

CLASSIFIED  
FOR AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY  
**TOP SECRET**

ATTENTION: JERROD LOCKHART

AUGUST 2008



# **SELF-LICKING ICE CREAM CONE**

GIULIA LAGOMARSINO

# SELF-LICKING ICE CREAM CONE

AN OPS PROTECTOR ROMANCE

GIULIA LAGOMARSINO

Copyright © 2023 by Giulia Lagomarsino

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover Design courtesy of T.E. Black Designs

[www.teblackdesigns.com](http://www.teblackdesigns.com)

Photography by Reggie Deanching

<https://www.rplusmphoto.com/>

Cover Model: Ryan Stacks

<https://www.facebook.com/ryanstacksharmon>

 Created with Vellum

*For Pte-he-ste*

# CONTENTS

Cast of Characters

Self-Licking Ice Cream Cone

Note from author

1. Cash
2. Juliette
3. Lock
4. Juliette
5. Lock
6. Juliette
7. Lock
8. Juliette
9. Lock
10. Juliette
11. Lock
12. Juliette
13. Lock
14. Juliette
15. Lock
16. Juliette
17. Lock
18. Juliette
19. Lock
20. Juliette
21. Lock
22. Juliette
23. Lock
24. Juliette
25. Lock
26. Juliette
27. Lock
28. Juliette
29. Lock
30. Juliette
31. Lock
32. Eva
33. Juliette
34. Lock
35. Juliette

36. Juliette

Also by Giulia Lagomarsino



# CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Cash Owens-** Owner of Owens Protective Services, sniper, and overall badass.

**Eva James-** deadly mistress of throwing knives and Cash's...person

## **Team 1:**

**Jerrod Lockhart-** Complete badass, rule follower, and generally the guy considered to always have a stick up his ass.

**Juliette Cassinelli-** Junk food addict, avid runner, tiny human that can't reach the top shelf. Oh, also a fabulous model who has stolen the heart of the unmovable Jerrod Lockhart.

**Edward "Edu" Markinson-** Hater of hospitals, slow drivers, and references to anything in the '80s.

**Brock "Rock" Patton-** Wannabe model, obsessed with his looks and constantly combing his hair...A ferocious fighter for a man so obsessed with his looks. Also, as a side note—he can't act for shit and hates the word 'loins'.

**Scottie Dog Thacker-** Tactical vomit expert, hater of flying planes, and always up for a good time. If you're with him, have a barf bag in hand. Has never had even a sip of alcohol in his life.

**Quinn Lake-** Awesome geologist who is terrible at telling people no. She's a runner—running from situations so she doesn't have to grow a spine and deal with confrontation. Awesome at Battleship and Twister.

## **Team 2:**

**Marcus “IRIS” Slater-** His name stands for *I Require Intense Supervision*. EOD expert that has taken up a new love...blowing up shit.

**Jane Layne-** IRIS’s sidekick in real life and in her mystery novels. Also known as Shayla Jacque. Absolutely despises technology, and goes so far as to use a typewriter to avoid it.

**Mick “Slider” Jeffries-** Not Slider from *Top Gun*. Sorry, ladies, I know he was gorgeous, but it’s not the same hottie.

**Tate “Thumper” Parsons-** No, not named for the adorable furry rabbit. Thumper got his nickname after losing a foot to an IED. Now using a robotic foot, he is probably the fastest person on the team.

**Bree Wilton-** Financial guru, killer of the boardroom, and newly appointed partner in her firm. Wilts under the sun. Hates hiking, dirt, bunnies, and generally all things that don’t come with a luxury sticker.

### **Team 3: Now known as The Ditty Boppers**

**Eli Brant-** Fierce team leader, but will put you in your place with a good practical joke when necessary.

**Red Warren-** Funny, meat-eating, California-hating, rifle owner. Proud to take out the bad guys in any way possible.

**Zoe Thacker-** Screenwriting badass that hates guns, refuses to eat meat, but loves a good gunfight.

**Bradford Kavanaugh-** Son of a senator, terrified of mummies, scarabs, and basically anything from ancient Egypt. Loves practical jokes, except when they’re about him.

### **IT Department:**

**Rae Dennon-** Sarcastic, witty, badass woman. Terrified of nothing, will take down any man with little effort, and has an intense feud with Dash.

**Duke Mason-** The mechanic. Sexy, dirty, and the man every woman wants. His hands alone could have a story written about them and all the things they can do. Not afraid to have his ass kicked by Rae.

**Dash-** Awesome with computers and a skilled fighter. Constantly being compared to Rae, the sexier version of him. Still trying to convince Fox he’s just as awesome.

### **Black Ops Team: Also known as The Three Js**

**Jack Cox-** Team leader who loves aviator sunglasses as much as a good gun fight. Willing to take one for the team as long as the mission is long and hard...just like his johnson.

**Johnny Wood-** Dangerous cowboy, loyal to Rafe—a man that would kill his own mother if it finished the job. Respects a man willing to get the job done.

**Tahlia James-** Mad scientist...well, coroner. Desperate for the truth and willing to do anything to get those answers, as long as it doesn't include enclosed spaces. Not afraid of Johnny and his sexy body.

**Jason Long-** Number 3 of the baddies. Dangerous and dark, always full of threatening wisdom. Stay out of his way.

### **The Other Guys:**

**New Guy- Also known as FNG-** Doesn't have a death wish, but firmly believes he can never be killed. Willing to take horrible risks to prove he's unstoppable. Medic and smart as a whip, but also one of the most ridiculous men you've ever met.

**Jones-** Spotter for Cash during their military days, with a bad attitude since losing the use of his leg. Like you really need one of those.

**Rafe-** Evildoer posing as the good guy. Or is it the other way around? Dangerous antihero with not a single redeeming quality who stays hidden in the shadows. Unknown relationship to Cash.

**Liberty-** Pretty ballerina with hidden talents. Obsessed with Rafe and willing to sacrifice anything to be with him. Or is she???

**Fox-** Works in training, has an undeniable fascination with throwing knives, and loves singing show tunes...sometimes a little too much!

**Anna-** Gorgeous Hollywood star that has captured Fox's twisted heart. Her looks aren't nearly as deadly as her right hook.

**Nicholas Tate:** Former SEAL that worked with Fox. Still a mystery, but currently works as a cop in Kansas after Cash got him a job. Must be crazy to be friends with Fox.

### **The Young Squad:**

**Asher White:** This suit-wearing enigma has a thing for dangerous jobs, fast women, and...trains. Yes, you heard that right! Don't come between a man and his love of locomotives.

**Jade Buchanan-** The wife of the elusive Asher. Forced into an arranged

marriage by her power-hungry father, she suffers from terrible nightmares, longing to leave this horrible life behind.

**Chase Carter:** Tattooed badass with a bullring in his nose. His wacky personality is nearly as irritating as his love of playing Monopoly.

**Patrick Cook:** This is no ordinary gigolo. Hang onto your hats ladies! You're not just getting a striptease with this stud!

# SELF-LICKING ICE CREAM CONE

## **Origins:**

The phrase appeared to have been first used in 1991–1992, in a book about Gulf War weapons systems by Norman Friedman, and On Self-Licking Ice Cream Cones, a paper by Pete Worden about NASA's bureaucracy, to describe the relationship between the Space Shuttle and Space Station.

## **OPS Meaning:**

A process that appears to exist in order to justify its own existence, often producing indicators of its own success.

## NOTE FROM AUTHOR

This title does not reflect the story in any way other than the model is like an ice cream cone to me, and I very much like the idea of licking an ice cream cone.



## CASH

I stared at the report in shock. I really hadn't expected this. No one had. But here it was in front of me. There was no denying it any longer. I leaned forward and pressed the button for the intercom.

"Everyone report to the conference room immediately."

Through the door, I heard my voice echoing over the loudspeaker. No one was going to believe me. But we had to accept what was right in front of us. I slid my hand into my pocket and clutched onto Betty. Anger rose inside me as I realized we'd all failed in protecting one of our own. I wanted to find whoever did this and kill them.

Then again, I knew Rafe was responsible. Everything that had gone wrong recently was because of him, and my team would be out for blood when I told them what was in this file. I shoved back from my desk and made my way to the conference room. Eva met up with me along the way and shot me a weird look.

"Is it what I think it is?"

"Yes."

Her hand gripped mine and squeezed. "It's not possible."

"That's what I thought too."

"No one's going to believe it."

"Trust me, I know this is gonna be a shitshow."

I shoved the door open to the conference room and made my way to the head of the table. Eva stood by my side, never straying. I was grateful, because this was going to be hard enough as it was. The banter going around the room made it difficult to interrupt.

"I'm just saying, if we all shift one seat to the left, then there's a more



symmetrical seating arrangement,” Lock argued. “It’s not that hard.”

“Except that every one of us has to get up and move to make your OCD feel better,” Scottie retorted. “Enough is enough.”

“You had no problem with my seating charts when you met Quinn and wanted her to sit next to you at the table,” he shot back.

“That was different. She was new to the group, and my date for the evening. I don’t see anyone dating someone in here,” Scottie snapped, making a point of looking at every person around the table.

“Hey, everyone, quite down!” I shouted over the chaos.

“Boss, tell them to move,” Lock glared at me.

“Boss, I’m not moving anywhere unless it’s out the door,” Scottie argued.

“You’re acting like a petulant child,” Lock shot back.

“Says the man that wants everyone to move so he can have his spot.”

“Enough!” I shouted, silencing everyone. They all stared at me in shock. It wasn’t like me to raise my voice. I was usually one of the guys whenever I could be. We had the type of relationship in which they listened and respected me, but didn’t treat me any differently.

Fox shoved his chair back and whistled loudly, despite the room already being quiet. “Alright, the boss has something to say, so everyone be quiet!”

“Thank you,” I said, rolling my eyes internally. “I just had a report come in—”

The whole room groaned. Reports were never a fun thing.

“From the coroner’s office. They’ve finally positively identified that the remains on the plane were those of FNG.” The whole room was silent as the news sunk in. “I know this is a shock and a lot to take, but—”

“Nah, that’s not FNG,” Dash said.

I stood there with my mouth gaping, then looked back at the file. “Uh... yes, it is.”

“No, it’s really not. FNG can’t die,” Dash continued.

“Look, I know this is hard. You spent the most time with him before his untimely death—”

“I spent a lot of time with him too,” Thumper said, raising his hand.

“Then you know this really is FNG.”

He shook his head. “Nah, I’m with Dash on this one. It’s not FNG.”

“Rae saw him on the plane! So did Fox!” I argued.

“It was an illusion,” Thumper said. “I’m telling you, it wasn’t him.”

I pulled out the coroner’s report that clearly identified the remains, then

showed it to all of them. “It says right here! The dental records verified it was him.”

“Dental records can be altered,” Fox spoke up, lifting his feet up onto the table. He opened a bag of Funyuns and popped one in his mouth. “Have you ever seen some of those mafia movies?”

“This is not a mafia movie,” I said in frustration.

“It could be,” IRIS said. “Let’s look at this from an explosives standpoint. Yes, there was an explosion. Yes, it would take out anyone on that plane. But was he really on that plane?”

My brows furrowed in confusion as murmurs of agreement filled the room. “How is that from an explosives standpoint? What does him being or not being on the plane have to do with explosives?”

IRIS laughed at me. “Well, boss, I think you would know by now that in order for an explosive device to take you out, you have to be close to it. You were by the plane when it exploded.”

“I know!” I shouted in frustration. “So was FNG.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking about this a lot,” Fox said, licking the yellow dust from his fingers. “There’s always the idea that he plastered a picture of himself to the window.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, irritated by the insanity of this conversation. “He plastered a picture of himself to the window of the plane to trick us all into thinking he was on the plane so we would all assume he died. *Then*, he faked the coroner’s report and added in his dental records for good measure. Is that what you’re telling me?”

He shrugged. “It’s a working theory.”

“And why would he do that?”

He chuckled as he stared at me. “Boss, I think that’s pretty obvious.”

Everyone else in the room nodded in agreement. “Okay, tell me because I have no fucking clue what you’re talking about.”

“Well, *obviously*—”

“Here we go,” Dash sighed. “This is just like the argument I had with FNG. Only that time it was over the word clearly.”

“Clearly is a good word,” Thumper agreed. “You know, at the time I was annoyed, but now that I think about it, I think clearly is underused in the English language.”

“Not if you’re arguing with FNG.”

I squeezed my eyes shut to drown out the stupidity. This was not the way

this was supposed to go. I was going to come in here and tell them about how FNG tragically died. Then we were going to plan his funeral and mourn the loss of our colleague. Instead, we were arguing over the use of the word clearly.

Fox interrupted their bickering. “Hey, can we get back to what I was saying? Obviously, if you want a turn to speak, you need to raise your hand.”

“This isn’t elementary school,” Dash snapped at him.

“No, but the rules still apply in any decent society.”

“And you know what that is?” Thumper snorted.

Eli shoved back from his chair, whistling loudly. “Can I just point out that this is beyond absurd?”

“Thank you,” I said in exasperation. “Finally, someone with a voice of reason.”

He nodded to me. “Clearly, FNG didn’t stick a poster of himself to the window to trick us all into thinking he was on that plane.”

“Thank you!”

“I mean, come on. Any of us would have realized that the image on the poster wasn’t moving.”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” I said, though I hadn’t thought of that at all because the whole idea was ludicrous.

“*Obviously*,” he said slowly, nodding to Fox.

“Thank you.”

Eli winked and continued. “Obviously, it was a face mask.”

I rolled my eyes and slumped down into my seat. It was like none of them were even interested in the science that was right in front of us on the piece of paper.

“You mean like in *Mission Impossible*?” Kavanaugh asked.

“Exactly! Remember, we’re talking about Rafe here. If anyone was going to pull off a job like this, it would be Rafe.”

“For what reason?” I shouted, shoving back my chair. “Do you even hear yourselves? The evidence is right the fuck in front of you, and you’re all coming up with excuses as to why this isn’t FNG!”

“Because it’s not,” Rae shrugged. “I mean, I was all on board at the beginning, but this makes more sense.”

I stared at her like an idiot. “Really? Someone put a face mask on FNG and boarded him on a plane to kill him?”

“No,” she said with a bite of attitude. “Obviously, someone else was

wearing the face mask. Otherwise, FNG would be dead.”

“Ooh, or it was one of those hologram things,” Slider said excitedly.

“Wait, are we talking like a *Star Wars* thing?” Scottie asked.

“Exactly like that!”

“New movies or old movies? Or is it more like *Mandalorian*?”

“Does it matter?” Slider asked.

Scottie scoffed, staring at Slider like he was an idiot. “Does it matter? Are you kidding? Of course, it matters! The CGI was so much better in the new ones.”

“Yeah, and Rafe would cheap out on something like that,” Brock added.

“If Rafe was involved,” Thumper sighed. “How do we know he had his hand in this? Maybe this is FNG’s big plan to make us all believe he finally died, but then he comes back from the dead.”

“That’s exactly what I was trying to say!” Fox yelled. “Nobody listens to me!”

Thumper nodded to him. “That’s what I say happened.”

“With a hologram?” I asked testily.

“*Obviously*, he has some really good equipment,” Scottie chuckled. “I mean, he wouldn’t go to all the trouble of pretending to kill himself only to do a bad job of it.”

Pressing my fists to the table, I did my level best to regain my composure so I didn’t pull out my gun and shoot all of them. I was getting tired of the arguments, and this wasn’t helpful to any of us. “Alright, here’s what we’re going to do. First and foremost, we’re going to ban the use of the words *clearly* and *obviously*. Second, we are going to accept that FNG is dead and plan a funeral for the man. He deserves that much.”

“Yeah,” Edu laughed. “If you think it’s not a waste of time to plan a funeral for a person that’s still alive.”

“He’s not still alive!” I snapped. “The records are right the fuck in front of you! Is there a single person in this room that actually believes what the evidence in front of us is saying?”

They all looked around at each other, but none of them raised their hands. My eyes locked on Eva, who was doing everything possible to ignore me, averting her eyes to a spot on the wall.

“Seriously?”

She finally looked at me. “What?”

“You believe this nonsense?”

“They make some very valid points. Besides, I’m not sure FNG would be very happy if we actually believed he was dead.”

“He won’t care because his body is about to live with the worms!”

“Geez, that’s not a very nice way to talk about our teammate, boss,” Fox said.

“I’m trying to get you all to see that FNG is dead. I’m sorry to have to keep harping on this, but he’s gone. And the sooner you all accept that, the easier this will be on all of us!”

I eyed them all one last time before I turned and stormed out of the room. I wanted the records to be a lie, but these were straight from the coroner’s office from a trusted colleague. There was no way to spin this in our favor. The fact was, FNG was gone. We had failed him, and now we had to give him a proper burial.

Eva looked gorgeous in her black dress. With her belly bump showing proudly, I couldn’t help but get a woody when looking at her. It was wrong. We were headed to a funeral, but that didn’t mean my cock would listen to me when I told him to be sad. She stood in front of the mirror and adjusted her earrings, then smiled at me.

“Are you ready for this?” she asked.

“As ready as I’ll ever be. I haven’t had to bury someone in a while. And never someone that worked for me.”

She turned around, shooting me a sad smile. “I know this is hard, but FNG wouldn’t want you to be sad.”

I sighed and took her outstretched hand. “I appreciate that.” I pulled her in for a hug, then frowned as I thought about what she said. I stepped back and looked at her questioningly. “Wait, are you saying that because you truly think he’d want us to be happy, or because you don’t think he’s dead and wouldn’t want us to believe it?”

She bit her lip, trying not to show her embarrassment. “Do you really want to know?”

“Christ!” I shouted, turning around in anger. “Does anyone actually feel sad today?”

“Not really. I doubt anyone sees the point in going.”

Huffing, I grabbed her hand and stormed out of the house, ignoring everyone else around me that was pretending to put on a glum face so that I didn't yell at them. It was ridiculous that a member of this team died and no one seemed to care.

They all followed Eva and me outside to our vehicles. I gently placed Eva in the passenger seat, then closed the door and glared at all the men around me. "A good man died. Let's remember that today."

I got in and drove to the cemetery, still fuming over our current predicament. Since FNG had no family, there was no point in having a service at the funeral home. It was only us and a few people that knew him from town attending. When we pulled into the cemetery and found his grave, a heavy weight pulled at my chest. I stared at the casket still raised above the ground and swallowed the feeling of failure I hadn't let go of since the moment I saw the report from the coroner's office.

"Hey," Eva said, stepping out of the minivan. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah. Let's just get this over with."

We made our way across the grass, through the hundreds of headstones that were well-maintained by loved ones. I'd have to be sure to hire a service to take care of his plot. I stopped in front of the casket and stared at the lid. Underneath was just a pile of bones. It wasn't right that no one could even see him to say goodbye.

As the rest of the guys gathered around and the women stood stoically beside them, the minister stepped up and the ceremony began. At first, all I could hear were the birds chirping, but then I heard what sounded like some kind of slapping. Discreetly, I glanced over my shoulder and glared at Fox and Dash, who were taking turns trying to slap each other's hands like ten-year-old boys.

"What are you doing?" I hissed.

Dash's eyes widened as he cleared his throat and straightened up. "Sorry, boss."

I narrowed my eyes at Fox, but he just shrugged with a smile. I shook my head, heaving a big sigh as I turned back to the ceremony. The father looked at me to continue and I nodded. Leave it to the guys to behave like immature teenagers when we were supposed to be respecting their friend.

The ceremony droned on, and as I looked around, I caught a few of the guys playing on their phones. I should have taken them away when we got here. Slider was leaning against Edu, his head on his shoulder as he snored.

Fuck, did no one have respect for anyone else?

“At this time, I would ask if anyone would like to step forward and say a few words.”

I was the first to step up. After all, he was my employee. It was only right I say something. I faced all of them and cleared my throat, pulling at my tie that felt like it was strangling me.

“Um...It’s hard to think of just one time that stands out in my mind about FNG. He was...a pain in the ass. I mean, the lengths he would go to prove he couldn’t die were ridiculous.”

I heard a snort in the crowd. “Like now?”

I couldn’t see who spoke, but my lips tightened in anger as I stared them all down. “As I was saying, FNG was well-liked by everyone, even if he didn’t have a team.”

“Because he saw your woman with Rafe,” Thumper snorted. Again, I narrowed my eyes at him. “Sorry, I forgot that was still a sore spot.”

“He was...” Christ, I couldn’t even remember where I was. I cleared my throat again and tried to get back on track. “He was a good friend to us all. He...loved beer and...jumping out of planes.”

Yep, it was official. This was the worst eulogy ever. I sucked at this. I really should have practiced more, but I had assumed that someone else would participate.

“Ooh, and he loved shawarma!” Fox shouted out.

“Yes, he did,” I nodded, looking desperately into the crowd for anything else.

“And the word clearly,” Dash shouted. “I’m not saying it’s a great word, but clearly it’s better than obviously.”

I rolled my eyes as Fox strolled to the front, stopping right in front of Dash. “What exactly are you saying?”

“I’m saying that clearly is a better word, just as I already stated. Obviously implies that something is easily perceived, but perception is in the eye of the beholder. Clearly indicates that it is clear to all.”

“Yeah? So, if I were to say that Eva is obviously pregnant, would you say that’s in the eye of the beholder? Maybe you just think she’s fat.”

“Hey!” Eva snapped.

“Eva, you know I love you,” Fox grinned at her. “And you’re not fat,” he said, turning back to Dash, “which anyone can obviously see.”

“They can clearly see that because she has a belly bump consistent with

pregnancy.”

I stepped forward and held up my hands. “Hey! We are not arguing over which word is better at FNG’s funeral!”

“I actually think he’d enjoy this, boss,” Lock chuckled.

“Hey, you know what he’d really like?” IRIS asked. “An explosive send off.”

“No!” I snapped. “We are not having explosions at a cemetery!”

“What about sparklers?” he asked.

Red laughed. “Yeah, because you set them up so well at the wedding. As I recall, you burned down our flower arch.”

“It was an accident!” IRIS shouted.

“You did it on purpose, and you know it! You just wanted to blow shit up!”

“Take it back,” IRIS snapped, rushing Red. My eyes widened as I ran forward to stop the fight, but Red side-stepped IRIS, then shoved him directly toward the casket. I was caught in his path and tried to get out of the way, but my ankle twisted and IRIS fell into me. And I fell onto the casket.

I heard it topple backward and then heard the sound of the lid popping open and bones rolling out. I sat up and looked behind me, wincing when I saw the casket completely upturned. This was not good.

I brushed off my clothes as I got to my feet. Kavanaugh stepped up beside me and we stared down at the bones scattered on the ground. “Fuck.”

“I know exactly how you feel, boss. It’s like when we were in the plane with that mummy and it flew against me. Creepiest fucking feeling in the world to see a dead guy pressed up against me.”

“You didn’t know that guy.”

He sighed. “Yeah, well, since that’s not FNG, you don’t know him either.”

He slapped me on the shoulder and walked away, along with everyone else.





# JULIETTE

“Juliette!” Andrew called as I heard him slam the door.

I ran around the room, grabbing my purse but couldn’t find the shoes I had just pulled out for the day. I tossed the blanket on the bed and searched underneath the metal frame, seeing it halfway under the bed.

“How the hell did it get under there?”

I got down on my belly and reached as far as I could, but I was just under five feet tall. I was never going to reach the damn thing. Short girl problems and all. Grunting in frustration, I got up and ran to my closet, pulling out a pole I used to grab hangers from the top bar since I was too short to reach those also.

“Juliette!”

“I’m coming!” I shouted, my voice echoing throughout the townhouse. I might be small, but I was loud, and everyone knew it. I got back down on the floor and used the pole to snatch the shoe from under the bed. I pulled by the heel until it was within reach, then dragged it toward me and rolled, lifting my foot in the air as I slid the heel on. Now I just had to find the second shoe.

I hobbled around the room searching for it just as Andrew flung the door open and sighed. “Again?”

“Don’t start with me. It’s not my fault.”

“You do this every morning,” he argued. “You’d think you would have learned by now not to take your shoes out of the closet until you’re ready to leave.” He marched over to the window and pulled the curtain back, revealing my other shoe.

“Ah! I love you. Thank you.”

He rolled his eyes and bent down so I could kiss his cheek. Andrew was

nearly six feet tall, so he was always bending over for me.

“Yeah, yeah. Can we go now?”

“You said the photo shoot isn’t until ten. It’s only nine.”

“Yes, and I have to tell you that to make sure you’re early.”

I hopped on one foot as I slid my heel onto the opposite foot. He grabbed my elbow so I didn’t fall and picked up my purse off the floor. “Oh, shoot! I haven’t eaten yet!”

“I’ve got food waiting in the car,” he sighed.

“But then I’ll need to brush my teeth—”

“I’ve got a toiletry bag packed with everything we need.”

My tiny romper was all disheveled now that I had rolled all over the floor. I did my best to adjust it as I hurried down the stairs, nearly falling in the process. I was awesome in high-heeled shoes, but running down the stairs was never wise.

“Would you slow down?” Andrew snapped.

“Go faster, slow down...I never know what you want from me.”

“I want you to not kill yourself before we get to the car.”

I made it to the bottom of the stairs and did a twirl for added effect, grinning at him like I always did. “You know you love me.”

He shook his head with a laugh. “I do love you. Sort of.”

My big brother was my manager and my keeper in every way. Without him, I’d be lost most of the time. He kept my schedule, made sure I was properly fed, and knew when to tell people to fuck off. How he ended up with the tall genes and I ended up with the short genes, I’d never know. But what I lacked in height, I made up for with my stunning skills in high heels.

I ran out to the waiting car and stepped inside, sliding across the seat. He got in beside me and nodded to the driver, Ethan. “To the studio.”

He sat back in his seat with a sigh. “Every fucking morning is like a race.”

“That’s what you get for letting me sleep so long.”

“I woke you up five times. You sleep like the dead.”

“I do not.”

“And you mumble in your sleep, usually a bunch of nonsense.”

“There is nothing nonsensical about anything I say.”

“Except when it’s in your sleep,” he argued, pulling out the schedule for the day. “Alright, you have a photo shoot at eleven, then—”

“Wait, you said ten.”

“I had to say ten because it’s already nine-thirty and it’s a half hour drive to the studio. You still need to eat,” he said, shoving a Tupperware container toward me. “And you still have to do hair and makeup. We’re already late.”

I stuck out my tongue and popped the lid. Fruit stared back at me, making me grimace as I held it up for him to see. “What is this?”

“It’s fruit.”

“But I’m hungry. This will never get me through a photo shoot.”

“And whenever I get you real food before a photo shoot, you complain how bloated you look in the photographs.”

“I do not.”

“You do too,” he snapped. “Jesus, just one morning, I’d like to be on time.” He leaned forward in his seat and called out to Ethan. “Take us to Mickey’s.”

“Already on the way there,” he laughed.

My jaw dropped in shock. “Am I that predictable?”

“Always. As I was saying, there’s a photo shoot at twelve—”

“You lied again?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him. “Seriously, what is the real time of the photo shoot?”

He winced, turning back to me. “Two.”

“But...why did I rush then?”

“Because you take forever to get ready. You’re completely unaware of how long it takes to get anywhere in this city, and you have a tendency to never know what you want until the last minute, which means Ethan and I are always scrambling to get you what you need.”

I wanted to argue with him, but I knew it was true. “Fine, what’s going on the rest of the day?”

“After the photo shoot, we have to go across town and meet up with a new model you’ll be working with on the Temptation campaign.”

“Why don’t we just use Scott?”

He shook his head. “Emilio said Scott is too pure.”

I winced at the terminology. Scott was so nice and handsome, but if he was too pure, that meant they were really going for sex appeal and Scott wasn’t cutting it. But I liked working with Scott. He was nice and didn’t act like a creeper during photo shoots.

“Well, that sucks.”

“For me too,” he mumbled. “Now I have to worry about sorting through a list of men which you’ll no doubt find issues with every one.”

“I’m not that bad,” I grumbled under my breath.

He turned to me with a smirk. “Do I need to go over the list of all the reasons I lie to you about your schedule?”

I sat back with a huff, crossing my arms over my chest. “Whatever.”

He droned on about the schedule for the rest of the week, though I wasn’t sure why. He clearly lied to me all the time. Not that I could blame him. We pulled into the Mickey’s drive-thru and I stared at the menu, wondering what I was going to get today.

“Um...get me a number 1. Oh, and extra hashbrowns and an apple pie.”

“Sure,” Ethan chuckled.

“Oh, and coffee.”

“Already on the list.”

“And—”

Ethan turned around in his seat and smirked at me. “Just leave this to me. I’ll get you everything you want.”

Maybe I was too predictable. I’d wait for him to order and then see just how well he knew me.

The lady crackled over the speaker and he leaned forward. “Yes, I’d like two number ones. Three extra hashbrowns, two apple pies, a french vanilla latte, and a strawberry milkshake.”

I scoffed, surprised that he pegged me so well. It wasn’t fair that he could predict my food choices like that. “How do you know I’ll eat all that?”

“Because you said you were going on a diet. And whenever you go on a diet, you binge the first day.”

He was right, and I hated that. We pulled forward and my food was thrust into the back seat. I grabbed the breakfast sandwich and bit into it with a moan. “Oh my God, this is so good.”

Andrew chuckled beside me, continuing with whatever he was doing on his phone.

“You want a bite?” I asked around a mouthful.

“Are you kidding?” he snorted. “And come between you and food? I don’t think so.”

I glared at him, but if he noticed, he didn’t say a word. “I have to start my diet tomorrow,” I said thoughtfully. “No Mickey’s.”

“Sure,” Andrew chuckled.

“I’m serious!”

“Ethan, you want to make a bet on this?” he called.

“Only if I get to bet that we still show up at Mickey’s.”

I glared at both of them. “Just watch me.”

“Oh, we will,” Andrew chuckled. “We’ll watch you inhale the same order tomorrow.”

Maybe they were right, but I wasn’t giving in. I’d kick this diet’s ass and prove to them just how wrong they were. That’s what I told myself as I polished off the rest of my breakfast sandwich.

I groaned as I bent over at the waist. “I don’t feel so good.”

“Could it be the milkshake?” Andrew laughed. “Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to inhale it while you were getting your makeup done.”

“No, I think that bitch Alicia poisoned my water.”

He laughed beside me. “Yeah, that’s much more plausible than you eating way too much for breakfast.”

I was exhausted after a three hour photo shoot. I really didn’t want to go over to Emilio’s studio and meet other models. That was the last thing in the world that sounded like fun right now.

“Come on,” Andrew said, slinging his arm around my shoulders. “We still have things to do. Then I’ll get you some dinner.”

“Pizza?”

“Yeah, that sounds like something you should eat right before this campaign.”

“Are you calling me fat?” I grumbled. I didn’t even have the energy to be mad right now.

“How could you be fat? Seriously, I don’t know where you put it.”

I had a high metabolism and a strict exercise regimen. As long as I stuck with my exercise routine, I didn’t seem to have a problem eating whatever I wanted. But I didn’t exercise to keep the weight off. I did it because it cleared my mind. I liked the feeling of exhaustion after a long run. I used to run track in high school, though I never won because of my short legs. But I refused to give up because I liked to run so much.

Right now, I wasn’t sure I could run to the car.

I took a nap on the way over to Emilio’s studio, only waking when Andrew shook me awake. “Number crunchers,” I mumbled.

“What?”

I swiped the sleep from my eyes and sat upright. “What?”

“You’re talking nonsense again.”

“Whatever,” I yawned. “Man, I need another nap.”

“Yeah, I’d like to see that happen.”

That was the other problem. I crashed hard for a nap every afternoon, and I always said I needed another nap, but then I got a second wind and couldn’t sit still. That’s why I ran at night. It was my way of making myself so tired that I could actually go to bed at a decent time for the next day’s schedule.

“Come on, peanut. Let’s see who Emilio has in store for us.”

I glared at my brother. “You know I hate it when you call me that.”

“Then maybe you should try to grow,” he smirked at me.

“Or maybe you should try to...” Dammit, this always happened. He was so awesome at digs, and I never had a good comeback. He would wait patiently as I tried to come up with something clever to say, and I always failed.

“...not...” He motioned for me to continue and I ground my teeth in frustration. “I hate you,” I said, stomping past him.

He burst out laughing and jogged to keep up, slinging his arm around my shoulder again. “You don’t hate me, peanut.”

“I strongly loathe you at the moment.”

We entered the studio, but immediately stopped when Emilio came running over with an alarmed expression on his face. “Um...you should probably go.”

“Why?” I asked, confused as to what was going on.

“Well, we had a bit of an issue with the test run.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “Did none of the models show?”

“They did, but...” He sighed and motioned for us to follow him. “You’ll just have to see for yourself.”

I followed him inside and laughed when I saw what was in front of us spread out on the table. He ran a hand through his thinning hair, then thrust his hand on his hip in frustration. “This is not good.”

Spread out on the table were the test images of me in the campaign pictures all slashed and bloodied. My eyes were gouged out and DIE was written across the picture.

“Okay...” I said again. “I’m not sure what the problem is.”

My brother scoffed, using a pen to pick up the dress I was supposed to

wear today. It was soaked in some kind of red liquid that I was sure was supposed to be blood. And it was shredded with barely any material still holding it together.

“The problem is, someone is pissed you got this campaign.”

“Again, what’s the problem? It’s modeling. People are jealous bitches.”

Emilio’s eyes connected with Andrew’s for a moment, then he handed over a piece of paper.

Andrew snatched it and read aloud, “That Juliette bitch will never live to see this campaign go live.” He dropped his hand with a sigh. “What are we going to do? Do we pull out of the campaign?”

“What?” I gasped. “Are you serious? Why on earth would we do that?”

“Because someone’s threatening your life?” he said incredulously.

“The models all left,” Emilio said hesitantly. “They didn’t want to be part of this if you were on the campaign.”

“What a bunch of pussies,” I muttered. “This isn’t even a real threat! A bunch of stuff out of a B rated horror film and a note? Ooh, like that hasn’t been done before.”

“Juliette,” Andrew said, grabbing me by the shoulders. “This is about your life!”

“Yeah, and I’m not going to be scared off by some chick that’s upset because she didn’t get the job. This is nothing!”

“It’s not nothing,” Emilio sighed. “The test dress is ruined. It’ll take days to get another, putting us even further behind schedule.”

“Look,” I snapped, “we are not going to be cowed by some immature asshole. I worked hard to get this job and I’m not giving it up for anyone!”

“Then you need a protection detail,” Andrew said forcefully.

I laughed in his face. “Are you kidding? I’m not getting some bozo to follow me around. I already have you.”

He grinned at me. “Look at that. You finally got a zinger in.”

“If you really want to move forward,” Emilio said worriedly, “I’ll need to order another dress. I don’t know. Maybe we should move to another location.”

“This location is fine,” I reassured him. “This is some idiot that can’t take losing. I’m sure they’ve already moved on.”

He didn’t look so sure about that, but there was no way I was giving up this job. It would bring in more money than most of my jobs throughout the year and put me on the map to be the highest paid model. With that, I could



pick and choose my jobs.

“You go ahead and order the new dress. Call me when it’s ready.”

“What about the model?” Emilio shouted as I headed for the door.

I turned around and thought about it. “There has to be someone that’s willing to work on this job. Andrew?”

“I’ll make some calls.”

Emilio nodded, but I could tell he was worried about the whole thing. This was meant to be a huge collaboration between Emilio, the Temptation brand, and myself. If this failed because of me, I would feel horrible for all the time Emilio put into it.

“We’ll see you in a few days,” I said reassuringly.

We walked out of the studio and I slipped my sunglasses on. “Well, at least we can go get that pizza now.”

“I thought you weren’t feeling good,” Andrew smirked at me.

“When has a full stomach ever stopped me from eating?”

Andrew jerked his head down the sidewalk and I practically cried. Ethan was walking toward me with a pizza. I knew this was going to be a good day.

“Just as you like it,” he grinned. “Thick crust, cheese on half and pepperoni on the other.”

“Ethan, you know me so—”

I screamed as I was shoved to the ground as an explosion sounded across the street. Looking up from where I was covering my head, I sighed when I saw our car now burning up.

“Holy shit,” Ethan muttered.

“Look on the bright side,” I sighed, grabbing the box from where it fell to the ground. “At least the pizza wasn’t inside.”



# LOCK

I sat down on my brand new couch that had just been delivered. I was one of the lucky few that had a house just built behind OPS. Tonight was my first night sleeping here, and the movers had already delivered everything I ordered. Not that it was much. I had a couch and a huge TV in the living room and a bed down the hall in the master bedroom. That was really all I needed at the moment. I would slowly fill in the rest as I figured out what I wanted.

Just as it was at my place in California, I would take the time to truly know what belonged in each room. I liked everything to be neat and in order, which couldn't be achieved if you didn't take the time to get to know a place. Was leather really a good idea? What was the humidity like in the house? What about dining room furniture? And then there was the placement of every piece, making sure it wasn't too overwhelming for the space. I didn't like clutter, so I wouldn't tolerate furniture in a room where it didn't belong.

"This is perfect."

"Yeah, and it only took you three months to pick out," Edu said, sitting down heavily with a beer in his hand.

I swiped it just as he was about to take a sip. "What the hell do you think you're doing? You can't have beer in the living room! And why are your shoes still on?"

He looked at me funny. "Um...because I'm not walking around in my bare feet."

"You're not barefoot. You'll have socks on."

He shrugged. "It was laundry day. Socks are in the hamper."

"If it's laundry day, then why aren't your socks in the wash? And do you

only have enough socks to get from one laundry day to the next? Where are your spare pairs of socks?"

"What, are you my mother?"

"Don't take that tone with me," I snapped. "You're in my house, and you'll go by my rules."

His eyes widened comically. "Wow, I can tell it's going to be a lot of fun over here. I think I'll go back to the bunker."

"Fine by me," I snapped. "Who walks into someone else's house with their shoes on?"

He spun around and jabbed a finger at me. "Who gets a house built and doesn't get any fucking furniture?"

"It's a process," I argued. "I need to test it all out first!"

"It's a chair for your ass, not a piece of art to put on the walls," he growled.

"That's not the way I work. I need to know that it all goes together."

He tossed up his hands in frustration. "You know, one of these days your rules are going to get you into trouble."

"Oh, yeah, that makes sense," I argued. "Rules are so dangerous. I'm really living on borrowed time."

"Exactly," he snapped. "You're one rule away from someone pulling the trigger. And if I have to see one more stupid map, I'm going to..."

"To what?" I snorted. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Switch teams."

"And how does you switching teams hurt me? I'm not gay!"

"Not that," he said incredulously. "I'm going to move teams in OPS, you idiot."

Well, that made more sense, but I still thought it was a stupid argument. "My maps and charts have saved us a ton of time and effort from doing things the wrong way."

"You mean what you consider the wrong way."

"You're just as bad as me, so I don't know what you're complaining about! When we're in a bad situation, who is always the first to ask my opinion?"

"That's just ridiculous. We ask because we don't want to do the planning."

"Yeah? And what about when we're at a table and I make a seating chart? You don't seem to mind then."

“That’s different,” he argued. “That’s about safety. You know as well as I do that all it takes is one of us out of place for everything to go ass over tits.”

“And if it weren’t for my charts, you’d be staring up at the sky right now.”

He frowned at me. “Wouldn’t I be staring at the ground?”

“What?” I asked incredulously.

“Well, if I went ass over tits, that would mean my ass would be in the air and my tits would be toward the ground.”

“You don’t have tits!” I snapped.

“Hey, you’re the one that said it. I’m just clarifying that if I did go ass over tits, my head would be facing the ground. I wouldn’t be staring up at the fucking sky!”

I shoved to my feet and got in his face. “And you think I’m a stickler! You’re arguing with me over a fucking phrase!”

“Then maybe you should think about what you say before you say it!”

I jabbed my finger toward the door, my nostrils flaring in anger. “Get out. Get the fuck out right now.”

“You’re such a pussy.”

“Hey! No one comes into my house with their shoes still on and insults me about my own phrases.”

He waved his fingers at me with big eyes. “Ooh, that’s big talk from the scary Lock.”

“You bet your ass it is. And you know what else?”

“Why don’t you tell me.”

“I’m going to have a party here this weekend, and I’m not going to invite you.”

He pretended to cry, wiping a fake tear from his face. “Oh, that’s so sad. Whatever will I do?”

“I don’t know, but you won’t be doing it here with my amazing barbecue sauce.”

“Fine by me!” he shouted, turning and storming for the door.

“And you can kiss Parcheesi nights goodbye!”

He yanked the door open and spun around to face me. “I didn’t want to play that stupid game anyway!”

He walked out and slammed the door behind him. I turned around and ran my fingers through my long hair, wondering how much longer I was going to keep this up. I should probably just cut it off. I wasn’t fooling anyone.

There was a knock on the door and Edu popped his head back in. “Are we still going to the movies tonight?”

“Yep.”

“Cool, see you then.”

“Now that everyone’s here,” Cash called out, quieting everyone down. “I’d like to say thank you for everyone that came to FNG’s funeral—”

“What a waste of time that was,” Fox snorted.

Cash narrowed his eyes at him, “—but since you all acted like misbehaving toddlers, you’re all going to put in an extra ten hours of training this week.”

A round of groans filled the room as he laughed at us. I didn’t mind. I liked to train, and getting in a few more hours was nothing to me.

“And since you all thought it was so hilarious when his casket fell over, you’re also going to put in an additional three hours with Fox with his throwing knives.”

“That’s just mean,” I snapped.

“Not as mean as you taking my beer just because I was going to drink it in your living room,” Edu coughed out.

I flipped him off, refusing to concede on that point. “You don’t walk into a new house and wear your shoes or take beer in the living room. It’s a thing.”

“It’s a Lock thing,” he corrected. “I’m sure if I were at Cash’s house, he would let me wear my shoes.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” Cash said, not even bothering to look at Edu.

“Boss,” Edu said in shock. “Come on. You can’t be serious.”

“As a heart attack. Anyway,” he said, looking up at everyone. “We have a new job on the books. This one is for your team,” he said, sliding a folder across the table to me.”

I slapped my hand on it and turned it around to face me. Opening the file, I whistled at the beauty in the photo. “She’s gorgeous.”

“She’s a model,” he said with a grin.

“Okay, and why does that make you smile?” I asked warily. My eyes flicked to the guys, but they were just as confused as me.

“She’s in the middle of a campaign. The name is *Temptation*.”

Again, he continued to grin at me. I had this bad feeling in the pit of my stomach that wouldn’t go away. The more he smiled, the more I knew he was up to something.

“And why does she need our services?” I asked slowly.

“Well, someone isn’t happy with her. At first, she thought it was a jealous model that wanted the job. The dress she was supposed to wear for the test run was torn and bloodied. She wasn’t concerned about it. But then they walked outside and someone blew up her car.”

“Great,” I muttered under my breath. “So, we get to deal with a hysterical woman.”

“And that’s not even the best part,” Cash grinned.

“And what is the best part?”

“Well, during this campaign, they’ll be traveling around to various locations. She’ll need someone by her side twenty-four, seven.”

“That’s usually what we do,” I said, still not understanding.

“And...let’s see, what’s the best way to put this?” he said with glee, leaning back on his heels. “Nobody else wants to model with her. After what happened, all the male models backed out.”

My face drained of color as he continued to stare at me. I swallowed hard as Scottie snorted under his breath. “You...you want me to...”

“That’s right. I showed your picture to the photographer Emilio. He happens to love you. He said you had great bone structure and your hair is perfection.”

“No,” I said immediately, shaking my head in denial. “I’m not a model. I protect people, but I do not take pictures.”

“You won’t be taking them,” he grinned. “You’ll be posing beside the lovely Juliette. See, this way, the job continues and we can catch whoever’s after her. And as an added bonus, no one will suspect you’re protecting her because you’re in the photo shoot. Isn’t that brilliant?”

I wanted to smack the smile off his face. “This is not brilliant. It’s horrible and terrible and...atrocious and...”

“Terrible?” he asked.

“Exactly. Made Edu do it.”

“Yeah, they didn’t want him,” Cash tsked. “I know it’s not fair. They said he didn’t have the right look. They love your long hair. Oh, and your tattoos. You have that...*tempting* look.”

“I’ll cut my hair off,” I said quickly, my heart pounding out of control.

“Too late. I’ve already removed all the scissors and told the salon they aren’t allowed to cut your hair. And...” He slid another document my way. “It’s in the contract. Neat and tidy, just as you like it.”

I flipped through it, swallowing hard as I read what was inside. This wasn’t fair. I didn’t want my face plastered all over everything. My head snapped up and I narrowed my eyes at him. “You can’t do this. It would expose my identity.”

His grin grew wider. “Exactly my concern, which is why you’ll be known on this job as...” He paused for dramatic effect, then said, “Royal Forsythe!”

Everyone in the room aside from me burst into laughter. The blood drained from my face as I stared at Cash in disbelief. “That’s just mean.”

“It’s the job,” he grinned.

“Boss, not a single person will take me seriously with a name like that!”

“That’s the brilliance of this plan,” he laughed. “It can’t fail.”

I shoved out of my seat, about to give him a piece of my mind when Scottie held up his hands. “Quiet, everyone! The king is about to speak.”

They all roared with laughter. I glared at them, but it made no difference.

“I’m not doing it, and you can’t make me.”

He nodded somberly. “You’re right. I can’t make you do it. After all, it’s not like it’s a real job, right? I mean, it’s only a woman’s life on the line. She’s just a model, though. I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

“But—” I had no argument other than I really didn’t want to be a model. I did it to myself the day I decided to grow out my hair. I clenched my jaw, refusing to do this his way. “Fine, I’ll do it, but I can guarantee you’re going to regret this.”

He tossed back his head and laughed at me. “I sincerely doubt that.”

“Yeah, and just think of how you can order around your servants while on location,” Thumper jeered.

“Maybe you can borrow a tiara from Anna,” Fox laughed.

“Alright, alright,” Brock stood, motioning for everyone to quiet down. “That’s enough. We all know that if any of us were in the same position, we’d be just as against doing this job. Let’s try our best to support him in his hour of distress.”

I cleared my throat, grateful for the way he stepped up. “Thank you, Brock. That means a lot—”

“Anything for you, my liege,” he said with a sweeping bow.



I grabbed my pen and flung it at him, which only made everyone else laugh louder. The whole thing was ridiculous.

“It’s fine,” I said loudly over the raucous laughter. “I’m a professional. I can handle this. Besides, we all know who I truly am.”

“Uh...not Juliette,” Cash grinned. “It’s vital that she plays along, and if she doesn’t, there’s no point in doing any of this.”

“She’s not going to know who I really am?” I said incredulously.

“It’s best to get a feel for your natural chemistry with her. Sorry, that’s the way it is.”

I pressed my fingertips to the table as I drew in a deep breath. I could do this. It wouldn’t be so bad. Except that I really wanted to fucking punch Cash in the face right now.

“Quick! Someone get him a cape so he can storm out of the room!” Kavanaugh laughed.

I spun on him, jabbing a finger in his direction. “Watch it, or I’ll put a mummy in your bed.”

“Boss, this is the best job ever,” Brock laughed.

“Yeah,” Cash grinned. “I thought you’d like it, but I wouldn’t laugh yet. You’re his entourage.”

Their faces instantly dropped as Cash slid the folders across to Edu, Brock, and Scottie. “Welcome to the team, boys.”

I smirked at them. “Who’s laughing now, bitches?”

I stared at her picture as we prepared for takeoff. She was fucking gorgeous. And I was going to have to pretend to be attracted to her for however the fuck long this photo shoot took. We were supposed to travel to locations all over the United States, which didn’t exactly give the impression this would be a quick job. And what happened if we caught him in the first week? Did that mean I had to continue to do the shoot?

It was going to be hard enough for me to keep my shit together around her. Just looking at her picture, I was already hard. The problem was, I didn’t know what exactly we were supposed to do during this photo shoot. Maybe I would stand there and stare at her from afar. Then I would never have to touch her, and she would never know just how attracted to her I was.

Brock sat in the seat across from me and grinned. “Checking out who you’re going to be protecting?”

I cleared my throat and raised my eyes to his. “I’m researching the client, just as we do before every job.”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Yeah, but...this is different.”

“And how’s that?”

“Well, she’s hot. Most of our clients aren’t this hot.”

He was right about that, but I wasn’t about to let him know that I agreed. I was going to have a hard enough time getting through this without the guys making it worse for me.

“She’s a client, and I will treat her that way.”

“But you can’t really. I mean, you’re supposed to be a model, not yourself. Which means we need to develop a whole new character base for you,” he grinned.

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, you can’t be yourself. There’s no way you’d pass as a model. You’re too rigid.”

“Maybe I have standards.”

He snorted at that. “Nobody in this industry has standards. They like to think they do, but they don’t.”

“And you think she doesn’t?” I asked, holding up her photo.

“She definitely doesn’t,” he said, practically salivating over her image, which just pissed me off.

“Hey, eyes off her!” I snapped. “She’s the job, not some chick for you to chase.”

He nodded at me. “Sure, I gotcha.”

“You get what?”

“You want her. It’s totally understandable. What Royal wants, Royal gets.”

He sat there with a smug smirk on his face. I leaned forward and lowered my voice. “Remember that river behind the property?”

“Yeah.”

“If you don’t stop with this Royal shit, I’m going to drown you there and leave your body for the fish to eat.”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “That’s a good one, except fish don’t eat people. Nice try, though.”

Edu walked up and plopped down in the seat beside him. “So, what are we discussing? Which outfit Royal should wear to meet his Juliette? I think it should be something out of the Renaissance period, you know, to really sell it.”

“Ooh, we could get him a codpiece.”

“Yeah, and he could enter with his sword, riding his brave steed Hercules!”

They burst out laughing, further enraging me. “Will you two shut it? It’s a job. That’s all it is.”

“Yeah, but getting back to that wonderful personality of yours, we should really think about giving it a facelift.”

Edu sucked in a breath, nodding at me. “Definitely. Can you imagine if he made a flowchart for her?”

“Or if he created the poses based on where everyone was standing in the room?” Brock mocked me.

I took off my seatbelt and brought my file to the cockpit, ignoring how they stood immediately and bowed as I walked past them. This job was going to suck if they did that every time I left a room. I pulled the plastic aside and plopped down in the co-pilot’s seat. Scottie glanced over at me as I put my headphones on.

“Why are you sitting up here? I’m not going to crash the plane.”

“I wanted some peace and quiet,” I said, glancing over at him.

“So, you came to me?” he questioned. “Seems odd, but whatever.”

I sighed and rested my head back against the seat. “I need a fucking vacation.”

“Yeah, be careful with that. Thumper went on vacation and was nearly shot.” He looked off with a funny face. “And then FNG shot him. Oh, and he bashed his head in, remember?”

“Yes, I remember,” I gritted out. “I’m not going to Utah.”

“And watch out for those cliffs. You don’t want to fall off those.”

“I said I’m not going to Utah.”

He sighed, “And you’ll have to wear your hair up in that stupid man bun.”

“My hair isn’t stupid. And it doesn’t matter because I’m not going to Utah,” I snapped.

“That’s definitely a man bun,” he snorted. “And man buns are stupid. I thought you knew this.”

“Mine isn’t a man bun. That’s for hipsters that want to look like lumberjacks. My hair is handsome and sexy.”

He nodded, then burst out laughing. “I’m sorry, were you being serious about that?”

“About what?”

“The whole handsome thing. Can hair be handsome?”

“Why are we even talking about this?” I asked in frustration. “I came up here to get away from stupid questions.”

Again, he nodded at me. “So, no stupid questions, but stupid hair is fine. Gotcha.”

“My hair is not stupid!”

“If it wasn’t, you wouldn’t be the leading star in this wonderful photo shoot. I can’t wait to see what they make you wear. Do you think they’ll put you in a loincloth?”

I unbuckled and stood.

“Maybe it’ll be a Tarzan and Jane shoot,” he continued.

I pulled back the plastic.

“How’s your O face?” he asked as I yanked the plastic back into place. “Royal?”

I turned around, glowering at Edu and Brock as they stood in front of me, bent at the waist with an arm stretched out. If only it wasn’t against the rules to kill teammates. I bet if I was Fox I could get away with it. I might have to give him a call on this trip.



# JULIETTE

“Juliette!”

I jerked upright in bed, pushing the curtain of hair out of my face. I wiped the dried drool from my face and rubbed my tired eyes. I had fallen back asleep, which I never did. I was a hard sleeper, but I didn’t usually doze after the alarm went off.

I scrambled to look at the clock on the nightstand. I had one of those old pink box alarm clocks, the same one I had since I was a kid. It still had a cassette tape player in the front. If I had a cassette tape, you’d bet I’d be rocking out to it in the morning.

“Juliette!” Andrew called again.

The clock read eight-thirty. “Shit!” I shouted, scrambling out of bed. I was late, and this was not the day to be late. It was the first day of the *Temptation* photo shoot with the new male model. We hadn’t met yet and we were supposed to arrive early to get in some test shots before we got started. It was going to be a long day, which was why I went to bed early last night. Apparently, my run had worn me out more than I thought.

I flung the covers off and dashed into the bathroom. Andrew was going to yell at me so much when he realized I was just getting up. I turned the water on and jumped into the shower, shrieking at the cold water as it hit me. I shoved my head under the water for an instant wakeup, shivering as the water sluiced over my body. Then I flipped it to hot. There was no way I was showering in cold water.

The door flew open, and the only reason I didn’t jump out of my skin was because I had an opaque shower curtain, and this was not the first time my brother barged in to yell at me.

“Juliette, seriously? On the first day of the shoot?”

“I know!” I shouted, rinsing my hair as I furiously scrubbed my body with a loofah.

“You’re supposed to set your alarm.”

“I did set my alarm. I fell back asleep.”

“What? You never fall back asleep.”

I jerked the curtain back just enough for my head to pop out. “I’m aware.”

“Not that this isn’t normal for you. You’re always late.”

“Can we talk about this some other time? Maybe when I’m not trying to quickly shower for this shoot.”

He pulled out his phone and started typing. “I’ll have to call Emilio and let him know we’re running late.”

“I’m not late yet.”

“You haven’t eaten.”

“I never eat,” I retorted.

“And you’ll have to allow time for hair and makeup.”

“That never takes a long time,” I said as the steam built around the bathroom. I turned up the heat just to fog it up out there and piss him off.

“Thank God I got you in for that waxing yesterday.”

I jerked back the curtain again, narrowing my eyes at him. “Excuse me, but I’m the one that made the appointment.”

“Correction, you reminded me you needed to do it. I scrambled at the last minute to get it done.”

“Well, aren’t you just Mr. High and Mighty.”

He smirked at me and reached over to flush the toilet. I shrieked, trying to quickly step out of the water, but I was too late. “You bastard!”

“That’s what you get for trying to fog me out. Learn some new tricks, little sis.”

“Stop calling me little!” I shouted, stomping my foot on the ground.

“Okay,” he laughed, then shut the door behind him. I added conditioner to my hair and brushed it through, then rinsed it thoroughly. Normally, the hair and makeup team liked my hair a tad greasy for easy styling, but since I went for a run last night and got thoroughly soaked in sweat, there was no way I was going to the shoot like that.

I shut off the water and stepped out. After drying off, I lathered up my body with lotion and ran out of the bathroom, slipping on the wet floor in the

process. I screamed as I went down hard, twisting my ankle in the process. Andrew burst into the bedroom and started laughing when he saw me on the floor in only my towel.

“Hell, are you capable of doing anything without injuring yourself?”

“I hardly ever hurt myself, and you know it! Now, if you’ll please leave me alone, I’ll get dressed.”

He saluted me and walked out. I gritted my teeth in anger and gingerly got to my feet. “Ooh, ow. Ooh, ow,” I winced as I walked across the carpet to my bed. I stared down at my ankle and winced at the swelling. That wasn’t good. I wasn’t going to be able to put on heels at this rate.

My brother opened the door again and walked inside with an ice pack. I didn’t even have to tell him these things. He just knew, which pissed me off. “Put your foot up on the bed.”

“I’m in a towel,” I huffed.

“Yep, and we’re not going to get you to Emilio’s unless we work as a team.”

I rolled my eyes and hefted my body fully onto the bed, making sure to keep myself covered. My brother might know a lot about me, but he didn’t need to see me naked.

He walked over to the dresser and pulled out sweats and a t-shirt, then grabbed my bra and panties. He held up two mismatched items and turned to me. “Do these need to match?”

“Can you please not hold up my panties? Do you know how gross that is?”

“It’s only gross if you think it’s gross.”

“Everyone thinks it’s gross!” I shot back. “No brother should hold his sister’s panties!”

He shrugged it off like he did everything else. “I fold your laundry on occasion, and I touch them then.”

