it kills me,” I told her.

Mom laughed and hugged me with her full, flour-dusted self. Even though I had to leave for my interview in five minutes, I didn’t complain.

“Fine. But be warned, I *won’t* charge you rent. And you better stop being so dramatic. Mayberry Holm is a lovely place with lovely people. Who knows. Maybe you’ll even get to meet someone special while you’re here,” she told me when we separated and promptly dusted ourselves.

“Huh! Fat chance of that happening,” I told her and resumed my ziti eating.

“Hey! What have I taught you about the law of attraction?” Mom said, pointing a stern finger at me.

She might not get strict very often, but she always turned into a *mean* caring mom whenever I brought myself down.

“Whatever I focus on, that’s what I’ll attract,” I mumbled.

When other kids were playing baseball in their backyard with their dads and hanging out with their friends, I was learning the properties of crystals.

So it was no surprise that the law of attraction rolled off my tongue. I tried to be positive like I’d been taught. I always saw the good in everything. But after the failure I’d been subjected to, it was hard.

Or maybe I’d forgotten my magical upbringing and needed a solid reminder.

Whatever it was, I needed to knock it down. No one wanted to hire a humbug, and I refused to be one when Christmas, my favorite time of the year, was just around the corner.

Whatever happened was in the past. It was time to move on.

“Exactly. So how about we focus on some of the positives, like the fact you get to be home for Christmas and spend some time with your goddaughter and your best friend?”

“I guess,” I replied and licked my plate clean before putting it in the dishwasher.

“Here,” she said, and I turned to see her open a cabinet and take out a crystal necklace.

She held it in her hands for a few moments with her eyes closed, and I watched as her lips moved silently, prayer-like, before passing me the rose quartz necklace with a warm smile.

“I don’t need love, Mother,” I told her, reluctantly taking the love crystal from her.

“Nonsense. Everyone needs love. Besides, rose quartz is also good for peace and balance, which you so obviously and

desperately need.” She waved a sassy hand in front of me, and I glared at her.

Not that she wasn’t right.

She absolutely was.

But I hated that she always was.

Do you know how horrible it is to never win an argument with your mother?

And do you know how irritating it is to always lose arguments that lead to your happiness and well-being?

Super annoying. Borderline child abuse, in fact.

But that was Lilian D’Agostino for you.

Super-annoying, super-affectionate, super-caring, and super-magical mom-extraordinaire.

“Fine. I’ll wear your stupid balance and peace crystal, but you better not have put a spell on this, or I’ll be upset,” I said and put the necklace on.

Mom scoffed.

“What kind of spell would I put on a crystal, Enzo dear?”

I shrugged.

“I don’t know. It wouldn’t surprise me if you made me fall in love with someone on this island just so I forget my woes,” I said through slitted eyes.

“Now, now. Would that be so terrible? Falling in love with someone on the island. Not the spell part. You know I’d never do that without your permission.”

We both knew that was a lie, but I let it slide for now.

“I don’t need to fall in love,” I said. “I’m still young. I just want to live my life, have fun, be successful. I just need to... how did you put it? Regroup, that’s it.”

Mom sighed and picked up the rolling pin again, getting busy with the pastry.

“Even fun gets boring when it’s constant,” she said.



“Speak for yourself, Lilian,” I told her, planting a kiss on her cheek before going to the hallway to put on my winter coat and grab my keys.

“Good luck!” she sang.

“Like you said, I’ll get the job even if I wave them my penis...” I replied and closed the door behind me to the sound of her heart-warming laughter.

I sighed as I climbed onto my moped and thought back to what she’d said.

I was home with my mom again and within walking distance from my best friend and goddaughter.

So what if I’d failed so big back in Boston that I couldn’t even face myself in the mirror? No one knew that here.

And besides, maybe Mayberry Holm had gained some new hotties for me to have fun with while I “regrouped.”

As I turned the engine on and drove away, I heard Mom singing from inside, a beautiful melodic song she’d made up when I was younger. One of many.

I may complain sometimes, but I had the best mom in the world.

And truth be told, all things considered, it was good to be home.

## 2. CARSON



“P eek-aaah,” I started and hid behind my hands. “Boo!”  
Ella looked at me as if I was an idiot.

I remembered the times she would literally pee herself laughing from something so simple.

“I guess you’re too old for peekaboo, aren’t you?” I told her, and she kept staring at me with the beautiful gray eyes she’d inherited from her dad. “Don’t give me that look, Missy. A few months ago, peekaboo was all the rage. It’s not my fault you’re growing faster than any of us care for,” I told her.

Crickets, yet again.

I sighed and leaned on the tray of her highchair.

“I’ll level with you, baby girl. You’re not the only one getting older than any of us cares for. I’m an old fu...fudge. An old fudge, and I’m only getting older.”

Ella tilted her head to the side, and her raven-black hair stuck to her food-smearred face.

“And what have I achieved in my life? Absolute zero. I haven’t been able to get a man to look at me, let alone be with me, and I’ve been salivating over a younger guy like a creep for the better part of two years. Other men have husbands, kids, the whole lot at my age, and what do I have? Zilch,” I said.

My beautiful two-year-old niece didn’t react. Instead, she grabbed a carrot stick and stuffed it in her mouth as if she knew my pity party was too laughable to even laugh.

“I mean, I would do something about my stupid, inappropriate crush, but then, of course, that big giant came in and swooped my crush off his feet. So what’s a man to do?”

Said giant being an ex-Navy SEAL and all, there was very little I could do anyway.

I looked at her as if she would magically give me the answer, but naturally, she did nothing of the sort. Just kept staring at me like I was the strangest creature in the world.

“I’ll tell you what I ought to do. Get back to work and stop obsessing over younger men I could never get in my life,” I said. “I don’t know how Darren did it, but fudge me. If I wasn’t so mad at him, I’d be admiring him for bagging that young, little gigolo.”

“Chick-olo,” Ella mumbled and chuckled, making me facepalm.

“My baby girl, out of all the words I said, that’s the one you’re gonna parrot?”

As if she knew what she’d done, she kept saying *chickolo* until I had no other option but to ignore her.

Terrible twos were the worst.

Apparently.

Not that I would know from firsthand experience. Being childless and all.

My phone rang, and I reached across the table only to find the familiar name on my screen.

Hwan.

Oh, Hwan.

My *pathetic* crush.

Even if I tried to avoid him, how could I when he was one of my closest friends?

He’d worked for me for years before opening his own bubble tea shop, but even then, that didn’t mean I hardly ever laid eyes on him. We lived on the same small island in practically

the same neighborhood, and I lent a hand every now and again until he hired more people.

“Hey, Hwan,” I answered the call and let out one of those long, drawn-out sighs I only reserved for him.

“Hey, sweetie,” he sang in my ear, and my sigh turned to two.

“Hi,” I said.

“You won’t believe it. It ha—wait a minute. Is that Ella?”

“Yup.”

“Why is she saying gigolo?” he asked.

“She’s not. She’s saying chickolo.”

“And the difference is?”

“Marginal,” I said.

“Right. Were you talking to her about Darren again?”

I nodded even though he couldn’t see me.

“Seriously, Carson. You need to get over the di—wait, I’m not on speaker, am I?”

“You’re not.”

“Dickbag! You need to get over that trash of the earth. It’s been five years already.”

He continued with his usual spiel. Everyone’s usual spiel, really, but I tuned him out. I had gotten over Darren and his betrayal. Kind of.

Did it still hurt having your boyfriend of ten years tell you he’s leaving you for a younger, fresher, better model? Yep, even after five years, but I was over Darren and his cheating ass.

But somehow, I’d managed to find myself in another sticky situation, this one more delicate and sensitive than my Darren-induced heartbreak.

Being in love with a man fifteen years your senior was definitely not what I wanted to be known for, so I pretended to still be hurt by my ex’s betrayal lest anyone find out what a

terribly stupid man I was or how ironic it was that I would fall for a twink when my ex left me for one too.

“How many ways can I tell you I’m undateable before you believe me? You think I haven’t tried to get over him?” And by him, I meant Hwan, of course, but Hwan didn’t need to know that. “No one wants to date me. I’m an aging workaholic with zero personality and zero loveable quirks.”

“That’s most definitely not true, Carson, but it’s okay. I’ll kick your ass when you drop by Bubble Bubble,” he replied in his usual cheerful snark.

“Why am I dropping by exactly?” I asked.

“Because you love me, and I’m your best friend,” he said.

If only he knew how true his statement was.

“Nah. That can’t be it.”

He huffed, and I imagined him rolling his eyes at me as if he was standing right in front of me.

“I got your napkin delivery by accident. Again,” he said.

“Again?”

“Again. I don’t know how you always manage to screw it up, but you know you don’t need an excuse to stop by, right?”

“It’s not an excuse. It’s my fucking—” I stopped and looked at Ella, hoping she hadn’t heard my bad word, but she was still busy singing chickolo at the top of her lungs.

*Good girl.*

“It’s the fudging autocorrect, or autofill, or whatever, on my laptop. I let you use it once to order your stuff, and it won’t stop thinking I’m you,” I explain.

Which is the absolute truth.

And one of the reasons I feel haunted by this young man I neither should nor could have.

“God, you’re such a grandpa, Carson. Bring your laptop when you come in, and I’ll erase any traces of my existence in your browser.”

*How about my heart? Can you erase all the traces you've left in my heart? Because they're starting to get ridiculous. And heavy. And annoying. So annoying.*

“Hello? Earth to Carson?”

“Yeah. Huh?”

“I said, see you soon?”

I nodded again.

“See you soon, yeah.”

An hour later, my brother, Cole, returned from another night shift, so I left him with his daughter—even in his zombie, exhausted state—and made my way to Bubble Bubble before going to work.

As soon as I saw the young pink-haired man behind the counter, my heart clenched in my chest, and I had to catch my breath or risk embarrassing myself. Which wouldn't be the first time.

“Are you okay, dear?” he asked me mockingly as soon as he saw me.

His boyfriend, the grumpy giant that had turned into a teddy bear in the hands of Hwan, appeared behind him and nodded his greeting.

“Um...yeah,” I started, knowing full well that Parker, Hwan's ex-Navy SEAL of a boyfriend, was aware of my crush on Hwan.

I glanced around the pink-and-white café, only to find it littered with pink glittery garlands and fairy lights.

“All those Christmas decorations are giving me a heart attack,” I said.

Which, once again, wasn't entirely false.

It was December.

And Christmas was just around the corner.

As was my birthday. On Christmas Day.

I wasn't looking forward to it, let me tell you that.

“Oh, shut up. ‘Tis the season. Even he’s excited for it,” Hwan answered and pointed to the large man beside him, only for him to scowl at Hwan.

Hwan, as usual, ignored him like he was nothing but a harmless stuffed animal with a sweet tooth.

Which he was.

Although he wasn’t harmless.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Pretend like you don’t know how crazy busy it gets in December. I can’t wait for January already,” I said and took the bubble tea Hwan had already made. Thai milk tea with tapioca.

“I honestly don’t get why you always turn into the Grinch every year,” he insisted.

“It’s not just me, young innocent Hwan. It’s anyone that works in this industry,” I told him.

“I’m not a Grinch.”

“I meant normal people in this industry.”

Hwan raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms, but he knew exactly what I was talking about.

The young Korean man was anything but normal with his flamboyant personality, abundant smiles, and colorful, ever-changing hair.

He was an exception if I ever met one.

“Whatever. I choose to see it as the time to make money and bring people joy,” he replied, and Parker shrugged.

“Whatever,” I grumbled, even though that was so not like me. I couldn’t stand being in Hwan’s presence while Parker was there. *Especially* now that Parker was there. Because it only told me what I knew already and had been trying to do all this time.

That I needed to get over Hwan.

“Where are my napkins, bitch?” I asked the young man with humor in my tone, and he responded by narrowing his eyes

and pointing behind the counter.

“Is that it?” I asked when I saw just one box. “I’m pretty sure I ordered five.”

“Oh, they’re all here, but I assumed you couldn’t carry all of them in one go.”

I looked from Hwan to Parker and nodded.

“Yeah. I’ll take one and get everyone to pick a box up on their way in,” I said, staring at the box and *not* the embrace Parker had initiated by putting his arms around Hwan’s small waist.

They were so cute together that it made me sick, and I was an even bigger creep for still feeling that way about Hwan when he was absolutely taken.

“Anyway, I should get going. I need to catch my cleaner before she leaves without dusting the light fittings,” I said and went around the counter, picked up the box, and made my way toward the door.

*I need to get over Hwan now.*

Before I embarrassed myself any further or lost my good friend.

The door was opening as I approached, and the man entering the shop collided with me, losing his balance and falling on his ass.

I dropped the box of napkins to the side and rushed to help the brunet man.

The man wore an oversized wool jacket over a bohemian print button-down and a pair of ripped jeans.

“Are you okay?” I asked, leaning down and offering him my hand. The guy looked up, and I recognized the blue sapphire eyes and innocent-looking face of Enzo D’Agostino. “Enzo!”

Enzo smirked at me and took the offer of my hand. I helped him up. A little pink gemstone hung from his neck, which was typical Enzo. He and his mom were the...eccentric type, to put it mildly.



I hadn't seen him in forever, but I couldn't help the familiarity that hit me in his presence. I'd watched the young man grow up, gotten him out of trouble even when he didn't deserve it, and helped him with his homework too many times to count.

Him and my brother.

The inseparable duo.

I'd half expected Cole to follow Enzo to Boston when he went off to college, even if my brother wasn't the college type, but he'd met Sandra at the time, so he had been all loved up.

But Enzo...

He'd done it.

He'd gone away and made something of himself.

And why wouldn't he?

He was young, sweet, and from what I could see, grown to be quite the looker.

*Perv alert.*

I needed to stop noticing how handsome men half my age were. It wasn't appropriate.

"Carson!" he replied with wide eyes and squeezed my hand tighter before he apparently realized and let go.

It bothered me when he let go, but I didn't know why, so I chose to ignore it.

"You're back," I said. "When did you get back?"

"Just yesterday," he answered.

"Strange. Cole didn't say anything."

Enzo squinted and bit his lip.

"Yeah...um...I haven't told him yet. I didn't get a chance, and I'm sure he's busy with Ella and work."

"Yeah, he is pretty busy. But I'm sure he'll make time for his buddy. How long are you staying?"

He looked at the floor and pursed his lips from side to side before he answered.

“For the foreseeable future,” he said.

He looked up and offered me an insecure smile, which wasn’t like Enzo whatsoever, and then looked at the counter.

“Anyway, I should...I’ve got an interview,” he pointed at Hwan, and I glanced at my friend and his boyfriend.

Hwan waved at us with a smirk that I couldn’t quite understand, and I nodded.

“You-you’re interviewing for a job here?” I asked in disbelief.

Enzo nodded.

“Yeah, is that...is that a problem?”

Probably not, but yet again, I was reminded how small this island could be, even with over ten thousand people living on it.

“No. Problem? No problem at all. I need to get to the restaurant. But listen, we should catch up,” I said and bent to pick up the box I’d dropped.

When I stood straight again, Enzo was looking above me, and I followed his gaze.

A sprig of mistletoe—the actual stuff with the white berries, not the red that everyone mistook for mistletoe—hung above our heads.

Enzo looked at me, and I looked at him.

When did it get hard to breathe?

I was sure it was because Hwan and Parker were watching us and not because I was standing under mistletoe with a young, attractive man.

*One hundred percent sure.*

“Do we...kiss?” Enzo whispered.

“What?” I asked, a little louder than I meant to.

Enzo’s eyes popped wide open, and he shook his head in panic.

“I was just...I was kidding. Obviously. Sorry. That came out of left field,” he rushed to add.

I didn't know how, but I managed to take a deep breath and relax. At least on the inside. I had no idea how I looked on the outside.

“Oh yeah. I know. Don't worry.”

Enzo bit his lip again, his hand fiddling with the pink gemstone on his necklace.

“I'll catch you later. We should catch up. Why don't you drop by the Grill later, and we can...”

*Don't say catch up. Don't say catch up. Don't say—*

“Catch up,” I said and rolled my eyes internally.

Why did I sound like a buffoon all of a sudden?

“Yeah. Sure. We can *catch up*,” he said and winked before walking away from me and toward Hwan.

What the hell just happened?

### 3. ENZO



Why did I suddenly feel like I'd been punched in the gut by a beautiful, bittersweet memory?

Oh yeah. Probably because I'd just bumped into Carson Williams and asked him to kiss me like a goof.

And probably because he'd acted shocked and horrified by my non-starter of a joke, which felt like a good licking of rejection.

Not that I'd had enough of that in the last few months.

After four years and a hundred miles of distance, I didn't think my teenage crush would still be there, mocking me in the back of my head, but surprise, surprise, it was.

Who could have known?

It wasn't as if I hadn't dated and slept with more men than I had any inclination to count.

It wasn't as if I had moved on with my life and trying to make something of myself.

And it wasn't as if I was back home feeling like a failure, all those feelings I'd harbored for Carson when I was coming to my sexual awakening were still there, as familiar as anything. Like nothing had changed. No time passed.

Which was just what I needed.

Note the sarcasm.

I watched him leave the bubble tea shop and couldn't control my eyes as they wandered to his ass.

*Damn, he still fills those jeans extremely well.*

“Hi,” someone said behind me, bringing me back to my senses.

*That’s right, Enzo. Get your head out of your ass and do the job you came here to do.*

*Or, more accurately, I guess, get your head out of Carson’s ass.*

I spun around and put my best friend’s older brother out of my mind—as much as possible, of course. I was still human after all—and approached the young man with the pink hair that had taken this island by storm merely a week ago. A week ago since his Instagram live went viral as he and his boyfriend took on a bunch of thugs trying to destroy his café.

His boyfriend was also there, and as I approached them, I realized how polar opposite they looked.

I’d seen the video a couple times and had been impressed with how the man had handled the criminals, but I’d never actually seen the young bubble tea shop owner and the bulking man together in the same frame. Their size difference was striking.

And they also looked like they were from different planets. How that had ever turned into a relationship, I didn’t know, but I admired it.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m here for the barista interview.”

I offered my hand to the young man, Hwan, and he took it with a warm, wide smile.

“I assumed. I’m Hwan, and this is my-erm-Parker,” he said.

Parker took my hand in a firm shake that made me *almost* wince.

Jesus, that man was strong.

And even though I wasn’t that much smaller than him, I felt like fucking Thumbellina under his gaze.

“I’m Enzo,” I said, looking from one to the other.

Hwan came out from behind the counter and pointed to a corner table, and I followed him.

“Would you like any water? Bubble tea? Coffee?”

I took a seat and rubbed my hands on my jeans.

“A glass of water would be perfection,” I said.

*A glass of water would be perfection? What the fuck? Who says that?*

“Sure,” he replied and returned moments later with a big glass of iced water.

“Nervous?” he asked as I lifted the glass to my lips, only to make a mess by spilling some on my shirt.

“Sorry. I don’t know why. I’ve got a lot of experience—” I started and remembered Mom’s words.

*Even if you shake your penis...*

Yeah, that wasn’t going to happen, but dammit, now it was all I could think about.

Since when did I get nervous about a simple interview for a barista job?

Probably around the same time my life came crashing down.

“Oh no, I know all that. Your mom is Lilian, isn’t she?”

I nodded.

Of course, he knew my mother. Everyone did. How could I have forgotten?

“I love the Happy Witch Café. Before I opened this place, I frequented your mom’s café. I may have had a few too many slices of her abundance cinnamon buns, but don’t tell anyone. And what do you know? They worked.”

He stretched his hands out and looked at his shop.

I smiled.

I knew it was a point of contention for a lot of people, but Mom’s magical goods tended to deliver on the promise.

Which explained how her business was still thriving and had hundreds of loyal patrons after all these years.

*A happy witch was a wealthy witch.*

One of Mom's mantras.

"You have a great café," I said.

Hwan nodded and raised an eyebrow as he leaned on the table.

"So does your mom. So the question of the hour is, why not get a job there?"

I could tell he was serious, but there was a playfulness to his voice that put me at ease.

"Ah, yeah. Because if I did, I'd have her plotting my marriage, kids, and retirement with every eligible gay that passed through the bakery, so I'd rather have a tiny *smidge* of independence while I'm here. Yeah, my mom has a thing for romance that edges on inappropriate."

Hwan laughed and put his hands up as if in surrender.

"That's fair. And when you say while you're here, how long are you planning on *being* here?"

"Well..." I started.

What I wanted to say was only a few weeks. Maybe until the holidays and the January slump passed. But considering I had nowhere else to go and no one missing me in the big city, the answer was...

"I don't know. I've got no plans for the foreseeable future and a lot of free time," I told him, and he seemed pleased with my answer.

The more we talked—and the more probing questions he asked—the more I felt like I was nailing this and like I knew the man.

And then, of course, it hit me.

"You went to school here, didn't you?" I asked him.

He seemed to be confused about my question but nodded anyway.

“I think I remember you. I think I’m a year younger, so we never really interacted, but I believe you were having some issues at school—”

“With bullies? Yeah. You remember right.”

Even though the subject should make him look miserable, he didn’t appear to be.

“I’m sorry. Those guys were horrible to you,” I said.

He waved his hand dismissively and laughed.

“That’s ancient history. They’re all broke-ass misery guts, and I’m…well, I’m thriving, aren’t I?”

I laughed and agreed with him.

What I didn’t tell him, because I didn’t know how much of a compliment or a relief it would be, was that his troubles made things better for Cole and me. If it wasn’t for his fiery grandma and her fierce actions, we probably would have been bullied too.

Not that either of us was as effeminate as Hwan, but bullies had a way of picking you apart regardless of your personality. It was like they had their own kind of gaydar. And I assumed many of them had an actual gaydar too, even if they were possibly in denial. But that was a subject for a thesis, not to ponder while trying to get a job.

“Well, I think I’ve asked everything I can think of. I think there’s only one last test to pass,” he said and stood.

Before I could ask him what he meant, Parker came up behind him, crossed his arms, gave me the once over, and huffed.

“Do you do drugs?” he asked.

“Erm…”

*Does weed count?*

“No,” I said before I overthought this.

“Do you have siblings or family members with a criminal background?”



I shook my head, unsure of what it was with the weird interrogation, and then it hit me.

*The viral video!*

“I swear I haven’t committed any crimes, and I don’t have any tickets or arrests. If you want to do a background check, that’s ab—”

“You have to excuse him,” Hwan said and slapped Parker’s chest affectionately.

I focused on their connection and let out an involuntary sigh.

They looked damn hot together.

“He’s just being overprotective. Our last employee—”

“Had to go all of a sudden, so we’re trying to find someone trustworthy,” Parker said with a glower at his boyfriend, making me wonder if that was the real story.

*Did it have something to do with the viral video?*

“Yeah. That’s right,” Hwan said. “Are you friends with Carson Williams? You looked like you knew each other.”

“His brother is my best friend, and I’m his niece’s godfather,” I said.

Hwan nodded.

“Well, that seals it then. You’re one of us, and you can be trusted,” he said and looked to Parker for approval.

Parker only gave a half-nod before Hwan turned to me again.

“You’re hired. When would you like to start?” he asked.

I had no idea what he meant by “one of us” and with “can be trusted,” but I was hoping I’d find out from Carson. Maybe he could enlighten me on what the hell happened in the shop a week or so ago and whether I needed to worry.

“Great. Thank you. I-I can start tomorrow,” I said, rubbing the rose quartz hanging off my neck.

“How does tomorrow noon sound?”

“Tomorrow noon sounds great,” I answered.

Hwan looked down at my necklace, and that was when I realized I was holding it between my fingers.

“Is that one of your mom’s?”

“Yes. She has an affinity for crystals and gifting them to people who need them,” I said.

“It looks great. What’s it for?” he asked.

I wanted to say peace and calm because that had been the primary function, but that would open a different can of worms I didn’t particularly want to open.

“Love,” I said instead.

“Awww, that’s awesome. I can’t wait to see how it works out for you. Or maybe it already has?”

I wasn’t sure what he meant, but I laughed anyway and got up.

I didn’t need love.

I needed to get my life back together and start again.

And maybe have some sexy fun in the meantime.

But my future bosses didn’t need to know that.

“Me too,” I said to appease them and shook their hands.

This time I was prepared for Parker’s firm handshake.

“See you tomorrow,” I called out and walked out of the bubble tea shop with a big question mark over my head and a lot of curiosity.

I needed to speak to—

*Blip. Blip.*

I stopped walking and took my phone out of my pocket.

It wasn’t Carson, but it was the next best person.

*A big birdie told me you’re in town? WTF? Ass!*

I smiled and unlocked my phone to reply.

*Sorry. I was gonna message, but I didn’t want to bother you.*

His reply came back in seconds.

*Bother me? When has my best bud ever bothered me?*

*How can I make it up to you, your highness?* I asked.

*You can meet me at the Grill in an hour. Dickhead.*

*An hour? What's taking you so long? You only live ten minutes away.*

Which was the truth.

*Um...I won't tell Ella you forgot she existed. But anyway, I'm changing her diaper. Which, technically, as her godfather, you should be doing to make amends.*

I laughed again and sat on a bench by the pier.

I looked up, and the familiar breeze and view of Mayberry Holm struck me.

I was home. I was really back home. Was this my future? Here? On this island? Would I have to find new dreams to follow fitting to a small town like this?

*I promise I'll change all the diapers. But that still doesn't explain why we have to wait an hour,* I messaged back my friend.

*Because I still have to shower and get dressed, get Ella dressed, get her in her stroller, find her favorite toy that means she won't scream bloody murder, and walk there. Unless you want my grimy ass anywhere near you while Ella screams her guts out,* he answered.

*Fine. Fine. An hour it is. Can't wait to see my baby girl.*

*Oh, is that how it is? You don't give a shit about me then? Just my offspring?*

*You said it!*

*Asshole,* came his reply, and I laughed out loud as I got up and made my way to Mom's café, where I'd parked my moped.

I had time to kill before I met my best friend, my goddaughter, and the subject of all my adolescent fever dreams in one go.

## 4. CARSON



So Enzo was back.

I didn't know why I cared. Or why that was all I could think about when I should be focusing on the invoices in front of me.

Or the boxes full of holiday decorations that should have gone up last week but hadn't taking up all my booth space.

Or the fact I was fully booked today, and one of my bartenders had called in sick.

But no. Instead of focusing on all the important things, I was thinking about my brother's best friend, who was half my age.

I didn't even know why he was dominating my mind or why his joke about kissing under the mistletoe was still running circles in my head.

It was clearly a joke. Both Cole and Enzo were—or had been—pranksters. Made even worse by the fact that they never really had many friends outside of each other, so I'd had to take the brunt of most of their adolescent stupidity.

And yet every time I closed my eyes, all I saw were his beautiful blue ones, and my body felt...tight. Constricted. I didn't know how to describe it. I may not have kissed him, but he'd still managed to steal the air from my lungs.

Which was weird because I'd never thought of Enzo as a grown man before. He'd always been the slightly odd but funny as hell friend of my brother and the son of the hippiest woman in town.

“Good morning, boss,” one of my chefs said as he walked into the restaurant carrying not one but two napkin boxes from Hwan’s.

“Morning, Enzo,” I said before I caught myself. “Erm. I mean Kinsley. Morning, Kinsley. Sorry. I don’t know—”

Kinsley shrugged and put the boxes on the bar.

*Where did that come from?*

“Don’t worry, Bob,” he replied.

I squinted and glared at him.

“See? I can do it too,” he said before he laughed out loud.

“Very clever. Did they teach you that in college?” I asked him.

God, when had I started being surrounded by kids? Just what I needed less than a month before my birthday.

“No. That’s just natural talent, boss,” he replied.

“You’re a natural idiot, is what you are. Get to work,” I told him, rolling my eyes, and he laughed again.

He did get to work, however, and I tried to do the same. I heard panting and pattering from the door, and I looked up to find three dogs with their tongues out and tails wagging.

Penelope, one of my waitresses, followed suit, trying to keep up with the canines ahead of her and carrying another box.

“Penny! You didn’t have to. You’re not even working today,” I told her. “And you’ve got your hands full, I see.”

The dogs pulled her in my direction and sniffed my hands, vying for my attention before Kinsley noticed them and came out to play with them.

They all but abandoned me for the younger, shinier model.

*Typical.*

“Oh, it’s okay. It was on my walking route anyway,” she said.

“You mean two miles from the very spacious and beautiful sanctuary your brother is running is on your walking route?”

“Oh, shut up, Carson. Do you want me to take the box back? Because I’m petty enough to do it!” She wiggled an eyebrow in defiance that did nothing to hide her smirk.

“Oh, I know you ar—” I started when I felt something wet and cold on my hands.

I looked down to find an adorable snout and the biggest puppy dog eyes I’d ever seen.

The red dog looked at me and pushed its snout at my hand again. It was only when she did it a third time that I realized she wanted me to pet her.

“Georgie! Look at you being cute all of a sudden,” Penny said to the dog as I scratched Georgie’s head.

The dog closed her eyes and kept pushing her head against me until she was a floppy mess at my feet, showing me her belly and begging for a rub.

“Oh wow. I’ve never seen her do that with anyone. Not even Duke, and you know my brother’s the animal whisperer,” Penny said.

I tried to laugh it off and gave Georgie a belly rub before removing my hand from her soft fur, but as soon as I did, she got back to her feet and pushed her snout in my hands again, whimpering.

“She likes you,” Penny said, and I resumed petting, patting, and rubbing the beautiful dog.

“What breed is she?”

“Pitbull mix, we think,” she replied.

“She’s gorgeous!” I said.

Georgie’s tongue flopped out of her mouth as I scratched her stomach.

“She’s up for adoption, you know,” she said.

I paused and looked from her to Kinsley, who was playing with the other two dogs, and shook my head.

“Oh God, no. I don’t have time to breathe, let alone for a dog. Are you kidding me?” I said.

I tried to laugh and looked down at Georgie, who watched me like she’d already determined our fate.

“I can’t,” I told her as if she could understand me.

“How can you say no to those eyes, Bob?” Kinsley said beside me, and I threw daggers at him.

“You’ve seen how much I work. It wouldn’t be fair to her,” I told him.

“We’d help out,” he replied. “She can be the Grill’s dog. I don’t know about the others, but I wouldn’t mind taking her out.”

“And you know I wouldn’t either,” Penny said, raising an eyebrow.

I shook my head again, but Georgie cocked her head, and I huffed.

“What’s her story?” I asked.

I wasn’t going to adopt any dog just because they seemingly fell head over heels for me.

Of course, it would be my luck that a dog would fall for me before any man would.

“She’s two. She was a Christmas dog. You know the drill. Some idiots thought puppies stay puppies forever, got one for their kid, and when she got too big, they realized they couldn’t look after her and she was too much of a responsibility,” Penny explained.

“Agh. Dickheads,” Kinsley huffed, and I nodded in agreement.

“How is her temper?” I asked.

“She’s a bundle of energy and joy,” Penny said.

Georgie wagged her body left and right as if she was scratching her back, and I couldn’t help but swoon over the dog, so of course, I gave her more belly rubs.

I only noticed a few seconds later that I hadn't said anything, and everyone was staring at me.

"I can't believe you even got me asking these questions. I can't have a dog, you guys. I work, like, twenty-four seven. She's already been abandoned by her previous owners. How can I take her and then abandon her in my house while I'm at work all day?" I shook my head and tried to step away from the dog, but her puppy dog eyes were breaking my heart.

"First of all, you're not her previous owners. I was there when they dropped her off, and they were some pretentious rich asses whose kids moved on to their next expensive toy. Second, maybe having her will finally convince you to take some time off! And third, you've got all of us to help out. Like we've said. Already."

I stared at my employee, trying to find the strength to refuse her again. I avoided looking at the beggar of a dog at my feet, but I was running out of excuses and, more importantly, resilience to turn her down.

"It's not that simp—"

"Carson, you know me. You know my brother. You know the work he does and that I help him with. Do you think I'd really suggest it if I didn't think she was the right fit for you?"

I sighed and finally looked down at the pitbull again. She let out a whimper as if to drive the point home and make me feel bad, and that just about broke my heart.

"Fine," I said, and the two humans in my company jumped for joy. "I'll think about it," I added.

"There's nothing to think about. I'll talk to Duke, and we'll get everything ready for you."

Agh, I hated this, but when I looked down at the dog, I couldn't help but feel an excitement that I hadn't in ages.

Maybe I could turn my life around for her.

The door opened, and I was about to tell whoever walked in that we were closed, but it wasn't just anybody. It was my brother, my niece, and Enzo.



As soon as our eyes met, my heart flared, and I smiled.

Yeah. Maybe change was what I needed.

I'd spent too long pining for a guy that wouldn't ever want me and hating a guy that dumped me a century ago.

Maybe I needed something...unexpected to change my life around before I turned forty.

I looked down to focus on the dog and convince myself I meant her, not the young man in front of me. I didn't need to obsess over another guy I could never have.

"Hey, everyone. What's this? Are we having a dog party?" Cole asked while Ella put out her hands and opened and closed her fists, reaching out for the pets.

"Doggiesss," she giggled.

"Oh my God. She talks now! She's grown up so fast!" Enzo said, clutching his heart and dropping to his knees in front of my niece.

"Doggiesss," she repeated, looking at her godfather.

"Yes, baby girl. They're doggies. Do you want one? Should we convince Daddy?" he asked her.

"Oh my God, yes! Let's do this. I'm loving today," Penny said with too much enthusiasm.

"I'm starting to think you have a quota or something?" I told her.

"Oh, please, no. I have no time for a dog. I barely have time for my princess. Don't anyone dare put any ideas into her head," Cole raised a finger and wagged it threateningly at all of us.

"Hey, don't tell me. They're trying to do the same to me," I said.

"Are you getting a dog too? OMG, yes!" Enzo said, clapping his hands together, putting on a show for my niece, who laughed with him.

“I only said I’d think about it,” I told him when Georgie pushed her snout at my hand again.

“Doggie!” Ella exclaimed when she saw Georgie do that.

“You can push a dog at him all you want. Just not me,” Cole said, and I glared at him.

“We live together, you idiot,” I said.

Cole pursed his lips for a second.

“I stand by what I said. If you get a dog it’ll be your responsibility and mine for the cuddles when I need them,” he said.

“You’re out of my will,” I told him.

“What will?” Cole said with a chuckle that I didn’t quite find entertaining.

“Wait, that won’t affect your babysitting schedule, will it?”

Enzo shushed his best friend and crawled toward Georgie—and me—on all fours, looking more like walking temptation than he had any right to and putting sinful thoughts into my head.

I tried to shake them off as he introduced himself to Georgie, but something told me this grownup Enzo in front of me on all fours would haunt me tonight.

And tomorrow, probably.

“Awww, she’s adorable. You should totally get her, Carson. Then Ella can have a doggie without her stupid dad worrying about it.”

“Hey! I’m not stupid,” Cole whined, but I barely registered it.

The only thing I could focus on was Enzo’s eyes staring right at me with their vibrant color and intensity as he sat on the floor at my feet.

*Fuck! What is happening to me?*

“We’ve been trying to tell him he needs her, but he keeps saying he’s too busy,” Penny said.

“I *am* too busy!”

“Well, she’s the perfect excuse to slow down then,” Enzo said.

“Carson? Slow down? Pfft,” Kinsley pursed his lips, and Cole laughed.

“Hey!” I exclaimed. “You’re both fired.”

“You can’t fire me. I co-own this place,” Cole said.

“And I’m the best chef in town. You don’t want to lose me,” Kinsley said with an arrogant smirk that I wanted to wipe off his face.

“I hate you all!”