“Well, you shouldn’t! Those are private things.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard you having sex before. Touching your panties can’t be worse than that,” he said as he shut the drawer and walked over to me, tossing my stuff on the bed. “Now, do you need help or can I leave before this gets really awkward?”

I narrowed my eyes at him, and the only reason I didn’t yell was because I knew he was joking. “Leave.”

“Five minutes. If you’re not done, I’m sending Ethan in here.”



That wouldn't be the end of the world. Ethan and I had a thing years ago. It never amounted to much. I had been drunk, and he was trying to keep me from doing something I might regret. I yelled at him, then kissed him, then almost gave him a blowjob. Thankfully, he pretended it never happened, and I pretended I was another woman altogether. My brother never found out, and if he did, I was pretty sure I would be in more trouble than Ethan.

After getting dressed, I flung the door open, irritated to find Ethan waiting for me. "I've been instructed to carry you downstairs."

I barked out a laugh. "Oh, I don't think so. You're not—ah!" I screamed as he picked me up and carried me toward the stairs. "What are you doing?"

"Getting you to the car. Andrew said we're running late."

"We're always running late," I sighed, wrapping my arm around his neck so at least I was comfortable for the trip downstairs.

"Maybe you should get up earlier."

"Maybe you should...dammit!" I shouted as I once again failed to come up with something clever to say.

He chuckled, smoothly opening the door while still carrying me. I saw Andrew grab my bag and run out behind him, closing the door and quickly making his way around Ethan to get the car door.

"Just toss her in the trunk," Andrew grinned. "They'll clean her up anyway. And then I won't have to hear her gripe the whole way to the shoot."

"Ha ha," I glared at him. "You're so funny."

"I know." He smiled at me in that teasing way he always did, then slid in behind me and helped me shuffle across the seat, even though I was perfectly capable of doing it on my own.

"Alright," he said, opening his organizer. "You're doing the test at ten—"

"Wait, is it actually ten, or is this one of those times you tell me ten, but it's really at three in the afternoon?"

He watched me carefully, then shrugged. "I guess you'll find out. Anyway, you have the test shoot first. Then, you'll get your hair and makeup done. The model you're working with is Royal Forsythe. He's—"

I held up my hand, stopping him from saying any more. "I'm sorry, did you just say his name is Royal?"

"Yes."

"And I'm expected to call him that?"

He slowly looked up at me. "Um...it's his name, so I would say yes."

I shook my head, crossing my arms over my chest. "No, I'm not calling

him that. It's a stupid name."

"Then what are you going to call him?"

"I don't know, but..."

"But what? Cat got your tongue?"

I glared at him as he handed over the picture of Royal. He wasn't bad looking. I mean, he had lots of tattoos, which were probably fine. He was very muscular, unlike most of the models I worked with. And that hair...I wasn't usually attracted to men with long hair, but there was something about his that made me want to run my fingers through it.

"So?" Andrew asked.

I swallowed hard as I continued to study his photo. Okay, he was damn impressive and my girls were perking up at just his picture. This was not going to be good.

"He's fine," I said, handing the picture back to Andrew.

"He's fine? The man is sex on a stick."

"And you know this because?"

He lounged back in his seat, always knowing when he was getting to me. "I'm comfortable enough as a man to admit when other men are good-looking. He's easily the sexiest man you've ever done a shoot with. Which is great considering that this is his first time."

My jaw dropped as I struggled to comprehend what he just said. "I'm sorry, he's what?"

"Yep, he's a model virgin. You get to break him in."

"No," I said immediately. "Emilio promised me someone good."

"And he is good. Look at that photo. His eyes will devour you in the photos."

"Okay, but that doesn't mean he can actually do this! Modeling isn't for everyone!"

He sighed heavily and sank back further. "Look, modeling is about chemistry. And if you keep looking at him like you want to lick every inch of him, you'll have no problem getting the shots we need."

"Unless he's stiff and useless!"

"Let's hope for your sake he is stiff."

My face flushed red and I huffed out an exasperated grumble as I turned away from him. I would not let him or my brother get to me. I was a professional, and I didn't let anything get in my way. Not sexy men with gorgeous, long hair. And definitely not men that had never stepped foot in a

studio before. I could handle this. And I wouldn't even bat an eye doing it.

I ran into Emilio's studio, stuffing a breakfast burrito in my mouth. My heels clacked on the floor as I hurried inside, swollen ankle be damned. My purse was hanging by a thread from my shoulder as I held my treasured breakfast in my hand. I was still starving, and Andrew was holding the rest of my food ransom until I got my ass inside and ran the test shoot.

"Uh her!"

Emilio frowned at me, staring at my stuffed face. "What?"

I sighed, chewing faster as I dropped my purse and grabbed the coffee from the table in front of me. Emilio stared at me in horror as I downed the drink, burning my tongue in the process. I nearly choked to death on the disgusting taste of the unsweetened caffeinated drink.

"Oh my God," I wheezed. "What is that? Emilio, since when do you drink black coffee?"

"I don't," he said, staring at me like a lunatic.

"Then why do you have it here? That's disgusting."

"That's because it's mine," a deep voice said from behind me.

I spun around and faced the man I was supposed to do the test shoot with. My mouth dropped open in absolute amazement. His body was even more gorgeous in person. Those rippling muscles had my thighs clenching to keep the growing pool of desire firmly in place. And his long hair was damp as if it was that way on purpose, hanging just over his shoulders in the most beautiful way.

"Do you normally drink other people's coffee?" he grumbled.

"I..."

I suddenly found myself unable to speak. If Andrew walked in here right now, he would laugh at me. I was never at a loss for words unless a witty comeback was required. But as his eyes roamed over me, it made it even harder to form a sentence.

*Pull yourself together, you idiot!*

I straightened my shoulders and acted like the professional I was. "Your coffee is disgusting."

*Yeah, that really showed him.* Insert eye roll. That was pathetic even to a

child's ears. Man, I really had to work on keeping my wits about me when he was in the room or I'd never survive the weeks-long shoot.

"It wasn't meant for you, so it really doesn't matter if it's disgusting." His eyes flicked to Emilio's. "Are we getting started anytime soon, or are we waiting on the princess?"

I was immediately put on edge by his cutting words. I was no princess. I worked harder than anyone I knew. It was why so many photographers wanted to work with me. Plus, I was super nice and had the best kind of personality. I just happened to run late a lot. But I made up for it in the studio.

"The princess will be ready in just a few minutes," Andrew announced as he walked into the room, straight to the sexy man who judged me without knowing me. I couldn't decide if I wanted to sleep with him or hate him. It was a toss-up at this point.

"Andrew Cassinelli, Juliette's brother and manager," he said, holding out his hand to the massive beast in front of me.

I watched as he gritted his teeth, but held out his hand. He had some definite anger management issues. "Royal Forsythe," he bit out, as if he hated the name.

My brother's lips twitched with humor, and I watched in fascination as something passed between the two of them. What the hell was going on?

"Juliette, you should get ready," Andrew said, finally tearing his gaze away from Royal so he could give me that *get moving* glare.

"I'll just be two seconds."

"Please, take your time. We have nowhere else to be," Royal said as I turned my back to him. I paused and glanced over my shoulder at him. I was going to claw his eyes out by the time this day was over.

I hurried over to the counter on the far wall and plopped my purse down. I'd worry about putting everything away when the test shoot was over. Andrew appeared at my side with my iced coffee and smirked at me as I quickly downed a few tasty gulps.

"Go get 'em, tiny," he grinned as he slapped me on the shoulder.

I would have glared at him, but I didn't have time for him right now. I rushed over to Royal and stood beside him, awaiting Emilio's instruction.

"Alright, let's get in a few warmup shots. Just do whatever feels natural."

I turned to Royal and placed my hand on his hard pec. Holy shit, that was unlike anything I'd felt before. All the other male models I worked with had

nice bodies, but never a pec that bounced under my touch. I found myself easily sliding my hands over his body, yet after a few moments, noticed that he was standing there stiff as a board.

“Um...Royal, you have to touch her,” Emilio said, stepping out from behind his camera. “This is supposed to be seductive, so you’re going to need to pretend that you’re attracted to her.”

I huffed in irritation at that. No one had ever needed to pretend to be attracted to me before. There was a natural chemistry with all models that I seemed to have no problem pulling out of them. Sure, there had been one or two that just didn’t work, but that was usually for models that were complete assholes.

“Just do whatever feels right,” I guided him. “It’s just a test shoot.”

He looked down at me, a look of confusion on his face. That’s when I remembered that he was a newbie and probably didn’t understand any of this.

“He just wants to get the lighting right and see what poses might be most natural for us. It gives him an idea of what to do with clothing and future sets.”

“Okay,” he said slowly.

“So, just do whatever feels natural to you.”

“None of this feels natural,” he muttered under his breath.

I cleared my throat and pretended not to be offended by his comments. He could mean literally anything. It might not even have anything to do with me.

“Alright, let’s try this again,” Emilio said.

I ran my hand up his chest and tried my best not to sigh at how good it felt to touch him. But damn, he was like God’s gift to women, and not in a bad way, but in a very sexy Roman God kind of way. I lifted my eyes to look into his, hoping he would get the idea and start moving in some way. If I couldn’t get him to work with me, this shoot was going to be a bust before it even started.

But then his hand slid around my waist, gripping my side as he pulled me closer. I gasped as my body was pressed flush against his. I felt my foot involuntarily flick up in the air, as if I was a Disney princess being kissed for the first time. Then his eyes met mine and we stared at each other, caught in this heated moment. His fingers bit into my side and my hand slid to his bicep, squeezing lightly as I held on for dear life.

My body started to overheat the longer I stared into those gorgeous eyes.

And then my hand moved on its own, sliding up into his hair. I fingered the long strands, my mind jumping ship and diving into the ocean of dreams where he took me to bed and had his way with me. My fingers would be tangled in his hair as he thrust inside me, making me gasp with pleasure. Every single thrust—

“Alright, that should be good,” Emilio said, snapping the connection between us.

I cleared my throat and untangled myself from Royal’s arms. I refused to look at him as I turned and faced Emilio. His grin told me all I needed to know. Not only was this going to work, it was everything he was hoping for and more. Which meant I was going to have to work with this man and somehow keep my libido under control.

“Perfect,” I said, putting on my professional face. “Then let’s move on to hair and makeup.”

I walked off set, ignoring Andrew’s knowing look as I passed. “Shut it.”

“I didn’t say a word,” he grinned as I passed.

He didn’t need to. We both knew I’d never done a shoot with anyone that had as much chemistry with me as Royal. I felt it from the moment we touched. And that was dangerous because it could only end badly. With my heart crushed.



# LOCK

I watched her sexy ass sway as she walked off set. This was going to be pure fucking torture. It wasn't just that she was by far the sexiest woman I'd ever laid eyes on. It was the way her eyes sparkled when she looked up at me. The way her hands slid over my body in the most seductive way. She was a temptress and I was supposed to work with her for the unforeseeable future, all the while protecting her. How the hell was I supposed to do that when I couldn't keep my hands off her?

Brock snickered as he typed something out on his phone. "Nice shoot. I think you got the job."

"I hate you," I muttered.

"Just remember what you're here for."

I jerked my gaze to his face, narrowing my eyes at him. "I know exactly why I'm here."

His grin widened as he stared at me. "And you said you couldn't do this job. It looked to me like you had things under control out there. You're a born model."

It was easy to do the job when I had a beautiful woman in my arms. I didn't have to pretend to like her. Everything felt natural when she was with me. And that was a bad thing. I was supposed to be protecting her.

"Whatever. Have there been any more reports since we arrived?"

"None. It could have been a one-off, in which case, this is totally pointless aside from the extreme thrill I get out of seeing you do this job."

"Where are Edu and Scottie?" I asked, trying to ignore his comments.

"They're doing a perimeter check. Can you flick your hair for me?"

"And what about forensics?"



“Clean. When you were holding her, what were you thinking about?”

“And her townhouse?”

“Scottie and Edu are heading over in a little bit to take care of security. Were you thinking about kissing her? Because it sort of looked like you were.”

I continued to ignore him, trying my best not to look at him. I was afraid he would see right through me. “I want a report as soon as they’re finished.”

“Sure, as long as you’re not in the middle of gripping her ass or something. Cuz, frankly, the two of you would make great porn together.”

I finally looked at him, letting him know with just one look that I didn’t find him funny. “This is a job. It’s not a set on *Fantasy Island* or *The Love Boat*. We’re doing a job.”

His brows furrowed. “You know what *The Love Boat* is?”

“Just keep it professional,” I bit out.

“Sure, as long as you do.” He snapped his fingers as if he just remembered something. “That’s right, you have to pretend to be in love with her.”

I stepped forward and lowered my voice. “What I have to do is my fucking job, which is to keep her safe. You may find this whole thing hilarious, but I take my job very seriously.”

“As you should.” He was trying to keep a straight face, but the twitch of his lips gave him away. I would punch him if it wouldn’t draw attention to us.

“Royal,” someone called out from behind me.

I almost didn’t answer. But then Brock slapped me on the shoulder. “You’re up! Go get ‘em.”

Was it wrong to murder a friend? Say, if they were really pissing you off and they deserved it. Was that technically wrong? Or did they have it coming because they knew what buttons not to push but did it anyway? Some would say that friend should have used better judgment. I bet if I posed it the right way, even I could win in a court of law. Then again, I had Fox on my side. I was pretty sure he could get rid of the body without anyone noticing, and not even blink an eye.

I turned and walked over to the chair where a makeup artist was waiting for me. I grimaced as the man patted the chair. “This is going to be an amazing shoot. I’m so glad I get the opportunity to work with you, Royal.”

“Likewise,” I muttered, trying my best not to be an asshole. Out of everyone here, Emilio and Andrew were the only ones aware of who I was.

To everyone else, I was a model, and I needed to get along with everyone I worked with. Otherwise, I wouldn't get any help from anyone on set.

He jabbered on about the shoot, about how nice my skin was, and what he was going to do to bring out my eyes. Frankly, I was bored out of my mind. And the feel of makeup on my skin made me itch. I couldn't imagine why women wore this shit. I wanted to scratch my skin and get every last scrap of it off my face.

I saw a flash in the mirror and tore the makeup protector from around my neck as I stood and stormed over to Brock, snatching the phone out of his hand. Unfortunately, I was too late. He'd already sent the photo to everyone at OPS. It would no doubt garner a lot of laughs from my teammates and give them something to laugh about for the next year.

"Royal!"

I deleted the photo and shoved it back at Brock. "Try to be professional."

He snorted a laugh. "I'm really trying, man, but it's hard."

"Then maybe I should replace you."

"And you think it would be better to have one of the other guys in here?"

I knew it wouldn't. No matter who was here, I'd have to deal with their shit.

"Royal!" the voice called out again.

I turned around and stared at Emilio. "Yeah?"

"We need you to finish getting ready so we can get started."

Despite knowing who I really was, Emilio still had a job to do. I couldn't ruin this for him, no matter how much I hated it. I walked back over to makeup and finished getting ready. A few chairs over, Juliette was laughing with her makeup artist. Her eyes danced as she laughed over some story, and her smile captivated me.

I watched as her nails tapped gently on the wood of the chair as she spoke, and her feet dangled in the air. She was so short I wondered if she had to hop up into the chair. Her flip flop fell to the floor and her toes wiggled with freedom. She had on a nude color polish that made her delicate feet look sexy as hell.

I shifted in my chair, imagining her toes running up the inside of my thigh as she teased me from across the table. Her toes would skim over my already hard dick, running along the outline through my pants. I ran my fingers over her toes—

I internally groaned when I realized I was fantasizing over her feet. This

had to stop. I had been around her a whole ten minutes and already couldn't keep my mind out of the gutter. I was a professional. I wouldn't be swayed by fantasies that would only get me into trouble.

I ignored her over the next hour as my stylist did all kinds of crazy shit to my hair. I did my best to keep a straight face so he couldn't see my disgust at all the product he used. I was going to need a massive shower when this was all done.

My eyes flicked to Juliette again, and this time she was eating, stuffing what looked like fast food in her mouth. How the hell did she eat that shit and stay as skinny as she was? I shook my head as I went back to ignoring her.

"Hey, man," Andrew said as he walked up to me. His eyes shifted to his sister's momentarily before returning to me. "How are things going? Enjoying the job?"

I glared at him, showing him my displeasure. "Peachy."

He nodded, shifting slightly as he slid a note to me when no one was looking. I opened it and read the cursive script hastily written.

*Bitch.*

That was it. Well, aside from the childish hangman drawing beside it.

"Where did you get this?"

"On the car windshield."

I folded it back up and stuffed it in my pocket. "No other threats?"

He shook his head. "I was going to have security check the cameras from the parking lot, but they said the cameras haven't worked in two years."

"I'll have Brock look into it," I said, keeping my voice low. "Don't let her know about this."

He frowned at me. "Why? She's not scared."

"She should be. Even if this is nothing, crazy people are dangerous. But I don't want her to know what's going on until we have more information."

"You're her security," he sighed, walking away.

"Five minutes!" Emilio called out. "I'd like to get the first part of this shoot done before we leave for the day!"

I was in hell. She was so natural, staring up at me with those big eyes. And I was like a bull in a china shop. I had no idea what to do with my hands, and

when Emilio gave me instruction, I ended up fucking it all up. I didn't know how to be a model. Hell, every time he told me to flick my hair, I ended up smacking her in the face with it. I wasn't used to wearing my hair down, and I sure as hell wasn't used to posing for a camera.

Juliette sighed when once again I failed to get the pose right for the camera.

"Alright, let's take five!" Emilio shouted.

Juliette stifled a groan and walked away. Her tiny body swayed as she sashayed away from me. Her heels clicked on the floor with every step she took, and I couldn't help but stare at her ass in that sexy, short dress that bordered on indecent.

"Royal," Emilio called me over.

Sighing, I walked over to him, shoving my hands in my pockets as I approached. "Yeah?"

He pursed his lips as he stared at me thoughtfully. "You have a natural attraction to Juliette, but you're holding it back. I need you to unleash that."

I stared at him, not understanding what he was saying.

"It's not that hard. Make love to her."

My eyes bugged out. "Excuse me?"

"Not literally." He sighed heavily. "You're too worried about the camera. Stop thinking and just pretend that it's just you and her in the room and you're desperate to have her."

"Emilio, this isn't what I do—"

"I need you to trust me on this. Don't worry about the camera. Just be yourself."

I snorted at that. "I don't think you really want that."

He stared at me for a moment, then pressed his fingers to his lips. "Would music help?"

My eyebrows shot up at that. "You...you think I would do better with music?"

"It's not unheard of."

"I'm pretty sure that would not help."

"It's not about getting you in the mood as much as drowning out everyone else in the room."

"I guess it couldn't hurt to try," I muttered.

"Just forget the rest of us are here."

I nodded and walked back to my position. Juliette looked stressed,

probably because of me, but she smiled at me as I stopped beside her.

“You just need to loosen up,” she nodded. “It’ll be fine.”

I was surprised she was being so nice about this. I really thought she would bite my head off for being so horrible at this. Emilio hit the music and 80’s music filled the room. It wasn’t exactly what I would have put on to get in the mood, but it would have to do.

I shook out my arms and cracked my neck. I could do this. The sooner I got this over with, the sooner I could get back to my job.

“Alright, Royal, wrap your arm around Juliette’s waist and pull her against you.”

I did as he said, nearly crushing her to me when I pulled harder than I thought. She winced in pain, but recovered quickly, pressing her hands to my chest. A fan kicked on somewhere and my hair blew into my face. I quickly thrust my hand up into my hair, shoving it to the other side of my head, but just as I was doing that, her ring caught on my shirt and got stuck.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, trying to extract her finger from the cloth.

“Here, let me.”

“No, I just need to—” She frowned as she tried to yank the ring free.

“I’ve got it,” I said, wrapping my hand around hers. Her breath caught at the contact and she stared at my chest for a good ten seconds while I memorized every inch of her face from the cute freckles the makeup artist tried desperately to cover, down to the small mole on the right side of her jaw. Her cute little nose was turned up slightly at the tip, and those plump lips begged for me to kiss them.

Slowly, her eyes met mine, and I was captivated. I couldn’t look away if I wanted to. She caught me in her snare with those big eyes that swam with so many questions. What would it be like to touch her, to kiss her? What would it be like to wrap my arms around her and haul her up against my body and feel her skin against mine? Would I break her if I took her to bed?

Before I even realized it, I was just a centimeter from her lips, her breath mingling with mine as we stared into each other’s eyes. I lifted my hand without realizing it, running my thumb along her lip, wondering what it would be like to taste her, to feel her lips on mine. Her eyes fluttered as she gasped when my hand slid down her neck and my fingers pressed against her carotid. Her pulse raced under my touch. She wanted me.

“Alright, that’s a wrap!” Emilio shouted.

I swallowed hard as she quickly pulled away from me. I felt like the

connection between us was suddenly torn away, and I was left reeling. She smiled up at me, but it wasn't the same smile she gave everyone else. She was nervous.

"That was amazing!" Emilio said as he walked over, laughing. He wrapped his arms around both of us and pulled us closer to him. "See? You just needed to get into it. That was the perfect start to our series. And it gives me some great ideas for our next shoot. I was going to go a different route, but now we'll have to rework this whole thing. This is going to be even better than I imagined!"

With that, he turned away and started barking orders to his assistants. I just stood there like an idiot. I hadn't even realized he'd been taking pictures. I was so lost in my head as I stared at Juliette that a shooter could have been in the room and I wouldn't have noticed.

I stepped back, then took another step further away from her. She was dangerous. I had to stay away from her. I ran my hand through my hair with a heavy sigh just as Brock approached me.

Before he could say a word, I shot him a dangerous look. He wisely kept his mouth shut as he handed me my phone. It was a message from Cash.

*Call me immediately.*

It was time to get back to work. With a final glance at Juliette, I stormed toward the door and shoved it open. I quickly headed for the street where I could think without the interruption of her intoxicating looks and called Cash.

"You called?" I said as soon as he picked up.

"We have a problem."

"What's that?"

"There was a murder...one of the girls Juliette worked with on a previous job. She was found hanging from the rafters of a photo shoot she had been at last night."

"How can you be sure it wasn't suicide?" I asked, though the earlier note instantly popped into my head.

"There was no chair underneath her, nothing at all that she could have stood on. And no way for her to climb up to the rafters. Someone killed her and left a note for Juliette."

My whole body went on alert as I glanced around the area, looking for anything suspicious. "What did it say?"

"The countdown begins."

I gritted my teeth and instantly went into work mode. "I'll find a way to

stay with her at her townhouse.”

“Will she allow that?”

“I’ll make sure it happens. Her brother can help me out.”

“Stay frosty. I have a bad feeling about this.”

I did too. And it wasn’t just because of whoever was chasing after Juliette. My attraction to her would be very bad for this job, and that could get her killed. I would have to find a way to keep my distance from her and fast.





## JULIETTE

I finished washing the makeup from my face and smoothed on some moisturizer. My fingers slowed as I massaged the cream around my lips. I could still feel his thumb caress my skin. My whole body felt like it was on fire just from that one touch. I'd never felt anything like that while modeling. Sure, the men were handsome, but they were usually so vain, so obsessed with their looks. I got along with them well because we all loved to model, but that was where the interest ended.

It was different with Royal, though. Maybe it was because this was his first time. He hadn't been jaded by the business or seen his body in a major ad campaign yet. That was probably why my attraction to him was so strong, and why I had to stay away. I wanted a man that wasn't obsessed with himself, and eventually, Royal would turn out just like the rest of them.

I zipped my case closed and opened the door to the bathroom, almost walking right into Andrew. "Excuse you."

"You're excused," he smirked. "So, before we head home, there's something we need to discuss."

"Yeah? What's that?" I asked as I shoved past him.

"Uh...Royal needs a place to stay, and since your townhouse is so large, I told him he could stay with you."

I stopped walking and turned around to face him. "You did what?"

"It's only temporary. We're going to be on the road soon, and you'll be at the same hotel, but for now, it makes sense."

"In what way?" I asked incredulously. "Andrew, you can't just welcome people into my home! I don't even know the man!"

"And what better way to get to know him than to spend some time with

him?”

“I don’t want to spend time with him. My life outside of modeling is my business.”

He sighed heavily, acting like I was the one being dramatic. “Please don’t make this harder than it has to be. The guy is completely new to this business. Would it really kill you to welcome the guy into your home?”

“Yes, it may very well kill me,” I retorted. “How do you know that he’s not a murderer?”

Andrew smirked at me. “Are you normally attracted to murderers?”

“Why would you ask that?”

He leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. “Emilio said this is some of the best work he’s ever seen from you. It’s the kind of thing you can only get when two people are really attracted to each other.”

“Yeah? Well, Emilio can shove it,” I said, turning and stomping away. I grabbed my purse and stormed toward the door. Royal was already waiting for me, and the way his eyes tracked me made me feel all sorts of things I shouldn’t feel, especially to a man I had to work with over the next few weeks.

I stomped past him down the stairs and out the front door, but he was right on my ass the whole time. He even walked ahead of me and got the door to the car. I did my best to ignore him and slid inside, crossing my arms over my chest as he got in beside me. Andrew sat up front with Ethan, even though he normally sat with me. That only pissed me off more.

“So, where do you live?” Royal asked conversationally.

“I guess you’ll find out soon enough,” I snapped, not bothering to look at him.

“I really appreciate this. Andrew said it was your idea to let me stay with you.”

I slowly turned my head to face the gorgeous man beside me. “Oh, he did, did he?”

“You have no idea how much this means to me. I’ll stay out of your way, but it’ll be nice to know that I’m not alone in all this.”

I snorted. Like I was actually going to do anything to help him. I would show him to his room and stay firmly on my side of the townhouse. I wasn’t even sure that I had sheets on the bed in the other room. The only person that ever stayed there was Andrew when we got back late at night from a trip.

“So, how did you get into modeling?”

I sighed, not at all interested in this conversation. “Look, I’m really tired. Maybe we can do this whole meet and greet thing another time.”

“Sure,” he nodded, but his eyes never left mine. I found it unnerving the way he stared at me. No man should watch a woman like he was watching me...like he wanted to devour me.

Thankfully, the drive back to the townhouse didn’t take very long, and before he could say another word, I was out the door and headed up the stairs. But for some reason, he jogged ahead of me and took the lead. I wasn’t sure what the hell he was doing, or how he thought he would get into my townhouse without my keys, but I sure as hell wasn’t handing them over to him.

When I got to my door, he was waiting with his hand held out. “Can I have your keys?”

My hackles rose at his demand. “No, they’re my keys.”

“I just want to check out your townhouse before we go inside.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“To make sure it’s safe.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, getting really pissed off at how he was acting. “I think I can make it into my townhouse like I have every day before I met you.” I shoved him aside and stuck my key in the lock, then turned the doorknob and walked in. But before I could get any further inside, he was storming through the townhouse as if he was looking for someone.

I turned around, nostrils flaring in anger as Andrew followed us up. “What the fuck?”

“He’s...protective.”

“Of what? This is *my* townhouse!”

He shrugged, then slapped me on the shoulder. “I appreciate you doing this. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“You can’t just leave me here with him!”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s a stranger!” I nearly shrieked. “What kind of brother are you?”

“Look, I already checked him out. He’s harmless. Ex-military,” he said, as if that made everything better. Like no one could go into the military and then murder someone. It was against the laws of physics or...insanity!

“Oh, that makes me feel better,” I snarled. “At least I know when he kills me, he’ll be able to do it efficiently.”

“See? Bright side!” my brother grinned. “See you in the morning, little one.”

I slammed the door in his face and turned around, only to stop in my tracks when the Royal bastard stood in front of me looking just as good as he did in the studio. “What?” I snapped.

“Thanks for letting me stay here.”

Did he really have to keep thanking me? It made me even more of a bitch when I got pissed at him for acting like I was his savior. “Well, now I feel like shit,” I muttered under my breath.

He slowly started walking toward me. I was like one of those animals in the wild, about to be devoured by the sexy lion. That wasn’t happening. I wasn’t about to sleep with a man I was working with.

“No, you’re right to be angry. No woman should ever feel unsafe in her home.”

I swallowed hard the closer he moved. Then he was standing right in front of me, towering over me with a stare that made me quiver with need. It had been months. Months? Maybe longer than months. Maybe closer to a year. But a year was still months, right?

Crap, I was rambling in my head, arguing with myself about months and what constituted months versus a year. I needed to stop talking to myself—to stop thinking about months. Then again, that kept me from thinking about how much I wanted him to lean in and brush his thumb over my lip again, maybe give it a little nip.

I pulled myself out of the trance of his eyes and hurried around him to my room. I slammed the door without a second thought and leaned against it breathing hard. “Stupid, Juliette. Keep it together.”

I needed to get out of here and burn off some of this lust. I pushed off the door and stormed over to my dresser to grab my running gear. Usually, I went after dinner, but I wouldn’t make it that long. I needed to wear myself out until the only thing I was thinking of was sleep.

After quickly changing, I threw open my door, only to stop in my tracks when I saw Royal in running gear, stretching in my living room.

“What are you doing?” I asked, wondering if he was somehow spying on me.

He stood up and eyed my workout outfit. “The same thing as you.”

“And that would be?”

“Going for a run.”

“No,” I shook my head. “No, you are not running with me. I run alone.”

He held up his hands. “I won’t run beside you. I’ll run behind you.”

“That’s creepy,” I argued. “Do you think I want you behind me, staring at my ass the whole time?”

“Why would I be staring at your ass?”

My jaw dropped at the confused look on his face. The audacity of him. Now I was insulted. Seriously, was he saying that my ass wasn’t worth staring at? In a huff, I stomped past him, refusing to acknowledge him. I grabbed my phone and earbuds off the charger and then grabbed my key, heading for the door. I stormed out in a flurry, then turned and nearly lost my shit when I saw him still standing inside.

“Are you coming?”

“Water?”

“There’s a fountain at a park halfway through. If you think you can make it that far,” I said in a snarky tone.

“I think I can keep up,” he smirked at me.

I highly doubted that, and I would enjoy the challenge. It would give me something to concentrate on other than his big muscles, gorgeous eyes, and tight abs. At least he was wearing a shirt.

“Fine, then let’s go.”

He pulled the door shut behind him as we walked out. After locking the door, I followed him downstairs and tried not to stare at him. I would not watch him run. I would not look at him at all. I was stronger than my carnal urges.

Oh my God, his ass was making it difficult to breathe. He kept running ahead of me, then dropping back behind me. And every time he ran ahead of me, I got a prime view of his tight ass. It was making it difficult to draw a full breath because I nearly choked on my own spit.

I had to stop this. I would not obsess over him. And the only way to get around it was to get ahead of him where I couldn’t stare at him any longer. As if a burst of energy hit me, I ran harder and went flying past him. I pushed myself more than I ever had before, almost to the breaking point. I could hear Royal yelling at me to slow down, but I didn’t care. I kept going until I hit the

halfway point, then I slowed and stopped by the fountain, pacing back and forth until I calmed down and Royal caught up.

After getting a long drink of water, I stretched my legs and caught my breath. As soon as Royal's back was turned to me, I took off back home. I heard him shout at me, but kept going. I pushed too hard for the first quarter mile and started to lag. I wasn't going to be able to keep up this pace. I was already losing steam and then he would catch up to me.

And just a few seconds later, he ran past me and turned and ran backward, smirking at me the whole time. "Did you think you could outrun me?"

"Can I run in peace?" I asked.

"You can if you can get ahead of me."

I narrowed my eyes at him. I wasn't sure I had anything left in the tank, but I never backed down from a challenge. I forced myself to run faster. The stitch in my side was painful, but it was all worth it when I surpassed him. I kept going until I saw my townhouse in the distance. I was so close. I would not lose.

The moment I hit the grass outside, I turned with my arms raised in the air in victory. "Ha!" I panted, barely able to get any other noises out past the wheezing. But the longer I stood here, the more I realized my legs were turning to jelly. Within seconds, I collapsed on the ground in a heap of exhaustion. Sprawled out on the grass, I stared up at the sky, breathing hard. Fuck it, I'd just sleep out here.

Royal appeared over me, smirking down at me. "You okay?"

I nodded, giving him a slight thumb's up. I wanted to talk, but my throat was so raw that I wasn't sure it was possible.

"Give me your hand. I'll help you up."

I shook my head. "I'll just stay here."

"In the grass?"

I nodded in a roundabout fashion. "It's cool."

"It's cool inside. You have air conditioning."

"Yeah, but I would have to get up," I mumbled.

He sighed, then bent over and grabbed me. I yelped as he lifted me as if I weighed nothing. Then I was tossed over his shoulder as he headed for the door.

"What are you doing?" I shrieked.

"Taking you inside."

Then his hand slid into my pocket and pulled out my key. I would have argued, but I'd already given up and let my body fall against his back. I couldn't fight him if I wanted to. He was up the stairs in no time, as if we hadn't just gone on a long run and exhausted ourselves. When he let us inside, he walked right over to the couch and dumped me unceremoniously on it. I just laid there, unable to move a muscle. I ached everywhere and was exhausted from the day.

"What do you want for dinner?"

"Nothing," I said, my face smooshed into the couch.

"You have to eat something," his low voice rumbled from above me.

I knew I shouldn't have done it, but I looked up at him and sighed. He really was very beautiful...in a very masculine way.

"You look sweaty," I said, without thinking twice about it.

Turns out, that was the wrong thing to say if I wanted him to stay fully clothed. His hands drifted to the hem of his shirt, and then he stood before me, crossing his arms in front of him as he slowly pulled his shirt up over his tight abs. The sweat circle on the front of his shirt slowly disappeared as he pulled the shirt up over his head as if in slow motion. I was powerless to turn my head away and stop looking. His muscles flexed as he slipped the shirt over his head, his ponytail falling out in the process. His hair fell in sweaty tendrils around his face as he shook it out. His arms fell to his sides with his shirt lazily hanging from his fingertips. But I wasn't looking at that.

I was pretty sure my jaw was hanging open as I stared at the magnificent specimen in front of me. "Holy shit," I whispered. "That's so unfair."

His lips tilted up slightly as he walked closer to me, then knelt down in front of me. "Do I need to carry you to the shower?"

I nodded without thinking about it. He lifted me easily, this time cradling my body to his. I wrapped my arms around his neck and breathed in his sweaty scent. God, he smelled good. Call me crazy, but I loved the smell of a man that earned his sweat.

"Are you sniffing me?" he asked with a chuckle in his voice.

"No," I said instantly, my face flushing as I ducked my head.

He pushed the door to my bathroom open and set me on the counter, then walked over to the shower and turned on the water.

"Hot or cold?"

"Cold," I said instantly. I needed to cool off fast.

I could have sworn I saw a smirk on his face as he turned away from me.

Once the water was running, he stalked back over to me and stood in front of me. “Is there anything else you need?”

*You. Your body on mine. Your cock in my pussy.* I shook my head, shoving my hands under my legs so I didn’t reach out and run my fingers down his sweaty chest. His eyes darkened at the move, but then he was gone, shutting the door behind him.

I finally let out a breath and slid off the counter. I took out my unused phone and earbuds, set them on the counter, then got in the shower. I didn’t even bother to get undressed. The cold water rushed over me, but I was still overheated.

I rested my head against the shower wall and groaned. “This is going to be the longest photo shoot of my life.”





## LOCK

As soon as I heard her get into the shower, I walked away from her bedroom door. Fuck, that was dangerous. I very nearly grabbed her and fucked her in the bathroom. When I took this job, I thought for sure I'd be working with some stuck up chick that was full of herself. And then I saw Juliette.

She was short as fuck, but had the kind of body I could grab onto and fuck hard. There wasn't an inch of her that I didn't want to devour. And when she talked back to me, it made me hard. I had almost kissed her multiple times today, including when I dragged her ass off the grass after she put on that show of beating me back to the house. I wasn't oblivious. I knew she was attracted to me, and she was trying to deny it just as much as I was.

It made me do stupid things like put on a striptease in front of her just to see her reaction. I was never like this. I was always in control, but when I was around her, all I wanted to do was see how she'd react to me. And it was sexy as hell.

Sure, women threw themselves at me. But no women had fought their attraction to me like Juliette did. She was a professional, and she didn't want any attraction to get in the way of her work. I respected the hell out of that. I just wasn't sure how well I'd be able to hold off. We had weeks left of shooting, someone threatening her life, and now I was living with her. It was like I had set myself up for failure.

I walked over to the front door after texting the guys. They were going to meet me downstairs to discuss any developments in the case. Since Juliette didn't know who I was, I couldn't exactly have one of the guys talking openly in front of her.

I shoved the door open and ignored the knowing look on Brock's face.

“What do we have?”

“The townhouse is clear. No one has come near it today,” Edu informed me.

“What about on the run?”

Scottie, who was still in his running gear, shook his head. “We had you covered the whole time without a single person that looked even remotely suspicious. If he’s watching, it’s from a distance.”

“And the model?”

“Annabelle Aramis,” Brock answered. “Twenty-four years old. No known drug use, depression, medications, or trouble with the law. She’s clean. I’m working on cross-referencing her with Juliette, but so far haven’t come up with any links other than the one photo shoot.”

“And the people working on the shoot with them?”

“Still working on it. So far, I haven’t come up with anything.”

I nodded, not liking the sound of that. “What about other women?”

Brock smirked at me. “Like, is Juliette involved with other women? I like the way you think.”

I glared at him. “No, asshole. I meant, what about other women that have worked with Juliette? Is there anyone with a grudge?”

“Not that we can tell so far,” Edu answered. “But I really doubt a woman could have killed Annabelle. The sheer power it would have taken to hoist her body up there...” He shook his head. “This has to be a man.”

“Or a man and woman working together. Let’s not rule anyone out.”

I turned to go back inside, but Edu stopped me. “That’s it? No juicy details?”

“What juicy details? This is a job,” I snapped as I faced him.

“Right, we saw the way you hauled her up over your shoulder.”

“And the way you were staring at her ass on the run,” Scottie grinned. “I actually got a pretty good shot of it from my position.” He pulled out his phone and held it out to me, but I snatched it away from him and deleted the photo.

“This is a job,” I spat. “Juliette is in real danger, and joking around isn’t going to keep her out of trouble.”

“Sorry,” Scottie said, bowing his head. “My apologies, Your Royal Highness.”

Edu and Brock snorted in laughter, but I would not let them get under my skin.

“Enough!” I snapped. “Juliette is off limits. Understood?”

“For you too?” Brock asked. “Because, honestly, what better way to protect her than if you’re in bed with her?”

“Or under her,” Edu grinned. “She looks like a woman that takes charge.”

“And she loosens you up more than growing out your hair ever did,” Brock pointed out. “I think I actually saw you smiling and joking around with her.”

“It’s a job,” I snapped. “I’m doing what I need to fit in.”

“Right, so you fit in,” he hid a grin from me. “Not because you’re attracted to her.”

“Or because you’re already fantasizing about how you want to fuck her,” Brock joined in.

“She. Is. A. Job,” I said slowly, emphasizing every word. “End of story. I don’t want to hear anything more about this. Understood?”

They all bowed simultaneously. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

I rolled my eyes and stormed back into the building, ignoring their snickers. Marching upstairs, I walked back into the townhouse and made sure it was secure. The water in the shower had stopped and it was quiet. I walked over to her bedroom and peeked inside. She was lying facedown on the bed, wrapped only in a towel.

*I should go check on her. Just to make sure she’s actually alive.*

I knocked gently on the door so I didn’t wake her up if she was asleep. And not at all because I wanted a closer look at her. She didn’t move at all, so I crept inside until I was standing right next to the bed. She was breathing deeply and her long eyelashes rested against her cheeks in the most adorable way. Fuck, she was beautiful. Her wet hair hung down her back and spread out across her pillow.

And that towel...it barely covered her ass. Against my better judgment, I lifted the very tip of the towel and got a good look at her beautiful pussy. I groaned internally, then stepped away. Fuck, I was a creeper. I pulled the covers over her from the other side of the bed and stalked out of the room. I needed a shower fast.

I went into my bedroom and shut the door, then flicked the water on in the en suite. I stripped quickly and stepped under the water, gripping my hard cock. With the first stroke, I saw her pussy. With the second, I felt her breasts pushed up against me as I carried her inside. I closed my eyes and jerked my cock hard. Fuck, I wanted her so bad. I was going to have a hard time staying

away from her.

My breathing became labored every time I thought back to the photo shoot. The image of her beautiful lips just an inch from mine was seared into my mind. I fucked my hand hard, coming with a shout as I spilled my cum all over the shower wall. Leaning my forehead against the cool tiles, I knew I hadn't even taken the edge off. Tomorrow would be even harder. That military phrase came back to me in a rush.

*The only easy day was yesterday.*

Fuck, that was going to be my mantra for the rest of this fucking job.

Sleep was hard to come by when all I could think about was Juliette and how much I wanted her. Even her name drove me crazy. *Juliette*. It was gorgeous, just like her. And now I sounded like a sap, daydreaming about a woman and her name.

I quickly dressed and headed into the kitchen to make breakfast. Except, when I opened the fridge, there was nothing inside. Like...literally nothing. Not a condiment or a stick of butter. Nothing. Frowning, I walked over to her pantry and opened it up. If I was expecting something different, I was sorely mistaken. Seriously, it was like she had just moved in and hadn't gone shopping yet. Who did that?

I checked the time on my watch and sighed. I needed to make a list. A *good* list since she had literally nothing in her pantry. But the kind of lists I liked to make took too long for a morning like this. If we were going to stop for breakfast, we would have to leave early, and Juliette wasn't even awake yet. I knocked on her door but got no response. Easing the door open, I saw her still lying facedown in bed.

I slowly walked in and called out to her again. "Juliette?"

She didn't answer, so I walked right up beside her and shook her shoulder gently.

"Kitties and mushrooms," she mumbled.

At least, I thought that was what she mumbled. "What?"

She brushed her hand over her nose and grumbled something else.

"I don't know what you're saying."

"Hashbrowns. Eggs." She sighed heavily. "Coffee."

“I can get you coffee, but we need to leave now.”

She rolled over and her towel fell, exposing her gorgeous breasts. I stared at her, unable to move as she laid spread out for me. Her towel just barely still covered everything below her belly. But those breasts...small, but fucking gorgeous as hell. Her nipples grew hard with the cold air. My fingers itched to reach out and touch them, twirl them in my fingers and make her come...to hear her scream my name.

Her eyes flew open and she gasped as her hands flew over her chest. She screamed and kicked out, nailing me right in the junk. I gasped and bent over, my face bright red as I struggled to suck in air. Pain like this couldn't be understood by any woman. Not even childbirth compared to this.

I saw her jump out of bed and stand in some karate stance over me. “What the hell are you doing?” she shouted. “Who does that? Who stands in someone's room like a creeper first thing in the morning? What is wrong with you?” she shouted, then unleashed a kick that landed right in my stomach.

I would have tried to block the next kick also, but I was too busy struggling not to puke. Fuck, this was not how I saw things going when I decided to wake her up.

She was breathing heavily over me, still naked as the day she was born. But not even that could help me recover from the massive hit my balls took. And my cock...he was shriveled up and crawling desperately inside my body to get away from the dangerous woman in front of me.

“Juliette!”

I really hoped she covered up before her brother walked in here. That was my first thought. The second was that I hoped he didn't decide to come in and kick me some more. I was already down and out.

Juliette rushed around the room and grabbed a robe before her brother entered the room. I could feel his eyes on my back, but I couldn't move or speak if I wanted to.

“What's going on?”

“You want to know what's going on? You told him he could stay here, and then I found him watching me this morning while I was naked!”

There was a pause and then he asked, “Why were you naked?”

“That's beside the point! It's my townhouse. I can be naked if I want!”

Even in my desperate condition, I heard the chuckle in his voice. “Not if you don't want a man to see you naked. Seriously, what did you do to him?”

I wheezed in a breath. “She kicked me in the balls.”

His feet came into view as he bent down in front of me. The sympathy on his face was clear as day. So, I wasn't alone. Maybe some woman kicked him in the balls before too. "Damn, are you gonna be okay?"

"You're asking him if he's going to be okay?" Juliette shrieked. "He was standing over me in my bedroom!"

He nodded in understanding. "Yeah, it happened to me once. Not the same situation, but she was wearing heels. Trust me, you got off easy."

I believed him.

"I said she was beautiful, and she took offense to that. Apparently, she was one of those enlightened women that doesn't like compliments on her looks. I've never said it to another woman."

"Understandable," I wheezed out.

"You want a hand up?"

I shook my head. "I'm good down here."

"I can't believe this!" Juliette snapped. "He attacked me and you're taking his side?"

"Did he really attack you?" Andrew asked as he stood.

"Well...no, but you don't know what he would have done if I hadn't woken up!"

"Juliette, it's time to leave. Is it possible that he was coming to wake you up and you were laying there naked?"

I peeked up to see her jaw hang open as she struggled to come up with a response. Okay, it wasn't exactly how it happened, but close enough. I didn't take off her towel. Okay, last night I snuck a peek, but that was last night. This morning, she rolled over all on her own. Her breasts were out and I struggled to look away. Any guy would. It was a fact of life that if breasts were out, a guy was going to look. It was like a train wreck. You knew you should look away, but you wanted to see the damage. Or, in the case of breasts, the beauty of them peeking up at you.

"Just go get dressed so we can leave," Andrew sighed.

As she stormed out of the room, Andrew bent over and his face turned serious. "Still thinking about her breasts?"

I shook my head.

"Good. I would hate to have to kick another man in the balls."





## JULIETTE

It took forever for Royal to get out to the car. He was moving slowly, limping as if someone had just kicked him in the balls. And that made me laugh. I delighted in the pain etched on his face. It served him right. What kind of maniac stood over a woman's bed in the morning?

If he kept moving like this, he was never going to be able to do the photo shoot. I rolled down the window and waited for him to look up at me. "Can you move a little faster? We're on a timeline here."

He grimaced as he picked up his speed. And by picked up, I mean, he got to the car two seconds faster than he would have at his normal pace. Andrew opened the door for him, motioning for me to scoot over. I grunted in disbelief, but moved for the royal bastard. He slid in beside me, groaning when he was finally situated.

"Serves you right," I said, refusing to look over at him.

"I swear to God, I won't ever wake up a woman again. The townhouse could be on fire and I'll just let you burn."

"Good," I said with a self-satisfied grin. "Andrew, I need breakfast."

"You always need breakfast. One of these days, your stomach is going to eat you."

"Hey, I didn't get to eat last night."

He turned around in his seat as we pulled away from the curb. "And whose fault is that?"

"His," I jerked my thumb at Royal. "If he wasn't so pushy, I might have gone on my run like I normally would, but he just had to join me."

Andrew sighed. "And what does that have to do with eating?"

"I told you," I snapped. "He's a pervert, and you left me with him."

“I’m sitting right here,” Royal muttered.

“And if you weren’t such a creeper, you wouldn’t be holding your balls right now and trying not to throw up.”

Ethan chuckled as he glanced at me in the rearview mirror. “Mickey’s this morning, Juliette?”

I was about to answer when Royal cut in. “Seriously? That’s disgusting.”

“No one asked you,” I snapped. “Yes, please, Ethan.”

“How can you eat that shit?”

“It’s delicious, and it’s fast.”

Royal shifted in his seat. “You know, if you actually had food in your townhouse, you wouldn’t have to eat out all the time. How do you not even have ketchup?”

“How do you come into my townhouse and judge me?” I retorted.

“Because it’s insane for a person to not have a single thing in her fridge,” he said incredulously. “Seriously, it looks brand new. There was none of that smearing you get inside the fridge when it’s been used. The glass was crystal clear. Explain that one to me.”

“I don’t have to explain anything to you,” I said angrily.

“And the cabinets are bare,” he continued. “Not even a granola bar. What do you do when you get hungry? It was like one of those nuclear bomb testing sites where all the food was plastic, except there wasn’t even plastic food in your townhouse! That’s insane.”

“You’re insane,” I shot back. “You came into my townhouse uninvited.”

“Your brother invited me,” he snapped.

“He doesn’t live there. He has no right to invite you!”

“Welcome to Mickey’s. What can I get for you?” the woman over the speaker said.

“I’m new to the area,” Royal snapped. “He was trying to be nice!”

“Serial killers can be nice. That doesn’t mean you should get in a car with them!”

“A number 2, three number 1’s, four hashbrowns—”

“What the hell is he ordering?” Royal snapped. He scooted to the front of the seat and leaned over. “Are you seriously getting her Mickey’s for breakfast?”

I grabbed him by the shirt and tried but failed to pull him back. “That’s my food! Don’t mess with me!”

“You can’t eat that shit. It’s not even healthy!”

“I’m also going to need a strawberry milkshake and some cookies,” Ethan continued.

“Don’t forget my coffee!”

Royal sneered at me. “That’s not coffee. Trust me, I can make you good coffee.”

“If I wanted coffee, you’re the last person I would go to.”

“You *do* want coffee,” he argued. “You just fucking ordered it!”

“And I will drink every last drop!”

“Ethan,” Royal said, grabbing him by the jacket. “Take us to a real restaurant. I’m not eating that shit.”

“It’s not shit,” I argued. “It’s fast food and it’s delicious!”

“It’s a heart attack waiting to happen!”

“So is bacon!” I shot back, “and I will still eat ten slices a day if I want!”

“Andrew,” Royal shouted.

“Andrew!” I said, shoving Royal to the side.

Andrew looked up from his phone. “Sorry, what?”

“Were you not listening to a word we said?”

He reached into his ear and pulled out an earbud. “Sorry, I wasn’t listening. What’s going on?”

I huffed, sitting back in my seat. My useless brother was going to be the death of me. “If I have to put up with Royal for one more minute, I’m going to end up in jail.”

“For what?” Royal snorted.

“For murdering you!”

He let out a deep chuckle that turned into a full-grown belly laugh. If I didn’t hate him so much right now, I would say his laugh was sexy. But I was fucking pissed at him, and there was no way I was giving him any kind of compliment.

“Lady, you couldn’t even lay a hand on me.”

“Says the man that was dead on the ground this morning when I kicked him in the nuts,” I grinned.

“Hey, that was one time, and you caught me off guard. I was trying to wake you up!”

I spun on him and jabbed my finger in his face. “You were trying to catch a peek!”

“I didn’t have to try very hard. All you did was roll over!”

I gasped, pulling my hand back to slap him across the face, but he

anticipated the move and caught my wrist in the air.

“Your coffee,” Ethan said, handing me my cup.

I took it, yanking my hand out of Royal’s firm grasp. “Don’t ever touch me again.”

“With pleasure. Although, it doesn’t exactly take touching you to get pleasure when you sleep naked,” he said with satisfaction.

This time, he didn’t see the slap coming. His head jerked to the side with my forceful swing, nearly making his head smash into the window. I was secretly chastising myself for not swinging harder. I went for it again while he was still distracted, but this time he caught me, knocking my coffee to the ground in the process. Hot, deliciousness spilled all over the back seat and my chin quivered as I watched my morning fix drip from the leather.

I would not cry. I didn’t do things like let tears spill down my face. This was not a big deal.

“Oh shit,” Andrew sighed. “You spilled her coffee?”

“What?” Royal said in shock. “No, I—”

“Why the fuck would you do that? You give a man an inch,” he sighed.

I pursed my lips, willing the tears to stay put. I would not let this get to me. It was only coffee. At my own thoughts, a whimper broke free from my lips and the tears started to track down my cheeks. I tried to swipe them away, but...my coffee was on the ground. There was no making up for this. I would never get through the day without my morning joe.

Royal stared at me with wide eyes as sobs burst free and my shoulders shook. “Uh...what’s going on?”

“You spilled her coffee. That’s what’s going on. Nice job, asshole,” my brother defended me.

“I’ll drive around and get another,” Ethan sighed. “Here,” he said, shoving the bag of food over the seat. “Start with this.”

“Thank you,” I cried, trying to pull myself together.

“Wait, are you serious about this?” Royal asked. “It’s just a shitty cup of coffee.”

Andrew sighed. “He’ll learn. Not today, but soon.”

“Learn what?”

I sat back in my seat and stared out the window as I dug out my hashbrown and tore into it. My coffee was gone, and life would never be the same.

“This is fucking ridiculous!” Royal sighed, resting back in his seat.

Five minutes later, I had another coffee and a smile on my face. But I would never forget what Royal did this morning. Some things were unforgivable.

“We’re running behind, people!” Emilio clapped his hands as he tried to get everyone’s attention.

Sheila finished my makeup and I slipped out of the seat, walking over to the set. I wasn’t very happy with Royal today, and I wasn’t sure anything could put me in the mood to work with him. I walked over to the set and tried my best not to stare at the devastatingly handsome man. Even pissed off at him, I couldn’t help how my body reacted to him.

I crossed my arms over my chest as I stared at Royal. He was doing his best to ignore me with his hands stuffed in his pockets and an indifferent expression on his face.

“Alright, let’s get into the mood,” Emilio said as he walked over to us, but his expression quickly died as he saw neither of us was in the mood today. “Okay, well, this is an interesting turn of events. What’s going on here?”

“He spilled my coffee,” I snapped.

Emilio gasped, holding his hand to his chest. “Why would you do that?”

“It was an accident,” Royal snapped. “Jesus, she got another coffee! Move on!”

“Move on?” I asked, spinning to face him. “There are few things I care about in this world, and coffee beats every other thing, including my brother!”

Andrew snorted as he scrolled through his phone. He knew the score. He didn’t need me to tell him that coffee would always trump our relationship.

“It’s a fucking cup of coffee. You got another. You ate your crap food. Why the fuck are you so pissy this morning? It’s not like you’re the one that got kneed in the balls.”

Emilio sucked in a breath and his eyes dropped to Royal’s crotch. “That could be bad for the shoot. Should we get you some ice?”

“I’m fine,” Royal snapped. “Now that my balls have stopped swelling and my cock is no longer trying to hide out in my body.”

Emilio's gaze swung to me. "You kicked him in the balls?"

"He was in my bedroom this morning," I snapped. "I woke up and he was leaning over me."

"I was waking you up!"

"You were staring at my naked body!"

"Oh mon Dieu," Emilio gasped.

"I wouldn't have been staring at your naked body if you actually put on some fucking clothes at night!" Royal yelled at me.

I was about to yell back when Andrew stood up and got between us. "Alright, he saw you naked. You're practically naked in your photo shoots. It's not a big deal."

My mouth fell open. "Not a big deal? I was sleeping! He disrespected my privacy!"

"And you lived to tell about it," he said nonchalantly.

"Really? Really?" I snapped. "Where's my brother that's supposed to protect me?"

He sighed. "You nailed him in the balls. He didn't move off the floor for fifteen minutes. I doubt you needed me there to hold your hand."

Okay, that was true, but still, he should be a little upset that a man was standing over me when I was naked. Something weird was going on here and I needed to find out what that was.

Emilio checked his watch and ran his hand over his head frustratedly. "Okay, we need to move on. We have a photo shoot to put away. At this rate, we'll have to wrap things up tomorrow."

I decided to let go of my anger for the moment. After all, Emilio didn't deserve this. "Fine, let's get to work."

"Great!" he clapped, walking behind the camera. "Now, you two turn on that sexy smolder from yesterday and we'll get this wrapped up in no time."

I gnashed my teeth, making sure Emilio didn't see. The fans kicked on and the shimmery material of my dress started floating around me. Royal turned to me with his hands stuffed in his pockets and tried his best not to glare at me.

I stepped up to him and placed my hands on his chest, but I wasn't feeling it. Today, I wasn't captivated by his eyes or entranced by his pecs. The only thing I wanted to do was claw his eyes out.

"Alright, Royal, place your hands on her waist. Let's feel that passion the two of you have!"

His hand went to my hip, but it was stiff and his arms were all awkward as he attempted to hold me. I shifted, trying to make us look better, but now we looked like high schoolers attempting to dance at prom.

“No, no, no,” Emilio sighed, stepping out from behind the camera. “Where’s the magic? Royal, you have to stare into her eyes. Tell her you want her with only your thoughts. Make her fall into your arms!”

He adjusted his stance and winced when his stomach let out a low growl. It was already past noon and he hadn’t eaten today. Not that I felt bad for him. It was his fault he wouldn’t just eat in the car with me. He was too damn good for Mickey’s and I had no sympathy for that.

“Maybe if you tried kissing her,” Emilio said hopefully, but immediately backed off when I shot him a disgusted look. “Or not. Let’s hit the music!”

I wasn’t sure why he thought music would help today. Nothing would make me want Royal. Just like every other self-centered model before him, he couldn’t put aside his differences for work. As sensual music filled the space, Royal moved closer to me, brushing his hand up my neck. I tried not to giggle at his attempt to seduce me. His fingers tangled in my hair, and then he couldn’t untangle his fingers with all the product they’d piled on top.

“Ouch!” I grimaced as he yanked too hard.

“Just hold still,” he snapped.

“Stop pulling! It hurts!”

“Maybe if you stopped moving, I wouldn’t be pulling!”

When he yanked again just a little too hard, I stomped on his foot with the heel of my shoe. His face turned red as he stilled, but refused to make any noise. His fingers finally slipped free and he took a step back. His face was beet red as he placed his hands on his hips and breathed deeply.

“I’m gonna need a minute,” he said, turning and storming from the room.

Emilio shot me a look, but I just shrugged. “He had it coming.”





## LOCK

I thought I would be calmer by the time I got downstairs. Instead, I was even more pissed off. I was pretty sure I had a giant gash on my toe. Either that or it was broken. I was really beginning to hate this woman and I'd only known her a day.

"What are you doing down here?" Brock asked as he stepped out of the shadows.

"Taking a minute to calm down so I don't shoot the woman upstairs."

He chuckled. "Glad you don't have your gun on you. I thought you two were getting along."

"Yeah, that was before she kneed me in the balls and then smashed her heel into my foot."

He winced at me. "Wow, you must have really pissed her off."

I wasn't sure how I could have pissed her off. I was trying to do the right thing. "I'm innocent. Mostly."

"*Mostly*. That's not the kind of thing you tell a jury."

"It's not my fault. She fell asleep last night on her bed in only a towel. Then this morning, she rolled over and it came off."

"And you looked away," he prodded.

I shook my head. "What was I supposed to do? She was laying there like a wet dream."

"Nice tits?"

"Fucking gorgeous," I groaned, running a hand through my hair.

"Did you see anything else?"

I hid my face in shame. "I may have taken a peek last night when she was passed out."

“Lock—”

“I know!” I snapped. “But you should have seen her. Wait...no, you shouldn’t have seen her.”

“Because she’s yours?” he grinned.

I growled at him, but yes, he was right. She was mine. Not that I would admit that to him. “Because it was wrong,” I lied. “I shouldn’t have looked, and you won’t get the chance to.”

“Because she’s yours,” he continued.

“No, because—”

“It’s wrong. Yes, you mentioned that. Yet, you still looked. And I bet that kick to the balls was worth it.”

I sighed heavily. “Fuck, it was definitely worth it.”

He grinned at me, slapping me on the shoulder. “Look at you, breaking your own rules and shit.”

“I didn’t break my rules.”

He barked out a laugh, then muffled it behind his hand. “Sure. Does this sound like you? *Women are to be respected and protected.*”

Yeah, that sounded like me. So, why did I lift her towel last night and look at her sweet pussy? The only explanation was that I had been taken out of my body in an alien experiment and they were testing my responses in this new body. Because the old Lock would never have done something so brazen. It was an invasion of a woman’s privacy, and against everything I stood for. Maybe if I told her I’d feel better about it. Not better like it was okay, but I would be absolved somehow.

“I’m going to tell her what I did.”

His face fell and panic took over. “Wait, what? That’s not what I was saying.”

“I’m going to do it. It’s only right.”

I turned for the door, but he raced around me and pressed his hand to my chest. “No, I can’t let you do this. You’re on the job, and this will not help you.”

“I think she’d value my honesty.”

“Are you trying to get kicked in the balls again?”

“Look, it’s all in how you present it. If I tell her the right way, she’ll probably see things from my point of view.”

“Are you fucking crazy? The only point of view she’s going to see is the one where she’s on the outside of the jail and you’re on the inside!”

“Look, I get that you want to protect me, but this is going to be good for us.”

“In what way?”

“Honesty is always respected.”

“Not when you admit that you looked under her towel while she was sleeping!” he argued.

I tried to walk around him, but he cut me off. I went the other way, and again he stepped in front of me. I sighed and grabbed him by the arms, shoving him out of the way. But before I could take another step, something hard hit the back of my head and everything went black.

I blinked several times as sunlight painfully pierced my eyes. People were standing over me, staring down at me in concern. I squinted and pushed myself off the ground, immediately thinking that something terrible had happened, but then I saw Brock standing further back, and menacing glare on his face.

“Royal, are you okay?” Emilio asked. His fingers twisted with worry as he looked to my other side.

Juliette stood on the other side, examining her nails as if she didn't have a care in the world. “He's fine. He's probably faking it.”

“Faking what?” I asked, my hand going to the back of my head. That fucker hit me hard. I pulled my hand away, and thankfully, there was no blood.

“Oh please,” she rolled her eyes. “Like we believe that someone just attacked you in the street?” Then she cocked her head to the side. “On the other hand, that is totally believable. If I saw you standing there, I might hit you too.”

“This could have to do with the threats against your life,” Andrew said, punching in a number on his phone. “We need to file a police report.”

“That's not necessary,” I said quickly, pushing to my feet. “I didn't see anything. I can't tell the police anything useful.”

“Yeah,” Brock said, stepping forward. “We should just get off the street before we draw any more attention.”

“Who are you?” Juliette asked.

“His agent,” Brock answered smoothly. “Brock Wellington the third.”

If he was hoping Juliette would be impressed by that, he was sorely mistaken. Juliette stared at his outstretched hand, then scoffed in disgust.

“I think we should wrap for the day,” Emilio sighed. “Let's start early

tomorrow. Maybe we can make up for the time we lost today.”

He turned around and trudged inside as if everything in life was going wrong. I watched him go, feeling slightly bad that I had ruined his shoot. Everything about this job was going wrong. I was supposed to be protecting Juliette, but I was only managing to piss her off. If she knew who I really was, this wouldn't be so bad. But instead, she assumed I was just another model.

“I'll meet you at the car,” Juliette said, storming back upstairs.

Once everyone had cleared out and it was only Andrew, Brock, and me, I turned my attention to Andrew. “This has to stop. She needs to know who I am.”

“And that's going to help when you slip into her room and spy on her while she's naked?” Andrew drawled.

“That was an accident.”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “You accidentally walked in on her, stared at her boobs, and then didn't leave.”

Well, when he put it that way...”Look, if I just tell her who I am, I think she'll take this whole thing a lot better. Maybe she won't want to nail me in the balls every five minutes.”

“She does that because she doesn't like you, not because of your job.”

She did like me. I knew that much was true. I could feel it when she was in my arms, when she squirmed against my body, begging me for more. Just because she couldn't admit it didn't mean it wasn't true. But that was a conversation for another time.

“Let's just get home. No,” I stopped suddenly. “Let's go to the grocery store. I can't have any more takeout. It's fucking disgusting.”

“You know, you could call Slider in,” Brock grinned. “You could have your own personal chef.”

But then I wouldn't be able to cook for her, which went against my plans to make her fall for me.

“The last thing we need is to bring in anyone else. It'll look suspicious.”

Andrew sighed. “Fine, but I have to be honest with you. I'm not sure she even knows what the inside of a grocery store looks like.”

“Then it should be a fun trip,” I grinned.

“Um...what are we doing?” Juliette asked as we pulled into the grocery store parking lot.

“Getting food for the townhouse.”

“My townhouse. You can’t just decide to get food. That’s not how this works!”

I opened the door as she stepped out with all the attitude she could muster at four foot nine. She might be small, but it was like a lion was standing next to me.

“That’s exactly how this works. I’m buying food. What’s wrong with that?”

She scoffed, staring at me incredulously. “First of all, it’s not your townhouse. Second, I never said you could bring food there. Who does that?”

“Me,” I answered, turning for the store entrance. “Your cabinets are empty. Besides, do you really have a thing against food in the apartment?”

“Townhouse,” she snapped as her little legs hurried to eat up the ground behind me. “And yes, I happen to have a problem with you arbitrarily deciding that you can do whatever you want.”

“I didn’t arbitrarily decide. If you want to eat, you have to have food. That’s how you live.”

She ran ahead of me, her heels clacking on the pavement in that annoying way that drove me crazy, but made my cock hard at the same time. “Then you need to find a different place to stay! I’m kicking you out.”

I chuckled at that, continuing to walk toward the store. She could try to kick me out all she wanted, but it wasn’t going to work. Besides, it wasn’t my problem. Andrew was either going to have to tell her the truth, or he could come up with some excuse why I had to stay.

“Hey! Did you hear me?”

“How can I not? You know, you’re very loud for being so tiny,” I said over my shoulder.

I heard her growl of frustration and smiled to myself. I liked to see her all riled up. Most guys probably wouldn’t like all that sass coming off a woman, but I found it sexy. I liked it when she slapped me. I could do without the knee to the balls again, but I’d definitely let her yell at me some more.

“I am not tiny! I’m vertically challenged!”

I laughed and walked through the automatic doors, grabbing a cart in the process. Then I saw one of those cars attached to the front of a shopping cart and pointed to it. “Do you want to drive?”

Her eyes narrowed in on me as she stared me down. “Do you want to keep your balls?”

I shrugged and pushed the cart into the store. I headed right for the produce section and started grabbing healthy foods to put in the cart. She grimaced as she stared at the carrots, potatoes, leeks, green onions, and asparagus I’d already set inside.

“Don’t tell me you only eat vegetables.”

I grabbed her shoulders and turned her to face the rest of the store. “Do you see all that space on the other side of the building? There’s more stuff over there. I’m just getting started. Next stop is the butcher.”

She perked up at that. “Are you making steak?”

“For you?”

“Well, you are staying with me.”

“True, but you like Mickey’s so much, I wouldn’t want to deprive you of what you really want.”

“I wouldn’t say no to a steak and maybe some mashed potatoes. Ooh, and some rolls.” I started pushing the cart away as she continued to talk. “And what about appetizers? Where do you stand on that?”

“If it’s healthy, I’ll eat it. But I’m not your personal chef,” I retorted. “If you want something, make it for yourself.”

“I don’t know how to cook,” she grumbled.

I stopped and faced her. “How do you not know how to cook?”

“It’s not like anyone taught me,” she snapped. “In case you haven’t noticed, Andrew isn’t exactly Mr. Mom.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Her eyes went wide for just a moment and then she stalked off in a huff of tiny mightiness. “Are you coming? Or do I have to do the shopping on my own?”

I pushed the cart behind her, more curious than ever about this new development. I got the feeling that Andrew was more than just her manager, which I found very interesting. I wanted to dig deeper, but wasn’t sure she’d answer any of my questions. They would have to wait.

I followed her around the grocery store until the cart was overflowing with groceries, most of which she tossed in as we passed like a kid in a candy store. At first, it was cute. Now, I was wondering what the hell I was going to make that involved cake mix, peanuts, frozen breakfast sandwiches, and pickles.

“Can we go now?”

She wandered down the cereal aisle with wide eyes, staring at each of the boxes with fascination. “You know, I was never allowed to eat cereal as a kid.”

“Because of all the sugar?”

She shook her head. “My mom said cereal was the devil’s handiwork.”

I frowned. “Um...what?”

Her eyes lit up as she found the Lucky Charms. “Oh, my God! I always wanted to try these!”

“Seriously? You’ve never had Lucky Charms?”

She snatched a box off the shelf, then paused when she saw that on the top shelf, they had the Limited Edition Lucky Charms with only green marshmallows for St. Patrick’s Day. She snapped her fingers at me. “Hey, big man, over here.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me, Gigantor. I need your help.”

I strolled over to her, stopping right beside her. “And that’s how you ask me?”

“I need that box.”

“No, that’s from March. It’s expired.”

She spun on me, her eyes blazing as she stared at me. “I don’t care. I want it.”

“Then you’re going to have to get it yourself. I’m not getting them for you.”

Her small foot started tapping on the ground, but when I refused to give in, she kicked off her heels and hiked up her dress damn near around her waist.

“What are you doing?”

She didn’t say a thing as she toed the boxes out of her way and started to climb, but the bottom shelf wasn’t enough of a boost. Her fingers gripped onto the next shelf as she hauled herself up to the next level.

“That’s not gonna hold,” I said, watching in amusement.

“I’m not that heavy,” she said breathily as she continued to stretch.

I cocked my head in amusement, waiting for the whole thing to collapse on her.

“What are you doing?” Brock asked as he walked around the corner. “We’ve been sitting outside for like an hour.”

I jerked my head in her direction and he burst out laughing. “What is she doing?”

“Almost...got it,” she groaned, stretching to reach just a tad further.

“Does she know you can see—”

“No, but I don’t think she cares right now.”

Her fingers wrapped around the box and she snatched it off the shelf in victory. “I did it!” She beamed at me. Then there was a snap and the shelf collapsed in a mess of boxes that clattered to the ground like a tornado. In one giant step, I swooped in and caught her just before she would have fallen to the ground.

“I’m out,” Brock said, running away from us.

He abandoned the cart and took off, leaving us behind with the food. “Hey!” I shouted, but he had already disappeared around the corner.

I had to make a quick choice of whether or not to leave the food. In the end, I ran without it. It wasn’t worth the risk of getting caught.

“What are you doing? Put me down!” Juliette yelled as I rounded the corner.

“We have to get out of here.”

“But my shoes are back there!”

“Forget the shoes,” I snapped, walking quickly down another aisle.

“Those were fifteen hundred dollars shoes!” she shouted.

“You can afford another pair.”

She struggled in my arms, but I held her tighter to me, refusing to look at anyone on the way out. The automatic doors opened and I walked swiftly toward the car without a word. Brock was already out there, having abandoned me in the cereal aisle.

“What the fuck did you do that for?” I snapped. “You left us behind.”

“Because she took down an entire shelf in the cereal aisle. I wasn’t paying for that!”

I set Juliette on the ground and marched up to him, poking him in the chest. “What happened to no man left behind?”

“That’s in the military. I have no problem leaving your ass behind when Twinkle Toes damages a store.”

“Hey! I am not—”

“Stay out of this!” we both snapped at her.

“You were supposed to have my back.”

“And I would in an actual dangerous situation,” Brock snapped.



“Why would he have your back?” Juliette asked. “Isn’t he your manager?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and turned to her. “Honey, let the men talk.”

Her eyes widened as anger washed over her. “I’m sorry, did you just basically tell me to shut up?”

I slowly turned back to her, swallowing hard as her glacial eyes tore holes into me. Yeah, that was maybe a stupid thing to say.



# JULIETTE

I turned and flung the car door open, slipping inside. Then I hit the lock and crossed my arms over my chest. “*Let the men talk.* What the fuck is that? Who says shit like that?”

Royal tried to open the door, pounding on the window when it wouldn’t open. “Juliette, open the door.”

I pulled out my phone and ignored him. If I was just some dumb woman that didn’t need to be included in conversations then there was no reason for him to sit in the back with me.

“Juliette!” he shouted, banging on the window. “Open the goddamn door!”

I calmly dialed and pressed the phone to my ear. “9-1-1. What is your emergency?”

“This is a non-emergency. Can you please send a police car to Matheson Grocers? There’s a man trying to enter my car.”

“Please remain calm, ma’am. Are you in danger?”

“I am calm. He’s just annoying, and I don’t want him riding with me.”

“Is he a threat to you?”

“He’s banging on my window and won’t leave me alone.”

As if on cue, he started pounding again. “Juliette, open the fucking door right now, or I’ll break the fucking window!”

I smiled to myself as the operator continued to type on her end. “I’ll send a car immediately. Would you like me to stay on the phone with you?”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

I grinned to myself and waited with all the patience of a saint until the police arrived. The lights swirled as the cop pulled up alongside our vehicle.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Royal yelled through the window. “You called the fucking cops on me?”

As the police approached, I rolled down the window and kept my smile hidden.

“Sir, is there a problem?”

“No.”

“This lady called and said a man was pounding on her window. The 9-1-1 operator heard you threatening to break the window.”

Royal ground his teeth as he glanced at me. “She wouldn’t let me in the car. We’re supposed to be riding together.”

“Sir, you can’t go around threatening innocent women.” Then he walked over to me. “Ma’am, you’re the one that called in the threat?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And this is the man that was pounding on your window?”

“Absolutely,” I said without hesitation.

“This is bullshit, Juliette. We need to go home.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“We have a photoshoot in the morning!” he shouted, making the cop step between him and the car.

“Sir, you need to calm down.”

“She’s just pissed at me because I told her to let the men talk.”

“I didn’t tell you to bang on the window like a madman,” I snapped.

“Sir, if you refuse to leave, I’ll be forced to remove you from the situation.”

“I can’t leave her,” he insisted.

He was taking this a little far. All he had to do was walk away and this would all go away, but he was determined to drag this out. And why? To prove a point?

“That’s what you get for being an ass,” I chuckled, slipping my sunglasses on my face.

And just when I thought I had him, he turned to the cop with an evil grin on his face. “She destroyed property in the grocery store.”

The cop turned to me. “Is that true?”

“What?” I gasped, glaring at the handsome bastard in front of me. “I didn’t destroy property! I wanted some cereal and this asshole refused to get it for me.”

“Why couldn’t you get it yourself?” the cop asked.

I snapped my mouth shut. I hated admitting that I wasn't tall enough to get it myself, but that was my only option at this point. "Because I couldn't reach the top shelf. I'm not even five feet tall!"

The cop swung his gaze to Royal. "Is that true?"

"That she's not five foot? Absolutely. She climbed on the shelves and the whole thing collapsed. If you don't believe me, ask them," he jerked his thumb toward the store.

"Alright, give me a minute to sort this out. The two of you stay here," he said as he took a few steps away.

"Happy?" he hissed. "Now we're both in trouble."

"Why couldn't you just walk away?" I asked.

"Why couldn't you just be reasonable?"

"Why couldn't you...not wear your hair so long?"

His eyebrows slammed together as he stared at me in confusion. Granted, it wasn't the best comeback, but it was the only thing that came to me.

"That doesn't make any sense."

"You don't make any sense."

"You're just repeating what I say."

"No, if I was repeating what you say, I would have said that...that doesn't make sense."

I ran that through my head, but before I could figure it out, the cop returned. "Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to step out of the car."

"What?"

"Ma'am, please unlock the door and step out."

"But—"

"Busted," Royal muttered under his breath.

I glared at him and unlocked the door, stepping out.

"I need you to both face the car and put your hands on the hood of the vehicle."

I rolled my eyes at Royal. This was so mortifying, and it was all his fault. Brock came over to talk with the cop after we were cuffed, but clearly, there was nothing he could do to help the situation. Twenty minutes later, I was in the back of a police car with Royal. And an hour after that, I was in a jail cell.

“This is so disgusting,” I said as I tried not to let my outfit touch anything in the cell.

There was a prostitute lounging in the corner of the cell with her legs spread, showing off her tattered thong. She jerked her head at Royal, who was eyeing me through the bars in his own cell.

“Is he your pimp?”

“He wishes,” I laughed.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Royal muttered. “I’m not sure anyone would pay to put up with that mouth.”

“Girl, don’t let him talk to you like that. You’re high class,” she said, her eyes roaming over me. “You could get a thousand a night if you found the right clients.”

“Really?” I asked curiously, getting off the seat and walking over to her. “What kind of clients?”

“Juliette!” Royal snapped, but I ignored him.

“Girl, with your body and those tits, I’m thinking you could be a high-class escort.”

“And who hires those?”

“All the rich men. They want women that will go with them to parties as eye candy.”

“Are they hot?”

I heard a low growl come from Royal, but ignored him.

The prostitute grimaced. “Not usually. But they pay well, and you might even get to keep the clothes.”

My ears perked up at that. “Clothes? And jewelry?”

“Sometimes,” she shrugged. “A friend of mine actually dated a guy for a while.”

“Really.”

Now I was down on the floor beside her, doing my best to cover my ass as the tight dress pulled around my thighs. “What are you in here for?”

“I got into a fight with a client. He decided to change the terms of our agreement for the night. So, I pulled a knife on him and made sure he remembered exactly who was in charge. He squealed like a girl, and the next thing I know, the cops showed up and I was being dragged away.” She shrugged like she was used to the whole thing. “Anyway, I’ll probably be in here for a few days until I can find a lawyer.”

“That’s awful.”

I couldn't imagine being in her position where she had to fight for everything.

"It is what it is. It's not my first time in jail, and it won't be the last."

I looked at her curiously. "Do you mind me asking how you got into this line of work?"

"Gotta pay the bills."

"But you must have wanted to do something other than this."

"Juliette!" Royal snapped for the second time.

"I had dreams," she continued. "My mom named me Vivien after Vivien Leigh. I wanted to be an actress from the moment I saw her in *Gone With The Wind*. I was going to move to Hollywood after high school and make my way in the world," she said wistfully.

"What stopped you?"

"She died just before graduation. My father had run off a few years before. We were poor and the bank was foreclosing on the house. I had literally nothing to my name. So, one night a guy approached me while I was wandering the streets, and the rest is history. Of course, I was a lot more glamorous back then. Now I've aged considerably and I'm not in the prime of my career."

I looked at her carefully. She had no real signs of aging at all. Other than her makeup needing to be refreshed, she looked quite young. "You can't be more than twenty-five."

She laughed at that. "Twenty-six. Believe it or not, that's considered old."

"What if you got a new job?"

"Juliette!"

I ignored Royal again and waited for her to answer.

"Not many people will give you a chance when your only job experience is giving blow jobs."

I opened my mouth to tell her I could get her a job when Royal called out again. This time, he looked like he was about to break through the bars of the cell to get to me. I rolled my eyes and held up my finger for her to wait a minute. Getting up in the most ladylike way I could, I walked over to him.

"Yes?"

"What are you doing?"

"Talking to my new friend."

He clenched his jaw angrily. "She's not your friend. She's a prostitute."

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at the man. "And what's your

point?”

“My point is that she could use this against you for money. You can’t just start up a conversation with her and hope she doesn’t decide to leak it to the press. Someone like that would get a big payday for an inside scoop from your jail cell.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have ratted on me about the grocery store,” I argued.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have called the police to begin with.”

He had a point there. That plan had backfired on me completely. Instead of sitting in my townhouse, I was in a jail cell. It wasn’t the most appealing way I’d ever spent an afternoon.

“Listen, my brother will get us out of this. Just keep your pants on and—”

The door opened and my brother walked in, along with another man. “Juliette,” my brother sighed.

“Don’t give me that tone. This is all his fault,” I pointed at Royal.

“You called the police.”

“And in hindsight, that was a mistake.”

“I’m glad you see it that way,” my brother grinned.

“I should have just kicked him in the balls.” His smile dropped and Royal swore in the cell beside me. “What? It would have been more satisfying and I wouldn’t have to hear him complain every five minutes about the lovely accommodations.”

Andrew turned to the man beside him. “Can we keep this out of the press?”

“We can try. The officer agreed that this was more of a petty dispute. As long as Ms. Cassinelli agrees to pay for the cleanup in aisle seven, the owners aren’t going to press charges. Oh, and they suggested that in the future, if she needed something from the top shelf, she ask her hulking man friend to help.”

I stomped my foot while Royal snorted in amusement. “He should have to help pay for it,” I argued. “He’s the one that refused to help me.”

“Juliette,” Andrew sighed. “You can afford it. They want you to cover the cost of the damage to the shelves and the labor for fixing it. It’ll be fine.”

“That’s not the point. Why am I being punished?”

“Because you were the one that climbed the shelves,” Andrew snapped.

“And he’s the one that refused to help me,” I argued. “It’s like I’m being punished for being short! Isn’t it enough of a punishment that I can’t reach anything even in my extremely tall high heels? Which, by the way, he refused



to go back for.”

“Do you want to be released or not?” Andrew asked.

I almost said no out of principle. Royal was a gigantic pain in the ass, and he was getting off scot-free. I didn’t even want to go to the damn grocery store. This was all on him. But I really wanted to get out of here and just soak in a hot shower.

“Fine.”

“Good. Can we move this along then?”

I nodded and walked over to the cell as the man unlocked the door. As he stepped forward, I noticed the badge on his hip. Walking through, I whispered to Andrew, “I want her out of here also, and get me her contact information.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Do I look like I’m kidding?” I asked.

Andrew knew me well enough not to argue with me. He nodded and said something to the other man as I waited for Royal to be released. Like it or not, I was stuck with him until this campaign was over.



## LOCK

“Do you want to tell me why we’re taking a prostitute with us?” I asked Andrew as we left the police department. Juliette was already getting into the car, so I slowed us down so I could figure out what the fuck was going on.

“Because Juliette wants us to,” he sighed, taking out his sunglasses and shoving them on his face.

“And that’s it? She gets what she wants?”

“Pretty much.”

“What the fuck? She’s not some princess. There are guidelines that you follow in a protection assignment, and picking up prostitutes from jail is not in any of the rulebooks.”

He stopped suddenly and faced me. “Look, this is her choice. If she wants to bail out the lady, that’s on her.”

“And you’re her brother,” I snapped.

“What’s your point?”

“You run her life. Tell her the way it’s going to be.”

He stared at me for a moment, then burst out laughing. “You’re funny. I like you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Look, Juliette and I don’t have that kind of relationship. Sure, it looks like I run her life, and I do a damn good job of keeping her on track, but she’s her own woman. She does whatever she wants.”

“Then change it!” I argued. “We can’t have her hanging out with prostitutes when someone’s trying to kill her. I don’t think it needs to be said that they hang around with a shady crowd.”

He winced. “I wouldn’t mention that to Juliette. She’ll only get pissed at

you.”

“For speaking the truth?”

“Are we seriously going to stand out here and argue about this? If you don’t like it, take it up with Juliette, but be prepared to have blue balls for the rest of the shoot.”

And with that, he walked away from me, getting into the front of the car. Brock slid into the backseat with me, eyeing Juliette with curiosity. He’d already heard about her decision to help the lady of the night out of jail.

“So, what’s on the agenda for tonight?” I asked.

“You’re free for the rest of the day,” Brock answered, as if he was my manager. “But we should have a meeting about how we’re going to handle PR after this incident.”

I nodded. “When we get back to the townhouse.”

Juliette snorted. “You mean my townhouse. And why can’t you have the meeting right now?”

“Uh...” Brock cleared his throat. “Because...we have to...confer with his rep.”

“I thought you were his rep,” she said suspiciously.

Brock looked absolutely lost for anything smart to say. “Right, but...his rep deals with his image.”

“His image,” she said, staring at him like he was stupid. “This is his first job and he already has an image?”

“This is going to be a huge campaign,” I cut in, trying to save his ass. “They just want to make sure I’m putting my best foot forward.”

“Your best foot? Christ, you sound like a school teacher.”

Brock laughed at that, not even bothering to stop when I glared at him.

We pulled up to the townhouse and I walked Juliette upstairs, pretending to set my stuff down until I heard her shower kick on. Then I snuck out and met the guys down the hall.

“Damn,” Scottie chuckled. “You really are breaking out of this whole good guy role. It hasn’t even been a week and you already ended up in jail.”

“Shut up,” I snapped. “It could have gone better.”

“You do realize that jail is not a good look for royalty,” Edu teased. “What will the royal family say when they hear about your most recent indiscretions?”

“And the prostitute,” Brock laughed. “Although, I’m pretty sure that’s been done before.”

“Haha,” I snapped. “Can we get on with damage control?”

“On your image or the job?” Scottie asked.

I flipped him off as he opened the file. “This is everything we have on Annabelle Aramis’s friends and anyone she’s worked with. So far, a few other models have crossed paths with Juliette, but no one suspicious. Most of them aren’t even in the country at the moment.”

“These are all women. What about men?”

“There’s one photographer that’s known to be hard to deal with. Juliette refuses to work with him, according to Andrew. He tried feeling her up when she was getting dressed.”

“Are you serious? What happened?”

“Well...” Brock looked at the others and stifled a laugh. “The same as you. Knee to the balls. Seems to be her signature move.”

That definitely put him in the running as a suspect. “And I’m assuming he’s done this with other women.”

“Annabelle made a complaint about him, but eventually dropped the whole thing when she landed a huge campaign with him. But she had security the whole time. A female bodyguard was with her whenever she was around the asshole.”

“What’s his name?”

“Lance Ackhurst, but everyone knows him by Lance.”

“Like a single name?”

Brock nodded. “Yeah, like Beyoncé or Madonna.”

“I highly doubt he’s like Madonna. And what kind of name is Lance for a single name? It’s not very catchy.”

“And Royal is so much better?” Edu laughed.

“I didn’t pick it,” I said, slapping the folder shut and shoving it against his chest. “Alright, Juliette will most likely go for another run tonight. We’ll keep the same formation as last time, but I’ll try and convince her to go another route. Let’s mix it up in case someone’s watching.”

Brock handed over a tracker for me. “Slip this in her running shoes under the insert. Any chance you can get her to wear a tracker?”

“Like us?” He nodded. “Sure, I’ll bring that up the next time we get together to do our hair. I’ll casually mention getting a jab in her arm and tell her how amazing it is. I’m sure she’ll agree immediately.”

“It was just a suggestion, asshole.”

“And it would be a lot easier if we just told her who I really am.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Brock said, “so just let it go.”

I sighed, rubbing my forehead. I was getting a headache, and the last thing I wanted to do was go on a run, but if she went, I’d have to follow her. “Alright, I’ll check in with you tonight. Let me know what happens with the prostitute.”

“You didn’t hear?” Edu asked, a slight grin playing at his lips. “Juliette rented her a townhouse. Andrew arranged the whole thing. Apparently, she’s going to be Andrew’s assistant.”

“The prostitute,” I clarified.

He grinned at me. “Yeah, it should get interesting.”

“Right,” I said, turning and walking back to the townhouse. This day was getting stranger by the moment. I opened the door and headed inside, only to find Juliette already in her running gear.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Going for a run. What does it look like?”

“But...but we haven’t eaten in a while. We shouldn’t go yet.”

“We aren’t going to do anything. I didn’t invite you along.”

“But...I need exercise too,” I said, rushing to my room. “Wait for me! I won’t be long!”

“Royal, look, I need some time to myself. Between spending my entire day with you and then some in jail, can we just go our separate ways for tonight?”

She turned for the door and I panicked. “I can’t be alone!” I shouted.

She slowly turned around, staring at me curiously. “Why?”

“Uh...” Why. That was a very good question. I’d gone all in and now I had no idea how to answer that. “Because...I’m afraid.”

She nodded slowly. “Okay, let’s assume I’m going to buy this. What exactly are you afraid of.”

“Oh...” I glanced up, nerves skittering through me. “What am I afraid of. That’s a very good question. Um...spiders. I hate spiders.”

“There are no spiders when running.”

“There could be. They’re outside and we’re outside.”

“And if you stay here, there will be no spiders,” she said, cocking her head to the side. “Goodbye.”

She turned to leave, so I shouted out the next best thing. “I can’t be alone!”

She sighed heavily and turned back to me. “What?”

“I...don’t like being alone. That’s why Andrew is allowing me to stay with you. I’m...afraid.”

“To be alone.”

I nodded. Christ, this would be so much easier if I could just tell her the truth. “Yep, I was left alone a lot as a child and now I can’t ever be alone.”

“What did you do before this job?”

“Huh?” I asked, not understanding the question.

“Before this,” she said slowly, “you lived somewhere else. Who was with you?”

“Oh...right. That’s a good point.” I frowned. “Um...I stayed with a hobo.”

I could tell she was losing her patience with me. “Seriously?”

“His name was Bill. And he...wore those big clown pants and...he...smelled.”

“You know, I can’t tell if you’re lying or if you really are that pathetic.”

*Please go for pathetic.*

“But I really don’t want to sit here and continue this conversation, so let’s just pretend we never spoke about this.”

“So, you’ll wait for me?”

“You have two minutes,” she said, walking to the door.

I rushed into my room and changed faster than I ever had before, pulling on my running shoes just as she was about to run out the door. And because she was leaving so early, I didn’t even have time to slip the tracker into her shoe.

She was purposely trying to get away from me. I suggested a different route today, but had no luck. I was pretty sure the whole hobo thing just freaked her out. But at least she wasn’t out running on her own. And as a bonus, I got to stare at her ass again as we ran. It was best to see the positives in this horrible situation.

We were almost to the park where she stopped for water, which meant I had only about a half hour more before I got to take a shower and jerk off to the memory of her ass swaying in front of me.

The squeal of tires drew my attention from her ass. Up ahead, a car was

pulling away from the curb, driving erratically in our direction.

“Juliette!” I shouted, picking up my pace. She wasn’t far ahead, but she had her earbuds in and couldn’t hear me. The car was only fifty feet from her and gaining speed. I ran harder, tackling her from behind and throwing our bodies to the side as the car nearly clipped me. I wrapped my body around hers, taking the brunt of the fall as I rolled us to the curb.

I immediately sat up and caught the license plate number and make of the car. I knew Scottie and Edu were close by, but that didn’t mean they had the right angle to see.

“Holy shit, what the hell was that?” Juliette snapped, pulling her earbuds out. “That asshole almost killed us!”

I nodded, still breathing hard as I got to my feet and pulled her up. “We need to go.”

“What? You’re bleeding!”

I glanced down at my arm, seeing the lovely road rash I now sported thanks to skidding across the pavement. In fact, my entire left side was torn up and blood was dripping down my leg. But it was nothing serious. I had to get her to safety first. That was the most important thing.

I wrapped my hand around her elbow and guided her to the sidewalk. We needed to get out of here. Out here, we were sitting ducks. An SUV pulled up beside us, squealing to a stop. Relief flooded me as Brock rolled down his window.

“Need a ride?”

“Brock?” Juliette asked. “What are you doing here?”

“I forgot some paperwork for Royal. I was bringing it back and saw that asshole nearly hit you. Need a ride back?”

“Yeah,” I answered, dragging Juliette to the back of the vehicle. With a quick glance around, I got in behind her and met Brock’s gaze in the mirror. Someone had just tried to kill her, and it would only get worse from here on out.

When we got back to the townhouse, I saw Edu slip out of the front door. I wasn’t sure how he made it back so fast, but he cleared the building for us, which left me one less thing to worry about.

“Let’s go,” I snapped, holding out my hand for Juliette as we got out of the vehicle. “I’ll get that paperwork from you later,” I said to Brock as we headed back to the building. I didn’t let go of Juliette the entire way, and she didn’t complain, though I knew there would be a ton of questions once we



got inside.

“Can you slow down? Geez, you’re injured.”

“I’m fine,” I bit out as I shoved open the door. I didn’t relax until we were headed up the stairs and inside her townhome. Even then, I locked the door and studied the room just in case something was missed.

“Okay, what’s going on?” she asked.

“You were nearly hit by a car.”

“Yeah, and I’m okay.”

“You weren’t listening. I tried to call out to you, and you didn’t hear me because of those stupid earbuds.”

“You have them too!” she retorted.

“Yes, but—”

I stopped myself just as I was about to reveal that she was in danger. Fuck, I really hated them for hamstringing me like this. Enough was enough. This needed to end, but I couldn’t reveal who I really was without putting my contract in jeopardy. That wouldn’t normally bother me if I felt that I was really being held back from doing my job, but this was Juliette. If I left her, there was no guarantee I’d find someone else like her.

So, I lied. I lied so hard that I was surprised I got through it without cracking a smile. I was a terrible liar on the best of days, unless it was absolutely necessary. This was stretching it a little far.

“The truth is, someone’s stalking me.”

She stared at me like she didn’t believe me. “And who would be stalking you? No one knows you.”

“I don’t know. But it’s clear now that whoever is after me has connected me to you.”

“Maybe because you pushed your way into my life,” she retorted.

“Yeah, I was trying to keep you safe.”

“By keeping me close?” she snorted. “Good job.”

“It’s not like I wanted this,” I snapped, feeling the pressure of the situation suffocating me. Fuck, I was going to kill Cash.

She sighed heavily. “Well, we’re going to have to get you a bodyguard.”

My head snapped up to meet her gaze. “Excuse me?”

“It’s the only thing to do. I mean, clearly, we can’t have you almost hit by a car again.”

“That’s—”

“What would we do for the shoot?” she said as she started pacing.

And here I was thinking she might actually care for me.

“I’ll call Andrew and have him find someone for you.”

“I can have Brock take care of it.”

“Trust me, I’ve been in this business longer. Andrew has a lot of contacts.”

She walked over to her cell phone and texted her brother, leaving me scrambling to text Brock.

*Me: Fuck, I just told Juliette that someone was stalking me.*

*Brock: Okay, and why would you do that?*

*Me: Because I panicked.*

*Brock: Why didn’t you just say that the person was driving erratically?*

*Me: Because that wouldn’t keep her from going out alone!*

*Brock: Right, so are you getting a bodyguard?*

*Me: She’s texting her brother now. Fuck, this is so messed up.*

*Brock: You can’t see it, but I’m laughing at you.*

*Brock: Now you really are like royalty. LOL*

I shut off my phone as she turned back around. “Andrew said he’ll get someone for you immediately.”

“Great,” I said, trying to sound appreciative. The last thing I needed was someone following me around. With any luck, he’d talk to Brock, and Brock would have Edu or Scottie tail me. At least then she’d have more protection.

She walked over to the counter and grabbed the box of Lucky Charms that we basically stole from the store. “Well, that was fun, but now I’m starving.”

“You gonna share?” I grumbled. My stomach was growling in hunger.

“I guess.” She eyed me skeptically for a moment, like I would actually steal the box and run. “But you’d better not steal all the marshmallows.”

“I promise.”

She eyed me warily for a moment, then plopped down on the couch. I sat beside her as she tore the box open and shoved her hand inside. Apparently, we weren’t going to be civilized.

“No bowls?”

“You wanna wash the dishes?” she asked as she tossed a handful into her mouth.

I found it disgusting, but shoved my hand inside and grabbed a handful. As I chewed, I remembered what it was like to eat these as a kid. “This would be so much better with milk.

“Yeah?”

I snorted. “You have no idea what you’re missing.”

“Maybe we can go shopping again tomorrow and get some milk,” she suggested.

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen. I will never go in a grocery store with you again.”

She whipped her head toward me. “And why not?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because you destroyed property?”

“You wouldn’t help me get the box!”

“You didn’t need this particular box. Haven’t you noticed how stale it tastes?”

“No,” she snapped. “And if you keep talking like that, I won’t share my food.” She leaned forward and grabbed the remote off the table. “Now, you’re going to have to be quiet so I can watch TV.”

“Fine.” I sighed and dug my hand into the box again, then popped the cereal in my mouth and chewed as she flipped through the channels. I groaned when she stopped on some romance film. “Seriously?”

“What? It’s good!”

“It’s romance!”

“It’s good, and it’s my townhouse. You’re more than welcome to find your own townhouse with your own TV where you’re not scared of being alone.”

I walked right into that one. I didn’t really have a say in the matter, so I kept my mouth shut and watched the stupid movie. This cereal was never going to be enough for me. I pulled out my phone and texted Brock one last time.

*Me: We really need food.*

*Brock: And I really need some fucking sleep. Deal with it.*

I guess it’s Lucky Charms for dinner.



## JULIETTE

I snorted awake, rubbing my cheek against something extremely soft. Sighing, I rubbed my cheek again and felt a small rumble against my body. That was interesting, but not interesting enough to move from the position I was in. It was like I was wrapped in a warm blanket that emanated heat. It was the nicest thing I'd woken up to in a long time.

"Jesus, what the hell happened here last night?"

"You don't want to know." Royal's low voice cut through my sleep and that rumble that felt so nice against my cheek reverberated again. But this time, I was awake enough to know that it was his voice and that vibration was coming from his chest. His very sculpted, very hard and warm chest that was currently pressed against my cheek.

I slowly opened my eyes, afraid of what I might see. The TV was in front of me, and I was most definitely lying on Royal's body.

Every. Last. Inch.

And man, did I feel it poking me. It had to be at least seven inches.

Wide, not long. I wasn't sure I was ready to know the length of him, considering what I could already feel.

"Why are you covered in cereal?" Andrew asked.

I groaned, slapping my hand over my face. "Andrew?"

"Yeah?"

"Please tell me I'm dreaming."

A chuckle rumbled underneath me and I groaned.

I was about to roll off when Royal's hand wrapped around my arm and held me in place. "Just...hang out for a minute."

I flushed bright red, grateful that he couldn't see my face.

“Yeah, I’m gonna leave while you...wrap up this situation,” Andrew said.

I waited until I heard the door slam, then shifted my head until I was staring into Royal’s intense eyes.

“Are you okay?”

His jaw clenched hard as he grew impossibly larger underneath me.

“What do you think?”

I made the mistake of shifting slightly, which only made the intensity of his gaze reach smoldering heights. I tried to move again, thinking if I could just get off him, his...situation might go down. His hand clamped down on me again as he hissed in a breath.

“You’re going to have to stop doing that.”

“I thought—”

“Don’t,” he hissed, his eyes closing as he tried to gain control. Not knowing what else to do, I rested my cheek on his chest and tried to calm my breathing. Maybe if I just laid here and relaxed, it would help him. I closed my eyes and slowed my breathing.

“Fuck, this is not good,” he muttered.

I tried not to laugh. I really did, but the ridiculousness of the situation was too unbelievable, even for me.

“You think this is funny?” he grumbled.

“We’re laying in a pile of cereal, and you’re...having a situation. I’d say this is the funniest thing that’s happened to me in a while—ah!”

I screamed as he suddenly flipped me over and pressed his body between my thighs. He groaned as his cock nudged at my entrance through my clothes. I moaned as desire instantly flooded me. I sucked in a breath and tried to regain my shit.

“Still think this is funny?” he asked, his voice gruff as he thrust his hips forward.

I moaned, instantly threading my fingers through his hair. His hips jerked again, but this time, I met his thrust with one of my own. “This is definitely not funny,” I panted. “Oh, God.”

I ground my pussy against his cock. I could practically feel him stretching me, pushing inside me one inch at a time. My breathing picked up as I pulled his hair, tugging him toward me. His head was a good foot over my head, so I couldn’t see his face as he jerked against me again.

I had a niggling feeling in the back of my sex-addled brain that this wasn’t a good idea, but I couldn’t stop. My breathing hitched as I rocked

against him. His arms wrapped around my body and he pulled me against him as he sat up and positioned me over him. His arms wrapped around me, dragging me right against him. His lips latched onto my neck, sucking hard as I started dry-humping him. I couldn't remember the last time I had done something like this.

"We should...stop," I moaned as sparks shot down my spine.

He grunted in agreement but didn't stop sucking on my neck.

"This is bad for...something."

"Huh?" he grunted, not really bothering to ask anything further as his hips thrust up against me as he held me down against his cock. I was panting hard. Stars exploded behind my eyelids as I stilled in his arms and his hard cock slammed against me one last time. I felt his cum dampen the outside of my already soaked panties. Fuck, this might have been a very bad thing.

We were both breathing hard as we held each other, but it was almost as if we didn't let go because we both knew we'd have to look at each other when this was done. Finally, I loosened my grip on his hair and allowed him to pull back from me. His lips licked at the sore spot on my neck where he'd acted like a vacuum, though I couldn't regret it at all.

The door swung open again and I saw Andrew stop right inside the door, staring at both of us in shock. "Never mind," he said, turning and walking out the door.

"Fuck," Royal muttered. "That shouldn't have happened."

"Right," I agreed, though I couldn't say much at the moment. I knew it was wrong, even if it felt right. "I should probably move."

"Probably."

But I didn't and he didn't attempt to shift me off him. We just sat there for a good five minutes, both of us breathing heavily as we held each other. This was going to make for a very awkward workday.

The door swung open again, and this time Andrew walked in covering his eyes. "Alright, whatever just happened, I don't want to know about it. But we have to leave in...ten minutes," he said as he looked at his watch. "So...if you two could separate, that would be really great."

The ride to work was awkward at best. I couldn't look at Royal, and he didn't

dare look at me. When I parted from him in the living room, I rushed to the bathroom and found Lucky Charms stuck to my face. That was a great way for us to have our first sexual encounter.

We pulled into the drive-thru at Mickey's and Ethan placed an order for us. I was grateful when the food was passed back to us. At least now I could eat to distract myself from the extreme uncomfortableness filling the car. Royal stretched forward and took his own order, grimacing when he took a bite. He was insane for not liking the deliciousness of Mickey's.

When we pulled up to the studio, a man stepped next to the car as Royal tried to get out. "Sir, please wait here while I secure the area."

Royal rolled his eyes as if he were annoyed by the whole thing when just yesterday he told me how scared he was. By the time the man 'secured' the area, we had been sitting outside Emilio's studio for a good five minutes.

"Alright, you can come out now."

"Thanks," Royal said sarcastically, grabbing my hand on his way out.

"Oh, we're...okay," I said, sliding across the seat.

The man stepped between us, but Royal never broke contact with me.

"Ma'am, you're going to have to step back."

I scoffed at the oversized man in front of me. He wasn't particularly well-muscled, just...very large. "I think you have me mistaken for someone else."

"No, I don't. But I need to protect my client at all costs. You're going to need to step aside."

Before I could mouth off to the bastard, Royal was back by my side, pushing the man out of the way. I was surprised he was able to. The man had at least fifty pounds on him.

"Back off. She's with me. Or...I'm with her. I don't go anywhere without her."

"But, sir—"

"Back. Off," he growled, sending a scathing look at the man.

I nearly started laughing, but held back. I didn't want to piss off his bodyguard and leave him with no one to protect him. We hurried inside and up the stairs, and the whole time, Royal never let go of my hand. I didn't understand where this whole possessive side to him came from, and I wasn't about to question it. We weren't fighting, and that was good enough for now. We had work to do.

I hurried off to get my hair and makeup done. We were once again running behind, and this time it was my fault. Okay, it was usually always my



fault, but it couldn't be helped. I just wasn't a morning person.

"Okay, people!" Emilio clapped. "After yesterday, we need to have a productive day. I hope you're all here to work and—oh my God! What happened to you?" he asked, pointing to Royal's arm where his sleeve was rolled up for the shoot. Then he gasped and pointed at his neck where he was also sporting a few red spots.

I turned around just as he hurried over to Royal and grabbed his arm, staring at the damage. "It's just a little road rash."

"Road rash! This is no good. How am I supposed to make this work?"

Emilio was working himself up in a tizzy, and it was clear I was going to have to step in and help him out. I rushed over and stepped in front of a very nervous Emilio.

"I can make this work. Just trust me on this."

"How can we make this work? The whole left side of his body is damaged!"

"And we'll use that to our advantage. Let me set the scene and you get ready to shoot."

He nodded, but I knew he didn't trust me on this yet.

"Um...okay. Royal, you come with me."

I grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the door when the beast stepped in front of us again. "Sorry, ma'am, but you're not taking him anywhere."

I huffed in frustration. "Would you just move? I'm trying to work."

But the giant didn't move.

"Look," Royal stepped up, "I get it. You're trying to do your job, but so are we. So, step aside."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can," he argued.

"No, I can't. It states in my contract that if anything happens to you, I'll never work in this industry again."

Royal glared at him, stepping into his space. "I hate to tell you this, but you won't be working here anymore if you don't move the fuck out of the way."

I missed the rest of the conversation because I was too busy staring up at Royal and trying not to think about how good his hand felt wrapped around mine. He was just another model, and I had to remember that. He would use me for my connections, and when this shoot was over, I would never hear

from him again.

“Juliette.”

My eyes drifted back up to his. “Yeah?”

“Are you ready?”

I noticed the guard was missing and Royal was ready to walk out the door. “Um...yeah.”

We headed downstairs, but I’d already forgotten what we were supposed to be doing.

“So, what’s your big plan?”

“Um...” What were we talking about again? Right, the photo shoot. “We need to get you dirty.”

“But I’m in my outfit for the shoot.”

“Trust me, Emilio won’t mind.” I stepped outside and took him around the corner into the alley. “Okay, roll around.”

“I’m sorry, what?” He stared at me with this baffled expression that had me laughing.

“Are you incapable of rolling around on the ground?”

“No, I just don’t know what you want me to do.”

“I want to make it look like you were just injured.”

“I was just injured,” he said, pointing to his left side.

“Right, but you’re clean. We need you dirty.”

A smile quirked his lips. “Really. You want me dirty?”

My face flushed and I pointed to the ground. “Down, now.”

“Anything for you,” he answered, getting down on all fours. When he didn’t move fast enough, I pressed my foot to his side and kicked him over, though I’m pretty sure he did most of the work on his own. He rolled around on the ground, getting his dress shirt completely dirty.

“Better?”

I shrugged. “A little, but—ah!” I screamed as he grabbed me around the waist and pulled me to the ground, rolling me over so I got just as dirty as him. “No! I don’t do dirty!”

I started squealing and laughing as he rolled me over, kissing my neck playfully to keep me down. I shoved at his shoulders, trying to get him off me, but then he started tickling me and I was a goner. I was laughing so hard I started crying, and when footsteps came charging around the corner, I wouldn’t have noticed except that Royal shoved me behind him and pressed me to the ground.

“What the fuck is this?”

I popped my head up, seeing Brock quickly stash something behind his back.

“It’s for the shoot,” Royal answered.

“That’s not what I thought was happening. Although, now I see you and I still don’t know what the fuck you’re doing.”

“Getting dirty,” Royal grinned.

Brock cocked his head to the side, grinning at him. “Shouldn’t *we* be on our knees for *you*?”

“Shut the fuck up,” he muttered as he pulled me to my feet.

Confused, I glanced at Brock, then Royal. “What is he talking about?”

“Nothing. He’s just teasing me because of my name.”

I bit back a grin. “It is a strange name.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t pick it.”

“Why did your parents name you Royal?”

“We should get inside,” he said, ignoring me and pulling me back to the building.

“Hold on. We still need one more change.” I grabbed his sleeve and started ripping, but damn, it was hard to rip a shirt.

“What are you trying to do?”

“Well, you have road rash. We need to see it.”

He grabbed his sleeve and yanked hard, tearing the sleeve immediately. I stared in awe at the man before me. He wasn’t just a pretty face. “Right, um...now you need to...get your muscles... your—” I motioned to his arm since I was too tongue-tied to actually say what I meant.

“Get my arm dirty?”

“Yes, your appendage.”

“My appendage,” he said, biting back a grin.

“Yeah, well...anyway, I’ll be inside.”

I turned on my heel and headed inside. I knew I was filthy, but it would work for the shoot. Now I just had to get through this without mauling him. I could do it. I was a professional.

At least, that’s what I kept telling myself.



## LOCK

“Are you sleeping with her?” Brock asked as I followed her to the door.

I hissed at him to shut up and only once she was inside did I answer. “Fuck, no. What would make you say that?”

“Um...because I came around the corner and then I nearly came from watching you act out a porno in an alley.”

“I wasn’t acting out a porno. We were getting in the mood.”

“To fuck? Is this campaign being shot in an alley?”

I rolled my eyes at him and headed back to the building. “She’s trying to find a way to use my scrapes in the shoot. I think she’s onto something.”

“Great, and you’re onto her. Got it.”

I rolled my eyes and yanked open the door.

“Hold up, I’m supposed to be opening doors for you,” he snickered.

“You know, one of these days, I’m gonna lose my shit and punch you.”

“Okay,” he said mockingly. “I’ll be ready now that you warned me you’re going to lose that classic cool of yours.”

“I don’t have a classic cool. I’m a dangerous man.”

He snorted out a laugh. “With a gun, yes. In general, I think the seating charts stick you firmly in the nerd category.”

I spun on him and glared. “There is nothing wrong with being organized!”

“Guys?” Juliette said, sticking her head out the door. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, let’s do this.”

Emilio gasped when he saw me. “Now we have to redo makeup and your clothes!”

“Emilio, trust me!” Juliette snapped, taking a rather forceful attitude with

him. "I've got this."

He nodded and hurried behind the camera. Not knowing what else to do, I followed Juliette and allowed her to position me on my knees. This wasn't exactly helping the situation, but as she got down in front of me, she took a deep breath and I knew I was in for one hell of a photo shoot.

"Okay, just follow my lead."

I nodded.

"Emilio, can we get some music?" she asked, never taking her eyes off mine.

The music kicked in and her hand slowly trailed up my arm. I stared at her, knowing I was supposed to be following her lead, but all I could look at was her beautiful face. Her fingers gently brushed over the scrapes on my arm, and then she leaned forward and pressed a small kiss just to the side of it. I groaned and tried my best not to give in to my desire and throw her down on the floor.

But my hands had a different idea as they moved to her hips and gripped the bare skin at her waist. She gasped and her eyes flicked to mine. The cameras and everyone else in the room melted away as her fingers continued up my arm, over my muscles in almost a caress. She had a smudge on her cheek from rolling around outside and my thumb immediately went to her cheek, checking to make sure I hadn't actually injured her.

Her eyelashes fluttered down for just a moment, and I saw the vulnerability in her shoulders. She was just as terrified of what was happening as me. I wrapped my arm around her back and pulled her closer. A small gasp left her and I captured it with my lips. I hoisted her up against me, her knees leaving the ground as she wrapped her arms around my neck and slid her fingers through my hair. With my face buried in her neck, I sucked on the delicate skin and got lost in her scent. She was fucking perfect, and when she tossed her head back, I ran my tongue over the base of her throat and up the other side.

Her legs wrapped around me and in the next instance, I had her on the ground, moaning as I shoved her legs wider and ground my growing erection against her. She cried out and I swallowed her cries as I kissed her hard. Something clattered to the ground and we both broke the kiss and our gazes snapped in the direction of the camera.

Everyone was staring at us, not doing a thing. Then I realized that I had her on the ground and I had completely forgotten about the camera. Clearing

my throat, I sat up and pulled her with me. She wiped her lips and brushed her hair back from her face.

“Um...I think we got it,” Emilio said, frowning at us.

“You got it?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he nodded slowly. “I...” He seemed to be lost for words the longer he stared at us. “Yeah, that’s a wrap for today. I think tomorrow we’ll need to find a new location.”

“Tomorrow’s Sunday,” Juliette reminded him.

“Right. With all the...” He motioned to the two of us and frowned again. “Anyway...see you tomorrow. Andrew!”

We just sat there as Emilio pulled Andrew aside for a few minutes. “That didn’t exactly go as I had planned,” Juliette whispered.

“Yeah, I think we got carried away.”

“We should probably get up,” she said, finally looking up at me.

“Probably.”

“And maybe we should...go to the grocery store.”

I nodded, but my eyes were locked on her thundering pulse. I brushed my thumb over it and closed my eyes. This was not helping me gain control.

“I’m gonna need a minute,” I croaked out. “You should probably...”

“Yeah,” she said, trying to extract herself from my grip. “Um... Royal?”

“Yeah?”

“If you want me to leave, you have to let me go.”

“Yep.” I was well aware of that. I was just having trouble putting the motions into action.

“It would be really bad if we kissed right now, right?” she whispered in my ear, immediately sending a shock to my cock.

“Yeah,” I croaked out.

“Is that all you can say?”

“Yeah.”

She chuckled and once again tried to extricate herself from me.

“I think I might just carry you downstairs.”

“Because of your problem down below?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Because I can’t seem to let you go.”

And this time when I looked into her eyes, she knew exactly what I was saying.

We did not go to the grocery store on the way home. Instead, we stopped at a diner and slipped inside, hoping nobody would notice Juliette. She had one of those unforgettable faces that people recognized. Well, everyone except for me. When I met her, it was the first I'd even heard of her. But then again, I didn't give a damn about fashion advertisements.

I pulled her to the back of the diner with Andrew and Brock in tow. And of course, my new bodyguard discreetly took a chair at a nearby table, though he did a shitty job of hiding why he was here. He kept looking back at me, staring as if the threat was in the very booth I was sitting in. I glared at him, but he didn't take the hint.

"Your bodyguard is shitty," I murmured to Andrew.

He smirked at me, as if he found the whole thing funny. In truth, he was a hindrance. I could keep Juliette safer without his interference, but my stupid ass hadn't known what to say in the moment and ended up blurting out the worst explanation possible.

"I'm so hungry," Juliette grumbled as she looked over the menu. "What are you going to get?"

"No idea," I answered, flipping open the menu. After a quick scan, it was clear that there was nothing healthy to order.

"Ooh, I think I'll get the double cheeseburger, onion rings, and a large strawberry milkshake." With a grin, she set down her menu.

"Where do you put all that stuff?"

"What do you mean? I put it in my stomach. Are you implying I'm bulimic?"

"No," I said slowly. That hadn't even crossed my mind. "I'm implying that you're skinny as hell and there's no reason you should be that way with the way you eat."

I shifted my foot and accidentally kicked hers, feeling it swing slightly. I looked under the table and smirked when I realized that she was too short for her feet to touch the floor.

Her lips pursed as she turned to me with that sassy attitude. "Have something to say?"

"Nope," I grinned.

"Because it looks like you do."

"Not at all," I answered, doing my best to keep my lips pulled tight.

Brock looked between the two of us in confusion. "Okay, what's going on?"



“Nothing,” I said instantly, sending him a look that told him to shut the fuck up.