“What? Even your niece? You monster!” Cole said.

“No. Of course, he doesn’t hate his niece,” Enzo said with a smile that was so beautiful it made me catch my breath.

Funny how I’d never noticed that before?

“Of course, I don’t hate Ella,” I confirmed.

“But you hate everyone else because they’re telling you to slow down and enjoy life. Got it,” Cole said, and I huffed.

When had everyone-against-Carson turned into a sport?

“Can everyone just shut up for a minute?” I shouted, and Georgie cocked her head to the side to look at me like the crazy man I was.

“Shur’ up!” Ella said and giggled.

I rolled my eyes.

My baby niece was trying to make me look bad.

“Look, it’s December, we’re about to get slammed like it’s Slam-o-rama, and I’ve got a manager on the verge of popping any time now. I’ve got so much crap to sort out. You know what I don’t have? Time to look after a dog and entertain a bunch of dou—silly billies. So everyone shut up and get back to work,” I said, glancing at my niece, who was hanging on to my every word, as were the rest of the people around me.

“First of all, how dare you call me a dou-silly billy in front of my daughter, and second...” I narrowed my eyes and stared at my brother as he continued, “You work too much, big brother.

You need to slow down, smell the roses, get laid, or some shit.”

“Look at the pot calling the kettle black,” I said.

“Yeah, well, we’re talking about you now,” Cole defended himself.

I looked at my niece, but she blissfully ignored her dad’s swear word.

So it was only mine she liked parroting. Good to know. She was out of my will too.

“Oh yeah. You definitely need to get laid,” Penny agreed as if it was normal for anyone to tell another human being that they needed to have sex.

“I third that,” Kinsley said, raising his hand in agreement.

“Yeah. You’ve been so focused at work since Darren that you’ve completely forgotten there’s a life outside work. You so need to get laid,” Cole repeated.

“I can help with that,” Enzo said, and I noticed he was still at my feet, hugging Georgie.

*What the hell did he just say?*

## 5. ENZO



**O**h my God. Why would I say that?

“E-excuse me?” Carson said, and I had to admit, I quite liked the view from down here.

He looked so large and imposing. So dominant.

*Head out of the gutter, Enzo. Head. Out. Of the. Gutter.*

“Um...that’s not...oh God,” I said and felt everyone staring at me. “That’s not what I meant. I meant I could help. With the whole getting laid thing. Shit. That’s not...I mean, I can help you find someone so you can...get laid.”

If only I could turn back time and shut my stupid mouth, I would. But all I could do was mentally slap my face and laugh it off.

“Oh, you can, can you?” Cole said from behind me. “Got a hankering for some old meat now, Enzo boy?”

“Hey! Who are you calling old?” Carson yelled at his brother, and...I was still on my knees in front of him. And the most adorable dog in the world was taking advantage of my moment and going to town on my neck and ears.

“Should we, like, leave the room? Are you going to do it here and now?” the girl in the room said.

“I mean, I was hoping to do some work, but if we’re doing God’s will, then I guess...who’s up for some beer at the Outpost?” the other guy said.

He had two dogs at his feet begging for attention, but his smirk was focused on Carson and me.

“Tha—that’s not what I meant. Idiots!” I managed to say before I took a deep breath and realized I hadn’t even introduced myself to the people I didn’t know. “I’m Enzo. Yeah, so, as I was saying, don’t be idiots. I meant I can help Carson get back in the dating game. I’m a master at dating, so I can spend some time with Carson, look at his dating profiles and what he does on dates, and help him find someone. To get laid. Or even better. Someone to be with,” I said, my mouth completely running away from me.

Why couldn’t I just shut up and go with the joke? What had I just said? And more importantly, why?

“So what you’re saying is you’re a...master-dater?” Cole said, and it took me a minute to register the pun.

“Oh, grow up, Cole!” I said and pushed him.

“So you want to be boss’s Matthew Hussey, minus the hot British accent?” Penny said. “I love that.”

I stared at her for a moment.

“I have no idea who that is,” I told her.

“Oh my God! You’ve got to Google him. He’s only the hottest dating coach there is!”

“Oooh. Yes. I like that. Hot dating coach. At your service,” I replied, unable to contain my laughter.

I wasn’t arrogant enough to think I was hot. But at the same time, I knew I wasn’t bad to look at.

Before I could stop myself, I turned to Carson, hoping he would notice that exact thing. I grinned.

“I don’t need a dating coach. Are you all out of your f—minds?” he asked, eyeing his niece for a moment before his gaze landed on me. I had to catch my breath or risk humming something inappropriate.

“As your brother, I beg to differ,” Cole told him.

“As your brother, please find a dildo and shove it up your behind,” Carson replied, and I burst into laughter.

“Knowing your brother, he probably does that anyway,” I added.

Cole gasped, Carson grimaced, and the other two laughed.

“I hate you, Enzo D’Agostino!” Cole exclaimed.

“Ewww, you just confirmed it, dickhead. TMI, people. T. M. I,” Carson shouted, sticking his fingers in his ears.

“I did no such thing,” Cole insisted before I gave him the side-eye.

“Don’t worry, Coley. I’m sure the boys of Mayberry Holm will be thrilled to find out,” Penny said, patting him on the back.

Cole rolled his eyes and moved his shoulder away from Penny’s touch with a huff.

“And as for the other Williams brother, you got a dog and a dating coach in one day. You must feel like a princess,” she continued.

I liked this girl.

“If I haven’t said it before like I really mean it,” Carson started. “You’re fired.”

Penny stuck her nose up and pretended like she hadn’t heard him.

“Anyway, I should be going. I’ve got some adoption papers to prepare,” she said, pulling the dogs back toward her.

Except for Georgie, who stood her ground and stared at Carson like he’d hung the moon. And who could blame her? He may as well have.

“I said I’d think about it,” he insisted but as soon as he looked down at the dog, his face softened and eyes glistened.

“Sorry to break it to you, Carson, but I think she’s already made up her mind,” I told him.

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” Penny exclaimed, but Carson raised his gaze to meet mine, and that damn knot in my throat

returned ten-fold. I froze in place.

I might be a “master-dater,” as my best friend put it, but apparently, I still had a thing for his older brother.

“Anyway, got to go. Don’t let Carson off the hook. He needs a boyfriend, stat,” Penny reiterated as she tried to pull Georgie back again.

“I don’t need a boyfriend. What I need is a bar manager,” Carson said.

“Oh yes, you do,” Cole added. “How long has it been? Five? Six years? You need someone to dust those cobwebs.”

“Are you still here, asshole?”

I would have loved nothing more than to volunteer for that job, but I didn’t think it’d be appropriate considering the circumstances.

All of a sudden, I didn’t care about the excuse. I just knew I wanted to spend as much time with Carson as humanly possible.

So what if I kept everything I wanted to do to him to myself? I was a strong man. I could handle it.

Even if it made no sense why I would want to inflict such torture on myself. I didn’t need to re-experience the anguish of my teenage crush all over again.

But dammit, how could I resist? I remembered the look on Carson’s face when he came back home after Darren walked out on him, clear as day. I’d always hated that man for “stealing” Carson from me—even if Carson would never look at me—but ever since he broke Carson’s heart on the day before their wedding, I’d loathed that guy like no other human being.

And even though it was somewhat disguised, I could still see the same pain in his eyes. Maybe it had died down a little, but it was there just as present as his exhaustion.

“Ash’ole,” Ella said, giggling.

“Oh, for fu—thanks for that, Uncle Carson,” Cole huffed.



“Don’t obsess over it, and she will forget she even knows the word,” Penny told him. “Right. Got to go.”

She dragged the dogs toward the door.

“Before you go,” Carson called to her. She turned to look at him, and Georgie attempted to run up to him again. “I still hate you, but any chance you can work tonight?”

Penny looked from him to me, then back to him before she replied.

“Only if you agree to let this hot dating coach teach you a thing or two,” she said, raising her eyebrow, smirking.

“I don’t need—”

“Do you need cover tonight or not?” she insisted.

Carson looked at me on the verge of defeat, and all I truly wanted to do was take him in my arms and keep him there until I banished all his sadness.

I leaned on him and whispered in his ear, “I promise I’ll go easy on you.”

Big mistake.

Now all I could focus on was the heat between our bodies as if a sun pulled us into each other.

“This seems like the stupidest deal, but...” He looked at me again and sighed. “Fine.”

Penny did a little jump of joy before agreeing to do the shift and leaving.

“You get back to work,” he shouted at Kinsley.

And I was still touching him.

How had that happened?

Dammit.

I tried to remove myself from him, but I couldn’t, so I patted his shoulder.

“I promise I’ll get you a beautiful, loving boyfriend before Christmas!” I said. “Hey! Isn’t that your birthday?”

Carson's chest rose and fell with a deep breath, and Cole pursed his lips.

"We don't talk about the birthday," he said.

"What? Why?"

"Because he's turning the big four-zero," Cole answered.

"And what?"

He may be turning forty, but he still looked as fine as wonderful red wine, and I wanted to drink him up.

"I'm old," Carson snapped. "That's what."

"Oh please, Carson. You're easily the hottest man in any room you're in," I said, slapping his chest playfully before I realized what I was doing and, more importantly, what I was saying. "Erm, what I meant to say is...you're not old. And I'll prove it to you. One boyfriend before Christmas Day coming right up."

I finally managed to pull myself off him and offered him my hand.

"And what do I win if you lose?" Carson crossed his arms and smirked.

I looked from him to his brother, and I shrugged.

"This isn't supposed to be a bet," I said.

"Well, I'm making it one. You said you can get me a boyfriend before Christmas, which I think is a tall, impossible order, so if you do it, I'll give you...I'll give you..."

"A check for one thousand dollars," I said.

He grimaced.

"What? Why a thousand dollars?" he asked.

"Why not?"

Sure, it wasn't much to start my life over, but it'd be a start, right?

Carson rolled his eyes and huffed.

"Fine. If you win, I'll give you a check for...a thousand dollars, I guess. But what do I get if I win?"

“Jesus, Carson. You make it sound like getting a boyfriend would be you losing,” Cole said.

Carson ignored him.

I couldn't.

He wanted a bet, and if there was one thing I liked more than Carson Williams, it was winning. Even if recent history had given me the middle finger.

“Fine. You got yourself a deal. I win, and you give me a thou. You win, and I'll...well, I don't have a thousand dollars, that's for sure.”

“I win,” Carson said with way too much enthusiasm for a guy who had been forced into this, “you will do anything I say.”

He stretched out his hand and let it hang between us, waiting.

“No. You win, and I'll owe you a favor. I'm not about to become anyone's puppet,” I said.

“So what I'm hearing is you're afraid to lose? Interesting.”

I gasped.

“How dare you. Fine. You win, and I'll do what you say for a day.”

I took his hand in mine, and the heat returned. As did the excitement.

“Deal,” he said.

This was going to be fun.

## 6. ENZO



“So...how long were you planning on hiding from me?” Cole asked as we sat in one of the booths at the Grill. The restaurant was open, and patrons streamed in for lunch service.

Carson was front and center, hosting, taking people to their tables, dropping off food and drinks, a constant blur of motion that seemed to always be running. He managed to do it all with a smile.

That wasn't the Carson I remembered. The Carson I remembered was a chill, happy-go-lucky guy who helped his parents with their restaurant and prepared for married bliss with his gorgeous boyfriend.

This new Carson seemed to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders and then some.

I didn't like it. I didn't like seeing him beaten down and overworked.

Even though our little wager was kind of a joke, I was actually excited to spend some time with him. Maybe I could help him find some of that carefree nature he seemed to have lost in the last few years.

“Hello!” Cole clicked his fingers in front of my face, bringing my attention back to the table and my best friend.

“What?” I asked.

He narrowed his eyes, looked at his brother, then back at me.

“You-you don’t have a *thing* for my brother, do you?” he asked, his voice dripping with intensity and curiosity.

“What? No. Why would you think that? Like, what?”

*Jeez. Calm down, Enzo. Giving it away much?*

I shrugged and shook my head more definitively before looking at the faux-leather emerald menu with gold-rimmed edges and fancy paper.

*Trust a gay guy to build a place up.*

The last time I was at the Grill, under Cole and Carson’s parents’ management, the menus were bigger than the table and covered in grease stains and rim marks.

“Are you sure? Because you’re looking at him...some way,” he insisted.

I skimmed through the appetizers and blew raspberries.

“What kind of way?”

Cole leaned back and crossed his arms.

“Like you want to lick him from head to toe.”

“I do not.”

“Tell that to the drool on your mouth,” he said and pretended to wipe his own mouth.

Of course, like the good fool I was, I immediately did the same, even though there was obviously no drool on my mouth.

“You’re a *dig!*” I said.

Confusion crossed my friend’s face.

“Well, I can’t exactly say the actual word, can I, with Ms. Repeat here,” I said, pointing to my goddaughter, who was busy tearing a napkin to shreds.

“In that case, thanks and likewise,” Cole said.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I said. “Do you know what you’re eating?”

“Don’t evade my question.”

“I’m not. Of course I don’t like your brother. I mean, not in that way,” I lied.

I always lied. The only thing I probably ever lied to Cole about. There was no point in telling him the truth when Carson and I were miles apart and, like, never going to happen.

I saw no reason to tell him when I was a teenager and his brother was a full-grown adult. And I saw no reason to tell him now.

“Okay,” he replied and looked down at the menu.

*Surely he must know it by heart by now.*

I was so tempted to ask him. To find out what he’d think of me if he knew I had a thing for Carson, but I wasn’t that gutsy.

“Any recommendations?” I asked instead.

“You have to try the jack ribs. They’re amazing.”

I raised an eyebrow and, with a smirk, asked, “Who’s Jack?”

Cole closed his menu and smacked me on the head with it.

“Jack as in jackfruit, idiot. I told Kinsley we needed some good vegan options so that when you finally grace us with your presence, you can eat in here,” he said.

I smiled.

“Oh, you. That’s sweet. But I stopped being vegan, like, six months ago,” I said.

“Oh wow. Nice one, bro. So I’m the last to find out everything, huh?”

He grinned, but there was an inkling of bitterness in his voice.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I was coming back. Until it happened, I didn’t even know I was going to. I was going to call—”

“It’s fine,” he tried to shrug it off, but he was obviously annoyed with me, or he wouldn’t have “joked” about it.

A beautiful girl came to our table. She had long blonde hair with pink tips and wore the emerald-green T-shirt that seemed

to be the staff uniform. She greeted Cole with a hug before she cooed at Ella with a cute baby voice.

“Madison, this tucker is my best friend, Enzo,” Cole introduced me.

I shook her hand, and she flipped her notepad open to take our order.

“I’ll have the jack ribs, the blue cheese mac and cheese, and the truffle fries,” I told her. “And the largest Mayberry IPA you serve.”

She wrote down my order, but when Cole ordered his steak, she seemed distracted.

“Are you okay, Madison?” he asked her.

“Huh? Oh yeah,” she answered.

Cole gave her a stern look, and her shoulders sagged.

“I got some news, and I don’t know how to feel about it,” she said.

“Do you need time off? What happened?” Cole touched her hand and made her look him in the eyes.

“I found my cousin online, and we’ve been talking and...let’s just say I found out what happened to him, and I’m kinda disgusted with my aunt and uncle, but enough about me. You guys didn’t come here to listen to Madison cry about her life,” she said.

“Oh please. Do you know who my mother is? Cry away. I may even have a spell to help you,” I said, reaching for her with the empathy I’d inherited from my mom.

Madison looked from me to Cole, and she closed her notepad, put it in her apron, and clenched her fists.

“All these years I thought my cousin just wrote us all off. We were so close, you know, so when he dropped off the face of the earth, I didn’t know what to think. But then it turns out my aunt and uncle kicked him out because they found out he was gay and, well, long story short, he was homeless for a while. They stopped him from seeing his younger brother. They

wouldn't help him unless he denounced the devil or some shit and came home."

"That's awful," I said. "Is he okay? Can we help?"

Madison shook her head and attempted to smile.

"Oh no. He's fine. He's a famous photographer now. That's how I found him, actually. I saw some of his work and sent him an angry message. He shared all of this with me, so now I have to figure out how much of that my parents knew because, Jesus, I can't believe they would let that happen to their nephew when their daughter is gay, so you know. Family shi—zz," she amended, looking down at Ella.

If the past couple of hours were any indication, my goddaughter would grow up with the kindest foul mouth in the world.

"I'm so sorry, Madison. Let me know if you need any shifts covered. That can't be easy," Cole said.

"Oh no, don't worry. He's actually decided to visit me so we can talk in person. I just can't help but feel...guilty. I should have looked for him sooner. I shouldn't have assumed he would drop me like he did."

"My mom says everything happens for a reason, and if my experience is any indication, I think she may have a point," I told her, remembering the mess my life had become in the last six months.

"Thanks, guys. I'll go put your order through. I didn't mean to bring you down," she said.

"Please. That's what friends are for," I told her, and she offered me a warm smile before she walked off. "The world sucks, doesn't it?"

I turned to my friend, who nodded.

"So, what kind of experience are you talking about? What happened to your deal in Boston?" he asked.

God, there was nothing that escaped him, was there.

"It...it fell through," I said.



I guess there was another thing I lied to my friend about now.

“There’s more to the story that you’re not telling me,” he said.

I rolled my eyes.

“Well, of course. But I’m still processing it, so if you wouldn’t mind, I’m not ready to talk about it yet,” I said.

Cole narrowed his eyes and stared at me again. His nostrils flared, and I was prepared for him to push the subject, but then he sighed and relented.

“When you’re ready to talk, I’m here,” he said.

“I know.”

He covered my hand with his and gave it a squeeze.

Even though I wasn’t ready to talk about my failure in Boston just yet, and I was frustrated to be back home, tail between my legs, nothing compared to having my best friend back in my life.

Madison returned with our drinks and a sippy cup of juice for Ella, and soon, our food was served.

“So you got a job at Hwan’s place, huh? You could have asked for a job here if you wanted,” Cole said after taking a bite of his steak.

“Why? What’s wrong with the bubble tea shop?”

“Nothing. Hwan is lovely. You’re gonna love working with him. And his boyfriend isn’t bad to look at either.”

Cole wagged his eyebrows, and I laughed.

“Oh, definitely not a bad view. Which reminds me. What the hell happened a week ago? I saw the video, and they were acting a bit...weird. Should I be worried?”

Cole told me what he knew, and even though it sounded awful—a bunch of thugs trying to scam people out of their money in the name of protection—it put me at ease knowing that the people responsible were behind bars.

“Anyway, what else have I missed here? How are you? Got a boyfriend or girlfriend yet?” I asked.

Cole grimaced and kept his mouth busy chewing.

“Now who’s being evasive?”

“What do you want me to say, Enzo? I lost the love of my life because of a stupid complication. I have this little angel I’m trying to raise and not fudge it up while also maintaining three jobs. There’s simply no time for anything else in my life right now.”

Before he even finished his sentence, I took my necklace off and put it around his neck.

“What’s that?” he asked as if he’d never seen my mom’s merchandise before.

“You need it more than me, my friend. I’m sorry I was gone when you needed me the most,” I told him.

All this time I was focusing on how fucked up my life was when Cole had it worse than me. I should have dropped everything and moved back home two years ago when Ella was born and Sandra passed.

“I’m an awful friend,” I said.

“Hey!” he protested. “You were with me. In here,” he said and pointed to his heart. “Maybe you’ve forgotten all those late-night phone conversations, but I still remember them. And they meant the world to me.”

Did I get dirt in my eyes? Why were they stinging all of a sudden?

“I love you, Cole,” I said, leaving my seat to sit next to my friend and give him a big hug.

He leaned on me and sighed.

“Love you too, Enzo,” he replied.

Maybe it was time to embrace my advice for Madison and accept that there may be a higher reason why I failed back in Boston and was back home now. Maybe my presence was needed right here.

The thought finally gave me comfort.

## 7. CARSON



“I’m so not ready for today,” Nalini said, struggling to sit at the stool on the bar until I glowered at her and she helped herself to a more manageable chair.

“You should already be on leave, crazy girl. As a friend, I’m concerned. As your boss, I’m glad, seeing as I have no replacement yet,” I told her.

“As your friend, thanks for your concern, but I’m not getting paid enough to go on leave yet. As your employee...” she said and paused, squinting for effect before she finished. “Pay up, bitch!”

“Huh, I bet you’d love that,” I told her as she held out her hands until I gave her the laptop in front of me.

“Are you kidding? Who wouldn’t love more money? But that’s you, Mr. Scrooge. All talk, no game,” she said, and I laughed.

I was paying Nalini more than enough *and* covering her maternity leave—in the middle of December, mind you. I’m a fucking saint!—but my manager was as stubborn as me and refused to go until it was absolutely necessary.

“Another reservation came through. Fuck me!” she shouted as she scanned the reservations software we used while rubbing her huge belly.

“Excuse you. My future godson is listening, and I don’t want that potty mouth of yours anywhere near him,” I warned her.

She blew raspberries.

“You should hear his father. Especially when we’re going at it in bed, he’s a—”

I immediately put my fingers in my ears and started singing to drown her out. I did not need to know what my two best friends were doing in bed. Or anywhere else, for that matter.

“I’m starting to think there’s an oversharing spell on this restaurant. There’s no other explanation,” I said when she finally stopped talking.

“Why? Who else is oversharing? What did I miss? Did Kinsley finally reveal his big-bottom energy? Or did Isla finally admit how many girls she’s fucked?”

I slapped my face with both hands and huffed.

“I can’t wait ‘til you go,” I groaned.

“Oh, shut up. My big potty mouth brings you *life!*”

“It brings my breakfast back up, is what it does,” I told her while reaching for some water.

I wasn’t a prude. Not really. I just didn’t like knowing what people did in the comfort and privacy of their own bedrooms. Especially when mine was as dry as the Sahara desert.

“Good morning, beautiful people. Is the coffee on, or am I going to have to murder someone?” Penny said, barging through the front door like she owned the damn restaurant.

And, of course, she did so with a doggy companion in tow.

“Georgie!” I exclaimed and jumped off the stool to greet the eager dog when I noticed another pair of legs behind Penny’s.

I looked up to find Enzo waving at me with a stupidly gorgeous grin and a cute ivory bobble hat hugging his face and making him so fucking tempting.

“Morning,” he said.

“Oh my God! Whose dog is this?” Nalini asked and attempted to turn and lean forward, but all she managed was to make the chair fart, which prompted her to apologize as if she’d dealt it.

“Carson’s,” Penny said, laughing.

“You got a dog?” Nalini was quick to follow up.

“I don’t,” I said. “Penny, I thought we talked about this. Look at us. I’ve got a manager who’s about to fart her kid to the hospital and a busy restaurant to juggle.”

Penny put her hands on her hips and shook her head.

“Don’t you worry your little head. I’ve got reinforcements,” she said, and I immediately turned to Enzo.

“Oh, I’m just here to find your boyfriend,” he replied so nonchalantly that I almost blanked out what he said.

“You’ve got a boyfriend?” Nalini exclaimed. “Since when?”

“I don’t have a boyfriend. And I thought that was just banter,” I told Nalini before I turned to Enzo.

“We shook hands. We’ve got a bet. What the hell are you talking about?” he said and dropped to his knees to pet Georgie too.

As he did so, he looked into my eyes, and a part of me unraveled at the sight of those beautiful blue orbs seeming to penetrate my very core without even trying.

*Agh, fuck. I don’t need this right now!*

“I don’t have time for...whatever you’ve got planned. And I certainly don’t have time for a dog!” The last part was addressed to Penny, who just smirked smugly and looked behind her.

“That’s why I took matters into my own hands, and you’re officially off today,” she said as Karan stepped up in all his muscular glory and smirked.

“Hello, gorgeous people!” he said.

“Oh my. Who’s that hunk? And do you want to meet me in the restroom, in say, a minute?” Nalini asked, fanning herself, ogling the tall glass of mocha that was Karan.

“Why wait a minute?” he responded and grabbed her hand, pulling her up and into his arms.

“Are you kidding me? I can’t leave. If I do, these two will put on a show for all my customers!” I said, turning to Penny, who hid a smile behind her hands.

“I mean...if they ask nicely,” Karan said, smirking.

I balled my hands into fists and sighed.

“You two deserve each other,” I told my best friends, and they laughed.

“We know,” they answered in unison.

Georgie’s tongue sagged out of her mouth, and her hot breath blew on my hand as I looked at all the crazy people in the room, trying to figure out when I’d left reality and entered a *Gilmore Girls* episode.

Probably around the same time Enzo returned to Mayberry Holm.

“So what’s the plan here, Penny? Are you going to kick me out of my own restaurant so I can babysit a dog I don’t have time for?”

Penny looked at Enzo and my best friends before she nodded.

“I wouldn’t quite say ‘kick’ you out. But I started a group chat, and we all agreed you need to step back, adopt Georgie, and get laid, so...”

Enzo pursed his lips with a hint of a smirk that made me think he was probably part of the group chat I’d been left out of. Which only made me scared of what else had been agreed to without my consent.

“All jokes aside...” Nalini said, and if it was coming from her, it was a big deal. “Even though I don’t know what they’re talking about, you need to get a life, my friend. And if it takes a dog and a...boy toy to do it, so be it.”

“I’m not a boy toy,” Enzo said.

“He’s not my boy toy,” I said simultaneously.

Enzo took a pause and glanced at me.

“I’m...I’m just helping him find one.”

I rolled my eyes as a collective cheer went through the room.

“When did it become okay to talk about someone’s dating life like that?” I asked.

“About four years ago, grandpa,” Penny said.

As if I needed any more reason to feel like one.

“Right. All of you get to work. I’ve got so much to do—”

Karan stepped in front of me and stopped me from reclaiming my spot at the bar.

“Which I will take care of as your bar manager.”

“But you’re off today. You don’t need to work. You’re going to have a screaming baby in—”

“Well, I’m not off anymore. You are,” Karan jabbed his finger at my chest and pushed me back. “Go and enjoy your new dog and your boyfriend.”

“Oh, I’m not his boyfriend,” Enzo quickly added.

Too quick, if you asked me.

Should I be offended by that? Or was it that he saw me as this grandfather figure, so the idea of being my boyfriend completely grossed him out?

Probably the latter.

“Whatever. Just go. Fuck off. Fuck something—” Karan said.

“Or someone,” Nalini added, draping herself over her husband.

“Or someones. As long as you’re out of here, I don’t care who or what you do.”

“But...but I’ve got interviews today,” I said.

This had never happened before. My staff had never ganged up on me like this. I didn’t know if I should be flattered or frustrated.

“I’ll do the interviews. Besides, I gotta make sure my replacement doesn’t outshine me. I want to return to my job,” Nalini said.

“And I’ll be around looking pretty like you do,” Karan said.

“That’s not what I do, you know,” I bit back at my friend.

“Isn’t it though?” he replied, wagging his eyebrows suggestively.

“And as for Georgie, Duke will pop by your house later to pick her up and check on you,” Penny added.

“I thought you said she’s mine now,” I snapped at her.

Which made her coo.

Why did she coo?

“Aww, see? You were playing hard to get, but you already love her,” she said.

I rolled my eyes and snorted.

“That’s not why I said it.”

“I may joke a lot, but I’m not stupid, boss. You can spend the day with Georgie and see how you feel after that. If she doesn’t win your heart more than she already has, then she’ll go back...to the sanctuary.”

“The way you said that makes the sanctuary sound more like a holding cell than the beautiful shelter it is,” I told her.

“Oh, shut up. You know what I mean,” she said.

“So I can still get out of this lunacy?” I asked Penny and looked down at Georgie’s big eyes watching me like I was the center of her universe.

I knew they said dogs were intuitive and all that jazz, but Jesus, how smart was this dog? Could she understand what we were saying and driving the point home?

“Trust me, you won’t want to,” she answered and passed me the dog’s lead.

I didn’t get a good enough grip, and it slipped right through my fingers. Georgie took full advantage and she ran away from me.

Penny tried to block her, but she went through her legs. I ran after the dog that apparently wanted me so much she was



running away from me too.

*Run while you can, baby girl. Everyone does eventually. I don't blame you.*

Georgie realized I was chasing her and her tail wagged faster as she hopped from side to side, trying to avoid me in what she must have thought was a game.

Then she beelined for Nalini, who giggled when Georgie sniffed her belly, but before she could be caught, she ran off again.

She finally stopped under a booth and sniffed at something—please don't be a mouse—which gave me the opportunity I was looking for.

I bent down to grab her leash when I felt a thud on my head, and I cried out, trying to soothe the pain.

When I looked next to me, Enzo was doing the same thing with his head.

Where had his beautiful head come from? And why had it hurt so much when he wore a soft beanie? And why were his eyes so fucking irresistible and making me think sinful things?

Georgie came out from under the table and looked at us. We looked at each other.

“Awww,” Penny cooed, and I had no clue why.

But when I turned to ask her, I realized there was mistletoe over our heads, hanging off the ceiling.

“Oh God,” I said, rubbing my head harder to cover up my embarrassment.

Why did this keep happening to me?

*“Do we kiss?”*

As Enzo stared at me, I remembered his question from the day before, and I unconsciously leaned toward him. Fortunately, Georgie licked both of our faces, saving me from total humiliation.

*Get your head together, grandpa. Enzo would never want to kiss you. You shouldn't even be thinking of him that way!*

## 8. ENZO



Was it my imagination, or had Carson tried to kiss me?

Yeah, definitely my wanton imagination. Carson Williams couldn't possibly look at me the way I looked at him, even when I thought I was in full control of myself.

But with a tongue slathering my face repeatedly, I couldn't really worry about that.

Instead, I laughed and put my hands up to stop Georgie from going to town on me.

When we managed to get the dog under control and back on our feet, everyone stared at us.

"What?" I asked the group of strangers I was quickly becoming accustomed to.

There was no avoiding that in a small town like Mayberry Holm.

"Nothing," Nalini said in a voice that indicated she had so much more to say but was restraining herself.

"You three need to get the hell out of my restaurant," Karan added from behind her. His hands draped around Nalini affectionately, rubbing her belly.

What was with all the schmoopy couples on this island?

"Yeah, get out of here, people!" Penny added with her hands on her hips.

"I think we better do as they say, or there will be consequences," I told Carson, grinning from ear to ear.

We all had known it wouldn't be easy to get him out of the restaurant, but Penny and Karan had thought of everything to make this as smooth as possible. And if Carson's staff was right, he really, truly needed it.

"Fine. But I'm not happy about this," he said, waving a finger in the air.

"I'm fine with that. What about you?" Penny shrugged and looked at the other two.

"Same."

"Couldn't care less, to be honest," Nalini said.

"If I haven't said it before, I hate you all," Carson growled and marched out of the restaurant with Georgie on his tail.

"We know. And we love you too, boss." Penny laughed and waved us goodbye as I followed after Carson.

"Have you always been a grump, or is this a new thing?" I asked him, bumping his shoulder teasingly.

"I'm not grumpy," he answered.

"Tell that to your face."

He looked at me, rolled his eyes, and sighed with a smile.

"Agh, I know. Sorry. It's the season. And I don't like them ganging up on me. It's a new color on them, and I'm not sure I appreciate it," he said. "But it sure is nice to be out of there. When did it get so cold?"

His face immediately relaxed. Or that's what he would have me believe, but I could still see it in the back of his head.

"Okay, out with it. What's bugging you?"

His smile deepened, but I raised my eyebrow higher, and the tension in his shoulders finally gave way.

"Okay, I'd love to spend the day with you and Georgie even if I didn't anticipate it, but there are a few reservations with allergens that I need to tell Nalini about, and the vegetable delivery didn't arrive today, so they might need to go to the grocery store to get some and..."

He continued as if he was going off a mental list, and I imagined him checking off each item as he spoke.

“How long have Karan and Nalini worked at your restaurant?” I asked.

“Three years. They actually met on the job. So they owe me their first offspring, which is due soon if you couldn’t tell...”

“I could.”

“And since Cole flaked out on me with Ella, they better make me their child’s godfather, or I’ll be making a visit to your mom to put a hex on them.”

We walked down Main Street, the sky gray and cloudy, but everywhere I turned were string lights, pine cones, and elaborately-designed wreaths that gave color to our stroll.

“So many things wrong with what you just said. Why would Cole make Ella’s favorite uncle also her godfather? You’ve already got benefits for life. And does that mean you don’t like me being her godfather? Plus, my mom doesn’t do hexes. She’s a good witch, so she couldn’t help you there either.”

“I mean, I know all this. But I still wanted to be Ella’s godfather.”

“Why?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe because godfather sounds a step closer to father than uncle does. And it’s obvious I’m never gonna have kids of my own, so...I’m pathetic, I know.”

Even Georgie stopped her excited trotting to turn and look at Carson.

“Why is it obvious you’re never gonna have kids? It’s not obvious to me,” I said.

Carson raised his hand and patted the middle of my back a few times. An act that sent such strong shivers through me that I barely heard what he said.

“Oh Enzo, Enzo, Enzo. I’m of a certain age and seriously undateable due to a demanding job and being stuck in a town

where everyone knows my story. Of course I'm never having kids. Or a husband. Or a life outside the restaurant."

"Oh wow," I exclaimed before I could stop myself, and Carson paused to stare at me.

"What?"

I shook my head and put my hands in the pockets of my woolen jacket.

"I didn't realize how desperately you needed me until now," I told him.

If only that was true.

What I wouldn't give for Carson to look at me the way I was sure I looked at him. But we had an age difference for the history books, and he'd never shown any interest in me. Never mind that he was so disillusioned about how he looked and the kind of person he was that even if age wasn't a problem, his own head probably was.

"I-I need you? Wh-why?" he stuttered, and I tried to tell myself it wasn't because he was nervous around me.

*Why would Carson Williams ever be nervous around me?*

*I'm not gonna lie. Whatever the reason, it's pretty hot.*

Before I did or said anything I'd regret in three seconds, I looped my hand through his arm, plastered a smile on my face, and pulled him ahead toward his home.

We had work to do.

"Because somehow, over the years, you've convinced yourself you're undateable. That you're old, going to die alone, and your only purpose in life is to run your parents' restaurant."

Carson took half a breath and pouted—fucking pouted!

"I haven't convinced myself. It's all true," he said.

"Oh, sweetie. You *so* have. You're not undateable. Trust me. I've dated undateable men. And even *they* got dates. So believe you me, Mr. Carson. I will find your Mr. Right if it's the last thing I do on earth. That way, you can walk up to

Darren—wherever the fuck he may be—and show him that you won!”

Georgie, seemingly in agreement with me, stopped, turned, and jumped on Carson with a happy tail, desperate for affection.

“I love your optimism. But you don’t need to do all that for me. I-I’ve made my peace with it all—”

“Peace? Jesus, grandpa, should I plan your funeral now, or do you want to wait until we’re home? What do you mean you made your peace with it? Do you know how many people start over at forty—”

“Technically not forty yet,” he corrected, and I fake-gasped.

“Do you know how many people start over at thirty-nine? How many people start over at fifty? At sixty? I had a dentist in Boston who only got her dentistry degree at the ripe age of sixty because it was her life-long dream? It’s never too late to start your life, and it’s never too late to start dreaming. So... get over yourself and let me work my magic on you.”

I tried to ignore that what I’d said to him also applied to me. He was the focus right now, and I could tell he was in desperate need of a new life.

I still had time to sulk and pout over my shouldas, wouldas, couldas before I begrudgingly took my own advice. It was still fresh for me. All the hurt, the rejection.

For Carson, it had been five years. It was time for him to move forward. Such a catch like him didn’t deserve to hide away in a restaurant and work that fine ass to the ground.