“Something’s going on. You looked under the table and almost started laughing.”

I kicked him hard, hoping to shut him up, but it only egged him on.

“Ow, stupid fucker. I don’t see what the big deal is. Why can’t you just answer the question?”

“Because there’s nothing to answer,” I bit out.

Andrew sighed heavily. “He’s laughing because Juliette’s feet don’t touch the floor.”

“Seriously?” Brock looked at Juliette, then ducked down with his hulking frame under the table. When he sat up, he did everything possible to school his features, but it was obvious to everyone that he was barely holding back. “That’s not funny, asshole.”

“I know, which is why I didn’t laugh.”

I desperately forced my laugh down into the pit of my stomach, but one look at his stupid face and I couldn’t hold it back. I snorted out a cough, and then the rest of them started laughing.

Juliette clearly wasn’t impressed. “Sure, make fun of the really short girl. It’s so funny. My feet don’t touch the floor.”

“Should we get you a booster?” Andrew laughed.

She must have kicked him, because he bent over, flinching in pain. “I don’t know. Should you?”

He shook his head vehemently. “Definitely not.”

The waitress walked up and stared at us all curiously. “Um...are you ready to order?”

“Yes,” I answered quickly, hoping to deflect from what was really going on. After we all ordered, silence fell at the table. I slipped my arm behind Juliette’s head, not even realizing what I had done until Andrew cleared his throat.

“So, Emilio had a word with me after the shoot.”

“And?” Juliette asked.

“He, uh...” His eyes flicked from Juliette’s to mine. “He wants the two of you exclusively.”

“Exclusively?” Juliette asked. “Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Andrew asked. “It was like a fire in the middle of that photo shoot. After the shots he got today, it’s going to be hard to top that.”

Juliette practically beamed. After all, it was her that came up with the idea. “That’s amazing. What is he offering?”

“A very generous contract.” His eyes flicked to mine. “He wants to lock this in soon.”

“That’s not possible,” I said immediately.

“Why?” Juliette asked, turning to face me. “This is a great opportunity for us.”

Silence fell over the table. This might be good for her, but after this job, I would never step foot in a studio again. But I couldn’t tell her that, because she thought I was an actual model. And what would she say when she found out I wasn’t who I said I was?

“I just don’t think it’s the right move for me.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “It’s not the right move for you? I’m sorry, you got one modeling job and now you’re cherry picking what you can do?”

“I’m just not sure I want to sign a contract. I don’t even know if I’ll continue to model after this job.”

“And why not? Is it not good enough pay for you?” she snapped. “Or you don’t like the hours?”

“I don’t like the attention,” I argued.

“Then maybe you chose the wrong profession.”

“Which is why I said I wasn’t sure it was the right move for me,” I snapped.

In a huff, she faced forward and blatantly ignored me until our food came. The tension at the table made for an uncomfortable meal. Even the waitress noticed the change when she dropped off the food. And instead of Juliette scarfing down her food like I’d seen in the past, she picked at it, sighing heavily every now and then.

I wasn’t an idiot. I knew what a great opportunity this was for her. But that didn’t mean I would give up my job for her. I couldn’t. I wasn’t a model, and no matter how much I liked Juliette, this was all smoke and mirrors to trick her. And once she found out who I really was, she wouldn’t want anything to do with me anyway. She’d move on to other modeling jobs and forget I even existed.

Andrew dropped cash on the table as we all shuffled out of the booth. I didn’t say a word as Juliette hopped down from the booth or when she shoved ahead of me to get away. But when she reached the doors, I grabbed her arm and pulled her to my side. She tried to pull away, but I wouldn’t

allow it. She could be pissed at me all she wanted, but I wouldn't let her out of my sight while someone was after her.

She jerked out of my grasp and glared at me. "Maybe you should find a different ride home."

"Not a chance in hell," I muttered, pulling her to a stop when I saw someone hanging around near our vehicle. "Brock," I snapped, fully aware that I was giving orders when my bodyguard was supposed to be protecting me. But if Juliette noticed, she didn't say a word.

"I'm on it."

"What's going on?" Juliette asked.

I pulled her back toward the diner, but the moment we turned around, I knew we were in trouble. Out of nowhere, people rushed at us with cameras. They were shouting for Juliette, but it wasn't adoring fans that were coming at her. It was paparazzi, and they were shoving their way past Andrew to get to her. My bodyguard tried to grab me and pull me away from Juliette, but the moment he touched me, I grabbed his arm and twisted it back, then kicked his legs out from under him.

"Stay," I whispered to him as he laid on the ground. Then I grabbed Juliette's hand as Andrew tried to hold the reporters back and took off away from the scene.

We ran down the sidewalk, away from the chaos, but the reporters were quickly on our tail, trying to catch up to us.

"Run faster!" I shouted when she started falling behind.

"I'm in a dress! And I have little legs!"

I glanced over my shoulder at the growing crowd behind us. I had no clue that Juliette was such a popular celebrity. She jerked to a stop and ripped her hand from mine, then bent over and tore her dress up the side all the way up to her hip. She kicked off her shoes and took off at a sprint. I was so shocked that it took a minute for my brain to kick in.

I grabbed her hand after catching up, and together we sprinted down the street, turning at the corner. "In there!" I shouted, pushing the door open to a high rise. We rushed past the security guards, who were now chasing us too. I hit the button for the elevator, but it didn't work without keycard access.

"Stop! You can't be in here!" one of the guards shouted.

I rushed around the bank of elevators, down two halls until I reached an emergency exit sign. Juliette shoved the door open and we spilled out into the alley.

“Down there!” one of the reporters shouted.

“Aw, crap,” Juliette muttered. “I really don’t want to have to kick his ass.”

“No time for that,” I said, grabbing her hand. “There’s too many of them.”

We took off again through the alley, turning down a cross alley until we hit a busy sidewalk. I glanced up at the clock tower and saw it was just now five o’clock. The sidewalk flooded with people leaving work and we easily got lost in the crowd.

I kept a tight hold on Juliette’s hand as we shoved our way through the crowd in the opposite direction everyone else was moving. I glanced over my shoulder a few times, but we seemed to have lost everyone in the chaos. I slid my hand into my pocket to grab my phone, only to find it gone. I must have lost it during the chase.

“We need to get to a phone,” I said, pulling Juliette closer to the buildings, away from the chaos.

“We can call my brother.”

“No, he’s dealing with the press. I’ll call Brock. Maybe the shop will let us use their phone.”

I was about to step inside when a knife was pressed to my throat.

Juliette gasped beside me, her hand squeezing mine tight. I slowly untangled my fingers from hers, needing both hands to take down this asshole. “Whatever you want, I recommend you move the knife away from me now.”

A low chuckle had me frowning. Something about it sounded familiar, and when the knife slipped from my throat and I turned around, I glared at the man standing in front of me.

“Fox, what the fuck?”

He tossed his head back and laughed. “Man, you should have seen your face. I thought for sure you were going to kill me.”

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

He glanced at Juliette, then leaned in close. “I came for you know who.”

“Who?”

“You know who.”

“I don’t know who.”

He grinned at me, nodding like a crazy person. “You know who.”

“I’m sorry, who is this?” Juliette asked.

Fox swooped in, grabbing her hand to press a kiss to her knuckles. “People call me Fox, but you can call me Fox.”

Her eyes crinkled in confusion. That was a typical response to Fox. “Um...okay, Fox. And how do you know Royal?”

“Royal?” He snorted, tossing back his head again. “Man, that’s good.” He bent over in a sweeping bow. “My liege.”

“Knock it off,” I snapped, slapping his hand down. “Do you have a vehicle?”

“Of course,” he snorted. “Did you think I walked here?”

“Let’s go,” I said, grabbing Juliette’s hand as Fox led the way.

“So, this is exciting,” Fox grinned. “Where are we going?”

“Back to Juliette’s townhouse.”

“Ooh, the inner sanctum! That’s so...”

“Exciting?” I asked in a deadpan voice.

“Completely!” Fox gushed.

Juliette rushed to keep up with me as I dragged her through the city to Fox’s vehicle. I just happened to see the polish on her toes before I remembered that she kicked off her shoes when we ran. Cursing, I hoisted her up into my arms and continued on without another word. She shot me an incredulous look but wisely kept her mouth shut.

“This is me,” Fox grinned, waving his arm at the vehicle in front of us.

“A minivan? Seriously?”

“Hey, I got used to riding around in them. Besides, with Anna on the nest, I figured it would come in handy.”

“For the baby?”

He stopped and looked at me strangely. “No, for the bodies.”

“So...not because Anna’s pregnant, but because you’ll have more bodies,” I said slowly.

“Right, from all the potential targets I’ll have to take out.”

I wasn’t going to touch that one with a ten-foot pole. But Juliette didn’t get the same message.

“Wait, why would there be bodies?”

“Because I’ll have to take out anyone in her path. Duh.”

“Take out?” Juliette questioned.

Fox opened his mouth to answer, but I quickly opened the passenger door and shoved Juliette inside. “How are your feet?”

“A little sore.”

“From running through the city,” Fox nodded. “You run really fast.”

“You saw us?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah. I was spying on you at the diner. I gotta say, I’m a big fan of your work,” he grinned at Juliette. “When you ripped your skirt and took off running, I was cheering you on the whole time. Very impressive.”

“If you were watching, why didn’t you intervene?” I snapped.

He slapped me on the shoulder with a laugh. “You totally had it. Let’s go,” he jerked his thumb at the van. He was about to get in the driver’s seat, but I grabbed him by the collar and shoved him aside, then snatched the keys. There was no way he was driving.

“Not cool, man. I didn’t come here and steal your ride.”

I ignored Fox’s pouting and got in the driver’s seat. As soon as he slid into the back, I pulled out and headed in a roundabout way back to Juliette’s townhouse. I took a few extra turns and kept a close eye on my mirrors the whole way, but I didn’t see anyone following us.

Fox slid forward and rested his elbows on the seats. “I’m a big fan. Well, Anna’s a big fan. She loves your work.”

Juliette smiled at him. “I’m glad.”

“Yeah, she’s a real beauty.”

Juliette twisted in her seat. “How do you know Royal?”

He pulled out a pack of candy cigarettes from God knows where and started munching on them. “That’s funny. He and I go way back. Candy cigarette?” he said, offering one to her.

“Way back to when we were kids,” I cut in, shooting a warning look to Fox.

“Oh, right. To when we were kids,” he laughed, sending me an exaggerated wink.

“No thanks,” she shook her head at Fox, who was still holding out the candy. “I quit.”

“She quit,” Fox grinned. “That’s so cute.”

“Okay, what’s going on?” Juliette asked. “You obviously know each other, but you don’t want to tell me how you met.”

“Through work,” Fox nodded.

“As kids,” Juliette clarified.

Fox cleared his throat. "Yeah, you know...mowing lawns."

She raised her eyebrows at me, but I pretended to not hear her.

"So, anyway, I thought with your connections, maybe you could help us out. I thought about asking Anna, but she's gotten out of the business."

"Well, it's tough. Not everyone can do it," Juliette answered.

"Oh, she can definitely do it. She just doesn't want to. All those annoying photographers and pushy managers. You know what I mean."

"Actually, my brother is my manager."

"Wow, that sucks."

"No, it's great."

"Does he know anyone that could help with advertising?"

"Um..." Juliette frowned slightly. "He knows a few people, but it depends on what you want to advertise."

Fox shoved his way between the seats as he pulled out a large rolled up paper, nearly causing me to swerve off the road. I swatted it away as I tried to get him out of my face.

"Fox!"

"Sorry." He unrolled the paper and held it out for her. I shook my head when I saw what it was.

"Who's FNG?" she asked in confusion.

It was a missing person's ad. FNG's face was on it, and it asked if anyone had seen him, then gave a number to call.

"Oh, he's this guy I work with."

"What does FNG stand for?"

"Fucking New Guy," Fox grinned. "Clever, right?"

"And that's a nickname?" Juliette asked.

"Well, duh," Fox scoffed. "It would be pretty silly if someone named him FNG as a real name." He looked at me and sent me an incredulous look, as if she was the crazy one here.

"But if you want people to find him, shouldn't you put his real name?"

He stared at her for a moment. "Well, if I knew his real name, I would put it on the paper."

"I thought you said he was a friend."

"Oh, definitely. We're like this," he said, crossing his fingers. "Almost as close as me and the Kamau, but not quite."

"The Kamau," Juliette said slowly.

Fox grinned at her wistfully. "Yeah, he's like...the best guy I know."

Although, it would be nice if he told me his favorite show tune. I can't get the guy to open up. He's like an onion. You gotta keep pulling back those layers until you get the heart of the man. Know what I mean?"

She stared at him, then turned to me. "Royal?"

"Fox, sit the fuck down. We can talk about this when we get to Juliette's townhouse."

Fox slid back into his seat, huffing about how unfair this was.

"He's coming upstairs?" Juliette asked.

"Uh—"

"Of course! We're like family," Fox said, shoving his head between the seats again.

"We're not like family," I told her.

"We're totally like family," he continued. "Like that time when we did the thing?"

"There was no thing. We didn't do a thing."

"There was a thing," he insisted. "And we shared a house. How can you say we're not like family?"

"You shared a house?" Juliette asked.

"Strictly for convenience," I assured her.

"And I put on that performance of Oklahoma for you," Fox continued.

Juliette pressed her fingertips to her forehead and sighed. "This is so strange."

"You have no idea," I agreed.

Fox slipped his arms around each of us and pulled us toward him. "Man, this is going to be so great. We're gonna be roomies."

Juliette sighed heavily. "I think I'll have that candy cigarette now."





## JULIETTE

“He’s not staying!” I shouted as I marched into my townhouse.

Royal hurried behind me. This time, my tiny legs were too much for him to keep up with. I was angry...pissed. Who did this guy think he was, inviting himself to stay in my townhouse without even asking? Though, that seemed to be the new norm for me these days.

I stormed into my bedroom, quickly followed by Royal, who shut the door behind him. “Look, I know this is...”

“Odd? Strange? Freaky as hell?” I said to him.

“Right, any of those things. But Fox is harmless.” I stared at him. “Mostly.”

“Mostly? You want me to let a man stay with me who is mostly harmless?”

He shrugged. “I mean...I’m here.”

“But you *are* harmless!”

He actually looked stricken by that. And slightly offended. “I am not,” he muttered.

“Oh, please. You’re a pretty boy model with big muscles,” I said, turning away from him. My anger was at a boiling point. I wasn’t sure how much more of this I could take.

“Look, he’s not going to stay. He could never be away from Anna for that long.”

I spun back around and glared at him. “Yeah, Anna. Like that’s supposed to mean something to me! He acts like I know her, like I would be awestruck if I met her! She’s probably a psychopath just like him!”

He cocked his head to the side slightly. “I wouldn’t call him a

psychopath.”

“Yeah? What would you call him?”

“I don’t know...Unique.”

“Unique,” I repeated. “You think a man that holds a knife to your throat and then invites himself to stay at someone else’s townhouse is unique?”

“You’d have to know him,” he said weakly.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and took a calming breath. “Royal, I understand you’re new to all this, but you can’t be new to society in general. It is never okay for a friend to invite themselves to stay at another person’s home who they’re not friends with.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t let him hear you say that. He might get offended.”

“I don’t care if he gets offended!” I snapped, stomping my foot on the ground.

“Okay,” he hurried over, grabbing my arm. “Okay. I get it, and I’ll talk to him.”

“Thank you,” I sighed.

His hands clasped around my arms and slowly ran up and down, as if he was trying to soothe me. “How are your feet?”

“They hurt,” I pouted. “I don’t normally run around without shoes on.”

“Come on. I’ll clean them up.”

He took my hand and led me into the bathroom. I sat on the edge of the tub as he ran the bath water and poured in some Epsom salts I had stored under the counter. I found it interesting how he took over and started cleaning up my feet. I didn’t want to see the damage, but I knew they were torn up from running around. But he was gentle, making sure to massage my feet in the process.

“Where did you learn to do this?” I asked, leaning back against the wall of the shower.

He smirked at me. “You know, from all those other times I went running through the streets with other women who had to kick off their high heel shoes.”

I smiled back at him as his hand ran over my heel and up my calf. I groaned as he massaged the sore muscles, closing my eyes in delight. “God, that feels so good.”

His breath hitched and my eyes flew open. He was staring at me, watching my face as he once again ran his hand up the back of my leg. The air was charged as he watched me with an intense, smoldering look that sent

tingles down my spine. I stiffened under his touch, not because I didn't want his hands on me, but because I was so turned on already.

"Royal," I whispered as his hand slid further up my calf until he hit the back of my knee. His eyes slid from my eyes, down to my heaving chest, lingering just for a moment on my breasts. My pussy clenched in desire the longer he stared at me. And then I felt his eyes on my throbbing clit, as if he could see it through my clothes.

He lifted my foot as he slid closer to me on the edge of the tub. Soon, my leg was draped across his lap, resting over his hard cock. I couldn't help but wiggle my foot over his length, eliciting a rumble from his chest. His hand slid further up my leg, gliding up to my hip where the fabric of my skirt was torn. His finger slipped under my panty line, caressing my skin leisurely.

In one swift move, I slid across his lap, straddling his thighs. My lips slammed into his, causing him to fall backward, just barely catching himself with his hand pressed to the opposite wall before he fell into the tub. He pushed off the wall and stood, grasping my ass in his other hand, kissing me back the entire time.

My hands twisted through his long strands, tugging him to me as he carried me into the bedroom. We bounced back on the bed as he rested between my legs. His fingers slid between us as he once again found my panties, but this time, there was no teasing. He tore the material from my body and his fingers slid across my slick entrance.

He leaned back, staring into my eyes as he slowly ran his fingers up and down my pussy. "Are you sure about this?"

"Do you really have to ask?" I said breathlessly as I lifted my hips, pushing his fingers against me.

His eyes glittered with desire as he stared at me, and for just a moment, I thought he was going to pull away from me. "Fuck it," he swore, kissing me hard as his finger thrust inside me. I gasped, and then his tongue was in my mouth, twisting with mine.

I was soaked, needing so much more than just his finger. I could feel his cock pressing into my leg, begging to be inside me.

"Royal," I gasped. "I need you."

His lips latched onto my neck as he slid a second finger inside me, fucking me harder. "Is that what you need, sweetheart?"

"Sweetheart?" I said breathlessly. "I'm not sweet."

His tongue slid down my neck, trailing the neckline of my dress along my

breasts. “So fucking sweet,” he groaned.

The last thing I wanted was to be thought of as sweet. I couldn't have him thinking I was some princess that needed to be handled with care. I palmed his cock, squeezing hard as I flipped him onto his back. His eyes slammed shut as I grabbed his length in my hand and stroked him through his clothes, but I needed more. Getting to my knees, I quickly undid his pants and yanked them down his hips as he lifted his ass for me. In a flash, I took him in my mouth, moaning as I swallowed as much of him as I could.

“Fuck!” he shouted, jerking his hips involuntarily and thrusting his cock further into my mouth. I gagged on his thickness, my jaw throbbing from how wide I was stretched. I nearly choked on him as saliva slid over his cock, dribbling down to his balls. His hand slid into my hair as he held me in place and started fucking my mouth.

I tried to control the pace, but he was relentless, thrusting harder and faster as he neared his orgasm. His hips jerked rapidly as he lost control, gripping me almost to the point of pain.

“Fuck, I'm gonna come,” he said breathlessly.

I doubled down, gripping his cock hard in my hand as I sucked harder. He thrust one last time into my mouth, stilling as his cum spurt in large ropes down my throat. I nearly gagged on the amount of cum filling my mouth. He held my head down, until I swallowed every last drop. I gasped for air when he finally released me, then slid my tongue over his sensitive cock, just to get him back for fucking my face like that.

I collapsed onto my back, breathing hard from my excellent performance, but he didn't let me take a breather. He slid to the floor and jerked my hips to the edge of the bed as he flipped the scraps of my dress up over my belly and spread my thighs.

“Royal!” I yelled as his tongue circled my clit. My eyes slammed shut as pleasure shot through me. My legs quivered and my spine arched with every swipe of his tongue, swirling over me like his favorite ice cream cone. My whole body shuddered as I came apart shamelessly from just his tongue. I tried to pull back from him, but his grip on my hips tightened as he held me against his mouth, flicking his tongue over my clit to draw out my orgasm.

I collapsed against the bed, exhausted and breathing hard. If he wanted to do anything else tonight, he was sorely mistaken. My eyes were already drifting shut. His soft lips slid up over my body, pressing kisses all over my skin as he pulled my dress up. My arms flailed uselessly as he tore the dress

over my head, and then his mouth was covering my breast, drawing my nipple into his mouth.

“Royal,” I breathed out. “I can’t.”

He chuckled against my breast, pulling my nipple between his teeth and biting gently, just enough to send a tingling zap down my spine. I groaned and wrapped my arms around his neck.

“Fuck it,” I sighed as he rolled me over on the bed, then twisted me until I laid on my back across his chest. His hand cupped my breast, twisting my nipple as his other hand slid down to my pussy. I was drenched, leaking all over the bed, but I didn’t care as he continued to play with me.

“One more, sweetheart,” he whispered, biting my ear.

I shook my head. As wet as I was, I just didn’t think I could get there.

But he didn’t take no for an answer. The hand cupping my breast slid up to my neck just under my chin. My head was pushed back as he slid his finger into my mouth, thrusting it in and out. I instantly sucked his thick finger just like I would his cock. And it must have turned him on because his fingers strummed my clit faster and faster with every second that passed.

My hand flailed out, grasping onto his cock as it thickened from my touch. He cried out, his fingers sliding over my clit so fast that my orgasm washed over me in a rush. And then he jerked up, flipping me over as he spread my ass cheeks and slid his hard cock through my juices and pushed inside me just seconds later.

His hand pressed on my back, shoving my face into the mattress as he thrust in and out of me. My body barely had time to adjust to him as he pounded into me. The world spun around me at a dizzying rate until I felt like I was falling hard to the ground. I faintly heard him cry out as he collapsed against my back and I was flattened to the mattress.

Together, we sounded like we’d just run the Boston Marathon, and we were sweating just as heavily. Yet, he still pressed kisses to my cheek and pulled me into his arms as if he didn’t want me to run away. My heavy eyes blinked slowly as sleep overcame me. I momentarily wondered where his friend was, but decided I didn’t give a shit. I intertwined my fingers with his and nodded off.

I swatted at whatever was touching my face and disturbing my sleep. “Chicken,” I grumbled, feeling like there was a feather tickling me. I heard his deep chuckle, but wasn’t awake enough to respond.

“Sweetheart,” he whispered, nipping at my ear.

“Dog,” I mumbled.

“Hot dog?”

“Pork.”

“You want a hot dog?”

I swatted at him again, rolling over to bury my face in the pillow, but he didn’t give up, turning me back over and running his hands over my naked body.

“Bastard,” I grumbled. It wasn’t fair that he was touching me to wake me up. I wanted to sleep.

I felt a soft bite to my shoulder and finally peeled my eyes open. He was sitting up in bed, staring down at me. “Come on. You’ve been sleeping for hours. I need food.”

“Food,” I grunted. “Feed me.”

“I would, but I don’t know what you want to eat.”

“Chinese,” I yawned, rubbing my eyes.

His heavy sigh was all it took to realize he wasn’t happy with my decision. “If you don’t want it, why did you ask me what I wanted to eat?”

“Because I want you to eat something, but I was really hoping for something other than junk food.”

“It’s not junk food,” I said, still too sleepy to really be upset with him.

“It’s garbage. You need to start eating better.”

I nodded and rolled over, burying my face again. “Kay. I’ll start eating better.”

“Good.”

“After I get my Chinese food.”

I squealed when he dug his fingers into my side and tickled me until I was wide awake. “Stop!” I cried, laughing hard. “Not fair!”

“Come on. Let me take you out for a nice midnight snack.”

He finally relented and leaned over to kiss me, but it didn’t stop there. His lips slid over my skin, down my body, as if he hadn’t had enough earlier. I grabbed his hair and stopped his descent.

“Food first.”

“You were dead to the world two minutes ago,” he argued.

“And now you reminded me that I haven’t eaten, and you woke me up. This is on you.”

I gently shoved him away and slipped out of bed, grabbing my robe off the floor where I left it earlier. After wrapping it around my body, I opened the door, only to stop when I saw Fox sitting in my living room. He looked up at me and grinned.

“Hiya! That must have been some great sex. I could hear you outside the townhouse.”

I slammed the door shut and leaned against it, closing my eyes.

“What?” Royal asked, getting up from bed.

“Look, I don’t want to be a bitch and tell you your friend can’t stay here.”

He stepped closer with a grin on his face. “But…”

“But he can’t stay here.”

A slightly lopsided grin came over him as he wrapped his arms around me, bending over to suck on my neck, his favorite spot. I was going to have a world of hickeys for Emilio’s makeup artist to cover up. His hands settled on my hips as he pulled me against him.

“He’s gone,” he whispered, continuing to kiss me.

“Good.” My eyes slipped closed as I melted into his touch. This wasn’t right. I was supposed to be getting food. I pressed my hands to his shoulders and stepped back. “No, you don’t get more until he’s gone and I have my Chinese food.”

“Fine,” he groaned. “I’ll get you Chinese food, but tomorrow we’re eating something healthy.”

I stuck my tongue out at him and swung the bedroom door open, ignoring the man on my couch as I opened the menu drawer.

“You have to leave,” Royal said to Fox.

“Sure, but Anna’s on her way out here. She’s dying to meet Juliette.”

I continued to ignore them as I dug around. I didn’t care if the woman was coming out here. It didn’t matter to me at all. He should have asked permission first, not just invited another person to meet me. Who did shit like that?

“Fox, she’s not coming.”

“Oh, I beg to differ, moi capitaine. She is indeed on her way out here right at this very moment. I would have told you sooner, but you were a little busy, and I’ve been told it’s rude to interrupt people when they’re banging.”

“It’s rude to interrupt people anytime, but it’s even worse to invite her out



here without asking first!” Royal snapped.

“Ooh,” Fox held up his hands, chuckling as he stared at Royal. “Somebody’s a little touchy. You know, maybe you’re not doing it right if you’re still this grouchy after getting laid.”

Royal pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Fox...”

“It’s fine,” I interjected. It really wasn’t, but Royal was getting all worked up, and right now, I just wanted to eat. I’d just have to put Fox to work. “Listen, if you want to stay, you’re going to have to get me Chinese food.”

Fox jumped to his feet with a grin. “No problemo. Have you ever tried shawarma?”

“Um—”

“Like in the Avengers movie. FNG is actually the one that brought it up. See, I was out on this job with him, flaying someone’s body, when he mentioned shawarma. And—”

“I’m sorry, you were what?” I cut in, sure that I heard him wrong.

“I was flaying someone’s body. That’s when you take a knife and slowly peel back the skin into a thin strip, just like with shawarma,” he grinned. “It’s so tasty.”

“The skin or the shawarma?” I asked, though I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer.

“The shawarma, of course. I’m not a cannibal,” he said, shooting me a look that said *duh*.

“But why were you flaying someone’s body?”

It was probably stupid that I was stuck on this point, but I just couldn’t move past it.

“Because he was a bad guy. I thought that was pretty obvious.”

“Right,” I nodded. “I...always flay bad people.”

“You do?” His face brightened at my false confession. “What knife do you prefer? I have several that I really like using, but—”

“Fox!” Royal snapped. “She was being sarcastic.”

Fox looked at me, his eyes pulled together in a frown. “You were?”

I nodded, wondering why he didn’t immediately catch onto that.

“Man, that’s so disappointing,” he sighed, his shoulders sagging.

“How about you just order the food so we can move on with this,” Royal suggested.

“Yeah, what do you guys want?”

Fox’s head perked up. “You mean I can stay for dinner?”

The hopeful look on his face actually made me smile. I wasn't sure why. The man had invited himself into my home, then invited his wife here. But there was something almost childlike about his appearance that I just couldn't turn away from.

“Yeah, it's fine.”

“Man!” he cheered. This is going to be so awesome.” He glanced at his watch and then clapped his hands together. “Alright, you order the food and I'll go get it. Then we have just enough time to hang out before Anna's flight gets in.”

“Perfect,” I forced a smile. “This is all so...perfect.”



## LOCK

It wasn't perfect. I was in hell. Fox wouldn't stop talking, no matter how many dirty looks I shot him. He dominated the conversation when all I wanted to do was spend some time alone with Juliette. Even though it went against everything at OPS to sleep with a client, I couldn't help myself. I was going to be in so much trouble when Cash found out.

"And then Anna lost it and totally stabbed the guy to death. And when I say stabbed, I mean she slaughtered him," Fox laughed. "Talk about a bloodbath."

Juliette sighed and stuffed another piece of orange chicken in her mouth. "That's really interesting."

I had to hand it to her, she was holding up surprisingly well with Fox yapping the way he was. She glanced at my dish and stretched her arm across the table, stealing one of my cheese wontons. I stared at her in shock as she bit into it and moaned. I knew that moan, and it was saved for the bedroom, but that wasn't important when she literally just stole food out of my dish.

I cleared my throat, wiping my mouth with a napkin before setting it on the table. "Um...I'm not sure if you're aware," I said, cutting off Fox from his ramblings, "but I ordered that."

She looked up at me, cocking her head to the side. "Yeah, and?"

"And it was my food."

She popped the other half in her mouth and nodded. "Okay..." She eyed my plate again. "Are you going to eat that California roll?"

Before I could even answer, she did it again! She reached across the table and snagged the food right off my plate!

"What are you doing?" I asked, my voice going unreasonably high.

“I’m eating. What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re eating my food!”

Again, she tilted her head at me. “Do you remember the things I just did to you in the bedroom?” I nodded. “And you’re worried about me eating your food?”

I sighed, scooting back in my chair from the table. “Alright, I can see we need to set up some boundaries,” I said, walking over to my bag that was just inside the door of the bedroom I was using. I grabbed a pad of paper and a pen, clicking it as I sat down.

“What are you doing?” she asked curiously.

“Setting some boundaries.”

“For what?”

I slowly looked up at her and narrowed my eyes. “For food. You just ate off my plate.”

“I also just ate your cock,” she retorted, lifting her eyebrow in challenge.

Fox burst out laughing, holding up his hand for her in a high five that she didn’t return. “Right, that’s cool,” he said, clearing his throat as he lowered his arm.

“So, because you performed a sexual favor for me, I have to share my food?”

“No, you have to share your food because we just had sex, which is crossing some kind of boundary in our relationship.”

I leaned forward on the table. “And what constitutes a relationship to you?”

She rolled her eyes and popped another orange chicken in her mouth. “Well...you kissed me,” she said around her food. “You went down on me. You fucked me. You then stayed in bed with me.” She finished chewing and washed it down with some pop. “If you had left the room immediately, I could agree with you that it’s not a relationship.”

The door swung open and Andrew walked inside, eyeing the Chinese food hungrily. “Damn, it’s like you knew what I was thinking.”

Juliette spoke around another mouthful of food. “Royal and I had sex.”

He nodded. “I always want Chinese food after sex,” he said, grabbing a plate as he walked over and grabbed my dish, upending half of it onto his plate.

I shoved the chair back, shaking my head at the insanity of it all. “What are you doing?”

“Eating,” he said, grabbing one of my wontons. “God, I love these.”

I snatched it out of his hand, crushing it in my fist. I wouldn’t eat it after he touched it, but that didn’t mean he was allowed to have it either.

He stared at me incredulously. “What the fuck was that?”

“He has a thing about people touching his food,” Fox answered, slurping his noodles into his mouth. “You want some of mine?” he asked, holding it out to Andrew.

“Who are you?”

“Mmm,” Fox nodded. “People call me Fox, but you can call me Neal.”

Juliette frowned. “Wait, why am I allowed to call you Fox, but he can call you Neal?”

Fox stared at her. “I don’t know. Do you need an answer right now?”

“I need an answer as to why everyone’s touching my food!” I shouted.

“So, you slept with Royal,” Andrew grinned. “I called it.”

“You did not call it,” Juliette snapped.

“I did. To Emilio, and Brock.”

“You didn’t tell me you called it, so you can’t call it.”

“Technically, he can call it,” Fox answered. “You didn’t have to be present for him to call it. Unless there was an exchange of money or a bet of some kind.”

“There was no bet,” I snapped. “Can we get back to why you two think you can touch everyone else’s food?”

Juliette rolled her eyes at me. “It’s just food, Royal. What’s the big deal?”

“Because if I started eating your food, you’d be pissed at me.”

“Because no one touches my food,” she snapped.

I stared at her incredulously. “How is that any different than what I *just* said?”

“Because I’m a woman. It’s customary that men share their food with the woman they’re seeing.”

“Ooh, so you’re seeing each other,” Andrew grinned. “Nice, way to move in.”

I shook my head at him. “She’s your sister.”

“Yeah, but she’s also a grown woman. What’s your point?”

“My point is that you should be more concerned with who she’s dating.”

He paused mid-chew and stared at me. “Should I be worried about you? Because I thought I had a handle on the situation, but maybe I was wrong.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” I snapped. “But it would be nice if you

were a little concerned.”

He shrugged. “You’re dating. What more is there to say? Should I play chaperone?”

“We’re not dating!” I shouted.

Everyone at the table stopped and stared at me. Maybe I was acting like a crazy person, but there were rules and guidelines to be laid down, and they were all just taking this so casually. It wasn’t right.

“So, you don’t want to date me?” Juliette asked. “Does that mean we won’t be having sex again?”

“No. Yes,” I said in frustration. “I never said we weren’t dating.”

Fox cut in. “You literally just yelled it. The guy down the block heard it. Edu and Scottie heard it, and they’re sleeping.”

“Who are Edu and Scottie?” Juliette asked.

“Look,” I said, grabbing my paper. “There are rules for dating. Not so much rules as boundaries we need to set. Like...who gets the last egg roll if we place an order? Is food sharing allowed? Who has control of the remote? These are all things we need to work out ahead of time.”

“Okay, let’s talk,” she said calmly.

“Good.” I blew out a breath and sat down.

“Clearly, the answer to all of that is me. Next?”

She shoved more food in her mouth and moved on as if it wasn’t even up for discussion.

“What do you mean?”

“Okay, I didn’t want to do this, but if you’re going to be in a relationship with me, you’re going to have to give in a little. Yes, I will always get the last egg roll. Food sharing is always allowed unless you’re trying to eat off my plate. I can get a little hangry. And it’s my place, so of course I have control of the remote.”

I didn’t get it. They were all nodding in agreement with her, and I was still trying to wrap my head around how we were already in a relationship. “So, let me get this straight. In your eyes, if we’re in a relationship, you get whatever you want.”

She grinned at me. “Now you’re getting it. And in exchange, I will give you whatever you want in the bedroom.”

“Take it,” Andrew pointed at me with his fork. “That’s one hell of a deal you got.”

“Again,” I said slowly, “she’s your sister.”

“Yeah, but even I know that’s a great deal. Never say no to a woman that’s offering sex up on a platter.”

“We’re not even in a relationship!” I argued.

The room went quiet as Juliette tossed down her napkin with a very pissed-off look. “Well, glad I know where I stand. I guess that means there will be no more sex between us. I kind of wish you had made that clear from the start.”

“Juliette, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“Really? Because you just said we weren’t in a relationship. I’m not sure how I could have misunderstood.”

None of this was going as planned. I was screwing everything up. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re mine. That won’t change. But we had sex, and then you ate my Chinese food, and suddenly, we’re in a relationship! I didn’t even get a chance to work out a morning schedule with you!”

Fox clucked his tongue. “Way to kill the mood, man. When I seduced Anna, I totally made her fill out a form for a morning schedule first.”

I stormed out of the townhouse after it was clear I wasn’t going to win an argument with the three of them. Fox was right. I fucked it up big time. I wasn’t trying to, but she ate my food, and there was something wrong with that.

I stormed outside and walked around the side of the building where I knew Scottie was hanging out. He slipped out of the shadows as I came around the corner.

“I didn’t think I’d see you out here.”

“I’m pissed.”

“Because Fox is here? Yeah, that would piss me off too. Just don’t let him talk you into doing the tango.”

I ignored him and paced the grounds. “She ate my food.”

“Okay,” he said slowly. “I’m going to need more to go on.”

“We ordered Chinese food and she ate off my plate.”

He hissed in a breath. “Wow, not cool. Why do women do that?”

“I have no idea. And then her brother walked in and did the same thing. Who are these people?”



“Crazy people that have no morals, clearly.”

“Obviously,” I retorted. “Who does something so...inconsiderate?”

“Women,” he nodded.

“And then she had the nerve to tell me that since I slept with her and stayed afterward in bed with her that we’re in a relationship. And because of *that*, I’m now obligated to share my food with her.”

He held up his hand to stop me from pacing. “Whoa, you *slept* with her?”

“I know,” I groaned. “She’s a client, and it was wrong. Cash is going to kill me.”

“No shit, but what I meant is, if you slept with her, she’s right.”

My eyes narrowed on his. “Right about what?”

“Look, everyone knows that there are certain things a man no longer has rights to once he’s with a woman. One of those is access to his own food. What’s yours is hers, but not the other way around.”

“No,” I shook my head. “Just because I slept with her doesn’t mean I have to give up my food to her. That’s not how this works.”

He winced as he stared at me. “Dude, you slept with her. If you had walked out of the room and said *thanks for the fuck*, I could agree with you. But if you stayed with her and snuggled?” He sighed heavily. “You fell into the trap.”

“What trap?”

“The woman trap. She now has you by the balls. You shouldn’t have stayed.”

That didn’t make any sense. “I wanted to stay. I shouldn’t have to give up my right to food just because I wanted to spend the night with her.”

“Then you should have eased your way into it. I bet you didn’t even have time to make a morning schedule with her.”

“Thank you!” I said, glad someone else understood. “I didn’t, and she thought it was weird I was even asking.”

“Women,” he muttered. “There has to be a schedule. Women take so long in the bathroom. We need clear guidelines for how long they need to get ready, and just when we’re allowed in the bathroom. Take Quinn, for instance. She actually expects me to stay out of the bathroom when she’s taking a shit. Like I haven’t been there, done that.”

“Scottie, you should always stay out of the bathroom when someone’s taking a shit,” I said in disgust.

“Why? I’ve gone down on her every week since we’ve been together.

I've shaved her legs and washed her hair. Why is pooping suddenly off the table?"

"Because it's a privacy issue," I snapped. "No one wants to smell that or hear the sounds that accompany it!"

He snorted out a laugh. "Trust me, staying outside the door doesn't prevent me from knowing what goes on in there."

I sighed and walked away from him. He wasn't helping the situation at all. "The point is, I don't know how to fix this. She's acting like this is some big deal that I don't want to share my food."

"So, just order extra," he said as if it wasn't a hard problem to solve. "If you know she's going to steal your food, get whatever she wants and double of what you want. Then you can steal her food," he grinned.

"I don't want to steal her food. And apparently, her food is only for her. It's not a two-way street."

"That's just wrong," he frowned. "Are you sure that's what she said?"

"I have ears, don't I?"

"Geez, you're fucking grouchy tonight. Shouldn't you be in a better mood if you just got laid?"

Everyone was fucking say that. "So, what am I supposed to do? I can't just walk up there and give her everything she wants."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not an insane person," I snapped. "If I give her what she wants on this, what's next?"

"Um...you get sex and stop being grouchy?"

"Like it's really that easy?"

"Yeah, it really is. I'm not sure why you don't understand this."

"Because I like rules and order. And she's none of those things!"

"You make her sound like she's really disorganized."

"She is! She rolls out of bed in the morning with no conscious thought of anyone else's time. And she eats junk food like crazy. Who does that?"

"People that like junk food?" I glared at him, but he just continued. "And she's not disorganized. From what I can tell, she's very respectful of others. Maybe she's not great at waking up, but you can help with that. Just fuck her early enough in the night that she falls asleep early and wakes up early. You're too fucking tense, man," he said, rubbing my shoulders. "You need to relax."

I sighed and allowed him to ease the tension in my body. I knew it was

wrong, but standing here in the shadows, I felt like I could finally let loose and be myself for once since I started this job. I was constantly on edge, hoping I didn't fuck everything up. And what would Juliette say when she found out who I really was? Would she still want to be in a relationship with me then?

I groaned and rolled my neck. "God, that feels good."

A throat cleared and we jumped apart. "Should I leave you two alone?" Andrew asked.



## JULIETTE

After Royal stormed out of the townhouse, I ate the rest of his food just to spite him. Did he really think he could have sex and then not share his food with me? That wasn't the way this worked. I liked food, and no one stood between me and what I really wanted.

“Oh, shoot,” Fox said, shoving his chair back. “Gotta go get my girl. Wanna come with me?”

“Not even a little,” I muttered.

“Are you sure? I'll tell you anything you want to know about Royal.”

He kind of laughed when he said that, which made me really want to know what Fox knew that I didn't.

“You know what? I think I will go with you.”

“Uh—” Andrew stood suddenly and looked between Fox and me. “I should tell Royal. He'll want to go.”

“Why would he want to go?”

“Because...” He looked at a loss for words. What was with Andrew wanting Royal to go everywhere with me? It was disturbing. “Because Fox is his friend and...after you slept with him, he won't want you alone with another man.”

I cocked an eyebrow at him. “Really?”

“Maybe? I'll go check. Wait here,” he said, rushing out of the townhouse.

“Let me change. I'll be right there.”

I stood, wincing as my feet touched the ground. I forgot that just hours ago, Royal and I were running through the city. It was beginning to get a little strange around here. That could only be because of these crazy people after Royal. And since the last bodyguard hadn't worked out, we really needed to

get someone else out here.

I sat down on my bed and pulled up the number I had found for security, before my brother said he would handle it. It couldn't be that hard to secure a contract.

"Reed Security, this is Maggie speaking."

"Yes, my name is Juliette Cassinelli. I need a bodyguard for a model working with me."

"Juliette...Did you say Cassinelli?"

"Yes, why?"

"Um...hold one minute."

The line went dead before I had a chance to say anything. While I waited, I put it on speakerphone and tossed the phone on the bed as I pulled on new clothes. I was just slipping on my shoes when the woman came back on the line.

"Juliette, of course we can help. When did you need someone to start?"

"The sooner the better."

"Uh-huh. And is there any reason in particular you need a bodyguard?"

"The model I'm working with, Royal Forsythe, has some crazy fans. Just earlier today, we were chased through the city."

"That's terrible. Do you have a preference for male or female bodyguards?"

"Um...you have females?"

"Oh, yes. In fact, I would recommend using a female for this particular job."

"Why's that?"

"You could have females pose as his groupies and blend in. It would work amazingly."

That did sound like a good plan. "Sure. That sounds great. I'll send you my manager's information and he can finish setting everything up with you."

"Great. I look forward to hearing from him."

Satisfied that all had gone according to my plan, I walked out into the living room just as Royal was entering my townhouse, eyeing me skeptically.

"I'm going with Fox to pick up his wife."

"No," he answered, his voice deep and domineering.

I was never one to be told what to do, and even less so if it came from a man. I grabbed my purse, ignoring the death look he shot me. "Yes, I am. You should rest up. We have that photo shoot in two days."

“It’s not safe,” he growled, sending a shiver down my spine.

“For you. The drama earlier today was because of you, not me. Which I still don’t understand, but at this moment, I really don’t care.”

I walked right past him for the door, ignoring the way my brother was smiling at me. He should have warned Royal that I didn’t bow to any man. “Ready, Fox?”

“Righty-O!” He linked his arm through mine and started skipping to the elevator. I thought it was a little weird, but he was growing on me, so I went with it. Besides, I had to stay on his good side if I was going to get any information on Royal.

Just as the elevator doors were about to shut, Royal stepped inside, glaring at me as he pressed the button. That could possibly make it more difficult to get information on him, but I would make it work.

Once we were in the minivan, which Fox decided we were taking since it had more space, I sat up front with him, leaving Royal to sit in the back where he scowled at the back of Fox’s head.

“So, tell me...what is Royal’s real name?”

Royal’s head snapped in my direction as Fox laughed uproariously. “Don’t answer that!”

“Jerrod,” Fox chuckled. “That wasn’t even a hard one.”

I spun in my seat and faced Royal. “So, you have a normal name. Why change it to Royal?”

“It wasn’t my idea,” he grumbled.

“And why don’t you want me to know what your real name is?”

“Because that’s what I go by now.”

I didn’t really think that was the reason, but I let it go for now. “And what is Royal really like? Please tell me he’s not really this stuffy.”

“Oh, even more than you see now. He’s all about seating charts and doing things by the letter of the law,” he said in a mocking tone.

“Seating charts,” I said, really interested in that one. “You mean, like at a wedding?”

He snorted. “At a wedding, when you go out for drinks at a bar, any restaurant. You name it, he has a seating chart for it.”

I spun around again. “Really? You have a seating chart at bars?”

The serious look on his face told me this was something he would never budge on. “There are procedures to follow. Let’s say that I take you out for drinks with my friends. Where should you sit?”

“By you,” I answered.

“Right, but then at some point, my attention will be drawn to someone else’s conversation, leaving you alone. You should be placed equidistant between me and other women you can talk to.”

“What if I want to talk to other men?” I asked.

“Societal norms dictate that you’ll want to talk to women. Take Anna, for instance. When you meet her, you’ll no longer want to talk to me. Therefore, when we get in the van, you’ll want to sit in back with her, and I’ll sit up front with Fox.”

“How can you be so sure I’ll want to sit with Anna?”

His eyes twinkled with amusement. “Trust me, when you see her, you’ll understand why I’m saying this.”

I wasn’t sure I trusted him at all, but I’d move on from that for now. “What else can you tell me about him? What about other women?” I asked, ready for more juicy details.

Fox shook his head. “No other women. Lo—I mean, Jerrod is very much a love ‘em and leave ‘em type of guy.”

“I am not,” Royal snapped. “I just haven’t found the perfect woman yet. Present company excluded.”

“Of course. But what does that mean? Are you going to ask me to marry you?”

He stared at me with a shocked expression. “Uh...”

“Because you said you hadn’t found the perfect woman until me. That would suggest that you didn’t need to look any further, that I’m what you’ve been waiting for.”

“Uh...”

“And if I’m what you’ve been waiting for, then you must see a future with me. I would assume we’ll date for the appropriate amount of time before you’ll eventually ask me to marry you. Then we’ll move into the suburbs and start having kids. Of course, we’ll have to get a nanny because of my job.”

He swallowed hard, so I continued.

“And, of course, you’ll have to keep up with modeling so I don’t overshadow you. We wouldn’t want the press to think I’m a bigger deal than you. I’m not sure your ego could take it. And you can’t stay home with the kids. I’m not one of those women that’s okay with supporting her man.”

“There’s a lot of ‘of courses’ being thrown around,” he muttered, still in shock.



“And then we’ll have to find the right schools. We should really start looking right away. Jerrod Junior deserves the absolute best education. And we’ll want him to go to Harvard or Stanford, so we have to set him on the best path now.”

Again, he swallowed hard. “Harvard?”

I cocked my head at him. “Did you have another school in mind?”

“I’m still trying to wrap my head around our wedding.”

“Oh, don’t worry. It’ll be a small, intimate affair. Just five hundred of our closest friends and family. And, of course, we’ll ask Emilio to take our wedding photos.”

I spun back around in my seat, satisfied that I had scared the ever-loving shit out of him. Between the food incident and all that crap, I’d just ensured that he wouldn’t be rushing things with us. In fact, I might have taken things just a tad too far.

“So, tell me about Anna,” I said to Fox, quickly changing the subject.

“Hang on,” Royal said, shoving between the seats. “What makes you think our kids are going to Harvard?”

I did a double take, surprised at his sudden change in demeanor. “Um...” Now it was my turn to look like a fool. Had that backfired on me? “Why wouldn’t we send them to one of those schools?”

“Because our kids aren’t going to some pretentious school. They’ll join the military.”

“The military?” I gasped. “Are you crazy? I’m not sending our kids off to be shot!”

“They’ll have weapons! It’s not like they’re gonna stand in front of a firing squad and just wait for death!”

“And you think that will protect them? No, our kids will get nice, normal jobs like an accountant or...a lawyer!”

“So, boring jobs. You want our kids to be dull and lifeless.”

“Better than ending up dead! What do either of us know about the military?”

“I’m former military, remember?”

But I ignored the ridiculous reminder and kept going. “Seriously, I may be able to run fast, but that would only help me to run away from whoever is chasing me! And look at you! All muscles, but I doubt you’ve ever actually been in a fight before.”

“Do you want to find out?” he snapped.

“No, because we’re in the middle of a photoshoot!”

Fox started laughing from his seat. “Man, this is so good. I wish I had this recorded. The guys would get such a kick out of this.”

I turned around in a huff, crossing my arms over my chest. We weren’t discussing this any further today.

But Royal just had to get in the last word. “And a small, intimate ceremony is not five hundred people.”

The car was completely silent as we parked in the pickup zone to get the elusive Anna. I wasn’t sure any longer that coming along helped. Instead, I somehow mapped out my future with Royal when I was really supposed to find out more information about him. All I’d gotten was his name and the fact that if we ever did get married, he’d be in charge of the seating chart.

“There she is!” Fox laughed, getting out of the car and rushing over to meet her. I glanced out the window and sighed, but when Fox pulled back and I saw her face, I did a double take.

“Is that—”

“Yeah,” Royal said as if it wasn’t a big deal to him.

I pressed my nose against the window, my hands splayed on either side of my face as I stared at the woman I absolutely loved. She was a movie miracle—America’s Sweetheart! Everyone loved her right up until the day she decided never to make another movie again. I’d heard she married someone and now lived a small life in the middle of nowhere. But she married Fox?

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked, still baffled that she was married to Fox. Sure, he was sexy and gruff and...a little dangerous looking, but he married a superstar? What the hell?

I was about to shove the door open when Royal beat me to the punch. “Get in the back seat,” he muttered, not bothering to make eye contact with me. He was still butt hurt over our conversation on the way here. But that took a back seat to the real issue right now.

Anna Brooks was getting into the vehicle beside me. She was going to sit next to me and talk to me. I started fanning myself as I slipped into the back and prepared for this amazing thing that was about to take place. The door opened and my breath hitched. It was really happening.

She slid inside and smiled at me, then we both squealed at the same time and flung ourselves into the other's arms.

"Oh my God, I'm hugging Anna Brooks!"

"I'm hugging Juliette Cassinelli!"

We pulled apart and then squealed again, hugging once more. It was better than I imagined, nothing like my wildest fantasies. When I finally let her go, I could see the excitement on her part was just as genuine.

"Fox kept saying his wife's name was Anna, but he didn't say you were a famous movie star!"

"Well, I knew who you were, and I insisted on coming out to meet you. This is so amazing! I love your ads. They're killer!"

"Seriously?" I gaped. "You love my ads?" I started fanning myself, unable to believe that Anna Brooks loved my work. It was the most amazing, uplifting feeling in the world.

I pressed my hands to my cheeks, feeling like I was about to cry. "Oh my gosh, would you go shopping with me?"

Her jaw dropped. "You want to go shopping with me? You're a fashion icon! And I don't even like fashion anymore!"

We grinned at each other and squealed again, hugging hard. "Oh my gosh, I've just found my new bestie!"

"Me too!"

"Hey!" Fox said, his face pulling in a frown. "I thought I was your bestie."

But Anna ignored him in favor of me, which only thrilled me further.

"I want to see your photo shoot. Fox told me things have been a little tense. Will they allow me to watch?"

"Are you kidding? Emilio would pass out if he saw you!"

She grasped my hand tightly, her face turning serious. "Emilio is doing the photo shoot?"

"Yes."

She took a deep breath and released it. "Okay, I will not lose my shit right now. This is amazing. I always wanted to work with Emilio."

"Seriously?"

"It was about the only thing about being a movie star that I ever wanted. It just never happened."

I hardly noticed the fact that the guys got back in the minivan or that we were driving. I was too wrapped up in Anna. She was amazing, asking me

questions about my career as if she was a nobody. She was Anna freaking Brooks! By the time we got back to my townhouse, I felt like I had the bestest friend in the world.

“I only have a two-bedroom townhouse,” I said, feeling terrible that she was entering my humble abode. Oh God, and I didn’t have food!

“Please, I live with a bunch of guys. It’s totally fine.”

“Yeah, but you probably lived in this amazing place and—”

“I lived in a one-bedroom townhouse. I couldn’t afford more than that. Trust me, it’s fine.”

The guys opened our doors and we got out, heading for the front door. I grasped Royal’s arm tightly and pulled him aside. “We have no food in the townhouse!”

“I know,” he said smugly. “Remember? We tried to go to the grocery store and you fucked it all up.”

“Now’s not the time to point fingers. We have no food to give our houseguest.”

“Oh, so now she’s a houseguest. When Fox got here, he was a dangerous psychopath. I’m guessing you’re fine with him staying now.”

Irritated, I put on my best angry face. “Would you stop pointing out the obvious and fix this?”

“Fine, after I walk you up, I’ll go shopping.”

“And take Fox with you. I need some girl time with Anna.”

“No,” he said instantly. “I’m not leaving you alone.”

“What? Are you afraid I’ll fall in love with her and you won’t be able to make the seating charts at our wedding?”

He paused thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t be totally opposed to that.”

I slapped him on the arm. “You’re sick.”

“Ow!” he grimaced, as if I’d actually hurt him. “You’re the one that brought it up.”

“Go get my food!”

“Geez, you’re so bossy.”

“And you’re just now figuring that out? If we’re going to stay on track to get married in a year, you’re going to have to come around to my moods a lot sooner.”

At his shocked expression, I turned and caught up to Fox and Anna, quickly unlocking the door for them. We headed upstairs, me holding Anna’s hand the entire time. It was like a dream come true.

“Do you want some takeout? I can’t make you anything. We’re completely out of food. I wanted to go shopping earlier, but Royal got us kicked out of the grocery store,” I lied.

She laughed. “I could eat. Ooh, you know what sounds great is shawarma. Do you have a deli around here?”

“Oh, I’ve always wanted to try shawarma,” I gushed.

“Since when?” Royal scoffed.

I shot daggers at him until he backed off. “Come on, I’ll show you the takeout menus, then the guys can pick up our order.”

“Sure, we have nothing better to do,” Royal snapped.

I glared at him and led her over to the counter to look through the menus. Nothing was coming between me and Anna. This was fate or kismet—whatever the hell that was. All I knew was that Anna Brooks was in my townhouse, and she wanted to be my best friend. This was the best day ever.



## LOCK

After rushing through grocery shopping, Fox and I returned with way more food than we could ever use. Then again, he had about ten bags of Funyuns—and not those small snack-sized ones. I had grudgingly left the townhouse only because Brock reminded me they were all in position, watching over her. Fox insisted that he stand guard right outside the door. That made me feel marginally better, but I still wasn't happy about letting her out of my sight.

I pulled out the groceries, setting them on the counter as I heard Anna and Juliette laughing in her bedroom. “What do you think they're talking about in there?”

“Girl shit,” he answered, breaking open a bag of Funyuns.

“Yeah, but what kind of girl shit?”

“You know...hair and makeup, probably.”

They could be, but they were laughing. That never boded well for any man. “You don't...you don't think they're talking about us, do you?”

He frowned, coming to stand by my side. “Well...that would be awesome!”

“Awesome for who?” I grumbled. No, I didn't like this at all. Nothing good could come from them spending so much time together.

“How bad can it be? They're in there discussing us. That's a good thing.”

“Unless they're trading notes.”

He frowned at me. “Notes about what?”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Sexual positions.”

The answering grin told me he really didn't get the severity of the conversation. “Yeah? You think they're discussing new and exciting ways to

have sex?”

“I think they’re discussing what they like and don’t like,” I snapped.

“That’s not a bad thing.”

I tossed a bag of Funyuns on the counter and marched toward him. “Really? You don’t think it’s bad for them to discuss what they don’t like in the bedroom?”

“Why would it be bad?”

“Because everything they don’t like is a reflection of us. It’s not just them not liking our moves. It’s them not being properly pleased. That’s what this all boils down to.”

Now he looked concerned. His eyes flicked to the door as he considered this. “You...you don’t think they’re discussing...girth, do you?”

“Christ, I hadn’t even thought of that,” I sighed. “I mean...not that I have anything to worry about.”

“Me neither,” he added quickly. “But...they could be *comparing* us.”

I winced, not liking where this was going. “Do you think they realize that sometimes we’re long and sometimes we’re thick?”

“Sometimes we’re both,” he added quickly.

“Exactly. But do they know that?”

He nodded as his eyes flicked back to the door. “I’m sure they do. We’re probably worrying about nothing.”

“My thoughts exactly,” I answered, pretending to busy myself with the groceries, but I couldn’t get my mind off what they were discussing. Then I heard a loud laugh and rushed over to the door, quickly followed by Fox. I pressed my ear against it, but everything was muffled.

“What are they saying?” Fox hissed from behind me.

I waved him off, straining to hear, but all I could gather was that they were having a good time. I pushed away from the door and stalked back over to the counter. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. They’re having a good time.”

“Exactly,” he nodded, joining me at the counter. “Besides, Anna has nothing to worry about in the bedroom. I more than satisfy her.”

“Oh, me too. I mean, Juliette. She’s more than satisfied too. Worn out, in fact.”

“Right,” Fox nodded over and over again. “Although...there was this one time that I didn’t exactly perform to the best of my abilities. But that was different. I had just eaten a lot of Funyuns and wasn’t feeling the best. She



wouldn't hold that against me, right?"

"I have no idea. I mean...they're women."

"Shit," he swore. "I knew I shouldn't have had all those Funyuns. Do you think I should do something?"

"Like what? It already happened."

"Has anything like that happened to you?"

"With Juliette? We've only been together twice."

"Right, but...maybe with someone else," he said uncomfortably.

I winced. I had never told this story to anyone, and I was afraid to say it now. "Well, there was this one time I took a woman out to dinner and then we went back to her place. Things were going pretty good...for a while."

"Yeah," he stared at me with rapt attention. "What happened?"

"Well...Christ, this is embarrassing." I sighed heavily, not wanting to go there, but the poor guy looked distraught. "We were...in the middle of foreplay when I suddenly felt a...rumble in my belly."

He sucked in a breath. "No," he whispered.

I nodded. "It was the soup. Broccoli cheddar."

He winced, shaking his head in commiseration. "What did you do?"

"Well...I ended the foreplay immediately. There is nothing sexy about those noises when a woman is going down on you."

"Never."

"So, I...I got her on all fours and fucked her hard. I don't think I've ever beaten that record for how quickly I could come."

"I'm guessing she wasn't overly thrilled."

"No, it all worked out. It turned out that she liked it hard."

"Did you...make it to the bathroom?"

"Fuck, as soon as I pulled out, I got dressed and hauled ass out of there. I don't think I even said goodbye. I found a restroom and...well, it wasn't pretty."

He slumped against the counter, as if the story was about him. "Man, that's rough."

I nodded. "It was. I never saw her again. I was so fucking embarrassed, and I don't think she even knew what was going on."

"Hey, it happens to everyone," he said, trying to cheer me up.

We both looked at the closed door, but the awkwardness that descended between us was suffocating. "I should...get these groceries put away."

"Yeah, I need to—" He pointed at his bedroom door and rushed away

from me.

I was grateful for the distance. I felt like maybe we'd shared just a tad too much in those few moments. I wasn't comfortable talking about that stuff with my doctor, let alone another guy on the team.

My phone beeped and I pulled it out.

**Brock:** *Coming up.*

I finished unpacking, then grabbed the rest of the bags, crumpling them into a ball just as a knock sounded at the door. I swung it open and let Brock come in, followed by Edu and Scottie. This couldn't be good.

"What's going on?"

"There was another murder," Brock said without any preamble. He showed me his phone. The picture showed a woman on her stomach with her hands bound behind her back. Blood pooled under her body and her eyes were open, staring out at nothing.

"Who is she?"

Brock's lips thinned. "She's a model Juliette worked with on her last campaign. They were friends."

"Shit," I sighed. "Any leads?"

"Nothing yet. Forensics is still gathering evidence. Tate was able to get this much information from the department, but until they gather all the evidence, there's not much to go on."

Fucking Nicholas Tate, Fox's friend from his days as a SEAL. He seemed normal, which was why I didn't trust him. I couldn't figure out if he was messing with Fox or if he was truly friends with him. But Fox trusted him implicitly. I still hadn't figured out what the hell was the connection between the two of them, but that was the point. They wouldn't let anyone know what the story was until they absolutely had to.

"This guy is upping his game. He's attacking models that are connected to Juliette. We can only hide this from her for so long."

"You can't keep this from her," Brock pointed at the photo. "It's already spreading like wildfire. It's better if you tell her yourself."

"What I need to do is tell her who I really am. I could protect her better if she understood the situation."

"But we're not going to catch this asshole if he knows she's protected," Edu pointed out.

"So, we just continue to let him kill other people?" I questioned. "How does that help us? He's not going to come after her until he's ready. And in

the meantime, none of these women are safe.”

“Andrew’s been working on spreading the word to whoever he can. Some people aren’t taking it seriously, though,” Scottie said. “You can’t make people get protection.”

“Not everyone can afford it,” Brock muttered. “Juliette’s lucky, but there are too many other models that don’t have her resources.”

“What about the photographers? Will they provide additional security?”

“Only on-site,” Brock answered. “They can’t afford to provide security to all these women.”

I sighed and studied the photograph. “Is there any connection between these women other than Juliette?”

“Not that we can see,” Scottie answered.

“Then we need to form a list with anyone that’s worked with Juliette. We’ll warn them of what’s going on. That’s all we can do at this point.”

Brock jerked his head to the door. “And Juliette?”

I pressed my lips together. “I’ll stay on her at all times.”

Scottie snickered. “Yeah, you’ll stay on her.”

“Fuck you,” I snapped. “It’s not like that.”

“Oh, it’s actually exactly like that.”

Brock drew the conversation back to him. “You know, it could be a good thing having Fox here. It’s additional backup.”

“He’ll never go for it, not with Anna here,” I answered. “The minute he finds out there was another murder and it’s directly linked to Juliette, he’ll send Anna back to OPS.” I nodded at Brock. “Were there any messages with this one?”

The grim look on his face told me all I needed to know. He slid the screen to the next photo and handed it over. Written in blood beside the woman on the floor was *Wherefore art thou, Juliette?*

“He doesn’t know where she is,” I frowned. “How is that possible?”

“He’s been tailing you. He tried to take you out on a run,” Brock frowned.

“Is it possible he’s playing mind games with her? Maybe he’s asking when she’ll come to him?” Scottie asked.

“That would suggest that his obsession is greater than we thought. If he’s waiting for her to come to him, maybe she knows him. Maybe he’s someone that she dated, and he’s obsessed with her because...because he’s literally waiting for her to make up her mind and come to him,” I pondered.

Fox's door swung open and he came out, eyeing us warily. "What's going on?"

"There was another murder," Brock informed him.

"Anything good?" he asked, his eyes lighting at the prospect of seeing pictures.

Brock held out his phone to him. "Ooh, that's sick," Fox said, licking his lips. "Naked, hands bound behind her back. This is sexual. It implies that he couldn't have her the way he wanted her before. He literally had to bind her to keep her where he wanted her."

"Meaning maybe Juliette wasn't interested in sex with him," I surmised. "Maybe someone she dated?"

"Could be. Is there anything else?" Fox asked. Brock swiped to the writing. "Wherefore art thou, Juliette? So telling."

"Either he has an obsession with Shakespeare, or he can't find her."

Fox shook his head. "No, you've got that all wrong. He's not looking for her."

"He's literally saying *where are you*," I pointed out.

Fox grinned at me. "See, this is one of those times that you should rejoice in my crazy knowledge of musicals."

"Romeo and Juliet wasn't a musical," I said in frustration.

"Ah, but it was. The French made a musical that premiered in 2001. *Roméo et Juliette: de la Paine à l'Amour*. Music and lyrics by Gérard Presgurvic," he grinned.

"Okay, so it was made into a musical. What does that have to do with anything?" Edu asked.

"Because it expands my knowledge of Shakespeare, which will lead you down the correct path in finding the information you need. See, wherefore art thou does not refer to not knowing where Romeo is. Wherefore means why. So, she's asking why is he a Montague, her sworn enemy. See?" he asked, quirking his eyebrows. "It pays to know someone with a vast knowledge of the arts."

I ignored his preening and tried to look at it from another angle. "So, whoever the killer is, Juliette is his enemy of some kind."

"It would appear so. At the very least, a competitor."

"So, he's killing off people that are competitors with him or her?"

"Him. Again, this is sexual," Fox pointed to the phone.

"It could be a female that's attracted to Juliette."

“Statistically speaking, only about eight percent of serial killers are female, and seventy percent of the time, it’s for financial gain from someone they know.”

“That still leaves a thirty percent chance that this is a sexual motivation,” I pointed out.

“Yes, but that’s like a two point five percent chance out of all serial killers that this was a female. I’m still going with my original opinion that this is a male. And if we go based on Shakespeare, I would be willing to bet that he’s going after her because she’s something he can’t obtain because of her job. Like, they could be together if it weren’t for who or what she was. You need to look into anyone she might have dated in the past. Look for someone that it didn’t work out with because of her busy schedule. He’s literally attacking women that are just like her, but may have the same crazy schedule that won’t accommodate him.”

I glanced at Brock. We were no closer to finding out who this guy was, but now it was clear we were only going to get answers if we went straight to the source. It was time to have a talk with Andrew.

“So, we’re looking at someone she might have dated in the past,” Andrew said, pacing in front of us.

Luckily, the girls were still locked away in her bedroom, gossiping about God knows what. Or maybe that was unlucky for me. I still thought she needed to know what the hell was going on, but her brother was determined not to drag her into this for no reason other than he thought she really didn’t care about the threat.

“Yes, but we need to talk to her about this,” I urged. “We have a better chance of catching this guy if we know who we’re looking out for. He could be anyone.”

“But you said if you had protection around her, we might never catch this guy.”

“My guys are good. They’re staying hidden. He’s never going to know she’s protected as long as we keep her in the dark. Why can’t we just tell her who I am?” I stood, getting pissed off at the cloak and daggers shit. “I can still go on performing as a model.”

“But she’ll know, and then she’ll start acting funny,” Andrew pointed out. “Besides, she’s not scared. If you think telling her is going to make her more careful, you’re wrong.”

“Then what do you suggest we do?”

He sighed, sitting down at the kitchen island. “I can go through all her past dates.”

“What? You kept a record?” I asked, interested that he was more like me than I assumed.

He stared at me. “I may appear to let her do whatever the fuck she wants, but that’s only because I know how hard she’d fight me if she knew how involved I really am in her love life.”

“Wait, so you have an actual list of men she’s dated?”

He grinned at me. “A list, along with anything you want to know about them. I’ll have it brought over in the morning.”

I glanced at the clock and noted the late hour. “The girls are going to want to hang out tomorrow. We’ll need everyone on duty.”

“We’ll take shifts,” Brock said, heading for the door.

“I can take a shift,” Fox piped up. “I’m here. You might as well use me.”

“And leave Anna alone?” I asked.

“It’s just as important that this fucker stays out of here since Anna’s involved. I’ll take my shift with Scottie,” he grinned.

“Fuck,” Scottie muttered. “Seriously? I will give you a hundred bucks if you trade with me,” he said to Edu.

“I think I’ll forgo the hundred dollars just to see you suffer.” He slapped him on the back and headed out as Fox slung his arm over Scottie’s shoulder.

“It’s just you and me and the twilight. Think of all the songs we can get through over the next four hours.”

“Or,” Scottie stressed, “we can *not* sing, not do *any* of the show tune trivia you love so much, and we’ll just *pretend* we’re doing it. Think of how fun that would be.”

Fox’s face scrunched up in confusion. “But if we’re not doing it, how would that be fun?”

Scottie shook his head, storming out of the room. Fox chased after him, still not getting it.

Everyone else dispersed rather quickly, and as soon as they were gone, I locked the door behind them. Heading to the bedroom door, I listened intently, trying to make out anything they were saying. Unfortunately, all I

got were giggles. I knocked on the door and let myself in, hoping I wasn't about to walk in on them waxing each other.

When I opened the door, I was a little disappointed. They were just sitting on the bed. I thought I would hate the idea of them doing all that girly shit, but I guess my dick thought differently. "Ladies," I nodded, stepping further into the room.

"Hey, *Royal*," Juliette said mockingly.

I glanced at Anna nervously, but she winked, letting me know she hadn't let the cat out of the bag. Clearing my throat, I walked further into the room. "So, what have you ladies been discussing all evening?"

"Just this and that," Anna said, yawning slightly. "Man, I'm exhausted. Where's Fox?"

"He's—" I almost said he was on guard duty, but realized I couldn't tell her that in front of Juliette. "He's making a Funyuns run, and then he wanted to grab a few things."

Anna nodded in understanding, but Juliette wasn't so quick to let it go.

"At this hour?" she asked, getting up from the bed.

"He's a night owl," Anna explained. "Sometimes he gets out just to clear his head. I'm gonna get some sleep," she said quickly, exiting the room.

"I'll show her where to go."

Not that there were a ton of places she could go, but it was a good excuse for me.

"I expect you naked and waiting for me when I get back."

She flipped me off. "Yeah, I don't think you've earned sex after that whole debacle."

I shot her a searing look, watching in amusement as her nipples hardened under her shirt. When I was satisfied she got the hint, I turned and walked out of the room, shutting the door behind me. Anna was waiting in the living room and glanced at the door before she spoke.

"She's amazing."

"Of course, you would think so."

"Like you don't?" she shot back.

I wisely kept my mouth shut. A man never spoke about what he did with a lady in the bedroom. "So, does she suspect anything?"

"Well, she doesn't understand you, which makes sense because you're not who you say you are."

"What about the murders?"

“It didn’t even come up. If she’s worried, she’s not showing any signs of it.”

I sighed, rubbing my hand across my jaw. “I don’t like it.”

“Honestly? I think she’d take it just fine.”

“That’s why her brother doesn’t want her to know. It’s like he thinks she’d dare the psycho to come after her.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“Andrew’s compiling a list of men she’s dated. Hopefully, that’ll shed some light on the situation. If not, we’ll have to let her know. I don’t see another way around it.”

It was silent for a moment and then Anna nudged me. “She wants to go shopping tomorrow.”

I grimaced, knowing Anna wasn’t into that stuff. “Can you fake it?”

“I can try, but…” She sighed heavily. “Do I really have to?”

“She’s in love with you,” I smirked.

“Likewise. She’s awesome, but that doesn’t mean I want to go shopping. And what if someone recognizes me?”

“We’ll get you a wig.” I glanced back at the door. “Did she ask you anything about why you left?”

“I could tell she wanted to, but she didn’t want to be rude. It would be helpful if I could tell her.”

“There would be so many questions that followed,” I admitted. “Let’s get through tomorrow and see if anything comes from the list Andrew provides us with.”

“Alright, it’s your call. But *Royal*—” I glared at her. “I really don’t like shopping.”

“Noted,” I said as she walked into the bedroom Fox was staying in. Once the door was shut, I walked around the townhouse and did a double check. With things escalating, it was going to get harder to keep things under wraps. And soon, we’d be traveling, which would add a whole new element of fucked up to the whole thing.

I headed back to Juliette, satisfied when I opened the door and found her waiting on the bed for me.

Completely naked.

I strolled in and gently shut the door behind me, doing my best to hold my shit together and not pounce on her. But damn, I really wanted to. I turned back to her and grabbed my shirt by the nape of the neck, dragging it



slowly up my body. I couldn't see her eyes, but I could feel the raw sexual desire pouring off her.

I turned, my lips quirking at the way her jaw dropped when I pulled it over my head and spun the shirt around for just a moment. Wadding it up in a ball, I tossed it at her, hitting her in the face. And then she fucking held it to her face and inhaled my scent. I fucking lost my shit, stalking over to her in two strides and grabbing her by the legs. I dragged her to the edge of the bed and spread those beautiful thighs, shoving my nose right against her pussy.

Damn, she smelled just as I remembered, full of lust and need. I didn't waste a moment pressing my mouth to her pussy, licking her cream as she cried out and squirmed beneath me. I pressed my hand to her belly, holding her still as I devoured her. And when I couldn't get close enough, I tossed both legs over my shoulders and dove back in.

My cock was aching to be inside her, but I couldn't tear myself away from her intoxicating taste. I loved watching her squirm under my touch and hear those sexy moans as I drove her wild. No matter how pissed she may be at me, nothing could make her so angry that she wouldn't come apart from my touch.

"Royal!" she gasped.

She came hard, squirting all over my tongue as I greedily lapped up the dregs of her orgasm. And as she was still quivering from my touch, I climbed up her body, slamming my lips to hers as I slid home inside her tight pussy. Her arms wrapped around my neck, holding me to her as I rocked hard, in and out of her body. I wasn't going to last long. Her body was squeezing me tight from her last orgasm, and it was proving to be hell on my cock.

I slammed into her harder and harder, just barely holding back until her lips latched onto my neck and she bit hard. I cried out, grinding my cock deep inside her as I let go. She cried out, grasping the back of my neck in a death grip as she came again.

It wasn't until the aftershocks of her orgasm had long since passed that she finally released me and relaxed into the sheets. I let out a long breath, relaxing between her breasts as my cock only semi-softened against her thigh. I was on the verge of passing out, but I did remember one last thing.

"Our kids aren't going to fucking Harvard."



## JULIETTE

Waking up under Royal's heavy arm was something I could get used to. The early hour was something we were going to have to discuss. I was never awake first thing in the morning, but as soon as I had a day off, I was wide awake at the crack of dawn. It wasn't fair.

I nudged Royal in the side, but it did nothing to shift his large frame from the stronghold he had on my body. Grunting and shifting, I finally got his massive weight away from me. And all he did was roll over. Stupid, gigantic man.

It wasn't right that I was so tiny and he could so easily trap me beside him. I stumbled out of bed and went to the bathroom. By the time I was finished, I was baffled to see him still in bed, snoring lightly as if he didn't have a care in the world.

I, on the other hand, was starving. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I went into the kitchen and rifled through the cabinets. There was everything under the sun from eggs and bacon to steak—none of which I wanted. I searched high and low until finally coming across the one thing I really wanted.

“Yes!” I hissed as I stared up at the cabinet above the stove that had never seen a day of use. He hid my cereal up there. “Why? Why would you do that to me?” I asked no one in particular. It wasn't right. It was like he was doing it simply because he knew I wasn't tall enough to reach it and, therefore, wouldn't eat what my heart truly desired.

But I wasn't one to be dissuaded. I grabbed the tongs from the crock on the counter and stretched on my tippy toes until I finally latched onto the box. Grunting, I grabbed it and pulled as if it weighed a hundred pounds, when in

fact, it was just really damn difficult to stay stretched like this and reach something so high.

The box slipped from the tongs and I screeched as it came tumbling toward my head, but never hit me. Bent over, I slowly peeked out from beneath the arms I had quickly thrown up for protection to see what prevented it from hitting me in the head.

Royal stood before me with a smirk on his face. "Having trouble?"

I glared at him. "You put that up there on purpose."

"I did," he said, not even bothering to deny it.

"Why? You know I like this stuff."

"Yes, but I could persuade you to eat something just a tad healthier."

I went to snatch the box from his hands, but he held it higher than I could reach, laughing at me when I jumped and completely missed.

"You're a jerk!"

"You love me," he grinned at me.

"I despise you," I said, rage seething through my pores.

"Face it, you want to marry me and have my babies."

Oh, that really burned. "I only said that because I wanted to freak you out."

"You said it because you mean it. Face it, you love me," he said in a singsong voice.

I took a step closer to him and grasped his cock in my hand through his thin shorts. "The only thing I love is what your cock does when it's inside me. And if you ever want to feel what that's like again, you will hand over my cereal."

He swallowed hard, all humor gone from his face, as I squeezed him gently. He ever so slowly lowered the box until I snatched it out of his hands, but the moment I did, he hoisted me up against the counter and tore my shorts down my legs. His cock impaled me in one swift thrust and I cried out, dropping the cereal on the ground. The box broke open and little pieces of sugary goodness scattered across the floor.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on as he thrust his cock deeper into me with every second that passed. My head slammed back into the cabinets on one particularly hard thrust. I cried out when he hoisted me off the counter and swung me around as he spread me out on the floor. Cereal crunched under my ass, and juices slipped down to the floor, effectively ruining the tasty treat I craved so much.

“You destroyed my cereal,” I panted.

“Good,” he grumbled, kissing me hard as he pulled me upright and spun around until I was straddling his thighs. “I’ll make you breakfast.”

I groaned when he gripped my hips and fucked up into me. With every move, he tried to slow me down, tried to prevent me from pushing him to orgasm, but I wasn’t about to let him control this. I clenched my pussy around him and slipped my hand behind me, massaging his balls as I rode him harder.

“No,” he ground out. “Not. Yet.”

I gave him a wicked grin and tugged as I bounced on his dick. His eyes crossed as he tried to hold out, but I knew I had him when his hands gripped my hips and pulled me down over and over until he cried out and wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me to him. His hot breath fanned over my face, making me sleepy. I rested my head on his shoulder, wiggling when I felt the cereal digging into my skin.

“That wasn’t exactly how that was supposed to go,” he muttered.

“I know,” I laughed. “And now you get to clean it up.”

He grunted in response and brushed his hand up and down my back, knocking away the cereal stuck to my skin. “You need a shower.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I should take one with you.”

I yawned, smacking him lightly. “You should go get me cereal.”

He huffed out a laugh, his deep rumble filling me with warmth. “Fine. Anything you want.”

“And a latte.”

“I’ll get you a latte.”

“And an apple pie.”

“A whole one?” I could hear the disbelief in his voice.

“Just go to Mickey’s. They have them there.”

He sighed heavily. “Anything else?”

I lifted my head and grinned at him. “You want a list?”

“I still can’t believe I’m shopping with you,” I squealed in excitement. Granted, Anna didn’t look nearly as thrilled as I was, but I chalked that up to

exhaustion from her flight out here.

“I’m just so happy to finally meet the woman that knocked Jerrod off his feet.”

“I don’t know about that. We’ve only actually been together a few days.”

She sighed dreamily as she stared at a dress, but it had nothing to do with the material she was holding. “Sometimes all it takes is a few days.”

“Okay,” I turned to her. “We’ve been skirting around you and your life ever since last night. You’ve done a great job deflecting, but now it’s time for some answers. How the hell did you end up with Fox?”

She shrugged, moving on to another dress. “He’s known me for years.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “Ever since we were little.”

I stood there, waiting for more, but it never came. “That’s it? That’s all you’re going to tell me?”

“What more is there to say?”

“Um...everything after he’s known me since we were kids? That’s not even—wait,” I said, stopping in my tracks. “You said he’s known you. That’s very specific, meaning you didn’t know him. What does that even mean?”

She spun around, shooting me this intense look. “Alright, he’s known me a lot longer. He has...issues, and they sort of manifested into...a scenario in which he had to check in on me to make sure I was okay. And he never really let me know he was there, so I hadn’t met him until more recently.”

I nodded. “So, he stalked you. He was a stalker. That’s all you had to say.”

“He wasn’t a stalker,” she sighed. “I mean, that’s not how I look at it now.”

“So, this is really Stockholm Syndrome.”

“He would have had to kidnap me in order for that to be the case. And you can’t kidnap someone you know,” she said, turning and walking off.

I rushed after her, trying to keep up with her long legs. “Yes, you can,” I retorted. I could kidnap you. I know you. If I took you against your will, that’s the exact definition of kidnapping.”

“Yes, but he was doing it for the right reasons.”

“It’s still kidnapping! And you married him?”

“He really is a great guy,” she said over her shoulder.

“Who kidnapped you!” I screeched.

She spun around and raised her hand, stopping me where I was. It was

only then I noticed the gnarly scars on her hand. I was more than certain I hadn't seen those in her movies, but then, Hollywood could do amazing things nowadays.

"He saved me in every way you could ever imagine. Yes, there was a time that I questioned my own sanity, and then he wasn't there because I shoved him away. Have you ever had someone that was always there for you?"

"My brother."

"Okay, imagine Fox is like that only with sexual benefits."

I grimaced. "That's...creepy."

"My point is, Fox is the one person I've always been able to rely on. Even after I did everything possible to make him leave me alone, he was there for me. He never really left. But when you think that person you depend on is actually gone, you realize how empty your life is without him. So, yes, Fox may seem crazy, and technically he did kidnap me. But I wouldn't have it any other way." She held up her hand again. "He literally saved my life. And he sees past all the scars and the celebrity to the person I really am. Without him...my life would cease to exist."

"Wow," I whispered. "That's like...super heavy."

"That's how Fox makes me feel. Completely guarded and secure, a shoulder to cry on, and the man I can always rely on for anything. There will never be another person like him. Not for me, anyway. If something were to happen to him, I'm pretty sure I would crawl up into a ball and die of a broken heart."

"That's..."

"Beautiful," she smiled.

I cocked my head to the side. "I was going to say creepy, but we can go with your definition if it makes you feel better."

"Trust me, you'll know what I mean when you finally see what you have with Lo—Jerrod."

That was the second time someone had done that. It was almost like they were going to say a different name and then changed their mind. But I couldn't figure out for the life of me what that would be. But before I could question her, she spun away from me and started grabbing dresses for me to try on. They were all cute, exactly the style I preferred for my diminutive stature. She ushered me over to the dressing room and forced me inside as if she didn't want to actually talk to me anymore.

I tried on the first one but wasn't at all thrilled with the look. It was one of those dresses that looked great on the mannequin but horrible on any living human being.

"Ugh," I said, tossing the dress over the top of the door. "That was horrible."

"What's wrong with it?" a male voice asked.

I screamed, covering my breasts with the next dress I was going to try on. A head popped up over the stall and I glared at Fox. "What are you doing?"

"Anna's tired of shopping. I told her I would take over for her. Besides, she's gotta put her feet up. That baby is really putting her through the wringer."

"Why didn't she tell me? We didn't have to go shopping."

He waved me off. "She hates shopping. She just wanted to spend time with you now that you're one of us. Funyun?" he asked, holding a bag over the top of the stall.

My eyes bulged and I snatched the bag from his grasp, earning me a warning glare. "God, I love these!"

"Seriously?" he asked, quickly morphing that glare into a smile. "It's like you're my new bestie! Nobody else appreciates Funyuns the way I do."

"What's not to love? Sugar, onion, crunchy," I mumbled around a mouthful. "They're so delicious!"

"I know! Wanna see something?" he asked, waggling his eyebrows at me.

"Um..."

Before I could respond, he somehow opened the stall door from the outside and pulled down his pants. I screeched, covering my eyes, but then peeked between them because...well, he said he had something to show me.

Fox had on bright yellow boxers with the Funyuns design on them across the butt. I burst out laughing, almost dropping my dress when I forgot that I was naked underneath.

"Is that awesome or what?"

"It's definitely unique. Why didn't you just get a shirt?"

"What fun is a shirt? This," he pointed to his butt, "this is fun!"

Royal came rushing around the corner, scowling when he saw Fox with his pants down and me standing with only a dress pressed against me. "Do you mind telling me what the hell is going on here?"

"Fox was sharing his Funyuns with me."

I turned and walked back into the stall, but I didn't miss the way Royal



rolled his eyes. “Seriously, Fox? You just had to draw her into your obsession?”

“It’s not an obsession. It’s a healthy appreciation of a good snack.”

“It’s sick!”

“No, sushi is sick. Funyuns are fun, hence the awesome boxers. What do you think?”

“I think I might kill you if you don’t get the fuck away from my woman.”

I rolled my eyes and slipped into the little black dress Anna picked out for me. I couldn’t zip it up, so I opened the door and strolled over to Fox, sliding my hair over my shoulder. “Zip me up?”

Royal pushed him out of the way, slowly easing up the zipper. “Seriously? You want Sticky Fingers to zip you up? Your back will be yellow.”

I turned and showed him my own yellow fingers, licking them again, even though I couldn’t get the substance off. “Just think, later tonight, this could be all over you.”

“I think I’ll pass.”

I grinned and stepped back. “So, what do you think?” I did a little spin and didn’t miss how Royal shifted where he stood, covering up the growing erection in his pants.

“It’ll do.”

My face fell. “It’ll do?”

He shrugged. “It’s covered in yellow fingerprints. Kind of kills the mood.”

“That’s not what your pants are saying,” I shot back.

“You know, this is why I don’t do this.”

He turned to storm away, and I just couldn’t resist. “Because you got hard just looking at me?” I shouted just as an older lady walked into the dressing room, staring at me in shock. “He’s my husband,” I lied.

“I should hope so,” she huffed, slamming the dressing room door behind her.

I chuckled as I walked back into the dressing room. I was about to close the door when Fox stopped me. “Yes?”

“I really didn’t want to do this now, but it might be my only chance since Royal won’t let you out of his sight.”

“Do what?”

He reached into his pocket, and just for a moment, a shock of fear rippled

through me. He pulled out...

A rolled-up piece of paper. "Do you think you could get the word out for me?"

I snatched the paper out of his hands and looked at it again. "Okay, so who is this guy again?"

"FNG."

"And he went missing, how?"

He huffed out a laugh. "Well, it's a bit of a doozy. See, first, there was this explosion, and we thought he died in the fire, but then it turned out the bones weren't his. So, I said to myself, he's not really dead. He's pulling an FNG because he thinks he can't actually die, even though he was telling everyone that night that he was going to die. And then, I could have sworn I saw him on a plane, but then it exploded. And the dental came back as a match, but who really trusts those things? I mean, we had a funeral and everything, but I really doubt it was him."

I stared at him in disbelief. Did he really think I bought that load of crap? "Seriously? You couldn't come up with a better story?"

He frowned, staring at me hard. "Um...that's a fucking awesome story... if it was a story, which it's not."

I rolled my eyes hard. "Fine, don't tell me why he's really missing."

He shook his head and launched back into his pitch. "So, anyway, will you help?"

"I'm not sure what I can do. The guy is dead."

"Look at the evidence!"

"You said the dental report came back as his. Isn't that evidence enough? Wouldn't any rational person take that for what it is?"

"A lie? Yes."

I sighed, shaking my head. "No, I mean, maybe you need to accept that your friend is dead."

"But he's not."

"But the dental report says he is. And you had a funeral. Why would you go if you didn't think he was dead?"

"Uh...because my boss made me?" he said as if I was stupid.

"Fine, if I were to help you, what exactly would I do?"

Excitement filled his face as he turned to me. "Well, I was thinking of putting posters on milk bottles, you know, like they used to. And I thought we could do some kind of ad campaign. A *have you seen this man* type of

thing.”

“I can see if anyone will work on it, but I make no guarantees.”

I walked back into the stall and prepared to change.

“Ooh, and make sure they know that he doesn’t think he can die when they sketch him. It’ll add character.”

“But you have a photo,” I said in confusion.

“And an umbrella!” he continued. “He loves umbrellas!”

“I’ll let them know.”

“And shawarma. He really did like my shawarma!”

I flung the door open, nearly hitting him in the face. “I’ll let them know. Can I change now?”

He waved me on, and at last, I had some peace.

“You know, one last thing. Not everyone knows what FNG stands for, so his name should really read Fucking New Guy.”



## LOCK

I dragged two handfuls of bags up to Juliette's townhouse, getting caught in the elevator from the massive amount of shit she bought. The door started to close on me, and Juliette just fucking stood there, her eyes laughing at me.

"Oh, hey, man. Let me help you," Fox said from behind me.

"Thanks."

He got the bags unstuck and then slipped inside with Anna. He grinned at me, giving me a wink as he wrapped his arms around both girls.

"Seriously?"

"Hey, man. You're holding up the elevator. In or out."

I glowered at him and pulled the bags the rest of the way out, watching as the doors closed. Enough of this shit. I stalked over to the stairs, shoving the door open. Fuck, I really didn't want to take the stairs with all this shit, but I wasn't waiting for the elevator.

I could hear the bags ripping as they periodically got caught on the railing or I tripped over one that caught under my feet. "This is fucking ridiculous," I muttered as I neared the second floor.

A shadow shifted above me and I immediately stilled, waiting for whoever was there to move again. A flash of black was all it took for me to drop the bags and take off up the stairs. I pressed my hand to my ear, only to realize that I didn't have a fucking earpiece in. I grabbed the railing and hauled ass up the stairs, pulling my gun from the holster at my back.

I couldn't get a read on this asshole. He was fast, staying away from the railing where I could get off a shot. But I would have him cornered as soon as he hit the top floor. There was nowhere for him to go aside from the roof, and we were too high up for him to take a flying leap.

I hit the last flight, quickly catching up to the asshole just as he burst through the door. Tackling him to the ground, I slammed my fist into his side and spun him over, but didn't catch his foot that clipped my head as he rolled, causing me to lose my gun. Stunned for just a moment, I went at him again, only to be nailed in the balls by his foot. I sucked in a breath and collapsed to the ground.

"Cheap shot," I said, wheezing as I tried desperately to catch my breath. It was a given in any street fight that no man went for another man's groin. It was wrong, and you just didn't do that shit.

I struggled to my feet, bent over and gasping for air as the asshole got to his feet and brushed his long hair over his shoulder. I cocked my head and took in the skin-tight pants and shapely leather jacket with boobs protruding underneath.

"What the fuck?" I muttered.

The mask was torn off, revealing a woman with the most innocent face. What the fuck was going on? I snatched my gun that laid on the ground just a few feet away and held it on the crazy fucking woman in front of me.

"Who the fuck are you?"

She was breathing hard as she stared at me, blushing furiously. "Holy shit. You're Lock, aren't you?"

I frowned, adjusting my stance slightly. "Who are you?"

"I'm Claire. I mean, technically, I'm your protection detail. But now that I see you in person, I'm wondering why I'm here. I mean, you've got huge muscles, and you seem to know how to handle yourself. Although, you didn't really see that foot to your nuts coming. You know, you should be prepared for anything. Not that I doubt your abilities," she rushed on. "I'm sure you're perfectly capable of handling yourself, but then again, if you were capable, you would have seen that shot to the nuts coming and defended yourself properly."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "I thought you were a guy. There's a code we follow, one in which there are no cheap shots to the nuts."

"Oh," she said, blushing an even darker shade of red. "I didn't know that. No nuts," she said, pointing to her crotch.

"I can see that. And what's this about a protection detail?" I asked, still pointing my gun at her.

"Maggie said we had a job."

"Maggie?" I asked emphatically. "Maggie, as in Sebastian's wife?"

She beamed brightly at me. “It’s my first ever.”

“Christ,” I muttered, lowering my gun. “Let’s go.”

She hurried after me, excited by the whole damn thing. “Where are we going?”

“To the townhouse to meet Juliette. I’m assuming she’s the one that arranged this whole fucking thing.”

I yanked open the door and stormed down the stairs to the third floor.

“This is so exciting. I’ve never been on a protection detail before. Oh, but don’t worry, I train all the time. Like, a lot. Maybe not as much as the guys, but I totally got this. And I watch my husband train. He’s really good. Derek, do you know him? Anyway, funny story, when I met him, I thought he was a superhero,” she snorted. “Yeah, it was strange because all these weird things were happening that I couldn’t explain. And then I met Knight, and...well, that wasn’t what I thought at all. And then—”

I spun around and she nearly crashed into me, staring up at me with wide eyes. “Do you ever stop talking?”

“Me? I tend to ramble when I’m nervous. It’s a thing. I once nearly got myself thrown in prison because I stole this ancient library book and used it to catch a bullet. And then Derek told me not to tell the police anything because the book was from the Library of Congress, but they grilled me for hours. Okay, technically, the officer walked in the door and asked if I needed anything, and that was all it took. I just blurted out the whole thing. And then I was sure I was going to be thrown in prison for the rest of my life, forced to wear that hideous orange color. But somehow Derek pulled some strings and saved me, just like he always does.” She took a deep breath and grinned. “Because he’s Superman.”

I opened my mouth to say something but couldn’t for the life of me think of a single thing to say to this woman. So, I spun around and continued through the door, down the hall to Juliette’s townhouse. Brock was grinning as he stood outside the door.

“You’re gonna love this, man.”

“I highly doubt that,” I said, opening her door and nearly crashing into a very pregnant woman. “Oh, sorry—” She turned around and I groaned. “Maggie, what the fuck are you doing here?”

“Juliette called about a job, so here we are!” she said, as she tossed her hands in the air, wincing when it was too much for her.

Juliette looked at me in confusion. “You two know each other?”

“I—”

“Know each other? Are you kidding?” Maggie laughed. “We—”

“It’s a long story,” I tried to cut in. Things were going downhill fast. “Does Sebastian know you’re here?”

“Um...define know.”

“Christ,” I muttered, running my fingers across my jaw.

“I love the hair, by the way. This new look is really awesome. Although, the guys would argue it’s a good way for someone to catch you. Maybe you should think of tying it back in a bun.”

“The guys?” Juliette asked in confusion. “I’m sorry, what’s going on here? And who is this?” she pointed at Claire.

“Oh, I’m Derek’s wife,” she beamed, racing forward before I could stop her. “I’m Claire. We’re from Reed Security!”

“Okay, I said it was fine to have women, but a pregnant one?” she asked, staring at Maggie’s large belly. “I’m not sure how that’s going to work.”

“Hey, I can still kick someone’s ass,” Maggie muttered. “Watch this.”

In a desperate attempt to prove that she was still a badass, she did what I’m sure she considered to be a kick. To me, it was just a step that made her unsteady on her feet. I reached out to keep her from falling over, but she thrust her palm out, striking me in the nose. Blood gushed from the force of her hit and I nearly fell to the floor.

“Fuck!” I shouted as my head snapped back.

“See? I’ve still got it,” she beamed.

Through tears of pain, I saw her wide grin, but I also saw how out of breath she was just from that small move. Staunching the flow of blood, I stormed over and grabbed her by the arm, moving her into the living room.

“Sit down before you hurt yourself. If that kid gets hurt, Sebastian will put a bullet in my head.”

“I don’t need to sit down! I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“You’re pregnant! You look like you’re ready to pop!”

She gasped at me, slapping me across the face. “I’m only six months along!”

I winced, wishing I had just kept my mouth shut. “You, stay. I need to call Sebastian.”

“Get your hands off me!”

I turned and saw another woman being shoved through the door by Edu. He seemed more than happy to be manhandling the woman, and I noticed he



too sported blood on his shirt and a trail dripping from his nose.

“I think this one belongs to you,” he said to Maggie.

I rolled my eyes and turned back to her. “Lindsey? Really?”

“What? She can hold her own.”

“Yeah, I can...” Lindsey swayed on her feet as she stared at my face. “Is that...” She pointed at my face. Her eyes rolled back in her head before she could finish the sentence. I ran forward and caught her just as she was about to hit the floor. She was down for the count, and I hauled her up in my arms, trying not to drip blood on her as I carried her over to the couch.

Juliette met me over there with a wad of paper towels in her hand. “Do you want to tell me what’s going on here?”

“Yeah, *Royal*,” Maggie smirked. “Why don’t you tell her what’s going on?”

I glared at the pain in the ass sitting in the living room and spun around, only to have Claire in my face. “Do you want me to handle her?” she pointed at Juliette. “I could totally take her out.”

“She’s the client!” I shouted, quickly losing control of the situation.

“Client?” Juliette asked. “Royal, what is going on here?”

The door opened again, and this time Sinner rushed through, nearly collapsing when he saw all the women in the townhouse. He bent over, hands on his knees as he sucked in deep breaths.

“Fuck, do you have any idea how much trouble you’re in?” he said when he finally straightened. “Cap is pissed as hell. You’re in so much fucking trouble, and me by extension, because I told him I would keep an eye on you while he was at that conference. Do you know what he’s going to do to me? He’s going to make me be there for the spawn you’re about to give birth to! I can’t do it! I can’t see your vagina again!”

“Hey!” Maggie shouted as she stood. “Don’t talk to me like that. A job came in, and no one at Reed Security was available. I asked the client if she could use women, and she said yes!”

All eyes swung to Juliette, who looked just as confused as ever. “I’m sorry, I’m really confused. What’s going on here?”

“Maggie, you’re pregnant!” Sinner continued. “You can’t go off kicking ass just because you don’t want to admit that you’re about to have a baby!”

“Hey, I brought grenades with me. I would have handled it fine!”

“Grenades?” Juliette asked. “As in, things that go boom?”

“Yes,” I said, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“That’s...”

“A bit much? An overreaction to the current situation? A fucking disaster waiting to happen?”

“I was going to say it’s really cool, but sure, we can go with yours,” Juliette grinned.

“See?” Maggie said cheerfully. “She’s all in!”

“Don’t...don’t do that, Maggie. This is not okay,” I gritted out. “Cap is going to kill me.”

Juliette stalked to the center of the group, holding up her hands. “Alright, can we back up just a second? Who is Cap? And why is he going to kill you?” she asked me. “And how do you know these people?”

“Cap is my husband,” Maggie rolled her eyes. “He forced a pregnancy on me and now wants to chain me to the house, never allowing me to leave or have any fun, which is completely ridiculous, because I am so much fun!”

“Wait, your husband raped you?” Juliette said in shock.

“No,” Maggie rolled her eyes. “He impregnated me when we agreed we weren’t having any more kids!”

Juliette watched her warily, then her eyes shifted to me. Yeah, she was crazy.

“Maggie, we need to get home. Cap is already sending me texts, wondering how you’re doing. I can’t lie to him,” Sinner said.

“You lie to him all the time. Why is this time different?”

“I say you let them take the job,” Edu grinned. “It could be fun.”

I stared at him incredulously. “One of them is heavily pregnant. Another passed out at the sight of blood. And the other said she caught a bullet with a book. Did you hear that? *Caught* a bullet!”

He shrugged. “It’ll be fun. I say we go for it and liven things up around here.”

“Because it’s not lively enough with someone killing models and threatening Juliette?” I shouted.

The whole room went quiet as I realized my mistake. Fuck. I slowly turned around and winced when I saw the anger on Juliette’s face. I hadn’t totally given away what was going on, but enough to let her know that things were not as they seemed.

“Juliette—”

“Where’s Andrew?”

“Let me explain.”

“Explain what, exactly? How you know all these people? Or how you know that someone’s threatening me? What exactly do you want to explain, Royal?”

Sinner snorted at the name. “Royal? Seriously, that’s the name you went with?”

I glared at him, but it was too late. Juliette was already onto the fact that I had *royally* fucked up. She turned on her heel and stormed out of the room.

“Nice,” I said, turning to Sinner.

“What? I’m not the one that chose the name.”

“You just fucked up the job.”

He nodded slightly. “I would say you did that the moment you chose the name Royal, but what do I know?”



## JULIETTE

I paced my room, trying to make sense of what the fuck was going on. There were currently a bunch of people in my living room, all of them fucking insane. And it seemed that Royal wasn't at all who he said he was. I had an inkling all along that something wasn't right, but I trusted my brother.

I snatched my phone off the dresser and shot him an S.O.S. I was going to get answers, and he was clearly behind all this since he was the one that was so damn worried about that note I received with the dress.

The door opened behind me, and I spun around, glaring at the man in front of me. He wasn't who he said he was, and I couldn't decide what I was more upset about: the fact that I trusted him or that I had slept with this guy and actually started to fall for him.

"Juliette, let me explain."

I scoffed at that. "Really? Now you want to explain?"

"It was never my idea to keep this from you. I wanted to tell you from the start."

"Tell me what, exactly? Who are you?"

He took a deep breath as he stepped closer. I backed up, not wanting him near me right now. "My name is Jerrod Lockhart. I work with OPS—Owens Protective Services. Brock is not my agent. He's on my team. And my other teammates Edu and Scottie are also here. You might remember seeing them."

I stood there, my mouth gaping like a fish. And the first words out of my mouth were not brilliant. "You're not a model."

"No."

I let my eyes trail over his body, the hard planes of his chest, and the way his muscles rippled under his shirt. How had I not seen it before? No models

were built the way he was. I just assumed he really liked the gym. But as I looked at him closer now, it was so glaringly obvious. He didn't know how to model. In fact, the only times we really got good shots were when we gave in to the passion between us.

The passion.

I groaned and dropped my head in my hands. "Was any of it real?"

"That depends. What are you talking about?"

My head snapped up and I glared at him. "You kissed me! We slept together! Was any of it real, or were you just using me to stay close to me?"

"It was all real," he said in a hurry. "Trust me, I never sleep with a client. I would never—Juliette, everything between us is one hundred percent real. The model shit is...well, that's all bullshit. I've never stood in front of a camera a day in my life other than for my driver's license."

"I let you touch me!" I shouted. "And the whole time it was a lie! How could you do that?"

"Because I couldn't not touch you," he retorted, standing in front of me in just two long strides. His hand cupped my cheek as he pulled me against him. "Trust me, I wanted to tell you every fucking day who I really was, but your brother wouldn't let me. But this," he said, gripping my waist and pulling me against him, "Every fucking second of it was real."

And then his lips were crushed against mine and his tongue tangled with mine. I gripped him by the hair, not wanting him to touch me, but I couldn't resist. I wanted him despite all the lies.

His hands cupped my ass and hauled me up until I wrapped my legs around him. His hard cock pressed against my pussy, and then he spun me around, pressing me to the wall. My fingers instantly went to his jeans, tearing at the zipper and shoving them down his legs. I worked his cock in my hand as he fumbled with my clothes, finally just tearing my shorts, literally ripping them from my body. I cried out, but it died on my lips the moment he was inside me, thrusting into me so hard that I could barely take a full breath.

I raked my nails down his neck, eliciting a growl from him. The pictures on the walls rattled, one of them crashing to the floor the harder he fucked me.

"Fuck," he said, sucking on the delicate skin of my neck. "I could never fake this," he panted. "I fucking need you."

I wanted to say something really clever or sexy, but couldn't even think

of anything to say. My brain turned to mush as my orgasm swept over me. I thrust my hand out, grasping onto anything I could as my whole body convulsed. He swallowed my cries as he slammed inside me one last time and pressed me into the wall as he came hard.

My whole body shook as my heart continued to race out of control. My legs sort of flopped down around his hips, and thankfully, he didn't set me down. He carried me into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. Setting me down on the counter, he pressed kisses to my lips, over my jaw, and down my neck. I closed my eyes and basked in the attention, thinking I deserved it after all the lies he told me.

"I'm so fucking sorry."

"Me too," I whispered. "We could have been having sex from the beginning if I didn't think you were a stuck-up newbie."

He chuckled against my skin, licking the sweat from my body. "I couldn't believe you actually thought I was a model."

"I didn't think you were. I just assumed...I don't know what I assumed," I sighed, resting my forehead against his chest. Running my hands up his arms, I squeezed his muscles. "You're a terrible model."

"Not according to Emilio. He thinks I'm amazing."

I slowly looked up at him. "Does Emilio know?"

He nodded. "Only Emilio and your brother. Well, and now everyone out there."

"They already knew," I grumbled.

"Not Maggie. But she does now, and she's going to be heartbroken that there's not a job for her."

I rested my head against him again. "So, what does this mean? Are you my bodyguard or my boyfriend?"

He tilted my chin up until I was forced to look at him. "Can't I be both?"

When we stepped out of the shower, it was quiet in the townhouse. I could only hope that meant everyone had left. I needed time to adjust to the idea that Royal—Jerrod...wasn't actually who he said he was. The whole thing was fucking strange, but so was my life at the moment.

"So, now that I know you're not a model, maybe you can fill me in on

what's actually going on."

I turned my back to him, ready to get dressed. For some reason, I didn't want to look at him as he told me the truth. Not because I was scared, but because my brother had concocted this insane plan to keep me in the dark. And that made me question what the hell was wrong with me that he thought I couldn't handle it.

Jerrod grabbed me gently and turned me around. He had a way of making me do whatever he wanted, and I found I liked it. "We need to have a serious conversation."

"I would say that's long overdue. What was my brother thinking?"

"He was thinking you wouldn't take the threat seriously. The idea was that if I was the model beside you, I could keep an eye on you without you finding out. Life would go on as normal, and we might even draw out the guy after you."

"Oh my God," I groaned. "All those times I said you were just a pretty face." I couldn't help the laugh that escaped my lips. The whole situation was ridiculous. Jerrod was an honest-to-goodness bodyguard, and I treated him like a dumb model. "Wait, that's how you knew where to go when we were running from the press."

"That bodyguard Andrew hired was the worst. I doubt he even had the proper qualifications."

"Is that why you attacked him?"

He snorted in amusement. "I wouldn't call it an attack. I would say I put him out of his misery."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What about Fox? Was he supposed to be there?"

"No, he's not on the team. But Fox always does his own thing. He shows up on jobs all the time and does...what Fox does."

"And your boss lets him do that?"

Again, he laughed. "No one lets Fox do anything. I'm not sure anyone could control him. He goes where the wind takes him."

I thought about that and then what Anna had told me. "And he really saved Anna's life?"

"One hundred percent."

"And he really stalked her?"

He cocked his head at me. "Can you stalk someone you know?" He held up his hands in surrender as I shot him a knowing look. "Hey, that's what he



says. I'm just repeating it."

I had to give him that. "So, what really happened between them?"

He quirked an eyebrow at me. "You want to know about them and not the crazy person that's after you?"

"Well...you're here with me. You wouldn't let me go for a run on my own, so I think you've got this."

He sighed, pulling me into his arms. "You know Anna was this big movie star."

"Everyone knows that."

He grunted and continued. "Someone was after her, only Fox didn't know it. Fox had a very fucked up childhood. His mom was a dancer and drug addict. She'd do anything to feed her addiction. Only, she couldn't pay and Fox walked in on the guy raping and killing her. He lost it and killed the guy. Ever since, he's just...been Fox. He's a little crazy, but he protects those he cares about. And the one person he's always cared about is Anna. So, when she was attacked by the son of the man he killed, he lost it. And then she lost it. The whole fucking thing was filmed."

"Seriously?"

He nodded. "The studio fed it to the press that it was a horror movie she was working on that wouldn't be finished."

"Why would the studio do that?"

"Because they let the psycho on set. And now Fox and Anna are inseparable. They eat shawarma and she feeds his Funyuns addiction."

I chuckled at that. "That can't be all they do."

"No, but I don't like to think about what they do."

I sighed and cuddled up to him again. I wanted to just stay in this room and forget the last twenty-four hours. "So, what do we do now?"

"We fill you in on the finer details and put together a real plan, one that doesn't involve putting you in danger."

I jerked back and stared at him. "No, you're not wrapping me in a bubble. We continue as normal. Besides, Emilio is counting on us to come through for him. This is a huge campaign. We can't let him down."

He stared at me in confusion. "I just told you someone's after you, and you don't want to let Emilio down?"

"He's a very good friend."

"Must be," he muttered. "Fine, but if we do this, you have to listen to me. No more going for runs."

I burst out laughing. "Um...fat chance."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. There's no fucking way I'm not running. It's how I release the tension at the end of the day. If I stay here, I'll just end up eating a lot of crap and getting fat. And then you wouldn't want me, and I wouldn't get any more jobs because I'd be that fucking fat."

"You could never be fat," he said sweetly.

But that wasn't going to win me over. "We're still running. Next?"

"You have to listen to my team. If we tell you not to go somewhere, you can't go."

"You've followed me everywhere I've gone so far with no problems."

"You were nearly run over by a car," he argued.

"You said that was for you!" I snapped.

"Yeah, and I also said I was afraid of spiders!"

I gasped in shock. "You're not?" He shook his head. "I actually found that kind of endearing."

He looked at me strangely. "You find it endearing that a man is scared of spiders?"

"Well, yeah. You're all muscled out and stuff. It would be cute to see you afraid of something so tiny."

I grinned as he shook his head at me. The big, tough guy was confused by me, and I found I really liked that.

"So, you also don't need a bodyguard," I surmised. "No one is after you."

"Only you. And Andrew thinks it may be someone from your past, someone you refused to date."

"Why would he think that?"

"In order to tell you that, you'd have to hear a big speech from Fox about musicals, and I'm not about to subject you to that."

"Then you shouldn't have brought him along," I said, giving him a saucy wink as I brushed past him and headed for the door, only realizing a moment too late that I was still naked. A dozen heads turned in my direction and grinned at me.

I quickly slammed the door and leaned back against it. "Why are they so quiet?"

"Because they're nosy fuckers."



## LOCK

“You’re not staying,” I argued with Maggie. “We don’t need you.”

She scoffed, stomping her foot at me. “I can be useful. No one’s going to suspect that a pregnant woman is dangerous.”

“And Sebastian will never let me keep my balls if I don’t send you home.”

“Or mine,” Sinner said, raising his hand. “And I’d just like to point out that I nearly lost the use of my cock already. I don’t need a repeat of that. Little Sinner is in prime working order, and nothing’s going to take him out. If I have to throw you over my shoulder and march out of here, I will. Even if I throw out my back in the process.”

I winced as Maggie spun on him and jabbed him in the chest. “Are you calling me fat?”

He paled slightly as he realized his mistake. “What? No, I was implying that...that I’m weak in comparison to you,” he said stupidly. “See, you’d be struggling to take me down—not because of your weight—and I would be powerless to stop you because you’re so...Maggie.”

He turned to me and I winked at him. “Nice.”

“Please don’t put a grenade under my bed,” he pleaded with Maggie. “Think of the children.”

“Cara could do better.”

“She could, but...but...”

“But what?” Maggie snapped.

“But I’m the man that got her to come out of her shell. If you kill me, who’s going to pick up the pieces?”

“Jackass,” I coughed out. That was a low blow, using his wife to cover up

his faults with Maggie.

She spun back to me and her eyes started to well up. “Please,” she said quietly. “Don’t do this to me. Sebastian never lets me do anything anymore. He has me locked up in the house, never letting me go anywhere. I’m desperate,” she cried as a single tear trailed down her cheek.

Fuck, I hated when women cried. This was worse because she was a pregnant woman, which firmly put me in the asshole category. “Maggie...”

“Don’t do it,” Sinner coughed.

I shot him a look, and saw the way he shook his head. He mouthed *she’s playing you*. I looked back at the woman in front of me. She looked so innocent. I knew that she was a ballbuster, but this was different. She was pregnant. Hormonal women were a beast I was unfamiliar with. This couldn’t be fake. It just couldn’t.

But as my eyes flicked back to Sinner’s, I decided to take his advice. “Sorry, Maggie. This is no place for a pregnant woman.”

And then the real Maggie stood up. Well, she was already standing, but man, did that beast rear its ugly head. If her head was ugly...

“You’re going to pay for this,” she snapped. “How dare you take this away from me! She called me!” she pointed at Juliette.

“Actually, I called Reed Security.”

“And I’ll be damned if you’re going to strip my last bit of fun away before I push this ten-pound watermelon out of the smallest hole known to man!”

“Oh, there are smaller,” Sinner grinned as he rocked back on his heels.

I was pretty sure now was not the time to taunt the pregnant lady, but who was I to argue with his methods?

She jabbed her finger in my face, terrifying the shit out of me. How did Sebastian live with a woman as feisty as this? “You’ll rue the day you messed with me!”

She spun on her heel and wobbled toward the door. Her exit would have been more dramatic if it hadn’t taken her an entire minute to reach the door. Lindsey stood, still a little pale and wobbly from passing out earlier. She avoided eye contact as she headed for the door. Claire, on the other hand, came right over to me with a huge smile on her face.

“This has been so thrilling. I mean, I know we didn’t actually see any action, but I’ve enjoyed every second of it,” she said, reaching out and gripping my arm. She flinched back and her eyes went wide as she realized

what she did. But before she could launch herself into a long-winded apology, Sinner grabbed her by the elbow and steered her toward the door.

“Well, this has been fun. And if you value your life, or mine, I wouldn’t let Sebastian know about this little road trip,” he said over his shoulder. “In fact, I wouldn’t even answer the phone if he calls!”

“Sure,” I waved as he exited.

When the door finally shut, I sank down in a chair, pulling Juliette into my lap as she walked over. “Fuck, that was not what I was expecting when I saw someone crouching in your stairwell.”

“Speaking of which, where are my bags?”

“Probably still in the stairwell,” I grunted.

“Well, are you going to get them?”

“Do I have to?” I whined. “I just sat down.”

She smiled at me, patting my cheek. “Of course, you don’t.”

She pushed off my lap and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?”

She didn’t bother to answer as she reached for the door. I jumped to my feet and ran at her. In a flash, I was slamming the door closed just as she pulled it open. Spinning her around, I pressed her up against the door, grinding my body against hers.

“You’re fucking crazy if you think I’m going to let you go anywhere without me.”

She batted those long eyelashes at me with a grin on her face. “Well, now that I know you’re my bodyguard and not a model, I wouldn’t dream of making you get my bags.”

“Woman,” I growled, bending and hauling her over my shoulder. Her feet dangled in the air as she squirmed against me, squealing for me to let her down.

I stalked back to the bedroom, ready to have my way with her.

“You know,” Edu shouted from the corner of the living room where I’d completely forgotten about the guys. “You get laid, and suddenly your friends don’t matter anymore!”

I slammed the door on him, and then had my way with my woman.