He deserved to be loved, cherished, and admired for the hunk he was.

I didn’t know why but it pissed me off to see Carson, the subject of all my wet dreams since I was fourteen, become such an insecure, defeated man.

And dammit, I would fix him before I left this island.

*If* I left this island.

It was just a shame I couldn't fix him up with me.

But he was my best friend's older brother, and he would never look at me like anything other than a surrogate younger brother.

Besides, I had renounced love the minute my father died, and it broke my mom's heart.

If it weren't for those two obstacles, I'd have been happy to show him just how dateable he was.



## 9. CARSON



Enzo let go of me as soon as we stepped into my house, and it felt like I could breathe again.

I didn't know why but having him pinned on me even with all those layers of clothing between us made me feel like I was sitting close to the sun. I was even sweating.

Georgie sniffed every corner around us and then looked proudly up at me until I took her leash off. Which was probably a huge mistake.

As soon as I did, she ran into one of the rooms, and I resisted the urge to follow her. If she was going to be mine, she needed to make this place her home.

Enzo took his bobble hat off, threw it on the shoe bench-slash-dumping ground, and put his hand out to me.

"What?" I asked.

"Phone. Now," he said.

I took my jacket off and hung it over the shoe bench, but Enzo was still waiting.

"You're aggressive," I told him.

*I like it.*

*Shit. No, I don't!*

Where had that come from?

"I need to aggressively overhaul your life, so yeah, I'm aggressive."

“Well, can we go up to the living room first, or do you expect me to stand here and wait for you to overhaul my life in the hallway?”

He raised an eyebrow as if he was about to defy me, but he relented instead, put his hand down, took off his own coat, and we climbed to the main floor.

Yeah, my parents were crazy like that. At some point in my teenage years, they decided our house needed a renovation. They flipped it upside down so my and my brother’s bedrooms were downstairs, and their bedroom—the untouchable holy ground even to this day—was upstairs with all the common rooms.

Considering how rabid my parents were—and probably still are to this day—we were all grateful we didn’t have to listen to their “special time,” as they liked to call it. It was enough of a scar for me to hear my parents have a go at it and nine months later to hold the result of that “encounter” when I was just a miserable sixteen-year-old that didn’t need to know how his parents made babies. It was surprising I didn’t have the whole cast of *Cheaper by the Dozen* as my siblings, but I guess there’s only so many times a condom could break.

“I can’t believe you never moved out. Either of you,” Enzo said as we reached the kitchen, and I turned the coffeemaker on.

“Well, I was planning to before Darren...and Cole keeps saying he will, but considering the sky-high prices on this island, I doubt that will happen any time soon. And it’s mostly empty now that Mom and Dad are cruising around the world,” I said.

Enzo put his hand up and gagged.

“That sounds wrong, man,” he said.

It took me a moment before I got it and laughed.

“Well, I don’t think cruising for straight people is the same as it is for gay people,” I said.

“Frankly, I think I prefer cruising for gay people,” he said, and then as if he caught himself, he rolled his eyes.

“So what you’re trying to say is you still hate boats, and you like jerking off in public while some creeps watch you? Got it...master-dater,” I said, barely able to hold back the laughter.

“Oh, shut up. That’s not what I meant...exactly. But yeah, I still hate boats.”

“I bet your ride here was fun.”

“I was hopped up on Dramamine. Best high ever,” he said, and I let out a roaring laugh.

We looked at each other for a few moments, moments that felt like centuries of looking at...

At perfection incarnate.

Watching Enzo made things inside me that I thought were dormant stir to life.

Things like happiness.

Things like hope.

But then he turned away from my ugly face to look through the large double doors that led to the patio with a view of Main Street and the Mayberry Port and that hope jumped off a cliff.

“So what brings you back? I thought you were busy being a superstar or something,” I said because the silence was awkward, and I couldn’t stop staring at him. I needed a way to cover it up.

I noticed his spine straighten and he swallowed hard.

“I was never a superstar and won’t be one now,” he said, looking out the windows before giving me a fake smile and putting his hands in his pockets.

I could tell there was more to that story, but I got the feeling he didn’t want to talk about it.

“Coffee,” I said instead of pushing the subject.

“Yes, please!”

He flopped down on one of the armchairs, and as I poured the coffees—black with one sugar for him, plain with cream for me—he turned over and waved his hand nonchalantly.

“And don’t forget your phone because I sure haven’t.”

A sigh escaped me before I could stop it, and I presented him with his coffee and my phone.

“Do we have to do this nonsense? Can’t we just chill and enjoy the fact I don’t have to work today?”

Enzo sipped his coffee, holding my phone in his free hand like it was the holy grail. The look he gave me reeked of confidence and arrogance.

When had the weird little monster who got my brother into more trouble than any one person had the right to turn into this confident man?

“We could. We could make it like *every* other day off you’ve had. Or we could change your life. Which do you prefer?”

I paused before daring to look him right in the eyes while sipping my coffee.

“You’re scaring me, so I’d probably say option one. Please,” I said.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Williams, but option one was never an option. It’s number two,” he said, arching an eyebrow and looking way too dominant.

“Which reminds me,” I rushed to say and stood from the sofa. “I need to dump one out.”

“Sit your ass down, Carson Spencer Williams, and let me change your life!”

Once again, I wasn’t sure why, but the bossiness in his voice put my entire body on full alert, and I didn’t dare think why.

“Oh, so you’re middle-naming me now, are you? I can middle-name you too, you know. You’re not special,” I teased, knowing full well how wrong my last statement was.

“If only I had a middle name,” he replied with a mocking tune that made me want to smack him. Or kiss him. Or both.

He raised an eyebrow and glanced at the sofa. So I did what he asked me to do, and Enzo set his coffee down.

“Password?” he asked, lighting up my phone.

“Ella’s birthday,” I replied, and he swiftly typed it and scrolled through my phone.

It felt wrong having another person go through my stuff, but at the same time, it felt like...like I was handing control to him. For some fucked up reason, that made my cock harden, and I froze.

“Jesus, do you even have a dating app in he—oh, found it,” he said and opened the Cinderfella app that had been sitting idle on my phone for months.

The last time I used it was to try to hook up with some guy so I could start getting over Hwan. All I got was ghosted, so I’d stayed off it for a good while.

“Awww, look at this adorableness,” he said, pointing the phone at me to show me a grainy picture of myself from a few years ago.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Well, don’t, because it’s shit. Not you. The picture. The resolution is so bad you can barely tell if you have a mouth or not. Don’t you have any better pictures?”

I shook my head.

“I’m not a selfie kind of guy,” I told him.

“Well, you may not be a selfie guy, but I’m a handy guy, so I can help with that.”

He paused, pursed his lips, and winced.

“Obviously, I mean, give a hand with that. Not give you a handy—”

His cheeks flushed and his eyes opened wide as he tried to unsay what he said.

It was a sweet color on him, and I couldn’t help but smile. His fumbling and the double entendre did very little to ease the tension in my pants.

“So let’s do this,” he said, holding up the smartphone to my face. My arousal dissipated as I tried to cover my face and protect my dignity.

“Jesus. Warn a guy,” I said.

“It’s pronounced Heh-sus, thank you, but I go by Enzo now,” he mocked.

“Heh-sus, Enzo, or whatever, put my phone down, now,” I told him.

“We need pictures,” he said.

“And I don’t do pictures,” I told him.

They only reminded me how unattractive and undesirable I was. Never mind the growing number of facial wrinkles.

“Well, tough, because no pictures, no dating,” he insisted.

“That’s fine.”

“So, what, dude. You want to lose a thousand dollars because you’re afraid of a teeny-weeny hole—camera. Teeny-weeny camera? You said you’re undateable—”

“I am.”

“Well, so far, it sounds like you don’t want to be dateable. There’s a difference.”

I stared at him and tried to convince myself he wasn’t right, that I wasn’t in this situation of my own volition, but...

He kinda had a point.

“Fine. I’ll let you try and make this ugly mug presentable, so you can see how undesirable I am to anyone with standards,” I told him.

“People with no standards need dates too,” he mumbled, and I threw a pillow at his face. “Hey! So what? You can call yourself ugly, but the minute I make a joke about it, I get assaulted? You’re not playing fair or making sense, Mr. Carson.”

I rolled my eyes and let him take a picture of me. But, apparently, one wasn’t enough. And as much as I tried to stop

him from taking more or grimacing my way into unusable photos, he had a whole gamut of ugly shots of me by the end. The only reason he stopped the impromptu photoshoot was because Georgie barreled through the room and attacked us with her tongue and whip of a tail.

We played with her for a minute before I filled a bowl with water, and she went to town splashing it.

“Awww, you like her. You *loove* her,” he said when he caught me staring at Georgie.

“She’s cute. It still doesn’t mean I’ve got the time for her.”

“Maybe she came into your life so you’d make time. For her. And someone else,” he said. “At least that’s what Mama D’Agostino would tell you. And I agree.”

“Maybe,” I said and pursed my lips before I admitted. “I can’t help but think what life would look like with her in it.”

Enzo wasted no time cooing and clapping his hands together.

“If you’re thinking that, then she’s already yours, my friend,” he said.

“Maybe,” I told him.

“So what are you going to name her?”

“She’s already got a name.”

“Yeah, but she needs a better one. She’s not a Georgie. She’s a whole bundle of energy and sweetness. She needs a name fitting her spirit. Something like Bounce or Joy or Honey.”

I laughed and looked at the dog, trying to determine whether she even wanted a new name.

“Honey...bee,” I said.

And of course, if you asked Enzo, he’d tell you it was fate or written in the stars, but that was the moment Georgie stopped what she was doing and turned to look at me with those big puppy dog eyes. I just about melted.

“Honeybee! That’s a great name, and she approves!” Enzo bounced excitedly, and Honeybee came over for ear scratches

and belly rubs.

“There. That’s perfect,” Enzo said after a minute or two, and I turned to him, all confused. And he showed me a picture of a guy fawning over a dog, smiling.

It took me a long moment to realize it was me. I’d never seen myself like that before. And for once, I didn’t even care about the baggy eyes or the wrinkles on my forehead.

“It is,” I said and looked up.

Our gazes met and locked for a moment or two, long enough to drive my head crazy with unseemly thoughts and make my body tense with feelings he awakened in me.

But this wasn’t going to happen. This couldn’t happen. I wasn’t going to go from being in love with my young employee to crushing over my younger brother’s friend. Kid. That was what he was, really. A kid. Even if sitting in front of me right now, with a smooth smile and bright eyes, he looked like complete and utter perfection, not a kid.

Honeybee got back to her feet and pounded out of the room before I knew what was happening. A scream came out of my employee on babysitting duty today.

“Oh my God,” Madison shrieked, and Ella laughed in her arms.

Honeybee climbed on her, pushed her nose into Madison’s hands, then tried to lick Ella’s fingers. Once the shock of the unexpected dog wore off, Madison crouched down with Ella still attached to her and played with Honeybee, who turned out to be incredibly gentle with my fragile small niece.

“So this is Georgie then?” she said after a while.

“Honeybee now,” Enzo corrected her.

“Awww, you’ve named her already. Wait ‘til I tell Penny.”

I didn’t respond. I didn’t react. All I could truly focus on was breathing because somehow, someday, being in the same room with Enzo after four years made me breathless.



## 10. CARSON



We ordered food, and Madison stayed with us until Cole returned from work and took Ella into his bedroom for a nap.

“He’s working a lot, huh?” Enzo commented when it was just the two of us and Honeybee again with a cup of mint tea after lunch.

“Yes, and I don’t know why. It’s not like we’re living hand to mouth, but the way he acts, it’s like if he stops, he’ll be homeless or something,” I told him.

My brother has been a shell of himself since Sandra’s death. Even though Ella was the center of his universe, everything else about his life had become empty. It hurt to see him bury himself in work at such a young age when he should be enjoying life.

“He’s probably burying his feelings into work. Sounds like someone I know,” he replied and raised an eyebrow pointedly.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said with narrow eyes and a hint of a smirk I couldn’t quite hide.

Enzo put his mint tea down on the coffee table and snatched my phone from my hands.

“Now, let’s get back to getting you a life before we get Cole one,” he said and unlocked my device with ease and shamelessness.

I’d missed Enzo. He fit into our family perfectly as if he’d never been gone. But he’d returned home a man.

“Now, before I open any of your Cinderfella messages, are there dick pics I need to know about?” he said with a strained face as if even the idea of seeing me naked was disgusting to him.

Why did I care? It wasn't like he was trying to set me up with himself. He was trying to set me up with other guys. It didn't matter if he thought the sight of me was disgusting.

And yet, there was a clench in my chest at the thought that he might find me repulsive.

“Of course not. What do you take me for?” I answered.

“Oh, dear. Don't worry, we can fix that,” he replied, and my jaw dropped. “I'm just kidding. Relax. Well...kind of.”

He stood from the armchair and came crashing down beside me, putting his feet on the table and resting his head on my shoulder.

It was peculiar. And the weight of him against me made it impossible for me to function.

But it was cozy. And it made me feel warm fuzzies inside, which was certainly not what I needed.

I'd rather still be obsessed with Hwan than have all these strange, inappropriate thoughts about Enzo.

“Oh wow, look, your new profile picture has already attracted a bunch of new matches,” he said.

It was a struggle to move my head, hell even my eyes, because doing so felt like I could explode. But I managed it by some miracle. I tried to focus on the screen and match notifications and not the scent of banana and chocolate that attacked me as soon as a strand of his hair rubbed under my nose.

“See? You're not undateable. You just needed a new picture,” he said.

“Uh-huh,” was all I managed to say without letting out an inappropriate sigh.

“So...what's your type? What age range do we want to go for?”

I watched as his fluffy sweater rose and fell as he breathed and willed myself to stop thinking about what it would feel like to undress him.

“I’m not picky. I guess probably closer to my age. I don’t want people to think I’ve turned into a sugar daddy all of a sudden,” I said.

Enzo glanced at me and shook his head.

“No one’s going to think you’re a sugar daddy if you date a younger man,” he said and bit his lip.

“I’ll think I’m one.”

“Whatever. I’m setting the age range for twenty-five and up,” he said.

“It’s not like I can stop you from doing whatever you’re doing, so...fine.”

“That’s right. You can’t. Now, what other preferences do you have?”

His finger hovered over the “Looking for Tops” button I ticked some century ago, and I swallowed the knot in my throat.

“Nu-nothing,” I finally said.

That was one way to embarrass yourself in the company of your baby brother’s best friend.

“Sorry a-about that,” I said before I could stop myself. “You didn’t need to know that.”

He narrowed his eyes and looked up at me. Our lips were mere inches from each other, making the temptation to kiss him almost impossible to resist.

“Nothing to be sorry about. I mean, sure, could I have lived without the information that my friend’s older brother is a power-bottom? Sure. Am I gonna let that change our... relationship? Hell no—”

“I didn’t say I was a power-bottom,” I said.

He smirked.

“But you are a bottom.”

“I can’t believe I’m talking about this with a kid sixteen years my junior,” I said.

He laughed, and I felt it roar through me, threatening to tear me apart with its intensity. This was not a conversation someone had so close to one another unless they were on a date.

And this was most definitely *not* a date.

“There’s no shame in positions or sexual preference. Society has made sex so taboo some people are too scared to even talk about this stuff with their life partners. We need to be more liberal as a society about sex. That’s the only way we’ll ever raise happier, healthier kids who are not afraid of themselves and their bodies.”

“Can we, I don’t know, change the subject before I die of embarrassment?”

Enzo lowered his hand with my phone in it until it rested on my thigh and stared at me as if his touch wasn’t kindling and I wasn’t burning inside.

“Fine. I’ll drop it, but there’s nothing to be embarrassed about. It certainly doesn’t change my opinion of you,” he replied.

“Which is?” I asked before I could change my mind.

He took a beat and licked his lips before he removed his hand from my thigh and readjusted himself on the sofa so he wasn’t glued to me.

“That of a...a wonderful, kind man who...who needs to get laid. Stat,” he said and got busy typing on my phone before I could react.

Deny it as he may, I couldn’t have made him more uncomfortable.

I didn’t know what was wrong with me. This whole wager had been a mistake. It was only going to end in disaster. Hell, it was going that way already, and we’d barely even started.

“Okay, so how often do you use this app? Because there are unread messages here from eons ago,” he said.

“Ah yeah, I don’t really go on there much. Most of them are just after...sex, and I want more than that,” I told him.

He did not need to know about my failed attempt at a hookup.

If he was going to “coach” me with this whole dating malarkey, he would soon find out how undesirable I was.

“There’s no one out there for me, and you’re gonna realize it sooner or later. Then you’re gonna lose the bet, and I’m gonna make you my slave for a day.”

“Hmm...I wouldn’t quite give up just yet, Mr. Denny Downer. We’ll find a cute guy to talk to,” he said.

I had one right next to me, and I was talking to him, but Enzo didn’t count, did he? He could never count.

“Oh wow. I never thought of that. You’re so wise,” I mocked him.

“Shut up,” he said. “See? This guy’s already replied.”

He showed me the chat. Enzo had typed *Hey, you*, and the username WanderingBundt had answered with *Hi*.

Enzo clicked on the username and visited WanderingBundt’s profile. A young black man with a green paisley headband stared back at us with a sweet smile.

“He’s twenty-six, has a mobile bakery, and wants to bake the world a better place. A little on the nose if you ask me, but hey, he’d be a good first trial,” Enzo said. “Oh, I just got it. Mobile bakery. Wandering Bundt. Clever. Anyway, here you go. Now, what would you typically answer? Maybe that’s where you go wrong.”

He handed me my phone back, and I huffed.

I didn’t think my chatting skill was the reason I was dateless, but I didn’t tell him that.

“I don’t know,” I said, going back to the chat. “How are you?”

Enzo gasped as if I’d said I wanted to murder the Wandering Bundit and shook his head frantically.

“You need to open with a joke. Something relatable. Something that tells him you’ve got a sense of humor like he does,” Enzo said.

“But I don’t.”

“That’s irrelevant. You want to impress him enough to go out with you, and then he can see what a great guy you are.”

I ignored his compliment because I knew he was saying it because he had to, and I rolled my eyes.

“You expect me to come up with a joke on the spot?”

“That’s how people usually come up with jokes. Sorry to break it to you,” he replied.

“I’m not good at these things,” I said.

“Clearly. Let me think,” he said and slumped on the sofa, finger in front of his lips, eyes narrowed in concentration. “Okay. I’ve got it.”

He took my phone from me and typed a message before he passed it back to me.

*Carson39: What did the French baker feel when his wife dumped him?*

*WanderingBundt: What??*

I looked at Enzo for the answer, and he laughed before sharing the punchline.

“Pain.”

I raised an eyebrow and shook my head in disappointment.

“Really?” I asked him.

“Really. It’s funny. Come on. Reply to him, or he’ll think you’re Googling it or that you’re not interested.”

I did as he asked, even though it was horrifying to even type, and we watched the screen as the dots danced at the bottom, waiting for his reply.

*WanderingBundt: Hahaha. That is probably the most sophisticated tacky pun I’ve heard.*

“Hm, that’s pretentious for a guy going around telling people he wants to bake the world a better place, but whatever. You’re in,” Enzo said and elbowed my ribs.

I seriously doubted I was anywhere near in because of a bad pun, but I typed *Thanks* as a response.

“Thanks a dozen,” Enzo corrected me.

“I’m not sending that.”

“Yes, you are. He’ll laugh. Trust me.”

Before I could do it, he snatched my phone away and typed away.

*Carson39: Do you knead more? I’ve got more to bake you smile.*

I snortled at the mere notion that I would ever say something like that, but it seemed highly entertaining for Enzo, so I let him control my phone. It wasn’t like I had a say in any of this. I was a pawn in his little experiment, and even though it should frustrate the hell out of me, it made me curious if he’d be successful and prove me wrong.

Although the idea of him being my minion for a day if he lost—the most likely outcome, obviously—sparked something in the pit of my stomach that I neither wanted nor needed to explore at this point in time.

*Carson39: Well, what can I say. I’m a weirdough.*

*WanderingBundt: I lick weirdoughs.*

*WanderingBundt: Sorry. That was terrible.*

*Carson39: Are you trying to say you wanna piece of me?*

“Oh my God, Enzo, stop it,” I said, more so because the smile on his face was frustrating than because of how truly unfunny this conversation was.

“Oh, come on. It’s all in good fun,” he replied and returned to the chat.

*WanderingBundt: I’d give it a taste test.*

*Carson39: Do you mind dates?*

*WanderingBundt: My favorite fruit.*

*Carson39: Should I set the day?*

*WanderingBundt: I'll set the timer.*

Enzo chuckled and gave me back my phone.

“And that, my friend, is how you get a date with a baker,” he said.

I shook my head in disbelief and watched as he got up and sauntered to the kitchen to pour himself a new cup of mint tea.

*No. Stop it. You're not watching his ass.*

But was it my fault he had the firmest butt I'd ever seen? It wasn't my fault for noticing. It was his for putting on the tightest jeans on this planet and not expecting anyone to look.

He turned around abruptly, and I dropped my head to look at my phone, hoping he hadn't caught me staring. Or he hadn't noticed. Or, at least, it hadn't been obvious I was salivating over his firm buns.

*See. I can make bad puns too.*

I read the chat and all the emoji and GIFs Enzo had sent in between those awful jokes, and while this date was probably going to be all kinds of a mess, I was actually excited.

*Carson39: Should I bring flours?*

I rolled my eyes at the last message Enzo had sent and tried to convince myself that it was maybe possible the WanderingBundt was my forever-after.

*WanderingBundt: I'll bring the seggsy.*

Yeah, somehow, I highly doubted that.

It was far more likely he was Enzo's soulmate than mine, and the mere thought could spin me out of control. If I let it.

*What is this feeling?*



## 11. CARSON



How had I ended up on a date with a guy barely a day after talking to him?

I watched Enzo trying to make the stand mixer work on the other side of the room and smiled.

*Ah yes. That's how.*

That little demon had somehow crawled into my life and turned it upside down within seconds.

“Do you want to do the honors?” WanderingBundt asked beside me.

His actual name, of course, was Zachary, or Zach, for short, and he indeed had a wonderful smile, just like his profile picture.

In fact, the only thing different about him was the length of his hair. He had a short afro in his profile picture, but now he had a buzzcut.

He was a little shorter than me and had an average physique, from what I could tell. He wore a black-and-white festive sweater—it was way too early in December for that if you asked me—and a pair of skinny jeans that accentuated his generous assets.

Not that I'd checked.

Okay, yes, I'd checked. And he had a lovely butt. I may be a bottom, but I loved a good ass to grab onto or spank.

Zach offered me the bowl with all the mixed ingredients and smiled.

It really was a lovely color on him.

“Sure,” I said and glanced to the other side of the room where Enzo and Madison were trying to make their own gingerbread cookies.

Or, more accurately, where Enzo was still fighting with the stand mixer. Madison caught me staring, and she tilted her head to the side, pointing at her partner and rolling her eyes.

I smirked.

“When you’re *bready*,” Zach said, and I jumped, turning my attention back to my date.

“Oh, umm, yeah, thanks,” I said and took the bowl from him.

Zach stared at me, waiting for something else, but I wasn’t sure what.

I bit my bottom lip and checked the sheet on the counter.

“Um...what’s left?” I asked.

I should have been paying more attention, but I couldn’t focus for some reason.

Zach’s smile looked a bit forced as he slid the egg case toward me.

“*Crust* the eggs and molasses,” he answered.

“Oh,” I said, cracking the eggs before I realized what he’d said and gave a halfhearted laugh. “Funny.”

He tipped the molasses in the bowl as I added the eggs, and then I emptied the bowl into the stand mixer.

Zach turned it on with ease. Of course, he did. He probably used one of these every day.

*“Well, you better get that check for a thousand dollars ready because I’ve got you a date for the ages,” Enzo said and turned his laptop to me to show me the screen.*

*“Cookie decorating class? Really?” I asked, unamused.*

*“Yes, really.”*

*“I’m only going to embarrass myself. Besides, that’s his job. I’m sure he doesn’t want to do it when he’s on a date too,” I told him.*

*Enzo patted my knee reassuringly and pursed his lips.*

*“Trust me, dude. It’s a first date. You don’t want to outshine him, and if he needs to come to your rescue, even better. People love feeling good about themselves on a date. So what better way to make Mr. WanderingBundt feel good about himself than to put him straight into his element?”*

*I gave him the side-eye and shook my head.*

I shook my head now at the memory.

I should have told him he was crazy and arranged for a simple dinner. This was too much work.

Work that I wasn’t capable of doing well.

“Right about now, you should all be finishing your dough mix. You want to roll it out evenly on the counter to about an inch thick and use the cookie cutter to cut it into shapes,” the instructor said. She was a woman about my age with a pretty mix of blonde and white hair and striking Molly Hagan-blue eyes.

Zach helped me tip the dough out, and with the help of a rolling pin, I rolled it out as instructed.

“Sorry, it’s misshapen,” I said when I finished and my dough was all oval-shaped instead of a square.

“Donut worry. I can fix it,” Zach said and held his hand out for the rolling pin, which I happily passed to him.

He held my gaze for a moment longer before smiling and getting to work.

I watched him work the dough like the pro he was for a moment and rubbed the jade necklace around my neck absentmindedly. I wasn’t looking at Zach anymore but at Enzo and Madison, who were laughing out loud, trying to do what came to Zach so effortlessly.

*“What is that for?” I asked before we set off for the church hall where the class was being held.*

*Enzo unclasped the necklace and put the thin rectangular green stone hanging from a golden chain around my neck.*

*He smelled of bubblegum today. I wasn't sure if it was his hair or his perfume, but it tickled my nose, and I had to bite my lip to stop the dirty thoughts from infiltrating my brain.*

*Thoughts like grabbing him by the back of the neck and sending my tongue down his throat.*

*Or pressing him against the front door and letting our bodies do all the talking.*

*Or leading him down to my bedroom and letting him use me like I'd never been used before.*

*“It's for confidence. If you feel like you're screwing it up or panicking about not being entertaining enough, just give it a rub and let its energy boost your confidence,” Enzo said, and the tips of his fingers pulled back from my neck, leaving traces of goosebumps where he'd touched.*

*“Thanks,” I said. “It'll probably be gold by the end of the date.”*

*He laughed.*

*“It's not bronze, silly. It's jade. Rub away,” he said.*

*He had no idea what he was offering and how badly I wanted to do just that.*

*Get your head out of your ass, Carson, and focus on a person you can have.*

*Not the person you can't.*

*“What shapes do you want to cut?”*

*Zach twirled his fingers over the little box with the cookie cutters before he picked out a heart-shaped one.*

*I held back from rolling my eyes and picked out a gingerbread-man cutter. This date was not going well enough for him to give me hints that there was love in the baking.*

Crap. I'd caught the pun bug. Somebody needed to save me from this cringe-hell.

"I like your necklace," Zach said, and we started cutting cookies.

"Thanks," I answered.

"Is it jade?" I nodded. "Is that your birthstone, or just a stone you like?"

"Oh, this? No, it was a gift."

He grinned and pressed his cookie cutter down.

"My birthstone is turquoise or blue topaz, or something," I said.

I hated that I knew that, but having Enzo and his mom in my life meant learning those things. There was no avoiding it.

He and Madison were in the process of cutting cookies as well, but there was a lot more mess on their table. Mess and laughter. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought they were the ones on a date.

Was Enzo bi like my brother?

It didn't matter. Why did I care?

"Oh, I love turquoise. My favorite is carnelian, and not because it's *my* birthstone," he said.

"Huh? Oh yeah, it's nice," I said, only half listening.

I didn't even know what carnelian looked like.

"Right, we're ready," he said after a few minutes when we'd spread our cookies out on several trays.

"Very good," the instructor said, passing our table.

She tapped her hand on our counter and turned to the rest of the class.

"Now, please put your cookies into the oven and remove the chilled ones from the fridge."

My brows knotted in confusion, a fact that didn't go unnoticed by Zach.

“We just made the cookies for the next class, and the class before made the cookies for us. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be able to decorate on them straight out of the oven,” he said.

I nodded in understanding and helped put the trays in the oven before Zach walked to the fridge to take out the chilled ones.

Enzo cast a glance at me and smiled, and for some reason, the room got brighter. A wave of fuzz and warmth rushed through my chest, leaving me unable to function.

Oh, fuck my life. Why couldn’t I focus on the date I did have instead of dreaming about a date with a man I couldn’t have?

Enzo gave me a thumbs-up. Madison noticed and did the same.

If they thought this was going well, they were both deluded.

“How are your piping skills?” Zach said when he returned to the table.

“Abysmal,” I replied, and we laughed.

“Don’t worry. I got your back,” he replied and put the tray on the counter.

I stole a glance at Enzo, but he and Madison were getting busy with the piping bags. Somehow they’d managed to get their fingers red, blue, and green in a matter of seconds.

*Forget him, Carson. Focus on your date. He’s cute, talented, and funny—albeit corny.*

“So, Zach, are you from Mayberry Holm? I don’t think I’ve seen you around before. And I’m sure I would have heard about your mobile bakery by now.”

“Oh, um, yeah, I’m still renovating it. I got a cheap old food truck, and it needs a lot of work. In the meantime, I’ve started a bread delivery service,” he said.

“Bread delivery?” I asked.

That was something I’d never heard of before.

“Yeah. You know how you have milkmen. Well, I’m your bread man.”

“That’s different,” I said.

A Hwan kind of different.

Zach’s smile wavered for a second, and I almost slapped myself.

“That’s not a bad thing. My friend’s got a bubble tea shop, and when he first told us he wanted to open one, we told him it wouldn’t work. But what do you know: one month in, and he’s doing pretty well for himself.”

“Oh yeah. The bubble tea shop. I’ve been there. It’s great. Better than the ones I’ve been to in New York,” he answered.

“Is that where you’re from?”

“Yup. Harlem, born and *bread*,” he said and winked at me. “Huh. Get it? Born and bread?”

I burst out in laughter, surprising myself.

*See, people, it’s so much funnier when it’s not forced.*

“What the hell are you doing here then? You left New York for Mayberry Holm? I smell a story there.”

Zach sighed and bit his lip.

“Sorry. That’s none of my business. Obviously. Please, don’t answer that,” I said.

“Oh no. It’s okay. I...it was a bad breakup. I needed a fresh start, and one day I came across this house for rent here. I went deep into research mode, and a few weeks later, I was here. I used my savings to buy the food truck and set up my business. This place...I never thought I’d find a place like this in my life. You always see small towns in movies, and they’re so nice and sweet. Everything is perfect, too perfect, and when you actually go to a small town, it’s usually full of weirdos who stare at your every move. So it was quite the surprise when I came here, and it felt...”

“Like home?” I asked.

It was always nice to hear people find some sort of haven on this island. As a born and bred Mayberrian, I loved my town, but I knew it wasn’t for everyone’s tastes.

“That’s it. Home,” he said, and the smile returned on his face full force.

It was a beautiful smile. An earth-shattering kind of smile. A smile that could make someone fall in love.

And yet, I didn’t feel...anything.

Well, not nothing. I was still human.

I could imagine going out with him, having a laugh, helping him out with his bakery. They were all nice and warm feelings, but...

They weren’t romantic feelings.

Maybe if I’d met him before Enzo came back into my life and crashed through my walls to settle in my head, I could have pictured a romance between Zach and me.

But I couldn’t.

This whole experiment was doomed to fail, which created a sinking feeling in my stomach.

Because, yeah, it was more than likely I would win the bet and order the little shit around for a day, but even if I won, I’d still lose.

It wasn’t like winning this bet would get me into Enzo’s life and heart.

I was doomed to lose and doomed to die alone.

*Fuck me!*



## 12. ENZO



What was happening to me?

Why couldn't I focus on the class and the great company Madison was? Why was all I could think about—all I could obsess about—Carson?

I was a twenty-three-year-old man who'd found himself in Boston and was used to being among friends and hooking up every other day. Now I was back in Mayberry Holm, living with my mom, hanging out with my best friend, and crushing on his older brother...

It made me feel like I was a teenager again, full of hormones, testosterone, and an unrepentant crush. Whatever confidence I'd managed to build away from home was collapsing all around me, and I couldn't stop obsessing over everything Carson.

"Agh!" I groaned as I tried to decorate the cookies, but I wasn't as creative as Mom. Or even Madison next to me.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "You just need to let the air out of your piping bag, and then it will flow better."

"Huh? Oh," I said and pretended that was what bothered me.

I looked over to the counter with Carson and Zachary, and they seemed to be having a blast.

Which should be a success where my mission-slash-wager was concerned, but I didn't feel the sinking in the pit of my stomach and the ache in my chest that I'd felt whenever I'd seen Carson with his ex, Darren.

A painstaking half hour later, the class ended, and I wasted no time checking out what was happening over at the other counter.

Zachary held out a box of gingerbread cookies, let loose his gorgeous smile I was sure Carson couldn't resist, and said something.

Carson laughed and nodded, holding another box of cookies, and winked at Zachary before he left. Carson headed toward our counter.

"How did you guys do?" he asked, glancing at Madison before he turned to me, holding my gaze for a second, then two, and then a few more beats.

"It was fun. I've never made gingerbread cookies before. I loved it. Although this guy here can't pipe to save his life," she said and nudged me.

I attempted to laugh but was distracted by Carson's pretty brown eyes.

"Well, um, it's a good thing no one's life is dependent on anyone's piping skills then," I said and yanked my focus away from Carson before I risked being exposed.

"Well, now I seriously doubt whether or not you grew up in a bakery," Madison said.

Before I could answer, Carson cut in.

"Enzo has always been hopeless with baking. To Lilian's dismay," he said.

And that right there was why I couldn't ever tell him how I felt or *do* anything with him.

How could I confess my love for someone who called my mom by her first name?

I know I did, too, on occasion. But that was different. That was on par for my relationship with my mom. My friendship with her.

"You two shut up," I said because the chaos in my head was getting louder. "I may not have culinary talents, but I have

plenty in other artistic endeavors.”

“Oh yeah, apparently, this guy can sing and play music. Never mind that he’s never let us hear it,” Carson said, pointing to me with a scrunched face.

“No way! You’re a singer. That’s amazing, Enzo. Sing for us,” Madison exclaimed.

I raised an eyebrow and looked around us.

“Um, no thanks. Anyway, this isn’t the Enzo hour. This is supposed to be the Carson hour.”

Madison’s face sunk, but she did turn to her boss.

“How’s it going? You seemed to be having fun.”

Carson shrugged and put his hands in his pockets.

“Well, the date is already over, so I don’t think it’s going that well!” he replied.

“What? Already? I would have thought you’d go out for dinner somewhere. It’s still so early,” Madison said.

“He’s got to wake up early. He’s a baker,” I said, remembering his profile and job.

I didn’t think I’d ever seen my mom still in bed at eight in the morning. She was usually up before everyone. And even now that she had help, she was still a ridiculously early riser.

“That too, but I don’t think he liked me,” Carson said with a sour face.

“Oh, come on. Why wouldn’t he like you? You’re a hottie with a bootie,” Madison said.

She had a point.

“I don’t think I was as funny as he expected. And he kept making those food puns and looked at me weird.”

“He was probably waiting for you to pun back,” I said.

He raised his shoulders and sighed.

“Maybe. But I’m not good with that stuff. See? That’s what happens when you chat on someone else’s behalf. Unrealistic

expectations.”

“Oh relax,” I said.

“So *you* were chatting to him?” Madison asked me.

“Yep. This guy over here was too shy to do it,” I said.

“Then maybe you should go out with him. Unless you’re not single?”