Now that the cat was out of the bag, Juliette's townhouse looked like a frat house. The guys started taking turns sleeping on her couch instead of going to the other townhouse. They said it was because they liked my food, but I knew it was because another woman had been killed. The threat was escalating at a rapid pace. I wasn't sure continuing this photo shoot was a good idea, but I couldn't exactly wrap her up and keep her in the townhouse for the rest of her life.

"So, what do you want to do? Today's the last day at Emilio's studio. Then we're on the road," Brock said.

"Where are we headed?" I asked. I already forgot the itinerary with the chaos of today's photo shoot.

"Texas."

I grimaced. The heat would be unbearable, but worse was the fact that everyone in Texas carried a gun. "Great, so identifying the target will be that much harder."

"Our killer doesn't use a gun," Scottie said from the couch. He was barely awake, but still managed to join in the conversation.

"That doesn't mean he won't take advantage of the circumstances," I pointed out. "Where's the shoot?"

"It's remote," Brock reassured me. "Thankfully, it's a closed set and we'll have a list of people allowed at the site. That should make it easier."

"It's fucking Texas. Nothing will be easier."

He nodded, watching me for my next move. I was still running over the crime scene in my head. They'd just found her last night, and the details were even more gruesome than last time.

"We need to draw this fucker out somehow."

"Go for a run," Brock suggested.

I rolled my eyes at him. "I meant, let's do it in a way that doesn't put Juliette in danger."

"Oh, so you want a magic bullet," he nodded. "Got it, because I thought we were going for logical ways to catch a killer."

"It's not a bad idea," Scottie muttered. "Go for a run."

"I'm not taking her on a run!"

"Not her, just you," he yawned. "The killer has to know who you are by now. Go for a run and draw him out."

My head snapped back to meet Brock's gaze. "That could work."

"It could. It could also leave either you or Juliette very vulnerable."

“I don’t need anyone watching my back,” I snapped.

He nodded as he thought it over. “Alright, let’s run through it. You go off on your own—probably closer to night so that he’ll come out of hiding. We’ll be back here, protecting Juliette. And then...and then you never show up because he’ll have murdered you and we won’t fucking know it! Yeah, brilliant fucking idea. And then we get to be the lucky bastards that tell Juliette you’ve gone missing. I love this idea. Really, it’s your best one yet.”

“Then what fucking suggestions do you have?” I snapped.

“Go for a run!” Scottie repeated, a little louder this time.

“I know you want me to go for a run,” I shouted. “Maybe provide a little more detail than that!”

He sat up, leaning on his elbow as he turned to face us. “You go for a fucking run. Take Fox with you. He’ll have your back and take out anyone even remotely close to you. And he’ll enjoy doing it. How long has it been since he’s gotten to boil someone? It’ll be good for him.”

“Not with Anna here,” I pointed out.

“Anna doesn’t have to know,” Scottie said.

Brock huffed. “She’ll know. Fox is always a lot happier after ripping someone apart.”

I stood and paced the room, running my hand along my jaw. “Okay, I’ll head out, but there’s no guarantee he’ll come after me. He might see that as an opportunity to get inside.”

“And we should let him,” Brock answered.

I spun on him, glaring hard. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“You want to catch this guy. What other choice do we have? You know we won’t let anything happen to her.”

“Shit happens,” I growled. “And I won’t let it happen to her.”

“If you let this opportunity slip past you, what the fuck do you think is going to happen? He’s going to be out there, killing more women,” Brock snapped. “Do you really want that on your conscience?”

The door to Juliette’s room swung open, and she stormed out, looking like she was ready to murder someone. “Boys, I was sleeping.”

“Sorry.” I immediately walked over to her and pulled her into my arms. “We didn’t mean to wake you.”

She pressed her hands to my chest and snuggled into me. “You could have just stayed in bed with me.”

“We had work to do.”



I thought maybe she wouldn't understand the deeper meaning, but I knew she had the moment she stepped out of my arms. "Who was it this time?"

"Andrea Lake."

Her jaw dropped open as she stared at me in stunned silence. "Oh." She brushed the hair back from her face as she walked into the kitchen, absently opening the cabinet door and pulling out a bowl. "How did he do it?"

I pressed my lips together. I wasn't about to tell her the details of this one. "That's not important. We need to figure out how to get this guy."

"Okay, so what do you have?"

None of us spoke. I was pretty sure no one wanted to tell her the plan. She was about to pour some cereal when she stopped and stared at us.

"Come on, one of you must have a plan."

"We do," I admitted.

"And I'm not going to like it."

Actually, I was pretty sure she would like it, and that was the problem. She didn't think it was any big deal to draw this guy out, but I wasn't about to put her in danger.

She walked around the island and stood in front of us. "Alright, someone tell me what's going on."

"We're going to draw him out," I finally said.

The guys all ducked their heads, none of them wanting to look at her. Her eyes flicked to mine. "Are you going to tell me more?"

"That depends. Are you going to listen to what we tell you?"

"Of course."

"That means no," Scottie said not-so-helpfully.

She pursed her lips and stared me down. "Just tell me the plan."

"Fine," I huffed. "I'm going for a run. The idea is that we'll draw him out to me because he'll think if he takes me out, it'll mean easier access to you."

"Why wouldn't I just go with you?"

"Because I don't want you hurt," I bit out.

"But you'll be with me. Why would I be hurt?"

"Because shit goes wrong," I snapped. "I won't put you in danger."

"Just yourself," she retorted.

"Well, yeah. I'm the one trained in this sort of thing."

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at me. "And you think I can't run from someone that's chasing me?"

"No, I think that if somehow I got taken down, there would be no one to

protect you.”

She smiled in amusement. “Yeah, like it would really be just you and me on the trail. Like you wouldn’t have the rest of them with us!”

“What if something happened to them?”

Her eyes went comically wide. “You mean, like if this one man happened to take all of this highly trained group of men out and leave me vulnerable?”

I hated that she was making a good point. “The fact is, he’s more likely to come after me alone. If you’re with me, he won’t risk it. Everything about the murders suggests that the women were alone when they were attacked.”

“Well, if it’s someone I’ve dated, there’s no way he’ll take out a group of highly trained ex-military brutes! You’re the first man I’ve ever been with that wasn’t afraid of a spider! And up until yesterday, I couldn’t say that!”

Scottie bit back a laugh. “Dude, you told her you were afraid of a spider?”

I glared at him and he immediately shut up. “Look, I make the rules around here, and I’m telling you you’re staying.”

“Going!”

“Staying!”

“Going!”

“Staying!”

“Oh, great,” Brock sighed. “And the foreplay begins.” He shoved to his feet and headed for the door. “Let me know when you’re done fucking. Then we can actually put together a plan. Scottie!”

“Fuck that. I’m staying here. I need my sleep.”



## JULIETTE

I stared at Royal—Jerrod—determined not to give in. I wasn't afraid of this asshole, and I wasn't about to let anyone stand between me and my job. "Look, you said it yourself, I'm the target."

"And I told you I wouldn't put you in danger."

I rolled my eyes at that. "You know, I wish people in my life would stop deciding things for me. I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions."

He stared at me incredulously. "Since when has anyone ever made a decision for you?"

"Well, you came here and pretended to be a model because everyone thought I wouldn't be able to handle the fact that a man wants me dead!"

"No, Andrew didn't want to tell you because he knew this was exactly how you'd react, with no regard for your safety."

"Andrew can suck a dick," I snapped. "I know what I'm capable of handling."

"Do you?" he shot back.

"Yeah, I think I know what I can handle."

He nodded and stormed into the room Fox was staying in. Moments later, he returned with a file folder, tossing it on the counter. "Take a look at those. Tell me you're fine with what you see."

I grabbed the folder and slid it closer, then opened it up. Okay, I wasn't quite prepared for what was inside. I flipped through the photos, studying each one more intently than the last. These were all women I knew, women I'd worked with at one time or another. One of these girls was with me on my very first photo shoot, and she'd paid the price with her life, all because she knew me.

It didn't scare me. It angered the fuck out of me. In my head, these women had died, but I didn't know just how bad it was. This was horrible. I turned the photo in front of me and stared at the woman in the picture. She'd been cut down, but it was clear she'd been hung until she strangled to death.

"I know her."

"You know all of them," Lock said, his voice low and dangerous. "They were all murdered because they know you." My eyes slowly raised to meet his. "I'm not telling you this to make you feel guilty, but you have to understand, if we don't catch this asshole, more of them will die."

"All the more reason for me to be the bait."

"And if something goes wrong and you die?" he snapped. "What then?"

"What do you mean?"

He stalked toward me, his eyes dangerous as they bored into my face. "I mean that if you're dead, the murders stop, and then what? How the fuck do we get justice for these murders? Those families deserve answers."

"And I deserve to have a say in this," I argued.

He sighed, turning away from me. I knew he was pissed at the circumstances, but so was I. If he thought showing me those pictures would scare me into submission, he was wrong. All I felt was an overwhelming rage that those women were killed all because of one man's sick obsession. And I was angry at myself for having been fooled for so long by my brother. He and I were going to have a long talk about the steps he took to keep me in the dark.

"Jerrod—"

"Don't," he said in a low voice that warned me to tread carefully.

"I can't just sit back and watch more women die. These are people I knew!" I pointed at the pictures. "Those women died because they were connected to me. Tell me how that's fair! Tell me how I should just stand back and let it continue!"

He spun around and the roar that left his throat left me speechless. "Tell you? Tell me how I'm supposed to allow you to take this risk! Tell me how I'm supposed to allow you to do something that could tear my fucking heart out! Tell me how I'm supposed to continue to protect you, knowing that you won't listen to a goddamn word I say because you're too fucking stubborn!" He turned, running his hand through his hair, but then he was back, glaring at me with hatred and lust. "Your brother knew this about you, and that's why he didn't want you to know. He knew you'd fuck it all up because you just

have to be in charge. Well, guess what? There's a reason he called me, and it's because I'm the best at what I do. But I can't protect you if you refuse to do as I say. So, tell me right fucking now what it's going to be. Are you going to listen to me, or am I walking out of here?"

I was well and truly chastised, but that last bit gave me pause. "You'd leave?"

"You want me to stay and watch you hand yourself over to this asshole? I can't do that. I'd rather walk away."

I was shocked by that. I thought he really cared about me, but he'd rather walk away? That didn't make sense, not after everything he'd said to me. And it was in that moment that I truly looked into his eyes and saw just a speck of vulnerability there. He was too scared to admit that if I didn't listen to him, he'd stay anyway. He didn't want to leave me. But the fear of something happening to me was forcing him to say things he didn't mean.

"Okay," I finally said.

He nearly flinched when I gave in. "Okay?"

"I'll stay behind."

Shock and relief filled his features as he stared at me. Then he was storming over to me and pulling me against his body in a crushing hug. "Thank fuck. Why?"

"Because of this," I admitted to his chest since he was smothering me. "I didn't realize..."

I didn't realize what? That I was falling for him? That I cared so much about him? That my feelings for him were now tangled up in every other aspect of my life? And the moment I realized that, I knew I had to let go. He was right, this was his job, and if he wanted me to stay behind, I would do it.

"Jerrod?" He grunted in return. "Are you going to let me go?"

He grunted again, and continued to hold me to him. I wasn't sure how long we stood like that, but eventually, Scottie broke the silence.

"Fuck, that was almost worse than listening to screwing."



## LOCK

“I’ll start off my run and head for the south end of the trail,” I pointed at the map. “From there, I want Fox coming toward me.”

“Shouldn’t he be closer to you?” Juliette asked.

All the guys chuckled as we stood around the table strategizing. When she said she would do things my way, that didn’t mean she was going to keep her mouth shut.

“If he’s too close, there’s a chance this asshole will catch on,” I explained.

“But if he attacks you, don’t you want someone close?”

“If he attacks me, I can guarantee he’s not coming out on top.”

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. “He’s killed multiple women!”

I didn’t want to sound cocky, but she was vastly underestimating me. “He’s never gone up against a man like me. He most likely caught those women off guard. The fact that there’s hardly any struggle on their part, and they were attacked in a location they were familiar with says that they were comfortable around this man. And unless you all know this guy, that means he appears non-threatening.”

“Yes, but you said he would go after you first to take you out, which would suggest that he would have other means of taking out a man like you.”

My woman wasn’t just beautiful. She was smart as fuck.

“I’ve added that into my plan. Don’t worry, I’m completely prepared.”

“How?” she cocked her head at me.

“Fox will be on comms with me. He also has the tracking information on me, so if by some slim chance he gets the drop on me, Fox can not only find my location, but he also has my vitals and will be able to tell if I’m in



distress.”

She watched me inquisitively. “Why don’t I have tracking?”

“You’d let me put a tracker in you?”

“Would it make you feel better?” she asked.

“Here we go,” Brock sighed.

“You mean, would I not be going out of my fucking mind every time I had to move more than five feet from you? Fuck, yes.”

“Then maybe we should do it,” she countered.

Edu shook his head. “Fuck, this is a twisted form of foreplay.”

“I’ll have Fox bring the equipment.”

“Will it hurt?” she asked, stepping forward.

“You’ll feel a small pinch. Nothing a woman like you can’t handle.”

“Then let’s do it.”

I snapped my fingers, knowing Fox was listening in and ready to go. Two seconds later, he was marching over with a small case in his hand. “I can’t believe I get to take your virginity.”

“Watch it,” I snapped, not liking his tone.

“Her tracking virginity,” he clarified. “Geez, I’m a married man with kids!”

“You also like Funyuns. Your judgment can’t be trusted.”

I maintained eye contact with her as Fox prepared the tracking device, cleaning off a spot on her arm. She didn’t even flinch as he inserted it. I stepped forward and brushed my thumb over the spot, feeling the bump under her skin. Fuck, that was hot.

“Okay,” Scottie said slowly. “That was like watching a really bad porno.”

“Let’s get this plan in action. I want boots on the ground in ten minutes.”

Everyone around me dispersed to take their positions, but I stood there staring at Juliette. Fuck, I was in love with her. We barely knew each other, but there was something between us that was undeniable. How the hell I was ever going to get out of this alive, I didn’t have a fucking clue. She twisted things up inside me, making me want things I’d never wanted before.

I leaned forward and brushed a kiss across her lips, feeling her shiver from my touch. “Still think our kids are going to Harvard?”

She wrapped her arms around my neck, her hot breath fanning over my skin. “I can see the appeal of sending them into the military.”

“Good, because there’s no fucking way I’m letting a kid of mine wear a suit.”

She looked at me funny. “Does that mean you’ll never wear a suit?”

“Not a chance in hell.”

A sly grin spread across her lips and I knew I’d fallen into her trap. “Then what will you be wearing on our wedding day?”

And with that, she pressed a kiss to my lips and walked away, sending me a saucy wink over her shoulder.

I tossed back my head and groaned. “Fuck, I’m so screwed.”

“You and every other guy that falls for a woman,” Scottie said, still laying on the couch.

“Get up. It’s time to get to work.”

He flipped me off. “Fuck you, princess. I just laid down to sleep, and I haven’t gotten any with you spewing your undying love to Juliette.”

“Hey, at least I didn’t subject everyone to your theory of building a fucking fire.”

He bolted upright on the couch and glared at me. “That worked, and you fucking know it.”

“She ran from you, and you fucking know it. Now get your ass up. We have work to do.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. “But if you end up dead, I’m taking a nap before I tell her.”

I ignored him and changed into my running gear. Juliette made herself scarce, and I told myself that was because she didn’t want to distract me, but deep down, I hoped it was also that she was worried about me. Either way, she was preoccupied, which gave me the opportunity to do what I did best.

“Keep her safe,” I said to Scottie as I headed out.

He looked at me in confusion. “Oh, was that what I was supposed to do? Fuck, I had it wrong all these years. I’m so glad you fucking told me.”

I flipped him off and headed out. Brock was waiting for me outside, along with Fox. “Where’s Anna?”

“I sent her home. She would have stayed, but I told her she’d just be in the way.”

“You freaked out, didn’t you?”

“Totally. Not even Funyuns would calm me down. I tried to find some pickled pigs feet, but you’d be surprised how hard they are to find.”

“Yeah. Shocking,” I said, trying and failing to sound surprised. “Alright, let’s head out. You’ve got the door,” I said to Brock.

He stared at me just like Scottie had. “Wow, thanks for that. What would

I do without your guidance?” he asked in a wooden voice.

“You know, a little respect for your team leader would be nice.”

“Yeah, and when you stop acting like I don’t know how to do my job, you’ll see it.”

“I know you know how to do your job.”

“Do you? Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you think I don’t know how to do my job, but you’re pretending I do, even though you think I don’t, just so you can fucking tell me what to do.”

I stared at him in confusion. “How the fuck did you keep track of all that in your head?”

“I’ve been practicing since this morning. I wanted it to sound fierce.”

“Oh, you nailed it.”

“Yeah?” he grinned.

“Completely. I actually got a few goosebumps from it.”

“Seriously?”

“No, you dumb fuck.” I jerked my head at Fox. “Let’s do this.”

“Let’s do this,” he said in an Arnold Schwarzenegger voice. “Man, I totally nailed that. Alright,” he said, slinging his arm around my neck as we walked to the elevator. I was a little uncomfortable with the gesture, but it was Fox. Sometimes you had to roll with the punches. “Here’s my plan. I’m going to drive to the other end of the park and when you give me the word, I’ll start running toward you, only I’ll be disguised with this,” he said, pulling his ball cap out of his back pocket. Grinning wide, he held out his arms. “Clever, right?”

“In what way?”

“It’s my disguise, so he won’t see me coming.”

I stared at him, shaking my head slightly. “Yeah, he’ll never see you.”

“Less is more,” he added. “I adopted the same principles with Anna when I...brought her to the safe house.”

“When you kidnapped her. You can say it. We all know it.”

“You *think* you know it, but you don’t actually know it. Because if you did know it, you would know.”

“Christ, what is it with you guys and riddles today?”

“It’s only a riddle if you don’t know it,” he winked at me, then stopped me with a hand to the chest. “What’s the likelihood that I’ll get shawarma out of this?”

“Fox, I will call in an order from your favorite restaurant and have it

airlifted here if you promise never to tell me any more riddles ever again.”

He grinned, slapping me on the arm. “Hey, no need to have it airlifted. I’m sure you can find it around here.” He turned to walk away, but then stopped. “Oh, and you’d better invite the Kamau too. You know how much he loves shawarma.”

“Almost to the park,” I said, keeping my eyes trained on my surroundings. There had been someone jogging behind me for the past ten minutes, but it was impossible to tell if he was following me. Without any backup, I was on my own. I knew this going in, but I hadn’t expected someone to follow me so closely so soon. I thought for sure the asshole would wait until I was someplace more secluded. Unless he was just trying to get a feel for what I’d do.

I took a right on the sidewalk and headed into the trees. Luckily, not too many people were out jogging right now, which meant that he was more likely to make his move. I held up my watch and glanced at the screen, which was also a monitor connected to the video feed attached to my clothing. The guy was still behind me, keeping a steady pace. It was hard to tell if he was watching me since he was directly behind me, but it was suspicious that he followed me into the park.

“Suspect about thirty feet behind me. I’m picking up the pace.”

“Roger that. I’m heading toward you now. Hey, did you know they sell hot dogs here?”

“Fox, we’re on a job.”

“Right, but protein is good when you’re jogging,” he mumbled. “Mmm, these are good.”

“You’re eating it right now?” I hissed.

“It’s not like I was going to hold it through the whole jog,” he said as he chewed.

“I can’t believe you’re running and eating. Who does that?”

“Smart people.”

“Or people that want to throw up,” I shot back. I heard footsteps pick up behind me and glanced at my watch again. He was gaining on me, but kept his pace steady. He wasn’t running like he was about to attack.

“He’s getting closer.” I had taken a screenshot earlier and sent it to Brock. “Any word yet on who this fucker is?”

“Negative,” Brock answered. “We’re still running through facial recognition.”

I kept my breathing steady, but I was getting pissed off. This was the fucker after Juliette. It had to be. Why else would he be following me?

I took a sharp left and headed deeper into the wooded area, off the trail. I wanted to see if he’d follow, and sure enough, he did.

“Fuck this,” I said into comms. “This fucker is following me. It has to be him.”

“Don’t move until he makes a move,” Brock warned. “We need something more concrete.”

“More concrete than him following my every move?”

“Where the fuck are you?” Fox grumbled. “I should have passed you by now.”

“I headed into the woods.”

I heard his exasperated sigh. “Seriously? What the fuck am I here for if you were just going to do your own thing anyway? You know, this is just like in Oklahoma when—”

“Fox!” I snapped. “Shut the fuck up.”

“I was about to give you a very good example of what not to do.”

“I don’t need a musical lesson right now,” I grumbled under my breath. “I’m coming back around.”

“Fine, but you’d better be there this time,” he snapped.

I took another sharp turn and headed back to the trail, and the fucker was on me the whole time. If I sped up, he sped up too. When I slowed down, he did too. It had to be him. I glanced at my watch one last time just as I was hitting the trail.

A body crashed into mine and I grabbed ahold of it as we tripped over each other and fell to the ground. I took the brunt of the impact, grunting as someone else fell on top of me. I caught an elbow to the face and a hard pinch where this person grabbed onto my arm to avoid hitting the ground.

“Sorry,” he muttered, scrambling to my feet. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sorry, I wasn’t on the trail,” I said, looking around for the guy following me. “Fox, you got him?”

“On it!”

I heard a cry and swung my head in the other direction, seeing Fox tackle

him to the ground. I got to my feet and turned to the man I crashed into. “You’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.”

Without another glance in his direction, I took off toward Fox. He slammed his fist into the guy’s face. “You got blood on me!”

“Fox!” I shouted, trying to draw his attention.

“I just wanted to talk and you got blood on me!” He looked over the man, then shook his head. “Wait, you don’t have blood on you.” He licked the blood from his hand and I grimaced. “Oh, it’s ketchup. No hard feelings?” he asked the guy.

“Why are you hitting me? I was just running!”

“You were following me,” I snapped. “Why were you following me? Did you think you could take me out?”

His eyes grew wide as he stared at me. “Take you out? What are you talking about?”

Fox slammed his fist into the man’s gut, and he doubled over in pain, wheezing for breath.

“You fucked up the moment you followed me. You won’t get away with murder.”

His head shot up and he stared at me in confusion. “Murder? What are you talking about? Who did I murder?”

“My hot dog,” Fox grumbled. “It was a really good fucking hot dog.”

“I didn’t murder anyone! I just took a job!” he said, his voice rising in panic.

“A job? What are you talking about?”

Eyes wide and sweat pouring down his forehead, he glanced from Fox then back to me. “I just needed some money. I’m putting myself through school. I swear!”

“What was the job?”

“I was supposed to follow you through the park.”

“Why?” I snapped.

“It was a study for some private investigator. He was trying to find out the reactions of people as they were followed. It was just the one job!” he cried.

“And you didn’t find that suspicious?” I asked. “What was his name?”

“Uh...Doodly. Dooley. Fuck, I don’t know, man!”

I grabbed him by the shirt and hauled him against me. I was tired of this

shit. “If you were working for him, how were you supposed to give him any information?”

“He was here observing,” he said quickly. “He paid me up front! It was a simple job!”

I quickly looked around the park, but no one was here. The fucker disappeared. I released him and grabbed his hand, taking his thumb and pressing it to my phone. It scanned his thumb print, and in seconds, came up with all the information I needed on this fucker.

“Grad student. What’s your field of study?”

“Human resources and personal development.”

I shoved him away, irritated that this guy was so fucking stupid. Nothing else showed up in his profile. He was as clean as they came, but I saved his information just in case.

“Get the fuck away from me, and don’t take any more jobs from strangers.”

The guy stumbled away from me, nearly tripping over his feet in a desperate attempt to get away.

“And don’t knock anyone’s hot dog out of their hands!” Fox shouted. He snorted as he turned to me. “Can you believe how inconsiderate that guy is? That was a really good fucking hot dog.”

“What I can’t believe is that this asshole got the drop on us. It was a fucking decoy.”

“Yeah, you really should have seen that coming,” Fox said not-so-helpfully.

“Thank you for pointing that out,” I retorted snidely.

“Well, that’s what I’m here for!” he clapped his hands together. “You want to grab another hot dog?”

“No, I don’t want a hot dog.”

I turned and scanned the area one last time. I couldn’t believe that fucker got away. With any luck, maybe we could pull camera footage from the area and find out who entered the park. It was a long shot, but it was our only shot at this point.

“Let’s get back to the townhouse.”

“Alright, but I want hot dogs tonight.”





## JULIETTE

The moment they walked through the door, I was on my feet, running over to them. “So?”

“Negative,” Fox sighed. “*And* he ruined my hot dog.”

“Forget the fucking hot dog!” Jerrod snapped.

He was tense, but that wasn’t surprising, given that he thought he’d catch the murderer. I walked over and pressed my hands to his shoulders, leaning into his back. The tension slowly eased as I did my best to comfort him. It was a new thing for me. Normally, I didn’t care for anyone, but I could tell this was really hard on him.

“We’ll get him,” I whispered.

“Yeah, but when? How many more women will he attack in the meantime?” He spun and wrapped his arms around me. “I need you to spread the word. Make sure these women know not to trust anyone, that they aren’t ever alone with anyone.”

“I’m not sure they’ll listen, but I’ll try.” I sighed. “What are we going to do about the photo shoot? Are we still going to do it?”

I prayed he wouldn’t say no. I couldn’t do that to Emilio, but I also understood that it would be hard for Jerrod to give up that much control. “I’ll make some plans with the guys.”

That was all he said before nodding to them. They slipped out of the townhouse without another word, leaving us alone. “So, what do we do now?”

He grunted in response, which I took to mean that he didn’t really care right now. Either that or his mind was elsewhere, and I was a distraction.

“You know what we should do? We should have a date.”

I stepped back, beaming at him, but the look on his face said the last thing he wanted to do was go anywhere. “Maybe we could just stay in,” he finally said. “I could cook for you.”

“Yeah,” I nodded, a little disappointed. It wasn’t that I minded staying in with him, but up until a little while ago, I thought he was a completely different person. I wanted to know who he was, and I wanted to go on an actual date with him where it was just the two of us, acting like a normal couple.

“We can go out,” he relented.

“No, really. It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,” he grumbled. “I’m being an ass because things didn’t go as planned. Besides, I’m not actually in the mood to cook, and I’m sure as shit not eating anything you make.”

“Hey!” I shrieked. “How do you know I’m not an excellent cook?”

He cocked an eyebrow at me in challenge.

“Okay, I’m not, but if I was, that was really insulting.”

“Sweetheart, if you could cook, you would have had actual food in your cabinets.”

“Fine, you’re right, but that doesn’t mean I won’t attempt it one day.”

“Just make sure I’m not around for it,” he grinned.

He pulled me to him and laid an indecent kiss on my lips that left me tingling and in need of so much more. But just about the time I was going to take things further, he stepped back and pushed me gently away from him.

“Nope, we’re going on a date.”

“Maybe we could just...”

“No,” he said firmly. “We’re doing this all backward. We’ve already planned out where our kids are going once they graduate and I haven’t even taken you on a date yet.”

“Fine, but I expect lots of sex later. We’ll be on the road tomorrow, and who knows what kind of time we’ll have.”

“It’ll be a hardship, but somehow, I’ll manage.”

He smacked my ass as I turned from him and walked into my room. I needed a shower before this date, and I wanted to look my best for him. Nerves jangled inside me as I shaved my legs. I shouldn’t be so worried about this date, but he wasn’t who I thought he was, and suddenly, I wasn’t sure he would actually want to be with a woman like me. I was a model. My face was splashed all over magazines and billboards. How would he deal with

that? And what did we actually have in common other than modeling, which now I knew was all a lie?

Questions floated through my mind the longer I stayed in the shower. Did he often go on jobs? Did he meet other women? What if he fell for someone he was protecting? Would he leave me for her? And how would we possibly make this work when I wasn't even sure where he lived?

I shut off the water and got out, staring at myself in the mirror. For the first time, I wasn't happy with the way I looked. I didn't find my face appealing because I knew it would take me far away from Jerrod. And some other pretty face could just as easily snag his attention.

Now more than ever, the pressure was on to make sure this date went well. I needed to show him that I was more than my career. And while my job meant a lot to me, a man like him would want a woman more for her brains than for her looks. Still, I took extra care to make sure I looked fabulous tonight. All it would take is one slip, and he might not see me the same way. I had to be perfect.

I sat down on my bed and took a deep breath. Fuck, I was losing it. My head jerked up at a knock on the bedroom door. I sucked in a breath, thinking it was Jerrod, relieved to find my brother standing in the doorway.

I stood and pretended everything was fine. "What do you want?"

"Hello to you too," he grinned. "You look beautiful."

"I know," I said, ignoring him as I walked over to my dresser and grabbed a pair of earrings.

"What's wrong?"

I frowned at him in the mirror. "What are you talking about?"

"You're acting weird."

"I'm acting like I always do," I retorted.

"Which is weird since you're falling for this guy. What's going on?"

I spun around and shot him an annoyed look. "I don't know what you're talking about."

A slow grin spread across his face the longer he stared at me. "You're nervous."

"Right," I said distractedly.

"You are. You're nervous. Why?"

"I never said I was. You're the one putting words in my mouth. What would I possibly have to be nervous about?"

"I don't know. But you're acting weird. What would you say if Mom was

here?”

That just pissed me off. “You know, you don’t have to do this every time I’m acting weird.”

He jabbed a finger at me. “A-ha! So, you admit you’re acting weird.”

“Yes, alright? What about it?”

“I just don’t get it. What could you possibly be nervous about?” He pressed his finger to his lips as he paced the room. “It’s not sex. You’ve already done that with him way more than I care to know about.”

I rolled my eyes at him, but he didn’t see because he was lost in thought.

“And it can’t be your looks, because you know you’re beautiful.”

“I’m not nervous.”

He stopped walking and turned to me, giving me that same knowing look he always did. He could read me like a book. “Unless you’re nervous *because* of your looks.”

“Seriously, you just said that. You’re making no sense.”

“It’s because of your looks that you’re nervous. You’re worried he’s not going to see you the same way now. You know that’s ridiculous, right? He’s always seen you for who you are. Why would that change just because you know who he is?”

“Well, obviously, he’s not who I thought he was,” I said in exasperation. “He was playing a part before. But he’s not some dumb model. He’s ex-military, and super smart. He’s strong and—”

“And the same person as before,” Andrew cut me off. “Trust me, he’s not faking anything with you.”

“But how can you be sure? What if we go out and he can’t think of a single thing to say to me? What if I can’t talk to him?” I asked, my panic increasing ten-fold. “He doesn’t care about modeling. He’s just doing his job, and he no longer has to pretend. Don’t you see what this means?”

“Yeah, it means that he still wants to be with you. Modeling is just a job,” he reminded me. “That’s the way you’ve always looked at it. I remember when you got your first job, you said you would do it as long as it was fun. You never wanted to be one of those models that got lost in the cattiness of it all. And you haven’t. Why would he see anything other than the awesome person you are?”

My shoulders relaxed slightly as he said the very words I needed to hear. He was great at channeling Mom, always knowing what to say. It wasn’t really fair of me to lean so heavily on him, but he had always been there for

me, knowing exactly what to say to make me feel better.

“I wish they were still here,” I whispered as he pulled me in for a hug.

“Me too, peanut.”

I punched him in the gut, to which he grunted, though I knew I hadn’t hurt him.

“You’re going to be fine,” he whispered, rubbing my back. I sighed heavily against him and took the comfort he’d offered. We only had each other, and I relied on him maybe a little too much all these years. He’d been so focused on me that I hadn’t really considered how his life was going.

I stepped back, punching him in the shoulder. “Maybe if you finally find a woman that can stand you, we can go on a double date.”

“And give up my bachelor life?” he scoffed. “Fat chance. I’m more than content with the endless stream of women that flow in and out of my bed.”

“You’re a pig,” I said, shoving him gently.

“Yeah, but you still love me.”

It was true. He was the best guy I knew, and if he wanted to be a manwhore, that was fine by me. Our parents’ deaths had affected him possibly more than me, because he was thrust into the role of parent before his time. Everything he did, he did for me, putting his own life on hold as he made sure I had everything I needed.

“You’d better hurry up. No guy wants to be kept waiting.”

“Well, I have to make him wait a little. I can’t have him thinking he just has to snap his fingers to make me come.” Then I thought about it. “Although, he has.”

Andrew grimaced. “You know, there are some things I just don’t need to know.”

Despite the pep talk Andrew gave me, the nerves fluttering around in my stomach returned with a vengeance as soon as I walked out of the building with Jerrod. The rest of his team tagged along at a distance, allowing us to keep up the appearance that everything was normal. After all, we still had a murderer on our hands.

“So,” I said as we took off toward the restaurant. “What do you normally do for fun?”

“Um...” He frowned as he stared straight ahead. “I don’t know the last time I actually had fun.”

“Really? No clubs or parties? Loose women?” I chuckled nervously.

He glanced over at me and shot me an odd look. Yeah, I was making things awkward, but so was he by not answering the question. I cleared my throat, shifting in my seat. For all my confidence in everything I did, I was feeling sorely lacking right now.

“So, where are we going?”

“Uh...” He cleared his throat, pulling at his shirt like it was choking him. Oh God, he was just as nervous as me. This was so bad. “Steakhouse,” he answered, not bothering to say the name of the restaurant. He glanced at his watch and then back at the road. Was he seriously watching the time?

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“No, I just want to make sure we make our reservation.”

Oh, that made sense. I relaxed into my seat, feeling slightly better about this now. Jerrod was actually a stickler for the time, so it made sense that he would check his watch.

“I’m a little nervous about the shoot tomorrow. Emilio didn’t really say what he has in mind. Now that he thinks you’re model material, I think he might try something crazy,” I said, laughing slightly.

I glanced over at him, but he was watching the road intently, not really paying attention to me at all. I puffed out my cheeks, trying my best not to say something snappy to him. I’d never been on a date where a guy actually ignored me. And even worse, Jerrod and I had already slept together. The chemistry was amazing between us, yet he was acting like I was an annoyance.

This was precisely what I thought might happen. My life didn’t work with his, and the sooner I accepted that, the better off we’d be.

“You know, we don’t have to do this. Maybe we should just go home.”

His head jerked to face me and he frowned. “What?”

“I said, maybe we should just go home. We don’t have to do this.”

“No, it’s fine,” he said, swiping at his forehead. Was he sweating? Hell, he was either just as nervous as me or...I wasn’t sure what else it could be.

We pulled up to the restaurant and he parked, getting out of the car. He stumbled slightly, as if he was drunk. Oh my God! He had to drink to come out tonight. Gritting my teeth, I flung my door open and stepped out, trying not to look as pissed as I felt. I couldn’t believe he’d gotten drunk to come

out with me. This was even worse than I thought it was.

He grabbed my hand and started tugging me beside him. I stumbled along, trying to keep up as he dragged me to the restaurant in my four inch heels that I thought would seal the deal tonight. That was definitely not happening.

“Two,” he barked at the hostess as we stepped inside.

My eyes widened at the way he spoke to her. He was being so rude. I tried to tug my hand from his, but he just tightened his grip on me.

“Of course,” the hostess said, shuffling two menus into her hands as she scurried off, terrified of the scary man barking orders at her. He stumbled again, running into another diner that shot him a scathing look. What the hell was he thinking?

“Sorry,” he muttered, continuing on his path.

At this point, I was so embarrassed, I wasn't sure if it was better to just leave or if we should sit down and pretend everything was fine. The hostess showed us a table near a window, but Jerrod shook his head. “That one,” he pointed at the corner. “And I want the shades down.”

“Sir,—”

“Now,” he snapped, not giving an inch.

When she hurried away, I turned to him, just barely holding onto my shit. “What the fuck was that?”

He pointed to my chair. “I need the corner so I can keep an eye on the restaurant. And I don't really want a bullet to the back of the head, if you don't mind.”

“What are you talking about?”

He pointed to the windows. “They're see-through.”

I narrowed my gaze at him. “What the hell is wrong with you tonight?”

“Nothing,” he snapped, pulling at his shirt again. He sighed heavily. “Let's just sit down. This whole situation has me on edge.”

“But the guys are here,” I said, leaning forward to whisper.

“I know, but that doesn't mean something couldn't go wrong.” He leaned across the table holding out his hand. “I'm sorry.”

While I didn't like his attitude, I couldn't blame him for being distracted and kind of an ass. He was trying to protect me, and he didn't feel he could do that from this position. I pressed my hand in his, grimacing at how clammy his hands were. I pulled back and picked up the menu. We just needed to get back on track.

“Let’s talk about something else,” I smiled at him. “So, you work at—” He cut me off with a glare, letting me know I wasn’t allowed to talk about it.

“Um...where’s your family?”

“Ohio.”

I waited for more information, but it didn’t come.

“And do you have brothers or sisters?”

“Two brothers,” he answered, then looked at his watch, frowning.

What the hell? I could almost understand him being distracted, but now he was watching the time?

“Am I boring you?”

“Hmm? Sorry, what did you say?”

He grabbed his water and sucked down the whole glass, setting it down with a wobble. He tried to steady it, but knocked over my glass, sending water cascading over the table and into my lap. Shrieking, I stood and got out of the way of the water dripping from the tablecloth.

“Sorry,” he muttered, squeezing his eyes closed. When he opened them, he grabbed the silverware wrapped in the napkin and unrolled it onto the table with a clatter, shoving the napkin my way. I took it only because I needed to wipe the water off my dress, but I needed a few minutes to clear my head. This date was not going as planned.

“I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll go with you,” he said, rising to his feet, swaying slightly.

“It’s the bathroom, and you have people all around. I’ll be fine,” I snapped, turning and stomping off in the direction of the bathrooms.

I had never been so mortified in all my life. I just didn’t get it. He was doing a total one-eighty on me, and it wasn’t because of the threat against me. There was something more going on, and I had a feeling it had more to do with his realization that we had nothing in common.

I shoved the bathroom door open and was happy to see I was alone inside. I put my purse on the vanity and dropped my head in my hands. “This is such a mess,” I muttered. I pushed my hair back from my face and stared at myself in the mirror. I didn’t understand why this was such a problem. We had all the chemistry in the world just two days ago, and now it was like we were complete strangers.

I took a deep breath and grabbed my purse. Well, I wasn’t about to hide out in the bathroom all night. I’d just have to go out there and face him. I



flung the door open and marched back to the table just as he stood, stumbling into the table again.

“What is wrong with you?” I hissed. “How could you show up drunk?”

“I’m not drunk,” he said as sweat poured down his face. He stared at his watch, his lips moving rapidly.

He gripped my arm tightly, then started dragging me to the exit, hitting nearly every table along the way.

“What is going on?” I asked.

He shoved the door open and stepped outside, then nearly collapsed against me. I wrapped my arms around him as his weight leaned heavily into me. “Jerrod! Jerrod, talk to me!”

“Brock,” he mumbled, but he was bordering on incoherent. His weight was too much for me to take and just as I was about to drop him, Brock came running around the corner.

“What’s going on?”

“I don’t know!” I shouted as panic started to set in. Jerrod’s head slumped against my body and his full weight came crashing onto my small frame. If it weren’t for the fact that Brock grabbed him at the same time, I would have been squished like a bug on the concrete.

“Lock!” Brock shouted, slapping him across the face when he didn’t respond.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“I don’t know!” Brock shouted, then pulled back to slap him again, but Jerrod started convulsing on the ground.

“Oh my God, what’s happening?”

“Scottie, Lock’s down. Get a bus here now!”

I stared at him incredulously. “We don’t need a bus! We need an ambulance!”

“An ambulance is a bus,” he said as he tore off his belt and shoved it between Lock’s teeth.

I didn’t know what the hell was going on, but my heart was pounding rapidly in my chest and everything around me started spiraling. My whole life was falling apart in just a half hour. The life I planned with him now looked like a distant dream.

And as I stared down at Lock, I saw my mother’s face just moments before she died. It was happening all over again, but I wasn’t sure I would be strong enough to survive this time.



## LOCK

It always sucked to wake up in a hospital, but it was worse when you worked for a security company and they all found it perfectly acceptable to sit in your room and bitch when you just wanted some fucking sleep.

“I’m just saying, the hot dogs in this place are nothing like they were at the park.”

“Fox, no one gives a shit about the hot dogs,” Scottie snapped.

“That’s because you didn’t try the one I did. It’s like eating really good shawarma and then having fast food shawarma.”

“Is that even a thing?” Edu asked. “Does someone make fast food shawarma? Is there like a shawarma-rama?”

Fox scoffed. “That’s not a thing. The only true shawarma is the kind I make.”

“Fuck, would you shut up?” Andrew snapped. “How the hell do you stand this?”

“This is nothing,” Brock answered. “You should see it when everyone’s together.”

I tried to ignore them, to push it all to the back of my head and just get some more fucking sleep, but that wasn’t going to happen with them being so loud. And fuck, it would be nice to get some sleep. With them all here, I knew Juliette was safe. My body felt utterly wrung out, incapable of even moving to relieve the itch spreading over my body. But if I wasn’t going to get some sleep, I could at least get some fucking answers.

“—you wouldn’t go to New York for a Chicago dog,” Fox argued. “That’s not even a thing!”

“Would you shut the fuck up?” I muttered, my voice so quiet, I wasn’t

sure anyone heard me.

But they did because the room got silent, and then I felt her soft hand in mine, squeezing hard. I smiled at the concern I felt rushing through me. She was fucking worried about me, and that made me feel like a king. I opened my eyes and stared at the beautiful face of the woman I lov—*shit just got intense*.

Except, she wasn't staring at me with concern and shit. No, she was fucking pissed off. "I didn't mean to ruin dinner," I grumbled.

"You're such a fucking asshole," she spat. "I thought you were ignoring me. I thought you were being an ass!"

"I'm sorry?" I said, unsure of how to respond to that.

"You're sorry? What kind of security guy are you?"

"Um..." I glanced around the room at the guys, not sure how to answer that.

"How could you let yourself get poisoned?" she shrieked.

I wasn't sure what to say to that either. "I was poisoned?"

"No, I just said that for the fun of it. I wanted to see what your response would be," she snapped. "I thought you were good at your job?"

Okay, I was pretty sure I was supposed to have a good answer for her, but I was still fuzzy on the details of what happened. And frankly, it didn't seem like there was a good way to answer her.

"I think I want a drink," Brock said, shoving out of his chair.

"Me too," Scottie followed.

"I'm good," Edu said, lounging back in his chair with a grin. Brock grabbed him by the back of the shirt and dragged him out of the chair and toward the door.

"Hey! You're stretching my shirt!"

Fox, on the other hand, grinned at me as he continued eating his Funyuns. "I don't suppose you want to fill me in on what's happening."

He tossed his head back and laughed. "Classic Lock. I tell ya, man, this is so you."

"What's so me?" I asked in confusion.

"Getting poisoned. I bet if you'd had a proper seating chart, this never would have happened."

I was even more confused now. "What does a seating chart have to do with anything?"

"Well, clearly, you were poisoned at the restaurant by the waitress with

the candlestick.”

He grinned like it was the funniest thing in the world. Meanwhile, I was trying to remember what the fuck happened. I vaguely remembered my heartbeat thundering in my ears as I realized something was wrong. At the beginning of the night, I thought it was nerves. My stomach had been off and I was sweating a lot.

Slowly, the memories came back to me, clueing me in to what happened. But after she left the table, everything got fuzzy. “I was poisoned?” I said again, this time louder.

“Yep!” Fox grinned. “Slow acting, too. The doc said it could have happened at any time today, but I still think it was at the restaurant. Man, that would be good fodder for Jane’s books. Just like *The Spy Who Choked On A Cherry*. Only, you’re not a spy,” he said thoughtfully. “So, we’d have to come up with some other name like *The Bodyguard Who Perished From Poison*. Ooh, I like it! It’s catchy. I’m gonna call her now,” he mumbled as he headed for the door.

When he was finally gone, I took another hesitant glance at Juliette. She still looked pissed as hell. “Sweetheart—”

“Don’t you dare fucking *sweetheart* me!”

I reached for her, but she tore her hand out of my grasp the moment I touched her. Yeah, she was pissed, but there was something else going on here. I just had to break down those walls and find out what it was.

“Juliette,” I tried again, softening my voice.

She refused to look at me, but I saw the moisture in her eyes. She was on the verge of tears. But then she blinked and they were gone. Within moments, those stormy eyes were back on me. “I don’t know what the hell you thought you were doing. We were supposed to be on a date. You really fucked that up.”

“I’m aware.”

“I thought you were drunk,” she snapped.

“Haven’t had a drink in a while,” I grumbled.

“And you had absolutely zero interest in me the whole night.”

“Because I was poisoned,” I said slowly.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “You can’t use that excuse. You didn’t know you were poisoned at the time.”

“Okay, but I was feeling the effects of it.”

In a huff, she spun away from me, tossing her arms up in the air. “Then

why the hell didn't you say that? *Hey, Juliette, I'm not feeling so hot. We should probably head home. Or to the hospital. Or at least fucking contact the GUYS!*"

I winced at her outrage. Okay, she had a point, but I didn't want to mess up our date. "I'm really sorry."

"You're sorry? You almost died, and you're sorry?" she snapped. "What kind of fucking idiot are you?"

I'd never heard her swear so much, or look so angry. She definitely had sass to her, but this was a whole new attitude for her. I was almost scared to answer one of her questions, like I might get it wrong and then she'd smack me with a ruler.

"I wanted the night to be perfect," I admitted. "I should have said something, but with all the lies I'd told, I just wanted to give you a good night."

"Yeah, well, that worked out just the way it should have."

I sighed, resting my head back on the pillow. I still felt like shit, but I wouldn't dare close my eyes until things were okay between us. She was terrified, not pissed.

"You were such a fucking idiot tonight."

Okay, maybe she was a little pissed, but it came from a good place. "I'm sorry. I knew something was off, but I thought it was nerves or...maybe I was coming down with something."

"So, if you were coming down with something, you were just going to infect everyone around you?"

Man, she was not going to let this go. "How long are you gonna bust my balls about this? I said I was sorry."

"Oh, well, that just makes it all better, doesn't it?"

"Juliette—"

"No, you were an ass tonight."

"I know."

"And you scared the shit out of me...I mean, after you fell to the ground and started foaming at the mouth. Before that, I was ready to kick you in the balls again."

I smirked at her. "I'd expect nothing less."

"You owe everyone at that restaurant an apology."

"I'll send flowers."

"And your guys were...well, they were sort of worried."

“Nothing really gets to them,” I smirked. When she didn’t say anything else, I gently grabbed her hand and tugged her to the bed until she sat down with a huff. “And you?”

“What about me?”

“What do I owe you?”

She huffed, looking away, but the moisture was back in her eyes. Fuck, I hated seeing her like this. “Well, you can forget about flowers. That won’t make it up to me. Although, I really like tulips.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“And I won’t be swayed by gifts. Even if you were to get me my favorite chocolates.”

I’d have to find out what that was from Andrew. “Of course not.”

“And hugs are most definitely out of the question.”

I tugged her to me and forced her to lay down beside me. Wrapping my arm around her, I held her to me as a tear dripped down her cheek and landed on me. I swiped at her cheek with my thumb, and she turned into my touch.

“I hate you.”

I chuckled as I pulled her tighter. “I know.”

“I would have forced our kids to go to Harvard if you died.”

“We don’t have any kids,” I laughed.

“Semantics.”

“Sure,” I said, trying to hold back the laughter. She turned in my arms and rested her head on my chest. Once again, I was reminded just how tiny she was. I was lucky I was the one that had been poisoned. With her body mass, the poison could have easily killed her twice as fast. I found myself gripping her tight, terrified that she was really the target, and it had been sheer luck that I was poisoned instead.

“My mom drowned when we were on the lake over the Fourth of July,” she whispered. “The water was really choppy and the boat was rocking hard. I remember my mom told us to go below while she helped my dad with the lines. We heard her scream and Andrew made me swear to stay below. But I was never very good at listening.”

I would have smiled if it weren’t for the tragic story she was telling me. She was so strong, it was hard to believe that she had such a horrible past.

“I ran up there just as my dad was hoisting her up to Andrew. He was still in the water, and I remember how his eyes met mine just before he was pulled under. It took the Coast Guard an entire day to find his body,” she

whispered.

She didn't need to tell me that what happened to me was like seeing her mother on the boat that day. I could already imagine how it all played out. She didn't say anything after that. We just laid in bed for what felt like hours until I finally drifted off to sleep.

"I don't need a fucking wheelchair," I snapped at Brock.

"Those are the rules."

"Fuck the rules," I growled.

I was pissed as hell that I had to spend the night in the hospital. Because of the late hour, they couldn't discharge me until morning, which really fucking sucked when all I wanted was to sleep in Juliette's bed. I had a pounding headache, which the doctor reassured me was from the poison, and my body felt weak. Again, a lovely side effect of the poison. But that wasn't going to stop me now that I was certain this asshole would stop at nothing to get to Juliette.

Not that I hadn't been certain before, but the attacks had all been focused on other women. This was a direct attack on us. The guys had been whispering about things the entire fucking morning, but they wouldn't dare say anything in front of Juliette, not until they had approval from me.

"Sir, we cannot discharge you until you sit in that wheelchair," the nurse snapped.

"Ha!" I pointed at her. "You already gave me the discharge papers!"

"Would you just sit your ass in the goddamn chair?" Brock snapped at me, getting way more pissed than I was used to. The angry look on his face made it clear that arguing any further would be pointless. I shoved off the bed, about to sit down when the door swung open and Edu pushed a fucking wheelchair in, decorated as a throne.

And Juliette was sitting in it.

She smirked at me, standing when Edu came to a stop. "Your chariot awaits," he announced, giving me a sweeping bow.

I would have been pissed as hell, but Juliette was smiling, and I wasn't about to wipe that look from her face. Not after how last night had failed so miserably.



Putting on my best *I don't give a fuck* face, I marched over and planted my ass in the fucking chair. The nurse shot me an exasperated look and pushed the other chair out of the room. Then Scottie walked in, carrying a fucking Burger King crown, like I used to wear as a fucking kid when my dad took me there.

He walked over as if the crown was something regal, gently placing it on my head. Then he gave a sweeping bow and gazed serenely at me as he stood. Yeah, I was gonna kill him later, but for now, I'd fucking deal with it.

"Alright, alright. Can we leave?"

"Sure, you get in *that* wheelchair," Brock muttered.

"You didn't get me a crown," I shot back.

"I'm so sorry, your royal highness."

I finally dropped the facade as Edu pushed me out of the room, then grabbed Juliette's hand and held it the whole way down to the car. Minivan. Fox waited with my chariot, honking as I was wheeled outside.

As we stopped, Juliette bent down in front of me. "Sorry, I just couldn't resist, now that I'm in on the joke."

"Yeah, yeah. It was hilarious." I tried to sound annoyed, but she was just so damn proud of herself. And cute.

"I know," she grinned, planting a kiss on my lips. "Let's go home."

She was way too fucking chipper this morning, as were the rest of them. But I kept a smile on my face until we got back to her townhouse. Once we were inside, Juliette wanted to wash the hospital off her. As soon as her bedroom door closed, I turned to the guys and the smile fell from my face.

"Alright, what do you know?"

"Remember that guy in the park?" Fox asked.

"The one that followed me?"

He shook his head. "The one you crashed into."

I stared at him for a moment, stunned by what he was saying. I hadn't even considered him a threat. In fact, I hadn't looked at him. I had run out of the woods and crashed right into him. It was so random. And that's exactly why I didn't see it coming.

"Fuck," I hissed, leaning against the counter. "He was right fucking there."

"We couldn't ID him," Brock said.

"How can you be certain it was him?"

"The doctors were able to narrow down the timeline of when you were

poisoned. He was the only person you came in contact with. And—” He stepped forward and motioned for me to lift my shirt. I did as he asked and looked where he pointed to the small red dot on my abdomen. “That’s our best guess. He fell on top of you. It gave him the perfect opportunity to inject you.”

“If you had gotten sick right away, we would have known immediately when you were poisoned,” Scottie said. “We think that’s why he chose the concoction he did.”

“Were you able to track him down?”

Brock shook his head. “He disappeared into the woods after he left you. He’s a ghost.”

“We were so fucking close,” I snapped, slamming my hand down on the counter. “Fuck!” I spun, spearing my fingers through my hair in frustration. We were so close and now Juliette was in even more danger than before. This guy was just your average Joe. He was a nobody, and we were about to go on tour—

“The tour,” I said, turning to the guys. “What happened with that? We were supposed to leave this morning.”

“Canceled,” Edu answered. “I spoke with Emilio. He agreed that we couldn’t risk Juliette’s life.”

Thank fuck. It was hard enough at home base, but on the road where nothing was familiar...that would be impossible to keep her safe. “Then we take her to OPS.”

“Are you kidding?” Fox grunted. “How the hell are you going to catch this guy if you leave?” He rummaged around in the cabinets until he pulled out a box of rice, then opened it and started munching on the uncooked rice like it was a snack.

“He’s got a point,” Edu said. “If we take her to OPS, that fucker is still going to be waiting. She has to come out of hiding eventually.”

“Then we wait for the police to find something on the murders.”

“There’s nothing,” Brock sighed.

“It’s still early. Hell, one of the murders was just days ago,” I argued.

“If they find anything, there’s no guarantee it’ll tell us anything more than we already know,” he snapped. “Face it, even with DNA testing and fingerprints, if he’s not in the system, we’re not going to catch him.”

“And you expect me to just keep her here with this asshole looming in the background?” I shouted.

“No,” Juliette’s voice sounded from behind me.

I closed my eyes and turned to face her. “Sweetheart...”

“No,” she said, brooking no room for arguments. “I won’t run away and hide. What do you think will happen when he can’t find me?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’ve seen enough movies to know that he won’t stop until he does. In fact, he’ll probably even go on a killing spree.”

I rolled my eyes, which was the wrong thing to do. Her eyes turned angry the longer she stared at me.

“Juliette, this isn’t a movie. We can’t possibly know what his next move will be.”

That was a total fucking lie. She was absolutely right about what would most likely happen. Not that she needed to know that. I didn’t need her feeling guilty because of what this asshole was doing.

“Don’t talk to me like I’m stupid,” she snapped. “This is my decision. I’m the client!”

“Technically, your brother is the client. He’s the one that hired us.”

“And I’m the one you’re protecting,” she argued.

She was right. She was the client. We would never do what the guy paying us wanted us to do if it wasn’t in the best interests of who we were protecting, but I was desperate to get her out of here.

“You’ll have to have your brother sign off on it,” I lied.

She pursed her lips and marched over to the counter, grabbing her phone. Fuck, if she called him, would he side with her? I glanced at Brock, who shook his head slightly. It didn’t look like this would go in my favor. I listened as she told him to get over here immediately, then turned to me with a scowl on her face.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Don’t make decisions for me,” she snapped.

“You’re the one deciding our future,” I argued. “How are our kids supposed to listen to you if you’re dead?”

“Easy, their father will do everything to protect me so I don’t fucking die.”

Well, I didn’t actually have an argument for that other than it wasn’t happening. “No.”

“No, you won’t protect me?”

“No, I don’t agree with your argument.”

“I don’t believe I was asking for your permission,” she snapped.

I walked over to her and stood in front of her, arms crossed over my chest, glaring at her.

“Whoa,” Fox whispered. “Back up.”

But I didn’t listen because this was one argument in which I refused to yield to her.

And then she smiled sweetly right before she drove her knees into my balls and I collapsed to the floor. Wheezing, I stared at Brock, who was grinning down at me.

“Well, I guess we know who won that argument.”



## JULIETTE

“I don’t like this,” Jerrod said as he paced in front of me.

“Too bad.”

“Think of this from my perspective,” he snapped. “Why would you put me in this position?”

I dropped my arms as Brock finished getting the bulletproof vest tightly wrapped around me. It was a skinny one that was still in the testing phase, but I agreed to it because it offered a better level of protection than wearing nothing, but didn’t give away the fact that I was wearing one under my clothes.

“I’m not putting you in any position,” I sighed. “This is my life and I will not live it in fear.”

“No, you’ll just go against everything I’m telling you.”

I held out my hand, motioning to everyone else in the room. “They’re all for this plan. You’re the only one that’s worried.”

“Because I don’t want you in danger!”

“Calm down,” Fox muttered. “You’re going to give yourself an aneurysm. Taco?”

I did a double take as I saw Fox eating the delicious food. Walking forward, I snatched it out of his hand, much to his dismay.

“Hey!”

“You offered,” I said, taking a bite.

“Yeah, to him!” he said, pointing a finger at Jerrod. “I was trying to ease his fears and you snatched my fear-reducing technique right out of my hands!”

I ignored him, moaning as I took another bite. “This is so good. I’m

telling you, if you're trying to get him to listen to you, tacos aren't the way to go. I, however, can always be swayed with food."