“Oh, I’m single, all right,” I announced. “Maybe I will hit him up.”

I glanced at Carson, and he frowned.

“Only if that’s okay with you, of course. Maybe a second date will break the ice better,” I said.

“Erm...be my guest. I doubt he’ll want to see me again,” he said.

There he went with that pessimism as if he was fucking Quasimodo.

“Oh yay! This matchmaking business is so fun,” Madison exclaimed, clapping her hands together.

“We need to get out of here,” I said as all the students left the room and new ones started streaming through.

We packed our cookies and left the church hall, finding ourselves in a haze of fairy lights, Christmas carols, and the smell of cider and cocoa.

“Whoa! Winterberry Festival is in full swing, isn’t it,” I said, taking the whole scene in.

There were cabin stalls along the street selling all kinds of holiday ware, people posed in front of Christmas trees, and reindeer figures and speakers along the road added atmosphere to the whole ordeal.

“I didn’t even realize it was starting today,” Madison said.

“Well, it was bound to start eventually. Only three weeks to Christmas,” Carson groaned.

“Add a little enthusiasm to your statement, dude,” I told him, and he gave me his signature look.

“Well, that means you only have three weeks to lose,” he told me with those striking eyes reflecting some of the fairy lights behind us.

It made my insides flare.

Were it any other guy causing this sensation in me—this yanking feeling of desire—I would have pulled him into my arms and frenched him like there was no tomorrow.

But he wasn't any other guy.

He was Carson.

“What makes you think I'll lose?” I managed to say through all the bullshit in my head.

“Um...this date?” he replied.

“Please! That was just a warmup. I've got plenty of time to teach you how to date and get you a hot new boyfriend,” I told him and he pouted, which I didn't know how to interpret.

Did he even want me to find him a boyfriend? Because it sure sounded like he didn't.

“Oooh, hot chocolate. Do you guys want some?” Madison asked and started walking toward one of the stalls.

A kid left that stall with her mom holding a big cup topped with whipped cream and marshmallows, and dammit, it looked too good to ignore.

“I'm game. Unless you have any plans.” I turned to Carson, knowing he wouldn't have made any.

He was going on a date. He wouldn't have scheduled anything in case it ended in sex.

And why did the thought of him getting it on with another man anger me so much?

*Oh wait. I know why.*

I wished there was a switch inside me that I could just flick and stop these obscene feelings for my friend's brother.

“No. No plans,” he said. “But I'll grab a hot cider if that's okay.”

He pointed to the stall on the other side of the hot chocolate, and I bit my lips.

Temptation all around.

“Ah, fine. Cider it is,” I said.

“That took a lot of convincing,” Madison giggled as we separated and lined up at the different stalls.

The weather had turned since we’d gone into the church and my woolen cardigan felt as pointless as a sleeveless shirt.

“You okay?” he asked after a minute as I put my hands in my pockets.

“Yeah,” I said, focusing on the head of the person in front of me.

I couldn’t look Carson in the eyes. I had a feeling the more I did, the faster my resolve and any rationale would fly out the window.

“Did I do something?” he asked.

“What? Carson, no,” I said and looked at him.

*Dammit. Why couldn’t I control myself?*

“You’re acting weird,” he said, and a little hiss escaped me.

*Fucking winter weather being a cruel bitch!*

“Oh. You’re cold?” he asked. “You’re cold!”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’ll get the hot cider, and it’ll warm me up.”

Before I’d even finished my sentence, Carson had taken his coat off and put it around my shoulders like the gentleman he was.

And like the asshole *I* was, my dick stood to attention because I was a sucker for these kinds of things.

“I’m okay, Carson. I don’t want you to freeze to death. I’ve got a boyfriend to find for you,” I told him.

He tipped his head to the side and stared at me for a minute before he blinked away and turned to the front of the line to

order our ciders.

“You can’t find me a boyfriend if you freeze to death,” he said, handing a twenty to the stall keeper.

“Awww, you guys are so adorable,” Madison said when we were done ordering drinks. “Why don’t *you* go out on a date? You make a cute couple.”

“Oh, ew, Madison. He’s a kid,” Carson said just as I opened my mouth, but the “ew” threw me off.

Was I so disgusting to Carson that he’d never even contemplate going out with me?

“Zachary is like three years older than me,” I said and immediately regretted it.

I didn’t need to appear as if I was begging for Carson to like me in the same way I did.

“Well, yeah, but I’ve known you since you were this big, so…” Carson said and covered his mouth with the cider cup.

“Oops. I feel like I’ve opened a can of worms,” Madison said and giggled.

“What? No, you didn’t. There’s no worms,” I said.

“There’s not even a can,” Carson added.

“Uh-huh,” Madison replied and sipped her hot chocolate.

She took her phone out of her pocket a few seconds later and pursed her lips.

“Oh shoot. Cole needs me to babysit, so I’ll… I’ll get going,” she said and locked her home screen again, but I caught a glimpse of it, and there was no such message.

“I can head back. You don’t have to—” Carson started, but Madison cut him off.

“It’s okay. I need the cash anyway. Cabo, here I come,” she said and fist-pumped the air with extra flair, making me wonder why she was lying.

Was it to get out of our way because she thought this was too awkward, or was she ditching to force this into a “date.”

A notion that Carson found disgusting, apparently.

“Anyway, love you both. Don’t have too much fun without me unless you absolutely have to,” Madison said, kissing us both and leaving in a matter of seconds.

Carson glanced at me, and I took a sip of my cider. Its warm sweetness trickled through me, releasing some of the tension I felt.

“Want to check out the fair?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said, and we walked down the street, browsing the stalls. Some I recognized as old locals, some I didn’t. I assumed they were new businesses and people that had started on the island while I was gone.

I knew Hwan had wanted to get a stall, but with everything that had happened and all the costs of fixing up the business, he hadn’t had the time or funds to apply. He was hopeful for next year though.

“Oh look. I bet your mom would love those,” Carson pointed at a stall that sold candles and crystals.

I glanced at them and nodded, doing my best attempt at a smile.

“Are you still cold?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“What’s wrong?”

I shook it again.

“Enzo, what happened?”

*Don’t say it. Don’t say it. Don’t say it.*

“So...I’m ew?”

*Dammit, Enzo.*

“What?”

“When Madison suggested we go out on a date, you said ew. So what? Do you think I’m gross?”

*Shut up, Enzo. Why are you still talking?*



“No. That’s not what I—”

“Then what did you mean?” I asked.

“I didn’t...it’s just...I’ve known you since you were a kid. I... why? Do you want me to ask you out?” he asked, and I froze in place.

*See? That’s what happens when you can’t control your mouth. Good job, Enzo.*

“What? No!”

Was that too strong a reaction?

Maybe.

But I didn’t need him knowing how I felt about him. Especially if his first reaction was “ew.”

“Then what—”

“I mean, I wouldn’t date you in a million years, but I wouldn’t say ew if someone suggested it,” I said.

Was I still talking? Why couldn’t anyone shut me up? Anyone. Literally.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way. You’re not gross, Enzo. You are...”

I looked at his lips, hating how desperate I was for what was about to come out of them.

“A great guy. And one day, you’ll make some guy really happy,” he said, and frankly, I wished he said I was disgusting because, for some reason, what he said felt worse.

## 13. CARSON



“How is our little angel?” Mom asked and leaned into the camera as if she could look inside the house by doing so.

“Ella is fine. Growing bigger every day,” I said and pointed the laptop at her for her grandparents’ entertainment.

“Gummy! Popsy!” she said and giggled to herself.

“Oh look at her. She’s so cute. I can’t wait until we’re back,” Dad said.

“Sweetie, you’re the cutest, but can I speak to Uncle Carson now?” Mom said.

I turned the laptop and looked at my parents sitting next to each other, holding each other as if they were still teenagers in love. The sea stretched behind them, making the frame look like a painting.

“Why is she calling me Gummy? I’m not *that* old! We need to have a word about what you call me around my granddaughter,” Mom said.

I put my hands up in surrender.

“Hey, that’s not on me. You can talk to Cole,” I told her.

Dad rubbed Mom’s back, and Mom’s playful face turned somber.

“How is he?”

“Still working himself to the ground.”

“I wish he’d quit one of those jobs and focus on Ella,” Mom said.

“He will, sweetie,” Dad said and squeezed her hand. “When he feels it’s time.”

“I’m hoping Enzo will be able to get him out of this rut,” I said.

“Enzo’s back?” Mom asked. “That’s great news. Maybe they’ll finally realize how good they are for each other and pull Cole out of the hole he’s digging for himself.”

My stomach clenched, and I reminded myself that Mom’s words were nothing new. Ever since Cole met Enzo and came out, everyone had assumed they were a couple or destined to be one.

Hell, even I’d thought the same once upon a time.

But now, the mere notion made me angry.

Especially when I remembered what had happened two days ago when I called him gross without meaning to, and he’d gotten pissed—rightfully so.

In my rush to make Madison believe I didn’t like my brother’s best friend, I’d made Enzo think that I thought he was disgusting when he was anything but.

“Where are you mooring next?” I asked because I didn’t want Mom to start one of her speeches about why Cole and Enzo were soulmates.

“Sri Lanka!” Mom said with over-the-top excitement.

“Fun. Any plans—”

Honeybee climbed up on me and wagged her tail, looking longingly into my eyes.

“I think she’s trying to tell me she needs a walk,” I said.

“Oh. You got a dog?” Mom asked.

“Yeah. She’s from Duke’s Sanctuary. It was love at first sight or something.”

I rubbed her coat and scratched behind her ears, completely forgetting about my parents for a second.

“Who’s a good girl? Who’s a good girl?” I said in my practiced baby voice that wasn’t good enough for Ella anymore.

“And you had to get one of *those* dogs? Aren’t they, like, aggressive? What about Ella?” Mom asked.

That brought me back to the call.

“*Those* dogs? You mean pit bulls? No, Mom. They’re actually great with kids. And they’re only aggressive if they have asshole owners.”

“Hey, man,” Cole said from the stairs, and I turned to look at him.

As soon as he realized I was on a call with Mom and Dad, he froze with wide eyes and shook his head.

“Hey, Cole!” I said, giving him no chance to escape. If I had to chat with them, so did he. “Welcome back from work. Here’s Mom and Dad. I’ve got to walk Honeybee.”

Cole gave me the evil eye but took over for me, and I walked away with Honeybee on my tail.

“So, Carson tells us a certain someone by the name of Enzo is back,” Mom sang at my brother, and I had to bite my tongue to not interfere.

Instead, I walked downstairs and got busy with Honeybee’s harness. I put on my coat and went out the door before I climbed back up those stairs and told them Enzo was mine and only mine.

He wasn’t.

I hugged my coat tighter around myself, and the sight of Enzo wearing my parka over his shoulders struck me like lightning.

I lifted the collar to my nose and inhaled the sweet and spicy floral remnant of his scent. I didn’t know if it was my imagination or if it was truly there, but it still smelled like him. That warmed me more than the fabric ever could.

Honeybee ran like the wind, and I had to sprint after her to keep up, her tail wagging brightly. When she eventually stopped to pee, I tried to catch my breath before she continued her frantic journey.

I was sure I wasn't the first to ever have an energetic pitbull, but I was certain not everyone ran after their dog like their pants were on fire.

But even despite her high levels of energy, having her at home, following me in every room, even in the bathroom for number two, was fun and exciting. Something different in my life.

At least if Enzo's plan failed, I'd still have Honeybee in my life.

That was something.

When I got back home, Cole was asleep on the sofa, and Ella was asleep beside him. He was supposed to open the restaurant in an hour, but there was no way in hell I was waking him up, so I gave Honeybee a bone to keep her busy and went to work in his place.

All my employees had reshuffled their schedule to help me out with the dog and Enzo's dating thing, but since Enzo hadn't spoken to me since that night two days ago, I doubted he'd have any plans for me today.

Lunch service went smoothly, even though it was a Saturday, so once things were quiet, I sat down to have my late lunch.

"Hello, boss," Madison said and dumped her bag beside me before she sprawled over the other side of my booth.

"What's up with you?" I asked her. "Did you go out last night?"

"What? No. I'm not hungover if that's what you're asking," she replied. "I'm just—"

"There you are. I thought you were off today." Enzo appeared before my very eyes like the breeze of cool and charm he was and stared at me.

"Yeah, Cole passed out when he came back from work, so I thought it best to leave him to it," I answered.

Enzo raised his head in understanding and sat beside me, with Madison's bag as the only obstacle between us.

*If only that were true. There were so many more things between us. Things I couldn't begin to count.*

"I wish he'd leave that job," he sighed.

"I tried to convince him, but it pays well apparently," I said.

"But he stinks!"

"I tried to convince him that too, but you know how stubborn he is."

"I know there's no shame in any job, but...he doesn't even need three jobs. I'd understand two. Firefighting has been a thing for him for a few years, but trash collecting? I wish I could get through to him," he said.

"If there's anyone that could, that'd be you," I told him, trying to forget my mom's words from earlier.

"I'm trying. But I'm not giving up yet. And I haven't given up on you either," he replied, and I arched my back.

"Wh-what do you mean?" I asked.

"Did you forget about our bet?" he said, and even though a wave of relief should have passed through me, it didn't.

For some reason, I wanted those words to mean something else, even if they shouldn't.

"Phone!" He held out his hand and didn't remove it until I gave him my phone.

"Don't be too funny, or he'll be in trouble again," Madison said absentmindedly.

Enzo narrowed his eyes and stared at her.

"What's up with you?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" she huffed.

"Because you look like something's *eating* you."

I watched and waited for a reaction, but she didn't seem to get my joke.

“See, that’s what I mean,” I added.

“Sorry. It’s just...well, my cousin is meeting me here in half an hour, and I’m nervous,” she said.

“There’s nothing to be nervous about. Everything happens for a reason, remember?” Enzo told her.

“But what if he doesn’t think the same? Or what if he’s turned into a douche? I haven’t seen him in eight years. He could be a completely different person now,” she said.

“Well, then you just chat and have a drink, and then you part ways. There’s no need to force a relationship where there’s none left,” he said.

I nodded in agreement.

“Wait, why are you meeting him half an hour before you’re supposed to start work? Did you swap shifts with someone?” I asked.

“No. I’m still working,” she replied.

“Then why are you only giving him half an hour of your time?”

“Because. If it’s awkward, then I have an out,” she said.

“You’re weird,” I told her.

“She’s got a point,” Enzo said, and I shook my head.

“Then you’re weird too,” I told him with a smirk.

“On top of gross? Thanks,” he said, and even though he was laughing, I hated that he still thought I’d called him disgusting on purpose.

Out of all the people in my life, Enzo and Hwan were the only ones I thought could wear their hearts on their sleeves and not give two shits about what everyone else thought about them.

“Yup,” I bit back with what I hoped he knew was banter.

As expected, a tall guy with curly hair and a shorter guy walked in and found Madison half an hour later.

Enzo moved to the next table to let them have their reunion and concentrated on my phone as if it had cast a spell on him.

I dreaded to think what kind of date he was setting me up with, but then the reservations started pouring through, and I had no time to worry about it.

Instead, everyone seemed to come in at the same time, and some bookings even came in early, and accommodating as I was, I sat them all.

When Madison jumped up to start her shift, tickets at the bar and kitchen were already backing up.

It was just Madison, Isla, and me on the floor today, and Karan was manning the bar to the best of his ability.

Time went by, service got slower, and people started complaining as their food took longer than normal or their meals were served before they got their drinks. Even though I should be used to it, the stress started getting to me until I couldn't even breathe anymore.

I ended up hiding in a corner, bent over, trying to calm my pounding heart and find the ability to breathe again.

"Carson, are you okay?" Enzo asked and put his hand on my back, an immediate balm to my body.

"I'm fine," I said.

"You don't look fine. Do you need to sit down?" the tall guy said, still in the booth where they'd been sitting with Madison.

"Yeah. I can't sit down. It's too busy, and I have no staff to take over," I said.

"Do you need some help?" he asked.

"Yeah, we can help," said his partner.

"That's right," Enzo added.

I shook my head and tried to return to work, but Enzo wrapped his hand around mine and pulled me back.

"Let us help, Carson," he begged me in a whisper that brought goosebumps to the back of my neck.

"Yeah. Rafe and I have been working in restaurants for years now," the tall guy said.



“Yup. I’m the manager of a restaurant in New York,” the other guy, Rafe, said.

“Oh my God, really?” Madison said as she stopped at the booth with two plates in her hands. “Would you mind helping out until it dies down, Pierce?”

“Sure thing,” the tall guy, Pierce, said and stood. “I’m Pierce, by the way.”

He offered me his hand, and I shook it.

“He’s my cousin. And that’s his husband, Rafe,” Madison added.

“Nice to meet you guys, but really, you don’t have to—”

“Oh, enough of that,” Rafe said, walking past me and straight through to the hosting point to greet a new table.

“You’ll have to forgive him. He loves his job,” Pierce said. “He can do it in his sleep.”

“See? Now you sit down and take deep breaths,” Enzo said, helping me into the booth.

Pierce gave us a captain’s salute, walked to a table, and effortlessly took an order.

“Relax. They’ve got it,” Enzo.

“But I don’t even know them. It feels rude to throw them into the deep end,” I said, accepting the water Enzo had poured for me.

“They want to help, though, so let them,” he answered and smiled.

“Excuse me. This steak is cold,” someone said, and I got up despite Enzo’s efforts to stop me. “This is ridiculous. With the prices we’re paying, the steaks shouldn’t be cold.”

I looked at their plates and bit down what I really wanted to say.

“I assume you ordered the steak rare?”

“Well, of course, we did. That’s the only way to eat steak,” the guy said.

“Well, I’m afraid it would lose heat faster since it’s not cooked for a long time,” I said.

“That’s stupid. I’ve had a lot of steaks in my life. None of them were ice cold. And it’s chewy too.”

My heart sped up again, and my stomach clenched.

“I’m sorry, let me take those back and get you fresh ones,” I said, but the guy held his plate back.

“Fresh one? What do you mean fresh one? This one wasn’t fresh?”

“Excuse me, where are our drinks? We’ve been waiting thirty minutes,” someone said from another table.

“We’ve been waiting for forty.”

*No, you haven’t, fucking idiots!*

I balled my hands into fists and tried to compose myself and take deep breaths, but it was all getting to me, and I didn’t know why.

*“If I had a wish, it would only be this.”* A melody played through the speakers that was so beautiful and captivating it soothed my insides. *“That you’d be back for Christmas with me.”*

The guest complaining about his steak and his family looked behind me, and I noticed other heads turning.

What was going on?

I turned around too and found the source of the beautiful voice.

Enzo’s deep-blue eyes were staring right at me.

*“Please be with me. Fill my Christmas with glee. My Christmas baby.”*

Was he talking to me? Was he coming up with the lyrics on the spot?

It couldn’t be. His hands slid over the piano keys without effort, and his lips kissed the microphone so tenderly and skillfully it made me jealous.

Was that one of his songs?

And why was it so fucking good?

*“This life without you is so lonely, and the winter and snow are so sorry without you here in my arms.”*

He kept staring at me, and I couldn't help feeling like he was calling to me. Like he was speaking to me. Even if he wasn't.

*Oh, Carson. Not again.*

*You didn't fall for the wrong guy. Again.*

## 14. ENZO



I hadn't done this since all the shit went down in Boston. I hadn't even dared play music in fear it would bring up the demons of my failure, but...

Seeing Carson breaking down tore my heart into shreds, and I needed to do something. I needed to find a way to help him, to relieve some of his stress.

Growing up in a bakery, I'd seen more than my fair share of crappy, grumpy customers. I'd been on the other side of those confrontations with the jobs I'd held during college.

I knew it was only momentary, and it didn't mean anything in the grand scheme. It would all end soon. The patron would leave or get kicked out, and the restaurant would slow down, but at that moment, seeing the glazed look in Carson's eyes and how fast he breathed, I knew I needed to do something.

And music was what I knew best.

I did it for him. No one else. Didn't think. I just acted.

My fingers glided effortlessly over the keys, turning small, delicate movements into beauty, melodies that, no matter my frame of mind, always made me feel at peace.

And the lyrics...

The lyrics were always the hardest part for me to write.

Music, I could write in my sleep.

But the words...

I wasn't born a poet. It wasn't in my blood, no matter how much my mother disagreed with me.

But letting those words I had so painstakingly picked over long hours vibrate through my vocal cords helped me transcend the current situation, the restaurant, the island.

It was as if I'd closed my eyes and was in a dream where there was only my music and me. And him.

In fact, maybe he'd always been there, and I'd never noticed.

Because singing and playing music felt just like my feelings for him.

As natural as breathing and as strong as the ocean's waves at Sandy Rocks. Even if I didn't want it to be.

By the time I finished, it seemed the entire restaurant was quiet and staring at me, and I came crashing back into reality.

"I'm sorry. Happy holidays," I said and pushed the piano stool back.

I tried to get off the small stage, but before I knew it, Carson was in front of me with a narrowed gaze and partially parted lips, staring at me.

I would have loved to think he was looking at me like that because he wanted me. Because he found what I'd done sexy or desirable. But if he'd made one thing clear, it was what he thought of me. And I didn't need my fantasies playing games with me.

"Carson, I'm sorry. I don't know why I did what I did—"

"I don't know what you think you did, but you better get back on that stage and keep doing it," he replied and pointed to the piano behind me.

Was he upset with me? Upset that I'd played or that I'd stopped?

I didn't have the frame of mind to question it or figure it out, so I turned on the spot and followed orders, choosing another one of my original songs to play for the restaurant patrons.

I didn't search for Carson's eyes again. I couldn't. I didn't want to see anger or frustration in them. Or even worse, anything that could be misinterpreted as love or affection.

Why had I signed up for this?

Why had I inserted myself into Carson's life when I had never gotten over my crush on him?

I was just making things worse for myself and my self-esteem.

"I don't know how to thank you, guys. I don't think I could have gotten through this shift without your help," Carson told Rafe and Pierce later that evening, once the majority of patrons had left.

"What he said," the waitress I'd been introduced to as Isla said.

"So true," Madison added. "But can we talk about Mr. Talent over here?"

She pointed at me, and I sunk farther into the couch at the back of the restaurant, trying to make myself invisible.

"Yeah. That was so fucking good, man," Pierce said.

I tried to hide behind my hands, but I could feel everyone staring, so eventually, I looked at them and tried my best to take the compliments.

"Yeah, we might have to chain you to that piano for the rest of your life," Carson said, counting a bunch of bills.

"I support this message," Madison added with a smirk.

I tried to catch Carson's gaze, but he kept his focus on the cash in front of him.

*Did he mean it?*

*And what did that mean?*

He was probably just a businessman thinking about his business.

It didn't mean anything.

"And you! You guys are awesome," he told Pierce and Rafe again.

Why did he look up at them but not at me?

Was he saying those things out of obligation?

And why did I care so much?

“Oh, stop it. You don’t have to mention it. Like we said, we’ve been doing this job for years,” Rafe said.

Pierce nodded in agreement before grabbing a pint of beer and taking a generous gulp.

“Huh! Want a job here?” Carson replied with a chuckle.

“Oh, that’d be awesome.” Madison clapped her hands together with a wide smile, and I took the opportunity to unearth myself from the pits of the couch.

Carson turned back to counting bills, and everyone started different conversations around him. He’d drink his beer, laugh at a joke, and greet a leaving customer, but he wouldn’t look at me.

As if he couldn’t stand the sight of me.

A few minutes later, after putting the money away, he returned to the bar and patted his pockets.

“Are you guys okay here? I want to walk Honeybee real quick, and then I’ll come back,” he said.

“We’re good,” Madison said.

“Take your time,” Isla added.

“Or don’t come back at all. We’re good here,” Kinsley said.

“I’ll just take her out and be right back,” he said.

He looked at all his staff, and just as he turned around, he glanced at me but didn’t linger. As if he was ashamed or something.

I didn’t understand it. Why was Carson ignoring me?

Had he just given me the compliment because everyone was saying how good of a job I’d done? Did he feel like he needed to lie to not hurt my feelings?

I didn’t care if he liked my music or my voice.

But then again, what would I do if he told me that?

Probably break down again. And after Boston, that was just what I needed, wasn't it?

Carson left, and even though I shouldn't be such a glutton for punishment, I couldn't help myself.

I ran out the door, wrapping my wool coat around myself to keep warm, looking for him.

He was only a few feet down the road.

"Did I do something?" I asked before I caught up, making him pause and turn.

"What? No. You didn't do anything."

He started walking again, and I had to speedwalk beside him to keep up.

"Then why won't you look at me?"

He didn't reply.

Why had I even come out here? I was only going to hurt myself more by pushing the subject.

"Your song..." he said after an agonizing century.

"My song, what?"

"Is-is it yours? I've never heard it before." He put his hands in his coat pockets and lifted his shoulders to protect his face from the cold. Or from me. Who knew?

"Yeah. I wrote it," I answered.

Another pause.

"I've never heard you sing before," he said.

"I-no."

I didn't sing in front of people. I always thought making music was where I belonged, and my singing was just something people would have to tolerate for demos before being replaced by someone...better.

It was only in the last couple of years I'd opened up and sang in front of people. That I'd found some confidence in my



voice before it was shattered.

“You...do you hate it?” I asked.

“What?” he stopped and twisted, making me collide with him.

I didn't lose my balance, but being so close to his face, his lips, his eyes, I did catch my breath before letting it go again.

“D-do you-do you hate it?” I whispered.

Carson blinked as if he didn't understand the question, and I opened my mouth to repeat it before he spoke again.

“Of course not.” His mouth stayed open as if he wanted to say something else, but a moment later, he exhaled and turned away from me to continue his walk home.

It took me a second before I chased after him again. I knew I should give it up, leave him alone, and let it go. But I was so close. Too close. Too close to the truth, and if I didn't find out, it would leave me with more questions than I already had.

“You can tell me if you hated it. I don't...I don't even know why I did it. I just saw you stressed out and thought you needed a distraction. And the Karens you were dealing with. I'm sorry if I embarrassed you. I didn't mean to—”

“Enzo, shut up,” he said, pushing the front gate open and racing up the porch, but I was too stunned to follow.

“I wish you'd just tell me the truth. I'm a man. I can take it,” I shouted after him.

He froze with the key in his front door. Honeybee's bark rose from the other side, along with scratching on the door.

“Just tell me, okay?” I shouted again, but my voice broke on the last word when the sting of tears threatened my eyes and my sanity.

“You want the truth?” he mumbled from the door, shifting his head but not enough to see me.

“Yes!” I said.

He huffed and turned. And with the deepest frown I'd ever seen in him, he stormed down the stairs and across the short

walkway. Just before he struck me, I closed my eyes.

I braced myself for the pain.

I didn't know I could stir such anger in someone with my music, but I was ready for it.

Instead of pain, I found myself off my feet. His hand around the small of my back, pulling me into him, and a pair of lips interlocked with mine.

No. Not just any lips. Carson's lips.

Soft, forceful, and thirsty.

The lingering bittersweet taste of beer flavored my mouth and warmth spread through my body like I was a fucking Christmas tree on fire. Warmth that went straight to my groin and filled me with need.

I parted my lips, and he pushed his tongue into my mouth, initiating a messy dance with mine.

And when he did, it was as if something clicked inside me. Like when a missing piece fits perfectly around another as if it always belonged together.

With every stroke of his tongue, a little piece of me found its place inside me. Each stroke slotted everything into place. As if it all made sense in a world of nonsense.

*Shit.*

I pushed him off me and tried to compose myself even though I had everything I'd always dreamed of. Even though he'd just done what I'd always wanted him to do to me.

"I-you-we-I can't. We can't," I managed to say.

"What? Why? Says who?" he asked, his eyes wide like a deer in headlights.

"Says me. I...we can't have 'fun.' You're Cole's brother!" I said, disliking the hell out of the words coming out of my mouth.

"What makes you think I want just 'fun' from you?" he asked.

“You don’t. You want more. You deserve more. And...and I don’t do more,” I told him, breaking my own heart doing so.

“Why not?”

The needles behind my eyes were starting to pierce. I just needed to get out of there.

To run before I went against myself and did something that would only hurt us both in the long run.

“I can’t. I’m sorry. I...I’ll see you tomorrow for your date prep,” I told him and started backtracking.

“What date prep? Screw the date prep.”

I shook my head and ran.

Ran from the only man who’d ever made me feel alive just by kissing me.

But as much as I wanted him, as much as I craved him, I couldn’t take it further.

He was Cole’s brother. He was older than me. He was looking for something different.

And I didn’t want to jeopardize my friendship with Cole.

Or get any more attached to Carson than I already was.

After all, I’d made myself a promise the day my father died.

And I was never, *ever* letting myself fall in love.

## 15. CARSON



The taste of his lips.

The light hint of sticky apple cider lingering in his mouth.

The scent of cinnamon on his skin.

*Fuck!*

I didn't know what had just happened, but I needed it again.

Needed *him*.

His soothing angelic voice still rang in my head as if he was right in front of me singing, and my body reacted to the memory. And the remnants of his taste on me.

Honeybee pushed her snout into my hands, demanding hugs, scratches, and kisses, and I abided absentmindedly.

What did he mean I deserved more? Did he feel something for me? And what did he mean when he said he doesn't *do* more?

I didn't care for the sheer panic in his eyes because whatever that reaction was, I'd felt my effect on him when I kissed him.

I'd felt him clinging to me. Felt his breath hardening under my tongue. And it hadn't been the only hard thing against me.

My own cock pulsed at the memory running circles in my head, and I had a feeling it would keep doing the same the whole night.

I tried to put it in the back of my mind, grabbed Honeybee's harness, walked around the streets, and avoided the fanfare of

the Winterberry Market. Once my new doggo had done her business, we returned home.

I had every intention of going back to work. I didn't even take my shoes or coat off.

But my cock was still so firm and painful. I couldn't go back like this. I couldn't get any work done like that.

Honeybee climbed the stairs to where Ella's babysitter was hanging out while Cole was at work, and I rushed into my ensuite bathroom and leaned against the door.

I looked at my reflection, the puffed-up upper body with the coat on, the mop of hair that sweat and stress had turned into a mess, the wrinkles on my face, the bags under my eyes.

And yet, the instant reaction my body and kiss had created in Enzo was undeniable.

He wanted me.

And I...

I knew it was wrong, and I'd go to all kinds of hell for even flirting with the idea...

But I wanted him too.

I pressed my hand on my crotch and took a deep guttural breath before running down the zipper and releasing my cock sticky with precum.

I arched my head back, closed my eyes, and thought back to the kiss. The plump apple-flavored lips that seemed like they were made for mine. The tension of our hips glued to each other. The feel of his cock against me. His melodic voice from earlier.

They all played on repeat like an immersive movie experience while I stroked my hard dick and tried to imagine what it'd feel like if he were the one doing the honors.

Each tug clawed me closer to release. Each breath delivered the threat of an orgasm I hadn't known I needed until now.

*"If I had a wish, it would only be this. That you'd be back for Christmas with me."*

His song. His voice. His music.

*“If I had a wish...”*

I want him. He’s my wish.

My knees buckled, my toes curled inside my shoes, and my stomach clenched as white ropes shot out of me, coloring my black marbled floor and knocking the wind out of me.

I caught my breath, and just before I cleaned up my mess, I dared sneak a peek in the mirror.

Once again, I noticed the baggy eyes, the patchy skin—time taking my youth for a wild ride—and sighed.

*Maybe that’s what he meant. I’m too old for him. He was just being nice.*

With that sobering fact weaving itself through my memories of tonight and resting heavy on my heart, I cleaned up, walked out of my bathroom, and went back to work. The only life I had left. The only thing I could still control.

“Excuse me,” someone said behind me.

I could feel my heart going a mile a second. I didn’t even know why I’d agreed to do this.

I put my hands in my pockets and turned to face the stranger I’d been set up with.

Enzo had told me I was meeting him at the Winterberry Market, in front of the Christmas tree at noon, and so here I was, freezing my balls off, waiting for my date.

Even when I wished my date was Enzo himself.

*There’s something seriously wrong with me. I need to go get my screws checked.*

An older man with a small kid in tow looked at me and smiled.

“Are you Wesley?” I asked.

He couldn’t be. Why would he be? Why would he have a child with him?

“Huh? No. Would you take our picture?” the guy said and offered me his phone.

I grimaced, nodded, took pictures of the stranger and his kid in front of the Christmas tree, and then checked my watch.

Was I being stood up?

Just what I needed after the momentous kiss from last night to confirm that I shouldn't be dating anyone. The only person I wanted to date was Enzo, and even he didn't want me.

"Hey, sorry I'm late," Enzo said, appearing beside me as if he'd always been there.

He was dressed in green tights, a green shirt with candy cane-striped sleeves, and elf ears.

The look was completed by a floppy red-and-green hat. It made his eyes stand out and his face look...perfectly squeezable.

"What happened?" I asked him. "Did Santa throw up on you?"

He rolled his eyes, and there was a flutter in the pit of my stomach. Had he lied and set me up with himself? Had he given me a fake name so I wouldn't expect it?

"I'm here to help you, duh! I told you so. Right, so Wesley should be here any minute now. He's a teacher from Mayberry Holm, and he's looking for love. He's perfect for you," he said.

I tried to act like I wasn't disappointed, but I did feel the muscles on my face loosen.

Was Enzo going to act like nothing happened between us last night? Was he going to sit there and watch as if we hadn't shared a mind-blowing kiss?

"Okay. That still doesn't explain why you're dressed like that," I said.

"You'll find out soon enough. Now, here."

He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out an amethyst necklace.

"To help you get over the past and embrace new beginnings," he said.

I watched the necklace dangling between us and tried to convince myself that he wasn't saying we needed to forget what had happened. He couldn't be. How could he forget when it kept haunting the back of my eyelids?

Unless it didn't have the same effect on him as it had on me.

"Are you trying to say you didn't like—" I started.

"Hold that thought. I think he's here," he said and looked behind me. "Yep. That's him. Act cool."

I huffed and turned to look at the man he'd set me up with.

He was a tall ginger man with a matching beard, wearing glasses. He looked to be in his early thirties and had an apple-shaped figure.

"Hi! You must be Carson," he said and reached for my hand.

"I...I am. Wesley, right?" I asked, and he nodded.

"So...what have you got planned for us? You said it was a surprise?"

I smiled and bit the inside of my cheek.

*So much for date prep, Enzo. I know nothing about this guy.*

I didn't even know when he'd spoken to him or what they'd said.

Was he trying to embarrass me on the first date?

"Mr. Williams was just talking about his booking with me. He's got a great date planned for you. If you follow me, I'll get you both ready," Enzo said, plastering a big smile on his face that made me want to slap the nerve out of it. Or kiss it.

Preferably kiss it.

We followed him into a store and through a set of doors until we entered a changing room.

"This is for you," he said to Wesley and handed him an elf costume. "And this is for you, Mr. Williams."

"Are you shitting me?" I whispered to him.

He shook his head.



“Dress up, Mr. Santa,” he whispered back.

I might have changed my mind about slapping him.

The little shit.

What was his plan here? To make me feel old and embarrass myself in front of a teacher, no less?

I changed into the costume even though the urge to storm off was strong. When we were ready, Enzo took us to Santa’s grotto, where apparently, we were going to spend the next hour listening to kids’ wishes.

“Well, that’s different,” Wesley said after Enzo explained everything to us.

“It’s for a good cause, and you’ll be making some children very happy,” he said.

The grumpiness that had settled on my chest lifted, if only momentarily. I knew the Santa’s Children Trust was a staple of our town and the entry donation was steep, but they did good work for children in need around the island and the world. I had no idea how he had paid for it, but the little shit was trying to make me look good, and I hated him for it.

It didn’t mean I wasn’t going to embarrass myself.

“That it is,” Wesley said and cracked his fingers.

There it was. The sign that this wasn’t going to go anywhere. Well, I didn’t know that already, but cracking fingers? Disgusting habit.

“Go on right ahead, Santa and Elf Wesley. We’ve got some very eager kids waiting for you,” Enzo said.

“I need to speak to you first,” I said.

“That can wait until after,” Enzo said and gave me one of his big smiles before he walked to the grotto’s front door and opened the floodgates.

Seeing as I was trapped, on a date, and surrounded by overexcited children, I did the right thing and sat on Santa’s chair, coaxing my deepest voice out of my gut. I entertained

the kids for the next hour while Wesley helped the kids, one by one, and Enzo took photos.

“You do a very good Santa,” Wesley said between kids.

“Thanks. I might steal the costume and use it for my niece,” I said.

“How old is she?”

“Only two. But she’s wise beyond her age. I don’t like it.” I added a shiver to my statement, and Wesley laughed.

“Yeah. Some kids are hella scary,” he replied.

“You said you teach, didn’t you? What ages?”

I hoped to whichever god was listening Enzo hadn’t already asked him that. What happened to him letting me chat with the potential dates? Hell of a dating coach *he* was.

“Elementary,” he answered.

“My sympathies.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I like it. I mean, don’t get me wrong, it’s a zoo sometimes, but there’s nothing like seeing a pair of young eyes light up when something finally makes sense,” he said.

“You must be a very good teacher because I don’t think my eyes ever lit up like that.”

“Huh. We’d have to ask your teachers about that.”

“Good luck with that,” I chuckled.

Most of the teachers who taught me at Mayberry Elementary were...six feet under.

“Challenge accepted,” he said.

His eyes narrowed, and his lips quirked, making his cheeks ball up into a sinful smile that I imagined could drive a man or two insane.

Hell, if I hadn’t kissed Enzo last night, I’d probably be giving him a round in the hay, but it would be unfair to Wesley if all I could picture while riding him was my sweet, sweet Enzo. Preferably in the elf costume.

“Next,” Wesley shouted and helped a young boy up on the dais and took his name while I got back into the role.

“Smile,” Enzo said from behind the camera, and I did.

I smiled as brightly as I could. As big as I could, hoping Enzo would see it, would see me for what I was and what I wanted him to be for me.

The hour came and went, and before long, another Santa took the chair, and Wesley and I were released from our elven duties. As I changed back into my clothes, I got a text message with the restaurant reservation Enzo had made for us, and like the good puppet I was, I followed his instruction and took Wesley out for lunch.

Despite my hunger, I couldn’t eat, but I kept grabbing the necklace Enzo had given me before Wesley arrived.

*New beginnings.*

What if I wanted a new beginning with him?

We left the restaurant half an hour later, having exhausted pretty much every subject we could have talked about. As I walked home, Enzo appeared by my side like a ghost or one of those angels and devils that appear on people’s shoulders in cartoons, and he smiled.

“So? What do you think of Wesley?” he asked.

“He’s a good guy,” I said.

“Isn’t he? And he’s gorgeous too.”

“Sure,” I said.

“How did it go?”

I shrugged.

It was a good date. It was a nice way to spend an afternoon, and Wesley was a sweet guy with a lot of heart.

“There was no spark,” I said.

“Oh. Shame,” he replied just as I reached the front gate of my house and the memory of last night’s kiss assaulted my senses again.

I reached for the gate, and he did the same.

Our fingers touched.

And an electric spark sizzled between us and coursed through me, making the hairs on my arms stand.

Enzo paused and looked at me with wet lips and a flame in his eyes.

“B-better luck next time. I...I gotta go,” he said, and before I could stop him, he ran off like he had last night.

*No. He's not doing this again.*

I chased after him, calling his name. He ignored me, but I caught up to him.

I grabbed his arm and turned him around.

“Are you going to pretend it didn't happen?” I asked him.

“Pretend what didn't happen?” his voice wavered, but he kept up the act.

“Don't play games with me,” I told him. “You know exactly what happened.”

I pulled him closer until we were inches apart, and I could feel his breath blowing on my face.

“M-maybe I forgot,” he whispered.

“Well, let me remind you.”

I kissed him again. Pulled him into my arms, pressed my hand on the small of his back, and navigated his sweet mouth like yesterday.

And just like yesterday, my body's reaction to his was instant.

He somehow put his hand on my chest and pushed me off him.

“Carson, we can't,” he said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because...” He looked into my eyes, and his bottom lip shivered. “Because I don't like you like that.”

“Oh.”

My grip on him loosened, and he slipped out of it.

“I-I’m sorry,” he said and turned his back on me.

*Shit.*

It had all been in my head. Whatever I thought he’d felt, whatever I thought I’d seen, was all in my head.

This was even worse than my obsession with Hwan. Because I’d never tried anything with Hwan. But I had with Enzo.

My brother’s best friend.

I’d screwed up.

I’d screwed up so bad.

## 16. ENZO



*S* *tupid!*  
*Stupid, stupid, stupid!*

Why would I tell him that?

Why would I tell him I didn't like him when he was the only one I wanted?

*Stupid!*

It was for the best. I knew it was.

Carson wanted something I couldn't give him, no matter how big the temptation was.

I couldn't give him more than my friendship. I couldn't give anyone more than my friendship.

The way my father's loss had torn my mom apart...

I didn't want that to happen to me. It had taken my mom years of therapy and spells to get on top of her grief. And I was still working on mine. I just...I couldn't handle a blow like that.

And it wasn't as if my father had been old when he died. He had only been thirty-four when he was taken from us. It just happened one day without any warning signs. His heart gave out, and so did ours when it happened.

How could I give my heart to anyone if I had no guarantee they wouldn't be taken from me the same way?

*No, it's better this way.*

I made my way to the pier and pushed the door of Bubble Bubble open, alerting everyone to my presence.

“Enzo! You’re early. You don’t start for another hour,” Hwan said, checking his watch.

His hair was a silky silver color today, and he had a headband on with red cat ears and two stumpy gold antlers that made him look very festive and cute.

“Yeah, I...um...I was bored,” I answered and went behind the counter, making my way to the storeroom to grab my pink apron.

When I came out, Parker was unloading a tray of glass cups onto the glasswasher with a scowl. I couldn’t blame the guy. The glass cups—more like lidded mason jars with a hole for the straw—were a new addition to the shop. An environmental, plastic-free option for patrons. Not that I thought Parker cared about the extra work. He was a big, hardworking guy. He could handle it.

“Need a hand?” I asked him because I was nice like that.

“Huh? Nah, I’m okay,” Parker grumbled.

After working with him for a week and watching him interact with others, I knew that was his standard setting that only softened when it was just him and Hwan. Or when they thought they were alone anyway.

It had been quite the start, walking into them going at it in the storeroom on my second day on the job.

“Hey, what are you doing here? You’re early,” he added after a moment and his eyebrows united over the bridge of his nose in confusion.

“Jeez, guys. If you don’t want me here, just say so,” I said.

Parker rolled his eyes and his nostrils flared as he returned to his task.

“We’re just surprised you’re so eager. Surprised and impressed,” Hwan said, handing a customer their change.

“I’m positively insulted.” I put my hands to my waist and shook my head in fake dismissal.

“Good,” Hwan said matter-of-factly. “Oh, by the way...I know what you did last night...”

He sang the last bit, and my nerves went on high alert.

Had someone seen us? Was the rumor mill going at it? What were they saying?

“You do?”

“Of course I do. We’re all talking about it,” Hwan said, the smile on his face getting dangerously sneaky as if he knew my inner, deepest, darkest thoughts.

“You are?”

“How could we not?”

I shrugged.

“I don’t know, Hwan. Maybe because it’s creepy?” Did I come off as upset? Or angry?

“How is putting on a show creepy, you weirdo,” he replied.

I raised an eyebrow.

“You’re filthy,” I told him.

Hwan narrowed his eyes and smirked.

“Oh, that I am, but how is talking about your little concert last night filthy?”

“Aaah, that’s what you’re talking about,” I said before I could stop myself.

*What a relief!*

“Of course. What else would we be talking about? Why? What *else* did you do last night?”

“Nothing,” I said, maybe a bit too fast.

Hwan hummed and stared at me for a moment too long.

“You’re hiding something, but I don’t feel like I know you well enough to prod. We’ll revisit this conversation



tomorrow,” he said.

“Because you’ll know me better tomorrow?”

“Of course. A week is a lifetime in my book.”

“You’ve got a weird book.” I laughed.

“You know, if you want to put on a show here every now and again, I wouldn’t be opposed.”

“Huh. No thanks,” I said.

Hwan kept teasing, but I didn’t care. I was thankful it wasn’t about what I’d done with Carson the night before. And earlier that day.

*Fuck!*

I brought my fingers to my lips.

His kiss...the faint taste of coffee and breath mint that I could still feel lighting up my taste buds and coursing through me like a sharp but warm hug.

Even my dick got semi-hard at the memory, although I was pretty sure if I didn’t stop thinking about it, that semi would turn into a full-on boner. Just what one needed during work.

I tried to forget it, but then Parker leaned in to grab something. His hand rested on my back for a moment, and the faint ghost of Carson’s touch on the small of my back while he kissed me reverberated as if he was right behind me.

I balled my fists and took deep, determined breaths. I helped Hwan at the counter, and as business slowed, Hwan and Parker finally left me alone for the evening. The constant work kept my head occupied from any further thoughts.

Although it seemed like every time I closed my eyes, all I could see were Carson’s.

“Well, if it isn’t the master-dater hard at work,” Cole said, leaning over the counter with a goofy grin.

“And how is my favorite a-hole?” I bit back and leaned over too.

Ella was in her stroller and laughed as soon as she saw me.

“Zozo,” she said, reaching for me.

“Hello, my princess. Is Daddy driving you nuts again? Do you need Zozo to rescue you?”

I went around the counter to pick her up and prop her on the bar while Cole grabbed some water from the glass dispenser.

“Who’s the prettiest girl in *all* the land?” I cooed over my goddaughter.

“All right, Evil Stepmother,” Cole said, rolling his eyes.

“Off with your head,” I told him.

“That’s Queen of Hearts,” he corrected me.

“Well, I’m a queen, and I’ve got the biggest heart of all, so it fits. Shut up.”

“Shu’rup,” Ella repeated.

I shook my head.

“What is this, Ella, sweetie? I thought we talked about this. We only repeat what Uncle Carson says to you. Not Zozo,” I told her.

“Shu’rup,” she said, giggling again.

I played with her a bit longer until a customer walked up to the bar, and I had to hand her back to her dad.

“How’s the Carson challenge going? Has he tapped anything?” Cole asked after the customer got her drink and walked back out.

Even the thought of Carson “tapping” anyone made me sick to the stomach.

I needed to watch that. I couldn’t behave like that. Carson needed me to find a date. I couldn’t let this...*feeling* get the better of me. Before I knew it, it’d turn into something else—something more—and the promise I’d made myself would be out the window.

“No, I don’t think so. Which is a shame because I keep sending him on some kickass dates,” I said.

“Yeah, my idea of a good date isn’t baking cookies, so I can’t say I blame him,” Cole said.

“Oh shu—sh. Shush. How’s *your* dating life? Have *you* tapped anything?”

“Why? You want to master date my love life too?”

“You’re a fu—fudgepopper,” I told him.

Cole glanced at his daughter and laughed. She was too busy tearing a napkin into shreds.

“Would that be so terrible? You can’t keep working so much. You need to go out. Have fun. Bake some *cookies*,” I told him.

He rolled his eyes and grimaced.

“No thanks. I’m good. I’m trying to save money anyway so we can move out at some point. I can’t live in my parents’ house all my life,” he said.

“Isn’t the restaurant and the firefighting enough? Do you have to do the trash collecting too?” I asked.

“Excuse me! Are you being uptight about my trash collecting job? I’ll have you know it pays better than most jobs.”

“All right, then drop the firefighting. Or stop doing shifts at the restaurant,” I told him.

His gaze started drifting, looking at anything and everything but me. I also noticed his body tremble, courtesy of his shaking foot.

God, I hated seeing my best friend so beaten down by life.

I knew he loved Sandra. Losing her must be tearing him apart.

*There. That there.*

*That’s what love does to you.*

That was why I couldn’t let myself fall for Carson. That was why I couldn’t take it further. Because I didn’t want to end up like my best friend.

“I know you miss her, but don’t you think Ella deserves to have a happy dad who’s there for her?” I said.

His face hardened.

“I’m there for her. How dare you say that. Everything I do, I do it for her—”

“But you’re also running yourself into the ground. Is that the kind of example you want to set for her?”

“And what would you know about setting examples, Enzo? You pretend you’re this zen witch who’s got their shit together, but you don’t let anyone in. You turned your back on us and this island, and every time you came back, it was by force of nature, not because you wanted to be here. So tell me again what you know about me and the kind of example I’m trying to set for my daughter?”

I bit my lip, holding back the tears that stung my eyes, and watched as Cole put Ella back in her stroller and stormed out of the shop.

“Great job, Zozo,” I told myself.

How long had he been keeping that inside?

Was that how he really felt, or was he projecting his worries and grief on me?

I needed to talk to him, apologize if that was how he truly felt, and figure out what was going on.

But I couldn’t do it now. Not while he was still pissed.

Four days later, Cole still hadn’t given signs of life. As if he was avoiding me. His words kept circling in my head like an awful mantra that made me question my life and all of my decisions.

And the moments I’d shared with Carson were circling my head like a spell gone awry. As if the more I thought about it, the more intense it became.

He also had exchanged only a few words with me. Which suited me just fine. It felt like even being in the same stratosphere as him would make my walls crumble.

But that didn’t mean I’d forgotten about my mission. As much as it pained me, I had to find him a boyfriend.

The sooner it happened, the less chance of me succumbing to him.

So I'd sent him on his fair share of dates. Pretty much one every day. And since I got the impression that my extravagant date ideas weren't that well received, I'd only arranged dinner dates for him. The good old-fashioned style.

*Hope you're on your way to River Rock Inn for your date with Jaxon.* I messaged him as I closed the shop.

*I'm not. I'm on babysitting duty tonight. Can you message him to cancel?* He responded almost instantly.

As if he'd been sitting on the message for a while.

*I thought Cole had the baby tonight,* I replied.

*He picked up a shift at the station. Sorry. The only date I can do right now includes diapers and cartoons, and I doubt anyone would be up for that,* he said.

*I would. Date with my goddaughter? Who could say no to that?* I replied before I realized what I was saying.

I only wanted to be around in case I caught Cole coming back from work—and of course, spending time with Ella—but now I'd given Carson the wrong impression, making him think I was up for a date with him.

*Great. I'll get the diaper changing station ready. Cole tells me you have plenty to change as part of your godfather duties.*

Crap.

There was no way to back out now.

*I'll be there in 30,* I replied.

Did I get a little giddy at the prospect of spending the evening with Carson?

Yeah.

Was I going to ignore it and not give him the wrong idea?

Also yeah.

*Looking forward to it...* he answered, and for some reason, I felt like the ellipsis said more than it should.

I put my phone away and finished closing the shop, trying to quell the flutter in my chest. There was nothing to be excited about. This was just an evening with my goddaughter and her uncle, my friend.

Nothing else.

Nothing more.

## 17. CARSON



There was a knock.

Honeybee went berserk and barreled down the stairs, barking and scratching at the door.

I followed behind her, carrying Ella in my arms. Ella played with my celestite necklace. I'd found it on my porch this morning.

*For happiness*, the note from Enzo had said.

I couldn't help but love this little ritual we'd gotten into every time I had a date, even if they never panned out. How could they when I was obsessed with *him*?

The men he found for me were great. I didn't know how he did it. How he could so effortlessly make me sound interesting and have men bending over backward to go out with me when I always failed after "*Hello!*"

And if my stupid brain could get on with the program that Enzo was simply not interested, maybe I'd be happy with one of the men I'd dated.

Zach had been great. My date with Wesley had been meh, but he was a cute guy. I could give him another chance. There was a dud of a date with a guy who only wanted a handy in the restrooms, which I didn't humor him with, of course. Most of my other dates had been great. And the guy I was supposed to see tonight had sounded great, but I couldn't bring myself to go on any more dates. They would only lead to disappointment, and it was unfair to my dates to make all that effort when I hooked on someone else.

I stepped onto the first floor and gave the dog a treat to distract and calm her before I took a deep breath—an action Ella copied—and opened the door.

“You little devil,” I told her.

“You know it,” Enzo replied. “And I come in a neat package.”

I took him in: the beauty of his eyes, his blue jeans and gray puffer jacket that swallowed him whole, the innocent but sinful look on his face as he rubbed his hands together for warmth.

He was a sight for sore eyes.

“I was talking to Ella. Full of yourself much?” I teased.

A voice in the back of my head reprimanded me.

Why was I teasing? Why was I giddy at the prospect of an evening with him?

I shouldn't have invited him. I didn't know what I'd been thinking. Being around him only made those feelings inside me bubble over. There was a reason I'd avoided him and stuck strictly to text messages for our communication. How was I supposed to control myself around him?

*He doesn't see you like that!* I reminded myself.

That should be good enough.

“Excuse me for knowing my worth. Hello, princess. Why is Uncle Carson calling you a devil?”

He cooed over Ella, squeezing her cheeks and tickling her neck.

“Because she's copying everything I do or say,” I told him.

“Good girl. Keeping good on our agreement,” he said, patting her head.

“Come in before we all freeze to death then. I can't believe how quickly the weather turned,” I said.

Enzo smirked, stepped in, and closed the door. Honeybee finished her treat and turned her full attention to our visitor,



whimpering like a beggar for scratches and kisses while Ella laughed at the silliness.

This felt...

Like a holiday postcard.

Like a family getting together just in time for Christmas and a night filled with laughter, love, and happiness.

I didn't want to savor this moment. It wasn't real. It was all in my head. But I couldn't help the joy that settled in my chest.

"So..." Enzo said and stood straight. He started taking his coat off and broke the spell for a moment. "What's the plan for this evening. Shouldn't Missy be getting ready for bed?"

I chuckled.

"Yeah, talk to your friend about that. I try, but I think she's gotten so used to waiting for him she won't go to bed before nine. But it suits me just fine because at least she doesn't wake up screaming until seven or eight, so...no complaints there."

"Oh. Yeah. My...friend," he said and looked at the floor as he hung his coat.

"Did something happen between you two?" I asked him.

Enzo dismissed the question and climbed the stairs, so I followed him. His silence was telling but also surprising.

Cole and Enzo never fought. In fact, their only fight was when they were thirteen and both had a crush on Chris Hemsworth. Neither would back down from their imaginary relationships with him. Until I pointed out Chris Evans was also hot, and Cole changed boyfriends.

It may sound stupid, but that was the only fight they'd ever had. I couldn't imagine what would make those two not speak to each other.

I closed the baby gate behind me and put Ella on the floor before I approached Enzo and touched his shoulder.

"Hey. You okay?" I asked.

He glanced at me and nodded before turning his attention to Ella.

“Enzo, what happened?” I said when he took her in his arms and buried his face in her hair. “Hey.”

Ella hugged her godfather back and patted his head affectionately as if she’d done it a million times before, which only made me wonder if she’d comforted Cole in the same way.

I watched them for a couple moments, and then he kissed Ella’s cheek and put her down again.

He looked at me and wiped his eyes.

“I think your brother hates me,” he said.

“I can’t imagine a reality where that is true. Why would you think that?”

“Because he told me?”

“He did?”

Cole wasn’t one to blurt out shit like that, even if he felt it. He was the kind of guy that kept everything inside, even if it ate him up.

“In his own way,” he replied.

I picked up the remote, put *Encanto* on for Ella, and dragged Enzo by the hand to the kitchen.

“Tell me everything,” I said and poured some milk into a pot.

While I made hot chocolate for us, he told me what happened a few days ago when Cole visited him and how my brother had been avoiding him since.

“He doesn’t hate you,” I said.

“He does.”

“He doesn’t. Maybe he’s hurt that you weren’t here as much as he’d like you to be, but you can’t stop your life for him. Especially if he won’t do anything to help himself.”

“Yeah, some life I have,” he huffed.

I squirted some whipped cream and sprinkled some chocolate powder and marshmallows into two cups before handing him one.

A smile appeared on his tear-stained face, and it filled my chest with warmth. I did that. I put that smile there. And it was beautiful.

“Right, and why are you acting like your life is over? You’re not much better than Cole, you know. What happened in Boston?”

He lifted the cup to his lips and narrowed his eyes.

“What happened in Boston, stays in Boston,” he said in a serious tone before taking a sip of his drink.

When he lowered his cup, he had a whipped-cream mustache that made him look even more adorable. Without thinking, I reached out to wipe it for him.

He froze, staring at my thumb. I froze, staring at his lips.

“Sorry,” I said and pulled my hand back so fast it almost gave me whiplash.

“It’s okay,” he mumbled.

I took my cup in my hands and used it to keep my hands warm and occupied. Less of a chance I’d do anything stupid that way.

“Now tell Grandpa Carson what happened in Boston.”

“You’re not a grandpa,” he said.

“Don’t deflect. Spill it before I make you.”

A smirk crossed his face quickly but vanished as he put his hot chocolate down.

“Last year, I got an agent after an open mic night. Lots of my friends and I went to play our music and get the thrill of sharing our songs with the world, but I got an email the next day. This guy wanted to represent me.

“I, of course, jumped at the opportunity. I met up with him, and he asked me for more music. He even helped me make a

demo to send out to record labels. Then earlier this year, he contacted me to tell me a label got my demo and wanted to sign me. He even managed to get me a pretty sweet deal.

“They put me up in a beautiful penthouse, gave me a PA and a mentor, and helped me create songs for my debut album.”

That all sounded so exciting for him. I never knew he wanted to be a star. I knew he loved music, but since I’d never heard him sing, I’d assumed he wanted to work the gig scene or something.

But after that Saturday night at the Grill...

He was a star. I knew it, the patrons there knew it, but it seemed like he didn’t.

And I had a pretty good feeling that what happened next was the reason.

“There were rumors about the label, but we thought they were just that. They assigned me a publicist, we started media training, and they told me I was the next big thing. I was going to be the next Ed Sheeran. The next Shawn Mendes. The next...insert whatever pop idol they could name-drop. I was bracing for my life to change in a big way.

“And then everything came crashing down. The label went into administration and then sold to the highest bidder. The new owner wanted a clean slate because they thought the previous owners’ talent and decisions brought the company to its knees. I was thrown to the curb like a sack of potatoes. Kicked out of the penthouse with no money and nothing to my name.”

My palms burned hot before I realized I was holding the cup too tightly, and I took a deep breath before I spoke.

“Fu—dgers!” I said.

Enzo gave me a sad smile and shrugged.

“It’s not their fault. If I was really that good, they would have kept me.”

“Hey!” I raised my voice, and from the corner of my eyes, I saw Ella also staring at me. “I heard you on Saturday. You are

*not* a failure. You've got the most beautiful voice I've ever heard, and you're the best musician I've ever seen. You're not a failure."

"I beg to differ."

"Then I beg you to shut up and listen to me."

He rolled his eyes, but he did smile and took another sip of his hot chocolate. I couldn't stop looking at him. It was like I could taste his drink just by looking at his lips alone.

"And hey, you've still got all those songs you created. Nothing stops you from sending more demos or even releasing them on Spotify or YouTube yourself," I said.

He pointed his finger up and laughed.

"That's where you're wrong, my Carson. I don't have all those songs."

"Huh?" I asked.

Had he called me his Carson? Or had it been a mistake? And why did I not care either way? I loved the words regardless.

"The label owns the songs because I wrote them when I was signed by them. Because, yeah, I'm that stupid, and I signed my rights away because I was too excited to read the small print. So technically, I shouldn't have even performed those songs at the Grill. If the label found out, I could be sued for everything I'm worth. Not that I'm worth anything."

I slammed my cup down and walked around the kitchen island so I could grab both his shoulders and shake the crap out of him.

"Do *not* say that. Never say that. You're not worth nothing. You're worth everything," I said.

We were so close, and his eyes were so big and needy, that I wanted to take him in my arms and keep him there until he believed me.

"Th-thanks," he said.

I let go of him before I did something stupid and unwanted.

“Right. Enough of this failure garbage. You know what cheers me up?”

He shook his head.

“Spending time with Little Ms. Nosy over there,” I said, and he turned to look at Ella, who was naturally staring at us.

“Sounds good to me,” he replied, and we both joined my niece to watch *Encanto* for the nine thousand, two hundred, and thirtieth time.

“Smells like a diaper change,” I said halfway through and turned to Enzo, who laughed and picked up Ella.

“My pleasure,” he replied.

“You won’t be saying that in two seconds.” I laughed.

I showed him where the wipes, diapers, and floor mat were, then left him to his own devices as I got prepared her milk.

Once they were done, I gave her the bottle and sat back on the sofa.

“She’ll be fast asleep in five minutes max. Watch,” I told Enzo.

We both kept sneaking glances at Ella, and just as I’d said, she drank half her milk and passed out with the bottle in her lap.

“You’ve got this mastered to a *T*, don’t you?” he whispered.

“Duh. I’m her favorite uncle,” I said.

“You’re her only uncle.”

“Fair point.”

Enzo helped me put her to bed in my parent’s room, which had been turned into an impromptu nursery while they cruised around the world.

We returned to the living room with the baby monitor, and once we settled back down, I turned to him.

“Want to watch something more mature?” I asked him.

“Carson Spencer Williams, are you asking me to watch porn with you?” he said, grabbing his mouth as if he’d said

something naughty.

“I like the way you think, but no. I meant something less cartoony. Idiot.” I rolled my eyes.

“I know. I am. I am. Sorry.”

“*Love Actually* or *Die Hard*?” I asked.

“Um...*Love Actually*, thank you very much. *Die Hard* is not a Christmas movie, and I’ll fight you to the grave about it,” he told me.

My body went on high alert. My nostrils flared, my pulse quickened, and my lips pursed.

“How fudging dare you?”

“Fudging? What are you? Twelve?”

“Oh, shut up. You try and live around a two-year-old parrot.”

“*Die Hard* is not a Christmas movie. You need to get over it and put *Love Actually* on.”

“I hate you,” I told him.

“No, you don’t,” he answered and batted his lashes innocently.

My breath caught again, but not because of his stance on *Die Hard*.

“No, I don’t,” I whispered.

I used the remote and put *Die Hard* on.

“Oh no, you didn’t. What the fuck, Carson Spencer Williams? Change it over right now!” He raised his voice with wide eyes and a hint of a grin.

“Stop full-naming me, you little shit,” I told him.

He tried to reach for the remote, but I stretched my hand away from him.

“You think that’s going to stop me?”

He jumped off the couch and made another attempt at getting the remote, but I ducked out of the way and put the coffee table between us.

“You want a fight? You’ll get it,” he hissed, shaking his head.

He ran around the coffee table, and I did the same. We did a couple of laps before he attempted to jump over it and landed on the couch. But my victory was short-lived because he was back on his feet, and this time, he chased me around the dinner table, back to the living room, and then to the kitchen.

Only I miscalculated because the kitchen island was connected to the wall in a U-shape, which meant I was trapped unless I wanted to climb over the stove and island. I doubted that’d be wise at my age.

“Nowhere else to run now, Mr. Williams,” he said with an evil smirk.

“Ew. No. Go back to the full name. It’s less weird,” I told him, although I didn’t know how true my statement was.

He walked toward me, and I pressed my butt against the stove buttons until he was a breath away from me.

He smelled of coconut and musk. A streak of sweat had formed on his forehead and his chest rose and fell, slightly out of breath.

I didn’t know how much longer I could resist him.

He tried to grab the remote from me, but I pulled my hand back over my head. Enzo clawed onto my sweater and went on his toes, trying to reach for it. His lips were so close to mine, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t do it again, knowing how he felt about me. I couldn’t force another kiss on him when he didn’t feel the same way about me.

I looked up at my hand, and a sprig of mistletoe was hanging over the stove.

“I swear someone’s putting these around on pur—” I started before I was cut off by the force of Enzo’s lips on mine.



## 18. ENZO



I couldn't take it anymore.

I couldn't stand being in the same room with him, in the same square foot, and not kiss him.

And those damn mistletoes were messing with my head at this point.

His lips were just as good as I remembered. Just as good as the memory of them that had haunted me day and night since he kissed me last week.

I twisted my fist around the neckline of his sweater and pulled him onto me while he dropped his hands to my hips and held tight.

The remote crashed on the floor.

I pushed my tongue against his lips, prodding for access, and he generously opened for me so I could deepen the kiss.

All I could taste in his mouth was the kindness and generosity with which he comforted me. All I could feel against my skin was his gaze branding me with its intensity. All I could hear was his beauty like a melody.

My world might have turned upside down in his arms, but it was the right way up for me. I knew I belonged there, and he fit into me perfectly, no matter how little sense we made together.

A hardness pressed against my crotch, making mine painfully present. I rubbed against Carson, pinning him against the

stove, and guided my hands south until I reached the hem of his sweater and lifted it slightly.

“Wh-what are you doing?” He pulled away from the kiss long enough to ask me and catch his breath.

“I want you, Carson,” I mumbled and tried to reunite our lips.

“I thought you didn’t.”

I looked into those brown eyes of his that were going to be my undoing and swallowed the lump in my throat.

“I lied.”

I pulled him back onto me, and as if urged by my words, he pushed me until my back collided with the wall. I was trapped under the weight of his body.

A moan escaped me as he moved the kiss from our mouths to my neck. I lifted his sweater halfway up his body, and he pulled back long enough for me to take it off him completely.

I threw it on the floor, and he made quick work of taking mine off before returning his eager tongue to my neck.

He sucked on my skin, and with each kiss, the energy shooting through my body made the ache in my balls stronger.

Those kisses were bound to leave their mark. A thought that made me even hornier for him.

Carson didn’t stop on my neck though. He navigated my body until he was down on his knees and unbuttoning my jeans.

He looked so good down there with his ruffled brown hair stuck to his forehead and his thick pink lips desperate to please.

I should stop him. I should push him away and leave. Stop this madness before it got worse, and we did something we would regret.

But I couldn’t find it in myself to do it. I couldn’t reject him again. Not when he was about to give me everything my pubescent self had always dreamed of.

This was a mistake.

But it was a mistake I'd have to learn to live with because I didn't have any power to stop it.

His fingers were light but effective. Before I knew it, I was standing in front of Carson Spencer Williams with my cock in his hand, a new lump in my throat, and desperate for release.

"You're so gorgeous," he whispered, the breath from his spoken words blowing on my crown, and I shuddered.

And then I blew up.

Or what I imagined blowing up would feel like if one could experience it without dying because he took me in his mouth.

Or maybe I had died, and this was all a postmortem hallucination. In which case, I wasn't letting him go until the end of time.

"Carson," I moaned, taking a handful of his locks in my hand.

He took me to the root for a moment and then let go. My knees wavered. His tongue flicked at my slit before he trailed over my undercarriage and gave my balls a sniff.

"You smell delicious," he groaned, and his voice trembled through me.

"Don't stop, Carson. Don't stop," I stuttered.

He took me in his mouth again, and it was like I grew five inches just by having his lips around me and his eyes pinned to mine.

I hooked a finger under his chin and pulled him up for a kiss. If this was only going to happen once, I wanted to have his taste in my mouth for the rest of my life.

He wrapped his fist around my cock as I kissed him and stroked me right under his crotch, where his own cock was begging to be released.

He tipped his head forward, resting his forehead on mine, and looked at me with heavy, lustful eyes.

"I want you to fuck me," he said.

I froze again.

Had he really just said that.

“I want you to fuck me right now before you change your mind again, and I have to live in regret for not seizing the moment.”

His voice was low and croaky, but it still managed to make my hairs stand on end.

“Please, will you fuck me, Enzo? I need you inside me,” he said, barely audible this time, and damn me and all that was holy and sacred. How could I resist him begging like that?

I took his hand, laced my fingers with his, and dragged him downstairs, picking up the baby monitor on the way. When we got into his room, he closed the door behind him, and even though I was painfully naked in front of him, I glared at him and licked my lips.

“Take your clothes off,” I said in a sharp, commanding tone, taking a deep breath when he wasted no time following my instructions.

He unzipped his pants and pushed them all the way down to his ankles before he stepped out of them, leaving me in full view of his hard, thick cock, shiny and leaking with precum.

“Fuck me,” I said before I could stop myself.

“My turn first,” he said and pushed me.

I fell back on the bed, and he climbed over me. Even though he wasn't that much bigger than me, he felt like a mountain, especially with his tempting man meat dangling over me, teasing me with its volume and eagerness.

“I want—” he whispered but stopped short, staring at me with hesitation.

“You want what?” I asked.

He shook his head, and I put my hand on his chest.

“Tell me.”

“You don't know what you're asking of me,” he said.

I wasn't sure what he meant, but nothing he could say could put me off right now.

"Why?"

"Because you might never look at me the same way again," he explained.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, and I couldn't help myself any longer. I wrapped my hand around his cock, and it was like it sizzled against my skin.

"I like...talking," he said.

"Who doesn't?" I said.

"I mean...during sex."

I raised an eyebrow and smirked.

"Then talk to me, Carson," I said and tugged at him, edging a hiss out of him.

"I can't—"

"Tell me what you want me to do to you, Carson. Do you want me to fuck you?"

*Shit.*

Was this really happening? Was I really saying those words to Carson? Was I really in bed with him?

*What am I thinking?*

"Tell. Me," I growled and tightened my hold around his length.

He gasped and let out a slow breath, dropping his head next to my ear.

"I want...I want your big gorgeous dick inside me, Enzo. Fuck my tight little hole, baby. Please fuck me senseless," he whispered.

When I found out Carson had a preference for bottoming, I didn't think he was telling the truth, and even if he was, I never imagined he'd be such a thirsty little bottom.

I'd done lots of things in my time, but dammit, I never thought having sex with Carson while he talked dirty to me would be a thing I'd do. Frankly, it brought a thrill to my stomach that I'd never felt before.

I let go of his cock and used both hands to hold his ass. It filled my hands and then some. It felt just as good as it looked. Better. It felt better than it looked. I could imagine coming just from squeezing his cheeks alone.

"Come on, baby. Use me. Use my hole before I burst," he begged.

*Damn, Carson.*

*You're making it really hard for me to say no.* Not that I could imagine uttering those words right this moment.

I stretched my forefinger between his cheeks and found the tight, puckered muscle he wanted me to use. He ground against me, and I felt it flexing on my finger.

"Yeah, that's it, baby. Use my hole. Use any hole. Just fuck me."

"I need lube," I managed to say while swallowing the dryness in my throat. Carson reached for the first drawer on his bedside table and pulled out a bottle of lube and a row of condoms.

I made quick work of stretching his hole with the lube, first with one finger, then two, but Carson kept asking, begging, so before long, I was sheathed, lubed, and ready.

His hole was so tight it took my breath away, but I persevered. He bit his bottom lip, seemingly enjoying the sting.

He groaned, and that only urged me on.

"You like that? You like that, Carson? You like that, bad boy?" I asked him.

He once again rested his forehead on mine, and his rapid breaths warmed my face as I picked up the pace.

"Yes, baby. Fuck, you feel good inside me. Don't stop. Use me, baby. Stretch that hole."

His cheeks had gone red. His hips worked my dick well. It wouldn't take long for me to blow, but I wanted to keep this going. I wanted to keep going for as long as possible. To enjoy and savor Carson crumbling right before my very eyes.