"I don't need to sway you," Fox retorted. "You're ruining everything."

I swallowed my food and snatched the coke out of his hands. "No, ruining everything would be if I choked on my food and died. Then I would agree with you. What a waste of food."

"Let me get this straight," Jerrod said, spinning on me. "It's tragic if you die after choking on a taco, but you're not worried about the man trying to kill you?"

I cocked my head at him, trying to see things from his perspective. "Well, everyone's going to die at some point. Why worry about it?"

"Because you could die!" he said slowly. "I don't understand how you don't see this!"

"Look, I get it. You're all in love with me and don't want to see anything happen to me. It's scary," I said, though I really didn't think it was. "I'll go in there, wait around for the psycho, and then you'll come in and make your move. Then we'll all go get pizza and the day is good."

He stared at me like I'd lost my mind, huffing in irritation. "And that's it. You think it'll all go that smoothly?"

"Why wouldn't it? And if it doesn't, we'll improvise."

He stalked forward and grabbed me by the shoulders, shaking me slightly. "You can't just improvise! You can't just wing it and hope things turn out for the best."

"Um...that's literally what improvise means."

"No, you don't improvise when catching a serial killer. You make a plan, and a backup plan, and a backup *backup* plan. But you do not improvise."

I nodded, pressing my lips together. Man, he was really taking this hard. I held up what remained of my taco and offered it to him. "Do you want to split my taco with me?"

He tossed his hands up in the air and stalked away from me, slamming the door as he walked out of the townhouse.

"Geez, he's really taking this hard."

"Yeah, silly man that's getting all grumpy because the love of his life might die in a horrific way," Brock chuckled. "What the hell is wrong with him?"

I completely got his sarcasm, but I didn't appreciate it. I was just looking at this realistically.

“It’s not like I’m actually going to die. You’ll all be there. He’s just overreacting.”

“Yeah,” Brock shrugged. “I mean, unless something goes wrong.”

“What would go wrong?”

He laughed a little. “What couldn’t go wrong? I mean, statistically speaking, we’re at the top of our game, but there’s always that one percent chance that something will happen.”

“Like what?” I asked curiously.

“It’s hard to say,” he said, scratching his jaw. “Maybe this asshole has company. Maybe he’s smarter than we think. Maybe he’s someone you already know in this room.”

I glanced around at the men and shook my head. “Right, he’s one of you and you just didn’t know it. In fact, I bet it was Lock. He’s been in on it from before I even knew about what was happening. How did I not see it?”

“Because most serial killers hide in plain sight,” he answered. “Take Scottie over there. He’s a pilot.”

“Yeah?”

“Pretty cool, right?”

“Definitely.”

“Yeah, he’s very level-headed. Gets the job done with hardly any issue. He’s fucking amazing.”

“Okay,” I said, sensing something else happening.

“Yeah, you’d never guess that he gets airsick and pukes all over the plane.”

I stared at Scottie across the room and wondered how that happened. “So, he has his license but doesn’t like to fly?”

“Pretty much.”

“Do you give him a barf bag?”

“We have a whole getup for him.”

“So, you’re telling me Scottie is secretly a vomiting serial killer.”

“No, what I’m saying is you never really know people.”

“I understand that, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to be afraid of everything.”

“Look, do yourself a favor and pretend for Lock. It’ll make him feel like you’re taking this seriously if you at least seem a little scared.”

“Why would I not take this seriously?”

“Uh...” He frowned at me, like he didn’t understand the question. “Well,



you don't seem like you are."

I shrugged. "No, I understand perfectly that anyone can die at any time. My parents were there one minute and dead the next. Trust me, I'm well aware of how quickly life can be torn away."

"Then you know this is a seriously bad situation."

"Yes, but I could also walk downstairs and get hit by a drunk driver. Or I could twist my ankle and fall down the stairs, breaking my neck. There are a million scenarios I could give you in which I could die. Life itself is dangerous."

"Right, so when we walk into the room with a serial killer, *that* would be the time to actually show concern," he said slowly.

"You say show concern. I say fight with everything I have to take out this asshole."

He just stared at me so I winked at him and walked away. Maybe I was being stupid in their eyes, but I wouldn't be shoved around by some guy that thought he could overpower me.

"You're sure you're ready?" Lock asked for the tenth time.

"Yes, I'm sure," I snapped. "How much longer are you going to make me wait in the car?"

"The rest of my life," he muttered, rubbing a hand over his face. "Now, remember, Brock is going to walk you inside and then get a call. Scottie will pull up and drive Brock away. Then—"

"Yes, I know!" I practically shouted. "Fox will be there with me the whole time. Brock will double back and cover the outside. I already know all this."

As I looked at him, I realized that was maybe a tad harsh. After all, he just cared about me. But still, how many times did a person need to hear a plan? I was a level-headed person with reasonable deductive skills. The plan didn't need to be drilled into my head.

"Alright, let's take her to the studio," Jerrod muttered.

"Hey," I said, trying to drag his attention back to me, but he was in protective mode and nothing I said would snap him out of that. I was just going to have to hope he wasn't always like this. I couldn't take Jerrod acting

like an alpha hole for the rest of my life.

The car pulled to a stop and Brock got out first, checking our surroundings before holding out his hand to me. This was all part of the plan, for him to play the part of protector. After Jerrod's run-in at the park with the real killer, his cover was blown as Royal. It made sense for him to stay out of the picture so it looked like I was unprotected.

Brock wrapped his hand around my elbow and guided me inside, taking the stairs up to Emilio's studio.

"Anything?" I asked.

"Not yet. We'll know soon enough."

"Do you think this guy took the bait?"

"We won't know until the night is over."

"You don't think he'll make a move before then?"

"No, he always waits until the model is alone."

I nodded and kept my mouth shut as he opened the door to the studio. It was just Emilio and his assistant tonight. We were trying to keep things low key to draw this guy out. Jerrod was pretty certain we could get him to strike tonight since the attacker had just put him in the hospital.

"Emilio," I smiled. "What did you need to see me about?"

"I want to take some test shots for the next shoot. I was thinking of doing some with you all alone, like something's broken between you and Royal."

"I like it."

"Only, I want these to be clean shots."

I understood what he was saying. He didn't want makeup, which made sense for the shoot. "I'm good with that."

I grabbed the clothes he laid out for me and changed in back. With no makeup artists around, I couldn't hook the outfit by myself.

"Emilio! I need help!" He didn't immediately answer, so I called out again. "Emilio! Can you—" I practically shrieked when his assistant appeared outside the curtained area.

"He forgot something in his car. What do you need help with?"

"Just the back."

"Sure, I can do that." He was very efficient, getting me hooked up in no time. "There you go."

"Thanks."

I smiled at him and felt slightly bad for not knowing his name. After all this time working with Emilio, I hadn't bothered to learn this guy's name.

But usually, assistants came and moved on to bigger and better things.

“Where’s Brock?” I asked, playing along.

“He had to step out. He had a call.”

“Oh.” I stood there awkwardly, waiting for Emilio to return. “So...”

I flushed at not knowing his name.

“Michael.”

“Michael,” I grinned. “Any idea what he wants to do for the shoot?”

He shook his head. “I just go where I’m told.”

My phone buzzed and I walked over to my purse, pulling it out. It was Jerrod. Damn, he was such a control freak.

“Yes?”

“You need to get out of there.”

“What?” I asked, not understanding why the sudden rush to abandon the plan.

“Get out of there now! It’s Brian.”

“Who?”

“Brian, the assistant.”

“His name is Michael,” I whisper-hissed.

“I don’t give a fuck what name he told you. Get the hell out of there!”

The phone was snatched out of my hand and I spun around to face the assistant, whoever he was. He ended the call and tossed it on the ground, but it was what was in his hand that drew my attention. I glanced down at the gleaming knife and internally rolled my eyes. This guy was so predictable.

“I wanted to have more time with you, but it looks like I’ve run out.”

If he was intending to scare me, he was doing a piss poor job of it. “Is this the part where I run?”

An evil smile played on his lips that nearly had me laughing. Okay, that’s a lie. I did laugh. And hard. “I’m sorry,” I said, trying not to crack up. “It’s just...you’re really getting into this whole serial killer thing.”

His smile faltered and he stared at me for a moment in surprise. “There’s nothing to get into. This is me.”

I nodded, pulling my lips between my teeth. “And it’s very convincing. I mean, you have a knife, which is so typical. Do serial killers use guns? I actually think they prefer knives.”

“Not all of them,” he muttered.

“It’s something about the torture, right? So, what’s your deal? Abused as a kid? Mommy didn’t love you? No,” I shook my head. “Since you’re

coming after me, this stems back to a girlfriend that didn't want you."

His nostrils flared in anger as he took a step toward me, but I stood my ground. His hand flew out and smacked me across the face. I flew to the ground, clutching my cheek as he approached.

"Now who's laughing?" he asked, grinning down at me again.

I snorted another laugh, knowing I should probably at least try to keep my mouth shut. I started clapping, completely throwing him off his game. "That's a great performance. Really. I'm very proud of you for taking the initiative to play out the whole serial killer thing so well. I'm sure the other girls were terrified."

"And you're not?" he bit out.

He stepped closer and I took the opportunity in front of me, kicking the side of his knee. His leg buckled, which gave me all the time I needed to jump to my feet and grab the camera with the tripod and swing it hard at his head. He dropped like a sack of potatoes, along with the camera that flew off the tripod and crashed to the ground. I didn't take the opportunity to run. I slammed the tripod over and over into his head until blood gushed and his brains were scattered on the floor.

I heard the pounding of feet on the stairs and knew Jerrod was on his way. I spun and glared at him as he rushed into the room. He was breathing hard as he stared at the scene before him. "What the fuck happened?"

I looked at the tripod in my hands and winced. "I...took out the serial killer."

Emilio ran in behind him and gasped. "My camera! What did you do?" he asked, running over to the ground and picking up the pieces of his precious equipment. "Why? Why would you be so cruel?"

"Um...because he had a knife and I didn't want him to use it on me?"

His gaze snapped to mine and the look he shot me was more terrifying than anything the serial killer attempted. "You could have used your stiletto."

I looked at my feet and nodded. "You're right. What was I thinking?"

Jerrod was still standing there, staring at the guy in confusion. Then Fox opened a closet door and stepped out, opening a bag of Funyuns. "Nice work, little lady."

Jerrod's head swiveled to his and he glared at him. "You were here the whole time and didn't help?"

"Pretty much. I figured she had it. Besides, I was eating," he said, holding up his bag. "You have no idea how hard it is to quietly eat Funyuns."

“Right?” I asked.

“And your girl had it handled.”

“She’s not supposed to have to handle anything!” Jerrod bit out.

“And where were you?”

“I was running up here!”

“Oh,” Fox rolled his eyes dramatically. “So, it’s wrong for me to stay in hiding, but you weren’t even close enough to get to her.”

“That’s what you were here for!” Jerrod snapped.

“But she didn’t need me! The whole thing was over in less than a minute!”

Jerrod stopped at that and frowned.

“My camera,” Emilio cried. Then he picked it up and started beating the assistant over the head with it. “You ruined my camera with your big head!”



## LOCK

My ego was more than a little bruised that she so easily took that ass out without me there to protect her. And she wasn't even scared! It wasn't right at all. There should have been some fear. Maybe a smidge. But instead, she was just ecstatic to retell it over and over again with Fox, who had listened from the fucking closet the whole time. I was going to suffocate him in Funyuns.

"He shouldn't have been that easy to catch," I muttered to Brock for the fourth time since we got back to Juliette's townhouse. "How do we really know we got him?"

"Because the police already matched his prints to the other murders."

"But why did Juliette get away so easily when the others didn't?"

He sighed heavily, already sick of my questions. "Because the others thought that if they complied, they'd be set free. It's the mistake most people make. Juliette's not like that."

"Still," I said, shaking my head at the stupidity of it all. "She outsmarted him so easily."

"Okay, you need to stop this," Brock said, standing and walking over to the counter. "First, it's kind of demeaning to say Juliette outsmarted him easily. Maybe she's just that smart. Second, there is nothing normal about your woman. I'm sorry, but she's just out there. She's an oxymoron."

"You're an oxymoron," I shot back.

He clapped me on the back and headed for the door. "We'll stay outside just by some odd chance he's not really the killer, but I think you have to resign yourself to the fact that Juliette will not be cowed by anyone."

I grunted at him, not liking his answer. In fact, he was right. Only about

sixteen percent of victims of serial killers actually escaped, and seventeen percent of those victims fought back. Once they were in the grasp of a serial killer, it was very unlikely the victim would survive.

I knew it wasn't a good thing that she waited for us to arrive. Things might have turned out differently. Maybe he would have just slit her throat when he heard us on the stairs, but that didn't mean I had to like the fact that she had so little regard for her safety.

"Are you still pouting?" she asked as she walked out of the bedroom.

"I'm not pouting," I said in a pouty voice.

"Could have fooled me," she answered, walking over to me and sitting right in my lap. "I think you're upset because you didn't save the day."

"I'm upset because you shouldn't have been here in the first place."

She nodded and kissed the side of my neck, running her hands down my chest. "And if I wasn't here, I'd be grouchy. Then you'd never have sex again."

I swallowed hard as she unzipped my pants and slipped her hand inside my boxers. "I'd convince you."

She frowned at me, sliding down to her knees. My nostrils flared with desire as she tugged on my pants and pulled them off me. I did my best not to give in, but it was damn hard with her on her knees.

"There must be something I can do to make up for my shortcomings as a girlfriend."

"Fiancé," I bit out as she wrapped her hand around my leg and stroked me hard.

"What can I do to make this right?" She leaned forward and swallowed me whole. My hand fisted her hair, gripping her tight as I guided her down my shaft over and over again.

"You're doing a damn good job."

She moaned around me, making me forget why I was mad. Something about serial killers, but my brain didn't want to think about that when her wet, hot mouth was fucking my cock. I sucked in a breath as she picked up the speed. I was so close, right on the edge. If she just...

She hollowed her cheeks and sucked me hard, practically milking my cock like a damn pro. I shouted as I came hard, filling her mouth with my cum. That hadn't even taken her a whole two minutes.

"What were you saying?" she asked, wiping my cum from her lips.

"What?"



She winked at me. “That’s what I thought.”

She squealed as she ran over to me, jumping into my arms. “I got the international job!” She squeezed me so tight, it was almost painful. “Oh my God! I can’t believe this! I’ll get to go to Milan and Paris,” she beamed. “This is so amazing! Think of all the cities we’ll get to visit!”

She was so happy, but I was still stuck on the whole international part. She told me she was hoping to get some job she really wanted, but she hadn’t said anything about international work.

I held her tight to me as I felt her slipping away. This was what she wanted, what she’d worked for her entire life. I couldn’t ask her to stay for me. And I couldn’t go with her either. Cash would never allow me to be her bodyguard. Sure, we fell for each other while I was on the job, and that was hard enough for him to swallow. No way would I be allowed on her detail. I could take time off to be with her, but how long would this last?

She pulled back, still smiling at me. “Jerrod, say something!”

“It’s...” I shook my head, still baffled by the whole thing. “It’s an amazing opportunity for you.”

“For both of us!” she squealed. “They want you to come too.”

I hadn’t been expecting that. “Juliette...I’m not a model.”

“Don’t be silly,” she laughed. “You did an amazing job on the Temptation campaign. Oh, and I talked to Emilio. He wants to finish up the final shoot next week,” she continued.

“But...the job is over,” I answered, not knowing what else to say.

Her smile slipped from her face. “You’re not going to finish the job?”

“Juliette, this isn’t my life. I don’t want to be on some billboard for perfume. That’s not me.”

“But you already did most of the campaign. You can’t walk away now!”

I sighed in frustration. “Fine, I’ll finish this one, but I’m not modeling in Milan or Paris.”

“Why not? This is a big deal. You get that, right? This job is something every model wants. This is the dream gig!”

“Not to me,” I answered, feeling a little hostile at the moment. She wasn’t listening to a damn word I said. “I don’t dream of going to Milan and Paris.

Maybe if it was with you on vacation, that would be fine. But this is not the life I want.”

“But you would be going with me,” she said in confusion. “And it wouldn’t be all work. We could still see all the sights and have international sex,” she winked. “It’ll be so amazing. And think of eating croissants in Paris while we sip coffee at one of those little restaurants! We could see the Eiffel Tower and—”

“Juliette, I’m not going!” I snapped. She stilled, her face falling as the dream slipped away. I hadn’t meant to shout at her, but she was completely missing everything I was saying. It was like she was so lost in the dream of it that she wasn’t hearing a damn thing I was saying.

“But—”

“No,” I said softly, trying to ease the pain. “I understand this is a big deal for you, but it’s not something I want to do. I have a job, a job I fucking love. And as much as I love you and all the plans we made, I can’t give up something that makes me who I am just to go flitting around the world with you.”

“Flitting around the world?” she asked, her voice growing tense. “Is that what you see this as?”

“Well, yeah. All those people see is a pretty face. They see the sexy body and your gorgeous eyes. That’s what you are to them. You’re making them money off your looks.”

Her lips thinned as she stared at me. “I had no idea my job was so meaningless to you.”

“How can you not see how they see you? You’re basically selling your body!” I shouted. I snatched the photographs off the counter and shoved them in her face. “This is what they see! Pouty lips and a nice ass. That’s what you’re selling. This isn’t about perfume. It’s about the body they’re selling. The image! The sex appeal. That’s what you are to them!”

She flinched back as if I’d hit her. The normally confident woman had just been struck down to nothing. And I did that to her. But I wouldn’t sugarcoat things to make her feel better. I wouldn’t tell her I thought her job was important when all I saw was another way for a company to make money off her body.

“Juliette—” I reached for her, but she pulled away from me.

“Wow,” she laughed, refusing to look at me. “That’s...” She shook her head and walked away from me.

That hadn't gone at all how I planned. Then again, I hadn't planned any of this. I somehow had it in my head that she was going to join me at OPS, that we'd have that family we'd been joking about. I thought she was going to marry me. And now all she wanted was to go to Milan and Paris.

This job meant something to her, just like my job meant something to me. And I'd just cut her down to nothing because I was fucking pissed that she was considering leaving me.

No, that wasn't right. She wasn't considering leaving me. She'd asked me to come with her. Fuck, I was screwing this all up.

"Juliette, let's just take a step back and—"

"No, I don't think that's necessary," she said, straightening her shoulders as she turned and stared at me.

Gone was the woman that loved me, and back was the woman that I first met in Emilio's studio.

"If you'll finish this shoot with me, then I won't ask you for anything else. But I don't want to let Emilio down after all the hard work he's done. The images really do look fantastic. Especially for someone who's never modeled before."

She pasted a smile on her face and grabbed her purse off the counter. "I have to meet Andrew to discuss the details of the job, so I'll see you later."

"Juliette," I tried to stop her, but she was already out the door.

I turned around and kicked the island, pissed at myself for not handling that better. I should have fucking thought before I blurted out all that shit. I was the worst fucking boyfriend on the face of the earth, if I could even still call myself that.

And now I was just letting her walk away, thinking that I didn't care enough about her. Or that her job was meaningless. It was only meaningless to me because it wasn't something I was passionate about. But it was everything to her.

Turning, I raced for the door, flinging it open as I ran into the hallway and called to her just as the elevator doors were closing. I saw the tears in her eyes that she quickly hid from me, and it was enough to tear my fucking heart out. Slamming my hand against the wall, I ran for the stairs, but was thwarted by a kid that'd spilled groceries all over the stairs. I jumped over him, only to land on a grapefruit. I went flying backward and landed hard on my back.

Groaning, I rolled over and pushed to my feet. Limping, I made my way down the next flight of stairs. By the time I made it to the front of her

building, she was already in a cab, heading away from the building.

I flagged down a cab coming my way, but he zoomed right past me. “Fucker!” I shouted, earning me several scathing looks from people nearby. I stood there for all of two minutes before it was clear no cabbie was going to pull over for me. I took off down the sidewalk, running after her, even though she was long gone.

I pulled out my phone and slid my earbud in as I dialed Brock’s number.

“What?” he groaned. “I was just going to sleep.”

“I need the car. I need you now!”

“What happened?” he asked, suddenly alert.

“Just get everyone over to...” I glanced at the street sign. “I’m at Marshall and Downing. I’m headed east on foot.”

“On foot? What the fuck is going on?” he asked. I could hear things rustling in the background, but I couldn’t stop to talk about it now.

“Get your ass here now!” I shouted, then hung up and dialed Andrew’s number.

“You fucking asshole,” he snapped at me. “What the fuck did you do to my sister?”

“Andrew, where is she meeting you?”

“Why the fuck should I tell you that? She called me crying. Fucking crying!” he snapped. “My sister never cries, asshole. What the fuck is going on?”

“I said something—” I couldn’t even tell him. I was so fucking ashamed for how I spoke to her, even if I did believe every word of it. “That’s not the point. I need to find her!”

I spun around in search of the car. If he didn’t tell me where they were meeting, I wouldn’t be able to apologize and get her back. My whole life was going down the drain faster than I ever imagined.

“Go fuck yourself, Royal,” he spat, using my model name.

“Andrew,” I growled, getting really pissed now. “I need to see her. Tell me where the fuck she is right now.”

“Not a chance in hell. If you want her so badly, maybe you should have thought about that before you made her cry. I swear to God, if you come near her again, I will castrate you.”

He hung up without another word and I screamed at the sky. “Fuck!”

“Jerk,” someone said as they ran into me, shoving me with their shoulder.

I stood on the busy sidewalk, trying desperately to figure out my next

step. And then it became so obvious. Juliette still had her tracker in. I pulled up the app on my phone and watched as she crossed town, then stopped at a building off 3<sup>rd</sup> Street.

I started running in that direction and called Brock to give him an update. He met me just four blocks away, screeching to the side of the road. I jerked the door open and hopped inside, slamming the door behind me.

“Go!”

“You have to give me directions,” he retorted as he pulled back into traffic.

“Next right,” I commanded.

“What’s going on? Is she in trouble?”

“She’s fucking leaving.”

“What? What are you talking about?” he asked as he made a hard right, narrowly avoiding hitting a pedestrian.

“She’s taking a fucking job in Milan!” I shouted, grabbing the handle as I pointed to the next left.

He jerked the wheel, shooting me an angry look for the late command. “Okay, it’s one fucking job. What’s the problem?”

“The problem is she wants me to become a fucking model. And I yelled at her, and told her they only wanted her for her body. Next right!”

He looked at me like I was crazy, then flipped on his blinker. “I thought you were the smart one.”

“I thought so, too, but apparently, I’m pretty fucking stupid.”

“You’re an eg-no-ra-moose,” he grinned.

“What?”

“You know, from Cracker Barrel. That game with the pegs and the— never mind,” he shook his head. “You’re fucking stupid.”

“I know that,” I snapped. “I don’t need you to point that out to me.”

“Apparently, you do. Who says that shit to the woman he loves?”

“Me, okay? I’m so fucking stupid.”

“You know, if you say it enough, it’s not going to go away.”

I pointed to the building up ahead on the right. “That’s it!”

He jerked the wheel and slammed on the brakes. I flung the door open and raced into the coffee shop, searching desperately for her. She was nowhere to be seen, and when I shoved my way to the front of the line, I didn’t exactly win any points with the patrons.

“Sorry, but have you seen a woman?”

The barista quirked an eyebrow at me. “I’m afraid I’ll need a better description than that.”

“Short...extremely short. Uh...you’ve probably seen her on a billboard. Her name is Juliette.”

He stared at me with a bored expression. “Yeah, that really clears things up. You know, while I was up here working, I was looking out for a woman that could be on a billboard. And the moment she walked through that door,” he said, pointing behind me, “I said, that’s Juliette. And then I stood up here waiting for someone like you to run in and interrupt service, pissing off everyone in line just so you could find her.”

I stared at him, trying not to lose my shit. “Have you seen her?”

“No. Shocker, right?”

I glanced down at my phone again and swore. It said she was right fucking here. I ran to the back hall and looked in the bathrooms, but she wasn’t there. She wasn’t in the front of the shop either. I ran back out, looking frantically in both directions, but didn’t see her.

The little dot on my phone didn’t move.

She was gone.



## JULIETTE

“He’s a keeper,” the barista said as I hid behind the counter. With my back pressed up against the refrigerator behind me, Jerrod couldn’t see me over the counter. I should have realized he would follow me with that stupid tracker.

“He’s an ass,” I answered, trying my best not to give in and run out into Jerrod’s arms. What good would that do me? He said plenty before I stormed out of the townhouse, and now that I really knew how he felt, I couldn’t go back to him.

“Are you sure you don’t want to run after him? That is one fine man.”

I narrowed my eyes at the guy currently eyeing my boyfriend. Ex-boyfriend. “He’s a growly bastard.”

The man looked down at me and grinned. “That’s just the way I like them.”

Scoffing, I crouched and peered over the counter, seeing him get in the minivan and take off with Brock. I had to remove this tracker if I wanted to get away from him.

“Do you have a knife?” I asked, looking around the counter.

“Why? Are you gonna kill him?”

“No, I’m going to take out this tracker.”

His eyes bulged as he stared at me. “This what?”

I started shoving things around on the counter as I searched for something to cut this stupid thing out of my arm. “Tracker,” I snapped.

“Hey, are you gonna take my order?” the first customer in line asked.

“I’m sorry, but who has a tracker in their arm?” the barista asked.

“People who listen to crazy people,” I muttered.

“Like a cult?”



“I just want a black coffee!” the man snapped.

“If you want a coffee, go to a coffee house,” the barista growled.

“This is a coffee house!”

Finally finding a knife, I held it up in victory. “Alright, this is easy,” I said, taking a deep breath as I pressed the knife to my skin. But as courageous as I was, the thought of slicing myself open wasn’t all that appealing. I thrust the knife toward the barista. “You do it.”

He flinched back in surprise. “You want me to cut you open?”

“Just a small cut,” I said, trying to convince him it was no big deal. “Teensy tiny. Barely a prick.”

He shook his head rapidly. “I hate blood. No way.”

“Come on,” I groaned. “You’re making this into a bigger deal than it is.”

“Am I?” he said in a loud voice that bordered on hysteria. “You’re standing in my...area, and you want me to slice and dice you.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “A small cut is not slicing and dicing.”

“And I’m pretty sure this is some kind of health code violation.”

“Nobody has to know,” I argued.

He turned and faced the crowd of patrons that had forgotten about coffee and were now watching in anticipation. “There are fifteen people watching!”

“We’ll swear them to secrecy,” I argued.

He stared at me a moment, then shouted, “No! You’re crazy!”

“No, they’re crazy,” I pointed out the door. “The man that came in here, desperate to find me, he’s the crazy person.”

“Why was he desperate to find you?” one of the ladies asked.

“Does it really matter?” I snapped.

She looked at me thoughtfully. “If you want our help, yes it does.”

I huffed and stomped my foot. I was tired of explaining myself. “Because he said some stupid stuff. Apparently, I’m not worth moving to another country for. Can you believe that? And then he said some stupid shit about me modeling and how I was basically selling my body.” I scoffed as I remembered the look of anger on his face.

“Well, he’s kind of right,” one woman answered.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Whose side are you on?”

She looked taken aback that I called her out on it. “Uh...I really just came here for coffee.”

I marched over to the coffee pot and poured her a cup, sliding it across the counter. “There, coffee.”

She stared down at the cup like it was the most disgusting thing in the world. “I really wanted a latte.”

I snapped my fingers at the barista. “Aaron, make the woman a latte. Next!”

“Uh...what’s going on here?”

But I ignored him and stared down the man in front of me. “What do you want?” I asked with a little more bite than necessary.

“Uh...just a black coffee.”

I slid the cup over to him that I’d just poured. “There, black coffee.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Uh...do you have a lid?”

“Christ, now you want a lid?” I turned around and scoured the place until I found the lid, then marched back up to the counter and snapped it on. “Three dollars.”

He frowned as his eyes flicked up to the menu. “But...it says a dollar fifty.”

I grabbed the cup and yanked it back, glaring at the man as I channeled the Soup Nazi. “No coffee for you. Next!”

“But—”

I dared him to continue arguing with me. “You want the coffee? Four dollars.”

He sighed and pulled out his wallet. “This is a scam.”

I snatched the five-dollar bill out of his hands and hit buttons on the register until it finally popped open. Slamming the money inside, I pulled out a dollar and shoved it in the tip jar. “Next!”

“Hey, that was my—” At my scowl, he turned and hurried out of the coffee shop.

A woman stepped forward and placed her order for some fancy coffee with no fat, no sugar...basically no fun. I turned to Aaron—the barista I’d named since I never bothered to ask—and shouted, “Give me a dirty ricky with two shots of sludge and a cream pie!”

He stared at me in confusion. “A what?”

I pursed my lips as I stared at him. “Make something delicious for this woman. Clearly, she’s never tasted anything with flavor before.”

“Five dollars,” I said, holding out my hand.

Carefully, she handed over a five-dollar bill. Clearing my throat, I raised an eyebrow at her. “I would think hard about that choice.”

She dug back in her purse and produced a dollar bill. But I shook my

head with a sigh until she dug back inside and pulled out two fives. Snatching them both, I stuck one in the tip jar and the other in the register after pushing every button on the pad again. When it finally opened, I squealed in delight and shoved the money inside.

Slamming the register, I moved on to the next person, calling out orders that didn't at all match the order given. If the patrons cared, they certainly didn't say a word. I was really liking this job, giving orders and making the customers give a little extra. There was a kind of power that I'd never experienced racing through my veins, and I found I liked it.

Slowly, the line died down until the shop was nearly empty. I grinned in satisfaction at a day's hard work. "That was surprisingly wonderful," I said to Aaron, noting his name tag said Paul.

"Yeah, if you don't mind offending every customer that walks in, giving them the wrong order, and coercing them out of their own money."

I grabbed the tip jar and held it in front of him. "Tell me you've ever made that much money in one morning."

His eyes skimmed over the container, but he didn't look impressed. "Yeah, bullying customers isn't really how we do things here."

"I wasn't bullying. I was tipping properly."

"With someone else's money," he argued.

"You know, you don't seem very grateful that I just made you all this money."

When he just stared at me, I turned back to the counter, gasping when I saw Jerrod standing there, glaring at me like I was the devil.

"Are you done?"

I cocked my head at him, pretending I didn't understand. "I'm sorry, can I take your order?"

"Yes," he bit out. "You can get your ass out here and go home with me."

"I'm sorry, I don't go home with customers."

Aaron rushed over and shoved me toward the exit. "Yes, you do."

"It's against company policy," I argued, doing my best to stop him from pushing me out. I grabbed onto the counter and refused to budge as he continued to shove me.

"You don't even work here!"

"Aaron, please!" I shouted.

"My name is Paul!" he snapped, showing me his name tag. "Can you read?"

“You know, you were a lot nicer when I first came in here.”

“I also thought you were running from a psychopath. Now I realize you’re the psychopath!”

I gasped at his harsh tone as Jerrod reached over the counter and grabbed me around the waist, hauling me over his shoulder. He started walking toward the door and I shook my fist at Aaron.

“You’ll pay for this, Aaron!”

“It’s Paul!”

“Whatever!” I shouted as the door swung shut, cutting me off from my new place of employment. “That was a good job,” I sighed.

“You don’t work there,” Jerrod muttered, setting me down on the ground outside the minivan. The door slid open and he crossed his arms over his chest. “Get in or I’ll make you.”

“Ooh, you’re so scary,” I said, waving my fingers in his face.

His scowl deepened and then he bent over in a flash, hauling me up off the ground and tossing me over his shoulder. But instead of putting me in the minivan, he started walking down the street.

“Hey! Put me down!”

I started beating on his back, but the stupid man was so muscular that it didn’t matter. He probably didn’t feel a thing. “You big, dumb, brute! Put me down!”

He slapped my ass in response, not bothering to actually open his mouth and speak. A man walking behind us eyed me warily.

“Help! This man is holding me against my will. You have to help me!”

The man looked baffled, then stopped at the corner and crossed the street, completely ignoring me.

“Hey, I could be in serious trouble! You could see my dead body tomorrow on the five o’clock news!”

“Nice,” Jerrod muttered. “I went from you loving me to telling people I’m going to murder you.”

I gasped, pushing off his back to try to face him. “I never said I loved you.”

“Almost every fucking day, sweetheart.”

I hated the grin in his voice. He knew he had me, but that didn’t make up for what he said to me. He was a jerk, and this would clearly have never worked out between us.

A woman walked past and turned to look at me. “Are you going to help

me?” I asked.

She flushed and turned around, avoiding my searing gaze.

“That’s right!” I shouted. “Keep walking! Don’t pay any attention to the woman being kidnapped!”

“You can’t kidnap someone in broad daylight,” Jerrod muttered.

“*That’s* what you’re going with?” I screeched. “Watch it, you’re beginning to sound like Fox.”

“I’m nothing like Fox.”

I snorted again. It was just one of those days for ridiculous statements that required the baffled snort. “Yeah, because he didn’t kidnap his wife.”

“Okay, maybe I’m a little like Fox, but at least you know me.”

“I thought I knew you,” I grumbled. “Then you went and called me a prostitute!”

“I did *not* call you a prostitute.”

“Ha! Could have fooled me. You said I was selling my body. By definition, that’s a prostitute.”

“You know that’s not how I meant it. Stop twisting my words.”

I would have smacked him, but it would hurt me more than him. And then to make matters worse, Brock pulled up beside us in the minivan, crawling along at a snail’s pace as he waved to me.

I waved back with a sigh. “How’s your day going?”

“Not bad,” he called back. “Other than creeping along in a minivan. Someone’s going to think I’m trying to kidnap children with candy.”

I perked up at the sound of that. “Do you have candy?”

He grinned, shaking his head at me. “No, sorry.”

I sighed, resting my chin in my hand as I leaned against Jerrod’s back. “You know, this is not how I pictured being kidnapped. I never thought a slow getaway would be preferable.” I kicked Jerrod as best I could. “Hey, Royal, isn’t there some rulebook about kidnapping you have to follow? Don’t you have a chart for this? Because I’m pretty sure this isn’t how it’s supposed to go.”

“I’m making it up as I go,” he answered, not slowing down at all.

I sighed again, about to just take a nap or something since this clearly wasn’t going to go my way. But then the smell of delicious hot dogs wafted into my nostrils and had me perking up. “Do I smell—”

“No, we’re not stopping.”

“But I’m hungry. I didn’t eat this morning.”

“Then you shouldn’t have run out.”

“I only ran out because you’re being a massive jerkhole.”

“That’s not a word.”

“Hey, Royal asshole, it doesn’t have to be in the dictionary for it to be a word. Ever heard of slang?” I pouted as we walked past the hot dog vendor.

He scoffed. “That’s not slang.”

I kicked him again. “I want a hot dog.”

“Too bad.”

“You know, I’m not going to stop complaining until you get me a hot dog. I could pass out right now, and then you’d be sorry.”

“The only thing I’m sorry about is that I didn’t tape your mouth shut before I took you.”

“So, you admit you took me!”

“I never denied it.”

“You said, and I quote, *You can’t kidnap someone in broad daylight.*”

“Are you going to argue with me about everything?”

“Yes!” Brock shouted. “Just get her the damn hot dog!”

He sighed heavily, but stopped and turned around, stalking back to the hot dog stand. “Two hot dogs,” he said.

“What do you want on it?”

“Everything!” I shouted, trying to contort my body to see over his head.

Within minutes, two hot dogs were in my hands and I was inhaling them. “Mm, this is so good,” I moaned.

“I gotta tell ya,” Brock shouted from the minivan, “there is nothing sexier than a woman inhaling hot dogs as she slung over a man’s shoulder.”

I flipped him off, then saw the ketchup on my finger and quickly licked it off. As I polished off the last of my hot dog, I crumpled up the paper and tossed it into a trash can we passed.

“How long are we going to walk?” I asked, already bored.

“As long as it takes for you to forgive me.”

“Yeah, I don’t see that happening anytime soon.”

“Then I’ll just walk around the city.”

“Great,” Brock sighed. “Driving two miles an hour around the city is exactly how I wanted to spend my day.”

“Better than being tossed over someone’s shoulder,” I grumbled, then winced when my stomach lurched. That wasn’t good. “Uh, I think you should put me down.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.”

“Seriously,” I said, pressing against his back to try and relieve the pressure from his shoulder digging into my stomach. “I don’t feel so good.”

“Like I’m falling for that,” he retorted. “If I set you down, you’re just going to run. I already sat outside the coffee house while you played barista and scared away all the customers. I’m not wasting any more of my day.”

“You were outside?”

“Did you really think I just ignored the tracker and walked away? I knew you were there somewhere. I just had to wait for you to come out of hiding.”

That was upsetting, but I couldn’t think about being angry with my stomach swirling. I covered my mouth as I threw up a little, then swallowed it down, grimacing at the taste.

“Lock, you might want to set her down.”

He spun to face Brock, and the motion made me lose my cookies. Vomit spewed from my mouth, down his back over and over until there was nothing left inside. Exhausted, I rested my head on his back, closing my eyes so I didn’t have to see the disgusting mess on the ground.

He was tense under me, but that was his fault. I told him to put me down.

“I’m pretty sure I have vomit in my ass crack,” he grumbled.

A small chuckle escaped my lips. Served him right.





## LOCK

“Put her in the van,” I grumbled, lowering her to the ground.

Luckily, she was swaying on her feet, so I didn’t have to worry about her running from me. I didn’t waste a minute stripping my clothes from my body, tossing them right in the trash on the sidewalk. I even tossed my shoes and socks. Hell, I wasn’t about to keep anything with vomit on it.

Standing in only my skivvies, I walked around the minivan, yanking open the passenger door as people stopped and stared at me. Whatever, I didn’t have time for this shit anymore. “Drive!” I snapped.

Brock quirked an eyebrow at me. “You know, you could be a little nicer. You’re not exactly hitting it out of the park today.”

I slowly turned and glared at him. “Did I ask for your advice?”

“Nope, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t take it,” he said, pulling into traffic. “Back to the townhouse?”

“Yeah,” I grumbled. “I need a shower.”

“Yeah, you do,” he laughed. “Never thought I’d see the day that someone would vomit on you. You should have listened when I told you to put her down.”

“I realize that now.”

“Hell, you should have listened the first time she told you to put her down.”

“I know,” I bit out.

“Or the second time. That definitely would have been the time to listen.”

“I heard you, alright?”

“You might have even gotten away with putting her down mid-puke. At least she might have missed some section of your clothes.”

“Jesus, what do I have to do to get you to shut the fuck up?”

He shrugged slightly. “I would say get me some food, but that didn’t work out too well the last time you did that for someone.”

Juliette moaned in the back seat. “My stomach hurts.”

I turned and snapped at her. “Maybe you shouldn’t have inhaled two hot dogs.”

Brock nodded. “That’s right. Yell at her. That’s the way to win her over.”

“I think I’m dying,” Juliette moaned.

“You’re not dying,” I sighed.

“You’re such an asshole. Why did I ever get involved with you?”

“Because you want to have my babies,” I said, hoping to bring the laughter back to our relationship.

She sat up slightly and glared at me. “Seriously? You want to bring that up now? Read the room, buddy.”

Then again, maybe humor wasn’t the way to go. It seemed to work for the other guys, but I fell flat on my face when I tried. We pulled in front of the building minutes later and I opened the back door for Juliette. I tried to help her out, but she glared at me.

“The last time you tried to help, I threw up on you. Maybe we should skip this part.”

She stormed off to her building, flinging the door open as much as she could in her weakened state. Fuck, I was screwing all this up. Brock came to stand beside me, crossing his arms over his chest as we watched her stomp over to the elevator.

“I really like this new technique you have going for you. What’s it called?”

I rolled my eyes, ignoring his jab.

“How to fuck things up when you have everything going for you,” he nodded. “I like it. It’s a great example of what not to do. You really have a way of winning over the ladies. I must say, I’ve never seen anyone screw up so spectacularly.”

“What do you want me to say? She threw me off guard this morning.”

“So, you decided to take out the ship and then go down with it.” He slapped me on the shoulder. “It’s not the way I would have done it, but I admire your panache.”

As he walked inside, I stood on the sidewalk and tried to figure out how I was going to fix things between us. I didn’t want her to go on this trip, but I

had bigger issues right now. Like how to fix the terrible things I said to her. She clearly wasn't going to get over that anytime soon.

"Hey, buddy. What are you doing?"

My head jerked up and I swore under my breath when I saw a cop walking toward me. "I'm just heading upstairs."

His eyebrows shot up. "In that? No, I don't think so."

"Really, I'm staying here with a friend."

"Yeah? Let me see some ID."

I reached for my wallet, only to remember that I'd tossed my clothes in the trash, and had completely forgotten about my phone and my wallet. Hell, even my keys were in the pockets.

"It's..."

"In your other set of clothes?" he said with a condescending look on his face. "Sir, turn around and face the car."

"Really, I'm in security."

"Yeah, and I'm a detective."

"No, really," I argued as he grabbed me and spun me around, shoving me up against the car. "I got in a fight with my client—well, technically, she's my girlfriend. At least, I hope she is after the stupid shit that fell out of my mouth earlier today."

"Mm-hmm," he muttered, slapping the cuffs on my wrists.

He spun me around, and I continued my story, hoping he would see my side of things. "

"See, she's a model and I was protecting her, but we sort of fell in love. But now she's going on a job to Milan and she wanted me to give up everything to follow her there."

"Tough break," he said, guiding me down the sidewalk to his police car.

"And then I said some not very pleasant things to her because I was pissed. I mean, who wants to see their girlfriend plastered on billboards?"

"Yeah, I really feel for you," he said as he opened the back door, shoving me inside. As he got in the front, I leaned forward and continued my story.

"So, she ran out on me."

"Yeah, hard to believe," he muttered.

"And I ran after her, but it was too late. She took over a coffee house and became a barista."

"Like, over a few weeks?"

"No, this morning. I'm pretty sure she messed up every single order and

coerced more than one person out of tip money. If you're gonna arrest anyone, it should be her," I snorted with laughter, then thought better of it. "Not that you should actually arrest her. She's a good person."

"Clearly," he said in a bored tone.

"And then I dragged her out of the coffee shop and was going to take her home, but she was hungry. So, I got her two hot dogs and after she ate them, she threw up all down my back."

"On purpose?"

I realized I left out part of the story. "Well, I had thrown her over my shoulder because she wouldn't have come with me otherwise."

"So, you kidnapped her."

Why did everyone think that? "You can't kidnap someone in broad daylight."

"You'd be surprised," he answered.

I leaned forward, the cuffs pulling at my wrists as I tried to explain. "No, seriously. You can't kidnap someone you know. She knows me!"

He quirked an eyebrow at me in the mirror. "It's still considered kidnapping."

"It's not," I argued, feeling defensive. I completely understood where Fox was coming from now.

But the officer didn't buy any of my explanations. If anything, he just seemed irritated with me. By the time we pulled up to the police station, I was pretty sure I hadn't done anything to convince him I was innocent. In fact, I think I made it worse.

The guy threw me in a cell and locked the door. I turned around and faced a big biker dude with a beard halfway down his belly. I jerked my chin at him and took a seat. "How's it goin'?"

He stared at me in only my boxer shorts and shrugged. "Better than you, I'm guessing."

I nodded and leaned back against the bars. "I normally wear clothes. This was a bad case of a woman vomiting on me after I hauled her over my shoulder and demanded she come home with me."

"Yep, been there, done that," he chuckled.

Somehow, I thought maybe he hadn't done exactly what I had. "Yeah, but she was my girlfriend."

The man nodded. "The wife," he answered. "She somehow got it in her head that she could just end the relationship. All I said was that I wanted her

to stop dancing.”

“Ballet?”

“Exotic,” he acknowledged. “You know, there comes a time when the kids need a better image of their mother than having her on stage shaking her tits.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” I said in exasperation. “They don’t need to see her selling her body.”

“Exactly. Your woman a dancer too?”

“Nah, model.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah,” I sighed heavily. “A fucking good one, too. She got offered a job in Milan.”

“Fuck yeah. That’s good work. She must be beautiful.”

“She is,” I muttered, not liking that he was right about so much.

I was pretty sure there was no easy way out of this for me. I loved Juliette, but he was right, it was impressive that she got the job. And I was being an ass about it. The whole caveman thing certainly didn’t help, and neither did not apologizing for the way I spoke to her.

I sat in my cell with the biker for a good two hours thinking about how I was going to fix things when the cop walked over to me, followed by Fox.

“What happened?” he asked. “He said something about kidnapping?”

I rolled my eyes. “I was taking Juliette home. She was over my shoulder. He said that’s kidnapping.”

Fox frowned at me. “Did you tell him you can’t kidnap someone you know?”

I trudged up the steps in Juliette’s townhouse, refusing to take the elevator so I could buy myself a little more time. The cop gave me some scrubs to wear home, though he didn’t know how long they’d been sitting at the department, or when they’d last been washed. The pants stretched across my thighs, pulling at my crotch, and the bottoms only came to mid-calf on me. I had ripped the shirt trying to get it over my head. But at least I wasn’t naked. I was pretty sure I wouldn’t be able to explain to the next cop any better than I had to the first.

When I was right outside her townhouse, I briefly considered just walking away, but that didn't seem like a wise idea. I had to fix things between us. I opened the door and walked inside, only to stop in my tracks when I saw luggage sitting out. Juliette walked out of her bedroom and tossed a small bag inside the suitcase.

“What’s going on?”

“Uh, Emilio is moving up the shoot so I can get the first flight out on Friday,” she said, not looking at me as she rearranged her suitcase. It was as if I didn't exist. I was nobody to her. I couldn't let her just get on that plane and leave—not like this.

“But...we're not supposed to wrap until next week.”

She refused to look at me as she walked back to her bedroom, talking over her shoulder. “I told him I wanted to get to Milan early so I could rent a place.”

“But...” I spluttered, running after her. “Juliette, we need to talk.”

“There's nothing more to say. I think we covered it all this morning.”

“No, we didn't,” I argued, grabbing her by the arm to spin her around. She jerked out of my grasp and glared at me.

“If you don't mind, I'd like you to stay in the other room for the remainder of your stay.”

“Juliette, we need to discuss what happened.”

“We don't need to talk about anything,” she said, finally really looking at me. Her eyes roamed over the clothes and she frowned. “Is this some new fashion thing you've got going?”

“I was arrested for indecent exposure.”

She quirked an eyebrow at me. “And this is what they gave you?”

“It's all they had,” I said in frustration. “I tried explaining why I was naked, but somehow got a kidnapping charge thrown at me.”

A smile tried to come out, but she swallowed it back. Damn, for just a second, I thought she might come around.

“Juliette, I was wrong. I'm so fucking sorry for—”

“Basically calling me a prostitute? For saying that my job is meaningless?” She shook her head, going back to her things laid out on her bed. “Jerrod, maybe you're right. Maybe what I do isn't as important as your job, but it means something to me. I happen to like what I do, and I'm good at it.”

“I never said you weren't.”

“Good, then we’ll agree that this was fun and part ways here.” She turned back to me with a bright smile. “We’ll finish up the shoot and be done with it.”

“It’s that easy for you? To just cut me out of your life like I mean nothing to you?”

Her small frame tensed as the words left my mouth. I knew it wasn’t easy for her. I just had to get her to admit she wanted me just as much. But the longer we stood here, I realized she wasn’t going to give in.

“It’s not about cutting you out of my life. It’s about realizing this was never going to work and moving on. That’s how this was always going to end, Jerrod. From the moment you walked into Emilio’s studio as a different person, the course of our relationship was already set in stone. There was never any way this could turn out differently. You didn’t want to be there. You were just pretending. But make-believe time is over, and it’s time to get back to reality.”

She grabbed a few more things and casually walked out of the room, as if my heart wasn’t breaking. As if what we had meant absolutely nothing to her. I clenched my fists, uncertain if I should go after her or give in. But by the casual flip of her hair and the relaxed state of her body, I knew it was over.

I turned on my heel and headed for the door. Luckily, I met Brock on the way because I had no money and no way to pay for the massive amount of alcohol I needed to consume.

“Hey, I was just—”

“Let’s go,” I said, grabbing him by the jacket and turning him around.

“Okay, so we’re going this way.”

“I need alcohol, and since I don’t have my wallet, you’re paying.”

“Right, that’s exactly why I came,” he grumbled as I dragged him behind me. “I really wanted to spend all my money on your drinking habit.”

“It’s not a habit until you do it consistently.”

I could practically feel the eye roll aimed at the back of my head.

“Why are you dressed in children’s clothes?”

“I got arrested,” I answered, giving no more details away.

“Right...okay. Let’s do this.”

When I finally released him in the elevator, he pulled out his phone and sent out a group text, probably telling everyone to join us at the bar so he didn’t have to drink alone with me. The elevator descended rapidly, and then we were storming out of the building and headed down the street to the

corner bar. There was no sense in driving when I knew I was getting plastered.

I took a seat at the bar and waved down the bartender. “Whiskey. Tall. The biggest you have.”

“The biggest I have is the bottle,” he retorted.

“Then I’ll take it.”

The bartender’s eyes flicked to Brock, who took the seat beside me. “Just the glass.”

I was annoyed that he was telling me to take it slow. I didn’t want to take it slow. I wanted to drink until all thoughts of Juliette were clouded in my mind.

“So, you got arrested.”

I nodded as I picked up the drink the bartender slid over. “Yep, indecent exposure.” I drank back the whole glass, wincing at the burn as I slid the glass back over to the bartender and tapped the bar top for another.

“That’s a slap on the wrist.”

I nodded, grabbed the freshly poured glass, and knocked it back. “Then I got hit with kidnapping.”

I tapped the bar top again. The bartender rolled his eyes. “How about I just leave this here for you.”

“We’ll need some water too,” Brock said to him.

Fuck, I didn’t need water. I needed to never think about Juliette ever again.

“So, if you were charged with kidnapping, how’d you get out of it?”

I rolled my head until I was looking at him. “Fox was there. He basically talked the cop to death until he released me.”

“Did he explain that you can’t kidnap someone you know?”

I pointed my finger at him, pretending to pull the trigger. Then I grabbed the bottle the bartender left and poured myself another drink. I could already feel the whiskey working its way through my system. My body tingled with warmth, which I didn’t normally enjoy. I liked beer and the occasional hard drink, but I never sat down and just drank myself to oblivion. Maybe I should do it more often. It was better than wallowing in self-pity.

“So, basically, I sat with this boxer in my bikers until Fox showed up.” I tossed back another drink and sighed.

“Maybe you should slow down,” Brock said, trying to snatch the bottle away from me.



“Why? What’s the fucking point?”

“Uh...mainly that you don’t puke all over the bar. That would be a horrible way to end the night.”

Someone slapped my shoulder from behind and sat on the other side of me. “Scottie Dog!” I said loudly, grinning at him like an idiot. “How’s it going, man?”

“Got your wallet,” he said, pulling it out and holding it by two fingers. “I think there’s some dried vomit on it, but...whatever.”

I grabbed it from him and slung my arm around his neck, pulling him in for a hug. “You’re the best, Scottie Dog.” Then my face turned serious. “There is no one I’d rather go down in a plane with than you.”

“How long has he been drinking?” Scottie asked over my shoulder.

I swung my gaze toward Brock and the world tilted slightly. I grabbed the bar and held on tight until everything leveled out. “Are you keeping up? Here, let me pour you another.”

I picked up the bottle and poured into what I thought was the glass, but then felt liquid dribble off the bar and onto my clothes.

“Damn, these were my good prison pants. Do you think they’ll give me another pair?”

“Sure,” Brock nodded. “All you have to do is go back and ask.”

“Really?” Man, this alcohol was really hitting me hard. Instead of pouring, which turned out to be a disaster, I snatched the bottle out of Brock’s hands and chugged, probably way more than I should have.

“Sure, then they’ll throw you in the drunk tank.”

I pointed at him, understanding what he was saying, although it took a little longer than it should have.

“Fuck, how drunk is he?”

The voice came from behind me and I spun, nearly falling off my stool. Standing, I held out my hands, mostly to steady myself. “Alright, we’re gonna need a table, because I can’t keep spinning around to see everyone.”

I pointed at Edu, who had just walked in, and then pointed at the table. I waved him over and he grudgingly came. Wrapping my arm around his shoulder, he steadied me as we made it to the corner booth.

“Hey! Rock, don’t forget the whiskey!”

“And we’re back to Rock,” Edu muttered.

“He totally looks like the Rock.”

“He looks nothing like the Rock.”

“He could be the Rock. I’m telling you,” I started, but then forgot where I was going with that. “Rock. Rock. Rock.” I kept repeating it over and over again until Edu slapped a hand over my mouth. Reverting to my childhood, I licked his hand, then laughed when he grimaced and wiped his hand on his pants.

“That’s fucking disgusting.”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if I was licking your body.”

He pulled away from me and I dropped to the ground like a rock. “You’re fucking disgusting when you’re drunk.”

I rolled over from where I’d face-planted and stared up at Edu. “Hey! It’s Edu! Eduardo. Eduardo the man,” I said in a low voice, laughing at how goofy it sounded. Then all of them were standing over me. “This actually works really well. I can see all of you and I don’t have to spin around to see you. Hold that thought,” I said, pulling out my hand and drawing with my finger. “This is a great seating arrangement.”

“He’s drawing on his hand with an imaginary pen,” Brock muttered.

“Should we take him home?” Edu asked.

“Nah, let’s just leave him on the floor,” Scottie Dog answered.

I laughed outright at them. They were being so funny. Then another face joined the group and I started laughing harder.

“It’s the Foxster! The Foxy guy that’s gonna murder the whole world!”

“Not the whole world,” he said, leaning over and grabbing me under the shoulders, hauling my ass up off the floor. “Just the ones that fuck things up.”

When I was somewhat steady on my feet, I placed my hands on his shoulders and stared at him seriously. “Man, I wouldn’t have survived prison without you.” I clapped him on the cheek and stared into his eyes. “What you did for me...”

He cocked his head to the side. “Yeah?”

“Sorry, I thought I was gonna puke,” I said, motioning to my mouth. “What was I saying?”

“What I did for you?”

“What did you do for me?”

“That’s what I’m asking you.”

“You don’t know what you did for me?” I leaned in. “Maybe you should have your head checked.”

“No, you said, *What you did for me.*”

“What did I do for you?”

“No, you said *What you did for me...* and then you stopped talking.”

I stared at him, trying to figure out what he was saying, but none of it made sense. “Maybe you need a drink.”

“Maybe you need to stop drinking,” Brock muttered.

I swiped the bottle out of Brock’s hand and headed over to a table, spreading my arms wide and nearly smacking Edu in the face with the bottle. “Now *this* is a table! Look at all the space! Okay, Edu, you sit here,” I said, pulling out a chair.

“Why do I have to have my back to the door?”

“Yeah, I say we put Lock’s back to the door,” Scottie grumbled. “He’s so drunk, he won’t see them coming anyway.”

I hurried around the table and pulled out another chair. “And this special chair is for you,” I pointed at Fox. “The star of the day! Not only did he get me out of prison, he also got me these awesome digs!” I pointed at what I was wearing.

“It wasn’t prison,” Fox retorted. “And digs refers to a place you live.” He shook his head. “Christ, I never thought I’d be the sane one of the group.”

“You’re still not,” Brock laughed, “but you’re better than this one,” he said, slapping me on the back. I stumbled forward and took a seat before I fell down.

Sighing, I rested my forehead on the table. “She’s gonna leave me.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have called her a hooker,” Brock responded.

“Prostitute,” I corrected.

“There’s no difference.”

My head popped up, along with my finger. “I beg to differ. You can be a high-class prostitute.”

“You can also be a high-class hooker,” Fox retorted.

I flopped my head back down, wincing as my head started pounding. “I just had to fuck it up. We were gonna get married and have kids. They were gonna go to Harvard or the military. Now what are they gonna do? Our poor kids!” I cried.

“You don’t have any kids,” Edu said, resting a hand on my shoulder.

I dragged my head off the table, swiping at some drool that slipped free. “Do you think she’ll take me back?”

“Not like this,” he said bluntly.

“Switch clothes with me,” I said, feeling the genius wash over me.

“Hell no. Not a chance in hell would I wear those clothes.”

“But I need my lady!”

“Trust me,” he said, grabbing my face so I could stare at him without my head bobbing around. “She’s not coming back, especially if you wear those clothes. Not even if you wore my clothes. You called her a hooker.”

“Prostitute,” I corrected.

“Either way, she’s not going to run back into your arms. It just wasn’t meant to be.”

I frowned. “I don’t like that answer.”