I grabbed his head and lifted him so I could still kiss him and feel his breath on me, but far enough for my lips to be a tease for him.

“You're so tight, boy. Have you been saving yourself for me? Huh? Have you been saving your ass for my big dick?”

Carson smiled before he let out a moan and nodded.

“Yes, Enzo. Baby. Fuck me hard and good.”

An animalistic growl came out of me as I tried to hold back my orgasm.

“God, Carson, you're...you're hot. This is hot,” I told him and pulled him down to my mouth so I could get another taste of those rough pink lips.

I slammed into him, feeling the tension in my body loosen for a second before I went tense all over again and my release shot out of me, filling the condom and leaving me spent.

“Mmm, Enzo baby, that was heaven,” he whispered after a moment and rested on top of me.

I wrapped my hands around him, and we breathed in tandem until I had enough energy to speak up.

“Is it my turn now?” I asked because his cock was still hard and pulsing, and my hole fluttered at the mere thought of having him inside me.

“Only if you want,” he said.

“Yes, please.” I nodded all too eagerly.

“Don't beg. I like to do the begging.”

“Then get that dick of yours inside me,” I said.

“You're a sin, you know that? And I'm an old fucking creep.”

“You're not old, and you're not a creep. You hear me, Carson Spencer Williams?” I told him, holding his head with both

hands until he agreed with me. “Good. Now fuck me.”



## 19. ENZO



I opened my eyes.

There was a purple glow in the room as the sun slowly came out. Carson was lying next to me, his hand draped over my stomach. The used condoms from last night were stashed together on the floor, a reminder of what I'd done.

*Oh, Enzo. You stupid, horny fucker.*

I stared at the ceiling, reliving the night with a clear head this time.

I'd kissed him. I'd initiated. Went back against my word, and I'd shown him that I liked him. I took him to bed. I gave him permission to tell me what he wanted me to do to him. And now I'd have to live with the sweet, perfect memories of what we'd done and the real, stupid repercussions they would have on my life.

*Oh, Enzo!*

I lifted Carson's hand off me and sat up in the bed, feeling very exposed. I needed to get out of here.

I got out of bed and looked around, but to no avail.

And then it hit me. My clothes were in the kitchen upstairs.

"Shit!" I cursed and turned to check on Carson, but he was still fast asleep.

I tiptoed to the door, did a little prayer to whichever god was awake at this time, and peeked outside.

The coast was clear.

I left the room and climbed the stairs, slowing as I got to the top so I could scan the room. No one. I breathed a sigh of relief as I ran the short distance from the top step to the kitchen, stopping short in front of the pile of my clothes as I remembered being pinned against the wall.

It was so good. I could still feel Carson's weight against me and the intensity of his kisses—

*Focus, Enzo.*

I hastily put everything back on, found my cell phone, and returned downstairs to put my coat and shoes on. I aimed for the front door, but...

*I need to check on him.*

I opened Carson's bedroom door again and looked at him lying in bed, naked from head to toe. His lightly-haired body looked so cozy and inviting. His exposed ass almost made me lose my resolve as the memory of being inside him filled my jeans. His hair created a sticky net on his face. I didn't know how it didn't bother him, but he looked so endearing, regardless. He licked his lips before his mouth opened and a light snore echoed through the room.

I couldn't help the chuckle that came out of me. I could watch him for hours.

*But you can't!*

I reminded myself of all the reasons I couldn't be with him and closed the door again. There was no use beating a dead horse. Carson and I would never, should never, be a thing.

I ran out of the house, got on my moped, and drove the hell out of there before anyone saw me.

The morning air made me shiver, and as if playing with my emotions, my mind kept running through my night with Carson. My perfect night with Carson. My only night with him.

*Oh, Enzo, you've done a stupid, stupid thing.*

*How am I supposed to live my life knowing I can't have that night with Carson ever again?*

*I need to get on Cinderfella for myself and hook up. Stat!*

When I got home, I resumed my previous cat burglar stealth and opened the front door. I walked through the small corridor and past the kitchen. My room was within reach. I could almost feel the handle—

“Good morning, sunshine. You’re up early,” Mom said from the kitchen.

I let out a long breath and walked back to the kitchen archway.

Mom was stirring something in a mixing bowl. How could I forget a baker would always be up at this time?

“Hi, Mom,” I said.

“Oh boy. That was heavy,” she said and put down the whisk to look at me.

“What? All I said was hi!”

She grimaced.

“Dear God, what happened? Are you okay?”

I crossed my arms and stared at my mother, refusing to give her more words for her to twist.

She took a deep breath as if I’d just told her I was dying, walked to the coffeemaker, and poured a mug. She offered it to me and sat at the table with her very own.

“Come on. Sit down. Talk to me,” she said.

I didn’t particularly want to do that, but I couldn’t resist the coffee offering, so I followed her directive.

We stayed silent, me watching the steam rising from my mug, my mother watching the steam coming out of my ears at this unexpected and unusual interrogation.

I lifted the coffee to my lips, but before I took a sip, I stopped.

“You haven’t added any truth serum to this, have you?”

“Should I?” she said, raising an eyebrow.

We both laughed.

That was the kind of stuff certain people on this island believed about my mother. Not that I put it past her to cast a little spell on the drink to get me to talk, but magic—her magic—didn't work like that.

“Did something happen at work?” she asked as I put my coffee down after a generous gulp.

“No,” I said. “Work’s fine.”

Mom pushed back her chair and returned to the table with a plate of red velvet cookies, and I could hardly resist.

“What type are these?” I asked, holding one under my nose.

“Verity Velvet,” she said.

I nodded and took a bite.

“Hold on a second! You *are* trying to compel the truth out of me,” I told her.

She rolled her eyes, broke another Verity Velvet in half, and stuffed a piece in her mouth.

“It doesn't work that way, and you know it. Now stop digressing and tell me what happened. Is it the label? Did they get in touch?”

I shook my head and indulged in another cookie.

I'd told her about my email to the label regarding buying my songs. It had been a few days since I sent it, and, of course, it had gone unanswered. I doubted I'd ever hear back from them or they would let me buy them, even if I had the money.

It was more of a principle. I wanted to see if I could get my songs back, and I thought maybe showing a willingness to pay would let me have them since I was the person who created them. Yes, I had coaches and mentors, but the music and the lyrics were mine and mine alone.

But that was not how the corporate world worked, I guessed.

“Is it to do with your little game with Carson?” she asked, and my throat seized.

I choked on cookie crumbs, and even though I tried to compose myself, it was only after another generous gulp of coffee that I could breathe again.

“Touched a nerve there, did I?” she sang, grinning.

“How do you know about that?”

“Oh please, sweetheart. I know everything. Do you forget I work at rumor central?”

“Who blabbed? Tell me.”

Mom hid behind her mug, and when she lowered it again, she shrugged.

“I don’t remember. I see and talk to so many people every day.”

“Cut the bullshit, Lilian,” I told her.

“You cut the bullshit and tell me. What happened? Did he hurt you? Did you hurt him? Do I need to have a stern word with his parents?”

I snorted and leaned back in my chair.

“Ew, Mom. Shut up.”

“Not until you tell me what’s got you in that mood after what should be a glorious walk of shame.”

I rolled my eyes again.

“You know you can tell me everything,” she insisted.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to,” I shouted and pushed my chair back.

I wanted to go to my room, get into my bed, and stay there until I could wake up from the mistake I’d made. But I knew staying home would mean my mom trying to take care of me and get me to talk. That was the last thing I needed.

I went back out, took my moped, and drove.

Every mile I drove was another moment of Carson circling my head. The way he felt when I fucked him. The way it felt when he fucked me. The heat of his kisses. The tenderness of his hands. Their ghosts on my skin stole my breath.

I tried to clear my head, let the cool winter air wipe those memories within, but nothing. No result.

What was I going to do? How was I going to go about life like that? How could I look at Carson in the eyes again after the night we just had. How could I look at Cole again? If he ever spoke to me, that was.

I'd screwed up. I'd screwed everything up.

The light rain started when I stopped at Sandy Rocks, and so did my tears. I looked out at the sea, the sky's gray turmoil perfectly reflecting my insides.

I stepped closer to the edge of the cliff and looked down at the little cove I'd spent so many of my summers playing in with Cole. Where Mom and Dad performed their handfasting when I was seven. Where we came to escape when it all got too much when the devout church ladies camped out of the café to protect people from the devil woman.

All those memories, mixed with all of my mistakes, made me break down again.

I sat and tried to forget it all. Repeat the words in a mantra hoping their strength would be enough to cast them out.

I shouldn't have come back home. I should have stayed in Boston. Or gone somewhere new. Start fresh.

What was I doing here? There wasn't anything here for me. My best friend hated me, my goddaughter was too young to care, my mom was determined to keep me here no matter the cost, and Carson...

Carson was a danger to my resolve.

He was a danger to the promise I'd made myself.

Because I couldn't fall for him. I *wouldn't* fall for him. Things would only get worse if I did.

And I couldn't take the risk.

## 20. CARSON



His hot breath blew on my face and a smile crept up my mouth.

“Morning,” I muttered and stretched my limbs as he started licking my jaw, then my cheek.

Weird places to lick, but who am I to—

*I’m being licked by my dog, aren’t I?*

I opened my eyes and confirmed my suspicion when the monitor by the bed screeched to life.

“Oh, give me a break, Ella!” I groaned, pushing Honeybee off me and the bed, and looked beside me.

Empty.

I slipped my underwear on and checked the en suite and the other bathroom on this floor.

Also empty.

“Where did he go?” I asked Honeybee as if she would answer me.

When she climbed excitedly on my bare chest and hooked her claws into my stomach, I decided to move on.

I walked up to Ella’s room, rubbing the spot where Honeybee had scratched me, and made a quick pit stop to give my dog some food before I picked up my crying banshee—erm, niece and soothed her.

He was still nowhere to be seen. After I offered Ella some food fight ammunition in front of the TV, I searched and found my phone.

*Nothing.*

It just kept ringing and ringing before going to voicemail.

What happened? Why had he left without a word? Did he...he regret last night? Had I gone too far with my dirty talk? Had I creeped him out?

*Idiot Carson.*

I heard the door downstairs and checked the staircase, but of course, it wasn't Enzo. It was my brother.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey. Work okay?"

"Sure. Peachy," he said.

He tried to walk away from me, but I went halfway down the stairs and stopped him.

"Want to talk about it?" I asked.

"Nothing to talk about, Carson. It's just work."

I wanted to push the subject, but I knew how sensitive he could be after a long night of work, so I dropped it.

"I'm gonna jump in the shower and then take over. I assume she's awake?"

"Of course."

He started to walk again when I remembered my conversation with Enzo last night.

"Everything okay with you and Enzo?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Because he seemed upset. I think you hurt his fee—"

"It's all good, Carson!" he shouted and slammed his bedroom door.



“I’m gonna take both your heads and smash them together until you start acting like adults,” I shouted back, but I doubted he heard me because the water in his bathroom came on.

I returned to my beautiful niece, who seemed oblivious to the fact her dad was back, and tried to distract myself with *Paw Patrol*. It sure could be annoying watching kiddie cartoons all day, every day, but dammit, sometimes they could be so funny.

Or maybe I was just losing it.

Ten minutes later, Cole graced us with his presence, and I handed Ella over to him so I could take my own shower. I got dressed under Honeybee’s watchful eyes.

“Do you want to go for a...?” I sang.

Her ears perked up, and her head tilted slightly to the side.

“Walk!” I let out, and she jumped on all fours, wagging that tail and doing circles around me with her saggy tongue.

I put her harness on, laughing. At least there was still someone in my life that liked my company.

As soon as we were out of the house and Honeybee got busy sniffing everything, I made another attempt at calling Enzo.

This time it went straight to voicemail.

The more I tried, the more the anxiety from earlier returned.

If I’d screwed up somehow, in some way, I needed to know.

I zipped my coat and decided to find out the results of my actions. I made my way to the Happy Witch Café.

The yellow building with the red chimney and cozy patio furniture loomed ahead. The sign with the magically enhanced muffin creaked as it swung under the influence of the soft wind. The waft of vanilla and cinnamon reached me before I even got to the sidewalk in front of the café. It immediately calmed my nerves and made me salivate.

I needed some breakfast.

I opened the front door, and the windchimes jingled. Before I knew it, Lilian’s kind blue eyes and affectionate smile were on

my case.

Her short dyed red hair made her head look like it was on fire. Probably not ideal when the more devout residents of this island wished they could do just that. Because apparently, some people still lived in the Dark Ages.

“Carson! It’s been so long.” She gave me a hug, and I relaxed. She always had that effect on people.

“And who is this little beauty,” she said, turning her attention to Honeybee, who naturally acted like she was starved for it.

“That would be Honeybee, the dog I was forced to adopt,” I told her with a raised eyebrow.

Lilian nodded with a knowing smirk.

“Forced. Yes. I can see you hate her guts,” she said.

“It’s that obvious, huh?”

“I’ll have to call the ASPCA, I’m afraid.”

“Do you think they’ll take me? Am I not too old?”

“They’ll take all kinds of bitches, don’t worry,” she said, and a dull silence rose between us before we broke into laughter.

“Ooh, boy, it’s been some time since anyone’s called me a bitch and I didn’t take offense,” I told her.

“Oh dear. Then let me try again.” She smirked and went behind the counter to grab a pot of coffee. “How are you, sweetheart?”

She poured me a mug and set it on a table. We both sat, and as I took a sip of the coffee, Lilian moved her hand, and Honeybee dipped her head under the table.

“Are you bribing my dog?” I asked her.

“I thought you hated her.”

I tried to keep up the banter, but Honeybee started crunching, and I just laughed.

“It’s just a little gravy biscuit I made. Anyway, I’m sure you didn’t come here to spar with a superior woman. Are you

hungry? Can I get you anything?"

I sighed and looked at the display of wonderful and colorful cakes and pastries. My stomach groaned in complaint.

"Do you have any apple pie?"

"What kind of question is that?" she said and disappeared behind her counter.

When she reemerged, she had a plate with a huge piece of apple pie sprinkled with cinnamon and whipped cream.

"One 'appy Apple Pie for my gorgeous friend."

I accepted the plate and felt my cheeks get warm.

I took a bite, ignoring Honeybee's pleas, before I got down to it.

"Have you seen Enzo? I can't reach him," I said.

"He came home at the crack of dawn and ran out again after a cup of coffee," she said. "Is everything okay with you two?"

I lifted the mug to my lips and shrugged.

That was exactly what I needed to know.

"Yeah. Yeah. He's, um...been helping me with something."

"Something?"

"This dating thing. Enzo's trying to help me find a...oh God, it feels stupid to even say it...a boyfriend."

"I know of your little game," she said.

A weight shifted in my stomach. Of course, she did.

"It's more of a bet," I said.

"Even better," she replied with a smirk. "And let me guess, you caught the feelings?"

I froze, staring at her.

*Shit.*

Was it that obvious?

“It doesn’t take a genius, darling. Besides, Enzo used to worship the ground you walked on when he was younger. It was inevitable—”

“He did?”

She tilted her head and pouted.

“Did you really not know? He was so bad at hiding it. Frankly, it was embarrassing to watch him. You know I had to wipe the drool off his face once? I nearly disowned him,” she said.

I couldn’t believe my ears. How was this a thing? Why hadn’t anyone told me if it had been that obvious? Not that I would have done anything back then, of course, but I knew how hard it was to pine for someone. I would have been more mindful of myself or something. And why had he told me he didn’t like me that way before? Had he been lying? Or had he learned to hate me after years of crushing on me?

“I had no idea,” I told her. “Wh-why would he push me away then? Especially after we—sorry.”

“You slept together,” she said matter-of-factly.

I stared at my coffee, too embarrassed to look at her. I’d always considered Lilian a friend. We’d spent way too much time in the same house, chatting, keeping an eye on or scolding Cole and Enzo.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled.

“Why? Was he awful?”

The joke took me by surprise, and I chuckled.

“Lilian!” I said. “You’re supposed to be upset an old fuck like me slept with your son.”

She gasped.

“If you’re an old fuck, what am I? Be careful, Mr. Williams, or I might become a monster-in-law when you two get married,” she said.

I huffed and slapped my face.

“As if that’s ever going to happen. He ran out before I woke up this morning. I don’t know what I did or said.”

“Oh crap. Maybe you’re the one that’s bad in bed,” she said. I glared at her, and even though she laughed, she apologized.

“He told me I deserved better when I kissed him last week. That he doesn’t do more, but I don’t know what he means. Do you?”

“Of course I do,” she replied, and I almost breathed a sigh of relief, but then she added, “But I’ve already said too much, and I think it needs to come from him, not me.”

“Argh, that’s not fair,” I told her.

“Well, it wouldn’t be a Christmas romance if I do all the heavy lifting, would it?”

“I hate you,” I told her.

“You too, honeybun,” she said.

I got up to leave, and Lilian said goodbye to Honeybee.

“You’re not mad at me, are you?” I asked.

She looked up and grimaced.

“Why would I be mad?”

“Because. We’re almost the same age, and I hooked up with your son,” I told her.

“Oh please, Carson. If I learned anything in life, it’s that the heart wants what the heart wants. You two are each other’s twin flame. Who am I to get in between that?”

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to tell her she was right, but considering Enzo was avoiding me, I wasn’t so sure.

“Thanks, Lilian,” I said and gave her another hug before I left, loaded with enough cakes and pies for a whole army.

It was a good thing I was going to the Grill because I didn’t think I had a sweet enough tooth to demolish everything.

So Enzo has liked me since he was a kid.

Then why was he avoiding me now? Did he realize I was an old creep and he should be with someone his own age? Had I scared him last night? He seemed to enjoy it.

My phone vibrated, and I took it out of my pocket so fast that I almost dislocated my shoulder.

*Jaxon: Hey, you. How about that raincheck? Dinner tonight?*

Damn you, Enzo.

Typical that I'd find out there were plenty of eligible bachelors in Mayberry Holm when I was fixated on only one.

I wanted to have dinner with Jaxon. I wanted to bake more cookies with Zach. Or go out with any of the other men Enzo had set me up with. But I couldn't.

Because my heart seemed determined and keen on one person and one person only.

Enzo.

## 21. ENZO



When I eventually dragged myself back to town—frozen to the bone—I made a beeline for the Grill.

I'd made so many mistakes in the last few days, and I needed to start fixing them. And I needed to find the Enzo I'd built up all those years in Boston because he seemed to have gone missing since I stepped foot on this island.

I parked the moped right in front, took the helmet off, and marched inside.

Isla and Nalini were there setting up the restaurant. Carson was planted in one of the booths with his laptop and a cinnamon bun in front of him, and he looked up as soon as I walked in.

*That cinnamon bun looks familiar.*

*Focus, Enzo.*

“Hey, where have you bee—” he started.

“Can I speak to you?” I asked and tried to cast the memories of his kisses from the back of my eyelids.

“I-um...sure,” he said and stood.

I glanced at one of the many doors in the back of the restaurant, and Carson nodded, letting me through one of them.

It turned out it was the storeroom.

“Are you okay? Where did you go? Did I—” he started as soon as the door was shut behind him and the lights were on.

“I just came to tell you last night was a mistake, and if we could please forget it ever happened, that would be great,” I said in one breath like I’d practiced.

“What?”

His face dropped, and his brows bunched at the top. He appeared so defeated, so sad. I hated putting that look on his face. I only ever wanted to put one look on him, the one I’d seen more than once last night.

*Focus, Enzo. Stop thinking about last night.*

“I’m sorry, Carson. What happened shouldn’t have happened.”

“I freaked you out, didn’t I? Honestly, the whole dirty-talk thing isn’t a dealbreaker. I went too far. I’m sorry—”

He closed his eyes and strained his face, and all I wanted was to reach out and smooth it out.

“It wasn’t. It’s not. Honestly, it was way hotter than I thought it would be. That’s not why,” I reassured him and shook my head, hoping to quiet the memory of him begging me to fuck him.

*“Yes, Enzo. Baby. Fuck me hard and good.”*

*Stop it, Enzo. You can’t keep thinking about last night.*

“Is it because I’m old? You don’t like me anymore?”

*Anymore?*

“No, stop it, Carson. It’s not you. There’s nothing wrong with you. You—”

*Don’t say. Don’t say it. Don’t say it.*

“You’re perfect. I just...I can’t. I can’t be with you,” I told him.

My nails dug into my palm as I resisted the urge to reach out and kiss him and forget all my resolve.

“Why? If you think I’m perfect, why can’t we be together? Just tell me the truth.”

He took a step closer, and I swallowed the dry knot in my throat.



“I am. It’s not you. It’s me. I’m...I’m not right for you. I can’t be with you,” I said.

He closed more distance between us until there was no space between us and nowhere for me to run.

“Why? If you really like me then why can’t we be together? Is it our age difference? Is it Cole? Is it—”

The whispery need in his tone made me catch a breath as I felt his heat on my face. The events of last night flashed before my eyes. Being inside him. Kissing him. Hugging him. Clinging to his lips as he came inside me.

“Fuck,” I groaned and reunited our mouths like two magnets that fit together.

I teased his tongue with mine and tasted the cinnamon and sugar of the buns, and my erection grew hard in my pants.

His hand came up to my neck and held me tight to him, pressing me against the wall behind me. I couldn’t help reaching between us to grab his cock.

It pulsed at the contact, even if there were layers between my skin and his, and I held my breath as I slid down and unzipped his jeans.

“Fuck,” I groaned and put my lips around his big, fat crown.

His top half collapsed against the wall I had my back on trapping me, and he stared down at me with thirsty, needy eyes and wet, puffy lips.

I flicked my tongue against his slit and drank the sweet nectar that dripped out of him before I made another attempt to take his girthy cock all the way to the root.

Carson gasped and bucked his hips toward me, pushing himself farther inside my mouth.

I put my hand on his stomach and left it there until I ran out of breath. He eased the pressure until I could take him in again. And again. And again.

He shuddered and covered his mouth with his arm to muffle the gasping orgasm, and I felt my mouth fill with his hot seed.

I swallowed him, and when I attempted to suck him some more, he flinched away as he tried to breathe.

And then I remembered how sensitive he had been after coming last night.

*Last night.*

“Shit,” I said and got back to my feet.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I-I shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry,” I said.

“No need to apologize—”

He tried to come back to me for a kiss, and I turned my head away. When would I stop acting with my dick and start acting with my head?

“I’m sorry. Everything I said is true. We can’t be together.”

“But why?” he asked, blocking my exit, but he wasn’t angry. Just sad.

“Carson, please let me go.”

“No. Not until you tell me why we can’t be together.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. Why?”

My nails dug into my palms yet again as a reminder that I needed to behave and not take Carson into my arms and succumb to temptation.

“Carson—”

“If it isn’t my age, appearance, or Cole, then what is it?”

“I can’t be with you because I’m never falling in love,” I told him. “And you deserve someone who will.”

I didn’t know if it was my answer or the shock, but Carson fell back, and the exit became clear.

“I can’t be more than friends with you, Carson. I can’t,” I said before running out of the storeroom and the restaurant.

I needed to get out of there before I changed my mind again.

## 22. CARSON



Having to get back to work after what just happened...

Not only was it impossible to stop thinking about his lips around my cock, but my mind also played tricks on me. I got hard just reminiscing about the mind-blowing blowjob he'd given me, but every time I remembered him walking out on me again, for what felt like the thousandth time, it made me angry.

Why couldn't he be with me?

Why couldn't he tell me the truth?

Why did he keep running?

What was he running from?

We were on the final stretch to Christmas now, and the last thing I needed was a young man playing with my heart and emotions.

But...

He was all I could think about.

In the afternoon, after the lunch rush and the expected dinner mayhem, I ran back home to walk Honeybee, and despite her high levels of energy and affection, Enzo was still top of mind.

*Little shit.*

He needed to talk to me. He had to talk to me.

So I marched to Bubble Bubble, determined to get some answers.

The windows were fogged up, and when I walked inside, Hwan and Parker were rushed off their feet, making countless drinks.

The buzz in the shop was suffocating, as was the heat from all the bodies, but I didn't give up. I scanned the café for Enzo. He had to be here. He had to be *somewhere*!

"Carson! You're not here to help, are you? Because if you are, I could just about kiss you right now," Hwan shouted from behind the counter.

"No, you won't!" Parker snapped at him, and despite my frustration, I still managed to laugh.

How strange.

Two weeks ago, this encounter would have killed me because I would have wanted nothing more than for Hwan to kiss me and dump Parker. But now?

It didn't bother me at all.

"Um, no, you little shit. I'm looking for Enzo," I said.

"He's home sick," Hwan said.

He was sick?

Was that true, or was he lying to avoid seeing me?

But then again, how would he know I'd stop by the shop?

I jumped the line to the front, leaned over the glass display that housed all the boba on offer, and got Hwan's attention.

"Did he say what was wrong? What happened?"

A couple of people groaned at my intrusion, but most people dropped to the floor to greet Honeybee, who seemed to enjoy all the attention.

Hwan grimaced and shrugged.

"Nothing happened. He just caught a cold and needed to sleep it off so he can be back tomorrow," he told me, and I let out a loud, involuntary sigh. "Everything okay with you?"

"I don't know," I told him.

Because it was the truth. I didn't know what was going on with me, with Enzo, with us.

"Hold on one sec," Hwan said.

He came out from the counter, found another guy in a pink apron—Asher, who had only recently moved into the island and occasionally helped at the café—and told him something.

Two seconds later, Asher was behind the counter taking orders, and Hwan came over to me and opened his mouth to say something when Honeybee put her nose to his stomach.

"OMG. Who is this little furball?" he said, dropping to his knees to pet her.

"Honeybee from Duke's Sanctuary," I said.

He scratched her ear, and she reciprocated by licking his neck and face.

"Oh my God, she's so cute! When did this happen? And how did I miss it?"

"It's a long story," I told him.

He nodded and got back to his feet.

"Ah yes," he said and dragged us through the back and upstairs to his apartment.

"What's going on?" he asked when the door was shut behind us.

"Nothing."

"Yeah, right. And I'm straight. Tell me," Hwan insisted.

I sagged against the door and let another involuntary sigh out.

"Enzo and I..."

"Slept together. Yeah, I know. But what happened?"

I looked up at him and grimaced. The smirk on his face was punchable.

*Strange. A month ago, I'd have said kissable.*

"What do you mean, you know?" I asked.

Hwan rolled his eyes and brushed his blue hair aside.

“Sweetie, please. It doesn’t take a genius to guess. You’re practically glowing. Besides...” He turned his back and walked to his kitchen. “You just confirmed it.”

*Dammit. I’ve been played.*

Hwan opened his fridge, gave Honeybee a slice of bacon, and offered me a drink. A moment later, we were sitting at his kitchen island with a can of soda each. Honeybee sat by Hwan’s feet, getting ear scratches.

“So...what happened?” he asked again, this time with less smugness.

“He ran,” I said.

“Dear God, Carson. Are you that bad? Or are you just out of practice?”

I glared at him.

He put his hands up in surrender.

“Fine. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Tell me what happened. I promise I’ll behave.”

“Huh. As if I believe that.”

“Promise.” He extended his pinky to me. “On Halmeoni’s life,” he added when I didn’t bite.

Halmeoni was his grandma, whom he loved more than anything, so he was serious.

“On Halmeoni’s life,” I said and locked pinkies with him.

When we let go, I told him everything. About the stupid wager. About the silly dates. The kisses. About last night.

“But now I don’t know what’s going on. Enzo keeps saying I deserve better. I deserve someone else. He says he can’t fall in love with me and I don’t understand why or what that means. I’m so confused and frustrated.”

“I can imagine. It doesn’t sound ideal,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

I shook my head.

“It’s not your fault. But thanks. Honestly...I wish I’d never agreed to his wager. I was happy just working and getting on with my life. I don’t have time for...whatever this is.”

Hwan cocked his head and bit his lip.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. I just realized something,” he said.

“Hwan, can you please stop being mysterious and just spill it?” I told him and put my can down. “Also, need another soda. Please.”

Hwan laughed and got me another can from the fridge. Honeybee followed him, and he gave her another slice of bacon.

“When Parker started working here, and we got together, I kept saying the same thing. Actually, long before that. I’ve been saying it for a while now. I don’t have time for love,” he said.

“I’m confused. What?” I asked.

“You just said you don’t have time for *this*. You don’t have time for Enzo and his mixed signals, and all that. I just realized where I learned it from. You’ve been using that excuse for as long as I’ve known you to avoid facing your fears. I guess I never realized I copied that from you.”

“Great. And how does that help me exactly?” I asked, cracking the can open.

“Well, I don’t know, Carson, but the moment I accepted that my excuse was covering for something deeper, I found true love. Maybe it’s time you also stopped using that excuse, and who knows what might happen?”

I scoffed.

“I’m not a workaholic. Haven’t I been trying to get *you* to stop working so much?”

“Oh, you have. Everyone has. But sometimes it’s easier to see someone else’s faults and not our own.”

“Are you saying I’m faulty?” I asked, trying to lighten the mood because I didn’t like where this was going.

“A manufacturer’s error, for sure,” he said, chuckling.

“Well, at least you make yourself laugh,” I told him.

“Oh, I make more than myself laugh. Parker laughs too.”

I winced. “That’s not the burn you think it is,” I said.

“Oh, shut up and listen to me. You’ve worked like a mule since Darren left you, and you’ve used your heartbreak as an excuse not to move on with your life. I don’t know Enzo or why he’s acting the way he is, but you should be more open to the idea of falling in love. Give people a chance. You should talk to Enzo, for sure, but don’t let him be another excuse to stop living. Like Darren was. Like I was,” he said.

I nodded, even though I hated what he was saying. Because he was right.

Wait. Did he just—

“You know I was in love with you?” I asked.

Hwan pursed his lips.

“It took me some time, but yes, I know,” he said.

I dipped my head and bit the inside of my cheek.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“What for? We can’t help who we fall for.”

“Still. It’s weird.”

“Weird? Why would it be weird?”

“Gee, where do I start? You used to work for me. You’re soooo much younger than me. Is that enough, or do I need to go on?”

I looked up at him, and he grimaced.

“You’re an idiot. I don’t think you’ll find any more reasons. You’re older than me, and so what? Lots of people get into relationships with big age gaps. And lots of coworkers hook up.”



“Are you trying to convince me to ask you out or...?”

He laughed so loud that even though I was joking, I did take some offense at how funny he found my question.

“I think we both know you’ve moved on.”

“I have,” I confirmed and stared at him to make sure he knew I meant it.

“Good. I’m glad. And don’t worry. We are still friends. Obviously.”

“I didn’t ask—”

“Well, I was preempting the question I knew was coming,” he said.

He was right. I was about to ask him.

*Smart asshole.*

“All’s well that ends well. Besides, considering how quickly you got over me as soon as Enzo came into the picture, is it possible to assume you weren’t ‘in love’ with me in the first place?”

I shrugged.

I didn’t know anything more.

What I did know was that being in Hwan’s presence didn’t hurt anymore and thinking of Enzo did. So maybe he had a point.

“Maybe you found someone you thought was unobtainable and kept fixating on that so you didn’t have to move on and face your fears.”

His stare was intense, so I drank from the can to put a barrier between us and think it over.

Had I thought Hwan was unobtainable? Yes.

Did I think everyone else was unobtainable? There hadn’t been anyone else because I kept myself to myself, worked my ass off, and never dated.

*Fuck me. The little douchebag is right.*

“When did you get so wise?” I asked when I put the now-empty can down.

“I always have been,” he said and grinned.

I frowned and looked him over.

“Yeah, must be it. I was going to say maybe it’s the wonder dick you’ve been getting, but Parker is dim AF, so that can’t be it,” I said, and he gasped in shock.

“Oh wow. Is that how you’re going to be now that we’ve cleared the air? Wow. I think I preferred the Heartbroken Carson to Jerk Central over here.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” I said, trying not to laugh. “I didn’t filter the thought before I spoke it.”

Hwan laughed.

“Idiot. And for your information, Parker is *not* dim.”

I put my hands up in surrender, and he glared at me like I’d tried to murder him. Couldn’t say I blamed him.

“Anyway, I should probably go back down and help before Parker and Ash come up and kill me,” he said and stood.

I did the same.

“Thank you for listening to me,” I said.

“Anytime, Carson.”

We started walking to the door.

“What do you think you’ll do?” he asked.

I looked at Honeybee’s excited face and wagging tail and checked the time.

“Did you say he was sick?” I asked.

I knocked on the door.

Nothing.

I knocked again.

When I got no response, I walked to the front windows that overlooked the kitchen and tried to peek inside, but no one

was there. Which meant Lilian was still at the bakery. That woman spent all her days and nights in a kitchen. I often wondered if she was a vampire because I couldn't understand when she got any sleep.

I rapped on the window when a shadow crossed the kitchen arch.

Two seconds later, the front door opened, and Enzo appeared wearing a blanket as a cloak.

His nose was bright red just like it had been when he stopped by the restaurant but now he looked puffy.

"Carson," he said when he saw me. His voice was nasal as hell.

"Enzo. So it's true. You're sick?" I asked.

He wiped his nose and snuffled.

"Of course I am. What are you doing here?" he asked.

I raised the paper bag between us and smiled.

"I got you some soup from the Soup Bar," I said. "I didn't know what flavor you liked, so I got you all of them. This is really heavy. Can I come in?"

The tension in Enzo's face dissipated, and he stepped aside. I marched straight into the kitchen and unpacked the soup bag.

"I've got tomato and red pepper, creamy mushroom, ginger miso, chicken noodle. And as for bread, there's breadsticks, rye, cornbread, and French baguette."

Enzo looked at all the soup tubs and mini paper bags for the bread, and a smile crossed his face.

"You shouldn't have gone through all the trouble. This must have cost a fortune," he said.

"But you're sick," I said.

The smile remained on his face as he leaned over the table and scanned the soups.

"I think I'll start with chicken soup," he said. "And I'll have the baguette."

I twirled my hand doing a small bow.

“At your service. You need to get back to bed. I’ll bring it to you.”

Enzo shook his head.

“You don’t have to.”

“But I want to.”

He glanced at me, pursed his lips, and retreated to his bedroom.

I put the soup on a tray with the bread and a glass of water and took it to him.

He was practically buried in his blankets and only sat up slightly when I put the tray on the bed.

“Thanks,” he said after a couple of sips of the soup.

“Any time,” I said.

I let him eat in peace, trying to find the right time to ask him about us, but it felt wrong when he was so sick. So instead, I asked him how he caught a cold because he’d looked fine earlier.

He gave a few awkward bats of his lashes and told me he’d gone to Sandy Rocks. I scolded him for going there at this time of the year. He admitted it was stupid and ate some more.

The tension between us seemed to ease.

“So, Enzo—” I started.

“I got you a date with a new guy. His name is Trent, and he’s looking for love,” he said at the same time.

“What?” I asked.

He got me a date? After what happened between us?

“I was bored in bed,” he said and sniffled.

“That’s not what I was asking.”

“I know what you were asking, Carson. But I told you. I can’t be with you. You need to move on with your life. I’m not the guy for you.”

I couldn't believe what he was saying. After everything I'd learned about his crush on me and all the time we'd spent together, the night we'd shared.

Maybe Hwan was right. Maybe I kept falling for unobtainable guys to stop me from moving on.

If Enzo didn't want me, there was no point pushing him. He'd made himself clear, time and time again.

So what if he kept going back on his word and doing things to me, like kissing, fucking, or blowing me?

He wasn't ready to commit for whatever reason.

So I needed to move on.

"Trent, huh? Tell me about him," I said, and I didn't miss the shadow that crossed his eyes.

But if he didn't like it, he could say it. And since he didn't, we spent the next thirty minutes pretending nothing had ever happened between us.

## 23. ENZO



Two days later, I was back on my feet but still feeling like a sad sack.

Because I hadn't been able to control myself around Carson.

Because I let him kiss me.

Because I kissed him.

Because I lured him to bed.

Because I let him go.

Because he let go with so much ease...

I knew I shouldn't be upset about the latter. It was what I'd asked of him.

But dammit, it was so annoying that he just accepted it and moved on to the next guy.

*And the fucking ass didn't even go out with Trent.*

Again, not the thing I should be upset about, but it still irritated me.

And to make matters worse, Cole was still not talking to me.

*Could my life get any crappier?*

"Oh look at that. It's cute. Ella would love it," Mom said and pointed to a cute crochet plushie reindeer in the toy store window.

"She would," I said.

Not that I'd know. I'd only seen my goddaughter on her birthday and the weekends I'd stolen away while living in Boston.

No wonder Cole thought I was a shit friend. He probably thought I was a shit godfather too.

"Come on, let's go get it for her," she said, and I let her drag me into the store.

When we came out, we continued our casual shopping stroll. Until we passed Carson's Grill. I checked the time. Fifteen minutes.

"Hungry, Mom?" I asked her.

She touched her tummy as if that would give her the answer and rocked her head left to right before she answered.

"Sure. I could eat. Do you want to go to Carson's?"

"No. I thought we could go to Porto Mirtillo," I said.

Mom narrowed her eyes for a second before she nodded.

"Lead the way then."

We walked back to where we came from, turned right to an alley, then left to a sidestreet until we came up to the harbor and Porto Mirtillo, a beautiful restaurant with floor-to-ceiling window views of the sea and some delicious Italian dishes.

A smiling woman with long dark hair greeted us when we walked in.

"We'd like a table for two, please, Alessia," Mom said.

"I've actually booked a table already," I told Alessia, the co-owner of the restaurant, and she glanced at a book in front of her.

When she looked up at me, she smiled and took us to our table.

As soon as we were on the main restaurant floor, I spotted Carson, although he didn't see me. He was too busy chatting with his date.

Jaxon.

Whatever.

It was a shit name anyway.

“Here we go,” Alessia said and showed us to a table close to Carson’s, per my instructions.

There was only a table separating us, which was unoccupied at that moment.

“Carson!” Mom exclaimed when she saw him, and he turned.

So did his date.

*Fuck.*

He was tall, dark, and handsome with muscles for days.

How could I compete with that?

*You’re not competing, idiot! You told him to move on.*

“Lilian! Hi, guys,” Carson said and stood.

His gaze lingered on me for a moment, but I just offered him my best fake smile and let my mom do the catch-up. She was an expert at small talk after years of running her bakery.

Carson introduced Jaxon and even offered to join our tables, but I refused. We did not need to crash Carson’s date.

I just had a vested interest in how it went. After all, a bet was a bet, and I wanted my thousand dollars.

*That’s it. That’s all it is.*

Mom and I sat at our table and were soon served drinks: a soda and water.

When I glanced at Carson’s table, I noticed a bottle of white wine.

“Pfft. Show-off,” I mumbled.

“What was that, sweetheart?” Mom asked.

I shook my head, but Mom turned to look at Carson.

“Hm...the last time I checked, wine on a date was normal,” she said.

“Stop being so intuitive.” I rolled my eyes.



“I’ll do my best,” she replied and lifted the glass of water to her lips.

“Hello, guys, are you ready to order?” the waiter at Carson’s table said and looked from him to Jaxon.

“I am,” the Jaxon guy said. “I’ll have the steak, medium-rare.”

“Typical. Steak in an Italian restaurant,” I huffed.

Mom glared at me, and I hid behind my glass of soda.

“I’ll have the chicken tortellini,” Carson replied.

*Eating light, are we? I guess you’re really moving on, aren’t you, Carson?*

As the waiter left the table, Carson followed his path, and our gazes met.

*What are you looking at, huh? You’ve got your date. You’re moving on. I’m the one that’s still stuck on this stupid island where everyone hates me.*

“Sweetie,” Mom said.

Carson licked his lips, took a deep breath, and turned his attention back to Jaxon.

“Sweetie,” Mom repeated, and I looked at her. “Eyes on your menu, please. These people are already rushed off their feet. They don’t need an indecisive little shit.”

I huffed and shook my head.

“Other moms talk to their kids like they’re little angels, you know,” I said.

“They’re fucking doing what now?”

I couldn’t help the laugh that erupted from me.

And apparently, Carson couldn’t resist staring at me.

Because he was. I caught him.

*Why are you staring? You’ve got your date. Fuck off!*

“Eyes on your menu!” Mom repeated.

“Okay, okay,” I answered.

The waiter came over, and Mom gave her order.

“I’ll have the four cheese gnocchi,” she said.

The waiter turned to me, and I looked at him.

Carson was supporting his head with his hand, talking, but his eyes kept flicking toward me.

*Oh, so now you’re watching me, huh?*

“I’ll have the steak. Medium-rare,” I said.

I caught Carson’s eyeroll as the waiter left.

“It’s great to spend this time with my son. If only my son could join the chat,” Mom sighed.

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “What were you saying?”

“I said do you want to go to Dare’s farm after we’re done shopping to try his blueberry pie...”

“No way. He left you for a younger man? How stupid. Look at you? What more could he want?” I heard Jaxon say to Carson.

“Apparently, a better model,” Carson replied.

“You’re the perfect model. And he’s an ass. Do you want to egg his car?”

*What an idiot. Darren moved off the island the day after he ditched Carson.*

“So?” Mom said.

“Huh?”

“For crying out loud, Enzo, if you didn’t want to go out with your mom, then why on earth did you drag me all the way here?” Mom asked in a raised voice, glancing toward Carson’s way.

“Oh shut up, Mom. Of course I wanted to go out with you,” I told her.

“Sweetie.” Her hand covered mine and made me jump. “If you love him, why don’t you tell him?” she whispered.

“What?” I pulled my hand from under hers and shook my head. “I don’t love him. What are you talking about?”

“Don’t act stupid. It doesn’t suit you. Much,” she said.

“I’m not. I don’t love him.”

“Sure. You’ve just liked him since you realized what you have between your legs and how to use it.”

“Exactly,” I said.

“Oh, honey, I don’t know if you’re trying to fool me or yourself, but I’m pretty sure either way, you’re hurting yourself.”

If she wanted to say anything further, I didn’t know because the waiter appeared with our dishes.

“These aren’t ours. I believe they’re theirs,” Mom said and pointed to Carson.

The waiter apologized and served Carson and Jaxon.

*Their names even end in -on. Great pair they will be!*

“What are you doing later? Do you want to watch a movie?” Jaxon asked Carson as he cut his steak.

*Jesus. It was only two in the afternoon. Thirsty much?*

Carson lifted tortellini with his fork, and just before he ate it, he glanced at me.

“Sure, I’d love to. What’s your take on *Die Hard*? Christmas movie or not?” Carson asked.

He was just doing it on purpose. The fucker.

I pushed my chair back and ran off to the restroom before I said or did something inappropriate.

Before I cried right in front of him.

I stood in front of the mirror and splashed my face with fresh water, hating what I had become.

In Boston, I could do whatever I wanted. I could sleep with or fuck whoever I wanted and then move on to the next. I had my studies. I had a career—until I didn’t.

But regardless, I was someone.

Here, I was just seventeen-year-old Enzo lusting after his best friend's brother no matter how old I really was.

"You're an idiot, Enzo D'Agostino," I told myself.

"I agree," Carson said, and I jumped.

He stood by the door with his arms crossed and a smug look.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Why do you keep pushing me away when you obviously like me?" he asked.

"No, I don't."

In seconds he was standing in front of me, mere inches apart, his head dipped to almost touch my forehead.

"You don't, do you?" he breathed.

I shook my head.

"Not at all." He moved his lips next to my ear, and the hairs on the back of my neck reacted to his voice.

"N-no," I said.

"Why do you keep denying me?" he asked.

"I'm not."

His hand reached up to my throat. He didn't squeeze but put enough pressure there to make me look him in the eyes.

And for my dick to pulse hard.

"You like me," he whispered in my other ear, still holding on to my neck.

I tried to move my head, to open my mouth and tell him he was wrong, but I couldn't.

"Kiss me," he said, and like the idiot I was, I did.

## 24. CARSON



I took him in my mouth.

I'd missed his taste, his tongue. I'd missed his body pinned to mine.

I might have gone an entire life without them, but now that I'd gotten a taste, I was hooked.

And no matter what he said with his words, his body reacted to me the same way. I just didn't know why he kept pushing me away.

I wrapped one hand around his neck to his nape and my other around the small of his back and deepened the kiss, my insides alight with need.

He fisted my shirt as if he wanted to push me off him but couldn't.

Our tongues got into an intricate wet dance for dominance, and no matter how I deepened our kiss, it wasn't enough. I needed more. Wanted more. Wanted him.

I moved my hands south to grip his ass cheeks, and before I even knew what was happening, he jumped, straddling me. The ache in my jeans was so hard I could have come from just dry-humping alone.

"I need you," I mumbled in his mouth.

"Me too," he answered.

That was all I needed to hear. I walked us into a cubicle, closed the door, and leaned him against it.

It was messy, dirty work, with acrobatics and weight-lifting involved, but once his ass and my dick were exposed, it was impossible to complain. Who could complain about any of this?

I spat in my fist and pressed my fingers against his puckered hole. It gave way as he let me stretch him. I bit his earlobe. He breathed into my neck, suppressing a louder moan, and when I'd introduced enough of my fingers into him, I bucked my hips and pressed my pulsing shaft against his hole.

As soon as I tried entering him, he hissed, biting down on my neck like a thirsty vampire.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Don't," he said. "Keep going."

"Are you sure?"

He didn't say anything, just nodded, and I followed his instructions. I pushed. The dry friction made me bite my lips. This would be so much better with lube, but I needed him now, and Enzo seemed to need me. There was no chance in hell I was stopping.

I only managed a few inches, but they were enough to send us both into a frantic, sweaty frenzy, gasping into each other's mouths, staring into each other's eyes, wishing this moment never ended.

At least I was.

He was what I wanted in my life. And he'd come into it at the right time to offer me everything I could ever need.

But why couldn't he see that?

Why wouldn't he talk to me? Why wouldn't he tell me what he meant when he said I deserved better?

How could I deserve better when I didn't know I deserved *anyone* until I reunited with him?

Was he afraid he wouldn't be able to fulfill my needs? Did he think I wanted more than I did and didn't want life predetermined for him?

“What is it?” I groaned into him as I felt my orgasm clawing at my insides.

“What?” he asked.

I ignored him and reached for his cock instead. I stroked him, pushing into him, and kissed him as if not doing so would break me. It probably would.

But I wanted to show him. Prove to him that he was exactly who I needed in my life.

*What will it take, Enzo? What?*

I dropped my head to his shoulder, and he leaned into my ear.

“Fill me, baby. I need your seed inside me,” he whispered, and I did exactly as he asked.

Moments later, he came in my hand, leaving us both breathless and sweaty. I lifted my hand to my lips and swiped at his cum while staring at him. The way he looked back, as if there was no one else in the world but me, could make me go for round two straight away.

But my poor, old knees gave out, and I helped Enzo back down.

“See? We’re perfect for each other,” I said.

Enzo smiled sadly as if agreeing with me while knowing it couldn’t be.

I offered him some tissue, and he cleaned himself while I did the same.

“How did you know I’d be here?” I asked.

He shrugged.

“I’ve still got your Cinderella logged in on my phone,” he said.

“You little shit,” I told him, squeezing his mouth with my hand.

I let go of him, and he resumed his task before he pulled his pants back up.

“Sorry,” he said. “I know I told you to move on. It was stupid of me to come here and crash your date.”

I buttoned up and threw the tissue in the toilet before I turned to him and touched his cheek.

“Don’t be sorry. I’m glad you did. I don’t want to move on, Enzo. I want you,” I said.

“But it’s better if you do,” he said.

“Why? At least tell me why?”

He rubbed his palms on his jeans and looked away from me. When I was about to plead with him again, he took a deep breath.

“I...I can’t be with you, Carson, because I can’t fall in love,” he said.

“What do you mean you can’t fall in love?”

“I mean, I don’t want to. I don’t want to love someone so fully, so completely that it consumes me.”

I reached for his cheek again, and he looked back at me.

“What are you talking about? Why wouldn’t you want love in your life? Are you aromantic or something?” I asked.

“No. It’s a conscious decision I made a long time ago. When we lost my dad, it completely destroyed my mom. It took years to put her back together. And she’s still not the same person she once was. She doesn’t smile or laugh the same way. She doesn’t do anything but bake—”

“It’s her way of dealing with her grief. She loves baking, and it gives her an escape,” I said.

“But I don’t want to be the same way. I-I don’t want to love someone like she did my dad and have it completely ruin me, or them, when one of us goes,” he said.

I wanted to give him a big hug, to hold him in my arms until he felt safe, but how could I when he had such a perverted view of love. There was so much to unpack, and unless he did, no amount of hugs would solve it.



“That...that goes with the territory. Don't you think there's something...I don't know, poetic, about being so in love with someone that the fear of losing them can tear you apart?”

“No. Why would that be poetic? Why would I want that? My dad was everything to me and my mom, and his ghost is everywhere I turn. Why would I want another ghost?”

“Enzo, sweetheart, you can't keep living in fear of loss. Loss is part of life. As is love,” I said.

He shook his head and pulled away from my touch.

“I don't want any of that. If I can avoid some pain, why wouldn't I?”

“Because life without love, any kind of love, is not life at all?”

The restroom door creaked open, and we both stood still as we heard someone piss at the urinal before the door creaked again without washing their hands.

“Pfft, unsanitary bastard,” I commented, trying to add levity to the asphyxiating tension in the cubicle.

But Enzo didn't laugh. Or smile.

“You asked me why. I told you why. Don't try to change my mind. I made it up a long time ago,” he said.

“But, Enzo, that's stupid. You can't write off love because of the fear of grief,” I said, and he pursed his lips with a grimace. “I didn't mean it like that. You're not stupid. But, sweetheart...Enzo, there's so much wrong with your 'solution.' You have to see it's not viable, right?”

He shook his head.

“You should give Jaxon a chance. He looks like a good guy. And judging from your conversations, he wants everything you do,” he said and turned his back to me, reaching for the door handle.

“But he's not you,” I told him.

He paused, and I stared at his hand, waiting for him to leave.

But he didn't.

He turned, draped his hands around my neck, and planted a kiss on my lips. It was tame, short, and...bittersweet.

Because I knew exactly what it meant.

“No, he’s not me. He’s not broken. He’s better. You two make a cute couple,” he said, and with that, he left the restroom again, and I knew without a shadow of a doubt that this was it between us.

## 25. CARSON



“Boss,” someone said.

I continued to type on my computer like a madman.

*On behalf of everyone here at Carson's Grill, we'd like to wish you a Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!*

Happy!

Was I ever going to be that?

There was one day until I turned forty, and even though I thought that would be the greatest disaster of my life, it wasn't, and I felt...

Nothing.

How could I have fallen in love so quickly, so deeply, that my major life milestone meant nothing to me anymore?

“Boss!” Kinsley repeated, and I put the finishing touches on my customer newsletter before I turned to my chef.

“Yes, Kinsley?” I said.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

No, I wasn't okay. I wasn't okay at all.

Why had Enzo come back into my life?

I would still be content if Enzo wasn't in my life and was still this kid who had driven me crazy with my brother while growing up. I would be content if I was still obsessing over my younger ex-employee, even if my heart-to-heart with Hwan had been more than healing.

Yet, I was this mess of a man that felt...

*Nothing.*

“Sure. What’s up?” I asked him.

“Nothing. I was just saying the guys and I are going to the Outpost after work if you want to come.”

I smiled and started to nod before I remembered.

“Sorry. I’ve got...plans,” I said.

“Oh yeah? With your fancy new boyfriend?” Kinsley’s grin turned salacious, and I was tempted to smack him.

But it was frowned upon to abuse your employees.

And probably illegal.

“He’s not my boyfriend. Just a friend,” I said.

Jaxon was a lovely guy. If I’d met him before Hurricane Enzo walked into my life, I’d probably have jumped in the sack with him straight away, gone way too fast too soon, and God knew what else, but...

He was just a friend.

For now, anyway.

Maybe one day in the near future, I’d be able to truly move on like Enzo had told me to.

But that day was not today.

“Sure. Sure. That’s what we call it now? I’ve got lots of friends like that too,” Kinsley replied. I gave him the middle finger before returning my attention to my newsletter, attaching the coupon graphic for the new year.

Hopefully, I’d be able to offset some of the slow January business with some regular patrons, even if they were only paying fifty percent of the original prices.

With the email ready and scheduled to go out tomorrow, I checked the time, closed the laptop, and got up.

Nalini was studying the reservations for today, Isla was finishing setting up tables with Penny, and Madison was

chatting to her cousin and his husband while polishing the silverware. Karan was chopping fruit behind the bar.

Everything was perfect.

Too perfect.

“Right, everyone. It’s time to open the doors. Are we ready?” I asked, and everyone turned to look at me.

“All good, hon,” Nalini said.

“All done,” Isla said and fixed her apron.

“Great. Let’s kick some serious—” I started as I walked to the doors, but someone groaned behind me.

I stopped in my tracks and turned. Nalini was steadying herself on the host desk, legs spread apart and amniotic fluid all over the floor between her feet.

“You gotta be kidding me,” I told her before I could stop myself.

Nalini offered me an apologetic smile while Karan literally jumped over the bar to get to his wife.

“You couldn’t wait another day? Seriously, so selfish,” I told her.

“I’m sure if I close my legs, I can...*try* to get through the shift,” she said, letting out another groan in the middle of her sentence.

“I think it’s a tad too late to close your legs,” I said.

“Can’t argue with *that!*” she replied.

“Are you okay, jaanu?” Karan asked her, his affectionate name for her sounding distressed.

I bit back another sarcastic comeback and rushed to my friend’s other side while Madison placed a chair behind Nalini.

“How far apart are the contractions?” Penny asked.

“How the fuck should I...*know?*” Nalini bit back at her and groaned again.

“I’m gonna go get the car. Are you going to be okay?” Karan asked her.

He covered the side of her face with his hand, and she attempted a smile before she kissed his palm.

Karan sprinted out of the restaurant while Penny sat by her side and helped time the contractions.

“Typical, you’d leave us in the shit on our last manic day,” I told her to distract her.

“If you weren’t so busy playing *The Bachelor*, you wouldn’t be in the shit, bitch,” she replied as she folded in pain.

She was right, of course. I’d been so busy letting Enzo run my life and obsessing over him that I hadn’t even thought about Nalini’s replacement. I’d really dropped the ball with work.

“I hate you, you know,” I told her, putting a hand on her shoulder and squeezing.

“Why? Because I’m *so*...much prettier than you?”

“No, idiot. Because I’ll have to share the limelight with my godchild! She’ll get all the attention because she’ll be born a day earlier than me,” I said.

Penny laughed. Madison gave her some water.

“Just for that, I’ll hold him in until tomorrow, so you have the same birthday, ass!” she said.

I narrowed my eyes and stared her down.

“Him? He’s a boy? I thought you weren’t going to find out,” I told her.

“Well, we did.” Nalini grinned.

My jaw dropped, and there was a sting at the back of my eyes that wasn’t there before. I threw myself over her and held tight.

I only let go when Karan honked from outside, making all of us jump.

Pierce and I helped her to the car, and they drove off, leaving us behind.

I turned around and saw people taking advantage of the open doors and walking into the Grill.

*Shit. I forgot about that.*

It seemed I'd forgotten about a lot. It wasn't just that Nalini and Karan were indisposed today. I'd lost my only restaurant manager for the next few months.

It was fitting. I was obsessed with work before Enzo. I could be obsessed with work after him.

Maybe it would help me truly move on.

When we walked back inside, Penny had already put a wet floor sign by the desk, and Madison was getting the mop, but the Grill sprung to life.

"How are you feeling?" Penny asked a few minutes later.

I shrugged.

"Well and truly fucked. But oh well, I'm used to it," I told her.

"Don't worry. Nalini will be okay, and you'll find someone to replace her," she replied.

"Yeah, right."

It had taken me six months, and I had yet to find anyone. No one I could take seriously anyway. And after what happened to Hwan's business and some other shops around town with the racketeering scheme, it was even harder to trust anyone to be my eyes and ears when I wasn't here.

I leaned against the bar for a moment—I knew I'd have to get to work soon—and sighed.

"Carson?" someone said.

I raised my head and saw Rafe, Madison's cousin's young Latino husband.

"Yeah," I said.

"You know, Pierce and I have been talking, and we kinda love it here," he said.

I smiled.

“That’s great. Mayberry Holm is a great place,” I told him.

“No, yeah, what I’m...what I’m saying is we might like to move here and...you know, if we do, I’d need a job, so...”

I stood straight and looked at the young man.

“Are you saying you’d like Nalini’s job?” I asked.

“If you’re offering,” he replied.

“Yes!” I said straight away. “Yes. A thousand times, yes!”

Rafe laughed, and I pulled him in for a hug before I realized that was probably also frowned upon with employees.

“Care to start today?” I told him when I let go.

“Already on it.” He winked at me.

We shook hands and got to work. Rafe handled reservations, Pierce helped out at the bar, and everyone else got into a rhythm despite the busy evening ahead of us.

When we finally wrapped for the night, and everyone got ready to go to the Outpost, Karan had sent an update that Nalini was still in labor.

That bitch was petty enough to keep my godson in until past midnight, so he shared his birthday with his godfather.

*God, I love that woman.*

“Hello! Table for two, please,” Jaxon said from the front door and walked in with a bunch of flowers and a bottle of wine.

How sweet.

He wanted more from me. I knew he did. It was pretty obvious from the way he treated me like some sort of royalty.

“For you, I might make an exception,” I said.

He offered me the flowers and the wine, and I took them from him with sincere gratitude. He scanned the restaurant.

“Where is everyone?” he asked.

“Oh, they’ve left to get wasted,” I replied.



Before I even finished my sentence, he leaned in for a kiss, but I managed to stop him.

“Sorry,” he said.

I shook my head.

“No, Jaxon, it’s not your fault. It’s me. I...I think I’ve been giving mixed signals, and that’s not fair to you. I really like you, but I...I’m not ready to take this further,” I said. “But I really like you. Can we...can we just agree to be friends for now and see where that takes us?” I asked.

Jaxon did a great job composing himself without looking like a wounded puppy. It was admirable, really. He put on his best fake smile and offered me his hand

“Friends, then,” he said.

“Friends,” I mumbled and looked at the wine he’d brought. “Would my friend like a glass of wine? It’s been a bitch of a day.”

“Sure,” he agreed, and we cracked it open.

I had planned for us to go somewhere else for drinks, but considering how tired I was, this was probably for the best.

“Can I ask my *friend* what he’s doing for Christmas?” he asked me halfway through our bottle of red.

Well, I was definitely not having a boyfriend for Christmas. And specifically not the boyfriend I wanted.

*Thanks, Enzo.*

“Probably spending it with my brother and niece,” I answered.

“Oh great. Can I join you? I’m an excellent cook, you know,” Jaxon replied.

## 26. ENZO



The handle of the bag dug into my skin under the weight of the present.

Or at least that was how it felt as I stood outside Carson's Grill and watched him drink wine and chat with Jaxon. A beautiful bouquet sat on the table between them.

*Wow. He wasted no time, did he?*

I knew I told him to move on, so why on earth did it hurt seeing him doing so?

I watched as my breath blew in front of my face, and I curled my fingers tighter. Not to protect them from the cold but to jolt me awake so I could get the hell out of here.

I didn't know why I'd thought leaving Ella's Christmas present with Carson would be better than facing Cole anyway.

I hadn't kissed Cole. I hadn't fucked him. I hadn't led him on and then turned him down. I'd only just betrayed our friendship.

*Stupid, stupid, Enzo!*

*How could you make such a mess of things?*

I marched away, the feel of him inside me making my whole body ache with need and desperation. The taste and shape of his lips on mine were ingrained in my memory, never to be forgotten. The sound of his words ran circles in my head like a catchy tune.

Why did I have to be like this? Why did I have to push him away?

And most importantly: why could I not stop feeling this way?

I wanted to forget him. I wanted to move on like he was clearly doing himself. I wanted to stop acting like it was the end of the world.

And yet, I couldn't.

I probably needed off this island for that to happen.

To run so far away that I forgot my own name, let alone his.

But how could I do that to my mom again? Having me home had been her lifeline. She was singing again. She was smiling again. She was happy again.

I needed to find a way to mend my relationship with the Williams brothers, but how?

How had I screwed up so badly?

I was home before I realized. I couldn't even remember driving, but the cold seeped through to my bones and the stinging in my eyes was uncontrollable as soon as the door closed behind me.

"Sweetheart, what happened? Why are you crying?" Mom said as soon as she saw me. Her arms enveloped me.

"Because I screwed up, and I hate myself," I whimpered on her shoulder, feeling like I was twelve again. Only the roles were reversed, and it was me crying, not my mom.

"You screwed what up? Come on. Let's get you some coffee and heat, and we can figure this out. I promise. There's no problem that can't be solved with some coffee and warmth." She soothed me and took me to the living room.

The fire crackled inside the fireplace as we sat, and the heat tickled my bare toes as Mom fussed over me.

"Now," she said when the coffee was served with a slice of panettone, an Italian sweet bread, that went perfectly with coffee. "Tell me what happened. Is it Carson?"

I paused with my cup and a piece of panettone in my hand and sighed before I dipped it in coffee and stuffed it in my mouth.

“But it’s not just Carson. It’s Cole too. I’ve ruined my friendship with both of them, and now I don’t know if they can ever be fixed.”

Mom picked up her own coffee and pursed her lips.

“Well, let’s start with the easy one. Have you tried talking to Cole?”

“He’s been avoiding me,” I said.

“But how hard have you tried? Has he been avoiding you whenever you try to talk to him, or has he been avoiding you because he hasn’t messaged or called you and you’ve made no effort?”

In lieu of answering, I took a sip of the hazelnut-flavored coffee and hid behind my mug.

“So? Which is it?” Mom insisted, never one to give up.

“It’s the second.”

“Enzo D’Agostino!” she exclaimed.

“I know. I know. But hear me out. He basically called me a shit friend. I don’t know how I can ever apologize for that. I don’t know what to say.”

Mom shook her head gently but set her coffee down before she said:

“How about you start with ‘I’m sorry?’”

I almost felt like slapping myself, but I knew it wouldn’t be as effective as if someone else did it, so I didn’t bother.

“Well, when *you* say it...” I said.

She chuckled, but she didn’t take her eyes off me. When I focused too much of my attention on my coffee, she got up, picked up a throw from the back of the couch, and pulled it over my legs, which was when I realized I was shaking.

“Now, Carson. What did you do?” she asked in the most nonjudgmental but definitely judgmental tone only a mother

could accomplish.

“I-I didn’t *do* anything,” I said.

“Enzo!”

I took a deep breath and turned my attention to the fire.

“I may have led him on.”

“And by led him on, you mean slept with him?” she asked.

I nodded.

There was an awkward silence before I continued. She knew that wasn’t the full story.

Of course it wasn’t. If it was, I wouldn’t have run home crying.

“It’s this stupid wager’s fault. I don’t know why I thought finding him a boyfriend would be fun. All it did was make all those feelings I had for him in high school come back to the surface. I just...”

“Just?”

“I never thought he’d ever see me that way. I tried to resist him. I did. But...I couldn’t, and every time I tried to make it right...”

“It led to things like sex in public restrooms?”

The way my eyes almost popped out of my sockets was the only thing that stopped me from completely melting away in a puddle of embarrassment.

“Is there anything you don’t know? Could I at least have *some* privacy?” I told her when I was sufficiently restored.

“If you want privacy, don’t take your mom out for lunch, go to the restroom for fifteen minutes, and come back sweaty,” she replied.

And this time, I *did* blush.

“So if he wants you and you want him, what’s the holdup?”

I gave her the look. The one she knew too well.

“You know I’ve renounced love,” I told her.

She rolled her eyes and slapped my knee.

“Don’t say that out loud. Someone will hear you, and it’ll be my face they egg,” she said.

“Why would you say that?”

Mom reached for her coffee, and I drank mine.

“You can’t keep saying crap like ‘you’ve renounced love’ and think you’re not gonna get a good talking to. You can’t say that like it’s nothing.”

I warmed my hands around my mug and exhaled.

“When Dad died, it tore you apart. I lost my mom that day too. It took years to get you back, and even now, you’re not your old self. You work so much—”

“I know I wasn’t the best mom you could have had after we lost your dad—”

I reached for her hand and squeezed it so hard I was afraid I’d break it, but I needed her to know.

“You were the best mom. Are,” I told her.

She smiled and kissed my forehead.

“I know you think that, but I live with regret. I let my grief consume me, but I came out of it. And yeah, I still miss him, and yes, maybe I work too much, but you know what?”

“What?” I asked her.

“I still wouldn’t change a thing,” she said.

I wiped a tear blurring my vision and shook my head.

“How can you say that? Since he died, you’ve been alone and heartbroken.”

“Don’t tell me what I am, young man. I know better than you. I may be alone and heartbroken, but I would do it all again. Your father gave me everything. He gave me his love. He gave his heart. He gave me his affection and his touch. And most of all, he gave me you.”

Her eyes glistened, and mine threatened to spill more tears, but I held back.

“But—”

“But what? Are you telling me you’d rather not have been born if it saved me the heartbreak? You’re not listening to me, Enzo. Love is precious because it lasts forever, even if the person doesn’t. Are you trying to tell me you don’t miss your father?”

“Of course I do. Every day.”

She nodded and set her coffee down.

“And are you trying to tell me that’s not love?” she asked.

“It’s not the same.”

“Of course it is. If you didn’t love him, you wouldn’t miss him. Love may hurt sometimes—”

“Or in the end,” I added.

“Or in the end,” she repeated after me with a grimace. “But it’s worth it for the memories you make, the people it changes, the beauty it affects. You can’t give up on love. It’s all around you. All over your life. You love Cole, and you love Ella. You love me. You love your music. You love your friends. And you love Carson. You already love him. You’ve loved him since you were a young boy. So how can you tell me you renounced love? You can’t renounce love, my sweet boy, because we’re born to love. No matter what.”

I watched her with burning eyes, letting her words ring in my ears over and over, and the more I breathed, the harder the tears fell.

How...?

How had I not seen it all this time? Why had I been so blind to the fallacy of my own rule?

I had convinced myself I didn’t want to fall in love because I didn’t want it to hurt in the end. I’d completely disregarded the love I already had for everyone in my life.

Would it hurt any less if I lost my mom or Cole than if I lost my soulmate?

No.

The pain would still wreck me. And yet, I couldn't imagine a life without them.

"I'm an idiot," I exclaimed and fell into my mother's lap to cry some more.

All this time, I'd convinced myself that taking things further with Carson would mean I would fall in love with him, and I didn't want that, but...

What was the pain in my chest that had been there since our first kiss?

What was the flutter in my stomach every time I thought of him?

What was the extra beat in my heart every time I spoke to him?

"You are, my love. But it's my fault. I raised you like that," she said as she caressed my face and swept my hair away from my eyes.

I glared at her, and she smirked.

"What am I gonna do?" I asked, looking up at her.

"The same thing you're going to do with Cole. Talk to him," she answered.

"But I told him to move on."

And boy had he jumped at the opportunity with Jaxon.

He'd even locked me out of his Cinderfella account.

Not that I could blame him. I still didn't know what I'd been thinking, chatting to people for him. It was no wonder my plan didn't work.

How had I convinced myself, or anyone else for that matter, that I was an expert at dating? All I knew how to do was hook up, and I hadn't done that since I'd stepped foot on this island.

Well, I hadn't done it with anyone *but* Carson.

*Oh God, I'm a hopeless case.*

"If you two are meant to be, it won't matter if he's moved on. Also, can I point out something really, *really* important?"



Her face turned serious, and I sat up next to her.

“What?”

“It’s only been five days. Can we chill with the drama? How serious do you think a relationship can get in *five* days?”

I opened my eyes and winced at the light glowing on my face.

There was drool on the side of my mouth, and my feet were toasty warm.

“What happened?” I said, my voice croaky and hoarse.

I cleared my throat and blinked several times until the living room came into focus once again.

“I slept here?” I asked myself, but Mom came in at that moment with a fresh cup of coffee.

“You sure did. You looked too cozy to wake up. Besides, you were sleep-talking about some big dick, and I did *not* want to be a part of that,” she said, passing me the coffee.

“Mom!” I shouted.

Had I really been sleep-talking about Carson’s big cock? What else had I rambled on about without my consent?

“I’m kidding,” she chuckled. “Or am I?”

The smirk and raised eyebrow she gave me would haunt me for a lifetime. Of that, I was sure.

“Merry Christmas, sweetheart,” she said.

I glanced outside the window as if that would tell me if it was true. Well, I guess it was light out, so it *did* verify it was the next day. Hence...

“Merry Christmas, Mom,” I replied and stood to give her a kiss. “Do you want your present now? Or after dinner?”

Mom pulled away and stared me down.

“What?” I asked.

“Did you forget what we talked about yesterday? About... *talking?*”

“Of course not, Mom. But it’s Christmas. I can’t bother them on Christmas!” I said.

“I can’t think of a better time to apologize and make amends with your family, can you?” she said.

And dammit, she had a point.

“Fine. I guess I can go now. Can I drink my coffee first, or is that also not allowed?”

She seemed to ponder my question for a couple of seconds before she smiled and winked at me.

“Go on.”

I sat back down, got a whiff of my stinky sweaty pits, and sighed.

“I guess I also have to shower,” I mumbled.

“I didn’t want to be the one to tell you,” Mom retorted and sat on the armchair she occupied whenever she wasn’t baking—which was practically never—and put her feet up with a mug of coffee on her lap.

I sipped on mine and whistled, hissing the sting away.

“I forgot you put brandy in it on Christmas Day,” I said.

She didn’t say anything, just lifted her cup and took a sip of hers too.

It was our thing.

No, that was inaccurate.

It was one of many things. These little rituals that only she and I knew about. And my dad.

I mean, what kind of parent gives their kid spiked coffee at eleven years old?

Okay, to be fair, there was hardly any brandy in my coffee until I turned fifteen or sixteen, but even the splash on my untrained tastebuds was like an explosion for my young self.

But it was one of many things that...*felt* like Christmas.

Like decorating every inch of the house with pine branches and fairy lights.

Or sitting by the fireplace and throwing pieces of paper in the fire, notes to Dad in the afterlife.

Or lighting a candle with our wishes for the new year and staring at the flame until our intention was heard.

Little rituals that, whether at home or away, always reminded me what a special family I came from and how there was no other family like mine.

Even if it was just Mom and me now.

*No, it's not.*

There was Cole and Ella and...

Carson. Whether I liked it or not—and I did—he had been a part of my life as long as Cole had. He was family too.

I just hoped I wasn't too late.

"I think I should get going," I said, finishing my coffee and getting up.

I needed all the liquid courage I could get right now.

But before I left, I took a shower, changed clothes, felt like a new man, and put my shoes on.

"Here, take this to Carson," she said as I opened the door.

She held out a box with a red bow, and I reluctantly took it from her.

"Panettone?" I asked.