“Tough shit,” Brock snapped. “What did you think was going to happen? You’d get drunk and then go have a heart-to-heart with her?”

“Do you think that would work?” I perked up.

“No,” he stared at me, not giving an inch. “I think you two rushed into the idea of being together. Hell, you planned out where your kids were going to college before you were even serious about each other.”

“He’s right,” Scottie nodded. “You didn’t build the fire.”

I would have punched him, but I wasn’t sure which of the ten of him I was seeing was actually him. Then I jerked forward when Fox slapped me on the back.

“I think you had the right idea in kidnapping her. But you didn’t follow through.” He sighed heavily. “It’s a shame when someone tries to emulate my awesome skills and then fucks it up. See, when you kidnap a woman, you have to actually spend time with her. You let her walk upstairs alone. What exactly did that accomplish?”

I felt like there was a question in there somewhere for me, but my brain was swimming with alcohol and I couldn’t even remember what he said at this point.

“Huh?” Yep, that was my awesome response. I was killin’ it tonight.

“Maybe we should just take him home.”

“Maybe we should leave his ass here.”

I wasn’t sure who was talking anymore. My eyes had drifted closed at some point, and then I felt a hard thunk as my head hit the table.

“Okay, but I get to be the one to draw on his face.”

That was the last thing I heard before I passed out, and I knew I was fucked.



## JULIETTE

I flung the door to the bedroom open and walked out, doing my best to ignore the fact that Jerrod was someplace in the townhouse. I was actually on time today, and it was a strange feeling to know that Andrew wouldn't be pounding up the stairs, ready to yell at me for running late.

I walked over to the coffee pot and tried to figure out how to make my own coffee. I could just wait and do my normal routine, but since I was up early, I might as well figure it out. I knew I needed coffee grounds, but they were nowhere to be found. I opened the cabinet above the coffee pot and found them immediately.

Of course, they were on the second shelf—the one I couldn't reach. This was why I didn't keep stuff in my townhouse. The cabinets were built for people that could reach things. I wasn't one of those people. I dragged over a bar stool and climbed up on it, snatching the coffee off the shelf.

A loud thump startled me, and I nearly fell off the stool, screeching as I grabbed the fridge beside me and held on as the stool wobbled.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

I glanced over my shoulder and saw Jerrod getting off the floor. He must have fallen off the couch, which explained the thump. But that wasn't what caught my eye. No, that would be the black marker drawings on his face. I was pretty sure he was supposed to be a cat. Not that I would tell him that. He deserved it. “I'm getting coffee.”

“Just fucking ask for it,” he grumbled, walking over to me.

“I have it now,” I said, attempting to lower myself without falling off the stool.

But Jerrod was there before I could complete the task, picking me up and

gently lowering me to the ground. My breasts brushed against his chest as he held me to him. For a moment, I almost got lost in his touch. My breath hitched in my chest at his close proximity, and I felt his hard length pressing against me. Not even the cat whiskers drawn on his face could quench the burning desire to drop his pants and grab his thick cock.

“Fuck,” he groaned, and that’s all that it took to snap me out of my lust-fueled haze. His breath smelled like alcohol...no, his whole body reeked of alcohol.

I stepped back and refused to look at him as I got to work making coffee. Not knowing how much of the grounds to put in the basket thingy, I just started pouring it in.

“What are you doing?”

“Making coffee,” I said, trying to discourage more conversation.

“Do you even know what you’re doing?”

That just pissed me off, even though I had no clue. I slammed the bag down on the counter and spun around to face him. “As a matter of fact, I don’t. But I don’t need you standing here lecturing me either. Despite the fact that I’m just a model selling her body, I can figure things out on my own. So, the next time you think you need to tell me something, keep it to yourself.”

Regret washed over his face, and for just a moment, I actually felt bad for him. Deep down, I didn’t really think he meant anything he said. But I wasn’t entirely sure there wasn’t some truth to his words. For the first time in my life, I didn’t feel good about myself. I had worked so hard to get where I was. And Andrew was my biggest champion, helping me achieve my goals. He never wanted me in this business, but the moment I said I wanted to model, he never told me I couldn’t do it.

He believed in me when I had no one else. He put his own dreams on hold so he could help me achieve mine. Now, that all felt tainted, like my life was a big joke. And I’d allowed Jerrod to let me feel that way. I never let a man dictate any part of my life, yet Jerrod held so much control over me that I allowed him to make me feel like I was less than him because of my job.

That wouldn’t happen again.

“We have to leave for the photo shoot in an hour. You should clean up.”

“Juliette—”

“Look,” I said, turning to him. “You and I live very different lives. It’s fine. Really. Once this shoot is over, I’ll be off to Milan, and you’ll go back to your life. I doubt we’ll see each other again.”

“That’s not what I want,” he said suddenly.

I sucked in a breath, for just a moment wishing that he not only meant it, but that it could be a reality. Even if he had never said all that bullshit yesterday, it didn’t change the fact that we were so different. It couldn’t possibly work between us. I could see that now, and despite his hurtful words, there was some truth to them.

I blinked back the tears that threatened to spill down my cheeks. I had resigned myself to a life without him last night, and I wasn’t giving in now just because he regretted what he said. “Well, it’s the way it has to be.”

I turned back to the coffeemaker and did my best to figure out what to do, but it was lost on me.

“Here, let me help you,” he sighed, gently shoving me out of the way.

Despite my anger at him, I allowed him to show me what to do. And when he pressed the button and the coffee started brewing, I stood in amazement as I watched the pot slowly fill. That lasted for all of two seconds before I decided to get some cereal and eat. I was going to have to cut back on just how much junk food I ate. Over the last week, I’d hardly gotten a run in with his overprotective nature.

By the time Jerrod stepped out of the shower looking every inch the fine specimen I knew he was, I had almost had an entire cup of coffee. But I had to set it down when he walked into the living room with only a towel wrapped around his waist. Water dripped from his hair as it hung over his shoulders, and the thin lines slid down his perfectly sculpted chest.

I spun around and washed out my mug, though there was plenty of caffeinated goodness for me to drink. I had to busy myself with something to do other than stare at him. But there was nothing to do. I set the mug down and headed for the door. I had to get out of here before I climbed his body for one last ride that would no doubt leave me feeling horrible inside.

I relished the look of horror on Emilio’s face when Jerrod walked into the studio with the cat drawn on his face. I should have felt a little bad, even though I had nothing to do with it. It would take the makeup artist way too much time to scrub the marker from his face, eating up valuable time we didn’t have to waste before my trip.



Still...I laughed.

Since it was going to take a while for Jerrod to get cleaned up, I gladly went to Andrew when he walked into the studio and waved me over. "Hey!"

"Are you ready for your trip?"

"Just about. Mostly everything is packed."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes, I normally run behind, but this is Milan! This is what I've been working for my whole life!"

His returning smile told me all I needed to know. He was truly happy for me, and glad that he could help me get to this point in my career. Without him, my life wouldn't be anything like the fairytale it was right now. He had encouraged me and done everything possible to help me along the way. I couldn't have asked for a better big brother.

I stepped into his arms and gave him a hug, feeling like my whole world was finally coming together. And then my eyes met Jerrod's and just a twinge of regret filled me. Okay, almost all of my life was coming together.

"Ignore him," Andrew rumbled, squeezing his arms around me. "He fucked up. That's on him."

"I know," I said, trying my best not to cry.

He sighed heavily and rubbed his hand up and down my back, just like Mom used to do. "I wish you would tell me what he did."

I shrugged because it didn't really matter. We'd go our separate ways soon enough, and I'd put him in the rearview mirror. I stepped back and made sure to put a huge smile on my face. "So, are you ready for Milan?"

"Of course. I wouldn't miss the opportunity to see Milan with you. You know, we should take some time to do some sightseeing."

"Yes!" I said excitedly. "I doubt we'll have time to travel, which is a shame. Mom always wanted to see the leaning tower of Pisa."

One side of his lips quirked up in a smile. "She'd be so fucking proud of you."

"You think?" I asked, my voice hitching slightly.

"Definitely. All she ever wanted was for you to be happy."

My smile faded just slightly as my eyes drifted to Jerrod.

"You are happy, aren't you?"

This time, it was harder to plaster that smile on my face. In truth, I was heartbroken, trying my best not to let anyone see how much it was killing me inside that Jerrod had so callously ripped me apart. Even if he didn't mean

any of it, you couldn't take back those words once they were said.

"I'll be happy when I'm in Milan," I beamed. "And who better to go with than my big brother?"

He rolled his eyes. "Not that I would give up this trip, but I would much rather be going with a supermodel, surrounded by a bunch of other supermodels who all thought I was the most handsome man they'd ever seen."

"Maybe if you're lucky, you'll find a few."

He sighed dreamily. "Italian supermodels. That does sound appealing."

"Juliette!" Emilio called. "We need some test shots for lighting while Royal gets the cat cleaned off his face."

"Okay!"

Andrew chuckled as he stared at me. "You shouldn't have done that."

"I didn't," I said, surprising the hell out of him. "He has his friends to thank for that."

I turned on my heel and went to wardrobe, slipping into the outfit they'd chosen for the day. I spent the next half of the morning taking shots for lighting, and then getting in shots of only me that Emilio thought would work well for the campaign. Initially, all of these shots were supposed to be done on the beach, but we'd had to change everything with the serial killer's presence.

Finally, by one o'clock, Jerrod was ready to go, though he looked like crap because he was clearly hungover. He stood beside me, wincing at the bright lights.

"Okay, let's hit the music and get this wrapped up! We're already running behind."

Thankfully, this time it wasn't my fault.

I stepped into Jerrod's embrace, but it was stiff and awkward. He had a hard time looking at me, and when I looked at him, I just heard his words on repeat. Then he burped and alcohol wafted off his breath. I grimaced and pulled away, ruining the shot.

"Hold on!" Emilio shouted. He walked forward and stared at both of us. "What's going on? Usually, you two have amazing chemistry. That's what I want to see today. This is the climax of the campaign. I want to see passion and love. I want desire and temptation! Make me believe this perfume has captivated you!"

I did my best not to roll my eyes only because Emilio was trying to

motivate us. It wasn't his fault our personal lives had ruined the job. We spent the next hour trying and failing to get anything right. Jerrod would wrap his arms around me and I would squirm from his touch. He ran his tongue up my neck, and all I heard were his words repeating in my head.

*They see the sexy body and your gorgeous eyes. That's what you are to them.*

"Wait," I said, pushing away from Jerrod. I stepped back and took a deep breath. I could do this. I just had to somehow erase his words and still find some way to look at him and not want to punch him.

"Emilio, can you give us a few minutes?" Jerrod asked.

He nodded and stepped back. "Let's take five."

Jerrod stepped into my space and lifted my chin with his fingers. I didn't want to look at him, to see that desperate look in his eyes. He'd hurt me, and I wasn't sure I could ever forgive him for making me feel so worthless. But I did look at him. His eyes were filled with sadness, just like mine.

"I was so fucking wrong," he whispered. "No matter what my feelings are about modeling, you're amazing. You're not selling your body, and I was an idiot to say that."

"It's fine," I said, trying to jerk my chin out of his grasp, but he held on tight.

"It's not. It's really fucking not. This is your life, and I had no right to take something you love and rip it apart. I know I can't take back those words, and you'll never forgive me for saying it." He sighed heavily. "I could see it in your eyes when we were doing the shoot, how those words were eating at you. But they shouldn't. Don't ever let some prick like me tell you your worth."

Okay, that melted me a little.

His arm wrapped around my waist and he pulled me closer. Slowly, I gave in and slid my arm up his back, pulling him closer to me. Just holding him in my arms eased the ache in my chest. I didn't want to ever let him go, but our lives were just too different. Even apologizing, it didn't really change the fundamental differences in our lives.

His chin rested on my head as he held me tight, just squeezing me to him. We both knew that after today, we would never see each other again. It was nice while it lasted, but in a week, he'd be on a new job, and I'd be in Milan. Our lives would never intertwine the way they should, and I had to accept that and move on.

“I really do love you,” he whispered, bending down so only I could hear.

My heart caught in my throat as I looked up into his gorgeous blue eyes. “I really do love you too.”

And then his lips were on mine and he was kissing me like it was the last time because after today, there would be no passionate kisses. My fingers tangled in his hair and I gasped when he broke the kiss and breathed in my scent. His mouth latched onto my neck and he sucked gently, his hands slipping down to my ass to haul me up against him.

“Juliette,” he whispered, kissing me harder.

Tears slid down my cheeks as I fell into his touch. Nothing around us mattered in this moment. It was just the two of us, wrapped up in a love that would never last. He slowly lowered me to the ground, cupping my cheeks as he pressed kisses to my lips and across my cheeks. For just a moment, our eyes locked and all I saw was the future I could have had with him. The kids and the crazy nights making love. But I also saw a woman that gave up everything for the man she loved, and regretted never seeing her dreams through.

“You’re going to be fine,” he smiled at me.

I smiled back, about to say something when Emilio shouted, “That’s a wrap! Excellent! I couldn’t have asked for a better ending. Well, that’s not entirely true. If I had another week with you, I have a feeling I would have come up with something even better!” He wrapped his arms around the two of us and sighed. “I don’t think I’ve ever worked with such talented models. Well, one model and a bodyguard. I’ll never find anyone that can replace the two of you.”

“Thank you, Emilio.”

He pulled me two steps away from Jerrod and cupped my cheeks. “Promise me that when you’re done being this fabulous European model, you won’t forget about me.”

“I never could.”

“Good, because you are by far my favorite model to work with.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling like I was about to cry. These tears really had to stop.

“Alright, I’m off. Have a wonderful time in Milan.”

“I will.”

As he rushed away, I turned around to tell Jerrod I would miss him, but he was already gone.



## LOCK

“Hey, man. We’re going for a few beers. You wanna come?” Brock asked.

I sighed, continuing to stare at my TV. I didn’t even care that he let himself into my house. What was the point? After living with Juliette, who was by far the most unorganized disaster I’d ever met, it somehow seemed silly to be upset when someone marched into my perfectly clean and organized house.

“Nah, I’m just gonna hang out.”

He peered in the door further, then walked inside and shut the door, still looking around.

“What are you looking for?”

“The person you’re hanging out with.” He opened the closet door and peered inside. “Where are you hiding her?”

“Who?”

He rolled his eyes at me. “You said you were hanging out. Usually, when you hang out, it’s with another person.”

I didn’t even have the energy to be pissed at him. “Well, I’m hanging out alone.”

“Gee, that sounds really exciting,” he said, widening his eyes in exasperation. “Just come into town with us. We’re celebrating.”

“I don’t feel like celebrating,” I pouted.

“Well, it’s not about you. Duke is walking on crutches, so forget your sorry-ass moping and come celebrate with the man.”

I really didn’t feel like going anywhere, but Duke didn’t think he was ever going to walk again, and it was only because of Rae’s bullying that he got anywhere. Besides, I needed an oil change soon, and I didn’t trust Bowie

to do it. After all, he still hadn't gotten an annulment from that psychopath Carly.

"Fine," I mumbled, digging around for the remote. Brock turned and stared at the TV with a frown. "Is this the Home Shopping Network?"

"So?" I grumbled, not wanting to talk about it.

"Why are you watching this shit?"

"Because they have cool stuff," I shot back, irritated by his questions. That's when he spotted the box on the floor beside me. I dove for it at the same time that he leapt over me. It was only because his foot kicked me in the head that he got the upper hand, snatching the box out from under me.

He ripped it open, then stared at what was inside with a shocked expression on his face. He picked up the pink stick and held it up. "Better than sex mascara." His eyes met mine warily. "Please tell me this isn't for you."

I shifted uncomfortably, doing my best not to look at him. "No."

"You bought this for Juliette. Man, she's not coming back."

"I know that," I snapped. "I never said I was trying to get her back."

"But you bought her mascara."

I sighed and leaned back in my seat. I really wasn't in the mood for a lecture right now. "Whatever, I'll just return it."

He looked like he didn't believe me, and then his eyes flitted around the room. I knew I was screwed. "Is that a new vacuum?"

I already knew he was looking at the cordless Dyson hanging on the wall. "So?"

"So, you already have a Dyson. Two, actually."

"And now I have three. What's your point?"

He eyed me warily, then marched into the kitchen. I leapt over the back of the couch and raced after him, hoping to catch him before he could see what was hiding in there. But he saw it before I got there.

"What the fuck is that?"

I stared at the silver object on the floor and tried to think of something too clever to say. "It's..."

He looked at me over his shoulder, his eyes bulging. "It's what?"

"It's an air purifier," I said in exasperation. "Are you happy?"

He snorted, covering a laugh. "Um...I'm not sure what to say. That's... very clean of you."

"It makes the air smell better and...I feel better," I grumbled.

“Seriously?”

“Hell, I don’t know.”

He lifted the yellow sponge off the sink and grinned. “A Sponge Daddy?”

“They’re very good.”

“And you have them in every color,” he said, biting back a smile as he looked at my neatly organized counter.

“Because there’s one for every type of dish. You wouldn’t use the same one you use on a greasy pan for something that has eggs stuck to it.”

“No, of course not.”

I was ready to smack the grin off his face, but instead of teasing me, he walked over to my fridge and grabbed two beers. “So, what else do they sell?”

I shrugged with one shoulder. “Stuff.”

“Girly stuff? Isn’t that what it’s all about?”

“Not always,” I grumbled.

I wanted to tell him to leave, but he sat down and raised the volume on the TV. I didn’t really want him to know that I was buying shit off HSN to kill the heartache growing by the day. But at the same time, as soon as they came back from a commercial break, I found myself entranced by what I saw.

“Turkish Cotton,” Brock muttered. “Do you think that’s better than American cotton?”

“It has to be,” I answered, taking a seat beside him. “Why would they advertise it as Turkish if it wasn’t better?”

“I really like those blue towels,” Brock said, leaning forward. He pulled out his phone and started dialing.

“What are you doing?”

“I need new towels.”

I pulled out my own phone. “I could use towels too.”

He shot me a funny look. “You’re only getting the towels because I’m getting the towels.”

“Have you seen my towels?” I snapped. “They’re falling apart.”

He laughed at that. “Sure, the guy that’s extra careful with his things suddenly has dingy towels.” He turned back to his phone. “Yes, I want to order a set of the blue Turkish towels...What color blue? Is there more than one kind?” He frowned, confused much like I was the first time I called in.

“Yes, I would like to order the medium gray Turkish cotton towel in the Concierge collection. Two sets of twelve please.”



Brock glared at me, covering the mouthpiece. “You want twenty-four towels?”

“It’s four washcloths, four hand towels, and four towels, asshole.”

“Uh...yeah, can I make that three sets of the royal blue?” he asked.

“Actually, I need four sets,” I said, going into competition with him.

“Five,” he countered. “Make it five sets.”

“You know, just ship me twelve sets,” I said with a grin on my face.

His lips pulled in a tight line as he stared at me. “No, we’ll settle on five.”

I finished placing my order and leaned back in my seat as he finished up. I was feeling quite proud that I was able to get more than him, not that I needed 48 towels in my house. I wasn’t even sure where I would store them now that both bathroom closets were filled with other various bathroom items I’d already purchased off HSN in the last week.

“Well, fuck,” he sighed, tossing his phone on the coffee table. “I’m pretty sure I didn’t need twenty bath towels for the house I don’t even have built yet.”

I grinned in amusement. “Nobody does, but it feels good, doesn’t it?”

He looked at me and grinned. “Yeah. What else do they have?”

“Have you seen the robot vacuums?”

His eyes went wide. “No, but I think I need to.”

I hit a button on my phone and my robot vacuum came around the corner seconds later. “Dude!” he shouted, laughing when he saw it. “That’s so fucking awesome!”

“I know, right? And it only cost me nine hundred dollars!”

“That’s it? I have got to get one of those.”

“And don’t forget the docking station. It empties by itself. So, you just sit back and drink your beer. It’s the coolest thing in the world.”

“Damn, I think I might be in love,” Brock said as he watched it move around the room.

The door swung open and Scottie walked inside, sighing when he saw me sitting on the couch. “Lock, this isn’t healthy. You need to get out of the house.”

He walked over to the couch and grabbed the remote, about to turn it off when a cordless pruning chainsaw caught his eyes. “What’s that?” he asked, sitting down beside Brock. “Man, that’s sweet.”

“I hope you brought your credit card.”



## EVA

I knocked on Cash's door, waddling inside, but he was nowhere to be seen. Sighing, I plopped down in the chair across from his desk and groaned. I just wanted a foot massage, and I'd walked all the way here to get that much-desired massage, only to find his office empty.

"Why?" I said out loud. I had wanted this baby, but now I wanted it out of me. My body was stretched beyond its limits and I was sure I was the only woman in history to ever feel this way.

"Why what?" Zoe asked as she walked inside.

I turned and stared at her with a pathetic look on my face. "I walked all the way here and Cash isn't even around. I just wanted a foot massage."

She grinned at me. "Ankles swollen?"

"So big. Why can't men get swollen ankles?"

"Because they wouldn't be able to handle it. Red was always rubbing my feet when I was pregnant."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Rub it in, why don't you?"

"Cash doesn't do the same?" The curiosity in her voice only made me want to cry.

"He's preparing for the baby in other ways. He's so distracted by work that he's forgotten about me."

"I'm sure that's not true. Cash has wanted to impregnate you since he saw you."

"That's what he tells me, but then he's not here."

She looked at me curiously. "You know, I didn't see anyone when I came up here. I was actually looking for Red. He said he was coming to work, but he isn't around. Do you think they got called out on a job?"

“No, I think Cash is hiding from me, and he’s using everyone around him to help.”

“That doesn’t sound right,” she frowned. “Can’t you get into the tracking system?”

I groaned again. “That means going down to the IT room and then walking like...an entire hallway to get there.”

She sighed at me like I was being a big baby. Maybe I was, but I was carrying around at least an extra hundred pounds of baby in my belly—okay, just a slight exaggeration. She pulled the rolling chair out from behind Cash’s desk. “Hop on.”

Grinning, I struggled into a semi-standing position before scooting over to the chair. I placed my feet on the legs and grinned when she pushed me out the door.

“This is the best way to travel.”

“Don’t get used to it. Nobody shoved me around in a chair when I was pregnant.”

“Where is your little spawn of satan?”

“At home with Cotton. I swear, he’s more protective of my kid than he is of me. It’s a little frightening.”

“At least you have someone to help,” I grumbled as we got on the elevator. “Cash is insisting that we can’t get a nanny.”

“Do you really want one?”

“No,” I admitted, “but I want the opportunity to have one. Why should I not get a say in who raises my kid? If I want some British woman to come in and raise my kid, that’s my right!”

“Damn straight.”

“I mean, I already took care of this kid for nine months and now I have to push it out a pea-sized hole. I think if I want *two* nannies, I should get them!”

“Hey, I’m not arguing with you. While we’re at home taking care of the kids, the men are off fighting wars and having fun. And where does that leave us?”

“At home covered in vomit,” I retorted. “I know that and I don’t even have a kid yet.”

“Just wait until you get that massive blowout in the middle of the night and you really have to pee. Do you think he’ll be there for you then?”

I snorted, shaking my head. “No, and who’s going to be there when the little fucker won’t go to sleep?”

“You,” she said. “It’s always going to be you.”

I frowned, looking over my shoulder at Zoe. “Do you think it’s wrong that I called him a little fucker before he’s even born?”

“Not at all. Sure, they’re sweet and innocent when they come out covered in goop, but then they open their mouths and scream at you. And it doesn’t ever end! I’m just entering the mommy phase.”

“What’s that?” I asked in horror.

“Everything is mommy. No daddy, just mommy. Trust me, when you get to that phase, you’ll wish you were back in the crying and shitting phase.” She paused, cocking her head to the side. “Actually, I’m still in the shitting phase.” She sighed heavily. “I can’t wait for this fucker to be potty trained.”

I was already regretting this kid and he wasn’t even born yet. The way Cash was acting, disappearing on me without a trace, really put me in a sour mood. Zoe opened the door to the IT room, even though it was supposed to be closed off to everyone, and gave a hard push. I went sailing across the room, catching myself at Rae’s desk. My fingers instantly started flying over the keys as I searched for the program.

Thankfully, I’d worked with Rae enough down here to know how to use her system. Within minutes, I was pulling up the tracking data, and what I saw surprised the hell out of me.

“They’re all at Lock’s house.”

“Really?” she asked, staring at the screen. “That can’t be good.”

“Why?”

“Well...they normally have meetings here. What do you think it means?”

My heart started pounding out of control as I considered the implications. Whatever was going on, it wasn’t good. “Lock just got back from that job with the psycho that was after Juliette. Do you think it has something to do with that?”

“Didn’t they kill that guy?”

I snorted. “When does anyone ever really die? How many times have we thought Rafe was dead?”

“Or FNG?”

I grinned, but then frowned. “Well, he actually is dead.”

“Right,” she nodded. “I sort of forgot about that. I keep expecting him to pop up.”

“Fox is convinced he’s still alive. He wants to put up missing person posters.”

“Well, maybe you could ask him to help out with the baby. Make him an honorary godfather. That’s what helped when he was drowning over losing Anna.”

I glanced up at her with a grin. “That’s not a bad idea, and it would seriously piss off Cash.”

She jerked her head at the screen. “So, what are we going to do about this?”

I thought about it, and then pulled up the data on their heart rates. “Shit, look at this. Their heart rates are all spiking.”

“All of them?” she asked, looking closer at the data. “How is that even possible?”

There was only one explanation I could think of, and that was that they were all in trouble. “We need help,” I said instantly. “If they’re all there, and they’re in trouble, then we need backup.”

“Anna would help,” she said immediately, pulling out her phone.

“So would Quinn, but she’s on a job.”

“Jane,” Zoe said quickly, shooting off a message. “She loves shit like this.”

“What about Tahlia?”

She winced. “I’m not sure. She’s got balls, but she won’t hold a gun. You can’t exactly yell at someone when they’re holding a gun on you and hope to win.”

I nodded in agreement. That left Bree. “You don’t think...”

“No,” she said immediately. “Unless you want someone to freak out during this rescue mission, do not call Bree.”

That was only four of us, and I would be more likely to strain a muscle than take anyone down. “What about Duke?”

She snorted. “Are you kidding? He just started walking with crutches.”

“And this is just the sort of thing he’d want to be in on. After all the shit he’s been through, he needs some action.”

“I’ll give him a call.”

A half hour later, nearly everyone was gathered upstairs at OPS. I had my throwing knives at my side and was ready to storm Lock’s house. Well,

mostly. I needed a minute to gather my breath after walking from the elevator to the front door.

Duke pulled the door open and very gingerly walked inside. His body was healed for the most part. Other than the crutches, you never would have known that one of his legs was basically pooping out on him. But he was getting stronger every day—not that it helped his surly attitude about the whole thing.

“Good, now that everyone’s here, we need to put together a plan.”

“A plan for what?” Duke grumbled.

“Um...” Zoe looked at me sheepishly.

“You didn’t tell him?” I shot her an incredulous look. I sighed and turned to Duke. “We think everyone’s in trouble.”

“Everyone, as in who?” he asked.

“Literally everyone,” I answered. “No one is around. They’re all at Lock’s house, and they haven’t moved since we found out they were there. And we’ve tried calling, but got no answer. On top of that, they all have elevated heart rates. Unless there’s a gigantic orgy going on over there, something’s happening.”

He stared at me blankly. “And you expect me—the cripple—to do something about it. It took me ten fucking minutes to get here from the truck, and that was after it took me five minutes to wrestle the damn crutches out of the back. And you want me to go over there and kick someone’s ass?”

“You still have your trigger finger,” I shot back. “I’m nine fucking months pregnant. This huge fucker is sitting on my bladder. I have to pee every five minutes, and by the time I get back to the chair, I have to pee again. I haven’t walked right in four months! And while I realize it’s not quite as dire as your situation, you don’t see me whining like a little bitch,” I finished, breathing heavily from lack of oxygen.

“Fine, but if I get shot in the leg again, I’m holding you responsible for ending my life. I’m fucking serious, just put a bullet in my head and call it good.”

I rolled my eyes at his dramatics. “Like Rae would ever allow that. I don’t care if she’s bleeding out right now on the ground. She would literally crawl out of the grave to get to you, and then she’d kick my ass.”

He sighed heavily, leaning against his crutch. “Don’t you think you’re being just a tad dramatic?”

“With my husband’s life? Not at all.”

“Look, I’ll go along, but I can guarantee there is nothing wrong. They’re probably having a team meeting.”

“At someone’s house? Are you kidding me?”

“Maybe they’re drinking. God knows I want to right now,” he grumbled.

“All of them?” I questioned. “Drinking during a work day? I doubt it.”

“Whatever,” he mumbled. “I really don’t care.”

“You don’t care that Rae could be in potential danger?”

He huffed a laugh at that. “Considering that Rae could kick anyone’s ass on the team? No, I’m not worried about it.”

“Fine,” I snapped. “Let’s go.”

We drove out to the property, stopping about a half mile from Lock’s house. After separating into teams, we moved as stealthily as we could toward the house. It was easy for everyone aside from Duke and me.

“This is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever done,” Duke complained.

“I highly doubt that. You did take Pin Up Barbie to her high school reunion when you were seeing Rae.”

He stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. “Eva, you’re pregnant and going in with throwing knives, and I’m hobbling in on crutches. What part of this do you think is going to turn out well for us?”

He had a point, not that I would concede right now. Something had to be wrong. Cash would never leave me when I was this huge and ready to pop. We approached the front door and it was dead silent. “There’s no way they’re all in there making absolutely no noise,” I whisper-hissed.

He frowned, finally looking a little concerned for the first time since I told him everyone had gone missing. He leaned one crutch against the house, careful not to make any noise, then pulled his gun out of his holster and nodded to me.

“Alright, on the count of three,” I whispered.

He nodded as I took one side of the door. He placed his hand on the doorknob as I shifted my stance to go in first.

“Wait, what are you doing?” he hissed.

“Getting ready to kick some ass.”

“Look, I may be a gimp and hardly able to move on my own, but there’s no way I’m letting a pregnant woman breach a door before me.”

I shot him a scathing look. “I may be pregnant, but I can still throw a knife.”

“You lost your balance getting out of the truck,” he hissed.



“So did you!” I shot back.

We held each other in a death stare, neither of us conceding. “Fine, we go in together.”

I pursed my lips at him. “Like we would both fit through the door at the same time?”

“Fine,” he sighed. “You can go first.”

I grinned in satisfaction and got back into position. He nodded as he placed his hand on the door. Then he flung it open and shoved his crutch right in front of me so I couldn’t move forward. He charged into the room at a hobble pace and stopped in his tracks, making me run into his back.

“What the fuck?” he growled.

I stepped around him and frowned at what I saw. Everyone was gathered around the TV, and stacked around them were various boxes, some opened—all of them with the HSN label on the box.

“What the fuck?” I whispered, unable to believe what I was seeing.

Duke shoved his way around me and hobbled into the living room. “I love Home Shopping Network.”



# JULIETTE

I sat outside a cafe, sipping my coffee as I watched the rising sun. The sky looked like a beautiful painting that I'd seen a dozen times before, but never thought I'd experience for myself. Milan was the city of dreams, and everything about it was so magical. I'd seen cathedrals and art galleries. I'd walked the streets that made me feel like I was back in another time. Everything about Italy was absolutely breathtaking.

But my heart was breaking with each day that passed. I missed Jerrod desperately. When I was at work, I kept thinking he would walk through the door and stare at me with that intensity that made me feel more alive than I ever had before. I waited for my phone to ring, for him to say he missed me and wanted me to come home. But that would never happen.

We'd said our goodbyes and that was the end. Why had I insisted on coming here? Despite the beauty around me, I couldn't remember why I wanted this so badly. I wanted to do this with Jerrod, and it lost its appeal the moment I stepped off the plane without him.

Andrew sat down beside me, pulling his sunglasses off his face and tucking them in his shirt collar. "Are you ready for today?"

I shrugged, not feeling at all like myself. The delicious pastry in front of me sat largely untouched. I thought for sure I would scarf it down, but nothing tasted good to me anymore. Every week that passed, my appetite grew more and more distant. The truth was, I was homesick, and no matter how much I wanted to be here, it would never be all I imagined without Jerrod.

"Are you gonna eat that?" Andrew asked, snagging the plate before I answered.

“Go ahead.”

He shoved the pastry in his mouth, stopping only for a second to stare at me. “What’s going on with you?”

I didn’t want to admit to him that I was homesick or that I missed Jerrod so much. But this was Andrew. He always knew what to say. “Do you ever think you really want something, and then when you get it, it’s nothing like you hoped for?”

He eyed me for a moment. “Not really.”

I swiped the lipstick from the outside of my mug, refusing to look at him. “If I ask you something, will you tell me the truth?”

“Always.”

I tore my gaze from the coffee cup and stared at him, needing to see it in his eyes. “What would you have done with your life if you hadn’t been managing me?”

He paused for a moment, and I knew he wanted to tell me a version of the truth. “Juliette, you know I love—”

“I’m not asking that and you know it.” He sighed, leaning back in his chair. It was time for us to have a heart to heart. “You had plans before Mom and Dad died. You would have gone off to college. Your life would have been completely different.”

“But it wasn’t,” he snapped, totally unlike my big brother. “Peanut, we dealt with the hand we got. It’s not bad. In fact, can you imagine being in Italy in any other scenario?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean it’s the way you wanted it.”

“I don’t regret what I gave up. It was worth it to see you get everything you wanted.”

That made me smile, but was it the truth? “What if I only thought I got what I wanted? What if what I really want isn’t something I can get with this job?”

He let out a humorless chuckle. “You want him back.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

We stared at each other for a moment. I didn’t want to say anything else. I just wanted a little honesty from my brother. I wanted to know that I hadn’t ruined his life, that he could still do what he wanted.

“Juliette, if you want him, what are you doing here?”

“I thought I wanted this, but now...I’ve lived this other life with him. I

can't do this job without him, and he won't leave his job to be with me. I guess part of me hoped that I was enough."

"Enough for what?"

"For him."

He nodded, staring at me intently. "Would you really want him to give up who he is to be with you? Can you picture Lock walking around here without a purpose?"

"No," I sighed. "Which is why we ended things."

"But..." he said, sensing my hesitation.

My eyes flicked back to his and I was terrified that he would hate me. "I once said I would do this as long as it was fun."

"And it's no longer fun," he surmised.

I winced, hating to break it to him like this. "I'm sorry. After all you've given up for me—"

"Hey, shortie," he teased. "Do you really think I can't get another job? There are plenty of things I can do."

"Like what? Badgering pretty women isn't a job."

"Sure," he nodded. "I could be a gondolier. We are in Italy."

"Wrong city."

"I could move."

"You're just going to row boats all day?"

"In the most beautiful city? Of course. Plus, James Bond was filmed in Venice."

I rolled my eyes at him. "That's not a reason to be a gondolier."

"Okay, then I could retire and get a ranch in Wyoming. I always wanted to learn how to ride a horse."

"Somehow, I don't think you should buy a ranch if you've never ridden on a horse. And I can't see you in cowboy boots."

"Fine, then I could become a chef of fine burgers and fries. I'd have a customer in you for the rest of my life."

I smiled at him, thankful he wasn't really upset with me.

"So, does this mean you're going back to the bodyguard?"

"I'm not sure he'll take me back. I haven't even heard from him."

His face lit with amusement. "Trust me, he'll take you back."

I sat up at the tone of his voice. "Have you talked to him? How is he? Did he ask about me?"

"I haven't."

My shoulders fell in disappointment. I so badly wanted to know how he was doing.

“However, I have talked to Brock, and you’ll be pleased to know that he’s absolutely miserable.”

“He is?” I asked hopefully.

“Desperately. Word is, he started watching the Home Shopping Network. You’re gonna have to get rid of a lot of shit when you move in with him.”

“Move in with him?” My eyebrows shot up in surprise at his statement.

“Face it, Tiny, he’s not going to move back to your townhouse when he has a job in Kansas. Looks like you’re going to have to get overalls.”

I cocked my head in thought as I pictured myself in overalls. I could be one of those chic women that wore overalls and cute pigtails. Hell, I would rock a pair of cowboy boots, unlike my brother, who didn’t like to wear anything other than his designer suits. Not that I was one to talk. I absolutely loved my designer clothes. Still, I was adaptable.

“You know, I have to ask...” I eyed him skeptically. Whatever this was, it couldn’t be good. “Before I give my blessing for you to run off and marry this guy and send your kids into the military,” he said, rolling his eyes, “I need to know what he did to make you cry.”

“Why? Are you going to beat him up?” I teased.

“No, but I’ll hit him with a very big stick. One with a pointy end. Those suckers can do some damage.”

Since I was fairly certain that even if he had a large stick, he wouldn’t do any damage to Jerrod, I told him. Then I ran after him in my four-inch stilettos as he stormed back to the hotel to call Jerrod and give him a piece of his mind.



## LOCK

I jerked awake to the sound of my ringing phone. My face was stuck to a yellow bag, and when I tore it from my face, I remembered my crazy night with Fox, complete with us binging on Funyuns. I had to pray that he didn't tell anyone the insane things I said about loving Funyuns, and what a tasty treat they were. I'd never live it down.

I stumbled into a seated position, only to slip on an empty bag of Funyuns on the floor. After nearly taking out my eye on the corner of the coffee table, I grabbed my phone and rubbed a finger over my bleary eyes.

“—lo?”

“You sound like shit.”

I sat up at the sound of his voice. If he was calling...Then again, I was high on Funyuns. What if I was only hearing what I wanted to hear? What if this was all a dream, a really sucky one that I would wake up from, only to find that I really was all alone, surrounded by empty bags of Funyuns I'd consumed to make myself feel just a tad better about myself?

“Andrew?” I asked hesitantly.

“Who the fuck else would be calling you?”

“Uh...literally anyone from OPS.”

“Oh, right. Well, it's your lucky day because I have news that's gonna turn your world upside down.”

Fuck, I wasn't sure I wanted to hear it. “In a good way or a bad way? If it's bad, just hang up and I'll suffocate myself on this Funyuns bag.”

“That depends. Do you still think my sister is whoring herself out for pictures?”

I groaned, slamming my forehead down on the table. This day couldn't



get any worse.

“Hey!” I heard Fox shout as the front door opened. “I brought sustenance!”

Fuck that, it could get way worse. “I didn’t mean it to begin with. I mean, I did mean it, but I wasn’t calling her a whore. I just wanted her to see that people want her for her body and nothing else.”

“And you don’t want her for her body,” he deadpanned.

“Um…” I rubbed my forefinger and thumb at my temples. “I feel like there’s no good way to answer this.”

“Listen to me really good, okay? She’s coming home. She wants you, and if you want her, you will be waiting for her at the airport.”

“What’s going on?” Fox asked.

I waved him away, but he sat beside me jumping on the couch. “Go away!” I hissed.

“Who’s on the phone? Ask them if they like snake. I have a new recipe.”

I ignored him and got back to the conversation with Andrew. “I can’t do that to her. I can’t take her away from her job.”

“You’re not, asshole. Believe it or not, when she started modeling, it was because she enjoyed it, not because of the money. She always said she would stick with it until she didn’t enjoy it. And guess what?”

“She doesn’t enjoy it anymore,” I grinned.

“Ding, ding, ding! We have a winner.”

“What’s going on?” Fox asked. “Put down the fucking phone and talk to me!”

I got up and walked into the other room, but he followed, shoving Funyuns in his mouth along the way.

“You know, you’re kind of an asshole.”

“You’d better watch it. I’m still her big brother. I might not be able to take you out, but I have my ways of keeping her away from you. I’ve done it with a lot of guys.”

“Yeah, and that’s how we ended up with a serial killer,” I retorted.

He was silent for a moment. “Okay, serial killer aside, I made some damn good choices. In fact, you could even say that I prevented her from being murdered because she didn’t go out with that guy because of me.”

That was a bit of a stretch, but if he was going to help me get her back, I was all in. “Does she know I’m going to meet her?”

Fox gave me two yellow thumbs up, grinning like a fool. I was so excited,

I even tried to slap his hand, but he gave me a fist bump and the whole thing was awkward.

“No, and she’s not going to. You’d better have something big planned, and I’m not talking about getting her fried food. You’d better fucking sweep her off her feet because she deserves that.”

“I will. I’ll get her flowers and everything.”

“Flowers? Did you just—fuck, I hate working with amateurs.”

Fox was shaking his head wildly at me, motioning for something big. “I’ll...get her something big.”

He got down on his knee and did some motion about a camera and a ring.

“I’ll propose to her on live television.”

Fox sighed and dropped his arms in defeat.

“Fuck, are you serious? What about her makes you think she’d like that?”

“I—”

“Never mind. I changed my mind. You can’t have her.”

He hung up before I got a chance to respond and I lost it, swinging hard at Fox. “What the fuck was that? Propose to her on television?”

He ducked and shoved the Funyuns in my face, trying to block my fist. “Dude, I was motioning that you could propose to her as a surprise ad campaign for Emilio!”

I was about to hit him again when I stopped and thought about it. That was actually good.

The phone rang and I quickly picked up. “Yeah?”

It was silent for a moment. “Friday, one week from tomorrow. Don’t fuck this up.”

I paced the inside of the airport, anxiety running through me with every second that passed. “What if she says no?”

I ran my hand through my hair, terrified that’s exactly what she would do. My brilliant plan would be ruined.

“She’s not gonna say no,” Fox said, munching on something black. “She loves you, man.”

I grimaced as I stared at the charcoal-looking thing in his hand. “What are you eating?”

“Fried tarantula. It’s fucking amazing.”

I cringed, a shudder running through me as I took a step away from him. “Where the fuck did you get fried tarantula?”

“Mm, I stopped at a bodega down the road.”

“And they just happened to have fried tarantula? In a bodega?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, I didn’t think it would be good either, but here we are.”

I scrubbed a hand over my face, wondering why the fuck I let him come with me. “And I thought the Funyuns were bad.”

“No, you didn’t. You love them. Admit it.”

“I’ll admit that they aren’t as bad as I thought.”

He stood and walked over to me, pointing what was left of his fried tarantula at me. “That’s not what you said when we were watching HSN together. You asked me to go get more.”

“I was trying to get rid of you.”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “That’s why you tore into the bag the moment I got back. You know, I don’t share my Funyuns with just anyone.”

“Fuck,” I spun around. “This is going to fail. I’m not ready for this. I didn’t even prepare a speech!”

“Really?” He looked at me funny. It was true, I was always organized, yet here I was, about to fail miserably at the one thing I couldn’t allow to fail.

“God, I really fucked this up.”

He slapped me on the back, still holding that fucking tarantula on a stick. “You’re in luck because your man thought of everything.”

I rolled my eyes. “Please don’t call yourself my man. It doesn’t sound right.”

“Doesn’t sound right?” He frowned. “I suppose I could call myself your midnight rider, but that doesn’t sound better to me.”

“You could just be normal and call yourself my friend,” I snapped.

A grin split his lips and he hugged me, nearly squeezing the life out of me. “You’re my friend? Dude, I had no idea!”

I sighed heavily, patting him on the back just to get this over with. Then he pulled back suddenly and stared at me intently. “You know, I wouldn’t do this for just anyone. Now, *So In Love* is out. That’s a special song between me and Anna, but I have another one that will totally kill.”

“I don’t want to kill her,” I snapped.

He tossed his head back and laughed. “No, man. Here...” He pulled out

his phone and searched for some music. An old song played on his phone, the crooning of a woman reminded me of something my mother might have listened to.

“What is this?”

He rolled his eyes, scoffing at me. “Seriously? You don’t recognize Billie Holiday? This is *So Easy To Love*. Dude, I don’t believe I have to explain this to you. It’s from—”

“Yeah, some musical that you’ll tell me every detail about. I don’t have time for it.”

“Really? You don’t want to know about the music that you’re going to get married to?”

“I’m not getting married to this.”

“That’s because you don’t feel it yet. Here—”

He grabbed me and pulled me into his arms. I shoved him back, but he twisted my arm up around my back and hissed, “Don’t make me break your fucking arm right before your wedding. I’ll do it.”

I gritted my teeth and went along with it, only because I had more important things to worry about than which hospital I would go to when my arm needed to be set.

Slowly, he eased my arm down and spun me around, pulling me into a dance. I listened to the music and pretended I was with Juliette. It would be romantic as hell.

“That’s it,” he whispered. “Feel it.”

My feet started moving of their own accord, and I could practically feel her in my arms, pulling her closer to me as we swayed to the music. This song really was perfect for us. I spun her around and nuzzled my face into her neck, smelling her intoxicating scent.

“Aw, shit. He got to you too.”

Scottie’s words broke my trance and I jerked back, realizing I had just been sniffing Fox’s neck. I cleared my throat, running my hand along the back of my neck.

“Right, it’s a good song.”

Fox didn’t look at all ashamed. “That’s all I’m saying, man.” He clapped me on the shoulder, but I instinctively pulled away from him.

“At least I wasn’t fucking sniffing him,” Scottie muttered. “That was fucking disturbing.”

“Are we all set?” I snapped.

“We are,” Scottie retorted. “I’m not sure you are. Have you changed your mind?”

“And why would I do that?”

“Oh, I don’t know...because you’re fucking sniffing another man while holding him tight? Some might think you’d switched teams. You should have decided that before you showed up at the airport for her.”

I ignored him and jerked my chin at Emilio as he rushed through the door. “I’m here!” he shouted. “I got caught in traffic and then I almost dropped my camera. Thankfully, it was in the case. So, where are we doing this?”

“Um...” My brows furrowed as panic washed over me. I really thought he would have the logistics worked out. I hadn’t even considered that I’d have to make the decision. My gaze swung to his and my eyes bulged in terror.

“Relax, I’ve got this,” he said, taking over when he saw my evident fear. “Okay, she’ll walk down the steps of the airplane. Thankfully, you got a private jet. This wouldn’t work otherwise. Before the doors open, I’ll have the carpet rolled out. That way, she’ll look like she’s walking down the runway. Is that what you’re wearing?”

I looked down at my outfit and frowned. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Wardrobe!” he shouted over his shoulder. “Thank God I anticipated this. You’re going to wear black.”

A garment bag was shoved into my chest and I clasped it to me. “Black?”

“It’s dark and sexy, just like you. Leave two buttons open. Go,” he jerked his head. “Get dressed. And for all that’s holy, pee before we get to makeup. We don’t need the time crunch.”

He glanced at his watch and started barking out orders as I ran off to the bathroom. I quickly dressed and checked myself over in the mirror. I looked pretty damn good in all black. I left the shirt unbuttoned as he asked, and walked out with my other clothes in the bag. I tossed it at Fox, who barely caught it with his tarantula stick still in his hands. Thankfully, the disgusting food was gone.

“Alright, what now?” I asked Emilio.

“Now, we make you a star,” he grinned.



## JULIETTE

I yawned after the long flight. We were about an hour from the airport, and I was still exhausted, but excited to see Jerrod. It would take me another half day to drive to him, but it would be worth it when I saw him again. The closer I got to the airport, the more I knew in my gut that this was the right choice.

“Here,” Andrew said, holding out a bag for me.

“What is it?”

His eyes widened in irritation. “Seriously? After all these years in the industry, you don’t know what a garment bag looks like?”

“I do, I just don’t know why you’re giving it to me.”

“It’s for when we land. Ray called.” That was the man in charge of the Milan campaign. “He wants one last photo shoot before you officially leave. He’s a little butt hurt about you not sticking around, but I smoothed it over. There’ll be press waiting when we land, so make sure you look your best. He wants your hair down and curly.”

I unbuckled in a huff of frustration. “And you’re just telling me now?”

“Relax, those women at the back aren’t here for me.”

I spun around and noticed for the first time that there were other people on the plane with me. I’d been so excited about the prospect of seeing Jerrod again that I’d completely blanked out on everything.

“They’re your hair and makeup team. Go get ready.”

I stood and snatched the bag out of his hands, rushing to the back where they were waiting. I hung up the bag and sat down in the chair they pointed to. After forty-five minutes, they were finally done with everything. My eyes were smokey and my hair was wavy, just as Andrew said. Now, all that was

left was getting into the dress.

I took it into the back and opened the bag, gasping when I saw the white sparkly material inside. I pulled out the dress and held it in front of me. It was flowy and had a single strap for my left shoulder. And inside were matching undergarments. As I slid them on, I relished in the soft feel of the fabric against my skin. Everything fit me perfectly. Next was the dress, and when I pulled it on, I knew exactly why Ray wanted me to wear this. It was elegant, but I immediately saw how the wind would catch the material and allow it to flow in the breeze. All that was left was the shoes.

One of the girls helped me slip them on and buckled them around my ankles. The dress hid them for the most part, but I still felt like a princess in the gorgeous outfit. I stared at myself in the mirror and smiled. It was my last time, just one final hurrah before I said goodbye to this life and hello to my new one. A life that hopefully, Jerrod would be happy to welcome me into.

“You need to sit down,” Andrew said, coming up behind me. “We’re about to land.”

“Okay.” But he didn’t move. He stared at me with what looked like moisture in his eyes. “Are you crying?”

“What? No,” he scoffed. “I just had something in my eyes.”

“Both of them?”

He cleared his throat and stepped back.

“Andrew, are you sure about this?”

“Hey, peanut, you got this. You look beautiful.”

“But are you sure? You don’t look happy about this.”

He took my hand and led me over to the seat. I strapped in as he asked, then waited for him to sit beside me. “You know, we haven’t had it the easiest, but through everything, I always knew I was doing right by you. And now you’re about to—” He cut himself off and looked away.

He was acting really weird, almost as if he was saying goodbye or something. I clasped his hand, terrified he was going to tell me he was dying or something. “Andrew, what’s going on?”

“Nothing,” he smiled. “I’m just really happy for today.”

“That I’m on a plane home?”

“That you’re finally getting what you want. I always knew one day you’d find something that would make you want to leave it all behind. I just wish Dad could be here to walk you...off this plane.”

That was such a weird thing to say.



“And Mom. She’d be crying.”

“Okay, Andrew, you’re acting really weird.”

“Am I?” he asked, glancing away.

The pilot came over the speaker, saying we were making our final descent. I sat next to Andrew in silence, wondering what the hell was going on when he gripped my hand, squeezing it tight. He was never afraid of flying, so that couldn’t be it. The only thing I could think of was that he was nervous about this next stage of our lives. We’d been by each other’s side since our parents died, and now we were going our own ways. It was scary, but I thought he wanted this. Now, I wasn’t so sure.

We landed and I unbuckled, standing immediately to make sure the dress wasn’t too wrinkled. I glanced out the window and saw people swarming the plane for pictures. There was a red carpet being rolled out, which I thought was a little dramatic for the final stage of the campaign, but what did I know?

“Are you ready?” he asked, a wobbly smile on his face.

“Of course.”

I didn’t understand why he was so nervous. It was just another photo shoot. The plane door opened and he took my arm, leading me toward the door.

“Andrew, I’ve got this.”

But he gripped me tighter and walked me to the opening. Finally, his face met mine and he smiled at me. “Tiny, this is your wedding.”

I stared at him in utter shock. Then that quickly morphed into bafflement. I was about to yell at him for springing this on me right as we got off the plane, but my eyes quickly started scanning the crowd for Jerrod. As if the crowd knew to part, they separated and there he was, standing at the end of the aisle, waiting for me with a smile on his face.

I could have throat punched my brother, and it was only because the cameras were there that I didn’t do just that.

“Keep a smile on your face,” he muttered through clenched teeth. “Everyone’s watching.”

“I’m aware,” I said, smiling wide. “You could have warned me.”

“What fun would that be?” he asked, turning to grin at me. “Should we get you married?”

“I thought you hated him?”

He shrugged. “Turns out I’m a sucker for HSN too.”



## JULIETTE

“Mrs. Lockhart,” Jerrod grinned as he carried me across the threshold into our house. I couldn’t stop smiling at him, mostly because he carted me around everywhere. Just because I was small didn’t mean I couldn’t walk, but I’d let him get away with it for today.

“Welcome home!”

He walked into the living room and my smile fell. There were boxes everywhere, all labeled HSN.

“Holy crap,” I muttered. “What did you do?”

“I uh...” He glared his throat uncomfortably as he set me down. “I didn’t have time to clean it out. I sort of...went on a shopping spree.”

I snorted in amusement. “I’ll say. Did you get anything good?”

He flushed red, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck. “Maybe.”

I grinned at him. “You know, this is kind of like getting a bunch of wedding presents, and now we get to open them together.”

Relief filled his face. “Good, because I don’t remember what I bought.”

“Why are there Funyuns bags all over the floor? Was Fox here?”

“You could say that.”

“And you thought it was a good idea to eat all his Funyuns?”

“Hey, he kept bringing them to me.” He frowned for a moment. “Although, now that I think about it, I’m pretty sure he laced them with something.”

“Really? He laced Funyuns?”

“I woke up with one stuck to my face. Tell me that’s not odd.”

I held my hands wide and spun around. “Jerrod, you have HSN boxes all over your house. There’s nothing normal about this.”

I heard a door close down the hall and frowned when a man came out in his boxers, jerking his head at Jerrod. “What’s up?”

“What are you doing here? And why are you in your boxers?” Jerrod asked.

He snagged a beer out of the fridge and sat down on the couch. Then he actually put his smelly socked feet on the coffee table. Jerrod was about to lose my shit.

“Can you take your feet off my table?”

“Geez, testy,” he muttered.

“Jerrod,” I whispered, “who is this?”

“Nicholas Tate. A friend of Fox’s.”

“Do you normally have men walking around in their boxers?”

“No,” he snapped.

I held up my hand, relenting on the subject. “Just had to be sure.”

“Nicholas, why are you here?” Jerrod asked.

“Because I live here,” he said slowly.

Jerrod looked around the room, pointing at the items strewn everywhere. “Those are most definitely my HSN boxes. No, this is my house.”

“Right, and I’m renting from you. Don’t you remember this?”

“No!” he snapped. “Don’t you think if I remembered suddenly gaining a roommate?”

“I don’t know,” I rolled my eyes. “I suddenly had a roommate one day.”

Jerrod turned to me, scowling in frustration. “That was part of the job, and you know it!”

“Yeah, like I’m saying, it just happened.”

“Fox did mention you could be a little odd at times,” Nicholas said, widening his eyes at the massive amount of boxes in the room.

That got Jerrod’s attention. “Fox?”

“Yeah, he’s the one that drew up the contract. Don’t you remember?”

It was clear he didn’t remember a damn thing.

Nicholas sighed and got up from his seat, walking over to the counter where he pulled out a document. Jerrod snatched it out of his hands and read through it.

“No, this isn’t right.”

I smiled as if this was all normal as I leaned in to whisper to Jerrod. “Please tell me you didn’t get a roommate right before you married me.”

“Of course not,” he scoffed, but then frowned at the document. “Wait,

this can't be right. It says you're supposed to pay me in Funyuns."

He snorted, taking his seat again. "I thought it was a little odd too, but you insisted."

His eyes bugged out. "*I insisted?*"

He scrubbed a hand down his face as he leaned forward. "Are we going to have to go over every detail of the last few days? Because I'd rather watch TV."

I watched Jerrod slowly freak out about the situation. He wasn't good with change, especially not something as drastic as this. And while I wasn't particularly thrilled about sharing my new house with another man, I wasn't sure what to do about it at the moment.

"Jerrod—"

"He's sitting on my couch, watching my TV, drinking my beer..."

"He's eating your Funyuns," I added, which earned me a glare.

"It was clear reasoning with him would not work right now, so I gave up and walked over to sit beside Nicholas on the couch. "What are you watching?" I asked, reaching into the bag to snag some of the tasty treats.

"Real Housewives."

"Ooh, this should be good."

"Juliette, what are you doing?" Jerrod asked, staring at me like I was insane.

I shrugged and pointed at the contract in my husband's hands. "Eating Funyuns. It's in the contract."

## ALSO BY GIULIA LAGOMARSINO

Thank you for reading *Self-Licking Ice Cream Cone*. Don't miss out on my next book in Owens Protective Services. Click here for [\*Pucker Factor!\*](#)

Join my newsletter to get the most up-to-date information, along with new content in the Reed Security series.

<https://giulialagomarsinoauthor.com/connect/>

Join my Facebook reader group to find out more about my obsession with Dwayne Johnson!

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/GiuliaLagomarsinobooks>

Reading Order:

<https://giulialagomarsinoauthor.com/reading-order/>

To find the individual series, follow the links below:

[\*For The Love Of A Good Woman series\*](#)

[\*Reed Security series\*](#)

[\*The Cortell Brothers\*](#)

[\*A Good Run Of Bad Luck\*](#)

[\*The Shifting Sands Beneath Us- Standalone\*](#)

[\*Owens Protective Services\*](#)