"No. Love Cake," she replied. "Just to jazz things up in case you screw it up again."

I rolled my eyes and tried to push it back to her, but she retreated with her hands up.

"Mom!"

"What? It's fresh, and I baked it specifically for him. You've got to give it to him," she said.

“I’m not making Carson fall in love with me with magic,” I said.

“What? Are you going to rely on your personality? Oh dear.” She giggled.

“Agh, I h—heavily dislike you,” I grunted.

“Love you too, sweetie. And good *luck!*” she sang the last part, and I closed the door behind me.

After the way I treated both brothers, I would need it.

## 27. CARSON



“I think missy needs her diaper changed,” I said, passing my niece to her father so I could get on with the cooking prep.

“Okay, birthday boy. I guess I’ll take care of that.”

“Damn right.”

I laughed, but it didn’t reach all the way to my gut.

I didn’t feel the Christmas or birthday spirit this year, which had nothing to do with my mom and dad being away for the holidays and me having to do most of the cooking.

I knew my fortieth wouldn’t be a celebration, but I never thought I’d just be going through the motions so I could get through the day.

I started peeling the carrots when my phone pinged. I checked my messages.

*Hey, still nothing. Doctors are saying there are no complications and nothing to be concerned about. Nalini begs to differ. I think she’s made one doctor and three nurses cry so far. I’ll let you know the tally later. Also, happy birthday, grandpa.*

I put my phone away with a smirk and picked up the carrot and the peeler when the bell rang, waking Honeybee from her slumber.

She jumped from a big cushion she’d made into her bed and practiced her vocals while I wiped my hands on a dishcloth.

“We’re never going to eat today,” I muttered and walked down the stairs, followed by my manic dog.

Jaxon stood there with another bouquet of flowers and a red gift bag.

What was with all the flowers? Did he think they would make me change my mind about being ready to date him?

“Oh hey, Jaxon,” I said. He waltzed in, embraced me, wishing me happy birthday, and kissed my cheek, ignoring Honeybee’s attempts at getting ear scratches.

All in all too intimate for someone I’d friend-zoned only yesterday.

“And Merry Christmas,” he added when he let go. “Which way do I go?”

He held out his coat, and I hung it up as I directed him up the stairs. I started to follow him when there was another knock on the door, which, of course, got Honeybee’s attention yet again.

“Aren’t I Mr. Popular today?” I sighed, and Jaxon laughed a little too loud, considering my joke wasn’t funny. Or even a joke for that matter.

I took the two steps back down to the first floor and opened the door, trying to put on a smile or any sort of expression that didn’t say, “fuck off, I’m pissed.”

But that wouldn’t happen. The muscles on my face were as impossible to tame as the heaviness I felt in my chest. I felt as if I’d been trampled by a million horses.

Not that anyone would survive that sort of thing.

And yet, here I was.

Despite all that, I did feel my jaw drop when I saw Enzo standing there with a white box in his hands and the most sheepish expression he’d ever worn.

Honeybee climbed on him, licking his hands, and like always, he dropped to his knees to give her all the love she wanted and deserved, bringing warmth to my heart.

I watched him entertain her for a few moments before he stood back up.

“H-hi,” I said.

Enzo attempted a smile, but his gaze landed on Jaxon, who was watching us from the stairs.

Enzo glanced from him to me, and I could tell all the things going through his head simply by looking at the rate of his blinking.

“Car, is everything okay? Who is that?” Jaxon asked behind me.

Car? What the fuck? When had we gone into nickname territory?

“Yeah, all good,” I told him. “I’ll meet you up there.”

Jaxon flashed me his teeth and disappeared onto the second floor.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” I asked, turning to Enzo when Jaxon was finally gone.

My dog stood in front of him, watching him with the same focus she did whenever there was talk of food.

Well, I guessed there probably was food in the box he was carrying.

“Um...” he started. “I...just brought you this. *Car*.”

He shoved the white box at my chest and started walking away from me. I watched him for a moment, still shocked by his presence.

What was he doing here? Was he here for Cole? For Ella? He wasn’t here for me, that was for sure.

But if that was true, why had he called me Car right after Jaxon had done the same?

Honeybee glanced at me and whimpered as if she was judging me. Who could blame her?

I put the box on the table next to the door and ran outside.

“Enzo, wait.”

He stopped but didn't turn around. Honeybee circled him, wagging her tail.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him, and I watched as his shoulders jolted upward.

"Nothing," he mumbled.

I took a step closer to him, and another, until I could reach out and touch him.

"Enzo, are you okay?"

He shook his head, and I decided enough was enough. He was being weird, and I needed to know what he was doing here. I needed him to tell me he wasn't there for me before my imagination took momentous leaps and started hoping again.

I walked around to face him and was immediately surprised by the tears streaming down his face.

"Enzo?" I asked, too stunned to form any more elaborate words.

At the sound of his name, he burst into more tears, and at that moment, I didn't care why he was here, what he had told me, what there had been between us. I pulled him into my arms, tucked his head safely under my chin, and let him cry on me for as long as he needed.

The cold didn't bother me. And even if it had, I wouldn't have cared. I had Enzo in my arms, and that was enough.

I caressed his hair, rubbed his back, massaged his neck, everything I could to calm him down. I wanted to ask him what was wrong, but even that didn't feel right at that moment. My dog was just as inquisitive, but when she realized that wasn't going to work, she resolved to running in circles around us, only pausing long enough to watch if that did anything.

At some point, Enzo pulled away from me with hesitation and apologized.

"No need. Nothing to apologize for. Are you okay? Feeling better now?"



He nodded, but the nod turned into a shake.

“I should go,” he said.

He was on the verge of tears again. I could tell.

Before he could escape again, I grabbed his arm and pulled him back toward me.

“You’re not going anywhere until I know you’re okay,” I told him.

He looked toward the door and bit his lip.

“You should go in. Your-your boyfriend will be waiting for you.”

“My boyf—” I started, but he attempted to escape again. “Jaxon isn’t my boyfriend.”

He stopped and snuck a glance at me.

“It’s fine, Carson. You don’t have to lie. I told you to move on,” he said.

Was he jealous? Did he really think Jaxon and I were a thing? And why did he care if we were?

“I’m not lying. He’s just a friend. Well, a friend who doesn’t seem to get it, but still a friend. We’re not together,” I said.

He simply shrugged in lieu of a response.

“What are you doing here, Enzo?” I asked him.

He needed to tell me he was here for Cole and Ella because the things going through my head were already way out of line, and not in a healthy way.

Because if he was here for me, then that might mean he wanted more...

He stared at me for a few moments, shivering.

“Come inside. You’re freezing,” I told him and showed him inside.

He hesitated for a moment, but since I didn’t relent, he followed Honeybee and me inside.

When I closed the door, he rubbed his arms and warmed his hands over the radiator in the corridor.

“So?” I asked him.

“I’m sorry,” he said but didn’t look at me.

He looked half his size the way he was standing, and I wanted nothing more than to close the distance between us and hold him until he changed his mind.

“About what?” I asked.

“Everything,” he mumbled. “I screwed up. With you, with Cole, and now it feels like everything’s changed.”

I stepped closer to him and took his hands in mine. Honeybee barreled up the stairs, leaving us alone.

“What on earth are you talking about?” I asked.

He stared at our hands as he spoke, and the warmth emanating from the radiator made me feel toasty and hopeful.

“I screwed up with Cole. I wasn’t here when he needed me. I should have never gone to Boston. I should have dropped everything the moment Sandra died. I—”

“You’re not responsible for what happened to her, and you’re not responsible for what happened to Cole. You were trying to live your life as much as he was trying to do the same,” I said.

He licked his lips but didn’t lift his gaze.

“And I screwed up with you. I played with your emotions, and now I’ve lost you because I was an idiot,” he said.

A knot formed in my throat, but I didn’t dare clear it in case it shattered the fragility of the moment, and I woke up without him in front of me.

“What are you saying?” I croaked, the hope hanging inches off my lips like candy that I craved but couldn’t quite have just yet.

“I’m saying...” he started and finally looked at me. “I was wrong. I was wrong about everything. I don’t know what

made me think that not getting attached, not letting people close would keep me from getting hurt. I was wrong,” he said.

I gave his hands an extra squeeze and held my breath.

“And I was wrong to think keeping you away would save me from falling in love with you because...the truth is, I...um... I’m already in love with you. I have been for years. But I’m not afraid anymore, and I know I’m probably too late, and you don’t want anything to do with—”

I’d heard enough. I grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him into my mouth.

He was here for me. And he had been jealous. He did want me the same way I wanted him.

*Shit. Am I dreaming? Please don’t tell me I’m dreaming.*

But the fresh taste of him in my mouth was unmistakable. I wasn’t dreaming. This was real. This was happening.

He returned the kiss with twice as much intensity until I was pinned against the wall, my ass burning on the radiator.

“Ouch,” I said, pulling away from the radiator and Enzo. “No, not you. It was just getting too hot on my tushy.”

Enzo covered his face with his fingers and laughed.

“Come here.” I grabbed his other hand and pulled him to the opposite wall where there was no fear of my behind getting burned.

“Does-does that mean you forgive me?” he asked.

“That depends,” I said, and a grimace shadowed his face. “Does that mean you want to be with me? Like, in a relationship?”

He nodded. Slowly and with hesitation at first, and then fast and eagerly.

“And you won’t push me away again when we both know we want each other?”

He shook his head.

“Then come here, boyfriend,” I said and kissed him again.

*Boyfriend.*

It seemed almost surreal for me to say that word and actually mean it.

In fact, I couldn't even believe it. And if it wasn't for the big beautiful truth of his lips on mine, I would probably still think this was a dream I would wake up from any time now.

But it wasn't a dream, was it? No matter how unreal this moment felt, how surreal, this was one hundred percent real.

And just like that, whatever heavy weight had been plaguing my insides lifted and vanished as if it was never there, replaced by comfort and warmth and...

Love.

## 28. ENZO



I couldn't believe how full my heart was, considering I'd bared my soul to Carson. And I couldn't believe he accepted me back after everything I'd said and done.

The feeling was so distracting that I didn't even care or notice Carson talking to Jaxon. But I did pay attention when Jaxon hugged him.

Why was he hugging my Carson? Why was he hugging my boyfriend?

"You don't have to explain anything. We're just friends, remember?" he told Carson, but I raised an eyebrow at that.

I was pretty sure friends didn't go out on dates and bring flowers, but what the hell did I know?

"Are you sure you don't want to stay? There's more than enough for everyone, and I wouldn't want you spending Christmas on your own," Carson told him, and as much as I didn't want Jaxon around, I couldn't fault him for being considerate.

"No, I'm good. My parents were missing me today anyway. You guys should be together," he replied and waved at me before he walked down the stairs and left us all alone.

"Are you okay?" Carson asked me and put his hands around my waist.

I looked into his brown eyes and smiled at him, feeling his hold tighten around me.

It was so comfortable and wonderful there, in his arms, being unashamedly affectionate.

Why had I been denying myself this pleasure? How could I have thought this feeling wasn't worth the potential hurt that may come in the future?

At that moment, I wished I hadn't been so stubborn. So blind.

But regardless of how I'd acted and what I'd said before, Carson was still here. Still holding me. Still kissing me.

"Never been better," I answered him and went in for a kiss.

"Woo, she's finally down for the count. Sorry I took so long. Tell me what I need to—" Cole said as he emerged from the master bedroom in a pair of gray sweatpants and a red sweater. "Enzo!"

He stopped in his tracks when he saw me. When he looked at mine and Carson's connected hips, I pulled away and pursed my lips.

I'd completely forgotten about that part of the equation.

"Cole! I, um, hi," I said.

"Hi," he answered.

He glanced from me to his brother and back to me, and I winced, bracing myself for another real talk.

"Damn, I owe Lilian fifty bucks," he said and shook his head, exasperated.

"What?" I asked.

"So you two are together now? Or is it 'casual?'" he asked.

"We're together," Carson and I said simultaneously.

I looked at Carson and smiled, taking a moment to savor this before I remembered my best friend again.

"I'm so sorry. I should have told you first and—" I started walking toward Cole, but he put his hand up and stopped me.

"No, it's fine. You've been in love with him for an eternity. And he's been alone even longer. You two are good for each other," he said.

“Wait, you knew I liked Carson?” I asked.

Cole rolled his eyes and shook his head dismissively.

“To be honest, I think the only person that didn’t know was Carson. And my parents. Even Darren knew.”

“He did?” Carson asked.

Cole nodded.

“Like I said. You’ve been blind. Not to say that you should have noticed back then. That would have been *all* kinds of wrong. But you’re both adults now, and you fit each other’s crazy,” he said.

“Watch it, mister. You’re not too old for me to smack your ass,” Carson told his brother.

“Please, keep me out of your kinks. That’s all I ask,” Cole said, and Carson flicked Cole’s balls. Cole cursed his brother and held his crotch protectively.

“I’m going back to cooking because we’ll never eat at this pace,” Carson said and walked around the kitchen island to grab a carrot.

“Can-can we talk?” I asked Cole.

He nodded and took me to the living room, where we sat side by side on the couch. Honeybee squeezed her head between us, eyes darting back and forth as if challenging us to resist her cuteness.

Of course neither of us did.

“Listen, Cole, I know I haven’t been the best friend—” I started when he reached for my hand and squeezed it.

“I’m the one who needs to apologize. I was the one who was unfair to you,” Cole said.

I shook my head.

“It wasn’t my place to say the things I did. And you’re right, I did abandon you, and I’m so *so* sorry. I should have stayed with you and helped out with Ella and—”

“Enzo, shut up,” he said. “I had plenty of help with Ella, don’t worry. And you have every right to criticize my choices. If my best friend doesn’t, then who will? I’m sorry I said all those nasty things. I didn’t mean them. You didn’t abandon us. You were following your dreams. It was your right to do so. If I’d stopped you from doing that, then I wouldn’t be a very good friend, would I?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but he wasn’t finished.

“I’m so proud of you and everything you’ve achieved. I don’t know what happened in Boston, but despite that, I’m still proud of you for following your dreams. Sandra and I were so jealous of everything you were doing and super proud. If anything, we should have come with you. Maybe if we had she...she’d be alive now.”

I reached for his face and made him look at me.

“Stop. Don’t do that to yourself. Let’s promise we’ll stop living in and regretting the past. Okay?”

I offered him my pinkie, and he hooked his with mine.

“Promise,” he said, and I hugged him.

Boy, it was good not being in a fight with him anymore.

It was good being back in the Williams brothers’ lives. Having Cole as my friend again and Carson as...as my boyfriend.

*Boyfriend.*

There’s a first time for everything.

But I wasn’t scared anymore. No more fear, no more beating myself up over things I couldn’t control, and no more thinking of myself as a failure.

It was time to move on.

With Carson by my side.

And my family. This island.

I didn’t know what the future held, but for once, I was hopeful.

We spent the next few minutes catching up on what happened to me in Boston while Cole cuddled Honeybee and listened.



Then, the bell rang, and Carson jumped to answer it.

“God, I hope it’s not Jaxon,” I said.

Carson rolled his eyes as he went down the stairs.

“Hey! I liked Jaxon. What’s wrong with him? He’s a nice guy,” Cole said.

“Then *you* date him,” I told him.

Cole winced.

“Ew, please. He’s got a thing for Carson. I’m not sleeping with anyone who’s got a thing for my brother. Perv,” he said.

“Then don’t say he’s nice in my presence,” I said.

“I’m sorry. You’re right. He’s fugly. So rude. Honestly, he makes me puke,” Cole said, and I laughed.

“That’s more like it.”

“Hello, hello, hello,” Mom said as she appeared, followed by Carson. “Merry Christmas, everyone. And happy birthday, darling.”

Shit. In all my wallowing, I’d forgotten to wish my boyfriend a happy birthday.

Gosh, that was weird. Would I ever get used to referring to Carson as my boyfriend?

“Mom, what are you doing here?” I asked.

“Carson called me,” she said, putting down a bunch of bags.

“We should spend Christmas as a family,” he said.

Mom squeezed his cheek affectionately before turning back to us and pointing at Cole.

“Before I forget, you owe me fifty bucks,” she said.

“I know. I know,” Cole huffed.

“Wait a damn minute. You two made a bet? What kind of bet?” I asked.

“That you’d get together. Duh!” Mom said.

“Mom!”

“What? When he told me your plan to find Carson a boyfriend, I knew things would backfire,” she replied.

I shook my head in disbelief.

“So it was you who told her!” I directed at Cole. “I thought it was the rumor mill.”

Mom shrugged.

“Po-ta-to, po-tah-to. Speaking of. What are we eating?”

Mom marched into the kitchen, owning the space, naturally, and Carson followed her.

“Oh dear. We need all hands on deck,” she said, and we all gathered around her, but there wasn’t enough space.

Carson peeled the carrots. I peeled the potatoes. Cole followed Mom’s instructions as he got her things from the fridge.

I noticed a white box on the kitchen island beside me, and when I looked inside, I realized it was Mom’s Love Cake. A piece had been bitten off, revealing the chocolate cake under the vanilla buttercream and strawberry coulis.

“Um...who ate that? Please tell me it was Honeybee,” I said, but the dog was watching my mom, completely hypnotized as if she was made of magic or something.

Probably accurate.

“I did. I thought it was my birthday present,” Carson replied, and I grimaced.

“Oh God,” I muttered.

“Why? Should I not have eaten it?”

Mom glanced at me and smirked, but I didn’t think Carson noticed.

“I-I don’t know. I guess we’ll see,” I said.

How could I have forgotten about the cake? Agh, Mom and her silly spells. Now I’d never know his true feelings for me.

A few minutes later, when all the vegetables were roasting in the oven, Mom clapped her hands and took her apron off.

Wait, when had she put an apron on? Where did she even find it? Had she brought it from home?

“Right, while everything is cooking, should we do presents?”

I looked at Carson, and he smirked.

“What?” he asked.

“I didn’t get you anything. I...you know, had my epiphany last night, so I didn’t buy anything. But I’ll go tomorrow and get you whatever you desire,” I told him.

Carson laughed, pulled me into his arms, and brushed my hair behind my ear.

“You got me the best present,” he said. “You.”

“I can make it even better,” I told him and attempted to kiss him when Cole exclaimed.

“Please! For the love of God, before you do that, get a room. We’ve got plenty.”

Carson flipped him the bird and kissed me.

He kissed me the way people kiss in movies where the girl lifts a leg in the air because the kiss is so mind-blowingly good.

But I didn’t lift my leg.

I just breathed him in and took comfort in knowing I got to kiss those lips for as long as the gods gave us on this earth, and that, for a change, was enough.

## 29. CARSON



“Aw, look at him. He’s adorable,” Enzo said, leaning closer to Nalini’s son and cooing at his sheer perfection.

“Yeah, didn’t do too bad, did I?” Nalini agreed with him.

“You did great, honey,” I told her, towering over Enzo to admire my godson.

“Naw, look at you two. You’re cute together,” she said, and Enzo’s cheeks flushed.

“Told ya,” Karan said with a raised eyebrow from the foot of his wife’s bed.

Nalini rolled her eyes.

“Get my purse,” she told him.

Karan gave her a red handbag, and she took her wallet out.

“Damn. I’m ten dollars short. Anyway, here,” she said and gave him the money.

“Excuse me, was there anyone who didn’t bet on us getting together?” I asked them, unable to believe my eyes.

It was one thing for Cole and Lilian to have a bet—it was weird, but not entirely unbelievable—but Karan and Nalini?

“No. I think pretty much everyone’s got a wager on,” Nalini answered, letting her purse fall to the ground and pinching her son’s cheek.

I couldn't believe it. Had it been so obvious that Enzo and I belonged together?

How could it have been so obvious to everyone and not to me?

At least I hadn't been the last to realize. I was going to tease Enzo with it for the rest of my life.

"Have you settled on a name yet?" Enzo asked.

"Not yet. We've got a few options, but we can't decide," Nalini answered.

"Well, whatever his name, he's going to be a heartbreaker," Enzo said and stroked the top of the baby's head.

"That he is," Karan said.

Enzo smiled at him.

"What's heartbreaker in Punjabi?" he asked. "Or just heart?"

Karan looked at his son and pursed his lips.

"Heart is Dila," he said.

"Dilan. Yes!" Nalini said, fist-pumping the air before she realized she was still holding her son.

"What happened?" Enzo asked.

"It works, right? It's Punjabi in one way or form, but it's still American," she told her husband.

Karan huffed and relented.

"I admit, it sounds nice," he said.

"I wanted an American name for him, and Karan wanted an Indian name. We couldn't agree on anything," she explained.

"Dilan with an *I* works perfectly."

Enzo smiled at Nalini and turned to me with glee in his eyes.

"I like this one. Don't let him go, please," Nalini said.

"Never," I said, staring into my man's beautiful blue eyes.

"Oh. Oh. Ew. You're dripping sap all over Dilan. Go away!" Nalini screeched, and Enzo laughed.

We spent a few more minutes with my godson, who I now shared a birthday with, and then made our way back home. Lilian left with us on the way to the hospital, and Cole stayed behind to clean up and watch Ella, of course.

When we returned home, Honeybee was awfully quiet, as was the rest of the house.

There was a note taped on my bedroom door.

*I'm sleeping upstairs today. The less I hear of your 'reunion,' the better. I also took Honeybee so you can have uninterrupted sex, you perverts!* the note read.

"I knew there was a good reason he's my best friend," Enzo said, grabbing the note and opening the door to let us into my bedroom. He started taking his socks off when he added, "I can't believe everyone had a bet about us."

"*We* had a bet about us," I said, leaning against the closed door and staring at my boyfriend. "And if I'm not mistaken, I seem to have won."

Enzo threw his socks on the floor and glared at me.

"What do you mean you won? I promised you a boyfriend for Christmas...and well, here I am."

I wagged my finger at him and approached him.

"Maybe so, but the deadline was yesterday," I said.

"Says who?"

"Says the rules of a bet. If you say you'll get someone something for Christmas, the clock stops at midnight the night before," I told him.

"That sounds like some shit if I ever heard any," he replied with a grimace.

"Oh, is it?" I asked him and hooked my finger around his sweater's neckband. "Because I was hoping to boss you around a little. As per our bet agreement."

Enzo licked his lips and dropped to his knees.

"Okay. I lost. What can I do for you...boss?"

I held back a laugh and shook my head.

“Nah, that doesn’t work for me.”

“Master?”

I tilted my head and thought about it.

“We’re getting warmer,” I said.

He pursed his lips from side to side and hummed as if deep in concentration.

“How about baby?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s hot.”

Enzo smiled and glanced at my crotch before he addressed me again.

“So, baby, what do you want me to do?” he asked.

I hooked a finger under his chin and leaned to whisper in his ear.

“You know exactly what I want you to do.”

His hand closed around my cock, already hard in my pants, and I let go of his face to give him room for his work.

He dipped his head and bit down on my zipper, staring right at me and rolling it down until it was undone. A flick of his fingers and my button was free too.

I stroked his cheek as he freed me from my pants and darted his tongue over my slit, causing my internal temperature to skyrocket.

It wasn’t long before he took me in his mouth. It was a pretty picture. My large cock filling his mouth to the brim, stretching his lips and gag reflex until there were tears in his eyes.

I could have stood there for hours watching him work my shaft. But as much as I would have loved that, I didn’t know if I could last that long.

With a painful groan, I pushed him off my cock and helped him back up to his feet so I could lick my taste off his lips and tongue.

He sat on the bed, and I followed suit until he was lying on it, with me on top, our mouths connected and thirsty for each other.

“What do you want me to do next, baby?” he asked when I dipped to his neck to refresh my marks on him.

“I want you to fuck me, baby boy. Can you do that?” I asked him, and he let out a sigh.

I reached for the lube in the drawer, but before I could do anything, he snatched it away.

Cold, wet fingers on my hole made me shiver. And we didn't stop there. His digits started going inside me one by one, leaving no room for breath or talk.

“You like that, baby? Tell me you like it,” he moaned as I ground our cocks together while he fucked me with his fingers.

I dropped my head by his and gasped.

“Yes, baby. I love it. Don't stop,” I whispered. “I need your cock inside me, baby. I want to feel you with every fiber of my being. I need you to come inside me, fill me up, mark me with your scent and seed.”

He bit down on my earlobe for a second, and I hissed at the pain.

“Damn, baby, you make it hard to play,” he said in a hushed, strained voice.

“Good. 'Cause I'm not playing,” I replied, and his fingers slipped out of me.

“Good. I'm not playing either. Now sit on my cock and let me stretch that beautiful tight hole of yours,” he said.

My dick jolted in response, and I sat up, guiding him inside me with raspy breaths. I tried to get a pace going, but a few moments later, Enzo rolled us around so he was on top. I hooked my fingers around his hips, and he fucked me hard and fast.



“You like that, baby? You like that dick inside you?” he asked me with the authority of a proficient master, and I’d be damned if that didn’t make me catch my breath and bite down on my rising orgasm.

His crown rubbed against my prostate, and as much as I wanted to keep my voice down, it was getting harder to do.

Probably very wise of Cole to sleep upstairs today. I just hoped he couldn’t hear us.

“Yes, baby. I love your big dick. Keep fucking me. Please, baby. Faster. Faster. I’m so close,” I panted.

He slammed into me, and I felt tingles spread from my core to my extremities. My toes curled in reaction. I dropped my hands to my sides and pulled at the sheets as I let go and my orgasm exploded inside me.

Enzo dropped his head to my shoulder and drowned a moan there as I felt his hot seed filling me. My cock pulsed in return, and my own cum pooled between us, leaving us breathless in each other’s arms.

It was almost surreal. Being in bed with someone—no, not just someone, with Enzo—and being myself. That I wasn’t spending my fortieth birthday alone. That I wasn’t going to spend any more moments alone. That I had someone willing to be in my corner and love me no matter what.

The flutter in my chest almost took me by surprise before I recognized it for what it was.

Love.

“I love you so much, Enzo,” I whispered in his ear, and I felt him still in my arms.

“What did you say?” he asked and sat up to look at me.

“That I love you. Why? What’s wrong? You told me you loved me earlier. I just never got a chance to tell you back,” I said.

Had I said something wrong? Should I not have said that? Was it too soon.

“Oh no, no, no. Dammit. I knew it was too good to be true,” he said and buried his head in my chest.

How bad could it be if he was still touching me?

“What? What did I do? What was too good to be true? Should I have kept that to myself?”

Enzo jumped and shook his head.

“No. No. It’s not your fault, baby. But you don’t love me. Not yet, anyway. This isn’t you. This is the Love Cake talking.”

“Huh?”

“The cake I brought earlier? Mom baked a Love Cake to make you fall in love with me. I didn’t want to bring it to you, but she insisted, and then you went and ate it.” He sighed. “And now you think you’re in love with me even though you’re not.”

I fought the urge to laugh and instead admired the worry and disappointment on his face.

“Says who?” I asked.

He looked at me with shy, reluctant eyes.

“I mean, you just said you love me. It’s pretty obvious the cake worked.”

“So, it’s not me. It’s the cake?” I asked, still resisting the urge to laugh.

“Well, yeah. How could you be in love already? We’ve barely been together long enough. I’ve been in love with you for years, but—”

“I fell in love with you the moment you opened your mouth and sang that beautiful song,” I cut him off.

I couldn’t take it any longer. As entertaining as it was seeing Enzo panic over something silly like that, I needed him to know my feelings were true and not induced by baked goods.

“You-you did?” he asked as if in disbelief.

“Yep. I did. I love you, Enzo. I don’t care if it’s the cake or not. I know what I feel, and what I feel is love.”

He lowered his head until we were a breath apart and smiled.

“That’s a relief. I love you too, Carson.”

I kissed him, and when we pulled away, he narrowed his eyes.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing. I hope you haven’t forgotten you’re still my servant for the next twenty-three hours,” I said, and he shook his head.

“What can I do for you, baby?” He smiled.

I tapped my finger to my chin and took a deep breath.

“For now, how about you hug me, and when you’re ready, you can fuck me again. And again. And again.”

“Hm...that’s hard to argue with,” he said. “But how about we take it in turns? Don’t want my hole to feel lonely.”

I burst into laughter and slapped his ass.

“That can be arranged.”

## 30. ENZO



1 Year Later

**M**y fingers glided over the piano keys as if they had a mind of their own. The microphone coil tickled my lips every time I leaned forward to sing my lyrics.

My lyrics.

Yeah, sure, maybe I had lost some songs to the God-forsaken label that I dared not speak its name, but that didn't mean my talent and my passion had to come to an end.

And with Carson by my side, it was easy. Music was born out of our love. Out of our relationship. Out of our life.

It was beautiful and adorable, and even a year on, I still couldn't believe it.

I still expected to wake up from the most wonderful dream I'd ever had. Yet every day, I got up to find out I was still in it.

Yeah, maybe I wasn't a big pop star, but I was still happy.

I was near Cole, my best friend and confidant, and yeah, he still resisted my attempts to get him a boyfriend, but I was sure one of these days I'd crack his code.

And then there was Ella, my gorgeous goddaughter, who I could see grow up and make up for lost time.

And my mom. I didn't realize how much I'd missed her until I returned. She was so happy to have me back in her life that

she'd even gotten new hobbies. Like matchmaking young and unsuspecting locals or volunteering at Duke's Sanctuary.

And yeah, she still spent a hell of a lot of time in the kitchen, making me fatter by the day, but she'd started to live her life again. I was excited to be there to witness it.

And despite what this island had put me through, I enjoyed living on it more than I ever thought I would. I was able to live my dreams on it, which I never thought would be possible.

I was still working at Bubble Bubble a few days a week, but there was nothing wrong with that. If anything, it was amazing to work for such a great couple like Hwan and Parker, who I now considered friends just as much as they were my bosses.

They were so understanding when I told them I wanted to go part-time so I could focus on my music. They were still super flexible whenever I managed to book a gig.

Like I said, I wasn't a pop star, but I was making music and sharing it online. My name was out there, people from all over the world were listening to my songs, connecting with them, and I was making money out of my passion. There wasn't a better feeling than that.

Carson stopped by the piano, gave me a smile, and then walked off again.

Well, yeah, I guess there was also him.

He was the best feeling in the world.

The best drug in the world.

Frankly, if this was a dream, I never wanted to wake up from it and find myself without him.

It was his love and encouragement that brought me here today. That had shaped who I was.

*"Dreams should be made of these..."* I sang the closing lyrics and the applause rose, filling the Grill with the kind of magic that made moments like these worth it so damn much.

I looked at my audience, the diners who seemed to be waking from a spell, and caught sight of my man.

Nalini was there with Dilan and Karan, and so were Cole and Ella with my mom. Madison, who had become one of my best friends and biggest cheerleader. Pierce and his husband, Rafe. So many more people I'd come to know and love.

"Thank you so much, everyone. And a big thank you to my boyfriend for helping me find myself again. I couldn't have done it without you, baby. Merry Christmas, everyone," I said, and he weaved through the tables to get to me.

The diners applauded again, and when Carson got to me, I stood to give him a big kiss.

Someone whistled. I had a pretty good idea who, but I ignored them.

When Carson and I let go, I started to walk off the stage, but he pulled me back as he reached for the microphone.

"Sorry, everyone. There was something I wanted to say too," he said, and I grimaced.

What did he want to say? Had they run out of steak, and he wanted to make an announcement?

*Great. Thanks, Carson. Way to let me soak in the moment.*

I rolled my eyes internally and waited for his big announcement.

He gestured for me to sit back down at the piano and then pulled a little black box from his back pocket as he got to his knees. My breath hitched.

"What are you doing?" I asked him.

"Enzo, baby, you came into my life like a storm and claimed my heart. You made me believe in myself and in love again. I don't ever want to let you go, so will you chain yourself to this old man and be at his beck and call until the end of time?"

He opened the box to reveal a gold band with two rows of rose quartz running around the ring.

"Is that your way of asking me to marry you?" I asked.

The diners laughed.

He nodded and took the ring from its resting place, holding it up for me.

“What’s it going to be?” he asked.

I cleared my throat, but whatever knot had formed there was determined to stay. My chest filled with butterflies and my fingers tingled as I opened my mouth.

“It’s going to be a yes, of course,” I said.

How could it be anything else? We were already a family. We’d been a family since I met his brother and made him my best friend.

Yes, our relationship might have transformed since then, but we’d been members of this big, loving family for a long time.

This just made it official.

## 31. CARSON



*A few hours later*

Something wet and whiny pushed against my neck, and for a change, it wasn't my dog.

"Good morning, fiancé," I said and opened my eyes to find Enzo's bright-blue orbs staring right at me.

He kissed my cheek and smiled, holding up his left hand.

"Fiancé, huh? I was just starting to get used to boyfriend," he said.

I pinched his side, and he winced away from me.

"I can take the ring back if you don't like it," I said.

He closed his left hand and put his fist under his chin protectively.

"Don't you dare."

I kissed his mouth as a response, and pretty soon, his ring wasn't the only hard thing between us.

But before things could get steamy, the door opened, and Honeybee marched into the bedroom with all the air and confidence of a queen.

"I hate that she knows how to do that now," Enzo commented as Honeybee sat by the side of the bed and watched us.

"Yeah, we need to start locking the door unless you want to be caught naked by my parents," I said.



“No thanks,” he replied.

Now that my parents had retired, they were looking for a smaller house. They had yet to find one, and the fact that they loved cruising so much didn't help the issue. But I couldn't wait until we moved to the master bedroom and had more space.

Honeybee whimpered and pushed her nose against our tangled feet.

“I really am not in the mood to take her out,” Enzo said.

“Me neither. I'm in the mood for something else,” I told him, wiggling my eyebrows.

“Oh God, what is that? Don't do that. Are you having a seizure?” He grimaced.

“Shut up,” I told him.

“Make me.”

I would have loved to, but Honeybee whined louder and pushed her wet nose against our feet again.

“Come on. I'm fiancé today. I can't be going out collecting poos this morning,” he said, holding up his left hand again and admiring his ring.

*Thank you, Lilian, for helping me pick a winner. The same stone that had brought us together in the first place would now be a sign of our eternal love for each other.*

“Um, I'm pretty sure that's not a thing, and you're not a princess,” I said.

“Is that how you treat your fiancé? Hm...maybe I'll rethink my answer.”

“Don't you dare.”

“Then take Honeybee out.”

I groaned against his shoulder. I was too horny and tired to get up.

“If you take her out, I'll let you top me,” he said, and I sprung up to glare at him.

“No deal,” I said. “But I’ll let you top me if I take her out.”

He twisted his face and laughed.

“I’m not sure you understand how these agreements work, but sure. You walk Honeybee, and I’ll fuck that gorgeous little ass of yours,” he said, and I got up and dressed so fast, I gave myself whiplash.

“You better be ready when I’m back,” I told him with Honeybee’s leash in my hand.

He winked at me and squeezed some lube over his hard cock.

Dammit.

“Honeybee, you better be quick. I’ve got a fiancé dicking to get to,” I told my dog and closed the bedroom door to the sound of my fiancé laughing.

*Fiancé.*

I liked that.

*I’ll like husband more.*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rhys Everly-Lawless is a hopeless romantic who loves happily-ever-afters.

Which would explain why he loves writing them.

When he's not passionately typing out his next book, you can find him cuddling his dog, feeding his husband, or taking long walks letting those plot bunnies breed ferociously in his head.

He writes contemporary gay romances as Rhys Everly and LGBTQ+ urban fantasy and paranormal romances as Rhys Lawless.

You can find out more about him and his works-in-progress by joining his [Facebook group](#) or visiting his website [rhyswritesromance.com](http://rhyswritesromance.com)

